

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

All My Sons

by Arthur Miller

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Notes

Henrik Ibsen, who is often referred to as the father of modern drama, popularized the social-problem play. As the name implies, the social-problem play deals with a social issue that looms large in the dramatist's society. In the United States in the 1930s, with its political turmoil and social unrest, the social-problem play was very popular. Unfortunately, though, at times the political and social concerns of the playwright loomed too large; as a result, the drama itself failed to be convincing. Consequently, most of these plays seem dated, and there is little interest in them today.

Arthur Miller's first play, *All My Sons*, is in the tradition of the social-problem play. Like Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, of which Miller did an adaptation, *All My Sons* deals with a businessman's responsibility to his society. Also like Ibsen's plays, Miller's play is still read and produced today. (In 1986, the American Playhouse did a production that is available on videocassette.)

As we study this play, see if you can determine how it is a part of the social-problem play tradition. Also, see if you can determine if the play is able to transcend the particular social problem it has as its main concern and take on some universal significance.

All references come from the Dramatists Play Service, Inc. edition of *All My Sons*, published 1974.

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Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify and discuss the characteristics of this play that make it a social-problem play.
2. discuss Miller's realistic style, including the use of colloquial dialogue, the absence of figures of speech, and the maintenance of unities within the play.
3. discuss the post-World War II background of the play and comment on the disillusionment that some people felt just after the war.
4. recognize the elements of this play that make it a modern tragedy.
5. identify character motivation and character development within this play.
6. discuss the following themes explored by Miller in the play:
 - A. Humans are sub-consciously self-destructive.
 - B. The psychological aspects of guilt last for years after the event that caused the guilt.
 - C. There is often a conflict between parent and child.
 - D. Every human being has obligations toward others.
7. discuss the symbolism of the apple tree.
8. comment on the plausibility of the love story between Chris and Ann and why Miller may have sacrificed realism to emphasize theme.
9. discuss the discrepancy between the way Chris seems to others and the way he is seen by others.
10. comment on the notion of the importance of the American family as presented in the play.
11. discuss the effects of Kate's inability to deal with her son's death.
12. understand that Joe's suicide was the logical result of his actions and personality.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. There are two suicides in the play. In what ways are they similar? How do these suicides relate to the characters' thoughts on idealism?
2. In what way does the falling of the apple tree relate to the events that transpire on the day the play takes place.
3. Chris and Ann come from a similar background, but hold very different ideas on family. How do these differences develop?
4. This play takes place during the course of one day in one location. How does this unity of time and place effect the play?
5. One of the most important themes in this play involves the changing place of family in post-war America. How does Ann and Chris' relationship reflect this theme?
6. Jim tells Kate about his theory of the struggle between a person's star and darkness. How does responsibility relate to his theory?
7. Although George was convinced by the courts of his father's guilt, after speaking with his father, George becomes convinced of Joe's guilt. Is he justified in changing his opinion? What reasons does he give?
8. The most important thing in the world to Joe is his family. Is he a good head of the household? Why or why not?
9. Although the reader never meets Larry, we learn a lot about him from what others say. In what ways is he like his father? His brother? To whom is he more similar?
10. One of this play's themes deals with the conflict between materialism and idealism. Which characters embody these philosophies? In the conflict, does either one win?
11. Kate refuses to admit that her son, Larry, is dead. What are the effects of this denial upon the family?

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Act I

Vocabulary

trellised – latticed
stolid – unemotional
dredged – pulled from the bottom
peevisishness – irritability
chivalric – with knightly honor especially of a male toward a female
exasperated – frustrated
haberdashering – selling men's clothing
exonerated – officially declared innocent
ambiguous – having an unclear meaning

1. Miller states in his introduction to *All My Sons* that he wants this play “to be as untheatrical as possible.” His intention is to make his play lifelike. What is realistic about the setting of the play?

2. What information does Miller give the reader or director about Joe Keller?

3. What is Joe Keller discussing with his neighbors as the play opens?

4. What is Kate's attitude toward the fact that Larry has been missing for three years?

Act II

Vocabulary

resenting – holding a grudge
aspersions – a derogatory statement
zeppelin – a blimp
unabashed – unashamed
briskly – quickly
ultimatum – a final choice
transfixed – frozen to a place; mesmerized
insinuatingly – in a sly and hinting manner

1. When and where does this act take place?

2. What does Kate fear?

3. What aspect of Chris' character does Kate emphasize?

4. Explain what Sue has against Chris.

5. What, according to Sue, is the public opinion of Joe Keller's guilt?
