CHAPTER I

ALL MY SONS: FAMILY AND SOCIETY
CHAPTER I

ALL MY SONS: FAMILY AND SOCIETY

The play, All My Sons, depicts the impact of social forces on man, and the consequent struggle in him, in the present set-up of society, between his "family relations" and social obligations. Miller expresses the view regarding the role of social forces in drama that

I hope I have made one thing clear ... 
and it is that society is inside of man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not.¹

In this world of automation, the boundaries of relations and links connecting man to man have been narrowed down. Miller, an ardent defender of the "social play", wrote All My Sons with a view to exemplifying the theme of man's

Society and the individual are inseparable. Neither the society is an aggregate body nor the individual a unit. This conception of the relationship of the individual to society is the main key to social realism. Miller is one of the few post-war writers to have closely achieved this conception.² All My Sons is a dramatization of this conception. From the beginning of the play, characters start their roles with a growing knowledge of the past, a past which gradually filters through paving the way for its being an ever present and haunting reality in the present. In All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The crucible and The Price, the characters have committed themselves to courses of action which have their roots in the past. These "plays cannot move forwards without moving backwards to dig them up."³

The story of the play is nearly over before the action starts. It is planned on the lines of Ibsen's method of


³Ronald Hayman, 'Between Sartre & Society,' Encounter, 37, No.5 (Nov. 1971), 73.
retrospective narration. The past is exposed in the present and it impinges upon the present. Miller's dramatic craft in All My Sons lies in resurrecting the past in the present and thereby enlightening the individual on his social responsibility.

The moment the play opens, the broken apple tree, an Ibsenian symbol, is noticed. Joe Keller and Frank, during the course of their conversation, talk about the tree, blown down by the previous night's storm. Soon they mention the name of Larry by drawing a connection between him and the broken tree. Frank mentions that he is working on Larry's horoscope. After this it is easy for Miller to start planting the past story of the play. Larry, Joe's son, was reported missing during the war, and Kate Keller, his mother, is still in the illusion that he is alive.

The incipient family banter is disturbed by the progressing events of the play which contribute to the gradual revelation of crime and a sense of guilt in the main characters. This again has an Ibsenian ring about it especially with the playwright using the Ibsenian device of the "fatal secret." "The Ibsen method of showing first an ordinary
domestic scene, into which, by gradual infiltration, the crime and the guilt enter and build up to the critical eruption, is exactly followed."

Joe Keller is a manufacturer of engines for fighter aircraft. He is the central figure of *All My Sons* whose perspective on moral responsibility includes no more than the family. His immediate object of concern or loyalty is his family. Whatever is not personal is not real to him. He does not owe anything, as he feels, to the extended and generalised sphere of society of which he is an "incorporated member."

For a man values of love and loyalty are supreme. He has to love and be loyal to his family and to the society too because society is the extended sphere of his biological and social affinities, and his family security is dependent upon the values of this extended sphere. But when the family security is seen to be quite antithetical to his responsibility towards the whole society, his inner struggle begins.

Joe Keller is not a downright selfish, profit-oriented capitalist. He is a good-natured, unselfish loyal

---

head of his family. His love for his wife and sons is genuine. But this family is everything for him. For its sake he will kill or be killed.

Joe Keller is an "uneducated man for whom there is still wonder in many commonly known things, ..." He is incapable of thinking in idealistic terms on his responsibility and relation to the society. He was responsible for the tragic deaths of more than twenty pilots. More than one hundred defective cylinder heads were shipped out to the American Air Force. This led to the tragic death of American pilots who flew the P40s with defective engines. Keller managed successfully in saving himself from accusation and punishment and in putting the blame on his innocent partner.

At a crucial moment, when his business seemed threatened, he took a decision against his responsibility or loyalty towards the men engaged in the social action of war, in order to save his family, his sons in particular, from total ruin. His resolution was taken in the interests of his familial responsibilities: the responsibility to create and augment, which a father owes a son. He is proud that he has done something

---

for his son.

Keller: It was too late ...
Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya? (p.115).

Joe Keller is not at all enamoured of his material success to the extent of indulging in the boastfulness that he is a self-made man. He is not like Josiah Bounderby in Dickens's *Hard Times*. Joe's article of faith is a passionate involvement in his son's life, as it is in the case of Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play, *Death of a Salesman*.

