Family versus Society: Collective individuality submerged into individual’s identity in Arthur Miller’s play *All my Sons*

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Abstract

Completed and first performed in 1947, winner of the New York Drama Critics Award for the best play, *All My Sons* launched Arthur Miller’s long and distinguished career in the theatre. “While few would argue that it is Miller’s best or most important play, no one would dispute the fact that *All My Sons* deserves a special space in the playwright’s canon because it constitutes his first major theatrical achievement, displays his extraordinary skill in handling dramatic form, and presages even better things yet to come from one of America’s greatest dramatists” (Bigsby 2010, 51). This paper focuses in the analysis and interpretation of the complex relationship of collective individuality toward separate individual’s identity. The research focuses in the main character of the play, Joe Keller and the values he transmits as an individual character, as a representative of the business community and as a father. The paper focus on how an individual can be the presentation or the representative of the rotted society’s conscience.

Key words: Individualism, identity, values, alienation, social context.

I. Introduction

Central to each of us and yet ambiguous in its form and composition, identity is perhaps one of the most complex and contradictory concepts studied by social scientists. It exists between a constant pull of opposing forces. It is both singular and plural, real and imagined individual and collective, defined by sameness and by difference. Perhaps identity’s ambiguity derives from the fact that it does not simply exist, but is instead continually formed and reformed, created and shaped by the discourse of the individual and those around them. Because of the dialectical nature of identity, it is fundamentally individualistic and pluralistic. (Taylor 1994: 25-35)

Miller seems to be in tune with Taylor’s idea about identity and he asserts in his essay “The Family in the Modern Drama” that no play that ignores social context can achieve what he considers to be the goal and justification of drama because as he insists it must be “obvious to any intelligence […] the fate of mankind is social.”(Miller 1965: p. 230). Miller also argues that “the force of pressure that makes for realism, that even requires it, is the magnetic force of the family relation within the play, and the pressure which evolves in a genuine, unforced way the unrealistic modes is the social relation within the play.” (Miller 1965, 221)

The family is always seen as an inseparable part of the society, as it incarnates its values and traditions, its past and predicts the future. It is seen as miniature of the society. When the context is the WWII, one of the most destructive wars that the world has ever known, the situation is complicated; the reality is tarnished with the omnipresent and omnipotent feeling of alienation toward society which barely reflects the reality of the families. Guilt, responsibility and alienation influence people’s behavior and transform our personality, our relationship with other people, of their lives and ambitions.

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Though the family is seen “as an agent as well as a victim of social dislocation and a disabling privatism, it is not the root cause of moral decay” (Bigsby 1982, 155). In All My Son Miller suggests that the family is simply a microcosm of a wider community to which ultimate loyalty is owed, but he seems to remain convinced that it is a primary expression of human responsibilities, a necessary model for personal and social values.

It seems that Miller’s thematic and philosophical intention is to draw us in two opposite directions in All My Sons, to dramatize the polar conflict between the familial and the social and to present the collective identity within the personal identity. In Miller’s play the foreground the Keller family occupies is too large, so large as to obliterate any other context which might or should be behind or around it.

2.1 All My Sons

“All My Sons is about a man who places survival above value, self above the group, pragmatism above the ideal, loyalty to family above responsibility to society. It is also however, about loss, loss of a sense of common humanity.” (Bigsby 2005, 80)

All My Sons is ostensibly a play about morality. On the surface, it is an extension of earlier themes. It is an assertion of the need for the individual to accept full responsibility for his social action, to acknowledge the reality of a world in which the idea of brotherhood is an active principle rather than a simple piety. It is an assault on a materialism which is seen as being at odds with human values, on a capitalist drive for profits which is inimical to human life and society.

