

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 17
Arthur Miller's All My Sons Part 3

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Keller: Did you ask Annie yet?

Chris: I wanted to get this settled first.

Keller: How do you know she'll marry you? Maybe she feels the same way Mother does?

Chris: Well, if she does, then that's the end of it. From her letters I think she's forgotten him. I'll find out. And then we'll thrash it out with Mother? Right? Dad, don't avoid me.

Keller: The trouble is, you don't see enough women. You never did.

Chris: So what? I'm not fast with women.

Keller: I don't see why it has to be Annie.

Chris: Because it is.

Keller: That's a good answer, but it don't answer anything. You haven't seen her since you went to war. It's five years.

Chris: I can't help it. I know her best. I was brought up next door to her. These years when I think of someone for my wife, I think of Annie. What do you want, a diagram?

Keller: I don't want a diagram... I...I'm... She thinks he's coming back Chris. You marry that girl and




We are discussing Act-I of *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller. There is some crisis about introducing Annie into the family's circles. Chris is interested in getting married to Annie and that is seen as a potential emotional crisis from for the family primarily because the Mother thinks Larry is still not dead.

Keller and Chris – father and son, they are continuing to have this discussion. There are lot of comparisons that we can find between the father-son relationships in both in *All My Sons* as well as in *Death of a Salesman*.

“How do you know she will marry you? Maybe she feels the same way Mother does? Well, if she does, then that is the end of it. From her letters I think she is forgotten him. I will find out. Then we will thrash it out with Mother? Right? Dad, do not avoid me. This is something that Chris repeatedly tells Keller, not to avoid things, not to ignore things, but to engage with things.”

Keller is also quite right in getting into this escapist mode given what he has gone through. Keller is trying to convince Chris that he need not be with Annie not because he cannot deal with the emotional turmoil with his wife, his Mother, with Chris's Mother.

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Keller: That's a good answer, but it don't answer anything. You haven't seen her since you went to war. It's five years.

Chris: I can't help it. I know her best. I was brought up next door to her. These years when I think of someone for my wife, I think of Annie. What do you want, a diagram?

Keller: I don't want a diagram... I...I'm... She thinks he's coming back Chris. You marry that girl and you're pronouncing him dead. Now what's going to happen to mother? Do you know? I don't. (pause)


Chris: All right, then, Dad.

Keller: (thinking Chris has retreated) Give it some more thought.

Chris: I've given it three years of thought. I'd hoped that if I waited, Mother would forget Larry and then we'd have a regular wedding and everything happy. But if that can't happen here, then I'll have to get out.

Keller: What the hell is this?

Chris: I'll get out. I'll get married and live some place else. Maybe in New York.



Keller – that is a good answer, but it do not answer anything. “You have not seen her since you went to war. It is five years. There are these this is sense of date and time that we keep getting over here. Both the children Chris as well as Larry, we understand both of them went to war, only one came back and Larry presumably died three years back.

I cannot help it. I know her best. I was brought up next door to her. These years when I think of someone for my wife, I think of Annie. What do you want, a diagram? I do not want a diagram. She thinks he is coming back. You marry that girl and you are pronouncing him dead. What is going to happen to Mother? You know that.”

This is the crisis over here. In the larger scheme of the play, that is precisely the role that Annie is playing over here. The presence of Annie triggers this conversation. This conversation is extremely important in order to address the emotional and the real problems that the family is facing at the moment.

If Chris is loved, if Chris goes ahead and marries Annie, it is like stating a fact forever that Larry is dead, Larry is not going to come back. “There is no hope anymore. And that hopelessness is definitely going to kill Kate. I have given it three years of thought. I had

hoped that if I waited, Mother would forget Larry and then we would have a regular wedding and everything happy. But if that cannot happen here, then I will have to get out.”

It is also showing some tensions in terms of the sibling relationship over here. It is understood that Larry is no longer with them, but this inability to accept what has happened to Larry is tension building up between Larry and Chris though we do not meet Larry at all over here.

There is this hope that Chris has that Mother would eventually forget Larry. There is something very delicate about this situation. While they all love each other, they also want to move on and that moving on also entails a lot of forgetting, it also entails the acceptance of a lot of unpleasant facts.

“Chris also sounds out certain things like if things do not get better in this home, I may have to move out. I will get married and live some place, maybe in New York.” We also get to know they are not in New York.

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Keller: Are you crazy?

Chris: I've been a good son too long, a good sucker. I'm through with it.

