



# The dialectic of the individual and Society: A study of Arthur Miller's All My Sons

Dr. Hasan Hadi Ali General Directorate of Education in Anbar Province.

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Asst. Instructor Jalal Hatim Rasheed AL- Iraqi University/ College of Arts

### **Abstract**

The American Dream is an idealistic dream which urges everyone in America to succeed through the successful business. Several individuals, according to the American ideology, believe that the successfulness in life comes from pursuing the materialism. The American Dream is routinely predicted and dramatized to be experienced on the individual level with neglecting the relatedness between the individual and the society in the success or failure the American Dream. Thus, the objective of this paper is to examine the interaction between the individual or the family and the society in Miller's All My Sons. This study is conducted in the light of the concept of the American Dream as discussed in Messner and Rosenfeld's Crime and the American Dream (2012). They think that the success of the American Dream depends on the whole society; the individuals as well as families. This study concludes that a balance between the social obligations and the individual interests may lead to the success of The American Dream. It also concludes that the failure of Keller in fulfilling his dream in All My Sons lies in his belief that his duty to his own family is more important than his duty to his society and anything else in the whole world.

**Key words:** Arthur Miller, American Dream, All My Sons, Capitalism, Materialism, Socialism



## 1.1-The individual's aspirations within society

America was a great place for success in term of materialistic affairs which creates an exploitive system that denies individual identity. The American Dream grants the rights for every individual that has objectives in the life to pursue his aspiration and achieve satisfaction. The objectives associated with the American Dream are to get a better life in term of power, money better education and life. Some features like values, goals and beliefs that identified with the American Dream are strongly nested in the American ideology and consciousness. The American Dream is as Messner and Rosenfeld state:

A broad cultural ethos that entails a commitment to the goal of material success, to be pursued by everyone in society, under conditions of open, individual competition. (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2012: 6)

Thus, Americans keep looking for their aims in the business success which regards the principal measure of power, success and status in their society. The individual in the American society reduces his aspiration and objectives just in the financial aspect which has the ability to open all the doors that may close in one's way. As a result, the accumulation of wealth becomes innate motives in the individual's life for the sake of his own family future stability and success. Thus, it is the shining phase of The American Dream that keeps the individual active and be away of idleness.

Accordingly, there is a negative and dark side of the American Dream that encourages indirectly the crime as the individual may be careless and indifferent to the feature of the relatedness of people. Messner and Rosenfeld put that "The American Dream is a mixed blessing, contributing to both the best and the worst elements of the American character and society" (2012, 8). This undesirable aspect comes to be existed in the society because of the temptations as well as the greed factor that lead to deviant behavior. Thus, the ambition of the individual to make something heroism creates a sense of self satisfaction that may bring a tragedy to other and weaken the relation with society: "The glorification of individual competition, which fosters ambition and mobility, drives people apart and weakens the sense of community" (2012, 8). So, the American

Dream also associates with the vicious factor that could be investigated in revealing the criminality.

The individual should apply values and equilibrium between self-interest and social responsibility. Without these characteristics, it may create predicaments for both the society and the individual in leading the peaceful and reliable life. And also, it may cause perversion concerning the relationship between the individual and society as Messner and Rosenfeld locate:

An important intellectual component accompanies the task of balancing social obligations with the individual interests. the extreme individualism of American culture impedes a full understanding interdependencies between the individual and the society. (2012, 127)

Literature has never mistaken the life as it reflects the peoples' actions in the reality. Thus, in order to understand life, we should comprehend literature as it reflects the actuality of life to avoid the dissatisfaction in life. Life is not reassuring; if it were we would not need the consolations of religion, for one thing. Literature and art are not required to reassure when in reality there is no reassurance, or to serve up 'clean and wholesome' stories in all times and all places. Those who wish such art are welcome to have it, but those who wish art to symbolize how life really is, in order to understand it and perhaps themselves, also have a right to their kind of art. 1

