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Absolving the American guilt: forgiveness and purification in Clint Eastwood's cinema

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ABSTRACT

The guilt-ridden character archetype is a recurring premise in Clint Eastwood's cinema, recognizable in the inner conflicts of the protagonists of iconic titles, such as *Unforgiven* (1992), *Mystic River* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Gran Torino* (2008). According to Scott, *Unforgiven* marks the beginning of the filmmaker's authorship stage, where scenarios of diverse genres, such as road movie, war cinema or gangster plots introduce protagonists who coincide in their need for purification. This paper aims to explore the construction of characters carried out in the four titles aforementioned, by means of a script analysis methodology based on the dynamics of conflicts and on the classic concepts of hybris, hamartia and catharsis. This analysis points to a double purpose. On the one hand, it highlights the purification sought by the protagonists of Clint Eastwood and its relationship with the Christian moral context in which the characters arise, as Roche & Hösle notice. On the other hand the analysis points out the social extension of the concept of catharsis addressed by the filmmaker, especially critical when exposing the fragility of the American Dream and its modern traumas.

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1. Introduction

Unforgiven (1992) is considered a turning point in Clint Eastwood's filmography as a director, a journey which began in 1971. In the early 1980s, Eastwood bought the rights to a screenplay entitled *The Cut-Whore Killings*, written around 1976 by David Webb Peoples – later known for his script for *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982). Eastwood delayed filming for more than ten years, however, using that time to acquire a maturity that would do justice to the telling of a story eventually titled *Unforgiven*.

The hallmark of the film, already evident from the beginning of the project, would forge a particular archetype around the *Eastwood persona* that would later accompany the other characters played by the actor-director. At the same time, this twilight Western has been understood by various experts as a mature work in which the

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filmmaker reflects on the use of force, political legitimacy and moral identity. In Eastwood's previous films these issues had been latent, if still under-developed, as can be seen for example in the trilogy of Spaghetti Westerns *The Man with No Name* (1964–1966) and the urban pentalogy of *Dirty Harry* (1971–1988). Kupfer (2008, 103) draws attention to the metanarrative nature of *Unforgiven* which approaches these themes from a revision of the classic references of the Western and anti-Western. García Mainar (2007, 27), on the other hand, points to this film as Eastwood's anointing as an auteur. Scott (2009, 111), for his part, warns of a morally sceptical and even contradictory position of an authorial discourse on individual and social responsibility in an environment where violence seems inevitable.

William Munny, *Unforgiven*'s bloody outlaw-turned-farmer, is the first of a series of characters marked by guilt for a violent or unjust past, and who turn to atonement as a remedy to pacify the conscience. This is a recurring dramatic master plot in Clint Eastwood's films, seen in the internal conflicts of other important protagonists in his filmography. No among them is the criminal Butch Haynes in *A Perfect World* (1993), the gangster Jimmy Markum from *Mystic River* (2003), boxing trainer Frankie Dunn from *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Korean War veteran Walt Kowalski from *Gran Torino* (2008) or Navy Seal Chris Tyle from *American Sniper* (2014). A study of the internal conflicts and inside stories of these protagonists offers a valid tool for exploring guilt as a major theme in Clint Eastwood's work as an auteur.

This article has a 2-fold objective. First, the scope of the purification sought by Clint Eastwood's characters within the context of the Christian morality in which they are set (Simon Roche and Höslé 2011). This is a nuclear theme in four fundamental films whose protagonists offer complementary perspectives and, at the same time, provide the key to thematic developments around guilt: *Unforgiven*, *Mystic River*, *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino*. The second objective explores the extent of the concept of guilt and the need for catharsis for the American society, which was Eastwood's primary audience, especially in the several tragedies that touch upon the failure or fragility of the American dream. This last aspect is dealt with in the penultimate section, which examines films that come after *Gran Torino*, and explores a social dimension of guilt more in line with the historical circumstances of productions, such as *American Sniper*, *Sully* (2016) or *Richard Jewell* (2019).

The reflection on guilt is approached from a methodology of dramatic analysis based on the conflict dynamics and the construction of characters, as seen in both the script and its cinematographic visualization. To this end, we examine the evolution of the characters through their transformational arcs and take the *fatal flaw* as a key narrative device, a trait of characterization proposed by Marks (2009, 112–120) that reveals the internal tension of the protagonists and is closely related to the climax of their inner development. According to Marks, the 'fatal flaw is a struggle within a character to maintain a survival system long after it has outlived its usefulness' (114). In the case of Eastwood's tragic characters, this flaw consists in an inability to achieve an inner goal of forgiveness while events compound the consciousness of guilt.

According to the theory of conflict dynamics present in screenplay structures (Seger 1986; McKee 1999; Sánchez-Escalonilla 2001), the internal conflicts of the characters demonstrate the reflections or themes implicit in the plot, thus encouraging the

exploration of human mysteries, including guilt and the need for forgiveness. Marks proposes this when he asserts that the *fatal flaw* of the protagonist represents the value considered opposite to the film's theme (2009, 117), which reveals the questions, judgments and points of view that propel the author to tell a story (75).

Clint Eastwood himself has called his films *Americanized Greek or Shakespearean tragedies* (BBC, 28 October 2014) or *great American tragedies* (*Hollywood Reporter*, 21 November 2019). Experts, such as Redmon (2017), Vaux (2012) and others have confirmed this categorization of his filmography as tragedy. It is therefore helpful to complement our dramatic analysis with a consideration of three elements from classical tragedy and the Aristotelian poetic tradition: *hybris*, *hamartia* and *catharsis*. These will allow us to gain insight into the internal conflicts of the films in which Eastwood more deeply explores guilt. *Hybris* is understood as the unholy passion of the violent in their transgressions and is often driven by arrogance and cruelty (Grenz 2000, 183). *Hamartia* is the fatal error of the hero who, while wishing to do the right thing, is unable to do so because of ignorance or a lack of knowledge of reality (Poetics XIII). The Aristotelian concept of *catharsis* refers to the emotional purification that the spectator experiences during the tragedy, effected by witnessing the fateful destiny of the protagonists (Gadamer 1995, 132).

