A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller

Essay Title: How does Arthur Miller present Eddie Carbone as a tragic hero in ‘A View from the Bridge’?

Tragedy – the tragic hero (or protagonist, which means most important character/actor) starts off as a good person but he has a weakness, a ‘tragic flaw’ which causes him to act wrongly. The consequences of this wrong act destroy him. Some tragic figures learn their mistakes, suffer and die – enabling life to return to normal (eg Macbeth).

In Miller’s play Eddie Carbone is the tragic hero, whose flaw – his obsession and inappropriate love for his niece Catherine which leads to him doing anything to try and keep her, causes the tragedy and his own death. Eddie could be considered an Everyman – a modern hardworking man who cares for his family, rather than the traditional royal or warrior hero, is poorly educated but battles on in a violent neighbourhood. However, although he is an average man, that does not mean that every man is capable of incestuous thoughts or an inability to recognise and confront these desires. Instead Miller implies that Eddie is an average man whose flaw is either too much love, that is inappropriate and incestuous and/or a refusal to control and stop his behaviour. It is positive that he cares for his niece Catherine and wants a better life for her. However, his care for Catherine moves from a protective role to a sexual obsession which he cannot articulate or control. This obsession – or tragic flaw – causes him to betray relatives and others in the community – breaking the code of omerta – and so becoming ostracised from the society. Eventually, he who lives by the knife, dies by the knife but finally realises his mistake in the last few words that he says.

The key words in the essay question are how does … Miller present .. In your answer, you should try to explain (with examples) what makes Eddie a tragic hero; but also how the writer shows (presents) the character of Eddie to the audience. Throughout the play, ask yourself: how do we feel about Eddie at this point (admiration? disapproval? shock? pity?).

General points:

- Use PEE
- Back-up your points with quotes or evidence
- Include contextual and literary references such as:
  Setting;
  Why did Miller try and write a modern tragedy?
  Explore how Miller uses the structure of a Greek tragedy to convey the concept that Eddie Carbone is a tragic hero
  Include audience reaction – how does Miller portray the characters to change the audience’s sympathy, empathy or condemnation
Here are some suggestions for paragraphs. Do not follow these slavishly but make notes cover the areas. Include quotes to back up your points.

**Introduction:**

**WHY:** Why does Miller create a modern tragic hero? What is he suggesting about the society or the fundamental nature of mankind? Is this story of wider relevance or does it only reflect the obsessions of one man?

**HOW:** How does Miller use the conventions of Greek tragedy in his play. Start with examining Alfieri’s role as a character and also the chorus figure. What is his perspective? How does he present Eddie?

**Eddie as hero:** you need to explore how he is represented at various times in the play and how this relates or breaks/subverts the traditional structure of a tragic hero’s rise and downfall. Therefore, establish his positive qualities and also his potential failings before going on to explore in depth Miller’s use of symbolism, specific stage directions and the deteriorating conflict between him and the immigrants. This will include the changes that he goes through towards other characters such as Catherine, Beatrice, Alfieri as well as Marco and Rodolpho.

Explore the use of language – and indeed Eddie’s inarticulacy.

How are we meant to view Eddie? What did Miller say? How does Miller generate sympathy, disgust or hostility towards him? Should he be punished? Does his punishment reflect the nature of his crime? Incest is condemned both by the law and the unwritten natural law which is designed to protect the whole of society from unnatural desires.

**Eddie’s defence:** can we understand his concerns over Rodolpho’s sexuality and motives – remember it is the 1950s? Does Catherine tempt him and flirt with him inappropriately? Is Beatrice not a real wife to him?

**Miller’s use of settings, stage directions and symbolism.** Significance of Red Hook and the Statue of Liberty? The clash of cultures – Italian and Sicilian codes versus the law in America.

**Structure:** play in is two acts – different perspectives. Alfieri as chorus figure. Use of Bolzano to foreshadow Eddie’s betrayal.

**Themes: Law, justice and omerta – honour and revenge.** These people avoid the law preferring to settle their disputes according to their customs – but this is not settling for half. What is Miller suggesting? A clash between old silent adversaries – Marco and Eddie? A better way of dealing with conflict? The need to move away from violence and towards reconciliation.

