**The Tragic Adventure:**

**Arthur Miller’s Portrayal of Survivors Guilt in *All My Sons***

By James Doyle

Throughout history, war has been a common subject and element found within literature. The glorification of battle and the hero’s return home have been idealized; dating all the way back to the ancient times of the Greeks and Romans. This glorification has been found extremely prevalent within the American culture not only in literature but amongst its societal norms. From the days of its early Independence, to the pivotal points of its involvement in World-wide conflicts, war has become a normality in America that at times has lost its weight and impact within the very society that condones it. Prior to the Great World Wars, little has been present within literature in regards to the residual effects not only on the soldiers that fight in these wars but on the family structures that these soldiers return to. One author that chose to focus on this subject was Arthur Miller. In Arthur Miller’s 1947 play, *All My Sons*, Miller chose to focus on an American family that had direct involvement in the Second World War. Arthur Miller can be seen to be ahead of his time by his introduction of elements that a combat veteran faces when reintegrating into society but also by his portrayal of the residual effects that the survivor’s guilt can have on the family he returns to.

Prior to Miller’s 1947 play, only a hand full of authors had published works concerning soldiers after they have returned from war. One of these authors was Ernest Hemingway. In Hemingway’s 1925 short story collection, “In Our Time”, Hemingway chose to indirectly present the obstacles that some veterans faced by portraying them in their choice of lifestyles following the war. One of Hemingway’s characters, Nick, is portrayed post war in the short stories, “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I & II.” Hemingway took a more modern approach in his writing by not focusing on Nick’s experiences directly in battle but chose to portray his everyday life following the war. In “Part I”, Nick is alone and a drifter, trying to find a good place to set up camp for the night. In this lifestyle, Hemingway presented Nick as content and finding comfort in the simplicity of his tent and life on the road where he could separate himself from the social norms of society. Hemingway tells the story through the conscious of Nick where we see subtle flashbacks to the men he served with and connections Nick makes to the things around him and his experiences in war. In “Part II”, Nick decides to go fish away from his camp down at a creek just along where he has decided to stay. Once Nick finds himself down at the creek, Hemingway tells us again through inner dialogue of Nick’s conscious about the ease and simplicity of fishing the open ends of the creek but how he is also avoiding the swamp end of the water. Hemingway states, “In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it” (Hemingway 155.)

If you choose to look at this passage at face value, it can come across that it is simply a story about a drifter that does not enjoy fishing in a difficult swamp. But in order to do the passage proper justice, one must analyze it through the struggle of the combat veteran. Hemingway’s swamp that he presented in front of Nick was a symbol of the society that Nick had chosen to avoid. Off on his own in the woods and on the road, Nick could find therapy and ease in his passage and reintegration, much like the ease found in fishing the clear open waters of the creek. But once he drifted closer to the deeper and swampy waters, life becomes more challenging to deal with, much like the reintegration directly into society. Hemingway describes this as the “tragic adventure” (155), which in turn, is what Arthur Miller was able to capture in his 1947 play. Where we see the focus on an isolated individual through Nick in Hemingway’s story, Miller chose to focus on the experience of a combat veteran that implanted himself back into his family and society.

One of the elements that Miller presented was the impact of the generation gap between the combat veteran in his story, Chris Keller, and his father, Joe Keller. We are told throughout the dialogue of the play that Joe was taking English classes at night which points evidence that he was originally an immigrant to the United States. This was very common in the United States during the 1940’s and would have been easy for Miller’s audience to relate to (Gross 15). Joe was also a very successful business man during this time due to his ownership of a manufacturing company that was dependent on contracts with the military during the war. Joe comes from the generation where family establishment is the primary goal and achievement in life. To Joe, his very world is providing for his family, and as a result his business (Gross 16). For Joe, the American Dream and opportunities that he is giving to his sons is the greatest accomplishment in life that he can have. It is not that he does not care about a bigger picture outside the realm of his family, it is that his family is that bigger picture.

