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## UNIT 3 THEMATIC CONCERNS IN *ALL MY SONS*

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### Structure

#### 3.0 Objectives

#### 3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Theme of Social Responsibility

3.1.2 Problem of Chris's Marriage as Theme

3.1.3 Idealism as Theme

3.1.4 Father-Son Relationship as Theme

3.1.5 Actions and their Consequences as Theme

3.1.6 Mother-Son Relationship as Theme

#### 3.2 Let Us Sum Up

#### 3.3 Exercise

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit discusses in detail various themes in the play *All My Sons* such as social responsibility, marriage, idealism, father-son relationship, actions and their consequences and mother-son relationship.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In *All My Sons* we come across several themes, the theme of social responsibility is the single major theme while there are several other themes juxtaposed with the major one. The relatively minor themes are interwoven in such a way with the major theme that they have become an integral part of the play.

#### 3.1.1 Theme of Social Responsibility

The play *All My Sons* has a single major theme - the theme of social responsibility. It emphasizes the importance of a man's duty towards society and his country before his duty to his family. The play brings out the tragic consequences of a man's mistake of becoming rich and providing a comfortable and luxurious life to his family at the cost of society. Joe Keller wants to fulfill the American Dream that goes back to the early puritan settlers in America who came with the aim to establish New Jerusalem, that practically meant establishing an economic civilization in the wilderness of American continent. In due course of time however the achievement of success was through manipulation and disregard for moral values. Keller merely believes in the economic interpretation of the American Dream where values and morality take the back seat. Joe Keller's dream is confined

to his family; his ultimate goal being to look after the comforts of his family. This obsession makes him dupe his own friend and partner Steve Deever. He is inspired by the myopic vision of the 'American Dream' This meant to become successful by manipulation and duplicity. He believes that to survive in this world of competition one has to be successful alone. The fear of failure leads him to betray not only his friend but also his own country.

Joe Keller, a manufacturer of aircraft engines, had received an urgent contract from the army to supply cylinder heads for aircrafts to be used in war. But it so happened that the whole batch of cylinder heads produced by the manufacturing unit had developed cracks. On the day the urgent order came Joe Keller was at home, while his business partner Steve Deever was in the manufacturing unit. Steve Deever called up Joe Keller to inform him about the hairline cracks in the cylinder heads discovered by him in the factory. Joe Keller could have asked Steve Deever to withhold the supply of these defective cylinder heads, but he felt that putting a halt to the supply of the damaged cylinder heads would lead to a huge financial loss. A hundred and twenty defective cylinder heads that the factory had manufactured were damaged and discarding them and making new ones would lead to a lot of delay as also to the termination of their contract. Moreover they would not be able to meet the demands of the army who needed the cylinder heads immediately for the ongoing war.

Owing to the financial pressure and the obsession of becoming rich, Keller risked shipping the faulty parts of the cylinder heads. Keller could not bear to see his business collapse that had taken forty years of struggle to build it. Keeping his personal and family interests in mind he called up Steve Deever asking him to weld the cracks on the cylinders and ship it out to the army. Keller told him that he was down with the flu and would not be coming to the factory, but would take full responsibility for supplying the damaged cylinders. Later defending his action, Keller tells his son that he thought that the authorities would send him a report of the damaged cylinder heads after they themselves had tested them. Twenty one pilots were dead in consequence as their aircrafts crashed. Both Steve Deever and Joe Keller knew that the defective cylinder heads would put the lives of the pilots in danger but they wanted to make profit without bothering about the consequences. Keller disregards his social responsibilities and seeks his own material interests at the cost of other people's lives. For Joe Keller the duty towards his family is his priority: he makes a wrong choice and the result is disastrous. Keller insists that his own values are those of the American capitalist society that emphasises achieving success by economic gain in this land of opportunity. As he asks, 'Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nothing, I'll work for nothing. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clear? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clear? Half the goddamn country is gotta go if I go.' (*All My Sons*, p- 87) Joe Keller places his commitment to his immediate family above his wider responsibility to the society at large.