**Societal and cultural influences:** This play breaks from the melodramatic sagas and musicals that were on Broadway. He uses real settings and real issues to explore the old theme of tragedy. How was it received? Is it still relevant today? Does it work?
Use the quotes below to show some of the character traits

**Eddie's good qualities:**
- hard-working - *I took out of my own mouth to give to her* (E)
- loved and admired by his family (Beatrice and Catherine) - *You’re an angel! God’ll bless you* (B)
- proud of his niece - *Sure she’s the best/You look like a Madonna* (E)
- has respect in his community - *He was as good a man as he had to be in a life that was hard* (A)/Believe me, Eddie, you got a lotta credit comin’ to you (L)
- gives hospitality to his wife’s cousins - *It’s an honour* (E)
- friendly to the immigrants - *You’re welcome Marco, we got plenty of room here* (E)
- believes in loyalty and justice - *Tell her about Vinny* (E)/just don’t you be the one who told [about the immigrants] (E)
- knows the importance of trust - *You can quicker get back a million dollars that was stole than a word that you gave away* [note: this make it so much worse when Eddie betrays Marco and Rodolpho to the immigration authorities]

**Eddie’s ‘tragic flaws’**
- has inappropriate (unlawful) feelings for Catherine – *too much love for the niece* (A)/When I think of that guy laying his hands on her … it’s eating me out (E)/*You want somethin’ else, Eddie, and you can never have her!* (B)
- obsessive concern for her way of dressing – *I don’t like the looks they’re giving you in the candy store/What’s the high heels for Garbo?* (E)
- jealous of any potential suitors – *Listen she’ll be with a lotta plumbers* (E)/puts his dirty filthy hands on her (E)/*You’re just jealous* (B)/Was there ever any fella he liked for you? (B)
- interferes, tries to stop her getting a job – *You gonna keep her in the house all her life?* (B)/*That ain’t what I wanted though* (E)
- treats Catherine like a child – I guess I just never figured one thing … that you would ever grow up (E)
- too intimate with Catherine (and she is unaware of this) – *You’re a grown woman and you’re in the same house as a grown man* (B)/You still walk around in front of him in your slip (B)

Other quotations that show the uneasy relationship between Eddie and Catherine: - *And it’s tough to love a doll that’s not your own* (from the song Paper Doll, sung by Rodolpho); *his face puffed with trouble … the room dies* (stage directions as Eddie watches Catherine with Rodolpho); *His eyes were like tunnels* (A) –does this suggest Eddie has a narrow view of life?

**Ways in which he acts wrongly**
• tries to discredit Rodolpho as his ‘rival’ – He’s only bowin’ to his passport/he’s a punk … like a goddam thief (E)
• ignores his wife Beatrice’s advice – When are you going to leave her alone? (B)
• ignores Alfieri’s advice – You cannot stop it/The law is only a word for what has a right to happen (A)
• goes against the code of honour – In my country he would be dead now (M)
• betrays his relatives – He degraded my brother, My blood (M)
• is self-deluded – She can’t marry you, can she? (A)
• repels the audience by kissing both Catherine and Rodolpho

The consequences of his actions
• destroys the happy domestic scene we see at the start
• alienates his wife and niece – I think I can’t stay here no more (C)/You walk out that door … (E threatens B)
• neglects his wife, rejects her love – when am I gonna be a wife again, Eddie? (B)
• ‘challenges’ Marco, who in turn shows his strength by lifting a chair with one hand
• loses his respect in the community/shunned by neighbours - I want my respect!/Wipin’ the neighbourhood with my name like a dirty rag! (E)
• goes against his own code of honour – My God, what did you do? (B)
• may have caused the death of Marco’s son because Marco will be deported so can’t earn money for his sick child – You will kill a family! (B)
• Catherine and Rodolpho’s marriage is brought forward so he can begin to apply for citizenship
• DIES – ironically Eddie is stabbed by his own knife, emphasising the theme of self-destruction (the tragic hero’s weakness leads to his own downfall)