The Theme Of Conflict In Arthur Miller’s A View From The Bridge

Arthur Miller’s ‘A View From The Bridge’ uses the medium of a tragic drama to address the theme of conflict. This is principally expressed through the conflict between the protagonist, Eddie Carbone and the various characters in the play as well as Eddie’s internal conflicts which stem from his hamartia and tragic flaw: his persistent refusal to accept his unnatural feelings for his niece, Catherine. Additionally, Miller exacerbates conflict through the underlying themes of the play such as the law as opposed to justice and masculinity in contrast to femininity. As the play progresses, Miller chronicles the descent of the common man as conflict builds which leads to Eddie’s eventual tragic downfall.

Conflict is initially introduced to the audience through the difference between law and justice. The contrast between Eddie and Alfieri’s perception of law and justice is used by Miller to generate tension and conflict which ultimately leads to Eddie’s regression and nemesis. Alfieri perceives the law as being equal to justice and recognizes that it is ‘better to settle for half’. This is juxtaposed to Eddie’s Sicilian sense of justice where ‘all the law is not in a book’. Eddie believes in a multifaceted concept of justice which is echoed by the ideals of the Red Hook community. Here, the norm is to harbor illegal Italian immigrants and deem it morally right. Despite Eddie’s initial doubts of Rodolpho, even he ‘wouldn’t do nothin’ about that’, signifying that Eddie feels the beliefs of the community overrule the law. Notably, the anecdote at the start of the play where Beatrice discusses about Vinne Volzano who ‘snitched’ and was ‘spat on’ by his family foreshadows Eddie’s eventual conflict with his own conscience. On a larger scale, the conflict between law and justice is a reflection of the conflict that exists between the American and Italian ways of life.

Eddie is symbolic of the stereotypical male traits in a patriarchal society which is indicative of the norm in Italy. Eddie’s discomfort with Catherine’s job as a stenographer and her attire (high heels) which would be considered casual suggests this. Furthermore, Eddie’s controlling nature and refusal to ‘let her go’ is exhibited in the line ‘don’t aggravate me, Katie, you are walkin’ wavy’. The use of an imperative followed by an idiomatic expression embodies the inner conflict and struggles that Eddie experiences and his fear that Catherine will leave him for another man. Eddie refers to Catherine as ‘the Madonna type’ which is a biblical reference to the Virgin Mary who is a symbol of purity, chastity and virginity. This veiled insult illustrates his inner conflicted double standards of morality; he expects Catherine to embody these virtues while he harbors impure thoughts for her. Miller portrays Catherine to have taken the role of Eddie’s wife, Beatrice through the fact that she tends to him after work and ‘lights [his cigar] for [him]’. Here, the ‘cigar’ is a Freudian symbol of Eddie’s manhood and virility and displays his conflicted incestuous feelings for Catherine. Additionally, the stage directions state that Catherine ‘blows out the match just in time’ which could be symbolic of Catherine’s unreciprocated sexual feelings and the disparity between their feelings for each other. The stage directions then state that ‘[Eddie] puffs quietly’ which has connotations of a relaxed and calm state of mind which is ironic as Eddie’s mind is in an emotionally turbulent and conflicted state. In addition, Miller depicts Eddie’s hubris through the word ‘cigar’ is a symbol of power, wealth and success. Eddie’s exalted and lofty sense of importance in his carefully crafted world of desires for himself is a source of his inner dissonance and conflict.

Miller uses irony when Eddie cautions Catherine to not ‘burn’ herself for it is Eddie who is inwardly ‘burn[ing]’ with complex and irrational desires and emotions. Later in the play, Miller presents marital conflict through the friction between Eddie and Beatrice. In Act one, Beatrice laments the state of their marriage when she questions Eddie ‘When am I gonna be your wife again’. The interrogative and critical tone of the statement expresses her repressed thoughts and feelings of being neglected by Eddie in favor of Catherine. Miller uses anaphora when Beatrice repeats the phrase ‘three months’ to further reiterate her misery concerning her failing marriage yet. Throughout the play, she is aware of Eddie’s misplaced feelings for Catherine and understands his struggles. Beatrice and Alfieri act as voices of sanity in Eddie’s confused and muddled conscience and are honest enough to tell Eddie the truth - ‘You want somethin’ else, Eddie, and you can never have her!’. It could be argued that Beatrice epitomizes spousal loyalty because she stands by and supports Eddie throughout the play. Their conflict is the only conflict that is resolved in the end when Beatrice defends Eddie to Catherine and Eddie ‘dies in her arms’, calling her ‘My B!’. Another major conflict in the play is that between Eddie and Catherine’s lover, Rodolpho.

