

An Overview of Arthur Miller's Play All My Sons and Locating Aspects Concerning Capitalist Failure

Farooq Shah*

Muhammad Altaf†

Saddam UI Islam‡

Abstract *This paper aims at exploring the mentality of the people which was shaped by the capitalist doctrine and how this mental state led the characters to take reckless and unethical decisions. The Marxist analysis is used to unravel multiple motivations and reasons behind those decisions, so basically, this study owes a debt to Karl Marx's class struggle and identification. The attitudes of the people are observed and looked at carefully through the Marxist lens, and the impact and failure of capitalism are identified. This research is organized on the basis of sharp textual and interpretative analysis of the text All My Sons by Arthur Miller under the umbrella of qualitative research method and the curious quest of the research questions besides the objectives to be explored under the lens of Marxist concepts; Class Conflict, Oppression, Exploitation and Commodification. The paper reveals how class conflict leads to the oppression of the masses.*

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Introduction

Since the very beginning, there have been different systems of trade and money distribution. At first, it was the exchange of goods or food for work done, known as the barter system ([Wikipedia, n.d.](#)). But later, this system started to evolve, and with the invention of money, the trading system experienced a sudden change. People started to be paid in the form of coins or notes for their services. Later, the mechanization and modernization of factories and the manufacturing processes led to Industrial Revolution, and it gave birth to two opposing economic systems, i.e. Capitalism and Socialism. Capitalism cannot be described in a single sentence, but for our purpose, we will describe it as "a system in which there is private

ownership, and there is competition". It means that anybody can own property or make a company or whatever they wish for. It is more inclined towards individualism ([Mahmud, n.d.](#)). Everybody races against each other to take their business to a higher level. Often, it leads to some unfair means as well. It is very unlike socialism which is a system where property or factories are owned by the state and the wages are determined by supply and demand and competition. In this system, a person may invest his capita while others will invest in the form of services they provide, but the economy is centrally controlled by the state ([Dagger, n.d.](#))

As described above, it is an economic system that allows for private ownership (as opposed to socialism), and there is an urge to

* Lecturer in English Literature, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan. Email: farooq@awkum.edu.pk

† Subject Specialist In English, Elementary And Secondary Education Department, KP, Pakistan.

‡ M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

produce more profit and, thereby, wealth. In such a system, people invest in a business to produce a product that is sold to different masses for more than what it costs.

Arthur Miller wrote *All My Sons* in 1946, immediately following World War II. It is based on a real-life incident involving the Wright Aeronautical Corporation, which colluded with army inspection officials to accept faulty aircraft engines for military aircraft, leading to the loss of about 27 aircraft and the fatalities of pilots. However, Joe Keller in the play is a successful businessman, married to Kate, and they are living in a comfortable house along with their son, Chris. But they have only one morose in their lives, and that is the loss of their other son, Larry. He went missing in WWII, but deep down, they all know that he had met a crash and is dead. But Kate still clings to the hope that one day her son will return (Miller, 2015). Anyhow, Chris and his father one day engage in a dialogue; there, Joe confesses to the faulty engines he had sent to the military, and it becomes clear that Larry was piloting one of those 27 aircraft with the faulty engines which cost him his life. Chris blames his father for his brother's death, and in the end, Joe shoots himself, possibly out of guilt.

It is an acknowledged truth that greed leads to reckless and immoral decisions, we all have witnessed it at some point in our lives. Often news stories reveal immoral, unethical, and lawless actions were taken by people and corporations just to satiate their greed. Greed can be anything, from money to getting admission somewhere. Reinhold Niebuhr once said that it is greed and people wanting more and more than what they need, which leads to anxiety and depression. The biggest drawback of greed is losing one's peace of mind. It leads to jealousy, selfishness, anger, and unhealthy competition. People indulge in unlawful activities, which as a result, are detrimental not only to their own health and peace of mind but to their families as well.

