

## **The Redeemer Figure in Clint Eastwood Films and its Ideological Implications**

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### **Abstract**

*A dominant theme in Hollywood films is the theme of redemption that is conveyed with multiple symbolic clues intertwined with filmic storytelling. While addressing the theme of redemption in films, a figure that comes forward is the redeemer figure that draws parallel with the biblical figure of Christ. The allegorical Redeemer Figure is portrayed as a saviour who may atone for, restore, reform or liberate often with acts of violence. This paper explores the use of the character trope of the Redeemer Figure built with symbolic Christian imagery often used by Clint Eastwood in his films to construct the narrative of redemption. There are various techniques that western filmmakers use to draw this parallel between their characters and the Redeemer Figure. This paper will specifically study and compare the implementation of the imagery to build this redeeming Christ figure in two films directed by Clint Eastwood: *Mystic River* (2003), and *Gran Torino* (2008). The paper focusses on the religious dimension of the selected secular films, carrying out a contextual analysis of the religious images and motifs used in their film language. The research concludes that these films communicate divergent ideologies that helps in understanding how the films begin a theological conversation with its viewers.*

**Keywords:** *Clint Eastwood, Redeemer Figure, Film and religion, Christ Figure, Theology of Redemption*

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### **Introduction**

Visuals are key contributors in the language of film and give significant meaning to a scene adding depth of meaning. Visual Imagery, generated with a combination of symbols and familiar images, is vastly used in films as they support its narrative. A good filmmaker challenges their viewers to interpret this visual language that they use, which encourages the viewers to

participate and engage with the themes presented in the films.

Christian imagery is often used by Hollywood filmmakers to construct the narrative of redemption and build a Redeemer Figure. In theology the concept of redemption addresses the need for humanity to be redeemed and the way God redeems, in the Christian context Jesus Christ is the redeemer figure. The theme of redemption and

the redeemer figure are often found in films that are either secular or non-secular.

A Redeemer Figure, running parallel to the biblical figure of Christ, is portrayed as a saviour who may atone for, restore, reform or liberate. Theologians have located these Redeemer Figures in various Hollywood productions like *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *The Lion King* (1994), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Superman* (1978) to name a few. The narrative of a redeemer is found to be a dominant theme in many western films probably because of Judaism's and Christianity's influence on Western cultures (Marsh 94).

With this use of the redemptive Christfigure, more secular films attempt to begin a theological dialogue with the audiences who consume it. Colleen McDannell in his book, *Catholics in the Movies*, says that,

“Theologians assume that the Christian story of salvation has universal appeal and so can appear -typically unintentionally- in movies.... Films become the modern way of telling parables that relate to Christian values and thus push us to think through the nature of God, the problem of evil, and the question of salvation.”

The technique often used in these films to form the Christ figure is by drawing allusions between characters in the film and the biblical Jesus Christ. Some scholars have composed specific criteria in order to establish the existence of Christ-figures in films. Some of the primary characteristics that are used to identify the Christ figure include “triumphalism”, “a willing sacrifice”, “cruciform pose”, “cross associations”, “holy exclamations”etc. (Kozlovic). Kozlovic lists out twenty-five such structural characteristics in his study as a methodology to help in identifying the cinematic Christ-figure.

Clint Eastwood, the American film actor, director, producer, and composer, also explicitly uses religious visual imagery that compels the viewer make a connection with what is framed and Christianity. On close reading of Clint Eastwood films, Christian symbols are found to be placed discreetly in crucial scenes which are often co-opted with violence. To get a better understanding of how Clint Eastwood uses Christian imagery author will critically study and compare the implementation of Christian symbols to build a Redeemer figure in two films directed by Eastwood: *Mystic River* (2003) and *Gran Torino* (2008). The focus will primarily be on the use of Christian visual imagery used to build the redeemer figure and the possible ideological implications of these films.

### **Redeemer figure and Christian imagery in Clint Eastwood films**

Symbols of Christianity in Eastwood's films are repeatedly put together with scenes of violence. These scenes compel us to reflect on the relevance and meaning of these images in association with Christianity and the attempt to build the Redeemer Figure. We see in his film, *The Gauntlet*, a billboard which says 'God gives eternal life' while the policemen are shooting Eastwood. In *Dirty Harry*, Harry Callahan (Eastwood) is beaten beneath a huge cross in a park, and behind the wounded vicious killer Scorpio is a cross of lime. In the article *Religion and violence in Popular Film* Bryan Stone writes,

“When religion is portrayed in connection with violence, it is rarely taken seriously as a motivating force for rejecting violence. On the contrary, while religion can play a chaplaincy or sanctuary role on screen for victims of violence, it typically serves either as a force for justifying and legitimating violence or as a device for enhancing the entertainment value of violence.”

