**“All My Sons”- Themes**

**THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL VS ONE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SOCIETY**

'Sure he was my son. But I think to him, they were all my sons.' (*Joe, Act Three*)

In Joe's world, he believes he has done nothing wrong because he put his family first. His **individual responsibility** to his family is more important that his **responsibility to society at large**. It never enters his mind that he's responsible for the death of the pilots who went down in planes with his faulty parts. Joe can further reconcile this responsibility because although Larry's plane also went down, he never flew that type of plane:

'Those cylinder heads went into P-40's only. What's the matter with you? You know Larry never flew a P-40.' (*Act One*)

He's completely focused on his **individual responsibility**. And when the truth comes out, that is still where his focus lays. There is nothing more important than the family, than saving the business to give to Chris: "For you, a business for you!" (*Act Two*)

Chris believes in a **greater responsibility to society**. This is what the war has left him with. And when Joe's responsibility in the scandal is finally revealed, his response is volatile:

'For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?' (*Act Two*)

Joe lives his life with blinkers on. He completely **blocks out his responsibility to society** and can't understand Chris' outburst: '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.' (*Act Three*)

Joe's insistence of **individual responsibility** is shown right from the start of the play with the description of the set. The stage directions describe the Keller's backyard as 'secluded.' There are hedges and 'tall closely planted poplars.' It's almost as if the family is physically shut off from the rest of the world. Hiding. When Larry's tree blows down Kate asks Chris at the top of Act Two if he notices that 'there's more light with that thing gone.' As the physical enclosures are removed so is the Keller's ability to hide from the world. The truth is coming to light.

The reveal of Larry's letter puts **Individual Responsibility** and **Social Responsibility** on a collision course. Larry writes Ann a letter in which he states that after learning about Joe's initial arrest for the cracked parts, he's going to purposefully crash his plane:

'Every day three or four men don't come back and he sits there doing business.' (*Act Three*)

The letter clarifies to Joe the difference between **individual responsibility** and **responsibility to society**. 'Sure he was my son. But I think to him, they were all my sons.' (*Act Three*) He realizes why Larry crashes his plane. The final question remains is whether by the end Joe learns to accept his responsibility. Does his suicide mean that he has?