



Tragic flaws in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Abstract

Tragic flaw is a literary term that refers to personality trait of a main character that leads to his downfall. A tragedy depicts the downfall and death of some important person and thereby arouse in the readers of such feelings as pity, fear, awe, and terror. If Aristotle had lived in our times, he might have changed his mind about the tragic hero, and he might not have laid down the rule that the protagonist in tragedy should be a man of a very high rank. We live in democratic times when theories of social equality are in favours, even though there is no actual social equality anywhere in the world. Joe Keller belongs to the affluent class of society, and therefore he differs from the ordinary kind of human beings who constitute the majority in every country.

The dialogue of all these persons is of the matter of fact kind. It is only the principal characters whose dialogue takes the plot of the play forward, while the subsidiary characters are useful chiefly in producing a realistic atmosphere in the play, though Frank does make a slight contribution to the main plot by confirming Kate's irrational belief that her son Larry is still alive. Tragic flaws in Miller's *All My Sons* date certainly a tragedy in the literary sense of this word. *All My Sons* is not exactly a powerful tragedy of the kind written by such authors as Marlowe, Shakespeare and Webster. But *All My Sons* is certainly a moving and poignant play. The protagonist in this play is a manufacturer by the name of Joe Keller. It may here be pointed out that the protagonist in this play does not meet the requirements of a tragic hero as conceived by Aristotle.

Keywords: tragic flaw, pity, fear, awe, terror

Introduction

A conflict is an essential ingredient of tragedy. A good tragedy contains both outer conflict and inner conflict. As for, we outer conflict have a confrontation between Chris and his father over Chris's desire to marry Ann who was engaged to marry his brother, Larry. There is a confrontation between Chris and George when the latter accuses Chris's father of having brought about the ruin of the Deever family.

There is a confrontation between Chris and his mother Kate who firmly opposes Chris's intention to marry Ann because Kate believes that Larry is still alive and would come back home one day. Chris would now like his father to face the consequences of his criminal action; but Keller defends himself first on the ground that he had done everything for the sake of Chris and for the sake of the family, later on the ground that everybody in the country has been using all kinds of fair or foul means to make money. Then there is the inner conflict. Both Joe Keller and Kate Keller suffer from a sense of guilt, but they have been able to subdue their sense of guilt so that the conflict in their minds is of a very mild kind.

In Chris we witness an acute mental conflict. He suffers from a sense of guilt because he has survived the war while all the men under his command had killed in the course of the fighting. Chris has a sense of guilt even about his desire to marry Ann. He faces this conflict in such an acute form that he has taken three and a half years to make up his mind to propose marriage to Ann; Chris faces another conflict when he finds himself unable to take any action against his father even after the latter has confessed his guilt. Finally, there is a kind of inner conflict in Keller when he wavers between going to

the police to confess his guilt and his disinclination to do so. They come the catastrophe. Joe Keller does finally decide to pay the price for the crime which he had committed; and so he shoots himself. Pathos is the key-note of *All My Sons* also, despite its many light moments. There is Kate's distress at the very outset of the play when the apple-tree has been brought down to the ground by the wind. Then there is her pathetic belief that Larry is still alive and that he would come back home someday. George's description of the plight of his father first to Chris and Ann, and then to Joe Keller is also very moving because George's father is spending

Chris's sense of guilt is another moving ingredient in the play, as is Dr. Jim's frustrated desire to pursue medical research. Larry's letter to Ann containing his decision to commit suicide because of his father's criminal action is also deeply moving. Chris's predicament on finding that his father is, after all, guilty of fraud and cheating is deeply moving too.

Chris now decides to leave home and to look for a job elsewhere to earn his livelihood instead of continuing to participate in his father's business. Then of course, Joe Keller's suicide at the end comes as a climax to all these moving situations. *All My Sons* is undoubtedly a deeply moving play. But we cannot affirm that it fulfils Aristotle's condition of what he called the Catharsis of the feelings of pity and fear. Pity is certainly aroused in our hearts by the events of this play, as has already been pointed out. In fact, the feeling of pity aroused in us in the course of the play is very deep; but it is not of the same magnitude as in the case of the great Shakespeare tragedies. The feeling of fear is also aroused in us. But this feeling too is not of the same intensity.

