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***ON THE WATERFRONT – SPARK NOTES***

*On the Waterfront* opens by introducing the small group of corrupt racketeers that run the docks of Hoboken, New Jersey, across the river from Manhattan. Terry Malloy, an inarticulate former prizefighter in his late twenties, serves as a petty errand boy for the union head, Johnny Friendly. Friendly’s gang uses Malloy as a decoy to draw fellow longshoreman Joey Doyle out of his apartment and onto the roof. Doyle is planning to break the bullied workers’policy of remaining “deaf and dumb” by testifying in front of the Waterfront Crime Commission the next day about the corrupt methods union bosses employ to extort money and labor from the working-class longshoremen. The gangsters push Doyle off the roof to his death, implicating Malloy in the murder as an accomplice. A shocked Malloy had fooled himself into believing Doyle would only be roughed up a little.



The neighborhood gathers over Doyle’s body. Pops Doyle, a longshoreman for four decades, tells everyone he had advised his son to be quiet, since his testimony would risk the jobs and lives of all the stevedores. Joey Doyle’s sister Edie, a buttoned-up Catholic teacher trainee who is home visiting from her school, screams passionately for justice over her brother’s corpse. Finally, the local priest Father Barry kneels over Doyle, praying. Besides Edie, the entire waterfront knows what really happened, but no one will speak. At Johnny Friendly’s smoky barroom hangout, Charlie “the Gent” Malloy, Terry’s brother, who serves as Friendly’s right-hand man, is introduced. Terry’s hot temper in this scene indicates that his conscience is wrought by his role in Joey’s death.

After lolling around his rooftop pigeon coop the next morning with a devoted neighborhood boy, Malloy walks to the docks for the morning shape-up. Two Waterfront Crime Commission officers seek out Malloy, who is rumored to be the last man to see Joey alive. Malloy stays mum. Edie and Father Barry appear to witness the distribution of jobs for the day—any man who receives a work tab will have a job. There are many more men than there are work tabs, however, and the work-thirsty crowd surrounds the foreman, Big Mac. Big Mac throws the work tabs across the pier, causing a mad free-for-all. Malloy meets Edie when he grabs a tab that she’s desperately trying to secure for her father and, upon learning who she is, gives her the tab.

Charlie asks Terry to attend a secret meeting in Father Barry’s church arranged by the men who didn’t get work that day. Not wanting to be a *stoolie* (short for *stool pigeon*), or informer, Terry offers weak protests. Johnny Friendly has set Terry up with a cushy job, however, so he doesn’t really have a choice. No one speaks at the meeting when Father Barry asks about Joey’s death. Thugs ambush the proceedings and mercilessly beat all who can’t escape. Grabbing Edie’s hands, Terry helps her escape. As he walks her home through a park, they awkwardly get to know each other. Edie accidentally drops her glove and Terry picks it up, suggestively sliding his hand into it. At one point, a homeless man interrupts and mentions that Terry saw Joey the night he was killed.

Terry leaves Edie sweetly and awkwardly. Pops Doyle, who witnesses the entire episode from his window and wants no daughter of his consorting with the brother of the vicious Charlie Malloy, packs Edie’s bags and prepares to send her back to school. Edie defends the confused Terry and demands to stay in order to find Joey’s murderer.

That evening, Edie and Terry meet accidentally on the tenement rooftop, where Terry has been caring for both his and Joey’s pigeons. Curious about his sensitive side, Edie agrees to go for a drink with Terry at a local saloon, though she’s never had a beer. In this raucous bar, the two have a tender, pained conversation. Edie pleads with Terry for help and he wants desperately for her to like him, but he can’t help her. After a disagreement, Edie tries to leave, but a boisterous wedding celebration sweeps her up. Edie and Terry end up dancing at the party until late. Two events crush their blissful escape. First, Johnny Friendly sends a goon to find Terry and tell him to report to the boss immediately. Moments later, the Waterfront Crime Commission serves Terry with a subpoena to appear at the State House in a few days to answer questions about the death of Joey Doyle. Angry with Terry for hiding facts about his and his brother’s involvement in Joey’s death, Edie runs away. Terry walks home alone, but Charlie and Friendly find him. They berate him for hanging around with Joey’s sister and not reporting on the meeting.

The next day at the docks, the union kills “Kayo” Dugan, a stevedore who had secretly testified at great length about Friendly’s operation, by “accidentally” dropping a crate of Irish whiskey over him. Beside Dugan’s body, Father Barry pledges his support to the longshoremen and demonstrates his commitment by standing firm as men throw rotten fruit and beer cans at him from above. He preaches at length from the hold that Dugan’s death was a crucifixion. Torn, Terry retreats to the rooftops and the pigeons that night. Edie finds him there, and they finally kiss passionately. The next day Terry confesses to Father Barry about his involvement in Joey’s death. Father Barry convinces the reluctant Terry to tell Edie. He eventually does tell her, in a momentous scene where the whistle of a steamship drowns out their conversation. Distraught, she runs away.

Back on the rooftop, a commission officer talks with Terry about his old prizefights, while at the longshoreman’s shack Johnny Friendly puts pressure on Charlie to make sure his brother doesn’t squeal. When Charlie and Terry ride in a cab together, their differing interests explode. Terry wants help from his brother, but Charlie wants to make sure Terry won’t talk. In the passion of conflicting emotions, Charlie pulls a gun on his brother, who piteously and gently turns it away. Charlie begins to reminisce about Terry’s boxing days, causing Terry to bring up the truth that Charlie forced him to throw a big fight, on Johnny Friendly’s orders. He laments that he could have made something of his life, had Charlie not betrayed him. After the conversation, Terry flees to Edie’s, and Charlie is taken to Johnny Friendly’s. Terry breaks down Edie’s door and forcibly kisses her. Through the window Terry is called down to the street, just as he had called to Joey at the beginning of the film. He and Edie run from a speeding car, only to discover Charlie hung by a hook in the gently falling rain, murdered for his failure to convince Terry to remain silent. Vowing to avenge his death, Terry runs to Johnny Friendly’s bar, gun in hand. Father Barry finds him there, drunk and confused. Terry curses at Father Barry, and Father Barry punches him. He tells Terry not to play at Friendly’s level, since he’ll achieve only mob justice and have no legal protection. He tells Terry the only right thing to do is to testify against the corrupt union leaders, and Terry finally agrees.