This conflict is an outward manifestation of Eddie’s inner conflict: his sexual feelings towards his niece. Catherine’s growing attraction towards Rodolpho triggers feelings of intense envy and jealousy in Eddie. Miller presents Rodolpho as being Eddie’s antithesis which further exacerbates their conflict. Eddie uses Rodolpho’s effeminate characteristics and traits that Eddie feels connote homosexuality such as the fact that ‘he can cook, he can sing, he could make dresses’ and his ‘blond hair’ to dehumanize Rodolpho and in the process come to terms with his own complex sexuality. Eddie calls him ‘weird’ and draws direct comparisons between himself and Rodolpho asserting that ‘I can’t cook, I can’t sing, I can’t make dresses’. These derogatory remarks illuminate the grander, more subtle theme of masculinity versus femininity and the irony that Catherine seems to be more attracted to Rodolpho’s effeminate traits than Eddie’s manly ones. As the play progresses, Eddie’s attempts to discredit Rodolpho become more explicit, shifting to physical conflict. Here, during a boxing lesson, Eddie slyly punches Rodolpho to belittle him and highlight his own traits of dominance and self-perceived masculinity. However, this works against Eddie he is forced to watch the symbolic ‘dance’ where Catherine indirectly chooses Rodolpho over Eddie. This ‘dance’ serves to further fuel Eddie’s insecurity and anger as the stage directions state that ‘he has bent the rolled paper and it suddenly tears in two’. In addition, Eddie’s desire to exert dominance is depicted in the scene where he forcibly kisses both Rodolpho and Catherine. This could be interpreted as Eddie releasing his repressed feelings as well as an act that suggests authority, which portrays Eddie’s inner conflicts as he fears losing power and Catherine.

Miller presents the theme of violence and retribution through the hostile conflict between Eddie and Rodolpho’s brother, Marco which stems from Rodolpho and Eddie’s conflicts’. This is primarily demonstrated in the play’s climax in Act one when Marco indirectly warns Eddie of the consequences of mistreating his brother Rodolpho. After Eddie ‘fails’ to ‘raise the chair’, the stage directions state that Marco ‘raise[s] the chair over his head’…’like a weapon’. The fact that Marco uses a chair from Eddie’s house and the simile comparing the ‘chair’ to ‘a weapon’ foreshadows Marco twisting Eddie’s blade on him at the end of the play. His demise had been foreshadowed by Alfieri who acts a chorus in the play. The stage directions note that ‘[Eddie’s] eyes were like tunnels’ which suggests his desperation, forlornness and fixation for Catherine; this simile shows the effect various conflicts have had on Eddie. Eddie’s actions in the play’s peripeteia shows the conflict between his personal vendetta and the code of the community. Despite Alfieri’s warning to ‘let [Catherine] go’ and that ‘he won’t have a friend in

the world', Eddie betrays his own code of honor when he contacts the immigration bureau. This turning point alludes to Alfieri's opening soliloquy as Eddie is 'powerless' to his desires and will go to any extent to stop Catherine and Rodolpho's marriage. The 'glow' of the 'phonebooth' is symbolic of his heightened feelings of distress and despair 'glow[ing]' in his mind and how he feels he has no choice which suggests that his inner conflicts have led to his downfall. This idea is reiterated at the climax at the end of the play, when Eddie's blade is twisted on himself which is a metaphor that his actions have caused his downfall.

In summation, Miller's characterization of Eddie and dramatic use of symbolism is vital in highlighting the internal and external conflicts Eddie experiences. By contemporizing the structure of a Greek tragedy and creating a character to embody the role of a tragic hero, Miller makes clear that the continual conflict Eddie undergoes is largely responsible for his nemesis. In my opinion, the more damaging outer conflicts result from Eddie's inability to resolve his own inner conflict and hubris.