All my sons

1 If everybody only thinks on himself/herself
the world will be destroyed

The first play I read that meant something to me. I was reading the usual
classic books that children of my age (I was 15) read. But I never read a play
that got to me. And I read it in English, at a time I knew it even less than
now. I was highly inspired by it. It was about morality and idealism. The
American dream and its demise. Guilt, and impossible relations between two
families. About so many things.

All My Sons presents an American middle-class life. Joe Keller is a manu-
facturer of cylinders for Army plains. One time he manufactures 21 cylinders
for plains and it turns out that they are defected. Joe faces an impossible
choice. If he sells these parts, plains may crash. But if he does not, his
business will go under and he will not be able to provide for his children.
For his sons. Not only that. He had this business for 40 years. How can he
destroy it in 10 minutes?

He decides with a heavy heart to sell the cylinders. He is thinking on his
sons. He says at one time: ”I am his father and he is my son. And if there
is something bigger than that, I will put a bullet in my head”.

Joe is in even worse situation. He has a partner Steve Deever. They both
agonize over selling the defective cylinders. But the day later, Joe claims to
be sick, and does not show to work. The man who officially decides to sell
the parts is Steve Deever.
This results in a great tragedy. Twenty one plains fall killing their pilots. A big scandal ensues. But Joe, not being at work that day, manages to convince the jury that he is innocent, while Steve Deever is sent to jail. Steve is furious with Joe.

Joe does not take any responsibility. And worse, He pretends that it was all Steve’s fault and ironically says that ”Steve is one of those people who would never take responsibility”. Joe insists that he is innocent. He is lying to himself, to the point he manages to convince himself.

If the tragedy was not enough a lot of additional tragic events occur. The older son of Joe, Larry, an Amy pilot in WWII, is missing in action. Kate Keller, Joe’s wife and Larry’s mother, is in complete denial, because they did not find the body of Larry. She holds to a pipe dream, that Larry will come back. She leaves Larry’s room unchanged. Keeping Larry alive in her mind leads to additional tragedy. Kate is not willing to hear any talk on Larry not returning from the war.

She has another son Chris. The son Chris is an idealist. He fought in the war and survived. He can not live in a world where his father is guilty. But during the play he slowly comes to grips with this terrible reality. He used to idolize his father. Him being idealist is what at the end brings his father’s suicide.

For Chris a ”practical” but ”immoral” decision is a complete sin. For Joe there is only his family. For Chris there are things more important than family. Ethics.

When Chris gets convinced that his father is guilty, he insists that his father would admit his guilt. His father also must admit that he is responsible for Larry’s death. Idealist people can be cruel.

Joe says that he acted the way he did for his son. And as he said before, for him there is nothing bigger than a father and a son. My only accomplishment is my son. I aint brainy. Thats all I accomplished. Joe says.

It is ironic, but the wars of the USA in the 20 century, made the economy flourished, and further, drove major technical advances. Do the American know that it was wars that made their country as rich as it is? I do not know. And I do not know what they would say if they knew. Life is complex. Its true. Wars are terrible, but bring other things that improve the lives of those who survive.

And the tragedy in enhances because Ann who is ”Larry’s girl”, Ann Deever. The daughter of the man Joe betrayed. She was engaged to Larry. But now, Chris and Ann love each other. But can not marry. It will destroy Kate. It will be an admission that Larry is not alive.

Joe suggests to his son Chris that he should not propose to Ann. In his mother’s eyes Ann is still Larrys girl. Chriss reacts in a way that would bring
him to a collision course with his father.

Chris tells his father: I dont know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer. My whole bloody life, time after time after time.

The denial of Joe makes his say: All right, but but dont think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? Thats only for you. Chris, the whole shooting-match is for you!

For Kate all of this is very traumatic. She does not welcome Ann. Ann was away for 3 years and just came back, and her visit could bring the world of Joe and Kate crumbling over their head.

Kate: Everything that happened seems to be coming back. They are at the time the last of the roses disappear and fall begins. Larrys birthday is near. He had a memorial put over an apple tree but this tree was destroyed in a storm. Then things get worse since Anns wants to marry Chris. Kate feels that the day of reckoning is near.

The crisis finally peaks when George appears. He is the brother of Ann and the son of Steve. He arrives at the Keller’s house to confront Joe.

He just visited his father and the sight was painful. He tells Chris:

He got smaller. Hes a little man. Thats what happens to suckers, you know. Its good I went to him in time another year thered be nothing left but his smell.

When they eat together, Joe makes the mistake of saying that he never took one sick day from work. George that was not completely sure Joe is guilty, now suddenly understands it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Joe did not remember the day he did not attend work, as a sick day. Because he was only pretending to be sick. Joe, mistakenly showed his hand.

George calls Joe a murderer. Chris does not want to believe it, but gets convinced when his mother tells him: Your brothers alive, darling, because if hes dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me?

At this time Chris leaves the house only to return much later.

Ann, does something she never wanted to do. She shows Chris and later Kate the last letter Larry sent her. In this letter Larry informs her that after he heard of what his father did, he could not bare the shame. He decided to go to mission and committed suicide by crashing his plain.

Kate cries dearly after she reads the letter, But the most difficult moment, is when they let Joe read the letter. The letter crashes Joe. For the first time Joe admits he is murderer and he is guilty of Larry’s death.

Joe finally understands that there is something universal. That he can not only think of his family. He can not only think of his sons, when the
results will be so dire to so many other people.

As Joe puts it:

"Sure, Larry was my son. But I think to him, they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were.

I agree with Chris and with what Joe just said. Joe should have looked at all the young pilots the same way he looked at Larry. We all must be our brother and sister keepers. Otherwise humanity will perish. We can care for our family of course. But you do not kill a bunch of pilots to protect your son. Because all those pilots, are also your sons. Humanity should think of itself as one big collection of people, who care for each other, and do not abuse each other. We do not need this as an ideal. We need this to survive, Because if everybody thinks only of himself/herself, there is no chance to achieve civilization. Without acting in a responsible way toward society, there will be nothing left. We will perish.

Kate wants Joe to continue living, but the play ends with Joe shooting himself in the head.

1.1 Some other thought

Joe is over consumed with money. This clouds his judgement. This clearly is an indirect accusation against the ”American Dream” that seems to be all about money.

George does not care about anything but revenge. And is not a positive character either. He also thinks only about himself. Never mind if this ruins the Keller’s family. Ann is one of the only ones who acts with a great deal of consideration. Only presenting the letter to Kate and Joe, after she understands for sure that that is the only way, she will be able to marry Chris.

Chris is an idealist. And the way idealist behave, causes pain many times, because they are concentrated on their ideals, and not on the real lives of people around them. The play does not present idealism in a good light.

Arthur Miller managed in one play to discuss guilt and assigning blame, to discuss the importance given to money, to discuss justice and idealism, to discuss people who lie to themselves, to discuss morality and ethics.

The play also talks on memory. The long time Kate expects her son Larry’s return. Refusing to forget him as a live person. The play clearly considers the importance of family. Above all, the play discussed bravery. Joe is transformed in this play from a self liar, to a brave man that faces the horror of him being responsible for his son death. The recognition that he had a huge responsibility toward the dead pilots, and he should have treated
them as his sons. And he bravely, takes the responsibility for the punishment, and kills himself. Now Chris and Ann can finally marry.