



Family, Morality, and the American Dream in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

Dr. Ch. Rajaniprashanth

Assistant Professor

Matrusri Engineering College, Hyderabad

Abstract

The concept of the American Dream—a vision of prosperity, success, and self-fulfillment—has been a recurring theme in American literature and drama. Arthur Miller, one of the most celebrated playwrights of the 20th century, critically examines this ideal in his plays, particularly in *All My Sons*. Set in post-World War II America, *All My Sons* portrays the consequences of pursuing the American Dream at the expense of ethical and moral values. Miller delves into the darker side of this ideal, exposing its flaws and the emotional and societal conflicts it engenders. By depicting the Keller family's tragic unraveling, Miller highlights the moral dilemmas and consequences of materialism and unbridled ambition. This study explores how the American Dream is both celebrated and critiqued in Miller's work, with a focus on its manifestations in *All My Sons*.

This paper investigates the portrayal of the American Dream in Arthur Miller's plays, with a special emphasis on *All My Sons*. Miller critiques the traditional interpretation of the American Dream by exposing its inherent flaws and ethical compromises through the tragic journey of the Keller family. The play examines themes such as moral responsibility, familial bonds, and societal expectations, revealing how the pursuit of material success often leads to personal and communal disillusionment. By contextualizing *All My Sons* within post-World War II America, this study highlights the interplay between individual ambition and collective responsibility. The analysis demonstrates that Miller's work not only reflects the complexities of the American Dream but also serves as a timeless critique of its shortcomings.

Keywords: American Dream, Arthur Miller, All My Sons, post-World War II, morality, materialism, societal critique, familial responsibility.

Introduction

The narrative of American civilization chronicles the ascent and decline of the illustrious American Dream. 'The Progressive Era' and 'The Great Depression' were the two significant periods in American history. The Progressive Era saw the principles of a harmonious human



society fully implemented to transform the Dream of wealth into a tangible reality. Poverty, stagnation, pessimism, and imperfection were deemed un-American terms. The depression decades disrupted the 'greatest society on earth.' The 'selected few' of the 'promised country' recognized the inherent poverty stagnation, pessimism, and imperfection embedded within its framework. The revolution significantly impacting American society must be seen in American literature. The playwrights, such as Odets, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, were part of the 'Depression' era of American civilization, honing their literary skills against the socio-economic context of the Depression period.

Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller are frequently associated as the twin stars of Gemini in the theatrical business. Both radiated with equal brilliance in the spotlight of the theatre.

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in the Harlem district of Manhattan, as the second child of Augusta and Isidore Miller, both of whom came from Poland. Despite familial indifferences, Miller was afforded a robust moral and ethical environment, as shown in his literary works. From childhood, Miller was affected by his mother's artistic talent and inquisitive nature. His father was a successful businessman who demonstrated his prowess as a manufacturer of women's apparel. However, the economic collapse of the Great Depression devastated his enterprise. Miller concurrently loathed and revered his father. He was frustrated by his inability to fully recover from the Depression and admired his capability to perceive humanity's inherent goodness. The character Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is modelled after his father.

Before the 1920s, the Miller family have sufficient wealth to employ their chauffeur and maintain an appealing residence. The Great Depression compelled them to relocate to a smaller residence due to financial constraints. Miller, a student at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn, favoured athletics over academics and graduated in 1932 with aspirations of becoming a renowned player. He began undertaking short-term employment to accumulate the funds necessary for attending the University of Michigan.

By the end of 1932, Miller commenced employment as a clerk in the auto parts warehouse, where he encountered American anti-Semitism. In 1934, he managed to accumulate the funds to register at the University of Michigan. In the summer of 1936, Miller composed his inaugural play, *No Villain*, to enter the Avery Hopwood Writing Awards competition. The reward was beneficial for Miller, fulfilling his financial requirements and bolstering his



resolve to pursue a career as a playwright. Miller (1987) responded to receiving an award by stating, “It reinforced my belief that the ability to write plays is innate, akin to a mental sport” (47).

