

Society, family,  
catharsis: male  
protagonists in 'all my  
sons' and 'the cement  
ga...



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Ian McEwan's controversial, macabre bildungsroman, 'The Cement Garden', and Arthur Miller's Ibsen-inspired domestic tragedy, "All My Sons", both profoundly explore societal and familial demands and expectations laid upon men in these epochs-1946 and 1978 respectively. Aristotle's definition of an ideal protagonist is "a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty... [and] is highly renowned and prosperous- a personage like Oedipus"[1]. Subsequently, corrupt businessman Joe Keller in 'All My Sons' and confused adolescent, Jack in 'The Cement Garden' are identified as the protagonists rather than the other male leads (Joe's son Chris and Jack's estranged brother, Tom). They fulfill these criteria as a result of their shared hamartia- a hubristic nature, defining themselves by their fundamental masculine desires for financial power and success, sexuality and status- which is the catalyst to their downfalls and has a cathartic purging effect on the audience. Ultimately, in both these pieces of notable, postmodern literature, the characters' protracted struggle with their own identities comes to a cataclysmic ending following the denouements. Joe and Jack's identities teeter precariously on the fact that they are top of their familial hierarchies. Like other men of his era, Joe is not only expected to support his family as breadwinner, but also his country while at war; as said by Miller himself, "All My Sons is a realistic play illustrating the theme that a man must recognise his ethical responsibility to the world outside his home as well as in his own home"[2]. Despite this overwhelming pressure for wealth and security being self-inflicted, he refuses to take responsibility for the consequences and blames his wife, Kate, for his own actions. In act three, he says "You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgive? You wanted money, didn't

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you?"[3]. Repetition of the word " money" highlights his primary focus, but the cacophonous sound foreshadows the effect his obsession will have and, although perhaps subconsciously, he is aware of this. Furthermore, his poor grammar not only implies that he is rushing amidst the height of emotional intensity, but also that he is uneducated both intellectually and socially, broadening the explanation for his desperate attempts for validation. This is reiterated by his rhetorical question and inability to appreciate that Kate is covering for him- he lacks the intelligence to recognise the error of his crimes. In his eyes, not achieving the goals he has set himself inevitably means failure as a man; so blaming her is a form of protection, preservation and a way to keep the possibility of the broken American dream alive.

Although his actions may initially appear narcissistic and selfish, it could be argued that his aspirations for him and his family are his primary motives. He is willing to tarnish his reputation and live with guilt for his family's benefit. Bosley Crowther expressed his agreement with this opinion in response to Edward G. Robinson's portrayal of Joe Keller in the 1948 movie adaptation, stating he presented " a little tough guy who has a softer side... [who is] tender and considerate in the presence of those he loves". However, it wasn't these values that were passed on to his son, but rather his greed.

Chris says earlier in act one " If I have to grub for money all day long at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want a family, I want some kids, I want to build something I can give myself to." The repetition of ' I want' indicates his self-righteous nature, developed from an expectation to be the leader and thus most important and it is evident from the mistakes in sentence form that he too is equally uninformed. Ultimately, Arthur Miller is describing two very similar men and the fact that Chris is in many ways a reflection of his

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father, suggests that the way Chris is portrayed reveals Joe's often well-hidden true character. The pastiche nuclear family wistfully constructed by the four siblings in 'The Cement Garden', is an insight into the perception of what was considered to be a desired family unit and the responsibility of men within it in the 1970s. Despite being set approximately three decades after 'All My Sons' and during a fundamental stage in social progression, the characters strive to assume stereotypical roles, naively emulating the unrealistic families in movies and television shows such as 'The Brady Bunch' and 'Little House on the Prairie'. Seventeen-year-old Julie takes on the position of housewife while fourteen-year-old Jack becomes the surrogate father who protects his younger siblings, thirteen-year-old Sue and six-year-old Tom, who act as their children. It is this role that comes to be his main focus for development; reflecting the social psychological structures suggested by Erik Erikson, Jack is at the stage of his maturation where he is questioning who he is and the position he wants to have in society. Because of his patriarchal mentality, he expects that as the father figure, he will be head of the family, however Julie, whose age gives her clout, initially proves him wrong. Evidently, unlike in 'All My Son's', there is a power struggle between the male and female lead, but Jack's determination and need to be the 'alpha male' leads to him ultimately having power over his three siblings, which they resent- as indicated by Julie who says " he wants to be one of the family, you know, big smart daddy. He's getting on my nerves". He strives solely for this outcome from the opening of the book, highlighted first by the pride he experiences to walk " in front followed by... [his] father" rather than following like before", and it is seemingly this aim that defines Jack's identity. However, the end of the novel sees his willingness to coalesce