German intellectual Karl Marx (1818–1833) and German humanist Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) introduced the concept of Marxism (TEAM, 2021). Marxism is a realist school of thought; as such, it makes an effort to explain things without acknowledging the existence of a world or a past distinct from our own and the people we interact with on a daily basis. It looks for specific, logical, and cogent explanations of

the realm of visible truth. (Its opposite is idealistic philosophy, which places emphasis on the existence of an extraterrestrial "world somewhere else" and would provide, for instance, strict and direct definitions of life.) Yet, though different methods of reasoning simply look to comprehend the world, Marxism (as Marx broadly said) tries to transform it. (Barry, 2002). Marxism is a free term utilized for depicting Marxist artistic hypotheses. Marxism manages the financial aspects of society that created the work or the real monetary factors in the work itself. It accepts that any writing is a result of the general public, and the financial status of the general public will decide the topics of the work, sorts of characters and different components in abstract work. Notwithstanding being the core value behind most scholarly works in Soviet Russia, Marxism additionally significantly impacted numerous Western authors. Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Bertold Brecht were profoundly impacted by Marxist and communist hypotheses of the day, and quite a bit of this kind of reflection is obvious in their works of the time. (Wikipedia contributors, 2020)

One of the principal worries of Marxism is the misuse of the common labourers by the ruling class or of the proletariat by the bourgeois. In basic words, misuse is the activity of treating somebody unjustifiably to profit from their work. The hypothesis of misuse is one of the persuasive speculations which expresses that labourers in an entrepreneur society are abused to the degree that they sell their work capacity to the industrialist for not exactly the full estimation of the products they produce. The hypothesis of misuse holds that the specialist works throughout the day and is paid just a large portion of the cash he merits. Along these lines, the specialist works a large portion of the day to win bread for himself and his family and a large portion of the day to additionally reinforce the industrialists (TEAM, 2021). The specialist is paid distinctly as much as he needs to take care of his family and thus help develop more labourers in the type of his youngsters for misuse later on.

Dr Marie Fernandes, in her paper, describes the situation of *All My Sons* play as economically depressive, and people were expecting—especially soldiers—solidarity after wartime. But they all were disappointed after seeing people inculcated with the greed for materialism

([Fernandes, n.d.](#)). He states that in such times, people are expected to be patriotic and show their loyalty and love for the country, but ironically, Joe Keller, who was supposed to be supporting the cause of the American Air Force and supplying them with the best quality cylinders, instead worked against them, by supplying them with faulty cylinders. In this case, it was not the outside enemy that was to be feared but the people within the country, the imposters who were driven by materialism. Family is like a small microcosm, while a country is like a big macrocosm. In this case, Joe Keller sacrificed the bigger macrocosm for the smaller microcosm, and ironically, his only son rejects to inherit his father's property, money and factory.

Alaeddin Nahvi pinpoints that Joe Keller has worked very hard and independently to take his company to such heights, and failing to deliver those cylinder heads on time could have cost him his hard work of all those years. He further says that when America entered into a state of war, production of arms was encouraged, and the prime goal was how much and how soon a company could produce the required arms and essentials of the war. As it was the time after the great depression so, people were inclined towards materialism and making money. So, they were in harsh competition. The situation of war in the field had changed Chris' idea of society, he had seen soldiers sacrificing themselves for each other. But the situation in his home town was very much different; people were selfish and running after material things. In a way, Chris had become unrealistic, and as a result, he could not keep up with his father, who was a realist. He concludes that the actions done by Joe Keller are because of money. He applied it to all Americans and concluded that the American dream creates false hopes and prevents people from being proud of what they have ([Nahvi, 2015](#)).

In their essay, Noorbakhsh Hootie and Farzaneh Azizpour point out that Joe Keller's business is the only aspect of the outside world that he interacts with, and as a result, it serves as a mirror for the ideals of the outside world. Business is a world without human values; it exists just to make money, benefit others, and make more money. Miller, therefore, blames the consumer society and the commercial world for Joe Keller's degrading actions. Joe Keller's problem, in a nutshell, is not that he cannot distinguish right from wrong, according to

Miller's Collected Plays, but rather that his mind refuses to acknowledge that he personally has any meaningful connection to his environment, his cosmos, or his civilization ([Hooti & Habibi, 2011](#)). They argue that sending defective cylinder heads to American Air Force does not make Joe Keller a villainous character. In fact, he did so to save his business which provides for his family and secure the future of his son in a materialistic society. It is the last remedy for a man's failure to understand the terms of the social contract. He says that the pressure Joe Keller was under is intangible, and as a matter of fact, we might have collapsed too. After all, as Miller puts it, humans are "vulnerable". *All my sons* dramatize the situation in which personal motives are in conflict with those of conventional societal norms. People are forced to put on a false front by society because they would otherwise not be accepted as members of it. Joe Keller makes desperate choices and performs a heinous crime in an effort to fit in with society, but in the process, he grows far from himself. The study concludes by asserting that the only way for man to find relief is to free himself from the constraints of legitimated modern views and embrace the postmodern world, leaving all the fossilised prejudices and fanaticism behind, which have always been the factors that slow down progress.

