



Original article

Psychological Analysis of Arthur Miller's All My Sons Through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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ABSTRACT

The present study employs qualitative textual analysis, supported by close reading of Arthur Miller's All My Sons, to explore the factors motivating the characters' behaviors and actions as they strive to maintain psychological stability amid family chaos. While critics and scholars have focused on themes such as responsibility, loyalty, denial, and the American Dream, less attention has been given to examining the characters' motivations in All My Sons through the lens of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Drawing on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the study examines how the characters in All My Sons, including Joe Keller, Kate Keller, Chris Keller, and Ann Deever, are psychologically motivated to fulfill their needs. The study argues that the characters in All My Sons are driven by psychological motivational tendencies that shape their decision-making, self-esteem, love, and belonging. Thus, following Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the analysis shows that the characters' actions are built based on unmet physiological, self-esteem, love and belonging, and self-actualization needs. The study, then, finds that Joe Keller's decisions stem from prioritizing physiological and safety needs, while Kate's denial functions as a psychological defense against threats to family bonds and stability.

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Keywords: All My Sons, Arthur Miller, Abraham Maslow, Hierarchy of Needs and The American Dream.

تحليل نفسي لمسرحية كلهم أبنائي لآرثر ميلر من خلال هرم ماسلو للاحتياجات

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المستخلص

تستخدم هذه الدراسة التحليل النصي النوعي، المدعوم بقراءة متأنية لمسرحية كلهم أبنائي لآرثر ميلر، لاستكشاف العوامل التي تحفز سلوكيات الشخصيات وأفعالها في سعيها للحفاظ على استقرارها النفسي وسط الفوضى العائلية. وبينما ركز النقاد والباحثون على مواضيع مثل المسؤولية والولاء والإنكار والحلم الأمريكي، لم يُولَ اهتمام كافٍ لدراسة دوافع الشخصيات في كلهم أبنائي من منظور هرم ماسلو للاحتياجات. وبالاستناد إلى هرم ماسلو، تتناول الدراسة الدوافع النفسية لشخصيات كلهم أبنائي، بمن فيهم جو كيلر وكيت كيلر وكريس كيلر وأن ديفر، في تلبية احتياجاتهم. وتشير الدراسة إلى أن شخصيات كلهم أبنائي مدفوعة بدوافع نفسية تُشكّل قراراتها، ومستوى ثقتها بنفسها، وعلاقتها بالحب والانتماء. وبناءً على ذلك، ووفقاً لهرم ماسلو للاحتياجات، يظهر التحليل أن تصرفات الشخصيات مبنية على احتياجات غير مُلبّاة، تشمل الاحتياجات الفسيولوجية، وتقدير الذات، والحب والانتماء، وتحقيق الذات. وتبين الدراسة إلى أن قرارات جو كيلر تتبع من إعطاء الأولوية للاحتياجات الفسيولوجية واحتياجات الأمان، بينما يعمل إنكار كيت كآلية دفاعية ضد تهديد الروابط الأسرية والاستقرار. وتعكس أزمة كريس كيلر انهيار تقديره لذاته وهويته، بينما يشير سعي أن ديفر وراء الحقيقة إلى توجه نحو تلبية احتياجات أسمى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كلهم أبنائي، آرثر ميلر، أبراهام ماسلو، هرم الاحتياجات، الحلم الأمريكي.

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller's literary works stand as landmarks for exploring the idealized promise of the American dream. Miller seeks to expose "the difference between the ideal dream and the often ugly reality" (Page, 2001, p.98). Miller has a nuanced perspective that shows the close connection between individuals and society. He sees the relationship between individual and society as the interrelationship between fish and water, both cannot survive without the other. He claims that, "society is inside man and man is inside society, the water is in the fish and the fish is the water" (Bigsby, 2000, p.30).

