

## Examining Kohlberg's Stages of Development in Arthur Miller's "All My Sons"

### Abstract

*Arthur Miller's All My Sons delves into the moral dilemmas and outcomes of choices made within a family during World War II. While analysing the play using Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, we can observe how the moral decisions of the characters correspond with or contest to stages of Kohlberg's theory. The conflict among these stages emphasizes the intricate moral dynamics of the play and reinforces its investigation of individual accountability, guilt, and the repercussions of ethical decisions. Joe's moral reasoning, centred on his personal interests as well as the welfare of his family, corresponds to principles of individualism and exchange, whereas Chris and Larry's actions reflect the broader societal issues and justice.*

**Keywords:** Kohlberg theory, Family, Morality, Dilemma, Conflict

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## Introduction

Of all the social structures in the world, the family stands out as the most extraordinary of all human social institutions. It is not only the longest-established but also the most ubiquitous of all the institutions. Often regarded as one of the most important and fundamental social frameworks, the family plays a crucial role in inculcating social values in individuals (Elsayed, 2024). Family, which concerns itself with love, relationships, marriage, child-bearing and various statutes and roles involved in kinship organization, is the basis of all types of social institutions (Maciver & Page, 1949). It's not surprising that family is often described as "the distinct institutions" that influence the values, beliefs, and identities of its members. If we put together all anthropology and ethnography, which tells us about primitive men and primitive society, we perceive that the first task of life is to live. In life, people frequently encounter circumstances that require them to face dilemmas, which means they are unsure about what is right or wrong. There are instances when a choice is advantageous for you but may not align with what others deem appropriate. Moral dilemmas frequently arise when organizations and individuals strive to address conflicting interests or when personal ethics clash with professional duties. Research highlights that through the moral development phenomenon, people come to recognize the difference between right and wrong, cultivate moral reasoning, and absorb the values and norms of their society, which are shaped by social experiences, interactions, and cultural backgrounds. It helps individuals to handle ethical issues in daily life (Puka, 1994). The Heinz dilemma serves as a moral thought experiment commonly utilized in the realm of ethics to delve into the intricacies of moral reasoning. It was presented by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg as a component of his moral development theory. The now famous Heinz dilemma created by Kohlberg discusses an imaginary scenario where a man called Heinz can only save the life of his wife, who is dying from cancer, by getting drugs sold by a local, greedy pharmacist (Gross, 2020). The scenario is as follows:

*Heinz's wife is gravely ill due to a specific type of cancer, and there exists a medication that could potentially save her. The medication comes at a high cost, which Heinz cannot afford. He approaches the pharmacist who developed the drug and asks if he could purchase it at a reduced price or possibly pay for it later, but the pharmacist declines. In despair, Heinz confronts a moral dilemma: Should he take the drug unlawfully to save his wife, or should he adhere to the law and allow her to pass away?*

The dilemma explores how people think about moral issues and take certain actions. Moral reasoning is often driven by instinct and activated more rapidly than logical thought (Haidt, 2001). Moments of ethical reasoning often arise in daily scenarios when we face certain situations or events, which can trigger intense emotions like anger, fear, compassion, or disgust (Gibbs, 2019). Kohlberg categorized various stages of moral judgement that individuals may use to tackle the problem. These stages progress from a pre-conventional level, where choices are influenced by self-interest or fear of consequences, to a post-conventional level, where individuals take into account more universal ethical values and the rights of others.

The Heinz dilemma frequently raises questions regarding the balance between moral principles (such as the prohibition against theft) and the outcomes of actions (like preserving a life). It prompts individuals to reflect on the ethical consequences of their decisions.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is structured into three primary levels, each containing two phases, resulting in a total of six stages. This theory illustrates how individuals' capacity to reason about ethical dilemmas matures as they age. Here are the stages:

**Level 1- Preconventional Morality (Typically seen in children):** The external outcomes, such as rewards and punishments, are the foundation for moral reasoning at this level. This level consists of two stages.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation: The desire to escape punishment motivates moral decisions. The immediate results of activities are the main focus. For instance, a child might not steal because they fear being punished.

Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange: Self-interest is the foundation of moral thinking, and people understand that authorities dictate multiple correct opinions. In order to satisfy their demands, people abide by the laws. For instance, a person might justify stealing by claiming it is for his wife's life has more value for him than the law.

**Level 2- Conventional Morality (Typically seen in adolescents and adults):** Moral reasoning is based on societal norms and maintaining relationships at this level. This level has two stages.

Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships: The foundation of moral reasoning is meeting social norms and winning people over. Relationships are the yardstick by which actions are evaluated. For instance, a person may choose not to steal the drug in order to be viewed as a good, law-abiding citizen or to improve his reputation.

Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order: The aim is to prevent chaos by preserving social norms and law and order. Individuals start considering society as a whole while making choices. For instance, a person may decide not to steal the drug because he thinks it is illegal and there is law to keep everyone safe and in order.

**Level 3- Postconventional Morality (Typically seen in adults, though not everyone reaches this level):** Moral reasoning is based on abstract principles and values, such as justice, equality, and human rights at this level. This level also has two stages.

Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights: Moral reasoning is based on the assumption that laws are social contracts that should endorse the greatest good for the greatest number of people. People feel that laws might need to be changed if they cannot protect individual rights. For instance, a person may decide to steal the drug, arguing that the right to life supersedes the property rights of the pharmacist and that laws should reflect the needs of the people.

Stage 6: Universal Principles: Moral reasoning depends on universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, and respect for human dignity at this level. The basis of decisions is the deeply held human rights principles, even if they conflict with laws or rules. For instance, a person may decide to steal the drug because he/she believes that it is morally wrong to let a life be lost over money. That person sees it as a moral duty to act in accordance with universal principles of justice and respect for life.

In this article, an attempt has been made to relate these stages of moral development to the characters in the play “All My Sons” by Arthur Miller. The study examines how the characters

of the play develop their relationships and value them, how they face dilemmas and how conflicts arise among various characters and reach their climax, and how it ends up in a tragedy.

### **Background of “All My Sons”:**

"All My Sons" is a play written by Arthur Miller that premiered in 1947. The tragic drama takes place after World War II and centers around the Keller family, especially Joe Keller, a businessman, and his son Chris. The play explores the intricate nature of relationships, investigating the significant emotional and ethical repercussions that arise from both personal and societal ties. "All My Sons" delves into the complex dynamics of relationships, examining the profound emotional and moral consequences stemming from both individual and societal bonds. The play examines how these relationships shape the characters' decisions, actions, and final results. The drama focuses on the disastrous outcomes of Joe Keller's decisions made during the war. Joe was a producer of aircraft components for the armed forces, and it came to light that he intentionally supplied faulty parts to the military, resulting in the fatalities of young soldiers. The narrative delves into the ethical and emotional repercussions of this verdict.

Larry, Joe's son and a pilot, was among the soldiers who lost their lives in the war. His fiancée, Ann Deever, has come back to the Keller family residence, nevertheless, she is currently in a relationship with Chris, Joe's surviving son. Meanwhile, Kate, the mother, acts as a protective figure, genuinely attempting to support her husband and sons in their efforts to forge guilt-free connections. As the play progresses, Chris learns the truth about his father's involvement in the sale of the faulty parts. As a result of the repentance, Joe tragically realises how much he has hurt everyone, even his own family. Joe ultimately commits suicide because he is unable to handle the fallout from his deeds. The tragedy stems from Joe Keller's character, who values family and his sons above all else. Chris Keller believes that his father's actions have violated the principles of justice and universal brotherhood.

The play presents the actual case of a small mid-western manufacturer. It is hailed as a thought-provoking drama full of psychological and sociological insights. The play is not merely a tale of crime and punishment, though apparently it seems to be just that, but it is about confrontation and commitment (Bhatia, 1985). Miller embodies the theme of moral responsibility for individuals to society as a whole, not simply to his family and those he loves. Joe Keller, the key character of the play, is a very ordinary man, decent, hardworking, and charitable; no one could dislike him. Nevertheless, like the protagonist of ancient drama, he has a flaw or weakness. He does not see beyond his sons and his family. His trouble is "Not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of minds cannot admit that he personally has any viable connection with his world, his universe or his society" (Miller, 1957, p.19). He is "not a selfish, disagreeable or greedy industrialist; he is really, an ignorant, good-natured and kindly fool whose love for his wife and family is genuine and unselfish (Blumberg, 1982).

### **Character Analysis**

Arthur Miller's play "All My Sons" poses a philosophical moral dilemma central to Kohlberg's theory of moral development. This section explores how the key characters (Joe Keller, Kate Keller, Chris Keller, Larry Keller and Ann Deever) in Miller's play face ethical challenges and how their decisions reflect different stages of moral reasoning.

Moral Dilemmas in characters of "All My Sons"

Joe Keller is roughly sixty years old and a self-made entrepreneur who established a thriving manufacturing company during and following World War II. Although not highly schooled, he possesses a strong will and determination. He is profoundly worried about the welfare of his family, especially his wife Kate and their son Chris. His main goal is to ensure their financial stability and contentment, which influences the numerous choices he makes. Joe is responsible for deliberately sending out faulty aircraft engine cylinder heads during World War II, resulting in the fatalities of twenty-one pilots. He shifted the blame onto his partner, Steve Deever, for the offence, letting Steve bear the consequences and serve time in prison. He defends his actions by stating that he acted for the sake of his family, aiming to save the business from collapse and ensure their future security. In general, Joe Keller embodies a tragic character whose quest for the American Dream and the safety of his family results in catastrophic outcomes for himself and the people in his life. He does face a moral dilemma when he decides to ship defective aeroplane components to keep his business afloat during World War II to support his family. This decision leads to disastrous results, which can be analysed through Kohlberg's stages:

- Individualism and Exchange: Joe's decision seems to stem from a self-interested desire to support his family and maintain his business. He argues that he put his family's and his own interests ahead of other people's lives by doing what was required to make ends meet.
- Maintaining Social Order: Joe's actions could also be seen as a breach of social norms and his duty as a responsible citizen. Instead of upholding the moral duty to refrain from injuring others, he prioritizes his own and his family's survival by selling faulty parts that could kill people over his duty to society.
- Universal Principles: Joe never attains Kohlberg's third level of moral development. Had he done so, he could have acknowledged the intrinsic worth of human life and chosen to adhere to universal principles, even if it required sacrificing his business and confronting repercussions. In the play, Joe's inability to attain this level symbolizes the tragic weakness that contributed to his demise. Joe justifies his behaviour by putting his family's financial stability ahead of the lives that have been lost because of faulty components. This illustrates his thought process in which self-interest is the highest priority.

Women in Miller's plays are usually the prop of the male principal, without whom man falters and loses his way. The only aspect of their character that Miller realizes is that of a mother. She "is always a mother figure even when she is a wife" (Corringan, 1969). Kate Keller plays the role of Joe Keller's spouse and the mother of Larry and Chris Keller. Her character is complex, embodying both nurturing and manipulative traits. She is portrayed as a woman with "an exceptional ability to love" and is profoundly dedicated to her family. Kate employs her affection and nurturing qualities to influence circumstances and individuals. Even amid her emotional struggles, she demonstrates intelligence and strategic thinking. She promptly evaluates circumstances and responds in a way that safeguards her family's interests. Kate plays a pivotal role in the story, particularly in Act 2, when her dialogue with George Deever unknowingly reveals Joe's deception regarding his illness during the shipment of the defective parts. This discovery aids in unmasking the Keller family's hidden truths and eventually results

in Joe's downfall. Nevertheless, she grapples with denial and the unwillingness to confront the reality of Joe's behaviour. She justifies Joe's actions to safeguard her family's reputation and preserve her hopes of finding her missing son, Larry. Her actions can be analysed through the third stage of Kohlberg's theory.

- **Good Interpersonal Relationships:** Kate's ethical considerations predominantly focus on preserving family bonds and fostering social unity, as she opts to hold onto the belief that Larry is still alive to avoid the collapse of the family's reputation. Her decision is influenced by the desire to maintain the family's integrity, frequently overlooking the broader moral implications. Her judgment/decision is aligned with the beliefs of many people. The majority of individuals believe that being ethical is defined by the actions that bring joy to and support others.

Chris Keller serves as a key figure in the play and is the living son of Joe and Kate Keller, while his brother Larry is unaccounted for as a result of World War II. Chris is depicted as a person of high moral standards, full of deep love and loyalty, yet he also struggles with feelings of guilt for having survived his wartime experiences. Chris acts as the ethical guide of the play, first justifying his father's choices but eventually facing the difficult truths of his family's past. In spite of the differences in the characters of the father and son, they love each other deeply. "If the father is monomaniacal in his loyalty, the son qualifies his familial devotion (Moss, 1980). Throughout the course of the play, Chris experiences a remarkable change. He evolves from a devoted and somewhat innocent son to someone who is more realistic and conscious of his family's moral shortcomings. His statement underscores this transformation, "I'm like everybody else now. I am practical now. You made me practical," which illustrates his transition to a more pragmatic perspective following the revelation of his father's culpability. Chris battles with his own guilt for failing to confront his father's immoral behaviour earlier. Guilt arises as an emotional reaction stemming from a clash between our actions and our ingrained sense of morality (Mancini *et. al.*, 2022). He acknowledges his cowardice and his inability to hold his father accountable, revealing a complicated blend of moral principles and personal vulnerability. His choice to confront his father about his behaviour reflects a change in his moral compass, which places more value on justice and truth than familial allegiance. His decision can be analysed through the sixth stage of Kohlberg's theory.

- **Universal Principles:** Chris shows more sophisticated moral reasoning when he loses faith in his father's behaviour and the moral concessions made for his own benefit. Chris finds it difficult to reconcile his father's betrayal with his conviction in the larger good—the lives of warriors. Since societal norms are random, the individual conscience serves as the final arbiter of morality. Therefore, these rules may be disregarded when they clash with "universal" principles. His decision is consistent with stage 6 of Kohlberg's theory, wherein people make moral judgements based on universal values and the common good, even when doing so goes against the law or social conventions.

