

Title of essay: “Tough ain’t enough” – representations of personal identity in Clint Eastwood films.

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Introduction:

By reflecting on films such as *Unforgiven* (1992), *A Perfect World* (1993), *Gran Torino* (2008), and especially *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), we intend to examine in a critical manner the way the hero and his personal identity are portrayed and thought of in Clint Eastwood films. The aim of this study is to try to understand the existential problems faced by the main characters, concerning their relationships with themselves and with their close family- whether blood relatives or symbolic family. In order to do this we have structured the study in five sections, which are inter-connected. Firstly we sketch out the obsessive representation of a victim-hero, or anti-hero, which runs through all Clint Eastwood films; we focus our analysis on *Million Dollar Baby*. Secondly we analyse two structuring groups, which we believe can help to structure the complex web of themes present in the director's films. This leads us directly to the third part, where we draw attention to the need for parental recognition, something which is common to the majority of the main characters. In the fourth part, the study will focus on the guilt feelings that are at the core of the main emotional issues lived out by the characters, and once more our main example is *Million Dollar Baby*. The last section consists of a summary of the main characteristics portrayed by the main characters, and is followed by our concluding remarks.

Our research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, aiming at a better understanding of personal identity in Clint Eastwood films. That is why we choose a very varied kind of corpus, including the literary, such as Walt Whitman, but also sociological studies (Anthony Giddens, Helen Lynd, Charles Taylor) or film theory (Robert Stam and Toby Miller, for example).

1 – The victim hero

The way the main character, Maggie, and her trainer, Frankie Dunn, are portrayed in *Million Dollar Baby* corresponds to the fictional building of the victim-hero characteristic of Clint Eastwood films. In fact, Frankie Dunn represents the archetype of the Eastwood' anti-hero, in search of redemption and trying to atone for traumatic events from his past, for which he feels responsible. Frankie lives in remorse for having allowed a boxer (Scrap, the film's narrator) one last fight, in which he loses an eye. Scrap himself tells Maggie about this episode, emphasizing the fact that Frankie could have done nothing, being his cut man and not his manager, and so lacking the authority to put an end to the fight. Even so, Scrap argues, Frankie could not forgive

himself for not having found a way to stop the fight. This is not, however, Frankie's only source of regret. He also lives tormented with guilt towards both his absent daughter and his daughter's double, Maggie, whom he has accepted to train, after some hesitation. Likewise, William Munny, the main character in *Unforgiven*, haunted by his past as a murderer and the death of a friend (once again played by Morgan Freeman), turns to the only weapon he knows: violence. Similarly, in the title role, *The outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), Clint Eastwood takes under his wing a group of defenceless people after losing all his family, slaughtered by Union soldiers during the US Civil War.

In 1980, Clint Eastwood allowed photographer Annie Leibovitz to tie him up at Burbank Studios, California. He looks as if he has just stepped out of a western setting, encircled by dust, standing erect as a pole, an icon of masculinity with his torso and legs tied with ropes. He looks at us, as if trying to throw back at us any feeling of embarrassment. The photograph was the cover for an essay by Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries, significantly called *The Sexuality of Men*. We're not saying there's a concealed pleasure in Clint Eastwood's face, as Paul Smith does in his essay *Clint Eastwood – A Cultural Production*. Still, there's a sign there: the willingness to always put himself in difficult situations...¹

In an interview about *Million Dollar Baby*, Peter Bogdanovich asks the director to comment on the following statement, made in 1968 by Don Siegel: "Clint Eastwood is obsessed by the anti-hero. It's what he believes in, and in all the films he made so far he insists on being one. I have never worked with an actor less concerned with his image." Clint Eastwood replies:

"Yes, when we did something anti-heroic, I was the first to step in. It may have been Cagney's influence – the guy that comes out eating a chicken leg and blasting a guy in the trunk of a car [*White Heat*, 1949, directed by Raoul Walsh]. But I figured: 'Hey, the public either likes me or it doesn't. If not, too bad.'"²

Gangster and western films draw on the stoic heritage of the self-staged hero. The hero will only toughen up if undergoing difficult circumstances, especially when finding himself alone. For the hero to be considered as such, he has to be experiencing

¹ Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood - A Cultural Production* (London: UCL Press, 2003) in Maria João Madeira, ed. *Clint Eastwood: um homem com passado* (Lisboa: Cinemateca Portuguesa - Museu do Cinema, 2008), 245. Translated by the author from Portuguese.

