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| Studying Arthur Miller's All My Sons |

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| http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/images/black.gif | This guide is written for teachers and students who are studying Arthur Miller's play All My Sons. The guide is written specifically for students in the UK, but I hope it may be helpful to users from other parts of the world. All My Sons is sometimes set as a text for assessed work in drama for English and English literature exams.  Introduction  The action of the play is set in August 1947, in the mid-west of the U.S.A. The events depicted occur between Sunday morning and a little after two o'clock the following morning.  Joe Keller, the chief character, is a man who loves his family above all else, and has sacrificed everything, including his honour, in his struggle to make the family prosperous. He is now sixty-one. He has lost one son in the war, and is keen to see his remaining son, Chris, marry. Chris wishes to marry Ann, the former fiancée of his brother, Larry. Their mother, Kate, believes Larry still to be alive. It is this belief which has enabled her, for three and a half years, to support Joe by concealing her knowledge of a dreadful crime he has committed.  Arthur Miller, the playwright, found the idea for Joe's crime in a true story, which occurred during the second world war: a manufacturer knowingly shipped out defective parts for tanks. These had suffered mechanical failures which had led to the deaths of many soldiers. The fault was discovered, and the manufacturer convicted. In All My Sons, Miller examines the morality of the man who places his narrow responsibility to his immediate family above his wider responsibility to the men who rely on the integrity of his work.  **The background to the action**  Three and a half years before the events of the play, Larry Keller was reported missing in action, while flying a mission off the coast of China.  His father, Joe Keller, was head of a business which made aero engine parts. When, one night, the production line began to turn out cracked cylinder heads, the night foreman alerted Joe's deputy manager, Steve Deever as he arrived at work. Steve telephoned Joe at home, to ask what to do. Worried by the lost production and not seeing the consequences of his decision, Joe told Steve to weld over the cracks. He said that he would take responsibility for this, but could not come in to work, as he had influenza. Several weeks later twenty-one aeroplanes crashed on the same day, killing the pilots.  Investigation revealed the fault in the cylinder heads, and Steve and Joe were arrested and convicted. On appeal, Joe denied Steve's (true) version of events, convinced the court he knew nothing of what had happened, and was released from prison. Before his last flight, Larry wrote to his fiancée, Ann, Steve's daughter. He had read of his father's and Steve's arrest. Now he was planning suicide.  Three and a half years later, Ann has told no-one of this letter. Kate Keller knows her husband to be guilty of the deaths of the pilots and has convinced herself that Larry is alive. She will not believe him dead, as this involves the further belief that Joe has caused his own son's death, an intolerable thought. She expects Larry to return, and keeps his room exactly as it was when he left home. She supports Joe's deception. In return she demands his support for her hope that Larry will come back. Ann and her brother, George, have disowned their father, believing him guilty. But George has gone at last to visit his father in jail, and Steve has persuaded him of the true course of events.  The play opens on the following (Sunday) morning; by sheer coincidence, Ann has come to visit the Kellers. For two years, Larry's brother, Chris, has written to her. Now he intends to propose to her, hence the invitation. She is in love with him and has guessed his intention. On the Saturday night there is a storm; a tree, planted as a memorial to Larry, is snapped by the wind. Kate wakes from a dream of Larry and, in the small hours, enters the garden to find the tree broken.  **Joe Keller - an ordinary Joe or representative type**  Western drama originates in the Greek tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, all of whom wrote in Athens in the 5th century B.C. In these plays the tragic hero or protagonist ( = first or most important actor) commits an offence, often unknowingly. He (occasionallly she) must then learn his fault, suffer and perhaps die. In this way, the gods are vindicated (shown to be just) and the moral order of the universe restored. (This is a gross simplification of an enormous subject.)  These plays, and those of Shakespeare two thousand years later, are about kings, dukes or great generals. Why? Because in their day, these individuals were thought to embody or represent the whole people. Nowadays, we do not see even kings in this way. When writers want to show a person who represents a nation or class, they typically invent a fictitious “ordinary” person, the Man in the Street or Joe Public. In Joe Keller, Arthur Miller creates just such a representative type. Joe is a very ordinary man, decent, hard-working and charitable, a man no-one could dislike. But, like the protagonist of the ancient drama, he has a flaw or weakness. This, in turn, causes him to act wrongly. He is forced to accept responsibility - his suicide is necessary to restore the moral order of the universe, and allow his beloved son, Chris, to live, free from guilt.  **Outline of events**   * Autumn, 1943: Joe allows Steve to supply the USAAF with faulty cylinder heads * Late autumn, 1943: Twenty-one planes crash; Joe and Steve arrested * November 25, 1943: Larry (having read in newspaper about father) crashes plane deliberately off coast of China * 1944?: Joe makes successful appeal; Steve remains in prison * 1945: Chris Keller starts to write to Ann Deever * August, 1947: Ann visits Chris; George (unknown to Ann) visits Steve * Saturday ? August, 1947: Larry's memorial blown down * Sunday ? August, 1947: Opening of the play   **The structure of the play**  The play has two narrative strands which finally meet. These are:   * Chris's and Ann's attempt to persuade Kate that Larry is dead, so they can marry. Joe wishes to support them, but sees that he cannot; * the attempt by George, then by Chris, to find out the truth of what happened in Joe's factory in the autumn of 1943.   A slip of Kate's tongue tells George of Joe's guilt, but he leaves without persuading Chris. Chris and Ann insist on marrying and Joe supports them. This drives Kate (who sees this as a betrayal) to tell Chris the truth. Ann's showing Larry's letter to her convinces Kate that Larry is dead. The letter also answers Joe's repeated question about what he must do, to atone for his crime. He cannot restore life to the dead, but he can give life (free from a sense of moral surrender) back to his living son, Chris.    **Notes on some characters**  Joe Keller is not a very bad man. He loves his family but does not see the universal human "family" which has a higher claim on his duty. He may think he has got away with his crime, but is troubled by the thought of it. He relies on his wife, Kate, not to betray his guilt.  Chris Keller has been changed by his experience of war, where he has seen men laying down their lives for their friends. He is angry that the world has not been changed, that the selflessness of his fellow soldiers counts for nothing. He feels guilty to make money out of a business which does not value the men on whose labour it relies.  Kate Keller is a woman of enormous maternal love, which extends to her neighbours' children, notably George. Despite her instinctive warmth, she is capable of supporting Joe in his deceit. To believe Larry is dead would (for her) be to believe his death was a punishment of Joe's crime (an intolerable thought), so she must persuade herself that Larry still lives. Joe sees this idea to be ridiculous, but must tolerate it to secure Kate's support for his own deception.  Ann Deever shares Chris's high ideals but believes he should not feel ashamed by his wealth. She disowns her father whom she believes to be guilty. She has no wish to hurt Kate but will show her Larry's letter if she (Kate) remains opposed to Ann's marrying Chris.  Dr. Jim Bayliss is a man who, in his youth, shared Chris's ideals, but has been forced to compromise to pay the bills. He is fair to his wife, but she knows how frustrated Jim feels. Jim's is the voice of disillusioned experience. If any character speaks for the playwright (Arthur Miller), it is Jim.  Sue Bayliss is an utterly cynical woman. Believing Joe has “pulled a fast one”, she does not mind his awful crime, yet she dislikes Chris because his idealism, which she calls “phoney”, makes Jim feel restless. She is an embittered, rather grasping woman, whose ambitions are material wealth and social acceptance. She does not at all understand the moral values which her husband shares with Chris.  George Deever is a soul-mate of Chris. When younger, he greatly admired him. In the war, like Chris, he has been decorated for bravery. He follows Chris in accepting that Steve is guilty. Now he reproaches Chris for (as he sees it) deceiving him. He is bitter because he has grown cynical about the ideals for which he sacrificed his own opportunities for happiness.  Lydia Lubey is a rather one-dimensional character: she is chiefly in the play to show what George and Chris (so far) have gone without. She is simple, warm and affectionate, rather a stereotype of femininity (she is confused by electrical appliances). Her meeting with George is painful to observe: she has the happy home life which he has forfeited. We understand why George declines her well-meant but tactless invitation to see her babies.  Frank Lubey (unlike George, Larry, Chris and Jim) is a materialist. He lacks culture, education and real intelligence, but has made money in business, and has courted Lydia while the slightly younger men were fighting in the war. His dabbling in quack astrology (horoscopes) lends support to Kate's wild belief that Larry is still alive.  **Selected quotations**  The quotations which appear below contain important references to the principal themes of the play. For the context of the quotation, two page references are given. The first refers to the Penguin paperback edition, in which All My Sons follows A View from the Bridge. The second refers to the Hereford Plays (Heinemann) edition.   * ...what the hell did I work for? That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you. p.102; p.16 * It's wrong to pity a man like that. Father or no father, there's only one way to look at him. He knowingly shipped out parts that would crash an airplane. p.117; p.29 * You're the only one I know who loves his parents/ I know. It went out of style, didn't it? p.119; p.31 * I owe him a good kick in the teeth, but he's your father. p.136; p.47 * None of these things ever even cross your mind?