

ENGLISH: *ON THE WATERFRONT*

In *On the Waterfront* Elia Kazan depicts a society in which personal survival is the highest priority. Discuss.

Elia Kazan's classic, *On the Waterfront*, is set on the crime-ridden docks of Hoboken, New Jersey. One possible view of the film that the director has depicted is that personal survival is the highest priority of the individuals in the society. However, it could be argued that whilst some characters display this, a desire for justice is more important for numerous others. Terry's choice to testify against Johnny Friendly, even in the face of danger and lack of power, is a strong indicator of this.

Kazan makes it evident that Joey Doyle, Kayo Dugan, Edie Doyle and Father Barry regard justice in precedence to their own safety. Joey Doyle's brutal murder is displayed in one of the first scenes of the film, showing the harsh repercussions of his attempt to make the waterfront a better place. After watching many of his fellow dockworkers being killed, such as Andy, he knew that his decision would pose a threat to his life. Therefore Kazan illustrates him as a character that prefers justice as opposed to security or a willingness to stay alive. Father Barry and Kayo Dugan work side by side in a courageous attempt to bring down Johnny's corrupt union. After the church has been raided by Johnny's thugs, Kazan depicts a menacing and dangerous atmosphere through the use of music. Dugan is seen being viciously assaulted, yet he subsequently agrees to Father Barry's proposal, 'You stand up and I'll stand up with you.' Ultimately, Dugan is killed, yet Barry is not intimidated into breaking his promise. He actively mentors Terry, acting as a father figure, although knowing of the possible consequences of his involvement. Through his 'sermon in the hold,' a target is essentially placed on his back – Johnny's thugs throw various items at him, showing their disrespect towards him. He believes his Christian values and instilling acts of justice into others is more important than his own survival. Edie Doyle, a strong willed and caring individual, has the immediate option to be sent away from the waterfront. However she chooses to stay and pursue her investigation, 'how can I go back to school and keep my mind on things that are just in books?' She is determined to find out who killed her brother, no matter how dangerous the task may be.

Terry Malloy is portrayed as a man characterised with integrity, natural decency and a longing for life to be fair. As all longshoremen, he is restricted to the 'D and D' code. However, more critically, he knows that testifying will present a risk to his own life, courtesy of Johnny friendly. He expresses his fears, 'if I testify, my life worth a nickel,' but courageously sets these aside. Kazan shows us that he is offered an easy life, working in the loft, being safe as long as he 'don't do anything' or 'don't say anything.' Yet he chooses the moral high ground, motivated by a longing to serve justice. When served a subpoena, he grasps this opportunity to openly expose Friendly, evoking anger within him, he threatens, 'you're dead.' Edie begs that they move away from the danger, evidently fearing for Terry's life. Once again Terry is faced with a proposal that will essentially protect his life, but he resists. Instead, he is driven to confront Friendly; he approaches the docks in order to get his 'rights.' As expected, he is callously bashed by Johnny's goons; he is barely able to stand upright. Regardless of this, he rises in attempt to 'win the war,' against the union corruption. Through the actions of Terry Malloy, Kazan represents a character more interested in justice than preserving his own life.

Charley's love for Terry is palpable in their every interaction; from the beginning it is clear that remaining loyal to Terry is his first priority. As Terry's loyalty to Johnny begins to shift, Johnny becomes suspicious that Terry might 'rat' on him. Johnny orders Charley to force Terry into silence, or else have him killed. The expression across Charley's face is one of dread and he states 'I can't do that, it's my kid brother.' Kazan is showing us in this moment, that even through the pressure and force of Friendly, Charley will be unable to put his life before Terry's. In the momentous taxi cab scene, we see Charley pleading with Terry, begging him to take a job that will ensure his safety. His pleading soon turns into sheer desperation, as he points a gun at his own brother. Terry's gentleness in dealing with this situation evidently sparks great remorse within Charley. He realises

that putting Terry first will involve allowing him to testify, resulting in his own murder. Charley Malloy is perceived as an individual with enough moral principle and love for Terry, to prioritise the livelihood of his brother before the life of himself.

The dockworkers are submissive to the demands of Johnny Friendly, sticking by his code of silence. 'Deaf and Dumb. No matter how much we hate the torpedoes, we don't rat.' They realise that in order to take down Friendly's union and create a fair life for themselves, their own lives will be at risk and so choose personal safety over all else. This choice is evident in the way Pop Doyle expresses his opinion after the death of his son, Joey. 'I kept saying to him "keep quiet, you'll live longer."' Pop is unsupportive of Joey's attempt to fight the corruption, even after his brutal murder. He is resigned, which Kazan makes blatant in the 'sermon in the hold' scene, as he sits on the cargo whilst Father Barry stands strong. The other longshoremen seem to share his same view, the director gives us an insight into this through their dialogue, 'you don't ask no questions, you don't answer no questions unless you want to end up like that.' Through the symbolism of hawks and pigeons, Kazan displays a life the longshoremen live as completely dependent on a desire for life, no matter how bad the conditions may be. The characters higher up on the social and political hierarchy, that is, Friendly and his thugs, symbolise the hawks and the powerless dockworkers symbolise the pigeons. This becomes yet more observable through dialogue by Terry to Edie, 'this city's full of hawks...Spot a pigeon, right down on him.' This indicates that the longshoremen must be in constant fear for their lives and do whatever it takes to survive. The innocent workers choose to remain silent rather than becoming a 'stool pigeon,' as they value survival as their highest priority.

Unquestionably, there are characters that Kazan illustrates as placing a high value on their life as opposed to anything else. However, in a community filled with individuals possessing much integrity, they display other selfless motives. Although Johnny Friendly and his men seem to have a tight grasp over the society in terms of his authority and through union oppression, Kazan illustrates many characters that are prepared to sacrifice their own lives for a greater cause.