From Sinners to Saviors:

A Comparative Analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Eastwood's *Gran Torino*

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"The lightless depths of Earth bursting open in kindness to receive him." – Oedipus at Colonus

"Go in peace." "I am at peace." – Gran Torino

Oedipus at Colonus is one of the three Theban plays written by the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles. Postdating *Oedipus the King*, it begins years after Oedipus' exile and ends with his death. The play preserves traditional tragic elements but achieves a breakthrough in its religious contemplation. Its narrative culminates not in bitter tragedy, as does *Oedipus the King*, but in a gesture toward redemption. *Gran Torino*, a 2008 American drama film directed by Clint Eastwood, parallels the Sophoclean arc. Depicting the journey of Walt, a Korean War veteran and a retired autoworker, the film begins with Walt's alienation from society and ends with his funeral, a seemingly tragic chronicle. However, by integrating religious themes, *Gran Torino* takes the audience beyond tragedy. The parallel between the two literary productions suggests a comparative analysis, a perspective that might reveal trans-temporal themes and universal wisdom, independently of any question of influence. The stories of Oedipus and Walt differ — for example, Walt commits a sin freely and lives in guilt, whereas Oedipus suffers from involuntary actions and insists on his innocence — yet it is surprising how many similarities exist. Both works portray the journeys of alienated, polluted sinners who achieve re-integration, redemption, and become saviors. The religious-spiritual dimension allows the narratives to move beyond bitter tragedy; they become stories of reconciliation that incorporate optimistic visions of death and life.

Oedipus and Walt both experience alienation from society that manifests itself in physical detachment and identity crisis. Exiled from Thebes, Oedipus appears in the story frail and

isolated, accompanied only by his daughter Antigone. The exile contains a twofold meaning: he is not only physically banished, but also deprived of self-identity. Once a king of Thebes, a husband to a wife, a resident to a homeland, Oedipus the loner loses his identity as his past greatness degenerates into bitterness. Likewise, Walt first shows up in the movie as an isolated figure. He stands away from the attendees at Dorothy's funeral and sits alone outdoors beside the lively, multi-generational neighbors. Appearing as the only white figure in the clinic's waiting room, he is also racially and aesthetically alienated, an alienation that symbolizes his detachment from the local community and society. The alienation strikes Walt when he hears his name being pronounced as "Koski," a falseness that alludes to his identity crisis — he is someone left behind, a veteran forgotten by the nation and its people (his grandchildren do not know where Korea is), and a bigot whose traditional values are being eroded. Moreover, his past sin of killing an innocent Korean boy haunts him. Walt lives under the badge of a sinner, ironically represented by his medal that marks his "achievement" in the war. The Hmong shaman precisely sees through Walt's identity crisis: the people — for whom he fought — do not respect him; food — a symbol of family — has no taste; he has made a mistake in his past life; he has no happiness and is not at peace. The absence of social recognition and self-worth triggers an identity crisis that manifests both physically and spiritually.

Condemned by their past transgressions, Oedipus and Walt become sinners dwelling in the hybrid of factual and symbolic sins. Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, a sin that is socially transgressive and culturally heinous. Oedipus laments that he "pollutes" his father's bed; Tiresias calls him "the accursed polluter of this land" (The Internet Classics Archive). The plague in Thebes, an actual disaster that kills many, is a manifestation of Oedipus's moral

contamination. Parallel to Oedipus, Walt's factual sin also stretches to a symbolic realm. Having committed a bloody murder in the real world, Walt says to Thao: "my hands are soiled." The symbolic stain on his hands is washed away when, after Walt is shot down, the blood run down his hands, a repetition that functions as a reversal, representing a purification that cleanses the pollution.

The two characters undergo transformations as they acquire humility and integrate into new communities. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is characterized by pride and stubbornness. He dismisses Tiresias's advice, accuses Tiresias of envying his achievement, and rages at Creon's "conspiracy" against him. Oedipus's realization of his crime marks a turning point: when his perfect self-image undergoes brutal deconstruction, his pride disappears. Oedipus attains full humility during his lonely exile. He describes himself to Theseus as "so wretched, a man stained to the core of his existence," and he praises Athens for having "reverence, humanity, and lips that never lie" (352). Oedipus displays humility not only in a lowly self-portrait, but also in his wholehearted appreciation of others — in this case, a foreign community. Moved by Oedipus's humility, Theseus establishes a genuine friendship with Oedipus and grants him protection, making Athens his new home and final resting place. Oedipus, once alienated by his home country Thebes, integrates into a new community where he gains acceptance and peace.

Similarly, Walt overcomes his arrogance and recognizes the dignity of the Hmong people. Walt first appears as an ugly person with racist comments. The Hmong family, especially Sue, educates and enlightens him. When Walt is enjoying a feast in their home, Sue teaches him Hmong cultures and traditions, which subtly changes Walt's racist perspective. Walt also learns that looking directly into a Hmong's eyes is disrespectful, a message that alludes to his fading

rudeness and burgeoning humility. Walt begins to recognize values intrinsic to people regardless of form and appearance. He also comes to understand himself with the help of the Hmong. The Hmong family rescues and transforms Walt. Walt's ugly racism is mocked by Sue, "a white devil," when Walt addresses the Hmong with racist terms. This equal relationship between Walt and the Hmong elevates *Gran Torino* above the "white savior" trope, a concept that the term "white devil" might allude to. Instead of presenting a grandiose narration of a white messiah-figure saving non-white, disadvantaged characters, *Gran Torino* negates this "white devil" trope by mocking the white, manly figure, who shows his limitations and is spiritually rescued by the Hmong family.