### 3.1.2 Problem of Chris's Marriage as Theme

One of the minor themes of the play is the problem of Chris's marriage. Kate Keller is of the view that her son Larry would return some day from the war that had ended three years ago. Larry went to the war as a fighter pilot and had been reported missing. For all practical purposes he was presumed to be dead. Steve Deever's daughter Ann had been in love with Larry and was engaged to him before he went to fight in the war. But after the news of Larry going missing, Ann had accepted the fact that he was no more. Larry's brother Chris is in love with Ann. After his brother was reported to be killed in the war, Chris desires to marry Ann. He keeps in touch with her through letters and later invites her to his house in order to propose to her. Ann comes to the Keller household in response to Chris's invitation and agrees to marry him. Their idyllic set up gets disturbed with Chris' invitation to Ann to visit the Keller household. The arrival of Ann to the Keller household opens up several questions that had been left unanswered for three years, leading to the downfall of Keller and the collapse of the Keller family. Her arrival after a long interval connects the present with the past and actions with consequences.

While everyone in the Keller household believes that Larry is dead, Kate persists in believing that Larry is alive and would come home one day. Joe Keller knows Chris's intention of inviting Ann home but he tells Chris that his mother would not agree to this marriage because she believes that her son Larry is still alive and Ann is Larry's fiancée. Kate is already suspicious of Ann's arrival to her house and when she learns that Chris wants to marry Ann she does not approve of it, as for her to agree for their marriage would mean the confirmation of Larry's death which in turn would prove her husband's complicity in the crime of killing twenty-one pilots. However, Ann is willing to marry Chris as she is convinced that Larry is dead. The Apple tree that had fallen down by the fierce wind on the day of Ann's arrival reinforces her belief that the coincidence has some hidden meaning. Kate refuses to agree with both Chris and Ann's firm view that Larry is dead.

The arrival of George in the Keller household further complicates the situation. George had come to the Keller household to prevent his sister's marriage to Chris after he learnt about certain facts about the case in which his father had been convicted and Keller had been exonerated after meeting his father in prison in Columbus. On arrival at the Keller household, George takes up the matter in order to expose Keller's complicity in the case. He tells his sister Ann that he would not allow her to marry Chris, the son of a man who ruined their father's life.

Kate wants Ann to leave with George because she still believes that Larry is alive and Ann should wait for Larry's return. Chris makes it clear that Ann would not leave the house and that he would marry Ann because Larry is dead. Kate says that Larry is alive and if everyone believes he is dead then he has been killed by his father. She says that a father never kills his son, so Larry must be alive. In spite of knowing that Larry is dead, Kate lives in self-deception that Larry will return. "To justify her conviction, she adopts

a blind faith in religion and obstinately argues that ‘God does not let a son be killed by his father’ (*Collected Plays* P- 114). In order to justify that he has not killed Larry, Keller says that Larry could not have been killed by engine failure because he was not flying P-40 but some other airplane. Chris is suspicious about his father’s role in the supply of damaged cylinder heads and asks him whether he was responsible for the death of the other pilots. Keller tries to hide the fact from his son Chris but reveals the truth when Chris threatens to tear him to pieces.

Keller admits his guilt saying that if the cylinder heads had not been shipped out to the army he would have become bankrupt. To save his factory from ruin he had no choice but to supply the defective cylinder heads to the army. He says that he had visualized the repercussions but he thought that the army would check before bringing them into use and report to him about their malfunctions if any. Shocked by his father’s arguments to defend himself Chris shouts at him for having endangered the lives of twenty-one pilots. Chris feels miserable and helpless at the crime his father has committed.

Chris wants to move out to earn his own living away from his parents. He refuses to be a part of the fraud by living on the profits of his father’s business made by wrong means. Ann offers to accompany Chris, but he refuses to take her along because Kate has made Chris feel guilty of marrying Ann. Kate objects to Ann’s marriage with Chris saying that he will have to wait for Larry to return and if Chris married Ann he would always be unhappy because he would be feeling guilty all the time that he had married a girl belonging to Larry.

