
UNIT 2 *ALL MY SONS*: READING THE TEXT

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit explains:

- The structure and plot of the play *All My Sons*;
- Miller's perspective about tragedy;
- The play *All My Sons* as a tragedy.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

All My Sons opened at Coronet Theater in January, 1947 and ran for 328 performances. Four years earlier Arthur Miller had read the account of the Truman Committee investigation into allegedly faulty airplane parts manufactured in Ohio. The actual idea of the play came to his mind when he got to know about a family where a daughter had taken her father to the authorities for selling faulty machinery to the army. Miller decided to write the play 'so that even the actual criminal, on reading it, would have to say that it was true and sensible and as real as his life,' (Arthur Miller, 1957). *Collected Plays*, Vol-I New York: Viking) *All My Sons* was extremely popular among the audiences. The success of the play earned great reputation for the author and secured his financial position.

2.2 THE PLOT OF *ALL MY SONS*

All My Sons is a well constructed and realistic play. It is conventional realism, Ibsenite only in that Miller - as Ibsen so often does - starts in the middle of things and spends most of the play uncovering the facts of the past so that the audience can see the last act consequences in the present.' (Daniel Hoffman *Harvard Guide to American Drama* Gerald Weales 1979. (OUP). The work of Ibsen influenced *All My Sons* structurally as well, for Ibsen had liberally applied the principle of Greek Theatre that stresses the influence of the past on the present. The play is carefully constructed and well knit. It follows the pattern in which there is an appropriate link between previous actions and present consequences. Miller skillfully observes all the three dramatic unities of time, place and action

mentioned by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The unity of time limits the action to take place in roughly a single day; unity of place limits it to one general location and the unity of action limits it to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, middle and an end. The play does not cross the time limit of twenty-four hours; thus the unity of time is observed by Miller. The play maintains the unity of place with the entire action taking place in the Keller home in the American town of Detroit. The unity of place and action is also observed in the play. The action happens in the backyard of the Keller household. This unity owes a great deal to the conduct of a single character, Joe Keller.

The setting of *All My Sons* is designed to suit Keller's 'myopic world view' of not thinking beyond his family interests. ('All My Sons' Steven R. Centola in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* edited by Christopher Bigsby.) The backyard of the Keller home in the outskirts of an American town..... The stage is hedged on right and left by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere..... At the right, beside the house, the entrance of the driveway can be seen, but the poplars cut off view of its continuation downstage. (pg-1 *All My Sons*) The scenic image successfully hides Keller's secrets, but gradually discloses them as the play proceeds.

The play *All My Sons* is divided into three acts that roughly cover eighteen hours from Sunday morning to the early hours of Monday. The entire action takes place in the backyard of the house of Joe Keller, a rich industrialist. The Keller home includes his wife Kate in her early fifties and their thirty two year old son Chris. Their neighbours who are also their family friends comprise forty year-old Dr. Jim Bayliss, his wife Sue around forty, their eight year-old son Bert, thirty two year old Frank Lubey and his twenty seven year-old wife Lydia.

Miller has skillfully worked on the exposition of the plot that gradually increases dramatic tension as we move ahead in the play. In the first act, Miller gives background information revealing certain facts about the past taking his own time, as the playwright Ibsen did. In act I the play opens with Joe Keller reading the Sunday newspaper, while involved in trivial talks with his neighbour Dr. Jim Bayliss, later joined by another neighbour Frank Lubey. The fallen apple-tree snapped under the wind's fury catches their attention. This scene is significant as it acquaints us with the background of the play, giving a flashback about Larry. The apple-tree was planted to keep Joe Keller's son Larry's memory alive who had been reported missing during the war while flying a mission off the coast of China and had been presumed to be dead. Larry's mother does not believe that Larry is dead and is hopeful that one day he would come back safe. This belief of hers plays a major role in the development of the plot.

A young woman Ann has come to visit the Kellers on Chris' invitation. Ann and Chris are in love and after writing letters to each other for two years, Chris has now invited her in order to propose to her. Chris discloses to his father about his intention of marrying Ann. Keller discourages him to marry Ann, because in the opinion of Chris' mother Kate, Ann is Larry's fiancée. Kate believes that Larry is alive and would turn up any day.

Ann is the daughter of Steve Deever, business partner of Joe Keller who owns a factory manufacturing cylinder heads. An urgent contract comes from the army to supply cylinder heads for aircrafts to be used in war. But it so happens that the

whole batch of cylinder heads, produced by the manufacturing firm has developed cracks. Keller calls up Steve Deever asking him to weld the cracks on the cylinder heads and ship them off to the army. The damaged cylinder heads were passed by the factory and shipped out to the army resulting in the death of twenty one pilots. There was a court case against both Joe Keller and Steve Deever. However, during the trial, Joe Keller denied his responsibility for the damaged cylinder heads. The court acquitted him while Steve Deever was sent to jail where he is at the time the play opens.