² Peter Bogdanovich and Clint Eastwood. "Clint Eastwood, Million Dollar Guy". *Y Cinema, Público*. 30 (Dezembro de 2005): 6. Translated by the author from Portuguese.

suffering, caused by a tragic event. The epic/anti-epic or hero/anti-hero dichotomy is part of the American epic poem as seen, for instance, in Walt Whitman's poems and essays:

I know I am august, / I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood, / I see that the elementary laws never apologize, / (I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by, after all.) // I exist as I am, that is enough, / If no other in the world be aware I sit content, / And if each and all be aware I sit content.³

On the other hand, there's a connection between the director, the book's author and the subject of the film, *Million Dollar Baby*. Which the writer F. X. Toole publishing his original story at the age of 70, Clint Eastwood directing and starring the film in his mid 70's and Morgan Freeman taking part in his late 60's, *Million Dollar Baby* is a story told by and mostly about mature men. The characters they create are cautious individuals, tormented by past mistakes and by choices they've made and cannot forgive themselves for. When Frankie starts training Maggie, he sets up the following rule: "protect yourself at all times". She answers him by recalling an episode of rejection on his part – "You gave me away. How is that protecting me?" The dialogue seems to redirect Frankie back to his relationship with his biological daughter, who often returns his letters unopened.

In *Million Dollar Baby*, the aged men swing back and forth between prudence and youthful' impetuosity. Scrap fails to protect the would-be boxer, Danger, and Frankie is not able to protect Maggie from herself. By giving in to Maggie's plea to put an end to her suffering, when she is paralysed from the neck down, Frankie's character in F. X. Toole's book accepts the priest's foretold condemnation, whereas in the film Frankie recognizes his loss and loneliness. In the film, he reads to Maggie *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, a poem by Yeats expressing the desire to live alone and find peace at last. The beginning of the second stanza goes like this: "And I shall have some peace there..." Wasn't this Frankie's long sought after peace in his faithful friendship with Scrap, in his efforts to renew his Irish roots, in his sudden frequent attendance to church and talks with the priest, and lastly in his profound relationship with Maggie? In the "somewhere between Nowhere and Goodbye", foreseen by Scrap as Frankie's place of destiny,

³ Walt Whitman. *Canto de mim mesmo*. Bilingual edition translated by José Agostinho Baptista (Lisbon: Biblioteca Editores Independentes, 2008), 50.

there's no more than a faint feeling that he will, in the words of Yeats, "have some peace there."

The film surprisingly ends under the sign of absence and emptiness, given the disappearance of the two main characters, leaving only the narrator's voice to comment on this final state of affairs. The last shot suggests, without confirming, Frankie's return to his favourite spot, the restaurant at the side of the road with "the best lemon pie" – the precious bond between the two missing characters, uniting them beyond death. The place can be seen as the cabin in the poem by Yeats that Frankie reads to Maggie in her hospital bed, and that he himself offers to build for her someday: "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there..."

The self-destruction characteristic of Clint Eastwood films relates to the idea of the loss of male power when compared to the woman. When one appreciates the main character's weakness, this issue is already quite the subject of his first film, *Play Misty for me* (1971). – In it, Dave, played by Clint Eastwood himself, is a disc jockey who gets involved with Evelyn, an obsessive fan who becomes more and more dangerous, and whom he can't get rid of. But it might well be in *The Beguiled* (1971) – a film that, despite being directed by Don Siegel, stars Clint Eastwood – that the traits of masochism and male impotence vis-à-vis the woman reach their peak. It is the story of a Yankee soldier, John McBurney, wounded and taken care of by a group of women living in a boarding school at the end of the American Civil War. Although an enemy, the women take him in, take care of him, and they all fall in love with him. However, while trying to profit from the women's feelings, the soldier jumps the gun in his yearning to satisfy his instincts, and ends up dying because of them. At the end of the film, the women find out that he has taken advantage of them and their revenge is terrible – they end up killing him, by serving him his favourite meal: the (poisoned) mushrooms the "innocent" girl that first found him wounded in the forest was picking.

