All My Sons

Arthur Miller’s tragic play “All My Sons”, which is set just after WWII in the mid-west of the United States, is one in which the protagonist, Joe Keller – an affluent businessman – is forced to come to terms with his crime of having sold faulty aircraft parts to the military, which results in the inadvertent deaths of 21 pilots. In the play, there are two main characters – Joe and his son, Chris – who contrast and who could be considered to function as theatrical foils for one another. This is important to my understanding of the play as a whole as it emphasises the contrasting initial idolisation of Joe by Chris and the final angry response Chris has towards him once he finds out the truth about his father’s crime. I personally had a lot of empathy for Chris’ character and his reactions to his father. Miller uses a number of dramatic techniques in order to explore these contrasting characters.

Joe Keller’s character is initially portrayed as being aloof, belligerent, defensive and delusional. He shows that he will not turn himself in to the authorities for his part in the defrauding of the military: “Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go!” Joe is therefore aggressively determined to stay out of prison and he shows that his own ego and pride are preventing him from admitting to his guilt. This quote also highlights his selfish nature. It also hints at a pathological level of solipsism since Joe seems to view his crisis of conscience as central to a whole country’s concerns.

During the war, Joe remained at home with his family and manufactured aircraft parts. He therefore felt a certain distance from the horrors of war and may have felt less culpable as a result. Furthermore, the public’s impression of Joe’s character during the war is one to which people might aspire in view of the fact that he is highly successful and well-respected in the community.

In contrast, his son Chris has direct experience of the conditions of soldiers in the war. He could be described as idealistic as he tries to convince a local doctor, a Jim Bayliss, to do medical research and strive for his dreams. Chris was nurturing towards others during the war even though he did not necessarily have any personal ties to those to whom he gave assistance.

“They didn’t die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they’d have been here today”. An anguished Chris evaluates the bravery of his fallen comrades during the war and commends their self-sacrificing actions. Indeed Chris states that “there is a universe of people outside and you’re responsible to it”. This statement is profound and highly philosophical in nature as it suggests that all people are morally bound to each other.

Chris’ actions contrast with those of his father who seems rather short-sighted and opportunistic in terms of making money out of supplying the military with armaments. His father also seems to have exhibited an unforgivable level of complacency when ordering his business partner, Steve Deever, to ship the faulty aircraft parts despite knowledge of the fault. Deever is ultimately blamed for this and a cowardly Joe refuses to accept any responsibility.

Furthermore, Joe is family-oriented and justifies his actions on the basis of his love for his family. He is forced to re-evaluate his actions however and he comes to the realisation in the conclusion that his provision of sub-standard aircraft parts may not only have directly caused the deaths of American soldiers but may also have caused his own son, Larry, to commit suicide due to the shame of his father’s actions: “Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were.” Joe thus finally acknowledges that he had a solemn responsibility and duty of care not only to his own son but to all the other soldiers who made use of and relied upon the safety and functionality of his factory produced parts. Joe is finally forced to reflect on the dereliction of his duties as a father and as a respected businessman.

Chris’ impression of the implications of his father’s guilt is clarified by his mother, Kate who states: “Your brother’s alive, darling, because if he’s dead, your father killed him”. In this dialogue with Chris, her rational thought processes are clearly brought into question as she cannot establish any real evidence on which to base her assertion that her son, Larry (missing in action during the war) is still alive. Larry’s continued absence causes a significant degree of family tension since Chris wishes to marry Larry’s former fiancée, Annie. Chris’ character is explored in the way that he manages to bear the stresses of a relationship which is placed on hiatus for three years. He nevertheless shows dignity and patience while respecting his brother’s memory. Chris is certain that his brother is dead. In contrast, his father continues to delude himself about the fact that Larry is dead and will never return as this is essential to avoid facing his own guilt.

In conclusion, Miller’s play “All My Sons” explores the contrast between father and son Joe and Chris Keller. Miller skilfully uses characterisation and dialogue to depict the key differences in attitudes and actions of these characters. This contrast allowed me to come to a deeper understanding of the main theme of the play i.e. that we are all responsible for everyone else and our obligations to others do not end with our own immediate family. Although Chris was depicted as more virtuous, I nonetheless felt sympathetic towards Joe’s ‘everyman’ character and understood his desperation to provide for his family at any cost.