



Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* Through a Marxist Lens

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Abstract

This study is a review of the Marxist theory with certain references to the Miller's play, "*All My Sons*", written in 1947. There are few articles conducted as Marxist critiques of capitalism in this play but these articles criticized capitalism without discussing its traits and drawbacks. The study discusses the characteristics and disadvantages of the capitalist system in detail by citing examples from the play. This article contributes to knowledge in various ways as it reminds us of the Marxist theory and its importance in the world of literary theory. It also attempts to prove that phony idealism destroys the family ties and realism is a real representation of human suffering. The current study emphasizes the Marxist claim that religion makes people idealists is far from reality. The article refutes Marxist perspective that opposes establishing family through marriage.

Key words: Marxism; Phony idealism; Capitalism; Marxist criticism; Religion

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1. MARXIST CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

Abrams (1999) sees literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (p.149). Some Marxist critics, thinkers and

writers favor literature that focuses on socioeconomic issues and depicts the life of people. In this chapter, we will discuss the traits and drawbacks of capitalism as well as its effects on the characters' lives. The characters' names in "*All My Sons*" have thematic significance as Miller did not haphazardly choose these names. We think, Joe Keller stands for capitalism, Chris represents religion and Jim Bayliss symbolizes the working class. Marx (1990) states that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another" (p.82). Many Marxist critics see history as a struggle among the poor and the bourgeoisie and show the hardships that face the oppressed. They stressed the importance of studying history within literature. The reality is that Miller's play refers to a specific time in American history, but it remains a powerful portrayal of peoples' lives.

Miller criticizes capitalism as a minority group of people controls the modes of production. Zinn (2010) points out that capitalism is the main cause of failure for the lower class and the middle class. In the play, Joe Keller has given his life to the American Air Force for forty years. He is a sixty year old, uneducated man, and runs a business with Steve Deever. The two partners represent the middle class and the representatives of the upper class are those who control the American Army. There is a conflict between the two partners in one hand and the American Air Force and Joe Keller in the other hand. In the third act, addressing Chris, Joe Keller clarifies that "I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; the process don't work you're out of business" (Miller, 71). Tragically, Joe blames himself in terms of selling faulty cylinders to the American Air Force and as a result of the deal twenty-one pilots killed in Australia during the war. In this quotation, Joe reveals information about his serving the dominating

class. We think the officials of the Air Forces that sign the contract of buying the cylinder heads are involved in the crime. Therefore, Joe's wife, Kate, is responsible for his husband war-profiteering money and tries to cover the crime. Murray (1995) states "the play shows that Kate, as much as Joe, destroyed George's family" (p.16). The suffering and the conflict have started since Joe began working with the upper class.

Capitalism has several characteristics that apparently appear in the play. Firstly, The capitalist system tends to use oppression since there is a conflict among the oppressed and the oppressor. Charlton points (1998) out "oppression occurs when individuals are systematically subjected to political, economic, cultural, or social degradation because they belong to a social group... results from structures of domination and subordination and, correspondingly, ideologies of superiority and inferiority" (p.8). Although he works with the superior class, Joe Keller is degraded because of belonging to a different social class. Sometimes oppression occurs within the same class, Joe denies his responsibility for selling the faulty cylinders, claiming that Steve signed the deal without his knowledge. By this, the court exonerated him as he had misled justice and they sent Steve to prison.

Eagleton (1976) indicates that "Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression" (p.76). The aim of Marxist criticism is to sympathize audience to revolt against oppression and persecution. Keller is a human being, father, successful man and lover, but through his work with the capitalists, we assume, he commits several faults and pollutes himself; hence, he does not only lose his identity but also his existence due to his competition with the upper class. The imbalance between the middle class and the upper class leads to his destiny.

