

---

## MILLER'S *ALL MY SONS*: A PORTRAIT OF DECLINING MORALITY AND CONFLICTING VALUES

---

Sayeef Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet 3114, Bangladesh

---

### Abstract

Since the recorded time, our human civilization has always been going through conflicts and contradictions. Most of these conflicts stem from ideological differences, and a troubled time like war actually helps human beings to get real picture of paradoxical ideologies regarding their values and principles they contain in them. Arthur Miller, in his play *All My Sons*, reveals that conflicting values in microscopic scale with a tragic story of a small family consists of a few members. This paper utilizes the content analysis method to make the story unfold through logical development of events, gradual consciousness of various characters and dramatic changes in their attitude and view of life. Through dialogue and retorts, the characters reveal themselves and find their own ideological stand in conflict with others. And in this way, Miller provides the readers and audience with ample food for thought so that they can ponder over and realize the importance of putting humanism over all other principles. The influence of 'American Dream', to say rightly, the misuse and misinterpretation of the Dream by the characters of the play is also a concern of this paper. And the ugly side of 'Capitalism' also caused decline of morality that is evident in the play. This paper explores *All my Sons* which has been

a paradigm to show how these conflicting values and visions operate, and how they influence our mental-set up, and make us work accordingly.

**Key words:** American Dream, Capitalism, Conflict, Value, Morality,

*All My Sons* (1947) by Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is a postmodern play connected with the false values in American life. A postmodern play is a play that belongs to the postmodern literature and it exhibits the features of that type of literature. As Simon Malpas goes on to say, "Postmodern literature is marked both stylistically and ideologically, by a reliance on such literary conventions as fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humour and authorial self-reference" (Malpas 42). Again, Jeremy Hawthorn went on to define what is postmodern in the following way, Postmodernism, then, can be used today in a number of different ways: (i) to refer to the non-realist and non-traditional literature and art which takes certain modernist characteristics to an extreme stage: and (ii) to refer to aspects of a more general human condition

in the late capitalist world of the post 1950s which have an all-embracing effect on life, culture, ideology and art, as well as some but not all usages to a generally welcoming, celebrative attitude towards these aspects ( Hawthorn 110). And, as we go through the play, we come across different aspects of postmodern literature in it like fragmentation, paradox, paranoia and so forth. Jeremy's definition of postmodern literature also seems to suit the play in concern.

In this Play, Miller wants to point out the devastating consequences that these values have in our lives. Joe Keller, the protagonist of the play, believes that his family will be happy if they are financially secure. Both his sons and wife however value the family bond which they once had over the stability that the family business provides for them. These differences in their ideologies give impetus to this research paper. The present study, however, aims to find out the paradoxical values those are in conflict seen in certain characters involving some sensitive grounds like the family and the country. This paper will also reveal the drawbacks of capitalism, individualism and American Dream along with the boomerang effects of the aforementioned theories as well. In addition, this paper will show how the opinion of individuals varies regarding of scholars and authors have already attempted to research on different aspects of the play *All my Sons* from different angles. They have even focused on the same topic as this paper does but briefly as found in David Krasner's *American*

*Drama* (Krasner 30). However, this can be hoped that the study in this paper will undoubtedly open a new area for further thought in research. The Play questions whether the family is more important or the country in human life and this gives a birth of conflict in values of the characters. Both family and country have equal significance in our course of life but there is a deep-seated distinction inside them evident in the play. Joe Keller represents the importance of family and is greatly devoted to the well-being of his family.

The term American Dream was first publicly used by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America* wherein he defined the dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement". (Adams 404, 1931; quoted in Pumphrey 115, 2011). In fact, the phrase 'American Dream' was embedded in the declaration of the independence of America in 1776 by which the founding fathers of the nation wanted to see a wealthy and happy America. But, the problem lies in the misinterpretation of the term. People after WW11 took the phrase wrongly and the influence of the misinterpretation caused loss and decline of moral values and rise of many social problems. This also happens in the case of the term, 'Capitalism' which originally incepted for the betterment of individual but later it was misused by vested quarters. Capitalism is a political ideology and also an economic

system wherein individual is given importance for socio-economic emancipation. According to the definition of Merriam-Webster dictionary, an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods; investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market” (“Capitalism”).But, sadly, the idea of ‘Capitalism’ and ‘American Dream’ has been used unethically and wrongly since their inception and in Millers’ *All My Sons* this is not an exception in this regard.