While in Michigan, he enrolled in Professor Kenneth Rowe's playwriting workshop, where he revised the play *No Villain as They Too Arise* and received an award from the Bureau of New Plays. Furthermore, his play *Honours at Dawn* earned him an additional Hopwood Award.

In 1938, after graduating from the University of Michigan, Miller returned to New York to join the Federal Theatre Project as a playwright. However, the agency was promptly disbanded due to allegations of communist affiliations. In subsequent years, he explored alternative employment opportunities, notably the renowned radio programs *Columbia Workshop* and *Cavakade of America*. He composed scripts and radio dramas for various organizations. In 1940, despite his ambiguous employment, he wed his college sweetheart, Mary Slattery, a Catholic. His Jewish heritage cast suspicion on this relationship. Nevertheless, he was able to gain the trust.

In 1944, Miller's inaugural play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, premiered and rightfully received the Theatre Guild National Award. *The Man Who Had All the Luck* explores the influence of materialism on familial relationships. It is a tragic narrative of affluent businessman David Beeves, who, despite his material success, was unable to sustain familial harmony, ultimately resulting in his suicide.

Miller's creative career was deeply attuned to the collapse of the American dream of material prosperity. Nearly all of his works emphasized the detrimental effect of material pursuits on familial relationships. *The Man Who Had All the Luck* did not receive the anticipated response from both the crowd and critics. Miller, disheartened, nearly resolved to abandon his profession in playwriting. It necessitated his examination of his hand while composing the text. In 1947, he authored *All My Sons*, which afforded him professional acclaim and established his status as a talented dramatist.

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* offers a poignant critique of the traditional American Dream by portraying its devastating effects on individuals and families. The Keller family's tragic journey exemplifies how the relentless pursuit of material success can lead to moral compromises and ultimate disillusionment. Joe Keller, the patriarch, embodies the darker side of the American Dream. His decision to ship defective airplane parts during World War II, resulting in the deaths of 21 pilots, highlights the ethical compromises made in the name of



financial stability and familial success. Although Joe justifies his actions as being for the benefit of his family, this rationale ultimately unravels as the truth comes to light, leading to devastating consequences for everyone involved.

The theme of moral responsibility versus personal ambition is central to the play. Chris Keller, Joe's son, represents the idealistic and moral opposition to his father's pragmatic but ethically flawed choices. Chris's confrontation with Joe reveals the inherent conflict between individual ambition and the broader societal responsibility. Chris's disappointment upon learning the truth about his father underscores how the pursuit of success, when devoid of ethical grounding, can destroy trust and family bonds.

The play also critiques the societal expectations tied to the American Dream, particularly in the post-World War II context. Kate Keller, Joe's wife, clings to the belief that her missing son Larry is still alive, a delusion that symbolizes the family's refusal to confront the truth. Her denial protects the illusion of their success and respectability but also traps the family in a web of lies and guilt. The eventual revelation that Larry took his own life after learning of Joe's actions shatters the family's facade and underscores the devastating cost of prioritizing personal gain over collective morality.

Miller highlights the interplay between ambition, ethics, and responsibility. He demonstrates that the American Dream, when pursued without regard for its moral implications, leads not to fulfillment but to isolation and tragedy. Joe's eventual realization of his culpability and subsequent suicide mark the collapse of the dream, leaving the audience to reflect on the broader implications of a society driven by materialism and self-interest. *All My Sons* thus serves as a timeless critique of the complexities and inherent flaws of the American Dream.

All My Sons is a play that explores the themes of prosperity, remorse, and responsibility amid material avarice. Joe Keller, the patriarch of *All My Sons*, compromises his family's welfare by selling substandard aircraft components, resulting in the fatalities of multiple pilots. Joe Keller's pursuit of material prosperity, characterized by unethical business practices, ultimately results in the loss of his sons. Joe, by valuing misguided aspirations, fails to achieve humanistic principles and ultimately suffers significant consequences. (Gould 1969) Miller in the play emphasizes that the pursuit of the American Dream is futile without humanitarian ideals.



