

## **ENGLISH: *ON THE WATERFRONT***

**'On the Waterfront demonstrates that collective action depends on the courage and conviction of a few individuals.'** Discuss.

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Battered, bloodied and bruised, the protagonist Terry Malloy, staggers up the ramp to lead his fellow longshoremen back to work. Elia Kazan's "On the Waterfront," is a social realist drama and a film noir that follows Terry's road to redemption whilst also exposing the difficult decisions made by an individual who chooses to stand up against a group. Kazan suggests that in order to triumph over injustice and unfairness, the individual cannot stand alone but requires a support network. Although Father Barry, Edie and later Terry, have courage and conviction, they require the assistance of others to deliver and fulfil their respective purposes for the greater good of all the dockworkers. The film also explores how collective action can be used for tyrannical means through Johnny Friendly who breeds a ruthlessly violent culture.

Kazan contends that individuals who possess conviction and great strength of character are able to initiate positive change. Edie delves deeper into the exploitation of longshoremen and realises how isolated she has been from the harsh reality of the docks where things are "are so wrong." Edie refuses to leave without answers and remains steadfastly at the docks, much to the distress of her father Pop Doyle who cannot bear to let his daughter see "things which ain't fit for the eyes of a decent girl." In spite of being a woman in this patriarchal society she rejects the code of silence and seeks the truth behind her brother's death. Edie removes the newspaper from his body in an attempt to expose his murder. Her defiance is further highlighted in her outrage with the priest for his calm platitudes and accusing him of "hiding" in the church instead of tending to those who most need him. Her saintly behaviour is captured in the close up shot as she resolutely looks up to the heavens for an answer whilst also being showered in radiant bright light, symbolic of her purity and goodness. She realises that she needs Terry's help and has the courage to ask him, "Help me if you can." With both Father Barry and Terry's help she fulfils her intention to find out, "who killed [her] brother." This signifies that the will power and boldness of one individual can motivate others and bring about a favourable outcome.

Similarly individuals with a firm belief in the truth and who exercise their faith in society, will also give rise to constructive communal action. In response to Edie's challenge, Father Barry takes the church out to the docks to forge an allegiance with the workers and participate actively in social movement, assuming a more authoritative position. He advocates the truth and becomes the moral force of the film as demonstrated by the meeting in the church. Here he is surrounded by religious iconography illustrating that he is God's representative. He persuasively argues that they must break the code of silence touching Dugan emotionally and later encourages him to testify, "You stand up, and I'll stand up with you." His sincerity and passion for the truth is further portrayed in the ship's hull scene. Standing tall and confident, he claims, "Every time the mob puts the crusher on a good man – it's a crucifixion." He is illuminated in brilliant light and as he speaks the shadow of a cross-like form rises on the wall behind him; a reminder of his religious authority. The impact of his speech is evident in Terry when he punches Truck for throwing more fruit at the priest exclaiming, "Let him finish!" A following shot then captures Father Barry as he defiantly rises from the hull with Dugan's body beside him, whilst the men reverently watch in silence. The film implies that those with strength of character and conviction to the truth will be elevated both metaphorically and physically, having an incredible impact and force on those around him.

Kazan highlights that the collective effort would never have been achieved if not for the inner strength and sacrifice of the individual. With the "hawks sitting on hotels waiting and watching," Terry is like one of his caged pigeons, never truly free to "a somebody" instead of the cognomen of just a "bum." Upon reflection of his conscience and learning to think about others rather than himself, he decides to expose the truth. However, his decision to stand against the group, results in alienation as he laments to Edie, "My friends don't even want to talk to me anymore." He wears

Joey's jacket which has become a mantle of the truth teller and is zipped up tightly before he confronts Friendly; a means of summoning up courage before his act of masculinity. Kazan illustrates that individuals must have courage to follow their conscience and eventually this bravery influences those who are too fearful of ostracism and persecution. The sacrifice Terry makes in fighting Friendly incites support from his fellow workers as they finally find their voice and actively choose to only walk in with Terry, "So the shippers can see [they will] take no more orders from Johnny Friendly." The defeat of Friendly is depicted through the high angle camera shot that looks down on him and his destroyed empire whilst Edie and Father Barry are illuminated in radiant light as they watch the longshoremen follow Terry back to work. The film suggests that such collective action would have been impossible without the perseverance and self-sacrifices of the individual.

The film suggests that collective action is not always for noble purposes and courage is often replaced by a brute force. Johnny Friendly's fervor enabled him to rise from the bottom rung to establish the support of the mob and Mr Upstairs. He justifies his brutal actions by exposing his scar; a talisman of his troubled past claiming, "When I was sixteen, I had to beg for work in the hold. I didn't work my way out of there for nothing." In the opening scene, his henchmen slavishly follow him out of the small and shabby shack accompanied by threatening military like drums and brass. The ironic framing emphasises the large extent of power possessed by a small minority with the intensifying drums mirroring their growing supremacy. The warm over coats and smart hats worn by the gang members distinctly separate them from the longshoremen in their short ragged jackets. This is symbolic of their hefty incomes and their exemption from any physical labour. The extent of his brutality and cruelty is depicted through his stronghold on the longshoremen in addition to getting others to do his complicit activities. There is nothing noble in his ability to have collective action in beating the men outside the church or entrapping the workers into the oppressive "Deaf and Dumb" code. Even in his bar, the men are trapped in a world of bars representing the deep-rooted inescapable corruption. In this respect, Kazan suggests that some individuals utilise collective action for more sinister purposes and pragmatic self-interests, rather than for the greater good.

On the Waterfront illustrates that for justice and morality to prevail, an individual must act with the assistance and moral guidance of others. The passion and determination of Father Barry, Edie and later Terry indeed brings about a positive outcome but only after benefiting from the support of others and making self-sacrifices. Furthermore, the film explores the notion that combined efforts may be used for unprincipled purposes where conviction and courage are substituted with malevolent forces. As Kazan himself asserts, "You've got to keep fighting – you've got to risk your life every six months to stay alive."

Kazan also suggests that collective action is required to get the desired result in criminal matters. The Waterfront Crime Commission demonstrates this as they know they don't have any hope of winning a case unless they have a witness. Hence they continually go to Terry, displaying great conviction.