The next day Terry testifies to the commission in court. On the way home, he’s protected by cops and scorned by his friends. Tommy, the neighborhood kid, has killed all his pigeons. Knowing what he has to do to claim his identity and independence, he grabs Joey Doyle’s jacket from Edie’s apartment and walks down to the docks for the morning shape-up. With all the longshoremen looking on, Terry calls Johnny Friendly out of his tiny shack and delivers an emotional speech announcing his new goal: to break away from mob rule toward independent thought. A fight ensues between Terry and Friendly. When the fight moves behind the shack, out of sight of the longshoremen, a pack of Friendly’s goons move in and pummel Terry mercilessly. Other goons restrain the longshoremen, who are not really making an effort to help anyway. Instead, they place all their hopes on Terry. Finally, Edie and Father Barry burst through and find Terry almost comatose, the water lapping at his body. Father Barry encourages Terry to stand in order to be a model of strength for the longshoremen. Terry rises without assistance, but he wobbles violently and squints through swollen eyes. He shuffles up the ramp and staggers toward the work hangar to show he’s ready for that day’s honest labor. Finally, he manages to reach the hangar. All the longshoremen, truly inspired, follow their new leader. Johnny Friendly wails helplessly, alone on the docks. The longshoremen disappear into the hangar, and the garage door closes.

**Character List**

**Terry Malloy** -

Played by Marlon Brando

The protagonist of the film. A former prizefighter, Terry is physically strong but shuffles through most of the film with his hands in his pockets and his collar turned up. Inside, he’s tender and conflicted, as is evident from his anxious physical behaviors and ineloquent speech. He communicates through long silences and seething outbursts.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Terry Malloy.](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/canalysis.html#Terry-Malloy)

**Edie Doyle** -

Played by Eva Marie Saint

The Catholic teacher-in-training who falls for Terry Malloy. Not familiar with the lifestyle on the waterfront, she exhibits bravery by choosing to stick around through a dangerous time. An almost angelic gentle soul who often rescues stray animals, she sees the good in Terry that nobody else sees. She walks cautiously and looks around curiously. In many ways, her utter innocence represents the complete opposite of Terry’s street smarts.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Edie Doyle.](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/canalysis.html#Edie-Doyle)

**Father Barry** -

Played by Karl Malden

The Catholic priest whose parish consists of the longshoremen. Like Edie, Father Barry has little understanding of what happens daily on the docks. But soon he puts on his heavy overcoat, hat, and white collar, and finds the strength of his own convictions in applied practice at the docks, rather than in the safety of the church.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Father Barry.](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/canalysis.html#Father-Barry)

**Johnny Friendly** -

Played by Lee J. Cobb

The vocal and corrupt leader of the Longshoreman’s Union. A tough criminal who had to claw his way to the top, Friendly cannot be described as purely evil. He demonstrates affection for Terry and Charlie, but he operates by a different set of rules. He’s “friendly” to the men as long as they’re on his side. If they’re not, they’re in big trouble. He almost always has a cigar.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Johnny Friendly.](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/canalysis.html#Johnny-Friendly)

**Charlie “the Gent” Malloy** -

Played by Rod Steiger

Johnny Friendly’s educated right-hand man and Terry’s brother. Charlie walks around in an expensive camel-hair coat that sparks derision from the longshoremen. His tense eyes betray tremendous anxiety beneath his calm, round face. Though he’s a willing and calculating criminal, he’s never able to hide his deep love for his brother.

**Timothy J. “Kayo” Dugan** -

Played by Pat Henning

A short, strong longshoreman who testifies to the Waterfront Crime Commission and is murdered on the job for it. Dugan’s sarcasm and ability to elucidate the longshoremen’s frustration single him out quickly as a representative for the longshoremen.

**Pop Doyle** -

Played by John Hamilton

The elderly stevedore father of the murdered Joey Doyle. After four decades on the docks, his face is grizzled and has patches of a white beard. He maintains a fierce, lock-jawed façade. His only concern for the duration of the film is the well-being of his daughter, Edie.

**Big Mac** -

Played by James Westerfield

The pier boss who dispatches the work tabs each morning. One of the more vocal members of Johnny Friendly’s gang, Big Mac maintains a stoic facade while insulting Terry and Charlie and remains steadfastly loyal to Johnny Friendly.

**Glover** -

Played by Leif Erickson

A Waterfront Crime Commission officer. Glover fulfills his official duties in a by-the-books, workmanlike fashion, but his tall presence also radiates sensitivity. His gentle questioning of Terry on the rooftops proves his understanding of Terry’s dilemma.

**Luke** -

Played by Don Blackman

An African-American longshoreman. His quiet, reflective demeanor radiates in his silent face. Good friends with Dugan, Luke respectfully returns Joey’s jacket to Edie after Dugan’s death.

**Tommy** -

Played by Arthur Keegan

The kid who idolizes Terry and hangs out in the pigeon coops. His attachment to Terry on the rooftops reflects Terry’s near-childlike innocence when daydreaming or tending the pigeons.

**Tullio** -

Played by former boxer Tami Mauriello

One of Johnny Friendly’s goons. Tullio’s round, mask-like face is cold and inexpressive.

**Truck** -

Played by former boxer Tony Galento

One of Johnny Friendly’s goons. Truck harasses Father Barry during his speech over Dugan’s body by throwing bananas at him . . . until Terry flattens him with an uppercut and a hook.

**Barney** -

Played by former boxer Abe Simon

One of Johnny Friendly’s goons. An enormous physical presence with an iron jaw and deep voice, Barney almost resembles a giant.

**Mutt** -

Played by John Heldabrand

A local homeless man. Unshaven, with a tan overcoat, Mutt appears sympathetic, intelligent, and down on his luck. Well-known around the waterfront, he seems to know exactly what goes on despite his desperate straits.

**Johnny’s Banker** -

Played by Barry Macollum

Nicknamed “J.P. Morgan.”A tight-faced stereotype, Johnny’s Banker dresses finely in a wardrobe that includes sharp hats. Physically, he resembles a weasel in his thin wiliness.

