|  |
| --- |
|  |
| *All My Sons:* |
| A Modern Tragedy |
| Stephanie Moody |
| Dr. Anstendig |
| 4/4/2011 |

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Stephanie Moody

*All My Sons* Essay #3

Dr. Anstendig

4 April 2011

*All My Sons*: A Modern Tragedy

“Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.” This quote, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, touches upon Arthur Miller’s belief that tragedy continues to be pertinent to modern audiences and despite popular belief tragedy can, and does, still exist in contemporary writing. There are three elements included in Arthur Miller’s, *All My Sons*, which confirm the assertion that the play is a modern tragedy. These elements include secrecy, struggle against society, and suicide. Also included in the text are several indications that Joe Keller, one of the main characters, serves as Miller’s tragic hero.

Before exploring *All My Sons* as a tragedy, it is important to know the answers to two questions: what exactly is tragedy and what elements make up a tragic piece of literature? Tragedy is defined as

An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain

magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament,

the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form

of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith

to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore,

must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot,

Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody (Butcher).

In *All My Sons*, the Keller family suffers ridicule due to a catastrophic decision made by Joe, a providing husband and father. Just as this definition implies, Miller suggests that Joe is flawed and that he must face his destiny due to the mistakes he has made. Though he was once revered by his son Chris, Joe’s negligence led to the death of several of young soldiers during the war when he allowed faulty air equipment to be sent out of his factory. Miller used a real life story to formulate Joe’s mistake or crime. During World War II, there was a manufacturing company that shipped out faulty parts and caused the death of several soldiers (Moore 1). While keeping this secret for several years, Joe and his wife Kate were also mourning the death of their eldest son Larry, the pride and joy of the Keller family. It is through these challenges that Arthur Miller demonstrates several elements of tragedy according to Aristotle’s, *Poetics*, and Miller’s, “Tragedy and the Common Man”.

There are three specific components included in *All My Sons* that verify it is a tragedy. First, there is secrecy. Characters are often caught up in some type of secrecy such as their flaws of character, intentions or past mistakes. In the case of the Keller family, Joe keeps his poor business decision a secret as he watches the consequences of this choice play out. This secrecy causes a rift between members of the Keller family. In specific, Kate is forced to carry the burden of this secret to protect her family which leads to resentment towards her husband Joe. Their relationship is in shreds as Kate pines over the death of Larry and the destruction of her family’s reputation. Chris is also affected by Joe’s decision; the evidence of this is shown in the conclusion of the play when Chris condemns his father saying, “You were afraid maybe! God in heaven, what kind of man are you?... What the hell are you? You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you?” (59). Chris loses the respect and admiration that he once had for his father who he viewed as a provider and business mentor. Now, he cannot help but see his father as a murderer above all things. The secret that Joe holds is intended to protect his family, but instead, it ruins them; it tears them apart at the seams and each character is left alone and suffering. It is secrecy that begins this tragedy and the consequences of it that bring it to an end.

The second component included in this play that verifies its validity as a tragedy is Joe’s struggle against society. In tragedy, according to Aristotle, there is typically conflict between one, or more, of the characters and a superior force such as fate or society (Butcher). In this play, Joe struggles against both of these forces. In order to attain the “American Dream”, Joe fights against society and the ethics of business. He wants nothing more than success for himself and his family and he is willing to assume risk to attain victory. In his short essay, “Tragedy and the Common Man”, Arthur Miller writes about this very struggle that Joe faces:“I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity” (“Tragedy and the Common Man” 1). Certainly, Joe is desperately trying to retain his dignity and reputation as a good business man even after he makes several poor decisions. Toward the conclusion of the play, Joe attempts to defend his decisions in order to convince both himself and his family that he was justified. He proclaims, “What could I do! I’m in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you’re out of business; you got a process, the process don’t work you’re out of business; you don’t know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell’s it to them?” (58). Joe tries to rationalize his lies by blaming society for the way in which business is conducted. Had he confessed to his wrongdoing, he believes that his family would have suffered a worse fate. He soon realizes that his battle against the “force” of society in his life ultimately leads to his death and his family’s mourning.

