





# Acknowledgements

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# On the Waterfront: difficult choices in an uncertain world

The purpose of this guide is to provide an introduction to *On the Waterfront* (PG, Elia Kazan, 103 mins, USA, 1954), an overview of the commentary and debate that the film has generated and some ideas that will help you form your own interpretation of this challenging film.

# Studying and Interpreting *On the Waterfront*

On the Waterfront is a film that is as problematic as it is extraordinary. It carries with it an interesting history which has, over the years, affected the way people have responded to the film. On the Waterfront encourages different and conflicting interpretations, with its controversial ending being a particular source of debate. This study guide is intended as an informative resource, providing background information and a number of different ways of thinking about the film. One of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of the film is its capacity to invite and sustain different and multifaceted interpretations.

On the Waterfront focuses on life's uncertainty and confusion, depicting both Father Barry's dogmatic certainty and Johnny Friendly's egotistical self-confidence as dangerously blinkered. For some viewers, Father Barry's vision of collective action and Terry Malloy's confused struggle to be a better man belong in two different films; however, the contrast between these two ways of looking at, and responding to, life's challenges highlights the limitations of each of these perspectives. At the same time, many critics would disagree with this reading of the film, and a number consider the final presentation of Terry as a Christ-like hero to be a shameful betrayal of the longshoremen's cause – their systemic exploitation being subsumed by a heroic tale of personal triumph. Others accept the point of view of the film's director Elia Kazan who argued that "Our lives are full of temporary heroes" who become the focal point of collective action.<sup>1</sup>

Note: Longshoreman is the American name for a waterside worker. Other terms are docker and stevedore or, in Australia, 'wharfie'.



# Introduction to On the Waterfront

On the Waterfront tells the story of Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) and his struggle for redemption. For most of his life, Terry has been controlled by crime boss Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb) but, after being an unwitting accomplice in a murder carried out by Friendly's henchmen, Terry starts to question his unthinking loyalty. With the support of Edie Doyle (Eva Marie Saint), the murdered man's sister, Terry is made to see the world of the waterfront with fresh eyes and learns to accept personal responsibility for his past inaction and complicity.

A key theme in *On the Waterfront* is the importance of individual integrity in a treacherous world. This film endures as a powerful observation of both society and humanity due to its acknowledgement of the difficulty of making moral choices in an uncertain modern world.

#### Activities

- Find out more about the ideals of unionism and the role of collective action in protecting workers' interests.
- The 1979 film *Norma Rae* presents unionism in a much more positive light than *On the Waterfront* and you may want to watch this in order to understand the idea of collective bargaining power. One of the most shocking aspects of Johnny Friendly's operation is the way that he and his thugs use the union against the workers it is meant to represent and protect.
- The United States and Australia have quite different union traditions. Nevertheless, you may find it interesting to watch the miniseries *Bastard Boys* that screened on the ABC in 2007. This production follows the events in 1998 when Australian waterside workers (wharfies) were locked out and replaced by an imported workforce.
- The National film and Sound Archive have an excellent website, Australian Screen, where you
  can find clips documenting Australian union history. A number of these links relate to waterside
  unions. In the 1950s, the Australian Waterside Workers Federation had its own filmmaking unit.
- <a href="http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/painters-and-dockers-strike/clip1/">http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/painters-and-dockers-strike/clip1/</a>
- <a href="http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/november-victory/clip2/">http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/november-victory/clip2/</a>
- http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/november-victory/clip1/
- http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/big-country-on-the-hook/clip2/
- http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/australasian-gazette-strike/clip1/
- <a href="http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/the-hungry-miles/">http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/the-hungry-miles/</a>



For a more recent example of collective action in the Australian context, you may like to reflect
on the struggle over Workchoices: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09ru1FG6Mu8">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09ru1FG6Mu8</a>.
 However, the Australian union tradition has not always been so focused on the collective good
and internal struggles are not uncommon: <a href="http://www.theage.com.au/national/union-in-crisis-over-rorting-claims-20090401-9jsk.html">http://www.theage.com.au/national/union-in-crisis-over-rorting-claims-20090401-9jsk.html</a>.



# **Section 1: Getting started**

## On the Waterfront: Surviving in a Treacherous World

Filmed on location in the port town of Hoboken, New Jersey in the middle of a freezing winter, *On the Waterfront* depicts the wharves as an inward-looking and enclosed world, constrained and organised by Friendly and his gang of lackeys, who take a share of everything coming into and going out of the port.

Friendly has made the waterfront his own empire and bargains with the labour of the longshoremen who depend on him for the opportunity to work. Most of these workers keep their heads down, enduring the injustice and the bullying tactics of Friendly's mob, partly because they are too frightened and intimidated to do anything else but also out of a contradictory sense of group loyalty. Having readjusted their expectations, the ordinary waterfront workers simply want to survive.

## Joey Doyle is killed

The film opens at a point where a handful of longshoremen have decided they can no longer bear being exploited. Frustrated by other men growing rich and fat from his and his father's hard work, Joey Doyle agrees to testify to the Waterfront Crime Commission about the restrictive and illegal practices taking place on the wharves. When Johnny Friendly and his gang get wind of Joey's plans to testify, they decide to shut him up. Employing the cold-blooded tactics that have entrenched their power, the union heavies get Terry Malloy to call Joey onto the roof, with the pretext that he has one of his pigeons. Terry, a washed-up boxer whose brother Charley (Rod Steiger) is Friendly's right-hand man, was a willing participant, believing that all the gang was going to do "was rough him up a bit." However, after Joey is thrown off the roof to his death, Terry begins to question his childlike dependence on both Friendly and Charley.

### **Activities:**

- This opening sequence sets up the rest of the film in a number of ways. Think about the way the first five minutes signal the film's key themes.
- Create a chart to record your thoughts. For example, Joey's fear of coming outside tells us that this is an unsafe world where it is difficult to know who to trust.



# The romance narrative: Terry and Edie

If it weren't for his meeting with Edie, Terry would probably have stifled his feelings of guilt and his awakening sense of responsibility. It would be much easier for Terry to continue on as before, but Edie offers him a vision of himself as a better man than he ever imagined he could be. As Terry gets to know Edie and then to fall in love with her, he is given a new perspective on the life that he has been living. He senses new possibilities in himself, but is haunted by the knowledge that he played a part in the death of Edie's brother Joey. Terry cannot bear the idea of telling Edie the truth, as he fears he will lose her trust and faith. Yet, if he does not tell her what really happened, he can never be the man she believes him to be. He says to the local priest Father Barry, "Conscience—that stuff can drive you nuts."

### Questions and activity:

- It is not hard to imagine why Terry is attracted to Edie, but what is it about Terry that appeals to Edie?
- The music for On the Waterfront was composed by Leonard Bernstein. One of the three musical themes is the 'love theme'. Initially shy and tentative, mirroring Edie's curiosity about the brutish Terry, the theme is first heard a half-hour into the film, when Terry and Edie find themselves together after the incident at the church. When you watch the film, take note of the way this theme recurs and changes as a way of signalling the couple's growing love.
- Thanks to his meeting with Edie, Terry grows and develops. Do you think the same can be said of Edie?

# An Unlikely Hero

As Terry learns to expect more of himself, he becomes increasingly aware of the opportunities that he has missed and of the destructive influence that Friendly and Charley have had on his life. Up until Joey's murder, Terry has refused to see what he and his life have become but, as he faces up to the influence that Friendly has had on him, he realises that Friendly has cast a net around the entire community. He and his gang have taken control of the lives of all the men working on the waterfront and, with their bullying tactics and shady deals, deny the longshoremen the dignity of an honest day's work.



