**Themes for discussion in AMS**

**5. Themes**

**American Dream**

In a sense, *All My Sons* is a critical investigation of the quest to achieve material comfort and an improved social status through hard work and determination. In the Horatio Alger myth, even a disadvantaged, impoverished young man can attain wealth and prestige through personal fortitude, moral integrity, and untiring industry. Joe Keller is that sort of self-made man, one who made his way from blue-collar worker to factory owner. However, Joe sacrifices his integrity to materialism, and he makes a reprehensible decision that sends American pilots to their deaths, something he is finally forced to face.

**Atonement and Forgiveness**

Paradoxically, Joe Keller's suicide at the end of *All My Sons* is both an act of atonement and an escape from guilt. It stems from Joe's realization that there can be no real forgiveness for what he had done. The alternative is confession and imprisonment. Death offers Joe another alternative.

Forgiveness must come from Kate and Chris. The letter written by Larry reveals that he deliberately destroyed himself during the war, profoundly shamed by his father's brief imprisonment for fraud and profiteering. It is a devastating irony that Joe's initial attempt to do right by his family--resulting in fraud and the deaths of twenty-one fighter pilots-- leads to destruction of his world.

**Choices and Consequences**

*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. Joe, at a critical moment, elected to place his family's finances above the lives of courageous American soldiers.

The revelations that lead up to Joe's tragic recognition of guilt and his suicide, the final consequences of his choice, are essential to *All My Sons*. There is a sense of *anake,* or tragic necessity, that moves the work along towards its inevitable moment of truth and awful but final retribution.

**Death**

The key in the tragic arc of *All My Sons* is Kate Keller's refusal to accept the death of her son, Larry. Initially, prone to false hopes, it seems that she is in denial; finally, it is revealed that her need to believe that Larry is alive allows her to avoid the terrible consequences of her husband's deeds. She realizes that if Larry is dead, then Joe is responsible for his death--something Larry himself confirmed in his letter to Ann. All along, Kate knew her husband's guilt but desperately avoided it, knowing that it would destroy her family.

**Duty and Responsibility**

Joe Keller's sense of duty and responsibility is to the material comfort of his family and the success of his business. At a weak moment, under pressure, he puts these values ahead of what should clearly have been a higher duty, his obligation to human life. His fear of losing lucrative government contracts--essentially his greed--blinded him to the murder he was committing.

**Ethics**

Joe's decision to send defective parts is not merely a result of skewed values, it is a serious breach of ethics. Joe does not fully comprehend how serious a breach it is. To him, success is more important than anything else, including human life and the good of his country. By setting up this ethical situation, Miller clearly questions the implications of a value system that puts material success above moral responsibilities to others.

**Guilt and Innocence**

In *All My Sons,* there are hints that Joe is troubled by his guilt--even before his eventual suicide. His suspicions of Ann and George Deever reveal his fears of being forced to face the truth. Even when he attempts to atone for his guilt by helping his former partner, Steve Deever as well as Deever's son, George, his offer seems rather lame given the enormity of his guilt. There is no way he can atone for the deaths of the American fighter pilots, however, something that he finally realizes.

**Punishment**

Joe's death at the end of *All My Sons* is paradoxically both punishment and escape. In one sense, Joe can do no less than pay for his crime with his life. It is not an empty gesture. It is made abundantly clear from the play's beginning that Joe is a man who is full of life and cherishes his roles as both husband and father.

When the truth comes out, Joe has to face not only a return to prison but also the alienation of his remaining son and the destruction his family. Death offers the only escape from that pain. It may also be seen as a sacrificial act, one which saves Joe's son, Chris, from further humiliation.

**Revenge**

Fueled by his anger over Joe's guilt, George Deever comes to the Keller's house seeking revenge and retribution. He is a major catalyst and intensifies the emotional tension of the play. For a moment, Kate's friendliness and warmth placate him. When, towards the end of the second act, Kate inadvertently confirms the probable truth of his father's accusations, George's anger returns. Joe is then forced to reveal his fraudulent and deceitful actions.

# All My Sons Theme of Guilt and Blame

Pretty much everyone in *All My Sons* has a secret. Even as they tell jokes, drink grape juice, and dream of dancing, the characters vigilantly protect damning information that, if revealed, will destroy their lives. Part of self-protection means placing the blame elsewhere, creating diversions. You shift the blame to an old neighbor, your son, your parents. All the forced fun of suburban family get-togethers covers a well of guilt and shame that inevitably boils to the surface.

## Questions About Guilt and Blame

1. Why doesn't the community confront Joe Keller about his guilt?
2. Do you think Kate knew about Joe's crime at the time? Do you think she encouraged him to go through with it?
3. If Ann hadn't arrived on the scene, do you think Kate or Joe ever would have come clean to Chris?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. In *All My Sons*, the suburban community's strong capitalist values enable Joe Keller to get away with murder.  
Chris poses as an idealist to distance himself from his father and subtly deflect blame from himself.