Miller was also an American realist who sought to make moral and social changes. He crafted several major plays throughout his career that gained both critical and commercial success while addressing significant political and social themes. One of Miller's most renowned works is *Death of a Salesman*, widely considered his dramatic masterpiece (Dakhil, 2025). Miller crafted dramatically gripping stories that sparked conversations about American society by inspecting the psychology of ordinary characters battling for dignity, truth or redemption amid oppression in their era. His perceptive plays still cast timely insights on human experience. His works examined the burden of masculine gender norms and the fragility of maintaining virtue in a conformist mass culture. However, Miller illuminated the costs of aspiring for or defying prevalent national pursuits of success through hard work and patriotism in plays like *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. His plays also attempt to examine the close connection between ambition and moral responsibility, focusing on the struggles of the individuals who have faith in the American Dream (Mutar & Al-Fahham, 2025).

All My Sons was one of Miller's early works concerned with "identifying the fractures and contradictions in post-war American optimism" as citizens struggled to rebuild stable identities. Miller frequently dramatized the psychology of "individuals trapped by the demands of a dehumanizing system" whether social, political or economic (Bigsby, 2005, p.72). The play captures the impact of personal guilt and responsibility on the community or the world they live in. Guilt and responsibility become not only a matter for individual himself but also have an influence on the whole society (Nedhi, 2017). In *All My Sons* responsibility plays a significant role, showing how the choices of the characters are influenced by other characters' actions (Sakurkar, 2024). *All My Sons* revolves around Joe Keller, a man who runs a very profitable business and lives with his loving wife and loyal son. In spite of these advantages, Joe Keller is accused of shipping cracked airplane parts that caused the deaths of twenty-one pilots during the Second World War. Keller's flaw lies in his denial of taking responsibility, instead, he blames his business partner, Steve Deever, for the crime. This flaw eventually leads to two tragic outcomes: the suicide of his son, Larry, and later Joe Keller's own suicide. As the truth about Joe Keller is revealed, the family collapses psychologically. As a result, the play becomes an example of the destructive impact of denial, guilt and the pursuit of the American dream (Nahvi, 2022).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Characters in *All My Sons*, are motivated by a hierarchy of needs to preserve a psychological stability. While the play digs deep into different themes such as responsibility, loyalty, death, and guilt, the present study seeks to find what motivates individuals to have their needs met. Maslow's Theory of needs proposes that humans are motivated to fulfill a hierarchy of needs ranging from basic survival requirements to greater ambitions (Maslow, 1943). His model offers insight into characters' behaviors that might not be evident from plot details alone (Adler, 1956; Maslow, 1954). Understanding needs allows greater appreciation of why characters make definite choices and how they develop psychologically. This study aims to explore Joe Keller, Chris Keller, Ann Deever, and Kate Keller through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy to reveal their core motivations.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study has four major objectives:

1. Identifying the most important needs of each main character according to Maslow's model.
2. Examining how their need priorities influenced key decisions and actions in the play.
3. Examining how characters' incompatible or conflicting needs created relational conflict.
4. Attaining a richer comprehension of post-war individual and societal turmoil depicted in the drama.

1.3 Research Questions

To address the goals, this study poses three guiding questions:

1. What combination of physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs were most important for each character?
2. Through what behaviors or dialogue does Miller expose these underlying drives at work?
3. In what ways did the characters experience goal struggles due to competing or mismatched inner needs?

2. Literature Review

Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* has won a critical attention as a social drama addressing issues of responsibility, capitalism, and moral accountability in postwar American society. Early studies have concluded that the play is a critique of the American Dream, emphasizing how the economy became prosperous at the expense of moral responsibility (Bigsby, 2005). Scholars often argue that Joe Keller embodies the moral failings of capitalist individualism, prioritizing profit and family survival over collective responsibility. Previous studies have examined *All My Sons*, through ethical and socio-political frameworks, focusing particularly on themes of guilt, denial, and social responsibility. Critics such as Bigsby (2005) and Abbotson (2007) suggest that the play embodies the tension between personal loyalty to family and public duty to society. This moral conflict is most clearly exemplified by the character of Chris Keller, whose idealism clashes with his father's pragmatic worldview. These studies highlight the moral dilemma but often stop short of exploring the underlying psychological motivations behind the characters' moral choices.

