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Conceptual analysis of human actions and its ascendancy in Arthur

Miller's *All My Sons*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research paper is to bring out the dominion feature of human actions and the socio-political influence in Arthur Miller's play. Every action of man is influenced by the circumstance. The study of human action is referred as praxeology. According to praxeology, there is some prominent reason for all the action of human being. Literature is always considered to be the mirror of life, so the characters in the fictions to be the shadows of real life. Thus, the characters of literature which is believed as the reflection of real world certainly will have the social, political, cultural and economical influence in their actions. One of the writers who have a wide range of external impact in his writings is Arthur Miller. When different perspectives of praxeology is applied to the characters of his play *All My Sons*, the ascendancy of the socio-political conditions plays a significant role in the actions of the characters which contribute maximum in the progress of the play.

KEYWORDS

Praxeology, Great Depression, American Dream, Humanity, Morality, Lack of acceptance, Wealth, Success



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INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller was born on October 17, 1915, in New York City. He spent his early years in comfortable circumstances, until his father, Isidore, a prosperous manufacturer lost his wealth in the economic devastation of the Great Depression. After completing high school, Miller had to take a job in a Manhattan warehouse. He had not been much of a student, but after reading Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* he decided that he was destined to become a writer. He had trouble getting into college but was accepted at the University of Michigan, where he began his apprenticeship as a writer and won several student awards for his work. After college he returned to New York and worked briefly as a radio script writer, and then he tried to write commercially. His first Broadway play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) closed after only four performances, but it did win a Theater Guild award and revealed the young writer's potential. He tasted the fruit of success by writing *Focus* (1945), a novel dealing with Anti-Semitism. In fact, at that time he wrote *All My Sons* (1947), his first dramatic hit which very well exhibits the writing style of Miller. He was better known as a writer of fiction than as a playwright. *All My Sons* established Miller as an outstanding and extremely talented dramatist. The play had a good run and won Miller his first New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Even the least favorable commentators recognized the playwright's great promise. Miller followed *All My Sons* with three of his most critically and



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commercially successful plays: *Death of Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). In these works, Miller attempted to show that tragedy could be written about ordinary people struggling to maintain personal dignity at critical moments in their lives. Social background, political and economic situation of his life influenced his play's characters which is evident in his famous play *All My Sons*. Most of his literary works deal with or have an innate reference of the socio-political condition of that time.

With these plays, Miller joined Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in *What in the post-World War II Years* was generally recognized as the great triumvirate of the American theater. Miller, a political leftist, gained some notoriety in the 1950s when he refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee and was held in contempt of Congress. From this experience, he found thematic material for one of his most famous and controversial plays, *The Crucible*, which focuses on the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. After 1955 production of *A View from the Bridge*, Miller took nine years of break from play-writing. Meanwhile, he married and divorced the famous actress, Marilyn Monroe. He did adapt one of his stories, *The Misfits* as a screen vehicle for his celebrated wife but did not complete another Broadway play until 1964, when the *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* were produced. The former play has been considered as Miller's most experimental play and also his darkest work, with many



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autobiographical parallels. His last Broadway success was *The Price*, produced in 1968. After this next play, *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972) failed in Broadway, which made Miller to stop performing works in New York. He continued to write plays, and enjoyed some success, but nothing that matched that of his earliest works.

Many of his later plays were short one-act plays and works comprised of sketches or vignettes. His greatest triumphs are *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. Both have been revived with great success. For example, New York production of *Death of a Salesman* garnered four Tony awards, including one for best revival and one for best direction. At the age of eighty-four, Miller was also presented with a special lifetime achievement award for his great contributions to the American theater.

PRAXEOLGY

Praxeology is a study of human action and conduct, concerned with the logical interpretation of preference, choice, and schemes. The actions are often predicted with axiom. This was an Austrian economical concept and term was first coined by Ludwig Von Mises. Some of the praxeological writers are Murray Rothbard, Hans Hamann, George Selgin, Alfred Espinas . This paper focuses on the actions and the conduct of the characters especially Joe Keller, the male protagonist of the play, with reference to the socio-political condition.