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his newfound power with infantilization as he takes the submissive role while consummating his incestuous relationship with his sister. As Jeannette Baxter points out “ this act of filial desire is couched in vertiginous terms”[4] which suggest his “ uncertainty of knowing how to negotiate trauma”[5]; Jack’s description of feeling “ weightless, tumbling through space with no sense of up or down” supports this. Furthermore, the sibilance in this section, such as “ soft shudder” juxtaposes sensuality with an unsettling ambiance.

Combined, these two linguistic features identify Jack as a confused individual who is merely forceful and dominant on the surface. With his “ lips around Julie’s nipple”, he makes himself vulnerable and reverts to sexually twisted infantile behavior and childlike lack of conscientiousness, whilst emancipating him of the pressures of male gender stereotypes. Due to their familial status, both protagonists are derogatory and repressive in their actions towards women. Joe is described as “ a man among men”- he sees men only as his equals and his subjugation of women limits them to the domestic arena and community. This treatment was, for the most part, universal as indicated by the surfacing of works such as Betty Friedan’s ‘ Feminine Mystique’. It was, therefore, something the audience would have related to, which is necessary as tragedy is defined partly as “ an imitation of an action that is serious”[6], therefore it must be something in existence. Maltreatment is made abundantly clear by the fact that Kate continuously refers to Joe by name but he does not reciprocate this respect, and Kate being titled “ mother” in the stage directions. They also describe her as “ a woman of uncontrollable inspirations and an overwhelming capacity for love”- using a word in the semantic field of hysteria, “ uncontrollable” not only plays into the Antediluvian opinion that women are unstable and

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inferior, but also suggests that as a woman she should be controlled by her significant other, Joe. The emotive aposiopesis in Keller's "commanding outburst" ending in the threatening phrase "I better -" highlights his masculine authority and the way it silences those he disparages. The depictions of females in the play and in 'The Cement Garden' are vital to understand the males, as male identities only exist when compared to women. Kate's weaknesses make Joe appear both physically and emotionally stronger. He is a "heavy man of stolid mind and build", who has come to terms with the death of his son (unlike his wife). Furthermore, comments Kate makes throughout the play provide insight into the misogynistic and judgmental views of Joe, who has likely seeded the ideas. For instance, the way she speaks about Ann's appearance, such as "I think her nose got longer" and "You gained a little weight, didn't you, darling?" suggests that Joe has potentially said these things about her own appearance and she is in fact mirroring them, hence implying Joe's manipulative and subtly abusive temperament. Applying the same theory would, however, suggest that he too has a nurturing and affectionate side, implied by the typical term of endearment- "darling", but he is ostensibly depicted otherwise as a proudly oppressive tyrant. Jack's attitude towards female 'inferiority' is similar to that of Joe, he expects them to be subservient; demonstrated by his disgust towards his brother dressing as a girl. This is recognised by Julie who tells him, "girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy; for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading." Furthermore, his sexual objectification of his sisters and disregard for anything but their physical attributes is, assumedly, <https://assignbuster.com/society-family-catharsis-male-protagonists-in-all-my-sons-and-the-cement-garden/>

the way he would view women in general. Only five paragraphs into the book Jack is uncomfortably describing the “ skin clung tightly to her [Sue’s] rib cage”, “ muscular ridge of her buttocks” and “ little flower of flesh” and soon “ the soft line” of Julie’s mouth. “ Little”, “ flower” and “ soft” conspicuously confirm Jack’s supposition for women to be innocent and pure yet weak.

Defining his sisters using a series of synecdoches gives a sense of depersonalisation and divulges his newfound hyperfocus on the female body; manifestly, his burgeoning sexuality is a defining feature of his character.

Ultimately, ‘ The Cement Garden’ is an odyssey that revolves around Jack’s developing identity throughout his arduous ascent into manhood and subsequent discovery of his sexuality. Lacking a male role model, Jack fails to pass the phallic stages of development as described by Freud and Kohlberg, and consequently he has a dangerously radical Oedipus complex.