Secondly, capitalism is based on the exploitation of the working class. Exploitation is "powerful, connected people deploying resources from which they draw significantly increased returns by coordinating the effort of outsiders, whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort" (Tilly, 1999, p.128). Joe has worked for a long time with the American Forces, exploiting his youth and labor in their service, then they threw him like an invalid commodity. The capitalist claim is that if you work hard, you will gain much money but this motto is a fallacy. Additionally, the capitalist ideology is that money makes everything, losing money threatens their existence, getting money by any means such as theft, fraud, human trafficking and robbery makes them stronger than those who just have their wages. In reference to the play, Chris takes his father's wealth and Joe betrays, Steve, his partner. Sarcastically, Joe promises Ann and George that he will recruit their father, Steve Deever, as a simple employer. We argue that exploitation does not necessarily mean selling the products at a profit and giving workers

less than they deserve. There are two interpretations of this concept, as we conceive it, might be used in this play: the American Forces may exploit the war's conditions to buy the defective engines; however, Keller seizes the war's circumstances in shipping the batch without their knowledge, but he, in the two cases, is a victim of greed. Inevitably, Joe lost his son and as a result he decided to commit suicide.

Next, in the capitalist system, alienation makes the individuals detached from the society as well as their works. Alienation is "the idea that two things that belong together come apart" (Wolff, 2003, p.29). To elaborate more, Steve Deever has unusable aviation equipment without knowing about the cracks. This means his detachment from the products is the main cause of his imprisonment. Still another cause, he is also excluded from the management of the factory. Anne also forgets his lover because she wants to marry Chris regardless of Joe's conspiracy in breaking down her family. She also abandons his brother, George, and joins to Joe's family. Therefore, the members of the middle class are detached from the upper class; hence, the relations among classes are fragmented as it can be seen in the play. Dr. Jim Bayliss works at another job because his salary is too low to buy his wife's needs. He does not have an affiliation to his profession as well as his dream in establishing medical research center and the society that he belongs to. The proletariat, we assume, are alienated from society because the fruits of their hard work are robbed by the bourgeoisie. Similarly, the bourgeoisie, we believe, are alienated from their society because of their manipulation of other people for their own advantages. Through his play, we firmly think, Miller wants to demonstrate that the capitalist system based on injustice, inequity and duplicity.

Fourthly, Marx characterizes human history in terms of the ownership of the means of production. This highlights the Marxist concept of commodification. "People themselves are commodified, valued not as people but instead as numbers, statistics, and cogs in an abstract economic machine" (Parker, 2008, p.193). According to capitalism, people are treated as objects, seen as a source of getting money. As can be really seen in the Miller's play, *All My Sons*, twenty one pilots lost their souls as well as the destruction of two families. As a result, humans are no longer humans since they lose their sense of humanity as Joe Keller did. Consequently, a person might be subjected individual in the way he/she sees and acts in the social world. The subjective interpretations of individuals emphasize another Marxist concept, the concept of interpellation. Interpellation is the "process of being passive, unconsciously drawn into dominant social assumption" (ibid 201). To elaborate more, it refers to the action of being attracted and driven by an internal force to follow bogus life style, orders and doctrines without awareness. In *All My Sons*, internal factors pushed Joe to do such these actions such as the genetic inheritance of

greed and the gratification of his wife's desires. Chained by their interests and its representation in the society, people's main concern develops and changes to whatever make them appear very desirable. By this, people with their new wanted appearance and behavior present another concept of Marxism, false consciousness. False consciousness, is "sociable to the extent that it involves wanting to be seen in a certain way" (Rosen, 1996, p.10). Being falsely conscious, Joe Keller thought that by sealing the batch no one will discover his crime, he also supposed that a lot of money will make his sons so happy. Here, Joe fails to see his class true position neither his oppressed position because "false consciousness" leads him to enter in a competition with a destructive and unknown force.

Briefly, Joe has a desire to follow "the American dream" that defines success as a capitalist belief of working hard and associates wealth with success regardless of the consequences of the class struggle. By adopting this principle, Joe loses his honesty, integrity and credibility in the middle class society. According to Joe, success means cheating and deserting morals even though those bad habits lead to the destruction. Joe has never learned that true success is appreciated by how we behave rather than what wealth we have. As a result of his deeds, Joe is rewarded by shooting a bullet in his head. Through the embodiment of Joe's character, Miller wants, through Joe's character, to assert Marx's views that the capitalist system manipulates people for the sake of gaining much money.

