



Studia
Filmoznawcze
33
Wrocław 2012

Łukasz A. Plesnar

Jagiellonian University

THE FATHER FIGURE IN CLINT EASTWOOD'S FILMS

Mothers give our spirit warmth, while fathers – light.
Jean-Paul Sartre

Few commentators on Clint Eastwood's oeuvre have noted that many of his films include the motif of a family. The family is usually incomplete and/or dysfunctional, sometimes even pathological¹. We encounter representatives of such families in, for example, *A Perfect World* (1993), *Absolute Power* (1997), *Blood Work* (2002), *Mystic River* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *Changeling* (2008), *Gran Torino* (2008) and *Hereafter* (2011).

In patriarchal cultures the most important family member is the father. He is the "lord of the house" and derives his superior, decision-making position from the symbolism of God the Father, thanks to which he gets the attribute of power almost automatically. Of course, through references to the New Testament the father emerges not only as a despot and great controller with the right to administer punishment, but also as a carer, capable of forgiveness and mercy. This last quality is best seen in the prodigal son parable², in which the word "mercy" is not explicitly mentioned, but in which the very essence of mercy is shown particularly clearly.

¹ The distinction between dysfunctional and pathological families is a matter of convention and degree. Dysfunctions and pathologies in families can be divided into three categories, which define and differentiate parents' behaviour. These categories are: compulsive behaviour (addiction to alcohol, medications, drugs as well as obsessions), physical violence (beating, sexual abuse) and emotional violence (emotional blackmail and emotional rejection). In the case of dysfunctionality, there is also physical and/or mental disability). See e.g. F. Adamski, *Rodzina: Wymiar społeczno-kulturowy*, Kraków 2002; and M. Ziemska, *Rodzina a osobowość*, Warsaw 1997.

² Luke 15:11–32.

The figure of the father is thus characterised by a kind of duality. This duality is also stressed by representatives of psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud, through Melanie Klein to Jacques Lacan. To simplify greatly, we could say that – according to psychoanalysts – the child must both love and hate the father. On the one hand, he is the most perfect of beings, i.e. worthy of love by all means, but on the other – he limits the working of drives and thus the connection between the child and the mother. This contradiction is always present in people's life. The figure of the father functions both as an ideal and a punishing subject, representing law, culture and language. As Michel Foucault notes,

Consequently, the father separates; that is, he is the one who protects, when, in his proclamation of the Law, he links space, rules and language within a single and major experience. At a stroke, he creates the distance along which will develop the scansion of presences and absences, the speech whose initial form is based on constraints and, finally, the relationship of the signifier to the signified which not only gives rise to the structure of language, but also to the exclusion and symbolic transformation of repressed material³.

In Eastwood's films the father figure functions primarily as a symbol of care, protection, safety and good advice, but also as a role model enabling the "child" to build a new, healthy identity. In all this, the "father" is rarely an unequivocally positive figure; often he is a "prodigal father", who treats his "fatherhood" as a compensation for, redemption of old sins.

The protagonists in Eastwood's films (played by the director himself) are sometimes real fathers, but their relationships with their children are not the best. In *Unforgiven* (1992) William Munny leaves his little son and daughter (Shane Meier and Aline Levasseur) for a few weeks, tempted by the reward offered by prostitutes from Big Whiskey for killing two cowboys who have disfigured their friend. In *Absolute Power* Luther Whitney, a burglar and thief, cannot win the approval of his daughter Kate (Laura Linney) because of his criminal past and many years spent in prison. In *Million Dollar Baby* Frankie Dunn, a boxing coach, is completely ignored by his daughter; every week he sends her letters which return unopened. We do not know what happened in the past and why the family bond in Frankie's case was broken. In *Gran Torino* Walt Kowalski realises after his wife's death that he has little in common with his sons (Brian Haley and Brian Howe) and grandchildren.

In two of these films (*Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino*) the characters played by Eastwood find surrogate objects for their fatherly instincts. There is a similar, though not identical, situation in *A Perfect World*. These three works will be the subject of my analysis.

Let us look at the initial sequence of *A Perfect World*, a film the action of which takes place in Texas in November 1963, shortly before the assassination of Presi-

³ M. Foucault, "The Father's 'No'", [in:] *idem, Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. J.D. Faubion, The New Press 1999, pp. 15-16.

dent John Fitzgerald Kennedy in Dallas. We see Gladys Perry (Jennifer Griffin), a single mother belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses, who – faithful to the tenets of her religion – forbids her three children, Phillip (T.J. Lowther), Naomi (Leslie Flowers) and Ruth (Belinda Flowers), to take part in Halloween games; she also chases away their peers asking for sweets with the traditional formula of “trick or treat”⁴. These shots, showing the sadness of Gladys' children alienated from their peers, are interspersed with pictures of Robert “Butch” Haynes (Kevin Costner) and his psychopathic friend Terry Rugh (Keith Szarabajka) escaping from the Huntsville prison, where they have been serving long sentences. The message of this sequence, which uses parallel editing, is clear: for Perry's children, especially the 8-year-old Phillip, home is a kind of prison. This happens because of their strict, oppressive mother, who, citing the tenets of her faith, imposed many restrictions on her children: for example, they cannot celebrate Christmas, eat sweets and go on a roller coaster.

