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Capitalism, Morality and the Human Cost: A Comparative Study of *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*

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Abstract

This comparative study explores Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and All My Sons through the thematic lenses of capitalism, morality, and the human cost. Both plays offer a searing critique of the American Dream, exposing the moral compromises and emotional toll exacted by capitalist ideology. In Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman is consumed by his delusional pursuit of material success, leading to personal and familial disintegration. Conversely, All My Sons presents Joe Keller, whose moral failure in prioritizing business over ethics results in tragic consequences for his family and community. Through character analysis, dialogue, and symbolism, this study examines how Miller portrays the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the tragic erosion of ethical responsibility. The plays, while distinct in narrative, converge in their condemnation of a society that values profit over people, revealing the universal and enduring human cost of moral compromise in capitalist systems.

Keywords

Capitalism, The American Dream, Moral compromise, Human cost, Tragedy. Ethical responsibility, Consumerism, Familial disintegration, Social critique, Individual vs. society, Illusion vs. reality, Post-war America, Business ethics, Existential despair.

1. Introduction

A. Background Context

Arthur Miller remains one of the most significant voices in American theatre, not merely for his dramatic innovations but for his persistent engagement with moral, social, and economic

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questions that continue to define the American experience. As a socially conscious playwright, Miller consistently interrogated the fabric of American society, especially its deep entanglement with capitalism, the myth of the American Dream, and the resulting moral consequences for individuals and families. His works are not just theatrical narratives; they are socio-political commentaries aimed at revealing the often invisible psychological and ethical toll of living in a materialistic and competitive culture.

Born in 1915 during a period of immense industrial and cultural change in the United States, Miller came of age during the Great Depression, an event that shaped his worldview and deeply informed his artistic vision. The economic collapse of the 1930s exposed the fragility of capitalist structures and revealed the ways in which economic systems could devastate families and communities. Miller's personal experiences, including witnessing his own father's business failure during the Depression, infused his writing with an acute awareness of the human cost of economic instability and the often illusory nature of upward mobility in America (Bigsby 22).

From his early works onward, Miller established himself as a playwright who refused to separate the personal from the political. His plays critique the individual's role in society and frequently examine how socio-economic forces dictate personal ethics and relationships. In a 1949 interview, Miller stated that "the job of the writer is to remind people of what they have chosen to forget" (qtd. in Martin 45), a statement that underscores his belief in theatre as a tool for moral reckoning and social reflection. He did not write escapist drama but rather plays that forced audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and their society.

All My Sons (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) are among Miller's most enduring works, in large part because they exemplify his commitment to dramatizing the ethical dilemmas born out of America's capitalist ethos. In both plays, Miller exposes the tragic disjunction between public success and private morality, showing how capitalism can erode individual integrity and familial trust. He does so not through abstract theory but through the lived experiences of deeply human characters—fathers, sons, husbands—who are both perpetrators and victims of a profit-driven culture.

Critics have often noted that Miller's plays are deeply American in their concerns yet universal in their implications. As Christopher Bigsby observes, Miller was "always aware of the intersection between individual psychology and the larger forces of society," and it is in this intersection that his most profound insights emerge (Bigsby 40). His characters are not merely products of their own decisions but are shaped—often tragically—by economic structures and

cultural myths that reward ambition and suppress ethical reflection. In this regard, Miller can be seen as a moral philosopher disguised as a dramatist, continually pressing audiences to question the cost of success and the moral compromises it demands.

Moreover, Miller's work reflects an ethical realism grounded in his belief that art should engage with the real conditions of life. According to scholar Enoch Brater, Miller's plays "represent a sustained critique of the cultural logic of capitalism," one that refuses to idealize the individual at the expense of the collective good (Brater 13). His drama thus stands in contrast to more romanticized or individualistic representations of the American Dream, presenting instead a vision that is sobering, critical, and profoundly human.

Ultimately, Arthur Miller's position as a socially conscious playwright is inseparable from his commitment to revealing the contradictions at the heart of American capitalism. By focusing on ordinary people caught in extraordinary ethical dilemmas, Miller elevates the domestic sphere into a site of ideological struggle. In doing so, he challenges the audience to see that the personal is always political and that the pursuit of material success, when divorced from moral responsibility, can have devastating consequences—not only for individuals, but for the society that produces them.

