

Using Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* to Teach Narrative Theory



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Definitions



- “One of the most important observations to come out of narratology is that narrative itself is a deep structure quite independent of its medium.”
- -- Seymour Chatman, “What Novels Can Do that Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)”

Why use film?



- “Each medium has its own properties . . . and intelligent film view and criticism, like intelligent reading, needs to understand and respect both the limitations these create and also the triumphs they invite.”
- --Seymour Chatman, “What Novels Can Do that Film Can’t (and Vice Versa)”

Why use *Gran Torino*?



- **Stock stories**

- “It is not an exaggeration to say that Eastwood’s whole meaning as western protagonist . . . is based on a repudiation of the naïve cowboy hero. . . . The transcendent Eastwood westerner is distinguished by ruthlessness rather than pity; vindictiveness rather than generosity; cold-blooded and indiscriminate rather than reluctant and selective violence; demonic rather than redemptive overtones.”
- -- William Beard, *Persistence of Double Vision: Essays on Clint Eastwood*, 27.

Iconic Eastwood Persona



- Solid
- Self-reliant
- Mysterious

- “possesses . . . an absolute mastery of violence; he is supreme and terrible in combat, seeming to carry some talismanic invincibility, some mark of a higher power.”
- -- William Beard, *Persistence of Double Vision*, 1.

Aspects of Narrative Theory



CHARACTER
SETTING
SEQUENCE
TIME
PLOT
COHERENCE

Character



- 1. Relationship between the characters
- 2. Individual features: looks, character, psychological qualities, and past.

- --Mieke Bal, *Narratology*

Setting



- In *Gran Torino*, the setting is Highland Park, Michigan, in a neighborhood that had been populated by white working class families and is now inhabited by poor Asian immigrants.

Sequence



- **Limitless ways to arrange the pieces of the story, depending on how the writer/filmmaker wants to shape the story.**
- **Two possible techniques shown in the film:**
 - Use of parallelism
 - Convergent narrative structures

Time



- **Chronological order and anachrony (chronological deviations):**
 - Difficulty of bringing together narrative threads to create a coherent unity “may create the need to refer back or point ahead.”
 - --Mieke Bal, *Narratology*, 82.

Time



Narrative levels: primary and secondary time

Secondary time involves referring to an event in the past in direct discourse.

- **Mieke Bal, *Narratology*,**

Time (cont.)



I'm in the hospital.

The others are also injured. That's why they don't come to take me home.

Doctors and nurses keep coming in to examine me. They tell me what happened – we crashed into a tree. It was a serious accident. These words stick in my head.

--from *Something Very Sorry*, quoted by Mieke Bal,
Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.

Plot Structure



- Initial steady state
 - That gets disrupted by a Trouble
 - Evoking efforts at redress or transformation
 - So that the steady state is restored or a new (transformed) steady state is created
 - Coda
-
- Anthony Amsterdam & Jerome Bruner, *Minding the Law*.

Plot



- “At a certain point in narrative, our sense of linear continuity changes perspective and we see design or unifying structure.”
- Northrup Frye et al., *Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications*, 7-8.

Plot (cOnt.)



- “Any narrative telling presupposes an end that will transform its apparently random details ‘as annunciations, as promises’ of what is to come, and that what-is-to-come transforms because it gives meaning to, makes significant the details as leading to the end.”
- --Elizabeth Fajans and Mary R. Falk, *Untold Stories: Restoring Narrative to Pleading Practice*, 15 *Legal Writing* 3 (quoting Peter Brooks)

Narrative Coherence



- Internal consistency – “how well the parts of the story fit together
- Completeness – “how adequate the sum total of the parts of the story seems.”
- J. Christopher Rideout, “Storytelling, Narrative Rationality, and Legal Persuasion,” 14 *Legal Writing* 53.

Stock Story Revisited



**HOW DOES THE ENDING OF *GRAN TORINO*
PROVIDE NARRATIVE COHERENCE?**

**HOW DOES THE STOCK STORY OF THE
ICONIC EASTWOOD PERSONA REINFORCE
THE MAIN THEME OF THE MOVIE?**