To a certain degree, Chris Keller suffers from what would later be diagnosed as “Survivor’s Guilt,” a psychological term originally coined in the 1960s to describe survivors of the Holocaust who felt they weren’t entitled to happiness or wealth after the trauma of the concentration camps. The arbitrary nature of war—the sheer incomprehensibility of why certain people die and others live—provides an unstable entry point back into society of most survivors.

In his introduction to *All My Sons*, British scholar Christopher Bigsby writes, “Chris feels guilty about his new happiness. In the war he led his men to their death. He is a survivor who feels the guilt of the survivor, a theme that Miller would return to in *After the Fall* (1964). Beyond that, he can see no connection between the sacrifices of war and the way of life it was supposedly fought to preserve.”

Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who studied psychological disorders in WWII veterans, described Survivor’s Guilt this way: “It is the soldier-survivor sense of having betrayed his buddies by letting them die while he stayed alive—at the same time feeling relieved and even joyous that it was *he* who survived … his pleasure in surviving becoming a further source of guilt. Essentially, the survivor is plagued by the question: how I can be thankful and guilty at the same time?” This syndrome is only accentuated in Chris’s case, as it was his brother who died in addition to his entire company. When we meet Chris at the beginning of Act I, he is making his first move since the war toward owning his much-tainted happiness—by asking Annie to visit.

Arthur Miller:

I was walking through the city in wartime feeling the inevitable unease of the survivor. I had even tried to serve by applying for a job with the Office of War Information, the propaganda and intelligence agency, but with my schoolbook French and no connections I apparently had nothing to offer and was turned down. I seemed to be part of nothing, no class, no influential group. … The city I knew was incoherent, yet its throttled speech seemed to implore some significance for the sacrifices that drenched the papers every day. And psychologically situated as I was —a young, fit man barred from a war others were dying in, equipped with a lifelong anguish of self-blame that sometimes verged on a pathological sense of responsibility—it was probably inevitable that the selfishness, cheating, and economic rapacity on the home front should have cut into me with its contrast to the soldiers’ sacrifices and the holiness of the Allied cause. I was a stretched string waiting to be plucked, waiting, as it turned out, for *All My Sons*.

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It takes a little time to toss that off. Because they weren’t just men. For instance, one time it’s been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That’s only a little thing…but…that’s the kind of guys I had. They didn’t die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and they’d’ve been here today. And I got an idea – watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of…responsibility. Man for man. You understand me? – To show that, to bring that on to the earth again like some kind of a monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him. *(Pause*) And then I came home and it was incredible I…there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of a – bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that rat-race again. I felt…what you said…ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. I seemed to make suckers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank-book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you’ve got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you’re got to be a little better because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there’s blood on it. I didn’t want to take any of it. And I guess that included you.