

**The Irreconcilable Relation between Family and Society:
A Study of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.**

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* is one of his famous plays, yet it is Miller's highly controversial play. Its contentious nature stems from the fact that Miller's idea about man's relationship with his society is extremely interpretive. Thus, the aim of this paper is to identify one of the major problems in this play, which is to which side man must commit his life, his family or his society. This paper shows that both sides are equally important, and man should not side with one on the expense of the other. Joe Keller, the main character in the play, believes that his family and his personal life are separable from his society. Thus, he considers the former more sacred. As a result, he devotes himself completely to his family and he subordinates his society accordingly. This matter allows him to import a shipment of defective cylinders to the Air Force of his country, and this causes the death of twenty-one pilots. When he is asked he answers that he does so because he wants to secure and guarantee the future of his family. Ironically, he does not know that he also causes the death of his son in the process. Thus, he is totally disillusioned and disappointed, and he commits suicide at the end of the play.



The Irreconcilable Relation between Family and Society
In Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is considered one of the greatest American playwrights. He writes social drama which is concerned not only with the evils of society, but with man's commitment to his society in general and his family in particular. Most of his plays show that man must make a compromise between his social and familial duties. Man should not neglect either of them. Both of them are equally important. He, as a result, must face the repercussions of his deeds if he neglects either of them. Henceforth, the aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which these two aspects are important

All My Sons made its premiere in January, 1947. It was the first play that gave Miller a real accolade after the terrible failure he had received from his first play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944). It is *All My Sons* that thrust him into public reputation. The play ran for 328 performances. The New York Drama Critics awarded to this play their Circle Award in 1947. Also, a movie was made by Hollywood, based on this play. In this play Miller attacks capitalism in the American life after Second World War. Capitalism is shown in this play as creating an exploitive system which denies the individual identity. American businessmen are delineated as selfish and monstrous who want to benefit from war, no matter what the cost is. They make from people's blood a means to gain their profits. Thus, *All My Sons* is an attack against those who make war a business to make use of, and who care more for their individualistic interests.

The play comprises three acts, and it is laid in a small American town in August, a few years after World War II. The events of the play occur on a single set, the back yard of the Keller home. The important events of the play have already transpired. The only action that occurs within the time frame of the narrative is the revelation of certain facts about the past, and it is important to track how the revelations change the relationships among the characters as well as their own self-definition .

All My Sons is concerned with a producer of aircraft engines, Joe Keller, who, under strain of wartime production, allows a batch of faulty cylinder heads to be supplied to the Army Air Force in the knowledge that they may cause catastrophic failure and thus endanger life. He does so rather than risk losing his contract and thus possibly his business, the business he wishes to pass to his sons. In the subsequent court case he denies responsibility, insisting that he had not visited the plant on the day in question, allowing his employee and neighbour, Steve Deever, to take the

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blame. At that time, Deever's daughter, Ann, had been engaged to the Kellers' son, Larry, who himself served in the Air Force. Following their father's conviction both Ann and her brother, George, sever all connection with their father, refusing to visit him in prison, or even to write to him. To sustain his own family, Keller sacrifices another thing. When Larry, a pilot, goes missing, Kate Keller refuses to acknowledge his death, not least because to do so would be to accept a symbolic connection between her husband's action and her own loss.

The play opens as their other son, Chris Keller, invites Ann to stay, intending to propose a marriage which will, effectively, signify public acknowledgement of Larry's death and thus precipitate a crisis for all of them as past and present are brought into immediate confrontation. The action takes place in less than twenty-four hours. As soon as we are introduced to Keller, we can easily identify his businessman character. Miller describes him in the stage directions as "*a heavy man of stolid mind and build, a business man these many years, but with the imprint of machine-shop worker and boss still upon him.*"¹ Keller's tragedy lies in his inability to understand his duties towards his society. He thinks that his family is more sacred than any other thing in the world. He cuts himself loose from his society and he does every possible thing just to secure his family's future. Christopher Bigsby sees that the play is "in part about the individual's responsibility for his own actions and in part about the obligations he has to his society. The crime at its centre raises in stark form the clash between self-interest and human solidarity."² Moreover, Keller also believes that nothing in life is more important than business, because it is the business that secures the family. He tries so hard to make his son, Chris, understand this code, but all in vain, because Chris belongs to a different generation. He becomes so much furious when he hears that Chris intends to leave his job:

CHRIS: I'll get out. I'll get married and live some place else. May be
in New York.

