

***All My Sons* as Precursor in Arthur Miller's Dramatic World**

Masahiro OIKAWA

Abstract

Since its first production in 1947, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* has been performed and appreciated worldwide. In academic studies on Miller, it secures an important place as a precursor, because it has encompassed such themes as father-son conflict, pursuit of success dream in the form of a traditional tragedy as well as a family and a social play. As for techniques, to begin with, the Ibsenite method of dramatization of the present critical situation and presentation of the past "with sentimentality" are obvious. Secondly, the biblical tale of Cain and Abel from the Old Testament allows the play to disguise itself as a modern morality play on "brotherly love." Thirdly, Oedipus's murder of his father in *Oedipus Rex* is used symbolically to place the play in the Western tradition of drama. Taking all these major themes and techniques into account, the paper argues that the play is dramatizing the universal, and that by looking at the conflict between father and son, we can understand why Miller's message in *All My Sons* is significant for Japanese audiences.

I. Introduction

Most of the reviews appearing in the major newspapers and magazines on *All My Sons* (1947) were rather favorable, which is quite understandable considering that the play vividly depicts the psychological aspects of the United States during and immediately after the Second World War in a realistic setting. In fact, it is impossible to understand the problems Joe and Chris Keller, the father and the son, get involved in without the background of the war. The moral or ethical issue the play presents through the conflict between Joe, a practical-minded realist and

Professor, College of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.

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Chris, a militant idealist, or even Larry, another son not appearing on the stage, becomes apparent with the very background of the war, per se. It is true that in the play Arthur Miller portrays Joe and Chris as victims of the war. However, if we look at it merely, say, as a social play reflecting the American society of the 1940s in relation to World War II, that will lead us to close our eyes to an appropriate evaluation of this play.

All My Sons is Miller's first Broadway hit and it's the precursor of his subsequent works on Broadway in terms of his own themes and dramatic techniques. It has encompassed such themes as father-son conflict, guilt of fathers,¹ conflict between the social and the personal, a man's personal integrity, survival and social responsibility, a moral crisis, individual and family pride, pursuit of the dream of success in the form of a traditional tragedy, as well as a family and a social play. As for techniques, first of all, the "Ibsenesque" method of how to dramatize what has gone before is well-known: "a viable unveiling of the contrast between past and present, and an awareness of the process by which the present has become what it is."² Second, the biblical story of Cain and Abel from the Old Testament allows the play to disguise itself as a modern version of a morality play on "brotherhood." Third, Oedipus's murder of his father in *Oedipus Rex*³ is utilized symbolically to place the play in the Western tradition of drama. Taking all these elements into consideration, this paper is an overview of *All My Sons* written over fifty years ago, and studies some of the universality the play embraces.

II. Father-son Conflict as Useful Dramatic Method

There is no denying that the father-son conflict is an old and also new theme in literature. Actually, there are a number of literary works dealing with the theme, like the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* and some other modern dramas. The relationship between father and son in literature takes on psychological quality

1. Harold Bloom argues: "Perhaps all of Miller's work could be titled *The Guilt of the Fathers*, which is a dark matter for a Jewish playwright, brought up to believe in the normative tradition, with its emphasis upon the virtues of the fathers." "Introduction," *Arthur Miller's All My Sons*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 3.

2. Arthur Miller, "The Question of Relatedness," *Arthur Miller's All My Sons*, 13.

3. As we later analyze, *Oedipus Rex* is used as a basic theme of the father-son conflict. Miller refers to *Oedipus Rex* to argue against the criticism that Ann's production of Larry's letter about his death in Act III is abrupt and too convenient for audience's tastes. Interestingly, this shows how much he was conscious of this Greek tragedy in creating *All My Sons*. Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987) 134-35.

just as explained in Freud's "Oedipus complex." It more often than not takes the form of the son's protest or rebellion against his father or that of the conflict just like a generation gap. The chief reason why the theme of the father-son conflict is often taken up in literary pieces is that, historically speaking, the father has almost always been the center of the family and has, therefore, tremendously influenced the son's way of living or thinking.

Before *All My Sons* Miller wrote a few plays dealing with the father-son conflict. For example, in *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944),⁴ Miller's first play on Broadway, he took up this theme in a rather indirect way. On the other hand, in *All My Sons* he directly dealt with the issue for the first time, and as in his biggest hit, *Death of a Salesman*, he has continued to stick to it in some of his subsequent works. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to say that without the father-son relationship there would be no way to fathom Miller's drama. This issue is the crux of his drama. Why, then, does he adhere to it so much? This is due largely to his belief that an individual and the society are closely related. He avers its relation is just like the one between the fish and the water. To Miller who insists on the importance of the solidarity between an individual and the society, in his dramatic world central figures are inevitably the father and the son who live both in the family (the place occupying a great part of an individual's life) and in society. In his case, the son is almost always portrayed at the most sensitive stage of his life: adolescence.

It was when Miller happened to read Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, presuming it was a sort of detective story in his high school days, that he began to take an interest in the subject of the father-son conflict.

