

Joe Keller – Act One

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. Why do you think Keller is the only character whom the playwright refers to by his last name in all the stage directions?
2. Why do you think Keller is reading the 'want ads' at the opening of the play? Why isn't it the 'for sale' advertisements or the sports pages or the business pages or even the cartoons? Think about what Miller is trying to show us here.
3. On page 7 Keller says, 'All the kind of business goin' on. In my day, either you were a lawyer, or a doctor, or you worked in a shop. Now ...'. What is the significance of this statement?
4. From the opening of the play Joe Keller seems to accept that his son, Larry, is dead. He asks Frank on page 7 about the horoscope, 'How can you make him a horoscope? That's for the future, ain't it?' What does this statement tell the audience about Joe?
5. Many of Keller's conversations and comments turn out to be ironic. What do you think is ironic about Joe's discussion with Bert on pages 12-13 about Bert being a policeman? Why are Joe's comments, '... on my word of honor' and a '... policeman don't ask questions' particularly revealing?
6. When Keller and Chris discuss the fact that nobody except Kate really believes Larry is alive on page 14 why do you think Joe says, 'What do you mean, dishonest?'
7. From the outset of the play the audience sees that Joe is a man who will not take responsibility for any actions and he often avoids giving advice by asking questions. Look on page 16 for evidence of this when Chris tries to talk to him about marrying Ann. Where else in the play can you find evidence of Keller's ability to do this?
8. In Act One we see that Joe Keller believes business, work and wealth to be the most important aspects of a man's life. Look at the way he reacts to Chris's assertion that he wants to feel inspired on page 17. Do you think Joe would really be violent towards Chris or is his behaviour just meant as a threat?
9. Throughout the play Joe Keller lies to those around him; it can be argued that he even lies to himself. On page 21 when Kate asks Joe why Ann is coming to visit Joe replies, 'Don't look at me like that, he didn't tell me any more than he told you.' The audience, however, know this is a lie because we have witnessed the conversation between Chris and Joe on page 15. Find other examples in the play where Joe blatantly lies and explain why you think Miller has him do this.

10. On page 23 there is a hint that Joe and Kate share a secret when Kate tells Joe, 'You above all have got to believe, you ...' Why do you think Joe reacts by saying, 'Why me above all?' and further down the same page, 'What have I got to hide? What the hell is the matter with you, Kate?' Later on in the play it becomes clear that the two do have a secret so why won't Keller discuss it with his wife here?
11. On page 30 Keller tells Ann what he did the day he got out of jail. He says that 'all the gang is playin' poker in this arbor' now and that the 'only way you lick 'em is guts!'. To what extent do you believe his claims? Do you think it is significant that the neighbours play poker with Joe? Think about how the game is played and the fact that players need to have a 'poker face'.
12. Do you think Joe gives away his guilt when he discusses Steve with Ann on pages 31-32? Look in particular at how he tries to interrupt when Kate joins in the conversation and his increasing exasperation. His longest speech in the play occurs on page 32 when he 'recalls' what happened that day. Look at his comment that, 'If I could have gone in that day I'd a told him'. He does not say he was ill: is this because it would be an outright lie? Count up the number of questions Joe asks here; again he rarely makes statements when discussing serious topics.
13. Joe becomes quite agitated when George phones to speak to Ann. On page 37 he asks Chris, 'She don't hold nothin' against me, does she?' and on page 38 the stage direction states '*a little more combatively*' when he asks, 'I mean if she was sent here to find out something?' What might an audience think at this point on seeing the play for the first time? What do you think Miller wants us to think of Joe Keller at this point in the play?
14. Throughout the play Keller makes a lot of comments about money and business and the fact that he has worked hard for his family. One of these occasions is on page 38 when Joe tells Chris, 'Because sometimes I think you're ... ashamed of the money' and afterwards, 'Because it's good money, there's nothing wrong with that money.' Find more examples from the play where Joe talks about money, wealth and the business and explain why you think he might feel the need to make such comments.