

## **Conscience on the waterfront**

Rachel Kafka, The AGE, May 3, 2013

The cry of longshoreman Terry Malloy, "I'm standing here now", reflects the central concern of Elia Kazan's 1954 film *On the Waterfront*. Kazan's film, heavily influenced by the Italian neo-realist films and their focus on the economically and socially disadvantaged, explores the redemption of a young man and his transformation from a self-confessed "bum" to a symbol of the power an individual can exercise even in the face of seemingly insurmountable corruption.

Terry's journey towards a moral perspective allows him to understand and acknowledge the way the codified silence of "Deaf and Dumb" facilitates the ongoing exploitation of the men who work the docks.

Throughout his metamorphosis, the naive former prizefighter grapples with questions of loyalty and conscience only to discover that ultimately one's greatest loyalty must be to what one knows to be right.

Written in part as a response to those who criticised Kazan for his friendly testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952, Kazan uses the character of Terry Malloy to both rationalise his own choice and glorify the informer.

After unwittingly playing a part in the murder of Joey Doyle, Terry is increasingly confronted by others who require his testimony as well as his own burgeoning conscience. Edie Doyle seeks the truth about her brother's murder while Detective Glover pursues Terry's testimony for use in the investigation into crime and corruption on the New York waterfront. Presenting Terry's testimony in a well-lit and relatively ordered courtroom, in contrast to the dark and shadowy lanes of Johnny Friendly's underground, reinforces the power of Terry's eventual testimony.

However, Terry's testimony is most powerful not because of the effect the Waterfront Crime Commission is hoping it will have on the malfeasance of Johnny Friendly, but because it proves Terry's ability to rise above his fear of community rejection and act in accordance with his previously dormant conscience.

It is local waterfront priest Father Barry and Edie Doyle who assist Terry to discover what lies beyond his initial state of moral ambivalence.

Father Barry's sermon in the hold of the ship provides not only a moment of great drama, but also unintentionally directly addresses Terry by using boxing terminology as Father Barry attempts to persuade the listening men that they possess the "power to knock 'em out for good".

This scene also reinforces the change Father Barry has undergone, thanks to the challenge Edie presented him with at the beginning of the film. The priest begins as an agent of the church, only able to console the long-suffering community with offers of "time and faith". However, over the course of the film we witness his transformation into a social activist, determined to improve the lives of the men in his parish. Directly encountering the harsh life these men lead allows him to understand the limitations of Christianity for a community so focused on daily survival that religious and moral convictions seem to be a luxury.

Although male characters seem to dominate Kazan's film, the position of women in *On the Waterfront* must also be explored. Relegated to the margins of the waterfront community, female characters are few and far between. Edie Doyle provides the film's social and moral conscience, but despite the clear influence she has on Terry's choices, ultimately she is both physically and metaphorically pushed aside as the male hero makes his way back to work with a throng of longshoremen following. Mrs Collins' report to the police officer that Joey Doyle "was the only longshoreman that had the guts to talk to them crime investigators" is shut down by Pop Doyle and ignored by the cop.

Either Kazan is commenting on the bravery of women, or he is highlighting their naivety about the severe repercussions of breaking the "Deaf and Dumb" code, which is so endemic in this world. The extreme fear of the potentially fatal result of breaking the D'n'D code is reflected in Pop Doyle's failure to tell his one surviving child, Edie, the truth about Joey's murder. Pop Doyle acknowledges the very real danger his daughter has placed herself in when she decides to remain and continues to pursue the truth about who killed her brother, and attempts to send her back to a world of safety and security in Tarrytown, but he ultimately allows his fear of speaking the truth to override his fatherly concern.

Boris Kaufman's cinematography is intrinsic to the story told in *On the Waterfront*. The camera captures the grittiness of the Hoboken docks, and the smog and smoke that permeate many scenes reinforce not only Terry's moral ambivalence but also the entrapment experienced by inhabitants of the waterfront. In Kazan's American tale, the New York skyline is not a glittering metropolis across the Hudson River, but a faded and faraway land, completely out of reach for those who live in a world that in so many ways "ain't part of America".