*All my Sons* involves the action of Joe Killer during the WWII. He owns an airplane engine manufacturing company run by him and his partner Deever. It is evident in the play that Keller deliberately ships out faulty cylinders despite his partner’s objections which resulted in the crash of several planes and death of twenty one pilots. In investigation it is found that all the accusations go to Keller but he cunningly makes his partner scapegoat.

Joe Keller is dutiful to his business to save his family from any kind of malevolence. He is willing to seize any sort of horrendous and dishonest action to settle in his business. To him family comes first before anything else. For the betterment of his business and family, he sacrifices his sense of right and wrong. He does not care about his responsibility and

about the duty towards the country. Never does he give a second thought to foist his corruption upon his friend. He does not care to make pilots, fighting for country, prey of death. He seizes on the war as a way of profiteering. Thus it is seen that Joe is solely motivated by the so called American Dream, “rugged” individualism, and extreme capitalism. His sons’ idealism, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of that of their father. To them, the country is important and accuse their father of murdering twenty one pilots.

The family of Joe is the vantage point that gives birth of conflicting values and it is also for family’s sake that Joe runs after American Dream. The pursuit of the American Dream is motivated by his desire to provide financial support to his family. To have a nice home, good job, financial security--all for the sake of the family. But Joe Keller’s decision to ship faulty airplane parts to the military which results in the deaths of several pilots, sacrifices the family security in the name of keeping the business from falling. Miller points out that flaw with a merely economic interpretation of the American Dream as business success alone. And in this connection what Pumphrey remarks, the American dream is so easily corrupted by the temptations of a consumerist lifestyle. This era was a period of change after World War I, and Fitzgerald is warning America about the direction the country could be heading in. ( Pumphrey 116) Keller sacrifices other elements of the American Dream for simple economic

success. He gave up his basic humane quality (consider the death of pilots) and a peaceful successful family life for his mercenary goal. But he never took the risk to sacrifice Steve or Larry's life though it happened ironically and consequently.

Miller articulates the flaws of a capitalist who has no grounding in cultural or social morals. The challenge is to recover the full American Dream of healthy communities of his hometown with thriving families, whether or not capitalism is the economic system that leads to this happy life. On the other hand, there is a rift in the Bayliss' marriage due to Dr. Bayliss' desire to do unprofitable research, because his wife wants him to make more money instead of doing what he enjoys and what will help others. And here one can find resemblance of the attitude of characters of *All My Sons* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* that essentially exhibit Capitalist and consumerist attitude of American society which is, of course, the devastating byproduct and effect of so called American Dream. A good example of the Capitalism and consumerist American society can be traced in the speech of Myrtle who complains about George by saying, "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman...I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe"( Fitzgerald 34; quoted in Pumphrey 116).

In the course of the play, Chris condemns his father and denounces father's wrong-doing as a criminal act and

Larry commits suicide having been shocked by the brutal deeds and shadowy business of his father. It is, however, conspicuous that father and sons' values are in conflict due to their differences in thoughts and ideologies. Joe is self-centered die-hard business minded man who dares not to do business with the lives of "own race," while his sons are dedicated to save them. The father-son conflict is also quite an effective dramatic technique in the sense that it instills a well-balanced tension and creates a climax in the play. More than anything else, it has an advantage to attract the audience's attention to the play on the stage.

Keller commits an obnoxious crime against humanity, against his own country, against himself, to say. He always wants to hide his crime and gives a look of being good and generous man. Whenever anything goes wrong in the family, he sweats as if the cat may come out of the box. When Chris, for example, is barred by his mother Kate to marry Larry's girl Ann Deever, he endeavors to have a talk with his father so that they can reach a decision and negotiate with mother. Chris, with fury, asks his father to have a word with him. At this, Keller first becomes afraid. He thinks if his son talks about cylinder. Miller depicts the look of Keller: "Keller looks at him searchingly a moment" (Miller 12). This quote helps us to internalize that Miller is cynic about a person like Keller, and he tries to focus on the inside of Joe Keller's personality. Though Joe Keller wears a good-gentlemanly face, he hides many layers and fishy plans inside him.

