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EXTENDED ESSAY

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Topic: Presentation of guilt and justice in Reginald Rose's "Twelve Angry Men" and Arthur Miller's "All My Sons"

Research question: "How are the themes of guilt, justice, judgment conveyed in Reginald Rose's 'Twelve Angry Men' and Arthur Miller's 'All My Sons'?"

Abstract

The purpose of this extended essay is to examine the ways in which the concepts of justice and guilt were portrayed on personal as well as societal levels in the plays “All My Sons” by Arthur Miller and “Twelve Angry Men” by Reginald Rose through the question “How are the themes of justice, judgment, and guilt conveyed in Reginald Rose’s ‘Twelve Angry Men’ and Arthur Miller’s ‘All My Sons’?”. The scope of this essay covers two plays of the same era in the United States, the 1950s. After reading the two plays, the circumstances provided in them paralleled to the present world in my head leading me to think about the judicial failures and disruptions. Both works are both critical and provide insight to the era in which they were written.

The scope of this essay consists of the judicial processes and their failures, crime, guilt, and punishment in All My Sons and Twelve Angry Men. The close examination of such concepts will be made through characters and their actions and choices, events, and interactions; comparisons and contrasts and parallels to the social context and background.

This essay concludes that even in the absence of judicial implementations, the existence of guilt helps justice find its way – not necessarily in a legal way. Guilt is a fundamental agent in determining one’s actions, regardless of whether they committed a crime themselves or share a bloodline with a criminal. Direct or indirect guilt lead one to take actions to make inner peace and/or bring justice back in place. Evident non-legal justice in All My Sons prevails when both Joe and Larry Keller commit suicide out of guilt; while in Twelve Angry Men, through the efforts and deliberations of Juror Eight, the justice system is forced to make the right call.

(297 words)

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I. Introduction

1950s America presents a country which is more powerful than ever; having shaken off the Great Depression and victoriously emerged from WWII. Consumerism was at a peak, middle-class was increasing in population, boosting the economy as the nation gradually became less foreign dependent. This shift redefined concepts such as guilt and justice. Miller's *All My Sons* portrays conflicts due to different forms of guilt and justice while Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* presents a situation of corruption and conflict. Both plays present people in conflict and the way they are challenged to sustain justice and overcome guilt.

Drama as a genre has served a wide range of purposes in different eras and places. Roman poet Horace, in a renowned statement on the purpose of writing and drama specifically, said it was planned "to delight and to instruct."¹ In the case of these two plays, it is mainly the concepts of justice, judgment, guilt on personal and societal levels that form the critique. Playwrights' main concern was the lack of judicial implementations rather than that of justice as a concept. Therefore, the plays serve as means to understand and gain a critical view of the value judgments of their perspective societies.

Since concepts of guilt, punishment, and justice are deeply woven into the society and affected and shaped by various concepts such as religion and culture, and regulated by written laws or oral traditions, understanding and application of these terms can vary. Investigation of these concepts have been carried out in both plays via characters; their actions and inactions, choices and the consequences. Both works deal with crime, guilt caused by it, consequences and justice on different levels, and their delivery to the audience differs. Investigation of the

¹ "A Quote from Epistolas Ad Pisones De Ars Poetica." Goodreads, GoodReads, 17 Dec. 2016

research question has provided the chance to study values and norms of the respective society followed by comparison and contrast of the concepts.

II. The portrayal of guilt

Under the burden of guilt, one might use self-deception which is a frequently used method to escape used to prevent one from feeling guilty, while simultaneously allowing themselves to avoid something that they do not want to face. Miller's *All My Sons* deals with Joe Keller's delusions, an independent man who, to achieve prosperity for himself and his family, takes unethical actions in the past. Joe represents the common aspirations and hopes of the 1950s American society, eager to get their hands on material prosperity. In the very beginning, Joe is described as *"a heavy man of stolid mind and build, a businessman these many years, but with the imprint of the machine-shop worker and boss still upon him "*. (Miller, 6) However, all his power and ambition to build a bright future through unethical means causes sorrow and destruction not just to him but many others. Although the illusion that he creates to hide his unethical actions and guilt lasts for some time, it has eventually been destroyed; proving that one has to face the guilt sooner or later.