Ann emphatically says that Larry died after his aeroplane crashed off the coast of China on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November which was not due to engine failure. Refusing to believe her, Kate accuses Ann of lying. In order to save her relationship with Chris, Ann shows Kate the letter from Larry, a proof of his death that he had written to her on the last day of his life. Kate was not shocked by the letter for she already knew the truth. Chris also had a vague idea about his father’s crime. Kate on one hand could not accept the death of her son Larry as this would lead her husband’s guilt to be proved. Chris on the other hand did not want to accept his father’s crime as he had idolized and respected him. In the letter Larry had written to Ann that he had come to know through the newspaper of his father being convicted for supplying defective cylinder heads that had killed a large number of pilots. Ashamed of his father’s crime, he was ending his life by letting his aircraft to crash. Ann Deever also had been living in denial after she received Larry’s letter. She knew about Keller’s guilt but does not reveal to anyone until she is compelled to do so to save her relationship with Chris.

### 3.1.3 Idealism as Theme

Another minor theme juxtaposed with the main theme in the play *All My Sons* is the theme of idealism. Chris has an idealistic bent of mind. He feels guilty in even wanting to marry Ann and settling down to lead a blissful and comfortable life while all the men under his command have been killed in the course of the war. These soldiers had repeatedly proved by their actions that they were real human beings. Chris feels guilty of having survived the

war while the other soldiers died. He tries to console himself by thinking that the soldiers under his command were sacrificing their lives for a noble cause. In his opinion, by giving up their lives these soldiers were helping in changing the world into a better place. But when the war ended and he came back home he saw to his shock that nothing had changed in the world around him. He found the same kind of selfishness, competition to make money and the desire to fulfill the 'American Dream' as he had observed before the war. The existing situation makes Chris feel guilty for the people who had given their lives in vain as nothing had changed in the world. Chris felt ashamed of everything around him. He was ashamed of looking at his cheque-book, or driving his new car or looking at the new fridge that was bought for the house. He feels awkward to use these comforts and is also hesitant to marry Ann. In the war he had seen men having a bonding among themselves while here people were driven by their selfish motives.

Chris's idealistic personality influences Jim Bayliss to such an extent that he wants to give up his medical practice for medical research. The idea of medical research upsets his wife Sue who accuses Chris of misleading her husband and filling his mind with wrong notions. Medical research had given immense satisfaction to Jim making that particular period of his life much happier. But he had to discontinue with his research to please his wife Sue for whom materialistic comforts mattered more.

Chris says, 'The business! The business doesn't inspire me'. (*All My Sons* Pg- 15) It is against his ideology to enter his father's business that had been built by fraudulent means. He fears that he might also follow the success-code of society. Chris's idealistic qualities even compel his father to realize the enormity of his crime of killing twenty-one pilots. Joe Keller is forced by Chris's idealism to realize his social responsibilities. In result he kills himself as a punishment for his crime of being involved with killing twenty one pilots.

### 3.1.4 Father-Son Relationship as Theme

Another minor theme interwoven with the main theme in the play *All My Sons* is father-son relationship. Keller says, 'there's nothing he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son . . . .Nothing bigger than that. . . . 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!' (*All My Sons* P-81).

Chris has a high opinion of his father Joe Keller. He considers him as an infallible father figure. He is very close to him and has complete trust in him. Keller is the first person in whom Chris confides his marriage plans with Ann. Chris convinces his father to support him in the fight that involves Kate who still thinks of Ann as Larry's fiancée. Joe Keller does not want to interfere in the complex matter: he thinks that Chris' marriage is his own affair and he is also worried that his wife Kate would not like the idea of Chris marrying Larry's fiancée. Keller is a friend more than a father to Chris. Giving him friendly advice Keller says that Chris should first take Ann's opinion in planning his marriage. Confiding with him Chris says that from the letters he had been receiving from Ann he is of the opinion that

she has forgotten Larry completely. Chris expects him to take his side if his mother refuses to allow the marriage, threatening to leave the house and live somewhere else if he is not given consent to marry her. Keller is shocked to hear his decision to quit home. He is worried about their family business that he had built for Chris. Chris blackmails his father saying that he would stay back to take charge of the family business only if he is allowed to marry Ann.

Chris refuses to believe that his father is guilty when Ann tells Chris that she heard from Sue that the neighbours think that Joe Keller has manipulated in the case of supplying defective cylinder heads to the army. Defending his father he says he would never have forgiven his father if his father had been found guilty of fraud. Chris trusts his father and tells Ann that he is innocent in the case but has been falsely accused.

