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First published in 2004.

Insight Publications Pty Ltd  
ABN 57 005 102 983  
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**[www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au)**

Cover Design: Graphic Partners  
Internal Design: Sarn Potter  
DTP: SPG  
Series Editor: Robert Beardwood  
Editing: Dianne Bramich  
Printed by Hyde Park Press, South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Hurley, Scott.

A view from the bridge - Arthur Miller.

For senior secondary English students.

ISBN 1 920693 59 9.

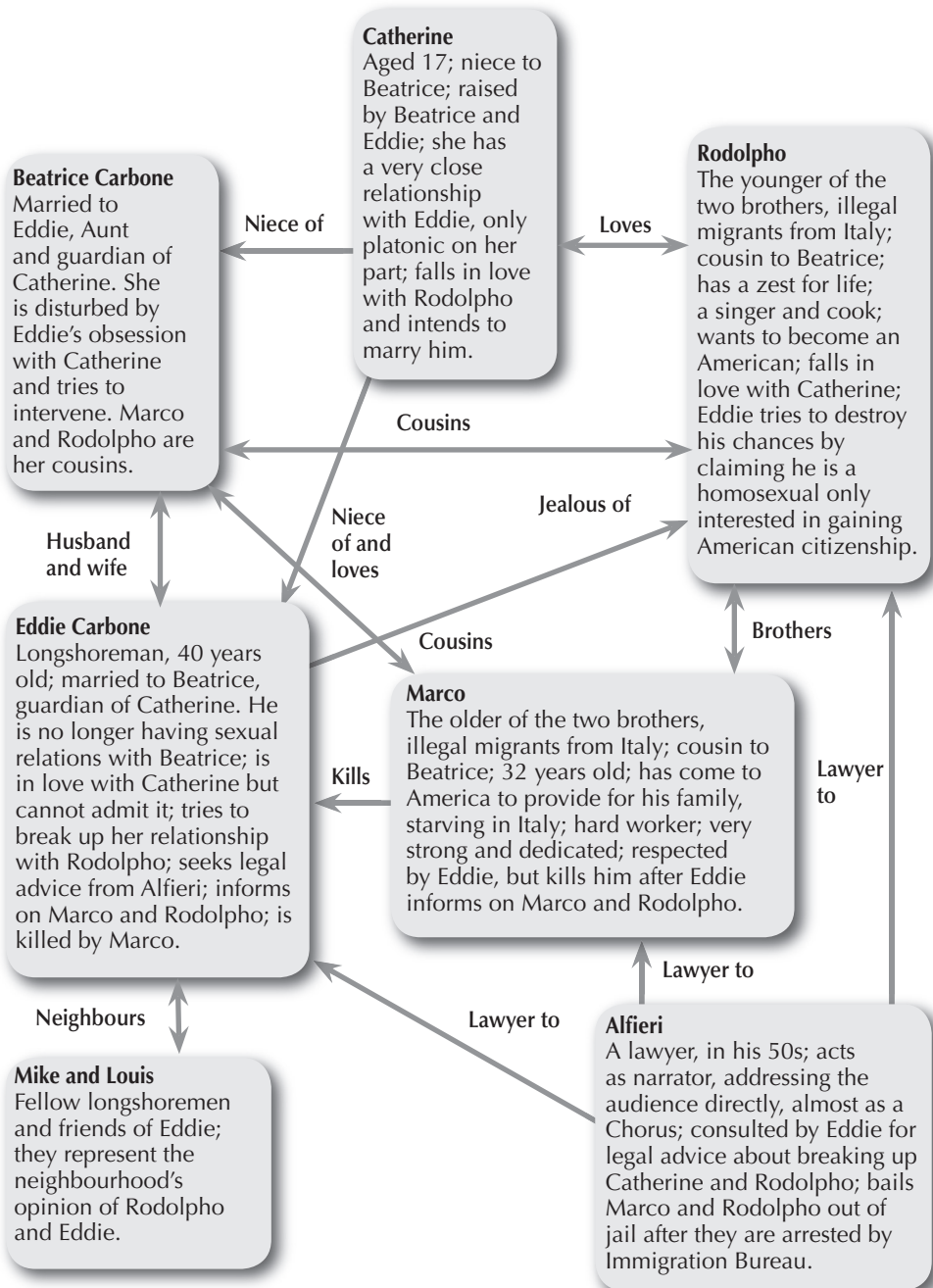
1. Miller, Arthur, 1915-. View from the bridge. I. Title.

