

All my Sons by Arthur Miller

ACT ONE

Summary of events

It is a Sunday morning in the backyard of the Keller home. The house lies in the outskirts of an American town and the time is soon after the Second World War. Joe Keller is a middle-aged business man whose factory produced aeroplane parts during the war. Chris Keller, Joe's son, comes into the yard with his father and sits down to read the newspaper. We soon become aware of how different father and son are when they start to talk about the tree that fell down in the storm during the night. It becomes clear that Joe is a man who does not like to face the truth when he suggests that they try to hide the broken tree from Kate, his wife. Chris makes it clear that this is a ridiculous thing to try and do as she already knows about the broken tree; he heard her crying in the night when it cracked.

They now start to discuss Chris' elder brother, Larry, who was a pilot in the war and never came back. The tree had been planted in his memory. Chris, always honest, makes it clear that he thinks it was a mistake to let her think that Larry could still be alive. He tells his father that they must say to Kate that there is no hope, but Joe refuses to do so. Once more we see a man unable to face up to the truth. Chris then says that he has invited Ann, who was Larry's girl, to come and visit. He has decided to ask Ann to marry him. Joe is appalled and says that he must consider his mother's feelings. From her point of view Larry is not dead and so Chris can have no right to take his girl away from him. But Chris can wait no longer; he wants to marry Ann and go to live in a different town. Joe is shocked to hear that Chris intends to leave the business which he has built up. After all, he only did it for his family, and so expects Chris to take it over from him soon. But Chris does not care: all he wants is Ann and a family of his own.

His mother, Kate, appears from the house and starts to speak about Larry. She says that she is glad that Ann is a decent girl who did not marry another man as soon as she heard that Larry was missing. Chris is embarrassed and tries to change the subject, but Kate goes on to speak of a dream she had: Larry had crashed in his plane and when she woke up, the tree had broken. She accuses her husband of having planted the tree too soon in remembrance of Larry; after all, he might come back. Chris says they must try to put Larry out of their minds, rebuild their lives without Larry. He suggests going out to dinner at the shore and goes into the house.

Kate is angry and turns on Joe. She tells him she has noticed what is going on between Chris and Ann but she cannot tolerate the idea of a marriage. She wants them all to go on believing that Larry is coming back. At this stage we are led to believe that it is Kate who cannot face reality and that Joe is, fundamentally, a good man.

Ann and Chris appear on the porch and, after a brief but warm welcome, Kate again begins to speak about Larry; she more or less tells Ann that, deep in her heart, she is still waiting for him. Ann denies this, but Kate insists that it is true. We now learn that twenty-one pilots were killed in the war because Joe's factory had produced defective cylinder heads. Joe and his manager, Steve, Ann's father, had been convicted. Joe was later exonerated after an appeal and the blame was laid fully on Steve, who is still in prison. Neither Ann nor her brother George has ever written to their father because they cannot forgive him; Ann is haunted by the idea that Larry could so easily have been one of the pilots thus killed. In her seemingly naive ignorance of the truth, Kate gets very angry and accuses Ann of being heartless; she forbids any more talk of Larry's death. She goes on to say that she knows Larry is alive and therefore all talk about his death is irrelevant. Joe also comes to Steve's defence, reminding Ann that great pressure was put on Steve by the armed forces to deliver the cylinder heads on time; when a defective batch came out Steve had more or less been forced to hide the faults. This was wrong of him but it was not murder. The irony of Joe defending Steve will become clear later and

Joe now goes out to order a table for dinner. The world would seem to be in order.

Left alone, Chris tells Ann that he loves her to which she replies she has been waiting for him a long time. Joe comes in to tell Ann that her brother George is on the telephone, calling from Columbus. As soon as she has gone out, Chris tells his father that he and Ann are getting married. Joe appears not to react; he seems distracted and worried about Steve, who is in prison in Columbus. He wonders whether the case could be reopened and cause trouble for him again. All he ever wanted was a new start for Chris, to build him a house and to see his son's name over the factory. Chris is alarmed, but then Joe's self-confidence returns; he even starts making plans for the evening which will be the perfect moment to tell Kate about the forthcoming wedding. Ann returns and announces that her brother is coming.

Ann and Chris then go for a drive. Kate tells Joe in a warning tone that it seems strange that George, who is a lawyer now and who has never even sent a postcard to his father, should suddenly take a plane to visit him and then come here. Unable to admit how frightened he is, Joe replies that he does not care and goes into the house in a rage; Kate follows him stiffly, staring, seeing.

ACT TWO

Summary of events

It is the same evening and Kate is worried about George's visit. She is afraid that the case will be opened up again; she remembers all too well that Steve never gave up his assertion that Joe made him cover up the cracks in the cylinder heads. She is convinced that the whole Deeever family hates them and wants Ann to go home with George. Chris tells her not to worry. Left alone with Ann, he promises he will tell Kate about their engagement later that night. Joe joins them and remarks, too casually, that he has been thinking about George. He should leave New York, where there is too much competition and settle in this town where Joe knows many big lawyers who could help him. We also says that he will bring Steve into the business again when he gets out of prison. Chris is against this and Ann is surprised; she thinks that Joe owes her father nothing, but Joe shouts at her that a father is a father.

