

## The Nature of Guilt in Arthur Miller's *All my Sons*

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### Abstract

Guilt is one of the most poignant and devastating senses, which is either perceived or imposed upon for one reason or the other. This perceived or imposed sense keeps on growing as a poisonous tumor, which ultimately turns into a terminal mental disease, a disease that disowns one from his own self and identity. This sense of loss of identity creates a murky dungeon of non-belonging, where one loses his sense of direction in life. This study is an attempt to shed light on the nature of guilt in Miller's *All my Sons*, by scrutinizing the different situations of the characters who helplessly try to get away from this oozy bog of guilt stricken world.

**Key words:** Guilt; Non-belonging; Binary opposition; Shame

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### INTRODUCTION

There is nothing more menacing than the sense of a collective sin or guilt that is supposed to be handed down from generation to generation and to permanently tarnish a people or a community. Guilt as a metanarrative heritage seems to be the omnipotent and omnipresent

stumbling blocks of man's tortuous path of life. It is indeed a flashback to one's regrettable and irretrievable deeds, which keep on torturing and ruining one's *Present* by highlighting the dark and tormenting memories of the *Past*; those memories which are firmly engrained within one's existence and keep on pestering the conscience and the consciousness every now and then. The burden of the guilt stricken past is so heavy that the *Present* finds itself too weak and fragile to cope with, so ultimately gets dissolved in it and loses its identity. When we look back at the memories with helpless anger, the memories, which are no more but still very alive and fresh, we find our mind and soul enchained in a horrifying spooky house in a marooned island, where no one can hear our suppressed voice, which yells for rescue. As Hooti & Maleki (2009) point out:

We might succeed in cheating others, but we can never cheat ourselves. We can turn a deaf ear to the world, but we can never ignore the voice of our conscience, which keeps on reminding us of our deeds every now and then. (p. 55)

Guilt can be interpreted differently in different contexts and circumstances. As mentioned above, when one's conscience cannot put up with the burden of a wrong deed, this sad and tormenting weight which does not leave the conscience in peace can be called the sense of guilt that one is undergoing. But again it might be interpreted further, the sense of guilt may show up when one blames himself for doing something wrong, but sometimes you feel the guilt without having a direct link with any wrongdoings, for instance, if a member of your family commits a crime, you feel guilty at being a part of such a family, or sometimes it happens that your family members keep on looking at you as a criminal, while you do not have such a feeling about yourself, here again you start feeling guilty at being a member of such a family, which has created a sense of non-belonging in you. This sense of guilt can be more colorful and heart lacerating when it is mingled with shame. As Tangney & Dearing

(2004) comment:

Shame and guilt are rich human emotions that serve important functions at both the individual and relationship levels. On the one hand, as moral emotions, shame and guilt are among our most private, intimate experiences. In the face of transgression or error, the self turns toward the self—evaluating and rendering judgment. Thus, the experience of shame or guilt can guide our behavior and influence who we are in our own eyes. On the other hand, shame and guilt are inextricably linked to the self in relationship with others. These emotions develop from our earliest interpersonal experiences—in the family and in other key relationships. And throughout the lifespan, these emotions exert a profound and continued influence on our behavior in interpersonal contexts. Shame and guilt are thus both “self-conscious” and “moral” emotions: self-conscious in that they involve the self evaluating the self, and moral in that they presumably play a key role in fostering moral behavior.(p. 2)

All the above mentioned kinds of guilt can be observed in Miller's *All my Sons*.

## 1. ALL MY SONS

*All my Sons* is based on a true story as Hooti & Maleki (2009, pp. 45-57) quote from Miller: the source of inspiration of *All My Sons* was from a story told by a pious lady from the Middle West about a neighborhood family that had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machinery to the Army during World War II.

