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