

## *Spinning the Bottle: Joseph Keller Dared*

### **Abstract**

*In this article I discuss the connection between literature and linguistics in Arthur Miller's play All My Sons (1947) by analyzing the speech act of promising as a means of showing Keller's guilt. Analysis of the speech act shows a direct relationship between the definition of sincerity in the speech act of promising and Keller's crimes. By examining the parameters suggested by Searle for this speech act, conclusions are reached which might be otherwise possible only by deep literary analysis of the play.*

In *All My Sons*, Act I, Joseph Keller and Ann Deever are found discussing "the case" (Miller 1974, 36-7). Ann is upset that people may still remember her father's crime and she doesn't want to stay at the Kellers' any longer if this is so. Keller, had framed Deever, his partner, and now the former is free after being exonerated, while the latter is serving a prison term. In order to carry on the charade of innocence, Keller tries to convince Ann if she wants to stay for the weekend she only needs to barrel through, make believe the faulty engine parts never existed and ignore what people may say about her family. In illustration he tells her how he acted when he came home after the court overturned his own conviction. In Keller's mind, guilt or innocence are irrelevant, as long as one maintains one's innocence. In Keller's confusion between right and wrong he cannot even see that Ann and he are completely different cases. Keller knows he has framed his partner by pretending to be sick first and then denying Deever ever called him from the plant for instructions.

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**Keywords:** *Speech act of promising; illocution, perlocution; felicity condition; Arthur Miller. All My Sons.*

As the play progresses it becomes clear that Keller has rationalized his guilt so well that he no longer feels he has done anything wrong. His attitude reflects that as would any good businessman, he merely tried to save his business from bankruptcy and his hard work provides handsomely for his family. On the surface he is an American success story and a pillar of the community. Keller's pretense at a normal life falls apart when his son Chris starts a relationship with Ann, Larry's fiancée and also Deever's daughter. This once again brings Keller's crimes out into the open, proves how deeply the Kellers are psychologically damaged by them, and sets the stage for Keller's downfall.

Kate is not innocent either, and while she is presented as a long suffering wife and loving mother who has taken on the burden of protecting her family from further harm, a critical analysis makes it clear that she must have been an accomplice after the fact even though this never becomes an issue in the play. Her suffering may be punishment enough. While her emotional fragility might be put down to her personal tragedy of losing a son, there are too many subtle hints that she knows and actively prevents others from knowing that Keller simply "pulled a fast one" (38). Kate is in a terrible position because she fears that Larry's disappearance and probable death are connected to Keller's crime. Therefore she stubbornly maintains that Larry will return and demands the other members of the family do the same, even if this means that they must remain unfulfilled, for example, Chris cannot marry Ann because in Kate's eyes this would confirm that Larry -- the son who is missing in action-- is dead. The broken apple tree indicates to Kate's that Larry is alive, and Ann's visit to the Keller home is another. For Kate, everything turns around the question of Larry's return as it would absolve Keller of having caused his son's death. Kate's irrational desire to uphold her husband's innocence is clarified when she points out to Ann what the difference is between Deever--Ann's father -- and Keller, for the latter owns a legal document to prove that he is innocent, while the former is a convicted felon, guilty of killing 21 pilots. In other words, the legal distinction becomes the authorization for Keller's innocence and in a way superimposes itself on the dialogue. While Kate and Keller both know what Keller has done, as long as the law believes him innocent, everything must be all right.

This notion of a piece of paper in Keller's pocket having such significance connects to the theory of speech acts. While there is a moral demand for sincerity in promising, be it orally or otherwise, legally there is no issue of sincerity. One may sign a legal document and not intend to live up to its terms, for in a court case it is the signature that matters and not the intention. From his actions, it seems that Keller has also made this distinction and the conflict in the play deals with his moral as well as legal guilt, especially since he has been absolved from the latter with the written exoneration. To a large extent, Keller's moral guilt becomes the greater crime, compounding his actions to the point where he can no longer be forgiven, especially not by himself<sup>1</sup>.

