

B.A III (Semester V)

All My Sons

Topic -1

Que : Discuss the theme of play “All My Sons”. OR

Is the Title of the play appropriate? Discuss.

Ans: ‘All My Sons’ is one of the best plays written by Arthur Miller. Arthur Miller is known as an American playwright. He was a modern playwright. He wrote many good plays. ‘All My Sons’ his first commercially successful play, was staged in 1947 and received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. All of the plays of Arthur Miller revolve around some social problem and this play is no exception in this regard. This play revolves around family relationships in the context of social and economic conditions of his time.

Arthur Miller was conscious of the simmering contradictions in the American milieu when he composed his play All My Sons and from the harsh socio- economic system and his personal experiences popped up the issue of the class and gender in this play. The division between classes is starkly visible in the social structure here, which is torn apart by the ravages of war, increasing economic gaps resulting out of rapid business growth thereby creeping in a loss of values in general. The question of gender too, does invite our attention here as the wife of the accused suffers silently, being aware of the reality from the beginning. The women depicted here are the traditional ones who are socialized in such a manner that they fail to look beyond the world of their children and family confining themselves to the hearth and not to the field. Though there is no mistaking their invincible will and resolve, they are not so pronounced in the ownership of the world at large and their outrage. Arthur Miller intended to write plays with which common people could identify themselves. A work of

art is aesthetic nullity for him if it has no social relevance to offer as he asserts in *Collected Plays* that “to imagine that a play can be written disinterestedly is to believe that one can make love disinterestedly.” (13) In a press interview at the premier of *All My Sons* in 1947, he quite clearly set forth his basic theoretical views on drama that he tried to take all his settings from situations in real life which involve the questions of right and wrong. The grand success of *All My Sons* marked a major turning point in Miller’s career, for it came at a point when the young writer was struggling to establish his identity as a literary artist. As he writes in *Collected Plays*, “I was turning thirty then, the author of perhaps a dozen plays, none of which I could truly believe were finished.” (19) The play that resulted was *All My Sons*.

The title of the play is apt and suggestive. It throws light on the theme of work and purpose also. It comes from Joe Keller remark,

“Sure, he was my son, But I think to him they were all my sons, And I guess they were”

These lines also indicate the theme of the play. The play’s central idea is a business man’s neglect of responsibility for a decision in wartime which led to the loss of twenty-one lives. Joe Keller is a businessman and always thinks that interests of his family are supreme than social interests. But he should never put them before society or nation, if he does so, he will have to pay a heavy price for it. Keller wants to earn money by fair or foul means. Once he gets a contract to supply cylinder heads to the Air force. He receives a batch of cracked cylinder heads from the process. He gives instruction to his partner to deliver the cylinder heads to Army after covering the cracks. He also gives promise to Steeve that if anything wrong happens, he will take all blame on himself. The planes filled with these cylinder heads crash and twenty one pilots get killed. Joe Keller and Steeve Deever both are arrested. In the trial court, Joe Puts

entire blame on Steeve Deever. He denies any telephonic conversation with his partner. He proves to be cheat. Joe is released and Steve is sent to jail for a long period. After his release, Joe becomes a famous businessman. When Joe's elder son Larry learns about his father's guilt in the cylinder scandal, he commits suicide. He was a pilot in the Air force. He sends a letter of farewell to his fiancée, Ann Deever. Chris' Joe's second son, also blames his father. He criticizes the money making mentality of his father. He opposes his father's theory that business and family interests should be above every other consideration. So, he opposes his father in a strong way. He says,

What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own. What are you?

But still Keller is not ready to accept his doings. He is stick to the point that he has done everything for his family, for his sons. He says, "Chris---- Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you." At the end of the play, when he comes to know that Larry killed himself because of his misdeed, he realizes his fault. He now realizes that the pilots who died in the crash were also his sons. Thus we can see that there is a continues clash between social ethics and business ethics. These ethics are represented by Keller and his sons. One has to adopt social ethics to become a good citizen of country.

There is also the theme of father-mother-son relationship, Joe and Larry and Chris and Kate and the most important is Kate and Larry. Kate proves to be a good mother. Her love for her sons is great. Up to the end of the play she believes that Larry is alive and he will come back one day. She is not ready to give the hand of Ann to Chris because Ann is the fiancée of Larry and only Larry can marry him. Her opposition is not only because the marriage would require her to consider Larry dead, but if Larry is dead, it means his father killed him. God does not let a son be killed by his father. So the psychological source

of her illusion that Larry is alive is here uncovered. Father son relationship also dominates in the play. Joe believes in the policy of selfishness. His sons rebel against him, but the author points out the idea that idealistic approach to life is not possible in the present day world. You have to be practical. Chris admits this at the end of the play and says:

“ But I am like everybody else now, I am practical now.”

