

# Practicality as a Common Product of the American Dream in Arthur Miller's *All My sons*

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## Abstract

*Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is a prolific American playwright whose work has occupied a significant place in the tradition of American literature. He is one of the leading American playwrights who rang a bell to warn the citizens of America against the crucial consequences of the American Dream. In All My Sons he introduces Practicality as a common consequence of the American Dream that generated the identity issues in the main character as it changed the way of thinking of the American individual.*

**Keywords:- Idealism, American Dream, Identity, Tragedy, Individualism in American Drama**

## I. Introduction

Practicality as a way of life does not represent an aspect of capitalism as much as it discloses the American personality which is eager to make a change, especially after the second World war. Wars in general maintain a grim image in the life of nations, yet they often trigger exceptional potentialities that are needed for the build-up of communities and social progress and prosperity. In the US, the case was not different if not much more consolidated in individual phenomenon. Americans, in the post war era were mainly preoccupied with the search for salvation of

the Yankees' image that was embodied in the form of the American Dream.

## II. Practical Characters

Joe Keller the successful businessman, owner of factory producing airplanes' equipment, is characterized by Miller as clever hard-worker, devoted to his family and has an ideology of the age. For Joe, the concept of the American Dream has indulged into the matrix of his personality and formed one of the basic maxims for survival in the US society. This maxim is, the 'survival of the strongest', while "the strongest" here means the wealthiest, the cleverest, and the superior. Joe runs his own factory, has his own family that comprises his two sons and wife who loves him much, and has his own house that has "two stories high and has seven rooms. It had cost perhaps fifteen thousand dollars in the early twenties when it was built" as Miller mentioned in his (AMS: 3).

Joe is introduced to the spectator as a common man who climbs Maslow's pyramid of need trying to get the top of the pyramid which represents the Self-Actualization after he passed the physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem needs. Survival for Joe means to attain every chance and create property that can save him from any economic critical

condition even if the cost was others' lives and denial of responsibility to the outer world. Joe is the normal production of the American dream after the war.

Joe thought of himself and his family only. He sold defective airplanes' cylinders' heads to the American Air-Force, despite his pre-knowledge that the goods is defective which might result in disastrous outcomes at a crucial time of the war. This irresponsible action causes the death of 21 pilots. In denying the responsibility he assists on convicting his partner in the work, the father of his son's girlfriend to let the authority exonerate him and jail Steve Deever. In this sense he did not feel guilty, on the contrary he insists on his fabricated opinion trying to convince his son Chris that he has done the right thing saying:

"You're 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 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? (his voice cracking) I never though they'd install them. I swear to Got. I thought they'd stop 'em before anybody took off." (Miller. AMS: 71)

The ideology of the American Dream planted the seeds of selfishness, which grew to be espalier producing the

egocentricity that not only makes him convict his innocent partner, but also it makes him insist on his selfishness saying: "Nothin's bigger than that [family]. And you're going to tell him, you understand? 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!" (Miller. AMS: 77)

Joe acts practically and denies any charge against him because he believes that he did not do anything wrong, he just follows the government's capitalistic guideline. Joe's selfishness makes him think of his family only neglecting other families. He sold his defective goods to ensure economical security for his family and neglected the harm the will be caused to other 21 families. Joe in the mid of the materialistic "dog-eat-dog" society is taught to Indeed, Joe does not act out of the box, rather he consolidates the American spirit of adventure which is a key to success. The daring spirit enhances the value of building up a psychology that fits into the American society. This spirit has encouraged people like Joe to go into the jungle and support his family, without abandoning the Machiavellian maxim that becomes involved into the matrix of individualism. The American Dream, then become embodiment of capitalism, individualism and adventurism. However, looked from a leftist viewpoint, all defects of such orientation are conspicuously seen and dissected by Miller who stand on the other side warning the Americans against the anticipated collapse of the categorical corpus of American values.

“Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they ship a gun or a truck outa 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 Goddam country is gotta go if I go! That's why you can't tell me.” (Miller, AMS, 2002: 82)

In this way, Joe reflected the American mentality after the war, and Miller portrays Joe to be a representative for the whole American society who absorbed the ideology of the American dream. The other side of Joe's personality is shown from the beginning of the play when Miller depicts him as a lovely man being friend with many of his family members, he is even friendly with children like adolescent neighbor Bert who loves Joe and plays with him. (AMS, 2002: 10)

Bert runs up from driveway. He is about eight. He jumps on stool, then on Keller's back.

Bert: You're finally up.

Keller: {swinging him around and putting him down} Ha! Bert's here! Where's Tommy? He's got his father's thermometer again.

Bert: He's taking a reading.