Miller's *All My Sons* is a tragedy written in the manner of the modern play. After this play, Miller seemed to be moving towards a greater emphasis on character. In "Tragedy and the Common Man", Miller makes it clear that the common man may have heroic stature, and that the tragic effect stems from the hero's struggle against the conventions, persons, and institution ranged against him. But Miller's concern is still largely with those forces which he wished to condemn and with establishing the underlying moral law or principle that could serve as an alternative to the prevailing social condition which makes or mars man.

From this belief he wrote many tragedies that won him awards a respect from his peers. One such tragedy was *All My sons* which were about the lies and immortality of a man and the resulting actions and sequences. The themes presenting dishonest and immortality- intensify the tragic mood of the play. These themes developed due to the actions of one man, Joe Keller, who could not be considered as a tragic man. The negative themes that are brought up by actions of Joe Keller, the tragic man proves that why this play is a modern tragedy. Themes in *All My Sons* are mainly derived from the concept of moral; the law of that man follows through our conscience. One of the themes that branches out from this is morality, the principles about human life. This theme is evidence when related to the Keller family, where the conflict between morality and the loss of it takes place. Joe Keller, the father of the Keller family, was responsible for sending out faulty cylinder heads during the World War II, which resulted in the death of 21 fighter pilots.

He believed those deaths were justified, because he kept his business, which in turn kept this family fed and healthy. He lay forty years into a business they knock him out in five minutes. He does everything to his son Chris. His wife, Kate Keller, supported him. Because if he was responsible for his son's death, Larry Keller, a fighter pilot. She says that his brother is alive, if he dead, his father killed him. Just like a Joe, she did not see the full scope of his crime, only caring about the family. Kate ignorance of the murder for the benefit of the family causes the loss of morality to be evident in the Keller house hold.

Once Chris found out the father's crimes, he demanded his explanations for his actions. To others he killed twenty one men. He was disguised that his father tried to justify it, he was shocked and furious.

Only when Chris interrogates Joe did he reveal the truth about his crime. The loss in honesty spread to the characters.

Joe is declared as a bad character sense of morality or honesty, but he once was a good and honest worker and was a very friendly person. His flash of tragic because it turned a good and honest man into a killer. This is called tragic flaw, present in the tragic hero in tragedies. Miller believes that tragedy does not only befall a hero, but the common man as well as believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kinds. This believe lead him to creation of the tragic man, and with the creation of the man came Joe Keller. He is seen as a polite man likes to socialize and keep everyone on a positive sprit personality without Frank the stars would not know when to come out. This is true for common man and hero as well, who by Aristotle's definition

has good and bad characteristics well, which ended up being his tragic flaw.

Unfortunately, he chooses wrong, loving his family so much he would do anything for his family. he was his son. But he thinks to him they were all his sons. And he guesses they were the tragic hero is meant to create sympathy because of the lost potential. Due to Joe Keller's tragic decision with the faulty cylinder heads, he went from a polite and friendly man into a disrespected man among his neighbors and his own family.

All My Sons falls into the category for classic Greek tragedy because the tragic hero Joe Keller suffer from hubris, or the sin of too much pride and because of Joe's behavior is responsible for his tragic circumstance; it is not by accident that he ends up committing suicide

Great tragedies have always focused on the tragic hero like Hamlet and Macbeth and Oedipus in Oedipus Rexam. These plays shows that focusing the story on the tragic hero is not a bad ideas, giving good reason so Arthur Miller did the play *All My Sons*. His purpose was to bring the beauty of the tragedy to modern literature, proving it wasn't only the upper classes of aristocracy. He succeeds making a modern tragedy partially based on the form of past Shakespearean master pieces, leaving the end of the play for example.

Arthur Miller in his plays combines elements of both the Greek tragedy and Christian tragedy. As in Christian drama the situation is not given, but as in Greek drama, the forces making for tragedy are often outside the protagonist he is caught in circumstances not of his own making. But unlike Greek drama, these forces that determine or are the fact of the protagonist are not beyond his reach. Hence the possibility of decisive action is held out, and the will of the hero is called into the play.

It in naturalistic and humanistic terms, not transcendental one. Our ignorance, our lack of consciousness, a remediable. Our environment which restricts and defeats us, which prevents us from realizing ourselves (a failure which to Miller is the heart of the tragic experience) can be changed- if they will. Miller is one of the most realistic American dramatists. Every play by him is realistic not only as regards its theme or subject-matter but also as regards the treatment of that theme. Furthermore, Miller is realistic in portraying the characters of his plays. He is realistic also in his analysis of human motives and in the depiction of the working of the human mind. In short, Miller is realistic to the core, and he is realistic in depicting almost every detail.