Butch and Terry, having escaped from prison, break into Gladys' house and terrorise her and her children as well as their neighbour who tries to help them. Unscrupulous Terry intends to rape the woman, but Butch defends her. The men go away and take a hostage – the shy and withdrawn Philip. He is chosen, because Butch wants to protect Gladys and her daughters from sexual advances of his utterly depraved companion. The men leave with the boy in a stolen car, in unknown direction. They are pursued by the legendary Texas ranger, Red Garnett (Eastwood). He is accompanied by a deputy, Tom Adler (Leo Burmester), an FBI sharpshooter, Bobby Lee (Bradley Whitford) and a criminologist, Sally Gerber (Laura Dern), sent by the governor.

Psychologists have often described the bond that is forged between the kidnaper and the hostage. The phenomenon is referred to as the Stockholm syndrome⁵. Generally speaking, it consists in strong, positive emotional relations being formed between the hostages and their captors. People suffering from the Stockholm syndrome begin to identify with their persecutors and sometimes even take care of them.

Thus they rationalise their situation and create tools of internal self-defence.

The case presented in *A Perfect World* is, undoubtedly, to some extent an illustration of this phenomenon. A strange sympathy and then friendship is established between Philip and Butch. “Are you going to shoot me?,” the boy asks at some point and Haynes replies, “No, hell no. You and me are friends.” From the very begin-

⁴ Eastwood is a little biased in his presentation of Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not forbid their children to eat sweets and take part in various games. What does not sound credible either is Phillip's fear that he could go to hell for stealing the Casper the Friendly Ghost costume – Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in hell as a punishment for sins.

⁵ The name is linked to a robbery, from August 1973, of the Kreditbanken in the Norrmalmstorg square, Stockholm, during which the robbers held hostages for a few days. After the hostages were freed, they defended the robbers and refused to cooperate with the police.

ning Philip spontaneously trusts Butch, who treats him in a warm and kind manner. When the primitive and aggressive Terry bullies Philip, Butch defends him and kills his companion, who tries to escape into a corn field. We do not see the killing. Our point of view is limited to what Philip can see. Like him, we just hear a shot and then see Haynes emerging from the corn field, holding a gun in his hand.

From the moment they are left alone, the relationship between Butch and Philip changes, becoming like one between a father and a son. The man behaves like a long-absent “dad”, allowing the boy to do many things which his mother forbade him: Philip stuffs himself with sweets and hot dogs, steals a Casper the Friendly Ghost costume⁶ and travels on the roof of the car. For the first time Philip is happy, his eyes, full of longing and sadness before, are now joyful. For him the journey turns into an adventure and real life lesson. He senses the taste of freedom and at the same time the presence of a man for whom – consciously or not – he has longed. Haynes becomes his surrogate father, thanks to which he gains power over him, understood as a possibility of influencing him.

What attracts Butch to Philip so much? Why does he treat him nearly like his own child? Haynes tries to find out what it means to be a boy, he tries to see himself in Philip. His own was a difficult childhood. Brought up without a father (just like Philip), he was neglected by his prostitute mother and her men rode roughshod over him. This has left deep wounds in his soul. He felt (and still feels) particularly strongly about his missing father, whom he idealises and mythologises in a way. He constantly carries a tattered postcard from Alaska, which he once got from him, and from time to time he rereads what is written on it: “Someday you can come and visit and we can maybe get to know each other”. This ragged keepsake becomes a symbol of his father for Butch, but also a symbol of his broken promise: “we can get to know each other”.

Haynes nurtures a dream of going to Alaska. He tries to convince Philip that this is where they are travelling and paints a vision of this northern state as a Promised Land or New Testament Kingdom of the Father, as well as the last frontier beyond which there is harmony and unlimited freedom. Butch knows very well that this “journey” will never end in success, that Alaska will remain only a symbol: of Eden, indestructible dream, fatherhood; a symbol, as it were, of a lack. Childhood without a father, Eastwood seems to be saying, is incomplete and, at the same time, dangerous. It triggers longing and desires that will forever mark a person’s life. Even if there appears somebody who tries, more or less successfully, to perform the role of the father.

