
Study Guide

Gran Torino



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in the *Gran Torino* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot Synopsis: Disenchanted by the recent death of his wife and the changes in his neighborhood, Walt Kowalski overcomes his prejudices to help a family of recent immigrants secure a future in America.

A. Prior knowledge in *Gran Torino*

One issue explored in *Gran Torino* involves youths' disrespect for the values of older Americans. Viewers see Walt's grandchildren genuflect and cross themselves at their grandmother's funeral. Walt's granddaughter is dressed in clothing that many people might not consider appropriate for a funeral. Viewers who know the appropriate dress for funerals would understand Walt's reaction to her clothing.

When Walt's grandson crosses himself, he accompanies each gesture with words that might be confusing to many viewers. If they knew the joke from which the words come, however, they might understand why they communicate a disrespectful attitude and why Walt might be offended by his grandson's behaviour. The joke that provides the context for the grandson's words follows:

A woman was standing on a busy corner waiting for the crosswalk signal when an oncoming vehicle hit a car making a left turn.

An elderly man stepped out of one car and immediately crossed himself (made the sign of the cross).

The woman rushed over to help. When she reached the man, she asked if he was hurt. "No." came the reply.

"Well, I think that it is wonderful that you gave thanks to God that you were unhurt."

"What are you talking about?"

"You made the sign of the cross when you got out of the car."

"What sign of the cross?!" The man asked, and repeated the gesture, this time saying, "Spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch!"

What other prior knowledge might help viewers to understand Walt's worldview?

B. Cinematography

Cinematography is used purposefully in *Gran Torino*.

1. When Walt enters his garage at night to catch a thief, he turns on an overhead light. The light swings back and forth, showing that someone is there, but obscuring the thief's face. Walt trips and falls, never seeing the thief's face.

Why is important that Walt failed to see the thief's face?

How does the lighting help viewers understand that Walt does not know that Thao is the thief?

2. When the Hmong gangbangers swarm Thao and damage his construction tools, the cinematographer uses a hand-held camera to photograph close-ups on the gangbangers.

How does the combination of the hand-held camera and close-ups help viewers feel Thao's fearful response to the assault?

3. When Walt throws the gang leader onto the lawn and beats him, the cinematographer photographs Walt from the gangbanger's point of view and photographs the gangbanger from Walt's point of view. The assault might have been photographed from the side, so that viewers saw both characters at the same time, but it wasn't.

What might be the effect on viewers when they see Walt pointing a gun directly at them and making threatening statements?

How might this choice of camera position make the movie more exciting for viewers?

C. Editing

There are a great many short scenes in *Gran Torino*. The scenes occur mostly in and around Walt's and Thao's homes over the course of a summer month.

1. Editors often use fade-ins and fade-outs to indicate changes in time, especially when the locations remain the same. The *Gran Torino* editors used straight cuts rather than fades in presenting its story.

What might be the effect on viewers of short scenes separated by cuts rather than the customary fades?

How might the cuts change the pace of the story?

2. When Walt tells Thao to uproot a neighbor's tree, the editor uses several alternating scenes of Walt smoking and watching Thao while Thao digs in the rain. The shots of Walt and Thao are separated by dissolves. Dissolves are often used to suggest a change in time between scenes.

What meanings might viewers make of the multiple dissolves in this scene?

D. Sound and Music

Sound and Music are used very purposefully in *Gran Torino*. The music often supports or predicts events, while voices are used to create character.

1. The composers used very dissonant and harsh music during the drive-by shooting. How might the music support the mood of the scene?
2. On two occasions, we hear brief military drums before Walt's altercations with gangbangers.

How might the drums predict the events to come?

Is this an example of musical humour?

3. We hear a very mellow melody as Thao drives the *Gran Torino* beside Lake Michigan. What might this song be telling viewers about Thao's future?

What meaning do you make from the repeated line in the song, "It beats a lonely rhythm all night long?"

4. Clint Eastwood modified his voice when playing Walter. In interviews, Eastwood's voice is mild and congenial, but Walter's voice is similar to the voice of Frankie Dunn, the boxing manager Eastwood played in *Million Dollar Baby*.

How does Eastwood's voice modification support the characterization of Walter Kowalski?

E. Language

Language is used very purposefully in *Gran Torino*. One use involves disrespectful language; another involves swearing.

1. Terms of Disenchantment

Walt Kowalski is a Polish-American and is affectionately called a Polak by his barber friend Martin. (Polak is a disrespectful label for Polish-Americans.) Walt trades insults with Martin, and with Kennedy, his construction-foreman Irish-American friend.