Keller: You've got a business here. What the hell is this?

Chris: The business! The business doesn't inspire me.

Keller: Must you be inspired?

Chris: Yes. I like it an hour a day. 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 that I can give myself to. Annie is in the middle of that. Now ... where to I find it?

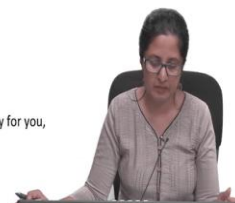
Keller: You mean... (goes to him) Tell me something, you mean you'd leave the business?

Chris: Yes. On this I would.

Keller: [after a pause] Well... you don't want to think like that.

Chris: Then help me stay here.

Keller: All right, but... but don't think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you!



“I have been a good son too long. I am through with it. You have got a business here. What the hell is this? The business, the business does not inspire me. Must you be inspired? Yes, I like it in an hour a day. If I have to grub for money all day at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want a family, I want some kids, and I want to build

something that I can give myself to. Annie is in the middle of that. Now, where do I find it?"

We can find a lot of ways in which this play resonating with *Death of a Salesman*, about this tussle between working for making money, and how sometimes both of these they do not really tally well just like he mentions that about death, about war, it disturbs all the tallies.

One needs to work for money. But is that does that mean that one should sacrifice everything else that is happy and beautiful. How does one strike a balance which includes both ends? This will something which is explored in greater detail, and you cannot take it with you which is which is a play which comes chronologically before Miller's plays.

This is also something which got discussed very essentially in you cannot take it with you. So, you mean tell me something, you would leave the business? On this I would. Well, you do not want to think like that. Then help me stay here.

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Chris: Yes. I like it an hour a day. 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 that I can give myself to. Annie is in the middle of that. Now ... where to I find it?



Keller: You mean... (goes to him) Tell me something, you mean you'd leave the business?

Chris: Yes. On this I would.

Keller: (after a pause) Well... you don't want to think like that.

Chris: Then help me stay here.

Keller: All right, but... but don't think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you!

Chris: I know that, Dad. Just you help me stay here.

Keller: (putting a fist up to Chris's jaw) But don't think that way, you hear me?

Chris: I am thinking that way.

Keller: (lowering his hand) I don't understand you, do I?

Chris: No, you don't. I'm a pretty tough guy.



This is a very touching scene over here when Chris is asking his father to help him stay here. He is entirely right over here. Chris knows that he had been a good son, and all of them know that they all know that he has been trying his best to stay attached to his family. We will see Annie presenting herself as a contrast to this.

Chris is also requesting his father to help him stay there because it looks like a one way project over here at least from Chris's point of view where he is trying his best to move on. He wants his family to stay happy. He wants his Mother to forget Larry not because he does not like Larry, but he wants his parents to be happy. "Alright, but do not think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That is only for you. The whole shooting match is for you. I know that, Dad. Just you help me stay here."

This desperation in Chris's voice where he wants the family to help him to continue to stay in that home, to continue to live. Because it is in so many levels, we find that Chris's life also came to an end along with Larry's death. As long as Larry's death is not accepted, as long as this uncertainty continues, none of them can move on, it particularly is beginning to affect Chris because he is involved with Annie who used to be Larry's girl.

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Mother: Minnie scoured that pail in boiling water last night. It's cleaner than your teeth.

Keller: And I don't understand why, after I worked forty years and I got a maid, why I have to take out the garbage.

Mother: If you would make up your mind that every back in the kitchen isn't full of garbage you wouldn't be throwing out my vegetables. Last time it was the onions.

Chris comes on, hands her bag.

Keller: I don't like garbage in the house.

Mother: Then don't eat. (she goes into the kitchen with bag)

Chris: That settles you for today.

Keller: Yeah, I'm in last place again. I don't know, once upon a time I used to think that when I got money again I would have a maid and my wife would take it easy. Now I got money, and I got a maid, and my wife is workin' for the maid. (he sits in one of the chairs)

Mother comes out on last line. She carries a pot of string beans.

Mother: It's her day off, what are you crabbing about?




Kate, the Mother shows up again. And they do have a lot of these very normal conversations about Keller throwing out garbage. Keller had thrown out some potatoes thinking it was garbage, and they do have some small talk about it. There is an attempt to get back into some kind of a normal behaviour, there is an attempt to reclaim normalcy, but that gets disturbed in so many ways too.

There is this one place where quite amusingly Keller also says- “I do not know once upon a time I used to think that when I got money, again I would have a maid and my wife would take it easy. Now, I got money, and I got a maid, and my wife is working for the maid.”