Haynes, too, seems to understand this. And yet he voluntarily accepts the role of the father, trying to teach Philip what he knows about life. However, this know-

⁶ Casper the Friendly Ghost is the protagonist of books, cartoons and films for children, present in American popular culture from 1939 to this day.

ledge is specific, for it was acquired in a pathological family, in the street and in prison. That is why Butch does not turn out to be a good father. Although he lets the boy, who he calls “son”, do many things, at the same time he teaches him behaviour commonly regarded as reprehensible, base, bad and amoral. On several occasions he hands Philip a gun, telling him to aim at people (at himself, at Terry and at the farmer, who took them in). As a result, the boy, already used to the weapon, pulls the trigger and wounds Butch himself. In addition, Haynes disregards Philip’s sensitivity, subjecting him to many traumatic experiences (stealing the Ford, smashing up police cars, using a gun in the store, tying up the family of the farmer at whose house they spent the night) and representing a socially negative model. Finally, Butch interferes with the child’s religious convictions, trying to impose on him his own views and turn him against Jehovah’s Witnesses.

We do not know what kind of man Philip will be in the future. It is highly likely, however, that he will become like Haynes. The seed of violence and corruption has already been sown in his soul. There is another reason to be pessimistic. Eastwood, like Red Garnett, whom he plays, clearly supports liberal (positivist) concepts in criminology. They are based on the conviction that an individual is a product of social, biological, psychological and economic factors influencing him or her. These factors determine this individual’s behaviour. If they are positive, individuals behave in accordance with the hierarchy of values prevailing in a given society. If, on the other hand, they are dysfunctional, they generate criminal behaviour. Since humans cannot effectively control these factors, they cannot control their actions and, consequently, be responsible for them.

Such a position is widely accepted today. However, its acceptance leads to unpleasant conclusions with regard to the child protagonist of *A Perfect World*. If human life is determined by what happened in childhood, Philip has little chance for having a normal life. He has learned to steal and shoot people, he has acquired a male role model that is far from ideal, violence and aggression have become normal and ordinary for him. We can rightly expect that after returning home he will never again be a nice and obedient son, meekly following his mother’s orders.

A Perfect World is full of scenes showing violence and aggression. Although the killings happen off screen (like in the 1950s Hollywood films), Eastwood does not spare the viewers images of fights, sexual abuse and use of weapons. All these elements appear already in the scene taking place in Mrs Perry’s house. But violence is at its most intense in the film’s key sequence, at the farm where the protagonists have found temporary refuge. In the morning Butch sees the farmer punishing his son for not doing what he was told to, and flies into a rage. First he beats up the man, then he terrorizes him with his gun and, finally, ties him up and gags him. When the farmer’s wife begs him for mercy, appealing to his goodness, Haynes replies coldly: “No, I ain’t a good man. I ain’t the worst neither.” Then he gives the gun to Philip. The boy, seeing what Butch can really be like and not able to stand the tension, shoots him, wounding him seriously.

Haynes' disproportionate and cruel reaction to the farmer's mistreatment of his son probably stems from bad memories of his own childhood. It is a dramatic return to the past, to the times, when he himself was the object of aggression from his mother and, first of all, her casual lovers. That is why he sees himself as he was years before in suffering children and cannot control his emotions. By punishing the farmer, he, in fact, symbolically takes revenge on all men (including his own father), who did not fulfil their parental functions properly and thus betrayed their own children and, through them, all children of the world.

After Philip wounds Butch, the plot draws straight to a close. The protagonists leave the unlucky farm. However, they are pursued by law enforcement officers. The encounter takes place on a vast meadow. Bleeding profusely, Haynes is sitting under a big tree, with the boy crouching next to him. Garnett and Gerber, both advocates of positivist criminology, do not want Butch dead, all the more so given the fact that there is a special bond between him and Garnett. It was Garnett that persuaded a judge to impose a long sentence (four years) on Haynes for stealing a car. As he himself says, he hoped that prison would have a salutary influence on the young man, preventing him from committing new offences. That this has not happened gnaws at him and makes him angry at his own inability to evaluate the situation correctly. The chasing group includes an FBI sharpshooter, Bobby Lee, who likes to be tough on criminals. It is Lee who eventually kills Butch. When Butch, weakened by the bleeding, reaches for the back pocket of his trousers to take out the postcard symbolising his dream and ideal goal in life, Lee pulls the trigger of his gun. Butch's death is unnecessary but it is provoked by himself. His fate is sealed. He will not go back to prison, which he compared to hell. But nor will he reach Alaska, understood both as a physical space and life's goal and ideal of freedom. Dreams usually do not come true, says the director. But they help us cope with the difficulties of everyday existence.

From the point of view of the genre, *A Perfect World* is a road movie or, to be more precise, a variation on road movies. It is his third film, after *Bronco Billy* (1980) and *Honkytonk Man* (1982), of this kind. Eastwood, as is his custom, plays with the audience, deconstructing many generic conventions, at the same time referring, though indirectly, to traditional clichés, even to specific films. If we watch this film carefully, we will notice allusions to such classic road movies as Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), and even Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991).

