

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 21
Arthur Miller's All My Sons Part 7

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Mother: Give me that!

Ann: He's going to read it! (She thrusts letter into Chris's hand) Larry. He wrote it to me the day he died.

Keller: Larry!

Mother: Chris, it's not for you. (he starts to read) Joe... go away...

Keller: (mystified, frightened) Why'd she say, Larry, what...?

Mother: (desperately pushes him toward alley, glancing at Chris) Go to the street, Joe, go to the street!
(she comes down beside Keller) Don't, Chris... (pleading with her whole soul) Don't tell him.

We have seen some of the major themes of *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller and we have also taken a closer look at the important instances which act as milestones in this play. This play unfolds the events in this play in lifetime. It happens in 24 hours, but the range of things that are being discussed and recollected is sometimes from the past of three years back. Sometimes it even refers to the childhood of some of the central characters.

We find that these 24 hours become very important in terms of unfolding certain events in terms of unfolding certain events and also very slowly unravelling the truth which is inherent in this. We do find that there is an Ibsenian kind of quality in this slow unravelling of truth.

The truth when it is revealed at the end we find that it completely disturbs the framework within which the play had originally begun. It unsettles the characters, but it also brings a sense of closure sometimes in slightly unpleasant ways. But nevertheless there is a sense of closure at the end of it when the truth is being revealed. We had been discussing *All My Sons* is about Joe Keller and he is a manufacturer of aircraft engines.

During the war time, when there is an increased demand for production we find that he perhaps inadvertently agrees to go ahead with certain flawed cylinders which eventually lead to the loss of life of about 21 young men who were flying those aircrafts made of those flawed parts.

In this process, in order to not to lose his contract and also to sustain his family and to make sure that his business stays, he resorts with certain drastic measures because there was no other option at the moment which even led to his partner his colleague and partner getting imprisoned that is Steve Deever, who is also the father of Annie in whom initially his first son and later his second son had a romantic interest in.

We find that this complication is further accentuated at the beginning of the play, when we find that Joe Keller's wife Larry's mother, Kate refuses to acknowledge the fact that Larry is dead. This acknowledgement, this unspeakability of death is also heavily intertwined with many other details, many other secrets or many other truths which the play as it unfolds it reveals as well.

A lot of critics have engaged with this question about the way in which the play has ended with the suicide of Joe Keller whether that substantiates anything, whether that legitimises or whether it could be considered as an atonement. But people are of different opinion in that sense about whether there is a complete atonement or whether it needs to be seen as another escapist way in which Joe Keller tries to deal with the reality as in when it is revealed before himself in its full form.

Larry's death at the beginning of this play is more symbolic. The acknowledgment of Larry's death or its denial either way is symbolic in multiple ways. We find that the characters lives their mental temperament the way in which their future course of action would happen. All that depends on either the denial or the acknowledgement of Larry's death.

It is very symbolic at the beginning which is why the memorial tree falling that is presented as a major symbolic event at the beginning. That the standing of the tree and the falling of the tree at the beginning of the play, we find that it is not essentially about Larry's death alone. The fall in fact is about the fall of that family, the fall of Joe Keller as a family person the fall of trust. So, what here fails with the falling of the memorial tree is the relationship between the father and the son.

Chris who at this point had believed that his father is quite infallible that his father is a survivor, he begins to realise that his father in fact, has blood in his hands and that is a reality that he cannot deal with. But ironically at the end of the play Chris is left with this feeling that he too has a blood in his hand, because he too had been partaking in this fortune, he too had been part of this family business.

He is also left with this feeling at the end of the play. He feels responsible in some form or the other, for Joe Keller's death as well. Because it is this movement towards truth that leads to Joe Keller's suicide that brings a closure, but it also leaves the family in very in more shattered ways than they were before.

We find that there is a commitment to absolute truth, to this absolute sense of value. This is again an Ibsenian quality over here just the way we would find wild duck. We see that Miller in some form or the other, replicates this movement towards an absolute truth. There is an absolute truth, an absolute sense of value which is privileged, and a foreground towards the end of it.

