

THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAYS

What use does Arthur Miller make of the father-son relationships in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*?

Essay

by

Martin N. Ségur-Cabanac

© 2006

Introduction

The relationship between a father and his sons is a recurring theme in many of Arthur Miller's plays, including *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Price*. Being deeply influenced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, as well as perceiving his own father to be a failure during and after the Depression, Miller developed an inherent interest for and fascination with this theme.¹ Even though it played only a subordinate role in Miller's first Broadway production, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, it is during the writing of this early play that Miller began to see the full potential of it:

in writing of the father-son relationship and of the son's search for his relatedness there was a fullness of feeling I had never known before; a crescendo was struck with a force I could almost touch.²

It is his subsequent "penetrating insight into familial relationships" that make both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* such arresting portraits of the father-son relationship.³ However, Miller never puts these relationships at the forefront of his plays, but uses them to great effect to enforce and enhance the central plot and theme. Following is an analysis the father-son relationships in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* and how Miller uses them in the context of the plays.

All My Sons

Arthur Miller's first successful Broadway production, *All My Sons*, deals with the repercussions of protagonist Joe Keller's acts as owner of a factory supplying the United States

-
- 1 Benjamin Nelson, *Arthur Miller – Portrait of a Playwright* (London: Peter Owen, 1970), p. 19, 80, Christopher Bigsby, "An Interview with Arthur Miller", *Readings on Arthur Miller* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1997), p. 33, and Arthur Miller, *Timebends – A Life* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 114.
 - 2 Arthur Miller, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), p. 15, Arthur Miller, *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 126, and Neil Carson, *Arthur Miller* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), pp. 37-38.
 - 3 Carson, p. 153.

military with cylinder heads for aeroplanes during the Second World War. One day the production line produced faulty parts that should never have been used, but Joe decided to have them shipped out anyway in order to save his business from losing vital government contracts. When twenty-one pilots subsequently died because of it, Joe, along with his partner, faced prison terms. Joe rescued himself and his company by successfully putting all the blame on his partner. He justifies this for himself by his firm belief that his loyalty and responsibility lie only with his family, and not with anyone or anything else. The drama's plot is that of this past decision catching up with him, triggered by the marriage plans between Joe's son Chris and Ann Deever, his former partner's daughter. When he learns that his other son, Larry, committed suicide during the war because of Joe's crime, he finally understands the wider implications of his actions and his responsibility towards the larger society. Not able to bear his guilt, he kills himself.

Beneath and parallel to the story of Joe's guilt and his coming to terms with the past lies the issue of the relationship between him and his only surviving son, Chris. Having built up the factory throughout all his life, Joe sees in Chris the ultimate purpose of his business endeavour; he does it all for Chris because his family is all that matters to him. What he does not understand is that Chris, having fought in the war, has become a different man with an entirely different set of values. It is the experience of the war that separates those two generations, a gap that neither of them can successfully bridge again. In order to gain a deeper understanding of their relationship and its function within the story, the characters of Joe and Chris must first be analysed.

Joe Keller is a simple man. Not having experienced any real formal education, he had to rely on his own hands and wits his entire life, and he has been remarkably successful in doing so. Even though there is no real explanation of how he came to own a factory, there is a sense of him having worked his way up from a simple "machine-shop worker" by sheer endurance and willpower.⁴ Because of that, he is extremely protective of everything he has achieved, and probably rightly so. All his life he has struggled to make his way within the capitalist American system, a system he is an integral and actively participating part of. One could even argue that he has achieved the American Dream. Therefore, his entire set of values is built on a reliance upon and loyalty towards himself and his family. Indeed, his intrinsic understanding of the competitive society he lives in probably puts his

4 Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge/All My Sons* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 89.