Travelling the back roads of Texas, Butch and Philip are on their way to meet their destiny. Eastwood lets events flow languidly, waiting for the relations between the protagonists to achieve the right depth and strength. In order for the tempo not to be too slow and for the tone too dark, the director introduces the chase thread. It allows him to present to the viewers several distinctive characters and use some comic effects, both on the level of dialogue (conversations between Garnett and

Gerber, and between Gerber and Bobby Lee), and situation (accident involving the trailer transformed into a police command centre).

If Butch and Philip make up a pair of the leading protagonists, Red Garnett and Sally Gerber are a pair of secondary characters. Their function is by no means limited to providing elements of humour in the film. Sally in particular has an important role to play. On the one hand, she is the opposite of Gladys Perry. If Gladys cannot manage without a man and cannot protect her own family, Sally is active, tough and persistent. In addition, she provides a counterpoint to all male characters, primarily Red. Initially, he and his companions treat her a bit like some unnecessary ballast that, apart from good looks, brings little to the team. Soon, however, they change their minds and begin to see Sally as a useful partner who has extensive knowledge of and expertise in criminology, a discipline that hitherto has been reserved almost exclusively for men. Gerber is a feminist figure of an independent, working woman, who succeeds in her profession thanks to her determination and stubbornness. She could have been a daughter or granddaughter of the famous Rosie the Riveter, an icon in the United States, representing American women working during WWII in typically male professions⁷.

Sally is respected especially by Red. However, their cooperation does not turn, as might be expected, into an affair, and their mutual relations are more like relations between a father and a daughter. Once again we are in a symbolic family, once again we are dealing with the figure of the father and figure of the child (daughter), with the parental role again stemming from a desire to redeem one's own sins from the past.

Red and Sally's mission is only partially successful. Although Philip is freed and returns to his mother, Butch is killed by Bobby Lee, an FBI agent. The killing is an act of insubordination (Lee shoots against his orders), which is why it provokes anger and frustration in Garnett and Gerber. The Texan Ranger strikes Bobby hard in the face, while the criminologist kicks him in the groin as hard as she can. However, this does not change the state of affairs at all: Haynes is dead and his death is a traumatic, tragic experience for little Philip. He remains shocked and disoriented. His life has completely changed. Neither he nor the spectators know where it will lead him.

A Perfect World is not Eastwood's only film in which a child is kidnapped. We will find a similar motif in *Changeling*, but the tone and message of this work are completely different.

Eastwood returned to the problem of "surrogate fatherhood" in 2004, in one of his most controversial films – *Million Dollar Baby*. It is a subtle character study and, at the same time, a sports drama taking place in the world of professional boxing.

⁷ The term "Rosie the Riveter" was used for the first time in a 1942 song of the same title, written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb. Today, Rosie the Riveter is commonly regarded as a symbol of feminism and economic power of women.

As Ed Buscombe rightly notes, in this work, like in most other films devoted to boxing⁸, a fight in the ring is treated as a metaphor of human life and fate⁹. It is also a pretext for presenting such values as courage, loyalty and friendship juxtaposed with cowardice, blind rage and corruption.

Eastwood's film is a generic hybrid. We see in it elements of a boxing drama à la *Rocky*, a melodramatic story of a poor girl who wins fame and money, only to become a plaything of cruel fate, and a social drama tackling and humanising the problem of euthanasia, very rarely seen at the cinema¹⁰.

In *Million Dollar Baby* we have three main protagonists. Frankie Dunn (Eastwood) is a fine and experienced but non-mainstream boxing coach. He is not very successful. Working in the seedy Hit Pit Gym in a working-class neighbourhood of Los Angeles, he drives an old, dilapidated car, and the faded, brown walls of his flat, in which he hardly ever is to be found, perfectly reflect the state of his soul. Frankie's personal life has been in ruins for a long time. His wife left him and daughter Katie does not want to have anything to do with him. The letters which he regularly sends her remain unanswered. Desperately lonely and suffering because of his separation from his family, Dunn seeks solace in God, going to mass every day for twenty-three years.

A man even more on the margins of life is Eddie "Scrap-Iron" Dupris (Morgan Freeman), a former boxer who has lost an eye during a fight. Today he lives at the Hit Pit Gym, working as a janitor. The only luxury he can afford is paid TV, where he can watch boxing.

Scrap plays an important role in the film. He is its narrator as well as a kind of ancient chorus, commenting on the plot. His remarks concerning the events on screen as well as reflections on human existence and favourite discipline are remarkably wise and pertinent. In the very first sequence of the film, he provides a subtle definition of the essence of boxing: "People love violence. They slow down at a car wreck to check for bodies. Some people claim to love boxing. They got no idea what it is. Boxing is about respect - getting it for yourself and taking it away from the other guy." Later he utters more aphorisms: "Boxing is an unnatural act", "anybody can lose one fight", "If there's magic in boxing, it's the magic of risking everything for a dream that nobody sees but you." As we can see, Scrap is an extraordinary mixture of fatalism and nearly mystical optimism.