Terry becomes the rather unlikely hero of the action. Because of his place on the inside of the union leadership, he is set apart from the other workers. Edie's brother Joey is a more obvious hero – an ordinary dockworker prepared to speak the truth in defiance of both the union bullies and his fearful fellow workers, but he is murdered at the beginning of the film. Similarly, the forthright and careworn Kayo Dugan is killed for agreeing to expose Friendly in court. After the death of his brother at the hands of the gang, Terry becomes determined to set things right by speaking out against the corrupt and violent practices taking place on the docks.

Despite having been most affected by Friendly's rule, Terry's fellow workers are not at all certain that he has made the right decision. The heroic tale of one man standing out against the crowd for what he believes to be right is balanced by the initial incomprehension of so many of his fellow workers and, in the final scene, by the uncertain victory that has been won. It is also important to think about the fact that Terry is initially motivated by revenge, a desire to pay Friendly back for killing his brother.

### **Activities and Questions:**

- How much of Terry's heroic struggle to lead the men into the warehouse relates to a personal vendetta and how much to heroism?
- When you watch the film, try to plot the moments in the story that tell us that Terry is changing. In what ways does he change?
- One of the most obvious indications of change is the way Terry speaks. Initially he mumbles and finds it very hard to communicate his thoughts and feelings. As the film goes on, his speech becomes much more authoritative. See if you can pinpoint some of the key instances of this change.



# **Section 2: Context and background**

## **Exposing endemic corruption on the waterfront**

On the Waterfront deals with actual events that took place on the New York and New Jersey waterfronts. After the end of World War II, during which time trade union activities had largely been suspended, the New York and New Jersey docks became the locus of sustained strike action in response to the cosy deals struck between the leaders of the International Longshoremen's Association (the representative waterside workers' union) and the ship-owners. Not only were workers left out in the cold as the big bosses grew rich on their labours, their protests were met with violence and intimidation. The shapeup, where the workforce was chosen each day, condemned workers to lives of constant uncertainty and economic hardship and made them particularly vulnerable.

In the period leading up to the making of *On the Waterfront*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of newspaper articles (written by journalist Malcolm Johnson for the *New York Sun*) drew public attention to the presence of corrupt practices, bullying and violence on the waterfront and to the connection between certain union officials and organised crime. The situation became so problematic and such a hot political issue, that the Waterfront Crime Commission was established in 1953 in an attempt to clean up the New York waterfront.

Always a serious filmmaker, director Elia Kazan was initially attracted to the idea of making a film about the waterfront when playwright Arthur Miller presented him with a script on the subject. Although the finer details are disputed, Miller dropped out of the project when it was suggested that the film downplay the influence of organised crime in order to focus on the scourge of Communism. With Miller out of the picture, Kazan joined forces with writer Budd Schulberg.

Prior to collaborating with Kazan to create *On the Waterfront*, Schulberg had been carrying out his own research into the situation of the waterfront workers and had written a number of articles for the *New York Times Magazine*, as well as working on a film script. Schulberg's research included extensive interviews with longshoremen and a number of waterfront activists. He was particularly impressed by the efforts of the feisty priest Father 'Pete' Corridan to politicise and unite the waterfront workers; Father Corridan became the inspiration for Father Barry.



When producer and studio mogul Darryl F. Zanuck turned down *On the Waterfront*, he told Schulberg and Kazan "What have you got here, boys? All you've got here is a bunch of sweaty longshoremen. I think what you've written is exactly what the American people don't want to see." Zanuck was proved wrong when the film became both a popular and critical success, placing the plight of the longshoremen in the national spotlight.

However, it is not clear that the process of public revelation that culminated in *On the Waterfront* had any lasting social impact:

"In fact, even as the film was being shot, the kind of results that Father Corridan and the insurgent longshoremen expected as a result of the exposure of waterfront and union corruption were not coming to pass. In September 1953 the ILA (International Longshoremen's Association) had been expelled from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for corruption...But just before Christmas, and a month before the production wound down, the ILA had won an election against the new waterfront union set up by the AFL. In May 1954 the new union lost again. Some reforms were later put into place, including the outlawing of the shape-up. But the people in power essentially remained the same, and Corridan was removed from his post at the Xavier Institute of Industrial Relations and sent by the Church to teach economics in Syracuse." 3

### **Activities and Questions**

- A brief history of the Waterfront Crime Commission may be found at: <a href="http://www.wcnyh.org/history.htm">http://www.wcnyh.org/history.htm</a>
- Go to the website of the International Longshoremen's Association to get a taste of this history from a different point of view:
  - http://www.ilaunion.org/history\_under.html
    http://www.ilaunion.org/history\_turmoil.html
- On the Waterfront directly engaged with a current social issue that affected the everyday lives
  of ordinary people. What does the film gain from this connection to the real world? What are
  some of the problems that might arise when complex social events become the subject of a
  feature film?
- Many feature films deal with important social issues. Note down a few that have made an impact on you and think about whether these films have brought about social change.



# McCarthyism and the Hollywood Blacklist

Elia Kazan made *On the Waterfront* after testifying against fellow members of the film industry. Kazan, who like many members of the film industry was a member of the Communist Party during the 1930s, was asked to give evidence against his friends and colleagues before the House of Un-American Activities Committee, a body whose post-war activities reflected Cold War fears about the communist infiltration of American life. The events that took place during this period have become synonymous with the name of Senator Joseph McCarthy whose pursuit of communist sympathisers has been described as a witch hunt, and has entered American mythology as one of the darkest moments of the country's history. For many years, Kazan bore the stain of having cooperated with the Committee, whose activities and conduct became the subject of Arthur Miller's allegorical play *The Crucible*.

Many in the industry considered *On the Waterfront* to be Kazan's way of justifying his decision. This is an oversimplification of Kazan's complex exploration of the conflicting themes of loyalty and truth through the character of Terry. However, in his notebooks and in subsequent discussion of the film, Kazan does indeed make it clear that he had a personal stake in Terry's struggle: "Terry Malloy felt as I did. He felt ashamed and proud of himself at the same time, he felt it was a necessary act." 4

Considering the condemnation meted out to Kazan for testifying, it is not surprising that Kazan used *On the Waterfront* as an opportunity to work through the issues involved and to appeal for a more sympathetic understanding of his own position. Because of his personal history, Kazan perceived the struggle to overcome waterfront corruption as a test of individual strength and integrity, rather than dependent on the collective effort of the group.

The perspective offered in *On the Waterfront* provides a thought-provoking insight into the complexities involved in taking a stand. The exposure of waterfront corruption and graft is inextricably intertwined with a complex web of personal relationships and conflicting loyalties. The film is driven by Kazan's awareness that the personal bonds integral to human existence cannot simply be set aside for the greater good or, at least, not without a cost. Kazan always struggled over his decision to testify and many years later commented that, although what he'd done might have been "correct", he was no longer sure that it was "right". <sup>5</sup>



On the Waterfront scriptwriter Budd Schulberg also testified but appeared to experience none of the mixed feelings that plagued Kazan. Schulberg, in particular, was determined to draw attention to the plight of the longshoremen and was frustrated by the decision to focus on the character of Terry, a union lackey, rather than on Father Barry and the collective struggle of the men. As a result of Schulberg and Kazan's conflicting points of view, the narrative of *On the Waterfront* is driven by the contrast between Father Barry's single-minded certainty and Terry's confusion and hesitancy, a contrast highlighting the complexity of the world being navigated and the issues being dealt with.

