

How acts 1 and 2 and
up to essay



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How does Arthur Miller build tension in Acts 1 and 2 and up to the entrance of George on page 138? Tension is defined as ‘latent hostility’, a state of mental or emotional strain on a person. This is particularly evident in the first two Acts of ‘All My Sons’ as there are many ways in which Miller builds tension. He uses the set, symbolism, retrospective exposition, mood and the backdrop of all-American tensions. It is the combination of all of these techniques which culminates in the overall tension of the first two acts.

The opening lines of the play describe the very claustrophobic setting ‘hedged on right and left by tall closely planted poplars’, this immediately sets the scene as being closed and private with the audience being granted access into the affairs of the Keller family. Aspects of the yard also contribute to the secluded atmosphere, for example the ‘small trellised’ arbour where people meet gives the impression of an isolated area; the trellis sheltering the group from the outside world. The imagery of the plant wrapping around the arbour is mimetic of the layers of deceit shrouding the Keller family. This consequentially builds tension as the audience becomes intrigued to find out the truth surrounding the characters and what that truth in fact entails. We later learn that Joe Keller plays cards in the arbour with his neighbours who have previously accused him of being a murderer. This in itself arouses tension due to the conflicting opinions between the characters.

Due to the set, the play places a 4th wall between the audience and the actors making the setting realistic as if we are living with the characters. This increases the tension felt by the audience as they feel involved in the emotions. One key part of the set is the ‘slender apple-tree’ which was blown down in a storm the night before the play starts. It is not immediately

obvious what the significance of the tree is but we later learn the tree was planted in Larry's memory and therefore its destruction is very symbolic of the confusion associated with the truth about his death.

It could be said that because the tree was blown down Kate Keller experiences a release from tension as she views the fall of the tree as a confirmation of her belief that Larry is still alive, because a supernatural force has removed the transgressive tree, a premature memorial to someone she believes is still living. The wind which knocks down the tree could be seen to represent the past returning therefore creating tension as the audience and the characters brace themselves for the reveal of the truth. Later in the act, Kate describes her dream in which the noise of the wind coalesces with the noise from the engine of Larry's plane. This natural symbol of a dream works in conjunction with the natural act of the tree being blown down to represent the unnatural theories surrounding Larry's death. As much as the tree represents Larry, the tree also symbolizes the Keller's lives since Larry's disappearance. The tree's fall links to the return of the Deever's, an obvious introduction of tension into the plot as their return sparks the reveal of the truth.

The 'fruit still clinging to its branches' could represent the sons of America dying in the war and tension is created as the audience is left to try and understand the Keller's connection with these deaths and in actuality their culpability. Alongside this the imagery of the fallen apples could also signify Keller's fall from grace and due to that his culpability in the deaths of the American soldiers. When Chris later saws off the tree and hauls the timber out of view at the beginning of act 2 his action could be seen to disfigure his

mother's memory of Larry as he refuses to believe he is still alive. This creates tension between Chris and his mother as she is in denial about Larry's death. Yet the tree's removal also foreshadows Chris' confrontation with his father and mother towards the end of the act as he tries to take control of his life by removing a symbol of his past (the tree). Due to all the tensions between characters in Act 1, Act 2 sees an apparent increase in heat in a literal and metaphorical sense.

Chris is described to be ' without a shirt' at the beginning of Act 2 showing the increase in temperature as the day progresses. Mother also comments on the heat claiming that ' it's suffocating upstairs'; this could refer to the tensions building between characters and also the heat of the day. These are both mimetic of the mood as the arguments are becoming more heated and more layers are emerging in the lies metaphorically suffocating the characters as more and more deceit is coated around the truth. The change in lighting acts in a similar way to the change in heat as the play starts as early morning but by the end of Act 2 it is ' twilight' which echoes the darkening of the mood and the gradual increase in tension.

Miller also uses retrospective exposition to build tension in the first two acts as the whole action of the play turns very quickly to trying to find out deep secrets from the past. When Frank Lubey comes into the yard to talk to the Keller's he starts to dredge up the past by asking questions about the events: ' Larry was reported missing on November 25th right? ' and ' does Dad expect a parole soon? ' These are both simple questions but arouse tension in the plot as answering them brings forth the inaccuracy surrounding the past. The way the plot revolves around the past is due to <https://assignbuster.com/how-acts-1-and-2-and-up-to-essay/>

Henrik Ibsen's influence in Miller's work. Ibsen is known for his realistic small scale productions tackling timeless emotions and conflicts. This is very true of 'All My Sons' where right and wrong is not immediately apparent and bad things do indeed happen to good people. 'All My Sons' is much like Ibsen's 'The Wild Duck' (1884) which was about a young man who returns home and slowly uncovers heinous secrets about his family.

Similarly to 'All My Sons' the protagonist insists on knowing the truth yet his ideals end up backfiring. Protagonists in 'All My Sons' (except for Kate Keller) are set on finding out the truth but find that knowing what really happened can be too much to bear. This inescapable influence of the past brings a lot of tension into the minds of audience as well as the characters as they try to understand the complexities brought forth by past events. Kate Keller puts this idea very clearly into words when she says, 'everything that happened seems to be coming back'.

This is again demonstrated when she 'stumbles' over Larry's baseball glove, metaphorically tripping over the past. Kate Keller viewed the tree as a tangible representation of the fact of Larry's death and so the return of another item linking to Larry gives her an unfounded optimism that he is still alive. The tension in Kate Keller's emotions is evident as her hope is precariously balanced on inconsequential ideas such as the presence of his baseball glove. The return of the past is most clear in Joe Keller's soliloquy when he explains what 'happened' at the factory explaining that due to Ann's father's nature he just 'takes out his tools and he covers up the cracks'.

Ann listening to this feels tension towards Joe as the 'little man' he is describing is the father she has disowned. All aspects of this play focus on all-American tensions of the time. The microcosmic Keller family is used to dissect the larger arena of tensions present in American society. The setting of a private space (back yard) is important to note because not only does it provide a tense atmosphere but due to the way Americans use their back yards as an area for socializing with neighbours, with perhaps only a fence separating the area from the outside, the setting appears to be an open space for all Americans to view the tensions present to them.

The poplars although creating a 'secluded atmosphere' are also a soft barrier allowing easy ingress. Through Miller's description of Joe being an 'uneducated man' yet also a man with 'experience', we have an insight into the debate between book learning vs. practicality, a discussion wrought with tension in America. Joe's decision to send off the broken aeroplane parts could show that Miller believes an educated man would have made a better decision as many men died at the hands of Joe Keller.

This links to the debate between the importance of business and the importance of society in America which brings tension to all families. There are many multinational companies monopolising the markets and looking after the customer and employee has become not as important as profit, and in the case of Joe Keller he disregarded his responsibility as a boss to Steve and as a supplier to the air force. The first two acts present this growing tension between the characters and between the audience; the ever more dominant question; consumerism or compassion?