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## Theme of Arthur Miller's Play All My Sons

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**Abstract:** *The dramas of Arthur Miller are realistic, their heroes are naturally real men of the real society. His usual themes are the relationship of the individual to society. He also shows the personal responsibility that any individual owes to society and society to the individual. The hero of All My Sons, Joe Keller, a business man with a limited vision, is caught in the quagmire of the materialistic values of a society the key of which is money-success. Joe Keller and his business partner Steve Deever owned a factory engaged in the business of manufacturing cylinder heads for the Army Air force planes during the war. Incidentally, a batch of the cylinder heads proved to be defectively manufactured. However, their defect was ignored and they were passed O.K. by the factory and supplied to the Air Force. This supply of defective parts proved fatal resulting in the death of twenty-one American pilots. Consequently, a court case was instituted against both the partners who were eventually convicted. However, Joe Keller got the benefit of doubt and was subsequently released, but Steve Deever was imprisoned. Chris, the second son of Joe Keller, is full of remorse and disillusionment. He feels that the dead pilots have sacrificed their lives for the sake of nothing, and in this world life is going on as before, as if nothing has happened. George, the son of the convicted partner Steve, comes to know that Joe, and not his father Steve is the real culprit. However, Kate, Joe's wife, is a righteous woman. She asks her husband to accept his guilt before his son and take the whole responsibility upon his head. Father-son relationship is not a new subject for the dramatists.*

**Key Words:** Realistic, naturally, relationship, personal responsibility, individual, society, limited vision.

Miller's heroes are ordinary human beings. They are the real products of the great American Dream. As the dramas of Arthur Miller are realistic, their heroes are naturally real men of the real society. Of the six writers representing the American Theater, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Clifford Odets and Arthur Miller, Miller is the one who participates most actively in the social life of today. He keeps his eyes open to the people around him. He is preoccupied with the relationship between the individual and the society with all its forces of politics, money and industry. Miller's usual themes are the relationship of the individual to society. He also shows the personal responsibility that any individual owes to society and society to the individual. Thus his heroes are individuals who are influenced by the society or who influence the society by their actions. They are social creatures who are accountable for their actions towards the society.

Miller's tragic heroes are not Aristotelian in the strict sense of the term. The Greek idea is considered archaic in the modern context of social tragedy. In modern times the old Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero is considered irrelevant, as the very nature of modern tragedy has undergone tremendous change, as Miller himself writes,

"In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another we are often held to be below tragedy-or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words, it is most often implied."

According to the classical conception, the tragic hero is placed against forces which are beyond his power and control. These forces are often named as Fate or Destiny. But in modern drama it is 'the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society' that is the major subject of representation. The essential dramatic situation in all his plays is that "his characters find themselves firmly and inexorably planted within a



family structure which in turn reflects pressures of society at large". From this point of view, Miller suggests that his play *All My Sons* should be seen. This tragedy is "a play, which is meant to become part of the lives of its audience—a play seriously meant for people of common sense, and relevant to both their domestic lives and their daily work, but an experience which widens their awareness of connection—the filaments to the past and the future which lie concealed in life."

The hero of *All My Sons*, Joe Keller, a business man with a limited vision, is caught in the quagmire of the materialistic values of a society the key of which is money-success. As the play opens Jim Keller and his neighbour Frank are seen talking on general affairs of the day. It is learnt that Larry Keller, the older son of Joe, fought as a pilot in the Second World War. He was reported missing and presumed to be dead, though his mother Kate still believes that her son would return one day.

Joe Keller and his business partner Steve Deever owned a factory engaged in the business of manufacturing cylinder heads for the Army Air force planes during the war. Incidentally, a batch of the cylinder heads proved to be defectively manufactured. However, their defect was ignored and they were passed O.K. by the factory and supplied to the Air Force. This supply of defective parts proved fatal resulting in the death of twenty-one American pilots. Consequently, a court case was instituted against both the partners who were eventually convicted. However, Joe Keller got the benefit of doubt and was subsequently released, but Steve Deever was imprisoned. But the neighbours and acquaintances still believed that Joe was guilty.

Chris, the second son of Joe Keller, is full of remorse and disillusionment. He feels that the dead pilots have sacrificed their lives for the sake of nothing, and in this world life is going on as before, as if nothing has happened. The values of co-operation and mutual responsibility which they had built up by their actions had been lost. Chris feels that people have lost all values and meaning of life. He is pained to see the loss and deterioration of moral values in this world of business. He realizes that the world is too much with us and we are running but the rat-race. The following words reveal Chris's deep-rooted anguish,

"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 loot, and there's blood on it. I didn't want to take any of it."

George, the son of the convicted partner Steve, comes to know that Joe, and not his father Steve is the real culprit. It was Joe who had asked Steve "to weld, cover up the cracks in any way he could, and ship them out". George has also come to know the fact that Joe Keller had promised to take the responsibility, but when they were prosecuted, Keller cunningly saved himself.