⁸ Films like *Body and Soul* (1947) by Robert Rossen, *Champion* (1949) by Mark Robson, *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962) by Ralph Nelson, *Fat City* (1972) by John Huston, *Rocky* (1976) by John G. Avildsen, *The Champ* (1979) by Franco Zeffirelli, *Raging Bull* (1980) by Martin Scorsese, *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988) by Paul Morrissey and *The Fighter* (2010) by David O. Russell.

⁹ E. Buscombe, "Million Dollar Baby", *Sight and Sound* 15, 2005, no. 3, pp. 67–68.

¹⁰ The most important films tackling the problem include *An Act of Murder* (1948) by Michael Gordon, *Soylent Green* (1973) by Richard Fleischer, *Murder or Mercy?* (1974) by Harvey Hart, *Act of Love* (1980) by Paul Newman, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (1981) by John Badham and *Igby Goes Down* (2002) by Burr Steers.

Frankie and Scrap have been friends for many years. Both depend on each other and fully rely on each other. What brings them together is sympathy, understanding and loyalty.

There have never been any women at the Hit Pit Gym. One day, however, Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), a 31-year-old who wants to become a professional boxer, comes to the gym and asks Frankie to coach her. She is as lonely as Dunn and Dupris. She comes from the Ozarks Mountain Country in Missouri¹¹. Her world collapsed after the death of her father, the only family member who gave her love and tenderness. Feeling abandoned by her egoistic mother (Margo Martindale), selfish sister (Riki Lindhome) and greedy brother from the underworld (Marcus Chait), she comes to Los Angeles. She works as a waitress, finding it hard to make ends meet and dreaming all the time about a boxing career. For her, boxing is an escape from the painful reality and the only chance of success. She chooses Frankie to be her manager and coach, because she sees in him a father figure – wise, honest and protective. Moreover, like her, Dunn is an outsider without a family (the director and the narrator tell us nothing about the reasons behind his conflict with his daughter) and coaching successes. Frankie has not been successful, because he has always feared for the health of his boxers, trying to instil in them the most fundamental principle: “always protect yourself”.

Initially, Dunn refuses Maggie, symbolically rejecting femininity which he needs so much and subconsciously wants. However, seeing the girl's obstinacy and determination, he becomes her coach. As time goes by, a relationship develops between them. Gradually, they open up to each other, they begin to trust and love each other. Returning from the Ozarks to Los Angeles, after a not a very good meeting with her mother and siblings, Maggie says to Dunn: “I've got nobody but you, Frankie!” and their lives become intertwined for ever. As Ray Didinger and Glen MacNow rightly point out, “Frankie and his sidekick Eddie ‘Scrap-Iron’ Dupris [...] become Maggie's family, and Maggie becomes Frankie's surrogate daughter”¹². This enables Dunn to satisfy his parental instinct and – at least to some extent – redeem the sins of his youth and become reborn morally and emotionally.

Frankie as played by Eastwood is slightly reminiscent of the protagonists played by John Wayne in his late westerns like Henry Hathaway's *True Grit* (1969), Andrew V. McLaglen's *Chisum* (1970), George Sherman's *Big Jake* (1971), Mark Rydell's *The Cowboys* (1972) or Stuart Millar's *Rooster Cogburn* (1975). In all these films Duke portrayed surrogate, symbolic fathers, ready for any sacrifice for their surrogate, symbolic children.

¹¹ The Ozarks Mountain Country (Ozark Plateau) is situated in the central part of the United States, covering the southern part of Missouri, north-western and northern Arkansas, north-eastern part of Oklahoma and south-eastern portion of Kansas. People of European origin who settled here have created a specific culture with its own music, folklore, dialect etc.

¹² R. Didinger, G. MacNow, *The Ultimate Book of Sport Movies*, Philadelphia 2009, p. 70.

A model example in this respect is particularly *True Grit*¹³. Wayne plays here a very elderly and infamous sheriff, Reuben J. “Rooster” Cogburn, whom 14-year-old Mattie Ross (Kim Darby) asks to catch her father’s killer. Initially, Rooster is amused by the proposal. Yet the girl’s stubbornness and determination win Cogburn’s respect and he decides to help her. During a long pursuit of the murderer, there develops friendship and then affection between the two. Rooster cares for Mattie (the similarity to the name of the protagonist of *Million Dollar Baby* is no coincidence) like a true father, and when the girl is wounded, he carries her in his arms, struggling to get through the mountains, to take her to a doctor and save her life.

Of course, *True Grit* and *Million Dollar Baby* resemble each other only in their content and consistent use of the figures of father and daughter. What makes them different is their genre and tone: Hathaway’s work is a western film with comic elements, while Eastwood’s is a serious drama with a controversial ending.