Larry Keller plays a crucial role in "All My Sons," even though he is already dead when the story begins. He is the elder son of Joe and Kate Keller and the sibling of Chris Keller. Larry's influence resonates throughout the play, mainly through his mother's inability to come to terms with his death and his brother's connection with his former girlfriend, Ann Deever. Larry's demise and his mother's refusal to acknowledge it are pivotal to the storyline. Kate's reluctance to accept Larry's death is, in part, fuelled by her struggle to face the reality of Joe's culpability

in sending faulty parts, which might have resulted in Larry's death had he been a pilot. Before his death, his decision is shown to be deeply moral. Moral Reasoning involves a “conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people (and situations) in order to reach a moral judgment” (Haidt, 2001, p. 818). In a letter, Larry expresses that he is unable to bear the burden of knowing his father's deeds and the disgrace they have caused to the family. His judgement corresponds to the sixth stage of Kohlberg's theory, where moral reasoning goes beyond individual or societal norms in support of ethical principles.

- **Universal Principles:** Larry’s decision to take his own life after knowing his father's involvement in selling defective aeroplane parts signifies a dedication to fundamental moral values, like justice and truth, even if it means sacrificing his own existence. As per the Evolutionary perspective, moral reasoning and social emotions probably developed to encourage fairness and reciprocal actions to promote cooperation and survival of groups.

Another significant character of the play is Ann Deever; she is the daughter of Steve Deever, who was once a business partner of Joe Keller and the ex-fiancée of Larry Keller. She is a central character in the story, frequently called the "truth-bearer" because of her involvement in disclosing essential information that propels the plot forward. She is portrayed as attractive, smart, and self-sufficient. She has relocated to New York and began anew, representing her resolve to break free from her family's history. Ann was in a relationship with Larry Keller prior to his disappearance. She has advanced in her life and is engaged to Chris Keller, Larry's brother, with whom she has exchanged letters for the past two years. The bond between her and Chris is founded on mutual respect and a commitment to honesty and transparency. Ann embodies a new generation and a future where integrity and accountability are valued. She signifies the idea of advancement while acknowledging past mistakes, in contrast to Kate, who overlooks the truth.

She has a multifaceted personality, and she is torn between her allegiance to her family, particularly her father, who played a role in the unfortunate airplane parts scandal, and her personal ethical beliefs. At the beginning of the play, she is loyal to her father, who is involved in the crime that led to the deaths of young soldiers. She has distanced herself from her father, Steve, following his sentencing for trafficking defective components to the military, which resulted in the fatalities of twenty-one pilots. Her decision as a child to be with his father or support him is due to obedience and to avoid punishment.

- **Obedience and Punishment Orientation:** Ann’s decision to support her father aligns with the first stage of Kohlberg's theory, which states that moral reasoning is based on the outcomes of a certain behaviour and the expectations of adults. She supports her father because she knows that she will be punished if she doesn't.

As the play progresses, Ann moves toward social awareness and relationships. She begins to doubt the ethics of her father's deeds and her involvement in perpetuating the deceit. After her engagement with Chris Keller, her decision to disclose the truth (especially regarding her father's involvement in the scandal) demonstrates an increasing recognition of social ethics over unconditional allegiance. This decision of hers is in alliance with stage 4 of Kohlberg's theory of moral development.

- **Maintaining Social Order:** With awareness, she was able to make a decision that signified her move from the pre-conventional level to the conventional level. Ann's decision aims to prevent chaos by preserving social norms, law, and order and considering society as a whole. With age, she thinks that it is an individual's duty to respect authority and maintain social order.

By the end of the play, Ann's behaviour could indicate a shift towards Post-conventional reasoning. She understands that honesty and fairness hold greater significance than loyalty to family. Her choice to reveal the reality about his father might be interpreted as a reflection of a common moral standard. She recognizes that Joe Keller's ethical lapse, prioritizing his family's safety at the expense of others' lives, reflects a wider societal problem that should not be overlooked or justified.

## Conclusion

The Kohlberg theory of moral development consists of three main levels: Pre-conventional, Conventional and Post-conventional levels. Miller's play examines the ethical decisions of these characters and investigates the interplay between personal beliefs, social expectations, and moral values, frequently resulting in tragic outcomes when ethical reasoning is undermined. Their central focus is "the family in crisis, trapped in moments of stress and conflict resulting from past or present actions that threaten to destroy its members individually or collectively" (Martin, 1982, p.3). In *All My Sons*, the various characters reflect different stages of Kohlberg's moral development. Joe Keller operates largely at the Pre-conventional and Conventional levels, as he focuses on personal and family survival over broader ethical concerns. Kate Keller continues to operate at the Conventional level, placing a higher importance on family reputation and connections than on moral clarity. Chris Keller and Larry Keller, in contrast, move toward Post-Conventional reasoning. Their focus is on justice and truth. Finally, Ann Deever operates at all three levels with the passage of time.

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