All My Sons has also been investigated through Freudian Psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, guilt, and denial. In this sense, Tyson (2006) interpreted Kate Keller's actions of refusing the death of her son Larry as a way of self-defense to preserve a psychological stability. Similarly, the denial of Joe Keller was unconscious strategy to escape moral responsibility. Such studies offer a thorough understanding of inner conflicts, taking into account pathology and ignoring other needs and motivations.

In contrast, Maslow's Theory of Needs offers new framework that has not largely been taken to understand the characters' motivational dynamics in *All My Sons*. Maslow proposes that individuals prioritize psychological and safety needs before pursuing any other needs (Maslow, 1943). Researchers, however, have recommended that following Maslow's Model in analyzing characters' motivations and ethical decision-making in literary works adds a rich value to literary criticism (Guerin et al., 2011). The present analysis suggests that Joe Keller's actions are determined by tendencies for economic prosperity and family settlement, but these tendencies are not systematically discovered in the lens of Maslow's Psychological Hierarchy of Needs. His Model clarifies that Joe Keller succeeds to preserve life needs such as material security and safety within the family. However, he fails to maintain his self-esteem and self-actualization. Unlike his father, Chris Keller aspires to higher-order needs, including morality and social responsibility, making a distinction between father and son.

Moreover, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs proposes an accurate understanding of the tragic structure of the drama. Larry Keller represents another form of idealized self-esteem that collapses when

confronted with ethical compromise. On the other hand, Kate Keller's denial to accept the death of her son is a reflection of her attempt to preserve a psychological safety within a destabilized family structure. Reading the play from this angle reveals how unmet psychological needs shape moral failure.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Overview of Maslow's Theory and the Five Levels of Needs

Abraham Maslow first introduced his theory of a hierarchy of human needs in his seminal 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation." In this chapter, Maslow proposed that human motivation is based on fulfilling basic needs in succession before moving on to more advanced needs. He theorized these needs as a five-tiered pyramid model (Maslow, 1943).

At the bottom of the pyramid are the most fundamental physiological needs, including needs for oxygen, food, water, shelter, clothing and homeostasis. Maslow argued that these basic survival needs must be met before an individual can attend to higher-level needs. Above physiological needs in the hierarchy are safety needs, encompassing needs for physical security, financial stability, law and order, and safety from harm. Once safety is reasonably attained, individuals feel motivated to fulfill social needs (Maslow, 1954).

The third tier in Maslow's hierarchy involves love and belongingness needs, namely needs for friendship, intimacy, trust and family. These social-emotional needs emerge when security is established. Moving up the pyramid, esteem needs then surface which concern desires for respect, autonomy, achievement and competence. Feeling capable and worthy in one's social spheres is prioritized at this level. Finally, at the apex of the pyramidal model is self-actualization, representing needs for personal growth, morality and fulfillment through creativity and problem-solving (Maslow, 1943).

In the present study, Maslow's human needs theory will be applied as a psychoanalytic framework of the core motivations driving the characters in Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*. By examining how the characters interact and what conflicts arise between them, inferences can be made about which needs are most salient for each character based on their behaviors and priorities. This hierarchical lens offers deeper understanding of the psychological underpinnings that influence the characters' motivations, relationships and decision-making over the course of the play.

4. Discussion

4.1 Physiological Needs of the Characters:

As the owner of the Keller aircraft parts manufacturing business, Joe Keller's primary motivation revolves around fulfilling his most basic Physiological Needs of securing financial stability, shelter, and access to food for himself and his family. Running a successful business enables Keller to earn a steady income to support not just his own Physiological Needs, but also those of his wife Kate and their two sons "For you, Kate, for both of you, that's all I ever lived for" (Miller, 1947, p.78). Keller's

words, "I'm in business, a man is in business" (Miller, 1947, p.71), define his personal needs for economic stability. He points out to his business not as something he chooses but a universal obligation. This statement justified his immoral actions, making them as requirements of survival rather than a moral failure. According to Keller, economic stability comes from a successful business, leading to family stability. For Maslow, safety needs, including a successful job and a stable economy, create a settled family (Maslow, 1943).