2 – The two thematic structuring groups

When we go over Clint Eastwood's filmography, we can see a complex web of themes drawn together into two structuring groups. The first one intersects western with police films, in which Clint Eastwood himself embodies the image of transcendental violence, whose highest expression may be *Unforgiven*. On the other hand, there are other films, among them *Million Dollar Baby*, that include a series of more "humane" characters, capable of relationships of affection; especially a great number of films in

which the actor/director plays the role of the father or of some father substitute. A *Perfect World* may be understood as the culmination of this second group related to the father figure, be it real or symbolic.

The “maxim” Frankie tries to convey to Maggie and which goes through the entire film in *Million Dollar Baby* – “Always protect yourself” - reveals the fear any father experiences knowing his child has to be able to protect itself in order to grow up psychologically. Frankie took a risk with Maggie and believed in her, and in spite of everything she faced the consequences of her actions to the end.

The complexity of the relationship between parents and children makes it difficult for the latter to grow up, but in order to achieve a certain emotional stability one has to embrace the parental figures. In fact, a child begins its life depending on the mother’s love, which is seen as the source of all existence, then turns to the father for guidance in thinking and acting. Once fully grown up, the child sets itself free from the parental figures and their authoritarian and protecting powers, and sets up the motherly and fatherly precepts within itself. In this way, it becomes its own father and mother.

Gran Torino seems to combine these two groups. By playing Walt Kowalski, a Korean War veteran now retired from Ford, Clint Eastwood brings together into the same character Josey Wales’s transcendence (*The outlaw Josey Wales*) and Dirty Harry’s rough manners (Don Siegel, 1971), while combining them, however, with the fragility of the tuberculous itinerant musician from *Honkytonk Man* (1982). On the other hand, there are many links between *Gran Torino* and *Million Dollar Baby*: from Walt’s relationship with the priest, similar to that of Frankie, to the development of the parental, though not biological, relationship with Thao, in the first film, and with Maggie, in the second – an initial rejection is followed by a strong relationship of affection between them. However, in *Grand Torino* Walt gives his life for Thao out of love, whereas in *Million Dollar Baby* Frankie ends up killing Maggie also out of love.

3 – The need for parental recognition

Most characters in Clint Eastwood films find themselves in search of parental recognition. It is obvious in the case of Maggie in *Million Dollar Baby*, but the thief in *Absolute Power* (1997) also tries to emotionally approach his daughter, who accuses him of having been an absent father. The tuberculous, itinerant country singer from *Honkytonk Man* travels in his nephew (Whit’s) company, passing on his own father’s

legacy. In fact, this last film and *A Perfect World* - in which Kevin Costner's character also dies at the end, leaving his imprint on the boy, who goes from being his hostage to being his travelling partner - have in common with *Million Dollar Baby* the fact that all three are kinship stories based on replacement relationships, and marked by an initiation based on complicity and loss. *Breezy* (1973) also relates to the films mentioned above and to *Million Dollar Baby* with regard to the characters' need to find love and rebuild a family. Although *Breezy* focuses on the romantic relationship between an older man (about 56 years old) and a young girl (17 years old), and therefore closer to *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) thematically, it still relates to *Million Dollar Baby*, even in that regard, the difference being that in this last film the relationship is of filial rather than a romantic nature.

In Clint Eastwood films, fathers are thus either non-biological, that is, metaphorical or substitutes, or the real ones, but in some way absent. In *Million Dollar Baby*, we have both: Frankie is an absent biological father – we never know why - but a present substitute and metaphorical father to Maggie. It is very rare in Clint Eastwood films for paternity to succeed in whatever way without any darker side or outright denial. *Absolute Power* may be an exception, since at the end of it one can infer a reconciliation between the biological father and his daughter. From this mixture of contradictions, compensations and developments arises a construction of ideas about fatherhood in the most comprehensive sense of the term. *A Perfect World* seems to be a perfect example of the broad scope characteristic of his father-figure construction: the criminal who kidnaps an eight-year-old boy ends up becoming his father in the most precious sense there is, conveying to him a fatherly concern at least as effectively as any biological father would.

