

**Written and Edited by Lindsay Price** March, 2009

**Issue 38
Anaylsis and Exercise - All My Sons by Arthur Miller**

**Welcome!**

This month we offer an analysis and exercise newsletter for Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

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**Introduction**

[Read **Quick Facts and Quotes** about Arthur Miller, and our **November Newsletter** on *Death of A Salesman*](https://www.theatrefolk.com/spotlights/arthur-miller-death-of-a-salesman).

'Rob the average man of his life-illusion, and you rob him of his happiness at the same stroke.'*Relling in The Wild Duck, Ibsen*

'What have I got to hide?' *Joe, Act One, All My Sons*

'This kind of placid American backyard was not ordinarily associated, at least in 1947, with murder and suicide.' *Timebends: A Life, Miller*

I'm always interested in one more time stories. The person who tries one more time at their craft, to make it before they close the door and do something else. *All My Sons* was Arthur Miller's one more time.

His previous play *The Man With All The Luck* closed on Broadway after four performances and he was giving himself one more before closing the door on theatre. What would have happened if Miller hadn't written one more play?

Of the three major Miller works *Death of A Salesman* is a far favourite of mine. But there's much to love in *All My Sons* - from a theatrical perspective of course – lovable isn't exactly a word commonly used to describe the play! I love the contrast of a perfect suburban life with a seething underbelly: the world is seemingly normal, the world is anything but.

I love that almost every character has a secret.

Miller puts the past in front of the audience in *Death of A Salesman* while in *All My Sons* the audience only sees the aftermath of the past through the present behaviour of the characters.

Miller was clearly influenced by Ibsen and Greek Tragedy. This past/present structure is a direct reflection. The events of the past come back to haunt the present to the point that there is no escape for the characters. It's amazing to see these particular characters in action.

As with our *Death of A Salesman* Analysis and Exercise Newsletter, we assume that you have a familiarity with *All My Sons*. Read the play and then dive in!

**Quick Facts About *All My Sons***

* Inspired by Isben's *The Wild Duck*. Isben's play follows a young man's desire to uncover the truth regarding family secrets with disastrous results.
* Also inspired by Greek Tragedy. Joe is often referred to as a classic greek tragic hero.
* Miller took two and a half years to write the play. When he started in 1945 he was 30 years old.
* Orginally produced on Broadway in 1947.
* The original production won the Tony for Best Play and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award
* The original production was directed by Elia Kazan
* There have been two movie versions (1948 and 1986)
* The most recent Broadway production closed on Broadway on January 11, 2009. It starred John Lithgow, Dianne Wiest, and Katie Holmes.

Timeline of the play

* **Act One**
Sunday Morning, August 1947
* **Act Two**
Twilight on Sunday Evening, August 1947
* **Act Three**
Two am the next morning, August 1947

Timeline leading up to the Play

* **Early Autumn, 1943**
Joe tells Steve Deever to patch faulty plane parts and send them out.
* **Late Autumn, 1943**
Twenty one planes crash. The faulty parts are discovered. Joe and Steve are arrested.
* **November 1943**
Larry writes a letter to Ann in which he reveals he knows about the arrests and plans to crash his plane.
* **November 25, 1943**
Larry is reported missing.
* **1944**
Joe is successful in his appeal, he is released from jail.
* **1945**
Joe's plant rebounds to become one of the most successful in the state.
* **1945**
Chris starts wrting to Ann Deever.
* **Saturday, August 1947**
Larry's memorial tree blows down in a storm.
* **Sunday, August 1947**
The Play begins.

**Dominant Themes**

*Before starting work on* All My Sons, *I had it in my head that the main theme of the play was basically the same as* Death of A Salesman – *the pursuit and consequences of the American Dream.*

*Certainly this aspect is strongly present but there is so much more going on. The themes of the play are particularly insidious (insidious: operating or proceeding in a seemingly harmless way but actually with grave effect) in their execution and the way they evolve throughout the play.*

*I've not specifically addressed a couple of very commonly mentioned themes (such as The American Dream, War Profiteering, Death, Money) because they are so commonly mentioned and are in fact part of the following larger aspects.*

**THE SACRIFICE FOR SUBURBAN LIFE**

'You wanted money so I made money. What must I be forgiven?" (*Joe, Act Three*)

The aftermath of the depression and further to that the Second World War left a huge imprint on American Life. There was an intense desire to live comfortably, to be settled, to be stable, to be normal. **To live an idyllic suburban life**. It's a desire that grips many families even to this day.

When we first meet the characters in *All My Sons* it seems they have achieved this idyllic suburban life. Joe Keller sits peacefully in the morning sun reading a paper. He and Jim talk about the weather. There is talk of the movies. Neighbours come and go, children have free reign to run and play. Not even the toppling of an apple tree brings out much of a reaction – more than one character describes what happens to the tree as 'a pity.'

When things look too perfect and too good to be true, they usually are. Miller is specific and purposeful with how he presents the characters in the opening moment of the play. For the sacrifice to obtain suburban life is one of *All My Sons*' dominant themes. This is more than a following of The American Dream where individuals attempt to achieve success no matter their social standing through hard work. This is a specific type of success: the suburban lifestyle.

