

Arthur Miller's All My Sons in the Light of Aristotle's Poetics

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Miller has been concerned in most of his plays socio-economic aura of the 'Depression Age' of American civilization. The disintegration of American dream was close to Miller's sensibility. All My Son gave him professional recognition and an identity as promising playwright. All My Sons was Arthur Miller's first successful play. In All My Sons, Arthur Miller has depicted the dark side of American Dreams by exposing immoral activities in the life of his protagonist Joe Keller. In All My Sons, Miller deals with the themes of materialism, wartime profiteering, and man's relationship and compulsion to society above and beyond the concerns of his own family circle. In the present article, it is tried to look on Miller's play All My Sons in the perspective of Aristotle's Poetics ignoring his concept of tragic hero.

In the sixth chapter of the Poetics, Aristotle defines tragedy and discusses its function, constituent parts, and relationship of plot and character. According to him, plot (mythos), character (ethos), thought (dianoia), diction (lexis), song (melos), and spectacle (opsis) are six constitutive parts of a tragic play. Tragedy is an artistic/imaginative representation or reworking (mimesis) of action (praxis) of a noble character (spoudaios) which is complete (teleios) and of proper size (megethos); in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action (dramon), not of narrative (apangelias); as such to effect the catharsis of pitiable and fearful incidents exciting our emotions of pity and fear. This is a formal-structural attempt to dovetail all characteristics of a tragedy to be consistent with Aristotle's Poetics. All structural elements get together make pitiable and fearful events in the text bearable, beautiful, and pleasure-giving to audience. Mere selection of tear-jerking and terrifying situations cannot promise pleasure. According to Aristotle, in the mimetic process two fundamental principles of probability (eikos) and necessity (ananke) ensure success. This is what in 19th century Mathew Arnold termed 'poetic truth and poetic beauty'. By action Aristotle meant all human activities including thoughts and feelings of rational human beings. In terms of key components of a tragedy, Aristotelians stress plot (mythos) and characterization as two factors of prime importance in a tragic play.

Plot is the logical structuring of events. It should be complete and a perfect unit having traceable beginning, middle, and end. All the events must be dovetailed with perfection. The transposal or withdrawal of any event may spoil the wholeness of the play. The arbitrary or haphazard arrangement is not acceptable so that the total structure look cogent and natural. In chapter X Aristotle talks of two kinds of plot – simple and complex. He also mentions the 'episodic' plot which is a sub-division of the simple plot. It is the worst type. In it there is no observance of the principles of necessity and probability. Simple plot is without 'peripeteia' and 'anagnorisis'. The complex plot inheres both. 'Peripeteia' means reversal of fortune or intention, and 'anagnorisis' means revelation or discovery. Thus the plot is divided into three parts- 'epitasis' or rising action, in which the incidents tend to reach a certain conclusion. Then, 'peripeteia', and last step is 'denouement' or falling action. The 'epitasis' is divided into 'exposition' and 'complication'. By 'exposition' the playwright seeks to explain the necessary events that happened before the beginning of the dramatic action. The 'complication' extends from the beginning to the point where the dramatic action takes a twist either for good or bad. The 'denouement' extends from the turning point to the end of the play representing the tragic protagonist struggling against inescapable situation, and is left with no choice. The plot may engage variety of incidents but it

should have a unity. Every event has a logical connection with the rest of action. Aristotle in chapter V talks of 'unity of time'. He thinks it proper to restrict within 'one circuit of the sun'. About 'unity of place' he is silent. Aristotle stresses 'unity of action'.

Aristotle alluded in chapter second that a tragedy is mainly concerned with the action of noble man (spoudaios) while comedy ignoble ones (phaulos). But it does not mean that actions of other dramatic characters are negligent. They move around the action of noble character. Now the question is who 'spoudaios' is? Spoudaios is one who is grave and serious or worthy of serious attention. Originally it was used to mean someone who was in haste, earnest, quick, serious, and zealous. In this way, 'spoudaios' does not mean that the characters are necessarily of high moral standing or that they must always be kings, heroes, or gods: the title character of Euripides' Medea is a wicked sorceress. Renaissance and neo-classical scholars mistook the concept of 'spoudaios'. They meant 'spoudaios' character of great reputation. According to them, tragic characters must be always kings or princes, great soldiers while comedy is peopled with the working or servant classes, but Aristotle was not talking about social or political distinctions. For him character is determined not by birth but by moral choice. A noble character is one who takes life seriously and seeks worthwhile goals, while comic characters are "good-for-nothings" who just waste their lives in trivial pursuits (Else 77).