B. Rationale of the Comparison

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* have often been studied independently for their dramatic form, character development, and thematic resonance. However, a comparative reading of these two early masterpieces offers a deeper insight into Miller's overarching critique of capitalism and its moral consequences. By juxtaposing the personal collapse of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* with the moral reckoning faced by Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, one can uncover Miller's sustained effort to examine how economic systems shape personal ethics, identity, and familial relationships. This paper seeks to explore not just what these plays say individually, but how, when read together, they offer a layered and urgent critique of the human cost embedded in the capitalist pursuit of success.

The rationale for this comparative study lies in Miller's unique ability to dramatize the intersection of private life and public ideology. In both plays, capitalism is not merely a background condition—it is an active force that influences character choices, defines values, and determines outcomes. Yet the form this influence takes differs significantly between the two. In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller's decision to prioritize business interests over human life reflects a broader critique of wartime profiteering and the suppression of ethical accountability

for the sake of economic stability (Brater 67). Conversely, in *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's downfall is more internalized; his tragedy stems from a blind belief in the capitalist myth that equates personal worth with financial success and likability (Bigsby 91). The contrast between Keller's external crime and Willy's internal delusion presents a rich basis for analyzing how capitalism operates on multiple levels—systemically and psychologically, socially and existentially.

Furthermore, this study is justified by the increasing relevance of Miller's concerns in the 21st century. In an era marked by corporate scandals, widening economic inequality, and the mental health toll of work-centric lifestyles, Miller's dramatization of capitalism's moral ambiguities remains pressing. Scholars such as Stephen Marino argue that Miller's plays remain "ethical templates for understanding how systemic forces and individual responsibility coexist in modern life" (Marino 24). The juxtaposition of Keller and Loman thus provides a dynamic case study for exploring themes that continue to resonate with contemporary audiences and readers: What is the cost of success? Can one be morally upright in a system that rewards profit over people? What happens to family and identity when economic failure is perceived as personal failure?

Apart from that, a comparative approach allows for a deeper engagement with Miller's evolving dramatic techniques. While both plays share structural similarities—two-act formats, climactic confrontations, tragic endings—their different dramatic rhythms and character arcs reveal Miller's experimentation with the boundaries of modern tragedy. *All My Sons*, rooted in classical dramatic structure, leads to a clear moral resolution, while *Death of a Salesman* complicates resolution through its non-linear narrative and psychological fragmentation. Analyzing these differences enhances our understanding of how form and content interact in Miller's social critique.

This paper also addresses a gap in many literary discussions, which often isolate these works rather than examine them in tandem. Though both plays are widely taught and frequently analyzed, few comparative studies have fully explored how Miller's recurring themes of morality, capitalism, and the American Dream are articulated differently across his early oeuvre. As Peter L. Hays notes, "a comparative framework reveals the consistency and development in Miller's social vision more clearly than reading each play in isolation" (Hays 78). This project, then, contributes to a broader academic conversation about Miller's legacy as a socially engaged dramatist and the evolving nature of American tragedy.

C. Research Aim

This research aims to explore the thematic and ideological critique of capitalism in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, with a particular focus on the moral consequences and psychological toll that the capitalist ethos imposes on the individual and the family. By engaging in a comparative analysis of these two seminal plays, this study seeks to demonstrate how Miller employs tragedy as a vehicle to reveal the disintegration of ethical values under the pressures of economic ambition, social conformity, and the relentless pursuit of the American Dream. The study will examine how both works depict capitalism not simply as an economic system, but as a cultural force that permeates human relationships, shapes moral choices, and ultimately leads to existential despair and familial fragmentation.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller presents the collapse of Willy Loman's identity as a man who has internalized capitalist ideology to the point of self-destruction. Willy's deluded pursuit of success—based on charisma, popularity, and financial achievement—exemplifies the dangerous allure of the American Dream when divorced from reality and ethical substance. His psychological unraveling and inability to reconcile his aspirations with his failures serve as a powerful indictment of a society that equates personal worth with professional success (Bigsby 103). Meanwhile, *All My Sons* foregrounds the external consequences of capitalist opportunism through Joe Keller, whose morally compromised decisions during wartime manufacturing cost the lives of twenty-one pilots and irreparably damage his family. While Willy's tragedy is rooted in self-deception and ideological entrapment, Keller's downfall is the result of conscious ethical failure in the pursuit of financial stability (Brater 61).