Ultimately, the narrative analysis offered here attempts to establish the extent to which the individual purification of Eastwood's characters is achieved or frustrated, and how this denouement of individual conflicts relates to the social dimension of the 'great American tragedy', as the filmmaker has most recently termed it.

2. *Unforgiven*. The aftermath of violence

According to Plantinga (1998), *Eastwood the auteur* proposes in *Unforgiven* a revisionist Western from a meta-narrative dimension that touches upon the *Eastwood persona*. Violence, a permanent theme in the director's filmography, runs through the central axis of the story like a curse that haunts the protagonist, William Munny, and the frontier community where he lives. Plantinga details the type of violence present where the tragedy takes place: 'Eastwood had figured prominently in the maintenance of the Western myth. In many of his Westerns and in the "Dirty Harry" series, Eastwood upheld the idea of purgative violence as a central path to cultural and personal restoration' (Plantinga, 65). At the turn of the years, the filmmaker discusses in *Unforgiven* this purgative function of violence that justifies the removal of the *outlaw* or *savage*. And this is achieved in a cinematic genre that, in the words of Slotkin, has traditionally portrayed 'the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and regeneration through violence' (Slotkin 1992, 12).

In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood presents William Munny as a bloodthirsty outlaw turned domestic settler, widower and father of two children, so that both archetypes – outlaw and settler – are paradoxically reconciled and juxtaposed in a single character, eventually causing the inner conflict that tears him apart. A violent past coexists with a familiar present in a scenario of precarious peace and justice. The farmer refers to his past on numerous occasions, through dialog that reconstructs his backstory and reveals the

crucial role of Claudia, his late wife, in his conversion. Thus, in one scene, Munny recalls the renunciation of his old life to his partner in crime, Ned Logan: ‘I ain’t like that no more. I ain’t the same, Ned. Claudia, she straightened me up, cleared me of drinkin’ whiskey and all’.

Munny wants to believe he is a new man. However, at the beginning of the film, he once again reverts to his old way of life, intending to collect a bounty which will contribute to the costs of raising his children. This decision will awaken the latent guilt present in his conscience, and of which, according to Claudia’s standard, he has not yet acquitted himself. The former bandit remorsefully relives his crimes as he approaches Big Whiskey, the Wyoming town where he will avenge two cowboys’ affront on a prostitute named Delilah, whose face they attacked and disfigured. Yet Munny promises Ned: ‘Just ’cause we’re goin’ on this killing, that don’t mean I’m gonna go back to bein’ the way I was. I just need the money, get a new start for the youngsters’.

The protagonist’s inner story is based on a trauma that he not only fails to overcome by the end of the film, but actually makes worse by his determination to take up the rifle again. In this decision lies the *hamartia*, the relapse into a tragic mistake that will convert Munny into a wandering, *unforgiven* spirit by the end of the film.

Claudia, symbolized by a cross at the foot of an oak tree, has become ‘the new Munny’s’ point of moral reference. The absent wife is more than just a venerated memory; she has become the bar against which his actions are measured, and, in a way, a reflection of the divine justice that he does not wish to violate. By submitting to Claudia’s authority, the outlaw-turned-farmer had rejected the traditional masculine role proposed by Tompkins in her study of the Western genre (Tompkins 1992). Tompkins contrasts the male association with the world of violence with the female association with the Christian and domestic world. For this reason, when Munny is in Big Whiskey and sees himself caught up again in his old way of life, he feels ill, and between delusions claims to see the angel of death together with Claudia: ‘Oh Ned, I’m scared, I’m dying. Don’t tell nobody, don’t tell my kids none of the things I done, hear me?’

Munny’s remorse is the character’s fatal flaw: the obstacle that causes his internal tension and prevents him from moving toward a level of stability where he considers himself to be truly forgiven. According to Marks, ‘Munny’s fatal flaw is that he can’t forgive himself, so it’s clear that what he must achieve for redemption is to reclaim his self-worth. No sinner can be redeemed until he comes to honor God’s greater work—himself’ (Marks 2009, 126).

The fateful imposition of the past seems to nullify Munny’s evolution toward inner peace, thwarted by his intentional return to a state of moral compromise. Paradoxically, the reason for the violence – to avenge Delilah and guarantee a future for his own children – is related to the domestic female role pointed out by Tompkins. By spilling blood to avenge a woman, Munny is protecting what Claudia represents, and this fact makes him a type of tragic hero. Hours before undertaking his bloody mission, Munny alludes to Delilah’s scarred face and confesses: ‘You ain’t ugly like me, it’s just that we both have scars’.

Munny collects the reward and is left alone, having been abandoned by his companions. But he then discovers that Ned has been tortured to death by the local sheriff,

Little Bill. The sight of his friend's corpse, displayed humiliatingly in a coffin outside Big Whiskey's saloon, unleashes a vengeful fury in Munny that closes his arc of transformation and converts him into a new character.

The farmer's domestication reveals its fragility in the face of the temptation to resort to uncontrolled violence and avenge Ned's death. Munny's *hybris* explodes in the saloon and thus confirms the tragic condition of the hero, still dominated by the murderous passion of the old days. As Beard explains, 'the death of Ned is also Munny's personal loss of his 'good' self, his loss of Claudia's forgiveness and his own self-forgiveness. When he walks into Greely's to kill Skinny and Little Bill he is a creature who has lost salvation, a damned soul, 'unforgiven' (1994, 50).