Keller is motivated by individualism. Self-interest is the prime interest to him. He does not worry about the interest of others. He ignores many things that don't have value to him. It is conspicuous until the end of the play: Keller is solely accountable for the demise of twenty one Pilots. Even he does not regret for the lives of the pilots. He is only concerned about his family and business stakes. Chris' ironic clear-cut word can be quoted in this regard. "You've such a talent for ignoring things"(Miller 13). Here, through words of Chris, it has been evident that both of them contain different principle and outlook about way of leading a progressive life and those values are very much conflicting in nature.

In act one, the assertion of Keller can be noted that shows the reason why he uses his friend on the trick. He worries about his family, about the future of his sons only. He never ponders over the sons of others. Being a father, he never realizes the importance of fatherhood in general. He is like a frog in the well. Family is everything to him and its members are the center of all happiness to him. Understanding others is foreign to his nature. He indirectly rationalizes his shadowy job saying, "That's only for you, Chris, the whole shooting; Match is for you" (Miller 15). Outwardly this statement articulated by Keller shows how dedicated he is for his son and for the betterment of his family. But in actuality it is nothing but a show of his effort to save his own skin in

the name of family and a kind of wrap to conceal his greed and avarice.

Most notably, in act one, a glaring contrast between the value of father and son is revealed. While Keller does and grasps what he can for his seemingly betterment of his business to protect his family, Chris is hanging tough to leave his father's business, which will be shortly his inheritance, that will help him tie a family marrying Annie Deever. In the whole play, Kate mourns and becomes sick psychologically for his missing son, Larry. She hopes that Larry must return today or tomorrow. She hopes so, because she has a genuine motherly affection for her children. On the other hand, Joe Killer is to much realistic. He has got nothing of fatherly affection especially for Larry. He is very materialistic. His family value blinds him. In the whole play until the end, he doesn't shed a single drop of tear for his missing son. He even doesn't regret for Larry. He wants Ann, Larry's girl, married off to Chris only to hide his nostalgic past. Joe Keller was so engrossed by the family that makes him Machiavellian. He is expert at camouflaging the truth taking temperamental pretensions. He really knows how to cajole people into doing what he wants and tries hard to coax Chris to believe him thus keeping his stigmatized work in veil. As he follows American Dream for only self-promotion, he drops many general parts of it. He is not encouraged by American Dream rather abetted by family dream, to say in brief. American Dream puts the

greatest interest on national cause before anything else, while Joe Keller values family cause above everything. The statement of Joe Keller regarding his dream can be extracted in this connection:

The beast! I was the beast; the guy who's sold cracked cylinder heads to the Army Air force; the guy who made twenty-one P-40s crash in Australia. Kid, walking down the street that day I was guilty as well. Except I wasn't, and there was a court paper in my pocket to prove I wasn't, and I walked... past... the porches. Result? Fourteen months later I had one of the best shops in the State again, a respected man again; bigger than ever (Miller 30).

This extract testifies that how much cheat, hypocritical, greedy and avaricious Joe Keller is. He evaluates everything in terms of money, and money becomes the real yardstick of honor, morality and values for him. Actually Money is second to none and nothing for Keller.

Joe Keller is a double faced man. his extreme capitalistic belief compels him to be different in value that is totally opposite of patriotic Chris and Ann, for her patriotic zeal, wants to hang her father even for the crime against humanity, for the crime against own nation. She, being mis-convinced of her father's guilt, declares, " It's wrong to pity a man like that. Father or no father (Miller 31)." Here lies the most evil part of Joe Keller's Character. Because he not only commits crime, rather makes Steve scapegoat of the crime and presents as innocent as

possible. His materialistic mentality makes him lie to his family member. It is well known to almost all the local people that Joe Keller us the man who ordered behind the screen to ship out the crack cylinders to pilots. But he rumored that he was at home when Steve sent out the cylinder internationally. He is trying to legalize the fact that during war they were too much busy with manufacturing and the Major was repeatedly asking to dispatch the cylinders. Saying so, he attempts to rationalize his profiteering motive in the name of war demands. He tells Chris and Ann to see shipping out the defunct cylinders as 'human' rather than a criminal offence. He puts cleverly: "It was madhouse. Every half hour the major callin' for cylinder heads, they were whippin' us with the telephone... I mean just try to see it human, see it human... that's a mistake, but ain't murder (Miller 33)." Here again Joe fabricates reality with his corrupt thoughts and tries to rationalize the situation which made him take such step. Actually his greed and mercenary motives were instrumental than those of pressure put on him by the army.

