

The Necessity For Human Solidarity In Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* depicts the human tendency of self-deception, betrayal and guilt which leads to the deterioration and the collapse of human values. The intensity of these elements may vary but they run through all of his plays. In *All My Sons*, Joe, a selfish businessman, in order to save his business from ruin, supplies defective cylinder heads to the American Air Force which results in the death of 21 fighter plane pilots. Joe atones for his crime by committing suicide. According to Miller, the American Dream creates false hopes that prevent people from being proud of what they have accomplished to make their lives better than they would be elsewhere, and eventually fail at achieving anything. Guilt is fundamentally a prosocial behavior because it strengthens interpersonal relationships. It is a kind of regretful, remorseful, painful, and aversive feeling aroused by one's own actions or inactions. Guilt is different from regret in that guilt is more related to interpersonal harm whereas regret is more related to intrapersonal harm. Guilt is usually related to and is operationalized as the acceptance of responsibility for harm. Guilt has long been related to prosocial behavior. People tend to use altruistic means when under the stress of guilt.¹

INTRODUCTION

Under the pressure of being guilty, one uses self-deception which is one of the popular escape methods that people use to prevent themselves from feeling guilty while in the same time allowing themselves to escape from something that they don't want to face. Self-deception involves a blind or unexamined acceptance of a belief that can easily be seen as "spurious" if the person were to inspect the belief impartially or from the perspective of the generalized other.² Using self-deception as a means to escape guilt, results in causing a circle of betrayal. The effects of betrayal include shock, loss and grief, damaged self-esteem, self-doubt, and anger. Not infrequently, they produce life-altering changes. The effects of a catastrophic betrayal are most relevant for anxiety disorders.³

This study, however, attempts to investigate how guilt, self-deception and betrayal operate in a play by Arthur Miller, and how the protagonist tries to hide his deeds, which result in making his life unlivable. The problem of these elements is one of the major themes Miller dealt with in his plays

DATA ABOUT MILLER'S LIFE

Arthur Miller was one of the leading American playwrights of the twentieth century. He was born in October 1915 in New York City to a women's clothing manufacturer, who lost everything in the

economic collapse of the 1930s. Living through young adulthood during the Great Depression, Miller was shaped by the poverty that surrounded him. The Depression demonstrated to the playwright the fragility and vulnerability of human existence in the modern era. After graduating from high school, Miller worked in a warehouse so that he could earn enough money to attend the University of Michigan, where he began to write plays.

Miller's first play to make it to Broadway, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), was a dismal failure, closing after only four performances. This early setback almost discouraged Miller from writing completely, but he gave himself one more try. Three years later, *All My Sons* won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play of 1947, launching Miller into theatrical stardom. *All My Sons*, a drama about a manufacturer of faulty war materials, was strongly influenced by the naturalist drama of Henrik Ibsen. Along with *Death of a Salesman* (his most enduring success), *All My Sons* and *The Man Who Had All the Luck* form a thematic trilogy of plays about love triangles involving fathers and sons. The drama of the family is at the core of all of Miller's major plays, but nowhere is it more prominent than in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*.

Death of a Salesman (1949) secured Miller's reputation as one of the nation's foremost playwrights. In this play, Miller mixes the tradition of social realism that informs most of his work with a more experimental structure that includes fluid leaps in time as the protagonist, Willy Loman, drifts into memories of his sons as teenagers. Loman represents an American archetype: a victim of his own delusions of grandeur and obsession with success, and haunted by a sense of failure.

Miller won a Tony Award for *Death of a Salesman* as well as a Pulitzer Prize. The play has been frequently revived in film, television, and stage versions that have included actors such as Dustin Hoffman, George C. Scott and, most recently, Brian Dennehy in the part of Willy Loman. Miller followed *Death of a Salesman* with his most politically significant work, *The Crucible* (1953), a tale of the Salem witch trials that contains obvious analogies to the McCarthy anti-Communist hearings in 1950s America. The highly controversial nature of the politics of *The Crucible*, which lauds those who refuse to name names, led to the play's mixed response. In later years, however, it has become one of the most studied and performed plays of American theater.

