

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?	
<p>Walt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <p>Thao and Sue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> raised by a single mother and grandparents, part of a large family part of the Hmong culture <p>Thao:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <p>Sue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> part of American society: goes to school, meets American friends strong feeling of belonging, well-integrated 	<p>Larry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <p>Silas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a colleague in the police department and therefore accepted by the community introverted but well-liked colleague has a girlfriend, Angie

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What is ambiguous about their way of belonging?	
<p>Walt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>Thao:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>Sue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deeply rooted in the Hmong culture but also perfectly at ease with the American way of life 	<p>Larry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>Silas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

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Are they successful in the end? Have they achieved a sense of belonging?	
<p>Walt:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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) <p>Thao:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes: shows stability and support for his sister and family, has connected to mainstream US society, has begun to actively shape his life <p>Sue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no: from the optimistic, sensible and life-affirming young woman to a struggling, broken girl 	<p>Larry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regarding Wallace: yes • regarding Silas: partly, as the future is unknown (carburettor as a symbol of starting friendship?) <p>Silas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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