Specifically in *Million Dollar Baby*, in spite of Maggie transferring her filial feelings towards Frankie, he already has a biological daughter who does not forgive him for some mistake he made in the past. What mistake, however, is never specified. By not clarifying Frankie's sorrow towards his daughter, the film doesn't allow us to judge him: how can we condemn the man, when we don't even know what he did? On the contrary, at the end of the film, after seeing what Frankie is willing to do and to risk for his "adoptive daughter" – going against the precepts of his Roman Catholic upbringing by switching off the machine keeping Maggie alive – we are led to believe that his biological daughter's refusal to forgive him is based on a tremendous misunderstanding in what concerns her father's worthiness. "I just wanted you to know what kind of man

your father really was”, we hear Scrap’s voice off saying almost at the end of the film, while the camera shows him at his desk writing a letter. In this regard, *Million Dollar Baby* is the classic sentimental melodrama, in which the loved one refuses or is incapable of recognizing the surprising nature of the love of the one who loves him, nor his courage, loyalty and love, until, painful as it may be, it is too late for that acknowledgment to benefit either one of them.

Nevertheless, *Million Dollar Baby* seems to reverse the typical roles characteristic of the classic Hollywood melodrama, especially the maternal melodrama, which emphasizes the role of the tender-hearted, self-sacrificing mother. Clint Eastwood’s film is the precise opposite: a paternal melodrama challenging women’s supremacy when it comes to parenthood and the self-sacrifice that comes with it – as is also the case with *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), directed by Robert Benton. Sticking to the rules of melodrama, and although wishing to stay with Maggie forever, Frankie sacrifices his “adoptive daughter” who wishes to free herself from the machines keeping her alive.

While we expect mothers to be willing to sacrifice their lives for their children if necessary, *Million Dollar Baby* presents a father being altruistic in such a way that he jeopardizes his chances of being saved after death, risking eternal damnation – as warned by his confessor, the priest. Melodramas focus on the idea of loss and on the feelings certain losses unleash in us: pathos, nostalgia, longing, etc. Losses may include lost opportunities, the loss of youth, the loss of loved ones and, in the case of *Million Dollar Baby*, the loss of the main character’s own soul. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *Million Dollar Baby* seems to mourn the loss of male power.

In *Million Dollar Baby*, saving a death is almost more important than saving a life. By giving her death, Frankie shows Maggie his love’s courage and strength just the same. He gave her life by ascribing it true meaning, and for the same reason Maggie tells Frankie she needs him to take her life before she stops hearing the applause from all of those who proved she had made her dream of being a boxer come true. Clint Eastwood said that *Space Cowboys* (2000), the film on which he was working at the time, “has one recurrent element [in his films]: the possibility given to people of living one dream, impossible until then.”⁴ *Million Dollar Baby* focuses on a physical accident that changes the course of the main characters’ lives, and this accident that claimed

⁴ Clint Eastwood In Maria João Madeira, ed. *Clint Eastwood: um homem com passado* (Lisboa: Cinemateca Portuguesa - Museu do Cinema, 2008), 55. Translated by the author from Portuguese.

Maggie, a metaphor for deep psychological wounds, is foreshadowed by another that led to the loss of one of Scrap's eyes – the wound is yet another deep link between Maggie, Frankie and Scrap. When all three of them are in the hospital waiting for Maggie's broken nose to be fixed, Scrap makes a remark to Frankie on how a broken nose doesn't hurt that much. In the very next shot, we hear Scrap, now in the role of the narrator, and having in mind Frankie's past, remarking there are many wounds that cannot heal themselves because they are too deep and painful.

4 – Dealing with guilt feelings

On the other hand, the individualistic ethics is heightened by the guilt feelings in *Million Dollar Baby*. In a radio interview, later printed in the paper *Irish Voice*, given around the time of the publishing of the book *Million Dollar Baby*, which inspired the film, the author F. X. Toole says: "I want to write Irish Catholic. I want people to know that I am Irish Catholic."⁵ Those not familiar with what it means to be an Irish Catholic can understand it by reading the book and watching Clint Eastwood's film. Both tell the story of the dream of Maggie, a thirty-year-old woman trying to become a boxing champion with the help of her trainer, Frankie. Her dream seems about to come true, when she gets a title match, broadcast live on television, against the German champion, Billie "The Blue Bear". At the beginning of round 5, though, Billie hits her when she wasn't expecting it. Maggie falls badly on a chair Frankie hadn't removed from the ring corner, breaks two vertebrae, and is left hopelessly paralysed from the neck down.