Three years after *The Crucible*, in 1956, Miller found himself persecuted by the very force that he warned against, when he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Miller refused to name people he allegedly saw at a Communist writers' meeting a decade before, and he was convicted of contempt. He later won an appeal. Also in 1956, Miller married actress Marilyn Monroe. The two divorced in 1961, one year before her death. That year Monroe appeared in her last film, *The Misfits*, which is based on an original screenplay by Miller. After divorcing Monroe, Miller wed Ingeborg Morath, to whom he remained married until his death in 2005. The pair had a son and a daughter. Miller also wrote the plays *A Memory of Two Mondays* and the short *A View from the Bridge*, which were both staged in 1955. His other works include *After the Fall* (1964), a thinly veiled account of his marriage to Monroe, as well as *The Price* (1967), *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977), and *The American Clock* (1980). His most recent works include the plays *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee* (1993), and *Broken Glass* (1993), which won the Olivier Award for Best Play. Although Miller did not write frequently for film, he did pen an adaptation for the 1996 film version of *The Crucible* starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder, which garnered him an Academy Award nomination. Miller's daughter Rebecca married Day-Lewis in 1996.

THE DREAM DELUSION OF JOE KELLER

All My Sons deals with the dream delusion of Joe Keller, seemingly successful, self-made man who, to attain the material upward mobility, adopted unethical and immoral means in the past. As the play opens, Joe Keller is described as a "heavy man of stolid mind and build, a business man these many years, but with the imprint of the machine-shop worker and boss still upon him". (I, 6) He appears to be a magnet in the neighborhood—neighbors come and go from his yard, and a young boy comes to play games with Joe. He is easily content with simple things, like reading the newspaper on the porch, and enjoys spending time with his family.

At the introspective phase of life, Keller realizes the emptiness of his success. The seeds of unethical means he has sowed in the past have brought him bitter harvest and sore fruits. The protagonist is a representative type of the character who has lived through the Depression and despite a lack of education has been able to attain the worldly success, hoping his son would inherit it. Joe represents common hopes and aspirations of American society, ultimately willing to achieve material prosperity.⁴

Miller reveals Keller's problem and trouble: "His cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." ⁵ According to Keller's moral code, his actions are not criminal as he is doing it for the sake of the family. Consequently, he denies any responsibility or guilt and insists on his innocence. For Keller, "Nothing is bigger than the family." (III, 83) The setting of the play described at the beginning of Act One also emphasizes this narrow-minded and restricted view: "The stage is hedged on right and left by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere." (I, 3) Miller's description of the backyard of the Keller home illustrates a metaphor for Keller's mind and range of vision. Keller indirectly admits his suffering through his speech with Bert: "Seein' the jail ain't allowed, Bert. You know that." (I, 11) Metaphorically, his guilty mind is a kind of jail which causes him suffering, yet he cannot admit it.

So he uses Bert to be his spy in order to know whether or not people are still talking about his past deeds. Keller tells Anne, his son's fiancée: "The only one still talks about it is my wife." (I, 31) Kate, on the other hand, indicates: "That's because you keep on playing policeman with the kids. All their parents hear out of you is jail, jail, jail." (I, 31) Keller tries to convince himself that the people who used to call him "Murderer" (I, 31) are the same who play with him: "Every Saturday night the whole gang is playin' poker in this arbor. All the ones who yelled murderer takin' my money now." (I, 31) Joe Keller, an escapist, wants to run away from reality. To safeguard himself, he has prepared around him a web of his false assumptions. He asserts that the power of money makes people forget his indulgence in crime. The truth seems surrendered to almighty money. His assertion underlines the corrupt mentality of American society which recognizes and honors the material success attained by betraying the character-ethic.