Why would an elderly American happily insult his friends?

Why wouldn't he be angry when they insulted him?

In his many conversations about and with the Hmong community, Walter uses many disrespectful labels. The list of labels he uses to describe the Hmong is not affectionate, and emphasizes the differences he feels between him and them. Among the list of insulting terms are gooks, zipperheads, zippers, slopes, boneheads, dragon lady, zips, eggrolls, swamp rats and fishheads.

Why would it be important for Walt to see himself as different from and better than, rather than similar to and equal to, his Hmong neighbors?

How does the screenwriter use Walt's use of demeaning labels to show his attitude towards the Hmong?

When does Walt's use of insulting labels change?

How does the change in Walt's use of labels signal a change in his attitude?

The uses of labels in *Gran Torino* is potentially confusing. When speaking about and with the Hmong, Walt's labels are insulting and hateful. But when using insulting labels with his Italian-American and Irish-American friends, Walt's insults communicate his affection for his friends.

What might viewers learn about the uses of insulting labels in *Gran Torino*?

How might viewers understand the differences between intensions of animosity and intensions of friendship in the use of insulting labels?

Why might viewers from different social groups have different reactions to *Gran Torino*? E.g., how might Hmong-Americans, African-Americans or other visible minorities respond to *Gran Torino* as compared to white Americans? How might first nations Americans respond to *Gran Torino*?

What is the risk that some viewers might learn to be bigoted rather than learn to be tolerant from watching *Gran Torino*?

2. Authentic Language

Many characters in *Gran Torino* swear. They swear often, and they use many of the harshest swear words.

Is it necessary for the characters to use strong language?

Would the story and characters be believable if they did not use the strong language?

Is the swearing over-used, or used appropriately?

Why might some viewers object to the use of strong language?

What might you say to help these viewers understand that the language is necessary?

F. Subtitles

The Hmong characters speak their native language among themselves. Sometimes the movie presents their speech in subtitles, but sometimes it does not.

Why might the filmmakers have shared the Hmong dialogue with viewers at one time, and not at another time?

Thao speaks Hmong with a police officer at the end of the movie when the officer tells him that multiple witnesses will ensure that the killers are sent to prison.

There are several police officers at the scene, and they represent a range of ethnic groups, from African-American to Asian to White.

Why might it be significant that Thao and the officer converse in Hmong?

G. Shifting Sensibilities

Many people believe that the election in the U.S. of Barack Obama, the first president of colour, indicates a significant shift in Americans' attitudes towards visible minorities.

One critic wrote that Clint Eastwood may have inadvertently made the first 'the first Obama-era movie.'

How might *Gran Torino* be 'the first Obama-era movie?'

If *Gran Torino* were an Obama-era movie, what would be the defining characteristics of future Obama-era movies?

H. Beyond the Screen

Viewers have seen Clint Eastwood many times before *Gran Torino*. Over a long career, he has portrayed many distinctive roles that have included cowboys, police officers and boxing managers. Even though the roles differed in time and place, they were often characterized by a strong sense of independence and commitment to seeing difficult challenges through to the end. The end often meant the death of villains.

Eastwood's many roles have created an Eastwood ethos, or philosophy, that his fans have been able to count on in each movie, no matter their genre or historical context. *Gran Torino* is a departure from the Eastwood ethos, however, because of the way that Walt deals with the villains. Walt's miming the shooting of the gangbangers with his fingers seems to predict a showdown, but it turns out to be something different than the usual Eastwood ending.

How might *Gran Torino* have changed viewers' perception of the Eastwood ethos?

Might the end of *Gran Torino* signal the end of the line for Eastwood roles?

I. Sequel: *The Real RockNRolla*

Consider the plot and characterization significance of each of the following soundbites.

"A Jew, a Mexican and a colored guy walk into a bar.
The bartender looks at them and says, 'Get the f*ck out of here.'"

'We used to stack f*cks like you five feet high in Korea to use as sandbags.'

"The thing that haunts a man the most is what he isn't ordered to do."

"I have more in common with these gooks that I do with my own spoiled rotten family."

"We just need to man you up a little bit."

"I'd let you take the Gran Torino."

"This kid doesn't have a chance."

"I'm not a good man."

"Boy! Does my *ss hurt from all the guys at my construction job."

Which other soundbites would be useful in helping viewers understand the meanings in *Gran Torino*?

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