#### **Activities:**

- For more information about the issues at stake, go to:
   <a href="http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue2/kazan.html">http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue2/kazan.html</a>
- Watch the interview: Most DVD copies of On the Waterfront contain extras including an interview with Kazan where he describes the collaborative process between himself, Schulberg and independent producer Sam Spiegel.
- In his 1956 novel Waterfront, Schulberg tells the story he wanted to tell from the perspective of Father Barry and without the ambivalence and ambiguity that Kazan channelled into the film. You may like to read this book which is still available in a number of libraries.

  Alternatively, have a quick skim and pick out a few moments to get a bit of an idea about the different way the story might have been told.
- A way of understanding the point of view from which a story is told is to imagine the story
  without Terry as the central character. Think about how different it would be told from Pop
  Doyle's point of view or Johnny Friendly's.

# Kazan's On the Waterfront: Dignity Regained

Although, Kazan and Schulberg had an extremely successful working relationship, it is worth noting their different perspectives on the issues being dealt with in the film. The social significance of the waterfront issue is highlighted by the fact that, by the time he was approached by Kazan, Schulberg had already written his own movie script on the corruption engulfing the waterfront workers. Informed by his contact with tough-talking, dockside priest Father Corridan, Schulberg envisioned Father Barry as the central character, providing a more wide-ranging point of view, centring on the workers as a group. In contrast, for Kazan, Terry's story needed to be the focal point of the film's action. Kazan's personal notebooks stress again and again that the key to the film was Terry's



redemption: "This motion picture is about one thing only: a young man who has let his <u>dignity slip</u> away, and regains it!" <sup>6</sup>

Because of their distinctive points of view, Kazan and Schulberg's collaboration lent *On the Waterfront* complexity and depth. The contradictions and uncertainties that are such a feature of the worldview presented in the film are pivotal to its dramatic impact and ongoing fascination: "The tension between the social commentary film with its semi-documentary detail and the poetic exploration of character remains an unresolved and therefore energising element of *On the Waterfront*." <sup>7</sup> It is often the case that films that take risks and deal with big ideas refuse neat interpretations and straightforward conclusions. There have been many arguments about both the ending of *On the Waterfront* and the depiction of Terry precisely because the film strikes such a chord.

On the Waterfront was received with enormous accolades when it was released and, at a time when Hollywood was obsessed with making blockbusters and big budget musicals, it pretty much scooped the pool at the Academy Awards. The film was not only a critical success but was extremely popular at the box office. Kazan had already established his reputation with serious films like Gentleman's Agreement and A Streetcar Named Desire and there is no doubt that Marlon Brando was a huge drawcard. Nevertheless, On the Waterfront, with its documentary style, overtly political subject matter and emphasis on ordinary people and real-life locations, tapped into a demand for a more serious and socially engaged film culture as a balance to the flamboyant cinematic spectacles produced to compete with television. Kazan is reported to have said that, after the success of the film, "nobody cared what my politics were, that I was controversial or difficult....I could do anything I wanted. That's Hollywood". 8

### **Questions:**

- In what ways does *On the Waterfront* present itself as a serious film?
- How does the black and white cinematography contribute to the story being told in the film?



# **Section 3: Characters**

## **Terry Malloy**

When we first meet Terry, he is a defeated character, literally and metaphorically. Having sacrificed his dream of becoming a champion boxer so that Johnny Friendly could win a bet, he lives as if in suspended animation. With a past that is too painful to contemplate and nothing to strive for in the future, Terry exists in the present, at the mercy of Johnny Friendly's whims. When Joey Doyle is murdered, Terry is forced to recognise how much he has allowed himself to be exploited by Friendly. In the scene where Joey dies, it takes Terry a few moments to register what has happened and, as realisation slowly dawns, he has the demeanour of someone waking up: "He wasn't a bad kid that Joey." As Terry contemplates his involvement in Joey's murder, he comes face to face with the kind of man he has allowed himself to become.

Terry has been thwarted by his relationship with Johnny and his place in the gang. Johnny and Charley treat him as a child, and Terry responds accordingly. However, once he begins to question his unthinking loyalty to Johnny, it becomes increasingly clear that his place in the gang has only ever been provisional. In reality, Terry is as much an outsider in the gang as he is amongst the waterfront workers who view him with so much suspicion. (This is emphasised by his ragged jacket which contrasts with the smart coats of the other gang members.) The only place where Terry can really feel at home is on the roof where he tends his pigeons but this place of refuge is sullied by Joey's murder and finally destroyed altogether after Terry's testimony.

In the scene in the back of the cab, Terry begs his brother Charley to recognise that Terry lost much more than a boxing match when told to throw the fight in which he had invested so much. Even people who have not seen *On the Waterfront* are familiar with this scene and can quote the lines: "I couda been a contender, I couda been somebody." There is something deeply moving about Terry's despairing realisation that he has done nothing with his life and even more moving is his anguished plea for his brother to acknowledge his pain and what he has lost.

While Joey's death forces Terry to question the nature of his relationship with Johnny Friendly, the implication is that he would have settled back into his old ways if not for Edie. She looks at him with fresh eyes and gives him a glimpse of the better man he could become. Her belief in him gives him something to aspire to, reviving his dream of being somebody. Yet, as he tries to live up to Edie's



expectations, Terry is haunted by the knowledge of his involvement in Joey's death. For Terry, there are no simple choices. In trying to live up to Edie's clear-cut faith in doing the right thing, he must make decisions that, as well as having a personal cost, are also destined to affect others.

Charley's death is a direct consequence of Terry's struggle to follow his conscience rather than submit to Johnny Friendly's bullying. Ironically, Charley's murder and the desire for revenge seal Terry's decision to testify, rather than the dictates of his conscience. Arguably, it is this desire for revenge that continues to motivate Terry as he struggles towards the door of the loading area in the film's dramatic conclusion.

Motivated by his love for both Edie and Charley, Terry undoubtedly grows in stature as the film progresses and he is driven to make difficult decisions about the way forward. An obvious indication of Terry's transformation is the gradual change in his speech. Initially he mumbles and finds it very hard to express his thoughts and emotions but he becomes increasingly authoritative. In the scene in the cab, Terry is compelling as he finally tells his brother what he has been feeling. In the concluding scene, where he stands up to Johnny Friendly, Terry counters Friendly's bluster by asserting his new identity untainted by Friendly's bullying and corruption.

Because he begins as such an inarticulate character, with very little self-knowledge, Terry reveals a lot about himself through his body language. For instance, note the way that he cradles the pigeon next to his heart and continues to rub the place under his jacket after Joey is killed. In the scene where he picks up Edie's glove and slips it onto his one hand, he expresses a desire for connection that he can't manage through words.

### **Activities and Questions**

- On the Waterfront is a tightly constructed film and each sequence that features Terry reveals another step in his transformation. Plot this process.
- Why does the line "I couda been somebody" elicit such a strong response?
- In what ways is Terry an outsider? Is he any less of an outsider at the end of the film?
- Director Elia Kazan described *On the Waterfront* as a classic story of redemption: "This motion picture is about one thing only: a young man who has let his dignity slip away, and regains it!" Is the story of Terry's redemption a simple one? What things make Terry's struggle to redeem himself so difficult? Does Terry redeem himself? How?



# Terry as hero

On the Waterfront is a film about difficult rather than valiant choices. As Terry staggers towards the pier door, in the troubling, much-debated final moments of the film, he is trying to fulfil Edie's faith in him, show Johnnie Friendly what he is made of and finally be "somebody". At the same time, as Father Barry urges Terry to get up, telling him that Johnny Friendly is laying bets he won't, Terry once again becomes a prize-fighter performing to please other people.