# All My Sons Theme of Wealth

Money, money, money. It's all over *All My Sons.* Protection of assets leads the characters to commit some unsavory acts – but that's the way the world is, right? The doctor's wife nags him to make more house calls to up their income. Joe Keller defends his war profiteering because caring for his family, to him, meant growing his business. Joe's idealistic son, Chris, disdains business, but get some grape juice in him and he's all "Annie, I'm going to make a fortune for you!" to his fiancée (1.545). In this play, capitalist culture is pitted against human decency, and the two just can't seem to get along.

## Questions About Wealth

1. Presumably, Chris will take over the business now that his father's dead. What do you think he'll do with it? Or do you think he'll take it at all?
2. Do you think Miller's portrayal of the overweight, money-grubbing doctor's wife has a touch of the misogynistic?
3. How does Miller reflect the material values of this society in his settings?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. In the world of *All My Sons*, the moral man is a martyr.  
In *All My Sons*, Miller pits capitalism against morality, implying that they cannot coexist.

# All My Sons Theme of Justice and Judgment

In the back-story of *All My Sons*, there's a massive crime – the shipment of airplane parts known to be defective. One partner in the firm ducks the blame. He's released on appeal and goes on to accumulate impressive wealth and prestige. The other partner rots in prison, and loses all support from his family. When the play begins, the children of these two partners suffer the repercussions of this gross injustice. One son has died, one son is morbidly depressed; the daughter and son who want to marry must fight through the tangles of their fathers' wrongs, judge them, and judge themselves.

## Questions About Justice and Judgment

1. Why do you think the judge exonerated Joe Keller and condemned Steve Deever? Is Miller using this injustice to say something about class or society? If so, what?
2. Why does George give up his quest for vengeance?
3. Why don't the neighbors judge Joe Keller for the crime they know he committed?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. Kate Keller is right: Ann Deever comes seeking revenge.  
The suicide of Joe Keller at the end of *All My Sons* does not mean "justice is done." Too many people survive who were complicit in his guilt, and yet remain unpunished.

# All My Sons Theme of Lies and Deceit

Everyone is a liar in *All My Sons.* Joe Keller lies to his sons and his neighbors about a crime that killed 21 American pilots and sent his partner to prison. His wife Kate keeps quiet about it too. Chris, the surviving son and heir to Joe Keller's business, lies to himself about it. He has nothing to fear from the neighborhood, though – turns out everyone knows everyone's lying. There's a friendly neighborhood agreement to keep things cute. It's this complicity that the dead son, Larry, couldn't stand returning to after the sacrifice and bravery of war.

## Questions About Lies and Deceit

1. Why doesn't Ann bring out Larry's letter at the beginning of her visit? Or in the years prior?
2. Is there an honest character in this play?
3. Do you think "deceit" and "complicity" are one in the same? Are those characters who play along just as guilty as those who commit crimes?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. *All My Sons* could be read as a study on shades of deceit: outright lie, complicit silence, and self-deception.  
Kate's wily intelligence combines with Joe's social talent to make the Kellers a crackerjack team of deceivers.

# All My Sons Theme of Morality and Ethics

In *All My Sons*, moral fortitude generally loses to practicality and self-protection. Fearing the failure of his business, Joe Keller ships faulty parts to the military, which causes the death of 21 pilots, and blames it on his partner. His son Chris, while suspicious, protects his share of the business (and his psyche) by neglecting to question his father. The scapegoat's son, George, comes for revenge, but faced with his sister's iron resolve to get married to Chris, leaves with nothing. Morality doesn't have the place in the day-to-day world. In the war, says Chris, men "killed themselves for each other… a little more selfish and they'd've been here today" (1.541). The characters in this play, though, are the survivors – the selfish and the self-preserving.

## Questions About Morality and Ethics

1. What moral position do Frank and Lydia represent in the play?
2. Joe Keller claims that his highest good is his family; that he committed his crime solely to protect them. Do you believe him?
3. If Chris were to "do the right thing" at the end of the play, what would it be?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. Chris Keller will grow up to be just as compromising as his father.  
George Deever is the only ethical character in the play, and must be ejected from the morally-tainted neighborhood.

# All My Sons Theme of Memory and the Past

The characters in *All My Sons* refuse to acknowledge the past. Their denial keeps the old ghosts around with their dirty fingers in everything. Memory of a dead son is inextricably linked, for his parents, to knowledge of a hideous crime. That same dead son's visage puts a stranglehold on his surviving brother's pursuit of happiness with his love, Ann. Characters struggle to suppress these memories but the past works to reveal itself through the arrival of an old neighbor girl, through a telephone call from prison, and through an old letter from the dead son.

