

Ethical Responsibility in a Modernist Universe: America in the Canvas of Miller's *All My Sons*

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Abstract:

In an interview with Enoch Brater in the University of Michigan, Arthur Miller emphasized the significance of the Depression of the 1920's on all playwrights of his generation. In one of his plays, namely, *All My Sons*, this re-emerges as an important theme, albeit implicitly. Focussing on the lives of a middle-class American household, Miller essays to show how politics in the realm of the public sphere happens to influence decisions that have tremendous emotional consequences in the private lives of all members. I attempt to show that this focus on the family as a space of theatricality is undertaken with a view to exposing the inextricable associations that exist between the two aforesaid spheres of life, and which conspicuously is left unidentified by the characters. The play makes it evident that the hidden presence of this issue is itself the principal cause of tragedy. In fact Miller himself in his well-known article entitled 'Tragedy and the Common Man' attributed the idea of self-persistence in an extremely uncontrollable universe to the idea of tragedy in modern times, and the idea of semblance of private autonomy (which no character in the play is bereft of) as mentioned above squares in perfectly well with this. In attempting to demonstrate the consequences of the inability to locate this nexus between the public and the private, I have undertaken to show how each character is, in the last instance, 'interpellated' by the ethos of a social discourse that ultimately puts into question their autonomy further, thereby identifying this 'hidden presence' as critics have spoken of vis-à-vis the play and its symbolic implications.

Keywords: Other, public, private, capitalist, modernism, American Dream.

"Do I dare disturb the universe?"

-T.S. Eliot (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)

In an age fraught with wars, nuclear proliferations, and , most importantly, severe political tensions, the documentation of individual agency and subjectivity is usually smothered by macro-narratives of nationhood, international diplomacy, and so on and so forth. The domain of literature, however , leaves room enough (as Miller demonstrates) for the depiction of the impact of the socio-economic environment upon the individual- his/her agency. This involves a substantial critique of liberalism (or neo-liberalism) or, even, capitalism and the ethical concerns along the same lines (as one finds in the works of another influential thinker at an earlier period- John Ruskin) but is conspicuous in its depiction of the ambiguities involved in an attempt to resolve the dilemma. Speaking of capitalism and its corresponding social representation, the nineteenth-century is another historical moment that

addresses the issue given the proliferation of the social-realist novels in England and Frederick Jameson's identification of it as the cultural logic of the initial stages of capitalist production. A nineteenth-century social treatise like Ruskin's *Unto This Last* also attempts to depict the underlying ethical problems of the capitalist world order with its semblance of individual *qua* private autonomy but the text in concern differs from these antecedents in its silence over any resolution that tries to redress these gaps. This, as I would like to show, is so because of the differences in the socio-economic and political milieu that the two authors inherit- one writing in the 19th century at the time of the rudimentary developments in the exchange of global capital, and the other in an epoch following the Depression and witnessing initial advancements in the same sector. In other words, it might be said that Miller's ambiguity stems from a perception of the very circumstances that had thrown an open challenge to the liberal claims of modernity, reinforcing what Ricoeur calls a 'hermeneutics of scepticism'. As Bruce J. Mann shows, there is an acknowledgement in Miller of an 'unseen presence' in life- its aspects that cannot be fully rationalized but must be conceded. It is scepticism itself that implicates the playwright as well in the maze of ambivalence we associate with the characters in the play.

All My Sons is a play centred on the lives of members of the Keller household, a well-established American family in the post-war period. The loss the family has suffered through the demise of their son, Larry in the war has inevitably left its mark upon all the other members, who ultimately are placed in their own subject-positions in hinting upon ways to deal with this loss. Thus while Larry's mother has to constantly make-believe that Larry is going to return, Chris, and the others do not seem to react as profoundly to this as she does. However each pursues his or her own agenda going to the extent of even imposing it upon the other even with respect to their dealing with the aforesaid incident. Ironically, this vigorous and unrestrained exercise of individuality leads to further tragic actions culminating into the suicide of Joe Keller, and the 'hidden presence', namely the unwillingness to acknowledge social ethics in the pursuit of individual subjectivity looms large over the horizon contributing both to the death of Larry as well as to the Joe's suicide. Thus the deceptive ramifications of the agenda of individualism is made evident and clear, and with it the ultimate uncertainty of all judgements with respect to the Other.

