

Kate Keller – Before she appears on stage

An overall view:

Kate is Joe's wife and Chris and Larry's mother. Throughout the play she is defined by these roles and her maternal nature is highlighted by Miller; she is referred to, even by the playwright, as 'mother' whereas Joe is referred to in the stage directions as 'Keller'. How does this affect our perception of her?

Before the audience meet her:

Kate Keller is spoken about some of the other characters before she appears on stage. Look at the quotations below:

FRANK: What'd Kate say?

KELLER: They're all asleep yet. I'm just waiting for her to see it. (p.7-8)

FRANK: Now what Kate wants ...

KELLER: Oh, Kate asked you to make a horoscope?

FRANK: Yeah, what she wants to find out is whether November 25th was a favourable day for Larry. (p.8)

KELLER: ... Annie up yet?

CHRIS: Mother's giving her breakfast in the dining-room.

KELLER: [*crosses, D.S. of stool, looking at broken tree*] See what happened to that tree?

CHRIS: [*without looking up*] Yeah.

KELLER: What's mother going to say? (p.12)

KELLER: What's she going to say? Maybe we ought to tell her before she sees it.

CHRIS: She saw it.

KELLER: How could she see it? I was the first one up. She was still in bed.

CHRIS: She was out here when it broke.

KELLER: When?

CHRIS: About four in the morning. [*Indicating window above them*] I heard it cracking and I woke up and looked out. She was standing right here when it cracked. (p.14)

CHRIS: I don't know the meaning of it. [*Slight pause*] But I know one thing, Dad. We've made a terrible mistake with Mother ... Being dishonest with her. That kind of thing always pays off, and now it's paying off.

KELLER: What do you mean, dishonest? (p.14)

KELLER: What do you want to do, argue with her?

CHRIS: I don't want to argue with her, but it's time she realized that nobody believes Larry is alive any more ... Do we contradict her? Do we say straight out that we have no hope any more? That we haven't had hope for years now?

KELLER: [*frightened at the thought*]: You can't say that to her.

CHRIS: We've got to say it to her. ... Nobody comes back after three years. It's insane.

KELLER: To you it is, and to me. But not to her. You can talk yourself blue in the face, but there's no body and there's no grave, so where are you? (p.14-15)

CHRIS: [*asking, annoyed*] Then it's all right, I'll go ahead with it?

KELLER: Well, you want to be sure Mother isn't going to ...

CHRIS: Then it isn't just my business.

KELLER: I'm just sayin' ...

CHRIS: Sometimes you infuriate me, you know that? Isn't it your business too, if I tell this to Mother and she throws a fit about it? You have such a talent for ignoring things.

...
KELLER: From Mother's point of view he is not dead and you have no right to take his girl. [*Slight pause*] Now you can go on from there if you know where to go, but I'm tellin' you I don't know where to go. See? I don't know. Now what can I do for you? (p.16)

KELLER: How do you know she'll marry you? Maybe she feels the same way Mother does?

CHRIS: Well, if she does, then that's the end of it. From her letters I think she's forgotten him. I'll find out. And then we'll thrash it out with Mother? Right? Dad, don't avoid me. (p.16)

KELLER:	... You marry that girl and you're pronouncing him dead. Now what's going to happen to Mother? Do you know? I don't! <i>[Pause]</i>
CHRIS:	All right, then, Dad.
KELLER:	<i>[thinking Chris has retreated]</i> Give it some more thought.
CHRIS:	I've given it three years of thought. I'd hoped that if I waited, Mother would forget Larry and then we'd have a regular wedding and everything happy.' (p.16-17)

Some questions for discussion:

1. What are the characters talking about in each of the above quotations, apart from Kate?
2. Why do you think these discussions centre around Kate and her reactions?
3. What do we learn about Kate from these conversations?
4. Look at the deceit that permeates these initial discussions – Chris and Joe in particular debate the fact that they have lied to Kate – how does this affect our understanding of the main subject of the play, Joe's deceit, and our feelings towards Kate when we later discover her part in the lie about Joe's illness?
5. Is there anything in the above quotations that suggest Kate can sometimes be cruel?
6. Joe seems anxious about Kate's reactions to the tree and Chris's marriage proposal. What sort of emotions would you attribute to Chris? Explain your ideas.
7. What sort of impression is Miller trying to give the audience of this woman?
8. Do you think it can be argued that Kate is as much the main character of this play as Joe is? Explain your ideas.