

Joe Keller – Act Three

Joe Keller is the protagonist of the play: the main character – both the tragic hero and the everyman. He is not, however, a simple character who can be defined in a sentence; in fact it could be that we never agree on who he is, what he symbolises or whether or not he is a good or bad man.

You need to go through the play, annotate and make notes on Keller's character. Use the following questions, statements and quotations to help you develop your understanding:

1. On page 75 Kate tells Joe that Jim knows the truth. Look at Joe's answer, '[*apprehensively*]: How does he know? ... I don't like that.' What do you think of Keller's reaction? Does it tell us anything about him or his relationship with Kate?
2. When Joe looks up to the light at Ann's window he asks Kate, 'Maybe I ought to talk to her?' and when Kate replies, 'Don't ask me, Joe.' He responds, '[*almost an outburst*]: Then who do I ask?' Why do you think Joe reacts in this way?
3. On page 76, Joe asks Kate, 'Then what do I do? Tell me, talk to me, what do I do?' What does Joe's continual questioning tell us about him?
4. Even at this point in the play Keller does not seem to understand what he has done wrong or what he has done that he should be ashamed of. When Kate suggests that Chris might forgive Joe he replies, 'He would forgive me! For what? ... I don't know what you mean! You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you?' Why do you think Joe constantly makes references to money? Why can he not understand that he has done something terribly wrong?
5. After Kate tells Joe that Chris feels there is something bigger than the family, Joe retorts, 'Nothin's bigger than that. And you're goin' to tell him, you understand? 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!' What is it that Joe wants Kate to tell Chris? How significant do you think it is that Joe moves from complaining that he made money because the family wanted it to being angry that Chris feels there is something bigger than the family? Do you think Joe thinks the two, family and money, are linked and, if so, how?
6. Do you think that Keller's statement that if there is something bigger than family, 'I'll put a bullet in my head' is the reason he does shoot himself at the end of the play?
7. On page 77 Joe seems to make a comparison between Chris and Larry: who does he appear to favour and why might this be?
8. What does Joe mean when he refers to Larry's view of the world as having, 'a forty-foot front, it ended at the building line.'?
9. Why do you think Joe agrees with Ann that Kate should tell Chris Larry is dead, 'You'll do that. You'll tell him. ... You'll tell him.'?
10. Does it strike you as out of character that Joe goes into the house when commanded to do so by Ann on page 79?

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11. Look at how many questions Joe asks Chris when he discusses what is wrong with him on pages 81-82. Do you think Joe is right to assume that Chris's anger is to do with money?
12. Who is Joe referring to when he says to Chris, 'Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they work for nothin', I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? 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! That's why you can't tell me.' (p.82)
13. After Chris has read Larry's letter out loud Joe appears to accept that he should go to jail, '[*looking at letter in his hand*]: Then what is this if it isn't telling me? Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were.' (p.83) What do you think Keller means and is he right?
14. When Joe kills himself at the end of the play do you feel that he had any choice?
15. Do you think the family's problems are solved by Joe's death? Discuss your ideas.