This sacrifice manifests itself in numerous ways, many of which are rather horrifying:

* **The sacrifice of morals**
Joe is willing to lie in court and claim his partner Steve Deever is responsible for the faulty airplane parts.
* **The sacrifice for the family**
Joe is willing to lie so he can give his family a certain lifestyle and pass his business down to his sons.
* **The sacrifice of a family**
Joe's need to survive whatever the costs destroys the Deevers. He sacrificed another family to save his own.
* **The sacrifice of responsibility**
Joe is the boss of the plant and lets someone else take the fall for the cracked parts. Joe does not see himself as being responsible to society at large (and to the boys who died) but only to his family. Chis, at one point, also sacrifices responsibility choosing to leave rather than turn his father in.
* **The sacrifice of reality**
Both Joe and Chris play along with Kate's desire to believe Larry is still alive, even though both men believe he is dead.
* **The sacrifice of men**
Joe sacrificed the lives of the pilots in the 21 planes that went down by sending the faulty parts. Chris also talks about how he lost most of his company during the war, how they sacrificed themselves for each other and for America.
* **The sacrifice of the truth**
All the neighbours play along with the notion that Joe is innocent of his crimes, even though they know full well he's guilty. None of them turn him in and thus play a part in his crimes. Sue actively despises the Kellers and lies to their faces, playing the part of happy neighbour.
* **The sacrifice of dreams**
Jim gives up his dream of being a medical researcher to give his wife the lifestyle she wants.
* **The sacrifice of self**
Jim sacrifices himself for his wife. Chris thinks himself a martyr and that every time he wants to reach for something, he has to pull back because 'other people will suffer.' This one, however, I would say is a bit debatable given Chris' action in the play.

Because what the characters sacrifice is actually necessary for the survival of their humanity, what they win is tainted. The perfect suburban life is phony. A veneer over reality. None of the characters are truly happy, it's a veneer of happiness. **It's a veneer of an ordinary, stable, normal life.**

* The set which is a seemingly perfect picture of suburban life with its trees, green grass, nicely painted house and trellised arbor, is marred with the jagged lightening struck stump of the apple tree.
* Joe tells Ann that all the neighbours get together in the arbor to play cards all the time – a normal suburban activity. But Sue tells Ann everyone knows Joe is guilty. Sue tells Ann she can't stand living next door to the 'Holy Family.'
* Kate has to believe that Larry is alive because otherwise, she then has to believe Joe responsible for the cracked parts.
* When George arrives and threatens to shatter the veneer, the family tries to tempt and seduce him with suburban trinkets: a comfy job, a dinner on the shore, a date with a girl, a nice shirt and tie.

Joe has fully bought into the veneer. **He doesn't see it as something fake.** He has to, in order to justify his past actions. His actions brought the suburban life. To that end, Joe often makes statements about suburban life that on the surface make sense but under the surface are completely ridiculous. This is particularly true when Joe talks about Steve Deever:

* 'That was a very happy family used to live in your house Jim. (*Act One*)
* 'I'd like to see him move back right on this block.' (*Act Two*)
* 'I want him to know that when he gets out he's got a place waitin' for him. It'll take his bitterness away.' (*Act Two*)

It's absurd that Joe can't understand why the partner he sold down the river would hate him, or not want to return to his old life.

Jim on the other hand does not buy into the veneer. He gets what is really happening in this suburbia. He has chosen to accept his lot in life and that his past dreams are forever gone. To that end, when he speaks he always speaks the **plain truth without the veneer**. 'Now I live in the usual darkness; I can't find myself; it's even hard sometimes to remember the kind of man I wanted to be.' (*Act Three*)

The eventual consequences for living a lie come back to haunt the Keller family most of all. But instead of facing the issue, the characters choose to remove themselves from the issue.

* When Larry finds out what Joe has done, sees Joe for who he is, the effect is so damaging he crashes his plane and kills himself.
* When the truth is revealed, Chris announces that he's leaving instead of turning his father in.
* Rather than face the consequences of his actions, Joe kills himself at the end of the play.

A common criticism of *All My Sons* is that the first act is too slow. But that slowness is necessary. It's necessary to establish the suburban veneer before it starts to peel away. It's significant that the lighting at the top of the play is a sunny, Sunday morning with Joe Keller sitting front and centre reading the paper. In order to understand the underbelly of these characters, to understand the consequences of what they have sacrificed, we must see their unsatisfying, unsettled, unstable reward.

Activities and Exercises

* In groups create a list on "What living in suburbia means in the twenty-first century." Then create a list on "What living in suburbia means in *All My Sons*." How do the two version of suburbia compare and contrast?
* In groups find lines in the play that demonstrate the perfect suburban life. Then create a tableau that represents those lines.
* The word mendacity means: **the act of lying, a tendency to be untruthful**. In groups find lines in the play that demonstrate the lies the characters tell. Create a tableau that represents those lines. Compare this tableau with the one that represents the perfect life.
* Improve moments that show the veneer and the reality of the suburban bliss. For example the card game that both Joe and Sue mention. Improve the game the way Joe sees it – a fun, normal suburban activity. Then improve it the way that the rest of the neighbours see it – every time they look at Joe they see his guilt.
* Compare Joe and his actions to someone recent who has also sacrificed others for his own success (For example, Bernie Madoff) What are the similarities and differences?
* Circle Answer: The class stands in a circle. Go 'round the group and each person answers quickly on a question. If there is momentum, go 'round the circle two or three times. If someone is truly stuck they can pass. **Questions:** How far would you be willing to go for a perfect life? What would you do if you found out your father did something bad? Is there ever a right time to do the wrong thing? Have you ever sacrificed something to be able to buy something else?

Questions To Answer

1. Why is the suburban lifestyle so important to Joe? How do Sue's feelings about suburbia compare?
2. What is the American Dream and is it explored in *All My Sons*?
3. Is Joe a victim of the American Dream?
4. Is Joe's action at the end of the play an admission of responsibility or a further sacrifice of responsibility?
5. How do Joe's sacrifices for his family end up hurting his family?
6. Are there any characters in the play who are happy in suburbia?
7. Are there any characters who have made worthwhile sacrifices?
8. What is the significance of the way light is used in the play in reference to the perfect suburban life?

