CHAPTER III

ALL MY SONS

Arthur Miller wrote *All My Sons* after his first play *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) had been a complete failure on Broadway lasting only four performances. Miller wrote *All My Sons* as a final attempt at writing a commercially successful play. If the play failed to find an audience Miller would vow to find some other lines of work. *All My Sons* was written in 1947. The play opened on Broadway at the Coronet Theatre in New York City on January 29, 1947 and closed on November 8, 1947 and ran for 328 performances. The play was awarded the Tony Award for Best Authored Play in 1947. It was directed by Elia Kazan (to whom it is dedicated) and won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, beating Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*. The play, *All My Sons* was twice adapted for film in 1948 and again in 1987.

*All My Sons* is based upon a true story which Arthur Miller’s mother-in-law pointed out in an Ohio newspaper. The story described how a woman informed her father who had sold faulty parts to the U.S. military during the Second World War.

Henrik Ibsen’s influence on Miller is evidenced from the Ibsen’s play *The Wild Duck*, where Miller took the idea of two partners in a business where one is forced to take moral and legal responsibility for the other. This is mirrored in *All My Sons*. He also borrowed the idea of a character’s idealism being the source of a problem.
The criticism of the ‘American Dream’ which lies at the heart of *All My Sons* was one reason why Arthur Miller was called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the 1950s, when America was gripped by anti-communist hysteria. Miller sent a copy of the play to Elia Kazan who directed the original stage version of *All My Sons*. Kazan was a former member of the Communist Party who shared Miller’s left-wing views. However, their relationship was destroyed when Kazan gave names of suspected Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee during the Red Scare.

At the beginning of Arthur Miller’s *Collected Plays* he commented on his feelings on watching an audience’s reaction to a performance of his first successful play:

> The success of a play, especially one’s first success, is somewhat like pushing against a door which is suddenly opened from the other side. One may fall on one’s face or not, but certainly a new room is opened that was always securely shut until then. For myself, the experience was invigorating. It made it possible to dream of daring more and risking more. The audience sat in silence before the unwinding of *All My Sons* and gasped when they should have, and I tasted that power which is reserved, I imagine, for playwrights, which is to know that by one’s invention a mass of strangers has been publicly transfixed. (22-23)
The play, *All My Sons* takes place in a small American town in August, a few years after the Second World War. The events of the play occur on a single set, the back yard of the Keller home, where a tree has recently been torn down by a storm. The Kellers are middle-class and have a working-class background. They are not rich, but they are financially comfortable, and there is a sense throughout the play that they worked hard to reach this state of stability.

Joe Keller and Steve Deever were partners in a manufacturing firm. They were also neighbors and close to each other. During the war they had got a contact from the Air Force to supply cylinder heads for the military aircraft. They had, accordingly, been supplying cylinder heads to the Air Force. On one occasion it so happened that a whole batch of cylinder heads, produced by them, were found to have developed cracks. It was evidently undesirable for the manufacturers to dispatch the cylinder heads. Deever informed Joe Keller about the defect. Joe Keller was at home and pretended to be ill. He told Deever to weld the cracks and send. Deever was nervous but Joe Keller replied that as he was down with flu, he was unable to come personally to the factory but he would take full responsibility for the supply of those cylinder heads after they had been repaired. Steve Deever dispatched the defective cylinder heads to the army authorities even though both he and Joe Keller knew in their hearts that defective engine heads would put the lives of the air pilots in danger.
The defective cylinder heads actually proved dangerous. Aeroplanes fitted with those cylinder heads started crashing and in a few days, as many as twenty-one aeroplanes had crashed and their pilots been killed. The authorities immediately carried out an inspection and found that the manufactures had supplied defective cylinder heads. A prosecution was launched against both partners. In the court, Steve Deever gave a full and truthful account of what had happened. But Joe Keller denied having given any telephonic instructions to Steve about the cylinder heads. The court convicted both the partners and held them equally guilty. But Joe Keller filed an appeal against his conviction. His appeal was accepted and he was acquitted.

These incidents had occurred during the war. About three and half years have now passed. The play opens at this point. Joe Keller is now a prosperous manufacturer running his business comfortably and continuing to live in the same town and in the same house. The Deever family, which also used to live close to Keller’s house, had vacated the house after Deever’s imprisonment. Steve Deever’s wife, his son George, and his daughter Annie had shifted to New York and had been living there since the imprisonment of Steve Deever. George and Annie had broken off their relationship with their father because of his public disgrace and because of his conviction on a charge of fraud. They have not even been on terms of correspondence with him.