The arrival of Ann's brother George gives rise to conflict between Chris and Keller. Revealing the truth George says that Keller is the main culprit in the damaged cylinder head case and had deceived Steve Deever. Chris objects strongly to George's accusations of his father having duped his partner Steve Deever. George says that the court had passed the judgment without knowing the cunningness of Joe Keller but Chris defends him saying he knows his father very well and that Joe Keller is not guilty of supplying defective cylinder heads to the army. Chris again blatantly denies George's accusations of his father being responsible for supplying defective cylinder heads. When George asks for Chris' permission to talk to Keller, Chris asserts that his father has done nothing wrong, and he knows what reply his father would give to his questions. Coming under pressure from George, Chris breaks the semblance for family harmony maintained all this while, questioning his father Keller about his role in the sordid business transaction. Justifying himself Keller says that financial pressure and his duty towards his family compelled him to supply the damaged cylinder parts.

The relation between father and son collapses with the clash of their principles. Joe Keller believes that nothing is bigger in the world than one's family and nothing is more important than a son's relationship with the father. Justifying his actions Keller tries to convince Chris saying, 'Chris ..... Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance do you? (All *My Sons* P-75) Chris has a different set of ideals. In his view there is a larger world outside his family and one has a certain responsibility beyond one's family. In Chris' opinion all the pilots killed in the war were also his sons. Defending himself of his actions Keller says that he has supplied the defective cylinder heads to the army to save himself from bankruptcy. He did not want to be out of his business which had taken him forty years to build; he was already sixty-one and was in no position to build up another business if he allowed his business to collapse. He says he did all this for Chris' sake, to protect his future interests and to ensure his family's survival. Further defending his actions Joe Keller says that there was no harm making money and that everyone else earned money by all possible methods during the war. Chris' character is contrary to his father's character. The conflict between Chris and Joe Keller arises from Chris' consciousness towards social responsibility while Keller is insensibly following the American Dream. Chris is ashamed to know of his father's principles and says that he had always put his father

on a high pedestal but now he had fallen in his estimation.

Chris says that he had judged Keller not as a man but as his father. Chris is furious to hear from his father that he had put the pilots' life at stake for his family's sake. Chris had been risking his life daily while fighting in the war and had seen soldiers under his command at the war perishing daily while Keller had ignored the interests of the country and worked for his selfish motives. He lashes at him furiously.

.... 'What the hell do you mean, you did it for me'? Don't you have a country? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own. what are you?' . . . . .  
(*All My Sons* p.76)

Chris does not know how to punish Joe. He feels helpless and miserable.

Larry's letter finally makes Keller realize that there is something bigger than the family. The letter reads that Larry could not live with the shame of his father being involved in the death of the pilots. Keller 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 ... (*All 'My Sons* p-89)'. Keller punishes himself by shooting himself on realizing that he was wrong in seeing only his family while both his sons Chris and Larry are right in seeing the larger family. Chris holds himself responsible for his father's self- destruction.

Keller wants to rename the business for Chris from 'J.O. Keller incorporated' to 'J.O. Keller and Son', but Chris is uneasy with the proposition. Keller suspects that Chris is ashamed of their money and he tries to convince him that he has earned them morally.

Unlike the Chris-Keller relationship, George's relation with his father improves from callousness to that of a dutiful son as the play proceeds. George disowns his father Steve Deever thinking him to be the main culprit in the defective cylinder case. He snaps his relationship with his father as he himself is an idealist like Chris who cannot tolerate his father's involvement in the crime of killing twenty- one pilots while working on his personal profit and looking after the welfare of his family. George comes to know about the truth after his meeting with his father in the prison when he went to inform him of Chris' marriage with Ann. Convinced by his father's version of the case he visits the Keller household to expose Keller's crime and prevent Ann's marriage with Chris. George's accusations against Keller are rejected by the Keller family and also by Ann. Though George does not succeed in convincing them, the sincere efforts of a dutiful son do bring disturbance to the peaceful existence of the Keller family.