Joe's capacity for betrayal seems out of key with his geniality and warmth of nature. He is one governed by a littleness of mind which is seen to be a form of myopia. There is a genuine inability in him to visualize the public consequences of what, for him, was a private act. He is neither a villainous capitalist nor a cynical profiteer deliberately reducing the margin of safety in order to increase the margin of profit.

Miller explains the condition of Joe's trouble in
his 'Introduction' to his collected plays:

Joe Keller's trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society. He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation. I hasten to make clear here that I am not merely speaking of a literal corporation but the concept of a man's becoming a function of production of distribution to the point where his personality becomes divorced from the actions it propels.6

Joe Keller's estrangement from the larger society around him and his absolute dedication to his family, which prompted him to commit crime, stem not from his own flaw but, ironically, from the influence of society and its values on him. He is the product of a society stressing the value of individual enterprise to an extent where the individual is alienated from his social cosmos: "Joe Keller ... is, nevertheless, a man whose sense of human responsibility

has been thrust aside by the every-man-for-himself individualism rampant in American society."

Kate Keller, the wife of Joe Keller, resembles her husband in her attitudes. She is a dominant character in the play who devoted herself exclusively to private loyalties. In the play she is the instrument by means of which the device of the "fatal secret" is employed. She keeps the secret of the past undisclosed unto the end. She dedicates herself to the task of protecting her husband in crucial situations when his hidden guilt seems to be disclosed. She fundamentally resembles Joe in the sense that what is personal or immediate is real to her.

When Chris, the son of Keller, invites Ann to his home, she suspects possible marriage between them, which would spoil her mission. The marriage between Chris and Ann offers, as Kate assumes, a public confirmation of the death of Larry. If Larry is dead, the war is real, and Joe would be the criminal and murderer of his own son by an act of mental association. For Kate, Larry is alive, and he will certainly return, and so Chris and Ann should not

mary. Thus, Chris's decision gives rise to a conflict between him and his mother. In fact, Kate's real concern is not the dead Larry, but Joe. If she surrenders her belief to Chris's decision, her husband's guilt and crime become obvious. She tries to inflict this belief that Larry is alive on all the members of the family so that Joe would be safe. She tries unto the end to conceal the reality and save her husband:

Her own desperate need to reject Larry's death against all odds and upon whatever flimsy scrap of hope has been the reflex of her need to defend her relation to her husband against whatever in herself might be outraged by the truth about him.8

Kate's powerful way of handling situations reveals her dominant personality. Her reaction to Joe's game about prison with Bert is significant in that it reveals her total dedication to her husband.

Mother: Go home, Bert. (Bert turns around and goes up drive-way. She is shaken. Her speech is bitten off, extremely urgent.) I want you to stop that, Joe. That whole Jail

8Arvin R. Wells, 'The Living and the Dead in All My Sons,' Modern Drama, VII (May 1964), 49.
business!
Keller: (alarmed, therefore angered) Look at you, look at you shaking.
Mothers: (trying to control herself, moving about clapping her hands). I can't help it.
Keller: What have I got to hide? What the hell is the matter with you, Kate?
Mothers: I didn't say you had anything to hide, I'm just telling you to stop it! Now stop it!
(p.74)

This conversation contributes to the process of the gradual infiltration of crime and guilt, while at the same time stressing Kate's loyalty to her husband, her commitment to the living. Kate is like Linda in Death of a Salesman in that she has made an irrevocable commitment in love and sympathy. No knowledge about the husband can destroy this commitment. When Kate's efforts to drive Ann out are opposed by her husband and son, she, out of exhausted emotion, discloses unwittingly the actual basis of her refusal to accept the reality of Larry's death. This revelation of the fatal secret leads to the final climax of the play:

Your brother's is alive, darling, because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live, that
boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father. Now you see, don't you? Now you see, (p.114).

When Larry's letter is handed to Chris, Kate makes desperate attempts to keep the myth alive by pleading with Chris not to read it. Even when Larry's letter destroys her myth and Keller acknowledges his crime, Kate's concern is for Joe rather than herself. Her ardent dedication to her private responsibilities and commitments and her loyalty to her husband are seen in their intensity so as to serve as a contrast to the values Chris upholds.

Chris Keller values the ideology opposed by his father, Joe. He is an idealist who sees responsibility to the society or the universe as supreme. Chris is his father's perfect opposite. While Joe cannot see beyond his family's dining-room table, Chris feels a sense of unity with the world.