Hospitalized and physically debilitated, Maggie longs to die and asks Frankie to help her do so. Frankie goes to confession and asks the priest for advice. The priest warns him that by doing so he will be forever damned. Frankie helps Maggie to die and in the last sequence in which we see him the narrator tells us he left Maggie's room "without his soul".

These issues, related to Irish Catholicism, are even more heightened in the film than in the book, focusing on Frankie's devoutness. In the film, the narrator lets us know Frankie has attended Mass daily for the last 23 years. At the beginning of the film, the first time we see him in church, he hassles young father Horvak with theological questions, leading him to answer back irritated "You fuckin' pagan." In the film, Brian O'Byrne, although an Irish actor, plays the role of a young priest who is not

⁵ F. X. Toole in Robert Sklar and Tania Modleski. "Million Dollar Baby. A Split Decision". *Cineaste*. Vol. XXX. (3, 2005): 6.

himself Irish. In F. X. Toole's book, on the contrary, Father Tim O'Gorman is older and Irish. A similar episode takes place later in the film and the priest sighs: "I have no idea why you come to church." In the book, the complex relationship Frankie has with the Catholic Church is made explicit. When Frankie confesses after Maggie's tragic request he says:

Put in a good word for me, Saint Judas Thaddeus. Despite my hatred for God, I ask for something impossible. If it is God's will, that I shall be allowed to sleep again. I ask this, and only this, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost (...)⁶

The narrator then comments:

The inconsistency of his hatred for God and his kneeling in church was not lost on Frankie. (...) To Frankie [the church] was a sacred place and he found comfort in it, knowing the torture he was going through was being reflected in Christ's crucified body.⁷

Frankie's character in *Million Dollar Baby*, in his relationship with the Church and especially with his parish's priest, thus also reflects on man's distress in the late modern age. The philosophical and political history of the West in the last 150 years may be seen as a series of more or less violent, more or less systematic, more or less conscious attempts to fill the void left by the erosion of the religious system. The decline of a consensual Christian doctrine confused or emptied of meaning vital notions of social justice, mind-body relations, the meaning of human history, and moral behaviour.

Frankie reads William Butler Yeats and studies Gaelic, which may give the impression, given the priest's repeated remarks, that he is more Irish than Irish Catholic. Contrary to what happens in the book, Frankie talks to the priest about Maggie's request, not in the confessional, but when they're both sitting side by side in a pew. The priest's words seem to echo those in the book: "It's committing a sin by doing it... If you do this thing, you'll be lost. You'll never find yourself again." But there's a difference between losing one's "self" and losing one's "soul", and the film seems to distance itself from F. X. Toole's ruthless judgment. At the end of the film, Scrap, the

⁶ F. X. Toole. *Million Dollar Baby* (Vila Nova de Famalicão: Editorial Magnólia, 2005), 129. Translated by the author from Portuguese.

⁷ F. X. Toole, 129. Translated by the author from Portuguese.

narrator, performs a redeeming monologue on how meaningful Maggie's quest was and on how she had to live her dreams in order to feel fulfilled. He also imagines Frankie, who has meanwhile disappeared from the gym, in Maggie's hometown of Ozarks, "somewhere between Nowhere and Good-bye." The film's last image is a *blurred* shot of Frankie as the owner of a rural restaurant by the side of the road: most likely the place where he and Maggie had found a tasty, homemade lemon pie – an event seen in a previous sequence. So, in the end, a comparison between the book and the film points to a choice between, on the one hand, condemnation and tragedy, and on the other hand, *pathos* and at least a glimpse of redemption.