### 1.2- Introduction

Arthur Asher Miller (1915-2005) is one of the most prominent twentieth-century dramatists after World War II. His theater is seen as one of the most fruitful and it is vastly illustrative due to its diverse social ethics. So, his name is echoed with the most distinguished American playwrights: Eugene O'Neil and Tennessee Williams to be the triumvirate of American Theatre. He devotes almost seven decades of his own life striving to enrich and mark the American literature identity. One can observe in his drama

various themes and symbols which, in fact, mirror the intensity of his dramatic creativity that characterizes the American society in an obvious manner. Two of the most recurrent themes in Miller's drama are the American family and Dream. People by innate want to achieve their opulence indifferently by means which cannot be disconnected from the dogma of the American household. Thus, since launching his artistry, he has been away from being purely 'social' which may stem from the 'problem plays' that may show a kind of tedious style. For being away of that, he makes a fusion of public and private clashes to be the supreme interesting objectives that meet with the cravings of American character

In this respect, Miller states:

(Bloom, 2005: 117-118).

I can hear already my critics complaining that I am asking for are turn to what they call problem plays. That criticism is important only because it tells something important about the critic. It means that he can only conceive of man as a private entity, and his social relations as something thrown at him, something "affecting" him only when he is conscious of society. I hope I have made one thing clear to this point—and it is that society is inside 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. The fish is in the water and the water is in the fish.<sup>2</sup>

Miller consistently implies in his pen the balance between the individual and the general public issues which could be plainly found in his plays; the dreams of the one within the society he lives in .In this context, Kobo Abe and Susan Glaspell state:

Miller successfully synthesized diverse dramatic styles and movements in the belief that a play should embody a delicate balance between the individual and society, between the singular personality and the polity, and between the separate and collective elements of life. (Abe and Glaspell, 2005:587-588)



The Great Depression in 1929 has a considerable impact on his writing as it directly turns his own life upside down. Hence, he overtly scrutinizes the failure of the capitalistic policy in his drama besides shows the sufferings of people due to the soulless of the economic order. This episode impresses his ideology and shapes his mentality to promote socialism over capitalism as the only safe path for the complicated modern society (Bryer&Hartig, 2010: 363). As a result, Miller emphases on the building of the individual within the society through portraying the harsh realities of the American life under the concept of realism to hit objectives. The individual should not mislay the balance between his/her interest and the social requirements that may lead to achieve the prosperity for both.

All My Sons reveals that Miller is greatly influenced by Ibsen's technique in building a play by means of giving the audience information about the past events little by little. By adopting this style, he intends to hold the attention of the audience that will be conscious of every action and speech onstage. In addition, his aim is to let the characters learn to bear the consequences of their past deeds. In doing so, we note that Joe Keller committed a criminal action by delivering the defected aircraft headed to the US Air Force that causes the killing of 21 American pilots. According to his mentality, he is forced to do that because he is at the risk of losing: his industrial reputation, his family's future stability and materialistic affairs. It is "(Joe Keller) who puts his love of family and their financial security ahead of his responsibility to society and the world."

# 1.3- The Dialectic of the Individual and the Society in All My Sons

All My Sons is one of the most important plays that has ever been written by Miller because it is regarded as a turning point among his literary writings, such as *The Man Who Had All The Luck* which has lasted for just four operations. So he has determined to pen a new play, which he has set out writing from 1941 until 1947, to be his turning point and fresh career of a life that is dependent on its consequence. He says:

I was turning thirty then, the author of perhaps a dozen plays, none of which I could truly believe were finished. I had written many scenes, but not a play. A play, I saw then, was an organism of which I had fashioned only certain parts. The decision formed to write one more, and if again it(*All My* 

Sons) turned out to be unrealizable, I would go into another line of work. (Miller, 2004: 16)

The play won New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play in 1947. Even though, Miller writes more successful plays as *Death of a Salesman* (1949), his masterpiece and the recipient of the same year Pulitzer Prize, and *The Crucible* (1953). However, *All My Sons* still stands the bedrock of his theatrical works. In this sense, Steven R. Centola contends that:

While few would argue that it is Miller's best or most important play, no one would dispute the fact that *All My Sons* deserves a special place in the playwright's canon because it constitutes his first major theatrical achievement, displays his extraordinary skill in handling dramatic form, and presages even better things yet to come from one of America's greatest dramatists. (Centola, 1997:48)

At the dawn of the middle class in the Western societies, there was a need for a new genre of literary work; the novel, to sustain the requirements of this class as it represents the majority of society. Accordingly, most artists tackle the issues of the middle class as it becomes the leading power of the prosperous countries. Moreover, Joe Biden, the American Vice President, states that it is "the backbone of this country(America)."