Keller sees the family as everything. His view is expressed by Sue, their neighbor when she calls his family "The Holy family." (II, 49) Sue is of course ironic. Keller holds up the family as a supreme ideal by lying to himself and believing his lies. In this sense, he tries to be the perfect father, husband, businessman and neighbor, but his guilt, shame, and the reality are something totally different. The family is his only justification for the crime he has committed. He is able to stave off guilt by telling Chris and Kate and, ultimately, himself, that he only did it for the family: "Chris... Chris, I did it for you... For you! A business for you." (I, 15) And "I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's

something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head!" (III, 83) He is willing to put all other ethics aside for the integrity of taking care of the family, and he lies and cheats by covering up the cracked airplane parts. Joe indicates this fact: "What could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business ...". (II, 67)

THE FAMILY MEMBERS AND REFLECTING THE VALUES OF THEIR WORLD

At the beginning of the play, the self-made Joe, devoted Kate and loving Chris appear to be a perfect family. Their self-deception and guilt are laid bare as the play develops. Their nature is revealed as they react to the crisis that arises "whenever the hand of the distant past reaches out of its grave ... to reveal some unreadable hidden order behind the amoral chaos of events." For Miller, "it is the point of *All My Sons* – that there are times when things do indeed cohere".⁶ The only outside world for Keller is his business. Therefore, he is reflecting the values of this world. The business world does not have human values. Thus, Miller puts part of blame for Keller's action on the society and business world whose values are fake. In this kind of world, human values are discarded. Joe is not the only one to blame; other characters have taking part in causing his guilt, self-deception, and betrayal directly or indirectly. Chris, for example, is part of this dilemma, for reasons which are shown by George:

Then why isn't your name on the business? Explain that to her!

Chris: What the hell has that got to do with...?

George: Annie, why isn't his name on it?

Chris: Even when I don't own it! (III, 61-62)

Most likely, Chris tries to do something but he was afraid of consequences as he reports: "I don't know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer." (I, 15) Then Joe tells Chris that he has collected his money by being honest and working hard:

"Sometimes I think you're... ashamed of the money. ... It's good money, there is nothing wrong with that. " (I, 41)

Though Chris has suspicions, but he ignores and tries to be like his father: "If I have to grub for money all day long at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want a family, I want some kids, I want to build something that I can give myself to." (I, 17) There is more than one incident which shows Chris's knowledge of the past deed, when he asks Joe not to talk about his partner as: "People misunderstand you!" (II,53) For Sue, Chris who always gives lessons of ideology and values to Dr. Bayliss, Sue's husband, has done some compromise with his idealist nature. After Sue's departure, Annie tells Chris how people on the block including Sue consider Joe guilty. But Chris' love for his father makes him deny the fact. Annie, too, seems convinced by Chris firm opinion about his father. However, she reminds him that she has turned her face from her father assuming him guilty. She has not forgiven her own father, and threatens Chris that if anything wrong she comes to know she can do the same with Keller.

THE IDEALISTIC YOUTH AND THE FAMILY'S DILEMMA

Chris Keller is responsible for his family's dilemma. The idealistic youth who energetically professes to detest dishonesty is as guilty as his parents for attempting to hide from reality. Though he persists

in pushing his mother toward an acceptance of his brother's death, he does so for his own selfish reasons and not because he thinks it is in her best interest to be able to face reality. Likewise, even though he adopts a high moral tone and energetically indicts his father for his criminal irresponsibility, Chris knows that his words ring hollow because he has long suspected his father's guilt but deliberately avoided confronting the truth — again for purely selfish motives: "I suspected my father and I did nothing about it." (III, 87)

At some level, Chris fears that, if he allows himself to see his father's human imperfections, he will also have to recognize his own limitations — and his experiences in the war makes him dread that confrontation. Having watched heroic young men under his command die selflessly in battle to save their comrades, Chris feels guilty for failing them and surviving the war. Chris desperately wants to escape this guilt and the anguish it produces, so, when given the chance, he tries to seek relief by disguising his disgust with himself as contempt for his father. His father become his scapegoat, and Chris casts all his own feelings of guilt and self-loathing onto his father in the hope that, by destroying his father, he can somehow expiate his own sins and escape from his own personal torment. In a revealing comment, Chris tells his father why he is outraged by his socially irresponsible act: "I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father." (III, 83) By buying into the ideal father myth, Chris perpetuates the lie that his father is anything more than just a man. Such self-deception not only fosters Keller's illusions, but also paves the way for Chris's eventual, and inevitable, disillusionment. He demands the impossible — perfection from the imperfect — and inadvertently reinforces Keller's absurd conception of himself as above the law and his society. Paradoxically, when faced with the unmistakable proof that this unshakable image of his father has been nothing but an illusion, Chris unrealistically expects and demands the kind of noble gesture that is inconsistent with his father's badly flawed character.

