In the name of the Father, the Daughter and Eddie Scrap: Trinitarian Theology in Million Dollar Baby

Sharon Roubach

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, roubach@vms.huji.ac.il

Recommended Citation
Roubach, Sharon (2016) "In the name of the Father, the Daughter and Eddie Scrap: Trinitarian Theology in Million Dollar Baby," Journal of Religion & Film: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss1/2
In the name of the Father, the Daughter and Eddie Scrap: Trinitarian Theology in Million Dollar Baby

Abstract

_Million Dollar Baby_ (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2004) is a boxing movie that uses imagery associated with the Holy Trinity – personified by the film's three protagonists – to put forth a view that the essence of Christianity relates to belief and love. The Trinity also lends itself as a medium for Eastwood's reflections of notions of home and family, through a comparison between biological dysfunctional families and human bonds based on love and compassion.
Clint Eastwood's award-winning *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) aroused the ire of conservative Christian groups in the United States. The film, written by Paul Haggis and based on short stories by F.X. Toole, was condemned as left wing propaganda and as non-Christian for its favorable attitude towards euthanasia.¹ In the following paper I would like to suggest that although the film does regard euthanasia as an act of mercy and love, it is a movie with a clear Christian message based on the image of the Holy Trinity. Through his use of the image of the Holy Trinity and his understanding of it Clint Eastwood conveys a viewpoint that Christianity is a religion based essentially on belief and love. The relationships within the Trinity serve as a context for discussing notions of home and family, including a comparison between biological dysfunctional families and human bonds based on love and compassion.

**Storyline**

*Million Dollar Baby* tells the story of three people: Frank Dunn (Clint Eastwood), an aging boxing trainer and the owner of a shabby gym; Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), a ‘white-trash’ diner waitress who dreams of becoming a boxer; and Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris (Morgan Freeman), a half blind ex-boxer who lives in Dunn's gym, cleaning and attending to it.
The movie begins when Maggie arrives at Frank's gym asking him to train her. He refuses, saying he does not train girls. She insists, and begins coming to the gym daily, working for hours on the punching bag; Dunn still refuses. Ultimately, it is Eddie Scrap who, moved by pity for her, lends her a boxing bag and persuades Dunn to help her out. It is he also who first recognizes her talent, comparing her with the legendary Sugar Ray. What begins as reserved training relationship between Maggie and Frank gradually evolves into a strong emotional father-daughter relationship, each replacing for the other the loving family they lack. Maggie's success shortly follows, as she wins one fight after the other. When boxing agent Mickey Mack offers her to leave Dunn and be represented by him, she is not tempted and tells him she will never leave Dunn. Maggie's decision is quite unlike that of Dunn's former protégé, rising boxing star Big Willie Little, who was tempted by Mack's offer and left Dunn because he felt that Dunn did not believe in him, a feeling that intensified when Dunn would not let him participate in a championship fight. Maggie's success continues until during a crucial fight for the total sum of one million dollars, when, just as she is about to win, she is attacked from behind by her opponent. Maggie's spine is broken, and she becomes completely paralyzed. She then beseeches Frank to help her die and tries in vain to kill herself when he refuses. Finally, torn between his wish to keep her with him and his love for her he grants her death. He then disappears, leaving the gym to Eddie.
The Holy Trinity

Priest: What's confusing you this week?

Frank: Same old one God, three gods.

Priest: Frankie, most people figure out in kindergarten, it's all about faith.

Frank: Is it sort of like snap, crackle and pop all rolled up in one big box?

Priest: You're standing outside my church comparing God to Rice Crispies? The only reason you come to mass everyday is to wind me up. It's not going to happen this morning.

Frank: Well, I'm confused.

Priest: No you're not,

Frank: Yes I am.

Priest: Then here is your answer: there is one God. Anything else? 'Cause I'm busy.

Frank: What about the Holy Ghost?

Priest: He's the expression of God's love.

Frank: And Jesus?

Priest: Son of God. Don't play stupid.

Frank: What is he then; does that make him a demi-God?

Priest: There are no demi-gods, you fucking pagan.