At the same time, the protagonist's transformation into a lost soul suggests a deconstruction of the violent protagonists played by the filmmaker in the past, and ultimately of the collective character of the *Eastwood persona* (Beard 1994, 46; Scott 2009, 104; Groves 2001). And this is not the only demystification we encounter in the film. The first happens when sheriff Little Bill dismantles the legend of the British gunslinger English Bob to his biographer W.W. Beauchamp. The latter had propagated an unrealistic and idyllically epic image of the West. In meta-narrative terms, the episode is reminiscent of the myth forged by John Ford around the lawyer Ransom Stoddard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Far from being a hero, English Bob had made himself rich with the construction of the railway at the cost of countless lives of Chinese workers, leaving yet another of the frontier icons – the train, symbol of progress – stigmatized.

Clint Eastwood demystifies the classic image of the Western – forged by directors, such as John Ford, Henry Hathaway, Howard Hawks and Anthony Mann – linked to the socio-cultural archetypes of the West and identified with Turner's thesis on the significance of the frontier as the core of national identity (Turner 2014). Through the characters of Sheriff Little Bill and the enterprising English Bob, the director unveils the cynical archetype of a genre devoid of honor and patriotism, symptomatic of a decadent Hollywood. This imagery coincides with the setting of the Spaghetti Western, where George Roy Hill and Arthur Penn coexist with Sergio Leone. It was in this setting that much of the *Eastwood persona* was forged, in 'quasi-demonic Westerns where the protagonist's power of violence exceeds any kind of explanation', as Beard explains (Beard 1994, 57).

This last stage of the Western collides with the values of the American dream and the spirit of the frontier. If, in the classic Western, violence was justified in favor of the regeneration of a territory and a savage society, in the new stage of the genre the agents of justice and progress are equated with the outlaws of the old West. The lawyer Ransom Stoddard and Tom Doniphon would be equated with the outlaw Liberty Valance, just as English Bob and Sheriff Little Bill are men not too morally different from the first William Munny.

Unforgiven marks the beginning of a meta-narrative phase in Eastwood's cinema. Rather than being an anti-Western, Eastwood presents a complex Western in which the genre's moral clarity is undermined by a postmodern scepticism where gratuitous violence, racial hatred, corruption of justice and dehumanized progress coexist. William Munny's confusion about his unredeemed guilt is a reflection of an equally

confused social scenario. After all, Munny has the good intentions of a widowed father who only wants to protect his home and ensure a future for his children: the traditional horizon of the American Dream. In Scott's view, Munny's unredeemed guilt ultimately takes on a dimension of national proportions through the genre of the Western:

What is at stake here is a transpersonal guilt, not simply clinging to the various unsavoury characters but also embedded in the genre itself, whose iconic shorthand compresses to the point of effacement the memory of large-scale national discord and ethno-racial conflict. (2009, 112)

3. *Mystic River*. The heirs of Munny

In his analysis of Eastwood's first meta-narrative film, Scott concludes with a reflection on the uncertain fate of Munny's sons, who move to San Francisco with their father – a 'known thief and murderer' – to help him set up a grocery store: 'Are they the great-great-grandfathers of today's street gangs or do their progeny belong to the California Chamber of Commerce?' (2009, 113). In a way, the answer to this question would come in 2003 with *Mystic River*, a drama starring a gangster named Jimmy Markum who, after a career of extortion and murder in the Boston underworld, runs a family grocery and liquor store. The plot, based on Dennis Lehane's novel of the same name, takes place more than a hundred years after *Unforgiven*, and its protagonist seems to be a reincarnation of Munny. Like him, Markum is an outlaw-turned-upright citizen whose inside story holds the wound of a guilt yet to heal.

In this film, the director returns to the elements of tragedy to weave a new tale of frustrated purification and forgiveness, this time in a contemporary urban setting. The action starts when Markum learns of the brutal murder of his daughter Katie, whose body is found in a park by the river that gives the film its name. Grief gives way to a vengeful rage that coincides with contradictory feelings. On the one hand, it was his love for Katie that caused him to reform his life of crime. On the other, as he addresses his dead daughter, his remorse leads him to acknowledge, 'I know in my soul I contributed to your death'.

3.1. *Redemptive violence to thwart metanoia*

Like Claudia in *Unforgiven*, the character of Markum's daughter has played a catalytic role in the protagonist's conversion. However, in the transformational arcs of Markum and Munny, we see the precariousness of this *metanoia* or personal renewal brought about by the action of sincere love and associated with both characters' familial status. For the classics, the concept of *metanoia* was related to the idea of transformation through reflection, regret and repentance (Myers 2011). Eastwood departs from this view and approaches the difficulties of this purification from a religious perspective: Munny expressly talks about his 'sins', and Markum reveals that he felt watched by God while committing his crimes. Through his characters, the filmmaker incorporates *metanoia* in a shock of realization that shakes them to the core. As Zubiri explains: 'Today's man feels himself thrown from the everyday course of his life into an encounter with the radical nature of his reality. And in this movement of realisation occurs

what St. Paul splendidly called *metanoia*, overturning or transformation' (Zubiri 1974, 346).

For Munny and Markum, Claudia and Katie have meant the reorientation of their lives, but the violent acts of the past reappear in a fateful way to ruin this reversal and reveal the true 'radical nature of their reality': their status as murderers. The inner stories of the bandit and the gangster start from a place of a seemingly purified conscience. However, an external incident – the proposal of a vengeful contract murder, the murder of a daughter –destabilizes the protagonists, pushing them to commit the very violence they had renounced, so that their second fall thwarts their conversion and makes them definitively unforgivable. In *Mystic River*, the *hamartia* or mistake that unleashes the tragedy is Markum's conviction that Dave Boyle is Katie's killer because of coincidences that the accused is unwilling to explain, to which conclusion detective Sean Devine's investigations also lead. Indeed, bloodstains on Dave Boyle's clothes and car confirm the suspicions of Markum and Devine.

