

LITERARY TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED BY ARTHUR MILLER IN ALL MY SONS

SONAL SHAHANE

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

SCIENCE & HUMANITIES DEPARTMENT

VADODARA INSTITUTE OF ENGINEERING, VADODARA, GUJARAT, INDIA

Abstract : To understand the subtle, popular and critical ideas expressed by arthur miller, an outstanding american playwright of the twentieth century in his play all my sons, a reader needs to explore the literary devices employed by the writer in designing a true portrayal of contemporary american society in its beauty and smallness in the post-depression period. The theme that recurs in most of his plays – the relationship between identity of a man and the image of him which is demanded by society is a universal one. A divorce lies between what individuals dream and what form the reality takes. This study explores how the playwright, who realized the vulnerability of human existence in postmodern era, has achieved effect of dramatic theatre in his occasionally eloquent and moving play which does not give readers an opportunity to look at the play from distance. An attempt has been made to analyze techniques employed by miller in sketching struggling characters who live in postmodern era but are victims of modernism belief.

INTRODUCTION

Truly, a writer is not an isolated phenomenon. He is an integral part of the context in which he lives. His literary work has the potential to survive in relation to the context in which it has been given rise to. But, a work of literature has the potential for multitude of meanings. Readers of a literary work even have effective strategies to interpret it. No writer demonstrates his creativity straight. A work of art has many embellishments to its credit which readers shall unfold piece by piece to feel its underlying nerve. New criticism, a movement in literary theory which dominated American literary criticism in the middle of the twentieth century, put emphasis on closing reading of a book. I. A. Richards, a well-known literary critic, stressed importance of literature as a self-contained object. It is marked by concentration on the language, emotional and intellectual tensions and imagery. Contrary to intentional fallacy which attempts to understand author's intentions when interpreting a literary work, New Criticism adheres to the text and the text alone approach. As F. R. Leavis states New Critics focus on "the words on the page". They are not concerned with author's biography, social conditions prevalent at the time of literary work's production and most importantly historical context. Arthur Miller was a prominent American playwright who produced notable works and received several awards during his lifetime. All My Sons, a play written by Miller in 1947, is one of his best works. This research paper follows the methodology of New Criticism and hence details of the social context in which this literary work came into existence will be discussed in the later part.

Characters:

Joe Keller (Keller)

Kate Keller (Mother)

Chris Keller

Ann Deever

George Deever

Dr. Jim Bayliss (Jim)

Sue Bayliss

Frank Lubey

Lydia Lubey

Bert

Joe Keller is a successful businessman who lives comfortably with his wife, Kate Keller, and son, Chris Keller, in a suburban American neighborhood. Their only dilemma is the loss of their son, Larry, who went missing during World War II. However, Kate clings to the hope that Larry is alive. Her another son, Chris wants her to embrace reality because he wants to marry Ann, Larry's fiancée and an old neighbor. On Ann's visit to the Keller family, Kate gets a little sensitive. Now, reader learns that Ann's father, Steve has been in prison for some time as he committed a crime of sending a batch of defective machine parts causing death of many pilots during the war, while working in Joe's factory. Joe, though convicted at first, was set free during his appeal; however Steve was imprisoned. Arrival of George, Ann's brother creates tension in the play. He is against Chris marrying Ann because George, who came straight from visiting his father in prison, knows that Joe is responsible for sending faulty cylinder heads. Despite George's disapproval, Ann continued with the decision to marry Chris and sent George away. Kate could not handle the reality of Chris and Ann getting married because it pronounces Larry a truly dead. Play ends with a strong revelation made by Kate. She tells Chris that Joe Keller killed his own son. Chris and his father's guilt finally confronted with each other. Joe Keller, who is already found guilty by Chris, got insights of the letter written by Larry to Ann, before his suicide, and felt devastated. He went inside to get few things and at the end of the play, a gunshot is heard. He killed himself.

Setting/Exposition – The setting of this play, the Keller's backyard in the outskirts of a town in America plays a significant role. The setting portrays a comfortable, calm and relaxed environment. Yet, the atmosphere is isolated. Once the reader starts exploring further pieces of the play, he or she realizes why the writer has used the word “secluded”.

