All my sons – Arthur Miller

Arthur Millers ‘All my sons’ is a play that explores the secrets and hidden guilt that surrounds an average family after the Second World War. The two main characters in the play are Joe (father) and Chris (son). Both characters are close, but differ in personality. Joe is isolationist whereas Chris is an idealist. This relationship is important to understand the characters and the main themes of the play. Their differences lead to conflict as the play develops, which results in a dramatic change in characterisation for both characters. This essay will explore Millers use of stage directions, characterisation and the use of props to develop the change in characterisation.

In terms of characterisation, it is clear from the beginning of Act 1 that despite their close relationship, both Joe and Chris have opposing ideals.

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

Joe doesn’t understand why Chris would want to be inspired, emphasises that’s Joe only cares about the business and himself. Joe’s isolation is clear from the start of the play, it is clear that Joe only cares about money and doesn’t want to try and better himself, Joe wishes to remain isolated from the outside world. It is clear that there is underlying conflict and tension between them early on in the play.

Chris is the opposite of his father: idealistic, selfless and morally responsible, he believes that people ‘can be better’. This is apparent in his comments about the newspaper, he always reads the book section but never buys a book. “I like keep abreast of my ignorance”. This suggests that Chris dreams of improving himself despite the fact that he never acts on it. Chris and Joe clearly have conflicting ideas and their relationship seems slightly turbulent.

As the play develops, the tension builds and their relationship begins to deteriorate.in the key scene, the truth about Joe’s actions during the war is revealed. Joe tries to justify his actions, saying that it was for the family.

Keller: I’m in business, a man is in business…what could I do, let them take forty years away, let them take my life away…For you, a business for you.

Repetitions of business emphasises that Joe was only thinking about himself.

Chris: What the hell do you mean you did it for me? You’re not even animal, no animal kills his own. (Stumbles away covering his face)

The stage directions shows that Chris is deeply hurt. Chris is so shocked by his father’s actions that he claims that Joe is unhuman, and is even worse than an animal. The underlying conflict and tension that has been building up has now exploded resulting in an explosive confrontation between father and son.

Following the key scene it is clear that Chris’ character has changed. Chris seems to have given up on being idealistic because of his father’s actions.

Chris: I could jail him! I could jail him. If I were human anymore. But I’m

Practical now. You made me practical.

Chris’ love for his father is stopping him from doing what is morally right and giving him up to the police. This is showing the theme of responsibility and the theme of family verse morality. Joe has metaphorically ‘killed’ Chris, in terms of his beliefs and morals. Chris has changed he is no longer the idealist which he said he was.

However the same can’t be said for Joe, Joe only goes deeper into self-denial. He tries to claim that he was not the only man who became successful after the war.

Keller: I’ll work for nothing…its nickels and dimes; war and peace, its nickels and dimes. What’s clean? Half the goddamn country is gotta go if I go!

This continues to emphasise that Joe still only cares about the business and money, still isn’t thinking about his soon.

The conflict has now caused a change in Joe, he changes when Chris shows Joe Larry’s letter.

Keller: 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 is finally realising that all the pilots he killed were metaphorically ‘All (his) sons’. In a way he has also killed both his own sons in the process. In a sense Joe remains to be selfish by taking his own life rather than facing up to the shame and going to jail. This therefore showing Millers views of men of America, they took no real responsibility for their actions nor shown any real remorse for what they done.

To conclude ‘All my sons’ is a play bases on the conflict between father and son, this friction is what helps emphasis the themes. Chris and Joe had a close relationship but completely different ideals. Chris was an idealist but his father’s actions hurt him so deeply it meant that Chris changed as a person, therefore Joe metaphorically killed his own son. As the two characters change Miller is able to highlight his views of modern America, the lack of responsibility in men and the selfishness of men like Joe Keller.