

Ethical Choices in *All My Sons* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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This study applies the basic theories of “Ethical Literary Criticism” proposed by Nie Zhenzhao to Arthur Miller’s play *All My Sons*, focusing on the ethical predicament Joe Keller faces in his specific ethical identity within the ethical environment of his time. It further points out the process and the consequence of his ethical choices in the conflict between family interests and social responsibilities, so as to reveal the ethical teaching function of the play. Joe’s ethical predicament arises from the contradiction between his family roles and his desire for interests as a businessman. In this conflict, the interaction of the human factor and the animal factor within the “Sphinx factor” causes Joe to make two different ethical choices. Through Joe’s tragic fate, Miller reveals the ethical enlightenment in *All My Sons*: Individuals, families, and society are inextricably linked, so today’s citizens need to recognize their inherent social nature and fulfill ethical duties in both personal and social aspects. Miller uses the play to criticize the ethical ethos of 20th-century American society and calls on readers to reevaluate the instrumental rationality behind the American Dream.

Keywords: Ethical Literary Criticism, *All My Sons*, ethical predicament, ethical choice, Sphinx factor

Introduction

As one of America’s greatest playwrights, Arthur Miller explores social problems in his plays, reflecting his belief in drama’s social value and ethical significance. Among them, *All My Sons*, written in 1946, portrays Joe Keller, a machine manufacturer, who faces the moral consequences of his wartime profiteering actions. The play reveals the conflict between individual interests and social obligation. In a play where characters are drawn together by family affiliation, it is the fractures in these relationships that most concern Miller, particularly the limitations of responsibility. Miller designs the play’s structure “to bring a man into the direct path of the consequences he has wrought” (Bigsby, 2006, p. 16). Joe’s tragedy, therefore, stems from his ethical choices, which can be interpreted from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism. By highlighting literature’s role in helping readers make the right ethical choice, this theory emphasizes its educational and moral function. More specifically, Ethical Literary Criticism explains changes in ethical identities, analyzes motives for ethical choices within historical contexts, dissects the ethical decision-making process, and reveals ethical insights such choices offer—contributing to the advancement of human civilization.

Three key concepts in the field of Ethical Literary Criticism are *ethical identity*, *ethical predicament*, and *ethical choice*. According to Nie Zhenzhao (2014, p. 173), an ethical identity is what defines a person's presence in society. It is a prerequisite for evaluating moral behavior, shaping both how individuals are perceived by others and how they view their own actions within ethical judgments. An ethical predicament refers to a complex situation where an individual must make a difficult choice between two or more moral demands: fulfilling one inevitably leads to the violation of another (Nie, 2014, p. 168). This tension between competing ethical obligations sets the stage for an ethical choice, where a decision must be made that reflects the individual's ethical priorities. Nie (2011, p. 26) further explains that the *Sphinx factor* plays a critical role in shaping ethical consciousness, comprising two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. The human factor represents higher-level reasoning and ethical awareness, while the animal factor reflects lower-level instincts and desires. In this play, the interaction between the two factors drives Joe to make two different ethical choices, illustrating the profound influence of the "Sphinx factor" on his moral decisions. These three concepts reflect the process of how Joe evades the ethical responsibilities required by society and loses his moral conscience in his ethical choices driven by material interests. Therefore, this analysis intends to examine the ethical predicament faced by Joe in his specific ethical identity and then point out the result of his ethical choice in the conflict between family interests and social responsibilities, to reveal the ethical value of the play.

Although a few scholars have studied the play's ethical issues, most studies interpret them from a traditional moral perspective, without deeply exploring the ethical environment surrounding the characters. Vivian Casper argues that Joe's suicide is motivated not only by his "realization of a new moral responsibility," but also by his desire to preserve his business legacy for Chris (2017, pp. 86, 97). Joe Sarnowski (2021, p. 146) links Joe's actions to the tension "between idealism and pragmatism," highlighting the interplay between "ethics and economics" in post-war America. Lu Haixia and Qin Yan (2018, p. 48) argue that Joe's pursuit of material gain drives him to moral collapse and self-destruction. While these studies explore Joe's ethical dilemmas, they isolate individual psychology from societal critique.

