



12-7-2016

## Mystic River: A Parable of Christianity's Dark Side

Charlene P. E. Burns

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, burnscp@uwec.edu

---

### Recommended Citation

Burns, Charlene P. E. (2016) "Mystic River: A Parable of Christianity's Dark Side," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# Mystic River: A Parable of Christianity's Dark Side

## **Abstract**

This paper examines *Mystic River* through the hermeneutic of visual story. When read as parable, the film becomes a powerful indictment of Christianity's complicity in the structural character of sin and evil in American culture. This claim is supported through examination of the film's use of Christian symbols and the function of women in the plot.

"Human pathos is the world's pathos become self-aware"<sup>1</sup>

*Mystic River* is a dark, disquieting film. Critical responses from media-based reviewers underscore its disturbing nature. Some proclaim it conveys "something classical or even biblical," that it "takes a piece out of you."<sup>2</sup> Others are more negative, interpreting its "ideological and psychosexual program ... [to imply] that the thirst for revenge is an honorable adult emotion."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, I found through informal survey that the film unsettles the average moviegoer, although few are able to clearly account for their uneasiness. Even so, viewers and reviewers give it high praise. This intuition of the film's high quality floating above an undercurrent of disquiet can be accounted for by analysis of the film through the hermeneutic of "visual story."<sup>4</sup> Viewed through this lens, the film can be seen as a parable of the moral failure of Christianity in the modern world.

John R. May's application of J. D. Crossan's work on myth and parable to film analysis serves as my model here. Myth and parable are distinctly religious forms of story that sit at opposite ends of the communicative spectrum. Religious myth functions to reassure us. Myth tells us our world is grounded in a transcendent reality, and although we experience alienation from this ground, myth establishes the possibility of reconciliation. But parable is subversive; change, not reassurance, is the goal."<sup>5</sup> As Crossan says,

The surface function of parable is to create contradiction within a given situation of complacent security but, even more unnervingly, to challenge the fundamental principle of reconciliation by making us aware of the fact that we made up the reconciliation ...You have built a lovely home, myth assures us; but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault."<sup>6</sup>

Both forms of story deal with conflict, but myth differs from parable in that the promise of resolution is always part of the message of myth. God is almost always one of the characters of myth and almost never so in parable. Jesus' parables dramatize conflict in human life, dealing with transcendent reality not directly but "in the mode of fiction - indirectly, figuratively, symbolically...[they] subvert world by challenging the listener to attend to mercy's unpredictability, to our impotence due to the demon within, and to the anguish of unrequited love."<sup>7</sup> In parable there is no resolution to the conflict. Parable is unsettling precisely because its message is this: There is something wrong in your world, and the way things are is not the way they ought to be. Parable is meant to transform us, not to comfort us.

### **Synopsis of the Film**

*Mystic River* is set in a working class Irish Catholic neighborhood of Boston. In the opening scenes we see three boys playing street hockey. When the ball is lost down a gutter, Jimmy and Sean decide to write their names in wet sidewalk cement. Dave somewhat reluctantly follows along. As Dave begins to write his name, a car pulls up. Two men claiming to be police confront the boys. When they discern that only Dave is not from the neighborhood, they take him

away, ostensibly to confront his mother with his delinquency. In truth, they are sexual predators who abduct and abuse Dave until he escapes several days later.

We next meet the boys as adults. Dave (played by Tim Robbins) is a husband and father. There is an air of dysfunction about him, but he seems to have coped with his earlier tragic experiences. Sean (Kevin Bacon) is a police detective whose wife has left him. She telephones periodically but says nothing. Jimmy (Sean Penn) has done time in prison but now owns a corner grocery, is a husband and father, and ring-leader of a group of petty criminals.

The story centers on the brutal murder of Jimmy's teenaged daughter, Katie. She goes out with friends one Saturday night, and doesn't show up for her younger sister's first communion in the Roman Catholic Church Sunday morning. Dave becomes a suspect, as does Katie's boyfriend, whose father disappeared many years ago. As the plot unfolds we come to suspect that Dave is indeed guilty of murder. Dave's wife, Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden), overwhelmed with fear and guilt, tells Jimmy that the night Katie died Dave came home covered in blood. He claimed to have been mugged. But Celeste believes he is Katie's murderer.

