

# All My Sons

Arthur Miller

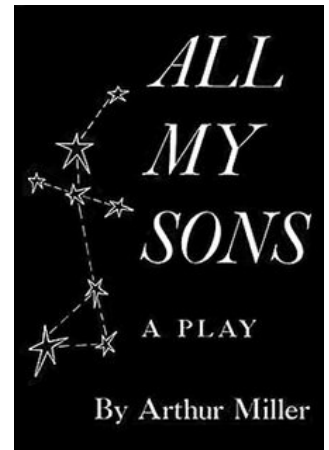


The success of a play, especially one's first success, is somewhat like pushing against a door which suddenly opens from the other side. One may fall on one's face or not, but certainly a new room is opened that was always securely shut until then. For myself, the experience was invigorating. It made it possible to dream of daring more and risking more. The audience sat in silence before the unwinding of *All My Sons* and gasped when they should have, and I tasted that power which is reserved, I imagine, for playwrights, which is to know that by one's invention a mass of strangers has been publicly transfixed.

Arthur Miller



[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All\\_My\\_Sons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_My_Sons)]



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## Author biography

**Arthur Miller is considered one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century. His best-known plays include 'All My Sons,' 'The Crucible' and the Pulitzer Prize-winning 'Death of a Salesman.'**

### Who Was Arthur Miller?

Playwright Arthur Miller attended the University of Michigan before moving back East to write dramas for the stage. He earned widespread praise for *Death of a Salesman*, which opened on Broadway in 1949 and won the Pulitzer Prize along with multiple Tonys. He received more acclaim for his award-winning follow-up, *The Crucible*, which reflected his unwavering refusal to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Miller's public life was painted in part by his rocky marriage to Hollywood sex symbol Marilyn Monroe. The playwright died in 2005 at the age of 89, leaving a body of work that continues to be re-staged internationally and adapted for the screen.

### Early Life and Education

Miller was born in Harlem, New York, on October 17, 1915, to an immigrant family of Polish and Jewish descent. His father, Isidore, owned a successful coat manufacturing business, and his mother, Augusta, to whom he was closer, was an educator and an avid reader of novels.

The affluent Miller family lost almost everything in the Wall

Street Crash of 1929, and had to move from Manhattan to Flatbush, Brooklyn. After graduating high school, Miller worked a few odd jobs to save enough money to attend the University of Michigan. While in college, he wrote for the student paper and completed his first play, *No Villain*, for which he won the school's Avery Hopwood Award. He also took courses with playwright and professor Kenneth Rowe. Inspired by Rowe's approach, Miller moved back East to begin his career as a playwright.

### Early Career & 'Death of a Salesman'

Miller's career got off to a rocky start. His 1944 Broadway debut, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, garnered a fate that was the antithesis of its title, closing after just four performances with a stack of woeful reviews. *Focus*, Miller's novel about anti-Semitism, was published a year later. His next play, *All My Sons*, was a hit in 1947, running for almost a full year on Broadway and earning Miller his first Tony Award for Best Author.

Working in a small studio that he built in Roxbury, Connecticut, Miller wrote the first act of *Death of a Salesman* in less than a day. The play, directed by Elia Kazan, opened on February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theatre, and was adored by nearly everyone, becoming an iconic stage work.

The drama follows the travails of

Willy Loman, an aging Brooklyn salesman whose career is in decline and who finds the values that he so doggedly pursued have become his undoing.

*Salesman* won Miller the highest accolades in the theater world: the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Tony for Best Play. (The work, in fact, swept all of the six Tony categories in which it was nominated, including for Best Direction and Best Author.)

### Marriage to Marilyn Monroe

In 1956, Miller divorced his first wife, Mary Slattery, his former college sweetheart with whom he had two children, Jane Ellen and Robert. Less than a month later, Miller married actress and Hollywood sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, whom he'd first met in 1951 at a Hollywood party. At the time, Monroe was dating Kazan, who had directed Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. When Kazan asked Miller to keep Monroe company while he dated another actress, Miller and Monroe struck up a friendship that turned into a romance. Author Norman Mailer called their marriage the union of "the Great American Brain" and "the Great American Body."

### 'The Crucible' & McCarthyism

Later in 1956, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) refused to renew Miller's passport, and called him

to appear before the committee. His 1953 play, the Tony Award-winning *The Crucible*, a dramatization of the Salem witch trials of 1692 and an allegory about McCarthyism, was believed to be one of the reasons why Miller came under the committee's scrutiny. Miller refused to comply with the committee's demands to "out" people who had been active in certain political activities and was thus cited in contempt of Congress. The contempt ruling was overturned two years later.

### Divorce and Marilyn's Death

Miller and Monroe were married for five years, during which time the tragic sex symbol struggled with personal troubles and drug addiction. Miller barely wrote during their marriage, except for penning the screenplay of *The Misfits* as a gift for Monroe. The 1961 film, directed by John Huston, starred Monroe, Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift. Around the same time as *The Misfits* release, Monroe and Miller divorced.

