

# Role of Illusions in the Dynamics of Relationships in *All My Sons*

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## ABSTRACT

*'All My Sons'* by Arthur Miller is a play woven around many deceptions, illusions and misleading beliefs. The poignancy of the tragedies that occur in the play gets manifold because of these illusionary factors. Every major character in the play is under some kind of an illusion: Joe Keller is under the illusion that everyone in the neighbourhood still respects him. Kate Keller is under the illusion that her son Larry will come back, Chris believes that his father is innocent, Annie is under the notion that she will be accepted as Chris's wife by Joe and Kate, and George feels Annie will return back with him and not marry Chris. These illusions affect/govern the relationships between different characters. My paper will talk about the dynamics of the relationships because of these illusions and how these could have been different, if characters could have been transparent and stopped deceiving themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* begins with the line: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." This statement is very much applicable to the Keller family of Arthur Miller's *'All My Sons'*. The unhappy family appears happy at the outset, but as the drama progresses, skeletons topple out of the family's cupboard and one by one, many secret incidents unfold that tell us how unhappy the seemingly 'happy' family is. In the beginning, in the first Act of the play, we find each character has woven a web of illusion around him/her that keeps them in a comfort zone.

## 2. Research Methodology

The research paper used textual analysis and archival research.

## 3. Discussion

### *Relationship between Kate and Joe/Chris*

Chris in the first Act tells Joe: "...We've made a terrible mistake with mother...Being dishonest with her. That kind of thing always pays off, and now it's paying off." (Miller 12) These lines clearly indicate that Joe and Chris were keeping the truth away from Kate. The reason was primarily because Joe wanted to avoid a confrontation with her:

Chris: You know Larry's not coming back and I know it. Why do we allow her to go on thinking that we believe her? (Miller 12)

Keller: What do you want to do, argue with her? (Miller 12)

Primarily, Joe wants normalcy and calm in the house. He does not want anyone in the house to be perturbed, agitated or disturbed by anything. So, he keeps telling lies and building up false hopes for his wife that his dead son Larry would return one day. He knows very well what the truth is, but at the same time he does not help Kate to come to terms with the truth. As is the habit of Joe, he loves fooling people and keeping matters

under cover and in doing so, he does not even spare his wife. He feels for every truth however direct, one needs some kind of evidence to believe it. He tells Chris:

"Keller: How're you going to prove it? Can you prove it?"

Chris: For God's sake, three years! Nobody comes after three years. It's insane.

Keller: To you it is, and to me. But not to her. You can talk yourself blue in the face, but there's no body and there's no grave, so where are you?" (Miller 12)

So, basically Joe in the above lines wants to push the truth back into the covers, though it is in front of him. Also, Kate knows about everything that her husband has done, and yet keeps supporting him. That shows her unconditional love for him. She does not for once question his fault or ask him to go the prison or repent in any form. In fact, she, in the manner of Lady Macbeth is a party to the crime as she sides with him and covers up for him whenever required. She becomes equally nervous when the news of George coming down to meet them reaches her. Towards the end of Act 1, the conversation between Kate and Joe clearly reveals that Kate knows everything her husband has done and yet decides to blindly support him:

"Keller: ...[To Mother] What does George want?"

Mother: He's been in Columbus since this morning with Steve. He's gotta see Annie right away, he says.

Keller: What for?

Mother: I don't know. [*She speaks with warning.*] He's a lawyer now, Joe. George is a lawyer. All these years he never even sent a postcard to Steve. Since he got back from war, not a postcard.

Keller: So what?

Mother: [*her tension breaking out*]: Suddenly he takes an airplane from New York to see him. An airplane!

Keller: Well? So?

Mother [trembling]: Why?

Keller: I don't read minds. Do you?

Mother: Why, Joe? What has Steve suddenly got to tell him that he takes an airplane to see him?

Keller [*frightened, but angry*]: Yes, I'm sure.

Mother [*sits stiffly in a chair*]: Be smart now, Joe. The boy is coming. Be smart.

Keller [*desperately*]: Once and for all, did you hear what I said? I said I'm sure!