A visit by Ann Deever to the Keller home in response to an invitation by Chris is a perfectly natural event, though her visit is not welcome to Kate. Then come a visit by George, and there is a strong reason for George to pay this visit to the Keller family. George's accusation against Joe Keller is not believed either by Ann or by Chris; and George has to go back disappointed. Subsequently, of the matter comes out and, after a discussion between Chris and Joe Keller, the latter he shoots himself. The catastrophe consists in Joe Keller's suicide. Now, there is nothing far-fetched or fantastic in any of the events of the play or in any of the situations.

The theme of the play has realistically been dealt with. The play clearly aims at teaching us that a man's social responsibility is higher than his responsibility to his family.

No matter how selfish we may be, yet after reading this play we would feel convinced though only temporarily, that human society is much larger than any human family, and that a man should not sacrifice the larger interests of society for sake of his narrow self-interest. Of course, not many people would become unselfish after reading this play; but such plays do produce some effect, however small it may be. Thus the convincing quality of the play can certain not is denied.

Then the subsidiary idea, namely that idealistic pursuits are nobler than the demands of a practical life also carries much weight. Dr. Jim Bayliss's dilemma is perfectly real. There are many people among us who would like to devote themselves to certain lofty ideals but are prevented from doing so by the practical, economic realistic of life.

Jim also proves useful to his neighbors when he goes to the airport to drive the visiting George to the Keller home. Sue naturally complains against her husband for not having driven her to the beach while he has readily gone to bring George to the Keller home. The dialogue of all these persons is of the matter of fact kind. It is only the principal characters whose dialogue takes the plot of the play forward, while the subsidiary characters are useful chiefly in producing a realistic atmosphere in the play, though Frank does make a slight contribution to the main plot by confirming Kate's irrational belief that her son Larry is still alive.

All My Sons is a social tragedy. Much of Joe Keller's suffering and his ultimate death is due to the nature of American society. The American society is characterized by competition and commercialization. Every individual is free to rise in life according his capabilities and resourcefulness in society. People of America have firm faith in "the great American dream" which is based on the doctrine of self-help. This doctrine assumes that a person endowed with sufficient initiative can rise from lower to a higher position.

This doctrine can be seen illustrated by the career of such great figures as Benjamin Franklin and John Garfield. Benjamin Franklin rose from a printer's boy to an ambassador and John Garfield went from a log cabin to white house. In the play *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman believes that a person can rise to a high position and can attain wealth by means of personal attractiveness charm and initiative. He applies this view to his son Biff also.

In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller also holds this opinion. He rises in his business by virtue of his persistent devotion. In fact, Joe is deceived by the American dream. He persists in believing in this American myth to the points of absurdity. But he cannot do otherwise. The social system of which he is a product has an iron hold upon him. Like most other Americans, he ardently believes in this law of success. The law of success teaches Americans that theirs is a great country and that there is no room for a man who proves a failure.

Miller makes a distinction between the familial play and the social play. According to him, the play which expresses primarily familial relation cannot be a great play. Such a play is usually sub jest to realism. Only when relations between characters transcend the family interests, the play becomes a non-realistic play. Speaking of Eugene O' Neill, Miller says that the great dramatist seems to have been speaking for some fate-making power behind the social force itself.

The language of the society or the language of the public life

is verse. Miller attributes the difficulty of the dramatist to unite these two elements together to the deep split between the private life of man and social life. "The common realism of the past forty or fifty years," remarks Miller, has been assaulted, because it could not, with ease and beauty, bridge the widening gap between the private life and the social life.

Thus it is that the problem was left unsolved by expressionism, which evaded it by foregoing psychological realism altogether and leaping over to a portrayal of social forces alone. That is why there is now certain decadence about many of our plays; in the past ten years they have come more and more to dwell solely upon psychology, with little or no attempt to locate and dramatize the social forces and conflicts of their characters. For it is proper to ascribe decay to that which turns it is back upon society when, as is obvious any intelligence, the fate of man-kind is social. In *All My Sons*, Miller pictures the individual's responsibility to society. In this play, the business interest that puts self-interest before social responsibility and humanity is attacked by the dramatist.

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