*All my Sons* is a play with a strong socio-political message. In this story Miller intends to arouse the socio-political conscience, which seems to be lulled to deep slumber. Joe Keller, a manufacturer, is found guilty for selling defective aeroplane cylinder heads on one occasion during World War II, which leads to the deaths of twenty one pilots. At his trial, Joe Keller does not accept the responsibility of this disastrous act and consequently Steve Deever, his business partner is convicted as the main culprit. After being declared innocent, Joe Keller re-establishes his business and is warmly accepted in his social life. But this sense of innocence does not last long as he hears the report that his pilot son Larry is missing.

When the play opens, about three and half years later, that son's fiancée, Annie arrives to marry the dead boy's brother, Chris Keller. Annie's arrival brings about a crisis in the Keller family, and especially for Kate Keller who has always refused to accept the fact of the death of her son, Larry, and who had so far been Annie's failure to marry anybody else as a proof of Annie's similar faith in his being still alive. The planned marriage between Annie and Chris therefore means that Kate Keller must abandon her fond belief that her son Larry is still alive. But her acceptance of Larry's death also forces her to acknowledge some connection between that death and what she knows to be her husband's guilt. The situation becomes more complicated when Annie's brother, George

fails to obtain a confession from Joe Keller, the planned marriage between Annie and Chris brings about that confession because Chris's mother plays her final card in order to prevent the marriage, which could mean the end of her belief and her hope in Larry's continued survival. She reveals her husband's guilt to her son Chris. But she and her husband are finally defeated by a letter, which Annie now reveals. In this letter the missing son Larry had announced his intention to commit suicide because of his father's dishonest action in having supplied defective equipment to the Air Force. Finding himself compelled to accept the responsibility for his action, Joe Keller shoots himself.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Miller always tries to bring the two different halves of individual in scrutiny; the first half belongs to family and the second one to society. In this challenging arena it is very difficult to create a fair balance between these two belligerent opponents in Miller's portrayed world. Indeed in such a never-solving judgment dilemma of Miller's *All my Sons*, a judgment is made by creating a binary opposition between family and society. As long as this dilemma exists, the guilt is inseparable from individual and his life. So in this infected values of humanities, we should not search for angel-like individuals who are free from guilt, but the sole thing we can do is to have an unbiased look at the nature of guilt. Before labeling one guilty one thing must be considered, which has the paramount importance, and that is the intention of the doer. Sometimes we intend to do something nice but the whole thing turns upside down. Nobody rejects the fact that Joe Keller does care a lot about his business but he does not have the intention of running his business at the cost of the lives of the pilots. In an emergency case he has to make a decision by giving it a 50-50 percent chance, and at the same time does not want to jeopardize his bread-and-butter business. Hence to consider Joe Keller within the realm of 20<sup>th</sup> century atmosphere and not judging him as an imaginary immaculate creature, we might not look askance at him as a villainous character. Indeed he believes that he has not done anything weird to make him stand black among the whites who serve the war. Joe's following words to Chris give us a closer touch of his inner world:

Keller: What should I want to do? [Chris is silent] Jail? You want me to go, say so! Is that where I belong ? then tell me so! [slight pause] what's the matter, why can't tell me? [furiously] you say everything else to me, say that! [slight pause] I'll tell you why you can't say it. Because you know I don't belong there. Because you know! [with growing emphasis and passion, and a persistent tone of desperation.] who worked for nothin' in that war? When they work', I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or truck out a Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nicles and dimes, what's clean? Half the goddam country is

gotta go if I go! That's why you can't tell me. (Miller, 1972, p. 87-henceforth, Miller)

Miller introduces Joe Keller as a kind and careful father who just tries to create a safe and secure life for his family. Everyone loves him and puts their trusts in his decisions. He is stable and sure about his needs and the way to gain them. As Hooti & Azizpour (2011, p. 23) comment, "Joe is a man who no one could dislike him... He is a successful, pragmatic, and self-made person. Joe cares about his family and puts them at a high priority." Nowhere in *All My Sons* can we find a character talk about doing something wrong intentionally. Indeed we never see any greed flavored intentions, which invite the sense of guilt in the whole exchanged dialogues of the characters to give us the excuse to convict them as criminals who have nurtured and masterminded any devilish plots to achieve success. As Derrida (1997) asserts:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical,...) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general... There is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texte] (p. 158)