Kate, Keller's wife, functions as the housewife, focusing on managing the house, cooking, and maintaining family stability to meet the physiological needs of food and shelter that are essential for family settlement. For Kate, physiological needs provide the structure through which the family is united. Maslow confirms that such needs are collectively met within the family, and Kate's adoption of unity supports her status as a guardian of the family's survival (Maslow, 1943). Maslow illustrates that individuals often encounter threats that influence lower-level needs related to safety. These threats make people experience stress and anxiety because the basic needs for survival are in danger (Maslow, 1954). Accordingly, Kate feels pressured when her feeling of safety is endangered, "everything decides to happen at the same time. This month is his birthday; his tree blows down, Annie comes" (Miller, 1947, p.18). These words capture the sense of accumulated stress overwhelming her as a mother. The set of events, the fallen tree, Annie's return, George's return, Chris's marriage to Annie, threaten the stability of the home that Kate seeks to maintain. As a result, Kate responds to that pressure through denial, stress, and anxiety.

Ann Deever is another character who lives independently after the suicide of her fiancé, Larry. She takes full responsibility to provide herself with the fundamentals of food, shelter, and other physiological needs through maintaining her independent lifestyle. Securing these basic requisites of life motivates each character's behaviors and decision-making, aligned with Maslow's assertion that Physiological Needs serve as the foundation which higher level needs are built upon (Maslow, 1943).

4.2 Love and Belonging Needs of the Characters:

Within Maslow's hierarchy, the Love and Belonging needs tier represents the fundamental human desire for social connection and acceptance (Maslow, 1970). For Joe and Kate Keller, whose family has been largely disrupted by the wartime disappearance of their eldest son Larry, the preservation of familial solidarity becomes a central psychological priority. Larry's absence increases the emotional attachment and their need to have a sense of belonging within the family. As Frank recalls the moments of loss, he says, "Larry was reported missing on November twenty-fifth, right?" (Miller, 1947, p.17), a statement that shows how the emotional life of the family has been shaped by this traumatic incident. Joe and Kate, in response to this loss, seek to regain their remaining family bonds, particularly their relationship with their surviving son Chris. Joe clearly expresses the connectivity between his own identity and a sense of fulfillment to this relationship when he states that "My only accomplishment is my son" (Miller, 1947, p. 49).

To some extent, love and belonging are largely represented by Chris and Ann Deever. For Chris, he experiences a profound need for love and acceptance, especially from Ann, after long years of war

and alienated family, “he loved you, Joe, you broke his heart” (Miller, 1947, p. 77). “These years when I think of someone for my wife, I think of Annie” said Chris (Miller, 1947, p. 15). This statement reveals that the only girl who fills up the emotional gap of his life is Ann. Chris aims to restore familial belonging, seeking reconciliation based on reality. According to Maslow, when a family emotionally suffers, family members seek to find love and acceptance with other people (Maslow, 1943). That is exactly what Chris experiences within his family. Similarly, Ann Deever feels alienated after the loss of her dead fiancé, Larry. Thus, she is motivated to build new connections with Chris to overcome feelings of isolation, having her needs of love, family, and intimacy fulfilled once more. In contrast with Kate, Ann chooses a relationship that is formed through mutual affection and honesty. Ann understands the meaning of belonging that cannot exist without honesty. She reveals Larry’s letter not to destroy the family, but to ensure that relationships must be based on truth. Maslow notes that love needs are destroyed when individuals are forced to maintain distrusting bonds which Ann refuses (Maslow, 1954).