The primary objective of this research is thus to analyze how both plays construct a moral economy—an ethical framework within which characters make decisions, suffer consequences, and seek redemption or justice. Through a close comparative reading, the study will address how Miller dramatizes the interplay between individual agency and structural coercion in a capitalist context. As Stephen Marino observes, "Miller's characters exist in a world where social and economic systems offer few moral certainties, forcing them to navigate a labyrinth of personal and collective responsibility" (Marino 38).

By investigating these objectives, the paper will argue that *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* together articulate a powerful moral critique of American capitalism. While the former reveals the internal collapse of a man who cannot escape the ideology he embraces, the latter exposes the external fallout of ethical negligence driven by profit motives. Miller's vision, therefore, is not one of simplistic condemnation, but of tragic complexity—where personal

failure and systemic injustice are deeply entwined. As Peter L. Hays notes, “Miller's tragedies work not only because they expose individual weaknesses, but because they make visible the ideological forces that prey upon those weaknesses” (Hays 86). This study, in turn, seeks to make those forces and their human costs more intelligible through critical analysis.

2. Capitalism and the American Dream: A Thematic Foundation

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* each present a distinct, yet ultimately converging, critique of the American Dream as shaped by capitalist ideology. While both plays explore how the pursuit of material success becomes entangled with identity and morality, they do so through different narrative structures and character trajectories. In both cases, however, Miller portrays capitalism not as a neutral economic system, but as a cultural and ideological force that distorts ethical priorities, fractures human relationships, and reduces human worth to commercial utility.

The American Dream, often idealized as the promise of upward mobility through hard work and merit, becomes in Miller’s plays a destructive myth. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is a tragic embodiment of this myth—he believes that success is measured by popularity, surface charm, and financial gain. He repeatedly tells his sons that being "well-liked" is the key to prosperity, echoing a commodified view of personality as capital (Miller, *Death* 33). This belief, however, traps him in a cycle of denial a nd failure. Willy is unable to reconcile his modest achievements with the dream he has internalized, leading to his psychological deterioration. As Stephen Marino notes, “Willy’s tragedy lies not in personal failure but in his misrecognition of what success should be, a misrecognition fostered by capitalist culture” (Marino 49). Capitalism, in this context, functions ideologically: it convinces individuals that their self-worth is equivalent to their market value.

In contrast, *All My Sons* focuses more explicitly on the ethical implications of capitalist practice. Joe Keller’s decision to knowingly ship defective airplane parts during World War II, resulting in the deaths of 21 pilots, is rationalized as a means of preserving his business and securing his family’s future. He insists, “I did it for you, it was a business” (Miller, *All* 69), framing his actions as part of a broader economic logic that prioritizes profit over moral responsibility. This utilitarian calculus, while common in the business world, is exposed by Miller as morally bankrupt. The American Dream, in this case, becomes a justification for ethical failure—a veneer of family-oriented success that masks public harm. According to Peter

L. Hays, Keller's actions reflect "the conflation of business ethics with familial duty, a hallmark of capitalist ideology that Miller seeks to interrogate" (Hays 81).

In both plays, the American Dream is not merely unattainable; it is revealed to be fundamentally flawed in its construction. The dream promises autonomy and reward, but Miller suggests it often demands the suppression of conscience and the abandonment of communal responsibility. Chris Keller's idealism in *All My Sons* clashes with his father's pragmatism, highlighting a generational rift over what constitutes moral integrity. Similarly, Biff Loman's disillusionment with his father's values signals a recognition that the dream they were sold is a lie. "I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been!" Biff exclaims, upon confronting the reality of his father's illusion (*Death* 104). Both sons emerge as voices of moral awakening, though neither finds a simple resolution to the ideological conflict at the heart of their family.

What distinguishes Miller's critique is that it does not vilify ambition or success per se; rather, it challenges a version of the American Dream that divorces economic goals from ethical accountability. The dream, as portrayed in these plays, is not merely an aspiration—it becomes a mechanism of coercion, leading individuals to sacrifice their integrity, relationships, and mental health. As Christopher Bigsby explains, "Miller's plays show that when success is defined in purely material terms, it becomes a corrupting influence, hollowing out the human core" (Bigsby 94).

The cultural power of capitalism in both *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* lies in its ability to shape not just economic behavior, but also emotional lives, familial bonds, and moral reasoning. By dramatizing the collapse of men who have placed their faith in a commodified vision of success, Miller exposes the inherent contradictions in the American Dream and the capitalist ideology that underpins it. Through this thematic lens, both plays can be seen as tragedies of ideology—narratives in which the characters are destroyed not solely by their choices, but by the false promises of the system they inhabit.