Frank Lubey, one of Keller's neighbours wants to know about Ann's father and enquires about his release on parole. Ann wants to avoid such a question, since she is critical of her father after he was found guilty of fraud. Ann recollects that the neighbourhood had described her father and her family members as murderers after her father was found guilty of causing death of several aircraft pilots in the war on account of defective cylinder heads supplied by him to the army. Even though Keller was acquitted by a higher court, the people of his locality still believed that Keller had got himself acquitted through underhand means.

Keller is of the opinion that Ann should write to her father explaining to him that during the war the conditions were difficult and no one knew what was actually happening. Ann and her brother George are no longer in touch with their father Steve Deever out of disgust and shame that he was involved in such a dreadful crime.

Ann is surprised at the concern Joe Keller still has for her father and her family. She was under the impression that Keller would have a feeling of revenge and hatred towards her father. Her father had charged Keller of being involved in the supply of the defective cylinder heads. Keller says that he had forgiven her father and had no grievances against him.

Ann is of the opinion that Larry died as a consequence of her father supplying defective cylinder heads to the army. Joe Keller disagrees with her and says that Deever was not responsible for Larry's death. The Aeroplane that Larry was flying had not used those cylinder heads; such cylinder heads were used exclusively for P-40 aeroplanes. Giving an account of how the defective parts were supplied, Keller explains that urgent orders had come for supplying cylinder heads to the army. The trucks were already rushing to army Depots with cylinders but more orders were pouring in. Steve Deever came across a batch of cylinders that had tiny cracks. Without thinking of the damage these cylinders could cause, he covered the cracks with his tools so that they would be accepted for use. Defending himself, Keller says that though Deever was his partner in the firm, he was not told about the cracks in the cylinder heads or else he could have saved such a disaster from happening by advising Deever to withdraw that batch of cylinders. He defends Steve saying that he cannot be held guilty of murder because he had no intention of murdering anyone.

Joe Keller informs Ann that her brother George had called up from Columbus and wished to speak to her. George's trip to Columbus surprises Ann as he had never gone there all these years to meet his father. Keller is suspicious of George's visit to his father Steve, and Ann's visit to their home. He tells Chris that Ann's father had been blaming him for the supply of defective cylinder heads to the army during the war and then George suddenly went to Columbus to visit his

father in jail. Keller is of the opinion that George must be wanting to reopen the whole case about the supply of defective cylinder heads so as to harm the Kellers. Both Joe Keller and Kate get worried and nervous about George's visit to the Keller household in order to meet Ann. Kate reminds Keller that George had become a lawyer and must have gone to meet his father in connection with the defective cylinder heads case. She warns him of George's visit and asks him to be alert and get ready for the worst situation he might have to face. This scene arouses suspicion in our minds that Keller has manipulated certain facts. Act I ends with the audience anticipating that some hidden secrets would be revealed with the arrival of George in Act II.

In Act II the truth about Keller's role in the crime is finally revealed increasing dramatic tension. Act-II begins in the evening of the same day with Chris sawing the broken off apple tree and the family getting ready to go out for dinner. Kate fears that Steve Deever who had alleged in the court till the last day of the trial that Keller had forced him to despatch the defective cylinder heads to the army might get the case reopened with George's help, thus putting them into trouble. Kate then urges Chris that he should help them if any difficulty arose.

Sue enters the scene asking Ann the reason why George was coming to the Keller household. She guesses that his visit was to get Ann married off with Chris. Ann herself has no idea why her brother was coming. Accusing Keller of being guilty like his partner Deever, Sue says that Keller being smart got himself exonerated in the case by some trick. Ann objects to what Sue says because she believes that her father alone is guilty in the defective arms case. To this Sue replies that Keller is smart enough to make the people of the neighbourhood believe that he is innocent. Ann asks Chris whether his father Joe Keller is guilty to which Chris replies that his father is completely innocent and has been falsely accused in the case.