**IDEALISM VS PRACTICALITY**

'He's driving my husband crazy with that phony idealism of his, and I'm at the end of my rope on it!' (Sue, Act Two)

**Idealism:** The pursuit of high principles, purposes and goals.

**Practicality:** Matter of fact. Mindful of the results, advantages and disadvantages of an action.

The characters in *All My Sons* live in two worlds: **Idealists** and **Practical Thinkers**. This has been an fascinating theme to analyze. In my head, to be practical is not a bad thing. It is the attribute of someone who is level-headed. But in the play, to be practical or to make practical choices is another form of sacrifice. Those who are practical sacrifice a level of 'goodness' as a human being. Chris goes so far to say that to be practical is not to be human. When characters use the work practical, it's not a compliment.

'The cats in that alley are practical, the bums who ran away when we were fighting were practical. Only the dead ones weren't practical. But now I'm practical and I spit on myself.' (*Act Three*)

Who are the Idealists and who are the Practical Thinkers? Are there any true Idealists in the play?

Chris – Idealist?

Chris is touted as the **idealist of the play**. He has an idealistic vision of his father. He is horrified that the sacrifices his soldiers made during the war mean nothing back at home. Because of his war experiences, he believes in a higher responsibility to the world at large. He has a hard time, even though he still seems to live quite a comfortable life and never outright rejects his father's money, with materialism: 'I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator....Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there's blood on it.' (*Act One*)

He also has a different view of the business than Joe does. He's willing to leave it behind in order to gain some beauty in his life; he doesn't want his life to be all about the money. This is the reason he has invited Ann to the house, he wants to propose to her and begin a new life.

But other than these points, it's the words of the other characters, rather than Chris' words and actions, that tell us of Chris' idealism:

* 'This one, everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents, and his hair falls out.' (*Joe, Act Three*)
* 'I believed everything because I thought you did.' (*George, Act Two*)
* 'Whenever I need somebody to tell me the truth I've always thought of Chris.' (*Ann, Act Two*)
* 'Chris makes people want to be better than it's possible to be.' (*Sue, Act Two*)

This is always a red flag writing wise – **why is the audience told something about Chris' character and not shown it?** Under the surface Chris' character doesn't seem so different to Joe's. When Ann asks if the neighbours talk about her father, Chris is quick to say, 'Nobody talks about him anymore,' (*Act One*) which is not true at all. When Joe's guilt is finally revealed, Chris declares that indeed he suspected but did nothing about it, nor will he do anything about it. Where are his war time ideals? He says his parents have made him practical because he can't send his father to jail:

'I could jail him! I could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now. You made me practical...' (*Act Three*)

But hasn't he been more or less practical all along?

Ann – Idealist?

In Act Two Sue calls Ann the '**female version**' of Chris. What does that mean exactly? Is it that Ann is an idealist, or does Sue see Ann as a 'phony' idealist? Ann puts the pursuit of higher principles above her love for her father. When she believes Steve is responsible for the cracked parts, she cuts off all contact with him. Ann is also very practical when it comes to marrying Chris. She comes to the house determined to get a proposal. She has the ammunition of Larry's letter, more or less proving his death, in her pocket and bring it out when the Keller's are most vulnerable:

'I'm not trying to hurt you Kate. You're making me do this, now remember you're – remember. I've been so lonely, Kate.... I can't leave here alone again. You made me show it to you.' (*Act Three*)

Larry - Idealist

Joe thinks that Larry was more like him, a practical person: "If Larry were alive he wouldn't act like this. He understood the way the world was made. " (*Act Three*) Larry turns out to be the **most idealistic** of all the characters. He is so affected by Joe's arrest and the fact Joe does business while men die that he kills himself by crashing his plane.

Joe - Practical

Joe is the character touted as **the most practical**. On the surface Joe's practicality is more matter of fact, more black and white. He cheerfully describes himself as a dumb guy who speaks plainly and took one year of night school. He works hard and feels pride that he is compensated for it. On the surface it seems his need for money is based in providing goodness for his family. He remembers fondly when everyone had straightforward jobs, he speaks matter of factly about the way the neighbourhood remembers the plant scandal, that everyone believes Steve Deever made a mistake and nothing else:

'I know he meant no harm. He believe they'd hold up a hundred percent. That's a mistake but it ain't murder.' (*Act One*)

As the play progresses we are exposed to another side of Joe's practicality. He ignores when it is practical. He lies when it is practical. Joe's practicality is tightly tied, to the point of being obsessive, to family loyalty and making money for the family. When he weighs the advantages and disadvantages, it's more practical to blame Steve Deever than to take responsibility. This way he maintains his lifestyle and has something to pass on to his sons. It's practical to say Kate is out of her mind when she reveals the truth about his part in the scandal. It's practical to say when push comes to shove that yes he's responsible but it wasn't his fault:

'I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop 'em before anybody took off.' (*Act Two*)

It keeps going. When his fault is pushed, Joe practically shifts his story: if he's to blame, then everyone is to blame. Everyone is driven by money, not just him.

'It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes, what's clean? Half the goddam country is gotta go if I go!' (*Act Three*)

And in the end Joe takes the practical route, rather than the idealist route when he kills himself. For Joe, there never seems to be an end to weighing the advantages and disadvantages of a situation. This is his flaw and what makes him a tragic character.

Kate - Practical

It is often said that Kate is hysterical with grief over Larry. "Because if he's not coming back, then I'll kill myself!" (*Act One*) This is perhaps not the case at all. Kate is quite practical. **She knows the truth will break her family apart**. She knows that by portraying the loving mother she may convince George not to pursue his father's innocence. She knows if Larry is dead, then Joe had a hand in killing him. Kate has weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the truth and therefore, Larry remains alive.