Though there are multiple ways in which American Dream had been condoning some of the vices which were part of the system. We find that Miller takes rather a black and white stance over here by condoning what needs to be condoned.

Chris's stance over here could be seen as the ideal as well as the stance which would be able to sustain the dream in the long run. The investment in the dream which does not compromise the values that the family holds, that an individual holds, something that does not get compromised in this pursuit of material comforts in this pursuit of making their family secure.

At various levels, we find that the dichotomy over here is between this commitment towards one's own, looking after one's own and the socio-political responsibilities which are there on the other hand. The critique of the American Dream over here is that, in this pursuit there is always this possibility of overlooking the larger good, of overlooking responsibilities towards the state the responsibilities towards the larger society, the political responsibility, the financial responsibility which needs to be meted out to the larger society over them.

Here, Joe Keller if he could be seen as a type, a typical person who is caught in this system facilitated by the American Dream. We find that he finds solace in the fact that he is been looking after his own and he has been doing this for his family. That seems to legitimise in his mind that seems to condone this larger guilt where he had actually led to the death of about 21 young men.

We find American Dream becoming a malleable sort of a system where each one is not just able to pursue their own dreams, each one is not just able to go after what they need in life, but at the same time they are also able to twist and turn the truth according to how they want it. It is perhaps the greatest flaw over here that Arthur Miller is also trying to foreground.

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(she comes down beside Keller) Don't, Chris... (pleading with her whole soul) Don't tell him.

Chris: (quietly) Three and one half years... talking, talking. Now you tell me what you must do... This is how he died, now tell me where you belong.

Keller: (pleading) Chris, a man can't be a Jesus in this world!

Chris: I know all about the world. I know the whole crap story. Now listen to this, and tell me what a man's got to be! (Reads:) "My dear Ann: ...", you listening? He wrote this the day he died. Listen, don't cry... Listen! "My Dear Ann: it is impossible to put down the things I feel. But I've got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can't express myself. I can't tell you how I feel... I can't bear to live any more. Last night I circled the base for twenty minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing 'business'.... I don't know how to tell you what I feel... I can't face anybody... I'm going out on a mission in a few minutes. They'll probably report me as missing. If they do, I want you to know that you mustn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him..." (Keller grabs the letter from Chris's hand and reads it. After a long pause) Now blame the world. Do you understand that letter?

Keller: (speaking almost inaudibly) I think I do. Get the car. I'll put on my jacket. (he turns and starts slowly for the house. Mother rushes to intercept him)

Mother: Why are you going? You'll sleep, why are you going?



The guilt over here is not just something Joe Keller feels alone. Chris also feels the survivor's guilt for two reasons. One he survives, but his brother did not and though he said there when play is happening, he is still not a privy to the truth of his brother's death.

But he is also feeling guilty because he feels that in some sense he has betrayed his comrades. He had also gone into war and he knows that though indirectly his father's company was responsible for the death of about 21 young soldiers who were flying those flawed aircrafts.

Though he does not hold his father entirely responsible for that the reason that his the very reason that his father owns industry which thrived during the wartime by selling such equipment, by making such machinery that also makes him partake in this guilt. This is a guilt which affects his personal relationships too in many central ways which is why Annie from the time that she begins to interact with Chris she realises that he seems to be ashamed of something all the time.

He is seems to be embarrassed about something about his past, something about his present all the time that it affects the way in which he shows his affection to. It is a half-hearted hug she feels, it is a half-hearted embrace, a half-hearted attempt to even propose to her. We find that this half-heartedness comes largely from the guilt that is looming high over his life too. *All My Sons* is essentially about the set of characters who have placed survival overvalue in many ways.

We find that Joe Keller is someone who places a pragmatic way of living over the ideal way of living. We find that all such characters are also living under the same roof which is the cause of conflict over here.