acquired property and wealth on the same level with his wife and offspring in terms of its importance and value to him. Though not justifying his shipping out faulty engine parts in wartime, this state of mind does explain why he was capable of committing such a crime in the first place. For him, the “tribal” law of the family stands above any legislative law imposed by a wider society he co-exists with, but never really feels part of. Therefore, when he disregarded the dangers of supplying the military forces with cracked cylinder heads, he did so in defence of his family and, most importantly, his sons. However, as Benjamin Nelson argues, this heightened sense of security born out of the desire to leave something behind for his sons is not entirely selfless. There is an element of egocentricity in his acts as he unconsciously tries to “combat his mortality through the promise and potential of his children.”⁵ Born out of this unconscious desire, his value system stands in stark contrast to that of his son (and, indeed, to that of all of the members of the younger generation presented in the play).

Miller describes Chris Keller as a “listener” and a man “capable of immense affection and loyalty”.⁶ Even though this loyalty might have originally been directed chiefly towards his parents and his brother, his experiences during the Second World War have changed his perceptions significantly. At thirty-two years old, he is a powerful and decent man with a value system impregnated by the intense and loving comradeship he experienced as commander of a company in the war. As he tries to explain to Ann, when he came back to America after the war he found himself somehow enlightened in a society that had not learned any of the lessons he had. It seemed to him that people back home did not – maybe could not – understand the feelings he had felt in the war. It was all “that rat-race again”, with everyone, including his father, out to make the highest possible profit without any consideration for his fellow men.⁷ For him, then, the highest law is neither that of the “tribe” nor that of society, but that of morality; an almost “New Testament law of love and co-operation” has been firmly embedded within his very soul.⁸ But he has almost given up on it, for he continues to work in Joe’s factory even though he despises the cut-throat competition there. It is not entirely clear why exactly he chose to return to his parents instead of staying true to his new beliefs and trying to find his own way in life. He might have been lured by the money he stands to make and inherit from his father, or there might still be enough of Joe’s sense of belonging to his family in him to overpower his new moral

5 Nelson, p. 83.

6 Miller, p. 96.

7 Ibid., p. 122.

8 Carson, p. 41.

sensibility. But it is ultimately those diametrically opposed sets of values between Joe and Chris that lie at the heart of their relationship throughout the play.

Joe's protectiveness towards his sons probably made him a good father to his young boys. Not only is it unlikely that they ever had to experience hunger, but he also seems to have found the time to be there for them, to play with them, as Chris and Joe's shared joy in the father's playfulness with Bert, a young boy from the neighbourhood, betrays.⁹ However, as Miller chose not to directly present the past in the form of flashbacks, the relationship between Joe and his young sons remains largely unknown. There is, however, a hint of glorification of his father on Chris' part, as he tells Joe in a state of utter desperation after he has learned about his father's acts that he never saw him as a man, but as a father.¹⁰ In this instant, Chris has finally become aware of the fact that his father is just another human being, prone to the same flaws and imperfections of any other man – or, probably even more so, any other civilian trapped in the same old capitalist system. It is in this pivotal moment that the son realises what he is about to become, or possibly has already become, and this betrayal of his own ethos of comradeship might hurt him even more than Joe's crime, as he states that he “can't look at [himself].”¹¹ And it is here that one of the functions of the relationship between the two within the drama becomes fulfilled. Speaking for an entire generation of war veterans, Chris casts a verdict on the selfish American society that has failed to learn any lessons through the sacrifice of their sons. Miller effectively uses one particular father-son relationship to illustrate a deeply dividing chasm he perceives between two entire generations of men. A small family in an unnamed town thereby becomes a metaphor for an America that has failed to deal with its war generation and to grow morally.