“...closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere”

Imagism is a popular literary device deeply woven by Miller in this play. Through excellent use of visual images such as poplar trees, a large house, green yard housing “plants whose season is gone”, etc. Miller succeeds in making audience feel the nerve of Keller's life. The very first scene unveils beauty of a large, expensive house thereby hinting at a financially well-settled family, the conflict of which is soon to be unraveled. The word secluded is highly symbolic. It signifies isolation from the community because the townspeople suspect the truth about Joe Keller's involvement in supply of faulty cylinder heads. Further, “.....and the yard is green with sod, here and there plants whose season is gone.” Miller uses image of a house especially its plants whose season is gone, in a distinctive manner. This image of a house probably hints at the life of Joe Keller who is soon to face calamities. The illusion of having a happy and morally satisfactory life adhered to by Joe Keller is soon to be shattered. Kellers are falling apart thereby losing their artificially built glory.

“ The house is two stories high and has seven rooms. It would have cost perhaps fifteen thousand in the early twenties when it was built. Now it is nicely painted, looks tight and comfortable”. Even the structure of the house makes readers dive into the illusion of exploring a family which enjoys immense level of peace and lavishness; the truth of which is soon to be unveiled. The play not only portrays illusion which its characters especially Joe Keller, Kate and Chris have been clinging to; but it also places reader in a state of false impression about the Keller family at first.

Another significant image is that of an apple tree “whose upper trunk and branches lie toppled beside it, fruit still clinging to its branches.” Now, the readers will come to know that tree stands for Larry later on; however it foreshadows falling of Joe Keller's illusion. The language at first appears to be quite simple; however it stirs feelings of anxiety and curiosity through its use of explicit images. Miller has been associated with theatre and this talent can be seen in his description of Keller's house and surrounding area.

Foreshadow - Play, in the first act, foreshadows an impending disaster. The apple tree planted for Larry has been destroyed by the nature in the early morning hours hinting at the dark force which is soon to destroy the family. Kate held on to the hope that her son Larry is alive. Throughout the play, she suffers from the same emotional burden. Apart from this, presence of Ann, broken tree which keeps getting observed by Kellers and neighborhood and even Bert, a small kid, asking Keller to see the jail; these happenings certainly put readers in the state of curiosity and foreshadows approaching misery. On account of what Joe has done to pilots, he shall not remain free.

“Bert: {pulling him down by the lapel and whispering in his ear} Can I see the jail now?

Keller: Seein' the jail ain't allowed, Bert. You know that.

Bert: Aw, I betcha there isn't even a jail. I don't see any bars on the cellar windows”

Even the remaining description of the setting “Downstage right is a small, trellised arbor, shapes like a sea shell, with a decorative bulb hanging from its forward-curving roof. Carden chairs and a table are scattered about. A garbage pail on the ground next to the porch steps, a wire leaf-burner near it.” is quite real. Thus, images used by Miller are not mere decoration, but the very essence. Reader is made to visualize this setting instead of experiencing the effect of alienation, which is one of the important characteristics of epic theatre as against dramatic theatre that Miller has probably tried to shape his story into.

Plot – In simple words, plot refers to the sequence of events inside a story or play. In this play, the nature first demolishes an apple tree which is planted in memory of Keller’s missing son, Larry. Then messengers like Ann and George arrives at Keller’s home and at the end, the yard is engrossed in darkness. Inciting incident in the play begins when Lydia, Bert, Chris and even Anne keeps observing broken tree at different intervals which ultimately signals beginning of the main conflict associated with Keller’s dead son Larry. Joe Keller’s harsh truth turns entire Keller family devastated leaving Chris and Kate alone in the family. The rising action of the play begins with interaction of Joe Keller, “a man among men” and Jim Bayliss. After his arrival, Jim keeps staring at a broken tree. Surprisingly, broken tree remains a strong symbol throughout the play. It signifies virtual presence of Joe Keller’s missing son Larry. It undoubtedly foreshadows the unexpected ordeal which Keller and his family will be dragged into at the end of the play. The tree itself signifies virtual presence of Keller’s missing son Larry. Being one of the most influential characters portrayed by Miller, Keller is someone who has come to terms with realities of a modern life. Keller, who is interested only in the want ads in news paper and criticizes people looking for old dictionaries simply to nurture their passion further, is a man who believes that people should go for something which makes living out of that. Throughout the play, theme of dream versus reality lingers.

“Keller: Here's another one. Wanted, old dictionaries. High prices paid. Now what's a man going to do with an old dictionary?

Frank: Why not? Probably a book collector.

Keller: You mean he'll make a living out of that?

Frank: Sure, there's a lot of them.

Keller: {shaking his head} All the kind of business goin' on. In my day, either you were a lawyer, or a doctor, or you worked in a shop. Now...