I think now it was because of the father and conflict, but something more. It is always probing beyond its particular scenes and characters for the hidden laws, for the place where the gods ruminate and decide, for the rock upon which one may stand without illusion, a free man. Yet the characters appear liberated from any systematic causation.⁵

This shows us that Miller not only learned the father-son conflict in *The Brothers*

4. Before *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, Miller dealt with the father-son relationship in *Abe Simon Trilogy* [*No Villain* (1936), *They Too Arise* (1937), *The Grass Still Grows* (1938)], and *Honors at Dawn* (1937).

5. Arthur Miller, "The Shadow of the Gods." *American Playwrights on Drama*, ed., Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965) 138.

Karamazov, but also found what he called “the hidden laws,” upon which the conflict is actually based at a deeper level. It could be said here that what Miller intended in the series of his plays is to identify “the hidden laws” by setting the father-son conflict as a central issue or theme. Concerning *All My Sons*, the following questions are crucial: why has Joe taken such an attitude as a father and what has his way of life meant to his sons, Larry and Chris?

The relationship between the father and the son in Miller’s plays holds a common pattern. Usually two brothers are adolescents and their father loves them very much. The brothers also love their father, but the older one, particularly, is an idealist and the younger one a realist. And when he comes out to society to find the father’s anti-social attitude and deeds, or faults and mistakes in his way of living and thinking, he becomes so embarrassed that he rebels, changes his attitude toward him and even denounces him. 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 whole play. More than anything else, it has an advantage to attract the audience’s attention to the play on the stage. Thus, we can say that Miller’s father-son conflict is a useful dramatic method in terms of content and form as well.

III. Decline of the Father’s Authority and Dream of Success

Examining the confrontation between Joe and Chris in *All My Sons*, we notice two different notions contradicting each other at a deeper level. For one thing, Joe represents the old generation in his realistic and practical thinking as opposed to Chris who is quite romantic and full of idealism. For another, while Joe puts his family before anything else and sticks to securing the father image and paternal dignity at home, Chris firmly, though superficially, believes that solidarity with the wider outside world beyond the individual family is an ideal way of living. Furthermore, Joe represents those who remained in the country during World War II, and Chris, on the other hand, takes a stance as a war veteran. Needless to say, at the bottom there lies a generation gap in the conflict. The conflict, however, constitutes a bit more complicated structure.

First of all, what kind of person is Joe Keller? He is a so-called “self-made man.” He is also a “rags-to-riches” type of man who has worked pretty hard and become a successful owner of a factory. The hardships he has gone through are not mentioned in detail in the play, but we can imagine them from what he says. He tells his wife, Kate, about Chris, “I should put him out when he was ten like I

was put out, and make him earn his keep. Then he'd know how a buck is made in this world."⁶ This clearly shows how he started his independent life away from home when he was very young. The following also tells us how he has established his present position through difficulties. "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?" (115). In this scene he is explaining to Chris why he would not like to give up his factory which he has kept forty long years despite the faulty cylinders the factory produced and shipped to the armed forces.

Another evidence of Joe's being a self-made man is found in his night-school education which was not good enough to read more than classified ads in the newspapers, in his surprise at the great number of new books published one after another, and also in his words, "Don't talk dirty." without knowing the true meaning of the French word "roué," etc. Since he left home when he was so young, we could easily assume that he had to make his own living without proper education. When we come to understand how hard he worked to become a successful owner of the factory, we could consider him an independent, rugged, and self-made Horatio Alger type of hero.

In fact, Joe's view of success is closely related to Alger's "success dream" on a deep level and clearly understood when we take his background into consideration. At the end of the nineteenth century when Joe was born and raised, "frontier spirit" and Alger's "success dream" were inseparably bound up with each other, and the view of life based on the "from rags to riches" concept must have been penetrating the general public. It was not impossible for the ordinary people to realize such a success dream then. But the disappearance of frontiers brought about capital based on industrialization, and the social system no longer allowed everybody to win a success on his own. Instead, only a selected number of people could become rich. The appearance of the competitive society took place here. With this the view on success inevitably became changed as a result. Ethical or moralistic characters the Alger success dream had held were disappearing in the competitive industrialized society during World War II. The social change accordingly produced both those who could follow it and those who couldn't. A representative of the former is Joe and that of the latter is Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy is over 60 and Joe is just before that age, and both of them lived almost the same period. While Willy could not follow the change of the time and became obsessed with the old values or success dream in

6. *All My Sons in Arthur Miller's Collected Plays* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967) 120. Further citations are given parenthetically in the text.

the past, Joe got along rather well, even though influenced by the old values to some extent. He is a realist.

The question is why Joe and Willy got stuck to the success dream. It is quite understandable that the success dream is the embodiment of the American Dream and shows the traditional spirit of Americans. However, Joe and Willy adhere to it too much. As discussed later, their attachment to success is closely linked to their perceptions of fatherhood or the “father image” for that matter. In an attempt to authorize themselves as a breadwinner in the family, they desperately need something to support it. What supports this fatherhood is nothing but the label called success. If they could become a president of their own company or an owner of a factory and have their son inherit it, it would strengthen their position as head of the family. This is the very reason Joe made an order to ship the cracked cylinders for army airplanes and put the blame on his partner, Steve. The time was during World War II and Joe was optimistic in thinking that his bad deed would be overlooked.