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1. "KELLER (*to Ann*): Listen, you do like I did and you'll be all right. The day I come home, I got out of my car-- but not in front of the house.. on the corner. You should've been there, Annie, and you too, Chris, you'd-a-seen something. Everybody knew I was getting out that day; the porches were loaded. Picture it now: none of them believed I was innocent. The story was, I pulled a fast one getting myself exonerated. So I get out of my car, and I walk down the street, but very slow. And with a smile. The beast! I was the beast; the guy who sold cracked

In his conversation with Ann Keller says that “none of them believed [he] was innocent” and indeed he wasn’t, but his actions are meant to prove that the court paper exonerating him was well earned, and Deever had been lying. In fact, Keller is paradoxically insincere here, because while everything he says is true. He was a beast; he had sold the cracked cylinder heads; he had caused the death of those pilots in Australia, and he had pulled a fast one: his words have the opposite effect. His long monologue is really a narrative report of events of that day, and while he is speaking directly to Ann, after all, we are dealing with a script from a play, and everything is presented as direct speech, his report to her of these events allows him to embellish the actions and utterances of others with his own interpretations and point of view. The illocutionary act of his monologue is of course to persuade his listeners of his innocence and courage.<sup>2</sup> In terms of speech act, Keller is making a declaration. His actions and words are very much a case of saying is doing. By walking past the porches, Keller is making “an internal speech act” (Levinson: 1983, 6). Keller was putting on an act in order to achieve the status of an innocent man, and he succeeds in this endeavor within a year. Perhaps we may classify Keller’s attitude as a “verdictive”<sup>3</sup> because he has a piece of paper attesting to his innocence. Eventually the people around him accept this state of affairs and accept Keller as innocent without worrying whether he actually is. Keller has managed to make the world fit his words. The exception here is Chris, who implicitly believes his father to be innocent of any wrongdoing solely based on the fact that Keller is his father (Act III). In fact, his reaction might be called “behabitive”<sup>4</sup> (Austin:1962, 151), because he applauds his father’s words and admiringly calls out “Joe McGuts” (Act I). Of course, the fact that Chris is so impressed with his father’s behavior, plus the fact that Ann immediately accepts Keller’s version of events, show that Keller’s statement has had its desired perlocutionary<sup>5</sup> effect.

J.L. Austin does not differentiate between acts and verbs, meaning that to him, acting is like

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cylinder heads to the Army Air Force: the guy who made twenty-one P-40s crash in Australia. Kid, walkin’ down the street that day I was guilty as hell! Except that I wasn’t and there was a court paper in my pocket to prove that I wasn’t and I walked...past...the porches. Result? Fourteen months later I had one of the best shops in the state again, a respected man again; bigger than ever (38)”. This description echoes that of a sports stadium filled with fans and a lone player making a home-run. There is a great deal of irony here and this particular incident reflects badly on American society, which is so quick to forget.

2. Illocutionary act is a technical term that has been introduced by [John L. Austin](#) in the course of his investigations concerning what he calls ‘performative’ and ‘constative utterances’. According to Austin’s original exposition in his famous [How to Do Things With Words](#), an illocutionary act is an act (1) for the performance of which I must make it clear to some other person that the act is performed (Austin speaks of the ‘securing of uptake’), and (2) the performance of which involves the production of what Austin calls ‘conventional consequences’ like, e.g., rights, commitments, or obligations. For example, in order to perform a promise I must make clear to my audience that the promise occurs, and making the promise involves the undertaking of an obligation to do the promised thing: hence promising is an illocutionary act in the present sense  
(Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illocutionary\\_act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illocutionary_act)).
3. Verdictive: acquitting, assessing, calling (by an umpire or referee), certifying, convicting, grading, judging, ranking, rating, ruling <http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/Spch.Prag.htm>.
4. Behabitive: often connected to acts in satisfaction of a social expectation.  
<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/Spch.Prag.htm>.
5. Perlocutionary act: Getting your listeners to believe that you mean what you say  
<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/Spch.Prag.htm>.

saying, so that not only 'saying is doing', but also 'doing is like saying is doing'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in *All My Sons* it matters what people say rather than what they have done, whether they actually verbalize or simply act according to these supposed beliefs. The perlocutionary force depends on the speaker's character. However, Keller's entire social status is based on a lie. His business is booming. His son loves him. His neighbors respect him, and most of all, he is not in jail. How did Keller achieve this? Is it possible to reduce all his actions to his own sincerity, or rather, the lack of it? In other words, does it all boil down to the fact that Keller is a powerful liar who is capable of persuading his audience of his sincerity? Austin considers the "expounding of views" and the "delivering of a finding, official or unofficial, upon evidence or reasons" verdictive or expositive speech acts (Levinson: 1983, 9). and I see the possibility of such verdictive/expositives both in overt and internal speech acts.

