

Themes

- What is a theme?
- What are the key themes of *A View from the Bridge*?
- How are the themes related to each other?
- How are the themes tied to the motive and actions of the characters?

A theme is an idea, belief or philosophy that a writer explores through the story he or she tells. Very few great books or plays are just stories designed to entertain us: almost all encourage us to think about 'big' ideas because these ideas are the themes that drive the plot forward. A theme gives a story set in a particular time and place a timeless and universal appeal because great themes are part of our human condition. Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, for example, is over 400 years old and deals with events that are supposed to have happened nearly a thousand years ago, but the work's main theme — how power can corrupt those who have it and tempt them to do dreadful acts — is as relevant today as it was when the play was written.

So let's explore the key themes that lie behind the story of *A View from the Bridge*.

Justice and the law

Throughout the play, Miller explores the potentially good and bad points of the sort of honour-driven code that Eddie and Marco live by. Their hard work and commitment to family is admirable. Eddie risks the law for months by harbouring illegal immigrants. Yet when he feels his territory and his status within his family and community is threatened, he acts in a way that will bring destruction onto himself and his family. Marco travels across the Atlantic to find work to provide for his family, yet his unthinking desire for revenge on Eddie is completely self-destructive for himself and those who depend on him.

Eddie will not admit to Marco that he has betrayed him, and he carries a knife to (potentially at least) kill Marco. Marco would rather kill Eddie to gain revenge and face execution in America than go back to Italy and do what he can for his children.

Miller creates a series of tragic events that destroy the two most principled and hard-working but flawed characters. There is an inevitability

Pause for thought

Natural justice can be defined as what we instinctively feel are right or wrong actions, regardless of what the law says. Given the conclusion of the play, what do you think Miller ultimately feels and wants us to feel about the idea of 'natural justice' that goes beyond the law?





about the tragic outcome of conflicts between men who are blinded by pride, and this allows Alfieri to claim from the very start of the play that he can see clearly how things will turn out.

The words 'justice' and 'law' are frequently heard in the play. In Alfieri's opening speech, Miller sets up the idea that justice and the law are going to be important. The lawyer refers to law in both ancient and modern contexts: 'in Sicily, from where their fathers came, the law has not been a friendly idea since the Greeks were beaten...I only came here when I was twenty-five. In those days, Al Capone, the greatest Carthaginian of all, was learning his trade on these pavements, and Frankie Yale himself was cut precisely in half by a machine-gun on the corner of Union Street, two blocks away' (p. 12).

Text focus

The things Alfieri says about Eddie on p. 85 add a brilliant touch of ambiguity to the last moments of the play. We might expect Miller to either end the story with the death of its main character, or to have Alfieri conclude the play by simply stating that Eddie's death was a waste and that he should have not blindly pursued natural justice.

However, while saying he prefers it that most people do not behave like Eddie, Alfieri also says that he remembers Eddie fondly: 'I think I will love him more than all my sensible clients' (p. 85). Notice that Alfieri says 'will', as if he will not forget Eddie, and his affection for the dead man will grow as time passes. He also compares his 'love' (a powerful emotion to express in this context) for Eddie with 'all' his sensible clients, suggesting just how deeply and strongly he has been affected by the death. There must have been something in Eddie's drive and passion that has deeply touched the lawyer.

It is this recognition of the qualities that Eddie had and the degree to which they have affected him that causes Alfieri to say he mourns Eddie with 'alarm'. Alfieri is shocked by what Eddie's forceful personality has triggered in himself.

To Alfieri, justice is a very important concept and one that should be linked to what the law says is just and right. However, he recognises that sometimes the legal system is incapable of delivering the kind of natural justice that some people believe in and want. He is suggesting that we will come to see how Eddie and Marco could not understand why the law could not deliver the justice they wanted. Eddie cannot understand why there is no law to stop Catherine and Rodolpho marrying, and Marco cannot understand why Eddie should not be punished for betraying him and Rodolpho.

Alfieri tells us he believes that it is best to settle for half, better to rely on a legal system and accept what it offers even if you are only half satisfied.

The written law may not always act in favour of justice yet it is better to obey the law than to take the law into your own hands.

Alfieri reiterates this point at the end of the play: 'Most of the time now we settle for half and I like it better' (p. 85). Having shown us Eddie's tragic story, Alfieri decides that he values the law more than any form of natural justice.

A View from the Bridge encourages us to ask 'What is justice? What makes justice?' Both Eddie and Marco have strong ideas of what is just and are prepared to go to great lengths to see that justice is done. However, they mistake their own desires for justice. They do not recognise any higher principle of justice separate from their own feelings. They do not recognise the kind of justice in which they have to settle for things they do not want. This is what leads to conflict.



An Italian shop in New York. How does Miller create a sense of a community apart from the rest of the city throughout the play?

Honour

Honour is very important to the male characters, with the exception of Rodolpho, who does not talk about honour.

Honour means far more to Eddie and Marco than the law. To be honourable is to be respected. If you do anything dishonourable, you lose respect. That is why Marco and Eddie are so keen to protect their names and get a 'just' conclusion for themselves, which is logically impossible. Possessing and protecting your honour is for them a key part of their identity and of being a man.

Pause for thought

Why do you think Alfieri tells Marco 'Only God makes justice' (p. 79) when he is offering to stand bail for him?



