Joe Keller:

Act 1 character analysis

Arthur Miller’s seminal tragic play ‘All My Sons’ explores the consequences of a businessman’s decision to sell faulty aircraft parts to the American Airforce which then results in the deaths of 21 servicemen. The play is set in post-WWII 1947. The businessman, a sixty year old Joe Keller, is the protagonist. In Act 1, he is portrayed by Miller as a self-made family-man who suffers from a lack of will and capacity to see the ‘bigger picture’ in life. He is uneducated and from a challenging, impoverished working-class background. Moreover, he struggles under a burden of resentment due to the privileged lives of his wife and child (Chris) which he believes they do not fully appreciate. Throughout the play, Miller develops a certain level of moral ambiguity not least due to the development of Keller’s character insofar as the audience may both judge him adversely for his actions by war profiteering while also sympathising with his character flaws and attempts to justify himself.

Firstly, in Act 1, Keller demonstrates various levels of self-justification. The bases for this include his desire to protect his family and way of life; his assertion that his crimes ‘pale into insignificance’ in comparison to others who may be more wealthy as a result of even greater crimes and corruption; his fear of a time period – the Great Depression – which continues to haunt him and form his psychological makeup; and because of his seething feelings of resentment towards Kate (his wife) and Chris. In a sense, he lives his life on the basis of feeling that life somehow ‘owes him one’. He has a ‘chip on his shoulder’; emotional damage which is even more destructive perhaps than that associated with the faulty aircraft parts he sold.

In Act 1, Miller quickly establishes the degree of luxury in which the Keller’s live: “The house is two stories high and had seven rooms. It would have cost perhaps fifteen thousand in the early twenties when it was built”. This stage description and commentary clearly shows that the Keller family is defined by the level of financial comfort of their lifestyles. These stage directions describe their suburban American home. Keller’s own character is described in great detail:

A heavy man of stolid mind and build, a business man these many years, but with the imprint of the machine-shop worker and boss still upon him. When he reads, when he speaks, when he listens, it is with the terrible concentration of the uneducated man for whom there is still wonder in many commonly known things, a man whose judgments must be dredged out of experience and a peasant-like common sense. A man among men.

This quote uses subtle imagery “imprint of the machine shop worker” to compare the repetitive formative pragmatic ideals which are core to Keller’s character with the industrial moulding of machine parts. In this way, Keller is portrayed in terms of a machine i.e. as emotionless and insensitive. Nonetheless, the audience may still feel sympathy for his character due to the “terrible concentration” Keller exerts when learning via trial and error throughout his life. Keller’s is thus a believable, flawed individual.

The concept that Keller is an ignorant man is continued as he is referred to as both an “elephant” and a “bull”. These animals symbolise avoidance of the truth and his materialistic aggression.

During Act 1, the character of Annie, a young woman who used to live next door to the Kellers, is introduced as staying at the Kellers. Keller’s late son Larry (who – the audience later learns - committed suicide on discovering the truth about his father’s culpability) was engaged to Annie. Annie thus may symbolise the embodiment of Keller’s guilt. Chris and Annie have since formed a romantic bond and wish to marry however the question as to whether Larry is really dead or not makes the relationship awkward and complicated in the extreme. In point of fact, Kate still seems to believe that Larry is coming back after three years of being declared missing. This belief however may simply be delusion linked to a denial (not only about her son’s death) but also of her husband’s guilt and involvement with the tragedies. There is obvious conflict between father and son about whether to shatter Kate’s illusion on this matter. Keller clearly wishes to maintain the comforting lie that Larry is still alive somewhere.

A tree which had been planted in memory of Larry (who is simply missing in action according to the family during Act 1) is struck by lightning during Act 1. This may symbolise the sudden, violent imposition of a form of truth which threatens the comforts of the whole Keller family. The truth is later to be revealed by Annie and Annie’s brother, George (who is a lawyer). Kate is pleased that the tree was felled by the lightning as it allows her to re-ignite her superstitious beliefs relating to her (and her neighbour’s) reading of Larry’s propitious horoscope and it allows her to delude herself again that Larry may still be alive. She resented the planting of the tree in the first place as she did not wish to memorialise her son as being dead. Joe then lies to his wife during this scene when denying any knowledge of Chris’ intention to propose to Annie.

Furthermore, during Act 1, Keller engages in a long monologue, recalling the day he was exonerated of the crime of selling faulty aircraft parts. He allowed his friend and business partner, a Steve Deever (Annie and George’s father) to take the blame such that Steve spends the play off-stage and languishing in prison.

Towards the end of the scene, Kate announces to Keller that George is due to arrive at their house. During this announcement, Kate repeatedly warns Joe to “Be Smart”. This links back to the audience’s first impression that Joe is not as verbally dexterous as George. The ominous phone-call acts foreshadows George as the bearer of difficult forms of truth about the past and about Keller’s involvement with the inadvertent deaths of the servicemen. Keller is clearly intimidated by the prospect of George’s arrival and what it might entail.

In conclusion, Miller effectively uses a range of dramatic techniques during Act 1 in order to fully engage the audience with the complexities of Keller’s attempts to justify himself. The Keller family appears to have achieved the ‘American Dream’ however Miller exposes the corruption and self-delusion underpinning this façade – a theme which retains a tragic relevance.

Word count 999 (not including in-text references)