The former gangster's rage turns into full-blown *hybris* when Markum murders Boyle and dumps his body in the Mystic. As in *Unforgiven*, the scene coincides with the climax of the script itself, a moment when past crimes and guilt form a ballast that makes absolution impossible; the fatal flaw of both characters prevents the final evolution toward inner peace in their transformational arcs. This denouement is further reinforced in *Mystic River* by a paradoxical anagnorisis in which Dave Boyle's innocence is revealed: the blood on his clothes belonged not to Katie but to a paedophile whom Boyle had murdered that very night in front of the young victim. But Markum does not believe Boyle who, in his confusion, confesses himself guilty of Katie's death.

The climax of Boyle's and Markum's inner conflicts occurs in the same scene. Both protagonists then reveal the same archetype of the avenging vigilante, a role that constitutes an essential part of the *Eastwood persona*. Unlike Markum, Boyle's victimized personality, disturbed and traumatized by the abuse suffered in his own childhood, has not undergone any process of conversion. Both, however, meet grim destinies related to two fateful events that have unexpected outcomes, as happens in classical tragedy with characters who incur *hamartia*. In Boyle's case, it is the murdering of the paedophile out of an uncontrolled impulse that ultimately leads to his own death. In Markum's case, a second *hamartia* is the revenge murder of Just Ray committed many years before; the revolver, discovered by chance by one of Just Ray's children, will cause Katie's death with an accidental shot.

Both uses of *hamartia* provoke in the spectator feelings of fear (*fobos*) and compassion (*eleos*) that Aristotle attributes to tragedy, and which cause the vicarious purification of those who contemplate the heroes' disastrous fate. Moreover, this fate is the result of violence, demonstrating one of the fundamental themes in the cinema of Eastwood, who in 2013 stated: 'I am interested in the results of violence, and the effects of it on the perpetrator as well as the victim' (Papamichael) (Aristotle 2013). Indeed, in the case of Jimmy and Dave the protagonists of *Mystic River* are affected by the violent acts they have committed, and in the case of Sean, by seeing, such acts on a daily basis in a corrupted social environment.

Hamilton describes the three protagonists as tragic characters, enmeshed in similar traumas of a cycle of violence:

In *Mystic River*, although his [Eastwood's] main emphasis is still with the victim, his larger concern is with the depiction of the effects of violence, how the trauma associated with it touches all involved, and with his ability to project this message through film [...]. As all the relationships and connections to violence are revealed, viewers begin to see the complexity and multi-layers of this story within the layers of the community where it takes place. (Hamilton 2017, 104)

The violent cycles of the three characters are resolved in different ways in the script, composing a complementary denouement where guilt is diluted – although not purified – in accordance with the conscience of each one.

In Boyle's case, his guilt over the murder of the paedophile is tempered by his unbalanced personality. In effect, the character commits a crime in order to kill his own demons and bring justice to those who robbed him of his childhood, but his remorse leads him to accept a guilt he does not have in Katie's murder. Markum's *hybris* similarly explodes, and with it the justification for a return to the violence his daughter had helped him to abandon. Markum certifies his return to the bloody cycle with the phrase he utters before the *Mystic* current carries Boyle's body away: 'We bury our sins here, Dave. We wash them clean', he says, believing Boyle to be guilty.

The revenge committed by Markum and Boyle takes place within Slotkin's scheme of regeneration through violence, a myth that the theologian Walter Wink attributes to primitive societies where any form of order is preferable to chaos, and the law of the strongest ultimately prevails: 'The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has even known' (Wink 2014).

3.2. Forgiveness and 'God's point of view'

At a second level, the film also deals with guilt through Sean Devine's internal conflict. The detective investigates Katie's murder at the same time that he is trying in vain to reconcile with his pregnant wife Lauren, who has recently left him and moved to another city. As in the cases of Markum and Boyle, Devine's tensions are defined by paternity and atonement, and although we are unaware of the offence committed, his conflict is the only one to be satisfactorily resolved through the only element that can really remove guilt: forgiveness.

During the denouement of *Mystic River*, Devine has one last phone conversation with Lauren. The previous ones have ended in failure, but now the detective begins the dialog by acknowledging his guilt in the break-up and, for the first time in months, he receives Lauren's response of forgiveness. In his work on forgiveness and redemption in the film, Simon explains that the subplot developed by the Devine's is resolved according to the process Adams identifies as 'Entering God's point of view'. According to this process, the victim sees the offender as someone with problems who has resorted to ineffective remedies and, as a result, has engaged in harmful behavior toward the victim. The victim, too, may suffer from the same flaws or problems as the offender (Adams 1991, 296). As Simon explains:

Unfortunately, while Jimmy [Markum] believes, imagines or hopes that this is how God sees *him*, he is unwilling to extend the scope of this leap of spiritual imagination to God's view of *others* or enter into the process that would conform his view to God's

view. Like the cross on his back, Jimmy's theology is no more than skin deep. In contrast, Sean, who sports no religious trappings, enacts a reconciliation with Lauren apparently undergirded by a process of re-imaging similar to Adam's characterization of Christian forgiveness. (Simon 2007, 185)

In a discreet but eloquent way, Eastwood alludes in his film to the silent presence of a spectator God who consents to the violence of men and does not seem to intervene in their affairs. This can be seen in the episodes where the characters experience their greatest suffering, and the camera moves from low angle to high angle, taking the perspective of God. One such case is when the First Communion ceremony of Markum's youngest daughter coincides, tragically, with the discovery of his eldest daughter's body. The filmmaker resists pardoning his characters, perhaps because they do not understand the Christian vision of forgiveness (Markum) or are fatefully immersed in a society incapable of escaping violence (Boyle). Only Devine is granted this privilege.