If we look at Stephen Deever who is now Steve Deever and in jail, has disintegrated family with Annie, his daughter and George, his son. We find that they are less ideal, but they seem to have been paying more for whatever Joe Keller had done.

They seem to be visibly paying more and visibly getting punished by the force of the law. Here that leads their disintegration, but ironically towards the end we find that the Deever family looks more close-knit, they seem to be on the same page more or less in alignment with what they want, what they had experienced compared to the Keller family. Keller family is completely disintegrated towards the end.

We realised that Larry is dead and Larry was ashamed, Larry in fact drove himself to suicide, flew himself to suicide because he could not take the guilt of what his father had done.

We find that here is a family, who are very close with the father. The relationship between the father and the son is very close that the sons cannot bear the thought of holding their father responsible for something. The sons cannot bear the thought that their father is possible of such kind of a vicious thing though inadvertently.

It is that relationship, that trust which they had in each other fundamentally that is what leads to their disintegration as well. The Deever family which is less idealist who do not have such impractical expectations of each other, they seem to be dealing with the crisis in some form in a better way, they seem to be able to move on. Annie is able to move on and George though who he does not get the life that he wanted he went to war he lost the girl that he loved.

He finds himself pretty much lonely and he finds the girl married with three kids. These are the circumstances in which the Deever family finds themselves in, but they seem to be more in control of the reality, they seem to be more in alignment with the reality and that makes it easier for them to go forward unlike the Keller family.

The Keller family is stuck in time in many ways, we find that the mother is still grieving in irrational ways. She has more reasons for that because she is also trying to preserve the sanity and legitimacy of Joe Keller as a father, as a husband. Because acknowledging Larry's death would bring down their family in ways that would be irreparable and that is what happens towards the end of this play too.

There is an atonement, there is a guilt which is resolved, but that comes at a great cost. The family completely disintegrates to borrow Joe Keller's words at the end of it the tally is that one son and father both are dead because of the same reason, because of this failure to own up to a certain mistake that they had committed.

There is also a prophetic nature to this realist play from the beginning with the memorial tree falling. When they hear of George visiting their father in prison, Kate Keller also says that everything seems to be coming back. They are in some sense possible to say that they have been living in this constant fear that things are going to come back to them.

Deep inside both Joe Keller as well as Kate Keller the husband and the wife they always knew that this is perhaps going to come back to haunt them in some form or the other which is why they also need to put up this face both of them are trying to find a different modes of escaping from the reality.

One is trying to keep her son alive and the other one is not looking at the real news. But living in some pseudo world where he is entirely immersed in this capitalist life and trying to find some something trivial in the day to day life to keep himself engaged.

But Chris also Joe Keller and Kate Keller they feel that maybe Chris also knew this deep down inside him, but being the idealist that he is Chris was never aware of this fact. He never thought that there would be a point in life where he would be required to encounter these different kinds of realities at the same time, these different truths at the same time.

Here is where we also find Annie as a as an excellent comparison over here almost like a counterfoil over here as we could see. We find that Annie always knew the truth, she is perhaps the only one who had access to truth. The truth and as well as the practical way in which she has been responding which enabled her to go forward with her life.

She was unable to forgive her father until she realises the complete truth about how Joe Keller was also implicated in this, but at the same time she is willing to go ahead with her life by not letting that affect her potential relationship with Chris. Here we find another kind of character, another type of character who is also willing to make the most of the systems, facilitated by the American Dream.

She is able to make use of her city life, she is able to make use of the mobility that the city provides her. She also wants to move away from these smaller neighbourhoods where Joe Keller and the rest of his family lives, because that is where they talk about things, that is where the past continues to haunt them.

It is something we find as a subtle theme over here where Arthur Miller is also in some form or the other, trying to show this urban rural divide in very interesting ways, how the city life, how the city exposure gives one a lot of possibilities to move on in life.

This is again irrespective of the starker critique of the American Dream, this is also a possibility that it offers about this possibilities of moving ahead with life, the possibility of hope, the possibility of starting life. If there is another way to look at the ending of this play rather than focusing on Joe Keller's suicide, we find that there is a young couple Chris and Annie both of them are ready to give their life one more chance.