Joe Keller’s family consists of four members. Both of his sons, Larry and Chris, had gone to fight in the war like Steve’s son George. Larry, who had joined the army as an air
pilot, had been reported as missing and had been presumed to be dead. Chris had distinguished himself as an army officer and had returned home, safe and sound. Likewise, George had earned several medals for bravery on the battle field and he too had returned home safe and sound. After the war, George had studied law and when the play opens, he is already a lawyer and has started practising in New York. Chris has joined his father in the factory. Joe Keller’s elder son, Larry had been in love with Steve’s daughter, Annie. In fact, Larry and Annie were engaged to each other and if Larry had returned safe from the war, they would have got married. But, as Larry had been presumed to be dead, Annie has accepted that fact. Now it is Chris who wants to marry Annie because he too had been in love with her. As Larry is no more in this world, Annie has agreed to marry Chris. Everybody believes that Larry to be dead except Larry’s mother Kate Keller. Kate Keller persists in believing that Larry is alive somewhere and one day he will return home.

Chris wants to marry Annie and Annie is willing to marry him also. When Chris tells his father of his intention to marry Annie, Joe Keller says that Chris’s mother would not agree to this marriage because she believes Larry to be still alive and because Annie was engaged to marry Larry. Annie’s arrival in Keller’s house has already created a suspicion in Kate’s mind and when she learns of Chris’s intention to marry the girl, she tells her husband that she would not allow Chris to marry Annie. So, a confrontation occurs between Chris and Kate. Both Chris and Annie express their firm view that Larry is dead, but Kate still expresses the view that Larry is alive. Kate says that certain things have to happen and that certain other things can never happen. The sun has to rise, and it
therefore rises. The rising of the sun everyday shows that there is a God in this world. But there are certain things which can never happen, and the death of Larry is one such event, says Kate.

Chris and Annie are agreed to get married. Chris kisses for the first time and feels very happy about it. At the same time, he experiences a certain embarrassment in his successful love for Annie. He tells Annie that his experiences in the course of the war had made him believe that there is such a thing in this world as human fellowship and human comradeship. During the war, men had made sacrifices for their country, and men had stood by one another. But now, after the war is over, Chris finds that the world remains unchanged and that the people are as selfish, greedy, and money-minded as they used to be before. He also says that he has a sense of guilt enjoying the privileges where others are suffering. Annie tries to soothe Chris’s feelings to shed his of guilt. Chris then feels cheerful and tells Annie that he would earn a lot of money for her sake, and that he would do, in fact, make a fortune for her.

A telephone call of George from Columbus to Annie changes the scenario of the family. It is understood that George is coming to meet them. Joe Keller and Kate Keller are in tension. Kate gives Joe a warning to be smart. It shows that she knew everything about Joe’s responsibility of dispatching the defective cylinder heads. George is against of this marriage—the marriage of Chris and Annie. He gets an idea after meeting his father in jail that Joe was responsible for this crime what he denied at court. He came to verify this. He
tried to convince Annie saying that she cannot marry Joe’s son in anyhow. When they were discussing, it is found from Kate’s speech that Joe was not ill at all. Then the truth opens to all. Joe Keller confesses his fault and tries to prove that Larry did not fly these aeroplanes. Joe is also justifying his actions picturing the war time scenario and the reality of keeping business ahead. Chris feels shocked to hear his father’s defense of himself and asks in which kind of world his father lives. He bitterly scolds his father for having endangered the lives of so many air pilots and having caused their deaths by his folly. Chris reacts vehemently and asks his father to do something for his guilt. Joe Keller then tries to depend on his another son, Larry who is more practical he thinks. But Larry’s letter to Annie proves that Larry was also equally disappointed by his father behavior and he also sacrificed his life for his father’s wrongdoings. Keller then goes into the house and to get dressed. Kate tries her utmost to stop both Chris and Keller from going to police, but Chris says that nothing would now stop either him or his father from taking that step. Just then a shot is heard from inside the house. Evidently Keller, instead of accompanying Chris to the police headquarters, has killed himself. Thus Keller has himself passed a sentence of death against himself, and has carried out that sentence also. Chris tells his mother that it was not his intention that his father should kill himself. His mother says that Chris should not blame himself for his father’s suicide but should now start a new life.

