

***A CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN DREAMS: ARTHUR MILLER'S ALL  
MY SONS***

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**Abstract**

Arthur Miller has been concerned in most of his plays socio-economic aura of the 'Depression Age' of American civilization. The disintegration of American dream was close to Miller's sensibility. The American Dream as a concept or idea characterizes the American state of mind. The ideal of equal opportunity regardless of economic status at the time of birth is the crux of the American Dream and a defining element of American psyche. Almost all Americans are victims to American Dream. To fulfill individual American dreams, sometimes means of hook or crook, get applied. In fact, mass welfare, environment protection like-issues are ignored and individual success emphasized. In *All My Sons*, Arthur Miller has depicted the dark side of the philosophy of American Dreams. He ruthlessly, exposed immoral activities grounded in the life of his protagonist Joe Keller. In *All My Sons*, Miller deals with the themes of materialism, wartime profiteering American people's mentality, and man's relationship and compulsion to society above and beyond the concerns of his own family circle.

**Keywords**

American Dream; materialism; Arthur Miller; Joe Keller

The phrase “American dream” has been used in several ways by the critics. No doubt, it is basically a proposal that seems to hint that anybody in America can be successful by dint of hard work and can have a joyful and flourishing life. Arthur Miller in his chief dramatic works like *Death of a Salesman* and *All my Sons* has skillfully revealed the viewpoint of American Dream where Willy Loman and Joe Keller are representative protagonists who are always seen in search of materialistic growth in their material world, and through these tragic protagonists, Miller has left an underlying meaning or message that we human beings are degraded and corrupted as we overlook moral principles and sometimes, commit such an atrocious offence for the outer world that we find ourselves victim of our own conscience.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the concept of *American Dream* refers to "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity though hard work, determination, and initiative". Liberty (especially religious), independence (abolition of class structure), competition, equality (justice included), hard work (ambition, perseverance), and success are six more or less essential elements of American Dream. It is believed by Americans that one's prosperity is dependent on the individual's hard work, and abilities. Such viable conditions attracted people from other parts of the world to America. However, it is quite difficult to compress all shades of American Dream. To some, it stands for individual ambition, aspiration for power and pelf, name and fame, well-structured family, to lead an idyllic suburban life, opportunity, self-help, self-determination, success, and above all happiness. The idea of American Dream is to see America as a land of opportunity, a melting pot wherein diversity is encouraged, social and political harmony, and respect for common populace world-wide.

The American Dream was originally about Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as Thomas Jefferson stated in his Declaration of Independence of 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, which among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (Jefferson 7).

American Dream as a concept and its popularization is generally credited to an American historian James Turslow Adams. He emphasizes the notion of equality and democracy. He defines it in his book *The Epic of America* (1931):

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 404).

To many critics the American Dream as an ideology appears untenable and illusion due to the forces operating simultaneously like racism, segregation, homophobia, and inadequate rights and opportunities to women. The conception of American Dream privileges white males. In *The Pursuit of Happiness: Government and Politics in America*, John A. Moore Jr. and Myron Roberts focus on building block nature of American Dream:

Happiness is a prime concern of democracy, and in its pursuit, Americans have created the world's first and richest consumer economy; have undertaken to mass produce education, entertainment, and goods on an unprecedented scale; and have sought to build a society in which most people would be free to follow the star of their own destiny in their own fashion. And if in the process, we have become a restless, troubled, and sometimes divided people, that is a price that had to be paid for having shifted the focus

of politics from the grandeur of the few to the well-being of the many (Moore and Roberts 45).

The American Dream motivated thousands of immigrants to come to America, dictated that through hard work, skill and effort a person, no matter how humble his origins, could achieve success. Its roots lie in the great thoughts of men like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who once said, "America is another name for opportunity." The American Dream is steeped in the complimentary ideas of self-reliance and self-determination. The American success myth is the part of American Dream which consists in virtue, money, and happiness. It refers to the gaining of wealth and rising in the social order from rags to riches. Success is based on individual efforts and accomplishments rather than the class structure into which they were born. The success myth stresses individualism and masculinity. Individualism is expected to look after family first. Comfort, status, and security acquired via industry are bases of the American dream. The idea is supported by stories or narratives about successful individuals who got position in the social order, for instance Dheeru Bhai Ambani, J. R. D. Tata, and Sunil Mittal etc. However, hard work has not promised happiness ever.

*All My Son* gave him professional recognition and an identity as promising playwright. *All My Sons* was Arthur Miller's first successful play. It ran for 328 performances and moreover won him the New York Drama Critics Award. About its story and background, Miller himself narrates an occasion:

During an idle chat in my living room, a pious lady from the Middle West told of a family in her neighborhood, which had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machine to the Army. The war was then in full blast. By the time she had finished the tale I had

transformed the daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind (Miller 17).

*All My Sons* is set after World War II and The Great Depression during 30's of 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was a decade of dramatic downturn of the economy worldwide. Many Americans were compelled to suffer high poverty, joblessness and homelessness due to shops, factories and banks closing.