### 3.1.5 Actions and their Consequences as Theme

Another theme that is integrated with the main theme is actions and their consequences. Joe Keller, manufacturer of aircraft cylinder heads, had been charged with the supplying of defective equipment that led to the death of twenty-one pilots. It was his decision to ship the faulty cylinder heads to the army, yet he denies his responsibility for his actions at the trial and the blame shifts to Steve Deever, his partner. While his partner is convicted, he is exonerated, thus re-establishing his business successfully and winning back the respect of his neighbours. Despite suspicions that he is guilty, they

apparently accept him back in their social life. But relief at his acquittal lasts only for three years. At the time the play begins, Ann, the daughter of Steve Deever arrives at the Keller household to get married to Chris Keller. Kate refuses to allow the marriage between Chris and Ann as agreeing to their marriage would mean that she has accepted the death of her son Larry with whom Ann was engaged. Acceptance of her son's death would also mean linking Larry's death with her husband's guilt. Keller is nervous and frightened once he gets to know that George, who is a lawyer, was on his way to the Keller household after visiting his father Steve Deever in Jail. George's arrival to the Kellers further complicates matters as he comes to the Kellers to know the truth of the defective cylinder case from Joe Keller. After visiting his father in jail, George now believes that Joe Keller is equally responsible for the death of the pilots. He wants Ann to break off the engagement with Chris and return with him to New York. Though he fails to get the facts out of Keller, Kate Keller accidentally lets out the secret by the slip of her tongue that Joe 'hasn't been laid up in fifteen years'. In order to protect her husband from being proved guilty she reiterates her faith in the theory of Larry being alive because if he's dead Joe Keller has killed him and God does not let a son be killed by his father. Chris angrily confronts his father, who tries hard to defend his actions as 'business'. Justifying his acts Keller explains that one works for forty years and in one moment with one failed shipment, the contracts get cancelled and one loses everything. He had thought that the army would check the engine heads before bringing them into use, and he would send him their reports. He would then warn them. But it was too late and the disaster had already taken place. Chris is flabbergasted that his father knowingly put the lives of pilots at stake. But his father says that he had done for Chris, for his family and his business. Keller had acted within the profit orientation of capitalism. Wartime profiteering and the pursuit of business profit beyond humanity was part of the American capitalist system. And Keller was one of thousands of men caught up in the existing situation making a choice according to his own values. Keller works for the interests of the family, otherwise he would have lost his business and his family would have landed in poverty. Chris is disgusted and ashamed of his father's choice, ignoring the larger social and cultural values. Larry's letter that is revealed by Ann after she fears that her relation with Chris is threatened brings out Larry's intention of committing suicide because of her father's actions. Stunned by the consequences of his actions that have led his son Larry to commit suicide and the guilt of killing the pilots and finally understanding that in the eyes of Larry and in a

the penalty for his actions. Keller's decision to commit suicide at the end of the play comes as a direct response to his realization that the pilots who died as a consequence of his actions were 'all his sons'.

### 3.1.6 Mother-Son Relationship as Theme

One of the minor themes again juxtaposed with the main theme is the mother-son relationship. Kate is a dominant figure in the Kate-Chris relationship. Chris's closeness to his dad is more evident in the play *All My Sons* than with his mother Kate though he cares for his mother and she is a loving mother to him. Ann's visit to the Keller household makes Kate suspicious that she might have come to many Chris. Kate believes that Larry is alive and will return someday and marry Ann. Both Ann and Chris try to explain



to Kate that it is ridiculous to wait for a man who had been missing for three years. Kate had known that her husband was guilty of shipping the defective cylinder heads but had kept the secret to herself. She lives in an illusion that Larry is alive and will return someday. Her son Larry being very close to her heart, she cannot come to terms with his loss. Her irrational belief is beneficial for the family unit and her false hope of his return strengthens her. Kate disagrees for the marriage of Chris and Ann because giving her consent to their marriage would mean that she would have to accept Larry's death which in turn would lead to the revelation of her husband's crime of killing twenty-one pilots so she still waits for Larry's return. Chris finds it ridiculous to wait for someone who has been missing in action for three years. Chris is of the opinion that his mother is simply harboring a wrong notion. In his opinion she is the only woman in America who is still waiting for her son to return.

Being aware of her husband's guilt in the case of supplying defective cylinder heads, a worried Kate asks Chris to protect both her husband and herself. She fears that Steve and George might re-open the case because on the last days of the trial, Steve Deever persisted in alleging in the court that Keller had forced him to dispatch the defective cylinder heads to the army.