The action of the play is set in August 1947, in the mid-west of the U.S.A. The events depicted occur between Sunday morning and a little after two o’clock the following morning limited to eighteen hours. Joe Keller, the chief character, is a man who loves his
family above all else and has sacrificed everything including his honor, in his struggle to make the family prosperous. He is now sixty-one. He has lost one son in the war and is keen to see his remaining son, Chris, marry. Chris wishes to marry Ann the former fiancée of his brother, Larry. Their mother, Kate, believes that Larry is still alive. It is this belief which has enabled her for three and a half years to support Joe by concealing her knowledge of a dreadful crime he has committed.

Arthur Miller, the playwright, found the idea for Joe’s crime in a true story which occurred during the Second World War. A manufacturer knowingly shipped out defective parts for tanks. These had suffered mechanical failures which had led to the deaths of many soldiers. The fault was discovered and the manufacturer was convicted. In *All My Sons*, Miller examines the ethics of a man who places his narrow responsibility to his family above his wider responsibility to the men who rely on the integrity of his work.

The play *All My Sons* is a criticism of the ‘American Dream’. Joe Keller, a representative type who would be considered an ordinary American, has lived through the ‘Depression’ and despite a lack of education he has been able to own a factory which he hopes his son will inherit. However, Keller’s quest for money leads to his responsibility for the deaths of twenty-one American pilots.

Keller has apparently achieved the ‘American Dream’. He lives in a ‘comfortable’ house despite being an ‘uneducated man’. Miller is emphasizing the hollowness of the
‘American Dream’ and that one should think about the consequences of one’s actions. However, this material comfort which Keller has worked to provide his family with the very best is of little consequence. His strong family unit is an illusion. His wife is ill, Chris is discontent and Larry has committed suicide as a result of his father’s narrow-minded and reprehensible decision. It is through the letter from Larry that Keller realizes that he has not only killed one son but all of his sons, a theme which is reiterated by the title of the play. In true sense, the ‘American Dream’ has become more like an American Nightmare. Chris shows social and moral responsibility while his father Joe shows intense family responsibility.

The play focuses on Joe Keller’s conflict of responsibilities, his responsibility to his family and that to wider society. He originally believes that he is justified in sending cracked cylinder heads and causing the deaths of twenty-one pilots as this allowed his family to make money and allowed his son Chris to inherit the family business. Keller justifies his actions as he thinks he has a higher obligation to his family over society. To Keller there is nothing greater than the family and Miller criticizes what he would consider a ‘myopic’ world view.

Keller: Nothing bigger than that. And you’re going to tell him, you understand? I am his father and he is my son, and if there’s something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head. (120)
Throughout the play, *All My Sons*, the idea of the family appeared on a number of levels. Chris and Joe demonstrated their dedication and love to one another through a strong bond. Joe proved this by doing everything in life, including committing a crime, for his son, Chris. Chris showed this bond by not believing in his father’s guilt even though the truth lay at the tip of his nose. Even after the realization that his father played a role in many deaths Chris overcame his anger and recognized that he still loved his father by demonstrating remorse at his father’s death. The tie between Joe and Chris Keller lay deep in the love and respect that each had for the other and proved too tough to break.

Responsibility is the underlying theme of *All My Sons*. One good example of irresponsibility is found when Joe insisted on claiming to George that it was his own father, Steve, who was the one responsible for the false plane parts. One example of responsibility occurs when Ann shows the letter to Kate. And a third example occurs when Joe kills himself and in doing so accepts the responsibility of killing the lives of all the twenty-one pilots.

Joe does not take responsibility for selling false plane parts for most of the play. In the end Joe finally takes responsibility for his crime. Joe is forced to accept responsibility. His suicide allows Chris to live free from guilt. At the end Joe finally explains to Chris what the truth is.
In the play *All My Sons*, the playwright Arthur Miller delves into the idea of the ‘American Dream’ exposing it as a materialistic, false and self-made way of life. He focuses on the different values expressed by Joe Keller and his son Chris, showing how Joes pursuit of success led to cutting corners and the death of twenty-one pilots during the war, whereas Chris comes to value humanity and truth. Many of the characters in *All My Sons* experience some denial and Miller reveals the frustrations they feel as products of the American dream.