The most blatant instance of deception occurring as a trope in the play is found in the description of the setting with which the play begins. The rich and affluent Keller household, living in the 'August of our era', appears to be adorned with opulent paraphernalia. This affluence, however, fails to conceal the tensions and anxieties running deep within the family. The 'unseen presence' is objectively rendered as the broken apple-tree with its branches lopped off (and therefore the 'absent' apple-tree). The apparently negligible element in the setting bears out the problem whose depiction is central to the play. Given that the horrors of the Depression had remained deeply etched in Miller's memory (as his interview with Enoch Brater at the University of Michigan suggests), the aforesaid trope is both a visual and narrative rendition of its occurrence. The economic meltdown, preceded by the merry epoch of jazz, had almost struck at the heart of a system that was ill-prepared to presage the catastrophe. Along these lines, the self-assured Joe Keller who needs none to rectify his sense of the lack of 'profitability' of newspaper reports (and who is therefore interested only in the 'ads') has no inkling whatsoever of the dilemma due to unfold later. The complete ignorance of social responsibility evident in the act does not ruin his 'profits' as a businessman but does lead to the 'loss' of his son, and, in connection with a larger string of events, his life. This is a world of vacillating perspectives- a world where there can be no easy dismantling of the associative relationship between the public and private spheres. The inability to acknowledge this complexity is what comprises the tragic façade of every character in the play.

Chris, Keller's elder son, has no qualms, as we notice in the very first Act, over the acceptance of the fact that their social situation owes itself to Keller's 'whole shootin' match' (Act One). There is however a change in attitude in Act Two when, being on the threshold of conviction about his father's 'guilt', he says:

For me-I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you

Did it for me?(Act Two)

The only problem noticeable in such a change is that Chris's behaviour displays a stark neglect of self-reflexivity. If he did bother to be self-reflexive, he could have discerned the root of the evil in a system (public) where private achievements and failures are only measured in terms of a certain idea of economic progress. In this respect, it is important to recall John Ruskin's idea of individual responsibility in an age of burgeoning industrialization because it pre-supposes his observation of the self-centred approach towards all enterprises in such a social context- an approach that accounts for Chris's readiness to absolve himself of blame and distance himself from the very idea of introspection to trace his own complicity with the dominant discourse of success. His advice to the merchant (the most important professional in such an age) regarding his "due service", and his acknowledgement of the responsibilities owed by the owner of the means of production to his employees and vice-versa, show a rather unbiased take on the pursuit of ethics in a world of increasing mechanization. One does notice a similar causal relationship between the public social order and private dispositions in *All My Sons*. The only difference between the two texts is that while Ruskin's work is prescriptive in nature (it does not stop at the identification of the problem), *All My Sons* makes no such optimistic attempt, putatively owing to its own 'momente', as Taine puts it. Miller is pitted against historical precedents which drive home the idea of the ultimate fallibility of the assertion of progress as the true end of modernity (one can recall Comte here) , and which show how the latter is entrapped in its own paradox, revealing itself sometimes as the Great Wars, sometimes as the Depression, or at other times as Auschwitz.