This revelation shocks Joe's son Chris also who feels that his world has collapsed. Every child sees an image of an ideal person in his father. But the illusions of Chris about an ideal father are shattered. He is totally disillusioned. He has lost faith in the world in which people like his father live and prosper. He, in a gust of rage, leaves the house.

However, Kate, Joe's wife, is a righteous woman. She asks her husband to accept his guilt before his son and take the whole responsibility upon his head. Only then Chris can be brought back. Keller, however, maintains that he had done everything for the sake of his family. By now Chris himself returns and tells his mother that he is going to leave them for ever. A letter written by Larry is produced which makes the situation more intense and tragic, **"I can't bear to live any more-I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me missing"**.

Now Joe's conscience wakens. It dictates him to confess his guilt and do penance. Kate tries to restrain him. She fears that Joe has decided to end his life. She says that Larry would not have allowed him to do so, "Larry was your son, too." But Keller's touching final reply states the whole theme of the play, **"Sure he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were."**



Joe Keller, the hero of this tragedy, is different from either the Greek tragic hero or the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy. A Shakespearean tragic hero is a bundle of passions, but a Miller's hero is the victim of society. Miller's hero commits the crime, not on account of any inherent passion-tragic flaw-but because of his family, a social unit which had assumed important dimension in American social structure.

Joe Keller is a man of 'society', the American society, which determines his actions. For him, there is 'nothing bigger' than a family. Family is his universe in which alone he moves and of which alone he keeps on thinking. He is ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of his family. Life for him means allegiance to his family. He can even ignore the basic morals of life. Even his country is subsidiary to his family. His primary allegiance is to his family and family members.

Keller does not see his crime in the light of ethics or morality. Rather he tries his best to justify his guilt on the ground that he did it for the sake of his family. He tells his family members, "For your sake, for both of you, that's all I ever lived for-?" Nothing is bigger for him than family relationships, as he mentions emphatically, **"I'm his father and he is my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put bullet in my head!"**

There is a vital difference between Joe Keller and his partner Steve Deever. While Joe thinks of the family in a narrow sense, Deever thinks of the nation in a wider sense. Joe Keller does everything for the family. He does not hesitate in resorting to socially unethical means in order to gain riches. Thus he represents the modern industrialist, or the modern commercialist craving for amassing wealth at the cost of every other consideration. Deever is a morally different person. He is concerned for several things other than the self interests. For him others, 'all his sons', are important, and so he can sacrifice the family for their sake. Keller, on the other hand, sacrifices 'all his sons' for the sake of his family. For Joe Keller, social obligations have little meaning. Personal and family obligations are paramount. Hence he is selfish, while Deever is sacrificing.

The major cause of Joe Keller's tragedy is that he fails to see beyond the bounds of his family. His only concern is with two typical family terms-'father' and 'son'. He sees this world from the point of view of the typical father whose sole aim in life is to see his children settled for success in this world. Universally, every father sees the dream that his son should go a step ahead of him in gaining a place in society. He says, "I'm thinking of Chris. See...that is what I mean. You get older, you want to feel that you-accomplished something. My only accomplishment is my son. I ain't brainy. That's all I accomplished." So Joe too thinks of the continuity of his materialistic success through his son Chris, **"I want you to spread out, Chris, I want you to use what I made for you-with joy, Chris, without shame-with joy."**

Americanism is evidently seen in the character of Joe Keller. His sub-urban middle class background, his belief in the material success and in the family as the ultimate social and moral unit, all these reflect typical Americanism in him. Like other tragic heroes of Miller, Keller is also committed to an ideal. In his case it is the ideal of family loyalty, even though it may be a narrow ideal in the perspective of the larger social loyalty. No doubt, he is a self-made industrialist, but Joe Keller had seen dreams of an ideal family in which he could live with his wife and sons in the most blessed condition. With this aim he had been working all his life. He worked for the sake of money, but money for the prosperity and success of his family. He has no hesitation in accepting the fact that he is made for his family, as he assures Chris, "What the hell did I work for? That's only for you". So Keller's statements speak of the importance of his family in his set of values.

Father-son relationship is not a new subject for the dramatists. It is a universal relationship and a lot has been written on this relationship. In this sense Miller was not doing anything unique by selecting this theme for his drama. But what appealed him was the nature of relationship that is spoiling the very structure of the modern society. In Miller's opinion, when commercial and material considerations get hold of this relationship, it ceases to have meaning. It becomes a commercial relationship, as between two traders in the market. This is what happens in *All My Sons*. The act of Joe Keller makes *All My Sons* a tragedy of father-son relationship. Harold Clurman comments on this relationship,



**"The father in Miller's work is a recurrent figure regarded with awe, devotion, love, even when he is proved lamentably fallible and when submission to him becomes painfully questionable....In the crucial confrontation with his father Chris reveals himself (and Miller) by exclaiming, '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 a father.' In this he has moved beyond the realm of common sense and speaks of fatherhood in a religious sense."**

Every son looks into his father an ideal person. He looks for moral support in his father. But when this vision of a support is crumbled, the son is naturally upset, and the situation creates a disbelief in this very world of relationships. This happens with Chris Keller. When he hears the story of his father's crime from Steve Deever, his respect and moral attitude towards his father is shattered. This puts a question mark to the concept of morality in the mind of Chris, who refuses to be a party to his father's crime. The image of an ideal father and an embodiment of ethical code that he had been so far cherishing in his mind now become faint and tarnished. Everything now seems to stink of the blood of the twenty-one pilots who died and also Larry. There is now seen a breach in the father-son relationship, as seen in the following dialogues,

Chris : quietly, incredibly: How could you do that ? How ?