Actually, social conditions in the United States during World War II were as follows: In February, 1941 the United States entered a state of war to a full extent. Production of arms was encouraged as much as any available resources could be used. How much and how soon they can produce is the prime question for any factory. Competing for volume and speed fits the American’s character. Also, companies in the war munitions industry were in harsh competition. Joe’s following words indicate the situation:

Who worked for nothin’ in that war? When they work for nothin’, I’ll work for nothin’.
Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean?
It’s dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it’s nickels and dimes, what’s clean? (125)

The decline of the father’s authority at home is a common phenomenon in modern society in general. The decline of Joe and Willy’s fatherhood can be explained by two factors. One is social change happening everywhere and the other is the indigenous American concept of fatherhood. Alexander Mitschelich suggests the causes of social change: Factors such as division of work in connection with mass production through machinery and control of diversified working masses, separation between home and work, change from an independent producer to a waged worker as a consumer, constantly expanded downfall of fatherhood both inside and outside of the home.⁷ The image of a father

a decade ago seen everywhere working hard with sweat on his forehead disappeared out of the home for quite some time. Almost every father worked now away from his own home, and children no longer knew their father's hardships. The father image they held was what Mitschelich calls "an invisible father."⁸ In addition, families existing as an economic unit were disunited, and thus families once in a productive community were transformed into a consumer community. Naturally, as a result the father-son relationship came to have a difficult form. It's no longer the relationship between the upper and the lower.

The second reason concerning the decline of fatherhood is quite an American one. The United States has a history of independence from the then oppressive Britain and formed the tradition of denying authoritarianism. Furthermore, it is a country of immigrants, and the traditional paternalism they brought about from their original countries was doomed to die out. It collapsed gradually generation by generation under the unique American conditions. Fathers lost their authority as the center of the family. Geoffrey Gorer explains this in his coherent hypothesis :

But whether the individual father hindered or helped his children to become a different sort of person from what was, was a question of minor importance; the making of an American demanded that the father should be rejected both as a model and as a source of authority. Father never knew best. And once the mutation was established, it was maintained; no matter how many generations separate an American from his immigrant ancestors, he rejects his father as authority and exemplar, and expects his sons to reject him.⁹

In effect the more an immigrant father succeeded in bringing up his children as all-American, the less they found anything worthwhile besides things American. The father's un-American character became the subject of their shame, and they began to criticize him. Subsequently, his existence as a role model started losing its importance, in accordance with the decline of his dignity.

Thus, there occurred a discrepancy between the immigrant father, the first generation, and the son, the second generation, and as generations passed, it had

7. Alexander Mitschelich, *Society without the Father: A Contribution to Social Psychology*, translated by Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969).

8. Mitschelich.

9. Geoffrey Gorer, *The Americans: A Study in National Characters*, edited with notes by Hideo Nakanishi (Tokyo: Kaibunsha, 1958) 9. The book was originally published by the Gresset Press, London, 1948.

become quite an American issue of the father-son conflict. This may not apply a hundred percent to Joe or Willy, but their decline of authority as a father at home is clearly connected with this American factor. We've discussed Joe from his ideas on success and also on family. To sum it up, he is a common family man living in modern society as a "provider, breadwinner, husband and father."¹⁰ He considers both the extension of his factory and the fame he obtains as a successful person in society to be the definite and surest way to keep his authority as a father in the family against his sons.

To Joe the family is everything. Especially his sons. Joe's following words to Kate concerning Larry show this: "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!" (120). His head has been full of dreams that he will let his sons inherit his factory which he has established for decades. This is related to the American ethos and that's where we can sympathize with Joe as a tragic person. Samuel A. Yorks explains: "After all, in our society a business to pass on to one's sons is a badge of honor for a life well spent. Joe obeys the values the clan has taught him."¹¹ Joe's problem, therefore, is not in the fact he couldn't distinguish between right and wrong as Miller himself explains,¹² but in the fact since he stuck to the small world such as a family, he could not turn his eyes to the general society at large, the world beyond the family.

Benjamin Nelson comments on this as follows:

In Joe Keller's eyes there is nothing dishonest in a plea to the two values upon which he has based his life: the worth of individual effort and the sanctity of family loyalty born of love. His second appeal extends beyond the individual and the family, but still is defined by the inner circle.¹³

What Nelson implies here is that Joe did not commit a crime solely for his own interest and personal profit. According to this observation, the total interpretation that Joe is an irresponsible person lacks validity. Then, what's his

10. Barry Gross, "All My Sons and the Larger Context," *Modern Drama*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (March 1975) 16.

11. Samuel A. Yorks, "Joe Keller and His Sons," *Western Humanities Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 4 (Autumn 1959) 403.

12. "Joe Keller's trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." "Introduction" in *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, 19.

13. Benjamin Nelson, *Arthur Miller: A Portrait of a Playwright* (London: Peter Owen, 1970) 85.

problem? Arvin R. Wells' explanation sums it up:

He [Joe Keller] has the peasants' insular loyalty to family which excludes more generalized responsibility to society at large or to mankind in general. At the moment of decision, when his business seemed threatened, the question for him was not basically out of profit and loss; what concerned him was a conflict of responsibilities - his responsibility to his family, particularly his sons to whom the business was to be a legacy of security and joy, versus his responsibility to the unknown men, engaged in the social action of war, who might as a remote consequence suffer for his dishonesty.¹⁴

In understanding Joe's adherence to fatherhood, we also should take into consideration Miller's background as a Jew, in whose families the father is the center.