They are trying to work out this possibility, a lot of things remain unchanged in their life her father is still in prison, maybe they were try and get him out, his father is dead commit suicide. They also know what their fathers had done one knowingly and the other one was implicated in it. We also find that things do look a bit dark and bleak for Kate Keller as well as for George.

But nevertheless there is this young couple who is willing to give their life a chance. In some form, by the end of the play, we can also find that there is a hope, there is a promise which the American Dream also holds out to this young couple irrespective of the bleak way in which things have been turning out. We find that the many myths that the family had constructed around the myth of their reputation, the myth of Larry's life, at the end of the play.

They were finding the fuel for their life that was on these many myths. We find all of those myths collapsing they are left with just some pragmatic truths and absolute truths at the end of it. And as Chris Keller and Annie tries to continue with their life, they are all they are left with. These practical elements which are very unromantic, very hard to face, but there are no myths over here, it is only hard stuck reality over here.

That is a realist quality as well not just in terms of its presentation, but also in terms of the themes that is the realist quality that Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* is trying to foreground over here. When the play begins we find that there is an undisturbed kind of normality until the end of the first act we find that things move on undisturbed. There is a normality which is constructed, looks very ordinary to begin with, the grief also looks ordinary though it is exhausting and frustrating.

But there is an ordinariness when the play begins till the end of the first act one could say that this normality is preserved in an undisturbed manner. We understand the point of such extraordinary normalcy being presented in the first act because everything goes for a toss from the second act onwards. We find that there is an extraordinary disaster waiting to happen in very stark contrast to this extraordinary normalcy at the beginning.

They all seem to be fitting in well in each other's life though there are various emotional struggles. But from the second act onwards we find that things are beginning to fall apart there is hardly anything which is holding them together they seem to be inhabiting

different worlds and seems to be in need of different myths to sustain the world sustain the reality that they believed in.

Kate needs certain kind of reality where Larry is alive. Joe Keller needs a reality where he is. He did not do anything which caused the death of this young man, he wants to blame it not on a person but on a system which had led him to do that. He also wants to in some form argue that he did this for his family and Chris needs an ideal state irrespective of what had happened.

Chris needs an ideal world where things happen according to certain set of absolute values. Annie is perhaps the most practical one among this who wants to inhabit reality as it is and who wants rest of the characters to accept that reality as well. We find that there is an extraordinary disaster which happens towards the end leading to truth revelation and a suicide and certain possibilities of a new, but uncertain life ahead.

We see that the 24 hours become extremely eventful perhaps more eventful than their life was in the last three years with Larry's death, with Steve's imprisoning and with the family's reputation suffering and then coming back. The 24 hours become more eventful and more catastrophic in some way than it was ever before.

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charity, throw it in the sewer. Does that settle it? In the sewer, that's all. You think I'm kidding? I'm tellin' you to do it, if it's dirty then burn it. It's your money, that's not my money. I'm a dead man, I'm an old dean man, nothing's mine. Well, talk to me! What do you want to do.

Chris: It's not what I want to do. It's what you want to do.

Keller: What should I do? (Chris is silent) Jail? You want me to go to jail? If you want me to go, say so! Is that where I belong? Then tell me so! (Slight pause) What's the matter, why can't you tell me? (Furiously) You say everything else to me, say that! (Slight pause) I'll tell you why you can't say it. Because you know I don't belong there. Because you know! (with growing emphasis and passion, and a persistent tone of desperation) Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go! That's why you can't tell me.

Chris: That's exactly why.

Keller: Then... Why am I bad?

Chris: 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. (Almost breaking) I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself!

He turns away, unable to face Keller. Ann goes quickly to Mother, takes letter from her and starts for



Keller and Chris have this conversation like an encounter, it gets a bit confrontational too and we find that Keller is in a way in a very vulnerable state over here.