American middle-class family is a rich topic to the writers for its multithemes which expose the effects and side effects in American life. So the artists portray the life of this class in their works to direct people's attention to the flaws which have vital roles in crystallizing the family and depriving it from development.

Miller, in *All My Sons*, focuses on the individual of the middle-class family in the context of the manufacturing field which is considered the most sticking component in the United States that searches for the materialistic prosperity irrespective to the other aspects of life. *All My Sons* grants us a peep on the weak side of the American personality in pursuing what is called the 'American Dream' indifferent to whatever the consequences will be. However, in contrast, James Truslow Adams explains the concept of



the American Dream as, "that dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (qtd in Bulkeley, 2008:13).

The title of the play calls directly the attention to the ethics of the individual within the society which suggests the idea that all the killed pilots are Keller's sons. This implies that the society seems to be as a single-family which should be coherent, conceal egoism and ignore disintegration because they are the basis of all factors that the des lead to destructions and landslides affecting the family's stabilization. It may be noted that Keller grasps, at the end of the play, the concept that all the pilots, whom he was the cause of their death, are surely his sons. This appears to come forth with the help of the suicide letter from his son, Larry. The title is very compatible with the content of the play as it directs our consideration to the reciprocal relationship which exists between the individual and the society to which he belongs. Thus, Miller states that "the crime in All My Sons is not one that is about to be committed but one that has long since been committed. There is no question of its consequences' ameliorated by anything Chris Keller or his father can do; the damage has been done irreparably" (Miller, 2004:18).

Keller is, a worldly man who appreciates his prosperous business than anything else, a self-made man. He represents the industrious man who had worked pretty hard to become a successful factory owner. The hardships he had faced in his early years are not reported in the play, but they can be imagined. All the wealth he has made is shaky as it is based on his crime. Keller does not feel the shame of his despised action. Furthermore, he intends to make his successor, Chris, continue his profession or dream as he tells his wife, Kate, about Chris: "I should put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and make him earn his keep. Then he'd know how a buck is made in this world" (II.,76).

The wrongdoing which is committed by Keller causes a kind of crystallization among the members of the family as if they have been placed in jail, which is suggested in the conversation between Keller and Bert at the beginning of the play:

**KELLER**: Now you're talkin',Bert. Now you're on the ball. First thing you know I'm liable to make you a detective.

BERT(pulls him down by the lapel and whispers in his ear): Can I see the Jail now?

**KELLER**: Seein' the jail ain't allowed, Bert. You know that.

**BERT**: Aw, I betchat here isn't even a jail. I don't see any bars on the cellar window.

**KELLER**: Bert, on my word of honor, there's a jail in the basement. I showed you my gun, didn't it?

BERT: But that's a hunting gun.

**KELLER**: That's an arresting gun! (I. p. 12-13)

Keller resorts to self-deceit to be a successful businessman and lead a normal life on the contrary of his community: his own family, his neighbors and his partner Deever, who know his guilt. The life of the family members is paralyzed as Kate rejects life without her son, Larry, and she keeps daily waiting for his coming. This may suggest the idea of not imprisoning, Keller, the criminal so that Larry is still alive. Concerning Chris, a militant idealist as Larry is, could not marry the fiancée of his absent brother, Larry, because Kate thinks that Larry is coming to marry her. He is a man of principles who is despised by his society as he prefers morality to money. He thinks and wishes that his father should sacrifice his life for the sake of justice and morality as Susan CW Abbotson envisions:

His friends and neighbors view Chris as a moral idealist, which is a hard role to fulfill. There are those, like Sue, who despise him for this, but others look to him to determine how they should behave—he inspires Jim to want to become a medical researcher, and the Deever children to believe in Keller's innocence and their own father's guilt. But Chris is unsure as to what he wants to do for himself. The road of the idealist is never easy. He feels torn between keeping his father happy by staying in the family business

and refusing to be caught up in the morally suspect world of commerce. (Abbotson, 2007, 51)