This is evident in the concluding part of the play. Although critics have commented on the sense of resolution that it imparts, one must take this assertion with a pinch of salt. All instances in the play which show a possibility of reconciliation (of polarities) are marred by the lack of consistent co-operation on the part of any one of the characters. One such instance is to be found in the second Act, when Frank arrives with Larry's horoscope at the Keller home. Chris's noble attempt to persuade Frank to choose a 'better time' for revealing the same shows his ethical responsibility to his mother. However, Frank's interest in the disclosure of the 'truth' takes no account of the impact it could have on the family. Similarly, in the last Act we witness Chris lamenting and being stopped short of making a putative equivocation by Kate, and the ending remains open-ended. The concluding gesture lays out the possibility of a new series of events (Chris does not respond at all and we cannot tell if he will begin equivocating later). Perhaps the most important reason for the absence of any definite solution to the 'problem' is the fact that no character in the play is a prototype of the spectacularly good and benevolent hero. Each faces his or her own moment of duplicity. Even Anne, for that matter, whom critics like Patricia Dennison eulogise as one who comprehends her own ethical responsibilities and can rise above her interests, cannot actually let go of her will to assert her individualism completely. Her desperate attempt to convince Kate that Larry is no more perhaps harbours a good intention but she fails to realize that such a revelation (which is being almost forced upon her) might shatter her mental stability once and for all. Given Chris's response to his brother's death, it is also not easy to ignore the suggestion that the event might just have opened up a possibility for the two of them to satisfy their long-cherished desire. Anne fails to grasp the perspective and approach of Kate to her son's demise only because she does not even

essay to look upon the event from a mother's point of view. Even Kate, for her part, is complicit with the very ethos of self-interest that the text attempts to demonstrate. Her presumption that Anny's sympathy for her father will override all other considerations, and could therefore strain the relationship between Chris and her is undoubtedly pragmatic but exposes itself to its own ideological substrate. The individualistic presupposition of the interest of the family, taking precedence over her concern for justice (standing therefore in contradistinction with the Abrahamic act of sacrifice) is what dominates the entire text and no one actually stands outside its influence. The interpellatory purpose of the notion is therefore fulfilled and reinforced by the fact (as mentioned earlier) that critique of individual behaviour by the characters do not account for the inextricable relationship between the public and the private. Mike Sells' contention that that 'All My Sons' is a play that deals with 'jurisprudence' therefore needs to be extended further to suggest that justice rests on the right choice of criticism and no one in the text manages to deliver it completely with success. Kate, on suggesting that she could have no arguments with George because 'they all got hit by the same lightning' establishes a somewhat parochial basis for the show of sympathy. She completely ignores her responsibility towards those who have been left unaffected by the crisis. The intrinsically self-interested nature of the claim shows how tainted it really is, and how it conforms to the ideas professed by a socio-economic system that insists on the determination of success on the basis of economic prosperity and status. Although Ruskin admits that the one point he has tried to bring home in his works is the 'impossibility of Equality' and the 'eternal superiority of some men to others', he also speaks of the necessity of enabling such men 'to guide, to lead, ... according to their own better knowledge and will'. Needless to say, a system such as his, would presuppose the acknowledgement of ethical responsibility of one to the other and is, in fact, the very reason for the profusion of ethical dictums in his text. Joe Keller is obviously in a better position to 'know' the technical aspects of the national economy during the War. Therefore he is in a better position to criticize the war-effort from the point of view of its deleterious impact on the economy. However he (*mis*)uses this situation to his advantage to deny his responsibility altogether, and subsequently absolve himself of his supposed guilt.

One might even suggest that 'All My Sons' as a play bears out the significance of a responsible and committed readership. The duplicities present in the text in the claims made and suggestions offered by each character and the fallacy of leaving the public-private nexus unquestioned or even its deceptive ending is ultimately left to the reader to discern. Miller himself, in the interview with Brater, had emphasized the significance of theatre-going as an intellectual exercise, using this point to distinguish between the state of the theatre in Britain and in America.