As the action develops, it turns out that Maggie has boxing talent and makes rapid progress. Soon come the first successes in the ring and the first signs of fame: pictures on magazine covers, interviews, spectators’ ovations. And then comes the unlucky fight for the world championship against the former GDR-born Billie “Blue Bear” (Lucia Rijker, a professional boxer). Maggie has an advantage. Her angry opponent unexpectedly attacks her during a break between the rounds. Falling, Maggie hits her head on a stool in the corner and is paralysed from the neck down. Later, the doctors also have to amputate her leg.

Bedridden in hospital, Maggie, having lost all she cares for in life, wants to die and asks Frankie to help her. He refuses, but after talking to Scrap changes his mind. He comes to a conclusion that no one and nothing can relieve him of the responsibility for a loved one (he was the one who put the stool, which Maggie hit, in the corner) and that agreeing to her request will be an act of love and not weakness. In the middle of the night he visits the girl and injects her with a large dose of adrenaline, after which he disappears for ever. We will never know what happened to him next. We may, however, find a clue in William Butler Yeats’ poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, which Frankie reads to Maggie at the hospital. It contains a motif of paradise and inner peace experienced by the lyrical subject. Was Dunn also destined to find such comfort? Did he achieve a state in which his body, mind and soul were in harmony with one another and with the world?

But perhaps being resigned to one’s fate and inner harmony concerns Maggie’s not Frankie’s soul. In such a case another interpretation would be possible and even preferable. Perhaps Frankie, having committed – though in good faith and acting on a noble impulse – a mortal sin, will forever wander around the world like the

¹³ In 2010 the Coen brothers made a remake of *True Grit* with Jeff Bridges as Cogburn and Hailee Steinfeld as Mattie, but it did not even come close to the original.

legendary Wandering Jew¹⁴. Such an interpretation is suggested by a statement of Father Horvak (Brian F. O'Byrne), Dunn's confessor, who warns him against the moral and religious consequences of his decision: "If you do this thing, you'll be lost. Somewhere so deep you'll never find yourself again."

The ending of *Million Dollar Baby* caused a lot of controversy among viewers and commentators. In January and February 2005 there were protests against the film by activists from movements fighting for the rights of people with disabilities. The activists accused Eastwood of promoting euthanasia. Debbie Schlusel, a conservative lawyer, political journalist and film critic criticised the film, saying that it is "political propaganda of the year ... it supports killing the handicapped"¹⁵. Yet these accusations do not entirely apply to the director. *Million Dollar Baby* is not a film about euthanasia (though the act of euthanasia is shown). Rather, it is a spiritual, even religious work about a search for redemption by an elderly, embittered protagonist who knows he has lost his life and is seriously disappointed with the world. This redemption happens thanks to the fact that Frankie accepts the role of the father. However, let us not forget that his relationship with Maggie is not only paternalistic; we can find in it friendship, very gentle eroticism and sadomasochism.

The act of euthanasia performed by Dunn is not an object of direct judgement in the world presented in the film. As an act of mercy, even love, it should arouse our, the viewers', approval or at least understanding. On the other hand, Catholic ethics (Frankie is a practising Catholic, going to mass every day) absolutely rejects euthanasia. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church,

Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator¹⁶.

It is difficult to establish Frankie's attitude to euthanasia unequivocally. There is no doubt that the decision to end Maggie's life is not easy for him. But in his daily disputes with God, he comes to the conclusion that his love for his surrogate daughter orders him to be loyal only to her. Not only because of his feelings for her, but also because of her vulnerability and complete dependence on her "father". In deciding to take this final step, Dunn "goes out of the world", gives up his own life, condemns himself to eternal struggle against his conscience and, at the same time, submits himself to the judgement of the Almighty.

¹⁴ We should bear in mind that in its oldest version (from before the 13th century) the legend referred to a man who could not lose his life because he had lost death. He wanders endlessly, doomed to eternal contemplation, waiting for the end of the world.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Ertelt, *Clint Eastwood's 'Million Dollar Baby' Euthanasia Plot Offends Disabled*, www.lifenews.com (access: 5 April 2009).

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Vatican 1993, 2277.

Million Dollar Baby is, alongside *Mystic River* and *Changeling*, Eastwood's darkest film. The director presents in it a pessimistic, fatalist and conservative vision of the world. Apart from the three main *dramatis personae* (Frank, Scrap and Maggie) almost all other characters are unpleasant, evil and repugnant. Maggie's mother and siblings, selfish, egoistic and obtuse creatures, utterly depraved, only want to use their daughter and sister, without giving anything in return. Maggie's opponent from the ring, Billie "The Blue Bear" is a former prostitute from the former East Germany (a symbol of inhuman system and political corruption), for whom there are no fair play rules and who contributes to Maggie's death. The boxers once coached by Dunn are not, to put it mildly, very bright. Only Father Horvak tries to follow some values in his life, though he is not able to adapt to the brutal reality in which he has to live and fulfil his vocation.

