

Society, Identity, and Individual Struggle in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Abstract: *Arthur Miller's All My Sons (1947) is a powerful modern American drama that examines the complex relationship between individual identity, social expectations, family responsibility, and moral consciousness. Set in the aftermath of the Second World War, the play presents the Keller family as a microcosm of a society struggling to reconcile private interests with collective responsibility. Joe Keller constructs his identity around the ideals of economic success, family loyalty, and social respectability, yet his involvement in the production and shipment of defective aircraft engine parts exposes the moral contradictions underlying that identity. Chris Keller, in contrast, struggles to develop an identity based on idealism, responsibility, and the values of the war generation. The conflict between Joe and Chris therefore reflects a larger tension between individual self-interest and social morality. Kate Keller's identity is similarly shaped by denial, grief, and her desperate attachment to the belief that Larry is still alive, while Ann Deever must confront the social consequences of her father's actions and the stigma attached to her family. Through these characters, Miller demonstrates how identity is socially constructed and how individuals struggle when personal desires conflict with ethical responsibility. The present article critically examines society, identity, family relationships, moral responsibility, and individual struggle in All My Sons, arguing that Miller transforms a domestic tragedy into a broader critique of American social values and the consequences of placing private interests above collective human responsibility.*

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Introduction: Arthur Miller is a major figure in twentieth-century American drama whose works examine the relationship between individuals and the social, economic, political, and moral forces surrounding them. In *All My Sons*, first performed in 1947, Miller brings modern tragedy into an ordinary American family and explores the conflict between personal ambition, family loyalty, and social responsibility.

The play centres on Joe Keller, a successful businessman who, during the Second World War, knowingly allowed defective aircraft parts to be supplied to the military, contributing to the deaths of American pilots. By allowing his business partner Steve Deever to take responsibility, Joe preserves his reputation and

continues to view himself as a devoted father and respectable citizen. However, the gradual revelation of the truth exposes the contradiction between his self-image and his moral actions.

The central concern of the play is therefore the conflict between individual identity and social responsibility. Joe defines his responsibilities primarily in terms of protecting his family, but Miller challenges this narrow conception of morality. The title *All My Sons* expands the meaning of family and suggests that individuals have ethical responsibilities toward the wider human community. Ultimately, the play demonstrates that personal identity cannot be separated from moral accountability and the consequences of one's actions.

Objectives: This article examines the ways in which society, identity, and individual struggle interact in *All My Sons*. It focuses particularly on Joe Keller, Chris Keller, Kate Keller, and Ann Deever and considers how Miller uses their conflicts to explore social morality, family loyalty, the American Dream, guilt, denial, and individual responsibility.

Joe Keller and the Crisis of Moral Identity: Joe Keller is the central figure through whom Miller explores the conflict between private interest and social responsibility. At the beginning of the play, Joe appears to be a prosperous businessman and affectionate father who enjoys the respect of his neighbours (Miller 9). His apparently ordinary domestic existence contributes to the illusion that he is fundamentally a respectable man. However, as the truth about his wartime actions gradually emerges, this identity begins to collapse (Miller 49).

Joe's moral identity is founded upon a narrow conception of responsibility. He believes that his primary obligation is to his wife and sons (Miller 52). When faced with the possibility of losing his factory, he chooses to allow the defective aircraft parts to be supplied to the military. His decision is subsequently rationalized as an act undertaken for the protection of his family (Miller 53). Miller thereby reveals how individuals can transform morally questionable actions into apparently legitimate ones by interpreting them through socially accepted roles and obligations (Bigsby 82).

The central contradiction in Joe's character is that he considers himself a good father while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge his responsibility for the deaths caused by his decision (Miller 54). His paternal identity becomes a psychological defence against his moral guilt. He does not initially regard himself as a criminal because he has constructed a narrative in which family survival justifies his actions (Miller 54). According to Bigsby, Miller's treatment of responsibility repeatedly challenges the tendency of individuals to isolate themselves from the consequences of their actions (Bigsby 83).

This conflict between self-perception and moral reality forms the basis of Joe's tragedy. He sees himself as an ordinary man who made a difficult decision under pressure, whereas the consequences of that decision reveal a much more serious failure of moral responsibility (Miller 55). His inability to recognize the connection between his personal decision and the deaths of the pilots allows him to maintain his constructed identity for several years.