Jim and Sue - Practical

When Jim was younger he was an idealist. He desperately wanted to pursue a higher purpose. A practical nature has been forced upon him by his wife Sue which he has come to accept. Jim associates practicality with lying, this is how he has weighed the advantages and disadvantages with his position in life. He lies to himself about his happiness and knows that Kate and Joe do as well:

'It takes a certain talent... for lying. You have it and I do.' (*Act Three*)

**Jim is wearily practical** with his wife's desire for the suburban lifestyle and money. He know the real value of money, that it doesn't bring happiness, but he's not willing to fight against Sue anymore.

Sue it seems, **was born practical**. When Joe calls her 'realistic' for forcing Jim to attend to a whiny patient, she laughs. She knows it's the truth. When Jim tried to pursue his love of medical research, she followed him and for all intents and purposes dragged him home. For Sue, an unhappy wealthy Jim has more advantages than a poor happy Jim. Sue goes so far as to pressure Ann to move away when she marries Chris, as he is a bad influence:

'My husband has a family, dear. Every time he has a session with Chris he feels as though he's compromising by not giving up everything for research. As though Chris or anybody else isn't compromising.' (*Act Two*)

Sue rejects idealistic thinkers. She believes a satisfactory life (i.e. a wealthy life) and idealism cannot exist together.

Activities and Exercises

* Define what it means to be an idealist and to be practical. How do your definitions compare and contrast with the way the words are used in the play?
* Based on the definitions, divide yourselves into two groups: idealists and practical thinkers. Create an tableau or a scene that demonstrates the definition.
* Come up with two lists of dialogue lines: one for idealism and one for practicality. Imagine a tug of war between two groups, using the lines as each sides 'pull.' Who wins? Which side's lines are more powerful?
* What are the symbols of idealism and practicality in the play?
* Physicalize idealism and practicality. In groups create a machine that employs each concept.
* In groups, write the scene where Joe is on the phone with Steve Deever about the cracked airplane parts – remember that there are two phone calls. What does Joe do between the two phone calls? What is Joe thinking? Does he know right away he's not going to go to the plant? When does he make that decision? Where is Kate? You can get a feel for the chronology of events that day from George's speech in Act Two.
* Circle Answer: The class stands in a circle. Go 'round the group and each person answers quickly on a question. If there is momentum, go 'round the circle two or three times. If someone is truly stuck they can pass. **Questions:** Name a moment in your life when you've been an idealist. Name a moment in your life when you've been a practical thinker. Is it better to be practical or an idealist?

Questions To Answer

1. Is Chris an idealist? Is he naive? How does he see his father before his crime is revealed?
2. Is Chris' idealism phony? Why would Sue claim as such?
3. Is Ann the female version of Chris? Is she a true idealist or a phony idealist?
4. Why are we more told about Chris' idealism than shown through his actions?
5. Were Joe and Kate ever idealists?
6. Both Kate and Joe want to use their practicality to protect the family they both love. Why do they fail?
7. Are Kate and Joe good people? Is it possible to look at them in black and white terms? Why or why not?
8. Which character do you most relate to? Why?

**THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL VS ONE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SOCIETY**

'Sure he was my son. But I think to him, they were all my sons.' (*Joe, Act Three*)

In Joe's world, he believes he has done nothing wrong because he put his family first. His **individual responsibility** to his family is more important that his **responsibility to society at large**. It never enters his mind that he's responsible for the death of the pilots who went down in planes with his faulty parts. Joe can further reconcile this responsibility because although Larry's plane also went down, he never flew that type of plane:

'Those cylinder heads went into P-40's only. What's the matter with you? You know Larry never flew a P-40.' (*Act One*)

He's completely focused on his **individual responsibility**. And when the truth comes out, that is still where his focus lays. There is nothing more important than the family, than saving the business to give to Chris: "For you, a business for you!" (*Act Two*)

Chris believes in a **greater responsibility to society**. This is what the war has left him with. And when Joe's responsibility in the scandal is finally revealed, his response is volatile:

'For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?' (*Act Two*)

Joe lives his life with blinders on. He completely **blocks out his responsibility to society** and can't understand Chris' outburst: '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.' (*Act Three*)

Joe's insistence of **individual responsibility** is shown right from the start of the play with the description of the set. The stage directions describe the Keller's backyard as 'secluded.' There are hedges and 'tall closely planted populars.' It's almost as if the family is physically shut off from the rest of the world. Hiding. When Larry's tree blows down Kate asks Chris at the top of Act Two if he notices that 'there's more light with that thing gone.' As the physical enclosures are removed so is the Keller's ability to hide from the world. The truth is coming to light.

The reveal of Larry's letter puts **Individual Responsibility** and **Social Responsibility** on a collision course. Larry writes Ann a letter in which he states that after learning about Joe's initial arrest for the cracked parts, he's going to purposefully crash his plane:

'Every day three or four men don't come back and he sits there doing business.' (*Act Three*)

The letter clarifies to Joe the difference between **individual responsibility** and **responsibility to society**. 'Sure he was my son. But I think to him, they were all my sons.' (*Act Three*) He realizes why Larry crashes his plane. The final question remains is whether by the end Joe learns to accept his responsibility.