Therefore, this study applies Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism to analyze Joe's ethical predicament and choices, revealing the interplay between personal and societal ethics. Joe's ethical predicament arises from the contradiction between his family roles and his desire for interests as a businessman. In this conflict, the interaction of the human factor and the animal factor within the "Sphinx factor" causes Joe to make two different ethical choices. Through Joe's tragic fate, Miller reveals the ethical enlightenment in *All My Sons*: Individuals, families, and society are inextricably linked, so today's citizens need to recognize their inherent social nature and fulfill ethical duties in both personal and social aspects. Miller uses the play to criticize the ethical ethos of 20th-century American society and calls on readers to reevaluate the instrumental rationality behind the American Dream.

Joe Keller's Ethical Predicament

From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, an ethical predicament is a complex situation in which an individual must choose between two or more moral demands, such that obeying one would result in violating another (Nie, 2014, p. 236). This usually occurs when conflicting values, duties, or social norms make the right course of action unclear. As a result, ethical predicaments cause personal and social turmoil as

individuals grapple with the consequences of their choices. Joe's ethical predicament arises from conflicting responsibilities tied to his multiple ethical identities—as husband, father, and businessman. These identities, based on kinship, moral norms, and profession (Nie, 2014, p. 263), require him to balance competing ethical demands. However, when Joe strives to make what he believes to be the right choice in one role, he may neglect or violate the responsibilities of another. Once Joe prioritizes his role as a businessman to maximize profits, he fails to fulfill his duties as a devoted husband and father, which is the root of his ethical predicament.

First, when Joe assumes the identity of a businessman, aiming for the highest profits, he is unable to fulfill his duty as a father well. Set in the aftermath of World War II, the play reflects a society influenced by a distorted version of the American Dream. Originally meant to inspire people to “prognosticate a better future for themselves and their family” (Hooti & Habibi, 2011, p. 14), the American Dream by the 20th century had become synonymous with financial gain. Wartime production intensified this shift, as “production of arms encouraged as much as any available resources could be used” (Oikawa, 2002, p. 104). Thus, a lot of war profiteers emerged, making illegal fortunes. Immersed in the money-oriented environment, Joe becomes a dishonest businessman, prioritizing economic success over ethical responsibility.

As a businessman, Joe is guided by the imperative to maximize profits and safeguard the longevity of his enterprise. This compulsion propels him to sell defective cylinder heads, attempting to evade financial ruin. However, this very action, driven by his commercial identity's pursuit of profit, fatally undermines his paternal role: it is an act that indirectly leads to his youngest son Larry's death and makes his oldest son Chris feel alienated from him. In emphasizing the importance of the family business to Chris—“I'm going to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road. [...] I want you to use what I made for you...” (Miller, 2000, p. 60)—Joe reveals his deep sense of paternal duty to create a better life for his son. Joe's ethos is grounded in “the familial obligation [...] He is not proud of being a self-made man or of his material success, he is proud that he has made something for his son” (Gross, 2013, p. 24). However, Chris expresses disinterest for financial success. He rejects his father's material aspirations and criticizes a capitalist system that prioritizes profit over human life. His ethical convictions reflect a commitment to moral integrity above financial gain. Disappointed by his father's wrongdoing, Chris shouts to Joe, “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!” (Miller, 2000, p. 101). These words pierce through the heart of their relationship, revealing the “irreparable loss of respect” that Chris once held for his father (Shahri, 2017, p. 83). In Chris's eyes, Joe is not a qualified father because Joe no longer embodies the virtues Chris expects. Joe's relentless pursuit of profit as a businessman conflicts with his paternal responsibilities, ultimately leading to his failure as a father.

Besides, Joe's choice to sell defective military equipment from a businessman's point of view also sabotages his role as a responsible husband. That's because Joe keeps Kate suffering from a guilty conscience for hiding the truth on behalf of her husband. Kate's concealment of Joe's misdeeds is linked to the expectations placed on women in the World War II era. During that time, a wife was anticipated to staunchly support her husband, “bolster his career, and help her husband maintain the image of a successful family provider” (Shahri, 2017, p. 83). Kate can never accept Larry's death, because to her, doing so would mean acknowledging the link between her husband's crime and her son's fate. So, she insists that “God does not let a son be killed by his father” (Miller, 2000, p. 89). Kate denies the reality so strongly that “she is out of her

mind,” behaving and “talking like a maniac” for three and a half years (Miller, 2000, p. 89). Joe’s care and tolerance for Kate’s mental instability may partly stem from his desire to be a considerate husband. More likely, however, it comes from his guilt over the psychological torment his misdeeds have inflicted on her. This guilt makes him even more protective of her emotions. Thus, the emotional trauma Kate suffers as a result of Joe’s dishonest behavior illustrates that Joe’s decision, made out of his identity as a businessman searching for profit, leads Joe to fail in his duty as a husband.

