

Ordinary Men, Fatal Choices: The Representation of the Common Man in Arthur Miller's All My Sons and Death of a Salesman

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Abstract:

Arthur Miller is widely regarded as one of the most important voices in American theatre. Two of his most celebrated plays *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) place the ordinary American man at the very center of the dramatic action. These are not plays about kings or generals. They are plays about a manufacturer, a salesman, and their families. People who live in modest houses, dream of success, and are ultimately destroyed by the choices they make and the values they hold. This paper explores the theme of the common man in both plays. These plays examine how Miller portrays the ordinary individual as the site of moral failure, social pressure, and genuine tragedy. Through close reading and textual analysis, the paper argues that Joe Keller in *All My Sons* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* represent two distinct but connected versions of the common man. One who knows what he has done and cannot face it, and one who does not even know who he truly is. Together, they form a powerful critique of the American Dream and a deeply human portrait of what happens when ordinary men make fatal choices. The paper is structured to examine each play individually before drawing comparative conclusions about Miller's vision of the common man.

Keywords: Common man, American Dream, moral failure, tragic hero, family, guilt, social pressure, identity, American drama, capitalism

1. Introduction:

Arthur Miller once wrote that tragedy is not the exclusive property of kings and princes. In his landmark essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), he argued that the ordinary person. The man who goes to work every morning, worries about money, tries to love his family, and dreams of something better is just as capable of real tragedy as any figure from Greek or Shakespearean drama. What makes a person tragic, Miller believed, is not their social status but their willingness to fight for a sense of personal dignity, even when that fight destroys them. This idea is not just a theory for Miller. It is the living substance of his two most celebrated early plays: *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Both plays are set in the world of everyday American life. Both feature men who have built their identities around their families and their work. And both end in devastation not because of fate or divine punishment, but because of choices made

by ordinary men who could not see clearly, or who refused to look.

Joe Keller, the protagonist of *All My Sons*, is a successful manufacturer who sold defective aircraft parts during the Second World War, causing the deaths of twenty-one pilots. He has buried this secret and convinced himself that everything he did was for his family. Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, is a travelling salesman who has spent his entire life chasing a version of success that was never real. Both men are ordinary. Both are deeply flawed. And both, in Miller's hands, become genuinely tragic figures. This paper explores the theme of the common man in these two plays. It examines how Miller constructs his protagonists as representative American men, how the plays critique the values and illusions of mid-twentieth-century American society, and what their stories reveal about the costs of self-deception, moral blindness, and misplaced love. The paper also considers what connects the two plays thematically and what makes them enduringly relevant not just as American drama, but as human stories.

2. Miller's Concept of the Common Man as Tragic Hero:

To understand what Miller is doing in these two plays, it is helpful to begin with his own theoretical framework. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller directly challenges the classical idea that only great or noble figures can experience true tragedy. He writes that the common man possesses the same psychological and emotional depth as any tragic king and that his fear of losing his identity, his sense of dignity, and his place in the world is just as powerful as any monarch's fear of losing a throne. This is a bold and democratic claim. Miller is saying that the man who sells goods, runs a small business, or raises a family in a modest suburb is not a lesser human being. His struggles matter. His failures are real tragedies and when society or his own illusions crushes him, that is a genuine catastrophe, not a minor misfortune.

Miller also introduces an important idea: the tragic flaw of the common man is often not wickedness, but a kind of blindness. Joe Keller does not think of himself as a bad man. Willy Loman does not think of himself as a failure. Their tragedy lies precisely in the gap between who they think they are and who they actually are. It is this gap between self-image and reality that makes them so recognizable and so heartbreaking. Both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are explorations of this gap. They ask a simple but devastating question: what happens when an ordinary man's life is built on a lie?