812.52

# **c o n t e n t s**

<b>Character map</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background &amp; context</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Genre, structure &amp; style</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scene-by-scene analysis</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Characters &amp; relationships</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Themes &amp; issues</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Questions &amp; answers</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>References &amp; reading</b>	<b>57</b>

# CHARACTER MAP



## INTRODUCTION

*A View from the Bridge* tells the story of Eddie Carbone, a hard-working longshoreman (stevedore) in New York supporting his wife, Beatrice, and her orphaned niece, Catherine. Tensions arise when Beatrice's cousins, illegal migrants from Italy, come to live with the family, and are further intensified when one of them begins a romance with Catherine. Unable to confront his own, improper feelings for her, Eddie spirals into a course of rage, bullying and venomous accusations. He is lured by his jealousy to commit the ultimate crime in his small Italian neighbourhood: the betrayal of members of his own family. This sets in motion a series of consequences Eddie could not have predicted, including his own destruction when he tries to win back his reputation.

*A View from the Bridge* is a play about obsession and bigotry, love and jealousy, honour and social position. It is the psychological exploration of how a man unravels when his repressed desires are displaced into hostility and paranoia. It is also the tragedy of a genuine, platonic love destroyed by sexual tension. *A View from the Bridge* is not a play that manufactures suspense from an unpredictable plot; rather, it generates in its audience the kind of horror reserved for those powerless to prevent a catastrophe they must watch unfold from beginning to end.

### Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller is America's greatest living playwright. Born in 1915, Miller has written such classics as *The Crucible* (1953) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949), two of the outstanding plays of the twentieth century. *A View from the Bridge* was first performed in 1955 on Broadway. It began as an experiment, a one-act reaction against the 'psycho-sexual romanticism' Miller saw as dominating the contemporary theatre. As the play moved from its birth in New York to its next incarnation in London in 1956, an evolution occurred (brought about mostly by new possibilities and new limitations in staging). *A View from the Bridge* transformed from a clinical, detached presentation of the protagonist's self-inflicted catastrophe to a complex character study and, not unlike *Death of a Salesman*, the tragedy of a family. It is a fascinating reminder that *drama* does not truly exist until it becomes *theatre*.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Setting

*A View from the Bridge* is set in Red Hook, Brooklyn, New York City, in the 1950s. Red Hook is a working-class neighbourhood primarily inhabited by longshoremen who work the docks unloading the cargo ships that come into New York Harbor. Though Miller's dialogue captures an authentic Brooklyn accent, the setting of the play is not really critical either to the action or the themes. Eddie Carbone's occupation does not have so great an influence on how he thinks or behaves that it could not be substituted for some other difficult, uncertain manual labour. I am not suggesting that it should be altered, merely that your appreciation of the play does not depend on knowing the ins and outs of a workingman's life in Red Hook, circa 1950. This is not true for Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, say (a film on which Miller reputedly worked in the early stages), which shares the exact setting of *A View from the Bridge* but does indeed depend on political and cultural aspects of place and time. However, with regard to Miller's play, it is enough to know that Eddie must work hard to make a living, and that he feels a strong need to maintain his standing in a very small, insular community.

### Migration

While Miller's play *The Crucible* has thinly disguised political ramifications essential to its meaning (involving the McCarthyist anti-Communist 'witch hunts' of the late 1940s and early 1950s), *A View from the Bridge* does not. It is true that one of the primary catalysts of its plot, illegal immigration, is a major social and political issue both in contemporary Australia and the United States. Miller takes pains to inform us that Eddie's own father migrated to the US from Italy (about half a century before the time in which the play is set), for reasons no doubt the same as those of Marco and Rodolpho or any of the other 'submarines' (illegal immigrants) of Red Hook. But he would have come at the height of an 'open door' policy in the United States, when thousands of migrants from Europe were being processed daily at New York's Ellis Island, and were only sent back in the case of health concerns. The men of Marco's generation face perhaps worse hardships in postwar Italy than Eddie's father would have in his time, yet the door is now closed.

While there is no doubt that Miller wants us to think about this difference, the play never tackles the issue of immigration policy beyond using it as a context through which the plot can unfold. Its strongest impact on themes of the play pertains to local opinion. Eddie's is just one of many families in Red Hook harbouring kin from Italy. When he eventually betrays them to the authorities, he is committing a crime as much against the codes of his entire community as against Marco and Rodolpho. And it is the power of ancient social codes that this play is about, rather than the mutability of public policy.