Keller : What's the matter with you !

Chris : Dad.....Dad, you killed twenty-one men !

Keller : What, killed ?

Chris : You killed them, you murdered them.

Keller, as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris: How could I Kill anybody ?

Chris : Dad ! Dad !

Keller, trying to hush him: I didn't kill anybody !

Chris : Then explain it to me. What did you do ?

Explain it to me or I'll tear you to pieces !"

The heroes of Arthur Miller are essentially social creatures. They are very much the members of the American society, a society which is passing through a very critical and transitional phase. Hence the fate of the members of such society is associated with the nature of this society. The tragedy of Joe Keller, therefore, is the tragedy of a man who does not come up to the expectations of his society. He fails to discharge his duty to the society. All My Sons illustrates the theme, as Pramila Singh remarks that "a man must recognize his ethical responsibility to the world outside his home as well as in his own home." But Joe Keller fails to recognize this 'ethical responsibility'. His eyes are blinded by the 'El Dorado' of the American dream. He persists in believing in this American myth to the point of absurdity and irrationality. The role of reason is put in the background. Passion over-rides the rationale of social existence in the case of Joe. Hence he falls.

Miller seems to suggest that the social system of which man is a product has an iron hold upon him. This social system recognizes the 'law of success'. Like most other Americans, Joe Keller ardently believes in this law of success, which teaches the Americans that theirs is a great country and that there is no room here for a man who proves to be a failure. In other words, a man who cannot make use of the formula of success has no right to live in America. Joe Keller is an ardent believer of this formula. He wants to materialize this formula by being a true man of business. His target is success in business in all practical sense. As a businessman he does not want to be a failure. When Chris argues with him, he tries to explain his views about business and success in business,

"I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work, you're out of business: you don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?"

Even Kate fails to convince him of his 'faulty' dream. Keller is in fact an opportunist, who does not want to miss any chance that comes his way. He has put on the spectacles of success. He has become a practical man of this



materialistic world. He does not want to lose any chance that comes his way. In his opinion man does not get a chance always. He tells his son Chris, **"I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty one years old you don't get another chance."**

But Chris, though young and not so much experienced in the ways of the world, is not convinced by what his father tells him. He is ready with his own arguments, **"For me!-..... What the hell do you think I was thinking of the goddam business? Is that as far as you mind can see the business? What is that the world-the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me?"**

Personally, Joe Keller is a considerate husband and a fond and loving father. But practically he is selfish. He thinks only in terms of his own self. His approach to life is limited to his own self and his family. That way he neither a responsible citizen nor an ideal father. He, therefore, fails to come up to the expectations of his son-the expectations of a good and responsible man-the expectations of an ideal father. There is nothing uncommon or ruthless about him. Like every other family man, his ambitions are a small and comfortable home for his family and a successful business to pass on to his sons. But he is not worldly-wise, nor is he fastidious in achieving his goals. His approach is narrow. He only thinks that it is the duty of a father to see his son succeed in life and in so doing he is only performing a social duty by trying to establish his son in his business. Like every other father he too wants his son to progress in life, "to spread out", so to say. But by doing so he neglects the larger interests, i. e., the society and the nation. He has reduced himself to be only a fond father and not a responsible citizen.

As a writer of *All My Sons*, Miller shows adequate understanding of man and society. He has summarized his theme as "the responsibility of man to society or the responsibility of man to his actions as recognition of his ethical responsibility to the world and outside his home as well as in his own home". *All My Sons* is, therefore, the author's contention that no individual's action can be self-contained, not even within the campus of the family. The 'ethical responsibility to the world' is as much the social necessity for a man of this world. Though Miller does not preach morality, he should be considered a social moralist. Through the story of Joe Keller he intends to project the idea that evasion of social responsibility needs punishment. Keller's offence is more social than legal. It is an offence unpardonable. Conflict is an essential element of a tragedy. Tragedy issues out a conflict which afflicts the tragic hero and affects his fate. Joe Keller's case is not different. His is "a conflict between the uncomprehending self and solid social or economic structure, the family, the community system." Tragedy emerges when the protagonist breaks his connection with the society, or he comes in clash with it, or when he begins to consider himself as an independent entity. Success is not an undesired aspiration. But for success, a harmonious bond between the self and the society is necessary. When a man fails to establish this bond, tragedy ensues. Miller tells, "Joe Keller's trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong, but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he personally has viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." Joe Keller's estrangement from his society causes his misery and ultimate downfall. Joe is no identity to an independent phenomenon, but it is integral to his society.

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