KELLER: Are you crazy?

CHRIS: I've been a good son too long, a good sucker. I'm through
with it.

KELLER: You've got a business here, what the hell is this?

CHRIS: The business doesn't inspire me.

KELLER: Must you be inspired?

CHRIS: Yes. I like it an hour a day. If I have to grub for money all the
day long at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want a family, I
want some kids, I want to build something I can give myself to.

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KELLER: You mean—(*Goes to him.*) Tell me something, you mean
you'd leave the business? (15)

What Miller wants to impress upon our minds through this play is that man should subordinate his personal interests and even the family interests to the interests of his society at large. This play, like many other plays by Miller, shows his deep concern with social issues. As is said, Joe Keller regards his responsibility to his family as the most sacred, and this was the motive that did not make him hesitate to supply the defective cylinder heads to the Air Force.

In spite of Keller's casual and feeble endeavours to illuminate the pervading darkness that falls on his family, he expresses his sense of guilt from the opening minutes of the play. His concern about Kate's discovering the fallen tree and the compassion he feels for her when his son, Chris, informs him that she was up when the tree cracked at four in the morning, partly disguises a deeper concern. He tells Chris that they cannot tell Kate that they believe the elder son, Larry, is dead or insist that she should face the truth because the finality of Larry's death would seal his own guilt. He is frightened at the thought of telling her because he knows she would associate Larry's death with those of the twenty-one pilots killed by faulty cylinder heads he ordered and shipped. Clearly, he knows that Kate is aware of his culpability in the crime even though she never openly speaks of it. When Chris tries to elicit his approval to marry Ann Deever, Larry's fiancée, Joe tries to evade commitment, apprehensive of how Kate would react and how such a union would resurrect a past he fears to confront. "Isn't it your business, too?" Chris asks. "You have a talent for ignoring things"—to which Joe admits with unintended irony, "I ignore what I gotta ignore" (14). Terry Otton suggests that in spite of Keller's "seeming obliviousness to the past, he cannot stop playing 'jail' and 'police' with the neighbor's children; and when Kate insists 'There's no jail here,' expressing her own denial of guilt, Joe responds defensively that he has 'nothing to hide.'" ³ Moreover, Kate intentionally tells Keller to pierce his conscience, that he must continue to believe in Larry's survival—"You, above all, have got to believe; you ...", "Why me above all?" he asks. "What does that mean, me aboveall"(21)?

It is important to notice that Keller desperately wants to make Anne change her ideas of her father. She believes that her father is a criminal because he causes the deaths of those pilots. Keller tells her

The man was a fool, but don't make a murderer out of him. You got no sense? Listen, you gotta appreciate what was doin' in the war.... It was a madhouse. Every half hour the Major callin' for cylinder heads,

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they were whippin' us with the telephone.... So he takes out his tools and he – covers over the cracks. All right—that's bad, it's wrong, but that's what a little man does. If I could have gone in that day I'd a told him – junk 'em, Steve, we can afford it. But alone he was afraid. But I know he meant no harm. He believed they'd hold up a hundred per cent. That's a mistake, but it ain't murder. (30-31)

Keller tries to exonerate the burden of his sin through convincing Ann and Chris about his intention in shipping the defective cylinders. He covers his deep-rooted feeling of guilt with his compassionate treatment of Ann. He is afraid that in future she will discover the truth about the real sinner in the case. His words show his hidden guilt that puts the innocent man in the prison, so he feels so compassionate to his surrogate who holds the responsibility instead of him. Besides, he tries to show that he did that for the sake of their families. He tries to justify his deed by emphasizing that his family was the cause behind what they did, because he wants to guarantee his family's future.

Keller cannot realize the necessity of the integration with his society. He in fact subordinates his social connections to his family concern. He tries to improve his business even at the expense of the basic human values. This detaches him from the social connections which man needs so much to make him evaluate his actions in relation to the world outside. Miller himself points out that "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 any connection with the world, his universal society."⁴ Consequently, Keller is "a man who places survival above value, self above the group, pragmatism above the ideal, loyalty to family above responsibility to society,"⁵ to quote Bigsby.

