

National Division
English Department
Grade: S1
Class:

School Year: 2019 - 2020
Name:
Date:

All My Sons

Act 3 Summary & Analysis +Questions

Summary

In the early hours of the next morning, the Keller household is not asleep. In his anger Chris stormed out of the house the previous night and has not yet returned. Jim Bayliss tells Kate, who is waiting anxiously for Chris to return, he always "knew" Joe was as guilty as Steve Deever. She acknowledges they all knew, thinking even Chris did at some level. Jim tells of his own compromises in life involving his unhappy marriage and assures Kate that Chris will eventually accept things as they are.

Joe and Kate talk about what he may have to do now that the truth is out. Kate suggests that he approach Chris with the possibility of his turning himself in to the authorities in the hope of forgiveness and retribution. She tells him Chris might understand and would never actively want such punishment for him. But Joe remains proud and unfeeling, justifying what he did for the family and their position and finances, despite Kate's insistence that "there's something bigger than family" to Chris. Joe still sees only the limited relationship of family loyalty and claims he'll "put a bullet in [his] head" if any ties are stronger than father and son. He clings to the idea his missing son would not force him to pay for his responsibility and relies again on Kate to do the talking.

Ann tells Joe and Kate that she will now insist she and Chris leave together because nothing remains for them there. She wants to start their new life together by having his family finally acknowledge Larry's death. To force the issue, Ann shows Kate a letter she has kept with her. When Larry heard of the scandal involving their fathers, he wrote to her. In desperation over the loss of his men in the war, a desperation caused by what Joe Keller and Steve Deever had done, he tells Ann he plans to kill himself as well by crashing his plane. The letter is dated November 25.

Chris returns but tells Ann he is going away alone now to make his own new life. He confronts his father and rejects Joe's appeals for understanding on financial grounds, not considering turning him in since he too feels sullied by the money from which they have been living. Ann still wants to be with Chris, away from the family, and shows him Larry's letter. With this last revelation of the truth, which he reads to his father, he alone decides to lead Joe to the authorities, as retribution

of some sort for his brother. Joe goes inside, seemingly assenting to his fate, and shoots himself. The play ends with the long-delayed bang, Chris urging his mother to face her own future and become a better, more truthful person and she urging him to go his own way. Larry's death will be meaningless, unless, Chris says, "you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it."

Analysis

The play concludes with a sense of inevitable finality given its start in false security and impending disaster. The Keller family has already lost one son and has lost another father/son connection by the time it ends. Joe Keller has completely absorbed the values of a patriarchal system based on family loyalty above all else. He uses this bond to justify to himself and others the abandonment of truth and decency toward humankind, even in times of war when people routinely sacrifice themselves for a cause. But when forced to hear the words of a son he drove to suicide, he cannot listen and understand anyone else.

The Kellers have been forced by the Deevers, whom they injured and deceived, to confront themselves. If the Keller family has been destroyed, so has the Deever family, in ways Ann and George barely understood until they were shown proof. Ann's holding onto the letter from Larry until the last moment—when she begins to realize she will not have either Keller brother but only her own brother to rely on—indicates a new solidarity and the inevitability of truth. The play must end immediately after the letter's contents are read and the Deevers, as agents of truth, have fulfilled their function. Now they can go. Chris and his mother remain and have each other, at least with clarity, as the symbolic uprooting of the tree that starts the play displays its final significance. As Chris, bare chested, cleared it away to start Act 2, the final cleansing leaves his mother with only one word of counsel for him, *live*. She tells him not to absorb any guilt for what his father has done. Her motherly nature comes through now as honestly as it can, without manipulation and without exaggerated intensity. And so does Chris's idealism when he tells her it's not enough to be sorry. "You can be better!" he says. "There's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it."

A curse seems to have fallen upon the House of Keller—in a figurative sense—with the Keller family representing any family; that is, a unit whose individual members influence the morality and well-being of all the other individuals and the whole. The Keller family patriarch, by limiting his loyalty to members of the Keller family only—and by placing money above a moral commitment to others—has cursed the family and brought on its destruction. Seeing other human beings as being outside the family is a grave mistake with enormous consequences. When Joe Keller in his last words sees other men as "all my sons," he speaks for the

ideals of Miller the playwright, who wished the postwar world to evolve into a better theater for humankind, all fathers and all sons, all one family.

Questions

1. Why is the confirmation of Larry's death understood and accepted so quickly by his family, especially by Kate?
2. What is the significance of the comparisons made between war and business in this act?
3. Why does Joe Keller decide to commit suicide?
4. How does the play end, and how is that ending tragic?
5. To what extent does the final scene resolve the primary conflict(s) of the play?

Answers

1. Ann confirms Larry's death by sharing a letter with the Kellers that reveals his intention to commit suicide; the details of the letter match the circumstances of his death exactly and cannot be denied. Kate finally gives in because a key motivation for her denial of the death has been revealed: Joe's role in the crime.
2. Chris compares business to war in this act by suggesting that even the tactics of the battlefield are more honorable than those of the marketplace. The implication is that betrayal, at least, is punished during wartime. His statement protests his father's decision to ship the faulty cylinder heads, an act that places the pursuit of profit over concern for human life.
3. Joe commits suicide because he cannot bear the news that he did, in fact, cause the death of his own son. He cannot live with the fact that greed has corrupted one of his most precious values: loyalty to his family.
4. The play ends after Joe's suicide, as Chris and Kate cling to each other in confusion. The end is tragic because each main character fails to overcome a fatal flaw and rise above the circumstances of the conflict.
5. The final scene suggests that business practices must be reformed if human communities, and the values that support them, are to survive. The

ending leaves the exact response or solution to this problem open to interpretation.