### 3. BINARY OPPOSITIONS AND SENSE OF GUILT

In a world where binary oppositions are preferred to binary concepts it is very easy to push individuals in a presupposed frame of justice, where the choices for judgment are predetermined and pronouncing individuals innocent or guilty can be done with the least sense of guilt. One of the worries of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>th</sup> century generations is creating and encouraging discriminatory elements like *weak* and *strong*, *black* and *white*...As Hooti & Shoostarian (2010) claim:

Using Derrida, especially, postmodernism suggests that the basic binary oppositions of modernist idea (true/false, mind/body, reason/ emotion) are less firm than we may take for granted. It is also maintained that there is no promise that foundational ideas like freedom or democracy really give rise to a better society. (p. 20)

In *All my Sons*, making society and family as two opposites can result in making them as two alternatives for Keller to choose either of them. But based on the ontological analysis of the play, we cannot see Joe Keller prioritizing family to society or vice versa; he simply decides to make a decision on the spur of moment. According to Hooti & Azizpour (2011, p. 24), "Life is full of many hard decisions that people have to take, often on the spur of the moment. Some of them are right others turn terribly wrong. Joe Keller, the tragic hero, is no different."

### 4. JOE KELLER AND SENSE OF GUILT

Joe as a responsible father never feels guilty, while the sense of guilt is imposed on him by others. He does not find his deeds contaminated. As Bigsby (2005) points out:

Speaking in 1999, Miller still insisted on its continuing relevance, nothing that audiences recognize the force, if not a justification, of Keller's defence of his actions, not least because they understand, while rejecting, his motives and acknowledge their own potential for complicity: "the justification that Joe Keller makes is that . . . you do what you have to do in order to survive", a defence which is 'always understandable and always unacceptable'. The fact is that audiences 'know pretty well that given the kind of pressure that Joe Keller was under they might have collapsed too, so that people participate in the conflict. They don't stand apart entirely from it because they know they're vulnerable.'"(p. xiii)

Pressure, it is the case in Joe's situation. He does what he has to do in that specific moment. Among the frighteningly wild and savage world of business, he has to make a tough decision to survive, as he tells Chris:

You are a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; you got a process, the process don't work you're 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? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty year, let them take my life away? ..." (Miller, p. 74)

But it seems that man is doomed to judge and to be judged out of context. You cannot cut out a piece of puzzle and say this is the whole. What Joe does is correct to him in that situation. If others were in his shoes, they might do the same, but they think they would not.

After a serious squabble between Joe and Chris, he (Chris) leaves the house. Kate wants Joe to go after Chris and bring him back home by confessing to his wrong deed. In other words, she wants to impose the sense of guilt upon Joe. but all in vain.

*Mother*: I think if you sit him down and you-explain yourself. I mean you ought to make it clear to him that you know you did a terrible thing [*Not looking into his eyes.*] I mean if he saw that you realize what you did. You see?

*Keller*: What ice does that cut?

*Mother [a little fearfully]*: I mean if you told him that you want to pay for what you did.

*Keller [sensing.. quietly]*: How can I pay for that?

*Mother*: Tell him- you're willing to go to prison. [Pause]

*Keller [struck, amazed]*: I'm willing to---?

*Mother [quickly]*: You wouldn't go. He wouldn't ask you to go. But if you told him you wanted to, if he could feel that you wanted to pay, maybe he would forgive you.

*Keller*: he would forgive me! For what?

*Mother*: Joe, you know what I mean.