Ann Deever suspects Keller's guilt and betrayal because of the letter she received from Larry before his suicide; however, she refrains from impeaching Keller until she feels compelled to do so in order to save her relationship with Chris. Her motives are selfish, governed primarily by a fundamental drive for self-preservation.

Kate knows very well her husband's deed. When Joe Keller plays a game with the neighbor's children, Kate warns him that he must stop "the whole jail business!", Joe replies, "What have I got to hide?" (II, 74) This indicates that there is something to hide. According to Stephen Centolla, Joe and Kate are "uncomfortable together because of their shared guilt and shame." ⁷ One is overconfident and the other is anxious. Joe and his wife live in fear of bad news, about their son and about the crime they have conspired to deny, the two inevitable connected in their minds. All the characters are drawn together by love, but that love becomes the source of a certain corruption. Christopher Bigsby indicates that:

Indeed, no one in this play is without culpability, without cruelty, without guilt. Kate's obsession with one son's fate makes her act with a callous disregard for the future of the other. Ann and George act in some degree out of guilt for the callousness with which they have treated their father. Even Joe Keller's suicide is, in part, an act of self-justification and 'a counterblow to his wife and son'. Like some Chinese who hang themselves in the doorways of the people who have offended them, and that many suicides are motivated by a desire to accuse or leave a residue of guilt.⁸ Kate tells Chris

that she has seen a dream, a kind of nightmare in which Larry falls from the sky despite her attempts to save him. This, however, indicates that at some level of her subconscious, Kate knows right well the truth of her son's death. Besides, the way she dreams of him as falling from the sky shows the blame she bears her husband and his faulty cylinder heads for the death of her son. Yet, she hopes that Larry is still alive somewhere, for this belief is at the crux of her ability to continue supporting her husband. Otherwise, she would have overtly rejected him for shipping the faulty cylinder heads:

Your brother's alive, darling, because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father. (III, 63-64)

Harold Clurman blames Kate Keller for being the "the villain in the Keller's home." 9 She is fully aware of Joe's crime from the very start, but she never openly speaks of it in order to keep "her brood safe and her home undisturbed." 10 Instead of encouraging her husband to face his responsibilities honestly, she protects him against prosecution by defending Joe and tells George that Joe was staying home from work on the day the cracked engine heads were shipped out. On the other hand, Kate denies her son's death by desperately trying to freeze the moment of Larry's disappearance. In this way, it is her silence and her selfishness that partly causes Steve Deever's imprisonment and his family's breakup. Therefore, she is also guilty by being an accomplice in the crime, while Joe commits it. Accordingly, "the play shows that Kate, as much as Joe, destroyed George's family" and "she [Kate] must be condemned along with Keller because of her active cooperation with the crime" In her mind, Kate connects Joe's criminal act with the absence of their son.¹¹

When hearing the news of George Deever's visit, Kate warns Keller, "be smart now, Joe. The boy is coming. Be smart." (I, 43) Obviously, Kate knows the real purpose behind George's visit, and her anger and stiffness seems to tell Joe that he is the murderer and his final day comes with George's coming. Keller is deeply hurt and frightened by her warning and suggestion. Kate frequently uses her knowledge of Joe's actual guilt to avenge for causing her son's death and her own torture and misery. Miller himself also points out Kate's sinister side. Miller comments that Kate is "a woman using truth as a weapon against the man who had harmed her son [...] there's a sinister side to her in short." 12 James Flanagan, reads George's arrival as an activity giving different dimensions to several strands. To him: "The play is a web, then of home spun fidelities, of faith placed and misplaced, a network of belief that, like the apple tree, snaps under pressure."¹³ George comes with the snap of truth to shake belief of Chris and Joe's web of illusion. Realizing the danger in George's arrival, Joe offers to set his career as a lawyer in his home town. By doing so, it is his effort to win the sympathy of Annie and George. Moreover, he tries to tempt Annie offering a good job for her father. But on the other hand, he is not willing to accept Steve Deever as his partner. The practical minded Joe is not ready to show any concrete favor to Deever who is actually a victim of Keller's deception. Joe's selfish nature makes him forget the sacrifice of Deever which saved him from total ruin.¹⁴