Keller considers achieving one's aspirations as a successful achievement, turning a weak man into a powerful man, in terms of materialistic factors which reflects the attitude of the American society. Therefore, he adopts the Machiavellian principle: the end justifies the means. As a result, he has denied the social responsibility by eclipsing his human values for hitting his target. He becomes a man with a single purpose: business affairs. Thinking that this the best thing that he can do for his family. However, this outrageous deed takes a wide scope of influence upon the family and the society because it is considered as the irreparable crime against humanity. As a result, he reaches his tragic destiny and creates a whirlwind among his family members. Anyway, most of the American people, at that time, were characterized by what was called the 'profit-oriented society'. This drags Keller to handle an anti-social behavior as he worships the word "money" which is echoed repeatedly onstage throughout the play. So we note that Doctor Jim has left the medical research, which he is fond of, under the pressure of his wife for the sake of more lucrative practice to achieve financial security. This is indicated in her discussion with Ann:

Sue: And he's got money. That's important, you know.

. . .

Sue: Jim's a successful doctor. But he's got an idea he'd like to do medical

research. Discover things. You see?

**Ann**: Well, isn't that good?

**Sue**: Research pays twenty-five dollars a week minus laundering the hair shirt. You've got to give up your life to go into it. (II. P. 44)

Kate Keller also concentrates on monetary issues as She urges her husband to accumulate more and more money as he replies her: "You wanted money, so I made money... You wanted money, didn't you"(III.P.76)? Similarly, Chris though he represents the voice of the morality and justice in the play, he reveals his ideology in tracing his father's pattern towards

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his future family when he gets Ann's approval for his proposal. He conceals the pleasure of life, the hope of a promising future with the satisfaction of conscientiousness and gives her the promise of fortune; "I am going to make a fortune for you" (I.P.36). This is what the family means to the patriarch whose aspirations are shaded by his family.

Keller complains that his son, Chris, does not know the value of money and business as he ignores the perspective of capitalism which is clearly shown in his debate with his father:

**Keller**: You've got a business here, what the hell is this? **Chris**: The business! The business doesn't inspire me.

**Keller**: Must you be inspired?

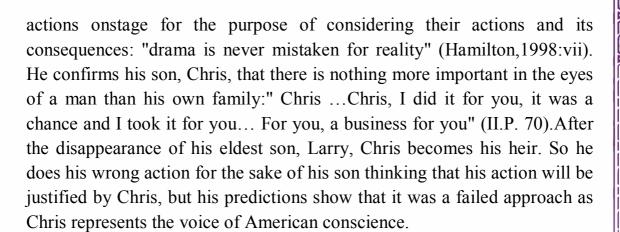
**Chris**: Yes. I like it an hour a day. (II.P 17)

Anyway, there is an interrelationship between the individual and family, the family and work as these relations could affect and be affected only by dealing with these two concepts. Thus, the responsible one may take drastic decisions which perhaps have a great effect on one's family or society in two aspects—poverty and richness. Gunz states:

It is widely the recognized that work and family lives influence each other in numerous ways. Family experiences can restrict or enrich one's career, just as work experiences can restrict or enrich family life. (Gunz,2007:144)

The impact on the patriarch will increase and cannot be resistible if there is an intimacy among the family. This can be interpreted a supplement of everything that his own family requires to reinforce the basis of his family future and be away from insufficiency. This is what Keller has done in his critical turn of his business.

Keller, who represents the typical American businessman, sanctifies the goddess of wealth. His main goal in life is to guarantee the continuous growth of his business to get rich for the sake of his family's prosperity. This play had been taken from the reality of American life, we can say that drama could be the mirror of the real life that enables people to watch their



Man is created given two shapes; man and woman and the plurality is the feature of everything in our world. In this sense, Man cannot live and work without other people as there is some kind of a net that links all the people in an emotional network called humanity. In this respect, it is noted that Emerson, the greatest American essayist, puts his emphasis on group working among people in order to get everyone her/his objectives so that he states:"... God, in the beginning, divided man into men, that he might be to himself; just hand divided into more helpful as the was fingers"(Bosco, 2015:92).