3. Character Analysis and Moral Conflict

A. Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*

1. The Salesman as a Symbol of Failure

Arthur Miller's Willy Loman stands as one of the most poignant representations of personal collapse within a capitalist framework. Far from being a figure of isolated psychological instability, Willy is best understood as a symbolic casualty of a society that equates personal

worth with economic success. From the outset of *Death of a Salesman*, Miller constructs Willy as a man who is not merely chasing success but is imprisoned by a vision of it that has been shaped by the capitalist values of postwar America. His deep internalization of the American Dream—believing that charisma, appearance, and likability can substitute for hard work and integrity—ultimately leads to his existential breakdown. "Be liked and you will never want," he tells his sons (Miller, *Death* 33), suggesting that popularity and charm are marketable commodities capable of ensuring prosperity. This ideology, however, proves devastating, as it offers no real resilience against failure or rejection in the ruthless world of business.

Willy's career stagnation and financial instability expose the false promise of meritocratic success in a society driven by capital. He clings to an outdated vision of success, idolizing figures like Dave Singleman, who, even in old age, was admired and successful—a mythic symbol of salesmanship that never truly existed. The tragedy of Willy's character lies in his inability to adapt to changing realities or accept a more modest, but honest, version of himself. As Christopher Bigsby notes, Willy "chooses illusion over reality not out of self-indulgence but out of a desperate need to preserve a coherent identity in a society that measures men by their economic achievement" (Bigsby 87). His illusion, therefore, is both a personal defense and a social product.

What makes Willy's failure especially tragic is the way his identity is bound so tightly to his professional role. He is not just a man who sells; he is a man who *is* a salesman, whose sense of value is entirely contingent upon his commercial success. The loss of his job and the erosion of his dignity are inseparable in his mind. "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" he proclaims to his son, insisting on a significance he no longer possesses (*Death* 105). Miller's dramatic structure underscores this disintegration, with flashbacks and hallucinations blurring past and present to reflect Willy's collapsing sense of self. As Enoch Brater suggests, the play's form itself mimics Willy's disorientation and emphasizes "the fragmentation of identity under capitalist pressure" (Brater 59). Willy becomes a symbol of the failed promise of the American Dream: a man who believes in a system that never truly believed in him.

2. Moral Blindness and Familial Impact

The moral consequences of Willy's capitalist delusions extend beyond his personal disintegration; they infect his family life and particularly the father-son relationship with Biff. Willy's inability to see beyond the myth of success renders him blind to both the emotional

needs of his children and the reality of their aspirations. He projects onto Biff the same false ideals that govern his own life, encouraging charm and ambition while dismissing moral integrity. When Biff steals a football and later a fountain pen, Willy rationalizes these behaviors as signs of leadership and initiative, failing to address the ethical implications of such actions. In doing so, he unconsciously teaches Biff that personal value is synonymous with being above the rules, a belief that later contributes to Biff's crisis of identity and rejection of his father's worldview.

The climactic confrontation between Willy and Biff in Act II reveals the full extent of the damage wrought by this moral blindness. Biff's insistence on facing reality—"We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!" (*Death* 104)—is a moment of painful clarity that Willy cannot accept. His breakdown is not just psychological but deeply ethical: he is unable to reconcile the lies he has lived with the truth his son demands. As Stephen Marino notes, "Willy's ethical failing lies in his commitment to an illusion that distorts his relationships, leading him to confuse financial success with moral virtue" (Marino 52). The play suggests that this confusion is not merely a personal flaw but a symptom of a broader cultural ideology that conflates material achievement with ethical righteousness.

Willy's moral disintegration culminates in his suicide, a final act that he rationalizes as a gesture of love and redemption. Believing that his life insurance payout will restore his family's honor and provide Biff with a fresh start, Willy ultimately chooses death as a business transaction—an act of commodifying his own body for the sake of legacy. This decision is framed as both noble and tragic, revealing the extent to which capitalist logic has colonized his moral imagination. As Peter L. Hays argues, "Even in death, Willy cannot escape the transactional worldview he has internalized; he sees his own worth not in life but as an insurance sum" (Hays 79).