The purpose of Sayeed Ahmed's essay is to identify the divergent moral principles held by various people when it comes to subjects like family and country. Truslow Adams defined the dream as "the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for everybody according to aptitude or achievement" in his book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931. However, it was misconstrued after WWII, which caused a deterioration in moral and ethical standards in people and consequently filled them with greed.

A similar thing happened in the case of "capitalism," which attempted to improve and develop people in accordance with their aptitudes. However, at some point, they were taken away from the principles and ethics they held due to misuse, misunderstanding, and theft. "Through the character of Joe Keller, Miller castigates the ideology of the older generation in general, especially of Capitalism and of the American Dream," writes Ahmed in conclusion

to his essay. These harmful ideas are well known to Chris himself. He responds to his father in a direct manner. I realise you're not any worse than most males, but I mistakenly believed you were superior (Miller 87). Chris was unable to accept that his father could do anything other than good because of the strong morals he was born with. But as he realises his father is guilty at the play's conclusion, his idealism and moral outrage are very apparent. The strong bond between them is then severed. Joe Keller believes he has done nothing wrong; thus, he feels neither guilt nor regret. He is aware that the war has largely or completely drawn his native people away from nationalism and patriotism. They drool over material and materialistic things and believe that the majority of Americans just seek happiness in things. To them, anything that appears humanitarian may be exchanged for cash. If the figurative and personified Frankenstein of the misuse of the American Dream, Capitalism, or Individualism cannot be halted, civilization will always suffer in the days to come. People are becoming very glued to material needs and gain, and they crave it like anything ([Ahmed, 2019](#)).

Abrams 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." (Abram, 1999, p.149). So, the same can be said about *All My Sons* that it is not just a play but presents to us the then struggle of society to achieve the American Dream and the extent to which they could go, leaving behind morality and ethics. It can be said that Joe Keller in the play represents the economic system of Capitalism, Chris is the embodiment of morality, and Jim Bayliss is the symbol of the working class. Marx 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." (Marx, 1990, p.82). Many Marxists like Karl Marx, believe that history has been nothing but the exploitation of poor people and the middle class by the upper class, and they blame capitalism for this exploitation. Arthur Miller's play is also based on this belief and portrays the wickedness of the upper class of American society. This play is not only relatable to the times of war, but it can be related to today's era, and it perfectly converges with it. Miller pinpoints the

shortcoming of capitalism which allows a handful of few people to have control over all the resources and wealth while the poor suffer to earn meals three times a day. Zinn also says that it is capitalism that deprives the poor of their rights and paves the way for the upper class to injustice and exploitation. This defect of individualism of capitalism, where everyone is given the opportunity to earn more and more, no matter the ways and the consequences, allowed Joe Keller to send those 21 defective heads to the Air Force and make some fortune for himself. Joe Keller addresses Chris, saying;

"I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; the process doesn't work, you're out of business" ([Miller, p.71](#))

It unravels the decision he had taken; he sent those heads to save his business; otherwise, he would have lost everything he had been building for 40 years. It was the fear of losing business that made him take that rash decision. But most importantly, this fear of losing money is inculcated in our minds by the economic system, which from the very first day, teaches us to earn more and more, and thus, only then could one make a decent living and earn a name for himself. The defect does not lie in Joe Keller, rather, it lies in the system; the system in which he is born and doing business. This dialogue also reveals Joe Keller as being a member of the upper class who, through his wrong-doing, took the lives of 21 pilots.

Capitalism possesses many characteristics, and most of those appear in the play. One of the characteristics of capitalism is oppression ([Zucchi, 2021](#)). There is a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed. Charlton points out that "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." (Charlton, 1998, p.8). Seldom can a person be seen oppressed by the same class; as in the case of Steve, Joe denies the responsibility of sending faulty head cylinders to the Air Force and thus, exonerates himself, but Steve is imprisoned for his doings. But this does not mean that Joe will no longer feel conscious or guilty for his doing; instead, he is haunted by the guilt and

the probability of killing his own son Larry, which makes it even harder for him. Joe says;

"You want her to go on like this? [To Ann] those cylinder heads went into P-40s only. What's the matter with you? You know Larry never flew a P-40" ([Miller, p.32](#))

Joe seems to convince himself not to have killed his own son rather than Chris and Ann. He is haunted by the thought of killing his own son and can't stand the thought. This firmness of belief can only shroud the truth and not change it. The truth remains the truth, and it is that Joe is responsible for the death of his son, along with 20 other pilots.