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nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go! That's why you can't tell me.

Chris: That's exactly why.

Keller: Then... Why am I bad?



Chris: 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.** (Almost breaking) I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself!

He turns away, unable to face Keller. Ann goes quickly to Mother, takes letter from her and starts for Chris. Mother instantly rushes to intercept her.

Mother: Give me that!

Ann: He's going to read it! (She thrusts letter into Chris's hand) Larry. He wrote it to me the day he died.

Keller: Larry!



Chris is also breaking down and saying “I never saw you as a man I saw you as my father”. This is right after the conversation that Keller, Joe Keller had with George where he almost reveals that they get to know and have different versions of how things had happened on the day of the arrest, on the day when the flawed cylinders were discovered and how Steve Deever was made to take the blame entirely on his own and Joe Keller refused to show up at the office in spite of getting repeated calls from Steve.

We find that they have different truths, different versions and Chris suddenly sees Joe Keller as a man who had lied, as a man who had betrayed. He says “I cannot look at you this way I cannot look at myself”. Here again in stark contrast with Annie, it is more difficult for him to see his father as a person who has committed this vicious thing. Annie seems to be more pragmatic in dealing with it she does not forgive her father until she realises the truth.

But at the same time she seems to be able to face this truth in a slightly better manner. There is also this letter which is revealed and could be seen as a centre of truth over here. The letter that Larry wrote to Ann just before he died. Annie also waited till this point before revealing this letter, she had access to this letter three years back, but she did not want to disturb the myth in which this family was living particularly how Kate Keller was sustaining herself in this myth.

She also did not want to disturb the dynamics within the family being the practical self that she is and when this letter is revealed we find that all of their worlds come crumbling down. This is how the letter reads, “my dear Ann, are you listening”, he wrote the day he died. She is coming to a point where this letter needs to be read out to his father.

“My dear Ann, it is impossible to put things put down the things I feel, but I have got to tell you something yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the states and I read about dad and your father being convicted. I cannot express myself I cannot tell you how I feel I cannot bear to live anymore.”

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Keller: (speaking almost inaudibly) I think I do. Get the car. I'll put on my jacket. (he turns and starts slowly for the house. Mother rushes to intercept him)

Mother: Why are you going? You'll sleep, why are you going?

Keller: I can't sleep here. I'll feel better if I go.

Mother: You're so foolish. Larry was your son too, wasn't he? You know he'd never tell you to do this.

Keller: (looking at letter in his hand) Then what is this if it isn't telling me? Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down. (exits into house)

Mother: (to Chris, with determination) You're not going to take him!

Chris: I'm taking him.

Mother: It's up to you, if you tell him to stay he'll stay. Go and tell him!

Chris: Nobody could stop him now.

Mother: You'll stop him! How long will he live in prison? Are you trying to kill him?

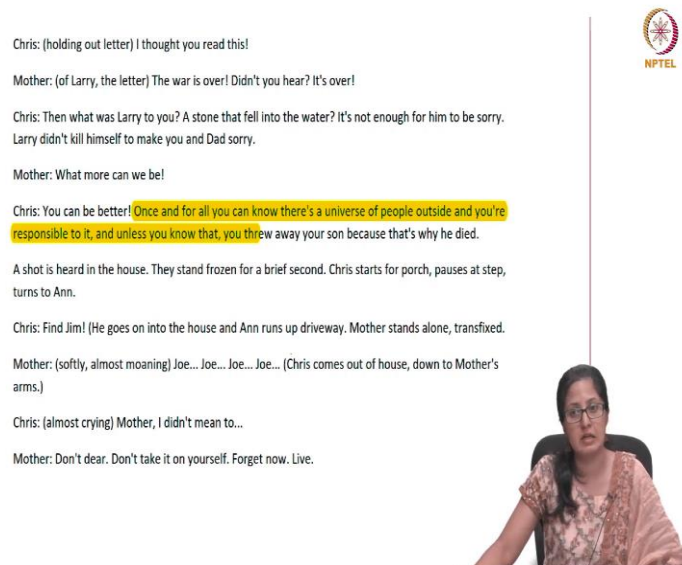


“Last night I circled the base for 20 minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business this is about Joe Keller. I do not know how to tell you what I feel I cannot face anybody. I am going out on a mission in a few minutes they will probably report me as missing if they do I want you to know that you must not wait for me. I tell you and if I had him there now I could kill him.”