Furthermore, the emotional landscape of the family is left fractured and unresolved. Linda's final monologue, where she sobs, "We're free and clear... We're free... We're free..." (*Death* 107), is deeply ironic. Financial freedom has come at the cost of emotional and moral devastation. The house may be paid off, but the family is emotionally bankrupt. Miller's portrayal of the Loman family illustrates how capitalism distorts not only public values but private affections, turning love into obligation and identity into performance.

In sum, Willy Loman is not merely a failed salesman; he is a tragic figure whose moral and psychological collapse is inseparable from the capitalist culture that shaped him. His illusions, while personal, are symptomatic of a broader societal pathology—one that equates human

dignity with economic utility, and familial love with financial provision. Through Willy, Miller crafts a devastating portrait of the moral costs of American capitalism, where success is prized above honesty, and failure is a fate worse than death.

B. Joe Keller (*All My Sons*)

1. Capitalist Success and Moral Compromise

Joe Keller, the central figure in *All My Sons*, represents a different but equally destructive embodiment of the capitalist ethos compared to Willy Loman. While Willy is a dreamer undone by illusion, Keller is a pragmatist whose actions are grounded in calculated, real-world decisions made in the name of business survival. His tragedy lies not in self-deception, but in the conscious moral compromise he makes to protect his economic interests and secure a future for his family. Unlike Willy, who clings to fantasies of success, Keller is, by all external standards, a successful man: he owns a business, provides for his family, and is respected in his community. Yet, as Miller reveals, this apparent success is built on an ethical failure with catastrophic consequences.

During World War II, Keller knowingly shipped defective cylinder heads for aircraft engines, leading to the deaths of 21 American pilots. He justifies his decision by invoking the necessity of keeping the business afloat: "If I had him [Steve Deever] take the blame, then I'm free and clear, don't you see?" (Miller, *All* 66). His defense relies on the logic of capitalist self-preservation—he acted not out of malice, but to ensure the continuation of his livelihood and, by extension, his family's well-being. Yet this rationale, which separates business from morality, is precisely what Miller seeks to challenge. According to Enoch Brater, "Keller represents the moral blindness fostered by a system that equates financial survival with ethical justification" (Brater 72).

Miller constructs Keller's downfall as a slow unraveling of the narrative he has built around his innocence. His refusal to accept responsibility is tied to his belief that his obligations end at the boundaries of the family. As long as he fulfills his role as provider, he sees himself as a good man. "I'm in business, a man is in business," he insists, underscoring his belief that success and survival in capitalism require moral flexibility (*All* 67). However, this belief is precisely what leads to the disintegration of both his familial relationships and his moral identity.

2. Familial Betrayal and the Ethics of Responsibility

The most devastating aspect of Keller's actions lies in their impact on his family, particularly his son Chris, who serves as the play's moral conscience. Chris is a war veteran who believes in social responsibility, sacrifice, and honesty. He holds an idealistic view of both his father and the world—one that is shattered when he discovers the truth about the defective parts. This revelation leads to a profound rupture between father and son. "You killed them, you murdered them," Chris tells Joe, not as an accusation rooted in anger alone, but in disbelief that his father—his role model—could have acted so dishonorably (*All* 76). The betrayal is not simply personal; it is ideological. Chris's entire understanding of morality is undermined by his father's utilitarian pragmatism.

Keller's inability to recognize the broader implications of his actions is what ultimately damns him. For Keller, the "family" was always his excuse for unethical decisions. But Miller expands the concept of family beyond the domestic sphere to include society as a whole. "They were all my sons," Keller admits in the final moments of the play (*All* 83). This admission marks his belated realization that his moral responsibility does not end with his biological children. As Peter L. Hays explains, "Miller's greatest indictment of Keller is that he restricts his moral obligations to those within his household, ignoring the communal ethic that binds all human lives together" (Hays 85). This realization comes too late—Keller's suicide at the end of the play is an act of self-punishment, but also of moral acknowledgment.

Keller's actions also devastate his wife, Kate, who has spent the entire play clinging to denial, refusing to believe that their missing son Larry is dead and trying to protect her husband's image. The burden of lies and guilt fractures the family unit that Keller was so desperate to preserve. As Stephen Marino observes, "The irony of Joe Keller's tragedy is that the very actions he took to protect his family are what ultimately destroy it" (Marino 60). Miller, therefore, portrays Keller not as a monstrous villain, but as a deeply flawed man whose adherence to capitalist rationality overrides moral reasoning.