**Gilette** -

Played by Marty Balsam

Glover’s assistant from the Waterfront Crime Commission. Shorter and less vocal than Glover, Gilette exists primarily as a sarcastic sidekick to his boss.

**Joey Doyle** -

Played by Elia Kazan

A young longshoreman murdered for his testimony to the Waterfront Crime Commission. Joey’s shadowed head from his apartment window is seen only in long shot, then his body falls from the roof to the ground. His death becomes the ghostly presence that overrides the film, as well as the spark that kick-starts all subsequent events.

**Mr. Upstairs** -

Played by an uncredited actor

The corrupt leader who directs Johnny Friendly from afar. Mr. Upstairs’s face is never shown, and we see only the plush estate (with television set and butler) where he lives.

**Jimmy Collins** -

Played by Thomas Handley

Joey Doyle’s best friend in the neighborhood. Jimmy’s refusal to speak out even after his best friend’s death illustrates the depth of the longshoremen’s silence.

### Analysis of Major Characters

#### Terry Malloy

The brooding, inarticulate protagonist of *On the Waterfront* nurses a seething bundle of contradictory emotions for most of the film. Terry doesn’t particularly care about work and instead devotes his dreams, energy, and care to his racing pigeons. After being pushed around for too long, however, he realizes that his actions have definite, provable results. Marlon Brando’s portrayal of Terry is key to our understanding his character. Brando shuffles around and affects such mannerisms as looking away from the person with whom he’s speaking, putting his hand nervously behind his head, or stuffing his hands in his pockets. Often, his focus seems misplaced, leaving us to wonder what’s going on deep inside his mind. For example, he plays with his jacket’s zipper while he learns what happened to Joey Doyle, and he fiddles with a piece of dust after Charlie pulls a gun in the cab. Malloy has a lot going on in the parts of his mind that we are never privy to.

As the film progresses, Brando’s physicality shifts, which indicates a shift in Malloy’s priorities and objectives. In Malloy’s final stand on the docks, when he wears Joey Doyle’s jacket, he stands more confidently, with few nervous gestures. He looks around him calmly, not fearfully as he would have earlier. He talks instead of whines. His gum-chewing is cockier. His burgeoning independence, rooted in a complex decision, infiltrates his whole being. Terry’s transformation is not wholly self-induced, but rather brought on by a string of revelations and events, including his misunderstood role in Joey Doyle’s death, his growing awareness of Edie’s love and his love for her, Father Barry’s pressing care, and the murders of Dugan and Charlie. There are so many factors working on Terry’s character, in fact, that we’re left wondering how much of a “choice” Terry Malloy really has after all.

#### Edie Doyle

Edie’s nearly angelic soul helps Terry to reclaim his conscience. Her restraint, modesty, and acceptance open up a new place in Terry’s rough-and-tumble heart. Sexuality is crucial in her involvement with Malloy, and their attraction grows, in part, because they are physical opposites: Malloy is a brawny former boxer and she’s a polite church girl.

Edie’s loyalty to her brother is the driving motivation for all her actions. Were it not for her steadfastness, Pops Doyle would have succeeded in sending her home, and the thugs of the gang would have succeeded in intimidating her. To Malloy, she represents a way out. Not happy with the few paths open to him on the waterfront, he could start a new life, with Edie, somewhere else. Malloy tests her genuine naïveté and faith in the good will of others when he tells her of his involvement in Joey’s death. But at the end of the film she has reclaimed her faith in humanity, and she remains almost purely good to the end.

#### Father Barry

Though his behavior changes throughout the film, Father Barry remains steadfast to one overriding mission: administering the word of God by advocating peaceful resistance. Early on, the priest appears well intentioned but of no practical use, as when he tells Edie she can find him in the church if she needs him. After visiting the docks and speaking with the workers who don’t get jobs that day, he begins a slow process of toughening. In many ways, his development parallels Terry’s—he becomes active rather than passive and begins to acknowledge his own potential effectiveness. Father Barry’s increased cigarette smoking represents his thickening skin. He affirms his faith in his mission to guide the longshoreman with a peaceful hand when he delivers his famous “Sermon on the Docks”over Dugan’s body, withstanding banana and beer can attacks to deliver his message and demonstrate the good of his word. Despite the presence and importance of Father Barry, religion does not play an overt role in the film’s crucial events.

#### Johnny Friendly

Once Johnny Friendly has power, he has to maintain it at all costs, and he acts out whenever someone or something challenges that power. His position as the leader of the Longshoreman Local Union requires daily muscle-flexing. In a passionate speech he gives at the bar the first time we meet him, Friendly describes his past life. Clawing for scraps and fighting to get by on the streets since his youth, an organization like the union became his only option for self-preservation. Money and power are his motivations now. When a man is on his side, as Terry is in the beginning of the film, Johnny Friendly is all smiles, quick to give out hugs, pats on the back, and extra $50 bills. When a man’s goals diverge from his, however, that man instantly becomes an enemy. Since Johnny Friendly abides by the same code throughout the film, his character traits change very little, but his effect on other characters—and on the viewers—changes dramatically. Initially, Friendly comes across as powerful, and his booming speeches command respect. His disseminations of beatings become cautionary tales. However, after Terry Malloy speaks out to the Waterfront Crime Commission and effectively strips Friendly of all his power, Friendly becomes pitiable. He is nothing more than a puppet with a few of his strings cut. He flails comically, he roars ineffectively, and none of his orders stick.

#### Charlie Malloy

Charlie Malloy negotiates a complex gauntlet of emotions and becomes a tragic figure at the end for unsuccessfully trying to bridge the gulf between two enemies. He’s as loyal as a blood brother to Johnny Friendly. Friendly has promoted him to second-in-command in the organization and has made it possible for him to provide for himself handsomely. Additionally, Friendly has been a sort of father figure for both Malloys since their father was murdered and Friendly took them under his strong and binding wing. However, Charlie’s love for Terry, Friendly’s enemy, is palpable in their every interaction. Whether he’s kidding with Terry about his cushy position on the docks or berating him for his relationship with Edie, Charlie exhibits concern for Terry’s well-being. However, he doesn’t consider Terry’s personal wishes, which proves to be a fatal mistake. Actor Rod Steiger portrays Charlie’s growing anxiety with knowing eyes and hesitant flappings of a glove in the taxicab. As the film progresses, Charlie realizes that his two sides cannot reconcile, and he becomes increasingly desperate to figure out how to maintain his loyalties to opposing parties.

### Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

#### Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

##### Informing as the Correct Moral Choice

Terry Malloy obeys moral authority by choosing to inform on the corrupt union officials—that is, in the film he clearly makes the morally correct decision. Those on his side include a Catholic priest and a kind-hearted teacher trainee, and these endorsements increase the audience’s sympathy for one side over the other. Vicious doubt and derision about his potential choice affect Terry and all his friendships throughout the film, since the men are understandably concerned about their own jobs and their own lives. The closing scene, however, changes these feelings profoundly. The entire work crew follows the bleeding Terry back to work, leaving Johnny Friendly alone, indicating that they’ve chosen a new leader to follow. Their group action confirms that, deep down, they all wanted Terry to do what he did. All of the previous discord, then, merely generates suspense until this mass action plays out.



The choice Terry makes to inform on the union officials echoes the choice Budd Schulberg and Elia Kazan made to inform before HUAC on former communists, but Terry achieves results that are far less morally ambiguous than the results Kazan and Schulberg achieved. Kazan and Schulberg effectively blacklisted for decades many of their creative, intelligent, and politically active peers. The only loser from Terry’s decision is Johnny Friendly, a merciless bully who clearly deserves what he gets. Kazan’s testimony allowed him to pursue a directing career undisturbed. However, many of his subsequent films deal with themes similar to those in *On the Waterfront*, whichsuggests that his HUAC decision haunted him, even in the creative realm, for at least a decade. The recurring themes also suggest that Kazan felt a need to continually assert the right of the individual’s conscience over that of a mob or governmental authority. At the end of *On the Waterfront*, Terry is surrounded with people who admire and respect him. His informing has elevated him in the longshoremen’s eyes, and he has no reason to doubt his decision. Kazan, though he built a successful career, was never fully embraced by Hollywood, and his own decision to inform stranded him in morally ambiguous territory.

##### The Transforming Power of Faith

Edie and Father Barry, the two characters who most help Terry figure things out, have faith in something intangible. Edie maintains faith in her belief that people care about the well-being of others and want to do the right thing. Father Barry maintains faith that acting as a representative of God can help others do the right thing. They both base their actions on these beliefs, and the film validates the value of living by certain principles. Essentially, Terry redeems himself by justifying their faith. The other characters do not have faith like Edie and Father Barry do, resulting in a distinct dichotomy. On one side are Father Barry and Edie, who have faith in concepts that are completely invisible. On the other side are the corrupt union officers, who have faith in money and power, acquisitions that are measurable. Though this delineation of good versus evil threatens to be overly transparent, the ways that faith changes Terry and forces Charlie to face his own moral wavering bring new depth and texture to the idea of what it means to be faithful and faith*less*.

##### Power Corrupts

Though the film sympathizes with Johnny Friendly and his rough upbringing, it shows that his taste for power has left him morally bankrupt. This idea that power corrupts does not apply only to Johnny Friendly, however. Mr. Upstairs, for example, turns on Johnny Friendly in an instant. In the game of power, the film says, there are no true friends, just the acquisition of more power and the defense of that power. Johnny Friendly cannot make even one decision that’s not related to maintaining his power or acquiring more. Even when he stuffs $50 into Terry’s shirt in a seemingly caring gesture, he is really buying Terry by obligating him to repay the favor with loyalty.

#### Motifs

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

##### The Rooftop as Retreat from the World

Whenever Terry Malloy feels pressure from the outside world, he retreats to the rooftop of the tenement. The rooftop is so far away from the docks that he can pretend it’s another world. On the rooftop, Terry can be a dreamer. He’s closer to the clouds, and he has a view of the city—and seeing the city from afar places him somehow outside it and above it. Terry’s goal is, in a sense, to stay up on the roof—that is, to be at all times the person he is when he’s there. Joey Doyle spent time on the roof, too, raising pigeons, and he made a similar decision to testify to the commission. The rooftop serves as a place where characters can go to scrutinize their own morals and choices without the pressures of the world below.

##### Crucifixion Dialogue

Father Barry often compares the deaths of innocent longshoremen and crucifixions, thus making their martyrdom explicit. Father Barry orders the longshoremen (as well as the viewer) to account for actions and non-actions, such as silence, that he considers sins. Joey Doyle and Dugan both died for the sins of the longshoremen, and religious imagery accompanies these deaths. Edie cradles Joey’s corpse like Mary cradled Jesus’ body, Father Barry rises out of the cargo hold with Dugan’s body as if ascending to heaven, and Charlie’s corpse hangs by a hook, all of which are visual references to Christ’s body on the cross.

##### “D & D”: Deaf and Dumb

The longshoremen try to portray their silence as part of a code, but the film suggests that it’s merely mob-approved cowardice.“D & D” runs throughout the dialogue, and the phrase is so familiar that men on all sides use it. Dugan the longshoreman and Johnny Friendly the union chief each refer to the phrase naturally. The words in the phrase suggest a kind of slavery. Those who are deaf and dumb have no articulate voice, and they are allowed to channel everything they see and feel only into work. Those who are deaf and dumb become work machines without identities. Part of Terry’s transformation in the film involves shaking up the accepted pattern of abiding by the code and thinking for himself, thereby forging an identity. He thinks, therefore he is.

#### Symbols

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

##### Hudson River

The Hudson River separates Hoboken, New Jersey, from New York City. Manhattan may as well be a thousand miles away, since the Manhattan life the longshoremen imagine is so different from daily life on the waterfront. The river is a border, an edge that the longshoremen will never be able to cross. The Hudson brings in the ships, and the edge of the Hudson is where the Longshoreman’s Local Union runs its corrupt operations. Others are free to come and go, but the Hudson reigns in the stevedores. Across the Hudson, the Empire State Building looms like the Emerald City from the *Wizard of Oz*, distant and strange. It represents dreams and a different life, yet it’s always glimpsed through a fog. Its sleek jutting frame contrasts dramatically with the ramshackle rooftops of Hoboken, with their discolored patches and mismatched roof levels.