/Yes, they crossed my mind. Anything can cross your mind! p.143; p.54 * You had big principles...so now I got a tree, and this one when the weather gets bad he can't stand on his feet...p.148; p.59 * Your brother's alive...because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now?...God does not let a son be killed by his father. p.156; p.66 * ...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...He probably just wanted to be alone to watch his star go out. p.160; p.70 * I thought I had a family here. What happened to my family? p.161; p.70 * There's nothin' he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son ...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! p.163; p.73 * Goddam, if Larry was alive he wouldn't act like this. He understood the way the world is made...To him the world had a forty-foot front, it ended at the building line. p.163; p.73 * We used to shoot a man who acted like a dog, but honour was real there ...But here? This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him. That's the principle; the only one we live by - it just happened to kill a few people this time, that's all. The world's that way...p.167; pp.76, 77 * I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. p.168; p.78 * Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were. p.170; p.79 * Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live. p.171; p. 80   Several long speeches are worthy of close study. The page references below are to the Penguin edition and the Hereford Plays (Heinemann) editions respectively. The speaker's name appears in brackets.   * Pages 121 to 122; 33 - 34, beginning: “It takes a little time ...” (Chris) * Page 157; 67, beginning: “You're a boy ...” (Joe) * Page 158; 68, beginning: “For me! Where do you live ...?” (Chris) * Page 168; 77 - 78, beginning: “What should I want to do ...” (Joe) * Pages 169 to 170; 78 - 79, beginning: “I know all about the world ...” (Chris; this speech contains the text of Larry's letter) * Page 170; 80, beginning: “You can be better!” (Chris) * Two long speeches by George may also repay study; they are on page 141; 52, beginning: “You can't know ...” and on page 143; 54, beginning: “Because you believed it ...”   **Writing about the play for analysis**  At all levels you are required to consider drama under four headings: character, action, dramatic devices and dramatic structures. You are not required to keep these separate, but it may help an examiner to see that you have covered them all in your work.  Character   * The central character of the play (whose tragedy it is) is Joe - how does Miller show this? * How is Joe's character shown through his relations with others: Chris, Kate, Ann and Larry? * How does the audience's idea of Joe change as the play progresses? * How do Chris's speeches help us form an idea of Joe? * What is the point of Joe's saying “...they were all my sons”? Why is this phrase the play's title? * Why does Joe decide to shoot himself? * What do we learn from Joe's comments on Steve (for example, that he wants him to have his old job back, when he comes out of jail)? * Although this play is clearly about Joe, other characters are closely connected with him. Comment on how these characters are presented in the play - Chris, Kate, Ann and George. * Minor characters - comment on those who are there not as characters in their own right, but to show the audience things about others (e.g. Lydia, Frank and Sue). * Comment on Jim Bayliss's special r�le in helping the audience understand the play.   Action   * Comment on things that are not directly shown, but narrated or recalled by characters in the play. * Explain how Miller makes use of past events having consequences in the present. * Look in the stage directions for examples of physical actions (they may seem trivial or small) and show how they help move the story on. * In this play, Miller uses exits and entrances (for example, when people answer the telephone) to bring particular characters together - comment on any examples of this which you can find.   Dramatic devices   * In general, these can be found by looking at stage directions. Comment on any such directions which help explain how the play should be presented. * The script for the play opens with a very detailed description of the Kellers' house, which the audience can see throughout the drama. Why is this? Explain its symbolism - especially in relation to Joe's comment on Larry's view of the world (“To him the world had a forty-foot front, it ended at the building line”). * Comment on other interesting features of the set, such as Larry's tree. * The most obvious feature of drama is perhaps the dialogue - comment on any passages which help the audience understand the action better. (You will find a long list of suggested extracts and long passages elsewhere in this guide.) * Comment on the way in which George is a catalyst for the uncovering of Joe's secret. * Comment on Miller's use of props in the play (e.g., the newspaper Joe reads at the start of the play, the pitcher of grapefruit juice Kate carries at the start of Act Two). * Comment on any interesting features of the production of the play which you have experienced (for example, how it has been adapted for radio).   