In Keller, Miller critiques a version of the American Dream that measures success by what one can provide materially, without accounting for ethical accountability. Keller believes that economic prosperity justifies moral compromise, but the play dismantles this logic through the emotional collapse of his family and his final recognition of shared responsibility. Chris's confrontation with his father, and his demand for truth, represents a generational shift—a demand for a more ethical and socially conscious approach to business, family, and citizenship.

Hence, Joe Keller's character functions as a powerful critique of the moral compromises embedded in capitalist success. While Willy Loman's tragedy is defined by delusion and internalized failure, Keller's is marked by conscious ethical betrayal and the external consequences of his actions. Together, these characters represent different but intersecting modes of moral collapse in a capitalist society—one rooted in illusion, the other in denial. Through Keller, Miller dramatizes the cost of prioritizing profit over principle, exposing the hollowness of a dream that demands success at the expense of humanity.

4 Comparative Analysis: Moral Economy and Human Cost

A. Individual Versus Society

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* reveal a persistent tension between the individual and society, dramatizing how personal moral values are often distorted or destroyed under the pressure of social and economic systems. In both plays, Miller constructs a moral economy—a symbolic framework in which individual choices are measured against collective ethical expectations. Within this framework, the tragedies of Willy Loman and Joe Keller arise not only from personal failures but also from their inability to reconcile private responsibility with societal obligation, revealing the deeper human cost of living within a capitalist paradigm.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's crisis is rooted in his profound identification with a social ideology that equates self-worth with economic success and social popularity. His aspirations are not based on personal fulfillment but on externally imposed ideals of what a man should be. The societal voice that Willy internalizes tells him that a successful man is "well-liked" and financially prosperous, leaving no room for alternative paths such as personal satisfaction, emotional honesty, or community-mindedness. His failure to achieve these goals is not treated as a failure of the system but as a personal inadequacy. Thus, Willy becomes a victim of what Terry Otten calls "the moral absolutism of capitalist ideology," which presents success as both inevitable and deserved if one works hard enough (Otten 61). Unable to find value in himself outside this myth, Willy's tragedy unfolds as society's judgment becomes his inner voice.

Meanwhile, *All My Sons* explores this dynamic through Joe Keller, who represents the opposite spectrum: a man who has succeeded materially but failed morally. Unlike Willy, Keller's conflict with society emerges not from failed integration but from evasion of responsibility. Keller actively chooses to prioritize his business over the lives of others, embodying the kind of ethical compartmentalization that capitalist logic enables. His justification—"I did it for the

family"—mirrors a broader cultural tendency to view morality through the narrow lens of personal interest, ignoring the societal repercussions of private decisions (*All* 69). However, Miller refuses to let Keller remain insulated in his private logic. Through Chris's confrontation and Keller's ultimate suicide, Miller dramatizes the inescapable demand that the individual must be accountable to the larger community.

What both plays make clear is that individuals are not autonomous moral agents in isolation; they are shaped, directed, and ultimately judged by the societies in which they live. The cost of ignoring this truth is shown to be devastating. Willy's internalized ideals leave him mentally fragmented and emotionally estranged from his family. In contrast, Keller's outward denial of social responsibility leads to alienation from his son and the collapse of the very family structure he claimed to protect. In both cases, Miller suggests that the moral economy of capitalism undermines authentic human connection by framing relationships in terms of economic roles and transactional values.

Moreover, the plays expose how society itself is complicit in these tragedies by normalizing unethical behavior when it serves economic ends. As Stephen Marino argues, "Miller's characters are tragic not merely because they make bad choices, but because the world they inhabit rewards those choices until it is too late" (Marino 66). The social systems surrounding both Willy and Joe validate ambition, competition, and materialism, while offering little support for introspection, vulnerability, or collective responsibility. The individuals are thus placed in an ethical paradox—compelled to pursue success by any means and punished when those means violate moral standards that the same society pretends to uphold.

The intersection of individual will and social forces is ultimately where Miller's critique gains its tragic force. In both plays, the protagonist's downfall stems from a failure to balance personal desires with ethical duties to others, a theme that reflects Miller's broader concern with the moral decay inherent in unchecked capitalist values. As Peter L. Hays notes, "Miller's dramatic universe insists that social responsibility is not an abstract ideal but a practical necessity for human survival and dignity" (Hays 84). Willy dies believing he is giving his family a future; Joe dies recognizing he has destroyed his. In both cases, the human cost is not just physical death but the erosion of moral identity under societal expectations.