DREAMS AND VALUES IN THE SOCIETY

Joe's head is so full of dreams that he will let his son inherit his factory which he has run for decades. This is related to the American ethos and here we can sympathize with Joe as a tragic figure. Samuel A. Yorks explains: "After all, in our society a business to pass on to one's sons is a badge of honor for a life well spent. Joe obeys the values the clan has taught him."¹⁵ Joe's problem is not in the fact he

could not distinguish between right and wrong as Miller himself explains, but in the fact since he sticks to the small world such as a family, he could not turn his eyes to the general society at large, the world beyond the family. Joe has been morally misled by the 'mores' of an abhorrent society, a society that Chris comes to describe as "the land of the great big dogs." (III, 87) Keller has been taught that it is the winner who continues to play the game and that society can turn a blind eye to moral concerns so long as the production line keeps rolling, this is the essence of capitalism. In *All My Sons*, Miller makes it clear that society in general values money and profit more than human life. Bigsby indicates: The play may express regret, through several characters, that money has become a primary determinant, but it is money that Chris promises to Ann. What is at stake is a model of human relationships which turns on mutual dependency, mutual responsibility.¹⁶ In addition, although the neighbors know about Keller's guilt as Sue indicates: "There's not a person on the block who doesn't know the truth", (II, 49) they are still friends with him and seem to accept it. This makes things even worse because this way Keller's illusion seems to be morally right and confirmed. Nevertheless, Keller denies any connection to the crime and to the community whose trust he has betrayed, by acting as if the court paper were proof of his innocence. His denial of personal culpability shows not only his lack of remorse, but also his unwillingness to face the consequences of his actions.¹⁷

Keller, thinks that he has achieved the "American Dream": he lives in a "comfortable house" despite being an "uneducated man." His strong family unit is an illusion. His wife is ill, Chris is discontent, and Larry has committed suicide as a result of his father's narrow-minded and reprehensible decision. It is through the letter from Larry that Keller realizes that he has not only killed one son but all of his sons. Bigsby indicates that *All My Sons* is A play about repression, about the compromises effected by individuals negotiating between private needs and public obligations. Joe is not the only character to substitute the story of his life for his life. They all construct fictions that enable them to justify themselves in their own eyes, as much as in the eyes of others. And this, it seems, is equally true of the neighbors and, beyond them, of a society that generates its own myths about innocence. What we witness is in part a collision of fictions which are mutually destructive, and, hence, their slow erosion, as what has been repressed begins to force its way to the surface.¹⁸ Joe Keller, the real culprit, successfully manages to make all his neighbors and even Steve's children believe that he is innocent and Steve's negligence causes that fatal accident. In fact, nobody has forgotten Joe's crime; rather, Keller himself wants to forget the past and even appeals to Annie to forget. But it is quite difficult to forget that incident and its consequences, which has almost destroyed her family; her father is being imprisoned, her mother is expecting a. Moreover, an accident makes them leave their house.¹⁹

Up until the very end of the play, Joe's loyalty to his family him to his responsibility to be moral outside his family. Though Joe is devastated after Chris blasts him about his lack of morality, Joe is not concerned with his lack of morality but about his relationship with Chris. Joe remains adamant in his belief that his responsibility to his family excuses all of his other responsibilities, even when Kate points out that this vision excuses his immoral act. Only after Joe hears Larry's suicide letter does he accept what he has been told. Joe gravely admits, "Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were" (III, 83). He realizes he has a moral responsibility in the world at large.²⁰ In fact, the origin of the plot of *All My Sons* lies in the incident of Joe Keller's rejection of guilt and its consequences. Joe Keller is the self-made man who has attained his success, starting from rags-to-riches. His success is stained with blood and deception.