*Keller*: I don't know what you mean! You wanted money, so I made money. What I must be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you? (Miller, p. 81)

What one thinks as being true may be considered *wrong* to others. As Nietzsche opines "Knowledge and Truth are only effective instruments, not transcendent entities. They are concepts that human beings invent. But

they can never be 'objective' because they always serve some human interest or purpose". (quoted in Robinson, 1999, p. 15) For Nietzsche:

all human values are always a reflection of some power struggle, the result of one group wishing to impose its own values onto others. Putting everything into two categories of good or evil is made by human being to take advantage of". (p. 26)

If we seek the historical background of the subject, it guides us to the American Dream. American Dream is related to the idea spread over United States society in late 19<sup>th</sup> century in which people always prognosticate a better future for themselves and their family. So the image of a rosy future can be found in all the heroes of Miller's plays as well as Joe Keller. When this social motivation knocks out, the father – Joe Keller – feels that he is responsible for these misfortunes. So the tradition of American Dream, the current soul of America's society, can be one of the external factors of intensifying what he did.

The new situation during the Second World War had come into existence. People found their Dreams in a competitive atmosphere. As Oikawa (2002, p. 104) said: "production of arms encouraged as much as any available resources could be used."

Hooti & Azizpour (2011, p. 25) pointed out on this issue:

In the competitive industrialized and postmodern society which if you have money then you are, ordinary people can realize success dream, but the social system no longer allows everybody to reach a success on his own. Only a selected people can become wealthy. And here we can be witnesses of cruel rules in the spirit of competitive society.

Joe believes that sometimes you are unconsciously conditioned by the circumstances, which lead to inevitable decisions and consequences as it can be observed from the following dialogue:

*Mother:* I didn't want it [money] that way.

*Keller:* I didn't want it that way, either! What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you....(Miller, p. 81)

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## 5. SUICIDE AND SENSE OF NON-BELONGING

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An important issue here is what Heidegger says about being and becoming. As he asserted:

...I myself am my future by way of this anticipatory forerunning. I am not in the future, but rather am the future of myself. Becoming guilty is nothing but carrying the *past* within myself. To become guilty means *to be my past*. In the state of being guilty, I hold onto the past thus made visible to me... (quoted in Kisiel & Sheehan, 2007, p. 266)

When the journey between being and becoming is filled with the burden of guilt and pessimism, you feel absurd and this sense of absurdity creates a sense of nothingness and meaninglessness in you. It is in such a complicated context that Joe finds suicide the apt choice in order to get away from the torturing sense of alienation

and displacement.

In ethical nihilism it has been said that: "There is nothing morally right or nothing morally wrong" (Cornman, Lehrer & Pappas 1992, p. 294). So as we can see, locating suicide among the morally wrong category is basically incorrect.

At the end of the play, Keller finds himself in a world that has suddenly become alien to him. His family has rejected him. His *being* just given him the sense of alienation, so his *becoming* does not improve his being, therefore he prefers to commit suicide. This death is not because of the sense of guilt but the sense of not belonging.

Miller (1978, p. 19) writes that, "Joe Keller's trouble is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any visible connection with his world, his universe, or his society".

Joe expects his family to understand that whatever he does is for them. For instance Joe says: "You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what can I do? Let them take forty years, let them take my life away"(Miller: 74). Joe finds himself in a wrong context and this gives him a sense of nothingness. He finds his life long effort shattered and depreciated, as he says, "...What am I, a stranger? I thought I had a family here. What happened to my family?"(Miller, p. 30)

Nelson (1970) says:

In Joe Keller's eyes, there is nothing dishonest in a plea to the two values upon which he has based his life: the worth of individual effort and the sanctity of family loyalty born of love. His second appeal extends beyond the individual and family, but still is defined by the inner circle. (p. 85)

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## 6. LARRY TRAPPED BETWEEN GUILT AND SHAME

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Larry though an offstage character plays a crucially key role in the tragic destiny of the other characters. He is torn between guilt and shame. As he is himself a pilot and is in the core of the misery of war, he feels totally guilty and ashamed of finding his father responsible for the death of his fellow pilots. He cannot bear the burden of guilt and shame, and consequently resorts to suicide, though his suicide marks neither the end of guilt nor shame within the doomed world of his tragic stricken family members.