In contrast to Joe, Chris is an idealist. The reason is that he is still ignorant of the world and mentally naïve and immature. Further, his war experience has constantly occupied his mind to an unnecessary extent. It is assumed that he had a comfortable upbringing, and stayed home until he left for the war. Accordingly, the war experience affected him tremendously. To comprehend the father's influence, it is essential for us to remember Joe as an almighty father figure. He puts his family before anything else and is supposedly a model husband for his wife and a role model for his sons. Rising from poor conditions, he has become a successful owner of a big factory with his own efforts. He, therefore, could keep his authority as a father without revealing his faults. On the other hand, how about Chris who was raised by such a father? As he himself confesses, he has been an obedient son: "I've been a good son too long, a good sucker" (69).

Generally speaking, a growing son goes from the process of respect or adoration toward his own father or somebody who has played a father's role to that of gradual separation from him and the social influence. Mitschelich again explains as follows: We overcome our father by loving and understanding him as a person who has a unique character and also as a father with some weakness. In the worst case scenario, we keep relationship with him with hatred and yet strive to overcome him by wishing not to become like him.¹⁵ Chris could not overcome his father as mentioned here. Although he did respect and idolize Joe, he could

14. Arvin R. Wells, "The Living and the Dead in *All My Sons*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (May 1964) 47-48.

15. Mitschelich.

not criticize or attack him. At least, that was true before he went to war. When his crime was revealed and when Chris severely accused Joe, he cried, "What's the matter with you? What the hell is the matter with you?" (114). This fact clearly shows that Joe had never been criticized or met with any protest from his sons previously and that thus he was acutely embarrassed with the son's accusation. Simply because he could not get over his father, Chris missed the chance to see his father as a person or a male, and regarded him solely as an ideal father.

In short, Chris could not become independent of his father, largely because Joe was a fond father to Chris, and Chris lost an opportunity to get independent and build up his own character. In addition, Kate's influence upon Chris cannot be overlooked. Her existence as a fond mother contributes much to the fact that Chris could not become independent of his parents. Kate says to Chris: "Honest to God, it breaks my heart to see what happened to all the children. How we worked and planned for you, and you end up no better than us" (105). Before this, Miller has described Kate as a mother with "an overwhelming capacity for love" (69). We can easily imagine that Kate's excessive love spoiled Chris to a great extent.

Let us now turn to the influence that the war experience has imposed upon Chris. The following is what Chris gained through his war experience.

One time it'd been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in pocket. That's only a little thing – but that's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they'd've been here today. And I got an idea – watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of – responsibility. Man for man. You understand me? – To show that, to bring that on to the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him. (85)

What Chris found out is the "solidarity" and "responsibility" between man and man. Those are noble ideas which Chris learned in his war situations. When he dared apply them to actual society, however, problems occurred. To Chris who had this war experience, it is quite natural that he found actual society "incredible."

And then I came home and it was incredible, I – there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a – bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that

rat-race again. I felt – what you said – ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man have for a man, you've got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there's blood on it. I didn't want to take any of it. And I guess that included you. (85)

It would be possible to say that the “solidarity” and “responsibility” which Chris experienced in the battlefield at least urged him to be aware of his own ego, that is, independence from his parents and establishment of his own identity. We can see these in Chris' adamant attitude both in speaking against Joe and Kate who are negative to his plan to marry Ann and in declaring his elopement with her if the parents reject it. Even though Joe says, “I want a new sign over the plant – Christopher Keller Incorporated” (87), Chris flatly answers back: “J. O. Keller is good enough” (87). This again clearly shows that Chris can now say what has to be said. Before this he was just following what Joe had said to him. As we have already seen, the war experience has made Chris aware of his ego or self. However, his experience was gained in an unordinary situation and it is not applicable to the realities of everyday life. In a way, Chris' tragedy lies in the fact that he has not realized this. The feeling of “solidarity” and the sense of “responsibility” he learned in the war has its true meaning in the army where military cooperation and union count as a harmonious whole.

In the dog-eat-dog American society of the war industry during the war, those words didn't mean anything. Naturally Chris can never get along with Joe because of his unrealistic ideas.

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 this world? What the hell are you? (116)

Chris' immaturity is clearly seen in his words to Joe, “I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father” (125), even after Joe's crime is revealed. Barry Gross compares Chris with Biff in *Death of a Salesman*:

When Biff Loman stumbles and weeps when he discovers at the age of seventeen that his father is not the god he thought him, we understand that an adolescent has made a painful but inevitable discovery. When Chris Keller, who has been “a killer” in the war, does the same thing at thirty-two, we must conclude that he is responding to some private drama unwinding inside him rather than to the relation of his revelation of his father’s guilt.¹⁶

Gross points out that it took Chris some years before he has established his self-ego.

