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ON THE WATERFRONT

Directed by Elia Kazan

INTRODUCTION

On the Waterfront is a classic Hollywood movie, winning eight Academy awards in 1954. Marlon Brando's portrayal of Terry, the simple young dockworker who takes on the corrupt waterfront bosses, is one of the great screen performances in cinema history. The film explores the struggle between conscience and self interest and the question of where loyalty belongs. Eva Marie Saint plays the innocent Edie whose love encourages Terry to become a hero. The film's black-and-white photography gives a stark presentation of the dirty tenements and the treacherous docks where the characters live and work.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Dockworker Joey Doyle is murdered as payback for giving police evidence against the corrupt waterfront Union. Terry Malone, a young, uneducated dockworker, has been used by the Union to lure Joey to his death, and he feels disturbed and worried by this. He becomes attracted to Joey's sister, Edie, who, together with local priest Father Barry, is determined to find Joey's murderers. Terry is loyal to the Union and the tradition of remaining 'D and D' (deaf and dumb) to government attempts to clean it up, but his growing love for Edie forces him to slowly realize that he belongs to a corrupt culture that oppresses the workers.

The code of silence is strong. Workers fear the Union's brutal reprisals and Father Barry finds it hard to persuade anyone to speak out. Docker KO Dugan is murdered after giving evidence. This makes Terry realise that he should testify against Union boss Johnny Friendly. His brother Charley, Friendly's moneyman, is ordered to dissuade Terry and is murdered when he lets Terry escape. In rage and grief Terry goes to kill Friendly, but Father Barry persuades him that a more effective revenge would be to bring Friendly's empire down by testifying.

After the inquiry Terry is shunned by the dockers and is refused work. He attacks Friendly but is brutally bashed by Union thugs. As the dockers watch, opinion turns in Terry's favour. Father Barry and Edie get Terry onto his feet and despite his injuries he leads the dockworkers to a new job, free of Union interference.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

On the Waterfront was made in 1954. Budd Schulberg's screenplay is based on a series of Pulitzer Prize-winning news articles by Malcolm Johnson, published in the *New York Sun* in 1949. The articles exposed the murder, extortion and standover tactics infesting the docks, which were controlled by the corrupt Longshoremen's Union. A Congressional inquiry, like the one in the film, was set up to hear evidence from the dockworkers in an attempt to clean up the waterfront. The movie reflects an aspect of American life at that time – in the same way that the *Underbelly* series is seen to reflect the story of Australian crime syndicates today – and was immensely popular.

Elia Kazan, the film's director, had his own reasons for wanting to tell the story of a courageous whistleblower who risks life and reputation to follow his conscience and give testimony. Kazan, a Communist Party member in his youth, had testified in 1952 to the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Commission) against his peers in the film industry and had been subjected to much contempt and rejection. It was an era of hysterical anti-Communist fear in the US, and the HUAC, under Senator Joseph McCarthy, was determined

to find any Communist sympathisers, especially in the arts community. Kazan is widely believed to have made the film in order to justify his actions, and he makes it endorse the moral judgement of one who stands against public opinion and follows his conscience.

On the Waterfront is set on the docks at Hoboken, New Jersey, and it was also filmed there, with many dockworkers taking roles as extras in the movie. The tenements, rooftops and narrow streets of the area were used in the film as much for its small budget as to achieve realism. Shipping business went on during filming and Kazan incorporated the sights and sounds of the busy dock into the action. This is done to great effect in the scene where Terry's frantic confession to Edie is drowned out by the ship's horn blast. The characters of Terry, Johnny Friendly and the crusading priest, Father Barry, were based on real people. With so many realistic elements and with its gritty, uncompromising approach to revealing an ugly side of American society and politics, *On the Waterfront* was an immediate critical and financial success, ensuring acclaim for Kazan and enduring admiration for Brando.

STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE

One of the most remarkable features of *On the Waterfront* is the cinematography, in which stark black-and-white moral issues are presented in equally confronting black-and-white film. Shadowy tenement buildings and laneways seem to close in around the characters, who are trapped in their narrow lives, and the sharp vertical lines of cranes and staircases hint at the dangers that await them. Contrasting with this darkness is the expansive rooftop, open to the sky, Terry's place of refuge.

The film tells two fairly simple stories whose narratives are entwined. The love story begins when Edie goes down to the docks to find out about Joey's death, and the story of Terry's redemption begins when he is first attracted to the beautiful, angry girl. It takes Edie's moral strength to draw Terry away from his allegiance to corruption and it takes the sexual attraction between them to draw Edie out of her convent-bred conservatism. The two main

characters are stock figures in drama: the flawed young man and the angelic young woman who helps him overcome his doubts and failings to become a hero. But in *On the Waterfront* the performances of Brando and Saint breathe realistic, vivid life into these characters.