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## 7. COLLAPSE OF CHRIS' UTOPIA

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Keller's younger son, Chris, is an idealist. He comes back from a war in which the ideal is to die for your country. But when he comes back and finds out that the people's ideal is something else, he feels alienated in the society. As Hooti & Azizpour (2011, p. 26) assert:

Such people are liable to find themselves in an alien world. It is surely this feeling that lies behind *All My Sons* and in particular the character of Chris Keller, back from the war to a family

concerned primarily with its own future and the business of making money, a society in which his neighbors, too, seem to have put idealism aside in the name of post-war pragmatism. The business of consumer society is, indeed it seems business.

He looks through everything by his ideal lens even about the concept of fatherhood he tells Joe: "...I never saw you as a man, I saw you as my father..." (Miller, p. 87). He thinks a father should not make any mistakes. Bigsby (2005) asserts:

This is a man [Chris], we begin to realize, who sees himself as a martyr, an idealist, yet the suspicion grows that this is an image behind which he hides. Doubts are swallowed up in his self-conscious presentation of himself as an honest man doing nothing more than demand honesty, a self-denier only now able to assert his rights. He presents himself, to himself, as serving truth; truth, however, not only places him at risk but, as we see, becomes a means of directing attention away from himself and his own moral failings.(p. 85)

Chris says that: "I've been a good son too long, a good sucker. I'm through with it" (Miller: 15). The ideal goal for those who fight in a war is to die for defending their country, and if they stay alive and find the world other than their ideal one, it gives them the sense of guilt. Bigsby (2005) believes:

Chris feels guilty for his new happiness. In the war he had led men to their deaths. He is a survivor who feels the guilt of the survivor. Beyond that, he can see no connection between the sacrifices of war and the way of life it was supposedly fought to preserve. Wartime camaraderie implies a conception of human relationships and a shared perception of worth that seems to have no correlative in a post-war world concerned with simple materialism... (p. 85)

Chris says to Joe that, "...What's that, the world 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?..." (Miller, p.76) Chris does not seem to believe that individual and his thoughts are controlled and affected by the unpredictable circumstances. Foucault believes:

Human beings have a history, as do their beliefs and values. The loose networks of systems and disciplinary institutions constitute human subjects, as well as exercise control over them. Their 'discourses' control what thoughts, beliefs and actions are possible, and therefore the picture that individuals have of themselves. Human beings do not possess a unique identity which is 'theirs'. They are subjects, made by systems and networks of power of which they are usually completely unaware. (quoted in Robinson, 1999, pp. 45-46)

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## CONCLUSION

The misery of man seems to be his/her fossilized beliefs in the established clear cut boundaries for the fixed and universal values in societies. Giving importance to binary opposition may be another roadblock. Joe Keller does not choose between good and evil, between family and society, he just does what he thinks as being correct. And we, as civilized human beings, live in a world where we should accept everyone's right of making decision without

harming others.

Grand narratives are the most lucrative materials of the political malls of the political-minded business figures. You cannot expect a free thinker to yield to these fossilized notions and beliefs and accept them as legitimized ultimate truth. Past can affect present, but it cannot control it, as Hooti & Azizpour (2011) point out:

In Miller's drama we can hear unheard voice of Arthur Miller who tells us although effects of past on present is inevitable, in the ever changing world we can cherish good memories and values of the past, but nourish the present and go forward with the tic-tac of time, to avoid being suffocated in the ever flowing flood of time which never stops for us. (p. 30)

At the end of the play Joe commits suicide, because he finds himself discarded just because he dares to see the world differently. He kills himself not because of carrying the burden of guilt or shame, but because he cannot not find any reasons to live among those strangers. The case with Chris is different, whenever he gives a flashback to his war time period he finds the present world as the refugee camp of the criminals, and this gives him a sense of guilt and inevitably leads him to the hellish world of his lost ever-fixed beliefs.

If we want to have a peaceful world, we must respect others' rights and accept others as they are and the way they are, and above all we have to respect the changes, which take place with the passage of time, and indeed these changes can be called as legitimate truth.

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