

The American Dream in Arthur Miller's "All My Sons"

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ABSTRACT

This study is distinctively restricted to the concept of the American Dream in modern drama in American literature. The American Dream is the product of the West and the frontier experience, rather than the puritan tradition, because of its essential belief in the goodness of man and nature. The American Dream in Miller's *All My Sons* shows the father-son relationship and its deterioration in American family. This play "*All My Sons*" represents a kind of criticism of the American Dream. It aims to find out the very existence of the American Dream testifies to its reality. The dramatist Miller in *All My Sons* criticizes war-profiteers and expresses an overt hatred for them. The hero's sense of social unrelatedness is symbolized by his hedged-backyard. It is divided into four sections, each analyzing a topic.

Finally, the study has reached some conclusions that verify the hypothesis of the study.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is true that "American literature" at its highest level is based on the discrepancy between American history and the American Dream. If we look closely at the literary works of the great American writers, we find that American literature has been an expression of the hopes, aspirations, down-falls and achievements of that great nation. All early American literature echoes the illusions and the disillusion of the American Dream.

1.1. The Vision of the New World

The American shores received immigrants of various nationalities but Europe had the lion's share of this flux; to be more precise the largest stock was that of England's. (Mann, 1992) One of the early writers states that the Americans are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. (Crevecoeur, 1962) Another, supporting the same view, states that "New World has been an asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. This signifies that the immigrants had experienced oppression and tyranny as inherent qualities of the New World which was also war-ridden. They came to the New World in order to escape these hard realities. In this sense, the New World is depicted in most of the writings of the early settlement of America as a refuge, an asylum, and a paradise. (Crevecoeur, 1962) This view on life reflects a world in which freedom is a necessity; peace is an inherent quality; love is an entity; abundance is a reality. such was the vision of the New World. Such is the concept of the American Dream.

1.2. The American Dream

The American Dream refers to the romantic expectations of fulfilment in life and the possibility of material success. (Bewley, 1968) Historically, the idea of a New World which will be a terrestrial paradise is not a new one. the Greeks believed in the Elysian Fields where blessed heroes of Greece went after death to their eternal afterlife. The Romans had the Islands of the Blessed, which produced abundance of food. The Christians were firm believers in the Garden of Eden. Even Columbus (the American explorer), during his third voyage of exploration to America (1498-1500), thought that he had found the real site of the terrestrial paradise. However, the American Dream is the product of the West and the frontier experience, rather than the puritan tradition, because of its essential belief in the goodness of man and nature. Thus it is true that at first the New World fell heir to pastoral visions but in the course of time these romantic visions clashed with the realities of the frontier and wilderness. (Luedtke, 1992) The American Dream has roots in the American experience. The settlement of a virgin land made the American tough and the frontier experience shaped their spirit. (Bradford, 1956)

The New World continued to hold the promise of fulfillment and satisfaction. This promise is sometimes met with denial especially when man holds inadequate views of life. Most Americans pursue this dream with a firm belief in the goodness of man and nature. Geoffrey Perrett in *A Dream of Greatness* says :

"In pursuing the realization of the
American Dream, Americans have ever
lost sight of three objectives: abundance in

a world of scarcity; liberty in a world of tyrannies; peace in a world torn by wars." (Prette, 1986)

The dream is a new way of life completely different from the old one. furthermore, the American Dream has flourished at a national level to shape a leading nation. Finally, the aspirations and faith in life which are inherent qualities of the American Dream had their fruition in a nation destined to rule the world as a super-power.

1.3. All My Sons: Plot

Arthur Miller (1915- 2005) was one of the most significant dramatists in modern American literature. He dealt with more social issues and different political cases that were suffering from the American society at that time such capitalism, communism and socialism. In *All My Sons*, Miller builds and reveals dramatic action that, by its very movement- by its creation, suspension, and resolution of tension; its inexorable rush toward tragic confrontation- proves that the past is always present and cannot be ignored, forgotten, or denied. (Bigsby, 1997) Miller's play , *All My Sons* which is a play about a war- profiteer, Joe Keller who sold defective plane parts to the government during war- time. Yet, Joe Keller escaped the hand of justice but his friend Steve, who was working for him, was put into prison for being responsible for the death of twenty one pilots. Joe Keller has two sons: Larry , the younger, has been reported missing in action for three years but his mother believes that he is alive. She urges those around her to hold to the same hope too.

Chris, the older, has come out of the war with ideal ideas and a concept of world brotherhood. He has, also, invited Ann home. Ann is Steve's daughter and Larry's former fiancée. The arrival of Ann, together with Chris's declared intention of marrying her, has made ' mother' very angry because the action signifies Larry's death. She tells Chris that if Larry is dead, Joe has killed him. Chris, who claims to want to live clean, says he cannot ' love a guilty father'. He wants his father to pay for his crime by admitting his guilt to the authorities. (Miller, 1961)

Larry had sent a letter to Ann before he committed suicide, telling her that he would kill his father if he saw him because all those who died at the front lines were his sons. Chris reads the letter loudly, so that Joe can understand that there is something bigger than the family pretending to be convinced by the idea, Joe Keller goes up to his room and commits suicide.