The conflict in the play *All My Sons* is embodied by two different sets of values. The older generation represented by Joe and Kate strongly believed in family values and pursuit of the American dream at any cost. In contradiction, Joe and Anne express the younger generation’s ethics and ideals clearly shown in the thoughts of idealism that money is not the most important thing in life. Even though the younger generation’s ideals are sometimes thought of as being irrational and in conflict with reality, their validity is portrayed as greater throughout the play.

Many times in parents-children relationships the parents have a very different view on things than the children they had raised. Most of these gaps are produced as a consequence of the different times they have grown in. In the play, *All My Sons*, the diversity between the two generations with two sets of ideals are mostly not a result of generation gap but a result of greediness and age. Many people when they are young, see the world from a more optimistic point of view and that is true for Chris and Anne. As
people get old and have their own kids they are thought of to be more rational in their actions in order to protect their children. Joe Keller worked his whole life trying to create a better future for his sons, but the question is, at what cost? Arthur Miller’s main point in the play is that people should look beyond their inner circle of society. The protagonist Joe Keller chose to ignore the reality.

Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* is a well-made play in every sense of that term. It is not only carefully and logically constructed, but also addresses its themes fully and effectively. The play communicates different ideas on war, materialism, family, illusion, reality and honesty. However, the main focus, especially at the play’s climax, is the issue of personal responsibility. The protagonist, Joe Keller, ignores his responsibility to make his dream true. In particular, Miller demonstrates the dangers of shirking responsibility and, then, ascribing blame to others.

Joe Keller is a man who loves and values his family very much. Like most Americans he has given everything so he can have the big house, the fancy car and the bulging wallet. He has given everything so he can have the ‘American Dream’. Unfortunately for Keller, everything is not as perfect as it seems.

*All My Sons* is a very tragic play. It shows how a man can sacrifice everything including the honor of his name to make his family prosperous. This struggle for wealth and
material goods involves Keller doing an awful crime because he wants his family to be wealthy. This is the cause of Keller’s downfall.

*All My Sons* is a play of social responsibility. Many critics have considered the play as the traditional social play. M. W. Steinberg observes:

“It is most simply and clearly in the tradition of the social problem plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy.” (40)

In his essay, Steinberg tries to place the play as social allegory by suggesting that the characters are mere illustrations of the forces working in “a selfish, materialistic society which respects economic success as its flaunts underlying moral law.” (Ibid 85)

Sheila Huftal has commented on Miller’s writings on social issues:

“…a writer has got to show both these things in operation both the enormous pressure of circumstances and the individual act of choice.” (67-68)

S. K. Bhatia has pointed out in his book, *Social Drama as Tragedy:*
“…..in *All My Sons* the private guilt of the individual is matched against the larger social evil. Social pressures from outside world work upon Joe Keller and make him do what he does.” (33)

Regarding many critics remarks on social plays Miller points out in his introduction to *Collected Plays*:

“The fortress which *All My Sons* lays seize to is the fortress of unrelatedness. It is an assertion not so much of a morality in terms of right and wrong, but of a moral world’s being such because men cannot walk away from certain of their deeds. In this sense Joe Keller is a threat to society and in this sense the play is a social play. It’s “socialness” does not reside in its having dealt with the crime of selling defective materials to a nation at war— the same crime could easily be the basis of a thriller which would have no place in social dramaturgy. It is that the crime is seen as having roots in a certain relationship of the individual to society, and to a certain indoctrination he embodies, which, if dominant, can mean a jungle existence for all of us no matter how high our buildings soar.” (19)

*All My Sons* is not a play about crime and punishment but it is rather a play about confrontation and commitment. It is a play about the myopic vision of a selfish businessman who failed to understand his social responsibility. Miller rightly points out:
“…..the crime in *All My Sons* is not one that is about to be committed but one that has long since been committed. There is no question of its consequences being ameliorated by anything Chris Keller or his father can do; the damage has been done irreparably. The stakes remaining are purely the conscience of Joe Keller and its awakening to the evil he has done, and the conscience of his son in the face of what he has discovered about his father.” (Ibid18)

Nearly every character in *All My Sons*, in one way or another, fails to take responsibility. The Keller family, as a whole, is severely dysfunctional in that they keep secrets and tell lies at every turn. Chris, the most reliable character, understands that his family has some problems but does not face boldly. He gives his mother to believe that Larry is not dead. Indeed, as a result, Kate is on the verge of being delusional, clings to the unrealistic hope that her son, Larry is still alive.