3. All My Sons: The Weight of Guilt and the Limits of Family Love:

All My Sons is Miller's first great success, and it remains one of his most tightly constructed plays. It tells the story of Joe Keller, a factory owner who, during the Second World War, knowingly shipped out cracked cylinder heads for military aircraft. The parts caused the planes to crash, killing twenty-one pilots. His business partner, Steve Deever, took the blame and went to prison. Joe Keller stayed free and rebuilt his business. On the surface, Joe Keller looks like everything the American Dream promises: a prosperous business, a comfortable home, a loving family. But the play slowly dismantles this surface, revealing the rot underneath. The action begins when Chris, Joe's idealistic son, announces he wants to marry Ann Deever, Steve's daughter and the former girlfriend of Larry, Joe's other son who died in the war. This seemingly personal matter pulls the hidden past into the light.

Joe Keller's defining characteristic is his absolute belief that family is the only true moral obligation. He has rationalized his crime entirely through the lens of fatherhood. He tells himself and believes it that he did what he did for his sons, for their future, for the family he was building. This is the logic he uses to live with himself:

"What could I do? I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, and nothin' happens, and then the next morning I get on my feet and I tell them: 'Ship it.' That's all. And then I see my son's name in the paper, and they're blamin' me... I did it for you, Chris, you gotta know that." (Miller 58-59)

These words are revealing in several ways. Joe Keller is not trying to minimize what he did. He is trying to explain it to make sense in terms that he can live with. He genuinely believes that family loyalty justifies or at least explains his choices. For him, the world is divided simply: there is the family, and there is everything else. His moral universe does not extend beyond his own front door. This is what makes Joe Keller such a powerful portrait of the common man. He is not a monster. He is a man who loves his family fiercely and has used that love to blind himself to his responsibilities toward the wider world. His fatal flaw is not cruelty. It is a failure of moral imagination. He could not see that those twenty-one pilots were also someone's sons.

Chris, who served in the war and watched his men die for each other, represents the opposite value system. He believes in a shared human responsibility that we are all connected, that we owe something to people beyond our own family. His confrontation with his father is the emotional climax of the play: "There's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died." (Miller 90)

Chris's accusation cuts to the heart of the play's argument. Joe's moral narrowness, his inability to see beyond the family is not just a personal failure. It is, Miller suggests, a failure of the American social imagination: the idea that individual success and family loyalty can be pursued at any cost, regardless of the harm done to the larger community. The most devastating revelation comes near the end of the play, when it emerges that Larry. The son Joe thought he was saving, actually knew about his father's crime. Larry's letter, read aloud by Ann, reveals that Larry was so ashamed that he deliberately crashed his plane. He chose death over the dishonor of being Joe Keller's son. This is the moment that finally breaks Joe: "Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were." (Miller 90)

These are the most important words Joe Keller speaks. In recognizing that the dead pilots were "all his sons," he finally achieves the moral vision that eluded him throughout his life. But it comes too late. He goes offstage and shoots himself. The ordinary man, the successful businessman, the devoted father destroys himself the moment he truly sees what he has done. Miller is not condemning Joe Keller as a uniquely evil man. He is showing how ordinary values like love of family, desire for success, fear of failure can, when taken to an extreme and pursued without conscience, become instruments of destruction. Joe is a man of his time and his society. And that is precisely what makes his tragedy so uncomfortable and so true.

4. Death of a Salesman: The Man Who Believed the Dream:

If Joe Keller knows what he has done and cannot face it. Willy Loman is something different, and in some ways more tragic. Willy does not know who he is. He has spent his entire life pursuing a version of success that was never real. He tells himself and his sons a story about American life that does not hold up under examination. He is not a criminal like Joe Keller. He is something more ordinary and more heartbreaking: a man who simply got it wrong.