George enters having visited his father in jail; he is very angry after hearing his father's version of what happened on that day in the factory during the war. Steve had seen that the cylinder heads were defective and telephoned Joe; but Joe did not come. When he phoned again, Joe told him to cover up the faults and ship the cylinder heads out. Joe had also promised to take responsibility, but later in court he said he had been ill on that day and denied having spoken to Steve on the phone. Now Joe is a successful businessman and Steve has had to take the punishment.

Neither Chris nor Ann can believe that Joe would do such a thing, but George now believes his father and wants to talk to Joe and then take Ann away with him. Kate enters, dressed for the dinner party. She is pleased to see George who has always liked her and asks him to stay for the meal. Joe then enters and greets George with strained cordiality. George refuses to stay to eat and Ann goes to call a taxi.

Joe now tells George about all the mistakes Steve made when he worked for the firm and that his father is a man who never learned to accept responsibility for his errors. George begins to feel less sure about his father's innocence and, on Kate's insisting, agrees to join them for dinner. He begins to feel at home and says that none of the Kellers has changed, especially Joe.

Kate proudly tells George that Joe has not been ill for fifteen years; Joe interrupts – too quickly – to remind her of how ill he had been on that fateful day. Now George becomes suspicious and asks Joe what really happened on that day. The quarrel comes to a head when Chris tells Kate that he is marrying Ann, and George accuses Joe of hiding in bed after telling Steve to murder the pilots. Kate becomes hysterical and insists that Larry will come back. Joe says that she is insane; losing all control, Kate hits Joe. She tells Chris that if Larry

is dead, Joe killed him and then Chris turns on his father in horror and, at last, hears the truth. It had been Joe who also says that he will bring Steve into the business again when he gets out of prison. Chris is against this and Ann is surprised; she thinks that Joe owes her father nothing, but Joe shouts at her that a father is a father.

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really gave the order to deliver the cylinder heads in order to save his firm; he had hoped that someone would notice the defects before it was too late. Chris is appalled at his father's action, that he could think only of his business when boys were dying every day. He cannot accept Joe's excuse, that he did it all for his son. He stumbles away, covering his face and weeping. Gradually the past is closing in on the family.

Joe now asks Kate what he should do and she suggests he ought to tell Chris that he is willing to go to prison for what he did. Perhaps Chris would then forgive him if he could feel that Joe was willing to pay. Joe becomes angry and says that he has spoiled his family. He even committed a crime to give them money. He thinks that there is nothing bigger than the family, but Kate says that there is something bigger. Ann enters, wanting to speak to Kate alone; she tells her that she will not reveal Joe's guilty secret. In return, she wants Kate to set Chris free, to tell him that Larry is dead and that she knows it, otherwise Chris will always feel guilty about marrying her. Kate refuses, so Ann takes a letter from her pocket which Larry wrote to her before he crashed off the coast of China. Kate begins to read it and breaks down, moaning.

Chris comes back, looking exhausted. He has decided he must go away for good. He hates himself for not being able to give his father up to the police and sees himself as cowardly in giving up his principles, just like everybody else. Ann wants to go with him, but Chris is convinced she will never forgive him for not delivering up his father. He cannot find a reason to make Joe suffer; putting him behind bars will not bring the pilots back to life. Ann now refuses to let Chris go.

Joe enters and asks Chris what he intends to do. He works himself up into a fury trying to defend his action. If he has to go to jail, then so does half the country. Chris can only say that he thought that Joe was better than other men because he saw him as a father. Ann takes Larry's letter from Kate and pushes it into Chris's hand.

Kate tries to push Joe away so that he will not hear what is in the letter. Chris reads out what Larry wrote to Ann three years before. He had read in the newspapers about their fathers being convicted. He could not stand life any more. He was going to commit suicide. Ann was not to wait for him. If he had had his father there, he would have killed him. The truth Kate hid for so long is gradually emerging. Joe grabs the letter and reads it. He tells Chris to get the car while he goes to put on his jacket. Kate begs him not to go and forbids Chris to take him. She says the war is over, but Chris retorts that it is not enough for them to be sorry about Larry's death. They must realize that there is a universe of people outside and that they are all responsible to it. Unless they realise that, Larry has died in vain. A shot is heard from the house; Joe has killed himself.

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.

Possible Questions

- Does any character in this play redeem him or herself?
- It has been said that this play shows the limits of the American Dream. What is meant by that?
- Is suicide a way to accept responsibility for your actions or a way to avoid accepting responsibility for your actions?
- You are George the night after visiting your father in jail for the first time year. Write your diary entry.
- Assume that Joe Keller had served out his time, what should Chris's attitude toward him have been? Would it make a difference whether or not Joe admitted his guilt and attempted in some way to atone for his crimes?
- If, rather than conceal the defects in the engines, Keller had immediately reported the problem to the government, what would have happened to him and his family? Would this have been the end of his life?
- Why was it so important to the wife/mother to refuse to acknowledge that Larry was dead?

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