Chris can be said to be an idealist who tides over the stern realities of life based on the experience he had in the extraordinary situation like a war, and inevitably clashes with Joe, who is a rather short-sighted realist. Chris’ idealism is, however, doubtful. When he says to Ann, “I’m going to make a fortune for you!” (86), we see inconsistency in his attitude of refusal toward his father’s business ethics. As a matter of fact, his hypocrisy is pointed out by Sue, whose husband is a doctor living next door to the Kellers: “if Chris wants people to put on the hair-shirt let him take off his broadcloth” (94). We see here that there is a discrepancy between what he says and what he does and that Chris can’t grasp reality as he claims. Considering this, we might say that his ideas on “solidarity” and “responsibility” are a cause merely good for the army. Therefore, we can’t help concluding that just like Joe, Chris is also a narrow-minded person obsessed with his own dogmatism.

Miller’s intention in the drama is not merely to describe the conflict between father and son. What is his real intention, then? To integrate several points discussed so far, the conflict between Joe and Chris is based on the basic pattern of the rebellion of a son against his father, who has become aware of his own ego. The object of Chris’ rebellion or protest is his father’s unethical actions urged by his family-centered way of thinking. Chris lambastes Joe’s behavior as egoistic, even saying “You’re even an animal. No animal kills his own, what are you?” (116). Joe, on the other hand, is too obsessed with “fatherhood” and “success” in the modern capitalistic society where both of them have become quite difficult to obtain. He has gradually lost moralistic or ethical aspects in his conduct.

In this father and son conflict, the father commits suicide as a loser. However, what does this actually mean? On the surface Joe seems to have cast away his philosophy of life all of a sudden, which he has cherished for 60-plus years. But actually, he hasn’t. He has only tried hard to convince himself that his

16. Gross, 18.

philosophy is absolutely right, but as a result, he has come to realize that he is wrong and that death is the only solution. What is Miller's real intention in presenting the father-son conflict? It is obvious that he is presenting two significant themes: the fall of fatherhood and the demise of the Alger-type "success dream" noticeable in modern American society. These clearly illustrate the end of the nineteenth-century American ethos, and the father-son conflict represents the myth of the family and that of success. In fact, Gerald Weales interprets the play in the mythical terms.

His [Joe's] death is more than a single man's punishment, for Joe Keller is a product of his society. He not only accepts the American myth of the privacy of the family, but he has adopted as a working instrument the familiar attitude that there is a difference between morality and business ethics. Joe Keller is a self-made man, an image of American success, who is destroyed when he is forced to see that image in another context - through the eyes of his idealist son.¹⁷

IV. *All My Sons* in the Western Tradition

Richard L. Loughlin views *All My Sons* as a moral play dealing with biblical themes such as "brotherhood" and "love of one's neighbor," and also as a Greek drama.¹⁸ This interpretation puts the play in the Western tradition and would be a good clue to think about its universality. To begin with, he asks why Miller picked "*All My Sons*" as a title and explains the relationship between the play and the biblical themes: "What did he [Miller] hope to accomplish by calling it *All My Sons*? Obviously, he is preaching brotherhood, using the Old Testament as both his text and his texture."¹⁹

Miller apparently chose the title from Joe's words at the end of Act III, "Sure, he [Larry] was my son. But I think to him they were *all my sons*. And I guess they were, I guess they were" (126, italics mine). Joe expresses these words after he learns of the suicide of the missing Larry and the motivation behind it. He was too concerned about his family to pay attention to the outside world. Those words imply the brotherly love taught in the Bible. It is revealed that Larry sent

17. Gerald Weales, "Arthur Miller," ed., Alan S. Downer, *The American Theater* (Voice of America Forum Lectures, 1967) 97.

18. Richard L. Loughlin, "Tradition and Tragedy in 'All My Sons,' *The English Record*, Vol. XIV, No. 3 (February 1964) 23-27.

19. Loughlin, 23.

the following letter to Ann just before his flight to his death.

It is impossible to put down the things I feel. But I've got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel – I can't bear to live any more. Last night I circled the base for twenty minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that? Every day 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'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me missing. If they do, I want you to know that you musn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him. (125-26)

Joe firmly believes that Larry is the one who has understood Joe's situation, but he is shocked to learn that Larry committed suicide due to his wrongdoing and this led Joe to his suicide.

The brotherly love recognized by Joe at the end of the play is one of the major biblical themes regarding two brothers in the Old Testament. The story goes like this: Cain, the older brother who is a farmer, and the younger one, Abel who is a shepherd, gave offerings to God and God preferred Abel's. Cain became disappointed and envious toward Abel, and killed him despite God's warning.²⁰ This is the first murder the humans had ever committed. "Am I a keeper of my brother?" is considered a typical example of selfishness seeking one's own benefits, "the root of all evils." Cain and Abel represent humanity in general and the Bible here teaches that it's precious for us to love each other like brothers. This is exactly what Chris learned from his comrades in the battlefields and reminds us of "solidarity" and "responsibility." Loughlin explains the relationship between *All My Sons* and the Old Testament.

In Miller's modern version and underscoring of the biblical story, Joe is Cain; Larry and the twenty-one P40 pilots who have lost their lives are Abel. Chris elicits from Joe the realization that all men are his sons, that there are no missing links in the chain of humanity. In this respect, *All My Sons* is a morality play, because each of us is Everyman.²¹

20. Genesis (4:8-16)

21. Loughlin, 24.

What we should take note here is that Loughlin regards *All My Sons* as a modern "morality" play. Joe committed a crime out of his selfish motives, saying he did it all for his family. Humanity could not escape from 'original sin' and in that sense he is not different from anybody, and Joe is 'Everyman.' That's Loughlin's point. As we have already seen, this interpretation is based on Western thought and should be highly appreciated.