As the plot moves toward its climax, the viewer is moved back and forth between scenes of Jimmy and his thugs confronting Dave, and Sean and his partner confronting Katie's real murderers. Lusting for vengeance, Jimmy demands a

confession from Dave and promises, "Admit what you did and I'll let you live." Dave falsely confesses in hopes of saving his own life. Jimmy stabs him and then shoots him in the head, saying "We bury our sins here, Dave. We wash them clean." The body is dumped into the river at the same spot where Jimmy committed his first murder, the one that has inexorably led to his own daughter's death. We do not learn until the end of the movie that Dave was indeed guilty of murder - of a pedophile he saw having sex with a child prostitute on the same night Katie died.

The next day Sean tells Jimmy the murderers have been arrested, and that Dave is missing. Sean asks, "When's the last time you saw Dave, Jimmy?" Drunk and apparently racked with guilt, Jimmy walks down the middle of the street and says, "Twenty-five years ago, going up this street ... back uh that car." With dawning awareness, Sean asks, "Jimmy, What did you do?" He knows, but without proof, he cannot arrest Jimmy, and so he leaves. As Sean drives away, the phone rings. It is his silent wife. He breathes deeply, says, "I'm sorry. I pushed you away." This is apparently all his wife has wanted from him, for now she speaks, telling him his daughter's name and agreeing to come home.

In the final scenes, we see Jimmy, his bare back exposed to us, looking out the bedroom window. He has a large tattoo on his back: a Christian cross. "I killed the wrong man," he says to Annabeth, his wife (Laura Linney). She comforts him, saying he has a "big heart", he is "a king," he did what he had to do for those he

loves, and "that is never wrong." The movie ends with no clear resolution. The neighborhood is gathered on the streets to watch a parade. Dave's guilt-ridden widow is there, as are Sean (with his wife and child) and Jimmy. It seems that Jimmy has gotten away with murder.

### **The Parable of *Mystic River***

Since film is primarily a visual medium, any attempt at religious interpretation that respects film's autonomy as an art form must examine the elements of its formal structure that correspond to the visual analogue of basic religious questions: the nature of God, the problem of evil, and salvation."<sup>8</sup> *Mystic River*, when viewed as parable, confronts the viewer with each of these questions. Religious language is (except for Jimmy's reference to washing away sins through murder) absent from *Mystic River*. However, there is explicitly religious visual imagery that insists the viewer make cognitive and emotional connection between the events portrayed and Christianity.

Because the religious allusions are nonverbal, unless the viewer consciously reflects on the film as a whole, the tendency will be to focus on the most cinematically-striking of these scenes and to misinterpret it. In the scene in question, Jimmy stands shirtless looking out the bedroom window, and we see tattooed on his back a large Christian cross that extends from his neck to the middle

of his back. Taken in isolation, this scene could mean that the viewer ought to see Jimmy as a Christ-figure. He is, after all, a suffering man with a cross on his back, albeit made of ink rather than wood. But Jimmy does not fit the bill as a Christ-figure. A Christ-figure is an innocent victim for whose suffering we are responsible and through whose suffering we are redeemed. No one in the film, much less Jimmy, meets these criteria. The scene (indeed the entire story) is tragic, but the character is not a hero; he is a vengeful murderer and thief: His suffering here is from the guilt of having killed the wrong man. The tragic nature of the scene is located in the obscenity of it; the Christian symbol of redemption has been co-opted by the evil-doer. And this is not the only time a Christian cross draws the viewers' attention.

When the cross does appear most visibly, it is worn by the most heinous of the victimizers: Jimmy and one of the men who sexually abused Dave."<sup>9</sup> In the movie's opening scene one abductor waits in the car while the other gets Dave into the back seat. As the first abductor turns around to smile at Dave, he puts his right hand over the seat. On the hand is a gold ring decorated with a cross. In a later scene, this pedophile approaches Dave in the semidarkness of the hide-away and we briefly glimpse a cross on a chain around the man's neck.