B. Familial Structures and the Inheritance of Values

In both *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, Arthur Miller uses the family not simply as a site of emotional drama but as a crucible for the transmission—and eventual questioning—of

cultural and ideological values. The plays suggest that familial structures serve as primary vehicles through which capitalist ideals are handed down, internalized, and, at times, resisted. The intergenerational dynamics in these works reveal how the ideologies of ambition, success, and material prosperity become ingrained in children through parental modeling and expectations. However, Miller complicates this dynamic by positioning the younger characters—Biff Loman and Chris Keller—as agents of moral awakening who challenge and ultimately reject the flawed ethical systems bequeathed to them.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is both a father and an ideological transmitter. His relationship with Biff is marked by the relentless projection of capitalist values: charm, popularity, wealth, and a disdain for manual labor or modest ambition. Willy dismisses Bernard, the studious and hardworking neighbor, as lacking the essential charisma needed for success, while idolizing Biff's athletic prowess and confidence. "That's just what I mean, Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him" (Miller, *Death* 33). This moment is illustrative of how Willy's worldview valorizes surface over substance—a belief system he passes on to Biff, leading the son to equate moral shortcuts with ambition.

Yet Biff's arc in the play reveals a counter-movement. After years of drifting and disillusionment, he comes to recognize the hollowness of his father's dream. His breakdown during the final confrontation with Willy—"I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you" (*Death* 105)—is not just a personal admission but a moral repudiation of the ideology he was raised on. Biff's realization that their lives have been governed by lies is deeply cathartic and positions him as a figure of tragic clarity. As Terry Otten observes, "Biff becomes Miller's spokesperson for the necessity of self-knowledge and moral authenticity in a world dominated by false ideals" (Otten 73). Through Biff, Miller dramatizes a rupture in the familial cycle of capitalist illusion, suggesting the possibility, albeit limited, of liberation through truth.

In *All My Sons*, a parallel structure unfolds with Joe and Chris Keller. Joe, like Willy, operates from a belief system that prioritizes material security above all else and sees his business decisions as extensions of his duty to his family. However, Chris represents a moral evolution—a younger generation shaped by the trauma of war and driven by a belief in collective responsibility. He is disturbed by the moral compromises that underpin his father's success, especially once he learns the truth about the defective airplane parts. Chris's ethical disillusionment culminates in a searing confrontation: "I never saw you as a man... I saw you

as my father. I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself!" (Miller, *All* 77). His anguish reflects the pain of inherited ideals clashing with personal conscience.

Chris's moral awakening is framed by Miller not as a betrayal of family, but as a redefinition of what familial and social duty should mean. For Chris, love for his father must include the willingness to demand truth and justice. As Stephen Marino writes, "Chris represents a progressive ethical consciousness that refuses to accept the privatization of morality" (Marino 70). He does not reject his father in a simple generational rebellion; he challenges the premise that family loyalty justifies public harm. The family, therefore, becomes a battlefield where two competing moral economies—the private and the communal—collide.

In both plays, the younger generation's awakening leads not to resolution but to confrontation. Biff and Chris do not achieve peace or clarity; they are left amidst the wreckage of their families, burdened by knowledge and uncertain futures. This ambiguity is deliberate: Miller refuses to offer easy redemption. Instead, he suggests that the first step toward ethical repair lies in recognizing the ideological structures that shape familial relations. As Peter L. Hays notes, "In Miller's dramas, the younger characters embody the hope of ethical renewal, but only if they can extricate themselves from the inherited mythologies of success" (Hays 83).

Thus, Miller uses the family not merely as a unit of domestic drama but as a mirror of the larger societal order. The Loman and Keller families are both structured by capitalism, but their sons expose the moral fractures at its core. In challenging their fathers, Biff and Chris also challenge the ideology their fathers represent, revealing how capitalist values are not only institutional but deeply personal—woven into the intimate fabric of family life. The inheritance of values, therefore, is not passive but contested, and Miller's plays dramatize the cost and necessity of such contestation.