Loughlin's second point is the relationship between *All My Sons* and the Greek tragedies, another traditional observation. In the first place, he discusses the so-called traditional three units of action, time, and place in the play.

Although a modern, naturalistic play, *All My Sons* is rather traditional in theme and in some other respects. It observes what are called the unities. Aristotle said that unity of action occurs when the parts are "so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole." *All My Sons* is solidly structured. It also satisfies the unity of time, because it unfolds over a brief period of time; the unity of place, because the action occurs in Joe Keller's back yard.²²

In addition to the three unities, Loughlin further argues other techniques of Greek plays, that is, the treatment of both brutal scenes and revenge off the stage. The former is about Larry's and Joe's suicide, and the latter applies to the fact that Chris avenges the deaths of 21 pilots of P40 and Larry, and to the unfair imprisonment of Steve Deever by leading Joe into suicide.

W. Arthur Boggs is another scholar who analyzes the similarities between *All My Sons* and *Oedipus Rex*,²³ Sophocles' great tragedy. He compares and considers both of them to be "tragedies of recognition." Indeed, it can be argued that Miller imitated Sophocles. Boggs' main arguments can be summarized as follows:

1. Both plays deal with killings at home.
2. Both protagonists are ambitious men of quick decisions and action.
3. Both protagonists are family men who love their children.
4. In the beginning both protagonists believe that they are innocent of the murder for which they are later punished.
5. In both plays, the curtain rises with unusual incidents such as the epidemic in Thebes in *Oedipus Rex* and the fall of an apple tree due to the

22. Loughlin, 24.

23. W. Arthur Boggs, "Oedipus and All My Sons," *The Personalist*, Vol. XLII, 1961, 555-60.

- storm the previous night in *All My Sons*.
6. Both plays have a tight structure of action: *All My Sons* within a few hours, *Oedipus Rex* within about 14 hours.
 7. Both plays contain events which the reader may find difficult to believe. For example, Oedipus had been living in Thebes for several years and his sons had grown up and yet they didn't know anything about Laius' death. Similarly, in *All My Sons*, George did not know about his father's trial, and he had no doubt about Joe's innocence, nor did Ann who was supposed to be at home at that time.
 8. In both plays those engaged in fortune-telling, Teiresias and Frank, appear.
 9. In both plays messengers appear: In *Oedipus Rex* from Corinth, and in *ALL My Sons*, George from Steve in the jail to the Kellers.
 10. Both protagonists have an antagonist, Creon and Chris, relatives of their own.
 11. Their wives avoid facing reality and insist unnecessarily on their husbands' innocence.
 12. In both plays reliable evidence is brought about by a third person: in *Oedipus* by a messenger from Corinth and also by a shepherd, and in *All My Sons* by Ann.
 13. Both protagonists in the end become confused to have recognized that they are guilty.

Boggs thus points out similarities between both plays in terms of plot, structure, characters, and other elements.

Boggs' observation, however, is that despite all those similarities, *All My Sons* is not better than *Oedipus Rex*, saying "in spite of Miller's ability as a dramatist, his treatment of Joe Keller and his problem does not result in superior, modern tragedy."²⁴ The main point is that in the beginning just like Oedipus, Joe is described as not guilty, but as the play progresses, his crime becomes revealed and because of that, his recognition of the crime lacks persuasive power as a result. The truth of the fact is that he has realized the connection between actions and Larry's death (suicide) rather than the recognition of his own sin. This is apparently different from Oedipus' recognition. Boggs, therefore, claims that *All My Sons* cannot be called "a tragedy of recognition" in the true sense of the word.

24. Boggs, 558.

His another point is that the play contains so many elements in a disorderly manner and lacks impact as a whole. He continues to assert that responsibility, one of the chief themes of the play, does not necessarily make the protagonist's existence prominent and boost the "tragic effect", either: "The tragic protagonist's dereliction from social responsibility normally places too much emphasis upon man in the mass rather upon the outstanding individual who goes wrong."²⁵

The biggest flaw, he persists, is that Miller hasn't really focused upon Joe Keller who is supposed to be a true protagonist.

In developing several strains of action, Miller never clearly focuses his audience's attention upon his tragic protagonist, but keeps it jumping from the dead Larry to Mrs. Keller, to the romance between Chris and Ann, to the intervention of George, to the plight of Herb Deever, to several minor characters who intervene in the play for various reasons. Worst of all, Miller apparently never really decides upon his protagonist. Chris receives as much dramatic attention as his father, yet if *All My Sons* is a tragedy, it is the tragedy of Joe Keller, who has violated his social contract with humanity.²⁶

True, if Miller's intention had been to create a tragedy, he should have made it as a tragedy of Joe, not as that of Chris. Miller's attention never focuses upon the process of Joe's self-recognition, interrupted here and there by other characters. Thus, Joe's final action turns out to be too sudden and gives the action an impression of an abrupt conclusion. As a consequence, the tragic effect hasn't been achieved to a full degree.