The final sequence of Kazan's film is highly ambiguous on several levels and is thus worthy of discussion. Some view it as uplifting, in line with the classic Hollywood paradigm of a happy ending where good is victorious over evil and a brave individual manages to overcome a corrupt system.

Leonard Bernstein's triumphant musical score reinforces this message.

However, a resistant reading of the final sequence reinforces a rudderless flock of longshoremen who, while no longer following the dictates of the ironically named Johnny Friendly, are still silently and unquestioningly trailing a single man.

The portico descends, trapping the longshoremen inside, while Edie and Father Barry – the symbols of traditional domesticity and religion, stand smiling. There is no promise of any long-term change, and, in fact, the final words of the film are given to Friendly. His disempowerment can be seen as only temporary and as Friendly bellows "I'll be back", we cannot help but remember his past success gaining control of the waterfront, and we have no reason to believe he could not repeat this feat. Further, the stevedore who calls the men back "to work" wears the iconic long coat and hat of Friendly and his goons, perhaps hinting that even if Friendly is gone, another corrupt power is ready and waiting to take advantage of this impoverished community.

This reading of the film's ending is supported by the fact that Mr Upstairs, the true source of Friendly's power, embodied in the large ship that dwarfs the dockside office of Local 374, is still at large, untouched by Terry's testimony.

Johnny Friendly is certainly an agent of evil but he can also be regarded as a victim of the corrupt system that reigns on the waterfront. Ultimately he is abandoned by Mr Upstairs, left to answer accusations about crimes benefiting men of far greater wealth and influence than Friendly. Friendly and the goons who assist him to maintain hegemony over the waterfront are, like the longshoremen, products of their environment.

And while the mob may don long overcoats and hats indicating that their corruption provides them with the social and economic status required for protection from this harsh world, they, too, are simply doing their best to survive in an environment where "it's every man for himself".

In his film Kazan presents us with a world where only those willing to exploit others have a chance at anything beyond daily survival. All those who attempt to reach what is promised by the American Dream through honest hard work, end up like longshoreman KO Dugan, "poorer now than when I started".

Almost 60 years after it was filmed, *On the Waterfront* maintains its power because at base it is the story of one individual able to triumph over his own weakness, recognising that despite his past sins, he can still do good in the world. However, as Terry stumbles down the pier in the film's closing scene, finally allowing himself to wear Joey's windcheater, the camera tellingly provides us with his point of view – a dizzying and unclear picture of what lies before him and the men who now follow him.

**Being Somebody**  
**Maria Joseph**  
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FOR Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando), Edie Doyle (Eva Marie Saint) and Father Barry (Karl Malden), the events that take place surrounding Joey Doyle's murder help each to grow as individuals. Director Elia Kazan portrays a clash between the world of Edie and Barry's Christian truth on the one side, and Terry's pragmatic but violent reality on the other.

Father Barry starts off believing his church is a sanctuary. He suggests the small group of disgruntled longshoremen meet there as they will be safe.

This turns out to be untrue, however, as the meeting is infiltrated by (the ironically named) Friendly's stooges and then rocks are thrown through the windows and the participants chased. K. O. Dugan is beaten and later killed for testifying at the crime commission.

The church building provides little sanctuary for its members. It is Edie, over the body of her brother, who implies Father Barry's parish should be on the streets: "Did you ever hear of a saint hiding in a church?" So Father Barry takes his mission to the wharf itself and after the church fiasco we see him largely in exterior shots.

In his climactic speech over the body of Dugan in the ship's hold, Barry literally and metaphorically stands up and does not stop because of the things thrown at him. Kazan has him rise, Christ-like, on the ship's hoist buoyed by the truth of his words.

Barry is altogether tougher; we see him smoking and drinking like one of the boys. And he punches Terry, knocking him down, to stop Terry shooting Friendly over Charley's death. On the whole, Barry's strength comes from his words. He encourages the victims of the crooked union to speak and to speak out against it. Yet in the punching of Terry, we also see that he believes some violence may be necessary to protect someone from a greater evil.

In coming home for the Thanksgiving holiday from St Anne's to Hoboken, Edie has very much entered a man's world of murder, drinking and violence. She stays with her father; her mother has passed away.

