

# ALL MY SONS

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## CONTENTS

1. Introduction	4
1. ACT I	29
2. ACT II	74
3. ACT III	112

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## Introduction

### About the playwright:

#### a- Early Life

**Arthur Miller** was the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants. He was born on October 17, 1915, in Harlem, New York City. His father, Isidore Miller, manufactured women's coats and was affluent. Thus, young Arthur was raised in a moderately wealthy household until his family lost almost everything in the Wall Street Crash of 1929. They subsequently fired the chauffeur and moved from the Upper East Side in Manhattan to Gravesend, Brooklyn.



Arthur Miller

#### Arthur Miller

After graduating high school, Miller worked a few odd jobs to save enough money to attend the University of Michigan. While in college, he took courses with the much-loved playwright professor Kenneth Rowe, a man who taught his students how to construct a play in order to achieve a proposed end. Inspired by Rowe's approach, Miller moved back east to begin his career.

It was at Michigan that he wrote his first plays. They were successes, earning him numerous student awards, including the Avery Hopwood Award in Drama for "*No Villain*" in 1937. The award was named after one of the most successful playwrights of the 1920s.

#### b- Playwriting Career

After graduating in 1938, Arthur joined the Federal Theater Project

(FTP). As he explained in his autobiography *Time bends - A Life* (1987): “To join the WPA Theatre Project ... and conniving to get myself a twenty-three-dollar-a-week job.” The FTP was an attempt to offer work to theatrical professionals and to provide “free, adult, uncensored theatre”. In 1936 alone, the FTP employed 5,385 people in the city. Over a three year period over 12 million people attended performances in the city.

In 1939 Miller was offered a contract with Twentieth Century Fox:

“... with the Federal Theatre Project, which was already coming to its end, I had no qualms about turning down a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-week offer by a Colonel Joy, representing Twentieth Century Fox, to come to work for them.”

A college football injury kept him from active service in the Second World War. In 1941 he began work on his play,

*The Man Who Had All the Luck*. It became his first professionally produced play when it arrived on Broadway in November 1944. It opened at the Forrest Theatre, where it ran for only 4 performances.



Miller's next play was *All My Sons*. Opening at the Coronet Theatre on 29th January, 1947, directed by Elia Kazan, and starring Ed Begley, Karl Malden and Arthur Kennedy. It became a hit on Broadway, running for 328 performances. Both Miller and Kazan received Tony Awards, and Miller won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. As Michael Ratcliffe pointed out: “A family tale of corrupt profiteering at home that led to the death of US pilots abroad... Miller's best scenes display a mastery of conversation, a gift for sketching vivid characters on the margins of a play, and a narrative talent for seizing the spectator's attention from the start.”

His next play, “*Death Of A Salesman*”, was directed by Kazan at the Morosco Theatre on 10th February, 1949. It played for 742 performances and won the Tony Award for best play, supporting actor, author, producer and director. It also won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play.



Elia Kazan and Arthur Miller while working on *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

“*The crucible*” was first performed at the Martin Beck Theater on Broadway on 22nd January, 1953. The play was not well received by the critics. As he pointed out in his autobiography: “I have never been surprised by the New York reception of a play... What I had not quite bargained for, however, was the hostility in the New York audience as the theme of the play was revealed; an invisible sheet of ice formed over their heads, thick enough to skate on. In the lobby at the end, people with whom I had some fairly close professional acquaintanceships passed me by as though I were invisible.” Even so, the production won the Tony Award for best play of 1953.



Miller’s next two plays, “*A View from the Bridge*” and “*A Memory of Two Mondays*”, were badly received. It is believed that this reaction was mainly due to political reasons. In 1956 Miller was called before the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Miller refused to testify and give names of former members of the American Communist Party, saying “I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him.” In May 1957 he was found guilty of contempt of Congress, sentenced

to a \$500 fine or thirty days in prison, blacklisted, and had his passport withdrawn.

After the Hollywood Blacklist was lifted in 1960, Miller wrote the screenplay for the movie,

*"The Misfits"*(1961). Miller's next play was *"After the Fall"*. He admitted that everything he had written in this play was based on somebody he had seen or known, alluding to his second wife Marilyn Monroe. However, the critics thought it was wrong of him to write about his marriage to a woman who had committed suicide. His next two plays were *"Incident at Vichy"* (1964) and *"The Price"* (1968). Other plays by Miller included: *"The Creation of the World and Other Business"* (1972), *'The Archbishop's Ceiling'* (1977) and *"The American Clock"* (1980).



In 1983 Miller himself directed *"Death Of A Salesman"* in Chinese at the Beijing Peoples Art Theatre and in 1987, he wrote an impressive autobiography, *"Time bends - A Life"* (1987).

He continued to write plays and the best of these include *"The Last Yankee"* (1991), *"The Ride Down Mt. Morgan"* (1991), *"Broken Glass"* (1994), *"Mr Peter'sConnections"* (1998), *"Resurrection Blues"* (2002) and *"Finishing the Picture"* (2004), a return to the subject of Marilyn Monroe.

### **c- Personal Life**

In 1983, Arthur married his college girlfriend, Mary Grace Slattery. They had two children, Jane and Robert. In 1956 he divorced his wife Mary and married movie star. Marilyn Monroe. With this marriage Miller achieved a different type of fame. It was a marriage doomed to fail,

as Monroe was, in Miller's words, "highly self-destructive," and indeed in 1961, they got divorced. Nineteen months later, Marilyn Monroe died of an apparent drug overdose.



Marilyn Monroe

After her death, Miller married photographer, Inge Morath in 1962, and had two children, Rebecca and Daniel. The couple remained together until Inge's death in 2002.

#### **d- Death**

Miller died of heart failure after a battle against cancer, pneumonia and congestive heart disease at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut. He died on the evening of February 10, 2005 (*the 56th anniversary of the Broadway debut of "Death of a Salesman"*), aged 89, surrounded by family and friends.

#### **e- Criticism of his literary work**

Miller based his works on American history, his own personal life, and observations. Though exceptionally and distinctively American, Miller's works were universal stories about an individual's

struggle with his society, his family, and especially, himself. Miller's characters suffer from anxiety, depression, and guilt, and it was the genius of Miller to portray their pain and sorrow realistically, creating works that were familiar, yet uncanny in their power to move an audience. Miller's bravery and willingness to fight for what he believed in his chosen art form made him a great American whose name will live on in world letters.

## f- His Legacy

Miller's career as a writer spanned over seven decades, and at the time of his death, Miller was considered to be one of the greatest dramatists of the twentieth century. After his death, many respected actors, directors, and producers paid tribute to Miller, some calling him the last great practitioner of the American stage, and Broadway theatres darkened their lights in a show of respect. Miller's alma mater, the University of Michigan opened the Arthur Miller Theatre in March, 2007. It is the only theatre in the world that bears Miller's name-as it was his wish.

Christopher Bigsby wrote Arthur Miller: "*The Definitive Biography*" based on boxes of papers Miller made available to him before his death in 2005. The book was published in November 2008, and is reported to reveal unpublished works in which Miller "bitterly attack[ed] the injustices of American racism long before it was taken up by the civil rights movement".

One had the right to write because other people needed news of the inner world, and if they went too long without such news they would go mad with the chaos of their lives.

*"The Shadows of the Gods"*

I think it's a mistake to ever look for hope outside of one's self.

*"After The Fall"*

He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid.

The structure of a play is always the story of how the birds came home to roost.



Maybe all one can do is hope to end up with the right regrets.

Don't be seduced into thinking that that which does not make a profit is without value.

The theater is so endlessly fascinating because it's so accidental. It's so much like life.

## **About the play**

### **a- Setting**

The play takes place in a small American town in August, a few years after World War II; precisely in 1947. The events occur on a single set, the back yard of the Keller home, where a tree has recently been torn down by a storm. They happen between Sunday morning and a little after two o'clock the following morning. The residents of this house are the Kellers. They are presented as a middle-class family with a working-class background. They are not rich, but they are financially comfortable, and there is a sense throughout the play that they worked hard to reach this state of stability.

### **b- Plot Summary**

**Act 1** introduces Joe Keller and Dr. Jim Bayliss in the yard. Keller is a middle-aged father, uneducated but sensible and generally undistinguished. Jim, the local doctor, is having a small talk with him. Then enters, Frank Lubey who is younger, and extremely superstitious and credulous.

Keller reads the want ads in the Sunday paper. Frank notices the broken tree. Frank implicitly refers to the fact that the tree was planted in memory of Keller's son Larry, who would have turned 27 this month. He knows Larry's birthday because he has been preparing a horoscope for Larry at the request of Keller's wife Kate/Mother. She wishes to know if November 25th, the day on which Larry went missing in the war, was a favourable day for her son. According to those who believe in astrology, it would have been fairly impossible for Larry to die on a favourable day.

Keller mentions Annie is upstairs sleeping. Sue Bayliss, Jim's wife, stops by to tell Jim that a patient is on the phone. Lydia Lubey, Frank's

wife, enters to complain of a broken toaster, and then asks if Annie is still unmarried (*she is*). Keller replies bitterly that it is because of the war that Annie is single and that he has one son instead of two. She leaves.

Chris Keller enters. He is an affectionate young man of 32, who clearly adores his father. A little boy named Bert runs in. He and Keller have an extended make-believe game in which Keller is the police inspector and Bert has been assigned to arrest other children in the town.

Early that morning, during the storm, Chris has seen his mother standing outside beside the tree when it cracked. She has been crying very hard and wandering around at night. Although Larry has been missing for several years, Mother believes he is alive somewhere. Chris thinks it is unfair that he and Keller allow her to hold onto this dream, while they are certain that Larry is dead. Keller is reluctant to finalize this fact because they cannot prove that their son is dead, at least not to his wife, without a body or a grave.

Chris says he is going to propose to Ann. Keller for there is no other girl for him and if his parents will not accept his marriage to Annie, then they will just get married and move elsewhere.

Mother appears. She says that it is funny that Larry's tree blew down in his birthday month, and this shows that he is coming back. She says that she loves Annie because she did not run off with another man as soon as her fiancé was declared missing. Mother has a headache, perhaps from a bad dream in which she saw Larry reaching to her from the cockpit of his plane. She sees this as a proof that they had been hasty in putting a memorial tree up for him.

When Chris goes to get her some aspirin, Mother asks Keller if Chris intends to propose to Annie. He answers noncommittally. Mother says that if Annie is still single, that means that she is waiting for Larry. Mother gets somewhat hysterical, claiming that if Larry is not coming

back, then she will kill herself. She says that Keller in particular should still believe -but Keller does not understand why he in particular should believe. Bert reappears, but Mother shoos him away, saying that they must end that jail business.

Ann and Chris enter. The room Ann is staying in is Larry's room. Ann is shocked to learn this because the closet is full of clothes and the shoes are polished. Mother asks if Ann goes out, and Ann understands that she is really asking if she is still waiting for Larry. She says no.

Frank asks Ann about her brother George, the lawyer. He also asks when her father expects parole. After Frank leaves, Ann is distressed that the town is still talking about her father. Keller claims that no one talks about the case anymore, because when he got out of prison he walked down the street with his head held high. Keller and Ann's father Steve have been in business together during the war, and they had sold a shipment of cracked cylinder heads to the Air Force, which made twenty-one P-40s crash. The two were tried, and Steve was found guilty and sent to jail, but Keller went home. Ann is surprised that Keller does not hold any grudges against her father, even though her father had tried to blame the whole thing on him. Ann does hold a grudge, though; she has not spoken to her father since then. Chris agrees and calls Steve a murderer. For all they know, Ann says, one of those cracked cylinder heads could have been in the plane that crashed with Larry inside. Mother is angered by this remark.

Kate and Keller go. Chris confesses his love. He feels uncomfortable in his happiness because he survived the war, while all the other men during the war that were with him, did not.

George, Ann's brother, is on the phone. Keller expresses puzzlement that George is calling from Columbus, where his father's prison is. Keller suspects that George and Ann are trying to open up the case again.

Chris is angered by the insinuation. Keller says he wants to rename the business for Chris, but Chris is uneasy with the proposition. Keller suspects that Chris is ashamed of their money, and he insists that it is good moral money. Ann says that George is coming that night.

**Act 2-** Mother fears that George is coming to open up the case again. Ann tells Chris that they ought to tell Mother about the engagement. Chris leaves, and Ann gossips with Sue who complains that her husband resents her for having put him through medical school. Sue says that Jim wants to do medical research and that Chris is the one who put idealistic thoughts of helping the world into her husband's head. She thinks that Chris makes other men feel guilty about their lives, while Chris lives on his father's business - she implies that this is not clean money.

Ann tells Chris that Sue hates him and says that everyone thinks Keller is guilty. Chris says he would not forgive his father if he had been guilty. When Keller enters, they lightheartedly banter about his lack of education. Keller offers to give Ann's father a job when he gets out of jail, ostensibly so that he will not burden the newlyweds.

George arrives and tells Ann that she is not going to marry Chris, because his father ruined her family. George explains that he went to the jail to tell their father that Ann was getting married, and he discovered that they had been wrong all along. They did a terrible thing in cutting their father out of their lives. Steve had been alone at work when the cracked cylinder heads came in, so he called Keller. Keller told him to weld the cracks and send the parts on to the army, but Steve, "a frightened mouse", was afraid to do it alone. Keller claimed that he had the flu and could not go into work. This excuse made it possible for him later to deny any involvement in the shipment. Chris replies that because Steve is such a frightened mouse he throws the blame on someone else.

Mother enters; there is a general pause. She gushes over George for a while, and he responds kindly. Lydia stops by (*she and George were old*

*sweethearts*), and it saddens him to see her. Keller walks in. George says that his father is not doing well, and Keller is sympathetic. He is sad to hear that Steve is still angry at him for Steve never knew how to take the blame. He lists incidents in which Steve tried to blame others to save face. George knows that this is true, and his anger is diffused. Mother brags that Keller has not been sick for fifteen years. Keller hastily adds the exception of his flu during the war. George's suspicion is reawakened.

Frank enters and announces that he has finished Larry's horoscope. The day he disappeared was his favourable day, so Larry probably could not have been killed on that day. Mother has packed Ann's bag in order to leave. Chris throws George out. Ann runs after him to try to calm him down.

The Kellers are left alone. Chris yells at his mother for packing Ann's bag, but she replies that everybody has to wait for Larry to come home. She is very insistent on this point. Chris says that he has let Larry go a long time ago. Mother cries that Larry is alive, because if he is dead, then Keller killed him. "As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father." Keller does not deny it; he ordered those cracked cylinder heads to be shipped out. Yet, they did not go into the type of plane that Larry flew. Chris says that Keller killed twenty-one men, and Chris then calls him a murderer. Keller explains that it was a matter of business: you work forty years, and in one moment, one failed shipment, the contracts can be torn up and you can lose everything. He thought that the military would notice the cracks anyway and that if they did not, he would warn them. But it was too late - the news was all over the papers that the planes had crashed, and the police were knocking on the door.

Chris is flabbergasted that his father suspected the planes would crash. Furious and betrayed, he asks why his father would do such a thing. For him, his father replies - for Chris, for the family, for the

business. Enraged, Chris rants about his father's small-mindedness, in particular his lack of empathy with his countrymen and the human race. He stumbles away, weeping.

**Act 3** –It is the middle of the night. Mother is outside waiting for Chris to come home. Jim appears and asks about the fight. He has figured out the truth about Keller and Steve a long time ago. Jim says that Chris would never know how to live with a thing like that. But he will come back, because every man has to compromise his ideals sometime, and besides he is a good son.

Mother tells Keller that when Chris returns, he has to make sure that Chris knows that he understands the gravity of his offense .He may suggest going to prison as a fair compensation for what he did, should Chris ask him to. Keller does not like this plan, because he thinks he made the choice for the sake of his wife and son. Furthermore, he spoiled them rather than making them earn their keep. Mother says that these points do not excuse his crime. Keller says Chris will forgive him, and that Larry would have understood because he had a mind for business.

Ann insists that Mother tell Chris that Larry is dead and she knows it, so that they can go away and be happy. Mother refuses, because she knows in her heart that Larry is alive, and she knows that Chris and Ann must feel the same in their hearts. Ann says that she knows that Larry is dead and gets out a letter from her pocket. It is a letter from Larry. He wrote it right before he disappeared. As Mother reads the letter, she begins to moan.

Chris returns and says that he will leave town because he cannot bear to be around his father. He could jail him if he were still human. Ann says she will go with him, but he refuses clarifying that in her heart she will always be asking him to send his father to jail. She says he should do what he has to do, but he cannot find a reason to make Keller suffer;