The arrival of Ann's brother George helps in the further development of the plot and causes conflict between Joe Keller and his son Chris. George reveals the truth about Joe Keller, accusing him of befooling and exploiting his father. Steve Deever was languishing in jail because of Joe Keller. According to George, Steve Deever was informed by the foreman in his factory that the cylinder heads produced had some manufacturing defect. Steve Deever called up Keller to come to the factory immediately. Meanwhile a large number of orders were coming from army authorities on an urgent basis. Instead of coming to the factory Joe Keller asked him to weld the cylinder heads and ship them to the army. Keller said he had flu and was unable to come to the factory but would take full responsibility for the supply of airplane parts. However, during the trial Joe Keller denied his responsibility for the damaged cylinder heads. The court knew that Joe Keller was telling a lie but in the appeal they believed Keller's story, acquitting him while sending Steve Deever to jail.

George then accuses the Kellers to have taken away everything belonging to the Deevers. He says that he will not allow Chris to marry Ann and asks Ann to leave the place with him. After listening to George, Chris confronts his father to know whether he is the culprit. To justify his actions, Keller says that there were a hundred and twenty defective cylinder heads in the factory which he could not discard or he would have got bankrupt. He did not disclose to the army officials that he had in the store damaged cylinder heads. This would make him lose the

contract and his business that had taken forty years to build. To avoid such a situation he supplied the defective cylinder heads to the army, confident that the army officials would check the engines before installing them to the aircraft. Keller further says that he was sure that the army authorities would send him a report after checking the engines. By the time he decided to inform them about the cracks in the cylinder heads the damage had already been done. The newspaper headlines read that twenty-one aeroplanes had crashed and the pilots had been killed. The military officers came to his factory to arrest him and he denied the charges keeping in mind his son Chris' future. Keller says if he had let his business to collapse, he would not have been in a position to set up another business at the age of sixty one.

Chris gets furious at this. He accuses Keller of killing his own countrymen. He was worse than an animal, 'no animal kills his own' (pg-76 *All My Sons*). Chris says that he does not know how to punish Joe. He cries out 'What must I do, Jesus God, What must I do?' (pg-76 *All My Sons*) and Keller says, 'Chris..... My Chris.....' Both of them seem to be helpless and feel miserable.

The play reaches its climax in Act III with dramatic tension building up again. Act III opens with Kate rocking impatiently in her chair waiting for Chris to return home after he disappeared from the house. Kate wants Keller to apprise Chris of the whole situation admitting his mistake once he came back. Kate suggests to him to tell Chris that he is ready to go to prison so that Chris felt happy that his father was willing to repent. According to Kate, Chris would not let Joe go to prison but would rather forgive him. Keller does not agree with her as he feels he had done everything for his family's sake. Kate says that for Chris there is something bigger than one's family and that Keller had broken Chris' heart.

Kate wants Ann to leave the very next morning without Chris and is firm on her belief that her son Larry is still alive. Ann tries hard to make Kate believe that Larry was dead and speaks about Larry's aeroplane crash on the coast of China on the 25th of November. Ann points out that his plane had not crashed due to engine failure. Kate refuses to believe her. Their future union in marriage is threatened by Kate and in order to save their marriage Ann takes out a letter from her pocket which she had brought as proof of Larry's death and shows it to Kate. After reading the letter that explains the motive of Larry's suicide Kate is not shocked for 'she has always known, while constantly denying, that Larry had died in the war.' ('P.56 Steve R. Centola's, 'All My Sons' in C. Bigsby's *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*). Unable to accept the death of her son she has lived in self deception that he was still alive and would come back home some day. Chris who had gone out, comes back after driving around. Chris informs his mother that he is leaving home alone for good and that he is going to Cleveland where he hopes to get a job in a private firm.

Ann wants to leave with Chris but he refuses to take her along. Meanwhile Keller appears on the scene to talk to Chris. Now it has become clear to him that both his wife and his son want him to go to jail. Keller asks Chris if he wanted him to be jailed. He further says that during war time everybody sold their manufactured goods to the government against money. Defending himself he says that everyone tries to make money by all possible methods. Chris says that he had idolised his father but the latter proved himself to be unworthy.

In order to show the letter to Chris, Ann snatches the letter from Kate, giving it to Chris to read. Chris reads the contents of the letter and tells his father that Larry had deliberately killed himself in a crash. He further says that Larry was very upset about his father's involvement in the death of his fellow pilots. Larry intentionally crashed his aeroplane when it became unbearable for him to live with this shame. He had further written that if he had been there at the time of his father's conviction in court, he would have killed him.

After reading the letter Chris tells his father that he should know what is to be done. Keller asks Chris to get the car ready and drive him to the police where he will surrender himself. Kate prevents him from surrendering to the police saying that Larry would not have wanted him to surrender. Keller says that in Larry's opinion the other pilots were also like his sons and so he has to pay the penalty. Kate pleads with Chris not to take his father to jail as she fears that he will die in prison. She reminds Chris that the war is over and the letter has no meaning anymore. Chris disagrees with her.