The revelation of Larry's suicide letter finally destroys this psychological separation. Larry's response to his father's actions demonstrates that the consequences of Joe's decision extend even into his own family (Miller 67). Joe can no longer maintain the distinction between "his" family and the families of the dead pilots. The moral significance of the title *All My Sons* becomes fully apparent because the dead pilots must be understood as part of a wider human family for whom Joe bears responsibility. In the final exchange, Joe recognizes that Larry believed the dead pilots were, in a moral sense, also his sons (Miller 68).

Joe's final suicide represents the ultimate collapse of his constructed moral identity (Miller 68). It is not simply a form of personal punishment but the consequence of his inability to reconcile his self-image with

the truth about his actions. His death demonstrates the destructive consequences of constructing identity around denial, economic success, and narrowly defined family loyalty (Bigsby 85). Miller thus presents Joe's tragedy as both personal and social: his individual failure reflects a broader failure to recognize the ethical responsibilities that connect individuals within society (Roudané 16).

Chris Keller: Idealism and Individual Struggle: Chris Keller functions as an important moral counterpoint to Joe. He represents idealism, collective responsibility, and the search for authentic human relationships. His wartime experiences have fundamentally shaped his understanding of loyalty and sacrifice (Miller 19). Unlike Joe, whose primary concern is the preservation of his family and business, Chris has experienced a form of collective existence in which individual interests were subordinated to the survival and welfare of others (Miller 33).

Chris's greatest difficulty lies in transferring the values of wartime brotherhood into post-war civilian society. He remembers the soldiers who fought and died alongside him as members of a community characterized by sacrifice and mutual dependence (Miller 33). After returning home, however, he finds himself in a society increasingly organized around individual economic interests and personal advancement. His experience therefore creates a significant gap between his idealistic expectations and the social reality he encounters (Miller 38).

Chris's relationship with Ann reflects his desire to construct a new identity after the war. He wishes to marry Ann and establish a life founded upon love, honesty, and emotional authenticity (Miller 17). However, Ann's connection with Steve Deeever links their relationship to the unresolved moral history of the Keller family (Miller 41). Chris therefore cannot entirely separate his personal aspirations from the consequences of his father's actions.

His confrontation with Joe becomes the central expression of this conflict. Chris's anger is not merely the response of a son discovering his father's crime; it represents the shock of an individual who realizes that the moral values for which he and his fellow soldiers sacrificed their lives have been violated within his own family (Miller 64). His disappointment is therefore both personal and ideological.

Chris's individual struggle consequently reflects a larger generational conflict. He embodies the idealism of those who believe that society should be founded upon responsibility, solidarity, and mutual obligation, while Joe represents an older social order in which economic security and family advancement are given priority (Miller 55). The conflict between them illustrates Miller's larger concern with the tension between private success and public morality (Bigsby 82).

Ultimately, Chris's identity is transformed through his confrontation with the truth. His idealized image of his father is destroyed, and he is forced to recognize the complexity of moral responsibility (Miller 65). Through Chris, Miller suggests that genuine maturity requires individuals to confront uncomfortable truths rather than preserve identities based on illusion. Chris's struggle thus becomes an important expression of the play's central argument that personal identity and social morality are inseparable (Bigsby 85).

Chris's final confrontation with Joe is especially significant because it forces him to reconsider his own moral position. Although he condemns Joe's actions, he also realizes that he had suspected the truth and failed to act upon it (Miller 67). His moral crisis therefore becomes more complex: he is not simply an innocent judge of his father but also an individual compelled to examine his own responsibility. Miller consequently presents moral identity as something that requires continuous self-examination rather than simple adherence to an abstract ideal.

The conflict between Joe and Chris therefore extends beyond the immediate family. It represents a fundamental opposition between two ways of understanding individual identity: one based on private interest, economic security, and family loyalty, and another based on collective responsibility, moral integrity, and human solidarity (Miller 56). Miller uses this conflict to demonstrate that the struggle to define oneself is inseparable from the struggle to determine one's obligations to others (Bigsby 82).

In *All My Sons*, Chris Keller's individual struggle becomes a vehicle for Miller's broader social criticism. His experience shows that returning to ordinary life after collective sacrifice is not simply a matter of resuming previous social roles. The values formed through experience continue to shape identity and determine how individuals judge the society to which they return (Miller 35). Chris's moral crisis consequently reflects the larger crisis of a society attempting to reconcile individual prosperity with collective responsibility (Roudané 16).