In this context, the play *All My Sons* is subjected to deeper analysis. Miller was primarily focused on elucidating the "contradictory forces all around, operating on people, creating tension between past and present, society and individual, and greed and ethics" (Atmaram 35).

The protagonist Willy Loman exhibits initiative, ambition, competitive spirit, and a desire for success. His pursuit of upward mobility and persistent experiences of failure imbue his existence with tension, ultimately culminating in his demise. The American Dream in the play is refuted and rendered worthless. The play is examined in depth, focusing on the essence of the American Dream and its influence on American society.

The issue of an individual's guilt consciousness is a prominent theme explored by Miller in his plays. The 1953 play *The Crucible* is based on the author's involvement with the House of Un-American Activities. It serves as an implicit analogy to the operations of the McCarthy Group. Despite receiving mixed critical responses, the play was enthusiastically embraced by the audience. Miller, a man of deep contemplation, is consistently preoccupied with pressing social issues. His other drama, *A View from the Bridge* (1955), encapsulates the themes of remorse and societal dignity. The themes of loyalty, treachery, and the quest for self and public acclaim are prevalent throughout the drama.

Miller, in his drama *After the Fall* (1964), repudiates the notion of passive goodness, which he believes sustains evil and is more perilous than evil itself. The drama highlights the necessity of introspection and self-examination in the pursuit of self-correction. His piece, *Incident in Vichy* (1964), examines guilt and moral responsibility. The enigmatic social force operation preys upon the individual who cannot differentiate between virtue and vice. Miller, during his theatrical career, emerged as a social critic, urging audiences to introspect and acknowledge the significance of morals and social responsibility. He perceived the peril in the pursuit of the American Dream, which, devoid of moral values, relied on the materialism of a capitalistic culture, detrimental to both familial and social structures.

The Depression-era fostered a widespread fear of failure across American society. The unsuccessful individuals consistently offered feeble justifications to satisfy their egos. *The Price* (1968) is another notable play by Miller centred on the issue of the conflict between success and failure. The family is once more the central focus of the narrative. It is the narrative of two brothers responding differently to their father's failure. Miller in the play



highlighted the significance of restoring familial relationships, which he deemed more vital than success or failure in life.

All My Sons, the 1947 play, was Miller's inaugural Broadway success, establishing his reputation as a playwright. It premiered at the Coronet Theatre in New York on January 29, 1947. The play was executed and esteemed globally. It achieved significant popularity, running for 328 performances and surpassing Eugene O'Neill's play *The Iceman Cometh*. The play received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Tony Award for Best Play. The play's popularity is attributed to Miller's use of thematic variety and adept dramatic technique. The drama is well considered as:

that explores themes including father-son conflict, paternal guilt, the dichotomy between social and personal obligations, personal integrity, survival, social responsibility, moral crises, individual and familial pride, the pursuit of success as a traditional tragedy, and familial and societal dynamics (Roudane29).

The pursuit of the desire for success is a central subject in the play, significantly impacting its other thematic elements. The repercussions of economic decline during the Great Depression and World War II serve as the backdrop of the drama. The drama is based on a true story that Miller's former mother-in-law brought to his attention. An Ohio newspaper reported that a woman disclosed her father's sale of defective components to the U.S. Military during World War II. The Truman Committee conducted an investigation, raising a question of wartime duty. Miller perceived that the pursuit of material wealth had reached a level that compromised honesty and responsibility towards the nation. Miller viewed upward mobility as a legitimate pursuit, emphasizing the importance of moral and ethical methods to achieve it; otherwise, success may prove to be an empty vessel. Philip Gelb, a distinguished critic, commends Miller as a thinker, playwright, and primarily as the prophet who "cautions us about the potential bitter consequences that may arise from our current constrained approaches" (Roudane 27).