Pause for thought

Why do you think Rodolpho does not appear to be interested in or motivated by a sense of honour?





Pause for thought

Do you think Eddie feels Rodolpho has honour? If Eddie thinks Rodolpho is not bothered about being seen as honourable, how might that make Eddie feel towards the younger man?



In the world of the play, agreed and understood codes of honour bind families and the whole neighbourhood with a sense of community. The positive side of this is that everyone should look out for one another. To betray someone is the most dishonourable action imaginable.

References to the high value of honour recur throughout the play:

Eddie tells Beatrice ‘It’s an honour, B. I mean it,’ (p. 17) when they discuss the imminent arrival of the cousins.

Alfieri warns Eddie that he will lose the respect of the neighbourhood if he betrays the brothers. ‘You won’t have a friend in the world, Eddie! Even those who understand will turn against you, even the ones who feel the same will despise you!’ (p. 67) Alfieri is a lawyer, yet he understands the power of honour to the extent that he encourages Eddie to do something illegal by continuing to keep the brothers hidden.

Grade **booster**



Miller uses the device of Eddie and Beatrice jointly telling Catherine the story of Vinny Bolzano (p. 23) to show how strongly they believe in the idea of honour. The tale is graphically told: ‘three flights [of stairs] his head was bouncin’ like a coconut. And they spit on him in the street, his own father and his brothers.’ They seem blind to the effect such a shocking story might have on Catherine because they believe absolutely that Vinny got what he deserved by acting dishonourably. Using a ‘tale within a tale’ technique is a neat device that playwrights use to make sure an audience understand the power of a theme or idea that underlies the action of the drama.

It is of course a dramatic irony that Eddie does just the same thing as Vinny.

Marco believes the only honourable course is to punish Eddie for betraying him and Rodolpho. Alfieri tries to persuade him not to pursue his desire for revenge: ‘To promise not to kill is not dishonourable’ (p. 78) but Marco’s sense of honour is too strong. It blinds him to any logic.

At the end of the play, Eddie blindly refuses to believe that he has done anything wrong. He desperately wants his good name back after Marco’s accusations cause the neighbourhood to turn away from Eddie. Miller does not make it clear if Eddie really believes that he has been wronged, in which case he is driven by a delusion; or if he knows he cannot admit what he has done and so desperately shouts that he is the injured party. No one actually says that the neighbourhood has turned against him. His claim to be the injured party could be summed up in the saying ‘The best line of defence is attack.’ For most people watching the play, however, the impression Eddie gives as he challenges Marco is of a desperate man who has lost any moral position.

Pause for thought

Do you think Eddie dies an ‘honourable’ death? He does not try to escape his fate — in fact, he encourages it — perhaps because he realises that to die might be better than to live with total dishonour.



Grade **booster**



Alfieri's oblique reference to people who might 'feel the same' as Eddie (p. 67) could just be a device by the lawyer to make Eddie feel less isolated in his secret passion for Catherine. It could also be a reference to there being people in their community who would recognise — and perhaps this is a new and growing thing for them — that to be good citizens they should obey the laws of the country they have come to live in rather than the codes of honour they have brought from their former homes.

Alfieri may also be trying to make Eddie feel that his reaction to Rodolpho coming into his house is something that other men in their community would understand and empathise with. Eddie is used to being in charge; now a young man has come into his house who has — perhaps unintentionally — challenged his authority over one of the women Eddie has looked after.

Grade **booster**



Notice that Marco gives Alfieri his word that he will not harm Eddie, then he immediately goes seeking revenge. In Marco's code of honour, it appears that the need for revenge is stronger than any fear about being dishonourable by breaking your word to someone who has just helped you.

Love

A View from the Bridge has none of the elements we would expect in any form of traditional love story. The love between Catherine and Rodolpho is only important insofar as it drives Eddie to fury. We can see this because Miller only gives us one scene where we see them alone together. Crucial steps in their growing passion — first date, first kiss, etc. — are not included in the play.

Although it is not a love story, the play explores various types of love. Different kinds of love are part of the motivation of almost all the characters. However, for many of them love causes pain and tragedy.

Love of a family

Beatrice, Eddie and Catherine are a loving family at the start of the play. Marco loves his family so much he has come to America to provide for them. Beatrice loves her family back in Sicily enough to support her cousins and take a risk by breaking the law for them.

Love between parents and children

Eddie loves Catherine deeply although they are actually uncle and niece. At the start of the play we see how this love has existed for a long time. However, Eddie's love for his niece becomes unnatural and destructive.



Love between brothers

Marco and Rodolpho have a strong bond — great enough for Marco to set out on a route of confrontation with Eddie by defending Rodolpho against Eddie's aggression. However, Marco's obsession with defending his — and by association his family's — honour causes his own destruction.

Love of place

Rodolpho and Marco speak very fondly of their homeland and to some extent appear to love it. Rodolpho loves America and the life it promises him.

Review your learning

- 1 Which of Miller's themes do you think is the most important one, and why?
- 2 Which of the play's themes do you think are particularly relevant to the world today?
- 3 Why do you think Miller was interested in the particular themes that the play explores? (Think about his personal experiences as well as his beliefs.)
- 4 Why do you think Miller chose to set the story of a man who had unnatural desires for his niece in a community like Red Hook?
- 5 How does Alfieri help us understand the themes of justice and the law? (Identify key places in the story.)

(See answers on p. 87.)



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