Frank: Well, I was going to be a forester once”

Melodrama – Interestingly, Miller has added a melodramatic element in the play thereby increasing curiosity of readers. An apple tree is shaken by wind on the night of the day when Larry was born. This gives reader the feeling of reading a gothic novel. Once again, Miller has placed reader in the state of illusion to be shattered only at the end of the play. Throughout the play, an apple tree stands for Larry reminding readers of his virtual presence. Melodramatic tension remains at the core of the play as everything decides to happen at the same time. “This month is his birthday, his tree blows down, Annie comes. Everything that happened seems to be coming back. I was just down the cellar, and what do I stumble over? His baseball glove. I haven't seen it in a century.”

Tone – Tone of the play especially first act is humorous and satirical as well. Conversation between Frank and Jim and even Frank and Lydia adds humorous element in the play. Though the character of Keller appears to be quite practical and easy to get along with at first especially when he exchanged few words with Jim and Bert, he seems to be engrossed into something related to Larry, a broken tree, and arrival of Annie, every now and then.

“Keller: What's she going to say? Maybe we ought to tell her before she sees it.

Chris: She saw it.

Keller: How could she see it? I was the first one up. She was still in bed.

Chris: She was out here when it broke.

Keller: When?

Chris: About four this morning. {indicating window above them} I heard it cracking and I woke up and looked out. She was standing right there when it cracked.

Keller: What was she doing out here four in the morning?

Chris: I don't know. When it cracked she ran back into the house and cried in the kitchen.

Keller: Did you talk to her?

Chris: No, I... I figured the best thing was to leave her alone.

Pause.

Keller: {deeply touched} She cried hard?

Chris: I could hear her right through the floor of my room.

Keller: {after slight pause} What was she doing out here at that hour? {Chris silent. With an undertone of anger showing} She's dreaming about him again. She's walking around at night.

Chris: I guess she is.”

Irony - An irony has been used by Miller at several parts. Joe Keller who is responsible for the death of pilots and who, for the sake of financially well-settled life, caused death of pilots, appreciates his son Chris for prioritizing other’s concern over himself. So, even Miller’s characters ridicule their own deeds.

“Chris: I don't know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer. My whole bloody life, time after time after time.

Keller: You're a considerate fella, there's nothing wrong in that.”

Another example of irony is associated with character of Jim who, on one side, makes fun of Frank by calling him “out of mind” when he tries to figure out if it is a favorable day for Larry. Paradoxically or ironically, he himself is not able to nurture his passion for medical research. Indirect satire can be experienced in which characters themselves make their opinions ridiculous by what they think. One of the most influential parts of the play is conversation between Chris and Keller. Character of Chris, who wants to marry Ann and have some kids and who is ready to leave the business developed by his father for the sake of having a family, contradicts with Joe Keller, someone who gave priority to his business and hence caused death of pilots. A dream of a happy life which Joe Keller has imagined for his son does not harmonize with his son’s desires. Even the very thought of Chris living somewhere else with Ann makes Joe a little bit anxious who wants his only son Chris to enjoy what Joe Keller has built.

“Chris: I’ll get out. I’ll get married and live some place else. Maybe 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! 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 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.

Keller: {after a pause} Well... you don’t want to think like that.

Chris: Then help me stay here.

Keller: All right, but... but don’t think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That’s only for you, Chris, the whole shootin’ match is for you!

Chris: I know that, Dad. Just you help me stay here.”

Realism - Miller has beautifully used the technique of realism, a faithful representation of reality. Depiction of something real even at expense of a well-made plot is one of the prominent characteristics of a post modern writer. However, realistic writings avoid sensational elements. But, Miller has added several melodramatic elements.

Empathy – Another literary device employed by Miller is Empathy which means an identification of oneself with an observed individual or a character which one seems to participate with while reading. Reader experiences the sensation felt by character. The setting scene, the wind harming Larry’s tree and the falling action totally make readers dive into multitude of emotions. Readers share the strength and weakness of the characters on page. This element of empathy gives this play a characteristic of a dramatic theatre which fully involves the audience by stirring various emotions.

Illusion and Reality – One of the most influential character, Kate, has an immense capacity of love. Except during the end of the play, she lives with the illusion that her elder son Larry is still alive even though he has been reported missing some years ago. Allowing Ann to marry Chris will indirectly declare Larry dead which Kate is not ready to accept. Her illusion makes her alienated from others. She probably is aware of the fact that her husband Keller is responsible for the death of pilots. On the other side, Keller is surrounded by the clouds of illusion. He is responsible for the death of not only his own son but other pilots whom he addressed at the end of play, as All My Sons. Keller is not ready to believe that Larry flew a P-40. Besides, he justifies crime of Steve, which is not actually his crime, by saying that it is a business.