## Questions About Memory and the Past

1. Why does Kate object to the planting of a tree for Larry?
2. How, if at all, do you think the characters would memorialize Joe Keller after his suicide?
3. Do childhood memories affect the behavior of Chris, Ann, and George? How?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. Because she possesses Larry's suicide letter, Ann is less burdened by the past than the Kellers.  
The neighbors' recollections of past aspirations and failures echo the regret and compromise of the main plot.

# All My Sons Theme of Family

We can tell from the title of *All My Sons* that the play is about family. We see three families onstage, and a fourth family – the disgraced former neighbors – emerges again and again in the dialogue. While Ann and Chris's plans to start a new family first give the story a drop of hope, the idea of marriage itself seems doomed by the complicated and compromised unions surrounding the young couple. Much more than a mom and dad plus 2.25 kids, *All My Sons* advocates a redefinition of family that extends beyond each of our own garden plots.

## Questions About Family

1. How do Joe and Kate work their magic on the Deever children?
2. Do you believe that Larry defines family differently than his father does?
3. Do you see any of your own family in the Kellers? The Deevers?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. For a moment, lured by the charms of Kate and Joe, George Deever wishes he could be a Keller.  
In *All My Sons*, Miller argues for a redefinition of family.

# All My Sons Theme of Courage

In a post-war (World War II) play like *All My Sons*, courage is necessarily an important theme. The characters have different pictures of what courage looks like. For Joe Keller, it's a fierce protection of his family. Joe's son Chris thinks of courage as self-sacrifice, at war and at home. For Chris's fiancée Ann, courage means perseverance: leaving the wreckage of the Keller family with the one thing she wants, a husband. The final act in the play – Joe Keller's suicide – raises a question of courage. Is his suicide a brave apology or ultimate cowardice?

## Questions About Courage

1. Why is Chris afraid to acknowledge his father's guilt?
2. Does Larry's suicide nullify his image as a war hero?
3. Joe Keller lied to protect his business and his family. Would you consider that brave?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate. In *All My Sons*, the women show the most clear-sightedness and courage.  
Though hero in the war, Chris reveals his cowardice in the day-to-day business of living.

**All My Sons - Summary of Themes**

**1. Family and Society**

The family is a mediator between the individual and society.

a) Keller family is sick.

b) Individuals in the family are struggling between their roles as father, mother, son and brother.

c) Chris behaved in battle the way he thought fathers should behave based on his beliefs about his own father.

d) A crime is a crime, but the fall of one’s own ideals (Chris and Joe) makes the play a tragedy.

e) Joe’s betrayal of Steve is like betraying a family member.

f) Joe didn’t only kill his own sons, but his whole family.

g) Kate is motherly, friendly, but at the same time causes pain by covering up Joe’s guilt.

h) Neighbourhood is the society in the play – how did the neighbours respond to the crime.

**2. Irony**

a) Lying and covering up a crime is like an illness even though Joe claims he was never sick.

b) Joe pretended to be more ignorant than the rest in order to cover up his past crime. However, what he is really ignorant of , is the ideals and morals of society which are necessary for human existence.

c) Joe is guilty of a crime, but plays the detective in Bert’s game.

**3. Crime and Punishment**

a) Family helps members to internalize laws of i) the family ii) of society.

b) Until justice is done, family can’t survive.

c) Joe’s game of detactive with Bert shows us that he has internalized society’s laws.

d) Main crime wa\sn’t tried well by society in the play, but is continually tried by individuals in the play e.g. by George, Kate, Chris, Jim and Sue.

e) Chris saw his father’s deed as a crime. Joe saw it as a mistake.

**4. Truth and Lies**

a) Kate hides from the truth.

b) Kate lies to protect her family – role of wife and mother is more important than role or duty as a citizen.

c) Ann loves Chris because he tells her the truth. What does she do with it? She tells Kate the truth about Larry’s disappearance and suicide.

d) Poplar trees in the yard – are they protecting the family or the lies?

**5. Morality and Idealism**

**1. Moral of the play: The Truth must be discovered to enable people to live with themselves and others.**

2. Joe was morally wrong but he acted by his own standards given the capitalistic society he was born into.

3. What is the moral justification for war and what impact does war have on people, families and society?

4. It takes courage to hold onto one’s ideals – Chris, George and Jim.

5. Society is materialistic and this causes people to be selfish at any cost.

**Morality**

1. Moral judgements of human behaviour (Arthur Miller’s own view of morality is reflected in the character of Joe Keller and his criticism of capitalist society).

2. Conflicting moralities are at the center of the play. Jim’s desire to research medical truth while living in poverty.

3. Joe Keller’s conscience which won’t let him escape prison.

4. Ann’s desire to establish a family whatever the consequences, including forsaking her own family for the Kellers.

**Question for the end of the play:**

**Joe’s death ends the platy but not the interpretations. What could the family do if Joe were to survive? Could a son put a father in jail? And if he couldn’t, what is his idealism worth?**