Guilt can be regarded to differently in various settings and conditions. When a person's conscience cannot withstand the weight of an immoral action, the unpleasant feeling which troubles the conscience is called the feeling of guilt. A person generally feels guilty for any wrongdoing they might have engaged in, however, the reason behind someone's guilt is not always their own actions. One might feel an intense guilt because they are related to a criminal. The part of the Keller family that knows about Joe's secret feels guilty, only because they are closely related to Joe. Larry feels his guilt at such lengths that he committed suicide over it; just as Chris feels guilty to be happy under the current circumstances. Even though

Larry is not a character actively seen on stage, a significant part in the disastrous fates of the onstage characters. He is in a moral dilemma between shame and guilt. He is capable of empathizing with the dead pilots as he is also a military pilot. He is crushed under the weight of his guilt and shame and thus finds his way out in suicide, however, it neither ends his guilt nor is the intense feeling of shame the rest of his family left to deal with. As a result of personal justice, the concept of “punishment” emerges. The characters in which we see traces of guilt tend to maintain inner peace by punishing themselves with whatever they deem necessary. Joe is another character that views suicide as the only way out of his guilt. Instead of trying to fix perjured statement to perhaps get Steve acquitted, he selfishly kills himself to run away from everything he has caused and punishes others.

Joe Keller is a man that puts his family first and foremost, thus justifies and normalizes his wrongdoings. Joe’s doubts of the Deever reveal his feelings of fright of being compelled to confront reality. When he attempts to make atonement for his guilt by helping his accomplice, Steve as well as his son, George, his offer appears to be somewhat insufficient given the largeness of his guilt. It seems rather unlikely that he can make up for the deaths of the American military pilots, something that he eventually comes to realize. Joe as a caring father and husband does not reveal any sign of guilt; however, the feeling of guilt is imposed on him by others. He does not believe his choices and decisions are wrong, on the contrary he thinks they are meant to be done. However, despite not revealing it, other characters cause him to feel the pressure and guilt. He justifies his course of actions as a need to fight against and withstand others in the ruthless world:

You are a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in 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? 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, 74)

In this situation, the action Joe takes is right according to him. The situation being one that brings relativity with, another person could have easily made the same choice as Joe, just as much as the exact opposite. Joe does not view the situation as one that requires him to be punished: he must do what he does to support his family and that anybody would have made the exact same decision. Although neither means nor ends can be justified in his case, he selfishly starts to live a lie, forcing everyone else by misusing his reputation and power to endure the illusion so as not to face the consequences of actions.

In the whole of the play, morality gradually fades away and gets defeated by self-protection and practicality. There are solid examples of morals appearing in the form of father-son dialogues. Because Chris frequently questions his father's integrity and entitlement to transport the faulty plane parts to support his family and business, he too feels the moral obligation to get to the bottom of the problem and resolve it.

"CHRIS: For me! - 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 Goddamn business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world - the business?"

(Miller, 59)

Joe does not hesitate to proceed with his decision, as it is a matter of life and death for his family, and as he is a family-focused man he believes that his choice is ideal. Chris questions his father's integrity, trying to understand why he has done such a thing even if it means the deaths of one hundred and twenty honest men. Joe and Chris, even though they are father and son, share utterly different morals. While Joe, a pragmatist, believes he has to deliver the parts to spare his family, what he considers the most vital thing on the planet to him, Chris, an

idealist, sees the situation utterly unacceptable. Nevertheless, Chris believes if he is to make a choice between providing his family with large amounts of money or sending innocent people to their death, either choice is indefensible. Joe's choice raises questions about how far one can go morally to provide for their family: either taking a chance with others' lives or battling financially their entire lives.

CHRIS: "I don't know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer." (Miller, 14)

This quote is from the part of the play Chris tells her mother he wants to marry Ann, yet she does not approve. It raises a moral question of whether Chris's marrying Ann is wrong since she is Larry's significant other before his disappearance. The quote makes it clear to the audience that per Chris' morals and what is right or wrong to him, there is a considerable focus on how his actions influence others and if his loved ones will suffer. However, these morals of his have been keeping Chris away from starting a life for himself, so he has decided to start taking his actions based on how they will influence him on in the event that it will hurt others. What Chris feels can be called pre-guilt; he fictions in his head of the events that may occur in case he decides to do anything. Unlike his father, he thinks of all the possible consequences that may come and how they will possibly affect others.

Rose forces the audience to question the concept of guilt and punishment in *Twelve Angry Men* from a different perspective. Guilt can be defined within the judicial system and there are certain consequences to it. However, the process has its own flaws. The idea of "reasonable doubt" is the concept to which Juror Eight focuses a lot of his arguments. He does not by any means focus on the concepts of "guilt" or "innocence." Instead, his focal subjects are legal and in accordance with the justice system in place. The idea that "the version of events being presented by the prosecution must be proven to the extent that there could be no

‘reasonable doubt’ in the mind of a ‘reasonable person’ that the defendant is guilty”² what Juror Eight bases his arguments on. He is capable of comprehending that the first and foremost aim of the jury is not to focus too much on such concepts, but instead on reasonable doubt to give reasonable decisions and come to a sensible and fair verdict. The ethical paradigm that guilt or innocence summons cannot be sensibly accounted for in the legal framework. Juror Eight acknowledges this and thus directs his analyses towards reasonable doubt.