Joe Keller cannot be regarded as a tragic protagonist, and the reason is explained when we put him in Aristotle's *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a tragic protagonist possesses a noble character. When Joe makes a serious mistake, what Aristotle calls a 'tragic flaw,' which causes his downfall, the audience feels the sense of "terror and pity," and experiences 'catharsis.' In Joe's case, he realizes his guiltiness right from the beginning. At the end he has recognized the seriousness of a series of actions he has made and their result. It is obvious that he lacks Aristotle's 'tragic flaw.' Joe's mind is occupied with the idea of how he could justify his sin. His suicide was the sole means to escape his wrongdoing. We never feel terror and pity about his suicide. On Joe's side, he may have followed business practice believing there is a sheer difference between morality and

25. Boggs, 559-60.

26. Boggs, 560. "Herb" Deever mentioned in this citation is wrong. "Steve" Deever is the right name.

business ethics, and his actions may have been made for his family, in particular, his sons.²⁷ However, there is no room for his justification. The following comment by Allen A. Stambusky hits the point:

Keller possesses, not the tragic flaw as Aristotle means it, but a sort of “post-factum” intellectual self-justification for his evil deed. It is Keller’s own way of escaping his sense of guilt at the realization that he has done what he knows to be inherently wrong. Hence, he does not “deny” his guilt, but intellectually “shakes it off” as being “practical”; he has convinced himself that he has acted like any “practical” American would under similar circumstances.²⁸

Thus, we can conclude that Joe lacks the moral integrity which the protagonists in Greek tragedies possess.

In “Tragedy and the Common Man” Miller states “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.”²⁹ Can we have the tragic feeling toward Joe and his death for that matter? The answer is ‘no,’ because Joe casts away the sense of personal dignity by his own suicide. Miller also insists in the same essay that a tragic protagonist attempts to gain a “rightful” position in his society. As Stambusky argues, Joe should have chosen to confess and go to jail for his crime thereby paying his debt of responsibility to society.³⁰

V. Immaturity and Universality

As most Miller critics agree, *All My Sons* is Miller’s first work without major flaws. It has a rigid structure with three well-balanced acts. However, the seemingly well-planned dramatic structure is too calculating and there are unnatural, unrealistic elements. That is one of the reasons why the play is not valued properly. The biggest weakness of *All My Sons* will be found in the bland

27. Weales, 97.

28. Allen A. Stambusky, “Arthur Miller: Aristotelian Canons in the Twentieth Century Drama,” ed. William E. Taylor, *Modern American Drama: Essays in Criticism* (Florida: Edwards, Inc., 1968) 97.

29. Arthur Miller, “Tragedy and the Common Man,” *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, edited with “Introduction” by Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996) 4.

30. Stambusky, 98.

description of Joe's psychological struggle. Act I is criticized as being too slow in its development. If Joe's inner conflict was revealed a little sooner, criticism could have been avoided.³¹ The abruptness of Joe's suicide at the end of Act III together with the sudden production of Larry's letter by Ann, provides the audience with the general impression that Joe's final recognition of the crime is quite artificial.

Joe's conduct was set during World War II, and it can be said the war inevitably urged him to commit the crime. In *All My Sons* the brutal aspects of the war are pushed aside off the stage, and Chris talks about his war experience, but it is not demonstrated in his actions. Therefore, his words and deeds do not reflect the war experience well enough to urge Joe to recognize the human solidarity and responsibility to society he has emphasized. His role in the play is too small to be in conflict with Joe. Some of his speeches are somewhat didactic and his words sometimes sound unnatural. This is another weakness of this play.

After pointing out the similarities in structure between *All My Sons* and *Oedipus Rex*, Robert Hogan states as follows:

In Sophocles' play, as in Miller's, the revelation of a criminal whose crime has occurred years earlier is the crux of the present action. However, in Miller's play the Oedipus character is split in two – one half being the father and criminal and the other half the son and detective.³²

"The Oedipus character is split in two" clearly demonstrates that in *All My Sons* the real protagonist is either Joe or Chris, or both. Actually, in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' sin is gradually revealed on the stage through his action and speech, but in *All My Sons* Joe's crime is pursued largely by Chris from outside, and consequently, Joe's distress or inner struggle lacks impact. So it would be quite possible to consider the play with Joe as a protagonist who has continued to conquer all difficulties during World War II, not the one with Chris as a protagonist who has confronted secular, practical Joe and became afflicted with the dilemma between kinship and a sense of guilt against the father.

On the one hand, Daniel E. Schneider considers Chris to be Oedipus as a protagonist and argues that the play develops the theme of *Oedipus Rex*

31. June Schlueter argues: "The effect of such early interest in Kate and in the developing conflict between her and her son Chris over Annie is to delay the interest the play will gradually but forcefully develop in Keller, who will prove to be the central character....." June Schlueter and James K. Flanagan, *All My Sons, Arthur Miller* (New York: Ungar, 1987) 46.

32. Robert Hogan, *Arthur Miller* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1964) 17.

regarding Chris.³³ On the other hand, Edward Murray views Joe as a protagonist and criticizes the incomplete portrayal of the protagonist.