The text itself is marked by constant shifts in perspectives. As David Savran suggests, the text is one amongst many of Miller's works that acknowledges its indebtedness to Greek tragedy marked by its constant intermingling of social spaces (the family, the state, etc.). Keller's heightened emphasis on the serving of his 'own' familial' interests being the chief determinant of his monetary priorities, stands contrary to the earlier instance of a conflict between Kate and him. An apparently mundane issue of conflict (argument over potatoes in the house) shows us how there exists a more serious conflict between the projection of individualism as an attitude centred around the family, and individualism per-se. Kate's emphasis on '*my* potatoes' [emphasis mine] is subtly countered by Keller's statement:

I can afford another bag of potatoes (Act One)

Again, it is interesting to note that the clean-chit given to Keller by the court of law is held up to be a testimony of his social reputation. However it does not seem to live up to the expectation of the

Kellers. The final outcome of events puts his responsibility at stake and the social implications of the same are reflected in Chris's comment:

I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better.

I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. [*Almost breaking*] I can't look

At you this way, *I can't look at myself* (emphasis mine) (Act Three)

Thus we find a disjunction between the politico-legal and social spheres with respect to the discursive role of reputation and goodness. However, the latter also has its own utilitarian value, in the sense that goodness of character caters simply to the end of upholding social prestige. In this context even Larry's commitment of suicide could be deemed irresponsible. It is true that as the play's 'unseen presence' it does indicate what most of the characters pass over- the inextricable nexus between the public and private. The realization of individual shame in the discovery of an essentially public action of his father is what drives Larry on to take the final decision. However, he fails to use this knowledge to question their (both his father's and his own) docility in the face of the dominant social discourse. He does not even consider for a moment his ethical responsibility to his mother when he decides to give up his life, re-enacting therefore the same hopeless role that Chris plays in talking flamboyantly of the War and his comrades' contribution to it. Steven Vogel's interpretation of Habermas's idea of communicative action shows how ethical responsibility to a silent Other could be most rationally asserted through a dialogic mode of knowing and letting know. It is precisely this aspect of ethical communication (somewhat resembling Spivak's notion of intimacy in an act of reading the Other) that is shut off completely when Larry decides to commit suicide, although the basis for the action is located in the Other. His ethical irresponsibility lies precisely in 'speaking for and of the Other', as Derrida would probably put it. The 'presence' of the invisible action in the play is therefore evidenced in the self-assertive traits displayed by one and all in the play, while it cannot be displayed ('unseen') because it needs to be 'read' and unearthed.

The play shows us the flaws in the attitudes of the characters that contribute to the tragic essentials of the play- namely, the inability to transcend the self (in terms of not merely interests but also of perceptions and speculations) and the incompetence to locate the public-private nexus and its ideological value. Both these flaws, it might be said, stem from a misdirected effort to prioritize the Self over the Other in a world where exchange is the basis of human society. In dealing with the question of individual assertion, the indispensable nature of ideology forms the backbone of Miller's argument. The semblance of autonomy, as Louis Althusser asserts, is the driving force of ideology that, in the text, comprises the principal element not simply of a tragic fall but also its re-enactment. However Miller's chief contention appears to lie in the fact that the identification of the cause of the tragic is not always pragmatically possible, and the critique of society and culture therefore is appropriated within the typically modernist context of the uncertainty of all assertions and narratives. That in fact is the chief reason behind the conception of tragedy which is so expedient a narrative for a historical milieu such as is provided by a post-war and post-depression America. The characters have nothing heroic in them nor does the playwright lay claims to any such trait, and although he carefully depicts the 'hidden presence' as outlined above, leaves the play open-ended for there is no definite alternative to offer and no didactic enterprise to pursue. In this respect the element of the tragic is rejuvenated for Joe, Chris, Anne and every other character is fleshed out keeping in mind their status as 'interpellated' subjects. There is also despair that follows this doleful open-endedness, keeping the high seriousness of the play intact, but at the same time paving the way for a new strategic intervention that would seek in later years to circumvent this tragic mode of the

portrayal of vacuity- a new outlook that would subsume every narrative into the world of 'play', heralding the postmodern intervention.

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