When Joe made the decision to sign off on faulty plane parts being sent off to the war, it was from the fear of failing at his bigger picture. If Joe would have reported the faulty parts, he would of more than likely lost his contract with the Army and in turn his business. To Joe, the money he was making and the success he was having in business was in order to provide something better for his sons that he did not have. His love and commitment were to his two sons, Larry and Chris, and giving them an opportunity to start fresh when they return home from the War. Joe’s love for his family blinded him to the consequences that sending those faulty parts off would result in the death of 21 pilots. These consequences were a part of the bigger picture that Chris became all too familiar with in his time of war.

Chris was a representation of the generation that found more of a priority to the ideals of a bigger picture then just the family structure like his father. For starters, Chris served as a Captain in the war. The aspects of sacrifice and commitment to his country took a precedent in him to enlist well before he ever became aware of the realities of combat. We see this ideology in Chris’s Act II confrontation with Joe when he finds out the truth about Joe sending off the faulty parts. Chris says, “Where do you live, where have you come from? For me!—I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me?” (Miller 70). Through the realization that his father continued to make money off of the parts that led to fellow service members dying, Chris’s nature is reestablished through this conflict (Hooti, and Azizpour 2). By asking his father “where do you live”, Chris is trying to make his father realize the impact of his actions.

We already are aware at this point in the play of the inner guilt that Chris battles and deals with from the loss of his men. We know this from his dialogue with Ann in Act I when Chris says,

I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt…what you said…ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you’ve got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you’ve got to be a little better because of that. (36)

Chris was internally battling this at the beginning of the play but through the realities of the generation gap between him and his father and the outlook that comes with the ideals of this “bigger picture”, Arthur introduced another element of the tragic adventure, survivor’s guilt.

The element of survivor’s guilt is what separated “All My Sons” from previous forms of literature highlighting the experience of war-impacted families. In his 2011 article, “The Nature of Guilt in Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*”, Noorbakhsh Hooti points out that the element of guilt can be pointed out in many different ways and circumstances. Hooti also points out the fact that guilt can be present even when the aspect of wrong-doing is not there (1). Arthur Miller establishes this reality through his characters in the Keller family, through Chris as the Combat Veteran, and through Kate and Joe as the mourning parents of their other son, Larry.

As stated in a previous paragraph, Chris was battling with this guilt from the beginning of the play. Through his dialogue with Ann, Arthur Miller highlights the reality of this guilt that many combat veterans face still today. In a 2009 research report by the *Journal of Traumatic Studies*, it was found that guilt and depression were the most frequent factors in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and post war social problems amongst combat veterans (Owens 657). Miller was able to capture this reality through his play in 1947. Miller wrote in his *Collected Plays* that this play was “designed to bring a man into the direct path of the consequences he has wrought” (Marino 191). Chris stresses to Ann that the lack of sight on the blood that was sacrificed is evident around them. The ideals that Chris must live with now is the knowledge that there is a greater love of man laying down his life for another man. The survivor’s guilt he carries is that those selfless men are dead, and he is still alive. Chris also tells Ann, “They didn’t die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they’d’ve been here today” (Miller 34). He feels guilty finding enjoyment in the selfishness of everyday life that many people in the American society overlook. This disconnect derives from the exposure of the ultimate sacrifice for one another and then being reintegrated into a society of individuality, or the “rat-race” as Chris states.

