

Study Guide for *On the Waterfront*



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Introduction

In the 1950s, corrupt union leaders controlled roughly 2,000 piers along the New York-New Jersey waterfront. Under the guise of paying dues to their unions, honest dockworkers were coerced into giving much of their meager earnings to the mob, who also stole a share of every delivery that made its way through the ports. Men who tried to speak against the ruling gangsters were murdered, their bodies discovered floating in the Hudson River or buried in quicklime.

Simultaneous to the corruption infesting the eastern shoreline, a fear of Soviet Communism was sweeping through the United States. The House Un-American Activities Committee investigated numerous claims of communist activities, particularly in Hollywood, where people known to have ties with communism were called to provide the names of others suspected to be connected to communist activity.

For Director Elia Kazan and Screenwriter Budd Schulberg, both of whom testified before the House Committee, *On the Waterfront* was the perfect story through which to meld these two real-life events. It's a story of control and systematic exploitation, with longshoreman powerless to speak up for their rights under the threat of being ostracized, beaten or even killed. Caught in the center of this corruption is Terry Malloy, an ex-prizefighter controlled by crime boss Johnny Friendly, who runs the local longshoremen's union.

Terry is strong, but simple and uneducated — a seemingly perfect tool to be used by the corrupt union. Yet his conscience weighs heavily on him after the murder of Joey Doyle, the one person who promised to testify against Friendly's racketeering before the Waterfront Crime Commission. Terry is even further troubled after meeting Joey's sister, Edie, and a local Catholic priest, Father Barry. Edie spurns the dockworkers for not standing up against Friendly's unmitigated power, and Father Barry is convinced that corruption can be overturned so long as the dockworkers band together and fight for justice.

The dockworkers are too scared to fight what they see as a losing battle, however, and care little for the priest's belief in justice and solidarity. After all, they think, what would a priest know about living as a longshoreman on the waterfront? Is speaking the truth worth it, whatever the risk?

*For those longshoremen who are straight and are good family men,
God be praised.*

*For those who slip once in a while and lose hope,
God have mercy.*

*To those responsible,
God grant the grace to see things on the waterfront as Christ sees them,
for the time is growing short.*

— Father John Corridan, S.J.



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Memorable Quotes

Kayo Dugan: One thing you have to understand, Father. On the dock, we've always been D&D.

Father Barry: D&D? What's that?

Kayo Dugan: Deaf and dumb. No matter how much we hate the torpedoes, we don't rat.

Father Barry: Some people think the crucifixion only took place on Calvary. They better wise up! ... Every time the mob puts the pressure on a good man, tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen, it's a crucifixion. And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows that happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of our Lord to see if he was dead.

Father Barry: You want to know what's wrong with our waterfront? It's the love of a lousy buck. It's making love of a buck — the cushy job — more important than the love of man!

Terry: If I spill, my life ain't worth a nickel.

Father Barry: And how much is your soul worth if you don't?

Terry: You don't understand. I could've had class. I could've been a contender. I could've been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am.

Thoughts for Discussion

1. The film opens with the murder of Joey Doyle. His death confirms what so many of the longshoremen already believe: voicing the truth will only end badly, with all their efforts going to waste.

Do you think that Joey's efforts are wasted? Or do you think it is worth committing yourself to a moral or social cause — such as the defense of the unborn or of persecuted religious minorities? Should our commitment lessen when social practices seem inflexible, or if being involved means our reputations or very lives are at risk?

2. Terry betrays Joey, convincing him to go up on the roof where two of Friendly's men are waiting. Joey barely has any dialogue, yet his death — like that of Christ, who stood silent while his friends betrayed him — changes the world of waterfront.

How does a view of Joey as a Christ-figure affect your opinion of the film's characters, especially Terry? If Terry can be considered a Judas-figure at the start of the film, does this change by the final scenes?

3. The waterfront is an isolated, tough world, with the dock's adjacent parks and homes falling under Friendly's domain just as much as the shipping cargo. Even the Catholic priests are initially intimidated by Friendly's control. Only Edie speaks her mind without fear, even accusing Father Barry of being a hypocritical Catholic: "Who ever heard of a saint hiding in a church?"

Consider the story of Mary Magdalen, who encounters the Risen Lord while the disciples remain home (see Jn 20:11-18). Christ gives her a very specific mission: "Go to my brothers and tell them." With this event in mind, why do you think Edie's words touch Father Barry's conscience in a way that Joey's death does not? How might her words change your view of Catholic evangelization and charity?

4. Once Father Barry takes to heart Edie's reprimand, the waterfront becomes "his church," where the longshoreman's code of being "D&D" is acknowledged for what it is: a sin of omission. He reminds the men that Christ is alongside them, feeling with them the pain of every injustice and every murder.

What do you think of Christ's presence on the waterfront? Or his presence in today's world, in places of unrest and religious persecution? Where can we find Christ amid a "culture of death," where people die each day as a result of legalized abortion and euthanasia? How can we call ourselves Christians if we stand by in silence?

5. Not long after Joey dies, his jacket is given to Kayo Dugan, who agrees to testify against the waterfront corruption. Yet Dugan is also not given a chance to testify; he is brutally crushed in a mob-planned "accident" at the docks. After Dugan's death, the jacket is again passed on — to Terry.

It seems that as long as Joey's jacket is worn by a longshoreman, a sense of integrity and honor cannot be abolished from the waterfront. If Terry never received Joey's jacket — if Joey had lived — do you think that Terry would have ever spoken up against Johnny Friendly?

6. As the relationship between Terry and Edie unfolds, we see that her actions on the waterfront are far from conventional — she speaks up to a priest, shouts against the mob, and despite the risks involved, chooses to spend time with Terry.

Why is Edie the catalyst for so much change? Is it because she sees Terry's inherent goodness and Father Barry's tenacity, which others overlook?

7. Terry is deeply entangled in the crime boss' racket, where lying, cheating and killing are accepted everyday occurrences. Yet Terry still has his own moral code, telling Father Barry that he can't "put the finger on my own brother." To this, the priest replies, "So you've got a brother. Let me tell you something — you've got other brothers getting the shorthand."

What does brotherhood and solidarity mean to those who live on the waterfront? Where do you find such bonds in your own life? In times of dissension, how do you know with whom you should stand?

8. Although he is an Irish-Catholic, Terry is uncomfortable meeting at the church; he only does so because Charlie convinces him to "join the congregation."

What is the role of Catholicism in this film? How might this Irish-Catholic world compare to that of Father McGivney and his community of Irish-Catholics in New Haven in the 1800s?

9. Acknowledging that he threw away his boxing career, Terry laments, "I could've been somebody instead of a bum, which is what I am." Terry never has a chance to be "somebody" in the ring, yet he does fight again — this time against the man responsible for destroying his career.

How does Terry's self-realization in the taxi scene influence this final fight? Why is it significant that this scene marks Terry's conversion into a model of strength for the longshoremen? Has he become a contender?

10. Unlike most of the films in the early 1950s, *On the Waterfront* was painstakingly filmed entirely on location, using the actual waterfront docks and roofs of New Jersey and New York, ultimately earning the film's art director an Academy Award.

What is the effect of this location filming? Do you think the story would have been equally convincing had it been filmed on studio sound stages or Hollywood lots? What does this style of filming tell us about the filmmakers' final vision?