Activities and Exercises

* Define what it means to be responsible. What is the difference between individual and social responsibility? Create a tableau that shows both kinds of responsibility. Compare and contrast the two pictures.
* Circle Answer: The class stands in a circle. Go 'round the group and each person answers quickly on a question. If there is momentum, go 'round the circle two or three times. If someone is truly stuck they can pass. **Questions:** Are you responsible? What are your responsibilities? Which is more important individual or social responsibility? Are you socially responsible?
* In groups look at the following speeches. Divide the lines up so that each person is responsible for a small chunk. Once they're under your belt perform them for the larger class in two ways: one with the entire class blocking the group in, creating human 'blinders.' This should allow for the speakers to be quiet, intensely focused. Then do the speeches in a large space where the groups have to try to communicate the speech to the class from far away. To society at large. How does the speech change? How does each manner feel for the speakers? Which way is more effective?
	+ **Joe's speech in Act One that begins** 'The man was a fool but don't make a murderer out of him.'
	+ **Joe's speech in Act Two that begins** 'You're a boy what could I do.'
	+ **Joe's speech in Act Three that begins** 'What should I want to do? Jail?'
* Do the above speech again. This time only one person speaks the speech. As they do, the other members of the group find places to call out 'Guilty!' It's the person playing Joe's job to convince the others of his innocence. Afterwards, what's the response?

Questions To Answer

1. What does the title mean?
2. Is Joe responsible for what happens outside of his family? Why or why not?
3. What are Kate's responsibilities?
4. Is Chris more responsible than Joe? Why or why not?
5. When Joe kills himself does this show a sense of responsibility or a lack of responsibility?

**PAST VS PRESENT**

'We're like at a train station waiting for a train that never came in.' (*Chris, Act One*)

Thorton Wilder writes in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 'If anyone tries to tell you the past, they're charlatans!' (*Fortune Teller, Act Two*) This is an excellent and relevant quote when referring to how the characters in *All My Sons* deal with the past.

The characters in the play are highly affected by the past. Some are so affected they can't accept the present **such as Kate**: 'He's not dead so there's no argument!' (*Act One*) Kate keeps Larry's room exactly as it was when he left to the point of regularly shining his shoes.

Some have to re-write the past, **such as Joe**: 'What have I got to hide?' (*Act One*) For Joe, the past is nothing more than a series of events and he gets angry when others don't share his view of the past.

Some carry the past with them and aren't sure how to deal with it, **like Chris** and his feelings about the war: 'They didn't die. They killed themselves for each other.' (*Act One*) His feelings about the war are what have caused him to take so long to express his love for Ann.

Some have to acknowledge their past dreams are gone, **such as Jim**: 'It's hard to remember sometimes the kind of man I wanted to be.' (*Act Three*)

Even those who have left get drawn into the lure of the past. Both **Ann** and **George** show extreme wistfulness when they speak of the past:

'I guess I never grew up. It almost seems that Mom and Pop are in there now. And you and my brother doing algebra, and Larry trying to copy my home-work.' (*Act One, Ann*)

'Kate, you look so young, you know? You didn't change at all. It.... rings an old bell.' (*Act Two, George*)

It's important to bring up the characters of **Frank** and **Lydia** at this point. These are the only two characters, who have been around just as long as the Kellers (at least Lydia has as she dated George before the war) and aren't affected by the past. Especially Lydia, who while glad to see George when he comes, doesn't seem to feel she's missed something by marrying Frank.

The Keller family does not address the past, nor do they move on from it. They are in a holding pattern.

Not only that, they are in a **holding pattern of a version of the past that is only a version of the truth**. In this version, Larry is alive and Joe had nothing to do with the scandal. The neighbourhood supports this version completely (in public at least); it's as if the street is frozen in time and no one wants to do anything to change it.

When something threatens this holding pattern, Chris and Ann wanting to marry, George returning to confront Joe, the majority of characters scramble to maintain the frozen past.

Kate pushes Ann to say she's still waiting for Larry. When she won't, Kate does whatever she can to get Ann to leave. She even goes so far as to pack Ann's suitcase.

Joe states that Ann's father should move back and take up exactly where he left off. He wants to give Steve a job back at the plant when he gets out of jail.

Sue tells Ann that if she and Chris marry they should move far away.

When George arrives there is a desperate attempt to lull him with past memories and joining them to eat at the shore.

Notice how many times the characters talk about 'going to the shore.' It's something they used to do before the war and demonstrates a happier time. Joe goes so far trying to get George back into the fold he wants to get George a job at one of the town's law firms.

But the consequences of maintaining this holding pattern are inevitable. **When the full truth is revealed the frozen version of the past cannot hold.** The characters are forced to move forward into the present whether they like it or not.

Activities and Exercises

* List the events of the play that happen in the past and affect the present. When was the last perfect moment for each character?
* In groups, go through the play and pick out any details that give a hint as to what the characters were like before the war. Create an improv that shows all these characters in that time. Imagine there's a garden party and it just so happens all the characters are there (knowing full well that Jim and Sue wouldn't be) Show Jim as a medical researcher, Chris, Ann, George, Lydia and Larry as teenagers. Are there any characters who are exactly the same as they are in the present? Any completely different?
* In groups create a scene around the moment it's decided to plant Larry's tree. During the play, Kate says she never wanted the tree planted because it was too soon. When was it planted. What was the conversation? Afterwards, run through the lines in Act One that address the tree, especially when Kate tells her dream.
* Circle Answer: The class stands in a circle. Go 'round the group and each person answers quickly on a question. If there is momentum, go 'round the circle two or three times. If someone is truly stuck they can pass. **Questions:** What is your favourite moment from your past? Your least favourite moment? Is there a past moment that rules your life? Is there a moment you wish was frozen in time? Would you ever change the present to regain the past? Can the past be forgotten? Can the past be forgiven?

Questions To Answer

1. What is the most significant moment in the past for each character? How does each character act in the present based on that moment?
2. Does Joe believe the past that he has re-written?
3. Do any characters in the play not live in the past?
4. What does Ann feel about the past?

**Characters**

As a character writer it's a thrill to dig deep with these characters. Indeed, this newsletter is so long because there is so much to discover!