##### Pigeons

The pigeons are cooped up in a cage. They’re fragile. Their natural impulse is to fly, but they’ve been trained not to. They represent a different, more elemental lifestyle, flying and eating and playing and sleeping. In all of these ways, they perfectly symbolize Terry Malloy. Though he’s a tough former boxer, his excessive care for these birds indicates a special affinity between them. The imagery of him actually inside the cage himself, evident when he tends the birds, suggests this affinity as well. Malloy is a dreamer, a delicate and sensitive man, and much of the conversation that Brando has with Edie about hawks and pigeons can be translated into words about each other. In many ways, Malloy essentially *is* a pigeon—that is, he lives on the rooftops. We never once see him in his apartment. His home is the roof.

The pigeons also have a negative connotation: *stool pigeon*, a slang term used to describe informers. The term comes from the combination of *stale*, a fifteenth-century English word used to describe one person who acted to catch another, and *pigeon*, which has always been used to describe someone who lets himself be swindled. A pigeon is a sucker. Every time a character uses the term *stool pigeon* or its abbreviation, *stoolie*, Terry Malloy’s conflict boils to the surface.

##### Hooks

The sharp metallic hooks that the longshoremen use to help them load and empty pallets hang over their shoulders menacingly. These hooks represent the forces that literally hang over them in the form of Johnny Friendly’s goons. Over the course of the film, Terry, Dugan, Luke, and many other longshoremen have the hawk-like talon of the hook pressing against their chests.

##### Gloves

Gloves appear only twice in *On the Waterfront*, but each time the symbolism is crucial to both the reading of the scene and the film as a whole. Gloves indicate a shift in the dynamics of a scene, exposing a new layer of a character’s anxiety, sexuality, or vulnerability. When Edie drops her pure white glove in the park, Terry picks it up and plays with it casually, frustrating Edie’s sense of order and decorum. In a way, he is touching an extension of her, especially when he inserts his hand into the glove. The gesture is both sexual and intimate, friendly and aggressive.

Gloves appear a second time when Charlie plays with his in the taxi with Terry. Charlie is scarved and buttoned up tight in his camel-hair coat and proper hat, but he takes one glove off and fiddles with it nervously for the duration of the ride. This gesture indicates his anxiety and suggests that he is bound to face something uncomfortable. Compared with Charlie’s tightly dressed body, his one naked hand suggests a small vulnerability. Part of him has slipped out of its tight wrapping, and in that sense the glove contributes to the crushing intimacy of the scene.

**Directing**

Kazan wanted his directing in *On the Waterfront* to be invisible so that the actors’ performances could be the focus of the film. Kazan and Polish-born, New York–based cinematographer Boris Kaufman eschew flashy camerawork and avoid employing extreme angles, intense close-ups, and overt camera movements. Instead, the actors often appear in two-shot (two people at midrange) or in wider shots to show the arrangements of characters. Kazan and Kaufman use the positioning of characters within a frame to suggest a power dynamic. For example, at the end of the film, when Terry Malloy runs down the ramp that connects the dock to the Longshoreman’s Local Union shack, he stands literally between both camps, hanging in thin air. Johnny Friendly sits below him, as if in a netherworld, emerging from a shack floating on the water. The longshoremen stand as a unified mass on the solid ground of land. Malloy is literally and symbolically in between. Kazan and Kaufman also use suggestive framing when Father Barry is hoisted out of the hold with Dugan’s corpse on the palette. In their unmoving, reverent pose, rising above all the men around them, Father Barry seems to be riding with Dugan straight into heaven as a reward for speaking his mind.

There are some moments, however, when the direction begs to be noticed and discussed. The most important incidence of style taking precedence over content is when Malloy confesses to Edie his involvement in her brother’s death. Instead of letting the viewer hear this crucial conversation, Kazan allows the noise of a nearby ship’s whistle to overwhelm the voices, and only a few of Malloy’s words can be heard. Kazan uses this impressionistic rendering to suggest the depth of feeling and the frenzy of confused emotions underpinning the conversation. Because the feelings are more important than the actual words spoken, the scene’s impact is more powerful than the impact a literal rendering would have provided. The ship’s whistle and a pounding machine overwhelm Malloy’s confession, emphasizing the weight his words have on Edie. She clutches her face and ears as if resisting the world around her, then flees. She leaves Malloy alone on a pile of rocks with the Empire State Building visible in the background through the fog, representing a distant dream and an idealized way of life. Scenes like this are rare, however, and Kazan usually allows his actors to work in an uncomplicated frame.

Kazan encouraged his actors to use a lot of physical touch, which was a significant directing development. Not all the touching is erotic—some is merely friendly or intimate. Goons and longshoremen push each other around in friendly games. Charlie and Terry sit practically on top of each other in the taxicab scene. Charlie and Edie touch often in the saloon with arm-taps and caresses. Father Barry touches almost everyone he comes into contact with. Even Johnny Friendly hugs and lifts Terry in their first scene at the bar. Touching emphasizes the crowded environment, but it also affirms the intimacy of all these relationships. In a stage production, where characters might stand a few feet apart from each other as they speak, creating naturalistic emotions is a challenge. But in Kazan’s world, people use their bodies. They bump into each other, shake hands, hug, tap each other to demonstrate points, horse around—they generally feel real to the viewer.

Kazan creates some of the most subtle moments of direction ever to hit the screen. In the first shot of the film, an enormous cruise ship fills the frame, lodged at the docks. From a grungy little shack in a small corner of the frame, Johnny Friendly marches out with all his men, followed by Terry Malloy. A very small group is running a large area, a contrast that the frame emphasizes. Additionally, Terry’s“confession” to Father Barry takes place outside of the church. Even though Terry wants to talk to Father Barry inside the church, the machinations of the plot draw them outside to the waterfront. This location shades the scene: Terry’s confession, Kazan is saying, is not a religious one. Merely speaking will not absolve Terry of any sins, and only action will alleviate his guilt. Father Barry is not a Catholic mentor to Terry but a mentor of the soul. The waterfront becomes a living, breathing part of his confession.