Upon the realization of his father’s actions, Miller forced Chris to face his very ideals in the setting of his home. To Chris, the disconnect that Joe had to the pilots that died was a reality of his new ideology, only it was his flesh and blood that had carried out the act. Chris saw the actions of his father as a business opportunity that was being exalted off the efforts and blood of his fellow service men. This reality carried even heavier weight when in Act III the suicide letter from Larry, the eldest son, surfaced via Ann, his fiancé (Miller 83). In this scene, the entire family is finally given the truth; that Larry was unable to live with the guilt that his father had made money off faulty parts that caused the deaths of 21 pilots. Larry came to the decision that he was not going to be able to live in the world that Joe had built him off the blood of his fellow pilots. Arthur Miller was able to portray this prior to modern studies that have shown that the correlation of combat induced guilt and suicidal tendencies in veterans is apparent (Bryan 41). Larry belonged to the same ideology as Chris. He was exposed to the bigger picture. Arven Wells points out in his article, “The Living and the Dead in All My Sons”, that Joe was able to live in his sense of security prior to the influence of his son’s ideals (4). What Chris’s ideals of brotherly sacrifice and Larry’s letter of suicidal guilt did to Joe was shatter that sense of security. Through this shattering, Arthur Miller presents another aspect of the survivor’s guilt to his play, only this time it is through the father Joe.

Prior to this shattering of security, Joe was able to live with the fact that his parts impacted other people because to him, his family was the height of his reality. To him, those 21 pilots were just part of the distant outside world. He did not see the connection of his two sons in war to those that were affected by his faulty parts. One-way Arthur Miller established this in the play was by the scenery he presented. The entirety of the play takes place in the Keller’s back yard. This can be seen as symbolism of the world that Joe maintains his perspective in. Even within that backyard, the Keller’s had planted a tree for Larry who they thought had just gone missing. We also see in the beginning of the play Larry’s tree is destroyed in a storm. Kate Keller, the mother in the play, interprets this as a sign that Larry is actually still alive. However, if we look at the scenery as a symbol of Joe’s security, the destruction of the tree can be viewed as the destruction of Joe security and in-turn what is soon to unfold in the rest of the play.

In Joe’s security, if Larry is still alive and just missing then his presumed innocence of not having an effect on the outside world still holds merit. The tree in the setting of Joe’s backyard represents that falsehood. At the same time, the storm that destroys the tree can be viewed as the intrusion of Chris’s new ideals and the truth within Larry’s letter. The colliding of the ideals between father and son forces Joe to confront the reality that his son Larry, would rather die than live in the world of Joe’s backyard. In addition to this, Joe’s son Chris wants to leave and separate himself from his father. Joe makes it clear in Act III that he now sees the bigger picture that his sons have seen. In reference to Larry’s letter, Joe states, “Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were” (83). We can gather from Joe’s statement that he realized by him being a part of the American society, he holds a sense of responsibility to all the soldiers that were fighting in the war, not just his two sons.

Chris enforces this ideal to his mother when he tells her that Larry did not kill himself just so she and Joe would feel sorry. Chris states, “You can be better! Once and for all you can know there’s a universe of people outside and you’re responsible to it, and unless you know that you threw away your son because that’s why he died” (84). By the following action of Joe taking his own life, Arthur Miller made it undeniable the effects that Chris and Larry’s ideals had on their father. Joe had built his entire world for his sons. When Joe finally comes to terms with the fact that his eldest son, Larry, killed himself due to his connection with those 21 pilots, Joe breaks. This clashing of ideals is what makes the reintegration for soldiers returning from war so difficult.

Some soldiers choose to take the role of Nick in “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I & II.” They isolate themselves; but in their perspectives, they would rather not take on the tragic adventure of trying to infuse their survivor guilt ideals to the back-yard perspective of everyday society. The very society that had glorified their departures in the beginning of the war, is the same society that they had to kill to return to. The horrors of the loss they underwent, not only through brotherly love but also the loss of their innocence and simple perspectives, are then amplified upon their return when faced with the reality that the majority of society went on without them. The same society that demands retribution at the hands of another’s loved one when their country is attacked, is the same society that is blind to their red-stained hands when they return home. Arthur Miller was able to capture these elements in “All My Sons”, not only through the veteran’s perspective in Chris, but also the weight this ideal of sacrifice can carry on a society if realized, such as through his character Joe. Seventy years later, the decision to enter the swamp is still very real for combat veterans. Which leads one to wonder, can gap between society and veteran ever be bridged? One can only pray.

For,

Malachi Villegas

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