**JOE KELLER**

'I thought I had a family here? What happened to my family? (*Act Three*)

Joe Keller is a boxer. He bobs and weaves, he avoids every punch and when he needs to, hits hard.

What makes Joe a great character to play is that **he is not an obvious villain**. He seems normal. The neighbourhood children love him. The neighbourhood men play cards with him every week. He clearly loves his family. He works hard. He is an ordinary man with a fatal flaw.

To Joe, **everything is about the family at whatever the cost**. It's not just about money – it's money for the family. The responsibilities of being a husband and a father supersedes his responsibilities to the plant, to Steve Deever, to the world at large. Because there's an ends to a means, he's able to live with what he has done and deny any wrongdoing. Joe has no concept that his actions affect others and because of that he makes some wildly inappropriate statements. He speaks strongly against 'crucifying' Steve when that is exactly what Joe did to him.

His world view is so narrow, that he becomes acutely frustrated when his choices aren't appreciated or shared.

Joe is often described as a **classic Greek Tragic hero**. The tragic hero is someone of good standing, who through poor judgement falls. The fall is always the fault of the hero. The hero learns from their mistakes but it is always too late and dies at the end. Oedipus is an example of a greek Tragic Hero.

[This is the Wikipedia definition of the Tragic hero.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic_hero)

[Dictionary.com also has a definition.](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tragic%20hero)

I do not fully agree that Joe is a tragic hero. Yes, his poor judgement brings about his own fall. But I do not agree that Joe learns from his mistakes in the end. His death is an escape rather than an acceptance of his crimes. What do you think?

Activities and Exercises

* As a group, think of the physical side to Joe Keller. Think of him as a boxer. How does he move? How does he use his fists? Have everyone move about the space as Joe. How do the physical portrayals differ? How do the girls see him?
* Perform Joe's speech in Act Three that begins, 'What should I want to do? Jail? You want me to go to jail?' As you perform the speech move as a boxer would move. This should be done by both girls and guys.
* How does Joe say the line, 'That was a very happy family that used to live in your house, Jim.' Knowing Joe singlehandedly destroyed the Deevers, does that come into play? Is there any wistfulness or regret? Or does it say the line with what he believes is full honesty?
* Joe says in Act Three that he was put out when he was ten years old. Is this the truth? Is it an exaggeration? In groups, come up with a timeline for Joe's life up to the beginning of the play. How do the groups differ? What is similar? When and where did Joe and Kate meet? What was his relationship with his own family?
* Outline the relationship between Joe and his two sons before the war. What would they do? How was Joe's relationship with Larry different than his relationship with Chris?
* Write a conversation between Joe and Larry as he leaves for war, and then between Joe and Chris. Does Joe say the same thing to each boy? How does the two conversations show the relationship between Joe and his sons?
* In groups discuss whether you agree or disagree that Joe is a classic Tragic Hero. Compare and Contrast Joe to Oedipus Rex.

Questions To Answer

1. Is Joe a tragic hero?
2. Is Joe evil?
3. How do the moments between Joe and Bert show Joe's likability? Is he likeable?
4. Why is so Joe surprised that Ann refuses to write to her father?
5. Does Joe really believe Steve doesn't hate him? Does he really believe Steve would come back to work for him? Why or why not?
6. How does Joe view the world?
7. Do you agree with the ending? Should Joe be allowed to escape through suicide? How would the play change if he decided to turn himself in? How does the suicide affect Joe's character arc in the play? Do you believe that by the end of the play Joe really has come to reconcile he needs to take responsibility for his crime? Is committing suicide taking responsibility?

**CHRIS KELLER**

'So who flew those P-40's, pigs?' (*Act Two*)

On the surface Chris seems like a straightforward character. Dig a little deeper and he turns into an enigma. What he says and what he does are often two different things. Always a great find in theatre!

* He is presented as an idealist but never rejects the money his father makes.
* He's upset that the war didn't really change the world, but when he returns from the war goes right to working in his father's plant. He doesn't carry through on his words.
* He tells Ann how difficult having money and materialism has been for him after the war, but the instant Ann agrees to marry him, he declares he's going to make a 'fortune' for her.
* He chastises Joe's 'talent' for ignoring things. But Chris has the same talent - it is revealed at the end of the play that Chris suspected Joe and did nothing.
* He's presented by Ann as someone who speaks the truth. But Chris also has the same talent for lying that Joe has. He says that none of the neighbours talk about Ann's dad anymore, which isn't true. He supports the lie that Larry is alive.

Activities and Exercises

* Chris is described in his initial stage direction as: 'solidly built, a listener. A man capable of immense affection and loyalty.' Give this description to students before reading the play. Have the students stand and create a physical presence for him. How do these descriptive words become three-dimensional?
* Alternatively, draw a picture or choose pictures of someone who fits this description. Then once students have read the play, have them draw a picture of Chris. Compare and contrast the two pictures.
* What are the physical similarities between Chris and Joe? Are they built the same way? Do they have a similar laugh? An identical gesture? Read the opening conversation between Chris and Joe establishing the physical nature of both characters. If Joe is a boxer, what is Chris?
* Now that you've established each character's physical presence, switch the lines but keep the presence (So Joe would read Chris' lines keeping Joe's physical presence and vice versa). What is the response from those observing the scene?
* In groups, define what it means to be a good son. What does that mean in the present day? Now give each group a character (Chris, Joe, Kate, and George) and define what it means to be a good son for each of these characters. How do these definitions compare and contrast with your own?
* In groups discuss Chris and Ann's relationship. Chris has been writing to Ann for the past two years, but has not seen her since the war. Why do you think Chris went after Ann? What is the timeline of his feelings for her? When did Ann know that she was in love with him?
* Write Chris' first letter to Ann and Ann's first letter to Chris. What initially prompts Chris to write to her?
* In groups decide what Chris was like during the war. Jim says that he was known as 'Mother McKeller.' Kate says she heard he was a 'killer.' Which is the more accurate description and why? Create an improv of Chris interacting with his soldiers during the war.
* What was Chris and Larry's relationship like? Improv a scene between the two brothers. Now add Ann into the mix. What were the three like together? Did Chris like Ann when she was dating Larry?