Keller grabs a letter from Chris's hand and reads it now “blame the world do you understand that letter”. It is at this point that Keller also is forced to arrive at this realisation that sure “he was my son, but I think to him they were all my sons, I guess they were, I guess they were.”

So, what eventually had led Larry to take his own life was this deep conviction within that it is not just him who is Keller's family, Keller's son, but all of them who died they were all Keller's sons by extension they were all his brothers, they were all his comrades. And that is where the guilt and that is where the guilt had taken him to the point of taking his own life. We also realised this is the same guilt maybe in a different degree that Chris had also been carrying.

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Chris: (holding out letter) I thought you read this!

Mother: (of Larry, the letter) The war is over! Didn't you hear? It's over!

Chris: Then what was Larry to you? A stone that fell into the water? It's not enough for him to be sorry. Larry didn't kill himself to make you and Dad sorry.

Mother: What more can we be!

Chris: You can be better! Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died.

A shot is heard in the house. They stand frozen for a brief second. Chris starts for porch, pauses at step, turns to Ann.

Chris: Find Jim! (He goes on into the house and Ann runs up driveway. Mother stands alone, transfixed.)

Mother: (softly, almost moaning) Joe... Joe... Joe... Joe... (Chris comes out of house, down to Mother's arms.)

Chris: (almost crying) Mother, I didn't mean to...

Mother: Don't dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live.

At the end of this, the moment Keller is being made aware to this guilt the moment he comes alive to this possibility that all of them who died were also his own sons and not just Larry.

In some form or the other he was responsible for driving Larry to his own suicide, we find that he cannot take it anymore. It could be his guilt, it could be his act of atonement it could be his escape somewhat we find that Joe Keller goes inside and with a gunshot takes his own life.

Chris also says towards the end “once and for all you can know there is a universe of people outside and you are responsible to it and unless that you threw away your son because that is why he died”. Here is where Miller in a very idealist form, but as well as in a practical way he is trying to bring in this central value system which according to him the most systems facilitated by the American Dream is also lacking.

The awareness that while one is taking care of one's own, while one is taking care of one's family and ensuring material and financial comforts, there is also this awareness that there is a universe of people outside. We are responsible for them too and not just for the immediate family that we see around us.

Because unless one has that kind of responsibility, these casualties will continue to happen and they will lead to these creation of a number of unhappy families which is what happens in a play like *Death of a Salesman* too where the denial. The denial that it is not just one's own family that we are in a system and this needs to be seen in a more organic way that is denial leads to the fragmentation of families itself.

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Chris: (almost crying) Mother, I didn't mean to...

Mother: Don't dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live.

Chris stirs as if to answer. Shhh... She puts his arms down gently and moves toward porch. Shhh... As she reaches porch steps she begins sobbing.

CURTAIN



It is a father-son relationship which is at the crux of this play. It is this desire to maintain the normalcy maintain the legitimacy of the father-son relationship that leads all of them to take desperate measures. Towards the end of the play, we also realise that even Kate had been holding on to this myth that Larry is alive.

The father-son relationship could be preserved because the moment that purity and honesty is visibly absent we find that Chris is unable to see Joe Keller as a father and Joe Keller is unable to even continue to live. That is a kind of sanctity which had been given to the father-son relationship and idealised beyond limits.

Miller's plays whether *Death of Salesman* or *All My Sons* could be seen as critiques of the American Dream, it could also be seen as a critique of this over idealization of the father-son relationships. It is the dynamics he explores, the intricacies of the emotional fallibilities of it that he continues to explore in both these plays.