Kate Keller: Denial, Loss, and Social Identity: Kate Keller's identity is constructed primarily around her roles as a mother and wife. Her emotional life is dominated by the disappearance and presumed death of her son Larry, whose absence continues to shape the psychological atmosphere of the Keller household. Her refusal to accept Larry's death is therefore not simply an expression of grief but an important element in maintaining the family's emotional stability and existing structure (Miller 15). Throughout the play, Kate attempts to preserve the belief that Larry may still be alive, thereby protecting herself from the painful consequences of accepting his death.

Kate's denial is closely connected to her desire to preserve the family structure. If Larry is truly dead, Chris may marry Ann; however, Ann was Larry's former fiancée. Kate therefore interprets the possibility of Chris and Ann's marriage as a betrayal of Larry's memory (Miller 16). Her attachment to Larry consequently prevents her from accepting a new emotional reality. In this respect, her denial functions as a psychological mechanism through which she attempts to preserve the family identity that existed before the war and before Larry's disappearance.

Kate's attachment to Larry also reveals the extent to which her personal identity depends upon her role as a mother. She defines herself through the protection of her children and through her responsibility for maintaining the emotional unity of the family. Her inability to accept Larry's death allows her to postpone confronting the deeper crisis surrounding Joe. As long as Larry can symbolically remain alive, Kate can continue to believe that the family has not been fundamentally destroyed.

Kate also becomes an important figure in protecting Joe from the truth. She intuitively understands that the discovery of Joe's responsibility for the defective aircraft parts would destroy the family. Her insistence that Joe is innocent therefore represents another form of denial (Miller 43). Her psychological position is strengthened by her desperate hope that Larry will return, because this hope allows her to avoid confronting the connection between Joe's actions, Larry's death, and the suffering of other families.

Her identity as a mother thus becomes inseparable from her desire to preserve her family at almost any cost. Miller presents this maternal attachment with considerable psychological complexity. Kate's behaviour is emotionally understandable because it emerges from grief and fear, yet her refusal to confront reality also prevents moral recognition. Her love for her family consequently becomes entangled with the denial that protects Joe from immediate accountability (Miller 44).

Kate's denial also demonstrates how private emotions can have wider social and moral consequences. Her refusal to accept the truth is not confined to her own psychological world; it affects Chris, Ann, Joe, and the entire Keller family. The family becomes trapped within a network of assumptions that depends upon the continued concealment of the past.

Kate's eventual acceptance of reality contributes decisively to the collapse of the family's constructed identity. Once the truth becomes unavoidable, she can no longer maintain the illusion that Larry will return or that Joe can escape responsibility (Miller 67). Her final recognition of reality marks the destruction of the psychological structure that she had attempted to preserve for so long. Through Kate, Miller demonstrates that identity based upon denial may provide temporary emotional protection, but it ultimately becomes impossible to sustain when confronted with moral truth.

Ann Deever and the Burden of Social Stigma: Ann Deever represents another important form of individual struggle in *All My Sons*. She is the daughter of Steve Deever, the man who was imprisoned for his involvement in the defective-parts scandal. Although Ann herself bears no responsibility for her father's actions, she nevertheless carries the social consequences of his reputation (Miller 17). Her identity is therefore shaped partly by circumstances over which she has no control.

Ann's situation demonstrates the influence of inherited social identity. The Deever name has become associated with dishonesty, criminality, and wartime failure. Ann attempts to establish a new identity independent of her father's actions, but the past continues to influence her relationships and her position within the community (Miller 18). Her relationship with Chris is particularly complicated because his family is directly connected to the same scandal that destroyed the Deever family.

Ann therefore occupies an ambiguous social position. She wishes to leave behind the shame associated with her father and create a new life with Chris, but she cannot completely escape the history that connects the two families. Her personal aspirations are continually affected by a past that she did not create. Miller uses this situation to demonstrate that identity may be socially imposed upon individuals rather than freely chosen.

The play consequently explores the difficulty of separating personal identity from family reputation. Ann is judged not simply according to her own actions but according to the social meaning attached to the Deever name. Her experience demonstrates how communities can transfer moral judgments from one generation to another, making it difficult for individuals to establish themselves independently of their families.

