

## ADDRESSING SOCIAL WORK CONCERNS THROUGH BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S ALL MY SONS

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### **Introduction**

The contrast between the traditional and the modern world is seen in the freedom given to the individual in the modern world. A key signifier of the modern world has been the autonomous place given to individual action and desires. But an implicit conflict is built into this modern world-view because the exercise of these actions and desires is bound to differ from individual to individual. This conflict is due to the differences in the opinion and action of the two individuals. Understanding life and making it meaningful emerges from the conflicting and cooperative attitudes and behaviors between individuals. This paper explores such a conflicting situation in Arthur Miller's play All My Sons. This paper straddles two subjects: Social Work and English Literature. It is divided into the following Sub-Sections

### **Objective of the paper**

This paper examines a conflicting situation in Arthur Miller's All My Sons. This classic was written during the World War II and centered on the great American dream; a dream which pays complete homage to the acquisition of material wealth. The central theme of the play is the realization of the difference between living for self and living for society. The realization of the difference is important because it leads to committed individuals willing to make sacrifices.

This play is a classic in English literature and it resonates with concerns which are also common to the profession of Social Work. They are central to the Social Work Area titled Working with Individuals and Families whose defining element is the individual's understanding of the predicament they are in and the possible ways of resolving these predicaments. This play beautifully depicts the complex inter-connections between a family and the larger world they live in, an

understanding of the dilemmas faced by the individual and the ways for resolving these dilemmas.

### **The Plot:**

The play All My Sons revolves around death: the death of 21 pilots in a plane crash. An inquiry brings forth the fact that the plane crashed because of faulty cylinder heads supplied by the Keller/Deever factory. Joe Keller is acquitted because of the influence he commands. The blame falls on Steeve and he is imprisoned. For Steeve the misfortune is doubled because his own children believe in the accusations made against him and distance themselves from him. This misfortune is not accidental. It is orchestrated: Steeve is victimised. How was this orchestrated? The defective cylinder head is brought to the notice of Steeve by the night foreman of the factory. Steeve immediately calls Joe. Joe cleverly stays away on the pretext of being down with flu and instructs Steeve to weld and cover up the cracks and send them to the army. Steeve objects and much against his will he is persuaded by Joe to weld and ship out the defective cylinder heads. Joe convinces Steeve that he would take all responsibility for this decision. In the court Joe denies all responsibility and Steeve goes to jail. How does Miller the playwright bring out the truth? This is done by the younger generation as the play unfolds. It is done through George, the son of Steeve. Over the dinner table there is a confrontation between George, and Joe Keller who blames Steeve for being cowardly. In this confrontation, Chris Keller the son of Joe Keller also supports the father by blaming Steeve. During dinner the conversation by chance turns to Joe's robust health. Joe has a reputation of never being ill in his life. During this conversation, George cleverly reminds Joe of his flu when Steeve had phoned him on the fatal day. Then the truth comes out. Joe admits

his guilt and Chris Keller is shattered. Chris is terribly angry giving rise to a conflict between father and son. This conflict leads to a further tragedy. Joe commits suicide.

What is the real problem with Joe Keller? Can he not distinguish a right action from a wrong action? Miller the playwright says that the real problem is that Joe has no connection with his living world. He is not a member of the human race. He is just a function of the production system. So deep is the impersonality of this system that Joe's action is divorced from his personality. Miller here brings in the idea of 'unrelatedness' which is a complete anti-thesis to the interconnections between and among people, culture and nature which together constitute the human race.

### **The Structuralist Approach:**

The play can be approached in the framework of structuralism. The plot moves from the micro level to the macro level. This three-act structure takes us from the family level to the world at large.

Act one introduces the nuclear family of Joe Keller living in their comfortable home in an American suburb. This material comfort is a contrast to the tragedy of the Keller family- the loss of their son Larry [in a plane crash?] In addition to this tragedy is the imprisonment of Steeve over an issue in which Joe Keller is acquitted. It creates friction between the characters though it is subdued and below the surface.

In Act two as the issue of Chris and Ann's marriage arises, the conflict takes a sharper edge. The climax occurs when Kate accidentally reveals that Joe Keller is responsible for Larry Keller's death. Chris reacts sharply to it.

Act three shows the argument moving from the family level to the wider societal level. Miller the playwright shows the binary oppositions in the arguments between the two characters - Joe Keller and Chris Keller. This dramatic conflict is presented through the paired opposites of the character Chris and Joe. Meaning emerges in the contrast between these viewpoints.

