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| **Essay Q&A** |
| 1. **What is Jim’s role in the play?**

Jim’s story mirrors Joe’s in many ways. Both men are victims of the American Dream in the sense that they have placed making money above moral and humanitarian considerations. Joe has done this of his own volition, while Jim has been pressured into it by his grasping, suspicious wife, Sue. Sue urges Jim to fleece patients who are not even sick, while Jim wants to give up everything and do medical research to benefit the whole of humankind.Joe, for his part, is surrounded by people who, while they are not directly guilty of any crime, effectively become accomplices because they conspire with him to keep his secret. These include Kate, Joe’s neighbors, Jim, and even Chris.Both Jim and Joe have convinced themselves that they are turning their backs on the dictates of their souls for their families’ sakes. But Jim is more aware than Joe about the self-delusion that this involves. Joe is an uneducated man not given to reflection and self-questioning. But Jim, along with Larry, Chris, and George, is more of a thinker and a philosopher. All these characters know that there is a world beyond looking after one’s own interests. They know that there is a larger family to which they are ultimately responsible.Jim’s response to this knowledge is cynicism about the life to which he has bound himself. In Act Three, he says, “Money. Money-money-money-money. You say it long enough it doesn’t mean anything.” After Chris drives off in disgust at the revelations about Joe’s crime, Jim says, “Frank is right – every man does have a star. The star of one’s honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it’s out it never lights again. I don’t think he went very far. He probably just wanted to be alone to watch his star go out.”It is clear that Jim’s detached, cynical, and pessimistic voice is close to the author’s viewpoint. No convincing arguments are ever raised to counter Jim’s stance, and he is correct about Chris, albeit in a way that he does not intend, when he says that Chris will return from his drive and learn to compromise: “Oh no, he’ll come back. We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made” (Act Three). What even Jim does not realize is that Chris has already made that compromise. Chris says, “I was made yellow [cowardly] in this house because I suspected my father and did nothing about it …”Miller seems to be making the point that even cynics such as Jim do not see the full extent of the rot in the capitalist system. A man whom he supposes to be an idealist, Chris, turns out to be yet another compromiser, while the true idealists, Larry and the airmen who sacrificed their lives for their country, are dead.**2. *All My Sons* is about a man who makes a profit at the expense of his responsibility to society. Does this raise any issues that are still relevant today?**One of the major issues addressed by the play is that of corporate liability, which is as relevant today as it was when Miller wrote it. Joe’s approach to life, in putting profits before humanitarian and moral concerns, has become known in capitalist societies as “business as usual.” The phrase is commonly used in a derogatory sense by critics of corporate behavior, to imply lack of concern about the humanitarian, societal, or environmental costs of doing business.The problem about corporate behavior, as many human rights and environmental campaigners see it, is that a corporation is as capable as an individual person of killing or maiming others in the course of its activities. Harmful corporate practices may include flouting health and safety rules in the working environment, or creating pollution that sickens or kills workers or local residents. But while it is a relatively simple matter to convict an individual of assault, manslaughter, or murder, the laws regarding corporate harm are more problematic.As of 2008, the issue of liability for damage caused to individuals or the environment by corporate activities continues to be debated. In the United States, people who believe that they have been harmed by the activities of corporations can resort to criminal or civil law, with civil law requiring a lower burden of proof than criminal law.One of the problems of the current system is that in many cases (such as, for example, illness or deaths that may have been caused by a company’s pollution) it is difficult to prove that a specific harm results from the activities of the corporation and not from other agents. Another problem is the cost of litigation, which can be long and drawn-out. One solution is a class action lawsuit, in which a group of litigants shares the legal costs. But a judge can refuse a lawsuit class action status if he or she deems it inappropriate. Even if the judge grants class action status and the litigants win the case, the damages awarded may be small and must be shared among the group.In practice, many class action lawsuits that are allowed to proceed do not make it to court, as the corporation negotiates an out-of-court settlement with the plaintiffs (the people who bring the lawsuit accusing the corporation). This has the advantage to the plaintiffs that they are compensated financially for damages without having to prove harm to the standard of certainty required by the law. However, the disadvantage