Miller thereby explores the idea that identity can be socially imposed. Individuals are sometimes judged according to family history rather than personal behaviour. Ann's struggle demonstrates the difficulty of escaping social stigma and constructing an independent identity (Bigsby 82).

Ann's decision to reveal Larry's letter ultimately becomes crucial to the exposure of Joe's guilt. By bringing the letter into the open, she helps transform hidden suspicion into undeniable evidence of the moral consequences of Joe's actions (Miller 62). In doing so, Ann moves from being a relatively passive victim of her family's history to becoming an active participant in the moral revelation of the Keller family.

Her role is therefore significant because she demonstrates that inherited identity does not necessarily determine individual action. Although Ann has been burdened by the consequences of her father's actions, she ultimately exercises her own moral agency. Her decision contributes to the destruction of the false identities that have been maintained by both the Keller and Deever families.

Family versus Society: One of the central conflicts in *All My Sons* is the opposition between family loyalty and social responsibility. Joe Keller believes that his family comes first and that his primary responsibility is to provide for and protect his wife and sons. His actions are therefore justified in his mind by his obligation as a father (Miller 52). This understanding of responsibility becomes the central moral justification for his decision to allow the defective aircraft parts to be shipped.

Miller challenges this belief by showing that family cannot exist independently of society. Every family is connected to other families through social, economic, and moral relationships. The pilots killed by the defective aircraft parts were also sons, husbands, brothers, and members of families (Miller 66). Joe's failure is therefore not simply that he has harmed anonymous individuals; he has harmed other families while attempting to protect his own.

The opposition between family loyalty and social responsibility also creates the central conflict between Joe and Chris. Joe continues to interpret responsibility in personal and familial terms, while Chris increasingly understands responsibility as something collective. Chris's wartime experiences have taught him that individual survival depends upon mutual sacrifice and cooperation (Miller 33). His moral outlook therefore conflicts fundamentally with Joe's belief that family interests can justify private decisions.

The title of the play captures this expanded conception of responsibility. The phrase "all my sons" transforms the idea of fatherhood from a private relationship into a universal ethical responsibility. Joe's tragedy lies in his failure to understand this principle until it is too late (Miller 68). The title ultimately challenges the boundaries that Joe has attempted to construct between his own family and the families affected by his actions.

The play consequently rejects an exclusively private understanding of morality. Miller suggests that individuals must recognize their responsibility for the consequences of their actions beyond the boundaries of their immediate families (Roudané 16). Private decisions can have public consequences, and personal responsibility cannot be separated from social responsibility.

This conflict also reveals Miller's broader concern with the relationship between individual identity and society. Joe believes that being a good father is sufficient to establish his moral identity. Miller, however, demonstrates that an individual cannot define himself entirely through a single social role. A person must also be accountable to the wider community in which he lives.

Thus, *All My Sons* presents family loyalty as valuable but insufficient when it is detached from wider moral responsibility. The tragedy occurs when private affection becomes an excuse for public irresponsibility. Miller ultimately suggests that genuine social identity requires individuals to recognize their connection with others and to accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Individual Responsibility and Collective Morality: The most significant philosophical concern of the play is individual responsibility. Miller shows that individuals cannot escape responsibility by appealing to social roles, economic pressures, or family obligations (Roudané 14). The play repeatedly challenges the tendency to treat personal circumstances as sufficient justification for morally questionable actions.

Joe's argument that he acted for his family reflects a common mechanism of moral rationalization. He attempts to transform a morally wrong action into a socially acceptable one by presenting himself as a provider and protector (Miller 53). Because he understands his primary duty as protecting his family, he convinces himself that his decision was necessary.

Yet the consequences of his action expose the inadequacy of this reasoning. Joe's intention to protect his family cannot erase the fact that his decision contributed to the deaths of other people's sons. Miller therefore separates intention from moral consequence and demonstrates that good intentions do not automatically make actions morally acceptable.

Miller presents responsibility as extending beyond intention. Joe intended to protect his family, but his decision harmed numerous other families (Miller 66). The moral significance of his actions therefore depends not only on what he intended but also on what he actually caused.

The play also suggests that social morality depends upon individual choices. A society becomes corrupt when individuals repeatedly place private interests above collective welfare. Joe's crime is therefore not merely personal; it reflects a larger social problem in which economic systems can encourage individuals to prioritize profit over human life (Bigsby 81).