Questions To Answer

1. Does Chris live up to his description in his initial stage directions?
2. Chris also says that he likes to keep 'abreast' of his ignorance. How does his ignorance differ from Joe?
3. He says he's a good son and a good sucker: In what way has Chris been a sucker? Is this statement true or an exaggeration?
4. What are the differences between what Chris says and what he does?
5. Does Chris idolize his father?
6. Chris says that he never saw Joe as a man - "I saw you as my father." What does this quote mean?
7. Is Chris better than Joe? Why or Why not?
8. Is Chris right or wrong to pursue Ann?

**KATE KELLER**

'Honest to God, it breaks my heart to see what happened to all the children. How we worked and planned for you, and you end up no better than us.' (*Act Two*)

Kate is another complicated character. It seems cut and dry: Kate is a woman who loves her family. So much so that when her son Larry goes missing during the war, she continues to believe he lives with a steely determination.

Just as Joe is willing to do no matter what to make money for the family, **Kate is willing to do no matter what to keep Larry alive**. And for Kate if it means going along with Joe's denial of his crime, that's what she is willing to do. In this regard, Joe and Kate are quite similar. They both feel intense individual responsibilities to their family and ignore the world at large to achieve that individual responsibility. Kate's maternal love comes at the determent of acknowledging the reality of the situation.

And just as Joe seems like the head of the family on the surface, it's **Kate who rules everything**. She is in such control that everyone around her maintains the fallacy of Larry's survival. At the beginning of the play Joe is unwilling to publicly back Chris' decision to reveal his relationship with Ann. Kate constantly needles Joe that he needs to support her because she supports him. Throughout the play she tries to bully Ann into admitting that she's still in love with Larry and waiting for him. And when George arrives with talk of confronting Joe, she uses her 'maternal love' to weaken George:

'We all love you. Joe was just talking about the day you were born and the water got shut off. People were carrying basins from a block away – a stranger would have thought the whole neighbourhood was on fire! Why didn't you give him some juice?' (*Act Two*)

Suddenly Kate is no longer a cut and dry character.

Activities and Exercises

* Kate is first described in the stage directions as 'a woman of uncontrolled inspirations, and an overwhelming capacity for love.' Give this description to students before reading the play. Have the students stand and create a physical presence for him. How do these descriptive words become three-dimensional?
* Alternatively, draw a picture or choose pictures of someone who fits this description. Then once students have read the play, have them draw a picture of Kate. Compare and contrast the two pictures.
* Stage the dream that Kate has about Larry. Why does Kate share this dream?
* What was Kate like before the war? Has she completely changed? Why or why not? Improv a scene with Kate and her family that shows her pre-war personality.
* Create an improv where Kate interacts with her two sons before the war. What was her relationship like with Larry? Was it typical? How did she interact with Chris?
* Stage the moment before the play begins with the storm and Kate entering the yard in the middle of the night.

Questions To Answer

1. Does Kate live up to his description in his initial stage directions?
2. Is Kate insane, or completely sane?
3. Why does Kate consider herself and Joe stupid?
4. Does Kate love Joe? Why or why not?
5. What does money mean to Kate?
6. How does her overwhelming capacity for love hurt those closest to her?
7. In Act Three Kate says she has no strength. Is this the truth or a tactic? Are there any other places in the play where she demonstrates a lack of strength?
8. How does Kate view the world?

**ANN DEEVER**

'You know? It's lovely here. The air is sweet.' (*Act One*)

It would be easy to mistake Ann for a sweet innocent girl. She's described as gentle, and the characters go on and on about her pretty looks. The first thing she does on her first entrace is laugh. She spends three weeks salary on a dress, on a whim. Growing up has not made Ann bitter, as it has Sue, nor has it made her desperate. She wants to marry Chris for love and companionship – not for his money.

But **Ann is a strong woman**. She knows want she wants and she is not easily swayed. Not only that but she displays a strength of purpose in getting it. Ann never once wavers in Kate's questioning about her feelings for Larry. She is not waiting for him to come home. No matter how hard Kate tries, Ann will not be bullied. Ann has brought her letter from Larry, a letter no one knows about, and when all else fails in persuading Kate, she brings it out when ethe Keller's are at their lowest.

Further, Ann has disowned her father. She is completely convinced of his guilt and feels no guilt herself in refusing to see or talk to him: 'It's wrong to pity a man like that. Father or no father, there's only one way to look at him.' (*Act One*)

**Sweetness and steel** are wonderful contrasting characteristics in a character.

Activities and Exercises

* Ann has a very clunky line in Act one - 'Gosh, those dear dead days beyond recall.' It's clearly purposeful, Miller wouldn't leave it in by accident. But why is it there? Why does she refer to the days as 'dear dead' and why are they beyond recall? Why is it important for her to say she can't recall them? Give everyone a chance to say this line and explain why it's there and why they say it the way they do.
* From the very beginning Ann is over Larry. It begs the question if she was over Larry before he left for the war. Especially since she nearly married someone 'two years ago.' That would be a very short time after Larry's death. Even though Larry tells Ann not to wait for him, she gets over him quickly. Discuss in groups why that is.
* Improvise a scene between Ann and the two brothers before the war. What was she like as a younger girl? Has she changed at all? Add George into the mix. How does he act at this age?
* In groups, find lines for Ann that accentuate her sweetness and her steel. Say the lines in pairs with a defined physical presence. How does her physical presence change when she is being sweet to when she is being strong? After the first round switch the presence – say the sweet lines with the strong presence and the strong lines with the sweet presences. How does that affect her character?
* Improv the day that Ann gets the letter from Larry. What does she do? How does she react? Does she ever think about talking to the Kellers? Or to Chris?
* Ann makes a choice to turn her back on George and stay with Chris. This is the second family member she's turned her back on. What was Ann's family life like? Write a scene in groups that shows the Deever's family life.

