

Conflict of Ideal between Parents and Children in “All My Sons”

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Abstract

Arthur Miller, a social dramatist, mostly deals with the theme of social relationship in his plays. His play **All My Sons** deals with the theme of guilt and responsibility towards the nation one belongs to. Like other plays of Miller, it exhibits his ideas on various social as well as economic matters and voices his criticism on the capitalistic society of his time. He questions for the definition of success. The play exhibits a family where a son, Chris Keller, is not happy with his father and not ready to respect his father, Joe Keller, as a responsible person for the nation he belongs to and tries to make realized him that what he did at the cost of being successful in the past was not right. Actually Joe supplied American Air Force with defective cylinder heads during the Second World War, and that causes the death of twenty one pilots. Chris feels blame worthy for this doing of his father because he thinks as a father Joe did it only for the sake of his family and this continuous thinking in Chris' mind begins a conflict between a father and a son which continues till the very end of the play and Chris makes his father realized his responsibility for all his sons. Now Joe has acknowledged his guilt in less and he does not find any reason to live anymore and finally commits suicide with having these words on his lips '*All My Sons*'.

Key Words: Relationship, Guilt, Responsibility, Nation and Capitalistic.

Introduction

Arthur Miller's play **All My Sons** deals with the recoils of central character Joe Keller's deeds as a proprietor of a factory which supplies the United States Air Force with cylinder heads for aero planes during the Second World War. One day the manufacturing line produced faulty cylinder heads which must never have been used but Joe decided to have them shipped out anyway only for the cause of saving his established business from losing crucial government contracts. It causes the death of twenty one pilots. Miller presents a picture before us as to what happens when we take wrong decisions and give importance to us, our family and business set-up more than our society and our nation.

*In themes that frequently recur, Miller appears to be arguing strongly in favour of a certain positive relationship between the individual and society, against injustice, exploitation, competition and vested private interest. He also exposes the human tendency to put one's self above all else, which causes confusion and suffering. The basic principles of the economic system (capitalism) in which Miller's character react their drama are directly or in directly blamed for the psychological distortions which they exhibit.*¹

Miller surprises us by showing what can happen in the world and how a person, being guided by his selfish interest, can forget how to behave in a society of human beings. With the help of Joe Keller's character, Miller portrays a merchandise of the American capitalist system only to condemn and criticize him. Miller's play **All My Sons** may be called an appropriately representative play of the war times which brings out the war time ambience which breeds moral want oneness among money minded and insatiable people who find it a good chance for making money through profit earning.

Two Different Sets of Principles

The disagreement that continues throughout the play is personified by two different sets of principles. The older generation is represented by Joe Keller and Kate Keller and the younger generation is represented by Chris Keller and Larry Keller. Although Larry is no more for some years before the opening of the play, Larry is as much a character in the play as anyone who actually appears on the stage. The older generation in the play believes in family values and is ready to do anything at any cost for living a successful and luxurious life. It is right that all the wrong deeds are done by Joe as he always makes his decisions but at the same time it must have been duty of his better half Kate to come in limelight and try to convince her husband that he is going on a wrong path. Kate is also responsible for the tragedy which happens with the pilots. She has perhaps performed the duty of a good wife but it should also be remembered that she has to be honest with the society as well as the nation.

In contradiction the younger generation that is represented by Chris and Larry expresses their belief in moral etiquettes and ideals which are clearly shown in the thoughts of idealism that money is not the only thing for a happy and prosperous life. A conversation between Chris and Joe shows this:

Chris: Yes. I like it an hour a day. 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. Annie is in the middle of that. Now... where to I find it?

Keller: You mean... {Goes to him} Tell me something, you mean you'd leave the business?

*Chris: Yes. On this I would.*²

A Responsibility towards Society

*The form of Miller's plays is as he himself has described it, 'conventional realism'. Though he has freely used non-realistic theatre devices, he builds his plays on a ground work of facts and real life like relationships. The narrative proceeds from cause to effect, from the past to future. Words and actions in Miller's plays have consequences which reveal human nature in a particular social context. The realistic picture of life which Miller's plays project includes moral judgments on that picture.*³

Joe thinks that what he did is right because it is the demand of being a successful businessman and to prove himself as a good caretaker for his family. He justifies this for himself by his fixed trust that his dependability and liability lie only with his family, and not with anyone or anything else. Joe thinks that he is performing his responsibility very well and it shows in his words when Chris argues with him:

*What should I do? (Chris is silent) Jail? You want me to go to jail? If you want me to go, say so! Is that where I belong? Then tell me so! (Slight pause) What's the matter, why can't you tell me? (Furiously) You say everything else to me, say that! (Slight pause) I'll tell you why you can't say it. Because you know I don't belong there. Because you know! (With growing emphasis and passion, and a persistent tone of desperation) Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they ship a gun or a truck out a Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the God damn country is gotta go if I go! That's why you can't tell me.*⁴

All My Sons is a social play which presents a relationship between the individual and the society where the society is neglected for the cause of family he belongs to. Millers how a picture where Joe understands the meaning of responsibility very well if it is the case of his

family but at the same time he forgets his responsibility for the society he belongs to. He shows us what we are and what we actually want. He wants us to know what a society is. He assumes that a society is a group of many families, and so it was not morally right for Joe to remember his own family and forget the others'. Chris' words to Ann Deever show Miller's idea of '*being responsible*':

It takes a little time to toss that off. Because they weren't just men. For instance, one time it'd be raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little thing...but...That's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die... They killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly. A little more selfish and they'd've been here today. And I got an idea... watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of... responsibility. Man for man. You understand me? To show that, to bring that on to the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him. (Pause) And then I came home and it was incredible. I... there was no meaning in there. The whole thing to them was a kind of a... bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt... what you said...ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you've got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really alot, and there's blood on it. I didn't want to take any of it. And I guess that included you.⁵

Conclusion

In his play Miller wants to convey a sense of '*being responsible*' for the society as well as the nation one belongs to. Joe Keller forgot his responsibility and committed a crime not only in the case of the death or rather murder of twenty-one pilots but also in the case of Steve Deever where Steve was in jail and Joe was living a cheerful if with his wife and sons.

Many a time it is seen that in parents-children's relationship the parents have different views towards life than the children have. Chris knows his father's guilt so one day he feels himself in a state where he wants to communicate his guilt to him. In a helpless state he says to his father:

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. (Almost breaking) I can't look at you this way, I can't look at

*myself! He turns away, unable to face Keller.*⁶

Most of these gaps appear as a consequence of the different times they have seen. In the play **All My Sons** these differences between the parents and their children come not as a result of generation gap but as a result of materialistic happiness and prosperity. Joe Keller worked throughout his life and wanted to create a better future for his wife and sons but he forgot the cost. Joe could do anything for making his sons' bright future at the cost of his life but how he had decided that the society would pay for him and his family.

Miller's crucial point is that people should look beyond their inner circle of society. Joe chose to neglect whatever does not concern his little circle of society. One should remember that one's duty towards the nation is more vital than that towards one's family and own self. Social responsibility means that one should think of one's own interests and necessities as secondary to the interests and necessities of the society or the nation. In order to fulfill his responsibility towards his family, Joe ignores his responsibility towards his nation. With sheer disregard for the welfare of his country, he supplies faulty cylinder heads to the air force that causes thereby several air crashes and deaths. A responsiveness of his responsibility in the culpability is created in Joe's heart by his owns on (Chris) for whom Joe has worked so hard throughout his life. When Joe realizes his guilt, he commits suicide. He punishes himself for his attitude of neglect towards a larger responsibility towards the society and his excessive attention to the smaller responsibility towards his family.

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