He saw self-sacrifice among the men he commanded at war. There he learnt the ideology of universal brotherhood and relationship between man and man. He reveals this to
Ann, whom he hopes to marry:

They didn't die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they'd've been here today. And I got an idea—watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of—responsibility. Man for man (p.85).

The conflict between father and son is a conflict of values. They argue with each other over these values. When Joe's guilt is finally revealed, Chris begins to condemn his father's crime. What his father has done is exactly the opposite of what he has seen in the war. Joe, for whom his home is everything and beyond it has no meaning, is unable to comprehend Chris's arguments based on his feelings of wider perspective of responsibility towards the society. Joe committed this crime out of his ignorance of this ideology. "Joe Keller is guilty of an anti-social crime not out of intent but out of ignorance; his is a crime of omission, not of commission." 

Barry Gross, 'All My Sons and the Larger Context,' Modern Drama, 18 (1975), 16.
Both Joe and Chris are unable to comprehend each other's commitments and responsibilities. This is partly due to the generation gap that separates them. They view the same problem with different attitudes and from different perspectives. For Joe, there is no society. His business and family are everything for him. He is husband and father. His responsibility as a father and husband is to provide bread to his family. He is directly responsible for his family's joyful life or its ruin. Anything that harms his family immediately strikes him hard. Thus he fails to understand the attitude of his son. He is proud that he is leaving a rich legacy for his son with which he can lead a reputable life without fear or shame. He is not incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, but his understanding of right and wrong is determined by his vision of values.

Chris Keller's fight is against the ethical insularity of the Kellers. He reminds Joe that Larry has committed suicide in shame. The father's crime drove one son, Larry, to commit suicide and the other one, Chris, to hate him. Both the sons opposed the father's act and values. Chris considered the father "not even an animal" and doesn't want to live with him. Joe tries to justify his act by pointing
out the generally accepted motive of business;

Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nothin', I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go! (p.125).

This again throws light on the society's influence on Joe.

By arguing this way Joe tries to obscure his personal guilt but at the same time reveals the more organised conflict between the personal or private loyalties and universal loyalties. Chris views that the responsibility to the whole universe of people is supreme. In his opinion Joe is a traitor as he betrayed the whole nation:

For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me?—I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world—the 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? (pp. 115-116).

In proclaiming this theme, containing the idealistic vision, Chris is perhaps 'the voice of the intended theme.'

Chris is prompted by a strong moral indignation derived from his experience in the war. His social conscience and its promptings make us see idealism as judged not per se but in terms of the conflicts it provokes. Chris, who has brought out of the war the idealistic vision, has also derived a festering psychological wound — a sense of inadequacy and guilt. He fears that in enjoying the profits of the business earned during the war, he becomes morally polluted. But ironically he does not reject the profits of business. Chris, who talks principles, cannot do anything to settle the issue of his father's guilt though he suspected it: "It's true. I'm yellow. I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it. ..... all I'm able to do is cry." (p.123) He has not rejected the illicit

---

10 Samuel A. Yorks, 'Joe Keller and His Sons,' Western Humanities Review, 13, 4 (Autumn 1959), 405.
spoils of war but considers himself morally superior to Joe. But inside his heart, he is conscious of his hollow nature and feels unworthy, condemned by his own idealism. So Chris's is a struggle which arises from his quest for identity. His is more a conflict within himself. He must maintain an ideal image of himself which is a perfect vindication of the ideal deaths of his comrades, who died in the war, or else, be crushed by his own sense of inadequacy and guilt, and accept personal defeat. During the war, watching the men whom he commanded die for each other, he learnt a kind of responsibility, "Man for man" (p.85). He wanted to seek this idealistic value after returning from the war. But when he returns home, he finds himself in an uncongenial atmosphere. His hopes crumble. He becomes disappointed as his values have no place in the society:

To show that, to bring that onto the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him (Pause). And then I came home and it was incredible. I — there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a — bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again.
I felt - what you said - ashamed somehow.
Because nobody was changed at all (p.85).

Chris is an enlightened person who knows the things which his uneducated and peasant-like father cannot know. Yet, ironically, he is no better than his father. His feelings of shame and guilt have no meaning as they do not stimulate him to action. Though his father's business does not inspire him, he will spend his life in the same business. His aspirations, as expressed to Ann, are about the limited circle, the family, the wife and the kids, which are again not different from his father's.