to the rest of the world is that any evidence against the corporation does not have to be made public, thus enabling corporate secrets to be kept. Also, no legal precedent against the alleged harmful activity of the corporation is established, so any future litigants against such activity effectively have to make their case anew.In *All My Sons*, Joe’s blindness to the moral consequences of pursuing profits at any cost will be all too familiar to modern activists who take on corporations in the name of social and environmental justice. When Chris takes him to task, he seems utterly unable to comprehend the wrongfulness of his actions:Chris [quietly, incredibly]: How could you do that? How?Keller: What’s the matter with you!Chris: Dad … Dad, you killed twenty-one men!Keller: What, killed?Chris: You killed them, murdered them.Keller [as though throwing his whole nature open before Chris]: How could I kill anybody?Miller emphasizes that corporate crimes such as Joe committed are not nameless statistics, but are perpetrated by real people and have real victims.**3. *All My Sons* is often described as a critique of the American Dream. Discuss this proposition.**The American Dream is the idea that in the United States, anyone, whatever their background, can become rich and successful through hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit. The protagonist of *All My Sons*, Joe, is an uneducated man from an unremarkable background who has indeed become wealthy and successful, but at a great price to society. His determination to make money and keep his factory producing has led to the deaths of twenty-one men. It has also led to the wrongful imprisonment of Steve, whom Joe made a scapegoat for his own crime by lying in court. Steve has been sacrificed on the altar of Joe’s single-minded pursuit of profit. He is frequently described as a “little man,” and such men, along with the idealists, are trodden underfoot in the onward march of the capitalist machine.Though Joe did what he did for the sake of his sons, so that he could pass on a prosperous business to them, his actions, paradoxically, lose him both sons. Larry cannot understand how Joe could place profits before everything, even men’s lives: “Every day three or four men never came back and he sits back there doing business” (Act Three). He commits suicide because of Joe’s action. Chris, too, is prepared to turn his back on Joe when the truth about his crime is revealed. In Act Two, Joe says that he did everything for the business, which in turn was for Chris. Chris is horrified, and replies, “Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?” For Chris, everyone has a responsibility to society in general which should override self-interest. Kate tries to explain Chris’s view to Joe in Act Three, in reply to Joe’s excuse that he committed the crime for the benefit of his family:Kate: There’s something bigger than the family to him.Joe: Nothin’ is bigger!Kate: There is to him.The deaths of the twenty-one airmen are the most obvious cost of the American Dream in the play. The tearing-apart of the Keller and Deever families and the acrimony in the Bayliss family is a further cost. Looking beyond those families, the entire neighborhood even participates in the corruption spread by greed: Joe’s neighbors overlook his crime because he is prosperous and successful.Joe’s final suicide is an example of poetic justice (in that the killer is dead) but it is also the most damning indictment of the American Dream. This is because it is not collateral damage wreaked by Joe’s determination to make money, but deliberate self-destruction by the champion of the American Dream. While the airmen and Joe’s family can be seen as sacrifices on the altar of the American Dream, Joe himself is the final victim and the final sacrifice. Just as Larry could not live with the knowledge of Joe’s crime, Joe himself cannot live with it once he comes to realize the truth that Larry knew instinctively. With Larry’s final letter in his hand, Joe says, “Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were” (Act Three).Joe’s words explain the title of the play and underline the interrelatedness of all human beings. As Miller explained in an interview in 1999 (Arthur Miller, *All My Sons: A Drama in Three Acts*, edited by C.W.E. Bigsby, Penguin Classics, 2000), “The concept behind it was that Joe Keller was both responsible for and a part of a great web of meaning, of being. He had torn that web; he had ripped apart the structure that supports life and society … that web of meaning, of existence. And a person who violates it in the way he did has done more than kill a few men. He has killed the possibility of a society having any future, any life. He has destroyed the life-force in that society.”The American Dream, Miller suggests, operates against the interests of society and of humankind.**4. *All My Sons* shows the influence of ancient Greek drama. How is this influence evident?