Indeed, Joe Keller defends himself by insisting that his own values are those of the world in which he moves. As he asks rhetorically, “Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nothing, I’ll work for nothing. . . Half the goddamn country is gotta go if I go” (Sons: 53). And his son, Chris, is forced to acknowledge: “This is the land of the great big dogs, you don’t love a man here you eat him! That’s the principle; the only one we live by – it just happened to kill a few people this time, that’s all. The world’s that way, how can I take it out on him?” (Sons: 54). However, he still continuous to press his demand of the ideal father, until his father can no longer live with his guilt and his suddenly intensified sense of loneliness. This is the basis of the play’s submerged theme – a concern with guilt as a principal mechanism of human behaviour, and with self-interest as a spectre behind the mask of idealism.

However, while this bare-bone synopsis is essentially accurate, it does in fact do violence the complexity of the play which operates “on three levels of significance: the cosmic, the social, and the psychological” (Carson 1982: 40). In his well-known essay “Tragedy and the Common man” Miller comments:

…..our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric, or purely sociological . . . From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither of these presents a balanced concept of life.
What is reflected here is Miller’s careful avoidance of the “purely” this or that, implying that no satisfactory understanding of Miller’s play may be derived form a criticism which commits itself to a “purely” view. The sociological view is particularly limiting in that it carries with the temptation to approach the dramatic action from the level of broad socio-cultural generalisation and consequently to oversimplify characters and action. (Martine 1979: 5)

Actually, like most of Miller’s plays, *All My Sons* demands of the reader an awareness of the deceitfulness of human motivation, an understanding of the human’s obscure nature. “Nowhere is it suggested that the social realities and attitudes that are bought within the critical focus of the play can be considered outside of some such context of human aspirations and weaknesses as is provided by the play; and nowhere is it suggested that the characters are or can be judged strictly on the basis of some simple ethic or ideal that might be deduced from the action.” (Boggs. 1961: 555-60)

The characters do not simply reflect the values and the attitudes of a particular society; they use those values and attitudes in their attempt to realize themselves. And it is these characters that give *All My Sons*, and other Miller’s plays, a density of texture so much greater than that of the typical social thesis play, which seeks not only to direct but to facilitate ethical judgements upon matters of topical importance. (Boggs. 1961: 555-60)

In Miller, the moment of awareness is always preparation for a moment of choice (Carson 1982; 40). According to Miller the central theme of this play is “the question of actions and consequences, and a way had to be found to throw a long line into the past in order to make that kind of connection viable” (Connected Plays, p. 20).

However, the success of the play lies in the complexity of ideas it transmits and especially in “Miller’s ability to capture the spirit and rhythm of a life not easily reducible to terse summery in a single assertion. In fact, […] despite its traditional form and adherence to the conventions of the realistic theatre, *All My Sons* resonates with ambiguity from the opening curtain to its powerful climatic close.” (Bigsby 2010: 53)

The play in its entirety makes clear that Joe Keller has committed his crimes not out of cowardice or pure self-interest, but out of limited values:

Like many uneducated, self-made men, he has no capacity for abstract considerations; whatever is not personal or at least immediate has no reality for him. He had the peasant’s insular loyalty to family which excludes more generalized responsibilities to society at large or to mankind in general. At the moment of decision, when his business seemed threatened, the question for him is not of profit or loss, but was a conflict of responsibilities - his responsibilities toward his family, particularly his sons to whom the business was to be a legacy of security and joy, versus his responsibility to the unknown men engaged in […] war. (Martine 1979, 6)

Believing that the family is the most important thing and what is done in the name of the family has its own justification, he acted dishonestly by causing the death of his son Larry and twenty-two pilots in Australia.

What is revealed in the Act I and II is Kate’s superficiality and rejection to accept her son’s death. Convinced at the beginning of the play that “God does not let a son be killed by his father” she
deliberately blinds herself to what she does not want to accept by revealing that she is fundamentally like her husband “only what is personal or immediate is real for her. If Larry is alive the war has no reality, and Joe’s crimes do not mean anything, their consequences are merely distant echoes in an unreal world. But if Larry is dead, then the war is real, and Joe is guilty of murder and by an act of association, guilty of murdering his own son” (Martine 1979: 7).