Dramatic structures   * Explain how the three acts of the play show the structure and plotting of the dramatic narrative. * Show how, within each act, Miller arranges the narrative as a series of episodes. * How does time in the play relate to the time before the play begins? * How does the structure of the play show that justice catches up with offenders eventually - the idea of nemesis? * Explain how, in the play, Miller gradually reveals more and more information to the audience, rather as in a detective story.   The play in performance   * To show your understanding of how the play should be a performance (not a book to read in class), explain and describe how you would present it for a given medium (stage, film, television or radio). You may do this for the play generally or for a specific episode. * Comment on your ideas for costume, props, the set, lighting, music, sound FX (effects), casting, direction and anything else you think interesting or relevant.   Overview and close-up  You cannot possibly write in great detail about everything in this play. Life (yours and your teachers') is too short. Try to balance general comment about the whole of the play, its broad themes, characters and relationships, with detailed and specific explanations of short episodes.  Finally, make a judgement  All My Sons is not a very pleasant play. In it Arthur Miller tries to show us how we can be better. The date of its first performance (1947) is clearly significant. Why would Miller write such a play then? Give your opinion of the play - what you like or dislike about it. Try to be positive and to relate your comments closely to the detail of the play.  A title for your work  There is no one perfect title, but the title you use should indicate what you have written about. At the most basic level, you might write about Character, Action, Dramatic Devices and Structures in All My Sons. If you were more ambitious, you might take as your title something like: How does Miller present Joe Keller as a tragic hero in All My Sons? If you concentrate on how to present the play for performance, your title could reflect this - All My Sons in performance.  Presenting your work  Theatre is a practical art - your work should recognize this. You may want to include illustrations, sketches, diagrams and plans, to show your ideas about the set, costume, lighting and so on.  And remember  It's a play. Refer to the audience not the reader. Do not refer to the book but to the play, performance or production. Make sure you spell Arthur and author in standard forms - and don't mix them up. Set out quotations conventionally, using quotation marks.  **Chris's relationship with Joe**  This section of the study guide suggests some ways in which to study what is perhaps the central or most important relationship in the play.  Getting started  How does Chris see Joe:   * At the start of the play? * When he discovers Joe's guilt? * After he reads Larry's letter to Ann?   What does Joe think of Chris's outlook on life and his values generally, before and after he hears Chris reading Larry's letter?  How do other characters or incidents in the play contribute to the audience's view of the central relationship?  Other characters   * Kate Keller (Joe's wife; mother of Chris and Larry): Explain how, and why, Kate has for years helped Joe conceal his crime from Chris. Why, at the end of Act Two, does she let Chris know the truth of his father's guilt? * Ann Deever: Show how Ann's visit to the Kellers brings the truth to light. Why is Joe troubled by Ann's harsh attitude to her father (Steve) while she believes him to be responsible for the deaths of the twenty?one pilots? * Jim Bayliss: Consider Jim's role as a commentator on Chris's values and attitudes. Why does Jim sympathize so strongly with Chris? What does he mean when he speaks of Chris's being alone to watch “his star” go out?   Incidents in the play  Consider the significance   * of the storm, and of Kate's dream; * of the arrival of George; * of Ann's eventual disclosure of Larry's letter.   The stage set  Show how the set of the play (the exterior of the Keller house) works as a symbol of Joe's values.  Contrasting values  Examine the difference between Chris's and Joe's ideals and values. Look, especially, at Chris's speech beginning “...It takes a little time...” and ending “...and that included you”. What does this tell us about Chris's outlook?  Before hearing Larry's letter read, Joe says (of Larry) “...for him the world had a forty-foot front. It ended at the building line”. After the letter is read, Joe says, “Sure he (Larry) was my son but I think to him they were all my sons, and I guess they were”.   * Who are “they”? * What does Joe now see Larry's view to have been? * How has this changed his (Joe's) outlook?   If Joe confessed to the police, he would be jailed for manslaughter and would receive a short sentence (relatively). Yet he chooses to kill himself.   * Why does he do this?   Consider Joe's speech, beginning, “Nothing's bigger than that...”. Look, too, at Kate's final words to Chris: “Forget now. Live”. What has Joe tried to do for Chris by his suicide?  A final judgement   * How does the play present this relationship to the audience? * How much do we know (at various points) in relation to those on stage? * Who is the more sympathetic character, Chris or Joe? |