Although Joe carries the burden of the theme, then, Chris is the driving force within the structure. This dichotomy, I believe, damages the play. In *All My Sons*, the shift in emphasis would seem unhappy because Joe's movement is to be made credible, the focus should be almost wholly on Joe. It is not that some dramatic "law" demands that Joe seal his own fate. It is that by the logic of this play, *All My Sons*, that Joe Keller must convincingly advance to his final gesture as a dramatic character.³⁴

In the final analysis, it would be safe to say that since Miller includes so much in the play, he has failed to focus on Joe who should be the real protagonist of the play. In the next play, *Death of a Salesman*, Miller could get inside the head of Willy Loman with Ibsen's technique of reminiscence bringing the past to the present. We had to wait for *Death of a Salesman* to see Miller's full technical development and his art of integrated character before Miller became a skillful established playwright. As to the theme of responsibility to society and accusation of sin and crime, again we had to wait for Von Berg's recognition of solidarity and his noble action in *Incident at Vichy* (1964).

Having discussed the play's technical immaturity, its universality will now be examined. Considering that in the modern capitalistic world human relationships are becoming farther and farther apart, the overall message Miller has conveyed in *All My Sons* still carries a lot of weight today, and that is the universality the play embraces. It is definitely dramatizing the universal, not just the local situation in the United States during World War II. It is indubitably something more than a period piece. The following episode is one such example.

In 1977 a Jerusalem production of *All My Sons* was the longest running dramatic play in the history of Israel and captured the souls of the Israeli audiences, aware of the play's parallels to their own war-torn world. Miller himself visited Jerusalem with his wife that year and saw a production of

33. "The theme propelling the basic drive of the play might be called: *the last shall be first* as a variation of the Oedipal conflict. It is the theme of an unpreferred son forced before the epoch of war to a subsidiary position in the affections of his father and mother, and even of the heroine, the daughter of the convicted foreman in the family next door, since she was betrothed to the preferred son missing in action. *It is a theme of inner hate and vengeance*. It reaches its high point when the surviving, unpreferred son beats his father upon his back, with fierce punches." Daniel E. Schneider, *The Psychoanalyst and the Artist* (New York: Farrar & Straus, 1950) 242-43.

34. Edward Murry, *Arthur Miller, Dramatist* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967) 8.

tremendous power, together with the president of Israel, Ephraim Katzir and the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

All My Sons had broken the record by then for length of run by a straight play in Israel, and the audience sat watching it with an intensifying terror that was quite palpable At the end of the play the applause seemed not to dispel an almost religious quality in the audience's attention and I asked Rabin why he thought this was so. "Because this is a problem in Israel - boys are out there day and night dying in planes and on the ground, and back here people are making a lot of money. So it might as well be an Israeli play."³⁵

Steve R. Centola regards *All My Sons* as a play of "bad faith."³⁶ By "bad faith" he means selfishness, self-interestedness, irresponsibility. According to this critique, almost all of the characters including Larry and some minor characters lend dramatic credence to Miller's ideas on bad faith. Centola especially discusses Miller's intention concerning his portrayal of Joe's downfall:

With his portrayal of Joe Keller's downfall, Miller suggests that every individual has the power to make free choices and the obligation to convert those choices into responsible actions toward society. When one refuses to accept his freedom and denies his responsibility to society, he lives in bad faith. *All My Sons* shows the danger of such bad faith by exploding what Miller calls the "exclusiveness" of private life in America.³⁷

In fact, Joe as well as others have failed to transform guilt into responsibility, even though they had a chance to. Centola concludes: "The collapse of the Keller family is not just a private affair; it is emblematic of a deeper, broader disintegration of humanistic values that could spell disaster to a world trapped in its own bad faith."³⁸ We can take this as proof that *All My Sons* is a "universal" play.

Barry Gross argues: "His [Joe's] world is bounded by the picket fence that encloses the suburban back yard in which the play takes place, his commitments and allegiances do not extend beyond its boundaries."³⁹ Indeed, Joe's mind sees

35. Timebends: A Life, 135.

36. Steven R. Centola, "Bad Faith and *All My Sons*" in *Arthur Miller's All My Sons*, 123-33.

37. Centola, 133.

38. Centola, 133.

39. Gross, 16.

nothing but the protection of the family and lacks the capacity to grasp the social meaning of his deeds. Protection of the family is justified even though it is achieved through injustice in society. Joe's sentiment is not strange at all to the Japanese audiences whose loyalty for the group member is valued over principles. Joe's impetus for his crime can be identified with that of the Japanese who go to great lengths to protect the group, in this case, family. The family issues in the play are not dealt with merely as a problem within a family, but as those related to the connection between the individual and society. For Japanese audiences who draw clear-cut lines between insiders (*uchi*) and outsiders (*soto*) and also between private life and public life, Miller's message has a profound meaning.

Furthermore, Joe's image of keeping his "fatherhood" is also a familiar theme to the Japanese. Traditionally, in Japan, children, especially, sons blindly obeyed the father as ruler of the roost. However, postwar economic growth toppled fathers from their lofty position by imposing longer work hours that kept them from home. Thus, the father is no more the absolute authority in the education of sons. Finally, I hasten to add that *All My Sons* somewhat reminds the Japanese of the Confucian values such as "hard work" and "loyalty," which Joe has cherished in his business life. Another Confucian value, "honesty," of course, is quite dubious and out of the question. Obviously, his problem is that he worked hard and showed loyalty or fidelity for that matter only to his own family, not for "something bigger" than the family.