



# Murderer of Martyrs: Father Son Relationship in *All My Sons*

Dr. Promila

Assistant Professor

C.D.L.U Sirsa

Dr Geeta Rani Bindal

Associate Professor

DN PG College, Hisar

## Abstract

All drama is social and to ignore the interest of humanity would inevitably cause tragic tension. *All My Sons* suggests that an individual will not be able to live with easy conscience and in peace if he tries to promote and shape his and his children's life at the expense of human values. He will have to make good the loss and the retribution will fall either upon him or on his children. Joe Keller made money for his sons by supplying cracked cylinder heads for use in airplane during the war. Twenty-one pilots die as the planes crash in the air due to faulty cylinder heads. A crime has been committed by Joe Keller in the name of love for his sons. But the elder son rejects his loot and the younger one commits suicide and makes Joe realize that those who died in the air crash were all Joe's sons. The whole family is disintegrated as the moral and social forces work upon the son fixated Joe Keller.

**Keywords:** anti-social, consequences, grief-stricken, incorporated member, warmth.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) in his essay on *social plays* has said that all drama is social and tends towards a description of how man should live in relationship with each other. The members of the society are not strangers and it is unconceivable that any individual can prosper unless they all do. If an individual tries to prosper by harming the society he cannot. He will have to make good the loss. In *All My Sons* Joe Keller wants to make money for his sons at the cost of human values. He is a manufacturer of cylinder heads for use in airplanes in the partnership of Deever. The war is going on. Joe's two sons, Larry and Chris are already at the front taking active part in the war. Joe's thirst for more and more money makes him supply the defective cylinder heads in a cunning manner. The day the supply of 120 pieces of cylinder heads is to be made Joe Keller stays home with an excuse of pneumonia with the mal-intention of making his partner the scapegoat of the disaster that the defective cylinder heads is likely to bring about. Deever has been

playing almost a second fiddle to Joe Keller and is a passive partner. Deever knows that the pieces are defective and if supplied in their original form would crash down the airplanes fitted with those very cylinder heads. He seeks the opinion of Joe Keller on telephone giving him the details of the manufacturing defect that the cylinder heads had. Joe Keller is afraid of losing a very good contract. So he advises his obedient partner to effect some welding here and there on the cracks of the cylinder heads and go ahead with the supply. The cracked cylinder heads show their effect and 21 pilots are killed due to the manufacturing defects.

The action begins after the war. All the things described have already taken place. The action is based on what is called Ibsen's retrospective method. Seeds sown in the past have to give fruits in the present. A crime is committed by Joe Keller and now the punishment is to fall upon his sons. The last cry of the hero in Ibsen's play *Brand* can well explain the whole action of *All My Sons*.

"Blood of children must be spilt

To atone for parents' guilt."

When Larry comes to know that those 21 pilots have died due to his father's guilt he commits suicide leaving a letter for his beloved, Ann expressing his feelings:

"I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel - I can't bear to live any more?.... How could he have done that? Everyday 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 tell you Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him." (*All My Sons* 169)

There was a time when Larry closely identified himself with his father but now, he has no affinity with his father's wrong doing. His sense of morality turns him severely against his father's pursuit of wealth by wrong means. His sense of personal dignity gets a shock when his father's ideal idol crumbles. He receives it as a personal defeat. His ideals are crushed. His committing suicide is a form of self-penance. Larry could not bear the wrong done by his father for the cause of humanity and he finds no other alternative but to commit suicide. A great penance on Larry's part and a great punishment to his father who made money by dubious means for Lorry. Here is an irony and here is retribution. Larry is reported lost to the great shock to his mother Kate when it was later on revealed by Ann that he had committed suicide to atone for the guilt of his father. As far as Chris's relations with his father are concerned Ronald Hayman points out : "The conflict between Joe Keller and his son Chris stems from the difference between their degree of commitment to society. Chris feels towards the whole of humanity the same sort of responsibility that Joe feels only towards his family". (Hayman 113)

Thus, there is a difference of opinion between the two. Chris represents one attitude and Joe the other. Chris considers the whole society a family. He is ready to own the social responsibility. "Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it..... ". But Joe's view point is limited. Miller himself has said in his *Introduction to the Collected Plays*:

"His cast of minds cannot admit that he, personally has any viable connection with his world, the universe or his society. He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation". (Introduction 3)

Joe has a family and nothing is bigger to him than that. He is quite hopeful that his son will forgive him. "Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son. Nothing's bigger than that..... I'm his father and he's my son" (163). Joe commits a crime because of his love for his sons. "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?" (*All My Sons* 158). "Joe is an engaged man but not to man or to men, only to his family, more precisely to his sons, not all the sons of the title, but the two sons he has fathered". (Gross 11).