The final sequence of *Mystic River* reunites the protagonists and their families during the *Columbus Day* parade. The festive tone of the community suggests that everything has returned to normal after the apparent restoration of order. However, during the parade, a gesture from Devine to Markum warns of a score that is still to be settled, and that may yet reignite violence. Meanwhile Celeste, Boyle's wife, senses her husband's murder, adding a tragic note to the festive scene.

García Mainar considers the patriotic celebration that closes the film as a reflection on the recurrent tensions in national history:

The film exemplifies the capacity of Eastwood's cinema to take part in the cultural debate about the foundations of the country that has followed the events of 9/11, a move made possible by the penetration of his authorial aura and reinforced by the internal contradiction on which it is based: [...] the contradiction between violence and democracy. (García Mainar 2007, 35)

With this last symbolic reference, the script transcends Markum's unredeemed guilt and extends it to the false triumph of regenerative violence, which Eastwood considers to be an endemic social guilt.

4. *Million Dollar Baby*. The limbo of the lost soul

In 2005, Clint Eastwood directed the story of Maggie Fitzgerald, a tenacious waitress from Missouri who dreams of breaking into competitive boxing. Despite her initial rejection due to age and the fact of being female, she finally succeeds in having Frankie Dunn, a veteran trainer of Irish origin, accept her as a disciple at the gym he runs in downtown Los Angeles. The screenplay for the film, entitled *Million Dollar Baby*, was written by Paul Haggis and was based on the short stories that F.X. Toole had published in the volume *Rope Burns: Stories from the Corner*. Haggis' adaptation, however, shifted the focus of the story from the boxer to the trainer's point of view. This dramatic shift allowed the filmmaker to further his exploration of guilt and purification through a character he chose to play himself.

Frankie Dunn's internal conflict stems from remorse for a past mistake, which has led to a rupture with his daughter Katie. At no point does he explain what that mistake was, but the feeling of guilt has driven him to attend church every day. Every night he

prays for his daughter and his late wife, Annie. Unlike William Munny and Jimmy Markum, the protagonist of *Million Dollar Baby* shows his wounds in the flesh at the beginning of the film, as his assistant who narrates the story, Eddie Scrap, recalls: ‘Some wounds are too deep or too close to the bone. And no matter how hard you work at it, you just can’t stop the bleeding’. When Father Horvak asks Frankie if he writes to his daughter, the answer is immediate: ‘Every week’. However, the old trainer receives all of Katie’s letters back again with the inscription ‘Return to sender’.

In the course of his narration, Eddie draws a comparison between boxing and life, making it an allegory of Frankie’s inner conflict. Frankie also maintains a trusting relationship with Father Horvak, spiced with sarcastic dialog. As Lindvall explains, ‘[Frankie’s] wit masks a grieving heart. For him, prayer is the source of communication he has with a world that has beaten him up’ (Lindvall 2019, 321). In this context, Frankie’s arc takes a twist when Maggie appears at his gymnasium, for, in accepting her as a disciple, he is actually welcoming the daughter who has not wanted to hear from him in years. This is an opportunity to make amends, something that Munny and Markum also enjoyed in their backstories thanks to a wife and a daughter, respectively. On the other hand, Maggie’s acceptance is a firm step for Frankie to overcome the regrets that lie at the heart of his fatal flaw, as it is not until then that Frankie decides to see a new future and abandon the vicious cycle of his life.

As with any conflict between characters, relationship stories present a paradoxical tension based on common dramatic elements. Frankie is reluctant to lead Maggie down the path of competitive boxing, where physical and emotional violence are guaranteed, but at the same time shares with her state of being beaten down by life and homeless. Eddie bluntly portrays Maggie’s underprivileged upbringing: ‘She grew up knowing one thing: she was trash’.

For the most part, the plot of *Million Dollar Baby* follows a quest for success on the competition path, where the instructor or wise old man is a trainer who has assumed a paternal role. However, unlike the master plot followed in paradigmatic screenplays, such as *Rocky* or *Cinderella Man*, the protagonist in this case is the trainer. We are therefore not surprised at the dramatic twist at the end of the second act, when Maggie, our protégé, receives a dirty blow that cuts short her fight for the world championship and leaves her a quadriplegic on a hospital bed. The central story continues undeterred, exploring Frankie’s inner struggles as he deals with the aftermath of Maggie’s misfortune.

Markum, Munny and Boyle justified their crimes through the perverse ethics of revenge. But in *Million Dollar Baby*, as Girgus explains, the moral economy of *Unforgiven* drifts into a new tragic dimension by presenting its protagonist with a terrible dilemma about life and death: ‘The battle over Frankie’s soul in the film continues into an ethical time outside to the ordinary, linear, mundane time of boxing matches and ordinary life experience’ (2014, 122). From the beginning of this inner battle, the protagonist accompanies Maggie like a real father and goes through the stages of a grief that will either purify him definitively or plunge him into an even deeper trauma.

This painful journey provokes a tension within the character, who approaches the climax of his transformational arc. During this dramatic ascent, Frankie experiences some of the emotional reactions noted by Kübler-Ross and Kessler in her study of grief

(Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2014): thus, shock and denial push him to seek second medical opinions, and the subsequent anger and helplessness lead him to blame others, including his assistant Eddie Scrap. As the coach contemplates his adopted daughter's pain, Frankie masks his suffering and reads to her a poem by Yeats, 'The Lake Island of Innisfree', which speaks of a cabin in a utopian place, far from the violent, urban world. The family nucleus that Frankie and Maggie have built, the closest thing to a home, is falling apart. The protagonist's inner conflict reaches its climax when Maggie, who has had her leg amputated, makes a terrible request: she wants him to turn off her support and let her go.

