

ANALYSIS

All My Sons (1947)

Arthur Miller

(1915-2005)

“The play, *All My Sons*, revolved around a small industrialist, Joe Keller, who is saved from bankruptcy by the wartime demand for machine products and who, under pressure, sells defective parts to the air force, thus becoming responsible for the death of twenty-one pilots. He is able to shift the burden of guilt to the shoulders of a little man less rugged than himself, and he wins acquittal. But the conscience of his son indicts him, and before this tribunal there can be no acquittal.

Joe Keller’s defense is that his motives were the best in the world; a deeply affectionate parent, he wanted to preserve his business for his sons. It was the author’s contention that no individual’s actions can be self-contained, not even within the compass of a family. Miller, who wrote *All My Sons* with humane understanding but moral sinew as well as taut dramaturgy, summarized his theme as ‘the responsibility of man to society’ or ‘the responsibility of a man for his actions, a recognition of his ethical responsibility to the world outside his home as well as in his own home.’

More than a drama about war profiteering, *All My Sons* made a strong impression and won the Drama Critics Circle award for the best play of the season. Its limitations, an overweaving of plot threads and the use of the old-fashioned device of decisive revelations by means of a letter, made it less than the masterpiece some critics thought it to be. But the play was a culmination of technical prowess for Miller in the Ibsen-influenced social-problem type of drama. It also represented a command of plot structure that was to serve the dramatist extremely well when he turned to his next project, the writing of a play in a free dramatic form. *Death of a Salesman* would not be so successful a drama of time present and time past, of present action and reminiscence, but for its author’s skill in pulling threads together and keeping a tight rein on scenes that would otherwise fly apart.”

John Gassner, ed.
A Treasury of the Theatre
(Simon and Schuster 1950) 1060-61

“*All My Sons* (1947) is a study of the effect of the Second World War in a typical American family. Joe Keller, the central character, is a sixty-year-old manufacturer and small businessman; his son Larry, a flyer, was reported missing during the war, and Joe’s wife Kate has ever since nourished an obsessive and neurotic belief that her son will some day be found alive. Another son, Chris, brooding and idealistic, fought in the war in the infantry and now works in his father’s plant.

As the play opens Ann Deever, formerly Larry’s fiancée, comes to visit the Kellers, and the secret shame of the family is revealed: during the war Joe had been in partnership with Ann’s father in a concern which had shipped defective cylinder heads to the Army Air Corps, causing the deaths of several young men; both had been arrested, but Joe had been exonerated while Deever was sent to prison for a long term. Now Chris, who has long loved Ann, plans to marry her, but his mother is opposed; clinging to her belief that Larry is still alive, she tells Chris that marrying Ann would be an act of betrayal to his brother. Then George Deever, Ann’s brother, arrives; he has just visited his father in prison and has become convinced that Joe is also guilty of the crime. He angrily accuses Joe and attempts to take Ann away with him. But the mother Kate, his old friend, succeeds in placating him. As the action proceeds, however, a doubt begins to grow in the mind of the idealistic Chris about his father’s innocence. By persistent questioning he finally elicits the truth: that Joe had known about the defective parts and had approved their shipment, later denying his part in the fraud when he was accused.

Joe tries to defend his action by arguing that many others did the same thing during the war, that in fact all war procurement was based on the profit system and was basically selfish, and that he committed the

fraud solely to win financial security for his family and his sons. Yet it was Joe who symbolically killed his own son Larry; Ann produces a letter to prove that Larry, in disgust over news of his father's fraud, virtually committed suicide in his own plane. Joe finally realizes that the American boys who fought in the war were 'all his sons,' and that he was as responsible to them as to his own family; he now knows himself to be a murderer. Tormented with guilt, he commits suicide; the mother, before neurotic but now the strongest member of the family, tells Chris, 'Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live.' Thus *All My Sons* demonstrates the basic ethical weakness of the American business morality, which justifies all through success and often ignores human values; Joe, setting out to succeed in the typical American way, has murdered his own son and brought destruction on himself and his family."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 403-04

"For Miller, the central problem of our society is one of consciousness, the inability to connect personal and social values. In *All My Sons*, Miller achieves this connection by showing the developing consciousness of Joe Keller. The social consequences of his actions are brought home to him by the collapse of his personal life, so that when, at the end of the play, he says, 'Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were,' the naturalistic language has an intensity of feeling which makes it do far more work than the words themselves suggest. 'The fiat for intense language is intensity of action,' Miller has written. Here the language is simple but the situation is so intense that the simplicity is explosive....

Joe Keller's awakening...is the last stage of a relentlessly developing situation. It is as if a broken mirror is slowly pieced together, so that at last he sees the full, horrifying image of himself as he really is.... The form of *All My Sons* is that of a well-made naturalistic play, and the family relationships are rooted in a world of concrete experience."

Albert Hunt
"Realism and Intelligence: Some Notes on Arthur Miller"
Encore VII
(May-June 1960) 12-17, 41

"During World War II the shipment of defective cylinder heads has caused the death of more than twenty combat fliers. Joe Keller, manufacturer of airplane parts, has been exonerated but his partner is still serving a prison term. Keller has two sons: Larry, a pilot declared missing for more than three years, and Chris, who has just returned from combat. Chris and Ann Deever, Larry's former fiancée and daughter of Keller's partner, intend to marry in spite of the resistance of Chris's mother, Kater Keller, who refuses to believe that Larry is dead. It is gradually revealed that her attitude is based upon her knowledge of her husband's guilt. Keller's negligence has sent many young men to death, but she will not concede that Larry could have been among them.

Chris desperately tries to believe in his father's innocence until he can no longer lie to himself. In a dramatic climax he forces his father to confess. The idealistic son can find no excuse for his father's facile business ethics. Joe first promises to give himself up, then commits suicide. Several supporting actors contribute to the atmosphere of life in the back yard of a typical American home—in this case a home shattered because its owner has subordinated his responsibilities toward society to his own financial welfare."

Theodore J. Shank, ed.
A Digest of 500 Plays: Plot Outlines and Production Notes
(Crowell-Collier 1963) 336

Michael Hollister (2015)