In the midst of Father Barry's triumph, Friendly's blustering, the shipowner's impatience, and even the workers' naïve faith, Terry seems irrevocably alone. Even Edie, who has shown Terry the kind of man he could be, appears curiously disconnected. The smile that plays on her lips seems to be more for the man who has avenged her brother's death than for her barely alive lover. It is as if Terry's efforts have made him more invisible than ever. By standing up against the mob, Terry becomes a hero, the "somebody' that he dreamed of being in the boxing ring. However, he also loses key elements of his identity, as he becomes alienated from the union mob, the longshoremen and the Golden Warriors.

When Terry staggers towards the door, it is significant that the events are literally seen through his eyes; he has become the film's moral compass and the audience looks through his eyes to see what the way forward might be. However, Terry is confronted by the imposing form of the shipowner, and his blurred vision is a reminder that nothing is certain in this world. Perhaps Terry's heroism comes from his effort to do the right thing despite not being absolutely sure what that is.

### Questions

- Do you think that Terry gains more than he loses as a result of the events that take place in On the Waterfront?
- Why does Terry agree to lead the men in to the work area?
- Would you describe Terry as a hero? Why? Why not?
- How does the music at the end of On the Waterfront influence our interpretation of Terry's struggle to make it into the work area?
- In thinking about the idea of heroism and its treatment in On the Waterfront, you might like to consider writer Lance Lee's idealised reading of both the film's ending and the human condition:



"Literature and film are full of examples of men either thought of poorly or without proper respect who are stripped to their own resources and then triumph against almost impossible odds. Terry is a powerful example of such a character....

The emergence of such a character touches a profound chord in ourselves, who are not heroes, but dream of the possibility. Such a character lends a luster [sic] not otherwise available to all those around him. But we shouldn't forget the need for the hero to suffer. A terrible price has to be expiated for having accommodated a false modus vivendi [way of living] and participated in evil."9

## **Edie Doyle**

Edie initially extends her visit because she feels she can't leave until she has found out what happened to Joey. As she finds out more about the exploitation of the longshoremen, she becomes increasingly aware of her isolation and that she has been cut off from the reality of the lives her family and her former friends are living. Edie is also drawn back by Terry, who not only fascinates her, but has an apparent openness that makes him stand out in the closed world of the waterfront: that he was involved in her brother's death is a fitting irony in the murky world the film inhabits.

We first encounter Edie kneeling next to her brother's body. Her grief and her passionate determination to find out who killed Joey contrast with her father's resignation and passivity. Edie's fury with Father Barry for offering words and platitudes rather than definitive action indicates her strength of will. Thanks to the clarity of her point of view and her candour, Father Barry is challenged to leave the comfort of the church and reach out to the people who most need him. Like Terry, Father Barry takes up Edie's challenge to become a different man.

One of the most obvious observations to make about Edie is that she is one of only two female characters to speak in *On the Waterfront*, and she is the only one with a major role. Edie's own mother is dead, but we learn that when she was alive, she and Pop Doyle scrimped and saved to rescue Edie from the male-dominated waterfront society by sending her to the exclusively female world of a convent school.

The fact that there is no valid place for women in the waterfront community is brought home when the distraught mother of a boy killed a few years earlier desperately tries to get the attention of the policeman investigating Joey Doyle's death but he ignores her. The idea of women being invisible in the male-dominated waterfront world is picked up on again in the scene in Johnny Friendly's bar where a woman, only seen from behind, silently rocks a baby in a pram. She is completely ignored,



even when Friendly leans over the pram to look at the baby. Just as oddly, she shows no interest in, and makes no response to, the events taking place. Towards the conclusion of the film, the wife of 'Mr Big' is shown quietly knitting in the background oblivious to his infuriated response to the televised court proceedings.

Edie, of course, is far from faceless and shows great strength of will in her efforts to get to the bottom of her brother's death. Edie is allied to Father Barry in her determination that the truth be told but, for her, the truth is layered with the complexity of individual experience, rather than being the uncompromising ideal that Father Barry espouses.

Schulberg has commented on the good fortune of finding Eva Marie Saint (spotted in a small part on stage): "We couldn't find anybody else who looked like that, truly virginal, not just in a sexual sense, but innocent in a true and complete sense." However, the idea of Edie's innocence needs to be qualified because she is not so much naïve as pure of heart.

Edie's refusal to be tainted by the complicated web of codes and allegiances that organise waterfront life gives her the freedom to turn up to the "shape-up" and demand a tab for her father and, subsequently, to attend the meeting at the church. This quality also gives her the ability to see something in Terry that even he had no idea existed. Intriguingly, it is also interconnected with Edie's feisty determination to get to the bottom of Joey's murder. Unlike her father, whose spirit has been crushed by his life on the docks, Edie rejects the code of silence that dominates the neighbourhood. Aware that Joey was killed for his courageous determination to speak the truth, Edie struggles to find out what really happened in order to reclaim Joey's life and give meaning to his death.

On the Waterfront uses the classic romance narrative – where the good woman leads the troubled man back to the path of virtue – to plot Terry's heroic redemption. Edie's faith in Terry and her capacity to see qualities and possibilities in him is the key to his transformation. However, as Terry gains strength from his determination to live up to Edie's expectations, she loses her confidence and determination. It is almost as if she transfers her strength to Terry. The scene where Terry breaks into Edie's apartment marks a clear change in her depiction. He deals with the pain and uncertainty that he is facing by subduing Edie, finding comfort in her surrender. In the following scene in which Charley's body is discovered, it becomes apparent that Edie has been relegated to the



sidelines. As Terry grieves over the slaughter of his brother, Edie's pleas fall on deaf ears and, indeed, in the scenes that follow, Terry no longer really hears anything that Edie has to say.

### Questions

- In what ways is Edie just as much an outsider as Terry?
- Why do you think the film sets up Edie as an independent character and then undermines this representation?
- What do you think of the scene where Terry breaks into Edie's apartment? How can this
  depiction of male domination and female submission be reconciled with the previously complex
  and subtle depiction of Edie and Terry's developing relationship?
- How can a film be so interesting in its acknowledgement of the subordinate position of women in the waterfront world but then be so dismissive of such a vibrant and courageous female character?
- Can you think of other narratives (film, book, play, TV show) where this happens to an initially strong female character? What do you make of this?

# Terry and Edie: The 'Glove' Scene

The scene where Terry picks up Edie's glove is often singled out as an instance of Brando's brilliance as an actor, as he uses the glove to give Edie a reason to linger but also to sew the first seeds of intimacy. Kazan has commented that Brando solved the "problem" of the scene: "Why should Edie, with her strict upbringing stay with a member of the opposite sex?" Saint's hesitant attempts to get the glove back contribute to this interpretation, but we have already seen that Edie is far from a shrinking violet. She is shy in Terry's company, but she is clearly already drawn to him and curious to hear what he has to say. Her initial attempt to get the glove back is a mere gesture. When Terry offends her by remembering that she was a "mess" when she was young, she has no trouble grabbing the glove. This scene encapsulates the complexity of Edie's response to Terry, a combination of curiosity, wariness, compassion and sexual attraction.

### **Activities and questions**

- Watch this scene and think about what it is about Terry that fascinates Edie.
- At the conclusion of this scene, Terry walks ahead, turns and orders Edie to "Come on!" and she meekly follows. How has the rest of the scene paved the way for this moment?



- Do you find the developing relationship between Terry and Edie believable? Why or why not?
- Make a note of the music in this scene. When does it begin? Why at this moment? Why does the music linger into the next scene? When does the music come to an end?