Eagleton indicates that "Marxist criticism is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*. It is part of our liberation from oppression." (Eagleton, 1976, p.76). The aim of Marxist criticism is to liberate people from oppression and persecution. Joe Keller is also a member of the same society as other people, but what makes him different from the rest is the struggle and conflict between the upper and middle class. The process of keeping himself apart from the rest of the herd costs him his identity, his son and peace of mind. The imbalance between the upper and middle classes leads him to his destiny.

The second characteristic of capitalism is 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", says Tilly. (Tilly, 1999, p.128). A similar situation can be seen in the play; for instance, American Air Force has exploited Joe's days of youth, he had been working for them for 40 years, and if he had failed to deliver that order, they might have thrown him like he was nothing. The fundamental motto of capitalism is that if you work hard, you will earn more, but despite having worked hard for 40 years, untimely delivery could have cost Joe his 40 years of hard work. So, to evade collapsing of his business and company, he opted for unfair means. Another irony of the capitalist system is that the working class stay poor, despite working hard, but the thieves, traffickers and robbers make more money than the hard-working class. Capitalism makes one believe that money is everything and one cannot live without money, in

the process, one loses his true self and identity and thus his existence is endangered.

Another characteristic of capitalism is that people are treated as objects and seen as a source of money. In this regard, Parker says, "People themselves are commodified, valued not as people but instead as numbers, statistics, and cogs in an abstract economic machine." (Parker, 2008, p.193). This thinking causes the lives of 21 pilots and the destruction of two families. It makes them lose their human side which happens in the case of Joe Keller. There is another concept of Marxists, called interpellation. Ibid defines it as, "the process of being passive, unconsciously drawn into dominant social assumption". It means the subtle internal forces which attracts one to follow and lead a bogus life, without knowing. In order to make gratify his wife and son's desires, he has to make more money, no matter the means. Furthermore, he thinks that he can hide his crime behind money and people would fail to see it. It does happen in the play, for instance;

"Keller: Don't listen to her. Every Saturday night the whole gang is playing poker in this arbor. All the ones yelled murderer takin' my money now" ([Miller, p.30](#))

It demonstrates the greed-driven nature of humans. The whole neighbor knew of his crime, but they stayed quiet and instead, came to his house, played poker and borrowed money and different things. This system has made humans hollow and has taken humanity from them. It alone is responsible for all the unethical and immoral deeds of humans.

Joe is also a victim of the American Dream. Before going to relate it with Joe Keller, this term needs some clarification. The term American Dream has two variants. Back in the days when it was originated, it conveyed that spirituality and morality lead to a complacent and happy life, but with the passage of time, people changed that spirituality and morality with money. So, for today's generation, it means that money leads to a complacent and happy life which indeed is a high misconception. Joe Keller became a victim of the latter concept of the American Dream and he believed that making more money would bring him complacency and happiness. But the opposite happened; he lost his son, destructed his family and in the end, lost his life. Miller is trying to say through the play that success is not

how much you earn through cheating or unfair means, rather it is how you behave. Through the character of Joe, Miller delivers the message of manipulating the nature of capitalism.

Conclusion

The exploration of the play *All My Sons* through the lens of Marxism has been the main aim of this dissertation. The research explores various characters of the play to understand the capitalist failure as portrayed in the play. The analysis shows that all the characters find themselves in a society that is governed by the capitalistic mindset where everyone is in love with money. Joe Keller, the main character of the play, is so much obsessed with money that in order to elevate his business he sells 21 defective cylinder heads to the American Air Force, which leads to the death of 21 pilots, including his son. The play is a tale of oppression where the upper class like Joe Keller exploits and make the lower class like Steve Deever, suffer for his own benefit. The Lower class is exploited by the upper class and

the people are treated as commodities. The upper class sell the people for money and they are deprived of their lives for money as the lives of the 21 pilots are taken only for the sake of business and mundane success.

This demonstrates that the play is portraying a society much like ours, where the mindset of the people is shaped by capitalism (individualism). These people are in love with money and the system encourages them to abide by that mindset. This shows that in the capitalist society the class conflict and love for power and money will lead to oppression and commodification. This implies the failure of the capitalist doctrine from multiple angles.

The book is rich and multiple themes are embedded in the plot which is the reason that this play can be studied from multiple dimensions as Feminism, Existentialism, and Postmodernism. The style of the play is so magnificent that it leaves a lot of areas open for stylistic analysis of the play.

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