**Mise-en-scène**

The mise-en-scène, or physical environment in which *On the Waterfront* takes place, is not a set. Kazan and his crew filmed *On the Waterfront* on the actual docks and piers of Hoboken, New Jersey, in view of New York City. Kazan achieves authenticity and grit thanks to the backdrops of the inner cargo holds of ships, the cramped, dank spaces in which the union workers live, and the seedy, smoky bars of the area. No amount of careful art direction could result in a set that comes even close to the real thing. Even many of Johnny Friendly’s goons were not actors. Instead, they were actual former heavyweight boxers who were hired for their rough demeanor and imposing physical presence. Many of the longshoremen, too, were actual workers from the Hoboken docks. The background sounds on the dock—ships’ whistles and chains clanging through metal loops—add to the realistic aural environment. All of these decisions result in an environment that heightens the reality and depth of the characters’ struggles and emotions.



Kazan filmed *On the Waterfront* outside on the docks in what happened to be one of New York’s coldest winters in years. Breaths are visible and steam up in the bone-cold air. A small detail like this suggests the brutal treatment these dock workers face daily, not only from the corrupt union officials but from the elements themselves. The visible breaths also affirm the unique existence of each character—it’s difficult to lump any of these men into the background. The cold took its toll on Kazan’s actors—Kazan says the hardest job of his directing was to get the actors to come out into the cold. The actors didn’t have to stretch to act cold from the comforts of a climate-controlled set. With so many natural elements to the *mise-en-scène*, the actors were free to focus entirely on their characters’ emotions.

The steamy hot air seeping up through the sewers or steam being released on the docks creates a misty visual atmosphere. The drifts of steam and cloud suggest the moral ambiguity of every character. When Malloy finally tracks down Father Barry to confess, for instance, they walk through an indistinct park, with steam swirling all around them, a seeming manifestation of the uncertain and frightening terrain through which they’re each carefully trying to find their way.

Ironically, the profoundly intimate taxicab scene is the one major scene that was not shot on location. It was shot in half a taxi’s shell in a studio—proof that the actors’ skill can shine in settings both false and real.

**Costumes**

The characters in *On the Waterfront* do not wear much makeup or elaborate costuming. Eva Marie Saint’s Edie Doyle is wind-worn in her close-ups—just being outside, it seems, is painful. She has wrinkles around her moist stung eyes and exposed cheeks. Marlon Brando’s Terry Malloy wears the same simple lumberjack’s coat with holes in the elbows for the duration of the film. Its checkerboard pattern helps us to identify him in any crowd and sets him apart as different. In the final scene, he’s *not* wearing the jacket. Rather, he wears Joey Doyle’s, signifying his acceptance of Father Barry’s belief that Doyle was a true martyr. He dons the skin of a martyr to stand up for a principle himself.



Changes in costume like this are also key indicators of shifting emotions or suggested eroticism in a paranoiac, code-restricted Hollywood. After we get used to seeing Catholic teacher-in-training Edie Doyle all buttoned up in her proper overcoat, her appearance at the end of the film in a soft white slip, with her hair free of its barrettes, is surprising. Her body is presented in a new light. She now has a feminine shape, and in comparison with her formerly demure appearance, her physicality jumps right off the screen.

**Acting**

Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy communicates the angst and confusion of an inarticulate speaker trying to form his own identity in familiar but newly threatening surroundings. He strives to be an individual with strong principles, and his movements reveal his struggle. He chews gum expressively, shrugs, lags behind, pulls his collar up, and stuffs his hands in his pockets. All of these nervous, almost evasive gestures and behaviors represent a stark contrast from the goons in Johnny Friendly’s gang. Though they are just as verbally inexpressive, the henchmen stand strong in twos and threes, in solid hats and long overcoats, sure of what they’re doing at all times. The henchmen make eye contact, while Malloy frequently looks away. Brando must convey Malloy’s interior life through these physical gestures, since the script gives Malloy so little verbal eloquence.

Kazan worked with Brando at the Actors Studio, so he knew his talents and knew the benefits of improvisation in acting. Improvisation means deviating from the written script and exploring an urge, a path, a riff, or an intuition because it feels right or “in character.” Improvisation can become scripted if, for example, an exploration works extraordinarily well in rehearsal. The famous“white glove” scene began as improvisation. Brando’s seemingly unconscious fiddling with the glove throws off the entire rhythm of the scene and adds to the unexpected nature of each step. It creates a second dynamic. The first dynamic is their private, delicate conversation, and the second gives meaning to their physical interaction. Dropping the glove makes Edie unsure of what she wants to do with her body. Should she reach out to grab the glove, or politely await its return? She cycles unconsciously and hesitantly through various options, even as she keeps up an intimate conversation. Each parry and thrust of her initial step and Malloy’s teasing counterstep sends an electric charge through the scene.

Strong acting is also notable in Charlie and Terry’s scene in the taxicab. Rod Steiger and Marlon Brando are large men stuck in a cramped environment, navigating through charged emotional territory. The actors choose unconventional reactions to throw the audience off guard. Steiger’s ultra-cool Charlie can’t stop fiddling with his gloves, for example, and Terry doesn’t flee the pistol but rather calmly turns it aside. The men speak very few words, and the words, too, are rather conventional. The actors’ symphony of facial expressions makes those few words eloquent. The pauses and ellipses between and around the spoken words, combined with the expressiveness of the faces, create volumes of meaning and emotion.

The scene in the taxi was shot three times. Once the crew rolled in a two-shot, with both Brando and Steiger visible. Once the camera closed in on Brando so that Steiger wasn’t seen, even though he was there with Brando as someone for Brando to interact with. However, when it came time for Steiger’s close-ups, the notoriously complex Brando had to leave for a psychotherapy appointment—so Steiger did all his close-ups with an extra on the set playing Terry Malloy off-screen. That the scene is such a success is a testament to the power of the acting.

1. Father Barry: “D& D? What’s that?”
Kayo Dugan: “Deaf and dumb. No matter how much we hate the torpedoes, we don’t rat.”