Frankie has encouraged Maggie to come to terms with the situation and adapt to her new life but, to his despair, she refuses the path of acceptance he proposes. In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis refers to the difficulties of dealing with overcoming a traumatic situation when hope is lost: 'To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he's had his leg off it is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies' (Lewis 1976, 38). The amputation Maggie suffers resembles the separation of the two characters, since the young woman does not wish to move on as Frankie would hope her to. A dilemma then arises for the coach. On the one hand, his acceptance of Maggie's request is tantamount to letting go of a part of himself and ruining the entire healing journey of his inner story; on the other hand, he cannot bear to see the suffering of the one he loves as a daughter and whom he has renamed in Gaelic *Mo cuishle* ('My darling, my blood').

The coach then turns to Father Hovort, a character posed as an alter ego of Frankie – sober, direct, blunt – and receives a harsh but realistic response: 'Whatever your sins you're carrying they are nothing compared to this. Forget about God... or Heaven and Hell. If you do this thing, you'll be lost somewhere so deep you'll never find yourself again'. Girgus agrees with Vaux (2012, 107) in that Frankie's decision to disconnect Maggie from the ventilator represents the ultimate redemption of his guilt, following a journey from the immanence of his former pain to the transcendence offered by the liberation of his adopted daughter as he accepts her right to die (Girgus 2014, 122). The authors also understand Father Hovort's response as a choice based on a religious precept prohibiting euthanasia, which, in dramatic terms, constitutes one of the poles of the protagonist's internal conflict. However, Eastwood denied this interpretation in an interview and referred to the priest's response in this way:

The priest even takes it [the dilemma] to a level that's emotional and spiritual but not by the Church rule. He's saying that psychologically you'll be damaged to a point that there's no return from. So he even drops the usual discussion that they have when it comes to this sort of thing or abortion issues, or anything else like that (...) I liked the priest and I liked the way he operated. (Taubin 2013, 203)

Like the endings of *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*, Frankie's story ends in a limbo of moral ambiguity where guilt and wounds are left open. With these words Eastwood summed up the film's final blurred image, which shows a man resembling the coach having a drink at the roadside diner that Frankie and Maggie once visited:

The ambiguity at the end is the same for Frankie as it is all the way along [...]. It's a little obscure so we don't know if it's Frankie. Maybe, maybe not. We don't know. So does he go on and become the lost soul the priest predicts he will become, which is

probably the case. Or maybe he does return to that little restaurant with great nostalgia for whatever life the two of them had together. (Taubin 2013, 200)

In any case, Frankie Dunn's initial fatal flaw has been staked out. Even though this time the character is not driven by revenge or rage, the life he has taken is still an act against himself and against the adopted daughter who could have cured him, and we are left once again with an unforgiven, wandering character.

5. *Gran Torino*. Immolation and catharsis

In the films analyzed thus far, the protagonists experience inner conflicts determined by guilt and purification, but none of them ever achieve full forgiveness and peace. Moreover, their actions cause death, deepen old traumas and, as a result, lead to tragedies where the *hamartia* of the past is reframed as an inescapable curse.

In *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*, revenge is unlikely to restore the protagonists' peace, destroyed as it has been by *hybris*. In *Million Dollar Baby*, the hopes for domestic renovation are frustrated by an accident that ruins a promising future and plunges the protagonist into an abyss that makes his guilt even worse, a fate shared with the protagonists of the other films. In *Gran Torino*, however, Clint Eastwood presents a rescue plot for the first time in his filmography as an auteur. Rescue often involves an inner plot of sacrifice, and this marks a decisive turn in the treatment of guilt begun with *Unforgiven*.

Walt Kowalski's starting point in *Gran Torino* is similar to that of other tormented protagonists, in this case because of his dark past as an ex-combatant in Korea. By introducing a sacrificial plot into this film, Eastwood comes closer to a more effective individual purification, so that the tragic concept of catharsis is not only achieved at the level of the viewer.

Walt is a stubborn Polish-American retiree living in a Detroit suburb. He is recently widowed, and among his wife Dorothy's final wishes is to have Father Janovich hear Walt's confession. But the old Ford worker remains unwilling to do so in spite of the young priest's efforts. Father Janovich concludes in amazement: 'Looks like you know more about death than about living'. Walt's new life as a widower is spent between visits from his children and grandchildren, who show little grief at the loss of their grandmother. Walt also disparages his neighbors, the Van Lor: a Vietnamese Hmong refugee family who live according to their traditions. However, initial contempt turns to growing affection, and Walt eventually takes on the guardianship of Thao, the family's teenager, to remove him from the influence of his cousin Spider's gang and find him a decent job, in accordance with 'the ways of American men'.

The Van Lors' gratitude contrasts with the coldness Walt receives from his own family, reminiscent of the loneliness experienced by Frankie and Maggie in *Million Dollar Baby*. In a similar way, Walt and Thao develop a growing relationship of adoptive parenthood threatened only by Spider and his gang. Furthermore, *Gran Torino's* script centers upon the protagonist's internal conflict, through devices, such as the scene in which a Hmong shaman reveals that a past mistake prevents Walt's happiness in life. As in the previous films, Eastwood relives the *hamartia* of his characters in the present to offer an opportunity for purification.

The opportunity to purge that guilt arises when Spider's gang shoots the Van Lor house, injures Thao and sexually assaults his sister Sue in retaliation for Walt's threats against the gang members. A final confrontation between the old ex-combatant and the aggressors is then foreshadowed, for he knows that Thao and Sue will never have peace as long as the gang stalks them. The script thus reaches its climax and the protagonist's inner conflict is at its most tense. As we have seen, William Munny, Dave Boyle and Jimmy Markum succumb to their own *hybris* in the denouement of their stories and justify their respective murders with revenge, but Walt Kowalski abandons this route, much to Thao's disappointment. Thus, his *hamartia* is revealed, and he explains to the young man that he received a Medal of Valor among other things for shooting a young soldier in Korea who had wanted to surrender, 'Not a day goes by that I don't think about it. You don't want that on your soul. I got blood on my hands. I'm soiled. That's why I am going it alone tonight'.