The drama of Joe Keller starts when he fails to make a compromise between his private world and the society in which he lives. Miller in this aspect shows the impact of the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, on his works. Ibsen, in his plays, displays the clash between man's individual integration and social disintegration. So does Miller. Robert W. Corrigan suggests that Miller's plays

outline a conflict between the unaccomplished self and a solid social or economic structure—the family, the community, the system. The drama emerges either when the protagonist breaks his connection with his society or when unexpected pressures reveal that such a connection has in fact never existed. Miller seems the need for such a



connection as absolute, and the failure to achieve and, or maintain it is bound to result in catastrophe.⁶

All My Sons was first produced before Miller's fame gave him the ability to commence more direct criticisms on the ways that the profit-seeking elements of capitalism can tend to destroy American social structure. As much as we understand Miller does not present Keller as a villain but as an ordinary man caught up in a bad situation and who makes a choice according to his own values, but Miller, on the other hand, challenges Keller's individual or family values as misguided, ignorant, and destructive in relation to the larger social and cultural values he could have been paying attention to. Keller sees that all what he has done is for the sake of his family. He tells Ann: "I'm thinking of Chris.... 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" (46). Miller introduces a potentially tragic conflict in Joe Keller. Keller ultimately does embody conflicting forces, not, as Benjamin Nelson writes, of "good versus evil," but "family and society, each of which is inherently good." And Nelson goes on to say that the tragic irony emerges when Keller's "crime against the outside world eventually becomes a crime against his own family as well."⁷ Interestingly, the criminal nature of Keller is suggested by his name, Keller, which connotes a killer who commits murderous acts. He is not only the killer of the twenty-one pilots, but he also kills all the ties he has with his society, just to achieve materialistic interests.

Keller's serenity is disturbed by the creeping past to the scene, especially with the arrival of George, Anne's brother, and the son of Steve, Keller's partner who is now in prison. George visits his father in prison, and he tells him that it was Keller who ordered this shipment. So, Keller did not only do a murderous act, but he also committed perjury in the court, to clear himself, and to put the blame on his partner. Again, family matters are the pretext that Keller pretends to be the reason behind doing so. When Chris realizes the truth, he asks his father: "Then... you did it" (66)? Keller answers him that what is important is that his son, the missing Larry never "flew a P-40" (ibid.), the airplanes for which the defective heads were brought. He thinks he commits no murder because his son was not among them. Chris is stunned by his father's words, so, he further questions him:

CHRIS: Then you did it. To the others

KELLER (*Afraid of him, his deadly insistence*): What's the matter with you? What the hell's the matter with you?

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CHRIS: How could you do that? How?... You killed twenty-one men!...

KELLER: You are a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; you don't know how to operate, you're stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up you contract, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what I could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?... I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop 'em before anybody took off. (66-67)

Keller thinks that risking the life of twenty-one persons is nothing as compared to the loss of his business. He thinks that one must do everything possible to survive, no matter what the result is. Miller says of Joe Keller that he feels justified in his actions because if his business had been threatened he would have had nothing to hand on to his son, and "that would be a fate worse than death because one of his psychological supports is that he is a provider . . . the father of the house . . . the man from whom all power and... energy flows". Nonetheless, "he does feel guilt about what he has done," but "at the same time feels that there was no other way for him...It's a crazy quilt of motivations and contradictions inside of him."⁸

Furthermore, when Kate tells Keller that he must not do what he has done, he tells her: "You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven" (72)? Also, when she insists that things should not be taken that way, he responds: "I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family," to which she answers: "Joe, Joe . . . It don't excuse it that you did it for the family" (ibid.).