A better understanding of the situation may be gained with the help of 'representatives',<sup>7</sup> with Keller using his powers of persuasion to make his words sound true. The 'direction of fit', meaning the logic of things, is still "words to the world", meaning that Keller is adjusting the reality to fit his definition of truth but the "psychological state expressed is Belief" and the notion of "true and false" comes into play (10), since he knows that he is not merely reporting simple facts. We may say that Keller is boasting when he describes the scene of his release to Ann—quoted in footnote 1 (Searle: 1969, 10).

J.L. Mey, in his article "The Speech Act Theories of Austin and Searle" writes that "all utterances are 'performative' in the sense of constituting a form of action, rather than simply a matter of saying something about the world", and he clarifies this point with the help of Austin's parallel between "explicit" and "primary" performatives (1993, 176). In other words, it is not necessary to explicitly employ a performative verb—to actually use such a verb-- as long as the meaning of the utterance is performative. Syntax, therefore is subservient to meaning, and so I must set aside both the notion of Austin's performative verb and Seale's notion of illocutionary verbs. Instead, I will address myself to such questions as intention and truth, examine the speaker's own belief in his utterances and the resulting influence of his speech acts, overt or internal, on his listeners. Then it will be possible to examine the influence of Keller's lies on the plot and finally the way his utterances precipitate the destruction of the fabric that holds his family together.

Keller and Deever both spend a year in jail, but on appeal, Keller succeeds in convincing the judge that the phone call on which his conviction was based never took place, and he is exonerated. This legal piece of paper in his pocket at first means nothing to the neighborhood. Keller says so himself. However, while both he and Deever had claimed innocence, the latter was incapable of shaking off what had happened because he was actually on the scene. In addition, Deever, for reasons only hinted at in the play, was unable to convince either his

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6. This is a rather lame attempt on this writer's part to add a mathematical equation to the notion of speech act, but there is logic involved here. Perhaps it should read:  $(s=d) = [D=(s=d)]$ .

7. Representatives: are speech acts that represent some state of affairs in varying degrees of truth with respect to the proposition: state, believe, conclude, deny, report. [http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0716-58112004001500013&script=sci\\_arttext](http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0716-58112004001500013&script=sci_arttext).

family or the appeals court that a phone call had taken place, and that Keller had actually promised to take responsibility.

In Act II, it is quite clear that Keller knew the engine parts must go out if he wants his shop to survive, and so he never intended to go to work that day. From the first moment he realized that his absence from the scene placed him in a good position to maintain his innocence should the case ever come to court. His later cry to Chris that he was certain the engine parts would hold up, or that the army would notice the defect, or even that he was about to recall the parts, does not ring true, since he has allowed Deever to take the fall and afterwards ignored him. For three years, Keller has maintained his own innocence loudly and at every opportunity. In Act III, when Keller is confronted by Chris, he even claims that he had, in fact, done it all only for his son, more proof that Keller feels no remorse at his actions. Only a never-ending progression of more and more lies eventually makes it abundantly clear that Keller is suffering from a guilty conscience, and that he is overcompensating for his own sense of guilt. It is only in view of all his other lies that the lie about the phone call comes to light. The playwright lets the phone call take place off-stage, so that there is no absolute knowledge about it and Keller denies it up to the end.<sup>8</sup> This phone call is related in indirect speech, when George Deever tells the Kellers about his conversation with his father. There is no place here to deal with indirect speech acts, but it would be an interesting avenue to explore in relationship to Keller's actions in the play.

Coming back to the act of promising, Raz (1977) writes that:

promising is creating an obligation [which] indicates that to acknowledge the validity of voluntary obligations is to accept a view of practical reason...according to which what a man ought to do depends not only on the way things happen to run out in the world (drought in another country, war, poverty)... what one ought to do depends in part on oneself, and this is not only because the behavior, needs, tastes, and desires of the agent count just as much as those of any other person, but because the agent has the power intentionally to shape the form of his moral world, to obligate himself to follow certain goals, or to create bonds and alliances with certain people and not others (228).