These scenes are disturbing because they simultaneously raise questions about the nature of God, evil, and salvation. Where is God in a world of sexual



predators who feel no discomfort wearing the symbol of Christian redemption? Is it not evil that a cold-blooded murderer so identifies with Christian symbolism that he has it permanently inked into his skin? What is salvation in a world such as this? These scenes nonverbally convey the truth that the cross has become an empty symbol at best, "an instrument of domination" at worst."<sup>10</sup> The molester's ring and Jimmy's tattoo call to mind Dorothee Sölle's story of a friend who was arrested by corrupt police in Argentina. During her arrest, the woman was blindfolded and interrogated for two nights by several men. At some point, she pled for mercy and said she was a Christian. One of her interrogators began to laugh and said "'Why are you telling us that? I too am a Catholic!'" He then put her hand on his bare chest so that she could feel the cross he was wearing. "It was a profound shock for my friend," Sölle says, "that ... a sadist, a torturer" should claim the cross as his symbol."<sup>11</sup> What was once a symbol of triumph over tyranny has itself become a symbol of oppression.

The film also raises issues related to the complicity of Christian teachings in undermining the moral agency of women."<sup>12</sup> Dependence and submission are the primary modes of being for the women of *Mystic River*. The only strong women in the film are Katie's boyfriend's mother, who (as befits the cultural reading of strength in women as "bitchiness") is a shrew, and Sean's wife, who is invisible. The ideal of feminine virginity fused with masculine violence is symbolized in the

first communion scene: the murderer's daughter walks down the aisle dressed in white dress and veil, symbolically to be wedded to the church's teachings. The ideal of wifely submission is artfully portrayed in the relationship between Jimmy and his wife. She knows that her husband is a murderer, yet she does not turn away from him. Annabeth encourages and comforts Jimmy, telling him he is a good man who has done what any loving father would. In the only sexual scene of the movie, Annabeth, the Ideal Wife, gives her body to her man as the ultimate form of solace for his murderous guilt.

Oddly, it is only through the actions of an invisible woman that we see any hint of refusal to be subject to the tradition's expectations of women. Sean's wife, not visible until the final scene, has refused to accept a secondary role in her husband's life. She left Sean while pregnant with their first child. In recent weeks she has begun calling but saying nothing. Sean recognizes the silent caller as his wife. Near the end of the film he finally realizes that she is waiting for him to humble himself. She is - without saying a word - insisting that he treat her with dignity, that he acknowledge his treatment of her was wrong. Her invisibility can be read as a symbol of the fact that Christian culture has yet to accept the full dignity of women. Or, perhaps her "pres-absence" is an invitation to the viewer to identify with her rather than with any of the more enflashed, traditionally-portrayed female characters. Her shadowy presence creates a space into which the female viewer is

invited, thereby offering identification not with the traditional wives but with the one who refuses the victimization and limitation inherent in her socio-religiously prescribed role.

### **Christianity and the Structure of Social Evil**

In *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* Edward Farley explores the dynamics of complicity in evil among social entities.<sup>13</sup> The church, as a social institution, has both primary and secondary aims. A social institution's primary aims lead to its specific agendas and organizational patterns. The church's primary aim theologically is to be the Body of Christ in the world. And so its specific agendas ought to be oriented toward making Jesus' teachings a living reality. If following Jesus' example, the church will be at work directly confronting evil at all levels and working to uphold the dignity of all human beings. But, because institutions necessarily are made up of individual human agents within a specific cultural matrix, secondary aims evolve that promote the aims of the societal environment. Secondary aims, influenced by personal and societal agendas, feed back onto the agendas for primary aims. In this way, an institution can become complicit in social evil. When secondary aims become infected with self-absolutizing goals, the primary aim is co-opted in service of victimization and subjugation of other groups: "When a social entity maintains self-preserving functions through absolutizing imageries, it will do anything and everything to

establish its place, power, and status."<sup>14</sup> If the institution (as in the case of the church) is a powerful one, this "agenda of evil" can spread from the institution into normative culture. The normative culture then "takes on and perpetuates symbolism ... and traditions of interpretation ... that mask subjugation by euphemistic symbols that render subjugated populations marginal if not invisible ... The symbolisms and organizational structures of religions legitimate the status quo of subjugating power."<sup>15</sup> For Christianity this subjugating power manifests itself in many ways, among them in defining roles for women and in maintaining the trappings of the faith without embodying the work of Christ.