## Terry and Edie: in the Saloon

In *On the Waterfront*, Elia Kazan stresses the contradictory nature of human behaviour and relationships, an awareness integral to the longshoremen's often self-destructive understanding of group loyalty. Similarly based on contradiction, Edie and Terry's relationship develops in a context of recognition, alienation and ambivalence. Edie is attracted to Terry, partly because he offers a completely different view of the world than she has experienced in the safe confines of the convent and partly because she sees something in him that she recognises. Terry is driven by a similar combination of curiosity and familiarity. The sequence of connection and disconnection that takes place in the scene where Terry takes Edie for a drink not only highlights their conflicting feelings for each other but their own uncertainty about who they are and how they fit into the world of the waterfront. Each of them is in their own way an outsider and this is something that draws them together but, at the same time, this recognition is continually challenged by moments of misrecognition and misunderstanding. Leo Braudy comments that "this complex sequence illustrates one of Kazan's basic tenets of film-making: 'Look for the contradictions' – the contradictions within a character, the contradictions of tone within a scene, and between scenes."

### **Activities and Questions**

- Using Braudy's words as a starting point, how does this scene reveal contradictions in Edie and Terry and in their behaviour towards each other?
- By the end of this scene, how can we tell that Terry has lost the detachment that he boasted of at the beginning of the evening? How has Edie changed in her behaviour towards Terry?
- Watch this sequence carefully and try to track the changes in mood that drive it forward. Try to
  note down the different ways that these changes are indicated. The music is a used in a
  particularly evocative way in this sequence.



# **Father Barry**

Edie, Father Barry and Terry are all in their own way outsiders. Each of them is motivated by a desire to become part of something and they recognise this desire in each other.

While Budd Schulberg, viewed Father Barry as an inspirational hero, Kazan saw this figure as flawed, driven by his desire to inspire and his belief in simple solutions. Kazan's insistence that the film be structured around Terry Malloy and his relationship with Edie dramatically alters not only Father Barry's narrative significance but also his reliability as a commentator on the action, an ironic but satisfying change. Kazan described Father Barry as "a rigidly ethical man who in any circumstance would always tell you what was right". <sup>12</sup> One of the most striking aspects of *On the Waterfront* is the way it questions the effectiveness of heroic and grandiose behaviour, and Father Barry's speeches are filtered through this lens. It has been suggested that Karl Malden, the actor who plays Father Barry, and Lee J. Cobb, who plays Johnny Friendly, are the only actors in the film who don't use the style of acting called method acting – where you inhabit a character rather than pretend to be that character. <sup>13</sup> Instead, both Malden and Cobb visibly "act" their roles. Whether by accident or design, this has the effect of emphasising the bluster in each of their speeches.

After Edie's screeched accusation that no saint ever hid in a church, Father Barry becomes determined to take the church to the workers rather than wait for them to come to him. However, his coming out of the church after these words leaves the unsettling impression that he has ambitions of sainthood. The next day he is down at the docks inviting the workers to hold their political meetings in the basement of the church; a change of emphasis that is sealed with a cigarette. Yet, in pledging his allegiance to the workers' cause and committing himself to social action, Father Barry becomes peculiarly authoritarian.

An effect of Father Barry's speech-making, swaddled in Christian certainty and underpinned by a language of conviction, is to deny the complex reality of the lives of the waterfront workers. He summons up the presence of Christ as a witness to the injustices of the waterfront but, while acknowledging the men's anxiety about being able to feed and house their families, Father Barry implies they have their priorities wrong as "He [Jesus] sees you sell your souls to the mob for a day's pay". In Father Barry's opinion survival is less important than the men remaining true to their souls.



### **Activities and Questions**

- Examine one of Father Barry's speeches and think about what he is really saying. What is he asking of the men and why?
- How can Father Barry be certain about what is right when faced with the dangerous and uncertain world presented in On the Waterfront?
- Consider the idea that Father Barry is like a director shaping people's behaviour and manipulating their responses.
- Compare Father Barry's speeches with Johnny Friendly's speech at the beginning of the film. What are the similarities? What are the differences? What is the effect of giving these two characters such "grand speeches" when other characters seem to use language in a much more understated way?
- Do you agree that Father Barry is a man of "total conviction"? Discuss.

## Father Barry: The Crucifixion speech

The producer of *On the Waterfront*, Sam Spiegel, drove Kazan and (especially) Schulberg crazy by insisting on making the film as tight and commercial as possible. Spiegel particularly objected to Father Barry's long speeches and wanted to cut the crucifixion speech delivered after Kayo Dugan's execution by the mob. However, Kazan convinced Spiegel that he could shoot it in such a way that it would not slow the film down. Accordingly, Kazan breaks up the speech with frequent cuts to register the responses of the various onlookers.

While Father Barry is lovingly lit so that there is no doubt that he is a good man who believes the view of the world that he is offering, his own certainty is not reinforced by the way he is shot. He is treated to some lowish angle shots that give him a certain majesty and most of the longshoremen listen respectfully. However, with the possible exception of Pop Doyle, Terry, set apart from the rest of the group in the hold by a pile of boxes, is the only one who is moved to action by this speech, punching Friendly's thug Tillio to prevent him from hurling another projectile. This action signals to Friendly that Terry has changed his loyalties, and sets in train the rest of the events in the film.

Father Barry's status as an orator is ambiguous – he is the centre of attention looked down upon by the audience of longshoremen as if he is in an amphitheatre, but this also means that he is positioned in the claustrophobic depths of the hold in contrast to Johnny Friendly who is framed by



the sky. Father Barry concludes: "Only you have the power to knock 'em out for good" and then looks down at Kayo Dugan's body as he says "OK Kayo". This grim physical reminder of the consequences of Kayo's attempt to resist the mob sucks all the vigour out of Father Barry's fighting words. Then, with the towering form of the foreman yelling out the order to lift the body out and Johnny Friendly's confirming wave, Father Barry's authority is further diminished. The body is raised to the surface with Father Barry standing strong beside it – an unsettling reference to the priest's earlier promise that he would stand up with Dugan "right down the wire". The spiritual authority given to the slowly ascending body through its depiction against the sky is placed in doubt by the fact that the sky that frames them also frames Friendly, who is the last person we see in this scene.

### **Questions and Activities**

- What strategies did Kazan use to keep this scene dynamic?
- Do you feel this scene works?
- Would it have worked better, if it had been made shorter and tighter?
- Note the use of close-ups in this sequence. Which characters are photographed this way and what is the effect.

# Johnny Friendly and Charley Malloy

The ideas of family, loyalty and allegiance are worked through obsessively in the film. Terry's brother is described as Friendly's right-hand man; he is both dedicated, trustworthy and has a good head for figures. Nevertheless, despite Charley's skills and the fact that he is so central to the smooth-running of the union activities, he is self-effacing and meek in his relations with Johnny. At the same time, Charley tries to protect Terry. For instance, he quietly smooths over any potential unpleasantness that might result from Terry's obvious distress at his involvement in Joey's murder.

In contrast to Charley's anxiously protective attitude to Terry, Johnny Friendly robustly lays claim to Terry, as he play-fights with him and ruffles his hair. There is an unsettling sexuality – unsettling because it is used to control – in Friendly's physical fixation with Terry; he touches and strokes him and, in a gesture that brings to mind tipping at a strip club, he thrusts a note down the front of Terry's sweater to try to win him back. However, once Terry attempts to break free of the gang, he is no longer the indulged child. Instead, he has become a threat and is expendable. When Friendly



realises that Terry can no longer be trusted and that he has transferred his allegiances, it is important to Friendly that Charley be made to choose between him and Terry.