Arthur Miller points out again in his introduction to *Collected Plays*:

“Joe Keller’s trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society. He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation. I hasten to make clear here that I am not merely speaking of a literal corporation but the concept of a man’s
becoming a function of production or distribution to the point where his personality becomes divorced from the actions it propels” (19)

At the beginning of the play Joe Keller is portrayed as a stolid and unintellectual businessman. He is also “the uneducated man for whom there is still wonder in many commonly known things” (59). When the play begins he is found with a newspaper in his hand. He says, “I don’t read the news part any more. It’s interesting in the want ads” (59). A few minutes later he reads—“wanted—Old dictionaries. High prices paid, and says, “Now what’s a man going to do with an old dictionary?” (60). His son Chris is interested to read the book section of the newspaper. The following conversation ensues:

Keller: What is that, every week a new book comes out?

Chris: Lot of new books.

Keller: All different?

Chris: All different. (64)

From the very beginning it is found that Keller is anxious about his family unity. When Chris wants to marry Ann and demands help from his father and mentions that he will leave the place if it is not accepted then Keller is frightened so much:
Chris: I’ve given it three years of thought. I’d hoped that if I waited, Mother would forget Larry and then We’d have a regular wedding and everything happy. But if that can’t happen here; then I’ll have to get out.

Keller: What the hell is this?


Keller: Are you crazy? (69)

Joe Keller thinks about the business what he has kept for his son, Chris. He cannot bear the news of Chris’s desire to leave home, if necessary. He wants to prove his immense love for the business what Chris will inherit. When Joe finds that Chris has no interest in business, he is unable to accept. He tries to convince his son saying that he has taken a lot of pressure to establish the business and now being his son, he cannot deny his task to keep the business ahead.

Chris: The business! The business doesn’t inspire me.

Keller: Must you be inspired?

Chris: Yes. I like it an hour a day. If I have to grub for money all day long at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want some kids, I want to build something. I can give myself to. Annie is in the middle of that. Now … where do I find it?
Keller: You mean...[Goes to him] Tell me something, you mean you’d leave the business?

Chris: Yes. On this I would. (69)

Chris gives a pressure so that his father will help him to marry Anne. Joe is eventually in favour of that marriage. But he requests his son not to think in that way, because the business is only for him. But Chris reacts in different manner and tries to get words from his father that he will help him to get married. Ultimately Chris knows that his mother will oppose and his father needs to take an initiative to manage her. The conversations following indicate the motives clearly:

Keller: [after a pause]: well....you don’t want to think like that.

Chris: Then help me stay here.

Keller: All right, but... but don’t think like that. Because what the hell did I work for? That’s only for you; Chris, the whole shooting match is for you!

Chris: I know that, Dad. Just you help me stay here

Keller: [putting a fist up to chair’s jaw]: But don’t think that way, you hear me? (69)
Joe Keller loves his son Chris very much. He does not want that his son will settle outside for any reason. When he gets the news that George is coming to meet them, he is worried about the future of his family though he tries to overcome. He tries to convince Ann portraying the practical things of life. He ascribes his eagerness to help George of getting establishment in the town itself so that he can practice in court and need not go outside. He also tries to prove that he has still a massive sympathy for her father, Steve. His words and gestures are enough to prove that he is really in tension to know about George’s arrival. He is, to some extent, preparing himself to encounter George. His discussion with Anne is remarkable:

Keller: Don’t surround me, will you? Seriously, Ann….you say he’s not well. George, I been thinking, why should he knock himself out in New York with that cut-throat competition, when I got so many friends here; I’m very friendly with some big lawyers in town. I could set George up here.

Ann: That’s awfully nice of you, Joe.

Keller: No, kid, it ain’t nice of me. I want you to understand me. I’m thinking of Chris. [Slight Pause.] See…this is what I mean. You get older, you want to feel that you – accomplished something. My only accomplishment is my son. I ain’t brainy. That is all I accomplished. Now, a year, eighteen months; your father’ll be a free man. Who is going to come to, Annie? His baby. You. He’ll come, old, mad, into your house. (96-97)
When it is found that Joe Keller is also responsible for the crime Chris reacted severely. Actually Keller was not ill but he pretended to be. He ensured Steve over phone that he will take the responsibility which he denied in court. Keller explains that he is in business and the business has some limitations:

Chris: Dad….Dad, you killed twenty-one men!

