

# The ethical breach of the business man



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Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* explores the relationship between father and son, and the lengths a man will go to for his family and for himself. The main character, Joe Keller, is a father who believed his greatest achievement was his son, and the business he built to provide for his family. In the true spirit of a businessman, Joe had to step on others to reach the top and to create his thriving business that he is desperate for his son, Chris Keller, to accept and be proud of. Joe's character has experienced trauma with the loss of his other son, Larry Keller, in WWII and the strain that the loss had on the health and well-being of his family that may make him seem worthy of pity.

However, Joe's life contained multiple selfish decisions of fraud and corruption that spilled the blood of innocent young war heroes. Joe Keller is a self-absorbed man with an egocentric disposition to promote his own self-interest; he ruins the lives of others by causing death, insanity, grief, loss of love, and unfair imprisonment, making him a character unworthy of sympathy.

Joe Keller's selfishness stained his hands red as his actions led young military men to die. Joe owned and operated a mass production factory that during wartime made airplane parts with his partner Herbert Deever. One night the machines produced over one hundred defective engine heads, and the next morning the army began to demand more airplane parts, but the only ones available were those with cracks. Under the direction of Joe, Herbert illegally welded over the cracks and shipped the parts to the army. The defective engine parts caused the death of twenty-one pilots in the war. When Chris finally learned the truth after three years of his father deceiving him, Joe tells Chris, " I'm in a business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty

cracked, you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work you're out of business; you don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up,... what could I do, let them take away forty years, let them take my life away?" (69) Joe selfishly felt that the business he built for his family and his son, which he considered his life, was more valuable than the innocent lives of those American soldiers whom he had a duty to through supplying them with quality aircraft parts.

Moreover, Joe's greedy disposition to operate a successful business not only murdered men, but he also sent his business partner, neighbor, and friend to prison for his own crime. When the process was producing the defective parts, Herbert called Joe from the factory to tell him of the trouble, and he asked Joe what he should do. Joe refused to come down to the factory, but he told him over the phone to weld over the cracks and ship out the parts. Joe knew a phone call would never be enough to indict him in court, because "on the telephone you can't have any responsibility." (54) When the law came knocking Joe denied any connection to Herbert's actions and allowed his partner to take the fall. Joe was a free man while Herbert served a sentence of years in prison. Joe spent years trying to justify to himself that his decisions were right because his business was his life and legacy to his son Chris. However, his actions were purely selfish and devastating to those around him because Joe's self-interest killed men, ruined his friend's life, and allowed him to avoid the criminal punishment.

Some may argue that Joe Keller deserves sympathy from the audience because of the pain and suffering that the war brought to his family. Joe's son, Larry Keller, was reported dead soon after Joe was arrested and tried for

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the defective parts. Larry's death led to mental insanity of Joe's wife, Kate, as she struggled to grasp the reality of her grief through ongoing hope and denial. She continued to believe Larry would come home alive because his body was never found and she insisted for years that, "...everybody has got to wait," (68) for his return. Joe struggled with the internal guilt that he may have caused his son's death through his faulty engine parts, but he tried to reassure himself that Larry never flew a P-40 aircraft which are the planes his parts caused to crash. Joe's family endured serious hardship through the stress of keeping Joe out of jail and the grief of losing one of their two sons while Chris continued to be at risk in the war too. However, it is Joe's own fault that his family experienced those traumas. Near the end of the play, it is revealed to the family through a letter written by Larry that when he heard the news of the twenty-one young men in the military, like him, who were killed by his father's action, Larry killed himself. Larry committed suicide at the grief he experienced from discovering his father's selfish murderous actions, which he expressed in the letter saying, " I can't bear to live anymore." (83) Joe brought on the pain and suffering of his family's grief through his egotistical disposition and self-absorbed mindset to promote his business above all else, making him a character undeserving of pity.

Joe Keller's character proved to be driven by selfishness to the very end when he committed suicide, adding to the ruin of the lives of others around him. This final selfish act of cowardice shows that Joe is a character unworthy of the audience's sympathy. Joe's suicide was his selfish way of avoiding the consequences and shame once the community and the law learned the truth about him and Deever. His selfish action of allowing those military men to

die caused Larry's suicide and caused Chris to view Joe as more of an animal than human, unworthy of forgiveness simply because of their father and son relationship. Joe says, " For you, Kate, for both of you, that's all I ever lived for...", (78) and once he realizes that he has lost the love and loyalty of his family, especially all of his sons, he ends his life. Joe made decisions whose consequences caused deaths, insanity, prison terms and heartbreak as Joe hurt his friends, wife, innocent men, and all of his sons.

The central figure of *All My Sons*, ultimately, is a self-absorbed man unworthy of sympathy because of his character's egocentric disposition and selfish actions that ruin the lives of others. Joe Keller considers his business and his family his greatest achievements, and does not allow morals or values to stand in his way of producing a successful legacy to leave behind to his son Chris Keller. Joe's narrow-minded drive to promote only his own self-interest led to the death of innocent military heroes, the unfair imprisonment of his business partner, the insanity of his wife, the loss of love and respect from his only living son Chris, and the suicide of his son Larry. In a final display of selfishness, Joe Keller takes his own life, adding more suffering to his already broken family, and this final cowardly act proves his character is too narcissistic and self-absorbed to be worthy of audience sympathy, empathy or pity, regardless of the suffering he himself may have endured.