So many themes are interwoven in this play, even the title of the play contains theme of the play.

All My Sons

Topic -2

Que: Joe Keller is a good husband and a good father, but fails to be a good citizen: Discuss.

OR Character-sketch of Joe Keller

Ans: “All my Sons” is a wonderful play written by Arthur Miller. It is a modern drama because it is based upon some social problem. Arthur Miller is a great American playwright. He wrote many successful plays and All my Sons is one of them. It was his first commercial successful play, which was staged in 1947 and received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Miller is usually regarded as an intellectual dramatist whose plays express moral, social and political ideas. He is a strong critic of contemporary American society and its values and this particular play is no exception in this regard.

Arthur Miller was conscious of the simmering contradictions in the American milieu when he composed his play All My Sons and from the harsh socio- economic system and his personal experiences popped up the issue of the class and gender in this play. The division between classes is starkly visible in the social structure here, which is torn apart by the ravages of war, increasing economic gaps resulting out of rapid business growth thereby creeping in a loss of values in general. The question of gender too, does invite our attention here as the wife of the accused suffers silently, being aware of the reality from the beginning. The women depicted here are the traditional ones who are socialized in such a manner that they fail to look beyond the world of their children and family confining themselves to the hearth and not to the field. Though there is no mistaking their invincible will and resolve, they are not so pronounced in the ownership of the world at large and their outrage. Arthur Miller intended to write plays with which common people could identify themselves. A work of

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There are so many characters in the play. Through these characters Miller tries to represent different social values. Joe Killer is the central character of play. The whole play revolves around him. He is hub and heart of the play. Without Joe Keller, we can not expect the theme of play. Regarding the physical appearance, he is a man about sixty. He looks rough and tough. He is a great industrialist now but he was once an ordinary machine-shop worker and that impression is still upon his face. We can say that he is a man, “whose judgements must be dredged out of experience and a peasant like common sense.”

Joe is totally a practical person. He does not have any ideals. He wants to be a prosperous businessman by fair or foul means. He wants to make more and more money. Money is his weakness. So only to make money he allows his partner to supply the defective cylinders to the Air force. He ignores the consequences of this fault. Twenty one pilots got killed. But he put the blame on his partner. He denies his telephonic conversation with his partner very easily. So he is not only a practical person but also a culprit one. Even after three years he is not ready to accept that he was guilty.

He is a socially irresponsible person. He is a great lover of his family and this family love makes him negligible towards society. He says that whatever he has done or he is doing all for his family. He says to Chris: That's only for you, Chris, the whole shooting match is for you! This cruel businessman is otherwise a good husband and a good father. He has good affection for his sons. He works hard for his family. In spite of such good qualities of good husband and a good father, he fails to be a good citizen. He is not at all aware of his social duty towards the nation. For him there is no any bigger world than his family. He says: "Nothing is bigger than that. And you are going to tell him, You understand. I'm his father, he's my son".

He is a very dishonest person. He can be called as a rough, tricky or a mischievous person. He has always to grind his own axe. He is cruel to the core. He gives many advances to defend himself. He is not ready to apologise and give himself up. Like all businessman, he too tried to make money. He says that if he had not send the cylinder heads in time, they would have cancelled his contract and it is very difficult to establish business in this world. He remarks: "You Lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes."

He says that selfishness is the order of the day. We all live in harsh, competitive world. In order to survive in this world, we have to be practical. Joe's arguments can not lessen the gravity of his crime. He says to Chris, "Chris, a man can't be a Jesus in the world." But he forgets that if a person can not be a God, he should not be Satan also.

It is only at the end when he comes to know that his son, Larry, committed suicide. On learning about his misdeed, he is shocked. Then he realizes the gravity of his crime. He says: "Sure, he was my son, but I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were." Now he realizes that he committed a sin by ignoring his social responsibilities. But now

there is no use of this. At the end, he shoots himself to get relieved from his crime. So in the end we can say that a man who ignores social responsibilities has to pay a heavy price for it and the same happened with Joe Keller.