Keller: What, killed?

Chris: You killed them, you murdered them.

Keller [as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris]: How could I kill anybody?

Chris: Dad! Dad!

Keller [trying to hush him]: I didn’t kill anybody!

Chris: Then explain it to me. What did you do? Explain it to me or I’ll tear you to pieces! (114)

Keller acts without the knowledge of public consequences of his actions. He also acts under a kind fear-psychosis generated by socio-economic pressures. The fear of losing his business and thus becoming a failure spawns a crisis of character in him. In a crucial speech, he tells this to his son:
Keller [- their movements now are those of subtle pursuit and escape. Keller keeps a step out of Chris’s range as he talks.]: You’re a boy, What could I do! I’m in business, a man is in business; you got a process, the process don’t work you’ve out of business; you don’t know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contacts, what the hell’s it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away? [His voice cracking.] I never thought they’d install them. I swear to God. I thought they’d stop them before anybody took off. (115)

Joe Keller goes under terrible pressures of a success-oriented society. He is afraid of reporting the defect or holding the supply of airplane engines because that will ruin his business and consequently the future of his sons. He tells his son:

Keller: It was too late. The paper, it was all over the front page, twenty-one went down, it was too late. They came with handcuffs into the shop, what could I do? [He sits on bench.] Chris…Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I’m sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don’t get another chance, do ya? (115)
But Chris does not accept this logic. He feels that what Joe has done is against humanity. Chris is a soldier and fights in the war. He does not compromise. In the name of business, no one can kill anyone. Business should not be given priority over country. He compares this attempt with animal’s attitude. Even he wants to say that animals are also better in this respect. They do not kill their own sons- rather they want to protect them. Chris is so shocked knowing the actual events that he is unable to take a decision what to do. His utterances indicate his inner feeling for the human beings which are outburst in the following conversations.

Chris: You were afraid may be! God in heaven, What kind of a man are you? Kids were hanging in the air by those heads. You knew that!

Keller: For you, a business for you!

Chris: [with burning fury]: For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me!—I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business? What is that, the world—the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the world? What the hell are you? You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do? (115)
Keller is supporting his activities what he does but he is opposed by his wife. His understanding about earning money is challenged by his family members for whom he actually does. Kate, his wife categorically mentions that they did not want money in that way. She rejects her husband’s demand and claims that this may not be an excuse at all:

Keller: I don’t know what you mean! You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn’t you?

Mother: I didn’t want it that way.

Keller: I didn’t want it that way either! What….Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I---

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Mother: Joe….Joe….It don’t excuse it that you did it for the family. (116)

An excess of love for his sons makes Keller succumb to the socio-economic pressures of society. He is called upon to play his role as a father on the one hand and as a citizen on the other, but his one sidedness and disproportionate allegiance to his family make him ignore his role as a citizen. In this context, Sheila Huftel remarks:

“In All My Sons Joe Keller is a father and a citizen, but because he could not take the citizen side seriously he became less of a father and destroyed his own children. You literally have to survive with this whole because you can’t survive without it.” (61)
The central conflict of the play is between the familial and social obligations. It has been rightly observed by Benjamin Nelson, in his book *Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright*:

“The thematic image of *All My Sons* is a circle within a circle, the inner depicting the family unit and the outer representing society, and the movement of the drama is concentric with the two circles revolving in parallel orbits until they ultimately coalesce.” (81)

The conflict between Keller and Chris is found at extreme point. Keller is now searching the consolation by mentioning his son Larry. He thinks that Larry was quite different. He could have understood him better. He compares both the sons:

Keller: Goddam if Larry was alive he wouldn’t act like this. He understood the way the world is made. He listened to me. To him the world had a forty-foot front, it ended at the building line. This one, everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents and his hair falls out. He don’t understand money. Too easy, it came too easy. Yes Sir, Larry. That was a boy we lost. Larry. Larry. (121)

Chris is eager to know from his father how he will compensate the crime. But father Keller is trying to give the real scenario of business of the country at war time. He is
persistently emphasizing on his family responsibility what he has done like many others.

But Chris is not satisfied. His idea about his father is totally shattered:

Keller: Exactly what’s the matter? What’s the matter? You got too much money! Is that what bothers you?

Chris: It bothers me.