1.4. The American Dream in Miller's All My Sons:

Joe Keller tells Chris in a moment of unmistakable frustration. He thinks that he is practical like most American war- profiteers, as he says, who have made a fortune out of war business. Furthermore, he thinks that he has exploited this chance for the sake of the family and for him:

" nothing is bigger than that I'm his father and he is my son, and if there is something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head" (Miller, 1961)

He also tells his son how he was forced to leave his family at the age of ten and how he had to fight so early for a living. Yet, Chris who has just come out of war with uncompromising idealism, feels that he cannot enjoy the fruits of a war- time economy " with joy And without shame", because , as a survivor, he feels guilty enjoying things at the expense of those who died at the front lines. He saw with his own eyes how the fighters were sacrificing themselves for each other.

" they didn't die; they killed themselves for each other... a kind of responsibility, Man for man". (Miller, 1961)

It is obvious that Chris is expressing worldly brotherhood. Yet, he is not sure if he is doing the right thing because he, as a survivor, is burdened with guilt. Throughout the play his actions and speech support this view. For instance, when he kisses Ann, she tells him that he has kissed her like Larry's brother. He feels ashamed mainly because of his hypocrisy. He denounces the flourishing war- time materialism and promises Ann a lot of money. He urges the other to be better and he doesn't do that. Accordingly, Sue's remark has much truth in it:

" if Chris wants people to put on the hair shirt let him take off his broadcloth,"

For a long time, he has doubted his father but he won't make my investigations. He tells Ann that he loves his parents but when his father's criminal case is expressed publicly he states that he cannot love a guilty father. Chris demands too much from his father. He wants him to acknowledge the death of those who die at the front lines as something monumental, but the father can hardly see behind the hedge- in backyard of his house. Miller's precisely chosen setting, in fact, allows little contact with the outside world, let alone abstract notions such as martyrdom and brotherhood.

For Keller, such things do not exist and hence war is unreal as long as it doesn't affect his personal life. A critic made the point that:

Like many uneducated self-made men,
Keller has no capacity for abstract considerations,
whatever is not personal or at least immediate has
no reality for him. He has the peasant's insular loyalty
to family which excludes more generalized responsibility
to society at large or to mankind in general. (Wells, 1979)

Therefore, those who are engaged in the social action of war continue to be foreigners for him. Their death does not mean anything for him.

Moreover, he is a man of limited knowledge and obvious ignorance. His surprise at Frank's remarks about the value of dictionaries and the possibility of eking out a living from book collecting testifies to his social unrelatedness.

The Greeks believed in a world controlled by fates that were directed by the gods, but Arthur Miller prefers to believe that people's characters have the biggest influence in determining their fate. Failure, in Miller's eyes, should not be blamed on an indefinable hostile fate or social system but on individuals who refuse to accept their responsibilities and connection to fellow human beings. It is the flaws that exist in Keller's character that ensure his defeat rather than any divine authority. Keller knowingly shipped out faulty aircraft parts that may have caused numerous deaths. To try to save his business, he has knowingly put others at risk. Because he refuses to accept responsibility for his actions, his guilt drives him toward the destruction of his relationship with both the sons whom he so wanted to have follow in his footsteps, and finally, of himself. (Abbotson, 2007)

Keller, the hero of this play, failed to find a connection with the world that is considered as a crime especially if there is a world to connect with and if there is a way to connect with it. (Cross, 1979) That is to say, Keller's isolation is due to his ignorance and simplicity of mind. However, Keller is aware that his separateness has nothing to do with any factors outside himself than his self-imposed imperatives. For example, when his wife criticizes his talent for ignoring things, he responds that he ignores what he has got to ignore. Accordingly, he knows that there is a world outside and he is responsible to it. This knowledge, to a very large extent, is blurred by his commitment to familial obligations.

Furthermore, if he doesn't know the consequences of his anti-social action, he won't assume innocence or least he won't concern himself with the reactions of the neighborhood. He feels the burden of guilt, a thing which explains his game of the policeman and thieves with children.

On the other hand, Chris is hypocritical. He has long suspected his father but will never do anything about that. He wants his father to pay for his crime so that he can feel clean. At one moment, he stands for America:

" I was dying every day and you were
killing my boys and you did it for me."

At another he criticizes it :

"this is the land of the great big dogs,
You do not love a man here, you eat him."

But, when Keller commits a second anti-social action by putting a bullet into his own head and his son cries " I didn't mean to"; these nice words ring hollow throughout the drama. The guilty father has sacrificed himself so that his selfish son can feel clean.

Joe Keller in All My Sons is misguided by familial obligations. When he tells Chris that,

" who worked for nothing. Did they ship a gun
or a truck outa Detroit before they got their
price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickles
and dimes, what's clean? (Miller, 1961)

Keller sounds earnest and loving; though misguided. Yet, half- truths do not excuse Keller's anti- social action; therefore, he is guilty. In the meantime, Chris Keller is burdened with guilt. He feels that it is hard for him to love a guilty father. His words:

" I know you are no worse than most men
but I thought you were better. I never saw you
as a man. I saw you as my father.

The character explains the nature of his guilt which is mainly egotistic. Obviously, the father is misguided but his capacity for love elicits wonder and sympathy.

II. CONCLUSION

The American Dream has obviously an unmistakable impact on the American mind. Owing to the fact that the first generations have experienced and acted out the enchantment of glory through their struggle against wilderness, tyranny, and other natural forces. The democratic experience has contributed to the welfare of this country (America) which is destined to rule the world as a super power. The American Dream has created a mighty Republic out of wilderness. In *All My Sons*, Miller shows the struggle between the father and the son in American family to announce the deterioration we can find and see in that society through the characters that appeared throughout the actions. So the hypothesis of this study is accepted.

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