The First Ethical Choice: Fall of Humanity

To dissect the ethical choice-making process, Nie (2011, p. 27) has proposed the concept of the “Sphinx factor”. It reflects the complexity of ethical choices and the internal conflict they often entail. Wu (2022, p. 26) further elaborates that the “Sphinx factor” is theoretically grounded in evolutionary ideas, the theory of virtue ethics, and the theory of psychoanalysis. The “Sphinx factor” originates from the mythological Sphinx, symbolizing the dual aspects of human nature: rationality and animalistic instincts. The “Sphinx factor” consists of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. According to Nie (2014, p. 39), the two factors constrain each other and are indispensable in the process of forming ethical consciousness. To put it simply, the human factor is a high-level factor and the animal factor is a low-level factor, and the former controls the latter, thus making man ethically conscious. Ethical consciousness is the outward manifestation of humanity. In this play, the interaction of human and animal factors causes Joe to make two different ethical choices.

In Joe’s first ethical choice, within the “Sphinx factor”, the animal factor suppresses the human factor; therefore, Joe betrays society and shows the loss of humanity. Joe’s first ethical decision encompasses two specific aspects: the first is his choice to sell defective products to the military, resulting in the death of 21 pilots; the second aspect is Joe’s evasion of social punishment by shifting the blame for his crime onto his business partner Steve, leading to Steve’s imprisonment.

Because Joe places greed for money and the interests of his family above moral considerations, the animal factor, in the first aspect of his ethical choice-making, prevails over the human factor and causes the tragic loss of 21 pilots. Above all, Joe rationalizes his actions as necessary to protect his business, even at the expense of public safety. As Joe justifies himself, “You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?” (Miller, 2000, p. 90). Joe’s animal factor is unleashed, transforming into his free will to pursue commercial interests at any cost. Fundamentally, this free will is rooted in Joe’s desire for money and arises in response to the potential threat of his factory facing bankruptcy. Since Joe’s animal factor is not properly restrained by human factor, Joe replaces his social responsibilities and duties with greed for money. Gradually, he loses his rational will and “starts down the path of ethical transgression” (Bigsby, 2006, p. 13). For him, human beings are like “lifeless commodities” (Shahri, 2017, p. 83). He pays no heed to the cries of the innocent who lose their lives because of his greed. Besides, Joe repeatedly justifies his actions by claiming that he acted for the benefit of his family—seeking to bequeath a thriving business to Chris and to ensure financial security for his wife. As Joe says to Chris, “I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I’m sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you?” (Miller, 2000, p. 91). Joe tries to offer Chris “the only stability he knows in the form of his business” (Taroff, 2012, p. 11). For him, the deaths of 21 fighter pilots hold no

meaning, as they are not his sons. Joe's words to his wife further reflect his belief that family comes above all else: "You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? [...] I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I have a family" (Miller, 2000, p. 96). Joe's prioritization of family interest over others' lives reflects the animal factor, which, under extreme conditions, favors immediate kin and financial survival over the broader collective.

In the second aspect of Joe's ethical choice-making, the animal factor again overpowers the human factor, because Joe prioritizes self-preservation over social justice and loyalty to his business partner, Steve. He betrays Steve by shifting the blame onto him, resulting in Steve's imprisonment. This choice not only violates the trust between him and Steve but also subjects Steve to unjust treatment. At this point, Joe's animal factor is out of control because his deep-rooted fear of losing personal freedom and reputation in society triggers "an instinctual response akin to a cornered animal fighting for survival" (Taroff, 2013, p. 12). This primal reaction suppresses the human factor that guides ethical conduct. As a result, Joe's free will is unleashed, leading him to evade social punishment, "forsake social justice," and lose loyalty to his business partners (Chaswal, 2011, p. 15). Therefore, Steve's imprisonment is a testament to Joe's moral failing, illustrating the domination of the animal factor over the human factor in his decision-making.

The Second Ethical Choice: Return of Humanity

Joe's second ethical choice also demonstrates an interplay between the human factor and the animal factor within the "Sphinx factor." In this choice, the human factor suppresses the animal factor; therefore, Joe's suicide by shooting himself functions as an act of atonement and symbolizes the restoration of his humanity.