The scene in the back of the cab stands out because of the genuineness of the love Terry and Charley reveal for each other. The waterfront world is full of fear, moral compromise and misplaced loyalty, but this is a moment of clarity where the brothers find each other again. The regretful and tender disappointment with which Terry pushes the gun away demonstrates his deep trust in Charley's love. And reminded of his previous betrayal of Terry, Charley realises there is no way he could sacrifice Terry to prop up Friendly's operation. It has been suggested that Friendly's decision to kill Charley rather than Terry is bizarrely illogical, especially as Charley's murder clinches Terry's resolve to testify. However, in the labyrinthine moral landscape of the waterfront there is a curious negative logic in the bullying decision to punish Charley for letting his love for his brother outweigh his loyalty to Friendly.

### **Activities and Questions**

- Johnny Friendly and Charley Malloy are just two of the many father figures who populate the male-dominated world of the film. All of these figures are deeply flawed. Make a list of these father-figures and describe the way they are represented in the film.
- Watch the opening of the film and note how small Friendly and his men look in comparison to the ship towering above them. Then watch the end of the film where Friendly is shot from above, a diminished figure yelling ineffectually at the workers. What is the effect of this bookending?
- In the cab scene, the enclosed space enhances the sense of intimacy between the brothers. The next time Terry sees Charley, he is a tiny figure suspended from a loading hook. The camera dollies forward until Charley's face is in close-up, its lifelessness contrasting with the loving tenderness revealed in the scene in the cab. Compare these two scenes and think about the way that they connect and drive Terry (and the story) forward.



# **Section 4: Interpreting the Narrative**

One of the most interesting aspects of *On the Waterfront* is the subtlety and ambiguity it gains from the melding of two different kinds of story. The individual story of Terry's personal redemption that held such importance for Kazan is interwoven with Schulberg's preferred focus on the rank and file insurgency organised by Father Barry. With Kazan's vision taking precedence, Father Barry's uncompromising belief in the power of truth and honour works as a fascinating counterpoint to the complexity and ambiguity of the moral world that Terry and the rest of the longshoremen are required to negotiate.

In another film, Father Barry's rousing speeches, Edie's clear-eyed belief in people's essential goodness and Terry's desire for redemption would be resoundingly vindicated. However, the single-mindedness of Father Barry and Edie's worldviews lends them a kind of innocence that is out of kilter with the murky world they inhabit. Father Barry believes that if one man is brave enough to stand up against oppression then others will follow, but Joey Doyle and Dugan are killed for their efforts and Terry is ostracised. Only after Terry is beaten do the other workers decide to support him, a decision that makes Terry into a kind of talisman to show the shipowners that the longshoremen want to break free of the union. Moreover, there is no certainty that Terry's painful struggle is really going to liberate the men and the ominous closing of the pier door suggests the contrary. For Father Barry, Terry's Herculean struggle to make it into the loading area with the other men is a triumph for the workers, and for Edie, it is a glorious display of personal integrity. However, each of these visions is at odds with the film's ambivalence about the consequences and effects of acts of individual heroism. How noble is a futile sacrifice?

While *On the Waterfront* was greeted with accolades on its release, and was a huge popular and critical success, some commentators objected to the film's political message, concerned that the focus on Terry's personal struggle and redemption dilutes the idea of collective action fundamental to the spirit of trade unionism. In a much-quoted essay on *On the Waterfront*, Lindsay Anderson (an influential British film critic who became a celebrated director) objected to the concentration on Terry's heroic and highly individual struggle at the expense of the principle of collective action: "The mob has been discredited; Friendly's hold is broken; the dockers have it in their power to be their own masters. Yet, instead of rising to the occasion, they turn like leaderless sheep in search of a new master." For another critic, Peter Biskind, Kazan's focus on Terry's heroic suffering makes *On* 



the Waterfront "one of the earliest and most effective attempts to suppress politics with morality and private values that the fifties produced". <sup>17</sup> However, an alternative reading is that *Father Barry* is the one obsessed with individual sacrifice. Father Barry is a man who approves of grand gestures by individuals, regardless of the results but, in the context of the film, such gestures are viewed with ambivalence.

At the end of *On the Waterfront*, Johnny Friendly and his thugs have been ousted, but Friendly's defeat is not sufficient in itself to herald change. This is driven home in a short scene at the comfortable residence of a wealthy New York power broker who, after watching the proceedings of the enquiry on television, informs his manservant, "If Mr Friendly calls, I'm out, and you don't know when I'll be back." We learn that Friendly's authority is both limited and temporary. Once his neighbourhood operation has been publicly exposed as the brutal and self-serving business that it is, he is revealed as a petty bully and small-time criminal whose downfall will make little difference to the general level of waterfront corruption.

Father Barry's passionate determination that Terry should get up and walk to the pier is undeniably ambiguous and, depending on how we choose to read Father Barry's urgings, the ending of *On the Waterfront* can be seen to be either celebrating or questioning the transformative power of single moments of heroism. There is absolutely no doubt that Father Barry is a good man who has the best interests of the longshoremen at heart. Yet, there is a curious sadism at play when Father Barry urges the beaten Terry to sacrifice himself again when he has already done what has been asked of him. Terry has allowed himself to be guided by Father Barry's faith in the power of the truth, and there is something rather unsettling about Father Barry's whispered enticement that "Johnny Friendly's laying odds that you won't get up." Leo Braudy, in his excellent study of *On the Waterfront*, observes that this line "transforms Terry from a person into a symbol and, like the moment when Barry sends Terry down to confess to Edie, it makes the priest into a kind of director." <sup>18</sup> The director of a film is the individual who shapes the film, the person with the ultimate creative authority.

### **Activities**

• Think about this idea of Terry being transformed into a symbol. What does Braudy mean by this?



- Compare the final scene between Father Barry and Terry with the earlier one where Father Barry urges Terry to tell Edie that he was involved in Joey's murder. Do you agree that Father Barry asserts too much influence in these moments, rather than leaving it up to Terry to decide the best way forward?
- Can a futile sacrifice be noble? Discuss this idea with reference to Terry's actions as well as the deaths of Joey Doyle and Kayo Dugan. Then think about present-day struggles like the one for Tibetan independence just prior to the Olympic Games in Beijing or the street protests against the Burmese military dictatorship.

## Individual Heroism/Collective Struggle

The ousting of Friendly and his gang leaves a space open for the men to work together as a genuine collective, and to use their combined strength as a group to insist on their rights both as workers and as human beings. Instead, they rely on the half-dead Terry to give them the confidence to broker a deal. Their faith in Terry's presence is almost childlike, and this is reinforced by their comments that if Terry can walk in, they will walk in with Terry "So the shippers can see we'll take no more orders from Johnny Friendly"; "And then they'll give us back our union so we can run it on the up and up." (The men also seem like children when they lower their heads in shame for having stood on the sidelines while Terry was beaten by the gang.)

The longshoremen's passivity is a product of years of domination at the hands of the union bosses. Their decision to use Terry's broken form as a symbol of possibility is sadly appropriate. They feel that if Terry can defeat the odds and get up and walk into the work area, maybe the harsh lessons that experience has taught them will be proved wrong. These men feel that they need a miracle. However, while Johnny Friendly may have been ousted, the sight of the shipowner standing in the doorway of the work area in his hat and overcoat casts doubt over the possibility that the power has shifted in the longshoremen's favour. The closing image of the roller door closing with such finality behind the men suggests they have been swallowed up by the industrial might of the shipowner.