Monroe died the following year, and Miller's controversial 1964 drama *After the Fall* was believed to have been partially inspired by their relationship. Miller was criticized for capitalizing on his marriage to Monroe so soon after her death, although the playwright denied this. Miller responded to his critics by saying: "The play is a work of fiction. No one is reported in this play. The characters are

created as they are in any other play in order to develop a coherent theme, which in this case concerns the nature of human insight, of self-destructiveness and violence toward others."

In 1962, Miller married Austrian-born photographer Inge Morath. The couple had two children, Rebecca and Daniel. Miller insisted that their son, Daniel, who was born with Down syndrome, be excluded from the family's personal life. The infant was institutionalized, and Morath reportedly tried to bring him home as a toddler but to no avail.

Years later, actor Daniel Day-Lewis who married Miller's daughter Rebecca, visited his wife's brother frequently. Day-Lewis eventually persuaded Miller to make further contact with his adult son, who had been able to establish a happy life with outside support. Daniel's existence was unknown to most of the public until after Miller's death.

### Other Works

Miller's other plays include *A View From the Bridge* (1955), *Incident at Vichy* (1964), *The Price* (1968), *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972), *The American Clock* (1980) and *Broken Glass* (1994).

In his later career, Miller continued to explore societal

and personal issues that probed the American psyche, though critical and commercial responses to the work didn't garner the acclaim of his earlier productions.

Miller's plays have become American classics that continue to speak to new generations of audiences. *Death of a Salesman* has had numerous screen adaptations, including a 1985 TV version that starred Dustin Hoffman, who also starred in the previous year's Broadway revival. In 1996, a film adaptation of *The Crucible* hit theaters, starring Winona Ryder, Joan Allen and Day-Lewis. Miller penned the screenplay, which earned him the sole Academy Award nomination of his career.

### Death of a Playwright

In 2002, Miller's third wife, Morath, died. He soon was engaged to 34-year-old minimalist painter Agnes Barley but fell into ill health before they could walk down the aisle. On February 10, 2005, the 56th anniversary of *Death of a Salesman's* Broadway debut, Miller died of heart failure at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut, surrounded by Barley, family and friends. He was 89 years old.

[<https://www.biography.com/writer/arthur-miller>]

## All My Sons - Introduction & Context

When the young playwright Arthur Miller began writing *All My Sons*, he was embarking on a project that would be either the beginning or the end of his career. His first and only play to be produced on Broadway, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, was an unmitigated failure, lasting only four performances. A practical man who had lived through the depression, Miller decided to give himself one more chance. If he did not have success with his next play, then he would quit the business and find "another line of work."

In the meantime, Tennessee Williams had met great success with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945, a very personal and psychological play with poetic overtones. Miller's plays, on the other hand, are public works, with straightforward (though not unpoetic) language, and which address issues of the individual's public persona and how people act. But he learned from Williams's success and set out to write a more commercial play, a drama that would "land" with audiences, in the language of the Broadway business. He also chose to write a play in a realistic style, a problem play in the manner of Henrik Ibsen, evoking a style he had not used in many years. The work of Ibsen influenced *All My Sons* structurally as well, for Ibsen had liberally applied the principle of Greek

theater that stresses the influence of the past on the present.

When the play was finished after five years of work, Miller asked his agent to send it to the director Elia Kazan. A former member of the Communist Party, Kazan had directed Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and he would later direct the genre-redefining *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* (and would win Academy Awards for *Gentleman's Agreement* and *On the Waterfront*). Kazan's career was tarnished in memory, however, and his relationship with Miller was permanently severed when he chose to name names for the House Un-American Activities Commission during the Red Scare. But at the time, as a successful director with a talent for eliciting monumental performances from his actors, and as someone who shared Miller's leftist politics, Kazan was the perfect choice for *All My Sons*. The cast included such rising stars as Ed Begley (as Keller, later of *Inherit the Wind*), Arthur Kennedy (as Chris, later creator of the roles of Biff Loman and John Proctor), and Karl Malden (as George, later of *Streetcar*, *Tea and Sympathy*, and *On The Waterfront*).

Luckily for Miller and for the American stage, *All My Sons* was a success. Opening at the Coronet Theatre on January 29,

1947, the first night's notices were mixed--with the crucial exception of the *New York Times*, whose Brooks Atkinson admired Miller as a genuine new talent. As usual, the *Times* review swayed all the others, and *All My Sons* ran for 328 performances (quite respectable at that time) and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle award for best play of 1947, beating out Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (which at the time had been coolly received and would only become a landmark of American drama in retrospect).

