

ENGLISH – ON THE WATERFRONT

“On the Waterfront explores the relationship between character and environment.” Discuss.

Elia Kazan’s ‘On the Waterfront’ investigates the complex and influential relationship between characters and environment. Set in the 1950’s on the crime-riddled waterfronts of Hoboken, New Jersey, the film depicts the unfaltering struggle for justice in the midst of corruption. The notion of an environment’s everlasting effect on a person’s character is explored through Terry and the many of the longshoremen, and additionally through people like Edie and Father Barry. Johnny Friendly too exemplifies the way in which a person can be defined by their surroundings, and in turn contributes to the complex web of cause and effect, and the way Kazan explores this.

The longshoremen are prime victims of environmental influence. They exist in a thriving business of deceit, surrounded by threats and illustrations of potential consequences for defiance, like the fate of Joey Doyle – “the only longshoreman who had the guts to talk to the Crime Commission.” The “D&D – deaf and dumb” mentality is ingrained in their minds, and “no matter how much [they] hate the torpedoes, [they] don’t rat.” The sudden dramatic, off-beat change in music during the church meeting – discussing Friendly’s overthrow – when Friendly’s men arrive, exhibits the degree to which “D&D” is embedded in their society – any hint at its dismissal generates uproar. Further into the film, Terry asks the children in his Golden Warriors club for advice concerning whether or not he should talk to the Crime Commission. Their rejection of potential justice based upon their aversion to “ratting” demonstrates what they have been exposed to from an early age, a by-product of their corrupt environment. Towards the end, after Terry has testified against Johnny Friendly, all the longshoremen ignore him, the piercing sounds of the waterfront ever-remaining – symbolising Friendly’s lasting omnipresence. Big Mac even further humiliates him by asking the one-armed rummy to work where the able Terry could. This exclusion proves the longshoremen’s innate aversion to fighting for justice, visually represented by Terry’s wearing of Joey’s jacket, showing his new and different identity of one in favour of righteousness. The vulnerable longshoremen are brainwashed this way because of what they are surrounded with – they know that if they “don’t say anything, [they’ll] live longer,” causing them to submit to Friendly’s authority.

Terry is influenced by his changing environment – as it changes, so does he. He has grown up under Johnny Friendly’s wing, touched by how he “used to take him to ball games when [he] was a kid.” Friendly strengthens their affection through endearment like “slugger,” and special treatment such as the privilege of the cushy job in the loft. He was initially surrounded by nuns who “thought they were going to beat an education into [him],” a factor that arguably stimulates his bitter “philosophy on life: do it to him before he does it to you.” His gratitude for Friendly having “bought a piece of [him]” enfolds him into Friendly’s widespread network, making him privy to the mob’s violent dealings. His loyalty encourages his tolerance of corruption, remaining “D & D” when he has the leverage to eliminate the unjust activity on the waterfront. His brother’s urging to “get some ambition” and to not “think about it, just do it” when “Johnny asks a favour” also contributes to his initial ignorance of his conscience, which urges him to confess. However, as he becomes increasingly acquainted with the determined Father Barry, who, in his own change of environment has progressed from “hiding in a church” to standing up “down the line,” Terry becomes more attracted to redemption. This is evident when he punches Tulio, supposedly one of his own, to defend Father Barry’s crucifixion speech against the mob. The camera tilts upwards to Father Barry at this stage, showing that he has more power over Terry, rather than the typical eye-level shot painting him as helpless as the longshoremen. The goodness of Edie, “the nicest thing that’s ever happened to [him],” in believing that “everybody [should] care about everybody else” leaves a lasting impression on Terry, inspiring him to “help [her] if [he] can for god sakes” and publicly blame Friendly for Joey’s death. Even the mob can see how his change in surroundings has affected him, believing that she’s “got [her] hooks in the kid so deep he doesn’t know which way is up anymore.” Edie’s environment changes from the conservative sisters of St. Anne’s to the “sights unfit for a young girl” on the waterfront, and as a result, changes her. She begins determined to “know who killed [her] brother, insisting to her father that she can’t go back and “focus on things in books.” Her

face is shrouded with light in this instance, representing the goodness and hunger for justice she senses. This contrasts to Pop Doyle's face hidden in the shadows, suggesting he is content to accept Friendly's wrath. As she becomes more exposed to the horrors of the waterfront, she becomes more hesitant, begging Terry to "please [not] do anything." This is seen in the close ups of her face, no longer exhibiting blind determination and fury, but fear and worry. Terry's environment undoubtedly shaped him into the "bum" he was, loyal to Friendly, and as it changed, like Father Barry and Edie he too followed suit.

The character of Johnny Friendly, the malicious source of authority on the waterfront, also underwent a change in character in reaction to his changing environment. He is seen as a "hawk," hanging "around on top of the big hotels. [He] spots a pigeon, then [he's] right down on top of it," – the pigeons representing the vulnerable longshoremen. This ruthlessness arguably stems from his tortured childhood, in which he and nine siblings were "raised on a watchman's pension." He is attracted to his expanding wealth and greed at whatever cost. His merciless drive is seen in the hooks over the longshoremen's shoulders, emblemising his morbid and tireless control over them. The security that new surroundings of wealth and crime bestow upon him is seen through his warm, thick jacket that he never takes off, presenting a contrast to the tattered jackets worn by the longshoremen. He is so dedicated to his cause because he is surrounded by those in a similar vulnerable position to what he was in during his past – "[he] didn't work [his] way up from that for nothing." The satisfaction of his current legacy drives him to endless bounds, exploiting, threatening and murdering to keep his power, his omnipresence being symbolised by the suffocating fog that doesn't lift until Terry confesses. Though Johnny Friendly is one of the key perpetrators of the suffering in Hoboken, he is a product of his environment just as the others are.

'On the Waterfront' undoubtedly, thoroughly surveys the dominance of a character's surroundings over their persona. The longshoremen have been conditioned by fear and relentless authority that they are surrounded with. Additionally, as Terry's environment improves, blessed with moral influences such as Father Barry and Edie, so do his ethics. Conversely, Edie shrinks away from her idealistic nature as her situation becomes dire, as the extent of Friendly's power reaching from "Boston to New Orleans" becomes clearer in her mind. Her comment to Father Barry about saints not "hiding in a church" stimulates his epiphany, and as a result he drives himself to ultimately help Terry make the walk into the workplace to "win the war" against Friendly. Even with all his power, Friendly was created from his dismal environment, revealing motivation for such callous behaviour. Overall, Kazan presents a deep exploration of such a relationship through many differing characters, suggesting a firm belief in the influence of environment on one's nature.