4.3 Esteem Needs of the characters:

In the sense of Maslow’s Hierarchy, the high-level-Esteem needs become influential motivators for human behavior after satisfying the basic needs. Joe Keller’s identity and self-esteem are deeply associated with his role and reputation in the community. Running a large company what makes Joe Keller feel respected and accepted by others in his community. As he asserts, “you’re a boy, what could I do! I’m in business, a man is in business” (Miller, 1947, p. 71). This statement suggests that Keller’s self-worth and identity are closely tied to his role as a business man. He experiences a dire need to be valued by others around him by having a high social status. For Kate Keller, she is confined to the domestic realm as a housewife, deriving a sense of respect and value by keeping the family in harmony. She likes to be heard and acknowledged by her family. She frequently repeats the words: “Tell him- you are willing to go to prison” and “Joe I tell you” (Miller, 1947, p. 76-77), emphasizing that those lower-level needs, including safety and family settlement, cannot keep the family in harmony. When Joe is urged by Kate to be imprisoned, she needs to restore family-esteem and reputation in the city. From Maslovian lens, Kate realizes that without moral accountability, the family loses not only social value but also self-esteem (Maslow, 1954).

Maslow’s theory looks at esteem needs as the desire for dignity, self-respect, and acceptance by others. Once these needs are lost, people feel ashamed, guilty, and disgusted, and they lose their identity (Maslow, 1943). However, Chris Keller’s self-esteem is collapsed when he comes to know that his father is behind the death of 21 pilots by shipping cracked airplane parts to the US military during the second world war. As a result, Chris left home in search of psychological and ethical clarity. As Kate later states “I told you. He had an argument with Joe. Then he got in the car and drove away” (Miller, 1947, p. 73). Chris realizes that his life has been built upon the deaths of innocent soldiers. Thus, Joe’s action produces, what Maslow defines, as a crisis of self-esteem, the loss of identity, and immoral accountability.

4.4 Self-Actualization Needs of the Characters:

In the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Self-Actualization Needs play a significant role, focusing on individuals' potential and moral purpose. Joe Keller's motivations are stirred by self-ego, profit, and ambition rather than moral accountability. He denies taking personal responsibility for the deaths of twenty-one pilots during the war and instead blames Steve Deever. As George Deever explains that:

I am not through now! Dad was afraid. He wanted Joe there if he was going to do it. But Joe cannot come down...He's sick. Sick! He suddenly gets the flue! Suddenly! But he promised to take responsibility. Do you understand what I'm saying? On the telephone you can't have responsibility! In a court you can always deny a phone call and that exactly what he did. (Miller, 1947, p.55)

Throughout most of the play, Joe refuses to acknowledge the responsibility he promised, which is a key element of self-actualization. Joe's denial also prevents him of reaching self-awareness that lies at the core of self-actualization. Moreover, his realization of the truth comes too late, after he has already destroyed the familial bonds and moral trust within his family. The sudden awareness upsets him because it forces him to fully confront the weight of ethical responsibility he has denied.

Chris functions as the character most oriented towards moral righteousness and justice. This quest serves as his means of self-actualizing values of honor and redemption. Still experiencing immense grief, Ann hopes resolving the lingering questions about Larry's death. This action allows her to achieve a sense of inner serenity and peace, aiming to fulfill her self-actualization needs. Each character's ambitions and interpersonal conflicts stem from attempting to meet these highest-level human needs of morality and self-fulfillment in distinctly different, and often competing ways (Miller, 1947)

5. Conclusion

The Maslovian readings reflected in the play represent much of contemporary social reality. In modern communities, many individuals are under the pressure to achieve economic stability and job success, which function as tools for personal self-esteem, especially in terms of moral responsibility. However, Miller's comment on the American Dream remains controversial today, as the struggle for economic prosperity, ethical accountability, and psychological fulfillments continue to shape human conduct. From a Maslovian perspective, the characters' actions in *All My Sons* can be understood as responses to human needs. For Joe Keller, survival means power, money, and respect, leading him to choose morally compromised actions. Denial becomes Kate's shield, holding on tight because facing truth risks losing love and identity. Truth and justice drive Chris forward, guided by a search for personal growth and making amends. Ann moves toward ending things so she can settle down. What each wants clashes, creating friction between them. Needs take different paths, often without anyone noticing. Peering into Miller's world reveals hidden forces, shaped by human needs we often overlook. Through Maslow's eyes, character drives take on deeper meaning - desires beneath dialogue shape fate. What seems external actually stems from inner cravings, guiding choices without warning. Seeing it this way shifts perspective, making inner conflicts feel more alive.

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