“Keller: You want her to go on like this? (to Ann) Those cylinder heads when into P - 40s only. What’s the matter with you? you know Larry never flew a P - 40.

Chris: So who flew those P - 40s, pigs?

Keller: The man was a fool, but don’t make a murderer out of him. You got no sense? Look what it does to her! (to Ann) Listen, you gotta appreciate what was doin’ in that shop in the war. The both of you! It was a madhouse. Every half hour the Major callin’ for cylinder heads, they were whippin’ us with the telephone. The trucks were hauling them away hot, damn near. I mean just try to see it human, see it human. All of a sudden a batch comes out with a crack. That happens, that’s the business. A fine, hairline crack. All right, so...so he’s a little man, your father, always scared of loud voices. What’ll the Major say? Half a day’s production shot... What’ll I say? You know what I mean? Human. (he pauses) So he take out his tools and he ... covers over the cracks. Alright, 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 percent. That’s a mistake, but it ain’t murder. You mustn’t feel that way about him. You understand me? It ain’t right.”

The characters in Miller’s plays seem to be engrossed into unexpected ordeal that they somehow fear to be experienced. Kate probably does not want Chris to marry Ann whose father is not guilty at all. Marriage of Ann and Chris, on the other side, can bring more investigations into Keller’s guilt. On the other side, Keller fears that his son Chris will consider it shameful to use his money once he knows the secrets of his father.

“Keller: We'll talk about it. I'm going to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road. I want you to spread out, Chris, I want you to use what I made for you. (He is close to him now) I mean, with joy, Chris, without shame... with joy.”

It is only during the climax scene that the illusion these characters have lived through comes to an end. Chris who was having a false impression that his father was not guilty was totally devastated on knowing the truth. Kate who has lived in illusion that her son Larry is still alive had to face reality at the end. Also, Keller who dreamt of a happy family felt disheartened after reading Larry's letter.

"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..." (Keller grabs the letter from Chris's hand and reads it. After a long pause) Now blame the world. Do you understand that letter?"

It is at this stage that Keller realizes the enormity of his crime. The people for whom he earned money had a different meaning of life. His quest for money and wealth devastated his entire family. The rising action of the play begins with arrival of Annie and George; and climax starts unfolding itself when George starts revealing the crime of Joe Keller to Chris. The falling action takes place when Annie shows Larry's letter to all. At the end, startling revelation of Larry drives Joe towards suicide leaving Kate and Chris devastated.

According to Gustav Freytag, a nineteenth century German novelist, drama can be divided into several parts like Exposition which sets the scene, Rising action which makes the story more exciting, Climax the moment of tension, Falling action which hints at something and at last Resolution during which characters solve the problem or come to terms with reality. However Freytag's analysis of a dramatic structure may not be totally relevant especially for post modern plays which are divided into multiple scenes without concrete acts.

All My Sons as Problem Play - The problem play is a form of drama which emerged during the 19th century. It was a part of realism movement. Problem play deals with social issues through characters, each representing conflicting point of view. In this play, Keller's view of a happy life totally differs from perception of Chris and Larry. Kate represents immense level of affection while Joe represents a man with stolid mind.

Thus, the recurring themes of illusion and reality and insecurity and anxieties, have been dramatically portrayed through well-developed characters, using various techniques and complex emotions, which readers cannot distance themselves from, by Arthur Miller who certainly has emerged as one of the most enduring playwrights of the postwar era.

“Well, all the plays that I was trying to write were plays that would grab the audience by the throat and not release them, rather than presenting an emotion which you could observe and walk away” – Arthur Miller

Historical context –

Modern American drama revolves around forms of realism and expressionism, themes of reality versus illusion and also language which reflects the society that writers write for. Truly, modern American drama is a canon of highly emotional work. The period during which All My Sons was written witnessed the idea of American Dream where everyone could be successful and happy with money. Miller grew up during the depression which hence played a major role in most of his plays. All My Sons is an attack on American Dream. Merely financial interpretation of American Dream left Keller family devastated. He sacrificed his human decency for gaining economic success. Arthur Miller criticizes the idea of American dream which solely focuses on profit and greed at the expense of human happiness and even entire life.