In key scenes, the actors' faces and gestures are as significant as words in helping the viewers' understanding. Brando's stretching of the woollen glove onto his workman's hand as he walks with Saint in the park teases her but shows his fascination with her; his gentle turning aside of the gun Charley pulls on him in the taxi says everything that is needed about the love between the brothers; and the confusion and misery on his face as he talks to Saint in the pub reveal the internal struggle of this inarticulate character.

Although the film is realistic in style, Kazan makes use of symbolism. The pigeons represent for Terry the possibility of flight and freedom and, as his tender handling of them shows, an outlet for his potential gentleness. Clothes, too, symbolise their wearers. The windbreaker that is passed from Joey to KO to Terry is a talisman, connecting its wearer to the struggle for justice. The fine, warm overcoats of the Union bosses show their swaggering prosperity, while the workers' poverty is apparent as they shiver in shabby jackets. The prize fight that Terry has lost, and that still rankles him, foreshadows his taking on the Union, with even higher stakes and a second chance to 'be somebody'.

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Terry Malloy

Terry (Marlon Brando) sees himself as a 'bum', a loser, and he drifts through life without purpose or hope. Uneducated, he is teased by the Union men as stupid and called 'Einstein' by a mocking Johnny Friendly. Terry's blind loyalty to Friendly's mob makes him unwilling to see their cynical use of him. He accepts Friendly's patronage and Charley's protection because they have looked after him since his miserable childhood. Brando portrays Terry in the

film's early scenes as a mumbling, slouching man without confidence. Unlike the hardened extortionists he mixes with, however, Terry has a gentle side to his nature. We see this in his tender handling of his pigeons and in the pity he feels for the grieving Edie as he hands the work token to her.

It is not easy for Terry to accept Edie's humane view of the world. Life has taught him to 'do it to him before he does it to you'; however, his fascination with the beautiful girl and his lingering feelings of guilt about her brother's death make him listen to her talk of 'conscience' and moral responsibility. As a man of action, quick and handy with his fists, Terry is reluctant and uneasy when the role of whistleblower is suggested to him. He struggles with the idea of deserting the code of 'D and D' that prevails among his workmates and that has provided him with some privileges. He is indecisive until Charley's murder. Rage and the desire for revenge are mixed with the moral decision he makes to testify.

After the Inquiry, Terry is transformed into a stronger, more positive version of himself. 'I'm not a bum,' he tells Edie firmly, as if acting on a moral principle has given him another chance to be the 'somebody' he once hoped to become. Brando plays Terry in this scene with strength and authority, his voice clear and his look direct, in contrast to the apologetic, shambling man of the opening scenes. Through Terry's character, the film shows the redemptive possibilities of love. Edie's love and belief in him has given him the hope and purpose lacking in his life.

Edie Doyle

Edie (Eva Marie Saint in her first movie role) is portrayed as an innocent with luminous, fragile beauty. In the film's stark black-and-white moral framework, Edie is clearly on the side of the angels. Her father is horrified to see her on the dock and the audience registers how out of place the slight, frail girl seems as the men fight each other. Edie is surprisingly feisty, however, and joins in the fistfight, attacking and slapping Terry in her angry determination to get a work token for her father. Despite her gentleness and innocence, we

see that Edie is capable of rage at injustice. Kept away from the corrupt waterfront by her parents, Edie has developed a Christian view of the world in which 'we should all care for each other'. She is unfaltering in her virtue and her valuing of family and justice. Terry is fascinated by her ideas almost as much as he is attracted to her.

Edie's decision to stay in Hoboken and find Joey's killers grounds her in the real world. The poverty and corruption around her are far from her studies with the nuns, and her sexual awakening occurs when she falls in love with Terry. Although she runs from him in the bar, rejecting his ideas, she is quick to cling to Terry when the wedding party jostles her. She is soon dancing close to him. Edie is strong in her principles and is ready to reject her feelings for Terry after he confesses his involvement in Joey's death. She is truthful: 'I didn't say I didn't love you. I said, keep away from me'. Edie plays the role of the virtuous, strong woman who supports her lover to fulfil his potential as a morally responsible man.