Both Chris and Kate are living in a state of denial of Keller's guilt; as a result their viewpoints are different on many issues. Chris disagrees with Kate's view of Ann being inwardly hostile to the Keller family because of her father. While Kate insists that Ann is still waiting for Larry's return, Chris disagrees with her as he knows very well that Ann is in love with him. Kate does not like the idea of Ann staying with them while her brother George leaves. She wants that both George and Ann should leave together. Chris makes it clear to Kate that Ann was not going anywhere. Chris calls Frank insane for believing in astrology and being certain that Larry was alive while Kate trusts Frank and disagrees with Chris.

Both Chris and Kate knew about the defective cylinder case but kept it to themselves trying to hide the fact from each other so that the family could function in harmony. Chris is suspicious of his mother's knowledge about the truth of the defective cylinder heads case when George accuses Kate of telling lies that her husband Keller had not suffered from illness in the last fifteen years and later his father modifies her statement saying that he had suffered from flu. Kate says that it had dipped her mind.

Chris is furious to hear from his mother that she has packed Ann's bag so that she leaves with her brother George. Chris makes it clear to his mother that Ann would not be leaving and that if Ann did not have any place in this house, he would go away from his house as well. Chris emphatically says that Larry is dead so he would marry Ann. Chris wants to go ahead with his marriage plan in spite of his mother telling him that she would not allow the marriage to take place and that everybody in the house must wait for Larry's return. Hinting that Keller is responsible for Larry's death, she says that Larry is alive and that if Larry is dead, then Larry has been killed by Joe Keller. And a father never kills his son, therefore, Larry must be alive. Taking cue from her statement Chris asks his father about the case and Keller is forced to come out with the truth of the case.

Kate's concern for her son is obvious in her restlessness following Chris' disappearance after Keller's acceptance of his guilt in the case. Advising her husband Joe, she asks him to tell Chris that he is ready to go to prison in order to pay for his guilt in the case. She is sure that it would satisfy Chris and he would forgive his father. Here Kate judges him wrongly.

Kate acts as a mediator between Keller and her son after Chris refuses to talk to his father once he comes to know about Keller's fraud. Joe asks Kate to convey to Chris that he had spoiled Chris and that he should have let him earn his own livelihood from the time he was ten years old, to make him realise that it was not easy to make money in this world. He further says that he would not ask Chris' forgiveness because he had committed the crime for the interests of his family. Talking about Chris' ideals, Kate says that for Chris the interests of the nation were bigger than the family.

Kate makes Chris feel guilty of his decision to marry Ann by reiterating that Larry was alive and that Chris would never have a happy marital life if he married Larry's fiancée Ann. Kate's disapproval for their marriage compels Ann to show Larry's letter written to her on the last day of his life. The contents of the letter do not shock Kate as she has been aware of her husband's complicity in the damaged cylinder heads case. Ann has to snatch the letter from her in order to show it to Chris as Kate tries to prevent Chris from reading the letter. Chris reads Larry's letter that is the proof of the circumstances in which Larry had killed himself. Joe Keller asks Chris to drive him to the authorities so that he can surrender himself. Pleading with Chris not to hand him to the authorities she says that if Chris would take Keller to jail, he would be killing Joe. Trying to save her husband from going to jail, she conveniently tells Chris that Larry's letter had no meaning as the war was over. Chris then asks his mother if Larry was not important to her any more. He makes both Joe and Kate realize that it is not enough to feel sorry, they should have a certain responsibility towards society and the nation. Kate had all this while kept repeating that Larry is alive in order to conceal her husband's guilt. And once Larry's letter comes out with the truth, she begins pleading with Chris not to take her husband away because he would not live long.

After her husband shoots himself inside the house, Kate consoles Chris like a loving mother telling him not to take the blame on himself. She asks him to be strong, to forget the past and to look forward to the future.

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### 3.2 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have discussed the themes in *All My Sons* in detail. After reading this unit we are clear about the main issues that Arthur Miller conveys to us through this play.

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### 3.3 EXERCISE

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1. What is the major theme of the play *All My Sons*?
2. Write a short note on the theme of actions and their consequences.
3. How is the character of Chris contrary to that of his father?
4. Briefly discuss the various themes of the play *All My Sons*?