The aggression suffered by the Van Lor family acts as a catalyst in the conscience of the ex-combatant who, unlike previous protagonists, rejects revenge even while keeping the habits typical of the vigilante archetype. As Vaux explains, '[Eastwood] remains true to one sad dimension of human experience. Some abandon and others rescue' (2012, 105). Walt rejects bloody vengeance and decides to do justice by guaranteeing a future for Thao. By opting for a true rescue, the old soldier goes beyond violent *hybris* and chooses his own immolation.

Before executing the double plan of atonement and rescue, Walt makes a double confession of his life's mistakes. In his first confession, made to Father Janovich, Walt admits that he kissed another woman at a party, that he has neglected his children, and that he committed fraud in an asset declaration: sins that affect his duties as husband, father and citizen, the three spheres that the protagonist holds sacred. But he reserves the great guilt of his life for his confession to Thao, allegorically made behind the grille of the door that blocks the boy's way, thirsting as he is for revenge. The confession to Thao of the atrocity committed in Korea also reveals the fatal flaw that has immobilized Walt since his youth, and which has kept him under the permanent constraint of guilt. His resistance to change overcomes, the character takes a step that allows for the ultimate evolution of his arc. Certainly, Walt has omitted his crime as a young soldier in Korea when confessing to Father Janovich, but Roche and Hösle explain in this respect:

When the priest forgives Walt and assigns him ten Hail Marys and five Our Fathers, we never see Walt recite them. But in his final moment, he dies with one of the Hail Marys on his lips, thus only partially fulfilling the priest's requirement, but with the consciousness that he has done far more than could have been asked of him even if he had confessed his most heinous deed. (2011, 658)

Despite Walt's estrangement from the Church, the ex-combatant recognizes the value of confession and penance and, for the first time in Eastwood's narrative of guilt, a tormented character achieves forgiveness. During the final scene of self-immolation, the protagonist collapses and opens his arms in a cross, symbolizing Christ's redemptive death. However, Walt does not die for the sins of others but rather to atone for his own, while at the same time performing a salvific act for the benefit of Thao and his sister Sue. Only in the latter sense can Walt be understood as a messianic hero or intrusive benefactor, according to the archetype considered by Balló and Pérez (1997).

In addition, Clint Eastwood deals in depth with the religious aspect of guilt and forgiveness, adopting a Christian perspective in *Gran Torino*. In this respect, Roche and Höslé acknowledge the growing importance of the religious component in the evolution of the filmmaker's characters:

There is in Eastwood's filmography an increasing interest in the broader themes that the Western tradition has tended to grasp with religious categories: the forging of community, the cost of vengeance, the idea of a moral imperative, the willingness to sacrifice, the desire for atonement and forgiveness, and the possibility of reconciliation. (2011, 664)

In previous films, the characters' references to God were either tormented and fatalistic (*Unforgiven*, *Million Dollar Baby*), or superficial and distant (*Mystic River*). However, Walt Kowalski's story demonstrates an attempt by the director to explore purification from Christian concepts of rescue and immolation, with a liberating outcome that heals the bitter fruits of revenge.

6. The American Dream and the purification of collective memory

As mentioned above, the tragedies *Unforgiven*, *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby* take place in settings which are related to the American ethos, where the drama reveals both the fragility of its original values and the need to make amends for its deviations on a social scale. Thus, William Munny's avenging journey takes place in frontier territory, and while the commonplaces of the Western continually allude to the national epic, the film denounces the myth of purgative violence, treating it as an endemic social evil. Eastwood describes its effects through the generations, from outlaws in settler land to the parallel societies of urban mafias, as in the case of Jimmy Markum in *Mystic River*. In *Million Dollar Baby*, a coach from an Irish background evokes, through a poem by Yeats, the natural paradise he would like to escape to in order to leave behind the violent urban world in which he lives. He tells of a paradise he might share with Maggie, who herself comes from a miserable *white trash* background that reflects a kind of degradation of American community values.

Through its effects on the internal conflicts of the protagonists, Eastwood also explores the social projection of guilt in the narrative subtext of his films, thus elaborating a critical discourse on the American Dream and the deviation from its promise, particularly that of equal opportunity for success and recognition (Adams 1931, 215). As indicated at the beginning of this work, our exploration of purification in Clint Eastwood's characters extends, with a second objective, to American society as the key audience of the filmmaker. From *Gran Torino* onwards, this discourse on the national ethos acquires greater depth as Walt Kowalski evolves from an initial xenophobe to a man with a more humane perspective, overcoming his initial rejection of his Asian neighbors. This change occurs, symptomatically, when he sees the strength of other people's family ties in contrast to the weakness of his own, a quality sadly characteristic of his own neighborhood and the American population in general. Kowalski's arc of transformation concludes when he accepts the Van Lors as his own true family, to the point of sacrificing himself for them.

In later films, Eastwood has also addressed other aspects of the American Dream related to the recognition of the heroism of ordinary citizens who have been ignored, used or discarded by institutions who are overly protective of their public image, such as the army, security agencies, the political establishment or the press. The filmmaker had already denounced this kind of national guilt in some of his revisionist films, such as *Changeling* (2008) and *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), where he exposes cases of citizens who have been unfairly used and blamed. The purification of collective memory has also been addressed in more recent films, such as *American Sniper* and *Sully*, two tales of disparate heroes embroiled in similar controversies. The first, Chris Kyle, became the most lethal sniper in American military history during his involvement in the Iraq war, where his deadly shots protected the lives of fellow soldiers and prevented greater tragedies. The second, Chesley ‘Sully’ Sullenberger, was a US Airways pilot who became famous in 2009 when his skill at the controls saved the lives of 155 passengers aboard an Airbus A320 that he crash-landed in New York’s Hudson River.

