**Act III**

It is now the middle of the night. Mother is waiting for Chris to come home. Jim appears and asks about the fight. He knows the truth about Keller and Steve--he figured it out a long time ago. Mother says she thought that Chris probably knew as well, and she did not realize it would be such a shock to him. Jim says that Chris would never know how to live with a thing like that. But he will come back, because every man has to compromise his ideals sometime. Chris probably just wanted to be alone to watch **"the star of his honesty"** go out because when he comes back he won't be honest any more, and he will stop being idealistic. He will have to make a compromise because he won't be able to send his father to jail.

Jim also had to make a compromise once when he left his wife for New Orleans to study a certain disease. However, Sue came and begged him to come back. He is a good husband, therefore he had to give up his research work. Likewise, Chris is a good son. Therefore, he will have to give up his ideals.

When Keller enters, Kate tells him that Jim knows everything. She advises Keller to explain himself to Chris, to tell Chris that he has understood the true nature of his deed and is willing to go to prison. Keller does not like this plan, because he thinks he did it all for the sake of family. Mother says that this is not an excuse. Keller insists that nothing is greater than the family, but there is something still greater in Chris's mind. Keller says that Chris will forgive him, because **"I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head."** Keller says that Larry would have understood; Larry had a head for business.

Ann enters and asks Kate to tell Chris that she has accepted the fact of Larry's death, because she wants Chris to feel free to marry her. **"You had two sons. But you've only got one now,"** she says. But Mother refuses, because she knows in her heart that Larry is alive, and she knows that Chris will never be able to accept Larry's death fully. Ann says that she knows that Larry crashed off the coast of China on November 25th, but not because of engine trouble. Mother senses that there is something Ann is not saying.

Ann decides to show Kate Larry's letter, which she never intended to show anyone unless it was necessary to allow her and Chris to get married. He wrote it right before he disappeared. In this letter Larry said that he had learned from the press about the conviction of Joe Keller and his partner, and he was so crushed by his sense of shame that he simply felt he could not go on living. He intended to commit suicide, or to go on a suicidal mission and not return alive. Larry's letter to Ann adds that he loves her but that she must not wait for him.

Mother reads the letter, she begins to moan, and Ann insists that the circumstances forced her to show the letter, since Mother would not believe Ann's word.

Ann has decided to marry Chris in spite of her father's hatred of Joe, in spite of Kate's opposition, and in spite of everything that has happened.

Chris returns and says that he will leave home and settle in Cleveland because he is unable to send his father to jail. He could jail him if he were human any more, but **"I'm like everybody else now. You made me practical."** Besides, it's no use punishing a man because this is the land of great big dogs "**where you don't love a man – you eat him."**

Keller returns and Chris walks away, saying that he has nothing to say to him. Keller asks what is bothering Chris—"**too much money? Then give it to charity".** Chris can do what he wants with it; the money is his. Chris responds that the issue is what Keller wants to do. Joe adds that no one worked for free during the war. Wartime is profit time, everybody worked for gain and he did the same. Chris agrees that honor and responsibility existed only on the front. Back home "**all the world is a zoo",** and his father is not different from the others.

Ann gives Chris the letter, though Mother tries to stop him, or at least stop him from telling Keller what is in the letter. But Chris reads the letter aloud.

Reacting to this letter Joe Keller says he now understands that to Larry all the young airmen were his brothers and Joe's sons. **"I think to him they were all my sons".**

**It was Larry's message to his family. Lives of other people were not less important. Joe Keller got the message and came to the conclusion that he had to be responsible not only for his two sons, but for all the soldiers in the world. That is why the play is called "*All My Sons".***

**Larry is the only real idealist. He can't live with crime. According to Larry, Joe knowingly killed boys in order to achieve material success.**

**Chris has the same values. He too thinks that a person has to be responsible for all the people in the universe, and not only his family.**

**However, when he has to turn his father over to authorities, he is unable to do it and prefers to move away from home. He starts hating himself because he stopped being an idealist.**

After reading Larry's letter Chris is able to send his father to jail. He thinks he owes this to Larry. Kate tries to prevent this saying that the war is over. Chris responds that Keller should not just feel sorry; Larry died not just for that. She asks what more could be done, and Chris gives her a way to become better: **"Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died."**

Larry's condemnation and Chris' hatred crush Joe, and he is no longer able to fight back. Keller goes upstairs and commits suicide. Chris comes out in tears and says, "Mother, I didn't mean to-" But she interrupts him and tells him not to take the blame for his father's suicide. "Forget now. Live."

