

## ENGLISH: ESSAY

**“Some people think the crucifixion only took place on Calvary Hill”. Discuss with reference of symbolism in ‘On The Waterfront’.**

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On The Waterfront (1954) is a film that serves as Elia Kazan’s response to those who critically derided him for exposing communists during the second Red Scare of 1952. Kazan’s contention- that informers are rightfully entitled to positive recognition- is not only made starkly clear through the portrayal of Terry Malloy’s ‘redemption’; the seemingly ubiquitous presence of symbolism also strengthens his point that informers should be commended, with regards to the social stigma and persecutions that they are faced with. Certain religious imagery serves to glorify Joey Doyle, an informant, as a righteous individual; Terry’s frequent encounters and references to pigeons alludes to his disciplined nature as a conformist and the presence of hooks symbolise the external pressures that “hang over” the workers of the waterfront. Kazan’s employment of both subtle and overt symbolism generates a profound reflection on the difficulties that were presented on the streets and waterfronts of 1950’s New York.

Kazan’s choice in denoting Joey Doyle’s death as a “crucifixion” calls for viewers to associate his death to a valiant sacrifice that was done with the intent of salvaging the goodness of society. Albeit Joey’s seemingly shot-lived impression on the script of the film, it can be noted that his untimely passing catalyses a series of events that result in Terry’s imminent decision to inform. Not much information is divulged on the character of Joey Doyle- however there are indications that he was a decent figure, provided from the accounts of several characters. Upon the realisation of her brother’s murder, Edie Doyle exclaims that “Joey (was) the best boy in the neighbourhood. Everybody said it, not only me”. She then proceeds to cradle her brother in her arms, with a close up shot detailing her expression as being contorted with grief. A religious reference is generated in the mid-shot that depicts Edie embracing Joey’s corpse, as it is reminiscent to Michelangelo’s *La Pietà*, which depicts a sculptured Mary cradling the body of Jesus Christ following his crucifixion. A common emotion that is made explicit between Edie and Mary is their anguish over the loss of two separate individuals who died as a consequence of social decadence. This imagery offers a possibility that by deciding to become an informant, Joey essentially posed as a martyr for the common good of society. Kazan’s subtle depiction of Joey Doyle as a subject of a “crucifixion” produces a significant impact on the viewer, in that their somewhat similar sacrifices allow Joey to be likened to a religious being who is overwhelmingly righteous.

Terry’s association with pigeons over the course of the film demonstrates the idea that he possesses pigeon-like traits which explain many of his ideals as a conformist. As an ex-boxer turned pigeon keeper, it is observed that Terry does not channel his aggressive mentality as a fighter into the caretaking of his pigeons. Rather, the manner in which he tends to the birds shows him to be a sensitive and considerate man- quite unlike the other men of the waterfront who bear ‘macho’ personas. Also, as Terry maintains his pigeons, the absence of thunderous, theatrical music indicates that he is ‘at peace with the birds’ and he is in his natural state. Perhaps Terry’s genuine concern for his pigeons is due to the possibility that he is able to empathise with the birds. Like most birds, pigeons are born with an innate ability to fly- however; On the Waterfront shows them to be disciplined as racers- forced to adhere to the daily routine of “eating, sleeping and raising gobs of squabs”. The presence of pigeons is a visual reference to the character of Terry Malloy, as the racing pigeon’s impulsive desire to fly represents his yearning to have an articulate voice in society and its restricted lifestyle symbolises Terry’s expected allegiance to the “D&D” (Deaf and Dumb) code. During numerous instances within the film, there are mise en scene shots that picture Terry to be in the pigeon’s cage. Essentially, Terry is signified as a confined pigeon- an individual who is bound to the expectations that are enforced by the “torpedoes” of the waterfront. Alternatively, Terry’s likeliness to pigeons can be interpreted in a cynical manner, as the term “stool pigeon” is a derogatory phrase that is used to describe an informer. During the instances when Terry is referred to as a “stool pigeon” or “stoolie” for short, he becomes visibly unsettled and indignant. Kazan’s choice in making Marlon Brando react to the phrases in this way suggests that Terry is more

inclined to reflect the symbolism of a restrained pigeon in contrast to a “stool pigeon”- this also relates well to the idea of Terry’s endeavour to break out of the cycle of uniformity.

On the Waterfront not only makes visual references to martyrdom and uniformity, it also suggests that the longshoremen are burdened by an external force through the symbolism of hooks. Kazan often depicts Terry and the other working men of the docks to have sharp, metallic hooks hanging on their chests in a threatening manner. There is a common knowledge derived from this film that hooks are crucial to the worker’s tasks of lifting and emptying pallets; however the positioning of the hooks on the workers suggests that a subtle reference on the men is being made. The ominous nature of the hooks- the possibility that these tools can be utilised to harm- links them to the henchmen of Johnny “Friendly”. Similar to these hooks, the goons of Johnny ‘hang over’ the workers in a figurative sense- they impose the systematic code of D&D that the workers must abide by for the sake of self-perseverance. For many of the scenes that consist of Terry and various longshoremen, mid-shots are applied to the subjects that depict the hooks to be grappling at their chests. Ultimately, Terry’s significant action of lobbing his hook at Johnny’s office door provides viewers with a sense that Terry has achieved emancipation from the demands of the mafia. He no longer lives with the thought that there is a forceful entity towering over him- oppressing him. The appearance of the hooks additionally allows them to bear a resemblance to the ravenous talons of hawks. As Terry once cited, “hawks spot a pigeon in the park (and swoop) right down on them”. A correlation is formed between the symbolism of hooks and pigeons, as the workers are envisioned to be the ‘prey’ of the hawks (represented to be the members of waterfront’s organised crime syndicate). Whether the hooks slung over the shoulders of the workers denote a physical body which dictates the men or it is an unspoken reference to imagery of pigeons that are vulnerable to the claw of a hawk, both interpretations illustrate the concept that there are ‘higher’ entities that implement power over an individual.

Produced during the years of post-second Red Scare, On the Waterfront received much acclaim for its relevance to issues that embodied society- such as the turbulence that was rampant among New York’s waterfronts. Kazan’s incorporation of symbolic references within the film serves to accentuate the significance of ideas that he wished to convey to the viewers. The “crucifixion on Calvary Hill”, controlled behaviour of racing pigeons and sinister connotations of hooks are merely representative of numerous imagery that continues to place informers in a positive light well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.