This also tells us about the progress that the family has made that maybe they are not very rich at the moment, but they are placed comfortably and they have struggled for it. They have worked for it, and they have reached a place where they can begin to take it easy.

But at the same time, it is not an ease which has come to them with a lot of price, they had to pay a lot, they had to pay a heavy price in terms of their lives in terms of their peace of mind to reach where they have reached which is why this comfort is also very its also cause of dilemma over here in terms of the money that money becomes something.

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Chris: (to Mother) Isn't Annie finished eating?

Mother: (looking around preoccupiedly at yard) She'll be right out. (moves) That wid did some job on this place. (of the tree) So much for that, thank Got.


Keller: (indicating chair beside him) Sit down, take it easy.

Mother: (pressing her hand to top of her head) I've got such a funny pain on the top of my head.

Chris: Can I get you an aspirin?

Mother picks a few petals off ground, stands there smelling them in her hand, then sprinkles them over plants.

Mother: No more roses. It's so funny... everything decides to happen at the same time. This month is birthday, his tree blows down, Annie comes. Everything that happened seems to be coming back. I was just down the cellar, and what do I stumble over? His baseball glove. I haven't seen it in a century.



Chris is also ashamed of and Keller also finds it difficult to articulate some of the achievements that he has had. He also finds it difficult to take credit for what he has done for the family because of what has happened in the past into which we are yet to get the audience as readers we are yet to get to do the details of it.

We found that Kate, the Mother figure she is more into things like horoscopes she sees and believes in certain signs which certain cosmic signs which appear before her. She is again beginning to see all kinds of things coming together, everything decides to happen at the same time.

This month is his birthday, his tree blows down, and Annie comes. “Everything that happened seems to be coming back. I was just down the cellar, and what do I stumble over? His baseball glove. I have not seen it in a century.”

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Chris: Don't you think Annie looks well?

Mother: Fine. There's no question about it. She's a beauty... I still don't know what brought her here. Not that I'm not glad to see her, but...

Chris: I just thought we'd all like to see each other again. (mother just looks at him, nodding ever so slightly, almost as though admitting something) And I wanted to see her myself.

Mother: (as her nods halt, to Keller) The only thing is I think her nose got longer. But I'll always love that girl. She's one that didn't jump into bed with somebody else as soon as it happened with her fella. ✓

Keller: (as though that were impossible for Annie) Oh, what're you...

Mother: Never mind. Most of them didn't wait till the telegrams were opened. I'm just glad she came, so you can see I'm not completely out of my mind. (sits, and rapidly breaks string beans in the pot)

Chris: Just because she isn't married doesn't mean she's been mourning Larry.

Mother: (with an undercurrent of observation) Why then isn't she?

Chris: (a little flustered) Well... it could have been any number of things.

Mother: (directly at him) Like what, for instance?



She is in her mind. She wants to see all these as signs as designs and prompting her to again and again believe that Larry is still alive. Chris is also trying to bring Annie into the conversation not just simply as an extension of Larry pointing that he wanted to see her himself, but Mother is not even willing to acknowledge that admission over there.

She is also trying to highlight the fact that I will always love that girl. She is the one that did not jump into bed with somebody else as soon as it happened with her fella. As soon as it happens, so her Mother his Mother, Larry's Mother will never use any unpleasant term, any anything real while she is referring to Larry.


It is largely the incident the death his absence is referred to as it. It also tells us about certain very old fashion values certain conservative value systems that she has in place over here. It also talks about some of those post-war crisis, and how we find that Kate the

Mother figure she becomes very judgmental about some of the responses of families, and women to certain real crisis.

“Never mind. Most of them did not wait till the telegrams were opened. I am just glad she came, as you can see so you can see I am not completely out of my mind. Just because she is not married does not mean she is been mourning Larry.” These are the kinds of equations that reinforce Kate’s mind that Larry is not dead. In her mind, in the Mother’s mind when she sees Annie as an unmarried woman, for her it is a validation that she is waiting for Larry to come back.


Chris comes across as this progressive modern man who also wants to give some more agency to the woman. She his multiple times in this play we will find that he is trying to highlight this fact that just because she is single it does not mean that she is mourning Larry.