In *All My Sons*, Miller shows how the impulse to betray and to deny responsibility for others, when left ungoverned, can run rampant and wreak havoc on the individual, his family, and his society — even, perhaps, civilization as a whole. The paradox of denial, therefore, is the very defense mechanism that is employed to justify the rightness of a socially reprehensible act can ultimately become the exclusive means by which an individual self-destructs. The Killers, and many of those around them, choose to blame everyone else for their dilemma, but only they are the authors of their destiny — and their failure to accept the tremendous burden of their freedom and responsibility is itself the cause of their personal tragedy.²¹

The purpose of Miller in *All My Sons* is to make Joe realize through various experiences that the sense of guilt, betrayal, and self-deception is larger than the family's interest: That one should not try to achieve success by betraying others. The lay *All My Sons* shows how the impulse of guilt and betrayal when left ungoverned, can wreak havoc on the individual, his family and his society. Joe's problem is that he cannot admit that he personally has feasible connection with his world, his universe or his society. What is right in Joe's ethos is the familial obligation, the father's duty to create something for his son. Joe is a man of limited view point. For Joe nothing is bigger than his family but Chris believes in the theory of achieving success without betraying others.

CONCLUSION

Arthur Miller stated that the issue of relatedness is the main one in *All My Sons*. The play introduces questions that involve an individual's obligation to society, personal responsibility, and the distinction between private and public matters. Keller can live with his actions during the war because he sees himself as answerable only to himself and his family, not to society as a whole. Miller criticizes Keller's myopic worldview, which allows him to discount his crimes because they were done "for the family." The principal contention is that Keller is wrong in his claim that there is nothing greater than the family, since there is a whole world to which Keller is connected. To cut yourself off from your relationships with society at large is to invite tragedy of a nature both public (regarding the pilots) and private (regarding the suicides). The reverse side of Miller's relatedness argument is his downplaying of the family as the nucleus of society. Somehow people are to feel a more general caring for others that is not drawn off by family obligations. What, then, is the place of the family in the larger social system? Discussions of the family serve mostly to contrast characters' opinions about an individual's responsibilities to the family versus society at large. The family is also presented as a unit that can be corrupted and damaged by the actions and denials of its individuals; a small-scale example of the way individual actions can corrupt society.

Joe Keller, a successful businessman, lives comfortably with his wife, Kate, and son, Chris, in a suburban American neighborhood. They have only one sadness in their lives – the loss of their other son, Larry, who went missing in World War II. After three years, Kate still clings to the hope that her son is alive. Chris would like her to give up that hope because he wants to marry Ann, an old neighbor and Larry's former fiancée. Ann arrives. Kate, sensing the reason for her visit, gets a little touchy. We learn that Ann's father is in prison for a crime he committed while working in Joe's factory. Faced with a batch of defective machine parts, he patched them and sent them out, causing the death of 21 pilots during the war. Turns out that Joe was also accused of this crime and convicted, but he was exonerated (set free) during the appeal. Steve went to prison; Joe returned home and made his business bigger and better. Soon after Ann's arrival, her brother George follows, straight from visiting his father in prison. He knows what Chris has in mind and is totally against

him marrying Ann. Joe and Kate do their best to charm George into submission, but finally it's Ann who sends him away. She wants to marry Chris no matter what. The marriage of Chris and Ann is becoming a reality – and Kate can't handle it, because it means Larry is truly dead. And if Larry is dead, she tells Chris, it's because his own father killed him, since Larry was also a pilot. Chris finally confronts his father's guilt in shipping those defective parts. But Chris won't do anything about it. He won't even ask his father to go to prison. Ann, who turned her back on her own father for the same reason, insists that Chris take a hard line. Joe Keller goes inside to get his things. A gunshot is heard. He's killed himself.

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