The small impact his despotic father has on him was the abuse and manipulation of women: Jack describes how he “ knew how to use his pipe against her”. His lack of guidance, combined with the resentment he feels towards his father (stressed by the positives surrounding his description) is what fuels his need for superiority and thus degradation of women. The dogged desires of the protagonists to emulate what they perceive as masculine values lead them to make mistakes (essentially murder and incest) and become anti-heroes. Like the majority of Miller’s protagonists, following Aristotelian principles, Joe’s hamartia and hubristic nature causes his demise but unlike John Proctor, Eddie Carbone or even Willy Loman, his suicide is selfish, rather than altruistic martyrdom. It is true to his character that he would sooner capitulate to his sins than atone and reach redemption. Cynically, Joe

believes the masculine values he strives for to be unobtainable. He will never  
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fulfill the moral responsibilities thrust upon him as identified by the biblical reference “ a man can't be Jesus in this world’; which is his justification for abandoning his cause. How can one be something that does not exist? Comparing himself to “ Jesus” shows he seeks solace in a higher power and is somewhat vulnerable, a characteristic he believes to be undesirable due to its feminine connotations. His name, Keller is a pun for ‘ killer’, marking him as guilty from the outset, despite his continuous attempts to conceal this. The moment “ a shot is heard in the house”, marks Joe’s disillusionment and is in fact him coming to terms with his identity in an exceedingly sinister manner. This anagnorisis moment would have shocked the audience and been a moment of manipulated tension- Miller said, “ the audience sat in silence... and gasped when they should have, and I tasted that power... which is to know that by one’s invention a mass of strangers has been publicly transfixed”[7]. However, being a tragedy of the common man and the subtle championing of the underdog makes it difficult to look so negatively upon Joe. Both works evoke a catharsis in the audience and reader, intensified by the somewhat relatable situations the protagonists are in, making their demises all the more disturbing and painful to watch. The falsehood of the concept of masculinity is portrayed- striving to become a strong and respected man has detached Joe from reality and leads to a lack of morality; accordingly his identity within society is ironically demeaned despite this being the opposite of his intentions. As ‘ All My Sons’ created controversy among a 1950s audience with the honest depiction of the futility of the American dream, ‘ The Cement Garden’ did with incest and sexual self-discovery- “ the novel skillfully inverts the traditional maturation narratives”- and Jack’s hastened rites of passage prove immensely

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destructive- in this way it is an urbanised adaptation of William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies'. Like most young adults, Jack has long aspired to be independent and virile. However, "given that instant adulthood they all crave"[8] too quickly proves traumatizing and harmful. He develops such a degree of hegemonic masculinity in the space of days that he loses sense of his own identity, in fact it bifurcates- symbolized in the line, "I stared at my own image till it began to disassociate itself and paralyse me with its look". The pronoun "it" underlines his dissatisfaction with himself and longing to be different. Additionally, his distressed questioning of his own character leads him into a spiral of immoral choices, culminating in his sexual relationship with his sister, and a constant feeling of unrecognised shame. The repeating nightmares of his mother reprimanding him for his serial masturbating, is a clear indication of this, in a sense it is him punishing himself. The taboo emotions and experiences described, although often hyperbolic, are relatable; as argued by William Sutcliffe who stated that the novel elicits "a degree of self-excavation that exposes seams one did not expect to find when the digging began"[9]. However, the unwillingness of many to admit to these ideas to themselves, let alone others, led the book to initially be banned in many schools and receive equally negative responses as positive. Jack is on the cusp of manhood but "torn between the impulses to progress and regress"[10] he makes mistakes and, much to the repulsion of the reader, sexually objectifies his sister, henceforth poignantly imprisoning him in a state of immaturity. In spite of the fact that Jack and Joe have internalized idealisms of the perfect family and American dream, they are driven by their innate instincts and pseudo masculinity, which is the catalyst for their downfalls and termination of their ceaseless desires.

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Evidently, both Ian McEwan and Arthur Miller focus predominantly on character analysis and development rather than plot in 'The Cement Garden' and 'All My Sons'. The identity of each male protagonist, Jack and Joe, is explored and deconstructed; at the core they are defined by a primitive desire for sexual dominance, a definitive God complex and inability to accept that they are not all powerful. However, the pursuit of these 'masculine' attributes leads to their ultimate demise; Joe is taken from a guiltless state of innocence to intense remorse, by nature of his sentient being, pushing him to commit suicide, whereas Jack's inability to see the indecorousness of his relationship with his sister leads Derek to call the police. Characterising the two by their flaws rather than strengths could be intended to encourage self-reflection in the audience and reader, thus bettering oneself by breaking the shell of superficiality so many rely on to create a favourable identity rather than a real one. The final note is "you can be better!"

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