Edie and Father Barry smile with satisfaction at the sight of the blustering Friendly and in response to Terry's triumph. They are satisfied by the conclusion to Terry's struggle. However, we have seen these events through Terry's eyes and know that the way forward is far from clear. The implication is that the two of them are seeing what they want to see: for Father Barry, truth has triumphed



while Edie's belief in individual integrity has been confirmed. With this in mind, critic Leo Braudy suggests that the ending of *On the Waterfront* is a testament to Kazan's refusal to provide a simple resolution through the classic romantic embrace of the hero and heroine. Braudy observes that, "The forces of history are too large to be resolved neatly, and the only way to end the film is with an embrace. But here the embrace, such as it is, is not between the hero and the heroine, but between the heroine and the priest." <sup>19</sup> The smile that lingers on Edie's lips was apparently Sam Spiegel's idea; it was meant to reassure the audience that the ending was indeed a heroic victory and Schulberg has complained that the smile overrides the pessimistic hints that Johnny Friendly's operation was just one small example of much more widespread and embedded culture of corruption. However, surely this smile raises many more questions than it settles.

### **Questions and Activities**

- Focus on the body language and facial expressions of the longshoremen in this scene. What is being communicated in the shots of the men gathered together as onlookers?
- How do you 'read' Edie's smile? What about Father Barry's?
- We think of endings as a kind of summing-up of what has gone before, but the endings that
  make the most impact are often those that are unsettling, leaving us with plenty to think
  about. Can you think of other films that ask more questions than they answer?



# Section 5: The Setting and Style of *On the Waterfront*

On the Waterfront is a visually impressive film. The film's 'look' depends on its striking use of the palette of black and white cinematography. On the Waterfront appeared in American cinemas at a time when Hollywood was trying to compete with television by providing a viewing experience that was worth going out for. As a result, many of the most successful 1950s films were lush, extravagantly coloured, widescreen extravaganzas. In contrast, Kazan and Schulberg always envisioned On the Waterfront as a black and white film. For audiences of the 1950s black and white instantly brought to mind: gritty documentary and the morally ambiguous (film noir) crime films of the period. It is worth noting that studio mogul Darryl F. Zanuck was appalled when Kazan pitched the film to him, raving instead about his forthcoming production, Prince Valiant, one of the first films to be made using the new wide screen technology Cinemascope. It must have been hugely satisfying for Kazan and Schulberg when On the Waterfront proved so successful.

On the Waterfront has been praised for the 'documentary' style of its on location shooting and emphasis on ordinary people. Cinematographer Boris Kaufman made the most of the fog and smoke that were part of the freezing January landscape but also used deep focus to position the characters within the landscape and to emphasise the ever-present connection between the individual and the group. There is a particularly effective use of depth of field in the scene on the waterfront the day after Joey's murder. Note, for instance, the way that Terry's conversation with the crime commission investigators is photographed, emphasising the presence of both Johnny Friendly's men and the rest of the workers. In the scenes on the roof, shots of the characters against the sky are balanced by shots that emphasise their ongoing connection to the society they are trying to escape. This way of depicting the waterfront society is a constant reminder that individuals in this world are locked into a complicated set of relationships with their fellow workers, the people they work for and other powerful people whom they may never meet.

In the daytime scenes the smoke and mist express the mood of uncertainty that prevails in the film. The constant mist and smoke that characterises the mise en scene of the film is a visual clue of Kazan's own awareness that moral choices are rarely easy to make. (The mise en scène is everything that you can see at a particular moment: sets, props, costumes, actors, camera angle, lighting.)

Much of this effect is a natural outcome of filming on location in the middle of a freezing January, but it assumes a symbolic power, particularly in the scenes on the roof where the characters' desire



to rise above the murky waterfront world below is cast into doubt by the rising mist and the billowing smoke from the chimneys and smoke stacks.

Kaufman, who enjoyed the challenge of working on location, left nothing to chance, and worked hard to make every shot full of meaning. He became an expert in lighting these real-life spaces: "I developed ways to apply precise lighting on location, which is not easy. By precision lighting I mean lighting that has a meaning. Of course, the only meaning of lighting is to reveal the inner expression of the face or the mood of a place." <sup>20</sup>

In the majority of scenes that take place at night, the smoky, pale-grey daytime look gives way to a highly stylised use of light and dark. (This look has its roots in German expressionism but, by the time On the Waterfront was filmed, had become associated with a Hollywood style of film called film noir.) The use of this dramatic form of lighting stresses the claustrophobic nature of the characters' world. Not only do the longshoremen work alongside each other each day, they also live cheek by jowl in their cramped apartments, attached by a network of fire escapes. Rather than providing a haven from the outside world, the domestic spaces in On the Waterfront are overlaid with the deprivation and fearfulness that have become an inextricable part of the longshoremen's lives. This point is made in the very first scene, when Joey falls off the roof through the lines of washing suspended from the apartments. One of the notable things about Joey's death is how public it is - the gang members are able to watch events unfold from the bar across the street and apartment lights go on in response to Joey's yell as he falls. As Edie and Father Barry crouch next to Joey's body, a crowd of workers looks on.

In the scene where Terry and Edie are chased down by a truck driven by Friendly's henchmen, the lighting creates the impression that Edie and Terry are caught in a narrow tunnel with no way of escape – a metaphor for the lives of the longshoremen and for Terry who has become caught up in events from which there is no escape. For Terry, there is no way forward that does not involve destroying something that he holds dear. Moreover, in the murky and labyrinthine world of the wharves, there is no guarantee that there is anything better to replace the system that the workers have been forced to accept.



#### **Activities**

- When watching a scene from *On the Waterfront*, think about the decisions made by cinematographer Boris Kaufman made about, for example, lighting and framing. Try imagining other ways that the scene might have been filmed.
- Choose any daytime scene in *On the Waterfront* and focus on how it has been put together.
- Contrast a daytime scene with one set at night. Focus on the differences in the way the two scenes have been put together.

### Motifs in On the Waterfront

A motif tells viewers more about the film's themes or characters and in *On the Waterfront*, two motifs make a particularly striking impact: coats and birds.

The coat is a striking visual motif. The warm overcoats and smart hats worn by the gang members set them apart from the longshoremen in their short jackets, pointing both to the size of their incomes and to the fact that they don't have to do physical labour. The long coats of the gang members link them visually to the Crime Commission investigators, the shipowner and Father Barry, who needs to have his coat besmirched with rotten fruit to prove he is a lot more than "a gravy train rider with a turn-around collar" and that he is on the side of the working men.

The connection between the investigators and the mobsters emphasises that money can buy the trappings of middle class respectability whilst an honest day's work cannot. (This is something that the makers of the Australian TV series *Underbelly* delighted in.) However, there is also something a bit sinister about these men from the Crime Commission. For one thing, their method of approaching potential informants in front of fellow workers would seem likely to discourage most people from testifying. The coat motif expands the theme of social difference, emphasising the vulnerability of the workers and their dependence on groups of people who, by and large, consider them expendable.

Joey's jacket is passed on first to Dugan and then to Terry because it is warmer than the ones they are wearing. But it is more than this: when given by Pop Doyle to Kayo Dugan and by Edie to Terry, the jacket is offered as a precious gift, in a world that offers few opportunities for generosity or for making someone warmer and more comfortable. Kayo, in turn, passes his coat on to another



worker, a gesture that indicates both shared hardship but also points to the presence of a genuine camaraderie amongst the working men. There is something very intimate about wearing someone else's clothes and, when Edie tenderly lays Joey's jacket over Terry, it bears the traces of Terry's early gesture of putting her glove on his hand.

