

# The Ambiguity of Belonging: Guiding questions



Gran Torino	Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter
<b>In what ways do the characters “belong” (or “not belong”) at the beginning?</b>	
<p><b>Walt:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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)</li> <li>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</li> <li>part of the Polish-Catholic community</li> <li>realises that he does not belong → "the last of his kind" in his street</li> </ul> <p><b>Thao and Sue:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>raised by a single mother and grandparents, part of a large family</li> <li>part of the Hmong culture</li> </ul> <p><b>Thao:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not want to belong to his cousin's gang, feels under pressure</li> <li>no friends, no relationship to a girl</li> <li>no clear plans for the future</li> <li>he does not have a feeling of belonging</li> </ul> <p><b>Sue:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>part of American society: goes to school, meets American friends</li> <li>strong feeling of belonging, well-integrated</li> </ul>	<p><b>Larry:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no close connection to any other people, only a part of the local community because of his parental roots and his garage</li> <li>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</li> </ul> <p><b>Silas:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a colleague in the police department and therefore accepted by the community</li> <li>introverted but well-liked colleague</li> <li>has a girlfriend, Angie</li> </ul>

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<b>What is ambiguous about their way of belonging?</b>	
<p><b>Walt:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a member of white mainstream American society but feels estranged from his neighbourhood because of the ethnic changes there</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• a father, but without any emotional relationship to his sons (and their families)</li> <li>• a part of Detroit's Polish-Catholic community, yet no real emotional connection to Christianity (only through his deceased wife)</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul> <p><b>Thao:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a decent young boy who feels compelled to act badly because of peer pressure (wish to belong vs. his own values and ideals)</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul> <p><b>Sue:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deeply rooted in the Hmong culture but also perfectly at ease with the American way of life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Larry:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has always been a member of Chabot's community but lives as a recluse, is shunned by the townspeople</li> <li>• grew up in a middle-class family but has economic problems now</li> <li>• longs for a friend and company but remains passive</li> </ul> <p><b>Silas:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• racial issues: as the son of a single black mother he was formerly excluded from society</li> <li>• uprooted and displaced more than once</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• as a police officer he is supposed to uphold the law ↔ in reality he is a liar (by omission?)</li> </ul>

**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

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<b>Are they successful in the end? Have they achieved a sense of belonging?</b>	
<p><b>Walt:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• no: sacrifices his life (but has succeeded in removing the gang from Sue's and Thao's lives)</li> </ul> <p><b>Thao:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• yes: shows stability and support for his sister and family, has connected to mainstream US society, has begun to actively shape his life</li> </ul> <p><b>Sue:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no: from the optimistic, sensible and life-affirming young woman to a struggling, broken girl</li> </ul>	<p><b>Larry:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regarding Wallace: yes</li> <li>• regarding Silas: partly, as the future is unknown (carburettor as a symbol of starting friendship?)</li> </ul> <p><b>Silas:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regarding Angie: yes → he has learned that a relationship requires honesty and openness</li> <li>• regarding Larry: partly, as the future is unknown (carburettor as a symbol of a starting friendship?)</li> </ul>

### 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