

A Critique of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Leadership and the Creative Imagination

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In the introduction of Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) Christopher Bigsby observed that this play is a "study of denial, of guilt, of social responsibility" (Miller, *All My Sons*, 2000), which ended tragically for all the characters in the play. The setting of the play is in the late 1940's, where Joe Keller owned an airplane parts manufacturing business. Joe, who was under pressure from a government contract to build airplane engine parts, let his employee and neighbor, Steve Deever ship cracked cylinder heads to the military. This decision resulted in the death of 21 pilots and landed Steve in prison. Joe did not go to prison regardless of his involvement in this action, and because he committed perjury by putting full blame on Steve for sending out the parts. As a result of Joe's actions it was revealed that his son Larry killed himself because of what he learned his father had done. Annie, Larry's fiancé, revealed this bombshell at the end of the play. Ultimately Joe made the decision based on this information to commit suicide.

The two themes most prevalent throughout the play are denial and guilt. Joe denied his involvement with selling the cracked cylinder heads and hid behind a veil of deceit. This is evident in the statement where he says, "None of them believed that I was innocent. The story was, I pulled a fast one getting myself exonerated... The beast! I was the beast; the guy who sold cracked cylinder heads to the Army Air Force; the guy who made twenty-one P-40's crash in Australia.... Except I wasn't, and there was a court paper in my pocket to prove I wasn't." (Miller, 2000, p. 30) Also, when he speaks with Steve Deever's son George he avoids taking responsibility. He states "There are certain men in the world who rather see everybody hung before they'll take blame." (Miller, 2000, p. 64) This is an interesting quote because even

though we know he was responsible for the cylinder head, he still puts the blame somewhere else.

Joe's son Chris has guilty feelings that are debilitating for him. He struggles with the facts that after leading men into war and watching them die, he has returned home safe. Larry was missing in action for three years, leaving behind his fiancé Annie. Chris falls in love with her, but he is hesitant to act on his feelings. This creates a quandary for Chris, because if he actually marries Annie, his mother will have to accept the fact that her son Larry is not coming back. Chris carries with him the guilt that he is in love with his brother's fiancé, and is conflicted by his feelings for Annie and his mother's resistance to let go of the hope that her son Larry is still alive. In an exchange with his father his guilt is magnified:

“Keller: ...She thinks he's (Larry) coming back, Chris. You marry that girl and you're pronouncing him dead. Now what's going to happen to Mother? Do you know? I don't!

Chris: All right, then, Dad.

Keller: Give it some more thought.

Chris: I've given it three years of thought. I'd hoped that if I waited, Mother would forget Larry and then we'd have a regular wedding and everything happy.”

(Miller, *All My Sons*, 2000)

Arthur Miller's works reflect his interest in the human condition, and how he viewed the world and the family unit as a fragile institution. Family is at the core of all of Miller's major plays, but nowhere is it more prominent than in the realism of *All My Sons* (Miller, *All My Sons*, 1947) and the impressionism of *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, 1949) (GradeSaver.com, 2008).

I was struck by Arthur Miller's ability to portray human frailty. As the play started, the setting was relaxed and cordial. The characters were everyday people espousing pleasantries and being kind hearted. There were no signs of the underlying issues that were right below the surface. As the characters were developed you started to see the mood and tempo of the play change. Christopher Bigsby's observation in the introduction where the play dealt with denial, guilt and social responsibility didn't disappear when Joe killed himself. In fact, when Mother says to Chris:

“Mother: Don't, dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live. [*Chris stirs as if to answer.*] Shhh... [*She puts his arms down gently and moves towards the porch.*] Shhh... [*As she reaches porch steps she begins sobbing, as*]” (Miller, All My Sons, 2000)

Despite Chris's need to grieve, Mother perpetuates the cycle of denial and guilt with her words.

Bibliography

Miller, A. (2000). *All My Sons*. New York, NY: Penquin Classics.

Miller, A. (1949). *Death of a Salesman*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.