

CONTENTS

PART ONE INTRODUCTION

How to study a play	5
Reading <i>All My Sons</i>	6

PART TWO THE TEXT

Note on the text	9
Synopsis	9
Detailed summaries	11
Act I	11
Act II	30
Act III.....	41
Extended commentaries	
Text 1 – Act I, pp. 115–16.....	46
Text 2 – Act II, pp. 155–7	49
Text 3 – Act III, pp. 167–9	52

PART THREE CRITICAL APPROACHES

Characterisation.....	56
Themes	
Social responsibility	71
Labour, industry, and occupations	74
War and the American psyche.....	76
Return of the past	79
Shame and guilt.....	81
Suicide	83
Setting, staging, and structure	
Formal structure	85
An American back yard	87
Imagery and symbolism	
The apple tree and the letter	88
Other symbols	90
Language and style	91

PART FOUR CRITICAL HISTORY

Reception and early reviews	96
Popular canonisation in America	97
<i>All My Sons</i> in academic criticism	98
Contemporary approaches	102

PART FIVE BACKGROUND

Arthur Miller's life	105
Arthur Miller's work.....	108
Historical background.....	110
Literary background.....	116
Chronology	121

FURTHER READING	129
LITERARY TERMS.....	133
AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES	136

CRITICAL APPROACHES

CHARACTERISATION

CONTEXT

To get around the lack of a **narrator**, playwrights have often used **asides**, where a **character** addresses the audience directly and conveys his or her thoughts. Such a technique could not be used in a realistic play like *All My Sons*, as it would destroy the effect of the world within the play being real.



QUESTION

How different would it be to read the play without stage directions? How much of the meaning of *All My Sons* is conveyed non-verbally? Would it still be an emotionally powerful work?

Dramatic works, in contrast to prose forms like short stories and novels, usually do not have a narrator, and thus must rely upon the principals' speech and actions to develop characters. Novels will often use a narrator to expose interior thoughts. In a play, we only have access to what the characters say and do, so the playwright must pay particular attention to word choice and the positioning of characters on stage. In the dialogue of *All My Sons*, specific phrases are often key to the development of characters, and provide revealing insights into their personalities. In addition, Miller successfully uses stage directions to develop his characters in *All My Sons*. This is one of the advantages of reading a play, rather than viewing a performance. Playwrights are often very explicit about how they want a character to come across.

JOE KELLER

Joe Keller is the main character in *All My Sons*. Although Chris and Kate play as great a role in the action as he does, he is responsible for the events that precipitate the **tragedy** of the play. He is in his late fifties, a father of two, and a prominent member of his community. A savvy businessman, he has built up his business from a small metal-working shop into a very successful enterprise. After seeing the shop complex, George quips, '**I saw your factory on the way from the station. It looks like General Motors**' (p. 150). Despite his affable and self-deprecating persona, Keller is a hard-nosed businessman. He manages to come across as likeable and friendly, but he is willing to bully or psychologically overpower others to get his way, and is not averse to threatening physical violence. As the play proceeds, the greed and selfishness that drive him become increasingly more apparent, and lead to his downfall. Above all, he lacks a true understanding of his responsibility to others outside his family.

Joe Keller is the **tragic hero** of *All My Sons*, as much as the play uses this traditional dramatic device. His drive to succeed in business, no matter the cost, and his failure to accept responsibility for his actions bring about the destruction of his family, and are the **tragic flaws** that define his character. Although the events of the play do not obviously follow a predestined course, as soon as Keller's culpability in the shop incident is known, his inability to admit his error makes his ultimate fall inevitable. He is duly punished for his ruthlessness, and pays for his crimes with the disintegration of his family, the loss of both sons, one literally and the other figuratively, and finally with his life. Although he wears the mask of a strong man through much of the play, it is his fundamental weakness as a person that brings about his demise.

Keller's character undergoes a transformation as the events of the play change his situation. At the opening of Act I, there is little indication of any weakness or meanness in his character. Later we discover the extent of his commitment to work, and his narrow focus on his financial success, and the prosperity of his family. At this point, he seems totally at ease relaxing in his back yard. He is no different from any working man approaching retirement. He has secured a comfortable lifestyle for his family, and no longer has to commit himself so fully to work. His interactions with Jim Bayliss and Frank further emphasise his comfortable position. He gives no indication that he has any reason to question his status.

His interactions with his family during Act I begin to expose some of the negative aspects of his character, and the pressures bearing down on him. When he discusses the apple tree with Chris, he steadfastly refuses to comply with his son's request that they confront Kate about Larry's death. Although at first this seems an understandable disinclination to provoke her, later events show that his response is indicative of his inability to face up to difficult situations. Likewise, it gradually becomes apparent that his actions are governed by his desire to stop suspicion over the shop incident resurfacing. This is the source of his ambivalence to Chris's plan to marry Ann. In response to this news, he merely says, '**Well, that's only your business, Chris**' (Act I, p. 100). He again cites his concern

CONTEXT

'Joe Keller's trouble, in a word, is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society' (Arthur Miller, writing in *Collected Plays*, vol. 1, p. 19).

World events

1929–39 The Great Depression sees widespread poverty in United States

1933 US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt launches New Deal to bring nation out of the Great Depression; Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany

1937 Japan invades China

1938–60 The US government investigates communist infiltration; the effort is led in the 1950s by Senator Joseph McCarthy

1939 Outbreak of Second World War

Author's life

1932 Miller briefly attends City College of New York

1934–8 Studies at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, Michigan; initially studies Journalism before switching to English; wins Avery Hopwood Award for the play *No Villain*

Literary events

1931 *Mourning Becomes Electra* by Eugene O'Neill

1932 *Light in August* by William Faulkner

1935–9 The Federal Theatre Project provides funding for writers, directors, and actors

1936 *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes

1938 *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell

World events

1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbour; US declares war against Axis Powers

1944 Allies launch D-Day attack and begin liberation of Europe

1945 End of Second World War; US drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan; United Nations founded

1945–91 Cold War

1946 League of Nations dissolved

1947 HUAC begins investigating communist infiltration of Hollywood

1951 HUAC opens second hearings to investigate Hollywood

Author's life

1940 Miller marries first wife Mary Slattery; Miller goes to sea on merchant vessel

1944 *The Man Who Had All the Luck* produced; daughter Jane born

1945 *Focus*, Miller's first novel, published

1947 *All My Sons* produced; wins New York Drama Critics' Circle and Tony Awards; Miller's son Robert born

1949 *Death of a Salesman* produced; wins Pulitzer Prize, and New York Drama Critics' Circle and Tony Awards

1950 *An Enemy of the People* produced

Literary events

1940 *Watch on the Rhine* by Lillian Hellman

1944 *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams

1945 *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

1946 *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill

1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

1948 *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer

1949 *The Young Lions* by Irwin Shaw

1951 *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones