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Topic -3

Que : Character sketch of Kate Keller

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There are so many characters in the play. Different characters represent different values. Kate Keller plays an important role in this play. She is in her early fifties. She is faithful and beautiful wife of Joe Keller. She is a woman of uncontrolled emotions and inspirations. She is a loving mother. Her son was reported missing during the war. Everyone in the play except her believes that Larry is dead. But she is not ready to accept the truth. She is confirmed that Larry will come back one day. So, She has been waiting for Larry for the last three years. She does not allow any body to make believe that Larry is dead. She strictly gives wrong warning to her husband by saying:

“If he is not coming back, then I’ll kill myself”

She even does not allow Ann, Larry’s fiancée to marry with Chris because according to him Larry is still alive and Ann is Larry’s girl.

Kate Keller is highly superstitious woman. She believes in God and occurrences of miracles. Ann asks her how she is sure that Larry is still alive then she replies "because certain things have to be and certain things can never be that is why there is God otherwise anything could happen". These lines reveal kate’s firm faith in God who is just and merciful. She believes that God cannot allow Larry's death and make his parents suffer. An apple tree which was

planted in the memory of Larry breaks down as a result of fierce wind. Kate feels that the breaking down of the apple tree is significant. It shows that God does not allow them to erect memorials to a living person. Kate also believes in astrological predictions. Frank Lubey, Her neighbourer tells her that Larry is alive somewhere because he prepares Larry's horoscope and he finds out that 25th November was his favourable day and a man cannot die on his favourable day. He says" it was a day when everything good was shining on him the kind of day he should have married on" This best prediction of Frank strengthens kate's belief. This reason is not enough to Kate. She believes that God is merciful. As she knows that her husband is responsible for the deaths of twenty one pilots. She says, "God does not let a son be killed by his father." This thought is unbearable to her. The psychological source of her illusion that Larry is alive is here uncovered.

She is a particular housewife. She is very much concerned about the welfare of his family. She feels happy to do the household works herself. Her husband is a rich person. He has earned lot of money. It was his dream in the past that when he would have money, he would have a maid and his wife would take it easy. Now he has everything but his wife is still busy in doing household works. He says: "Now I got money, and I got a maid, and my wife is working for the maid."

Kate loves feeding people. She becomes very anxious to see that George has grown very weak. She offers him grape juice. She wants to see everyone healthy and happy. Chris remarks about her, "She would turn Mahatma Gandhi into a heavy weight." Kate is also a caring wife. She is very much worried about her husband who is coming under the attack of Deever's family. She asks Chris to be helpful to his father. She gives George a motherly treatment so that he may forget his resentment and cool down. She is also arranging a date for George to go to the dinner party.

Kate is also a very wise lady. She tries her best to protect her husband from friends and foes. She asks Joe to admit the fault before Chris so that Chris may forgive him. She knows it very well that Chris will never give any punishment to his father if his father admits his crime before Chris. When Joe commits suicide she remains calm and also suggests Chris to forget past life and start a new life.

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Topic -4

Que 4: Character sketch of Chris Keller

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There are so many characters in the play. Different characters represent different values. Chris represents young rebels of society. He has an idealistic approach towards wife. Chris is Joe’s second son. He is about thirty two. He is stern like his father. He is a man of immense feelings, affection and loyalty. He was an officer in the army during the war. He had a respectable position in war. At one point Jim Bayliss tells us about his behaviour in war by saying that, “In the battalion, he was known as Mother Mc Keller.”

He is still unable to forget the memory of his army life where the soldiers sacrifices their lives for each other. He is very sad to find that sense of sacrifice is absent in common people. According to Chris there is a great difference between Army life and life in society in general. He is of the view that war is just like a bus accident for the people of society. He says that several soldiers are killed and several are injured. After some time the war is forgotten. He says that he has also become money minded after returning from war.

“The whole thing to them was a kind of bus accident. I want to work with Dad and that rat race again.”

He has an idealistic approach towards life. But like any other idealist, he has to make compromises in his life. When he comes to know that his father

was responsible for the supply of defective cylinders heads to Air force, he feels angry to know the crime of his father. He expresses his feelings of frustration by giving following remarks to his father:

Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? You aren't even an animal, no animal kills his own, who are you?

But he soon realises that he is unable to punish him. He loves his parents so much. So he can not do anything to harm him. In this way, he has to give up his idealism because of his father. He says, "I am like everybody else now, I am practical now."

Chris is sincere and devoted as a lover. Chris falls in love with Ann. Both of them are convinced that Ann's fiancée Larry, Chris' brother, is dead. Ann comes to Chris's place on his invitation; Chris expresses his love for Ann. The main hurdle in their marriage is Chris' parents. Chris' father Joe Keller initially opposes his idea of marrying Ann but later he agrees. But Kate, Chris' mother still against their marriage because she believes that Ann belongs to Larry and Larry will come back one day. She does not know the fact of Larry's death. It is only at the end of the play when Joe has killed himself, Kate asks Chris to forget the past and begin a new life. So, it is only at the end, the way is cleared for Chris-Ann relationship.

