

Father –Son Relationship in Arthur Miller’s ALL MY SONS

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Abstract

Father-Son relationship is Miller’s most favourite theme. He portrays this relationship excellently in his plays. His plays deal with the father’s duties and dreams as well as the son’s expectations and aspirations .The father provides food shelter, clothes and education to his son and expects his son worthy person in the society. His dreams revolve round the success of his son. On the part of the son, he expects his father to be an ideal man to follow. The son loves and respects his father not for material success alone. He expects his father to be a successful man in social moralities also .If there is any disappointment in their expectations towards each other, there is a friction in the relationship

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Father-Son Relationship

Miller handles this Father- Son relationship in many of his plays. Especially in his plays *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* this aspect is portrayed more sensitively. *All My Sons* tells us the story of a successful businessman Joe Keller and his relationship with his son Chris Keller. In the eyes of Chris his father is a successful businessman, respected and loved by the society. In short, Joe Keller is successful both materially and morally. But actually, Joe Keller is not a completely straightforward man. In his past, he once sold defective cylinder heads to the Army Air Force and caused the deaths of twenty one American Pilots. His son Larry, committed suicide knowing the cause of these deaths. Moreover, Joe Keller also managed to send his partner Steeve Deever to prison, letting the blame fall on him. Thus, Joe Keller has violated his social responsibility and is a failure in social moralities. When this truth is disclosed to Chris, his opinion about his father shatters. He violently confronts his father, which leads to the suicide to Joe Keller. According to Adam Julie:

“The play dramatists the conflict between the Chris, the champion of brotherly love and social responsibility and the father Joe Keller spokesman for the business ethic and for a social individualism.... Two types of idealism clash in the play: Chris’ self-righteous search for the truth and total dedication to his business and his faith in the primacy of the profit motive” (52-53)

Illusion in the play

Miller very carefully presents us the character of the father and the character of the son which are contradictory by nature. In the first act itself the true nature of these characters are revealed subtly. Joe Keller is really skilful in creation illusions. He has created the illusion of a ‘Noble father’ to his son and a ‘Good man’ to the society. Even to his wife he is not completely truthful. In contrast, Chris is an idealist who wants shatter down the illusions. Both Joe Keller insists on keeping her in illusion.

One important feature Miller employs in this play in the Father- Son relationship is their closeness. Chris openly discusses his love matters with his father. He even goes to the extent of emotionally blackmailing his father that, if he does not get Annie, his dead brother’s fiancée, married to him he will leave the house. Keller is really ready to do anything for his son. Having lost his another son, Larry, in the war, he has focused his entire love and attention only on Chris. The words uttered by Keller, when Chris says that he will leave the house and business if he does not get Annie married to him throw ample light on his love for his son: “.... don’t think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That’s only for you Chris, the whole

shooting match is for you” (CP 69).

Joe Keller indirectly states that, whatever he had done in the past was done only for the sake of his son. Joe Keller is an uneducated man. But he is excellent in studying human characters. He knows very well that his son is an idealist. If Chris knows about the ‘crime’ committed by him, he would not even touch his money. That is why Joe Keller often tells his son like this: “Because it’s good money, there’s nothing wrong with that money”(CP87).

Lover and as an Idealist

But indeed, Keller’s money is ‘wrong money’. This fact is revealed to Chris in the second act by their neighbour Sue. When Annie speaks about this to Chris, he immediately replies: .”Do you think I could forgive him if he’d done that thing”(CP 95). These words are really from his heart, and not a blabbering of a man who is blinded by love. He is not saying these words to his lover to show himself as an idealist. It is obvious that Chris is in love with Annie. But at the same time he gives respect to certain moral values:

Chris, wants to be different from his father, watching his comrades die for each other and for him, he has become aware of “a kind of responsibility, man to man”, ... From his speeches in the play we should infer that... he had been wavering between a contemptuous rejection of this intolerably unchanging world and a sentimental urge to find solace in his love for Ann and to settle down eventually. (Rajakrishnan77)

Keller also has been aware of these two facts. He knows Chris both as a lover and as an idealist.

In contrast to his son Chris, Keller’s thoughts are always materialistic. But at the same time, his love for his son is great. Because he believes that his “only accomplishment” is Chris. For example, as mentioned earlier, Joe Keller knows very well that if Chris does not marry Annie, he will not stay with him. Therefore, Keller tempts Annie that he will offer a job to her father, when he is out of jail. He thinks at least to show her gratitude to him, she will marry Chris. Thus, his concern for his son’s love is clear here.

Keller’s love to his son is not one sided. Chris equally reciprocates his father’s love and is concerned about his father’s dignity. When George, Annie’s brother, accuses Keller of sending his innocent father to jail, Chris violently confronts him and is also on the verge of hitting him.

But at last, Keller crime is disclosed to Chris by his mother. As Rajakrishnan points out, “Her (Chris Mother) abject refusal to give up her morbid belief that Larry is not dead is a source of conflict in the play; her slip of the tongue brings about the turning point in the action... (67). She strongly believes that “God does not let a son be killed

by his father” (CP 114). But the truth is harsh. The father only caused the death of his own son. When Chris realises this truth, there is violent confrontation between the father and the son.

Keller tries to justify justifying his deeds. Apparently, he is not an evil man. He values his family more than the society he lives in. In this regard, Barry Gross says:

He is an engaged man, but not to man or to men, only to his family, more precisely to his sons, not all the sons of the two sons he has fathered....He is not proud of being a self made man or of his material success, he is proud that he is proud that he has made something for his son.

Above all, he is concerned with his son’s life. To give him a proper successful life he has committed that crime. He himself confesses it to Chris who is an idealist, reacts differently:

Chris: with burning fury: For me! Where do you live where you come from from? For me- I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the God dam business? Is that as far as your mind can see the business? What is that, the world- the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the World? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do? (CP116)

Of course, Chris enraged words and his feeble attempt to attack his father physically proves him as an idealist and also as a patriot. But he forgets one thing that if he thinks something noble, it is because of the education his father has given him. However, Keller’s deeds cannot be justified on this ground.

Keller thinks, material success alone can yield him his son’s love and there is nothing bigger than the relationship between them. He tells his wife, “.. I’ m his father and he’s my son, and if there is something bigger than that I’ll put a pullet in my head!”. (CP120). At last, he realizes that there is truly something bigger than the father-son relationship. He also perceives that Chris is not such a type, who forgives a man’s crimes just because he is his father. Therefore, in the end Keller really puts a bullet into his head.

Keller’s decision to commit suicide is not a suddenly taken one. As pointed out earlier, if he feels something bigger than father-son relationship, he will commit suicide by putting a bullet into his head. But what makes him to feel that’s ‘something

bigger'?. It is Chris's words that attack him like a hammer stroke, and make him to realize that there is something bigger than family relationships. Keller in the last scene as his last attempt, once again tries to convince his son before the tragic end. He tells Chris, thinking that Chris hates not him, but the money which he made out of illegal deeds,"..If it's dirty then burn it. It's your money, that's not my money... (CCCP124). He also says that it is not him alone, profited during the wartime by illegal ways. For this statement Chris responds most strikingly:"... I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father" (CP 125).

Conclusion

These are the words that force a Keller to realize the true nature of father's responsibilities. It is not only material wealth a father should save for his children, but also a morally strong image of himself. This alone can yield proper love and respect to a father from his children. Here Keller, though a successful man in amassing wealth for his son, has failed as a father to give a strong image of himself. So, he attempts, to create it in his death.

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