Father Barry

Father Barry (Karl Malden) also plays an important role in Terry's moral growth. Like Edie, he is an outsider on the waterfront and the men's explanation of the corrupt system that operates there shocks him. He is presented as almost naive when he asks, 'What about your Union?'. Father Barry makes a crucial decision early in the film. The catalyst for this is Edie's contempt when he tells her he will be 'in the church if you need me'. It shames him into coming out of the church and into the thick of the fight for justice.

A man of commitment from the beginning, Father Barry becomes a man of action. As a priest, his position in this traditionally Irish Catholic community initially provides him with some protection from violence. In the scene in the ship's hold after KO Dugan's death, however, Father Barry is fearless, risking the anger of the Union with his inflammatory words and taking the objects thrown at him without flinching. His insistence on human rights and dignity articulates the moral dimensions of the situation and underlines the cruelty

and greed of the Union mob. He is inspirational to Terry, clarifying the relative value of loyalty when he tells him, 'What's ratting for them is telling the truth for you'. Father Barry, along with Edie, provides the moral compass of the film. He expresses in Christian, doctrinal terms the same values that she expresses in her relationships.

Johnny Friendly

Hardened by his early life of poverty, Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb) is determined to maintain control and no concern for justice or the law is allowed to interfere with it. He enjoys power and its trappings, the cigars and the expensive clothes as well as the fear and deference people show him. He is ruthless and unforgiving, grinding the Union members for money, punishing his own associates when they step out of line and arranging the murder of 'canaries'. He shows a rough affection for Terry, but his attitude towards Terry is also patronising and cynical.

Friendly's fear is that he will be seen as 'just another fella', and will lose the status and power he holds. This fear is realised after the inquiry. The final scene of Friendly dwarfed by the crowd of men surging past him shows him reduced to ineffectual blustering. Within the moral framework of the film, Friendly's cruel treatment of all whom he comes into contact with present him as almost inhuman.

Charley the Gent

Charley (Rod Steiger) is described by Pops Doyle as a 'butcher in a camelhair coat'. His well-dressed, respectable appearance is at odds with the criminal life he has adopted. Charley has used his intelligence to raise himself out of poverty and has put aside any moral scruples to do so. As chief moneyman for Friendly, he is also a trusted crony and an integral part of the corrupt operation Friendly runs. Unlike his brother, Charley puts paramount value on money, encouraging Terry to take a more active role in the Union's extortion. There is ambivalence in the audience response to Charley. While he is clearly

greedy and corrupt, he is portrayed as having a strong concern for his brother. Even in the early scenes of the film, Charley protects Terry. He covers up for Terry when he stumbles over counting the money and he pleads for his brother when Friendly's patience is at an end.

Charley, like his brother, is pulled between two strong loyalties, in his case family and self interest. In the taxi scene, Charley's dilemma is acute. It is very likely Terry's gentle reproach about the boxing match, 'You shoulda looked out for me', that finally shames him into choosing to save his brother's life and risk his own. One of the most significant expressions of the brothers' relationship is Terry's disbelief when Charley brings out the gun. He turns it away gently as if almost embarrassed for Charley, unable to believe that his brother would harm him.

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Justice

The film's prevailing idea is the need for justice in human affairs, and it conveys its message in a very traditional way: a large but intimidated group of people is ruled and oppressed by a smaller group with power and money who use ruthless measures to maintain control. An ageless and universal concern, it has been well worked by storytellers throughout history. Kazan's film sets this struggle for justice on the dangerous Hoboken docks where corrupt Union officials have stolen their rights from the very workers who elected them.

Visually, the injustice of the situation is made clear early in the film as the poorly dressed dock workers huddling in the cold are watched by sleek Union officials who laugh at the sight of them fighting for work tokens. The film's viewpoint is underlined in the ending, when Johnny Friendly is reduced to fear at the prospect of jail. The belief that justice has been restored to the docks provides a satisfying conclusion to the story.

The film's sympathy is clearly with the workers. Their narrow, pinched features and hunched shoulders invite our compassion as they wait for Big Mac to pick them for a day's work. We see how emasculating it is for these strong labouring men to be so dependent on the whim of the boss's man. The 'juicehead' in the park provides another view of Union ruthlessness when he complains of being cheated out of his compensation. He compels our sympathy when we see that he has been reduced to begging.

The black-and-white moral viewpoint of *On the Waterfront* identifies its villains unambiguously. The scene in the Union hut at the beginning of the film reveals the greed that motivates this ruling clique. Johnny Friendly tantalises his men by throwing banknotes at them to count and there is an unseemly scramble to the table at the end of the scene as they almost fall onto the piles of money. Friendly's later boast, that this money is extorted from the dockworkers in exchange for the right to work, positions the viewer to despise his greed and to see more clearly the plight of the workers.