We will now look at the Christian imagery specifically used in the films selected for this study: *Mystic River* (2003) and *Gran Torino* (2008).

*Mystic River*, a mystery drama directed by Clint Eastwood is based on the novel by Dennis Lehane which is set in an Irish catholic neighbourhood in Boston. The film begins with three friends, Jimmy, Sean, and Dave, playing street hockey. Later men claiming to be police, abduct and sexually abuse Dave until he escapes several days later. We next meet these childhood friends as adults who have drifted apart but are reunited after a brutal murder takes place. Reformed convict Jimmy Markum and his wife learn that their teenage daughter, Katie, has been murdered. Sean is the detective assigned to the case, Dave becomes a suspect along with Katie's boyfriend.

Celeste, Dave's wife, herself suspects that her husband had murdered Katie because the night Katie was murdered Dave returned home with blood all over him. He tells his wife that he might have killed a mugger. Celeste does not trust her husband and tells Jimmy about it. Jimmy, to avenge his daughter's death, approaches Dave and demands a confession from him. Jimmy promises him that he will let Dave go if he confesses, Dave to save his life makes a false confession. Despite the promise made, Jimmy kills Dave and dumps his body into the river. Jimmy later realises that he has killed the wrong man, that it was Katie's boyfriend's friends who had

murdered her. We learn at the end of movie that Dave did kill someone, but it was a paedophile with a child prostitute.

We find two very striking images of Christianity used in the film *Mystic River*: a ring with a cross worn by the abductor in the beginning of the film and the tattoo of the cross on Jimmy's back towards the end of the film. In the first sequence of *Mystic River*, when the two abductors take Dave into their car. One of the abductors turns around to smile at Dave, when he puts his hand over the seat we see him wearing a gold ring with a cross. The other image of Christianity is that of Jimmy standing shirtless after he has murdered Dave, he is standing in his bedroom and we see a large Christian cross tattooed on his back that extends from his neck to the middle of his back. Here, the viewer might be tempted to assume that the bearers of the Christian symbol are redeeming Christ figures based on the structural characteristics used to identify the cinematic Christ figure. But the symbols used here are empty as they are worn by the victimisers and these characters do not bring redemption in any form.



*Figure 1 The abductor wearing the ring with a cross (Source: Screenshot from Mystic River, 2003)*



*Figure 2 Tattooed cross on Jimmy's back (Source: Screenshot from Mystic River, 2003)*

The symbols of Christianity in this film are explicitly co-opted with the evil doer. Jimmy with the tattooed cross on his back is a paradoxical Christ figure, who is suffering from the guilt of having killed the wrong man. He bears the Christian symbol of redemption but has not attained redemption by the sacrifice he has made. Yet, his wife Annabeth perceives him as a divine figure who exceptionally loves his family and has the right to do all that he pleases and rule the town. He bears the Christian

symbol of redemption but he is the evil doer here, not the one who brings redemption to the characters. Symbols of Christianity have been adopted here but it is devoid of the essential Christian message of redemptive sacrifices and love, this points to the 'hypocritical religiosity' of these characters. As Bryan Stone writes,

“Almost as prevalent as portrayals of religion supporting righteous or redemptive violence are portrayals of religion as the fountain of immoral and corrupt violence. It is not always clear, however, whether religion in such instances is to be taken as inherently leading to such violence or whether such violence is really an abuse or distortion of religion. Much is left to the subjectivity of the viewer. The *hypocrite* is one of the portrayals, it is a character who presents a socially prominent, religious façade to the public, but whose religiosity is actually a thin veil covering his or her immorality which leads ultimately to violent or injurious behaviour.”

Contrastingly, the film *Gran Torino* has the central figure Walt Kowalski being closer to the cinematic Redeemer Figure. In the film *Gran Torino* directed by Clint

Eastwood he plays the character of Walt Kowalski, a racist Korean War veteran living in a crime-ridden deteriorating neighbourhood. Walt is a misanthrope with many prejudices in the gradual process of being redeemed. As viewers we are repulsed by Walt's racism but we see that his own prejudice are challenged when a Hmong teen, Tao, from his neighbourhood attempts to steal his prized Gran Torino. Tao attempts to steal his Gran Torino as part of a gang initiation rite and Walt catches him in his act. Later, the Tao's mother forces him to do odd jobs at Kowalski's house as an act of penance. In this process, Walt and Tao gradually connect with each other and develop a relationship.