Keller is a man of time out and out. He denounces the people of his country. He does not want them to get educated. His assertion regarding garbage boy can be mentioned here: "I don't know, everybody's getting so goddamn educated in this country, there will be nobody to take away the garbage (Miller 50)." He does not want his country to go ahead, to get improved. He cares for only his promotion keeping his country in troubles.

He desires for keeping all country people in ignorance. He hates the people of his race.

In act two, George goes to see his father and learns the conspiracy of Joe Keller who stitches up his father and sends him to jail. Joe gets afraid when he comes to know about the meeting between George and Steve. George comes to take Ann back and talks to Chris. Chris loves his father most. He cannot believe that his father can intentionally order Steve to send crack cylinder heads which caused the premature death of twenty-one pilots. He thinks of his father to be humane and sympathetic to others. It never occurs to him that his father may possess corrupt ideology that is limited only to the well-being of his family members. George reveals the machination of Joe to Chris that Joe cunningly orders Steve over telephone. George angrily discloses the shrewdness of Joe: "In a court you can always deny a phone call and that's exactly what he did. They knew he was a liar the first time, but in the appeal they believed that rotten lie and now Joe is a big shot and your father is the patsy (Miller 57)." It means that Machiavellian nature of Joe Keller is also an open secret to all local people like George.

While he is exchanging words with George, materialistic attitudes of Joe Keller come to light. He unconsciously reveals his inside to George saying that rich people make mistakes and poor people stagger with the load of those mistakes. How nasty and corrupt capitalistic he is can be traced backing his

own word: "A little man makes mistake and they hang him by the thumbs; big ones become Ambassadors" (Miller 67). It reveals the inside of capitalistic world and indicates how injustice prevails a society where materialistic need is the prime concern casting away all other values including humanism and nationalism.

Joe Keller is a liar by heart. It is now clear to everybody that Joe is the real culprit behind the curtains. But he still denies the crime he did and accuses his friend of his own crime. He says "If I could've gone that day, I'd never allow Dad to touch those heads" (Miller 70). Keller's secret is disclosed by his wife. To solve the problem regarding Larry's coming, Kate angrily tells if Larry is dead that means his father killed his son. It clears up all the confusions and conflict of sending of crack heads. It is also crystal clear that Keller is the person who for his business puts his friend to the altar of death. Chris, being a country lover, asks his father if Joe really killed twenty-one pilots. Keller replies that he did not kill Larry. Chris is repeatedly asking about others, those who were fighting for natural causes, who were ready to sacrifice their own lives for motherland. Chris gives more priority over the lives of other than that of his brother.

Joe tries to coax Chris to convince that whatever he did, he did it to keep his business alive, to help his family financially. His present standing is the result of his many years of shadowy business. He cannot let anybody destroy

his business in a minute. He says to Chris convincingly: "You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in a minute, what could I do..(Miller 74)". Here lies crude vista of so-called American dream where people chase after money and wealth.

To Keller, it was a chance for him to extort profit. He gets this chance at the end of this life, he cannot let it go. He seizes on it. For he may not get such a chance in his life. On the other hand, Chris is getting hacked off as his father is talking in favor of his business and family eschewing his country and county people. Furthermore, Joe is not telling a single word for those who were dying for the country, who were also sons of some fathers.