[Explanation for Quotation 1 >>](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/quotes.html#explanation1)

This exchange takes place during the secret meeting the priest holds in the basement of the church. It illustrates the depth and longevity of the longshoremen’s bind. Though they all agree, deep down, that the treatment they receive from Johnny Friendly and his goons is unfair and inhuman, speaking out about it might put them in a worse situation—that is, jobless or dead. Living by the code forced on them by the corrupt union has preserved their lives, but they live in a degraded state almost like slaves. To save their own lives, the longshoremen agree to act as if they see and hear nothing. The word *torpedoes* is slang for Johnny Friendly and his goons, who point weapons of sorts at the longshoremen every day. The goons hang out on the docks as perpetual reminders of Friendly’s strength, and they have a long history of roughing people up. To *rat* means to reveal injustices or transgressions to a party that’s not immediately involved, such as a lawyer or the Waterfront Crime Commission. It holds the same significance as *stool pigeon* in the slang of the stevedores.

2. Edie: “Which side are *you* with?”
Terry: “Me? I’m with me—Terry.”

[Explanation for Quotation 2 >>](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/quotes.html#explanation2)

When nameless thugs ambush the secret meeting, Terry helps Edie escape. As they walk through the park in front of the church, a hesitant Edie tries to figure out who Terry is. She can’t read him because she isn’t familiar with the area or the way the dock works. She doesn’t know who’s who. Terry’s casual answer here reveals a streak of naïveté because, though he may think he’s independent at this point, he’s clearly a pawn of Johnny Friendly and Charlie “the Gent.” He wouldn’t have shown up at the meeting if he were truly on his own. As Terry’s conscience swells inside him, and as he begins to act on that conscience, this statement becomes increasingly true. But at this time, his attempts to distance himself from either side are mere dreaming. Nevertheless, this dreaming reveals his awareness that he wants nothing of the life either side can offer him. Deep down, he’s not a thug, but he’s not a day laborer either. The film traces Terry’s discovery of who that “me” really is.

3. Terry: “Hey, you wanna hear my philosophy of life? Do it to him before he does it to you.”

[Explanation for Quotation 3 >>](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/quotes.html#explanation3)

The night after Terry and Edie walk through the park, Edie finds Terry on the rooftop tending to the pigeons, including Joey’s. Curious about his sensitive side, she agrees to go with him to a saloon, where they have an intimate and revealing conversation. Terry’s statement here indicates the huge philosophical gap between him and Edie. This gap makes their developing relationship all the more powerful, because to understand each other they must attempt to understand an unfamiliar and even unsavory way of living and thinking. Terry’s words summarize a lifetime of being pushed around and having to scrap for every morsel and every bit of self-confidence. In Edie’s worldview, everybody cares about everybody else, while Terry visualizes a dog-eat-dog world in which people do what they have to do in order to survive.

4. Terry: “But you know if I spill, my life ain’t worth a nickel.”
Father Barry: “And how much is your soul worth if you don’t?”

[Explanation for Quotation 4 >>](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/quotes.html#explanation4)

After Father Barry hears Terry’s out-of-church confession about his involvement in Joey Doyle’s death, he urges Terry to tell both Edie and the Waterfront Crime Commission, and he gets this response. This brief exchange effectively summarizes Terry’s mounting dilemma and is the thematic crux of the film. Terry must decide whether he wants to risk his life by speaking out against larger, stronger forces, or to live the rest of his life with a secret harbored deep in his heart. Father Barry’s response here indicates that Terry’s duty as a human being is to tell the truth. Otherwise, he’ll live a tortured existence with a cowardly soul. As a priest, Father Barry believes in a glorious afterlife, but only for those who have done their best to cleanse their souls. This conversation foreshadows Terry’s final explosion on the docks in which he reclaims his conscience and forges an individual identity:“I been rattin’ on *myself* all these years.”

5. Terry: “You don’t understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been someone, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let’s face it . . . It was you, Charlie.”

[Explanation for Quotation 5 >>](http://www.sparknotes.com/film/waterfront/quotes.html#explanation5)

Terry says this to Charlie at the end of the profoundly intimate taxicab conversation where the two tense brothers are alone for the first time in the film. Charlie, who cares deeply for his brother but hasn’t looked out for him properly, allows himself to deny the reason for Terry’s failed boxing career. He condemns mistakenly the rotten trainer who supposedly mismanaged Terry’s skills. But in truth, Charlie’s association with Johnny Friendly meant that the union had a boxer it could control. Through Charlie, Johnny Friendly ordered Terry to tank a big fight, guaranteeing himself a huge payoff by betting on the opponent. Even though Charlie made sure Terry got a bit of cash, Terry complains here that Charlie killed what was really at stake—his soul, his pride, and his self-esteem. This well-known quote reveals the complexity of the brothers’ relationship and expresses Terry’s deep inner pain that the relationship probably cannot be salvaged. The brothers love each other—but Terry now acknowledges his brother’s partial responsibility for his current bind, and he finally realizes that he can escape the label of “bum” only through his own actions.

**date of release** · July 1954

**producer** · Sam Spiegel

**setting (time)** · 1950s

**setting (place)** · Hoboken, New Jersey

**protagonist** · Terry Malloy

**major conflict** · Terry Malloy must decide whether to inform the Waterfront Crime Commission about the corrupt leadership of the Longshoreman’s Union, which would risk his employment and his life, or to stay silent, which would poison his conscience and have untold effects on his life.

**rising action** · As Terry Malloy struggles with his decision, his blossoming relationship with Edie Doyle, the passionate support of Father Barry, and the revealing taxicab conversation with his brother Charlie all push him toward realizing that he has only one choice for his own conscience.

**climax** · When Johnny Friendly’s gang murders his brother Charlie, Terry realizes the inescapable cycle of union corruption and vows to make the union pay whatever the cost, now that he’s felt the pain personally.

**falling action** · Though in his rage Terry wants to murder all the goons he can find, Father Barry convinces him to rise above their level and testify in court to the Waterfront Crime Commission the next day, which he does. He then goes down to the docks to confront Friendly.

**themes** · Informing as the correct moral choice; the transforming power of faith; power corrupts

**motifs** · The rooftop as retreat from the world; Crucifixion dialogue; “D & D”: Deaf and Dumb

**symbols** · Hudson River; pigeons; hooks; gloves

**foreshadowing**

· Joey Doyle sticks his head out of his apartment window to answer Terry Malloy’s call from the street, and that answer brings his death. Much later, Malloy finds himself in the same position, sticking his head out of Edie’s window to answer a dark call from the street, which leads to the discovery of his brother’s corpse.