In chapter XIII, Aristotle argues that three types of characters are not to be engaged in a tragic performance. First, a good man should not be seen passing from happiness to misery; second, a bad man from misery to happiness; third, an extremely bad man passing from happiness to misery. According to him, a tragic character is one who is not pre-eminently good and just but is highly renowned and prosperous and suffers from 'hamartia' - intellectual error, miscalculation or wrong step- which brings about his/her downfall which he/she does not fully deserve. The protagonist's fall is caused by 'hamartia' not by some vice or moral depravity of nature. In chapter XV Aristotle suggested four points while delineating characters to be taken into account. First, the character should be good (chrestos); second, appropriate (harmotton); third, like us (homoios); and fourth, consistent (homalon).

In the definition of tragedy, the last but evergreen and moot term catharsis is yet to be focused briefly. It must not be explained depending on audience psychology. The Poetics is a kind of grammar dealing with technical aspects that make a drama successful. It is a manual of playwrights. In this sense it is foolish to take catharsis as a medical, moral, religious, or intellectual metaphor. Catharsis at the structural level is a kind of a potential which lends charm to the situations of fear and pity. Otherwise, reader or audience would lose the control over him/her and could not enjoy fully. By dint of catharsis fearful and pitiable incidents get moderate, pleasing, and bearable to audience. All the terms mentioned in the definition getting together bring about catharsis or beautification.

As per the conviction of the present author, Arthur Miller's All My Sons (1947) is to be viewed in the light of Aristotle's dramaturgy. The play portrays events restricted to 'one circuit of the sun' (Poetics; chapter V). More precisely, it covers eighteen hours. Miller brilliantly teases reader and audience by keeping truth in twilight. By implications, reader knows everything except the conclusion that is the suicide of the hero Joe Keller. All the three acts of the play are dovetailed to a large extent. The first act is made a little larger. At the very outset of the play it is hinted by histrionic devices that something happened wrong in the past. On the stage, "the four-foot-high stump of a slender apple-tree whose upper trunk and branches lie toppled beside it, fruit still clinging to its branches" (All My Sons 1). Later on, Kate Keller, the wife of Joe Keller sees in the dream blown down apple tree which was planted in the memory of her son Larry who is missing. To say it simply, before the start off the play it is reported that Larry the elder brother of Chris is lost perhaps dead. Joe Keller the catalyst in this tragedy is a business man, ships out defective rather cracked cylinder heads of P-40 airplane. Consequently, 21 pilots lost their lives. His partner Steve Deever is held guilty in the court and sent to jail. After this tragic event, Joe Keller took fourteen months to recover and regain lost position and recognition in the society and business.

If the first act is the beginning, the second act is middle and the third act is the denouement section. No doubt, Miller elongated a little the beginning and curtailed remaining acts. In the first act, Ann Deever the daughter of Steve Deever, once neighbor to Keller family before shifting to

New York visits Keller's house to meet Chris. She also comes to know through Sue that neighbors still hold Joe Keller responsible for the loss of 21 pilots. And moreover, three and a half years past since Larry's missing report; Kate Keller hopes for Larry's come-back. Larry before committing suicide wrote a letter addressing Ann but she kept it hidden. To narrate the post effect of this event, Miller observed brilliantly the principles of eikos and ananke. The plot of the play is complex.

The play is about the chequered career of Joe Keller, the tragic hero. Three and a half years ago he took a poor rather tragic decision to supply airplanes having defective cylinder heads which claimed 21 lives. This event defamed him badly and spoiled his business. To get back former position, he took fourteen months. But after recovery, the real story of the play begins. Ann Deever came to meet Chris with an intention to get married with. Chris is also in love with her. Chris convinces Joe that Larry will never come back. He is going to tie knot with Annie. Joe Keller finds his decision awkward. His mother Kate never could reconcile herself that Larry was dead. Ann and her brother George never visited jail where their father was languishing. Joe brings her round that Steve had no malice or intention to supply defective heads. On some impulses, George visited jail, Steve persuaded him. Meanwhile George confirmed that Annie was set to marry Chris. In order to prevent her marriage with a man of bloody lineage came to Joe Keller's house. When George comes to the truth, he gets hostile and remorseful. Having broken the long, mysterious betrayal of his father, he is now convinced of his father's blamelessness and assumes that Joe has used his father for a "sucker." He wants Ann not to marry Chris because Joe has deceived and destroyed the Deever family. He breathlessly blurts out:

My life turned upside down since then. I couldn't go back to work when you left. I wanted to go to Dad and tell him you were going to be married. It seemed impossible not to tell him. He loved you so much. [He pauses] Annie – we did a terrible thing. We can never be forgiven. Not even to send him a card at Christmas. I didn't see him once since I got home from the war! (All My Sons 56-57).

Before George turns up, Kate asks Joe to be smart and cautious. Her instruction throws light on her inner sense that she also accepts Larry's death. In the second act George turns up and persuades Annie not to get married with Chris. Joe Keller wishes to hand over the ownership of his enterprise and make him a famous businessman. Chris rejects categorically and expressed his desire to settle down somewhere having a family. He is not altogether interested in Joe's property as he takes it all bloody. Joe received a shocking jolt at Chris's behavior. He even tells him if he marries Annie, it is simply the declaration of Larry's death. Chris having been fed up by war-time experiences, he turned practical and sought to know the relevance of all criminal acts done for the sake of family and its comfort. He wanted his father to explain him:

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 up 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? [His voice cracking.] I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop'em before anybody took off (All My Sons 74-5).

Chris angrily criticizes Joe and his business ethics:

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—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 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 (All My Sons 75-6).

Kate is of the opinion that Chris may pardon Joe, provided he confesses frankly his guilt, and that might quench Chris's philosophy and leave insisting on sending Joe to jail. Chris claims that there

is nothing to forgive Joe. Joe reveals one more fact that he wasn't the only one who profited the war in anticipation that Chris' filial love should forgive him:

There's nothin' he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son....Nothin's bigger than that. And you're goin' to tell him, you understand? I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that, I'll put a bullet in my head (All My Sons 81).

Kate Keller's illusion that Larry is alive shattered when Ann brings his suicide letter and reads out before Kate. At first, Ann seems willing enough to let Kate persist in her delusion that Larry is alive. When Ann could sense Kate's intuition that Larry really died on November 25 instead of being "nearly killed that day," Ann resists the desire to shatter Kate's hopes. Out of her wifely love, Kate pleads with Chris to protect Joe from the damning news of the letter. Larry committed suicide out of shame.

Joe proved himself a self-centered man in business whom money and family are everything. Chris is uninterested in his father's endeavor. Keller says: "...what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you!" (All My Sons 15). His only accomplishment is son. He wants Chris to pay attention to him but Chris is planning to go away from the house. Keller asks for Kate's apology and gives reasons: "You wanted money so I made money. What must I be forgiven?" (All My Sons 81). Kate's answer broke his heart into pieces:

I didn't want it in that way, either! What differences is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should've put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and made him earn his keep. Then he'd know how a buck is made in this world. Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I- (All My Sons 81).

In the end both Chris and Kate strongly condemn him. Joe feels estranged and broken altogether. He realized that all attempts done for the comfort of his son and wife were meaningless, and moreover realized that one's responsibility is not restricted merely to his / her family only. At last he commits suicide. At his suicide, Chris feels broken but Kate asks him not to take himself responsible, forgetting all that live.

Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that the playwright observed and followed largely Aristotelian requirements of a tragedy. The principles of eikos and ananke, spoudaios, time, peripeteia, anagnorisis, hamartia, pity and fear, and catharsis can be explained with reference to All My Sons. Joe is a man like us. He is not a king or renowned soldier. Like Hardy's hero, Joe Keller is seen in the play ever ready to blanket his weaknesses. He is keen to surrender each and every one but cannot see and face his declining position. His pride proved him tragic. Larry's suicidal note, Ann's reappearance, George's disclosure of fact, Chris's decision to settle somewhere else turned things untoward. Joe's realization that all accident-met pilots were his sons materialized fully with the estrangement of Chris and Kate. We feel pity for his narrow mindedness. The virtue of catharsis rendered the play ever-pleasing and green puzzle.

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