The cross figures largely in *Mystic River*, but the church does not. Where are its representatives when our characters suffer tremendous personal losses? For these people the church is nothing more than a social institution; its teachings have no impact in their lives. Annabeth and Jimmy are proud parents when their daughter partakes of the Body of Christ for the first time. Were the church adequately manifesting its primary aims in the world, we anticipate that the emotion attached to this spiritual event ought to spill over into a lived spirituality for these people. And yet, although Jimmy feels guilt at having murdered, it is only guilt for having killed the wrong man. Further, Annabeth, is a willing accomplice to murder. The Eucharist is for these people nothing more than a rite of passage. The primary aims

of the church in offering communion have been so infected with absolutist claims that they no longer operate to make Christ a felt-presence.

When we interpret *Mystic River* as parable, we make audible its subversive whisperings: "The lovely home built from your Christian myth is situated on a most dangerous earthquake fault. The foundations are likely to give way at any time ... Understand and be transformed!" The Parable of *Mystic River* tells us that the symbols of Christianity have been adopted by our culture, but its substance has not. Christianity has become so culturally conditioned that it verges on moral bankruptcy. If transformation is to come, it must take on the shape of social redemption. "Social redemption is political and thus calls for strategies that address entrenched institutional power" but in order to be effective it must "reach the social world of shared meanings." It is only through radical criticism to expose and discredit the subjugating structures of the church and their displacement through the founding of theonomous communities of liberation that full redemption might come."<sup>16</sup>

There is no happy ending here. It is only through Sean that we see the slightest hint at redemption. In the final scene, the neighborhood is gathered for a parade. We see pathetic Celeste running alongside her son's float, calling out to him in an attempt to cheer him. We see Jimmy, supported by his loving wife, surrounded by his faithful thugs. And we see Sean, reunited with his family. On the surface, it

seems that Jimmy has gotten away with murder once again. But Sean, standing across the street, catches Jimmy's eye, raises his hand and signals. Sean, police detective and cultural symbol of the good, aims his fingers in the classic masculine imitation of a gun. He winks at Jimmy and completes the gesture, squeezing the imaginary trigger. In the gesture there is perhaps a glimmer of hope. Sean seems to be saying "I've got you in my sights."

We are left with the visual promise that striving for justice has not ceased. Like Jesus' disciples who heard but did not understand, who sensed the meaning of his parables but could not articulate it, the viewer leaves *Mystic River* disturbed, hearing the faint whisper of parable: "In the evils portrayed here, you too are implicated."

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Farley *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2001) 102.

<sup>2</sup> The first quote is from Peter Bradshaw, *Guardian Unlimited* October 17, 2003. The second is from Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone* September 25, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Vengeance is Theirs," *Chicago Reader* ("chireader.com/movies/%20archives/2003/1003/031024.html"). Thanks to my colleague, Sean McAleer, for bringing this review to my attention, and for our friendly debate on the meaning of the film that served to coalesce my thoughts.

<sup>4</sup> John R. May, "Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film," in *Religion and Film*, 23-43. eds. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> May, "Visual Story," 32.

---

<sup>6</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975) 53. qtd in May, 32.

<sup>7</sup> May, "Visual Story," 33, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Jimmy's wife wears a cross necklace during the communion and morgue scenes, his youngest daughter wears one as well. There is also a cross over Dave and Celeste's bed. But none of these seem intended to draw the viewers' attention in the way that Jimmy's tattoo and the molester's jewelry are.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 125. Latin American Liberation theology has shown us in stark relief the complicity of the Christian church in political oppression and totalitarianism.

<sup>12</sup> Much has been written on this aspect of Christian history. cf Carol J. Adams & Marie M. Fortune, eds, *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995)

<sup>13</sup> Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-260.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.