Her own desperate need to reject Larry’s death is a desperate hope that reflexes her need to defend her relationship with her husband. Nevertheless, what is typical of Miller’s women’s characters is their blind commitment toward their husbands. Kate, like Linda in Death of a Salesman, has an unalterable dedication toward her husband that no knowledge about him can destroy, even that of killing his own son.

Kate desperately announces that: “Everything that happened seems to be coming back” (Sons: 104). And she is right “the circumstance of the play and its dialectic, as present interrogates the past and the past infiltrates the present” make it possible that in “All My Sons the clock is started again and as a result the characters are forced to acknowledge the implacability of time and the power of causality” (Bigsby 2005: 81). They all live in the terror of the consequences of the past actions and the inability to move further which implies accepting the wrong deed and Larry’s death.

As Bigsby points out these are people who have an image of themselves which is at odd with the reality of their lives (Bigsby 2005: 81). Especially this conflict is more obvious in Chris Keller. “Chris’ is the conflict between who and what he is and who and what he wants to be, or thinks he ought to be.”(Martine 1979: 12) Chris has brought out of the war an idealistic morality of brotherhood based on what he has seen of mutual self-sacrifice among the men: “one new thing was made. A kind of – responsibility. Man for man”. However he has not survived the war unwounded; he bears a psychological wound, a sense of inadequacy and guilt. He has survived to enjoy the fruits of a wartime economy, and he fears that in enjoying them he becomes unworthy of their sacrifice. Even his love for Ann Deever, the sweetheart of his dead brother, has seemed to him a guilty desire to take advantage of the dead to whom he somehow owes his life. “When Chris Keller, who has been a “killer” in the war, (weeps when he discovers that his father is not the god he thought), we must conclude that he is responding to some private drama unwinding inside him rather than to the revelation of his father’s guilt.” (Martine 1979: 13)

At the rise of the curtain in Act II, Chris is seen dragging away the remains of Larry’s memorial tree. The action is clearly symbolic; Chris because of his own needs has determined to free the family of the shadow of self-deception and guilt cast over it by the memory of Larry, to let in the light of truth. However, when the truth comes out Chris is less able to bear it than the others because he must maintain an ideal image of himself or else be overwhelmed by his own sense of guilt. In insisting that his father must go to prison, Chris is, in effect, asking him to give him back his self-respect. Chris’s inability to accept his father “as a man” leads Joe to believe that his life is gone in vain and so was his sacrifice and kills himself.

Conclusion

All My Sons leaves a dual impression: the action affirms the theme of the individual’s responsibility to humanity, it also demonstrate how a small man like Joe Keller can be an emblematic figure and a representative of the moral corruption and decadence of his time, but at the same time, it suggests that rigid idealism operating in the real world causes suffering and waste. There is no simple opposition here between those who know are right and those who are wrong, between those who possess the truth and those who have failed to grasp it, between the spiritually well and the spiritually sick. (Read Wiegand: 1957) Moreover the corruption and destruction of a man like Joe Keller, who is struggling to preserve what he conceives to be a just evaluation of himself in the eyes of his sons and his
neighbours, implies, in the context of the play, a deficiency not only in Keller’s character but in the social environment in which he exists, the World War II which drove a wedge between those who fought and those who stayed at home.

Keller’s appeal to the ethics of the business community:

*If my money’s dirty there ain’t a clean nickel in the United States. Who worked for nothin’ in that war? . . . Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got the price? It’s dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace; it’s nickels and dimes, what’s clean?* (Sons: 125)

-does not justify his action, yet it is a reflection of that community, it seems that collective identity is submerged in the personal identity of Joe Keller, as it indicates that the community failed to provide any substantial values which might have supplemented and balanced American business at that time. Furthermore, Kate’s words, “*We were all struck by the same lightening.*” are true, the lightening was the experience of the Second World War, a massive social change and spiritual corruption in which they were all involved and definitely transformed.

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