From the outset of play, Joe has been telling that he does everything for Chris who abhors him now learning that his father is as corrupt as some other businessmen who value self-interests more than collective -interests. Chris' value judgments are fundamentally in conflict with those of his father's. Father-Son's conflicting dialogues can be mentioned here. Keller says "for you, a business for you" and Chris retorts with burning fury:

For me! Where do you live,  
where do you come from?  
For me!  
I was dying everyday and  
you were killing my boys  
and  
and you did it for me?...  
don't you have a country?  
Don't

you live in the world? What  
the hell are you? You are  
not even animal, no animal  
kills his own. (Miller 76)

These lines are the encapsulation of Chris' ideology, morality and his value. Over and above, Joe being motivated by antique ideology fails to understand his elder son Larry. Larry used to believe in humanism and nationalism. It occurs to Joe that "If Larry was alive he wouldn't act like this." Rather he would understand and appreciate what his father has done. But the truth is that Larry unlike Chris is an altruistic. Being hurt by the embarrassing act of his father, Larry plunges himself into death. His altruistic attitude compels him to die because of the shadowy business his father has done to others.

"Miller understood the power and danger of ideologies" ( Sternlicht 119). Through the character of Joe Keller, Miller castigates the ideology of the older generation in general especially of Capitalism and of American Dream. Chris himself is well aware of these self-defeating ideologies. He puts it bluntly while answering his father back "I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better "(Miller 87). The firm values inbuilt in Chris blocked him from believing that his father could do anything but good. But at the end of play, his idealism and moral outrage come across heavily as he realizes that his father is guilty. Afterwards, the solid connection between them is broken. Still Joe Keller feels no shame, no regret as he thinks he has no wrong. He knows that all his native

people are partially or thoroughly enticed away from patriotism and nationalism by individualism during the war. They salivate over material and pecuniary objects and think only objects can make them happy what most of the American look for. To them everything looks humane can be converted into money. So people are getting very stuck to material need and gain, and they crave for it like anything.

Arthur Miller's Plays depict the human tendency of self-deception, betrayal and guilt which leads to the deterioration and the collapse of human values. According to Miller, the American Dream creates false hopes that prevent people from being proud of what they have accomplished to make their lives better than they would be elsewhere, and eventually fail at achieving anything (Nahvi 1029). Arthur Miller, in fact, through his play *All My Sons* documents conflicting values which are biased by Capitalism, Individualism, and the so-called American Dream of post-war generation especially of American people. Miller takes this conflict of values to such a level where it turns into a paradigm to expound ideological conflicts inherent in almost all living human beings on the earth. And if the metaphorical and personified Frankenstein of the misuse of the American Dream, Capitalism or Individualism cannot be stopped, the civilization will always suffer in the days ahead.

#### References:

- [1]"Capitalism". *Merriam-Webster.*, Merriam-Webster

Incorporated 2019,  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitalism>,  
Accessed on 2 November 2019.

[2]Hawthorn, Jeremy. *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc.1992.

[4]Krasner, David. *American Drama: 1945-2000: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell. 2006.

[5]Miller, Aurther. *All my Sons*. Ed. Nissim Ezekiel. New Delhi: Oxford UP, Rpt. 2005.

[6]Malpas, Simon. *The Postmodern*. New York:Routledge,2005.

[7]Nahvi, Alaeddin. "All My Sons-The Tragic Conflict between Family Loyalties and Social Responsibilities". *Science Journal*, Vol. 36, No.3, Special Issue, 2015, pp. 1025 1031, Cumhuriyet University. *ResearchGate*.2019.

[8][https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281150178\\_All\\_My\\_Sons-The\\_Tragic\\_Conflict\\_between\\_Family\\_Loyalties\\_dergicumhuriyetedutrcumuscijarticlelevi](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281150178_All_My_Sons-The_Tragic_Conflict_between_Family_Loyalties_dergicumhuriyetedutrcumuscijarticlelevi)ew5000118929, Accessed on 4 November 2019.

[10]Pumphrey, Kimberly. "God Bless America, Land of The Consumer: Fitzgerald's Critique of the American Dream". *The Undergraduate Review*, 7, 115-120.Bridgewater State University,

2011

[https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_research/vol7/iss1/22/](https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_research/vol7/iss1/22/), Accessed on 31 October 2019.

[12]Sternlicht, Sanford V. *A Reader's Guide to Modern American Drama*. New York: Syracuse UP, Rpt. 2002.