The reason for Chris's close attachment to his father was that he thought his father was innocent. He cannot extend the same love when his father's guilt is discovered. In reality, he suppressed his suspicions about his father's guilt in order to escape the consequences of it. He has in a way lied to himself about his father's guilt. When his mother, Kate, unveils the hidden truth in a certain emotion, his reaction to it is significant. It makes obvious some private drama unwinding inside him. When Kate is surprised by his reaction, Chris's intentional pretension becomes clear. Chris has persisted in believing the lie of his
father's innocence and has compromised himself with his father's guilt. And now as the guilt is disclosed, he can no longer live in self-deception. He is the person who is determined to deliver the family from the grip of self-deception and guilt cast by the story of Larry. But when the truth is disclosed, he is less able to bear it than the others. All Joe's arguments in defence of his crime do not convince Chris. What he now needs is self-respect which he feels is lost by his father's crime. What hurts him more is not that his father's sin caused the deaths of twenty-one men, but it reveals to him that Joe is no better "than most men." For Chris "thought" his father was better and he has never seen his father as a man. "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!" (p.125)

Unless something is done to relieve him of the pursuing guilt and give him back his self-respect, Chris will not live in peace. This makes him insist upon just punishment to be inflicted publicly despite Larry's letter bringing about a change in Joe:
Joe's arguments in self-defence—that he had expected the defective parts to be rejected, that what he did was done for the family, that business is business and none of it is "clean"—all act on Chris's idealism. They cannot satisfy Chris's conscience. Consequently, even after Larry's suicide letter has finally brought to Joe a realization of his personal responsibility, Chris insists upon a public act of penance.

In insisting that Joe must be punished, Chris is in a way asking Joe to give him back his self-respect so that he may lead a guiltless life which is rightfully his. As long as Joe is left unpunished, Chris has to bear guilt and become an obvious sharer of the crime. So in his view the public act of penance is necessary. Joe has to be sacrificed at the altar of Chris's moral purification:

The father becomes, indeed, a kind of scapegoat for the son; that is, if Joe expiates his crimes through the acceptance of a just punishment, then Chris will be relieved of his own burden of paralyzing guilt. 11

11 Arvin R. Wells, 'The Living and the Dead in All My Sons,' Modern Drama, VII (May 1964), 50.
Joe acknowledges the wider perspective of responsibilities, when Larry’s letter is read. Joe who says, “I’m his father and he’s my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head!” (p.120), literally fulfills his words when Larry’s letter indicates to him that there is something bigger than the family.

This dramatic denouement is structured in Ibsenian terms by means of the device of a concealed letter from Keller’s dead son who had known of his father’s guilt. A similarity is noticed between the father-son opposition in the plays, All My Sons, and Ibsen’s The Wild Duck. In both the plays the owner of a factory has been implicated in a business scandal and then exonerated; his partner disgraced and sent to prison. Each of the former partners has a son; one young man is shamed by his parents’ imprisonment; the other attacks his wealthy father’s materialism with idealistic motives. Werle in The Wild Duck cannot dissociate himself from a sense of guilt derived from participation in his father’s firm. As though to expiate this guilt, Werle urges the "demand of the ideal" which leads to death and despair. This shows how Ibsen’s influence on Miller is more than a "structural" one.
Joe admits his legal guilt and acknowledges the ideal of universal brotherhood only after the discovery of a direct connection between his crime and Larry's death. He moves from a state of disavowal of ultimate responsibility to one of final acceptance of the rest of the society as being, "all my sons." More than Joe's legal culpability, his ability to accept the necessary relationship between self and society in his acceptance of the ideal of universal brotherhood is stressed in the play. But the play suffers, according to C.W.E. Bigsby, from a failure of craft because of Miller's empirical distrust of the ideal. While Joe's legal guilt should be subordinated to moral awakening, the stress in the play seems to be on his admission of his legal guilt and on the discovery of a direct connection between his crime and his son's death. His moral awakening seems to have touch of physical casuality rather than moral conversion. The ideal wins in the end, but it is undercut by examples of inhuman, self-justifying idealists like Chris and George.