On a more functional level, the relationship between Chris and his father acts as a trigger for Joe to be able to understand the wider implications of his deeds. Because leaving something behind for his sons is ultimately the only goal Joe strives for, his sudden and climactic realisation becomes all the more powerful for being forced upon him by his sons, both living and dead. Indeed, one could argue that it has to be his sons who make him understand, since neither societal law nor Joe's own sense of morality will ever accomplish it. He commits suicide not only as a “penance for his previous

9 Miller, p. 97.

10 Ibid., p. 168.

11 Ibid., p. 168.

deeds,” but also because he cannot continue to live with himself or with his only remaining son hating him.¹² At the same time, Joe's understanding presents a catharsis for Chris as well. Only by seeing the extent to which the capitalist system can affect, even negate, moral principles within his own father can Chris grow. Joe's downfall is necessary for Chris to see what he is about to become and to act accordingly. Even though the play ends right after the father's suicide, the audience is left with the feeling that Chris will not continue down his path to become just another member of the market-driven society, but will preserve his war-time sense of honour and morality and live the rest of his life accordingly. Metaphorically, Chris had to effectively commit parricide to fulfil his own destiny. Miller acknowledges this, as for him “all suicide victims are murdered,” becoming victims either of aggression or “of truth that is in the form of a weapon.”¹³ In other words, as German author Hermann Hesse put it in his famous novel, *Demian*, “who would be born must first destroy a world.”¹⁴

Death of a Salesman

Miller's masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* depicts the last day in the life of salesman Willy Loman. Having spent his entire working life travelling up and down the country for the same company, Willy finds himself in a belated mid-life crisis. Never having achieved the glorious existence as a salesman he had envisioned for himself, he, much like Joe Keller, places all his hopes in his two sons, Biff and Happy. But because their father has infused them with the same fundamentally wrong sense of morality and of what is important in life that has hindered his own success and happiness, the sons find themselves equally trapped and suspended in time without the ability to succeed. Blatantly preferring his older son Biff, Willy put not only his hopes but also immense pressure on him from an early age on to become the “number one man”.¹⁵ But when Biff once caught his father cheating on his mother on a business trip to Boston, the son's godlike reverence of Willy was shattered. From that moment on, Biff wandered around devoid of any sense of purpose, a bum surviving through low-wage labour and stealing. When the family is reunited once again under one roof, the father's pressure on and control over his sons – especially Biff – once again refuel the old conflicts between them and ultimately lead to Biff's decision to leave and never come back. Torn between what he knows he must do and the love he feels for his father, Biff hugs Willy one last time.

12 Carson, p. 43.

13 Richard I. Evans, *Psychology and Arthur Miller* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1969), p. 77.

14 Hermann Hesse, *Demian* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999), p. 78.

15 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 111.

It is at that moment that Willy becomes aware of Biff's love for him. It is a textbook example of the "human affection exchange" theory of male behaviour, which finds that fathers and sons very seldom express their affection for each other directly through "verbal statements or direct non-verbal gestures".¹⁶ This, together with the loss of his job, prompts Willy to finally commit a long considered suicide in order to bequeath twenty thousand dollars of life insurance money to Biff for him to finally become "magnificent".¹⁷

The father-son relationship is much more central in *Death of a Salesman* than in *All My Sons*. Neil Carson points out that the play can even be seen as a "social drama" with Biff as the central character.¹⁸ Although Carson concedes this is clearly not the case, as Willy's centrality in the story undoubtedly makes him the protagonist, it is accurate in so far as that Biff is his father's chief antagonist; the relationship between those two is the pivotal one. Even though the main plot line follows Willy's increasing loss of grip on reality, as he has more and more visions of his past, to his suicide, his interactions with his sons – especially Biff – play a vital role both in his downfall and in the overall drama. Again, to fully understand their relationship, the personalities of Will, Biff, and Happy need to be analysed.