His amicable personality is clearly reflected in the network of relationships he managed to establish with all people around him. This has created a huge sense of cordiality that engulfs his character. And this cordiality is often thought to be one of the intrinsic requirements of the American dreamers. But this cordiality does hide another ugly guise when it comes to

material benefit that had begun to cover the matrix of the American society. Poisonous honey or honey poison, no matter what begins, the loser is the client who in the case of *All My Sons* is Joe himself. Joe is a natural outcome of the capitalism that shaped the personality of most of the American society. The dictates that capitalism creates the greed in the individual's personality. Joe's love for his family has motivated him to neglect the harms that may be caused to other families. His love for his wife and his sons pushed him to commit the crime and that what he tries to tell her saying “I don't know what you mean! You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you?” (Miller, AMS, 2002: 76). Joe resists to admit the crime he has committed so he tries to justify his action to his wife and concentrates on his son Chris because he does not want them to hate him and that may waste all his efforts to make him happy and proud. Thus, he asks Kate to persuade Chris to forgive his father saying “Keller: Nothin's bigger than that. And you're going to tell him, you understand? 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!” (Miller, AMS, 2002: 77).

Joe scares most from the idea that Chris may hate him as a result and accordingly may desert him and that is shown vividly in his speech:

Keller: You heard me. Now you know what to tell him. (Pause. He moves from her. Halts) But he wouldn't put me away though...

He wouldn't do that... Would he?

Mother: He loved you, Joe, you broke his heart.

Keller: But to put me away...

All his efforts go in vain because his son Chris is an ex-member of the GIs who value the lives of others and do not tolerate such a crime even if the criminal is his father. So instead of reporting his father to the authority, he decided to go away saying:

“Chris: Mother... I'm going away.

There are a couple of firms in Cleveland, I think I can get a place. I mean, I'm going way for good. (To Ann alone) I know what you're thinking, Annie. It's true. I'm yellow. I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it, but if I know that night when I came home what I know now, he'd be in the district attorney's office by this time, and I'd have brought him there. Now if I look at him, all I'm able to do is cry.”

(Miller, AMS, 2002: 80)

He does so because he knows his father's mentality and exactly knows how to punish him psychologically and let him suffer the loss to test the suffering of the other families who lost their sons because of his greedy nature. Chris wants his father to handle the social responsibility and to have some social awareness that makes Joe give up his selfishness and egocentricity, therefore he reproaches his father for the loss of Larry and to scold him more when he reads Larry's letter, which was written in high dramatic form that arises the sense of

real humanity in both the characters and spectators, saying:

“My Dear Ann: it is impossible to put down the things I feel. But I've got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel... I can't bear to live any more. Last night I circled the base for twenty minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing 'business'.... I don't know how to tell you what I feel.... I can't face anybody... I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me as missing. If they do, I want you to know that you mustn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him...” (Miller, AMS, 2002:83)

Joe is shocked facing the reality, that his son feels disgusted from his irresponsible actions. At this moment, Joe's mind suffers from internal conflicts whether he accepts the reality or keeps denying his guilt. He now realizes the false doctrine of the American Dream of success and learns that everything has a price and his fortune's price was his son and his humanity.

Miller, on the other hand, depicts Joe as a man who cries desperately for his lost identity saying “Then what is this if it isn't telling me? Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I

guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down" (Miller, AMS, 2002:84". When he realizes there is something bigger than the family, which is the community, he keeps his word he gave to Chris and "put a bullet in [his] head!" (Miller, AMS, 2002: 77).

By killing himself, Joe falls from Maslow's fourth level pyramid of needs and fails to be Self-Actualized because of his adoption for wrong beliefs that made him beast at large. Joe fails to fulfill his identity as an individual within a large society in which he has rights and duties. Gerald Weales (1962: 6-7) argues that for Chris, Joe's fault is that he does not recognize any loyalty to society in which he lives. His lack of awareness of his social identity is the main cause behind his myopic vision. However, whatever his outlook towards his father, Chris on his side fails to gauge precisely the familial needs that have imposed on Joe the responsibility of procuring them regardless of whether he was doing the right or the wrong thing. It is, therefore, believed that Chris was only looking at the ethical side of his father who looks accordingly awful. In other words, his evaluative or rather reproachful stand towards Joe is based on what many critics call the insufficient alibi that has been used harshly against him. This done, no one may dare say that Joe was right but everyone may discern that he deserves his end.