C. Tragedy and Catharsis

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* both engage with the conventions of classical tragedy while simultaneously reshaping them to reflect modern socio-economic realities. Drawing inspiration from Aristotle's Poetics, particularly the notions of hamartia (tragic flaw), anagnorisis (recognition), and catharsis, Miller infuses traditional tragic structure with a scathing critique of capitalist ideology and its human costs. In doing so, he redefines modern tragedy not as the fall of the noble or aristocratic hero, but as the spiritual and moral disintegration of the common man, caught in the machinery of an unforgiving economic system.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman exemplifies what Miller, in his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, called "the tragic figure who is ready to lay down his life… to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity" (Miller, "Tragedy" 1). Willy is not a king or a warrior; he is a traveling salesman, aging, forgotten, and deeply insecure. His hamartia is not excessive pride in the classical sense, but his unyielding belief in a false version of the American Dream, which blinds him to both his limitations and his genuine worth as a human being. This internal conflict—between who he is and who society tells him he should be—drives his descent. His anagnorisis comes fleetingly when he realizes that Biff truly loves him not for his achievements but in spite of them: "Isn't that—isn't that remarkable? Biff—he likes me!" (Miller, *Death* 106). However, this moment of clarity arrives too late to save him, and he commits suicide believing his death will restore his family's dignity and financial stability.

The catharsis in *Death of a Salesman* arises from the audience's recognition of Willy's essential humanity and their awareness of the societal forces that have deformed his identity. His tragedy is not merely personal but emblematic of the countless individuals crushed by economic structures that offer dreams but no support for those who fall short. As Christopher Bigsby explains, "Miller's innovation was to locate tragedy not in personal hubris but in systemic cruelty, in a world where value is measured in dollars and charisma" (Bigsby 103).

All My Sons follows a more overtly classical trajectory, aligning Joe Keller more closely with traditional tragic heroes. Keller is a successful patriarch whose hubristic belief in the rightness of his decisions leads to catastrophic consequences. His hamartia is not ignorance but moral rationalization—his conviction that business exigency excuses the deaths of 21 pilots. Unlike Willy, Keller begins with material success and community respect, but the truth of his actions slowly unravels his authority and moral stature. His anagnorisis is stark and devastating: "They were all my sons" (Miller, *All* 83). In that line, Keller finally acknowledges the broader human responsibility he long evaded. This realization destroys the ideological foundation of his identity, resulting in suicide—a classical tragic end, symbolizing the collapse of the individual under the weight of truth.

Catharsis in *All My Sons* is achieved through the shattering of Keller's illusions and the moral reckoning forced upon his family. The audience is led to pity Keller not as a monster, but as a man whose ethical blindness was shaped by a society that champions success at all costs. As Stephen Marino notes, "Keller's fall is tragic not because he is uniquely corrupt, but because his logic is disturbingly familiar and socially validated" (Marino 72). The emotional purge

comes not only from sorrow for Keller's fate but from discomfort with the society that allows, even encourages, such moral compromises.

By bringing classical tragic structure into the realm of the domestic and economic, Miller redefines modern tragedy as a genre deeply entwined with social critique. His protagonists are not heroic titans battling fate, but ordinary men battling invisible yet omnipresent ideologies. In both plays, tragedy lies not in failing to achieve greatness but in misunderstanding what greatness truly means. As Peter Hays asserts, "Miller democratized tragedy by insisting that the struggles of the common man were worthy of the tragic stage, especially when those struggles reflected the larger moral dilemmas of their culture" (Hays 82).

In this way, *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* perform a dual function: they evoke the emotional purgation typical of classical tragedy while also demanding intellectual engagement with contemporary issues of ethics, capitalism, and personal responsibility. Miller's reworking of tragedy affirms the genre's enduring relevance, showing that profound moral conflict and catharsis need not depend on royal bloodlines or ancient prophecy, but can emerge from the everyday lives of men crushed under the weight of modern systems.

Conclusion

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and All My Sons collectively illuminate the devastating consequences of unbridled capitalism when moral integrity is sacrificed in the pursuit of economic success. Both Willy Loman and Joe Keller become tragic figures, undone not only by their personal flaws but by a society that equates human worth with material achievement. The emotional fallout—alienation, guilt, disillusionment, and death—serves as a powerful indictment of the American Dream's darker undercurrents. While Death of a Salesman internalizes this tragedy through psychological collapse, All My Sons externalizes it through social and legal consequences, offering complementary perspectives on the moral price of capitalist ambition. Ultimately, Miller's works urge a reevaluation of success, advocating for ethical responsibility and human connection over economic gain.

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