***All My Sons* has elements of the tragedies of ancient Greece written by Aeschylus (525-524 BCE–456-455 BCE), Sophocles (circa 496 BCE–406 BCE), and Euripides (circa 480 BC–406 BC). In these plays, the protagonist (main character) commits an offence or error, sometimes unknowingly. The Greek word for such an offence was*hamartia*, which was originally an archery term meaning missing the mark. The ancient Greeks used the term to mean anything from an error to a character flaw to a sin against the gods. The Greek term has passed into dramatic criticism, where it is used variously to mean an error or a “fatal flaw” in the protagonist’s character.In ancient Greek drama, the protagonist’s offence catches up with him later in life. He has to recognize his fault and suffer for it. He experiences a reversal in fortune, described by the ancient Greek word *peripeteia*, and often dies at the end. Thus, order is restored and justice is done, creating an effect of *catharsis*, or purging of negative emotions, in the audience.The action of many ancient Greek plays takes place over a time period of twenty-four hours, in the interests of a rule for drama defined by the philosopher and critic Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE) as “unity of time.” The idea is that the time span portrayed in the play is sufficiently close to the audience’s “real time” to seem realistic. Unity of time also has the effect of telescoping the events into a small period in the characters’ lives and thus adding to the dramatic impact.Aristotle identifies two other unities that he believed should be observed in drama: unity of action and unity of place. Unity of action meant that the play should follow one main plot, with no or few subplots. Unity of place meant that the play’s action should take place in one location.The protagonist of ancient Greek plays was a prominent man such as a king or military leader, because such men were thought to influence the fate of nations by their actions. In the modern age, people no longer view such men in these terms, so modern drama has an ordinary person or “everyman” as the protagonist.Applying these features to *All My Sons*, the protagonist, Joe, is a successful business owner. This is a significant comment on the modern age, as the most influential people are no longer political or military leaders, but business people.Joe’s crime of sending out faulty cylinder heads to the armed forces catches up with him in later years. This drives the action of the play, which takes place over twenty-four hours in one place. There is no subplot beyond the glancing references to Jim’s story, which serves to reflect Joe’s story.The lie that Joe lived for years unravels and he suffers a reversal of fortune. He realizes that he has lost one son and alienated another through his crime. This is truly a tragedy for Joe as his sons are the reason he built up his business.The play ends with Joe’s death by suicide. Unlike Greek tragedy, however, there is no sense of a clean resolution or *catharsis*. Chris is left with the guilt of his father’s death on his hands, overshadowing his planned marriage to Ann. Meanwhile, the moral and social problems highlighted by the play are not lessened by Joe’s death. The onward march of the capitalist machine continues.**5. Frank, an amateur astrologer, believes that the position and movement of the planets influence people’s lives. How much do the characters blame outside events for their actions, and to what extent is this plausible?**Frank believes that Larry could not have died on November 25, the day he went missing, because it was his favorable day. Thus bad things could not happen to him on that day; it was more likely to be the kind of day he would marry on. In fact, Larry did die on that day, but it was not an accident, but his own choice. He was taking a moral and spiritual stand over his father’s crime. Thus, a kind of fulfillment did happen for Larry, but it was not marriage to a woman, but a refusal to compromise. Thus Miller shifts the focus from predetermination (which is how Larry understands of astrological influence) to individual moral choice (Larry’s decision to die rather than compromise).Joe in particular blames outside events for his crime. In Act Two, when Chris confronts him with his actions, he justifies them on the basis that he had no choice: “What could I do! … 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?” As he puts it, his action is the fault of the armed forces officers, who are demanding the airplane parts and who have the power to shut his factory down if he does not deliver. He also blames others for not spotting the faulty parts before installing them: “I never thought they’d install them. I swear to God, I thought they’d stop ‘em before anybody took off.”In Act Three, Joe continues to blame others. He blames Chris for not understanding money and business, and he blames his family, for whom he felt obliged to make money. It is left to Kate to say, “Joe, Joe … it don’t excuse it that you did it for the family.” When Chris implies that Joe should turn himself in and go to jail, Joe uses the excuse that everyone else does what he did: “Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go!” This, again, is a way of shifting blame outside himself, onto society as a whole.Even Chris blames his parents for his failure to raise his suspicions about Joe: “I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it” (Act Three).However, Miller’s point is that everyone bears responsibility for his own actions. Joe made choices the day the faulty cylinder parts were shipped out, and Chris made the choice to draw a salary from the business and not to confront his father, just as Larry made the choice not to live with the knowledge of Joe’s crime. |