Of course, as the jacket is passed from one man to another, the mantle of truth-teller/informer is also passed on with all the physical threat and moral turmoil it entails. The jacket of the golden warriors gives the boys in the neighbourhood a sense of identity and makes them part of a shared history, alongside Terry who started the gang. The fact that Tommy is wearing the jacket when he rings the necks of all of Terry's pigeons underscores how much Terry has lost by testifying, and that he has been cut adrift from one of the few people who thought he was somebody.

Leo Braudy comments that clothes in *On the Waterfront* become a kind of armour, used by people as a way of securing themselves against the unforgiving world they inhabit.

"Clothes are a kind of armour, not just against the cold that suffuses the film, but also against other sorts of vulnerability. Big Mac, the pier boss, zips up his jacket just before giving the signal to drop the crates of Scotch on 'Kayo' Dugan, and Father Barry zips up Terry's jacket as he persuades him to make the walk that ends the film. Although almost everyone in the film talks about "guts" the visual message, like the stiff upper lip of D 'n D, is to maintain a manly surface, keep the leaking wounds invisibly inside". <sup>21</sup>

#### **Activities**

- Watch the 'crucifixion' speech again. In the light of this discussion about the significance of clothes in general and coats in particular, describe the effect of Father Barry's long black coat being pelted with rotten fruit.
- Choose any character it doesn't matter how insignificant and consider what he/she is wearing. What do the character's clothes tell us about his/her role or status in the society depicted in the film?

# **Birds/Pigeons**

When Terry is up on the roof with his pigeons he is most "at home". *On the Waterfront* is full of symbolic families and the one made up of him, the boys from the gang and the pigeons is initially the most functional. Nevertheless, even in these early scenes, the innocence of this rooftop world



has already been compromised by Joey's death. Terry lures Joey to the roof with one of his pigeons, engaging his trust because of their shared passion. Terry stands with Charley and two other gang members when he sees Joey fall to his death. The men describe Joey as a canary and comment "Maybe he could sing but he couldn't fly." This grim observation underlines what we have already seen: the pigeon flying up to the roof and Joey plunging off it. Afterwards, in his revulsion for what he has done, Terry's hand keeps slipping into the place in his jacket, next to his heart, where he had held the pigeon.

The fact that Joey and Terry keep pigeons and then become, in the eyes of the gang, "stool pigeons" fuels the grim scene where Terry goes up onto the roof after testifying to discover that Tommy has killed them all. "A pigeon for a pigeon," he yells before running off, leaving Terry bereft and realising (as represented by the wall of cyclone wire between him and the camera) that he has built a prison for himself.

In American slang, a pigeon is someone who is easily duped, a sucker, while a 'stool pigeon' is someone who informs to the police. (Apparently) the term comes from the use of a pigeon tied to a stool or some kind of fixed object in order to lure a hawk into a waiting net. In both scenes when Edie and Terry are on the roof together, he refers to hawks being a danger to the pigeons.

### **Activity**

• List any other recurring images that might be described as motifs and think about their purpose and effect.

### Soundtrack

After *On the Waterfront* had been shot, producer Sam Spiegel became increasingly nervous that noone would want to come and see such a bleak and serious film. He felt it would have more appeal if he could persuade Leonard Bernstein, who was already a well known composer, to write the musical score for the film.

Bernstein had refused all previous requests, saying he could not see the satisfaction in writing something "whose chief merit ought to be its unobtrusiveness". However, when Bernstein saw the rough cut of the film, he was so impressed, he agreed to compose an original score for the film. To



write the score he used a Moviola – a viewing machine that enabled him to run the film over and over, reel by reel, forwards and backwards. Later he commented:

"I have seen the picture some 50 times, in sections or in toto, and I have never changed in my reaction. Day after day I sat at a Moviola, running the print back and forth, measuring in feet the sequences I had chosen for music, converting feet into seconds by mathematical formula, making homemade cue sheets; and every time I wept at the same speeches, chuckled at the same gestures." 22

Kazan has since complained that Bernstein's music was too intrusive. He has commented that Bernstein's music did not simply enhance or accompany *On the Waterfront*'s narrative, but drew attention to itself: "So you're aware of the music. It put the picture on the level of almost operatic melodrama here and there." A decision was made not to use Bernstein's music for Kayo Dugan's murder. Similarly, the accompaniment written for Terry's furious speech at the end was dropped. The music kicks in when Terry and Johnny Friendly start to fight.

Bernstein never did another film score because he did not like the loss of control that came with the cutting and editing process. However, he wrote the music for *Westside Story* (1961) which became a hugely successful feature film.

One of the memorable aspects of *On the Waterfront* is the ambient sound (the background noise). For example, sound is used to great effect in the scene where Father Barry persuades Terry to tell Edie about his involvement with Joey's murder. The jarring mechanical rhythm of the machinery in the background contributes to our growing awareness that Terry is just one small element of a much larger world over which he has little control. In a very dramatic moment, the horn of a ship drowns out the conversation between Terry and Edie. According to Kazan, he employed this effect because the audience already knew what Terry had to say. Without the distraction of dialogue, the characters' physical response to what is going on highlights the intensity of their emotions. Edie's horror and revulsion is countered by Terry's helplessness and distress. Yet, some critics find this scene fake and gimmicky.

### Activities and questions

• Choose a scene or sequence that you think is particularly important to the unfolding story and themes. Watch it and note if there is any music accompanying the action or dialogue. If there is, what kind of music has been used, and how does it add to or detract from the scene. If there is no music, what can you hear?



- You might like to turn the sound off and watch some of the key scenes. What effect does this have?
- Try listening to some of the film without watching. Does this add to your understanding of the way the film works as a whole? How?



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Young, Jeff and Kazan, Elia, *Kazan: the Master Director discusses his films: Interviews with Elia Kazan*, Newmarket Press, New York, 1999, p. 123. The entire quote is as follows: 'Throughout the history of the American labor movement, there were often vital changes that came as a result of the emergence of a martyr figure. Our lives are full of temporary heroes.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Baer, William (2000) *Elia Kazan: Interviews*, University of Mississippi Press p. 24

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Braudy, Leo (2005) *On the Waterfront*, London, BFI Publishing, pp. 73-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ciment, Michel (1974) *Kazan on Kazan*, Viking, New York, p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Cited in Rothstein, Mervin (2003) 'Elia Kazan, Influential Director is Dead at 94', *New York Times*, 29 September, <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/28/obituaries/28CND-KAZAN.html">http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/28/obituaries/28CND-KAZAN.html</a>, last accessed 17 September, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Rapf, Joanna E. (ed.) (2003) *On the Waterfront*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Braudy, p. 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> In Rothstein.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Lee, Lance (2003) 'On the Waterfront Script Analysis: Conventional and Unconventional', in Rapf, pp. 80-1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Baer. p. 27

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Kazan, Elia (1988) *A Life*, Deutsch, London.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Young and Kazan, p. 158.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Thomson, p. 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Georgakus, Dan (2003) 'Schulberg on the Waterfront', in Rapf, pp. 51-2.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Biskind, Peter (1975) 'The Politics of Power in *On the Waterfront'*, Film Quarterly, 29, Fall, p. 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Braudy, p. 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Braudy, p.74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> http://www.cinematographers.nl/GreatDoPh/kaufman.htm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Braudy, pp. 42-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Goldberg, Albert (1954) 'Bernstein Writes Initial film Score', *Los Angeles Times*, May 9 cited in Burlingame, John (2003) 'Leonard Bernstein and *On the Waterfront*: Tragic Nobility, A Lyrical Song, and Music of Violence', in Rapf, p. 128. <sup>23</sup> Cited in Burlingame, p. 140.