A key idea explored in the play is the American Dream and it is one of the main themes in the play, as it engages all major and minor characters and shows that they all relate to this theme in some way. Joe Keller sacrifices moral values which bind people only to achieve his American Dream as he does not hesitate to tell a lie and claim that his partner Steve Deever is responsible for the plane crash and the loss of 21 pilot's lives. He doesn't hesitate to destroy the family of his business partner. He even doesn't feel his responsibility for more than his own family. Joe and Chris both play with the emotions of Kate Keller. Joe and Chris know that Larry is no more, but Kate is not ready to believe in.

In *All My Sons*, Miller deals with the themes of materialism, wartime profiteering, and man's relationship and compulsion to society above and beyond the concerns of his own family circle. When Joe comes to know that Chris decided to shift somewhere else, his short-sighted American Dream receives sudden jolt. He realizes that all of his attempts he has done in building up his business will be of no use if Chris does not step in to take it over. Totally self-centered, Joe cannot imagine anything extra to his family and its comfort and he has never been able to observe any responsibility beyond his duty as a husband and father.

George Deever, and his sister Ann go to prison unexpectedly to visit their father, whom both children had rejected as a murderer. Joe immediately gets and asks Ann to have sympathy for her convicted father Steve Deever. In fact the Joe's appeal is a justification of his own incriminatory deeds:

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 takes out his tools and he—covers over the cracks. All right- 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 (*AMS 32-33*).

Joe fears of getting abandoned at the hand of Chris if he gets able to verify the truth in the same way as the Deever children have rejected their father. Joe every time forwards a new excuse for hiding the truth. Joe even explains the nature of villainy to George and Ann:

There are certain men in the world who rather see everybody hung before they'll take the blame (*AMS 68*).

When George comes to the truth, he gets hostile and remorseful. Having broken the long, mysterious betrayal of his father, he is now convinced of his father's blamelessness and assumes that Joe has used his father for a "sucker." He wants Ann not to marry Chris because Joe has deceived and destroyed the Deever family. He breathlessly blurts out:

My life turned upside down since then. I couldn't go back to work when you left. I wanted to go to Dad and tell him you were going to be married. It seemed impossible not to tell him. He loved you so much. [He pauses] Annie – we did a terrible thing. We can never be forgiven. Not even to send him a card at Christmas. I didn't see him once since I got home from the war (*AMS 56-57*)!

George wants to have a talk with Joe. Joe reveals a fact that “A little man makes a mistake and they hang him by the thumbs; the big ones become ambassadors” (*AMS 67*).

Kate Keller in the play is shown hysterical insisting that Larry her son is not dead. He will return one day, whereas he has been declared missing for the last three years. She knows the fact very well that Larry will never turn up. The matter of fact is that Chris and Ann want to get married. Ann is Larry’s fiancée. If Chris marries Ann, it will be an acknowledgement that her younger son is really dead. She perfectly weighs loss and profit of getting her husband’s criminal acts exposed. She is too victim to her American Dream. She doesn’t want her family and business to be destroyed. Kate never lets Chris admit that his brother, Larry is dead. She states to Chris her logic that has sustained her from accepting Joe’s guilt for Larry’s death:

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 (*AM S 73*).

Chris having been fed up by war-time experiences, he turned practical and sought to know the relevance of all criminal acts done for the sake of family and its comfort. He wanted his father to explain him:

You’re a boy, what could I do! I’m in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you’re out of business; you got a process, the process don’t work you’re out of business; you don’t know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell’s it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? [His voice cracking.] I never thought they’d install them. I swear to God. I thought they’d stop’em before anybody took off (*AMS 74-5*).

Chris angrily criticizes Joe at the end:

For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! – I was dying every day 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? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world—the 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? What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do (*AMS 75-6*).

The first two Acts of the play have been concerned with preparing Joe to confess his guilt. Act Three brings Joe to feel his true accountability of his crime. Chris symbolizes post war disillusionment. He emerged from World War II with a sense of a new social order and brotherhood among men. In this act, Chris's ideals shatter. Chris tells Joe that the business doesn't motivate him for more than an hour a day. If grubbing is necessary for money, Chris is ready to quit and wish to join Ann and a family to make the toil worthwhile. Having just admitted that he feels guilty in using the material things that wartime prosperity has helped create, Chris Suddenly reveals that he is "going to make a fortune" for Ann (*AMS 37*). He admits that his faith in his father's honesty and incorruptibility is bogus altogether:

It's true. I'm yellow. I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it, but if I knew that night when I came home what I know now, he'd be in the district attorney's office by this time, and I'd have brought him there. Now if I look at him, all I'm able to do is cry (*AMS 85*).

Chris' strong sense of moral superiority flickers before the pragmatism of his parents.

I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical. You made me practical (*AMS 85*).

Although Kate is conscious of Joe's blunder from the very beginning, yet she continues her support to Joe her husband. Thus, like Joe, she also never expanded her concerns beyond her own family. Her perverted ethics makes Joe's responsibility a little passable and bearable because she thinks it is too bitter to hold Joe guilty for his own son's death. Kate seems little cared about other twenty-one pilots. For her that is a remote fear, but the horror of Larry's death makes her worried. She continues believing that Larry might be flying P-40.