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Mother: I was fast asleep and... {raising her arm over the audience} Remember the way he used to fly low past the house when he was in training? When we used to see his face in the cockpit going by? That's the way I saw him. Only high up. Way, way up, where the clouds are. He was so real I could reach out and touch him. And suddenly he started to fall. And crying, crying to me... Mom, Mom! I could hear him like he was in the room. Mom! ...it was his voice! If I could touch him I knew I could stop him, if I could only... {breaks off, allowing her outstretched hand to fall} I woke up and it was so funny. The wind... it was like the roaring of his engine. I came out here... I must've still been half asleep. I could hear that roaring like he was going by. The tree snapped right in front of me... and I like... came

awake. {she is looking at tree. She suddenly realizes something, turns with a reprimanding finger shaking slightly at Keller.} See? We should never have planted that tree. I said so in the first place. It



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Chris: [she is looking at the tree, she suddenly notices something, she starts remembering things, shaking slightly at Keller.] See? We should never have planted that tree. I said so in the first place. It was too soon to plant a tree for him.

Chris: [alarmed] Too soon!

Mother: [angering] We rushed into it. Everybody was in such a hurry to bury him. I said not to plant it yet. (to Keller:) I told you to...!

Chris: Mother, Mother! [she looks into his face] The wind blew it down. What significance has that got? What are you talking about? Mother, please... Don't go through it all again, will you? It's no good, it doesn't accomplish anything. I've been thinking, y'know? ...maybe we ought to put our minds to forgetting him?

Mother: that's the third time you've said that this week.

Chris: Because it's not right. We never took up our lives again. We're like at a railroad station waiting for a train that never comes in.

Mother: [pressing the top of her head] Get me an aspirin, heh?

Chris: Sure, and let's break out of this, heh, Mom? I thought the four of us might go out to dinner a couple of nights, maybe go dancing out at the shore.



The Mother is also reliving the agony that she faced at night when the tree snapped right in front of me. She again says we should never have planted that tree. “I said so in the first place. It was too soon to plant a tree for him. Chris is alarmed, when she hears; when he hears Mother using the term is too soon. Mother is refusing to see the sense over there, and we rushed into it.

Everybody was in such a hurry to bury him. I said not to plant it yet. To Keller, I told you to. Mother, Mother, the wind blew it down. What significance has that got? What are you talking about? Mother, please do not go through it all again, will you? It is no good, it does not accomplish anything. I have been thinking? Maybe we ought to put our minds to forgetting him? That is a third time you have said that this week.”

This is equally agonizing for the Mother as well as Chris. This is extremely agonizing for the Mother to think that the rest of the world, the rest of her family that they wanted to bury him too soon. Everyone was in such a hurry to pronounce him dead, and to bury him and to plant a tree in memory of him. But Chris feels that there is there needs to be some more collective effort, concerted effort into forgetting him.

This play between memory and forgetting becomes extremely interesting over here this inability to forget. This more than the inability, there is an unwillingness to forget becomes a central cause of trauma over here. In this process, the Mother is agonizing herself and putting the rest of her family through this agony too. He is also accusing her.

She is accusing the rest of the family for the death for which none of them are responsible. This is in fact the delicate nature of this play and what war has done to them. In terms, when Joe Keller mentioned this at the beginning that their lives did not really tally, things did not really tally after the war.

This is also what he means by that even emotionally things are not really tallying. There is no tallying between the act of remembering, and the act of forgetting, the emotions are not getting tallied over here. We will get this we will wrap up with this statement that Chris makes because it is not right.

We never took up our lives again. We are like at a railroad station waiting for a train that never comes in. The existential angst, the absurdity of what they are facing is entirely revealed over here, waiting for a train that never comes in that is how they all find themselves placed in. The only difference is that Chris is the only one who feels that they are stuck.

For the Mother there is also strange kind of comfort, she is in that phase where she is stuck. And for Keller, he chooses not to take sides he keeps swaying this side and that side because he just he does not want to arrive at a decision either. He is he knows in his mind that Chris is right, but he never wants to get into an, the mode of an argument or in any kind of emotional turmoil with his wife.

This is perhaps another instance which capture the crux of this play how they never how their lives never took off again. We are like at a railroad station waiting for a train that never comes in. We also find a play like *Waiting for Godot* resonating very heavily over here though in a very different circumstance altogether.

The absurdity, the fictional absurdity, the philosophical absurdity which gets foregrounded in Beckett's play becomes a very real crisis over here. Here is a family who is living this absurdity, who is living out this absurdity on a day-to-day basis. It is part of their life, inherently woven into their ordinariness which makes this absurdity all the scarier as well.