On the Waterfront explores the idea that corruption undermines justice: the desire for power and the longing for justice are conflicting values in human society, constantly at war. Johnny Friendly's lust for power and money comes from the poverty and humiliation of his childhood, yet he shows no empathy for the workers he now impoverishes and humiliates. His determination and ruthlessness are too strong for the uneducated working men who want only the opportunity of a decent life. His selfishness is contrasted with Pops Doyle's love for his daughter and the long, hard work he has undertaken (leaving him with one arm two inches longer than the other) to save enough money for her education.

Moral growth and redemption

On the Waterfront endorses the idea of redemption and the possibility of moral growth. It shows that in an environment of intimidation, there is little incentive to try to fight corruption. When the boss can ignore your pleas for work if you are thought to be a malcontent or fling you from the roof of a

building, if you go to the police, it is more prudent to accept the situation than to risk your personal safety. The men are too browbeaten to oppose Johnny Friendly and his thugs, and so they are resigned to the extortion, poverty and injustice of their lives. It takes a hero to stand up to the powerful.

Joey Doyle and KO Dugan show great courage when they attempt to help police clean up the waterfront. Their murders show the risks for Terry, who reluctantly takes on the role of hero. He seems an unlikely whistleblower at first, as he is a Union insider, a protégé of Friendly's, who receives favoured treatment on the docks. Nor is Terry an independent thinker, likely to ponder the moral aspects of Union activities. He seems slow to understand that the Union is responsible for Joey's murder; or it may be that he comes to a resentful understanding that the Union has cynically used him once again. In either case, Joey's murder is a catalyst for Terry, and he allows himself to face the truth about Johnny and Charley. He is driven to confess his part in the murder to Father Barry and Edie as his conscience begins to trouble him. However, it is a slow awakening. Though Edie and Father Barry work to convince him that he should testify, it takes the death of his brother to bring him to the point of where he will give evidence to the government inquiry and bring down Johnny Friendly. Terry becomes a hero, not as a champion boxer, but as a champion of his people, overcoming the ties of corruption that previously held him.

It takes the help of others for Terry to see the world in terms of moral choices. His love for Edie prompts him to become involved in getting justice for Joey. Her gentle goodness helps him understand a view of life that is not self serving, and the desire to be good enough for her leads him to want to do what is right. Father Barry too influences Terry's moral development. The film shows the priest's shock and dismay – as an outsider – when he sees the oppression the men suffer. His fervent Christianity, in the scene after KO Dugan's death, leads him to an eloquent sermon about the suffering of the dockworkers. It is a call to action for his listeners, including Terry. These two principled, compassionate people show Terry that a way of living transcending selfishness and greed is possible and they support him to the end.

Charley also shows the possibility of redemption. His brave choice, to let Terry escape, comes from a mixture of love for his younger brother and guilt, when he realises what his cynical greed over the boxing match has done to Terry. The 'butcher in a camelhair coat' wins the late respect of the viewer when he finally decides to 'look after' Terry's interest and sacrifices himself to Friendly's revenge.

Loyalty

The film questions the value of unconditional loyalty. The Union has protected Terry as a favoured son. But despite the affection Charley and Friendly show him, the film encourages the viewer to endorse Terry's decision to testify against the Union. The loyalty he owes these people cannot overcome the murders of Joey and KO Dugan. The moral value of loyalty, the film suggests, is relative: Edie's loyalty to her brother and her determination to find his killers are presented as admirable, but it is misplaced loyalty to protect evil men. However, the cost of breaking faith with his protectors is shown to be great.

Terry's loyalty to the Union has been tested once before. He sacrificed his one chance at a boxing championship fight, a way to be 'somebody', so that Charley and Friendly could wager against him. We see the pain that throwing the fight has caused him when he tells Charley, 'You shoulda looked out for me'. The Union has used him as a fall guy in the pursuit of profit, without considering his interests. Now it assumes his blind loyalty: Terry has been used to lure Joey Doyle to his death and is expected to refuse to speak to the investigators. This proves too much for the young.

The film also portrays the cost of breaking with former allies. Terry comes to his decision slowly and after much soul-searching. It is interesting to note that the Union, which enforces loyalty in its members, betrays him first. We will never know where Terry's loyalty would ultimately lie if Charley had not been murdered for failing to convince him not to testify.