The conflict between Joe and Chris further illustrates this distinction between private and collective morality. Joe considers his family the primary unit of moral responsibility, whereas Chris recognizes a broader obligation to the community. Chris's wartime experience has taught him that individuals are interconnected and that the welfare of one person cannot be completely separated from the welfare of others.

Through Joe's downfall, Miller demonstrates that social responsibility cannot be delegated entirely to institutions or abstract systems. Individuals make the decisions that create social consequences. Personal choices therefore contribute directly to the moral condition of society.

The play ultimately argues that genuine moral identity requires accountability. An individual cannot define himself only through his intentions, family role, or social position. He must also be willing to confront the consequences of his actions and recognize his responsibility toward the wider human community.

The Tragic Dimension of Individual Struggle: Miller transforms the ordinary Keller family into a modern tragic household. Joe is not a traditional tragic hero possessing extraordinary social status or political power. He is an ordinary businessman and family man. Yet his moral conflict produces consequences comparable to those found in classical tragedy (Bentley 10). Miller thus demonstrates that tragedy can emerge from ordinary domestic circumstances when individuals confront the consequences of their decisions.

The tragedy emerges fundamentally from the gap between who Joe believes himself to be and who he actually is. Joe views himself as a good father, successful businessman, and respectable member of society. However, the revelation of his actions exposes the contradiction between this self-image and his moral reality (Miller 55).

His inability to recognize this contradiction until the final stage creates the conditions for his destruction. For much of the play, Joe protects himself psychologically by separating his family identity from the consequences of his business decision. Once this separation becomes impossible, his entire sense of self begins to collapse.

Chris and Kate also experience tragic struggles because their identities depend partly on assumptions that collapse when the truth is revealed. Chris loses his idealized image of his father, while Kate loses her denial about Larry and ultimately has to confront the reality of Joe's guilt (Miller 65).

Chris's tragedy is particularly significant because his moral idealism is placed under severe pressure. He returns from war expecting to build a life based upon the values of loyalty and collective responsibility, only to discover that his own family has violated those principles. His struggle demonstrates that moral ideals can become difficult to sustain when confronted with complicated personal relationships.

Kate's tragedy, meanwhile, emerges from the destruction of the emotional world she has attempted to preserve. Her identity as mother and wife has depended upon protecting her family from painful truths. Once those truths become unavoidable, the psychological structure supporting her identity is destroyed.

The tragedy therefore lies not only in death but also in the destruction of identities, relationships, and moral assumptions. Joe loses the identity he has constructed for himself; Chris loses his idealized understanding of his father; and Kate loses the illusion that Larry can return and that the family can remain unchanged.

Miller demonstrates that modern tragedy can emerge from ordinary domestic life when individuals confront the consequences of their choices (Roudané 18). The Keller household becomes tragic not because its members possess extraordinary power but because their ordinary desires—family security, economic success, love, and social respectability—become entangled with serious moral consequences.

Ultimately, *All My Sons* presents individual struggle as inseparable from social and moral responsibility. Miller's modern tragedy suggests that identity cannot be sustained indefinitely through denial or self-justification. When individuals are forced to confront the consequences of their actions, the identities they have constructed may either be transformed through moral recognition or destroyed by the truth.

Conclusion: Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* is much more than a family drama concerning a wartime business crime. It is a profound examination of the relationship between society, identity, and individual struggle. Through the Keller family and their associates, Miller explores how individuals construct identities through family roles, economic success, social expectations, personal memories, and moral beliefs. Joe Keller represents the dangers of defining responsibility exclusively through family loyalty and economic success. His attempt to protect his family ultimately destroys the very family he sought to preserve. Chris Keller represents an alternative moral vision based on collective responsibility and the ideals of wartime brotherhood, while his struggle reveals the difficulty of maintaining those ideals within a self-interested social environment. Kate Keller demonstrates how grief and denial can shape identity, whereas Ann Deever illustrates the burden of inherited social stigma and the possibility of constructing an independent moral identity. The play ultimately argues that individual identity cannot be separated from social responsibility. Human beings exist within networks of relationships, and their actions inevitably affect others. The title *All My Sons* expresses the central ethical insight of the drama: responsibility must extend beyond biological family and encompass the wider human community.

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