Keller: If you can’t get used to it, then throw it away. You hear me? Take every cent it to charity, throw it in the sewer. Does that settle it? In the sewer, that’s all. You think I am kidding? I am telling you what to do, if it’s dirty then burn it. It’s your money, that’s not my money. I am a dead man, I’m an old dead 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 [with growing emphasis and passion, and a persistent tone of desperation]: Who worked for nothing, I’ll work for nothing. Did 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, its 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! (124)

They come to know from Larry’s letter that Larry himself sacrificed his life after knowing his father’s deeds. So, Keller loses his last resort also. Chris asks his father to think what to do now:

Chris [quietly]: Three and a 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 Jesus in this world!

Chris: I know all about the world. I know the whole crap story. Now 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 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 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? Everyday 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 will probably report me 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 letter from Chris’s hand and reads it. After
a long pause.] Now blame the world. Do you understand that letter? (125)

Keller gets the message but his wife tries to cool him saying that Larry was his son and
he did not tell him to do anything wrong. Keller realizes his wrongdoings and is ready to
pay for that:

Mother: You are 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 will be right down. [Exits into house]
(126)

Joe Keller carries the illusion of getting material success by which he is able to get a
family. This family dream enforces him to do something wrong. His wife, sons and
friends do not accept this attempt and he is severely attacked by his sons for whom he
does the immoral thing. In the end, Joe Keller realizes that he acted wrongly and finally
he had to sacrifice his life for the wrong doings. S. K. Bhatia has pointed out in his book
on Arthur Miller, Social Drama as Tragedy:
“All my Sons is the tragedy of a man who can’t see beyond his own family. Joe Keller, in this sense, has a myopic vision. He cannot see that a larger world exists outside his small family world. In caring too much for the prosperity of his own family, he jeopardizes the safety and security of the society at large. Paradoxically his myopic vision is a gift of the same society against which he errs because it is based on the ethic of success. He is a product of the society, and also its enemy. His mind and psychology are shaped and distorted by the capitalistic economic system and the chief motivating force behind his shortsightedness is the success-code of the society which he thoughtlessly follows. The myth of success and its counterpart the fear of failure compel him to do what he does. He knows that a failure in society cannot survive, so, in order to survive in the world of competition, he takes recourse to dishonest means.” (33)

The message of All My Sons is Arthur Miller’s belief that people have a wider responsibility to the society in which they live, and this is something that Chris, Joe’s son, is aware of and believes in. Unlike his father, Chris feels society and other people play a main part in a person’s responsibility, as when he finds the truth out about his father’s actions; he is horrified –“What the hell are you? You’re not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?” (116) and here it is possible Chris has become a sort of spokesperson for Arthur Miller in the play. Keller seems to still not understand his sons anguish, as his responses are “Chris...my Chris...” (116)
Not until Larry’s letter is revealed to him, Keller is unable to see the point of view of the next generation. Only after hearing Larry’s letter he does reply to Chris’ question “Do you get it now!” (126) with “Yes...I think I do” (126) and then lead into where the play’s title comes from when Joe Keller eventually realizes that “they were all my sons”. (126) Keller kills himself in the final few pages of the play, leaving Kate on her own, the one thing she has always been said to fear, but the truth seems to give her a sort of strength in itself, as she tells her hysterical son Chris in the last line of the play, to “live...forget now...live”(127)—freeing him of the obligation of living with any feeling of responsibility for Keller’s suicide, in which he shoots himself in the head.

_All My Sons_ is about wartime profiteering. As there were large contracts when America entered the war on two fronts, the conditions were created for what Arthur Miller described as profiteering on a vast scale. Chris Keller is particularly angry that his selflessness in fighting in the war is contrasted by the selfishness of those making money off the war:

> Chris: It takes a little time to toss that off. Because they were not just men. For instance, one time it’d been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of day socks. Put them in my pocket. That’s only a little thing—but ….that’s the kind of guys I had. They didn’t die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they’d’ve been here today. And I got an idea—watching them
go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that
one new thing was made, A kind of responsibility. Man for Man…….(85)

Kate Keller, the mother refuses to accept her son Larry’s death. She denies the possibility
of this death for a long time. Recognizing the death of her son would mean that she
recognizes that her husband was responsible. This is an issue that constantly weighs on
Kate throughout the play. She mentions:

Mother: [going to her]: Because certain things have to be, and certain
things can never be. Like the sun has to rise, it has to be. That’s why
there’s God. Otherwise anything could happen. (78)