· Kayo Dugan wishes daily that the stevedores could unload crates of crisp Irish whiskey instead of bananas, which they unload every day. The day a ship finally arrives with a cargo of Irish whiskey is the day the gang murders Dugan on the job—by dropping a crate of whiskey on his head.

· After Joey Doyle’s murder, Pops Doyle gives Joey’s jacket to Dugan, suggesting that perhaps now Dugan has a mark on him. After Dugan’s murder, the jacket is given back to Edie. On the final scene at the docks, Malloy grabs Joey’s jacket and wears it in front of all.

**Quiz**

Scroll through the page to review your answers. The correct answer is highlighted in green. Your incorrect answers (if any) are highlighted in red. If you'd like to take the test over again, click the reset button at the end of the test.

1. Whose death causes Terry Malloy to start wondering about Johnny Friendly’s business methods?

(A) Charlie Malloy’s

(B) Tim Dugan’s

(C) Joey Doyle’s

(D) Terry’s father’s



2. When Edie drops her glove outside of the church, what does Terry do with it?

(A) Puts it on his hand

(B) Steps on it

(C) Gives it back

(D) Gives it to the local “Juicehead”



3. According to Terry, how did Charlie derail Terry’s promising boxing career?

(A) By setting him up with a poor manager

(B) By not paying for his training

(C) By betting on the opponent in a big fight

(D) By stealing all his boxing shorts



4. Where does Father Barry hold the secret meeting for the longshoremen to discuss their rights?

(A) Johnny Friendly’s bar

(B) Pop Doyle’s apartment

(C) The basement of the church

(D) The cargo hold of a banana ship



5. What event makes it difficult for Edie to leave Terry at the saloon?

(A) An underground Communist meeting

(B) A raucous wedding

(C) A group of Johnny Friendly’s goons drinking

(D) A dance marathon



6. How is Charlie“the Gent” Malloy easily identified?

(A) His four-inch facial scar

(B) His camel-hair coat

(C) His thick Irish accent

(D) His Burberry scarf



7. Why does the Waterfront Crime Commission actively seek out Terry for a subpoena?

(A) He’s a pushover with a history of informing to the police

(B) He’s poor and the Commission feels he’d have to accept a bribe

(C) He’s wanted on other charges and will have to cooperate

(D) He’s rumored to be the last to see Joey Doyle alive



8. What important event not seen on -screen happens after Father Barry’s secret meeting?

(A) Dugan gives testimony to the Waterfront Crime Commission

(B) Johnny Friendly kills Mutt, the local homeless man

(C) Pop Doyle calls the nuns to come and retrieve Edie

(D) Terry accidentally kills one of Joey Doyle’s birds



9. Who helps Terry Malloy in the fistfight with Johnny Friendly at the end of *On the Waterfront*?

(A) Pop Doyle

(B) Father Barry

(C) No one

(D) The entire longshoreman union



10. Terry admits that he threw his big fight to whom?

(A) Pop Doyle

(B) Glover of the Waterfront Crime Commission

(C) Kayo Dugan

(D) The bartender at Johnny Friendly’s bar



11. What part of the New York metro area provides the setting for *On the Waterfront*?

(A) Brooklyn, New York

(B) Staten Island, New York

(C) Hoboken, New Jersey

(D) Hartford, Connecticut



12. Over whose corpse does Father Barry deliver his famous “Sermon on the Docks”?

(A) Joey Doyle’s

(B) Kayo Dugan’s

(C) Charlie Malloy’s

(D) None of the above



13. Why is Charlie Malloy murdered?

(A) He swindled money from Johnny Friendly

(B) He was going to testify to the Waterfront Crime Commission

(C) He couldn’t convince Terry not to testify to the Commission

(D) His death was an accident, not a murder



14. What birds does Terry raise tenderly on the rooftops?

(A) Hawks

(B) Canaries

(C) Mourning doves

(D) Pigeons



15. What does Terry do when his brother Charlie pulls a gun on him in the taxicab?

(A) Screams and tries to back out of the door

(B) Knocks it out of Charlie’s hands

(C) Freezes like a deer in headlights

(D) Looks sad and gently turns it away



16. What style of acting does Marlon Brando employ in *On the Waterfront*?

(A) Method acting

(B) Expressionist acting

(C) Stage acting

(D) Psychological acting



17. What does “D& D” stand for in the lingo of the waterfront?

(A) Dumb and depressed

(B) Deaf and dumb

(C) Deaf and divided

(D) Dodge and dive



18. Who encourages Terry to confess to Edie the extent of his involvement in Joey’s death?

(A) Father Barry

(B) Pop Doyle

(C) Kayo Dugan

(D) Luke



19. How does Terry fight back against the murder of his brother Charlie?

(A) Terry murders Johnny Friendly

(B) Terry testifies to the Waterfront Crime Commission

(C) Terry leaves town with Edie, never to be heard from again

(D) All of the above



20. How does Mr. Upstairs find out about what happens in the courtroom?

(A) A stoolie calls him on the telephone

(B) He waits for the next day’s papers

(C) The proceedings are televised

(D) He’s in the courtroom, watching for himself



21. How does the neighborhood kid Tommy greet Terry when he returns from the courtroom?

(A) Tommy runs to Terry and embraces him

(B) Tommy spits in Terry’s face

(C) Tommy releases Swifty, the lead bird

(D) Tommy kills all of Terry’s birds



22. How do the longshoremen at the morning shape-up know if they’re going to work that day?

(A) The foreman, Big Mac, gives them work tabs

(B) The foreman, Big Mac, points at them and pats them on the back

(C) Johnny Friendly has a list of that day’s workers posted on the shack

(D) Johnny Friendly and Big Mac take the first hundred men who show up



23. To what does Father Barry compare the murder of Kayo Dugan?

(A) A tragedy

(B) A crucifixion

(C) A drowning

(D) A ritualistic sacrifice



24. Where does Terry run immediately after his taxicab conversation with Charlie?

(A) To the church

(B) To Johnny Friendly’s bar

(C) To Edie’s apartment

(D) To the rooftop of the tenement



25. Whose jacket does Terry wear for his final showdown at the docks?

(A) His own

(B) Edie’s

(C) Joey’s

(D) Charlie’s

**Full Bibliographic Citation**

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