TOPIC HIGHLIGHT

This paper deals with the influence of social, political and economic events of the country in author's works. In this paper, Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* is taken for scrutiny under the lens of praxeology to prove that the characters and their actions which pave way for the plot has influence of their circumstances.

ASCENDENCY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN *ALL MY SONS*

The impact of the Great Depression and the Second World War can be found in many of Miller's works. Even when Miller's plays did not specifically deal with the political woes of his age, they delineate the political realities and complexities of the American power. The play *All my Sons* was written immediately after the Second World War. Second World War elevated the US out of the prolonged financial crisis; employment opportunities and the idea of democracy was a boom for them after the war. Miller designed the Keller family in such a way that responds to the political conditions. Almost everywhere, the references of the changing political situations and the adaptation of the conditions are available in the play. This play is an attempt to screen the values common for the American families after the Second World War in order to determine good life meant in an age of rising economic circumstances. Miller wanted to bring out, the moral complexities of the American families after the accumulation of the materialist wealth.



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Joe Keller, often noted as the tragic hero by Miller himself was an uneducated business man in the play. He loved his family and wanted to earn rapidly and heavily for his family members. He wanted to be loaded with money within a short span of time. This was the condition of most of the families after the war. He worked hard and became a successful business man which was not described in detail. However, could understand his hardships from his conversation with Kate about Chris, “I should put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and make him earn his keep. Then he’d know how a buck is made in the world”. This statement clearly explains the struggle of the Americans to rise up from the economic depression. Keller was a self-made man without any support so he protected his children more. He wanted to earn enough money irrespective of the means of earning. Keller wanted to protect his reputation only for his business deals but not to himself. It is clearly understood that he focused mainly on the happiness of his family. After the World War, people of America wanted to get rid of the economically downtrodden state and believed that money would offer them a good life. They became more materialist and deviated from the path of religion and morality. Keller was accused for his intentional mistake (sending the defective cylinders for the aircrafts) but the inducement of the action was hidden from the readers. His wife Kate’s desire of becoming rich made her to pester him for money and that made him to violate the humanistic values. In the beginning of the play, Miller gives an idea that male and female are equal when the play moves further Kate



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was projected as an opinionated women who was lingering in the past. She can be compare with the mother in the poem *Home Burial* by Robert Frost, who refuses to forget her dead son and blames her husband for being emotionless. Similarly, Kate blames Keller for not believing that Larry is alive and he will return from the air force. Miller made attempts to make the reader know about the false American dream which made several common citizens of America to suffer. The best example of the above mentioned idea is, Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*. He can also be compared with Keller as they shared suicidal notion. They both failed to convert their guilt into responsibility, eventually laid path for their tragic end. Keller's suicide is the effect of the political and economic pressure laid upon the citizens. He refused to face the reality and wanted to escape himself from being called as a murderer. "Every Saturday night the whole gang is playing porker in this arbor. All the ions who yelled murderer takin' my money now" illustrates that the people of America were not satisfied with their belongings they had a dream with false hope which made them to indulge in crimes. The crime of Keller was partially due to the dream of achieving the high economic standards. This false hope made him to forget that human life is valuable than money and profit. The materialistic mind of Keller, as the Americans after the war, made him treat happiness as a material.

Apart from Keller, other characters like Chris, Larry and George can be seen with social responsibilities and concern about the fellow human beings. However, at a point Chris suspected



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his father but deliberately avoided confronting because of his mother's health. War, gave them a new democratic freedom eventually which made them to deviate from the morality.

CONCLUSION

Arthur Miller paints the character Joe Keller as an idealist man. He attempted to criticize the so called American values of success and American Dream. The collapse of Keller's family is the result of the destruction done to humanity after the war. When the character is approached from the praxeological view point it is obvious that the circumstances are created by man so he will not survive without its influence in his life. When the fictional characters are designed, they are always meant to reflect the effects and impacts of the socio-political conditions of their age. In this play, Miller emphasizes that achieving the goal of American dream caused the chaos in the society as well as in Keller's family. He justified that the deviation of American society from morality after the Second World War is because low economic standards and heavy want of wealth. *All My Sons* concludes as humanity, values and ethics are need for an hour in America during Miller's time.

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