For all that has been said, *Million Dollar Baby* is a film reflecting on guilt and its vital role in modern Western societies. Guilt may be defined as the anxiety generated by the fear of transgression, that is to say, when one's deeds or thoughts don't match normal expectations. Shame, on the other hand, is directly related to self-identity, since it is mainly about an anxiety over the adequacy of one's personal narrative, upon which one's autobiographic coherence is sustained. While guilt is based on the internalization of values, shame is based on outside disapproval, by other people.⁸

5 – Main character characteristics: summarizing

The main character in Clint Eastwood films is usually a man whose life has been marked by an event that takes place prior to the beginning of the film and which may or may not be directly mentioned in the story we're watching. This director's films thus become romantic in the sense that the main character remains in that past – as is the case with Frankie in *Million Dollar Baby*. Its main character's conservatism is somehow an attempt to avoid an early wound's repeating itself, in the sense that every change can be understood as a potential source of suffering. It seems to us this is the main reason why Frankie begins by refusing to train Maggie. Such conservatism is thus a way of remaining in a place which pain cannot reach. No one is allowed in such a place, either ethically or physically. Though his main characters change houses or wives, their deep connection is with the idea of loss. In all his films, even when Clint Eastwood is not part of the cast – as in *A Perfect World* or *Mystic River* (2003) – the main character carries a

⁸ Anthony Giddens. *Modernidade e identidade pessoal*. Tradução de Miguel Vale de Almeida. 2º ed. (Oeiras: Celta Editora, 2001), 60-64. Helen Merrell Lynd. *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1958), 21. Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer. *Shame and Guilt. A Psychoanalytic and a Cultural Study*. (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1953) 10.

flaw, a wound, and all his efforts are put into trying to disguise it, even if it means defeat, loneliness or even tragedy.

The main character in *A Perfect World*, an outlaw played by Kevin Costner (Clint Eastwood is the Marshall pursuing him), is one of the most explicit examples of this kind of profile. In this film, Kevin Costner finds love in the eight-year-old boy he kidnaps, the same way Frankie ends up agreeing to train Maggie in *Million Dollar Baby*. Both characters end up accepting “someone else” into their lives, but it is a long and painful way to acceptance. This “someone else” represents the main character’s last chance for redemption, which in Frankie’s case is the retrieval of the fatherhood he wasn’t able to achieve with his biological daughter, and in the case of Kevin Costner’s character is the chance to convey the whole father-figure symbolism to the boy, before getting killed by the police.

The idea that Frankie helps Maggie to die out of love has its highest expression in *Gran Torino*. In both films, one of the main characters has to die in order to save the other. In *Gran Torino*, we may ask ourselves whether it was Kowalski that saved the Hmong kid or the Hmong kid that saved Kowalski. As for *Million Dollar Baby*, we may wonder whether Frankie would be able to live with himself if he hadn’t helped Maggie to die. Isn’t it through someone else’s salvation that so many of Eastwood’s characters simultaneously save themselves?

Final remarks

We may therefore conclude that all the main characters in Clint Eastwood films reveal the complexity of life and of the ways to manage violence. Clint Eastwood’s evolution as an actor and director who, after *Unforgiven* and *A Perfect World*, once and for all deconstructs the dichotomous image he had created with his “man with no name” character in Sergio Leone’s trilogy and with the character created in *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). He shows that reality is not black and white, and that the fact that a human being is a “good person” doesn’t mean he’ll always do good deeds, or show ideal, perfect behaviour. We all make mistakes, but we all can also think about how we made them and change the angle, the perspective on what we did – only then will we be able to avoid losing hope of a lasting new beginning.

All in all, Clint Eastwood films are suggestions on how to act: how can we find our way in life? It’s acting with an existential background. Still, however, “tough ain’t enough”: there are sides to it we cannot change and, in the end, this seems to be life’s

ultimate complexity. Besides this maxim – hanging on one of the gym’s walls, in *Million Dollar Baby*, and Frankie’s answer to Maggie in one of their first meetings, we hear Scrap’s voice off right at the beginning of the film saying that “boxing is about respect” and that “everything in boxing is backwards”. All Clint Eastwood films reflect on this complex but simultaneously simple way of life presenting itself. So, when Frankie notices Scrap cleaning the gym’s floor with an expensive bleach, he says to him: “bleach is bleach”. Things are as they are: simple.

Filmography

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