## Arthur Miller on *A View from the Bridge*

Some older Penguin editions of this play begin with an introduction by Arthur Miller; unfortunately, the current edition does not retain it. While many authors' introductions can leave one with more questions than answers, Miller's is refreshingly revealing about how the version of the play we know was brought to life. Its more important insights are worth considering. Originally a one-act play, *A View from the Bridge* was not well received when it opened on Broadway. However, it met greater success in London about a year later when it was presented as the two-act play you have read. Miller calls the one-act New York version 'hard, telegraphic, unadorned drama', and writes that he did not want any of the conventional concerns of theatre to get in the way of the audience's witnessing Eddie's path to catastrophe:

It seemed to me then that the theatre was retreating into an area of psycho-sexual romanticism, and this at the very moment when great events...cried out for analytic inspection...the spectacle of still another misunderstood victim left me impatient...To bathe the audience in tears, to grip people by the age-old methods of suspense, to theatricalize life, in a word, seemed faintly absurd to me, if not disgusting.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, his first version probably contained too much 'analytic inspection' for most people, and not enough emotion. In trying to avoid 'heart-wringing sympathy' in favour of 'wonder', Miller seems to have left his first audiences a little cold. The second version was fleshed out by the addition of 'significant psychological and behavioral detail' to become, in his view, 'more human, warmer and less remote'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Miller, 'Introduction', *A View from the Bridge*, Penguin Plays, New York, 1977 (reprint of the 1960 Viking Press edition), p.vi.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', p.x.

## The Role of Suspense

The difference between the two versions of the play is really of little interest to us, but what Miller says about his intentions in the first version, and how he met them in a different way in the second, offers a lot of insight into the play's meaning. The idea behind telling Eddie's story as he did in the first version was to limit the theatrical convention of suspense. Miller did not want his audiences' involvement with *how* the story would end to interfere with an appreciation of what it all *meant*: '[Eddie's story] must be suspenseful because one knew too well how it would come out...by knowing more than the hero the audience would rather automatically see his life through conceptualized feelings'.<sup>3</sup>

In the second version, the 'narrative' speeches by the character Alfieri leave little doubt that the play will end tragically, even if he offers no specific details. And even though there is equally little doubt that Eddie is going to make his fatal phone call, a palpable sense of suspense is still generated. Miller is arguing, and I think the play bears it out, that the suspense on offer is of a different kind, intellectual rather than emotional. Rather than *weep* for Eddie, we *wonder* how a man could destroy lives in a cause he cannot properly recognise, and how such a thing could be allowed to go so far when the outcome seemed so predictable. We are not awed by the power of fate or of mercurial gods as we are in classical tragedy; we are awed by something we know only too well: the destructiveness of human emotion.

Another important idea Miller raises has to do with what would seem a minor incident: he was able to hire a larger cast for the London production of the play. The latter scenes could therefore be played before a crowd, and this seems to have crystallised Miller's thinking about Eddie:

The mind of Eddie Carbone is not comprehensible apart from his relation to his neighborhood, his fellow workers, his social situation. His self-esteem depends upon their estimate of him, and his value is created largely by his fidelity to the code of his culture.<sup>4</sup>

The addition of a crowd, and of a set that suggested the density of urban living, gave one the sense, in Miller's words, 'that Eddie was living

<sup>3</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', p.vii.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', p.viii.

out his horror in the midst of a certain normality, and that invisibly and without having to speak of it, he was getting ready to invoke upon himself the wrath of his tribe'.<sup>5</sup> I believe this concept is crucial to understanding the very last scenes of the play, when against all sense, and against all recognition of the terrible things he has done, Eddie goes in front of his community to demand back from Marco his reputation, his good name that has been torn down. Bear these comments in mind as you think about and re-read *A View from the Bridge*.

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

Since *A View from the Bridge* is a play, reading it can only give you part of the picture. That is, a *play* does not fully take life until it is presented as a *production* in which a director and actors make decisions about how lines are to be delivered, how scenes are to be staged and a thousand minor details that can affect the audience's reaction. As you read the lines of the play, always try to keep in mind how it might be staged, and what contribution non-verbal aspects of the play should be making to the overall conception. I have discussed above the fact that *A View from the Bridge* was originally a one-act play that Miller transformed later into the two-act version we now know. The first act is significantly longer than the second, and each uses the same set. There is really little *dramatic* purpose in putting the intermission where it is – although it seems the most logical place to put it, considering that the play is probably too long to run without it.

