



## PRAGMATISM IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *ALL MY SONS*

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the evolution of Realism in the different parts of the world especially in the light of Realism in Arthur Miller's play All My Sons. Arthur Miller with this play has brought back into the theatre, the drama of social question. His plays belong to the school of social realism which has been enriched by the writers like Henrick Ibsen, John Galsworthy and George Bernard Shaw. Miller is a social dramatist. His plays pragmatically deal with the social themes like the one related to the relationship between the individual and the family or the society and American dream. He deals with the American dream and the social matters in a realistic manner, highlighting the issues of his age.*

**Keywords:** Realism, Individual, Society, Pragmatism, Theatre, Family, American dream.

### INTRODUCTION

We all are influenced by the world around us and the experiences affect our personality. In the same way, an author is influenced by the past and the society he lives in and hence it has a huge impact on his writings. In order to understand realism of Arthur Miller it becomes very important to study the life of the author in the background. Arthur Miller, in full Arthur Asher Miller, one of the most outspoken Americans, held generally progressive and radical views and has variously written against racism, capitalism and Vietnam War. All these ideas are reflected in his plays. Miller's characters, especially the protagonists, were not someone of heroic stature rather the exploited and harassed individual of modern society.

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Among the twentieth century's greatest playwrights, Arthur Miller is recognized today as a formative influence on modern American drama. His best plays seamlessly combine the psychological and the social to produce riveting treatments of the fraught relationship between the individual and society. Never satisfied with American realism, he experimented widely throughout his career, drawing on aesthetics as wide-ranging as classical Greek drama, Henrik Ibsen's realism, and Bertolt Brecht's symbolism and expressionism. Like his plays, he maintained a strong sense of political and social responsibility, serving as the president of PEN International and advocating on behalf of artists everywhere for freedom of expression.

Arthur Miller is considered one of the foremost American playwrights of the twentieth century who wrote a remarkable series of highly regarded pieces that reveal profound insight, humanism and empathy that are the hallmarks of his great dramatic works. Miller started writing plays during his college days. Those amateur stage plays were followed by radio plays. He didn't enjoy writing plays for radio as the medium was full of restrictions and taboo. Miller was heavily influenced by the tumultuous time of his time: The Great Depression and the Civil War. The works of Eugene O' Neil, Chekov and Henrick Ibsen inspired him the most. He was considerably influenced by expressionism, socialism, realism, naturalism and symbolism. He says, I connected with Ibsen...because he was illuminating process. Nothing in his plays exists for itself, not a smart line, not a gesture that can be isolated (Miller 37).

In this study the focus would remain on the first phase of his thinking, before his entry into the world of cinema and glamour, and therefore, the five plays containing in Collected Plays have been chosen here which are *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955) and *A View From the Bridge* (1956). This is because in this early phase, Arthur Miller has pronounced Marxist view and his early plays are considered to be his best plays. Later he drifted towards upper strata when he married Marilyn Monroe. Even in *The Crucible* and *A View From the Bridge*, there is a deviation towards the psychological depiction of characters more than the economic issues.

Arthur Miller uses Marxism as a tool to comment upon Capitalism. Since economy is basis of every nation, Miller uses this base to draw themes of this plays. He believes that literature should reflect the age in full accuracy. Miller is highly influenced by the works of Shaw, Ibsen or Chekhov but his world is not very similar to that of these dramatists. His work unveils a truth already known but unrecognized as such due to ignorance or lack of insight.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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This study relies on the various aspects of Miller's life and the changes that mould the playwright's approach towards literature especially in his treatment of the subjects in realistic fashion. Further, this study traces the beginning of realism and treatment of realism in different countries of the world. This study pragmatically examines the historical background of the playwright's country i.e. America followed by connecting Arthur Miller's plays to Realism especially in *All My Sons*. This study also compares two of the Arthur Miller's best known plays namely *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* bringing out the common topics and the major differences which make them unique in their own way.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is the tendency of the writers to get influenced by the word and the happenings around. *All My Sons* is the mirror reflective of the age and various critics have talked about it at length. Steven Centola, 1997 says, In *All My Sons*, Miller adopts Ibsen's technique of gradually "bringing the past into the present". The war and the aftermath of the war and its destruction is the highlight of the play. Christopher Bigsby, 2000 writes that for Joe, the protagonist of the play, "appearance... matters more than reality." Escaping the bitter truths of reality to a disillusioned world was the major tendencies of a post war world. "No man is an island entire of it; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." John Donne, 1624