As reasonable doubt brings about different reactions from the members of the jury, it begins to take up a key part in Rose's play, and his portrayal of how different individuals of a community may react to contrasting perceptions. At first isolated with his personal understanding of the case, it is Juror Eight who reminds others of the sensitivity of the circumstance by saying *"we're talking about somebody's life here."* It's for his appreciation and full comprehension of the jury duty that he presents reasonable doubt to the other jurors, therefore becoming the purpose behind the long hours of arguing and analyses. Empathizing with the defendant through his own "angry, hostile" child, the third Juror's bias emerges as a reaction to reasonable doubt. His prejudiced disagreement to Juror Eight's argument of reasonable doubt can be assumed to be the medium through which Rose depicts how a community might be vulnerable to bias, and how *"bias always obscures the truth"*. Furthermore, following his own judgment of the *"kids who crawl outta"* Juror Ten's self-absorbed nature encourages as a solid disagreement to any source of reasonable doubt. By using Juror Three's "sick" approach towards others, Rose projects yet another comprehension of the broader community's reaction to a diversity of opinions. Along with the third and the

² Brody, David C, and Acker, James R. "Criminal Law." Criminal Law. Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Sudbury, MA, 2010, p. 21.

tenth jurors, Juror 7's prejudice against the defendant is also seen through his objection to reasonable doubt; "*I'm tellin' ya they're all alike.*" It is by using the idea of reasonable doubt within the context of the play that Rose exhibits how members of a community may react to different opinions, and certain level guilt is associated with certain groups in society.

Emerged from Juror Eight, the idea of reasonable doubt is not necessarily valued by all jurors; while being a reason behind highlighting their prejudices, it gets to be distinctly one of the key actors of Rose's play. In the play where at first everybody except Juror Eight wants to get the jury duty over with, thinking their plans are more important than an innocent boy's life. All thanks to Juror Eight convincing the rest that the evidence should be gone over once more, they are convinced, one by one, that the boy may not be guilty at all. Using the verdict to be decided upon, Rose conveys another approach towards the concept of "guilt" via the guilt and pressure the jurors felt upon themselves, sending an innocent boy to his death. Therefore, the actions and choices of an individual can define one's life and bring about guilt to the decision maker despite not being part of a bigger crime.

In "All My Sons", there is direct and indirect guilt: the guilt that Joe Keller is crushed under caused by his own actions, and the one Chris and Larry are troubled by caused by the actions of their own flesh and blood. Toward the end, Keller winds up in a world that has all of a sudden turned out to be a complete stranger to him. Feeling rejected and alienated, he chooses to commit suicide. His death is a result of both the feeling of guilt and that of not belonging. In Rose's "Twelve Angry Men" however, the concept of guilt is given through both the punishment the boy is about to get, and the burden of another's life the jurors feel upon them. They start to care once about Juror Eight starts to present evidence that might alibi the defendant. Rose proposes that 'reasonable doubt' remains the best safeguard for justice. The jurors are therefore taken into the standard black box scenario and witness the challenges encountered by the twelve individuals when trying to follow the judge's directions to

"deliberate honestly and thoughtfully" (Miller, 9). Every individual interprets the standard of "reasonable doubt" differently. By staging the heated arguments, Rose exposed the troubles that surround the legal concept of reasonable doubt and its implementations. In both plays guilt occurs in different forms and its consequences lead to a process of justice either formally or informally.

III. The portrayal of justice

Justice is the use of power as appointed by law, honor or standards to support fair treatment and due reward³. Each society has a definition of justice in their understandings of law and behavior influenced by various concepts such as religion, philosophy, politics, etc. Each society has a definition of justice in their understandings of law and behavior influenced by various concepts such as religion, philosophy, politics, etc. Justice can be regarded as the matter that holds communities intact and includes the thought of maintaining the law with the work of law enforcers such as police officers, judges, and jurors. Although it is difficult to come to a consensus on what justice means for all and define the gray area, the black and the white are crystal clear: purposely selling faulty plane parts knowing that they can end up killing people is a crime, just as much as first-degree murder is. One of the real issues tended to by the play "All My Sons" by Arthur Miller is corporate responsibility, which is as applicable today as it was in the 1950s. Joe's way to deal with life, in putting benefits before moral and humanitarian issues, has turned out to be referred to in industrialist social orders as "the same old thing." The expression is regularly utilized as a part of harsh criticisms to infer the lack of concern about the societal, humanitarian, or natural expenses of being in the

³ "Justice Dictionary Definition | Justice Defined." Justice Dictionary Definition | Justice Defined, www.yourdictionary.com/justice

industry. The fundamental idea of the American Dream was that regardless of the background, anyone could become rich with hard work. As suggested in Miller's *All My Sons*, Joe, the protagonist, does not have a very wealthy background. The fact that he refuses to acknowledge his guilt and defends his actions can be evaluated as the justification of his actions and a form of self-consolation and living his dream. At the point when Chris criticizes Joe, he appears to be unaware of taking responsibility of the wrongfulness of his actions.