Kate also carries the illusion in her own way. The tree is a symbol to her that represents
that Larry is still alive, and when the tree gets knocked down Kate still refuses to believe
that her son is in danger. Even at the last moment when Chris was eager to know the
matter she says:

Mother: Altogether! [To Chris, but not facing them] Your brother’s alive,
darling, because if he’s dead, your father killed him. Do you understand
me now? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be
killed by his father. Now you see, don’t you? Now you see. [Beyond
control. She hurries up and into house.] (114)
The confrontation between the father and the son actually springs from Chris’s awareness of responsibility to others and his father’s lack of it. Chris’s character is the exact antithesis of his father’s character. The antithetical nature of the two is made clear in the very beginning. Chris is an idealist whose entire allegiance is to the society. He tells his father: “I don’t know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer.” (68)

When Chris finds out his father is responsible for killing the twenty-one pilots, he replies “I was dying every day and you were killing my boys” (114) and it is very notable Chris refers to the pilots as ‘his boys’ and says ‘I was dying every day’; making them closer to himself and trying to indicate to the audience the extent of which he feels he has moral obligation to society. S. K. Bhatia has pointed out:

Chris’s concern for others has been polarized against his father’s lack of concerns for others. “The business”, he says, “the business does not inspire me” (p.69). He stands in direct contrast to his father. Dr. Jim Bayliss, their neighbor, says about Chris to his mother, “It takes certain talent—for lying. You have it, and I do. But not him” (p.118). Joe himself aptly sums up Chris’s moral character in a moment of anger when he says “…everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents, and his hair falls out. He don’t understand money” (p.121). (39)
Chris thinks about society and civilization. He lacerates his father through a number of speeches. The dominant feature of these speeches is the bestial imagery which is deliberately used; it seems, to suggest that human civilization is retreating into a jungle existence. He says bitterly:

This is the land of the great big dogs, you don’t love a man here, you eat him! That’s the principle; the only one we live by—it just happened to kill a few people that time, that’s all. The world is that way, how can I take it out on him? What sense does that make? This is a zoo, a zoo! (124)

The play, *All My Sons* is also about the disillusionment of the young, and this theme can be traced through the character Chris, who comes to be disenchanted with his family, society and himself by realizing that none of these is as moral as he once believed. When he finally finds out through questioning his father that his father is, in fact, guilty of knowingly shipping out the cracked cylinder heads, he says to his father that he does not know what he must do. This is the point where Chris becomes disillusioned with his family. His father is guilty of doing the crime, and his mother is guilty of hiding the information. Chris now believes that his father is worse than an animal and is disgusted that he has lived with his parents since the crime happened without being aware of it. He sees his parents now as evil people rather than role models, and feels that if even his parents are capable of such a thing, then society as a whole must be the same or worse, because he tells his father that he once believed him to be better than most men.
In comparing *All My Sons* to the ‘American Dream’, *All My Sons* employs a pattern that is fundamental to most tragedies. Protagonists in tragedy must, in some degree, be held accountable for their actions. When faced with a moral dilemma, they often make a wrong choice. The wide gap between Joe Keller’s dream of a happy and wealthy future for his family and the reality underscores the ironic nature of the situation. His hopes are frustrated by his own sons for whom he worked. Larry, as a result of the ignominy, feels on account of his father’s culpability, kills himself. Chris turns violently against him when he discovers the reality. Joe is ironically destroyed by his own weapons. Both his sons, whom he loved more than the entire world, become the instruments of his punishment. Larry’s deliberate suicide is a mode of revenge upon his father. Joe Keller achieves the realization, however crudely, and admits “they were all my sons” (126). This realization is too strong to keep him alive. He goes inside and shoots himself. His ultimate suicide is an act of self-purification.

The ‘American Dream’ is simply to grow up, become wealthy, and own lots of property. Though there are many different variations of the ‘American Dream’ yet this is the general gist of it. The part of the American Dream which is contradicted in this play is only the last part of it which states that after growing up, becoming wealthy and owning lots of property, one cannot live happily ever after. Joe Keller surely grew and became wealthy, yet his life turned into a disaster in the short period of time that took place in this story. Arthur Miller is trying to convey two different points in his play *All My Sons*: the ‘American Dream’ is fake and only pertains to certain people and even with money, life can turn into a disaster in true sense.