In the end, We can say that Chris is a good Character. Chris represents the young rebels of society. It is only through Chris that the dramatist expresses his views about man's responsibilities towards his society. He wants to make people realize that they should not be money minded. There is something bigger than family interests and that should be taken care of.

All My Sons

Topic -5

Que: Theme “Conflict between Self and Society”

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Conceived in wartime and begun in wartime, *All My Sons* presents a sharp and heart-breaking spectacle of human sacrifice in contrast with aggrandizement. Miller writes, “At a time when all public voices were announcing the arrival of that great day when industry and labour were one, my personal experience was daily demonstrating that beneath the slogans very little had changed. In this sense the play was a response to what I felt ‘in the air’. It was an unveiling of what I believed everybody knew and nobody publicly said. At the same time, however, I believed I was bringing news, and it was news which I half expected would be denied as truth.” *All My Sons* presents Chris Keller, the ex -army officer, rejecting Joe Keller’s criminal irresponsibility, even though the latter is his father. The father shoots himself once the son knows the truth. He accepts his fate, but so does the son. In the war time, Joe has allowed 120 cracked engine heads to go from his factory into P - aircrafts, directly causing their pilot’s deaths. He allowed his subordinate and next -door neighbour, Deever, to be imprisoned and disgraced for his own criminality, but at the age of sixty one, he comes to realize that those pilots who died were ‘all my sons’ and commits suicide. Keller’s life is thus a waste; he forfeits his son’s love and his own good name for a public business ethic which is strictly

unusable in private family and good neighbourly life. The business ethics puts financial and self interest first and social responsibility and purpose second.

Joe's horror at his own crime is insignificant beside his larger irresponsibility to a universe of people. It reminds one of Kurtz's cry in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: The horror! The horror! At the centre of each play of Miller is the tension between little people and big issues. Henri Popkin rightly remarks in *The Sewanee Review*: Miller's people inhabit the dead centre of dullness as they sit and wait for the voice of doom. Or, if they don't sit, they go about the 41 daily round of their lives - washing cars, eating late snacks, playing football, picking up girls, going to movies, as if destiny would never come calling. Joe Keller is also not an exception who does his best to hide his guilt. He proudly exhibits his business skills - "that's the only way you lick'em is guts;" the businessman father is quite sure that Larry never flew a P -40 while supplying faulty cylinders. But the son thunders - So who flew P -40s, pigs? The father has his own splendid plans for his son - I'm going to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road. I want you to spread out, Chris, I want you to use what I made for you. (87) Now a father's concern for his family is not something culpable but his middle class ordinariness of overlooking the society, his itch to build something for his son which he could not have from his own father, leads him to a blind alley. Joe's trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society. As Miller avers: He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation. (CP 19) 42 The corporation here means the concept of a man's becoming a function of production or distribution to the point where his personality becomes divorced from the actions it propels. That's why perhaps Miller says that "the fortress that *All My Sons* lays seize to is the fortress of

unrelatedness". (CP 19) How can man become so alienated from others? - this is the question that haunts Miller consistently throughout the play. The play is an assertion of not so much morality as the world being such because men cannot walk away from certain of their deeds.

Joe surely appears to be any other man representing his class. Like a typical businessman, money is very important for him. He is doubtful of a career as book collector as In my day, either you were a lawyer, or a doctor, or you worked in a shop. Having sons is a matter of pride for him, as he recollects: In my day when you had sons it was an honour. Today a doctor could make a million dollars if he could figure out a way to bring a boy into the world without a trigger finger. This gender preference puts him again in a particular class which is interestingly perceptible not only in America or in India but all over the world irrespective of time and age. Now the question arises about Miller's own perspective about gender too, as to why he chooses all sons plot not giving place to daughters in his most popular plays like All My Sons and Death of a Salesman? He seems to be conservative in taking father -son relationship only, excluding daughters, as he writes in his autobiography of a cathartic kind of experience he feels when he writes about father-son relationship.

