**All My Sons Summary and Analysis of Act I**

[All My Sons](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons) takes place in a small American town in August, a few years after World War II. The events of the play occur on a single set, the back yard of the Keller home, where a tree has recently been torn down by a storm. The Kellers are solidly middle-class and have a working-class background. They are not rich, but they are financially comfortable, and there is a sense throughout the play that they worked hard to reach this state of stability.

At curtain rise, [Joe Keller](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#joe-keller) and [Dr. Jim Bayliss](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#dr-jim-bayliss) are in the yard. Keller is a middle-aged father, uneducated but sensible and generally unexceptional. Jim, the local doctor, is making small talk with his neighbor. After some talk about the weather, another neighbor enters. [Frank Lubey](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#frank-lubey) is younger, pleasant, and profoundly superstitious.

Keller is reading the want ads in the Sunday paper, and he is quietly impressed by all the different types of business there are nowadays. Frank notices the broken tree, and Keller replies sadly that it fell the previous night. His wife has not yet seen it. Frank refers obliquely to the fact that the tree was planted in memory of Keller's son Larry, who would have turned 27 this month. Frank knows Larry's birthday because he has been preparing a horoscope for Larry at the request of Keller's wife Kate (referred to in the stage directions as "Mother" throughout). She wishes to know if November 25th, the day on which Larry went missing in the war, was a favorable day for her son. According to those who believe in these things (that is, Frank and Kate, but not Keller), it would have been fairly impossible for Larry to die on a favorable day.

Keller mentions that a girl named Annie is upstairs sleeping, and the mention of her makes Jim and Frank excited. Jim is new to the neighborhood, so he has never met Annie, and Frank is eager to see an old acquaintance. [Sue Bayliss](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#sue-bayliss), Jim's wife, stops by to tell Jim that a patient is on the phone. Jim implies that the patient in question is a hypochondriac, and Sue suggests that he should be happy to take his doctor's fee whether the patient is really sick or not. Sue mentions that Annie should stop by later to see what they have done to the house she used to live in, and they exit.

[Lydia Lubey](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#lydia-lubey), Frank's wife, enters to complain of a broken toaster, and then Frank exits. Lydia lingers for a moment to ask if Annie is still unmarried (she is). Lydia finds that hard to believe, and Keller replies bitterly that it is because of the war that Annie is single and that he has one son instead of two. She exits.

[Chris Keller](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#chris-keller) enters. He is an affectionate young man of 32, who clearly adores his father. They wonder what Mother will say about the broken tree. A little boy named [Bert](http://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/character-list#bert) runs in. He and Keller have an extended make-believe game in which Keller is the police inspector and Bert has been deputized to arrest other children in the town. After being told that there is a jail in the basement of the house, Bert leaves to continue his patrol.

Chris and Keller resume conversation about the tree. Early that morning, during the storm, Chris saw his mother standing outside beside the tree when it cracked. She had been crying very hard and wandering around at night, like she did shortly after Larry died. Although Larry has been missing for several years, Mother still thinks that he is alive somewhere. Chris thinks it is dishonest that he and Keller allow her to hold onto this dream, while they themselves are rather certain that Larry is long dead. Keller is resistant to making this fact final, however, because they cannot prove that their son is dead, at least not to his wife, without a body or a grave.

Chris sits him down and says that he asked Annie to visit because he is going to propose to her. Keller is lukewarm about the idea, because Annie was Larry's girl. From Mother's perspective, Larry is not dead, so Annie is not available to Chris. But Chris insists that there is no other girl for him, even though they have not seen each other since the war. He declares an ultimatum: if his parents will not accept his marriage to Annie, then he and Annie will just get married and move elsewhere. Keller is shocked that Chris would leave behind the family business.

Mother appears. She is somewhat younger than her husband, and she is very loving. She says that it is funny that Larry's tree blew down in his birthday month, and this shows that he is coming back. Uncomfortable, Chris tries to change the subject and talk about how good Annie looks. Mother says that she loves Annie because she did not run off with another man as soon as her beau was declared missing. Mother has a headache, perhaps from a bad dream in which she saw Larry reaching to her from the cockpit of his plane. She sees this as more evidence that they had been hasty in putting a memorial tree up for him.