Questions To Answer

1. Why doesn't Ann bring out the letter from Larry sooner?
2. Is Ann right or wrong to use the letter?
3. Did Ann really love Larry?
4. Has Ann ever suspected Joe?
5. Sue describes Ann as the 'female version' of Chris. Is this a true vision of Ann? Why or why not?
6. What is the relationship between Ann and George? Who is older? Who acts older?
7. How does Ann view the world?

**GEORGE DEEVER**

'You know in your heart Joe did it.' (*Act Two*)

George is the messenger character. He's the one who brings the bad news. **The truth**. The other characters try to placate him, woo him with the past, seduce him with grape juice and food. And because the pull of the past is so strong in the Keller's back yard, George almost falls for it. As a character, George is like that. It seems that he's always falling for something, rather than leading the way. **This the first time he's stood up**. When Kate slips and tells the truth when she should have told a lie, George rises up. He delivers his truth, which starts the collapse of the Keller's perfect suburban life.

Activities and Exercises

* Come up with a list of lines of dialogue describing George before we meet him. Describe George physically based on your list. Compare and contrast your description with his actual entrance.
* Ann does not seem overly surprised during her phone call at George's behaviour, more irritated as if he's acted like this before. Later on Chris says that George 'dives' into things without thinking. Improv a moment between Ann and George, where George's behaviour is excitable and over the top. George is the older of the two, why does it seem that he is the younger?
* George is described as being on the 'edge of self-restraint.' In groups work on George's lines in Act Two that begin, "My life turned upside down since them." Each person gets a small chunk. As each individual speaks, they are held down by the other members of the group. How does it feel to perform like that? Which lines make more sense when they are restrained and which need to be out of control?
* Create a scene between George, Chris and Larry before the war. George states in the play that he looked up to Chris. What would that look like in action? Did George follow the brothers around like a puppy? Did he imitate them? Did the brothers ignore him? Tease him? Bully him?
* What was George's relationship with Lydia like before the war? Was he embarrassed of her? Improv a conversation between them.

Questions To Answer

1. What made George decide to go and see his father?
2. Why does George believe him now, when he didn't before?
3. Did George decide at the same time as Ann not to talk to their father, or did he do it because she did?
4. What was George's experience during the war?
5. What was he like before the war in comparison to what he's like now? He mentions that Lydia 'laughed too much.' How does that reflect his character?
6. What is his relationship with Ann like?
7. Why did George decide to go into law? Why is he disillusioned with law now?
8. How does George view the world?

**THE NEIGHBOURS**

'I resent living next door to the Holy Family.' (*Sue, Act Two*)

Jim, Sue, Frank and Lydia are the neighbours on either side of the Kellers. Frank and Lydia have been around the Kellers a long time. Frank knows Annie, and Lydia used to date George. Jim and Sue moved into the Deevers' old house. The Deevers left after Steve Deever was sent to jail.

The purpose of Jim and Sue is clear in the play. **If the Kellers are the fake perfect suburban family, Jim and Sue are the real deal.** Jim is weary and aware of what he's given up for money. Sue is bitter and angry all the time even though she has exactly what she wants. The two clearly have no love for each other anymore. They both know Joe is guilty and choose to keep quiet.

What is the purpose of Frank and Lydia? What do they offer to the landscape? They are well off – Frank's house is paid for – and have a lot of leisure time. Frank sees movies and does horoscopes. Lydia designs hats. They always seem happy, if a little dim. Neither has a true sense of reality or the real world.

Activities and Exercises

* Improve conversations between Jim and Sue, and Frank and Lydia. How do they talk about the Kellers behind closed doors?

**LARRY KELLER**

'If Larry were alive he wouldn't act like this...' (*Joe, Act Three*)

Even though Larry is never seen in the play, he's an essential character to the story. He symbolizes the past. He symbolizes the war. He symbolizes the height of idealism. The revelation that he purposefully crashed his plane brings the 'fake past' crashing to a halt for the Kellers. It's impossible for the characters to continue on as they have with this revelation. They must address the truth and move forward. Joe chooses to kill himself rather than face prosecution. Kate finally let's the past go in a fashion: "Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live." (*Act Three*)

It's interesting to think about how the present would have turned out for these characters if Larry had lived. Given how he ended his life, there is certainly the notion that of all the characters in the play he would not have let a suburban life get in the way of the truth.

Activities and Exercises

* Create a picture of what Larry looks like. Is he solidly built like Chris? Completely different? We know he's an idealist, how does that translate to his physical presence?
* In groups create a specific memory of Larry for each character.
* Imagine a confrontation between Larry and Joe. How would it go?

**Resources**

* [Arthur Miller's All My Sons (Modern Critical Interpretations)](http://amazon.com/dp/1555460607/?tag=theatrefolk-20)
By Harold Bloom
* [Amazon link for the 1986 movie](http://amazon.com/dp/6300185109/?tag=theatrefolk-20)
* [Wikipedia entry on All My Sons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_My_Sons)
* [The website for the 2008 Broadway production](http://www.allmysonsonbroadway.com/)

Bottom of Form