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 manufacturer of cylinders for Army plains. I think his name is chosen to be as close to killer as possible. And Deever may be close to dive, like the plains did. Every major character in this play has a secret. Many of the characters are faced by impossible two really bad choices. The play wanted perhaps to hint that in the USA its all about money. This is a fair critic.

The first to be faced with an impossible choice is Joe. One time he manufactures 21 cylinders for Army plains. Upon checking the cylinders, they turn out to be faulty.

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. He had this business for 40 years. How can he destroy it in 10 minutes? And then not be able to provide food for his sons Lazry and Chris?
He decides with a heavy heart to sell the cylinders. 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 dishonest and gets away with it for a while. He has a partner Steve Deever. They both agonize over selling the defective cylinders. They Joe says: Sell! But the day later, Joe claims to be sick, and does not show up 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, The truth is that he is at least as guilty as Steve. However, Steve Deever is sent to jail, and Joe is found innocent. Steve is furious with Joe.

Joe does not take any responsibility. He pretends that it was all Steve’s fault and ironically says that "Steve is one of those people who would never take responsibility”. In psychology this is called projection. Taking your properties, and projecting it onto another person.

Joe insists that he is innocent. He is lying to himself for so long, to the point that he may have been able to convince himself.

This is still a small part of the tragedy. The older son of Joe, Larry, is an Army pilot in WWII. Larry is missing in action. Kate Keller, Joe’s wife and Larry’s mother, is in complete denial, 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. Kate is not willing to hear any talk on Larry not returning from the war.

Chris, the Keller’s other son is some sort of an idealist. He fought in the war and survived. He can not live in a world where his father is guilty. He idolizes his father. But during the play he slowly comes to grips with this terrible reality. Him being an idealist will play a serious role in how things end.

For Chris a ”practical” but ”immoral” decision is a definite sin. For Joe the family is the highest value. 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 insist and put a very high bar.

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 think not.
What would they say if they knew? Life is complex. Its true. Wars are terrible, but bring other things that improve the lives of those who survive.

Now perhaps the main part of the tragedy. Ann Deever the daughter of Steve, the father that is in jail. Three years ago Ann was considered "Larry’s girl” then. They were engaged. The daughter of the man Joe betrayed, was engaged to his missing son. But now, Chris and Ann love each other. Ann is sure (see later) and Chris assumes that Larry is dead. But they 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 Larry’s 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 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 (like Larry) and just came back, and her visit could bring the world of Joe and Kate crumbling over their heads.

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. He is a liar and a murderer.

George calls Joe a murderer. Chris cant 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. Being the kind girl she is. 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 commit suicide by crashing his plain. And this is what happens.

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 only 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 family. Every value, almost has a limit. All those pilots, were also Joe’s sons, as the play sees it. 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 because it sounds nice. 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. The American dream is not perfect, as already said.

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 this is the only way, she will be able to marry Chris.

Chris is an idealist. And the way idealist behave, may cause pain. 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, the over importance given to money, justice and idealism, people who lie to themselves, 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 Courage. 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.