The pilot’s maneuver was, however, the subject of an aggressive official investigation into the creation of an allegedly dangerous situation during the short flight. Viewed with a similarly negative lens, Kyle’s work in Iraq was widely perceived by the public as the result of an illegitimate military undertaking. In both cases, the characters were seen by their countrymen as both heroes and villains, and this tension provided the filmmaker with an interesting internal conflict from which to approach the construction of the characters. In the case of Kyle, Eastwood delved into the moral wounds inflicted on the shooters by post-traumatic stress disorder, a phenomenon similar to the one William Munny suffers in *Unforgiven*.

According to Redmon (2017), both characters experience a similar process of overcoming individual trauma that goes through the phases *event*, *traumatic-response*, *traumatic-recovery*, *ending*. For Chris Kyle, healing comes when the character assumes his role as a *sheepdog* once again, this time with veterans. For Sullenbergen, the trauma disappears when, as the person responsible for lives on board, he reaffirms to the commission the decision he made during the emergency maneuver.

Eastwood also applies this model of internal conflict to *Richard Jewell*’s protagonist. The film recounts the case of the security guard whose actions minimized the effects of a bombing during the 1996 Atlanta Olympics that killed two people. Although Jewel was first hailed by the national press as a hero, federal police suspicion of his culpability in the explosion was hastily reported by the media, and the guard was transformed in the public eye into a fanatical profiler who, driven by a desire for the limelight, may have plotted the bombing. A subsequent Justice Department investigation determined that the FBI had attempted to manipulate Jewell’s statements, and months later he was finally cleared of any wrongdoing.

After the release of *Richard Jewell*, Eastwood referred to the security guard’s case as ‘a great American tragedy’ (2019) that he had wanted to tell for five years. The plot highlighted the stress suffered by a protagonist facing accusations of guilt and national disrepute, just like Sullenbergen and Kyle. Eastwood had already employed the master plot of the *underdog* (Tobias 1993) a year earlier in *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), when he characterized the protagonists Alek Scarlatos and Spencer Stone to be superior in moral values even while they were discarded for competition or selective processes. The film

recreated the actions of two young military men who neutralized an Islamist terrorist on board an Amsterdam-Paris train. The script highlighted the frustrations of their troubled pre-adolescence, as well as the rejection of their applications to join elite military corps.

In these post-2008 *American tragedies*, Eastwood presents a new type of heroic protagonist whose inner conflict is based on a false guilt, the fruit of a social conscience which is in need of purification. We could therefore speak of a second stage in the filmmaker's filmography on guilt, where the fatal flaw of the protagonists no longer lies in their difficulties in pacifying a truly guilty individual conscience, but in their struggle to achieve society's forgiveness in spite of the exemplary citizenship or patriotism of their actions.

7. Conclusion

The purification of guilt in Clint Eastwood's characters is a theme that defines his work as an auteur, and in which two periods can be distinguished. The first is marked by four landmark films that appeared between 1992 and 2008, whose protagonists present a tragic constant around a common fatal flaw: the inability to purify a past guilt despite the attempt to amend one's own conscience, an inner goal shared by Munny in *Unforgiven*, Markum in *Mystic River*, Frankie in *Million Dollar Baby* and Walt in *Gran Torino*.

As is usual in tragedy, catharsis is denied to the hero and is only granted to the spectator, who contemplates – between fear and compassion for their disastrous fate – the fruitless efforts to rectify the evil committed in their respective *hamartias*. At the end of the dramas, their transformational arcs conclude with an aggravation of the primitive traumas and the certainty of knowing themselves to be unforgiven or definitively condemned.

However, Walt Kowalski is the exception: despite sharing a similar backstory with the previous characters and being involved in equal dilemmas, the protagonist of *Gran Torino* avoids resorting to violence and tries to act justly. Neither does he unleash *hybris*, as in *Unforgiven* or *Mystic River*, nor does he again indulge in *hamartia* by harming someone dear to him, as in *Million Dollar Baby*. In *Gran Torino*, Eastwood deviates from tragedy by addressing the question of guilt, and for the first time one of his protagonists is able to pacify his conscience by undertaking a rescue that involves self-sacrifice. Through Walt's sacrifice as a tragic hero, the filmmaker also departs from purgative violence as the dismal fate of his previous characters and, by extension, proposes the overcoming of one of the endemic illnesses of the society in which they live, according to Slotkin and Wink.

In subsequent films, Eastwood has rarely returned to the pattern of the guilt-ridden protagonist, with the exception of Earl Stone in *The Mule* (2018) – another Korean combatant who, in old age, decides to give his family the attention denied them throughout his life. In fact, since 2008, the director has been inclined to dramatize real cases starring average citizens whose heroic actions, unjustly silenced or distorted by institutions, have generated a type of social *hamartia* that he has determined to denounce. This is the case in films, such as *American Sniper*, *Sully* or *Richard Jewell*, in

which the transpersonal dimension of guilt that Scott and García Mainar find in *Unforgiven* or *Mystic River* can be appreciated. As a result, it could be argued that the filmmaker has evolved toward a new kind of tragedy in which he vindicates the American values of stigmatized characters, while pointing out the guilt of public powers such as the army, the press, the political establishment, the administration of justice or police departments.

In these ‘great American tragedies’, to use Eastwood’s term, the internal conflicts of the characters are no longer the consequence of their mistakes but of a social conscience whose purification would ultimately be a catharsis of the failures of the American Dream. In his comparison of *Sully* with *American Sniper*, Redmon evokes this purifying effect of tragedy on the American spectator in the historical moments recreated in the films, even beyond the treatment of the characters’ personal traumas:

By creating two films that can be shown to do more than simply project stories of trauma, Eastwood offers a profound reassessment of benefit that follows the interplay between film and their audiences. Films can form a *there*, some site of trauma that might otherwise be forever lost, that can be brought *here*, to a place of coherence and relevance, through the active engagement of the spectator. (2017, 173)

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