The purpose of the playwright is to make Joe realize the enormity of his guilt and show that social interests are larger than the family interests. Joe has made money out of war just because he wanted his sons to prosper. But the sons are not ready to share his loot, as there's blood in it. Joe also has the feeling of guilt. It is not an innocent crime by him. Barry Gross says : "Joe Keller is guilty of an anti social crime not out of intent but out of ignorance; his is a crime of omission, not of commission", (Gross 11) but this view does not appear to be very convincing. Gross is being partial to Joe. Joe knew well that the cracked cylinder heads will bring disaster. He was thinking that the Government would stop them before anybody took off. Joe knows well of his crime. "The Beast : I was the beast; the guy who made twenty one P. 40s crash in Australia. Kid, Wallkin, down the street that day I was guilty as hell". (*All My Sons* 116). From Joe's confessional words it becomes clear that Gross's view which explains Joe's crime as that of omission is not well founded. If Gross were right, Joe would not feel guilty and reproach himself for his wrong deeds. His sense of guilt is soon suppressed by his desire to make money for the sons. It's only after he has committed the immoral act of supplying defective cylinder heads in full knowledge of facts that he begins to rationally explain his deed as a step in the direction of family welfare. "He is safe from any serious assault of conscience, so long as he can believe that the family is the most important thing and that what is done in the name of the family has its own justification. Yet he is not perfectly secure within his sanctuary". (Wells 6) Joe does not want to oppose his wife's waste wait for Larry's return. This is again a sign of his guilty conscience. He wants her to remain in the illusion that he is alive and will come some day. Because Kate tells Chris "If he's dead, your father killed him. God does not let a son be killed by his father" (156). Thirdly he asks Ann to have a soft attitude for her father. She should not believe in "Crucifying a man". When he asks for a soft corner for Deever, he is in fact asking it for himself. He wants the assuagement of his own crime. Moreover, his insistence that Chris should take what he has earned "with joy.... without shame" is a revelation of his guilty conscience. But Chris is not in the least ready to accept that his father has done something great for him. He rather tries to revoke the sense of guilt of Joe. He says –

I was dying everyday and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of the goddam business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? ... You are not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to take the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?" (*All My Sons* 158)

Henry Popkin believes, "Joe recognises, as his sons have done, that he cannot live for his family alone, that he and his family belong to the world and therefore, he commits suicide, because he cannot live without his good name". (226) It does not seem proper that he committed suicide because he wanted his good name. If it were to be so then he should've committed suicide three years back when he came from the court and the porches were loader and people were crying "murderer, a murderer". It was Edie who died for his name. "I want my name, Marco. Now Gimme my name and we go together to the wedding". (*A View* 84) When Marco denies and calls him an animal, Eddie stabs the knife into his own heart and dies. The act of suicide is not done in cold blood: its rather done in rage and passion.

According to Barry Gross, "Joe's suicide is less a moral judgment than an act of love. In fact, Joe kills himself so that Chris need not kill himself. Chris - "What must I do?" - and because Chris tells him to – Chris : Now you tell me what you must do". Joe commits his second antisocial crime in the name of the same love that motivated the first". (Gross 12) In Gross's interpretation the moral focus is blurred by the filial love. If Joe commits suicide in the name of love for his son then the playwright's purpose fails and there remains no significance of the title. It means there is no learning. The play ends from where it began.

It is the moral condemnation from his son Larry, who crashed his plane out of shame and it drives Joe to a change of heart. He feels that he has no right to live upon this earth after killing twenty-two persons. Larry has written in his last letter, "If I had him there now I could kill him" (110). Joe at once thinks of killing himself.

Kate : You're so foolish. Larry was your son too, wasn't he? You know he'd never tell you to do this.

Keller : (Looking at letter in his hand) 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 (Exits into house) (170).

And with this realization he commits suicide. A light for universal love dawns upon him.

Arthur Miller in his Introduction to the Collected Plays says, "The play is designed to bring a man into the direct path of the consequences he has wrought". Joe Keller committed a crime and then he had to pay for it. He paid more attention to his selfish interest at the expense of human values. He made money out of others' lives. Raymond H. Reno says, "Joe Keller rejects the doctrine of man's universal responsibility and restricts the idea of love to the purely natural ties binding the family together. His conception of guilt is also and accordingly limited. A man is guilty, he believes, only if he harms his own". (1971-72) Ultimately he

has to pay for it. He did all those things for his sons. They rejected his money. Younger son Larry committed suicide out of shame and the elder son, Chris is ashamed in calling him father. Chris : "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 my father. (Almost breaking) I can't look at you this way, I cannot look at my self". (*All My Sons* 168)