Chris says that maybe they should be trying to forget Larry, and Mother is furious. Chris exits to get her some aspirin, and Mother asks Keller if Chris intends to propose to Annie. He answers noncommittally. Mother says that if Annie is still single, that means that she has been waiting for Larry, and they dare not take her faith away. Mother gets somewhat hysterical, claiming that if Larry is not coming back, then she will kill herself. She says that Keller in particular should still believe--but Keller does not understand why he in particular should believe. Bert reappears, but Mother shoos him away, saying that they must end that jail business.

Ann and Chris enter. She is beautiful and strong-willed. Their entrance cuts short the argument. Jim and Sue briefly enter and are introduced to Ann. Before she leaves, Sue tells Ann that she should never, not even in her mind, count her husband's money. Ann and the Kellers discuss their plans for the evening, and Mother mentions that the room Ann is staying in was Larry's room. She is shocked, because the closet is full of clothes and the shoes are shined. There is an awkward moment, and Mother pulls Ann aside to gossip. Ann says that her parents are not getting divorced. Mother asks if Ann goes out much, and Ann knows that she is really asking if she is still waiting for Larry. She says that she is not. Mother insists that deep in her heart she must think he is still alive. Ann asks why Mother still believes, and Mother says it is because "certain things can never be," not in a world with a God.

Frank enters and asks Ann about her brother George, the lawyer. He also asks when her father expects parole, and Ann clams up. After Frank leaves, she is dismayed to realize that the town is still talking about her father, even though he has been gone and in prison for years now. Keller claims that no one talks about the case any more, because when he got out of prison he walked down the street with his head held high. It is slowly established that Keller and Ann's father Steve had been in business together during the war, and they had sold a shipment of cracked cylinder heads to the Air Force, which made twenty-one P-40s crash. The two were tried, and Steve was found guilty and sent to jail, but Keller went home. Ann is surprised that Keller does not hold any grudges against her father, even though her father had tried to blame the whole thing on him. Ann does hold a grudge, though; she has not spoken to her father since then. Chris agrees and calls Steve a murderer. For all they know, Ann says, one of those cracked cylinder heads could have been in the plane that crashed with Larry inside. Mother is angered by this remark, and she insists that it all has nothing to do with Larry. Keller says that Steve was a little man who followed orders when the army called for the cylinder heads, and that the incident was just a mistake, not murder.

The parents exit, and Ann says that she will not stay. Chris changes her mind by confessing his love. But their embrace is unsatisfactory to Ann, and Chris explains that he feels uncomfortable in his happiness because he survived the war, while all the other men in his company did not. Ann says that Chris should be happy with his good fortune and proud of his money and his business.

Keller enters and says that George, Ann's brother, is on the phone. Ann exits to answer the phone. Keller expresses puzzlement that George is calling from Columbus, where his father's prison is. Keller is suspicious that George and Ann are trying to open up the case again, and Chris is angered by the insinuation. Keller changes the subject and says he wants to rename the business for Chris, but Chris is uneasy with the proposition. Keller suspects that Chris is ashamed of their money, and he insists that it is good money, moral money. Ann returns and says that George will be coming that night. She and Chris leave. Mother enters and is shaken by the fact that George needs to speak to Ann. She asks what it is Steve has to tell George that has required George to take an airplane from New York to see him. Keller insists there is nothing, and Mother twice questions his resolve on that matter. Mother finishes with a warning that Keller ought to be smart.