Miller's success gave him financial stability, confidence, and the confirmation of Miller's identity as a playwright. This success was necessary for him to take a risk with his next work, *Death of a Salesman*.

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## All My Sons - Themes

### Relatedness

Arthur Miller stated that the issue of relatedness is the main one in *All My Sons*. The play introduces questions that involve an individual's obligation to society, personal responsibility, and the distinction between private and public matters. Keller can live with his actions during the war because he sees himself as answerable only to himself and his family, not to society as a whole. Miller criticizes Keller's myopic worldview, which allows him to discount his crimes because they were done "for the family." The principal contention is that Keller is wrong in his claim that there is nothing greater than the family, since there is a whole world to which Keller is connected. To cut yourself off from your relationships with society at large is to invite tragedy of a nature both public (regarding the pilots) and private (regarding the suicides).

### The Nuclear Family

The reverse side of Miller's relatedness argument is his downplaying of the family as the nucleus of society. Somehow people are to feel a more general caring for others that is not drawn off by family obligations. What, then, is the place of the family in the larger social system? Discussions of the family serve mostly to contrast characters' opinions about an individual's responsibilities to the family versus society at large. The family is also presented as a unit that can

be corrupted and damaged by the actions and denials of its individuals, a small-scale example of the way individual actions can corrupt society.

### The Past

*All My Sons* is a play about the past. It is inescapable--but how exactly does it affect the present and shape the future? Can crimes ever be ignored or forgotten? Most of the dialogue involves various characters discovering various secrets about the recent history of the Keller family. Miller shows how these past secrets have affected those who have kept them. The revelation of the secrets is presented as unavoidable--they were going to come out at some point, no matter what, and it is through Miller's manipulation of the catalysts that the truths are all revealed on the same day. While the revelations are unavoidable, so are their fatal consequences.

### Denial and Self-Deception

How do we deceive ourselves and others? We select things to focus on in life, but do we also need to deny certain things in order to live well? What toll does denial take on the psyche, the family, and society? Two main facts about the Keller family history must be confronted. One is Larry's death, and the other is Keller's responsibility for the shipment of defective parts. Mother

denies the first while accepting the second, and Keller accepts the first while denying the second. The result is that both characters live in a state of self-deception, willfully ignoring one of the truths so that the family can continue to function in acceptable ways.

### Idealism

Chris is described by other characters as an idealist, although we do not see this trait in action aside from his angry response to the wartime profiteering. Yet the others define him by his idealism, setting him apart as a man of scruples. Chris decides that he must abandon these scruples to the cause of practicality when he is faced with the prospect of sending his father to jail. Is idealism sustainable in a fallen, complex world? If ideals must be sacrificed, is there any supervening ideal or principle to help us decide which ideals should be sacrificed in which circumstances?

### Business

Keller argues that his actions during the war were defensible as requirements of good business practice. He also frequently defines himself as an uneducated man, taking pride in his commercial success without traditional book learning. Yet, his sound business sense actually leads to his downfall. This failure is connected with Miller's leftist politics and the play's overall

criticisms (shared by some conservatives) of a capitalist system that encourages individuals to value their business sense over their moral sense. How could rules that govern business be exempt from the moral norms and laws governing the rest of society?

### **Blame**

Each character in the play has a different experience of blame. Joe Keller tries to blame anyone and everyone for crimes during the war, first by letting his partner go to jail. Later, when he is confronted with the truth, he blames business practice and the U.S. Army and everyone he can think of--except himself. When he finally does accept blame, after learning how Larry had taken the blame and shame on himself, Keller kills himself. Chris, meanwhile, feels guilty for surviving the war and for having money, but when the crimes are revealed, he places the blame squarely on his father's shoulders. He even blames his father for his own inability to send his father to prison. These are just a few

examples of the many instances of deflected blame in this story, and this very human impulse is used to great effect by Miller to demonstrate the true relationships and power plays between characters as they try to maintain self-respect as well as personal and family honor.

### **The American Dream**

Miller points out the flaw with a merely economic interpretation of the American Dream as business success alone. Keller sacrifices other parts of the American Dream for simple economic success. Has he given up part of his basic human decency (consider the pilots) and a successful family life--does he sacrifice Steve or Larry? Miller suggests the flaws of a capitalist who has no grounding in cultural or social morals. While Keller accepted the idea that a good businessman like himself should patch over the flawed shipment, Miller critiques a system that would encourage profit and greed at the expense of human life and happiness. The challenge is to recover the full American

Dream of healthy communities with thriving families, whether or not capitalism is the economic system that leads to this happy life. Economic mobility alone can be detrimental--consider George's abandonment of his hometown for big city success. There is a rift in the Bayliss marriage over Dr. Bayliss's desire to do unprofitable research, because his wife wants him to make more money instead of do what he enjoys and what will help others.

[<https://www.gradesaver.com/all-my-sons/study-guide/themes>]