The third and last component of tragedy included in, *All My Sons*, is suicide. Almost always, tragedy ends in the death of one or more characters. This play deals with the death of two characters, Larry and Joe. Even though Larry dies before the start of the play, the cause of his death, which is suicide, is revealed at the conclusion. It is the truth behind Larry’s death that ultimately drives Joe to also kill himself but there are other factors that lead up to it. Now that Joe’s reputation is lost, Joe loses everything he was worked for in the past several years. His job will be lost with the evidence of his catastrophic decision. By losing his job, he will no longer hold the American Dream, which is the motivation that drives his life. Joe also loses the respect of his family and Chris’ lack of forgiveness is too much for Joe to live with. In the last moments of the play, Joe speaks to Kate saying, “There’s nothin’ he could do that I wouldn’t forgive… I’m his father and he’s my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head” (*All My Sons* 63). Just a few pages later, “a shot is heard in the house” (*All My Sons* 69). Joe’s suicide is the final piece of evidence that *All My Sons* is a tragedy and the first bit of evidence that Joe Keller is the tragic hero of this play.

There are three arguments as to why Joe is the tragic hero of, *All My Sons*. The first is Joe’s fatal flaw. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must have *hamartia*, which is translated into “tragic flaw” (Butcher). A tragic, or fatal, flaw is the characteristic that the protagonist, Joe, has which causes his downfall or destruction. Joe’s tragic flaw is pride. Because of this he feels that he will let his family down if he does not fight to the death to achieve the American Dream. Unfortunately, Joe fights to attain this status at all costs and his family ends up suffering. In “Tragedy of a Common Man”, Miller writes that this pride is due to “the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image” (“Tragedy and the Common Man” 2)*.* Also because of his pride, he fails to admit to his mistakes and instead claims, “You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could you do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?”(*All My Sons* 58). This tragic flaw that Joe demonstrates accelerates the conflict in the play and serves as the first reason why he is the tragic hero.

The second reason why Joe is the tragic hero is his fall from power or greatness. Joe was once revered by his family as the provider, a wonderful father and husband and the head of the household. When the incidents unfold however, Joe loses respect from his family and they begin to look at him differently. After Chris learns the truth about his father’s actions, he says, “I know you’re no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. I can’t look at you this way, I can’t look at myself” (*All My Sons* 67). Chris’ disapproval hurts Joe deeply because he is constantly seeking the approval and gratification of his family. Joe must pay a greater price than the disapproval of his family, however; he must face the consequences of his decisions which lead to a jail sentence: “Jail? You want me to go to jail? If you want me to go, say so! Is that where I belong?” (*All My Sons* 67). This is not easy for Joe to process because he continues to deny his part in the crime in order to maintain a rapport with his family.

This leads to the third and final reason why Joe is the tragic hero of *All My Sons*. Joe faces an enlightenment period when he realizes that he is guilty for his actions. After engaging in a fight with his son Chris about the death of his other son Larry, Joe confesses, “Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were” (*All My Sons* 68). In this statement, Joe finds redemption. He recognizes his wrongdoing and feels remorse. This element is crucial for a character to be considered a tragic hero according to Aristotle because it allows a tragic ending to have some hope (Butcher). Even though the hero is defeated, in death, the truth is revealed as Joe gains understanding. In his flawed character, he becomes an example for others who may be following along the path he has trodden (Butcher).

Aristotle writes that “A tragedy is a representation of an action that is whole and complete and of a certain magnitude. A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end.” It is because of Joe’s actions that *All My Sons* should be considered a modern tragedy and it is because of his pride and redemption that he is the play’s tragic hero. Though the play rises in turmoil, readers may rest in the knowledge that the Keller family will move on and learn from the flaws of their husband and father, the murderer of “all my sons”.

Works Cited

Butcher, S.H. “Poetics by Aristotle”. 2007: 1-26. Web. 20 March 2011.

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristitle/poetics/>.

Miller, Arthur. *All My Sons*. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1947.

Miller, Arthur. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *Viking Press* 1978: 3-7. *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller.* Web. 24 Mar. 2011. <http://theliterarylink.com/miller1.html>.

Moore, Andrew. “Studying Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*.” Universal Teacher. Web. 20 Apr 2011. <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk>.