Meanwhile, the trouble caused by the gang in the locality was increasing day by day. Once while Tao was going to work he was confronted by the gang and was physically assaulted. Angered by this, Walt goes up to the gang members' house and beats them up, warning them not to cause any trouble again. Later, the gang members have a drive-by shoot at Tao's home and rape his sister Sue. Eastwood in an attempt to redeem the family and their community from the trouble caused by the gang, provokes the gang members to shoot him down when he was unarmed and with the attention of the people in the

neighbourhood, so that the gang members would be arrested for their crime.

The story of Walt offering a “willing sacrifice” as an ultimate act of love for his neighbour is closer to the image of the salvific biblical Christ. Though we do not see Walt bearing any explicit visible signs of Christianity, the visual imagery used to portray the character of Walt as a Redeemer Figure can be seen in the “cruciform pose” used. Towards the end of the film, when Walt is shot down by the gang members he falls down on the ground with his arms stretched out and the body straight, bearing close resemblance to the image of Christ nailed to the cross. There is a close up of his stretched out arms where one can see a little trail of blood flowing out and his cigarette lighter in his hands. Earlier his son had referred to it as coffin nails. Thus, symbolically suggesting that Eastwood's hands were nailed.



*Figure 3 Walt Kowalski after he is shot dead (Source: Screenshot from Gran Torino, 2008)*



*Figure 4 Walt Kowalski with stretched arms and trail of blood (Source: Screenshot from Gran Torino, 2008)*

The character of Clint Eastwood in the film is the closest to the Christ figure. Christ figures are martyrs, sacrificing themselves for causes larger than themselves. Though Walt despises Christian beliefs and sacraments, his final deed literally fulfils the Christian teaching of love: “There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (Gospel of John 15:13). An article by John McEver, *The Messianic Figure in Film: Christology beyond the Biblical Epic*, says that,

“With the decline and fall of the religious epic, Christology (the study of the person of Christ) in film has moved into genres outside of the biblical spectacular. What has proven more successful is the Messianic Figure: a formula in which the central character is a non-conformist or unlikely redeemer who transforms lives and ultimately undergoes martyrdom. Christology has managed to move into genres

outside of the biblical spectacular, both intentionally and unintentionally.”

Walt is one such character, he was indifferent to the people around him, he was not close to his own sons, he was a racist, and a man who has killed people at war. He was, as Sue said, a 'White Devil'. But Sue also called him a 'Good Man'; he turned out to be a saviour figure- saved both Tao and Sue when they were troubled by the gangs in the locality and also becoming Tao's role model.

### **Ideological implications**

Clint Eastwood has made use of religious Christian imagery quite contrastingly in the two of the selected films: *Mystic River* and *Gran Torino*. He uses some of the structural characteristics of cross associations, cruciform pose, willing sacrifice and holy exclamations to construct the redeemer figure. But as Kozlovic prescribes, these symbols do not directly point to an obvious Christian message. We are then to go beyond a simplistic parallel drawn between the Christ figure and characters in the film and approach it as “a two-fold dialogue is allowed to emerge between theology and film” (Deacy). For this the Christ figure has to be seen as the one who begins a theological conversation, rather than the one who simply makes a Christian story accessible to the viewer.

With this lens when we look at the two films at hand, we can decipher that though both the films use Christian imagery, Eastwood does not seem concerned with the external aspect of religion or its rituals. An indication would be the priests in his films who are representative of organised religion, they are concerned with the external, and thus he despises them. In *Mystic River* the ones who bear the cross are also followers of this organised religion and do not bring any form of redemption. In contrast in *Gran Torino*, the true act of Christian redemption comes from the one who is seemingly outside the structure who does not bear the cross, but symbolically becomes the Christ or the redeemer figure. Even though these films talk about faith they reject the external representations of it. In his disregard and rejection of the external symbols of religion, he also seems to be critiquing the hypocrisy of the ones who carry a distorted perception of Christianity and use religion to veil their immoral deeds.

### **Conclusion**

Various symbols and familiar images are used as vehicles in building the redeemer narrative in Clint Eastwood films to form an ideology. The use of religious visual images and symbols in Clint Eastwood films prompts the viewer to make a perceptive connection between the events

portrayed and Christianity. The Christian imagery is used to substantiate storytelling and filmic language to build the redeemer figure. The redeemer figure in Clint Eastwood films is the one who embodies the message of Christ with their acts of love and not the one who simply bears external symbols or is a strict follower

of organised religion. The allusions of the Christ figure in Clint Eastwood films and the use of various Christian symbols become a modern way of telling Christian stories, transcending cinematic text and beginning a dialogue between the film and the viewer.



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