The picture of the world in Eastwood's film shocks with its pessimism, fatalism and grey colours used to paint it (many scenes take place in the evening and at night, in darkness, in which only from time to time do we see some brighter contrasting colour). The universe surrounding the protagonists is wild, full of violence and devoid of hope. In this dehumanised reality there are no social, familial or religious rules. People are lonely and when they try to come closer to each other, evil fate thwarts their efforts.

The father figure is presented slightly differently in *Gran Torino* (2008). The central character is Walt Kowalski (Eastwood), who lives in a house with a lawn in an old neighbourhood in Detroit. He is an embittered Korean war veteran, retired Ford employee and widower, who loves canned beer, guns and American cars, filling his empty and boring days by doing home repairs, going to the barber on a regular basis and chatting to his loyal companion Daisy, old labrador retriever bitch.

Walt does not maintain any close relations with his sons and grandchildren. He is not very fond of people anyway¹⁷. Kowalski despises them deeply and openly. As an inveterate bigot and racist, he regards all Asians as suspicious and calls them "gooks", "swamp rats", "damned barbarians", "bastards", "fish heads" and "zipperheads". This is the way he treats his closest neighbours, the matriarchal Vang Lor family.

Walt's quiet and lazy life changes, when one night someone tries to steal his pristine 1972 Ford Gran Torino. The failed thief turns out to be Thao Vang Lor (Beer Vang). This shy, quiet teenager is forced to steal by his cousin Fong "Spider" (Doua

¹⁷ His old neighbours, whom he approved of, have died or moved out, and have been replaced by the Hmong, immigrants from south-eastern Asia. The Hmong are an ethnic group living in the mountainous regions of South-East Asia, e.g. Vietnam and Laos. During the war in Indochina they sided with the United States. After the communists' victory they were persecuted. Many escaped to Thailand and from there to America and several other western countries. Cf. D. Yang, *Hmong at the Turning Point*, Minneapolis 1993; and J. Hamilton-Meritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942–1992*, Bloomington 1999.

Moua), the boss of a street gang. For Thao, this is to be a double initiation: transforming the boy into a man and joining the gang, on which the boy is not very keen.

Kowalski, a tough and brave man, used to facing many dangers, chases the thugs away with his gun (the legendary M1 rifle), unwittingly defending Thao. Now the boy's mother and his elder sister Sue (Ahney Her) as well as the entire Vang Lor clan regard Walt a hero. They give him flowers and food, and insist that Thao atone for his deed by working for Kowalski. Kowalski initially does not want to have anything to do with "these people", but eventually he agrees to Thao's daily visits.

With time Walt and the Hmong boy come to understand and like each other, a bond that soon turns into one resembling a family tie. The fatherless Thao finds in Walt a mentor, teacher and role model¹⁸. Both learn from each other. Thao learns what work and responsibility mean, how to talk to people and court girls. The old and stubborn pensioner, on the other hand, revises his attitude to other people based on stereotypes and prejudice. He comes to the conclusion that the Hmong are largely people like him, believing in the same values and the same ideals. However, they are subjected to the terror of violence to which they are unable to respond.

Thanks to Thao and Sue, whom he also protects¹⁹, Kowalski, like in the old days, can live life to the full and again feels he is needed. He also opens his soul and returns to the terrible wartime past, which has haunted him during sleepless nights. He tells Thao one day that killing a man is the worst thing that can happen in life and he will remain faithful to this truth till the end.

Walt, though seemingly in great shape, has health problems. Every now and then he suffers from cough attacks and begins to spit blood. The results of medical tests are far from optimistic. Although it is never explicitly stated, we can guess from numerous suggestions that Kowalski is slowly dying of lung cancer. This helps us understand his later actions.

One day gangsters attack Thao. Outraged and wielding a gun, Walt catches one of the gangsters, beats him up and threatens to kill him, if the thugs continue to behave aggressively. The gang retaliates by firing at the Vang Lor family house from a car and wounding Thao, then raping and brutally beating up Sue.

Now Kowalski, like many of Eastwood's characters, decides to eliminate evil. And like many Eastwood's protagonists (William Munny from *Unforgiven*, Frank Corvine from *Space Cowboys*, Terry McCaleb from *Blood Work*) he sets out on his last mission. "But me, I finish things. That's what I do, and I'm going it alone," he says. This time, however, it is a suicidal mission, carefully thought-out and planned.

¹⁸ We are dealing here with a reversal of the situation presented in John G. Avildsen's 1984 cult film *Karate Kid*. There the mentor and teacher is Kesuke Mijagi (Pat Morita), while a white American teenager, Daniel Larusso (Ralph Macchio), is his bright pupil.

¹⁹ See the scene in which Sue is assailed by young black thugs ("spooks" in Kowalski's terminology) and Walt, threatening them with a gun, takes the girl to his car and drives her home.

Having locked Thao, who wants revenge, in the basement, explaining that he is too young to kill, Walt goes to the house occupied by the gang members. There, clearly seen by the neighbours, he provokes them into shooting him and dies, but the gangsters will go to prison for many years as a result.