2. MARXIST CRITIQUE OF IDEALISM AND FAMILY

Idealism is opposite of realism and the idealists avoid to use logic and depend on their thoughts in analyzing things rather than experience, putting the ideas on the top of their priorities. The idealist is generally defined as "a person who sees the world as it could be rather than as it currently exists." (gotquestions.org). Many Marxist critics including Lukács, Brecht, Adorno, Althusser among others criticize idealism because it focuses on how the world ought to be and ignores how the world is. For Marxism, idealism depends on morals, values, emotions and hope that are actually far from the reality. Meyers (2009) points out that "*All My Sons* is based upon a true story, which Arthur Miller's then mother-in-law pointed out in an Ohio newspaper" (p.93). Miller employs literature to reflect reality as the events of this play truly happened in America. Miller adopts Marx's views in criticizing idealism and depicts Chris as an idealist. In addition, the speech of other characters tells us of Chris' idealism rather than Chris himself as Annie points out "Whenever I need somebody to tell me the truth I've always thought of Chris." (Miller, p.44). Ironically, Miller describes Chris as the absolute truth, later Chris says "I know what you're thinking, Annie. It's true. I'm yellow. I was made

yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it... Now if I look at him, all I'm able to do is cry... I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now. You made me practical." (Miller, p.80). Here, Chris' idealism forbids him to suspect his father or even to jail him due to religious commitments towards his family. Because of his cowardice, Chris contributes in destroying the values and morals rather than maintaining the advancement of society. We think that through his practical idealist attitudes, Chris covered his father's fault for two reasons: he fears his mother's opposition of marriage from Annie as his mother is the source of authority, and he knows after discovering the crime, his father will be imprisoned or executed. Hence, he will gain his father's wealth and will marry the girl he loves. Chris says to his fiancée "Annie, I'm going to make a fortune for you." (Miller, p.36). Here, Miller criticizes Chris' idealism, we assume, Chris does not tend to reveal the truth, claiming that the religious duty to his father prevents him from taking an action or a decisive decision. The other reason is that Chris knows well that the fortune will be inherited by him. Chris' impressions and emotions of love are fake. And Kate plays an important role in obliterating his personality.

Selden et al. (1997) point out that Lukács wants, among other traditional Marxist critics, literature to "reflect" reality without fantasies. Marxists often have tended to portray the real situations of life and how people suffer through their struggle against the dominating minority and thus their everyday needs. Miller criticizes Chris' idealism that contributes to his father's death as well as his brother's. All characters, in the play, differ in their personalities, attitudes, beliefs and opinions in terms of what is wrong or right. Consequently, the play is a severe conflict among the idealists and the realists. Kate Keller is an idealist woman because of rejecting the idea that Larry was dead, trying to convince herself that her son, Larry, will come back some day. Miller tries to prove that the idealists, Kate and Chris, felt shame through revealing Joe's crime in front of the whole society. Lovibond (1983) states that the members of the community who understood their own life style were not embarrassed by it. Although the idealists know the truth well, they resort to ignoring the truth and live in the world of imagination because their dreams cannot be easily achieved. For example, Chris thinks that the soldiers who fight the enemies in the different parts of the world may lose their souls instead of rescuing people's lives. His idealism considers the soldiers as heroes because they defend their country. To extend the discussion, we assume, that the soldiers are victims of the American policy as they were killed far from their country and therefore the ideological state apparatus through the effect of the mass media create unreal opponents.