The Trinitarian image of the three protagonists is very strong. Frank Dunn is the Father and the creator not only of his estranged daughter who returns all his letters unread but also of Big Willie Little and of Maggie, creating them as boxers and
caring for them like a father. Like God's betrayal by Adam, he too is betrayed by his first creation (Big Willie Little) who is tempted by the Devil (Mickey Mack), and by the pressure of his spouse, the modern Eve, to act in contradiction to Frank's orders. He then creates Maggie, granting her the name Mo Cuishle, meaning in Gaelic: 'My darling, my blood.' This name symbolizes the fact that Maggie is a part of him, the part he must finally grant death in order to bring salvation. Only this time the salvation is not of humanity but of Maggie herself, and in a way, also of himself. Maggie's name of endearment also brings to mind the divine words in Jesus' baptism: 'You are my son, the beloved.' After the death of his beloved 'daughter,' Frank leaves the world, symbolized by the gym, in the care of the Holy Ghost – Eddie (see [7], below).

Maggie is the daughter suddenly appearing, like in the Gospel according to St. Mark, at the age of thirty to begin her mission. Poor and humiliated, she is driven by a strong sense of destiny. She stoically withstands the mocking of the other boxers in the gym and is not tempted by the Devil's offers of success. Like Jesus she renounces her biological family, when at her deathbed she sends them away, refusing to sign the papers transferring her property to them. She courageously asks Frank to end her life. When persuading him to help her die, she explains that she has a feeling of having fulfilled her mission, and that were she to die today her last thought would be: 'I think I did all that.' The feeling of fulfillment,
of completing her earthly mission, echoes Jesus' death words in The Gospel according to John: 'It is finished.' Unlike the other gospels in which Jesus protests God's abandoning him, here he accepts his death peacefully. As in the story of Jesus, Maggie's death is foreshadowed from the outset. In one of the first scenes of the film Maggie is seen in the diner, packing a steak left over by one of the customers. When she notices the owner watching her she remarks that she is taking it for her dog. The next scene shows her sitting alone at home eating the meat. The sequence stresses Maggie's poverty but it also implies the end of the movie by linking Maggie's story to the story of her father's dog. In one of their conversations prior to her accident Maggie tells Frank of the love her father had for his dog, a love so great that when the dog became old and crippled her father ended the dog's life. She returns to this story when she beseeches Frank to end her own life. In eating the steak Maggie becomes the dog, given death out of love.

Eddie Scrap is the Holy Ghost, acting not only as the expression of God's love, but also, in its Augustinian sense, as the bond of union in the Holy Trinity. It is he who brings Frank and Maggie together, almost forcing them on each other. He is driven by compassion out of which he cares not only for Maggie and Frank, but also for Danger, a young, frail boy who suffers from a mental disability and who dreams of becoming the medium-weight champion of the world. Eddie constantly protects Danger from the mockery and violence of the young boxers
training in the gym. It is also he who persuades Frank to let Danger practice in the gym without paying. Eddie acts in a way as Frank's emotional part, seeing and understanding things that Frank either ignores or is unable to see. He serves as the mostly anonymous narrator of the film, providing a voice-over that only in the last frame of the film turns out to be a letter he is writing to Frank's estranged daughter – like a new Gospel narrating the actions of God and his daughter in the world. And once Maggie dies and Frank disappears, it is he who remains in the world running the gym.

**Family and Home**

Maggie: You got any family, boss?

Frank: What?

Maggie: You're spending so much time with me. I didn't know if you had any.

Frank: Well, I've got a daughter, Katie.

Maggie: Well that's Family.

Frank: We're not exactly close.

The Holy Trinity serves the film not just as a way of presenting a modern Gospel or making a statement concerning euthanasia; it also serves as an image through which modern notions of family and home are examined. Throughout the film the narrator repeatedly states: 'boxing is an unnatural act, everything is backwards.' At one level this statement relates to the film's plot: unlike life in which hatred brings
about violence, here it is the violence of boxing that enables the love between Maggie and Frank. But mainly, this saying serves in the film as the basis of the comparison between 'natural' bonds between people, based on blood, and 'unnatural' bonds, based on love and compassion. Theologically it recalls the Pauline notion of Israel in the flesh as compared with Israel in the spirit; it is the emotions and not the blood that make a true family.7

All three protagonists lack a true family. Frank is a father, but he has no relationship with his daughter and the daughter's mother is not mentioned at all in the film. Frank tries to make contact with her by constantly writing her letters, but she ignores his attempts. When Maggie enters Frank's life she replaces his daughter; the granting of the Gaelic name Mo Cuishle, meaning: 'My darling, my blood', turns her into his true daughter. The family bond that ties Frank to Maggie is emphasized by the fact that although she is a thirty-year-old woman and although there is close physical contact between them, their relation is completely non-sexual.