Keller goes inside the house and a shot is heard from inside the house. Chris enters the house and has no idea that his father has shot himself. Chris comes out inconsolable after seeing his father dead. Kate knows very well that her husband had committed suicide to pay the penalty for his crime. She tells Chris not to feel guilty for his father's suicide but to forget the past and live a new life. The play ends with a tragic scene, Ann running to look for Dr. Bayliss while Chris and Kate are left alone grieving for Joe Keller.

'The play ends with Chris facing with horror his own complicity in his father's self-destruction, and with Keller's death the play forcefully repudiates anti-social behaviour that derives from the myth of privatism in American Society'. Steven R. Centola's ('All My Sons' in *The Cambridge Companion To Arthur Miller* edited by Christopher Bigsby).

The minor characters in the play such as Dr. Jim Bayliss, his wife Sue, Bert, Frank Lubey and Lydia contribute to the unity of the plot with their dialogues enhancing the play's realism. Their dialogues contribute to the routine activities of daily life such as the damage caused to the trees that were snapped by the fierce wind, the weather forecast in the newspaper, the poor remuneration which the doctor gets as compared to a film star, a toaster that is out of order, and has to be repaired. The banalities of conversation bring interest to the plot giving it a realistic effect without disturbing the progress of the main plot.

2.3 ARTHUR MILLER ON DRAMA AS TRAGEDY

In his essay, 'Tragedy and Common Man' Miller says that there were very few modern tragedies written because people thought that they were 'fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly' ('Tragedy and the Common Man' in Arthur Miller's *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* and with an Introduction by Robert A. Martin The Viking Press 1978 New York) as Aristotle believed. For Aristotle, in a tragic play the protagonist should be a king or someone of high class so that his change in fortune from good to bad can be presented on a big scale Arthur Miller challenged the belief previously accepted about tragic plays, saying that tragic consciousness existed even in the ordinary people. For him

‘the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity’ (‘Tragedy and the Common Man’ in Arthur Miller’s *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* and with an Introduction by Robert A. Martin the Viking Press 1978 New York). Arthur Miller believed ‘that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were’ (Tragedy and the Common Man’ in Arthur Miller’s *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* and with an Introduction by Robert A. Martin The Viking Press 1978 New York). Miller emphasized that main characters in a tragedy should be ordinary people in domestic surroundings to whom the audience will readily relate. The audience’s understanding of a tragic play becomes easy with ordinary people playing the main role. A play having a great person as protagonist would involve elevated language, understood only by the upper-class people while the common man would be unable to comprehend the meaning of the play. According to Miller, ‘Tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly. The ‘tragic flaw’ is not exclusively in grand or elevated characters,’ it is also present in ordinary people. ‘The flaw or crack in the character is ‘his unwillingness to remain passive of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status.’(‘Tragedy and the Common Man’ in Arthur Miller’s *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* and with an Introduction by Robert A. Martin The Viking Press 1978 New York)

Arthur Miller wrote tragic plays such as *The Crucible*, *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. In fact *All My Sons* was Miller’s first attempt to write such a tragedy of the common man. His tragedies were associated with the American’s belief of a certain form of idealism, that man is the captain of his fate. One such tragedy was ‘*All My Sons*’ which was about the high significance of Joe Keller and the resulting actions and consequences. His actions lead to his downfall, making him a tragic character and the play a modern tragedy.

2.4 ALL MY SONS: A VIEW OF THE TEXT

The play ‘*All My Sons*’ deals with the fate of Joe Keller. Though uneducated and a self-made man Keller has committed an atrocious act during World War II. Joe Keller and Steve Deever are partners of a factory that manufactures cylinder heads for aircrafts. During the war they get a contract from the army for supplying to them cylinder heads on an urgent basis. Steve Deever is informed by the foreman in his factory that the cylinder heads that were produced had hairline cracks in them. Steve Deever calls up Keller to come to the factory immediately. Keller says that he would be unable to go to the factory as he was down with flu. Asking him to weld the cylinder heads, he assures Deever that he would take full responsibility for the damaged cylinder heads. These damaged cylinder heads cause twenty-one planes to crash, killing their pilots. Both Deever and Keller are arrested and convicted but at the trial Joe Keller denies responsibility and is exonerated as the blame shifts to Steve Deever who is imprisoned. The main action in the play revolves around this tragic incident.