Willy Loman is a man of "mercurial nature", anguished by "massive dreams" and "turbulent longings within him."¹⁹ Never having had a strong and caring relationship to his own father (but revering him nonetheless), he strives to give as much guidance and advice to his sons as he possibly can. He deeply loves and cares for Biff and Happy, and his continuing involvement in their affairs even when they are grown men makes him a father with good but misdirected intentions. In contrast to *All My Sons*, Miller does show different episodes of their upbringing as Willy's visions of the past. During these episodes it is made clear that Willy is indeed a good father who tries relentlessly to instil his own sense of morality and his own understanding of the world into his boys. His failure as a parent therefore is not one of neglect or intentional misleading, but a result of his own flawed sense of what is important in life and the manifold contradictions that make up his own character. As his own father left when he was still a small child, his strong urge of guidance towards his sons is a direct result of

16 Kory Floyd and Mark T. Morman, "Human Affection Exchange: II – Affectionate Communication in Father-Son Relationships", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 143, 5 (2003), 601.

17 Miller, p. 106.

18 Carson, p. 47.

19 Miller, p. 8.

the lack of guidance he experienced himself.²⁰ He is, in a sense, “the eternal adolescent arrested at an early stage of development” and therefore unable to give proper guidance to his sons.²¹ Longing above all else for their respect and even their adoration, he lies to them about his own prowess as a salesman. These lies have become so deeply rooted within him over the years (partly as a means to please his own dead father) that he has come to believe them himself, and it is only with the help of his down-to-earth wife Linda that he can still sometimes connect to reality.²² Never having fulfilled his aspiration to succeed in capitalist America, he wants his sons to make good for him, to achieve what he could not, and thereby take partial credit for their success. Therefore, his ambitions for his sons are probably even more selfish in Nelson’s terms than Joe Keller’s are. Even so, such an interpretation might not be entirely justified, as Willy commits suicide in order for Biff to receive his life insurance money and build up his own sporting goods company with it. However, since Willy has already made numerous attempts at suicide in the past, his final motivation can also be seen as an excuse for himself: now that he can see something good coming out of his death, he feels justified. And so, even in his death, Willy Loman remains contradictory.

Biff, the Loman’s oldest son, has been brought up not only with the will to succeed, but with an almost unbreakable sense of the certainty of his success. However, since this high sense of self-esteem is based solely on the praise he gets from his father, whom he loves and puts on a pedestal, his entire value system came crashing down when he caught him cheating on his mother. This, together with the wrongful encouragement he received from his father for showing “initiative” through stealing, sent him down a self-destructive path into a life in which he can find neither financial success nor happiness.²³ Torn between his desire to work outdoors and with his bare hands, and the still existing longing to please his father by becoming a “leader of men”, Biff never succeeded in anything in life and even landed in prison for a brief period.²⁴ His journey in the course of the play therefore is that of finding himself, of becoming aware of his father’s wrong dreams and of the fact that they do not work for him just as they never worked for Willy. He is the only person in the drama that displays any “character arc”, i.e. any significant change in his “inner nature”, by finally realising who he really is.²⁵

20 Carson, p. 50.

21 Ibid., p. 49.

22 Ibid., p. 52.

23 Miller, p. 23.

24 Ibid., p. 105.

25 Robert McKee, *Story – Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 104.

Happy has been brought up by the same principles as his older brother, but without the sense of manifest destiny: he was always considered second. This has left him with an even stronger desire to please his father in any way he can. Even though he is only a minor character in the play, his function within the story is an important one as he acts as a buffer between Biff and Willy. Throughout the play, his devotion to his father is unquestioning, and he always defends him whenever Biff is on the attack. When he exclaims at Willy's grave that he will "win" the dead man's "fight" in New York, he sentences himself to the continuation of his father's illusions; he becomes the next generation of the tragic hero that was Willy Loman.²⁶

