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Collapse of the Ideal in Arthur Miller's All My Sons**Yasir M. Abdullah**

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Abstract: Idealism is a pivotal motto of the propaganda led and announced by America's pursuit of the dream since its establishment in the new world, but what has emerged as a dream has ended up as an illusion.

The aim of this paper is to expose how Arthur Miller portrays the collapse of the ideal father figure in an exemplary American family at the time when the pursuit for personal and familial betterment was used to disguise materialistic corruption and egoistic thirst for social mobility in American society at the expense of values and ethics.

Keywords: Collapse of the ideal, egoistic thirst, materialistic corruption.

INTRODUCTION

One of the central themes in Arthur Miller's All My Sons (1946) is the death of the ideal in American society during and after WWII. The play hinges on the decline of American values and one of the essential values for any society is idealism. The social environment that Arthur Miller portrays is evidently

influenced by the consequences of the materialist pursuit at the expense of human values and virtues during WWII. Miller presents an average American family which can be considered as a microcosm of the entire world of the time. Joe Keller's family consists of four members; one of them, Larry, is already dead in the war.

During the course of the play, most of the action takes place in a small town, particularly in Keller's backyard. This scene indicates that the setting is a family and neighbors and although it is not identified, the setting could indicate the universality of the action. The hinging character in the play is Joe Keller who, together with his friend Steve Deever, runs a successful business manufacturing plane parts. Joe as a head of a family in an American society tries hard to better the financial status of his family. In the course of trying to achieve such familial commitment, he gives supremacy to survival above human values.

Although he often expresses that he is doing things for the benefit of his family, Joe Keller is presented as an egoistic character whose self-interestedness is exposed in placing pragmatism above idealism, the self above the group, and loyalty to the family obligations above the social duty (Biggsby 2005).

His capitalist overambition and greed is the reason behind choosing to ship faulty plane parts which result in the deaths of 21 American pilots in the war. The play opens with dominating binary stories that Steve is in jail for shipping these faulty parts with shattered family and Joe having a relatively established home. His seemingly fatherly intentions in supplying his family financially at the time of commercial competition do not save him the blame over what some of the people in his neighborhood consider as murder. Arthur Miller made us anticipate whether the father's behavior can be viewed within the concept that a family can be put before any other social concerns (Abbotson 2007), but this of course can never be justifiable. For Joe it is fundamentally important to win in the harsh social life which pushes the play beyond the limits of the idealistic tone.

It is worthwhile to mention that the concept of money recurs a great deal throughout the play "as a kind of counterpoint to the idealism generated by the war" (Biggsby 2005). Joe always discusses business and the value of money with Chris stressing that it is all that he dedicated his life for. In doing so, Joe sacrifices the ideal for the material. The Kellers' neighbor, Dr. Jim Bayliss, under his wife's demands, also sacrifices his dream of becoming a doctor in medical research to end up as a physician believing that this profession would secure their family financially. Thus, the central endeavor in the play is the blinded pursuit of financial security at the expense of moral values.

The social survival for the richest, so to speak, becomes the driving force behind most of the character's behavior in the play. The war did not only bring deaths to thousands of soldiers but it also destroyed the long-established familial human values and principles leaving man as a machine in a machine world.

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