Mother [*nods weakly*]: All right, Joe. [*He straightens up*]. Just...be smart." (Miller 41)

The 'smartness' that Kate refers to, she implements herself immediately in the next scene (Act 2) on George's arrival. She digresses every conversation that she has with George from Grape juice to his past romantic interest in Lydia and other girls. What she does can be read as an 'innocent affection' by gullible readers; however, if one goes to the bottom of the matter, any of Kate's behaviour is anything but innocent. Like mentioned earlier in the paper, Kate Keller is very much similar to Lady Macbeth and would do anything to save her husband from being caught. She also weaves the illusion of Larry being alive. Whether she actually believed it or did it just to hide Joe's involvement in the death of 21 pilots is debatable. All her hyper nature is nothing but a facade to divert everyone's attention from the enormity of her husband's crime. This also shows her love and affection for her husband, for whom she was prepared to go to any extent.

### **Relationship between Chris and Annie**

When Chris asked Annie why she had not revealed his feelings to her earlier, she said she was waiting for him to write to her. Both of them were under the illusion that the other had not forgotten Larry and hence were not ready to accept each other. However, when they meet, it is revealed in Act 1 that Chris was 'ashamed' of possessing 'anything' (and that included Annie):

"Chris: It take a little time to toss that off. Because they weren't just men. For instance, one time it'd been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little thing... but... That's the kind of guys I hd. They didn't die... They killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly. a little more selfish and they'd've been here today. And I got an idea ...watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of... responsibility. Man for man. You understand me? To show that, to bring that onto the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him. (pause) And then I came home and it was incredible. I... there was no meaning in it here. The whole thing to them was a kind of a ... bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt... what you

said... ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you've got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there's blood on it. I didn't want to take any of it. And I guess that included you.

Ann: And you still feel that way?

Chris: I want you now, Annie.

Ann: Because you mustn't feel that way anymore. Because you have a right to whatever you have. Everything, Chris, understand that? To me, too... And the money, there's nothing wrong in your money. Your father put hundreds of planes in the air, you should be proud. A man should be paid for that..." (Miller)

Again, after one illusion is burst, in the above quote of Annie, we find that the relationship of Chris and Annie is based on a wrong belief. Annie makes Chris believe that he has a right to be proud of everything his father has done. It is to be thought that here though she already knows the truth about Joe (as we come to know in Act 3), she hides it from Chris and continues to blow into proportion the hidden truth about what Joe had done. Here, probably one can assume she did it because she wanted Chris to live a sane life, and not get depressed by what his father had done. She did so keeping in mind Chris's sensitive nature, which is revealed in the conversation above. However, if she would have brought out the truth at this stage, perhaps the tragedy that happens later could've been avoided.

### **Relationship between George and Annie**

George comes to meet Annie at the Keller household in Act 2. He tells Annie that he has come from Columbus and has met their father in jail. He reveals to Annie that their father is innocent and Joe is the guilty one. At this point, one wonders what was the reason that propelled George to meet his father after so many years; why didn't he go earlier? However, Annie refuses to let go of George's belief that she should not marry into the family that has ruined their father's life and spoiled his reputation. Here, she reinforces the web of illusion that Joe is innocent, though she very well knows that he is guilty. Perhaps, she does this because she loves Chris and wanted a good life with him, forgetting all the past.

### **Relationship between Kate and George**

It is not to be denied that Kate had motherly, affectionate feelings towards George. She affectionately addresses him as 'Georgie' when he comes from Columbus in Act 3. However, her feelings for her husband are definitely more overpowering than her affection for George. She tries her level best to be 'smart' and keeps talking about grape juice, George's childhood- how he had grown up in their locality and about his romantic interests. Here, she does this so that George forgets

altogether his purpose of visiting the Kellers and believes that they are still the 'Holy Family'. As soon as George enters in Act 2, he has a heated discussion with Chris and even Annie intervenes. However, when Kate enters the scene, the atmosphere altogether changes:

"Mother enters on porch. She is dressed almost formally. Her hair is fixed. They are all turned toward her. On seeing George she raises both hands, comes down toward him.

Mother: Georgie, Georgie.

George: (he has always liked her) Hello, Kate.

Mother: (cups his face in her hands) They made an old man out of you. (Touches his hair) Look, you're grey.

George: (her pity, open and unabashed, reaches into him, and he smiles sadly) I know, I...

Mother: I told you when you went away, don't try for medals.

George: (laughs, tiredly) I didn't try, Kate. They made it very easy for me.

Mother: (actually angry) Go on. You're all alike. (To Ann) Look at him, why did you say he's fine? He looks like a ghost.

George: (relishing her solicitude) I feel alright.

Mother: I'm sick to look at you. What's the matter with your mother, why don't she feed you?