All My Sons narrates the tale of Joe Keller, a seemingly prosperous self-made individual whose pursuit of material advancement led him to employ unethical and immoral methods in the past. During the introspective period of life, he recognized the vacuity of his accomplishments. The unethical actions he engaged in previously yielded a sour crop and painful consequences. Joe Keller, the protagonist of the play, epitomizes a guy who has



endured the Depression and, despite his limited education, has achieved worldly success, aspiring for his son to inherit it. Joe embodies the prevalent ambitions and goals of American society, eventually striving for monetary riches.

The 'father-son' struggle is a crucial theme in Miller's works; notably, his plays *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, and *The Price* extensively explores this conflict, mostly through various interpretations of the American Dream of prosperity. Miller, in a comprehensive interview with Ronald Hayman, asserts that "the whole son-father thing is a dried husk in the plays" (Roudane 188). It serves as a highly effective instrument in *All My Sons*, illustrating the dream achieved through the adherence to values vs the dream realized via the betrayal of values and integrity.

Chris' view of the dream of success is fundamentally humanistic, with character ethic as the central ingredient. He is not opposed to earning money, but he highlights the importance of doing it ethically. The play, *All My Sons*, not only addresses the struggle between two generations but also contrasts differing interpretations of the American Dream. In the play, Joe observes the repercussions of the Depression, negatively impacting the mental and physical condition of American civilization. His interpretation of the American Dream likely lacks character ethics and a humanistic perspective. Chris belongs to a new generation that espouses utopian and romantic notions of achievement. Annie also believes that:

... there is nothing wrong with your money." Your father deployed numerous aircraft, and you ought to take pride in that. A man ought to receive compensation for that ... (122).

Annie's perspective on material accomplishment, while pragmatic, has parallels to Chris's idealistic attitude. During a talk, Chris, while envisioning a blissful existence with Annie, assures her of a prosperous future.

In the aforementioned lines, Atma Ram, an Indian scholar in Miller, examines Joe Keller's state of mind. His American Dream compels him to reevaluate his accomplishments. His success's lack of significance has already alienated him from society, and he is now denied a place inside his family, for whom he believes he has sacrificed all. Amidst the empire, he constructed his existence in isolation, entirely estranged from his family. The moment of revelation regarding his guilt is pivotal for him, as it has divided him into two contrasting extremes, his material prosperity is precariously founded on the shame and total denial of his family's complicity in the crime he perpetrated. Miller (1963) accurately observes in the



preface to Selected Plays: Joe Keller's dilemma is not his inability to discern right from wrong, but rather that his mindset cannot acknowledge any meaningful link to his world, universe, or society; he is not an active participant in society, but rather a mere integrated member (2).

Joe's theory regarding the fulfilment of the American Dream is founded on erroneous assumptions. His conception and interpretation of success is wholly contingent upon his belief in the influence of wealth and the status it confers. His character is shaped and undernourished by a typical era and society that is indifferent to specialized vocations and a humanitarian approach towards others. (Flanagan1990) His avarice for wealth and rank has isolated him from the surrounding world, reducing his existence to the narrow confines of familial relationships. Consequently, his conception of the American Dream of prosperity is restricted to narrow interests. Ultimately, after the play, he recognizes that his conception of success is neither endorsed by his family nor substantiated, rendering his purported success a false illusion that culminates in his demise.

Miller effectively highlights the significance of ethics and the moral foundation of social health. In the drama *All My Sons*, he emphasizes the critical importance of ethical ideals in the intensely competitive nature of society. Miller contends that post-Depression American culture urgently needs a reevaluation of its concept of success. (Martine1980) The material security of the family and survival in a competitive culture cannot serve as justifiable reasons to undermine the values and ethics of life. While it may lead to material success, it can undoubtedly harm an individual's conscience on a psychological level.

References

- Gould, Jean. *Modern American Playwrights*. Bombay: Bombay Popular Prakashan, 1969.
- Atma, Ram. *Perspectives on Arthur Miller*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1987.
- Roudane, Matthew. *Conversations with Arthur Miller*. London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987.
- Miller, Arthur. *All My Sons*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1947.
- Flanagan, James K. *Arthur Miller*. New York: Ungar, 1990.
- Martine, James J. *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980.
- Bloom, Harold. *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
-