

Joe Keller – Act Two

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 48 Joe has a conversation with Ann and Chris about education. Do you think there is any significance to his comment, 'It's getting' so the only dumb ones left are the bosses.'? Is he just making a joke or is there a serious undertone to his statement? What does he mean when he says, 'I got so many lieutenants, majors and colonels that I'm ashamed to ask somebody to sweep the floor. I gotta be careful I'll insult somebody.'? Is Keller highlighting his own feelings of insecurity or is he subtly undermining the status of those who have served their country/
2. Is it important that Keller, '*breaks apple in half, passing it to ANN and CHRIS,*' on page 48? If it is unimportant why has Miller included the direction?
3. What does Keller mean when he says to Ann on page 49, 'My only accomplishment is my son. I ain't brainy. That's all I accomplished.'? Which son do you think he is referring to?
4. Why do you think Joe Keller first appears to offer George a job on page 48 and then offers Steve a job on page 49? What do you think of his reaction when Ann questions his magnanimity?
5. What do you think an audience's reaction would be when George says to Chris on page 55, 'And he's the kind of boss to let a hundred and twenty-one cylinder heads be repaired and shipped out of his shop without even knowing about it? ... And that's the same Joe Keller who never left his shop without first going around to see that all the lights were out. ... The same man who knows how many minutes a day his workers spend in the toilet.'?
6. On page 62 Keller tells George he looks 'fine' but when Kate contradicts him Keller replies, 'That's what I said, you look terrible, George. [They laugh.] I wear the pants and she beats me with the belt.' Why might these two statements be significant?
7. Why is Keller's statement to George about Steve ironic on page 63, 'As long as I know him, twenty-five years, the man never learned how to take the blame.'?
8. On page 64 Joe lists a number of times when Steve got in to trouble at work and someone else was blamed. Why do you think Miller has Joe make these remarks? Is he just covering up his own guilt, is he lying or is Miller highlighting that everyone makes mistakes at some point in their lives?
9. Do you think that Kate's 'mistake' on page 65 about Joe's illness is the turning point in the play or do you think it comes at another time? Explain your ideas.

10. After Keller says on page 65, 'I know how you feel, kid, I'll never forgive myself. If I could've gone in that day I'd never allow Dad to touch those heads.,' he does not say anything else until the end of page 67 and there are no stage directions to indicate his actions. What do you think Joe should be doing at this time and why? Why do you think Miller silences the character at this moment for such a period?
11. Why do you think Miller has Kate hit Joe on page 68 after he says to her, 'I got plenty to say. Three and a half years you been talking like a maniac –'? What does this suggest about their relationship and the way the family operates? You might want to think back to Act One when Joe appeared to threaten Chris by putting his fist to his chin.
12. Look at Joe's speech on page 69 when he tries to explain himself to Chris which begins, 'You're a boy, what could I do!' Count up how many times Joe uses the word 'business' and explore why you think Joe says it so often. Why do you think Joe equates losing the business to, 'let[ting] them take my life away?'
13. What impact do you think it has that Joe tells Chris on page 70, 'I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you?' and moments later, 'For you, a business for you!?' Do you believe Keller's plea or do you think he is merely using his son as another excuse?
14. Act Two finishes with Keller's words, 'Chris ... My Chris ...' How effective do you feel it is that the Act finishes in this way? What is particularly striking about the line? In what ways might the line be interpreted?