The first time we see her she is confronting the death of her brother Joey. Her feisty character and her insistent desire to know the truth are evident as she screams over his body, "Who killed my brother?" Her quest throughout the narrative is to find the answer.

At one point her father buys a bus ticket for her back to the convent — "get back to the sisters where you belong" — but Edie refuses to leave until she finds the truth. She and Father Barry come up against the "D & D" (deaf and dumb) policy of the union members and so her frustration grows.

Edie is portrayed as angelic, underscored by Kazan through the stereotypical fairness of her hair and complexion. Her clothes are plain and nun-like and she has grown up being educated by the sisters, who teach her to tell only the truth. In many of the shots of Edie, Kazan includes a crucifix or the shape of one in the background.

Like Father Barry, she has goodness and faith on her side in her quest for truth. Indeed, Edie and Father Barry are regularly together in shots and scenes where it is somewhat odd for Edie to appear, such as in the ship's hold, indicating the similarity of their roles in supporting Terry and in bringing Joey's murderers to justice.

Matters are complicated for Edie when she falls for Terry, who is seemingly on the inside of Friendly's gang. He protects her as they run from the church skirmish and they end up in a playground near the waterfront. They used to go to primary school together and Terry teases her about how she used to

look. He playfully steals her glove and sits on a swing. Kazan uses the playground to symbolise the innocent early stages of their love and of how much growing both still have yet to do.

Next, Terry takes her to the saloon, giving Edie a taste of liquor and the place's rough-house atmosphere. On the one hand he is something of a bodyguard protecting her innocence; on the other he relishes exposing her to his tough world. He explains his real-world philosophy in a series of clichés: "Do it to him before he does it to you ... every man for himself."

When he finally confesses he was the one used to lure Joey to the rooftop, Edie runs away from her love for him until he breaks down her door to reclaim it. For Edie, Terry has been the introduction to a world of masculine passion taking her away from the cloistered walls of the convent. Yet the violent reality of his world is still something she spurns and finds dangerous.

Like the audience, Edie only really has respect for Terry when he finally "stands up" for himself in the name of what is right. He has become his own man, an individual, outside of the clichéd role Friendly's gang have for him.

For Terry, Edie in all her "whiteness" (think of her costumes) and goodness embodies his conscience, which is being brought to the foreground of his character and which he must accept and love. Edie, who wants to be a teacher, teaches him to do what is right, as does Father Barry. Both of these supporting characters help Terry find a voice for his inarticulate conscience.

That Terry already has a conscience before Edie and Barry arrive on the scene is clear. Terry protests to Friendly's crew, "I thought they was just going to lean on him." He seems genuinely ignorant and surprised by Friendly's methods in pushing Joey off the rooftop.

His relative youth and ignorance are highlighted by Kazan in the following scene at Friendly's bar where Terry is teased and considered a punch-drunk dolt by the older men. He is "owned" by Friendly and cannot protest against the jobs given to him. This ownership is further highlighted when it is revealed that Terry took a fall in a prize fight so that Friendly could win big betting against him. Charley, Terry's brother, is part of the group that owns Terry.

He was part of the fight scam and later attempts to persuade Terry to drop Edie and to take up a lucrative insider's union job. In this close scene set in the back of a car, Kazan delicately shows the affection the two brothers have for each other. Like two prize fighters, each is backed into a corner with no way out. But this time it is Charley who takes the fall for Terry.

Charley's death finally enables Terry to take action against Friendly's mafia, and Barry and Edie direct this action into words (testifying at the commission) rather than violence.

The support and love from Father Barry and Edie give Terry the courage to stand up against these men and "be somebody". But Terry knows the violence of the world and cannot run away to "start a farm somewhere". He knows, as Father Barry too learnt, that at some point violence must be stopped by violence.

In the final scene, after the unjust fight in which Friendly's group set upon him, he literally has to struggle to stand. It is significant, however, that he must "walk alone" — without help from either Barry or Edie or anyone else — to be his own man. This is his most heroic act: being the leader and not the follower.

Kazan's film ends, not with words or dialogue, but with one man physically struggling against the odds to claim the truth. (*Dr Maria Joseph is a freelance writer and lecturer in literature.*)