Ann: He just hasn't any appetite.

Mother: If he ate in my house he'd have an appetite. (to Ann) I pity your husband! (To George) Sit down. I'll make you a sandwich.

George: (sits with an embarrassed laugh) I'm really not hungry.

Mother: Honest to God, it breaks my heart to see what happened to all the children. How we worked and planned for you, and you end up no better than us.

George: (with deep feeling for her) You... you haven't changed at all, you know that, Kate?

Mother: None of us changed, Georgie. We all love you. Joe was just talking about the day you were born and the water got shut off. People were carrying basins from a block away... A stranger would have thought the whole block was on fire! (they laugh. She sees the juice. To Ann) Why didn't you give him some juice! (Miller 30)

When Kate reminisces about George's childhood, the aim is more to digress the topic rather than genuine affection for him. Though she is definitely concerned about George, the relationship has changed. Now, it is more fear than concern. She is scared because she guesses the reason for George coming here is reopening the case and sending Joe to prison.

### **Relationship between neighbours and Joe/ What Sue reveals to Annie**

Joe has the illusion that every one of his neighbours has forgotten the past and accepted him without any glitches. The reader also has that perception till the point of first meeting between Sue and Annie.

"Sue: I resent living next to the Holy Family. It makes me look like a bum, you understand?

Ann: I can't do anything about that.

Sue: Who is he to ruin a man's life? Everybody knows Joe pulled a fast one to get out of jail.

Ann: That's not true!

Sue: Then why don't you go out and talk to people? Go on, talk to them. There's not a person on the block who doesn't know the truth.

Ann: That's a lie. People come here all the time for cards and...

Sue: So what? They give him credit for being smart. I do, too, I've got nothing against Joe. But if Chris wants people to put on the hair shirt let him take off the broadcloth. He's driving my husband crazy with that phony idealism of his and I'm at the end of my rope on it!" (Miller 23)

At this point, the illusion is broken in the mind of Annie about the perception of Joe by the neighbours. However, still she is unable to think of her father Steve as innocent. The web of illusion in some form still hovers in her mind till Act 3.

### **Relationship between Annie and Kate/Joe**

Though both Joe and Kate seem to genuinely like Annie, they are somehow reluctant to accept Annie as Chris's wife because somehow it will remind them of Steve and the entire case of the crashed plane and twenty one pilots. Kate remains under an illusion that Larry is alive somewhere and if Chris marries Annie, that will proclaim Larry dead. Little did she know about the suicide of Larry and other hidden facts till the letter is revealed in Act 3.

### **Relationship between Steve and Annie/George**

Annie and George are under the illusion that their father is guilty till the point George goes to meet Steve in prison. He comes back and tries to tell Annie the truth but in her mind, the illusion still persists despite the letter she has with her. It's only after Chris's heated confrontation with Joe that the truth comes out and Annie realises the truth about her father.

### **Relationship between Joe and Chris**

Chris idolises his father too much. Though there is a clear ideological difference between father and son, Chris definitely looks up to his father. However, he too, like the neighbours harbours the illusion that Steve is guilty and not his father. Till the point where George rakes up the past, Chris does not confront his father. After he is convinced by George, Chris starts doubting his father and flares up saying:

"Chris: Dad... Dad, you killed twenty one men!

Keller: What, killed

Chris: You killed them, you murdered them.

Keller: (as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris) how could I kill anybody?

Chris: Dad! Dad!

Keller: (trying to hush him) I didn't kill anybody!

Chris: then explain it to me. What did you do? Explain it to me or I'll tear you to pieces!

Keller: (horrified at his overwhelming fury) Don't, Chris, don't...

Chris: I want to know what you did, now what did you do? You had a hundred and twenty cracked engine heads, how what did you do?" (Miller 36)

It is in the above lines that the illusion of his father's image finally bursts in the mind of Chris and he becomes devastated.

Things could have been different if Chris would have confronted his father earlier because he says he was "made yellow" in the house and he did nothing about it.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus we see how all the above mentioned relationships are based on some kind of illusion or the other. May be things would have been different if Larry would have confronted his father instead of ending his life like a coward. May be Annie could have produced the letter earlier to remove the illusion in Kate's mind and may be Annie and George should have trusted their father, and not Joe or popular perceptions of other people. Maybe the tragedy of Joe's death could have been averted if he would have accepted his mistake. Numerous ifs and buts; the illusions bring upon many disasters.

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