The calamity reaches its end when Ann gives Chris the letter which Larry gave her before he disappeared. The letter shows Larry's suicide because he could not stand the shame his father did when he caused the deaths of twenty-one pilots. The letter in fact is a direct accusation to Keller that he killed not only those pilots but also he himself was the cause of his son's suicide. It is only then that Keller realizes that his act has a dangerous consequence on his private life and his family. Thus he cries in pain: "But I think to him they were all my sons," (79) the statement that explains the intent of the title of the play. Thus, Keller's illusion of the sanctity of his family is shattered by his son's suicide. He now realizes that "there is something bigger than his guilt in shipping out the faulty airplane parts cannot be excused by his desire to save his family business."⁹ The letter thus proves to Keller that there must be a solid connection with his society which is equally important to him beside his family. Keller feels that his life

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becomes useless after the scatter of his dream; therefore, he goes upstairs and puts a bullet in his head, thus ending his life and his wrong principles. His suicide thus becomes “self-justifying, for the events leading up to it have been presented with a directness and an increasing tempo that makes any alternative impossible.”¹⁰

To sum up, Miller portrays in this play the dilemma of a man who is unable to understand the importance of his social life beside his familial one. He thinks that his family is more important than anything else in the world. This gives him the impetus to waste the lives of twenty-one pilots just to secure his name and his family. Furthermore, he puts financial and self interests first, and social responsibility second. He never thinks that social life is as important as his private and familial life. He thus cuts himself entirely from his society to live for his family. This in fact is his tragic flaw that brings about his downfall. Miller wants to point up that man must make a kind of conciliation between his society and his private need. The preference that man has for anyone to the other is a real crime, Miller deems. Thus, Joe Keller becomes a victim to his misevaluation and misjudgment, and also a victimizer to the twenty-one pilots, his sons and himself.

NOTES

¹Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, ed. E.R. Wood (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1979), 3-4. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in my text showing page numbers.

²Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 78 .

³Terry Otton, *The Temptation of Innocence in the Dramas of Arthur Miller* (University of Missouri Press, 2002), 16.

⁴Arthur Miller, *Introduction to Collected Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), 11.

⁵Bigsby, 80

⁶Robert W. Corrigan, “Introduction: The Achievement of Arthur Miller,” in *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1969), 8.



⁷Benjamin Nelson, *Arthur Miller: A Portrait of a Playwright* (London: Peter Own, 1970), 83.

⁸Matthew Roudan' e, *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (London: Jackson, 1987), 101.

⁹Gerald Weales, " Arthur Miller," in *The American Theatre*, ed. Alan S. Downer, (New Jersey: Reference Library International Communication, 1967), 97.

¹⁰Dennis Welland, *Miller: The playwright*, (London: Methuen, 1983),27.

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علاقة المخاصمة بين العائلة والمجتمع

دراسة لكتابات آرثر ملر

د. حارث تركي الدليمي

جامعة كويا / كلية اللغات

الملخص

تعد مسرحية "كلهم أبنائي" للكاتب المسرحي الشهير آرثر ميلر واحدة من أهم أعماله المسرحية وهي أيضا الأكثر جدلا. حيث إن فكرة ميلر عن علاقة الرجل بمجتمعه هي فكرة قابلة للتأويل وهذا ما أعطى مسرحيته طابع الجدل. لذا فإن هدف هذا البحث هو البحث في إحدى المشاكل المهمة في هذا العمل المسرحي وهي إلى أي جانب يجب أن يركن الإنسان في حياته: إلى عائلته أم إلى مجتمعه. ويبين البحث أن كلا الطرفين مهمين في حياة الإنسان وعلى الإنسان أن لا يركن إلى إحدهما على حساب الآخر. يعتقد جول كيلر، وهو الشخصية الرئيسية في هذا العمل، إن عائلته وحياته الخاصة منفصلان تماما عن مجتمعه. حيث يضمن أن عائلته هي أكثر شأنا من مجتمعه. لذا فقد كرس نفسه كلياً لعائلته وفصل نفسه كلياً عن مجتمعه. هذا ما دفعه إلى استيراد شحنه من الاسطوانات المعيبة إلى سلاح الجو في بلادة، الأمر الذي أدى إلى موت أكثر من واحد وعشرون طياراً من سلاح الجو. وحينما تعرض للمسائلة كان جوابه انه أراد أن يحفظ مستقبل عائلته. ولم يدرك انه قد تسبب أيضا بموت ابنه في تلك الشحنة. لذا فقد قرر في النهاية الانتحار بسبب خيبة الأمل التي أصيب بها من جراء العملية.