CHRIS [quietly, incredibly]: How could you do that? How?

JOE: What's the matter with you!

CHRIS: Dad... Dad, you killed twenty-one men!

JOE: What, killed?

CHRIS: You killed them, murdered them.

JOE [as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris]: How could I kill anybody? (Miller, 59)

The way justice appears is a combination of how legal justice fails and societal justice finds its way to prevailing, to the point where one of two equally guilty men goes free while the other is in prison for life, later on, to commit suicide, obeying the invisible laws of societal justice.

JOE: "It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean?" (Miller, 67)

This raises the moral question of whether having the means to provide for your family at the cost of other people's suffering is right or wrong. It is obvious that Joe thinks if what you do will support your family and grant them an easy life, it is alright for strangers to suffer, a "three wise monkeys" policy. However, from being at war and with other soldiers, it is

deduced that Chris thinks the exact opposite and even says that even having the money makes him feel guilty. Joe believes that many people in America take actions that may hurt others; however, they are willing to take them and believe it is their obligation keeping in mind that the end goal is to provide for their family. Many examples are seen on a daily basis with people who take actions later to be regretted, for the sake of their family, which relates back to the fact that the concept of justice can be easily misinterpreted and it is not always possible to sustain via written laws. Values such as dignity, family, and profit can force you to make choices and wrongdoings which cannot always be punished by current judicial system but our invisible sense of justice work in a better way. Individuals' inner self or community's judgment can compensate for the failure of justice and provides what is right or just.

There's an apparent vagueness of the justice system in Rose's Twelve Angry Men which is made all the more troubling given that the members of the jury emphasize their confidence in the quality of the system. They discuss an individual's entitlement to a "fair trial", but neglect to see that the trial doesn't simply stop when the court is adjourned but proceeds into the jurors' room in an even more heated fashion. They argue that the defendant has failed to make a solid defense, even though that obligation is not his – it's that of the prosecution. They think in terms of guilty and innocent, rather than the critical concept of reasonable doubt. Indeed, even their understanding of reasonable doubt is foggy, with most considering it as ready to be equated with proof of innocence. What seems certain at first sight may not be what it looks like at all. Without the examination of all aspects, it is hard to conclude, and thus a verdict. The existence of rigidly defined laws does not always ensure the righteous applications of them. Even under the guidance of laws, there are misinterpretations and therefore wrongful implementations of laws based on personal beliefs, prejudices, and approaches. In the case of Twelve Angry Men, the teenage boy is assumed to have committed the crime he is being accused of, only because he comes from a lower-class family. At a first

look, the case seems surely like the member of the black area as defined before: a teenage boy has murdered his father. One man is all it take to make a difference in the crowd's understanding of the case. Therefore judicial system by itself does not guarantee a just conclusion to be reached. Each "angry" jury due to civic duty is there to decide what is just and act according to common sense and justice system, however, Rose shows the consequences and roles of individuals' irrationality and fallibility while trying to define justice.

Twelve Angry Men presents justice eventually finding its way through a series of obstacles caused by the jurors other than Eight. If it was not for him, an innocent boy would have been sentenced to death without getting the chance a fair judgment. Similarly, All My Sons presents a finding of a way of justice, but in a not-so-legal form. Joe at the time has lied during his statement at the court to save himself and frame Steve for their mutual crime. He does not feel any sort of remorse, at least not publicly, until he commits suicide. His way of making peace with himself or maybe even atoning himself is through taking his own life out of guilt: justice that arrived later than expected.

IV. Conclusion

In the eyes of a 1950s American, the desire for making money overpowered all else. Only a few years out of the Great Depression, the US was overflowing with young entrepreneurs aspiring to be the rich one in the family, in light of the promises made to them: everybody can be rich with the right spirit and the right amount of work. This newly-formed consumerist/capitalist ideal was a way of businessmen to legitimate the ethical and judicial laws they were bending, or in some cases breaking, and suppress the guilt one is expected to feel in such a scenario. This group of people became the core characters of the literary works of most artists, most of the time forged as social criticisms. Rose in “Twelve Angry Men” and Miller in “All My Sons” conveyed their criticisms through windows looking at separate and quite ordinary lives: a guilty man with a family he loves more than anything in the world and twelve jurors on jury duty arguing to come to a final verdict. The research and findings concluded that regardless of what might have been done to obscure the course of justice; it takes its course. This taking, of course, does not always happen in a lawful sense, but rather on a personal level. An individual's self-atonement from guilt can result in various actions: Joe makes his inner peace by committing suicide and eventually sharing the destiny of the twenty-one innocent pilots; just as the innocent young boy from “Twelve Angry Men” is saved from the malpractice of the judicial system by the proper re-examination of the evidence.

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