Analysis

Like her husband, Mother is in denial. She knows about Keller's guilt, and it is the source of her anxiety and headaches throughout the play. She is complicit in Keller's denial, and as for her own denial, she is forcing her son to stay alive, if only in her mind, in order to allow her to continue to live with her husband in some acceptable way. That is, if she had to accept that her husband effectively killed their son, then she could not bear it. But her loyalty to Keller ironically serves to separate the couple, since her knowledge of his guilt strains their relationship. Like her husband, she prefers to believe that there are forces outside her control--in her case, astrology and God's choice, both on Larry's side--that ultimately dictate life or death more than individual choice does.

But all this is not the blind trust of a grief-stricken mother. Just as she mistakenly thought that Chris always knew in the back of his mind that Keller was guilty, she always knew in her heart that Larry was dead, despite a play full of protestations to the contrary. When Ann shows her the letter that proves Larry's death, Mother suffers no great shock. Like Martha in Edward Albee's [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*](http://www.gradesaver.com/whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf/), she learns the "death" of a son who did not really exist anymore anyway. She knew--she always knew. What mattered was that no one said it aloud, because that way she would not have to examine the implications. And again like Albee's Martha, what truly died was not the son, but the mother's self-deception, the universe she had constructed inside her head in order to cope with the painful truth.

The title of the play becomes clear in Keller's final line. After years of denial, he is forced to acknowledge that the soldiers who died as a direct result of his actions were someone's sons, and they all might as well have been his sons. But this line, with the title, actually serves two independent arguments that run through the work. "[All My Sons](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/)" has both an emotional center and an intellectual center. The emotional "All My Sons" has the Keller family at its core, being primarily concerned with the impact of shameful secrets on family relationships, in particular how their past can come back to haunt the present. When the work is performed, audiences are usually struck the hardest by the story of the crime and its consequences for the Keller family.

But the intellectual "All My Sons" is the story of that same crime and its consequences not for the Keller family, but for the world. If Miller is proposing a world-scale ethic of concern for everyone's sons, he proposes that Keller (and each member of the audience) should find in himself a kind of generalized care for all of the sons and daughters in the world. Miller later wrote that he wanted the play to be about "unrelatedness," describing Keller as a man who "cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." The admission that the pilots were "all my sons" is, for Keller, an admission that he might as well have killed his own child. The admission is also a new understanding that it should not matter whether the dead pilots could have been his sons; rather, we all have an obligation to society to value everyone's sons as though they were our own. Whether that level of concern is possible or feasible, indeed whether it is healthy and desirable to refuse to help your own children and neighbors while you try to help the whole world, is a different question, but the idealist might give it a try.

The tension among these values is highlighted throughout the play in Keller's and Chris's conflicting moralities. For Keller, there is nothing more important in this world than the family. For Chris, the destruction of the war wrought a new "kind of--responsibility. Man for man." And in the play, Keller's morality actually eclipses Chris's, even though Miller is giving the audience a shot at accepting Chris's leftist argument. In the end, what draws audiences is the emotion of a comprehensible, identifiable unit of society--that is, the drama of the nuclear family. The primacy of Miller's unrelatedness argument is defeated by its own truth. We will always care more about the one son whose father we see before us and with whom we identify, than the twenty-one dead sons who are not our own. At least, however, we can rise to the responsibility of making wise and prudent decisions to honor both the one and the twenty-one as well as we can.