Public opinion runs against those who break the traditional code of silence. Terry is mocked by the policemen who escort him home after the hearing. He

is initially shunned as a 'canary' by the dockworkers, who give sullen loyalty to the Union in order to survive in the harsh world of the waterfront. He suffers a terrible beating when Friendly calls in the Union heavyweights to thrash him. Loyalty to the group has given Terry security and a place to belong; rethinking that loyalty and opposing the group has cost him pain, but ultimately the film presents Terry as a hero of almost mythic stature as, staggering and stumbling, he leads the dockers to a new working deal.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

The transformation of Terry Malloy from Union errand boy to whistleblower is the focus of *On the Waterfront*. Consider these different interpretations of his character.

Interpretation 1

'*On the Waterfront* is the story of Terry's journey to heroism.'

The statement suggests that as Terry's moral understanding grows he is drawn to follow his conscience, eventually becoming the good man, and leader, that he was always capable of being.

- He struggles to understand, is trustful at first, but becomes alienated by the Union's brutal, cynical methods.
- He has to extricate himself from long term loyalties; he is prepared to risk the violence of the Union by testifying to the inquiry.
- He acknowledges his part in Joey's death to both Father Barry and Edie.
- Edie's support helps him both to understand the moral dimensions of the situation and to want to become worthy of her love.
- He faces his peers' contempt on the docks in the end and is finally recognised as having the strength and courage to lead them away from Union oppression.

Interpretation 2

'It is Terry's anger that leads him to testify against Johnny, not his newly awakened conscience.'

This statement suggests that Terry is less than heroic in his motives, even though his actions lead to the end of a crime racket.

- It is unbelievable that Terry, an insider, did not know about the Union's murders. His surprise at Joey's death is probably because the Union has used him to facilitate it. This causes resentment towards Friendly that simmers throughout the film.
- Edie's love is a strong inducement to follow his conscience but he is unwilling to betray his old allegiances, especially Charley. He spends a long time resisting his conscience.
- The catalyst for Terry's action is Charley's murder. Rage and grief are transformed into revenge when Father Barry encourages him to destroy Friendly by testifying.
- Terry is tough and brave but his motives for acting righteously are mixed. They have as much to do with pride and revenge as a desire for justice.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. '*On the Waterfront* reveals the powerlessness of the individual against a corrupt ruling group.' Do you agree?
2. 'It is Terry's anger that leads him to testify against Johnny, not his newly awakened conscience.' Discuss.
3. 'The poverty of the dockworkers' lives is portrayed effectively in the film's cinematography.' Discuss.
4. '*On the Waterfront* suggests that most people prefer security to justice.' Discuss.

5. 'The film suggests that love is a powerful influence for good.' Do you agree?
6. 'The film presents clear-cut heroes and villains and a black-and-white view of morality that lacks subtlety.' Do you agree?
7. '*On the Waterfront* tells us that we need the support of others in order to act bravely.' Do you agree?
8. 'Although Terry complains that he "coulda been somebody", he finally does become somebody worthy of our admiration.' Discuss.
9. "What's ratting for them is telling the truth for you."
'The film suggests that loyalty is not always a virtue.' Discuss.
10. '*On the Waterfront* presents a powerful argument that all human beings should be treated with dignity.' Discuss.

Analysing a sample question

'The film suggests that love is a powerful influence for good.' Do you agree?

It would be easy enough to agree with this statement and then find examples from the film to support it. However, your essay would be unlikely to achieve the insightful analysis and complex discussion that marks the best text responses. Consider the implications of the statement. What kinds of love are seen in the film? Is love shown to be always for good? Is love powerful enough to influence someone to change? One possible response could follow these lines:

- Begin with the contention that in a corrupt, threatening environment, love between individuals seems powerless to change anything, but the film shows the different ways people can show love and support to each other to improve things.
- Falling in love means learning about the other's way of thinking. Terry learns Edie's gentle philosophy of life and his desire to be worthy of her ends in his transformation into an honourable man.

- Selflessness of love is seen as admirable. Edie's parents' work and sacrifice have enabled her to escape the dock world through education.
- Family love is a complex bond: Charley's support has sustained Terry throughout a miserable childhood but it has led him into a dubious connection to the Union mob. Charley's love for his brother leads to giving his life so Terry can escape.
- Love and compassion arising from religious principles can inspire people to acts of selflessness. Father Barry's sermon in the cargo hold forces both KO and Terry to see the suffering around them and helps them to act bravely and morally
- Conclusion: love comes from many sources and the film explores these and finds them all good. Love is shown to give intimacy and purpose to life and to bring out the potential goodness in people.

THE TEXT

On the Waterfront 1954, dir. Elia Kazan, Columbia Pictures. Starring Marlon Brando, Eva Marie Saint, Rod Steiger, Lee J. Cobb and Karl Malden.