Death of a Salesman is structured around Willy's fragmented consciousness. The play moves between the present where Willy is sixty-three, exhausted, and being fired from his job and

the past, which returns to him in extended daydream sequences. These flashbacks are not simply memories; they are the story Willy has told himself about his life, and they slowly reveal how different that story is from reality. At the centre of the play is Willy's belief in the American Dream. The idea that if you are well-liked, confident, and hard-working, success will come. He has built his entire identity on this belief, and he has passed it on to his sons, especially Biff. He tells them that being "well-liked" is the secret to everything: "Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want." (Miller 21)

This philosophy is deeply American and deeply flawed. It is based on image, personality, and charm rather than on real skill, hard work, or moral integrity. Willy has never questioned it. He has repeated it so often that it has become his gospel. And yet, at sixty-three. He is borrowing money from his neighbor Charley to pay bills, driving his car off the road, and slowly losing his grip on reality. One of the most painful aspects of the play is Willy's relationship with his son Biff. Willy has always seen Biff as his greatest hope. The proof that the dream works, that Willy's values and vision will be vindicated. But Biff has never become the success Willy imagined. He is thirty-four, drifting, unable to find his place. The reason for this disconnect is gradually revealed: as a teenager, Biff discovered his father having an affair, and the discovery shattered him. It destroyed his faith in his father and in the values his father represented.

The scene where Biff confronts Willy with this memory is one of the most emotionally powerful in American drama "You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!" (Miller 95) This outburst carries years of betrayal and grief. Biff is not just calling his father a liar. He is rejecting the entire value system that Willy represents. For Biff, the discovery of the affair was the moment the dream died. It was the moment he saw his father as an ordinary, fallible man rather than the great figure Willy had always pretended to be.

Willy, for his part, cannot accept this. Even at the end of his life, when everything has collapsed, he clings to the belief that Biff loves and admires him, that his life has had meaning, that he will be remembered. When his son Howard Wagner fires him, a humiliation made worse by the fact that Howard is a young man who inherited the business from Willy's mentor and friend. Willy's world begins to fall apart completely. His cry of protest reveals his sense of existential entitlement: "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away — a man is not a piece of fruit!" (Miller 61-62) This line is both sad and revealing. Willy believes he is owed something. not just fair treatment, but recognition. He wants to be seen. He wants his life to have counted. But the modern business world has no room for sentiment or loyalty. It moves on, and Willy Loman, the old salesman who was once "well-liked" is simply disposed of.

The play's climax comes when Willy and Biff have their final confrontation. Biff, who has achieved a kind of hard-won clarity about himself and his father, tries to make Willy see the truth: "Pop! I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it anymore. I'm just what I am, that's all." (Miller 106) This is the bravest and saddest speech in the play. Biff is not attacking his father. He is asking to be allowed to exist as an ordinary man not a great success, not a failure, just a person. He is begging his father to give up the dream. But Willy cannot do it. He hears Biff's tears and interprets them as love, as proof that Biff still believes in him. He decides, in his distorted thinking, that by dying and leaving his life insurance money to Biff, he can give his son the capital to finally succeed.

Willy drives off into the night and crashes his car. His death is not heroic. It is a final,

desperate act of a man who could never distinguish between love and delusion. The Requiem scene that follows is devastating in its quiet: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong." (Miller, 111) Biff's words over his father's grave are the play's final verdict. Willy Loman was not a bad man. He was a man with the wrong dreams, dreams given to him by his culture, by his society, by the seductive mythology of American success. His tragedy is not just personal. It is the tragedy of a system that promises everything and delivers nothing to the ordinary man who believes in it most completely.

5. The Common Man and the American Dream: A Comparative View:

Reading *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* together reveals how deeply connected they are, and how Miller develops his vision of the common man across both works. Both plays are set in the same post-war American landscape. A world of new prosperity, rising expectations, and enormous social pressure to succeed. And both plays show what happens when ordinary men accept that pressure without questioning its values.