Chris, like Werle in *The Wild Duck*, is an immoral idealist whose motives cannot be dissociated from individual justification. They try to justify their inability to put
the idealism into practice by finding fault with their fathers and circumstances. Chris's attempts to free the family or the mother from illusions and self-deceptive affirmation that Larry is alive stem partly from his desire to marry Ann but not from any genuine idealistic aim. When Joe's crime becomes apparent, Chris behaves cruelly. He insists on reading Larry's letter which leads Joe's committing suicide. This inhuman treatment meted out by Chris in the name of seeking justice puts the ideal of truth itself in doubt. On returning from the war, George, Ann's brother, refuses to visit his father who is in prison. After knowing about his father's innocence, he repents and admits the enormity of his action and determines to secure some semblance of justice for his father. It is with this mission that he arrives at the house of Joe. And he too sees Joe as a scapegoat for his own inhumanity, an inhumanity which stems from the concept of idealism. When Chris insists on reading his dead brother's letter acknowledging the cause of his suicide, justice is seen to be secured at the expense of compassion. The play thus portrays the struggle between justice and humanity, as Bigsby
The struggle between justice and humanity shows how *All My Sons* recognizes the necessity and the need to recognize responsibility as operating in a sphere larger than the family but including the family.

The characters in *All My Sons* are involved in the dramatic action through their own personal commitments and relationships. The consequence of the crime committed by Joe is seen in terms of personal commitments and responsibilities. But the crime brings to the fore social and personal consequences and forces:

If Keller's son had not wanted to marry the convicted man's daughter (and they had been childhood friends, it was that neighbourhood which Keller's act disrupted); if his wife, partly in reaction to her knowledge of his guilt, had not maintained the superstition that their son killed in the war was still alive; if the action had been between strangers or business acquaintances, rather than between neighbours and neighbouring families, the truth would never have come out. Thus we see a true...
social reality, which includes both social relationships and absolute personal needs, enforcing a social fact, that of responsibility and consequence.  

Miller's view is far deeper and more ironic than Ibsen's in *Pillars of Society*. The pillars of society, according to Ibsen, are the spirits of Truth and Freedom. Though Miller's intended theme is the ideology, professed by Chris, there is a certain evidence of the development of the reverse theme in the play. The way Joe commits suicide provides certain clues to question the integrity of the obvious intention of Miller. Does Joe commit suicide in disappointment, denounced by both the sons, rather than acknowledging the ideal? The rhetorical responses and emotional outbursts of the Kellers clearly reveal Miller's sympathy for them. Their world has been broken by the revelation of truth. While the intellectual Miller spoke through Chris Keller, the emotional Miller clung to Kate and Joe Keller.

A close examination of the play reveals to us Miller's own conflict between his intention and his acknowledgement of the realities behind it. The play consists of an honest conflict of values which have been treated equally and left to the characters' own efforts to achieve them. Each must resolve these opposing aims as best as he may. Joe is sincere in his own limited circle. Chris, the idealist, fails in implementing his motive and turns a hypocrite, and in his attempt to regain his distinction as a better man, he becomes inhuman. When finally his unsympathetic and stubborn insistence on idealism causes destruction, he is left stunned. This inhuman treatment of the idealist puts the validity of the very ideal he propounds in question. 

Here we see a real struggle. Miller, as a social dramatist stresses the superiority of the ideal but he is all the time conscious of the practical difficulties involved:

All My Sons is in many ways a compromise. It is a compromise between the social dramatist, eager to endorse the message of brotherhood and integrity, and the empiricist, all too
aware of the reality behind the ideal.\textsuperscript{14}

The play, \textit{All My Sons}, offers a critical analysis of the intricacies of human motivations and human relationships while outlining the theme of the individual's responsibility to humanity. A fine balancing of tensions is achieved in the play. The opposition is between those who possess the truth and those who fail to grasp it. Joe Keller's struggle to preserve what he conceives to be a just evaluation of himself is seen in the context of the play to be a deficiency not only in his character but in the social environment in which he exists as well:

Who worked for nothin' in that war? ....
Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean?
It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? (p.125)

Kate's words, "We all got hit by the same lightning," (p.106) are in a sense true. The lightning she is referring to is the experience of the Second World War and the profits war has created by means of suffering and death. That is,

the war has provided the context for Keller's temptation which led to his son Larry's suicide, and wife's morbid obsession. Chris Keller and George Deever brought the ideal of brotherhood out of the war. George pays in remorse for the principles that led him to reject his father. Chris's idealism is poisoned by shame and guilt. Tempering justice with mercy seems to be an ideal to be achieved. *All My Sons* is a social drama not in the sense that it is an attack on the capitalist business ethic, but "as a study of the bewildered common man groping in a world where moral values have become a shifting quicksand, where you ask for guidance from others no surer than yourself, and when the simplest lesson—moral responsibility to others—is the hardest to learn."  