This means that a promise is a moral obligation and if we go back on this moral obligation our moral world may very well collapse. All My Sons, such is indeed the case. Keller's world of lies and more lies collapses in 24 hours, and he dies by his own hand directly as a result of his breach of promise. Keller's words to Deever would have been morally binding because, by Keller's own admission, he is the dominant partner. Deever looks to him for guidance: when Keller speaks, Deever listens, and when Deever makes a mistake, Keller is there to clean up after him. All this we know from Keller's own words. Unfortunately, Keller can twist words

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8. Keller's sense of guilt is apparent in retrospect when he consistently claims to be ready to forgive and forget and offers Deever a job. He does the same for George in an unlikely attempt to win him over as well. The fact that none of the characters catch on that Keller is feeling guilty merely proves the man's powers of persuasion and strengthens the case against him.

well, and he uses the fact of Deever's dependence on his partner's judgment to convince George, Deever's son, that his father is the only guilty party. This proves that Keller was capable of manipulating others by making empty promises, but there is still no certainty as to whether the phone call was ever made. This doubt seems to be a direct result of Keller's forceful character and it is rather doubtful that Deever could have commanded such credibility had the tables been turned with Deever denying receiving Keller's phone call from the plant.

As it turns out, Deever told the truth, and the phone call did take place. In terms of speech act, Keller's promise constitutes a performative, yet the felicity<sup>9</sup> condition is not met, since Keller himself was not sincere. Keller never intended to actually take responsibility for the fiasco at the plant, and preferred to rather wait and see (Act III). In terms of the preparatory condition, Deever wants Keller to come down to the plant, but barring this, Deever believes Keller to be sincere in his promise. Deever's mindset is an essential condition in terms of speech act. It is possible to add the Gricean Condition<sup>10</sup> which allows for Keller to "produce in [Deever] the knowledge that the utterance is to count as placing him [Keller] under an obligation to take responsibility" for shipping out the cracked parts (Harnish: 1971, 171).

Harnish sets out various rules for promising, and when Harnish is applied to events in the play, most of his rules governing promising are not observed. I must mention Harnish' "rule 3", where the promise is uttered in the context of a relationship where it is clear to both speaker and hearer that the speaker can do what he says he will "in the normal course of events". This is essentially still part of the preparatory condition. However, the sincerity rule is definitely not met here, since Keller obviously had no intention of keeping his promise (172).

We must ask what Keller's intentions were, and we infer them only from subsequent events. Moreover, we can draw some conclusions about the sincerity condition in this case and the felicity condition. After all, in the partnership Keller is the stronger one and the dialogue between George and Keller proves this (Act II). Deever obviously trusted Keller implicitly to straighten things out, since he had always been able to do so. This precedent, coupled with Keller's own description of Deever as a weasel, suggests that Deever could not have made any far-reaching final decisions about sending out defective parts without Keller's OK. Yet, it is not clear whether initially Keller expected to leave Deever in the lurch, or whether events took hold and Keller and Deever were both swept away by the legal system. This is where the linguistic concept of sincerity comes to the fore. Keller may have been sincere when he made the promise to take responsibility. As the law caught up with his actions, he may have grasped at straws, and perhaps a smart lawyer could have found the very loophole for which he had been searching. The vagueness of the phone call may have stood up in the initial trial, but on appeal, with only the transcript in front of him, the appeals judge may have missed the subtle undertones needed to uphold the verdict of guilty.

According to Searle, "obligation and promise are not separate entities" (Smith: 1990), meaning that Keller had an obligation once he made his promise to Deever. Unfortunately for

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9. Felicity condition: The hearer assumes that the speaker means what he is saying