This choice comes at the end of the play when Joe realizes the disastrous consequences caused by his first choice. Above all, Joe's money and ethical values in his first choice are not acceptable to his sons Chris and Larry, who have spent time in the battlefield. Chris comes back from a war in which the ideal is to die for the country. Lu and Qin (2018, p. 47) note that battlefield values emphasize others' needs to reinforce group cohesion and conformity. In war, individuals are expected to sacrifice personal interests to the collective. But when Chris comes back, he feels alienated from a society that has "put [patriotic] idealism aside in the name of post-war pragmatism" (Hooti & Habibi, 2011, p. 16). He finds himself back in a family "concerned primarily with its own future and the business of making money" (Hooti & Habibi, 2011, p. 16). Returning from war, Chris faces an ethical shift in a world where the pursuit of wealth overshadows the noble ideals he once upheld. This disillusionment leaves him struggling to find his place. When Chris learns that Joe sold faulty cylinder heads to secure the family business for him, he sternly asks Joe: "I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business?... What is that, the world—the business? Don't you have a country?" (Miller, 2000, p. 91). As a survivor, Chris feels guilty for leading many of his soldiers to their deaths in the war. To Chris, wartime camaraderie reflects genuine human connection and shared values, contrasting with the materialistic ethos of postwar society. Chris's outrage reveals an ethical rift with Joe. He tries to awaken Joe to the tragic consequences of prioritizing profit over civic duty, insisting that business gains can never justify wartime loss of life.

Larry also rejects his father's ethical values. As a pilot, he is ashamed to find Joe responsible for his comrades' deaths. Larry describes his disappointment and resentment with his father in the letter to Ann:

Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. [...] I can't bear to live any more [...] How could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business [...] I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me missing. If they do, I want you to know that you mustn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him here now I could kill him. (Miller, 2000, p. 102)

Unable to accept that his father profited from others' deaths, Larry's suicide reflects his moral integrity. The contrast Larry draws between the soldiers' sacrifice and Joe's war profiteering exposes the tragic conflict between the soldier's sense of duty at the front and the corrupt business practices at home. Larry's struggle to face others and his mention of the impulse to kill his father highlight the moral implications of Joe's decisions. Tellingly, the war has shaken society badly. While Joe thinks "work and individual family units offer the most security" (Abbotson, 2005, p. 32), Chris and Larry believe social responsibility outweighs family interests. Joe realizes that his dishonesty has turned him into "the enemy his Germanic name has suggested all along; Keller becomes Killer in his sons' eyes" (Abbotson, 2005, p. 40). This reveals how his actions distort his sons' perception of him.

Moreover, Joe's first ethical choice torments his wife, Kate, who, aware of his crime before the play begins, suppresses the truth out of love for her family and recognition of the role money plays in their lives. When she realizes the slip of the tongue that "[Joe] hasn't been laid up in fifteen years" (Miller, 2000, p. 86), she quickly covers it up: "I meant except for that flu. Well, it slipped my mind [...] He wanted to go to the shop but he couldn't lift himself off the bed. I thought he had pneumonia" (Miller, 2000, p. 86). To Kate, her family means everything. She can't accept that Joe's actions resulted in Larry's death. Consequently, for three and a half years, she has lived in denial, using aspirin to alleviate mental anguish.

Reflecting on such disastrous outcomes, Joe begins to question his initial decision. At this moment, the human factor resurfaces. It reflects awareness of one's role within a larger societal framework and the recognition that one's actions have far-reaching consequences. Joe's human factor is transformed into rational will, which furnishes Joe with the compassion for the twenty-one pilots, and the capacity for ethical reflection. He realizes the harm he has done to others and understands that he can't be ruled by the greed that free will can unleash. Joe undergoes a moral awakening upon hearing Chris's words. When Chris yells "You can be better! Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it" (Miller, 2000, p. 103), Joe realizes his greater duty to care for others in society. He accepts "the moral responsibility in the world at large" (Casper, 2017, p. 98), extending beyond his family. Joe's repetition of "[the pilots killed] were all my sons" (Miller, 2000, p. 104) reflects a restored rationality. No longer confined by self-interest, his final suicide becomes an act of atonement and a recovery of his humanity. It marks the triumph of the human factor over the animal factor—of ethical responsibility over profit-driven instinct.

Ethical Enlightenment of Instrumental Rationality in *All My Sons*

Literature, as an ethical expression of human society, provides moral guidance for self-improvement (Nie, 2022b, p. 6). As a socially-conscious playwright, Miller uses drama to expose social problems and convey ethical lessons. Max Weber's (1930, p. 19) theory of instrumental rationality, known as a "rationalization of capitalistic calculation," explains how modernity prioritizes efficiency and predictability over ethical values. In *All My Sons*, this rationalization is reflected in the characters' ethical choices, which reveal a conflict between

moral duty and instrumental rationality. Thus, the play not only helps recover the ethical values lost by ordinary people of that era, but also carries significant moral implications for contemporary society in two aspects.