Joe is able to sleep soundly blanketing his guilt, but Kate cannot. She is mentally as well as physically paralyzed by the burden of Joe's guilt. In Act III, Dr. Bayliss asks Joe to keep Kate abed. She complains of frequent headaches and aspirin in times of threatening crisis. As a defense Kate has retreated to superstition, horology, and omens. She regards the blown down Larry's memorial tree as a bad sign.

Kate tells George that Joe has never been ill for fifteen years. It was just a kind of Freudian slip of tongue and truth revealing moment. She kept Joe's guilt hidden for more than three years; she might have subconsciously wished to expose and prevent the marriage of Ann and Chris and to be comforted of her growing neuroticism. She still shines Larry's shoes, and she keeps his cloths and his room just as he left them. Joe tells Chris that Kate's behavior has become the same as it was when the news of Larry's death was first received. At one point Kate threatens to commit suicide if Larry is not going to return. She holds that Chris has been aware of his father's guilt for some time.

Kate is of the opinion that Chris may pardon Joe, provided he confesses frankly his guilt, and that might quench Chris's philosophy and leave insisting on sending Joe to jail. Chris claims that there is nothing to forgive Joe. Joe reveals one more fact that he wasn't the only one who profited the war in anticipation that Chris' filial love should forgive him:

There's nothin' he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son....Nothin's bigger than that. And you're goin' to tell him, you understand? I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that, I'll put a bullet in my head (*AMS 81*).

Kate Keller's illusion that Larry is alive shattered when Ann brings his suicide letter and reads out before Kate. At first, Ann seems willing enough to let Kate persist in her delusion that Larry is alive. When Ann could sense Kate's intuition that Larry really died on November 25 instead of being "nearly killed that day," Ann resists the desire to shatter Kate's hopes. Out of her wifely love, Kate pleads with Chris to protect Joe from the damning news of the letter.

Joe proved himself a self-centered man in business whom money and family are everything. Chris is uninterested in his father's endeavor. Keller says: "...what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you" (*AMS 15*)! His only accomplishment is son. He wants Chris to pay attention to him but Chris is planning to go away from the house. Joe grew rich by foul means only to support his lone survived son, Chris and wishes to spread out his name and he expects Chris to take the charge with joy and no shame at all. But Chris finds the world in which honor and punishment have lost their values; Chris cannot find a viable way of punishing his father:

... Do I raise the dead when I put him behind bars? Then what'll I do it for? We used to shoot a man, who acted like a dog, but honor was real, there, you were protecting something. But here? This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That's the principle; the only one we live by—it just happened to kill a few people this time, that's all. The world's that way, how can I take it out on him? What does that make? This is a zoo, a zoo (*AMS 86*)!

Joe in his defense evasively reasons out that he was forced to send out the defective plane parts. Hence it is not he to be blamed rather the system, the capitalist system which demands individual production to be continued even at the expenses of human lives. Joe says: "You want me to go jail? If you want me to go, say so! Is that where I belong? Then tell me so" (AMS 87)!

Keller's success ethics is derived from his social environment, and his crime had its roots in the dog-eat-dog morality of American capitalism. Keller asks for Kate's apology and gives reasons: "You wanted money so I made money. What must I be forgiven" (AMS 81)? Kate's answer broke his heart into pieces:

I didn't want it in that way, either! What differences is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should've put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and made him earn his keep. Then he'd know how a buck is made in this world. Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I- (AMS 81).

Dr. Jim another bloody victim of American Dream at the hands of his wife's desires for the suburban lifestyle and money. He knows one good moral that prosperity and money do not ensure happiness, but he could not dare fight against Sue. Sue Bayliss criticizes Chris for having disrupted her own life. Sue even forces Jim to attend whiny patients to keep away him from the influences Chris has. When Jim was about to pursue his medical research, Sue accompanied him and for all intents and purposes brought him home back as she calculated loss and profit. Sue goes so far as to pressure Ann to move away from the neighborhood to get married with Chris as he has had a bad influence on her husband:

My husband has a family, dear. Every time he has a session with Chris he feels as though he's compromising by not giving up everything for research. As though Chris or anybody else isn't compromising (AMS 46).

To the conclusion, it can be said that *All My Sons* is the play about realization of success, guilt and responsibility in the course of material greed. Joe Keller, for the well-being of his family

commits the crime of selling defective aircraft parts, claiming lives of several pilots. Joe Keller for the quest of material success went by malicious business ethics and eventually lost his own son. Joe's long cherished wrong dreams fail to attain humanistic values and finally paid the severe price. Miller in the play tries to emphasize the fact that devoid of humanitarian values, the attainment of American Dream is meaningless. For Keller, the American Dream stands for providing luxury and comfort to family and nothing is bigger than that. Miller exposed American Dream by showing out hiatus between the individual and the society. It was borne in him during the great depression that the one is inextricably intertwined with the other. Miller tries to preach that individuals must acknowledge and adjust to their limitations rather than obsessively pursue egoistic ambitions.

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