“All my Sons”: A Critique of the American Dream

        Arthur Miller’s play ‘All My Sons’ (1947) concerns the protagonist, a Joe Keller, who is the tragic hero. Joe is a wealthy war profiteer who sold faulty aeroplane parts to the Air Force during world war II.  This lead to the deaths of 21 pilots and results in Joe being accused of the deaths of these pilots, but instead he puts the blame onto his business partner, a Steve Deever.  One of the main themes of the play relates to the exploration of the moral dimensions of the ‘American Dream’. Joe’s character is particularly useful in evaluating this Dream as, even though he seems to have accumulated wealth and possessions such that he seems to have achieved this Dream, along the way he has had to compromise his own honour by lying to others on an ongoing basis; betraying his friend and business partner and by purporting to be a patriot despite having been the cause of the deaths of many American servicemen.

        Throughout the play, Joe and his surviving son, Chris, act as dramatic foils and contract in terms of their conflicting ideologies i.e. Joe represents pragmatism whereas Chris represents idealism. One of Miller’s main messages within this play seems to be that ‘reality’ actually lies somewhere between these two extremes.

At the start of the play, Joe is happy and very calm about the situation at hand and is using his money to make a fresh start for his son Chris and his fiancée Ann.  However, her father Steve and brother George intend to stop her marriage with Chris because of his father’s actions. This makes Joe nervous and scared that he may be caught out and sentenced to a prison term, which he is not willing to do.

Joe warns Chris about the repercussions of marrying Ann: “She thinks he's coming back, Chris. You marry that girl and you're pronouncing him dead. Now what's going to happen to Mother. Do you know? I don't”. This quote shows that if Chris marries Ann, the whole family will officially have to admit that Larry is dead.

       Joe is trying to forget the self-inflicted quandary in which he finds himself; he is paranoid and is constantly buying things with his new found wealth, but the truth about his involvement with the defective parts keeps coming back to haunt him.  The money that he made has the blood of 21 pilots written all over it. This money made on the basis of war-profiteering makes Chris feel very guilty: “I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator.” Chris is very sensitive and feels very deeply about issues to do with survivor’s guilt and the morality of improving one’s own lifestyle on the basis of earning money from selling weaponry. Despite the idea of the American Dream that the accumulation of money and possessions i.e. the advancement of mass consumerism is of paramount important in life, Chris is nonetheless highly dissatisfied. This contrasts with the perspectives of his father, Joe.

       During the play Joe becomes more depressed and nervous about the deaths which he has caused. For example, when Ann’s brother George (who is a lawyer) arranges to come to the Keller’s home, Joe begins to panic: “It's crazy, but it comes to my mind. She don't hold nothin' against me, does she?” He doubts the motivations of both George and Ann and believes that his downfall is imminent. This also illustrates that Joe is an inarticulate, blue-collar character who uses a lot of slang in his speech. It can be argued that Joe’s working-class background and his subsequent success as an industrialist, allow him to justify his later actions in selling defective parts. Perhaps he feels as though his ongoing labours to ‘rise’ in economic and social status give him a form of social dispensation as a result.

When George arrives at their home, Joe desperately tries to justify himself by outlining his world-view i.e. that highly successful people are, by definition, those who have had to make moral compromises: “That's the way they do, George. A little man makes a mistake and they hang him by the thumbs; the big ones become ambassadors.” He criticises the way in which the world seems to be overly judgemental towards those who make what (in his mind) are relatively ‘small’ compromises. He thus tries to advocate a form of moral relativism.

At the end of the play, Joe faces judgement from both of his sons. Chris (who is offering him a ride to prison) and the late Larry, who is (in Joe’s mind) accusing him of the deaths of all his brothers-in-arms which gives the title of the play “All my Sons”. Chris’s own debilitating sense of guilt on behalf of his father, ultimately causes his father to commit suicide: “Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel – I can't bear to live any more.” Chris is deeply distressed and confused about his own obligations and loyalties. He feels a conflict between loyalty to his own immediate family to a wider community of servicemen and to humanity in general.

In a moment of guilt, grief and desperation, Joe feels that he has no place to turn to and he sadly shoots himself to end all his pain and misery.

      In conclusion, the final scene brings the play to a dramatic climax.  Although the actions by Joe were inexcusable, I do feel sorry for him because all he wanted to do was to make his family feel proud of him and make them happy, no matter the cost.    He pursued the American Dream relentlessly and, in so doing, gave up on his moral compass. In contrast, his son Chris symbolised a complete disenchantment with the unattainable (certainly in terms of being able to attain such a Dream in a completely moral way) nature of the Dream. Miller effectively uses a number of dramatic techniques including characterisation and symbolism in order to convey a sense of the unrealistic, unachievable mirage that is the American Dream.

Word Count: 1040