However, Keller secludes himself as well as his family from the world especially his community: "The stage is hedged on right and left by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere" (I.P 5). This is because his perjury in the court to free himself from being imprisoned with his partner, Deever. In spite of his efforts, he cannot lead a common life as Miller comments on Keller's dilemma in his play by saying:

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. (Miller, 1947: 19)

This is due to the relatedness of people. And this is underlined by Aristotle in his Politics as he states the following:

Man is by nature a social animal: an individual who is unsocial naturally and is not accidentally either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is a beast or a god. (qtd in Dugatkin, 1997: 3)

According to Aristotle's words, mentioned above, Keller, surely, is not a god. So he is a kind of beast in the shape of a man. This deformation of humanity reminds us of the picture of Man in the poem of W.B. Yeats "The Second Coming," who describes Man as a beast: "A shape with lion body and the head of a man"(Rosenthal, 2011:90). This depiction refers to a new kind of human who use modern techniques to kill people for the sake of their benefits. In this respect, Chris despises his father for being less than an animal in his business: "What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own"(II.P.70). Then, he denies the fatherhood of Keller and does not see Keller as his father anymore: "I know you're no worse than most men that I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I never saw you as my father" (III. P. 82).

Keller desperately endeavors to convince his son that they are human and can perpetrate bad things unlike the Godly men: "a man can't be a Jesus in this world (II.P.83)! In this sense, Chris denies the successful business of his father which is constructed upon the tragedies of his people. Moreover, Keller has spoiled the principle of responsibility that keeps his family from being hurt as Chris tells him: "A kind of ... responsibility. Man for man. You understand me" (I.P. 35-36). In addition, he accuses him of having hatred towards humanity because of his deeds: "This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him" (III.P. 81)! The materialistic effect has the power to transform people into practical individuals and make them forsake their humanity. Thus, Chris has not the ability to imprison his father, Keller, because he has already transformed to a practical one. So what he can do in his position, is to escape from his shame to join bums as he states to his mother: "I could jail him! I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm



practical now. You made me practical...the bums ...were practical... and I spit on myself. I 'm going away. I'm going now"(III. P. 80).

Keller constructs his world through covering his lies that lead to the death of 21 pilots. He keeps denying his criminal action. Instead of facing his wrongdoing, he does his best to escape from the consequences by many excuses which eventually become worthless in the eyes of society even his own family. The past which he strives to bury comes together with the present to curse him. sensing his barbaric action he confesses that "they were all my sons"(III.P. 83). Consequently, he kills himself not for being the cause of killing the innocent pilots, but because he wakes up to reality; A reality where he has failed to be human and a good father to his family, which is the climax of the play. This play resists dying as the works of Shakespeare do, which talks about the individual's actions that can happen at any time in reality. This tragedy, *All my Sons*, intends to report that the tremendous harm could be done by the individual's selfishness and ignoring the moral responsibility to the society for accumulating money at the time of war.

Miller's characters are linked to the past and ruled by the rational world since he believes that the past has a direct influence in shaping the present as he states: "We live in a world made by men and the past"(Harris, 1994:51). Characters in *All My Sons* learn that they are responsible for their past actions as is the case with the play if we take everything into consideration. The author makes a combination of Ibsen and Greek dramatist's methods of juxtaposing the past actions with the present ones, Gottfried states that:

Miller smoothly adapted a scheme of retroactive construction that effectively introduces facts of the past without making the dialogue uncomfortably expositional. The play's present action indeed hinges on past events (Gottfried,2003: 100).

It may be sensed, in *All My Sons*, there is a kind of curse that hovering around Keller's family. This curse happened in the past life of the family and springs in the present time to give a clear explanation of the havoc

which is caused by Keller to put an end to the people's lives as Miller puts it: "the past is a dimmer present for everything that is alive in us"(Miller,1987:131). And this is what has happened to the character of Paul in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* when he comes to conclude that he cannot lead a normal life because of the past's effect. So he runs away

from his hometown thinking that he may actualize his life. Similarly, the character of Oedipus in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* recognizes that his past choices cease his progress and gets rid of his eyes. Thus, for the same reason, Keller ends his life.

