The Ambiguity of Belonging: Guiding questions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gran Torino | Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter |
| In what ways do the characters “belong” (or "not belong") at the beginning? |
| **Walt:** * lonely old man without any really close connection to other people: estranged from his sons and their families, no real friends (only superficial bantering with Martin at the barber shop / cracking jokes with his drinking buddies 🡺 stereotypical "hard man" behaviour)
* seems to be the typical representative of an American blue-collar worker: house in a (formerly) white neighbourhood, family, no financial hardship, job in a traditional industry (Ford Motor Company), proud of his work ethics, a symbol of Detroit's glorious past, self-reliant, active
* part of the Polish-Catholic community
* realises that he does not belong 🡺 "the last of his kind" in his street

**Thao and Sue:*** raised by a single mother and grandparents, part of a large family
* part of the Hmong culture

**Thao:*** does not want to belong to his cousin's gang, feels under pressure
* no friends, no relationship to a girl
* no clear plans for the future
* he does not have a feeling of belonging

**Sue:*** part of American society: goes to school, meets American friends
* strong feeling of belonging, well-integrated
 | **Larry:*** no close connection to any other people, only a part of the local community because of his parental roots and his garage
* apart from his ill mother, 'belonging' seems to be limited to a place (garage, house) and animals or things (chicken, tools, books) but not to people

**Silas:*** a colleague in the police department and therefore accepted by the community
* introverted but well-liked colleague
* has a girlfriend, Angie
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gran Torino | Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter |
| What is ambiguous about their way of belonging? |
| **Walt:*** a member of white mainstream American society but feels estranged from his neighbourhood because of the ethnic changes there
* part of white mainstream US society but his old job in production, his past, his values make him look like a relic of something that has long since disappeared
* a father, but without any emotional relationship to his sons (and their families)
* a part of Detroit's Polish-Catholic community, yet no real emotional connection to Christianity (only through his deceased wife)
* during the Korea War he killed people: believes that he has sinned, haunted by his guilt, yet also seems to be somewhat proud of his service / has kept his old weapons

**Thao:*** a decent young boy who feels compelled to act badly because of peer pressure (wish to belong vs. his own values and ideals)
* caught in the middle of nowhere: isn't accepted as a man in his Hmong family AND would be considered a failure in US society

**Sue:*** deeply rooted in the Hmong culture but also perfectly at ease with the American way of life
 | **Larry:*** has always been a member of Chabot's community but lives as a recluse, is shunned by the townspeople
* grew up in a middle-class family but has economic problems now
* longs for a friend and company but remains passive

**Silas:*** racial issues: as the son of a single black mother he was formerly excluded from society
* uprooted and displaced more than once
* seems to be an active member of the community (job, hobby, Angie) but shuts himself off emotionally as soon as relationships become closer 🡺 distanced relationship with his girlfriend
* as a police officer he is supposed to uphold the law 🡸🡺 in reality he is a liar (by omission?)
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gran Torino | Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter |
| How do they manage to change things? |
| **Walt:*** watches Sue and Thao's ways of behaviour and their situations
* compares the Lor family with his own family
* realises different ways of his and other people's behaviour as helpful or not for others
* reflects on his (former) duty as a soldier and his duties as a man today
* questions his prejudices and moves beyond them
* opens up and reaches out to other people (the Lor family, Father Janovich)
* gives up his real family in favour of the Lors (cf. his bequests)
* accepts Sue's quality as a role model
* wants to change life by mentoring Thao
* as a war veteran: faces and accepts his past

**Thao:*** takes responsibility, accepts that he will have to take care of his life himself
* stands up for his ideas
* develops plans for the future
* becomes active in their pursuit

**Sue:*** does not really change anything
* her optimism comes to an abrupt end when she is raped by her cousin's gang
 | **Larry:*** tries to break free from his solitary life by communicating with others and reaching out to them
* realises that Silas has failed him as a friend because he didn't help him but lied about Cindy's disappearance
* realises his passive behaviour as purposeless
* becomes active
* faces reality

**Silas:*** realises that the past influences the present and his relations to other people
* opens up to Angie, starts telling the truth about his past (Cindy as his girlfriend; Larry as his half-brother and childhood friend)
* by seeking to renew the friendship with Larry he tries to make amends for the damage done in the past
* takes responsibility
* communicates with others
* bonds with people
* accepts his guilt
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gran Torino | Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter |
| Are they successful in the end? Have they achieved a sense of belonging? |
| **Walt:*** yes from a psychological point of view: he is no longer the grumpy, distanced, arrogant cynic as at the beginning of the film. He opens up, finds a new family and purpose in life, becomes a role model to Thao.
* no: sacrifices his life (but has succeeded in removing the gang from Sue's and Thao's lives)

**Thao:*** yes: shows stability and support for his sister and family, has connected to mainstream US society, has begun to actively shape his life

**Sue:*** no: from the optimistic, sensible and life-affirming young woman to a struggling, broken girl
 | **Larry:*** regarding Wallace: yes
* regarding Silas: partly, as the future is unknown (carburettor as a symbol of starting friendship?)

**Silas:*** regarding Angie: yes 🡺 he has learned that a relationship requires honesty and openness
* regarding Larry: partly, as the future is unknown (carburettor as a symbol of a starting friendship?)
 |

Other ideas to consider:

* housing: Walt's immaculate garden; well-maintained house vs. the Lors' wild garden; neglected, crowded house
* mobility: Walt's two Ford cars vs. the Lors' dependency on public transport or family's help
* work and education: Walt and his (former) skilled job vs. casual jobs in the Lor family; Sue as the educated school girl
* free-time activities: Walt reads newspapers and repairs household items vs. Thao as the silent, helpful boy without any hobbies but doing household chores
* religion: Walt's reluctance towards the Christian church vs. the Lors' open display of religion and culture