10. The Gricean condition: The hearer should "understand" the literal meaning of the utterance.

Deever, this promise is not anchored in any document. It is, indeed, “not physical”, but the promise stands according to Crosby, since it is also not psychical, or mental”, meaning that it is not a figment of Deever’s imagination (Crosby: 1990). And so, there is a “causality” in the act of promising, which according to Crosby has not been sufficiently researched (Reinach: 1969). To clarify his point, Crosby uses the example of the smoke which results from a fire -- the cause-- and which is instrumental in inferring the fire itself. The problem remains that in the case of promising “we cannot determine whether a given promissory claim or obligation really exists... through itself but have to go back to the act which posited it, and determine whether the act was really performed” (63).<sup>11</sup> This notion sets in motion a chain of events of stipulations and assumptions which go to the heart of the speech act of promising. In the final analysis it makes sense to define a promise as “a social act” (64). The notion of a social act echoes both Austin and Searle in their discussions of the illocutionary acts. There is a need to interact with another person, since without such interaction, no social act would be possible (64-65). From this alone one might claim that Keller can make a legal case for innocence, since Deever could not prove that any such interaction had indeed taken place.

Reinach, in his essay on the concept of promising as a social act, points out that without two people, at least, there cannot be such act, since this kind of illocutionary act cannot “be complete internally”. It means that social acts such as “asking a question...or [accusing] someone of a crime” cannot be completed internally and must be given “outward expression” (64). Crosby claims that personal conviction before an utterance such as promising is made must be a prerequisite, so that a certain internal state is needed before the utterance can be made in the context of a social interaction where the promise can be conceived as being an obligation by both speaker and hearer. Crosby defines this stage as the moment where the “social act and the [internal] act” are complete (68). In Crosby’s opinion, the speech act of promising is the epitome of an “intention to do something in behalf of another”. Such an action, says Crosby, is the social act *sine qua non* (69).

What makes a promise such an outstanding speech act is the intentionality attached to it, for it presupposes that the speaker has “the intention to do the thing promised” and as such there is an internal sincerity which must be prerequisite to the act of promising, or it becomes an insincere and empty gesture. Keller’s promise to take responsibility can be interpreted in two ways. At best, Keller was ill that day: when Deever called, he did not feel well enough to come into the office. However, he did tell Deever to do the best he could and did promise to take responsibility. Deever, in his subservient position, does as he is told, and is now relieved to know that he does not have to take a unilateral decision. In other words, the weak Deever suspends his own judgment before Keller’s bulldozer personality.

There is, however, a second interpretation possible, in the light of Searle’s theory concerning perlocutionary acts which should have a desired effect of frightening the hearer into doing something he may not want to do. This may have been Keller’s intentions. He is, after all, a sharp business man, always on the lookout for a quick killing, in the best American tradition

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11.. This is All My Sons in a nutshell, as it turns around the question of a promise that may or may not have been made.

of making a buck. Keller knew Deever's weaknesses and assumed the latter would do his bidding. All Keller needed to do, then, was to convince Deever that he could safely ship the cracked engine parts because Keller would take responsibility. Keller was never sincere in his promise and he insincerely uses a promise to get Deever to do his bidding. The notion of perlocutionary effect is the crux here (70).

The first footnote in this paper is a long monologue about Keller's account of events the day he was released from jail. This monologue is significant because it shows Keller's attitude towards the symbols of a democratic society, such as the courts, while the reader knows that his contempt for the ethics of this society is immense. Keller's promise to Deever was not anything as banal as promising to make him coffee, but rather constitutes an obligation to stand behind a decision that has criminal repercussions. It is the falseness of the promise that leads to the destruction of both families. Searle considers the mindset of the speaker of the utmost important as an initial stage before making a promise and he suggests four preparatory conditions. Searle links the intention of being under obligation with an intention to do the thing promised, and claims that these intentions are mutual to both promisor and promisee. While Crosby argues against the notion that the promisee has some sense of intentionality, I disagree, since it seems that without Deever's understanding that Keller has placed himself under any kind of obligation, he would not have taken it upon himself to actually send out the cylinder parts.

Keller, who recognizes the social institutions of his society when they are formalized in paper, ignores them, and even perverts these very same social institutions, when they are not sanctioned by officialdom. This is the major premise of the play as well: man's obligation to society overrides man's obligation to his family and himself. In trampling the intentions of the speech act of promising, Keller tramples all the values of his society. In this way, the speech act theories manage to focus completely on the deeper meaning of the language, and the pragmatic, linguistic reading has lead to the same conclusions as the subjective, literary interpretation. This proves that pragmatic reading can be a valid tool, and that speech acts are indeed a case of 'saying equals doing'.

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