Walt sacrifices his own life to save Thao and Sue, to free them from the burden of violence and give them hope for the future. This heroic act is also an act of redemption for sins of the past. Before his death Walt, an agnostic who does not acknowledge any authority, will manage to make a confession. "I am at peace" he will say to Father Janovich (Christopher Carley), a confessor and spiritual guide of his late wife, whom he has hitherto refused to allow to interfere in his life. He will also manage to give Thao the Silver Star, a military decoration he received during the Korean war²⁰. It is the most precious and most personal memento, given only to the closest relative, for example a son. It also serves an additional symbolic function: it testifies to Kowalski's belief that the young Hmong boy will have the courage to go through life honestly, holding his head high.

Gran Torino is a hymn to traditional moral values: honour, responsibility, tolerance, courage and loyalty. It is also a work deeply rooted in the American reality with its pressing social problems: demographic changes consisting in a shrinking of the white population and a growth of the African-American, Latino and Asian populations; increasing illegal immigration; lack of full assimilation of many ethnic and cultural groups; plague of violence, visible especially in poorer areas of big cities; and the emergence of a specific morality and culture of youth gangs. In addition, the director wonders about the difference between suicide and self-sacrifice. In his struggle with God, Kowalski shows a lot of determination and cunning. In deciding to ultimately confront the gang, he chooses death to free the Hmong community from aggressive thugs and himself from the suffering associated with the inevitable progress of disease. It is an act of self-destruction, not really different, from the protagonist's point of view, from suicide. Yet Walt manages to avoid a mortal sin²¹. Formally speaking, he dies not by his own hand, but is killed by thugs.

In *Gran Torino*, Eastwood refers directly to his own screen image shaped in the 1960s and 1970s in Sergio Leone's western films and, especially, in the "Dirty" Harry Callahan series. The director previously tried to challenge his heroic macho image many times. He did it for the first time in *The Gauntlet* (1977) and for the last time in *Blood Work*. This time, however, his destructive desires acquired an ultimate form owing to the death of the character he portrayed. Kowalski is a retired blue-collar

²⁰ The Silver Star, awarded for valour in the face of the enemy, is the third highest military decoration in the US Armed Forces after the Medal of Honour and Distinguished Service Cross.

²¹ In most monotheist religions, including Catholicism, suicide is regarded as a mortal sin, condemning the person committing it to eternal damnation. However, according to modern Church teaching, suicides can be saved, if their acts of self-destruction are a result of the working of the devil, strong stress, sacrifice, depression etc. In such situations, they do not necessarily commit a mortal sin.

worker, but he could just as well be a retired Callahan. He has the same character traits: obstinacy, uncompromising attitude and attachment to traditional values. Yet unlike Callahan, who is a slightly cardboard and one-dimensional character, Kowalski not only has a complex psyche, but his personality evolves. Walt changes: he makes a journey from instinctive cultural racism to cultural tolerance, from egoistic focus on his own problems and phobias to openness to others, from agnosticism bordering on atheism to acceptance and reconciliation with God as well as the Church as a religious and social institution. In his will he bequeaths all his property to Father Janovich's parish and not to his children and grandchildren. Only Ford Gran Torino is given to Thao, Walt's symbolic son and the person closest to him.

Just as *Million Dollar Baby* resembled *True Grit*, so too *Gran Torino* in many respects resembles Don Siegel's *The Shootist* (1976), the last film featuring John Wayne, who plays John Bernard Brookes. The protagonists of both films are ageing tough guys who become friends with young men (in *The Shootist* the young man is Gillom Rogers played by Ron Howard). An important role in both works is played by women, who turn Kowalski and Brookes into father figures for their young charges. In both films this happens against the protagonists' will, as it were; the protagonists want to be left in peace, but, finding themselves in the thick of violence, they have to defend those closest to them. Finally, both films feature the characters of spiritual advisers – doctor E.W. Hostettler (James Stewart) in *The Shootist* and Father Janovich in *Gran Torino*.

The films examined in the present article, though very different, nevertheless have some features in common. All feature a male protagonist, whose family and personal life is not very good and who finds a fatherless half-orphan (a boy, a young woman, a teenager) and decides to take care of him or her, serving a quasi-parental role. All films tackle the problem of violence and its morally acceptable boundaries. In all one of the main characters is killed. The most spectacular end is that of Butch Haynes in *A Perfect World*. The most symbolic – Walt Kowalski's death. In terms of its content, it is an apotheosis of self-sacrifice, so important a value in the Christian doctrine, based on the dogma of Christ sacrificing his life in order to be able to offer people salvation. When it comes to acting, it is Eastwood's farewell of sorts to the audience. In his subsequent films Eastwood limited himself to being the director and producer and, in the case of *Hereafter*, composer, entirely giving up appearing on screen.