First, individuals must shoulder ethical responsibilities on the personal level. Joe's rationale for shipping faulty airplane parts lies in his aim to secure his family's well-being, reflecting his commitment to providing for his loved ones. However, this commitment, while understandable on a personal level, leads him to rationalize the death of soldiers as a collateral consequence of his business decisions. According to Weber (1930, p. 181), the dominance of instrumental rationality traps individuals in the "iron cage" of "external goods," obscuring their ethical responsibility and blinding them to wider moral concerns.

On the personal level, Joe tries his best to take on the ethical responsibilities of family identities, which highlights the significance of maintaining ethical family relations in modern society. Joe's thoughtfulness as a husband and consideration for his sons' future as a father underscores the idea that individuals must uphold ethical obligations associated with their familial roles. According to Ethical Literary Criticism, the main sign of the transition from a natural being to a social being is the possession of ethical consciousness, which means that in the corresponding ethical relations, individuals have to take the corresponding ethical responsibilities (Nie, 2022c, p. 42). Since family is "an important place with certain ethical attributes constructed by blood and marriage" (Nie, 2022a, p. 17), individuals must fulfill the ethical responsibilities of their family identities. Only by doing so can a reasonable ethical order within the family be formed.

Second, it's important to shoulder ethical responsibilities on the social level. Joe can't balance family and social ethical identities, keeping them separate. His first choice reflects Weber's concept of instrumental rationality, where actions are evaluated by their efficiency in achieving a desired outcome, often at the expense of ethical considerations. Joe's decision to ship faulty airplane parts reflects that he prioritizes business survival over human life. In a rationalized society, ethical values are often subordinated to calculative efficiency, leading individuals to justify morally questionable actions for economic gain. Joe's failure reflects the common man's struggle to link private life with public responsibility. Thus, modern citizens must recognize their social nature and fulfill their ethical duties.

Miller, through the play, criticizes the values of his time that prioritize monetary gain over community welfare. The relentless pursuit of self-interest fosters dominance of the animal factor, undermines personal ethics, and alienates individuals from society. Joe's first choice illuminates the conflict between personal gain and ethical integrity in the pursuit of the American Dream, which is shaped by instrumental rationality. Such rationalism is defined as "an economic system based [...] on the deliberate and systematic adjustment of economic means to the attainment of the objective of pecuniary profit" (Weber, 1930, Foreword, p. I[e]). It treats actions merely as tools to produce particular outcomes, ignoring broader moral implications. The embodiment of instrumental rationality reveals the dark side of the American Dream. Thus, Joe's predicament goes beyond a tension between family and society—it reflects an ethical clash with the spirit of capitalism. Miller calls on readers to reevaluate the value system behind the American Dream and question whether it causes neglect of the public good. The bureaucratic nature of social institutions creates a moral vacuum, where ethical considerations are overridden by the efficiency of the system.

Therefore, Joe's struggle underscores a crucial lesson in contemporary society: citizens should fulfill ethical obligations not just within their personal lives but also in the broader social sphere. Miller suggests that

one should not pursue private profit at the cost of public welfare; one who betrays society and business partners should not go unpunished; and individuals must be held accountable for actions that harm society. Joe's story is not only a personal tragedy but also an ethical indictment of American society, exposing the tension within capitalism. As individuals adhere to its ethical framework, a paradox emerges: they risk losing themselves in the self-centered pursuit of material wealth embodied in the American Dream.

Conclusion

In *All My Sons*, Miller presents an ethical inquiry into the conflict between personal interest and social responsibility. Guided by Ethical Literary Criticism, this analysis examines Joe Keller's ethical predicaments and choices in his roles as husband, father, and businessman, underscoring the primacy of social responsibility over personal and familial interests. Joe's ethical predicament, stemming from the clash of his ethical roles, culminates in devastating outcomes: his materialistic desires override his moral compass, leading to the betrayal of societal norms and the loss of human connection. The play urges readers to reassess the post-war American Dream's focus on "instrumental rationality," which often sacrifices ethical integrity for personal gain. In doing so, it illuminates the tension between personal enrichment and moral rectitude, advocating the prioritization of ethical duties over self-interest to promote a more honest society today.

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