Henry Popkin (Winter 1960: 34) states that Miller's regular practice in his plays is to confront the dead levels of banality with the heights and depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a

liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility. Joe's act of killing himself at the end of the play comes out of his myopic vision of the self-purification as he thinks that in killing himself will be enough to let his sons and other members of the society forgive him. The sense of punishment he is thought to deserve lies in his harsh realization of his wrongdoing which is sufficient to let him live in a self-made inferno that is pushing him to his tragic end. Joe's ethical, religious and personal criteria is tested severely against his late realization yet his insistence on proceeding on with his bad doing is justified on an economic or rather financial basis. Steve R. Centola calls Joe's Ideology as the "bad faith", which is depicted by Miller in his *All My Sons*. Miller shows that Joe's value-system of the American dream is embodied by the irresponsibility, selfishness and self-interestedness. Centola explores the intention of Miller in portraying Joe's downfall saying:

"With his portrayal of Joe Keller's downfall, Miller suggests that every individual has the power to make free choices and the obligation to convert those choices into responsible actions toward society. When one refuses to accept his freedom and denies his responsibility to society, he lives in bad faith. *All My Sons* shows the danger of such bad faith by exploding what Miller calls the "exclusiveness" of private life in America." (quoted in Bloom's 1988: 133)

Joe the manufacturer led by the capitalistic government has already formed his own identity based on ‘struggle for survival’ to gain the respect of others. This has shaped his false consciousness to attain the desirable appearances. Rosen (1996: 10) defines the false consciousness as “sociable to the extent that it involves wanting to be seen in a certain way”. Bigsby (2005: 78) avers that Joe

“was a man, neither worker nor bourgeois, corrupted by ‘opportunity’, and there is in the play, and particularly in the early drafts, a conviction that idealism and justice shatter on materialism and corruptions which seem to shadow a desire for success”

Susan Abboston (2007: 51) agrees with Bigsby’s former opinion about the preinstalled ideology of Joe saying, “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”

Frank Rich in his review frankly blames the capitalistic system saying “the real villain of *All My Sons* is not the father in any case - or, for that matter, the capitalist [system] that produces war profiteers” (*New York Times*, 23.04.1987). Many scholars use this point as a way out to justify his greedy actions as Dennis Welland (1979: 26) states :

“[Joe is not a] cynical profiteer, deliberately reducing the margin of safety in order to increase the margin

of profit. Miller sees him as the simple man who has got on by energy and will power but who is hardly clever enough to know how he has done it.”

Thereupon he admits that Joe is “genuinely unable to visualize the public consequences of what was for him a private act” (ibid), Just like Bhatia (1985: 33) who admires this opinion in justifying Joe’s action saying:

“Paradoxically his myopic vision is a gift of the same society against which he errs because it is based on the ethics of success. He is a product of the society, and also its enemy. His mind and psychology are shaped and distorted by the capitalistic economic system and the chief motivating force behind his shortsightedness is the success-code of the society which he thoughtlessly follows. The myth of success and its counterpart the fear of failure, compel him to do what he does. He knows that a failure in society cannot survive, so, in order to survive in the world of competition, he takes recourse to dishonest means. The important thing from the view point of tragedy is that he lives on to realize his error. In the end, he realizes that he acted wrongly and was not acted simply upon”

That exactly means he has adopted different identity when he believed in the myth of the American Dream. However, the other new identity Joe adopts is just another mechanism required for going along with the new teaching of the materialistic society in the middle of which he lives. In other

words, this is slightly not only his choice, rather it is partly the choice of the community, otherwise he will not be able to generate more vitality in his work whose consequences were not carefully calculated.

Dr. Jim Bayliss and his wife Sue Bayliss are ideal production of the American Dream. They are obsessed with money earning and that what shapes their identity. Dr. Jim is Keller's neighbor and their close friend. He tries to pass over his practicality to his son as revealed in his chat with Frank and Keller in AMS (2002: 6-7)

Frank: That boy's going to be a real doctor. He's smart.

Jim: Over my dead body he'll be a doctor. A good beginning, too.

Frank: Why? It's an honorable profession.

Jim: {looking at him tiredly} Frank, will you stop talking like a civics book?

Jim: I would love to help humanity on a Warner Brothers salary.

Keller: {pointing at him, laughing} That's very good, Jim.

Jim's economical thinking of money makes him decide for his child profession on the future. He wants his son to be an actor instead of doctor because the actor is earning much more than a doctor, therefore he asks Frank to stop talking idealistically on the contrary of Keller who proves his practicality by approving Jim's way of thinking. Jim's practicality makes him unable to believe in astrology when Frank reads Larry's horoscope. Even his advice revolves around money, that what appears in his talk with Ann when he meets her for

the first time. He advises her "I've only met you, Ann, but if I may offer you a piece of advice... When you marry, never, even in your mind, never count your husband's money." (AMS, 2002: 24). Money is his main concern, he is a man of strong capitalistic beliefs. Inconsistently, Jim has Chris as his role model; he is fond of Chris, the idealist, and he likes to be like him therefore he frequently defends Chris in the court and in public. Steven R. Centola in his essay entitled 'All My Son' in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* edited by Christopher Bigsby, (2005: 58) illustrates that Jim is lost in darkness and Chris is his guide and the source of his inspiration and if he loses his light it will be impossible for him "to remember the kind of man he wanted to be". Jim also has sense of familial commitment when he gives up the medical research for the sake of his wife Sue who wants him to work overtime to earn much money to live a lavish life.