The action of the play is eventual, means one incident leads to another. One incident creates the necessity for the other. There is a big demand for the cylinder heads because the war is on. Joe advises his partner to supply the cracked cylinder heads as he is afraid of losing the contract. The cracked cylinder heads make the aeroplanes crash. Twenty-one pilots die and the manufacturers are suspected. Larry, Joe's son feels very guilty and commits suicide to atone for his father's guilt. He writes Ann his last letter which Ann shows to the mother to make her sure that Larry has died. Joe feels guilty and considering himself to be the murderer of twenty one pilots shoots himself. Raymond Williams suggests, "one way of looking at *All My Sons* is in these universal terms: the father, in effect, destroys one of his sons, and that son, in his turn, gives sentence of death on him, while at the same time, to the other son, the father offers a future and the son, in rejecting it, destroys his father in pain and love". (Williams 309)

Kate, Joe's wife is fundamentally like her husband. What is personal is real for her. She too gives importance to her own affairs. If Larry is alive then the war has no reality and "Joe's crimes do not mean anything; their consequences are merely distant echoes in an unreal world. But if Larry is dead, then the war is real and Joe is guilty of murder even by an act of association, guilty of murdering his own son." (Wells 7) She tells Chris : "Your brother's alive, darling because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father". (156).

As the play opens, we witness the signs of mother-son conflict. Chris is thirty-two and he has returned from the War. He wants to settle down peacefully in life. He wants to take all those things which are rightfully his. He has decided to assert himself and as an initial step he has invited Ann to his home. He wants to marry Ann, but Kate does not want Chris to marry Ann because it is the public declaration of Larry's death. If Larry's beloved marries Chris it will be the confirmation of Larry's death. So, she is unable to bear it. She is a very indulgent mother who has lost her calmness and repose due to Larry's death. Thus, the mother-son relationship in the play is restrictive or inhibitive. The mother is lost due to her too much attachment with Larry.

Kate suffers because her husband has done a wrong deed. He gave priority to his selfish ends. He overlooked the public welfare and made money for his sons. The sons don't accept his money and pay the price. Larry commits suicide because of his father's guilt. And the incident of committing suicide leaves the mother in pain and suffering. She is always waiting for the person who has not to come back.

The social implication of the familial relations is that there is something bigger than the family. One should not try to harm the society in order to make profit for the family. The concern of the play is clear by the end of the play. Chris tells his parents that Larry did not commit suicide in order to make Dad sorry but to make him realise that "there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it". Joe takes a limited view

of human relationships. For him filial relations are confined to home alone. He can think of only his own prosperity. Though on the surface level he seems to be very friendly, he is indulged in little children's play. He is always playing with them, the policeman and jail game. Once Kate tells him very strictly to stop all that jail business. It reveals Joe's guilty conscience. He finds solace in being the in-charge of the jail.

On the other hand, Chris and Larry take more magnanimous view of human relationships. For them family extends into society. Larry felt deeply attached to his fellow men. So much so he owned his father's guilt and considered himself responsible for the death of twenty-one pilots and committed suicide. The same is the attitude of Chris. He tells Ann: "They didn't die, they killed themselves for each other.... A kind of responsibility man for man. You understand me?" (121) The mother has been described by the writer as "a woman of uncontrolled inspirations and an overwhelming capacity for love". And really, she is so. She showers a lot of affection upon George, Ann's brother. She receives Ann very warmly. It is due to her too much love for Larry that her better part is always gloomy and sad.

The emotional implication of the play is that the blood is thicker than water. There is a constant struggle between the emotional and social aspects of the play. The social implication is the moral of the play. And being a moralist Arthur Miller shows social implications having an upper hand over the emotional ones. The emotional aspect is being represented by Joe and the social by Chris, Larry and Ann. The emotional aspect is personal and selfish. Joe wants to make profit for his own sons, whereas the sons are idealists and think of the general good. There is a constant struggle between the two and ultimately it is the son who wins and the father recognizes his fault and accepts "he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were. I guess they were". (170)

Earlier Ann loved her father too well. She was very sorry when he was sent to jail. But when the news about Larry's death comes, she becomes aggressive.

"When they took him away, I followed him, went to him every visiting-day. I was crying all the time until the news came about Larry. Then I realized it's wrong to pity a man like that. Father or no father, there's only one way to look at him. He knowingly shipped out parts that would crash an airplane. And how do you know Larry wasn't one of them". (117)

It means her opinion about crime and punishment is also coloured. If no personal harm is done to her then her father's crime has no meaning. And as Larry has died in an air crash her father is equally responsible for the accident. She is similar to Kate in this regard. When George comes to know that Joe is as guilty as his own father his hatred for the father fades away. He repents why he did not send Christmas greetings to him. It means once again the emotional aspect gets brighter. All the children, Chris, Larry George and Ann hated their fathers as they did wrong to the society.

Thus, Miller in *All My Sons* has tried to transform a relatively impersonal social world into a home that offers familial warmth. When this play was first staged the seeds of love and warmth sprouted in Miller's own heart: "It suddenly seemed that the audience was a mass of blood relations and I sensed a warmth in

the world that had not been there before". (22) Miller meets his motive successfully when Joe, the hero of the play, extends the narrow world of family to the larger world of humanity.

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