The loners form surrogate family ties that bring them joy and love. Walt surprisingly realizes that he is closer to "these goddamned gooks" than his "own spoiled-rotten family." He forms a mentor-student relationship with Thao, who becomes his spiritual son. Walt further shows his humility when he recognizes the priest's admirable characteristics and invites the priest to call him "Walt." Promoted by mutual goodwill, they also foster a father-son relationship. Walt's two biological sons, on the other hand, covet Walt's house and contact Walt solely for self-oriented needs. Symmetrically, Oedipus's son Polynices visits him only to gain his support for war, since "the side [Oedipus joins] will triumph" (363); Creon, Oedipus's brother-in-law, regards Oedipus as an object that brings blessing to whoever possesses it. In contrast with the original relationships characterized by exploitation, the surrogate communities nourish each man with joy and unconditional love. The two works present the trajectory of alienated loners being integrated into new, redemptive communities. This interpersonal arc

presents a deep-rooted optimism, one that stresses a faith in the power of human connection and the altruistic capacity of human nature.

Oedipus and Walt develop a sense of religiosity as they come to recognize a higher existence. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus manages to deny the oracle and escape from his pre-doomed fate, attempts that reveal his impiety. Having failed traumatically, Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* embraces faith and salutes the greater power: "This is the sign, the pact that seals my fate" (286). Accepting his humble existence, Oedipus submerges himself to the fate wheeled by the divine supremacy. It is noteworthy that faith in *Oedipus in Colonus* is ultimately non-targetive. The messenger who witnesses Oedipus's death describes the divinity as "it was some god" (380), a divine presence not reducible to any known deity. In his prayer, Theseus not only worships the Olympian gods as usual, but also salutes "the powers of the Earth" (381), a gesture echoing Oedipus's finale: "the lightless depths of Earth bursting open in kindness to receive him" (381). The narration expresses a deep sense of spirituality, a religiosity unrestricted by the Olympian system but integrated with a higher realm. Oedipus is received not by one specific god, but rather by nature, the world, and the universal wisdom that embraces every humble existence.

Gran Torino also expresses a capacious sense of religiosity: it includes Christianity but goes beyond it. At first, Walt mocks the priest and rejects a confession, showing impiety and disregard for religion. However, the Hmong's shaman attracts him; having listened carefully, Walt walks away, but his facial expression turns shocked and painful. Re-integrated into communities, Walt eventually makes confessions to his two spiritual sons respectively, which allow a resolutive death. Before his death, Walt recites the Hail Mary, an embrace of

Christianity, a submission to a greater power, and a gesture of peace. The film also hints at the value of Taoism, a reference alluded by Thao's name. The highest values of Taoism are non-action, moderation, humility, and peace, all of which are evident in Walt's final "Christian" act. The religiosity of *Gran Torino* contains Christianity but transcends it. By incorporating Taoist and Shamanist elements, it beckons a welcoming gesture toward the capacity to tolerate, embrace, and synthesize. The sensibility of a higher movement makes both characters achieve spiritual integration. Religion, non-reducible to Christianity or other specific religions, is of existential significance — it is a universal element of human life.

The religious-spiritual dimension allows both works to move beyond bitter tragedy into reconciliation; the main characters present self-sacrifice and end in a gesture of redemption. Oedipus gives his body to Athens as a gift that brings prosperity to the city. By giving away his body, a sacrifice that resembles the Christian crucifixion, Oedipus becomes a savior who blesses the future of Athenians. Oedipus finds a persistence of his life in them, who will carry on his blessing and story. Similarly, Walt sacrifices his life for the future of Thao and Sue. In them lies a continuation of his life, a bright ideal emphasized by the final scene: Thao adopts Walt's dog and inherits the Gran Torino, the embodiment of Walt's spirit. At his death, Walt lies with two arms outstretched, a gesture that mirrors crucifixion. Walt, intentionally associated with Jesus Christ, becomes a savior. The final resolutions of both works portray a dynamic between being a savior and being saved, two sides of the same coin. While giving away their lives, Oedipus and Walt gain redemption and peace. Being polluted sinners, they atone externally and work out their salvation. Oedipus, who commits a sin and pollutes a city, makes his atonement by blessing another city; Walt, having committed a crime in killing an innocent Asian boy, attains

redemption by saving Thao. Penance washes away one's symbolic stain; while becoming holy, sinners are saved by their own sacrifices.

Depicting the journey of alienated, polluted sinners to achieve integration into communities and become saviors, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Gran Torino* provide special insights into sin and salvation. The analysis concludes with an optimistic view toward life: a sinner can gain peace through positive social relationships and can be saved by external atonement — actively working out his own salvation. Whereas tragedy has traditionally been associated with the emotion of fear and pity, both works take us into a more cerebral realm of contemplation. They evoke structures of spirituality and religiosity without reducing it to a particular religion; the characters acknowledge a higher existence, an abstraction, and submit themselves to it. The religious-spiritual dimension of the two works reveals a universal wisdom: religion is a fundamental aspect of human society; it brings peace and salvation to tortured souls.

References

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