Sue Byless is the greediest female character in Miller's plays. She is depicted as selfish, greedy, capitalistic, yet practical woman who is introduced to the reader as "rounding forty, an overweight woman". (AMS, 2002: 7). She seeks Jim's gratitude because she had helped him financially when he was an intern. She frankly tells Ann about her husband's refusals to take her to the beach arguing that it was hot but that did not deter him from picking George from the airport. Her economical way of thinking visualizes to her that Ann wants to marry Chris because of his money. Money for her is everything and that is revealed in her arguments with Ann in (AMS, 2002: 44)

SUE: And he's got money. That's important, you know.

ANN: It wouldn't matter to me.

SUE: You'd be surprised. It makes all the difference. I married an intern. On my salary. And that was bad, because as soon as a woman supports a man he owes her something. You can never owe somebody without resenting them. *Ann laughs.*

That's true, you know. afterward she tells Ann that:

Sue: I'm very serious. My husband is unhappy with Chris around.

Ann: How is that?

Sue: Jim's a successful doctor. But he's got an idea he'd like to do medical research. Discover things. You see?

Ann: Well, isn't that good?

Sue: Research pays twenty five dollars a week minus laundering the hair shirt. You've got to give up your life to go into it. (ibid)

Practically, it is inappropriate for Sue's husband to give up the doctor profession and be a medical researcher because he will not earn much money as a doctor. She is completely indulged in the dictates of the American Dream and the idea of success when Sue considers the real success is money-making. The abundant materialism seems to be overwhelming in *All My Sons* as Miller wanted to warn that it was no good solution for the dilemmas of the American society. Perhaps, the nature of the Capitalist society has denied any particular understanding of the benefits

of other systems such as socialism. The reason does not go far from political agenda that has chosen to differ from the communist bloc. Therefore, any call for placating the intense effects of capitalism was conceived to be antagonistic to the capitalist corpus in general. It is on this basis Miller was rather misjudged. Critics also adhere to that Miller has his own personal views towards the defects of the system which he feels accountable to disclose to the public.

### III. Conclusion

Suffering the wars, the great depression and many economic crises, make the American individual struggle frantically to survive and that what Miller has profoundly depicted throughout many of his plays. Many of his characters try hard to make things true. Accordingly, the current study conforms totally to all other previous studies which showed the American Dream as a conceptual phenomenon that has contributed much to rejuvenate the old veto against the tremendous indulgence into the bombastic illusions of the American Dream.

In *All My Sons*, Miller removes any doubt that the consequences of the American Dream clearly disclosed evils of greed, gluttonous run after fortune and the empowering of capitalist factors that were rather destructive of the American household. Joe Keller is the common product of the WWII and the Great Depression who fought an "unfair" battle in order to establish a luxurious life for his family by selling defective airplane's head



cylinder for the USAF. The result which many critics considered a vehement shock to the American familial conscience caused the death of 21 American pilots. Joe was rather brain-washed by the dictates of the American Dream, and he ignored his responsibility towards all other sons. Motivated by egocentricity and selfishness, Joe was turned into a beast who does anything in order to be financially safe. In *All My Sons*, Miller touches upon the heart of the American capitalism which turned the American society into a “Zoo” in which “dog-eats-dog”. Joe’s blind pursuit for Dollar makes him unable to define himself as a father for all the pilots; therefore he commits his crime unaware of its consequences. The socialist Miller wants to assert the universal brotherhood that he depicted in portraying Chris and Larry’s responsibilities toward their brothers in the Army. *All My Sons* has hence exposed that such obstacles to man’s realization of his true self and the society at large result in his being unable to see himself through right perspectives; his ego is primary, next comes his family and for these two he can do anything unethically and this retrospection perpetuates miseries on himself and family. Throughout the character of Joe Keller, Miller highlights how individuals are trapped in the quagmire of greed, false dictum and quest for identity. In *All My Sons*, Joe kills himself when he finally realizes that all the pilots were his sons. At this moment he discovers his true identity as a father of the 21 pilots who were crushed because of his greedy nature and his myopic vision. Joe’s suicidal act has been a kind of forbearance left to him by his sons’ revulsion of his misdeed, though he was

“ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity” (Miller, *Tragedy and Common Man*, 4).

To sum up, Joe is killed by his greed, which was generated by the American Dream. Thereafter, Miller decided to assert the crucial consequences of the American Dream when he introduced his other play that exposes the obsolete ideals of the American Dream

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