As Jim is sympathetic to Chris's notions about life, he seems to be sailing in the same boat as he lives in the usual turmoil unable to find himself. He tries to be a good husband as Chris endeavours to be a good son, although their respective hearts don't conform to it. Kate, the mother, appears to use astrology unrealistically to prove that her son Larry is not dead. She reads the stars to prevent Chris from marrying Larry's former girlfriend. Her argument is that allowing the marriage would be an admission of Larry's death. As it turns out, Kate is protecting the fiction of Larry's survival not for her own sentimental reasons but because she knows that her husband would blame himself for Larry's death, even though the defective airplane part is not directly

responsible. Kate realizes that the hope of Larry's survival is all that allows Joe to live with his guilt. Chris's investigation of the past unearths more truth than anyone can bear. A letter from Larry to Ann, his formal girlfriend and now Chris's fiancée, proves to be the key to the mystery, conveying more than anyone expects it to. Ann introduces it at first to prove to Kate that Larry is dead so that she will give the young people her blessings to marry. Chris doesn't know the contents of the letter except that, according to Ann, it establishes once and for all that Larry is dead. He reads it aloud to his father without having read it himself and then realizes that he has gone too far. In the letter Larry announces that he will commit suicide because he knows his father was responsible for the defective parts and therefore for the death of his brothers-in-arms. This direct blame for his son's death is too much for Joe Keller. Miller claims that the good people have no theories, no ideologies, except for their goodness. Their practice and their faith are the same - doing good. Their virtue needs no legal or official sanction, and, in practice, it may defy the official code. For instance, the good society is present in the neighbours in *All My Sons*. They help out when they are needed – the day when you were born and the water got shut off. People were carrying basins from a block away - a stranger would have thought the whole neighbourhood was on fire.” But they also express their collective disapproval of the corrupt businessman even when the court exonerates him. What Miller depicts is that we can always walk away when the going gets tough saying to hell with it but no, as Jim says to Kate beautifully: We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made. In a peculiar way. . . . everyman does have a star. The star of one's honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it's out it never lights again. It remains an interesting proposition to see whether Chris is really different from his businessman father in his perspective. As Chris shows the same love for money when he proclaims to Annie: I want a family, I want some kids, I want to build something I can

give myself to. In fact, Chris represents a different class in the play. Business does not inspire him. If he has to grub for money all day long, at least in the evening, he wants it beautiful. He longs for some meaning in life. His experience in war watching his comrades dying for each other, has taught him to be aware of a kind of responsibility.

Another conspicuous fact that we find in Miller's plays is that the fathers seek the highest aim of their life - the affection and approval of their sons. In *All My Sons*, Miller has taken a family as forming the centre of the play but this doesn't mean that he has written a family drama. Nor is it a social drama also. The play rather depicts the turbulences caused in the close family unit by deeper consciousness of its place in the community. It is the question of class, divided further into the varied sub -classes depending on one's alignment to his or her respective star of honesty, despite all socio-economic and political chaos. Joe Keller needs to feel a connection, firm and real, with others. The tension arises when this desire imposes upon one certain restriction. To Miller, this tension is not due to a clash of opposing urges that must necessarily end in the overpowering of one urge by the other. Rather this tension is necessary for our meaningful existence as men have potential to give meaning to their lives. As far as gender is concerned, one may say that Kate has Joe's talent for ignoring things. She seeks refuge in astrology believing certain things have to be, and certain things can never be. But the conflict between Joe and his son presses astrology to the wall until its mysticism gives way to psychology. Still one may say that Kate, a woman with overwhelming capacity for love, in fact, appears to be a strong woman though outwardly she seems to be broken at her elder son's loss. It is she who would never let her husband forget about his guilt. She never turns hostile to him but speaks a lot through her unspoken words. She, like Chris, is never in a direct duel with her husband taking a stand against him because of her conventional personality, but she is not prepared to forgive him

either. She is addressed as 'Mother' by the husband too, that speaks of her imposing stature in the family. The husband is shown to be loving to the wife when he says - Once upon a time I used to think that when I got money again I would have a maid and my wife would take it easy. Now I got money, and I got a maid, my wife is workin' for the maid. (70) But that doesn't excuse him from the guilt. Rather maid represents here a class too, which is generally treated with utmost insensitivity. How the wife runs the show at home front with perfect élan, with or without the maid, is beyond the comprehension of the husband .

To conclude, one may say that Miller's plays generally show his serious preoccupation with the problems facing his society. His concern, however, is not so much with general problems but with a vital problem – the predicament of modern man in a rapidly advancing commercial society, i.e. the conflict between self and society, and so on. To be drawn towards one's blood -relations is a natural tendency but there's a limit to it. One should expand one's activities beyond the narrow circle of self to embrace as large a circle as possible. The basic truth that needs to be grasped once again is that man's quest to give meaning to his life lies in the ideal of living usefully as well as meaningfully. And the preliminary urge of this is seen within the confines of family. .