

TSSMTM
Creating VCE Success

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“On the Waterfront”

SAMPLE

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AUTHOR NOTES

Elia Kazan (1909–2003) was born to Greek parents in Istanbul, Turkey. His family migrated to America in 1913.

After completing secondary school he studied drama at Yale university, though his father wanted him to take over the family rugmaking business. He joined the politically leftwing Group Theater in the 1930s. Many notable actors, writers, and directors were members. He then became an official member of a communist cell in 1934, but quit in 1936 because of perceived hypocrisies. He became a skilled stage director in New York, noted for his ability to draw out the best from his actors. In 1947 he co-founded the Actors Studio, a group of performers that became a noted force in film and theatre.

Kazan followed the experimental teachings of Russian dramatist Konstantin Stanislavski, who greatly influenced both stage and screen acting. His style became known as Method Acting. Method actors do not use emoting techniques consisting of exaggerated speech, expressions and gestures. Instead they adopt naturalistic speech, expressions and gestures as in normal life. Further, actors drew on themselves - memories and experiences were called upon from their own lives to add depth and complexity to characterisation. Marlon Brando [Terry] was one such actor. Many of these acting techniques are standard practice today, evidencing Kazan's radical work. He became one of theatre's most prominent directors.

Most of Kazan's work was done from the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s, one of the most controversial eras in film history, as this film testifies. He directed ten films in the decade after World War II, all critically acclaimed, including *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947) [Best Director award], *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), and *East of Eden* (1955)

Kazan directed *On the Waterfront* in 1954. Critics almost universally regard it as both a masterpiece of Method Acting and a presentation of themes that were central to its time. However, critics were less sure at the time of its release. They were wary of the Method Acting style and ambivalent about Brando's semi-articulacy. The film is based on a series of investigative articles published in 1949 by journalist Malcolm Johnson, which won him a Pulitzer Prize [journalist award]. The film improved its reputation over time, through the strength of the acting and the personal struggle that each character undergoes.

Despite critical reservations, the film was a success, earning more than \$10 million on a \$1 million budget. This allowed Kazan to form his own production company that made his next three films.

In 1999 Kazan was presented with an honorary Oscar for a long and distinguished career. But many still believed that his actions before the HUAC in the 1950's [see Historical Issues above] were intended to save his career at the expense of other screenwriters who had been blacklisted. However, others, ironically including Arthur Miller, felt that his great cinematic achievements should stand on their own merits.

The film won eight Oscar awards:

Best Picture; Best Actor; Best Director; Best Story and Screenplay; Best Supporting Actress; Best Art Decoration; Best Cinematography; Best Film Editing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the end of World War II, America stood as the world's pre-eminent nation. It was the world's strongest nation economically and militarily, having been least affected by the debilitating outcome of the war. After years of self-imposed 'isolationism', during which it played little role in international politics, America saw itself as undertaking a leading role in the post-war world order. It defined this role as being pro-democracy and anti-communist.

When the European war against Germany was over, the nations of eastern Europe fell under the communist control of the USSR. It had been Soviet forces that had freed them from German occupation, and the Soviet Union was not inclined to allow these nations to return to independence. So it set up a communist regime in each country that was subservient to the USSR politically and economically, and it also enforced their membership in a military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. Due to the near-success of Germany in defeating the USSR during the war, it is felt that the main reason for imposing communist governments on the Eastern European nations, apart from an attempt to spread communism, was to use them as 'buffer' states to protect the USSR from any possible future military threat.

While it had been America that had first developed nuclear weapons, the USSR increased its international standing when it also became a nuclear power, so promoting the on-going 'standoff' between the democratic nations, led by America, and the communist nations, led by the USSR. A long and involved 'Cold War' [non-shooting war] then commenced, involving continual political maneuvers by one side against the other in order to gain international ascendancy. When China fell to communist control in 1949, concerns in the democratic nations became greater.

In America during the 1940's and 1950's there was at times considerable concern, encouraged by the political actions of senator Joe McCarthy, about communist sympathisers in various places in American society. McCarthy provoked considerable concern about the activities of such people. He wanted them to be exposed and undertook political activity to that end.

In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was formed to purge America of communist influence. The prominent liberal attitudes of the Hollywood film industry brought it considerable attention. HUAC subpoenaed many actors, writers and directors to pressure them into informing publicly on their colleagues as to who had associations with the Communist Party. Film director Kazan himself appeared before two hearings. *On the Waterfront* thus appeared at a time when there was heightened national sensitivity to undemocratic activities in American society.

HUAC subpoenaed Kazan once, and at his initial hearing he refused to divulge details. At a second hearing in 1952, however, Kazan chose to give the names of seven former colleagues from his Group Theater days [see Background Notes]. Budd Schulberg, the screenwriter of the film, also cooperated with the committee. Kazan justified himself on the basis that supporting anti-Communist efforts would protect his liberal beliefs and his country. However, he was criticised by Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller who accused him of betraying fellow artists. *On the Waterfront* celebrates a man who informed on mob leaders, and many believe that Kazan made the film as a response to the criticism. [Miller's play, *The Crucible*, puts the alternative view, about someone who refused to inform. Tennessee William's play, *View from the Bridge*,

also set on the waterfront, puts the negative view – as opposed to Kazan's positive view – about someone who also informed.]

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