Analysis

The important events in All My Sons have already transpired. The only action that occurs within the time frame of the narrative is the revelation of certain facts about the past, and it is important to track how the revelations change the relationships among the characters as well as their own self-definition. [Arthur Miller](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/arthur-miller) carefully controls the flow of information rather than focusing on plot and action. Thus the play, influenced by the work of the playwright Ibsen, is paced by the slow revelation of facts. In the first act, not much is said that is unknown to the characters, but it is all new to the audience. Miller takes his time revealing the background information to the audience by having the characters obliquely refer to Larry and to his disappearance again and again, until all the necessary information has been revealed through natural dialog. The explanation of Keller's and Steve's business during the war, and the ensuing scandal, is similarly revealed through insinuation and association. The first reference to Steve's incarceration occurs when Ann says that her mother and father will probably live together again "when he gets out." This does not mean much to the audience until Frank asks about Steve's parole. Therefore, Ann's estrangement from her father and the community's hostility and curiosity towards the man are established before the audience knows exactly where Steve is and how he got there. Miller's manipulation of the background information heightens the anticipation and the curiosity of the audience.

Again, very little new information is presented to the characters in this act. Chris reveals his intentions to marry Ann to his father, Ann learns of Chris's feelings of guilt for surviving the war and coming home to a successful business, and Mother learns that Ann has not exactly been waiting for Larry all these years. Yet Miller's skillful and carefully planned withholding of the characters' backgrounds prevents the first act from feeling like forty minutes of exposition--which, in function, it actually is. The slow pace of the first act also allows the horror of the crime to seep into the atmosphere, imbuing the audience with a sense that this idyllic, placid community has been injected with a slow poison.

In addition, as in many plays and written works, Miller's choices in establishing the relationships in this fashion allow him to closely manipulate the audience's inferences and judgments about each character. (The effect is not unlike that of F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-great-gatsby), in which the first-person narrator, speaking after the events of the narrative, slowly reveals Daisy Buchanan's character to the reader.) Yet Arthur Miller did not have the narrative tools of the novel at his disposal like Fitzgerald did. A playwright mainly employs dialogue. Therefore, readers and viewers should pay careful attention to the ways that Miller sets up the necessary details about each character and their relationships. Keller's insistence that Steve was not a murderer, and Chris's strong belief that patching those cracked airplane heads was morally reprehensible, are not just foreshadowing. They are essential elements of each character's personal trajectory, and these elements express the principal concept of the play: the past has an enduring influence on the present which never quite goes away. Fitzgerald's work leaves the reader with the message that one "can't repeat the past," and Miller's adds the caveat that one cannot ignore the past either.

The first act also illustrates the tensions between the characters that will rise to the surface in the second and third acts. The Kellers seem like a happy family at first; it is even remarked that Chris is the rare sort of person who truly loves his parents. But there is resentment beneath the surface of their contented existence, resentment that reflects more than just grief at the loss of a son. Larry was clearly the favored of the Keller boys. Keller compares Larry's business sense to Chris's lack of it, and Chris complains that he has always played second fiddle to Larry in the eyes of his parents and of Ann, who was first betrothed to Larry. The family sometimes implies bitterness that Chris, not Larry, was the son who survived the war. Chris is too idealistic, too soft about business. Like Michael Corleone in Mario Puzo's [*The Godfather*](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-godfather), Chris returned from the war with a new idealism that will not permit him to condone his father's shadier business practices. And like Vito Corleone, Keller believes that his actions are legitimate if he acts for the sake of his family. In the end, like Michael Corleone, Chris must compromise his values in order to protect his father and his own family.

Mother's insecurities are expressed through her obsessive delusions about her dead son. She is anxious, suspicious of Ann, and highly superstitious. She cannot handle her husband's casual "jail" game with the neighborhood children, because there is something weighing on her conscience. Jail has been a real specter in this family. When Keller responds to her worries with "what have I got to hide?" we see the first clue that he does have something to hide after all--and Mother knows all about it--and it makes her sick with worry.

Ann is more of a simple character, serving the purpose of the plot but not actually a focus of the plot herself. All My Sons is the story of the Kellers, so we do not see much of Ann's reaction to the realization that her father was largely innocent after all. She functions in this act as a catalyst, a femme fatale in the literal sense, the woman who brings destruction to the false calm of the Kellers' life by churning up a past that some of the family, in some ways, has tried to ignore. She and George have their own family drama, but Miller keeps a tight focus, so Ann's and George's story is not the subject of this play except inasmuch as their disgust for their father heightens the tension between another son and a father who might be guilty.