Maggie has a mother, a sister and a brother, but her relationships with all of them end up in bitter disappointment. Trying to please her mother and win her love, Maggie buys a house from the money she earned from boxing and offers it to her. Her mother refuses the gift, fearing that social security will reduce her benefits if she becomes a homeowner. A further hurtful misunderstanding results when, upon seeing Maggie's bruises, her mother becomes certain that Frank is their source.
When Maggie proudly informs her that she was hit by no man and that rather the bruises are a result of her boxing, her mother complains that she is the target of mockery because of her daughter's boxing, and tells her to get herself a man.

When Maggie is injured and lies in the hospital in Las Vegas (where the lethal fight took place), her family is notified. Maggie sits at the window awaiting them, and tells Frank that once her mother arrives he will no longer need to care for her. But when they do finally show up in the hospital six days after their arrival in Vegas during which they spent the week sightseeing, all they are interested in is making her sign the papers turning her money over to them. All the while Frank sits day and night by her bed, washing and caring for her, doing all he can to transfer her to a different hospital where he believes she will receive better treatment.

Eddie's family is never mentioned in the film. We are told a little of his past as a boxer and how he made the bond with Frank, but there is no mention of him having a family of any kind. Frank, and later Maggie are his only family and the gym his only home, both metaphorically and physically. Indeed, alongside the different notions of family, the film offers also various images of home. Apart from the physical homes – the one that Maggie tries to offer her mother, and the one Eddie does not have – the notion of home reappears in the movie through various images.
During the film Frank is in search of a homemade lemon pie. When he asks Maggie if the diner she works in serves lemon pie with homemade filling, she replies, "of course, the one that comes in a can with the label 'home made' on it." She does finally bring him to the place that serves his dream lemon pie, a diner she used to go to with her father when she was a child, and it there he returns after her death. Through the homemade lemon pie Maggie succeeds in offering Frank not only the notion of family but also of home embodied in the lemon pie.

Ireland is another recurring motif in the movie. Frank reads books in Gaelic and reads the poetry of W.B Yeats, the Irish poet. Before Maggie's first international fight, he offers her a green silk costume, with the Gaelic words Mo Cuishle embroidered on it. The costume is not only in the Irish national color, but is also identical in color to the costume of the Catholic priest in St. Mark's church, the church Frank attends daily. Ireland, although not mentioned by name, serves as the far and longed for homeland, emphasizing the aspect of home as a place where one belongs.

Million Dollar Baby is a film about the human search for family and a true home, where one feels a real sense of belonging. The film tells a sad story, of loneliness, of dysfunctional and shattered families, severely criticizing not only the crisis of modern family but also the institutional church as an alternative home. The only representative of the Church appearing in the film, the Priest of St. Mark, is
unable to offer aid to Frank's tormented soul, to provide deep answers to his elementary thoughts concerning faith, or other but the laconic Christian objections to euthanasia. And yet, Million Dollar Baby is a film with a clear Christian message, using the imagery of the Holy Trinity to offer a hope that humans can create their own families bound by love and compassion through the bonds they form with one another.

1 See for example: http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/filmforum/050113.html or http://www.debbieschlussel.com/columns/column011004.shtml where, in an entry dated January 2005, Debbie Schlussel stated that the film will win the Oscar because 'it supports killing the handicapped.'

2 Mark 1:11 (new Revised Standard Version).

3 This is an intentional reference by the director, St. Mark being the name of the church Frank visits daily – this Gospel is indeed most influential to the film's narrative.


5 John 19:30.

6 Augustine, De Trinitate.