### Textual Study:

Miller in his plays writes on contemporary issues of society. A confrontation with society enforces upon us certain prejudices. Some of the common themes which dominate the work of Millers are division between the rich and the poor, ever increasing hunger for materialism, importance of family and deviated relationships and subjugation of women, and man's quest of meaning of life in this imperfect life. *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A Memory of Two Mondays* and *A View From the Bridge* plays an important role in the dramatic presentation of the American society and are perfect examples of Miller dealing with contemporary issues of the society.

*Society is inside of man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not. The fish is in the water and the water is in the fish (Miller 37).*

Most of the characters of Miller's plays were not people belonging to higher strata to life rather a common man. In his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man* he says:



I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations (Miller 1).

Although it's anti-American themes sparked controversy, *Death of a Salesman* ran for 742 performances and won the Tony Award for Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Realism or verisimilitude is a pragmatic approach to represent the subject matter or describe life, without fabrication. It also means that realism tries to avoid impossible events like exotic and supernatural events and misconception of fairytale. Realism was introduced in late 1800s but became popular in mainstream art and literature in the nineteenth century in Europe (France) and from there it travelled all across the world to countries like England and United States of America. It did not begin as a coherent group which means initially it wasn't a movement; in fact, critics used the term under many different forms as they tried to categorize the various styles of arts the artists were working in. Later on, realism became a movement in art as a steer away from romanticism which dominated the French literature and art from the late eighteenth century. Realism rejected Classical subjectivity i.e. the traditional form of art and literature.

*Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and the unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavors to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there; to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance (Rawlings 313-24).*

Hence, realism as a movement in literature addresses group as a whole, mostly middle and lower class lifestyles where the characters or the protagonists is result of social factors which forms an integral aspects of dramatic complications. Realism prefers culture over nature and the representation of society and its norms, religiously or politically, involve real life circumstances. In literature, the writers prohibited themselves from using embellished words rather resorted to colloquial language. They designed their settings, characters, plots without

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using figurative language like similes and metaphors. Most of the writers were pragmatist giving much emphasis on observation, facts and experiences rather than emotions. Hence we can clearly conclude that realism was a strong reaction against romanticism as romanticism spoke larger than life, favored idealization as well as imaginative world which was far away from reality and relying on decorative language and sugar-coating of events contrary to the principles of realism. Realism didn't begin as a coherent and uniform movement but it was felt heavily in the world literature especially in the literature of Europe and America.

The prominent aspect of the plays of Arthur Miller is that he has brought back into the theatre, the drama of social questions. All the plays of Arthur Miller have an essence of realism in it. The realistic dramatist is one who seeks truth to observe facts (facts about the outer world or his own feelings), while an idealist dramatist wants to create an ideal picture, whether true or not. Arthur Miller as a dramatist tries to include within the limits of drama almost everything and not just merely presenting one-sided view of it. In his drama, he deals with all the facts of contemporary American life, the pleasant as well as the unpleasant, the beautiful as well as the ugly. Life, in his dramas, is presented with detached accurate, regardless of morals or ideological conventions.

The drama of social questions in England were rejected on the grounds of being superficial because the dramatic forms in which social questions were ordinarily raised had become inadequate: declined low-pressure naturalism. Arthur Miller, one of the greatest American dramatists, acts as a catalyst to break out from this deadlock through his reinvigorating passion of revival and effective range of experiment in dramatic forms. His five plays is a reflection of his excellent creative effort.

*Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are not studied nor are the individuals are merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in complete personal terms (Williams 278).*

The main aspect of realism in the plays of the Arthur Miller lies in the idea of relationship of the individual to society. The relationship between an individual and the society co-exist with each other i.e. it is an inseparable process. Neither the individual is seen as a single entity nor is the society considered as a whole. This is very much evident in his plays like *The Death of the Salesman* and *All My Sons*. The themes of the plays of Arthur Miller are contemporary in nature which gives a clear reflection American society and their lifestyle. American Dream, duty and responsibility, materialism, types of ethics and the social and moral obligations of business are some of the prominent aspects of his plays. The way he deals with these topics

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elevates him to a dramatist with abundant talents, who understood the essence of his age and penned down beautifully in his works. His works distinguish him from the ordinary sociological problem play; his successful characters are not just figures in his plays but living entities bringing the true essence of contemporary American society.

Miller's experimentation with the realistic style in his plays is aimed to discover the ultimate truth about the individual in the society. Miller was of opinion that a dramatist's goal should be to merge 'surface of experience with cogent emotional life of an individual' (Miller 35). Miller always favored dramas and stage production of the plays to reflect reality and evaluation of life with characters as real and passionate as the man in real life which through passion seek awareness. Miller's realism is very much conventional in style yet he doesn't ignore the psychological and emotional understanding of human beings. Miller acknowledges a major debt to Henrik Ibsen and declares that he has stood squarely in conventional realism. In order to assess Arthur Miller as a realistic dramatist, it becomes quite important to deal with some of his major plays. Miller's plays like *Death of the Salesman*, *All My Sons*, and *The Crucible* highlight the realistic theme of American dream, disillusionment, estrangement, and parent-child relationship. In all the three plays, the driving force that governs the parent-child relationship is the guilt- the father stands for idealism whereas the sons stand as the destroyer of the idealistic approach of their fathers toward life. This creates friction, a kind of tension in their relationship leading to disillusionment and estrangement. On looking at *All My Sons* in universal terms: Joe Keller tries to offer the world to his son irrespective of the crime and its consequences; on the other hand, Chris rejects his love by giving sentence of death on him, leaving him in pain and guilt. Similarly in *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, like Joe Keller, lived all of his life for the validation from his family hence living in a world of illusion and yet again his sons rejects him leaving him in a state of despair and anguish which ultimately leads to suicide of Willy Loman. Miller's another play *A View from the Bridge* presents a rough type of realism. It is a drama of passion almost an uncontrollable Freudian passion for a girl named Catherine by Eddie Carbone. Miller gives a new dimension of human personality through this play by exploring the hidden forces of instinct and passion. *A Memory of Two Mondays* is a short autobiographical One-act play that examines life of factory workers without hope through the lenses of unhappiness, frustration and the age of depression.

You're a boy, what could

The father of modern drama and the pioneer of realism as a literary trend had major influence on Arthur Miller. If we clearly observe the undercurrent theme of the play, we find Miller has depicted a complex father-son relationship which gets influenced by the unavoidable circumstances and environment. The common theme of *All My Sons* is the struggle between individual and society and their struggle to co-exist together. The plot at its very core



questions an individual's duty towards society, personal responsibility, and distinction between private and public matters.

Joe Keller has devoted all his life to run a successful business career and in providing a comfortable life for his family. During war time, he provided defective cylinder heads to the US army which led to the murders of 21 American pilots. However, Keller didn't stop here; he puts the entire blame on his innocent staff, a weaker link, Steve Deever. Keller was so strongly guided but his intense love for his family and by an intense emotion to protect his business at all costs that he never felt guilty for the heinous crime he committed. All his excuses are restricted to, For you, Kate, for both of you, that's all I lived for (Miller 64) i.e. his family. But the ending of the play gives us enough proof that the principal contention is that Joe Keller is wrong in his claim that there is nothing greater than family.

It was during the Second World War when Miller started writing this play and hence, the impact of horrors of the war is clearly evident. The war resulted in the death of Larry, the war highlights the capitalist mind frame in form of Joe Keller and post war disillusionment of Chris. Miller wanted to reflect the pragmatic reality of war time profiteering. He said, everybody knew that a lot of hanky-panky was going on... A lot of illicit fortunes were made, a lot of junk was being sold out to the armed services, and we all knew that. The average person was violating rationing. All the rules were violated everyday but you wanted not to mention it (Bigsby 5). Keller admits that wartime production was stressful and in order to protect his business and his family he day to ship the defective cylinders head. He says to Chris:

*You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business. A hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business. You got a process, the process don't work you're out of business. You don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear your contracts, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? (Miller 59)*

While, Chris who is an idealist didn't understand his father's explanation for his heinous crime as a defense to protect his family. He screams at his father burning in fury,

*For me! 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? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the  
Goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?  
What is that, the world of business? What the hell do you mean, you*

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*did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world?  
What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills  
his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear  
the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do? (Miller 60).*

Chris suffered the horrors of the war and hence, he wanted the society to give up on the rat-race and transforms for good. His idealistic thoughts clash against a capitalist system that encourages individuals to value business over moral sense. The play also deals with a major question, how past affects the present and future. Miller through this play tells us that escaping the truth is unavoidable and one day truth will be revealed, the revelation is unavoidable and one has to bear its fatal consequences. Keller lived in a world full of lies and illusion and however much he justifies himself he cannot escape the consequences of his past actions and it will affect his present and future. Chris tells Ann, We are going to live now (Miller 28). The play very ironically moves forward only to shatter his confidence with the revelations of truth, everybody avoided.

Miller is a staunch critic of contemporary American society. He is against the Materialism, exploitation, escaping from one's responsibilities and injustice. The play also deals with the American belief of accumulation of wealth and material possessions of the post-Second World War society. Joe takes pride in calling himself self-made and gets amused by the increasing trend of education in the country. He says, It's a tragedy: you stand on the street today and spit, you're gonna hit a college man (Miller 40). Joe feels there's nothing wrong in the money he has earned and he wants his family to feel the same way. However, when Kate confronts that the source of his wealth is an outcome of death of pilots and fraud, he becomes defensive and says, You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you? (Miller 64). This whole incidence highlights the theme of self-interest versus responsibility the people owe to the society. When Frank praises the profession of doctor as it serves humanity, Jim very sarcastically says, I would love to help humanity on a Warner Brothers salary (Miller 5).

Chris is the spokesperson of Miller himself. Chris is highly disturbed by the sharp contrast the two world offer: the one were soldiers' sacrifice their lives for their country, the other where the people had no regard for the sacrifices instead they used war for profits and accumulating wealth. The other world is a prime example of American Dream. Chris wanted the society to change and while talking to Ann he compares the two worlds and presents a sharp contrast.

Miller ended the play with the suicide of Joe Keller who could face the truth and the hatred of his son. Miller highlights the ordinariness of the character who lived all his life in illusion and when it got shattered he could not face it and eventually took a shortcut by ending his life.

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Miller also suggests that suicide is a form of revenge. Even though Joe Keller was guilty, his suicide led many characters who felt sole responsible for this act of Keller. Even though Chris was right in condemning his father, his father suicide would never let him feel happy.

## CONCLUSION

One question that stayed with me throughout the study was: Which literary genre of the two is most appropriate- Idealism or Pragmatism?

With the constant introspection and analysis, I reached to a conclusion that to say that the either of the two is the best would be a blatantly implausible claim. If we closely examine both the literary genre, we can say that Idealism is to see things in a way as we want whereas pragmatism is to see the things as they happen in a current situation and what they are, and how they are. Realism began with mid-nineteenth century. It was an age when the world witnessed new changes: a complete shift in the perception. Talking exclusively in the context of America, the country witnessed the Great Depression and the Civil War and this brought a revolution in the literature of America. Capitalist exploitation, economic inequality and materialism led to a paradigm shift in the writers approach towards the literature. The fairy tales or the dream world created by the idealist writers, presenting the rosy picture of the society was disturbed when reality pierced through the carefully created layers of the positive impressions.

This whole project is a detailed study of realism and pragmatic approach especially in context of Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*. Arthur Miller like George Bernard Shaw used his tool of writing to address the problems of the society, expose the evils present in it and to bring a desired reform in the world they lived in. Today's world is no different than the world Miller lived in. However, there's a sense of awareness and consciousness towards all the evil inherent in the society and literature acts as a medium to address these problem. Hence realism as a literary genre acts a mirror to represent lives as it is without idealizing it. Therefore, we can safely conclude that realism as a literary genre is still relevant in this modern contemporary world and pragmatics is the need of the hour to meet the challenges of the cosmopolitan culture.

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