### **Literary Concerns: Binary Oppositions - Contrasting Joe Keller and Chris Keller**

Miller has contrasted Chris with Joe. Strikingly it is Chris the much younger person who demonstrates a conscience and is sensitive to the world around. A supposedly much older and matured Joe is depicted as a person of limited sensitivity. What makes Chris such a sensitive person? The destruction Chris saw while serving in the Second World War brought home to him the sense of responsibility which each human being has towards the other. The death of fellow soldiers brought home to him the compelling need for a broader vision of human life. This also brought in a feeling of revulsion for people making money.

*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 onto 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. (Act I)*

Was it just the death of a fellow-soldier that makes Chris Keller so humane? So caring? As Chris very tellingly points out that they did not die: they were killed. If they had been a little more selfish they would have been alive today. Did everything die with this death and destruction? Something new emerged. A new idea came; that human beings have a responsibility for each other. With this realization comes other realizations also. Chris is able to drive a car or open a bank account because someone out there sacrificed his life for Chris. This was a sacrifice of love and this sacrifice demands that each person has to be little better than otherwise. Blood has been shed so that the living can live peacefully.

*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 can 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.*

Chris Keller's apprehension about the many dealings of his father, Joe Keller turns to shock when he sees his father justifying all the illegal dealings. Joe has his justifications. He is in business and survival in business demands that all actions are justified. He also claims that he never expected the faulty cylinder - heads to be installed and was planning to replace the faulty parts. The tragedy for Joe Keller is that the risks he took was for his son Chris and for his family.

*I am in business, a man in business; a hundred and twenty cracked and you are out of business, you got a process, the process don't work you are out of business; you don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them?... I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I am 61 years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? (Act II)*

**Chris Keller argues –**

*What kind of a man are you? Kids were hanging in the air by those heads. Where have you come from? For me - I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me?*

Chris brings the argument at a larger level. The argument moves from a single family to the world as a global family.

*.....What is that, the world – the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? You are not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? (Act II)*

Joe fails to understand Chris' view. Joe feels that Chris has become a spoilt person because he never had to work hard to make money. For Joe the only concern is his family and this justifies all his actions. He blames Chris for being uncomfortable because he had too much money and challenges him to give it away. The rift between father and son deepens.

The climax occurs when Chris gets hold of Larry's letter which reveals his feelings about his father's involvement in the scandal. Unable to live any more with it, Larry commits suicide.

Chris reads out to Joe the contents of the letter

–  
*Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business.*

The letter transforms Joe. He finds it difficult to cope with the truth and finally realization dawns on him.

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 letter written by Larry opens up the doors of realization of Joe's conscience. Finally, he is able to see his son in all the other soldiers who died in the tragedy. He is able to see the world as his family.

### **Relating Literary Concerns to Social Work Concerns: Binary Oppositions and the Social Work Area of Working with Individuals and Families:**

Binary opposition is the system by which, in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another.

1. It is the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms, such as on and off, up and down, left and right.
2. The views of Chris Keller and Joe Keller are set off against one another. Their views are completely in contrast with each other. Though they are father and son yet they do not share the same ethics and morals. One represents good while the other evil.

This binary framework from English literature can be studied and related to a key Social Work area titled 'Working with Individuals'. This area discusses the dilemmas which individuals face in the transition from tradition to modernity. A critical area of this transition is the divided loyalties between the traditional values and the modern values faced by individuals in this phase. Joe Keller the traditionalist has loyalty only to his family. Chris Keller his son who has experienced the horrors of war has much broader loyalty. They are to the human race. That is why Arthur Miller has All my Sons as his title. Social Work as a profession attempts to bridge the gap between traditional primordial

loyalties and to a modern world of human beings.

The principle of working with individuals can be studied with the background of binary oppositions. An individual can be approached by studying the group to which he belongs. It can be understood better if there is a survey of such oppositions present in society and find out whether social workers can remove these oppositions. Binary oppositions are deeply embedded in society. Since literature portrays life and society literary texts can be used as a tool to study the binary oppositions present in the characters. These characters portray human predicament which will enable social workers to find ways of social intervention.

Joe, the father, realizes his mistake when he is confronted by his son who contradicts him at every step. The oppositions in their characters are brought forth and are dealt with only through confrontations. These confrontations are possible only when the conflicting areas become visible.

The use of binary opposition in literature is a system that authors use to explore differences between groups of individuals, such as cultural,

class or gender differences. Authors may explore the gray area between the two groups and what can result from those perceived differences. Such gray areas need to be explored by the students of social work while studying and working with individuals and families. .

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