## A Modern Greek Tragedy?

*A View from the Bridge* is a tragedy, reminiscent more of classical Greek tragedy than of Shakespearean tragedy. This is not the place to go into all of the details of Greek tragedy, but there are some basic concepts that will be useful in helping us to understand *A View from the Bridge*. Greek tragedies portray the downfall of characters larger than life – kings, queens, princes, princesses, or great heroes, some of whom are semi-divine. If their downfalls often are partly due to an intervention by the gods, they also involve what has come to be known as the 'tragic flaw',

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', pp.viii-ix.

or in Aristotle's term, *hamartia*. A protagonist's *hamartia* is a blind spot, a mistake or personality flaw that drives this character towards a disaster otherwise preventable. The Greeks' concepts of fate and freewill were complex; suffice to say that they had no problem accepting seemingly contradictory ideas. For instance, in Greek tragedy a tragic hero's downfall is both ordained by fate *and* contingent upon the hero's actions – hence it is directed by the gods, but dictated by the hero's *hamartia*.

### **The Hero's Reversal of Fortune**

In the course of the tragedy the hero experiences a *peripeteia*, or a reversal of fortune. It might be a seemingly innocent event that sets off a chain of others taking some time to unfold, but it invariably ends in catastrophe. Eventually there occurs in the tragic hero an *anagnorisis*, or recognition of the said reversal. Greek tragedies were meant to instruct and the stories were well known. Greek audiences did not attend tragedies to find out what happened, but rather to learn something from the playwright's treatment of a familiar story.

### **Catharsis**

The final term we should discuss, then, is *catharsis*, a release of the pent-up emotion the audience members experience as they watch the tragedy played before them. Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* that a tragedy should invoke *horror* and *pity* in the audience; they should be horrified at watching the downfall of the hero, but they should feel pity when the hero experiences his or her own recognition of what has happened. Catharsis is one Aristotelian term that we have adopted into everyday English, and our meaning for catharsis is not much different from Aristotle's: it invokes the idea of a very trying experience that somehow makes us better by surviving it. Again, Greek tragedy was supposed to instruct and not just entertain; catharsis is essentially a transferral of anxiety into higher understanding.

### **Reading the Play as a Tragedy**

Arthur Miller's introduction has alerted us to some of the ways we might see *A View from the Bridge* as a modern version of Greek tragedy. It definitely involves a reversal of fortune in the life of its main character, as well as a notable tragic flaw that leads irrevocably to Eddie's downfall and death. The biggest problem we might have with such a reading is the

fact that Eddie is hardly a 'great man', not a king or a hero but a common longshoreman from an undistinguished neighbourhood in Brooklyn. Miller observed that an important aspect of the London production of the play was that Eddie's tragedy was able to unfold before a large crowd representing his neighbourhood:

A certain size accrued to him as a result. The importance of his interior psychological dilemma was magnified to the size it would have in real life. What had seemed like a mere aberration had now risen to a fatal violation of an ancient law.<sup>6</sup>

The severity of Eddie's abuse of the code by which the people of Red Hook live makes him somehow larger, more mythic than he might have been.

However, Eddie still does not match the profile of a classical tragic hero. What Miller does not mention is a trend in twentieth-century art that sought to demystify some of the codes of classical literature and reapply them to modern life. Arthur Miller was one of its great exponents; his *Death of a Salesman* is the perfect example of the tragedy of an ordinary man, proof that a salesman's life is as rich a subject as a king's for the tension and emotionality of high tragedy. Many other artists explored these ideas in their own ways – Eugene O'Neill in his tragedies, Irish novelist James Joyce in his epic *Ulysses*, even the composer Aaron Copland (who was born in Brooklyn) in the piece of music entitled 'Fanfare for the Common Man'. I suspect that it is *because* Miller was a leading exponent of this literary movement that he does not defend his right to make tragedy out of the story of an obstinate longshoreman. Certainly, though, a tragic dimension does accrue to this working-class man who destroys himself through jealousy and desire.

Miller's words about not wanting to appeal to his audience's emotions would seem to fly in the face of Aristotelian catharsis, yet if 'pity' is missing, *A View from the Bridge* is not short on 'horror'. More to the point, Miller's goal of getting his audience to respond to the work intellectually is precisely the same as that entailed by the Greek concept of catharsis. He was simply trying to achieve this result (of an enhanced understanding) without capitalising on the audience's emotions in

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', p.ix.