The ostensible harmony of the house is disturbed three years later with Ann’s arrival to the Keller household in order to marry Chris Keller. Situation in the Keller home worsens with the arrival of George, Steve Deever’s son and Ann’s

brother who comes to prevent Ann's marriage with Chris. Kate believes Larry to be still alive though he had gone missing in action during the war. It is this belief of hers that enables her for three years to support her husband Joe Keller and be partner in his crime by concealing her knowledge of the case. George reveals the truth that Keller was the main culprit, responsible for the death of twenty-one pilots and because of him his father is in jail. When confronted by Chris to know whether his father was guilty, Keller justifies his action saying that he took the decision to ship faulty cylinder heads to the army to preserve his business and for the welfare of his family. Joe Keller pursues the American Dream of owning materialistic wealth — a nice home, good job, financial security, car — all are done for the sake for the family. Keller says,

‘Chris...Chris, I did it for you, it was chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya? (*All My Sons* P.75)

Kate Keller supports her husband's guilt by concealing her knowledge of the terrible crime he had committed fearing that it might break the family unit. It is also ironic that Keller's decision to act for his son and his family is the cause of estrangement between him and Chris. Keller's myopic world - view disallows him to see beyond his family. His claim that there is nothing bigger than his family cuts him off from any kind of relationship with society which is wrong.

The views on morality of both Chris and Larry Keller are a contrast to those of his parents. Chris is disgusted when his father tries to justify his act, saying:

‘For me! 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 god dam business? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you?...' (P.75,76 *All My Sons*)

Larry's letter to Ann reveals that shamed by his father's involvement in fraud and profiteering Larry is compelled to destroy himself deliberately. It is a devastating irony that Joe's attempt to work for the interests of the family results in fraud and the deaths of twenty one pilots. The clash between the ideals of father and his sons finally results in the suicide of Joe Keller.

Denial on the part of most of the characters of the play also contributes towards making the play a tragedy. Joe Keller the chief character himself lied to everybody including his family that he was not involved in supplying defective cylinder heads. His denial in the court despite the assurance given by him to his partner Steve Deever at the time of the shipment landed Deever in jail. To save her husband from going to jail Kate herself lives in denial and self deception. She firmly believes that Larry is alive despite the knowledge of his death because she knows that Larry's suicide is the result of her husband's crime of killing the pilots. Her belief that Larry is alive is beneficial for the peace and harmony in the family. Chris has a vague idea of his father's crime but is unable to accept him as a criminal as he had always looked up to his father and idolised him.

Ann herself chose to deny the truth the truth for three years only to save her relationship with Chris. The facts of the case that Keller had manipulated to

prove himself clean was also known to the neighbours but they pretended that he was honest 'and they accepted him back into their social life'. (P.167 'Arthur Miller' *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* C.W. E Bigsby)

In spite of being uneducated, Joe Keller is a hardworking person and a successful business man. An honest worker and a friendly and polite person he likes to socialise with everyone. But he has a flaw or weakness. This in turn causes him to act wrongly. His tragic decision to ship defective cylinder heads that killed twenty-one pilots changes him into a despised character. His love for his family and his unwillingness to become bankrupt forces him to ship the faulty cylinder heads to the army. His wrong decision was due to a 'tragic flaw' in his character that led Larry to commit suicide which in turn caused him to take his own life. Realising his guilt that the pilots were all his sons, Keller shoots himself towards the end of the play, creating for him sympathy in the audience.

Keller's act of suicide at the end of the play is tragic in a number of senses: he is unable to cope with the estrangement between him and his son; at the same time his death is designed to spare Chris any further embarrassment at what his father has done, etc. The conflict between morality, denial of the characters, the guilt of killing pilots who were all his sons and finally Joe Keller's realisation that there can be no real forgiveness for his actions point towards the state of affairs in the modern world.

All My Sons is considered a modern tragedy because of the creation of the chief character as tragic and how his actions lead to several tragic consequences.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In the first section of this unit we have discussed the structure and plot of *All My Sons* while in the second section we get to know Miller's views on tragedy and why the play *All My Sons* is primarily called a tragedy.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. How does George's arrival to the Keller household help in the development of the plot in Act II?
2. How is Larry's letter instrumental in forcing Keller to realise his guilt?
3. Does Kate know about Keller's guilt? If yes, why does she conceal the facts from others?
4. What is Miller's view on tragedy?
5. Why is *All My Sons* considered a tragedy?

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Hayman Ronald, *Contemporary Playwrights: Arthur Miller*. Heinemann, London. 1973.

Gould, Jean. *Modern American Playwrights*. Bombay Popular Prakashan. 1966.