The relationship between Willy and his sons plays an integral part in the salesman's demise. Finding himself at the end of his tether, the future success of his sons is the only reason for him to keep going on. Unaware not only of the wrongness of his ambitions for himself but also of the undue pressure he puts on Biff and Happy to conform to his vision of the American Dream, he jumps on the bandwagon of the idea of a sporting goods company run by his sons. Even though it is originally Happy's idea, the younger son seems content to let Biff go ahead to try to secure funding for it by asking for a loan from one of Biff's former employers, thereby further enforcing his subordinate position within the male triangle. This gives Willy a new dream to dream, a new vision of the future grandness of his sons, as he sees them "lick the civili[s]ed world".²⁷ When Biff finally manages to break free from his father's influence by stating that he will leave and never come back, Willy commits what he perceives to be the only act left to him to ensure the success of his offspring, thereby redeeming his own failures: suicide. Therefore, in contrast to Joe Keller, Willy does not die a broken and guilt-ridden man, but a father full of hope and confidence; it is through his sacrifice that he sees his ambitions for his sons finally fulfilled. But, in terms of Biff's future, the situation is very much akin to that of Chris Keller's: he, too, had to effectively destroy his father's world in order to grow up and become his own distinct personality. He has learned the truth about himself and his position in the world and has thereby surpassed both his father and his younger brother in the eyes of the audience. The tragedy of the play, therefore, lies not only in Willy's death, but probably much more so in the stubbornness of Happy in continuing along his father's path. Hence the message to the audience is

²⁶ Miller, p. 111.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

not only one of the limits of the American Dream and that it cannot apply to everyone, but of the necessity of the sons outgrowing their fathers, of the importance and value of the next generation to break loose from their forbears.

Conclusion

In both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller presents fathers whose primary goal in life is to make a better future possible for their sons. Both Joe and Willy do everything for their sons, and in doing so fail to understand and come to terms with their own limits and shortcomings, albeit in slightly different ways. While Joe is quite successful within the capitalist system and can thereby pass a considerable sum of money on to his son, Willy never manages to attain the status he so desperately wishes for himself. What the two tragic protagonists do share is a flawed value system and the inability to critically analyse and deface it as such. And this is where their sons need to step in to open their eyes to the world that lies outside their own boundaries. In Joe's case, Chris (and Larry in the form of his suicide note) need to make their father understand and face his accountability and responsibility towards wider society; in Willy's case, it is on Biff alone to make the salesman see that not every man can be a leader and that personal happiness and self-knowledge are more important than social status within a capitalist system. In both plays the father-son relationship is thereby utilised to get to the core of the tragic flaw within the protagonist and to confront him with it.

Equally, Miller uses the respective father-son relationships in both plays to illustrate the chasm that exists between the two generations, and the necessity for the sons to confront their fathers and thereby cut their *umbilical cords*. Chris needs to emancipate himself from his capitalist father in order to grow and adhere to his own sense of morality based on love and comradeship, and Biff needs to reject his father's self-destructive dreams to find his true self and make up the rules of his own life. Both Chris and Biff, therefore, need to act as antagonists to their protagonist fathers in order to find fulfilment in their own lives. Existing along with the main motif of the destructive potential of American capitalism, this theme makes both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* classic plays that ring as true with today's audiences as they did at their time, and will continue to do so.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Miller, Arthur. *A View from the Bridge/All My Sons*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Secondary Sources

Bigsby, Christopher. "An Interview with Arthur Miller". *Readings on Arthur Miller* (ed.) Thomas Siebold. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1997.

Carson, Neil. *Arthur Miller*. London: MacMillan Press, 1982.

Evans, Richard I. *Psychology and Arthur Miller*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1969.

Floyd, Kory and Morman, Mark T. "Human Affection Exchange: II – Affectionate Communication in Father-Son Relationships". *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 143, 5 (2003), 599-612.

Hesse, Hermann. *Demian*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999.

McKee, Robert. *Story – Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. London: Methuen, 1999.

Miller, Arthur. *Plays: One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1989.

Miller, Arthur. *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*. London: Methuen, 1994.

Miller, Arthur. *Timebends – A Life*. London: Methuen, 1987.

Nelson, Benjamin. *Arthur Miller – Portrait of a Playwright*. London: Peter Owen, 1970.