

Opening stage directions

Arthur Miller wrote in the Introduction to the Collected Plays: 'My intention in this play was to be as untheatrical as possible. To that end any metaphor, any image, any figure of speech, however creditable to me, was removed if it even slightly brought to consciousness the hand of a writer. So far as was possible nothing was to be permitted to interfere with its artlessness.'

Look at the opening stage directions below:

The back yard of the KELLER home in the outskirts of an American town. August of our era.

The stage is hedged on R. and L. by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere. Upstage is filled with the back of the house and its open, unroofed porch which extends into the yard some six feet. The house is two stories high and has seven rooms. It would have cost perhaps fifteen thousand in the early twenties when it was built. Now it is nicely painted, looks tight and comfortable, and the yard is green with sod, here and there plants whose season is gone. At the R. beside the house, the entrance of the driveway can be seen, but the poplars cut off view of its continuation downstage. In the L. corner, downstage, stands the four-foot-high stump of a slender apple tree whose upper trunk and branches lie toppled beside it, fruit still clinging to its branches. Downstage R. is a small, trellised arbour, shaped like a sea-shell, with a decorative bulb hanging from its forward-curving roof. Garden chairs and a table are scattered about. A garbage pail on the ground next to the porch steps, a wire leaf-burner near it.

ON THE RISE: *It is early Sunday morning.*

Can you see any possible symbolism in any of Miller's directions? Make a note of any ideas you have and share them with someone else before moving on.

Now discuss the following questions and decide whether or not you think the opening stage directions suggest Miller has been successful or unsuccessful in making the play 'untheatrical'.

1. Is it significant that the play is set in the Kellers' back yard? Why isn't the play in the living room with the characters looking out on to the split tree? After all Joe Keller is keen to discuss his success and show off his wealth so why has Miller chosen the outdoors for the setting?
2. Why is the home 'in the outskirts of an American town'? Why does Miller even include this stage direction? As an audience are we likely to be able to tell this when watching the play?
3. Is 'August of our era' important? Think about the season and what it symbolises.
4. Why do you think the stage is 'hedged on R. and L. by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere'?
5. Why can we see the entrance of the driveway only?
6. Why is Larry's memorial an apple tree and why has Miller killed it before the action of the play begins?
7. Why has Miller included 'a garbage pail on the ground next to the porch steps, a wire leaf-burner near it.'?
8. Is setting the play on a Sunday significant? What about the time of day?

Some notes to help discuss the questions

1. Is it significant that the play is set in the Kellers' back yard? Why isn't the play in the living room with the characters looking out on to the split tree? After all Joe Keller is keen to discuss his success and show off his wealth so why has Miller chosen the outdoors for the setting?

Miller's choice of setting might hint at the smallness and fallibility of humans in comparison to nature. Joe Keller is, after all, sometimes compared to a tragic hero – someone who has a tragic flaw and is doomed to fail. By setting the play outside of the house Miller shows the audience that Keller's wealth is irrelevant, it does not affect or change what happens to him despite Keller's belief that it is central to his existence.

The back yard might also be significant because it is where a family gathers outside; it is where children play and adults socialise. In USA where the weather in summer is so often warm and pleasant many families spend a long time in their garden; as an audience we are literally looking at the heart of the family. The front of the house would be the side strangers look at: by seeing the back of the house we are invited to a far more detailed perspective of the family – we can see their secrets.

2. Why is the home 'in the outskirts of an American town'? Why does Miller even include this stage direction? As an audience are we likely to be able to tell this when watching the play?

The 'outskirts' suggest something or someone on the fringes, not really a part of innovation and change. Joe Keller is certainly someone who does not really fit in despite his desperate attempts to do so. There are comments throughout the play about how he has tried to win the favour of his neighbours since his successful appeal. He believes he has won his neighbours over but other characters' comments suggest otherwise. Keller is on the 'outskirts' of society just as his house is on the outskirts of town.

3. Is 'August of our era' important? Think about the season and what it symbolises.

August is the high point of summer before the arrival of autumn. With autumn comes the harvest when all produce is gathered in before the winter months. Harvest is sometimes used as a euphemism for death and the play is about death: of Larry; of innocence; of denial; of love; and ultimately of Joe Keller. The play also centres on the idea of 'reaping what you sow': in other words you can not escape the consequences of earlier actions. For a brilliant example of seasons as symbols look at *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: the moment when Tess is in the garden before her marriage to Angel Clare and again when she is working at the harvesting of the turnips. Of course this is nothing whatsoever to do with *All My Sons* but it does illuminate the point very well!

4. Why do you think the stage is 'hedged on R. and L. by tall, closely planted poplars which lend the yard a secluded atmosphere'?

If something is secluded it is set apart, secret, unobserved. It can be oppressive, particularly as the poplars are 'tall' and 'closely planted'. The set suggests a still, almost stagnant atmosphere where nothing intrudes: just like the Keller family up until the moment of the play. They are a family who live in the past – they can not move on because of what will be exposed if they do.

5. Why can we see the entrance of the driveway only?

This might be a purely practical stage direction: so that the audience can see the arrival and departure of characters but think about what it might suggest as a symbol. A driveway means a road, a pathway that goes somewhere but here it is cut off just as the Kellers are. They are unable to 'go anywhere' because of Joe Keller's guilt and the secret that they share. Their lives are isolated and still. They can not 'move on' just as their driveway is cut off and therefore useless.

6. Why is Larry's memorial an apple tree and why has Miller killed it before the action of the play begins?

Again you can look at this on a purely practical level and claim that Miller kills the tree because it then gives a reason for a lot of the conversations that take place in the play but the tree doesn't need to be dead for it to be central to the action. Characters could comment on its fruit; its health; its beauty – there are reasons Miller chose to kill it and it's not just because he felt like it. The tree represents Larry – also 'cut down' in the prime of his life. The tree was bearing fruit; it was obviously young and had potential just as Larry did. The dead tree in the middle of the stage can be seen to represent all that is wrong with the Keller household: it has been killed and its death is acted out through the play just as the tree's death is discussed. Why is it an apple tree? Why didn't Miller choose pears or hazelnuts or a flowering cherry tree? The apple is of course a symbol of corruption because of the apple in the Garden of Eden. Apples are also symbolic of an American way of life; there is a saying, 'As American as apple pie,' and in USA it is easy to find references to 'traditional apple pie' and 'mom's apple pie'. In other words apple pie symbolises family life and traditions; the apple tree in the play is snapped just as Joe Keller has snapped social codes by sending out faulty parts which cause the death of other people's sons.

7. Why has Miller included 'a garbage pail on the ground next to the porch steps, a wire leaf-burner near it.'?

Do these suggest rotteness; decay; destruction? Why has Miller included them if not as symbols? What role do they play except to act as examples of ordinary family life? Both of these objects are to do with discarding; throwing out; the end of the usefulness and life of items.

8. Is setting the play on a Sunday significant? What about the time of day?

Why is the play on a Sunday? Why not Saturday? Why does it matter what day it is? Is it just to show us it's a day when adults might be around during the day? Is it because Sunday is a day of rest; a religious day; the beginning of a new week? The time of day hints at new beginnings and of possibilities. Consider the times of day for the other two acts before drawing conclusions.