

GRAN TORINO

Directed by Clint Eastwood
Produced by Clint Eastwood, Bill Gerber, and Robert Lorenz
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 2008

Gran Torino is a revenge fantasy without the revenge. And even before its twist ending the film bestows another innovation. Not only does Walt not have to fear the consequences of the sin of murder, he need not fear even as he pursues it. We get the vicarious thrill of plotting to murder people we hate, without the vicarious guilt of seeing such an ugly deed carried out. Usually guys in revenge flicks have something to lose, which sets up a conflict between the protagonist's desire for justice (as *he* sees it) and his fear of making things worse. Here things can't get worse. Walt has no family in town. He is a widower. So no one else can be threatened or hurt to dissuade Walt from standing up to the gang. Moreover, he's old, so if he's going to die, he won't be missing out on much living. And, icing on the cake, he's got terminal cancer, so he's on his way out anyway. Why not go down swinging? Finally, as a bonus, he's a Korean War vet who knows how to get down and dirty with a rifle. So what he conceives he can actually achieve.

The critical shift in the story happens when Walt realizes he has more in common with the Hmong next door than with his own family. Walt shifts from being the Neighbor from Hell to being a father to Thao and Sue. If he is going to kill, it won't be to satisfy his disdain for Asiatic thuggery, but to protect his adopted family.

All his lessons for Thao are a gift. But Walt's greatest gift is locking Thao in the basement. He doesn't want Thao to know the guilt of murder. And he wants Thao to survive. And one of the critical elements to being a man is protecting your family and protecting women. Thao's sister Sue was gang-raped. So Thao, who has learned from Walt what it takes to be a man (rough talk, a car, a job, tools, and a girlfriend), is protected from putting into practice the final lesson. By being locked in the basement he is protected from feeling emasculated. Since he was locked up, he couldn't go, so there's no loss of face. Moreover, the most important thing is that the gang is dealt with. And Walt knows that it will be done.

We think he's going to lay an elaborate trap and pick them off one by one. Instead, he goads them into murdering him, making sure plenty of witnesses are made aware of what's happening.

He dies to put the gang in jail, but also as a penance for his slaughter in Korea, an act Walt has lamented and agonized over for more than fifty years.

(It's a good plan morally, but lacks strategic certainty. He can almost guarantee they'll blow him away, but he is a little too confident that the gang will hang around long enough to be caught. Sure, there are plenty of witnesses for once, but how are the neighbors going to contain these guys before the cops arrive?)

So Walt dies. In Thao he had the joy of a son like he never had before. Thao has a job, a car, a girlfriend, and a dog. But most important, he knows that someone loved him and sacrificed his life so a boy could have a future...as a man.