Joe Keller and Willy Loman are very different characters, one is practical, tough, and clear-eyed about the world; the other is dreamy, emotional, and hopelessly confused. But they share the same fundamental flaw: an inability to see beyond their own desires and self-images. Joe cannot see that his responsibility extends beyond his family. Willy cannot see that his version of success is a fantasy. Both men are trapped inside stories they have told themselves, and both are destroyed when those stories collapse. The family is central to both plays. Miller uses the family not as a place of warmth and safety but as the arena where the common man's values are tested and ultimately found wanting. In *All My Sons*, Joe's love for his sons becomes the justification for a crime that kills other men's sons. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy's dreams for Biff become a form of violence. He imposes a false identity on a man who simply wants to be himself.

Miller also uses fathers and sons to explore the question of inheritance, not financial inheritance, but moral and psychological inheritance. What do fathers pass on to their sons? In both plays, the answer is disturbing. Joe passes on guilt and disillusionment. Willy passes on false dreams and emotional instability. The sons in both plays, Chris and Biff, are left to sort through the wreckage of their fathers' lives and decide who they want to be.

Linda Loman, Willy's wife, deserves special attention in this context. She is one of Miller's most complex female characters, loyal, perceptive, and heartbreaking. She knows her husband better than anyone, and she loves him with a devotion that is both admirable and, in some ways, complicit. Her famous speech in Act I is a plea for the dignity of the common man:

"I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." (Miller 40).

This speech is the moral heart of the play and in many ways, of Miller's entire project. Linda is not arguing that Willy is great or even good. She is arguing that he is human, and that his suffering matters. The phrase "attention must be paid" is a demand for recognition for the acknowledgment that ordinary lives have weight and value. It is Miller's argument, made through Linda's voice, for the dignity of the common man.

6. Social Pressure, Moral Blindness, and the Cost of Illusion:

One of the things that makes both plays so powerful is the way Miller shows how society

itself creates the conditions for the common man's destruction. Joe Keller and Willy Loman are not simply individuals who made bad choices. They are products of a specific social and cultural environment that shaped their values, their ambitions, and their blind spots. The America of the late 1940s, the world these plays were written for and about, was a society of enormous optimism and enormous pressure. The post-war economic boom promised prosperity to ordinary men who worked hard and played by the rules. Success was not just a possibility; it was an expectation. A man who failed to achieve it had not just failed financially, he had failed as a man.

Both Joe and Willy have internalized this pressure completely. Joe pursued success by building a business when the war threatened that business, he chose the business over his conscience. Willy pursued success by selling, not goods, exactly, but himself, his personality, his charm and when the market for that kind of selling dried up, he had nothing left. Neither man has the critical distance to question the values that are destroying him. This is what Miller means by moral blindness not stupidity or evil, but the inability to step back and see clearly. Joe cannot see that family loyalty has limits. Willy cannot see that his version of the American Dream is a fiction. These are not failures of intelligence. They are failures of imagination, the inability to conceive of a different way of living.

The plays suggest that this failure is not entirely the individual's fault. Society offers very limited scripts for ordinary men. Work hard. Provide for your family. Be successful. Be liked. These are the instructions that Joe and Willy have followed all their lives. The tragedy is that following these instructions, without question or reflection, can lead not to fulfilment but to destruction.

7. Conclusion:

All *My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are powerful plays not because of technical skill or history, but because they show real and uncomfortable truths about ordinary life. Arthur Miller presents common men like Joe Keller and Willy Loman, who work, love, dream, and also deceive themselves. He shows that their struggles are serious and deserve attention. Joe and Willy are not traditional heroes. They are ordinary people dealing with money, family, and personal dreams. Yet, their failures and realizations are deeply tragic, especially when they finally understand the truth about their lives. Both plays highlight that the biggest enemy of the common man is self-deception. Joe believes that family love justifies his crime, while Willy believes that being well-liked means success. These false beliefs, influenced by society, ultimately destroy them. Miller's message is not only tragic but also hopeful. He suggests that honesty, moral understanding, and self-awareness are essential in life. Through these plays, he reminds us that ordinary lives and choices matter, and we must question the stories we tell ourselves.

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