Miller gives us a chance to understand the essential problems that the individual, in the modern era, has faced during the time of capitalism and war. As it is obviously shown, the supreme value of the capitalism is the materialistic factor that numbs the moral values and common welfare which are crushed in the profit- oriented society. Thaddeus Wakefield points out that:

Cultural values of the family became modified by a capitalistic influence which pervaded all of American society... spouses became commoditized by a capitalistic society that placed a greater materialistic and economic value on individuals rather than on intrinsic 'humanist' values. (Wakefield, 2003: 5)

Thus, it is noted that Keller is tracing the way of the business world for the sake of survival under the pretext of self-interest and self-indulgence as he defends himself as follows:

Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nothing, I'll work for nothing. 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? Haif the goddam country is gotten go if go. (III.P.82)



Keller was under a tremendous pressure in the wild world to take his choice whether he will lose everything or adopts the characteristics of the materialistic society to stay on the top of his society. Hence, it may be suggested that Keller has been a victim of capitalism as he lives in a world where 'dog eats dog'. This is what makes Christopher Bigsby write the following about Joe Keller:

This was a man, neither worker nor bourgeois, corrupted by 'opportunity,' and there is in the play...a conviction that idealism and justice shatter on materialism and corruptions which seem to shadow a desire for success. Joe Keller denies transcendent values. (Bigsby, 2005: 78)

Miller reveals his ideology through the role of the absent characters, chiefly Larry who works a 'proximate cause' and 'catalyst', in order to say that Keller lost; his sons, family and own life in All My Sons (Morrow, 2009). The action of the play might take another direction if Larry appeared on the stage and was alive like other characters. Larry would not have been able to convince Keller that he had done a terrible action. His absence is more powerful simply because Keller would have told him that he had done this for his sake as he had told Chris too. Keller is only touched when he discovers that his action kills his own son, Larry. Kate also would have kept her husband's secret forever, but she reveals Keller's secret when both Keller and Chris try to let Larry go. Hence, as Paul Rosefeldt notes "The absent character can become a spiritual witness of a ceremonial drama or an oracular voice directing the action of the play" (2002: 123). Though we do not glimpse Larry on stage, he is the one who renders Miller's message. Resulting in the audience perceiving why Miller chooses the title All My Sons for his social play.

Keller is, above all, loyal to his family, yet the dramatist presents him with insight and sympathy. Keller is consistently presented as "a man capable of immense affection and loyalty"(I. P.11). Truly, he is depicted in his dodging responsibility at the time of the defective process in his plot by pretending that he is sick and allowing his weaker partner, Deever, to be blamed for their actions alone. Miller makes no obvious choice in *All My* 



Sons though he grants Keller force and conviction. His cry lingers in our ears while we consider whether it is a simple artistic integrity or not to make Keller be a villain. Keller, as the immense majority of the world, perceives his qualities, yearnings, and fantasy as a profitable man in a condition of the materialistic variables which is mirroring the state of mind of the American civilization.

Everyone who would prefer not to kill his/her children, of course, needs to depend on morals that will allow him/her to enjoy a cheerful life; as it is revealed by Aristotle, there should be:

Justice with a balance among reason, spirit or anger, and the desires collectively known as *epithumiai*. This controlled balance is the happiest state available for human souls as well as the most moral; so if imitation undoes the soul's justice, it brings both vice and misery.<sup>5</sup>



The study concludes that Keller in All My Sons failed to achieve his dream as he has insisted that nothing in this life is bigger than the interests of the family. He failed to realize the interrelatedness among the individual, the family and the society's interests. Keller represented the affluent business community which regards the world success and financial gain as the principal motives behind their whole effect, which proved its failure in fulfilling the American dream. Moreover, the study concludes that the individual's duty to him/herself and to his/her family cannot be separated from the duty to his/her own society. Thus, Keller at the end of All My Sons causes tragedies to his own family members and the humanity because he could not comprehend the necessity of interaction and the need for equilibrium among the individual; the family and the society in terms of individual interests and social responsibilities.

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