According to Lenin, idealism "is merely a subtle, refined form of fideism, which stands fully armed, commands vast organizations and steadily continues

to exercise an influence on the masses, turning the slightest vacillation in philosophical thought to its own advantage.” (Acton, 2003, p.406). Lenin completely attacked idealism as Miller did in this play. But, we disagree with them that idealism restricts the mind and depends on fideism that Plantinga defines (1983) it as “exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone” (p.187). Faith does not limit the mind’s ability to think and rethink profoundly. Human beings are born with brains and each brain consists of millions of cells that save numbers, images and letters, recalls information, and reacts against different situations. Consequently, the role of the mind is to investigate the truth through touching, seeing, inducting and collecting data. The way of thinking differs from one person to another; hence, people work in different jobs and earn different amounts of money and wages. We believe, the belief in a religion does not affect the mind’s activities and any religion includes a set of principles that organizes people’s life and does not collide with the human mind.

Through a Marxist perspective, Miller mocks religion as Chris knows the truth of his father’s crime through “The voice of God” (Miller, p.57), as he claims. In this play, Chris and Ann condemn selling the cracked cylinders. Ann gives up her father although she loves him so much, and Chris rejects the luxurious life and its facilities because he regards everything is looted. Also, Larry kills himself because of shamelessness. To elaborate more, we assume, these three idealist characters fled from facing the truth and bringing Joe to justice, resorting to creating justifications to get rid from the sequences of Joe’s plight. They pretend to solve the problem just by blaming. Sue Bayliss says “he’s driving my husband crazy with that phony idealism of his” (Miller, p.46). Sue emphasizes that Chris tries convincing her husband to follow his dream to be a medical researcher and thus the doctor will give up his responsibility towards her. Cunningly, Chris pretends that his father’s money is contaminated, but uses this money to establish a business in another place.

Some Marxist principles, we assume, are unrealistic in their application in real life. They tend to ignore religion by seeing it as the cause of injustice, oppression and tyranny. Marx, by doing this, antagonizes religion. Negatively, one can see the way he misunderstands religion and how he looks at the way it was practiced in England. In this view, Marx over-generalizes his thoughts concerning religion to include all religion. To push the discussion further, Marx’s ideas concerning family are also not applicable in reality. Marx does not accept family because it makes people keen on ownership. In “*All My Sons*”, Miller portrays Kate’s role in the leadership of the family as a dominant role, describing her “a woman of uncontrolled inspirations and an overwhelming capacity for love” (Miller, p.16). To gratify her ambitions and desires, Joe makes impossible things to gain money by any means. Chris’ silence on the crime to win Ann

is further evidence on Miller’s criticizing of marriage. Accordingly, Marxism, we believe, goes against marriage and thus of having your own children. Moreover, these views how they ignore the human nature of degrading women and their role in society. In rejecting the family, they advocate work relationships only instead of private ones presented in having one’s wife and children. Miller depicts Kate as the dominant authority in the family, and Joe is weak in front of her attraction. As if he wants to say to the audience that Kate is a victimizer, and sacrifices the father and the son together.

Marxist theory as a “complete thought” (Mayo, 1956, p.235) is unacceptable when it comes against its applications to the real life. The idea of abolishing marriage hurts the conservative communities and leads to mixing lineages, adultery, prostitution, and sexual diseases such as AIDS, Syphilis and Hepatitis. Marxism investigates the natural life of people without artificiality as it is clear in the stage direction in Miller’s play. Miller tackled the precise details of Americans who live under the capitalist system in 1950s. Miller had a Marxist thought since he strongly criticized capitalism in his plays: “*All My Sons*” and “*Death of a Salesman*”. Miller highlighted the American policy during the war and its hegemony over the world.

CONCLUSION

The article discusses the capitalist system from Marxist perspectives. It takes Miller’s play, *All My Sons*, as an example of people’s life style in America in the fifties. The study shows how Miller could persuade the audience that the capitalists work unethical things at the expense of fame and living happily. It also demonstrates the features and disadvantages of capitalism. The study argues the Marxist claim that religion contributes in shaping idealism and controlling the human mind. The study opposes Marx’s views that the family relations and marriage increase the families’ properties. The study agrees with Marx in some points in terms of capitalism and its traits.

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