

Revenge Therapy

I don't approve [of] revenge, but I understand it.

Victor Vazquez, Class of 2009

Her son's body drifts below her, mangled, torn in two.

The little blood he has left streams silently into the water surrounding them both, floating around her like a flower opening before sunlight.

She watches him slip away from her, powerless to repair the brutal damage inflicted upon him, powerless to keep alive the one she once gave life.

Agonized, fleeing the fresh corpse and the flowers of blood, she crawls onto the bank. She screams, an impossible sound to imitate – grief and guilt and rage grinding against each other like broken gears within her throat.

Nobody hears her.

She struggles to her feet to see a trail of blood, her son's blood – *her* blood – lining the trail back to Heorot.

Grief-wracked and ravenous, desperate for revenge,
thirsty for pain, hungry for slaughter,
she follows the trail.

The smell of her son's blood mingling with the snow and soil rises from the ground, fills her mind, increasing her anguish with every step. But she forces herself to walk that gory path.

She has no choice.

She reaches the hall of men, sleeping men – men who will open their eyes in the morning.

– The light fading from his wounded eyes, eyes like mine –

Her son will never open his eyes.

Should they?

She launches herself through the doorway, frenzied and furious.

Bodies bolt upright, screams erupting from places unseen.

So many bodies! So many people! So many more than she had pictured –

– The humans rush for their weapons, panicking, thinking only of blood –

– My son's blood lining that trail, lining it for foot after foot –

She grabs the nearest human, crushing him within her grasp, spinning away as blades clatter to the floor behind her, fleeing for the door.

She freezes – only for an instant – at the sight of her son's ravaged, shredded arm, blood crusted at its socket, mounted proudly above the doorway.

Grabbing the gruesome trophy, she bolts through the door, carrying her victim in one hand and a piece of her son in the other.

The screams and wails from those in the ruined hall fade into whimpers as she races away, ferrying her bloody cargo home, following the trail of her son's blood for a final time.

She reaches the haunted mere – her only home – her son's graveyard –

looks into her captive's frightened eyes,

and

rips

him

apart.

His body lies below her, mangled, torn in two.

The little blood he has left streams silently onto the ground surrounding them both, forming bloody petals on the frost-bitten soil.

A suffering mother. Another dead son.

Revenge.

Grendel's mother is a villain.

Someone is hurting your mother.

Someone is hurting your brother.

Someone is hurting your best friend.

Someone is hurting you.

Someone is getting away with it.

Someone is doing it with a smile.

What would you do?

What would you want to do?

Are they the same thing?

Someone is hurting your child.

What would you want to do?

Don't think about what you *would* do. Think the thought that occurs in the split-second after you imagined the scenario I listed above. Think that visceral thought, the one everyone expects you to think.

Are you proud of that thought?

Mohandas Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves the whole world blind and toothless.”

Those words remain wise decades after he first said them, and will remain wise long after we have grown too old to remember them. Not only are they concise, meaningful, and memorable, but there’s a certain poetry in the image Gandhi evokes – a self-mutilated world, too bent on correcting wrongs by any means necessary to notice the damage the pursuit of “justice” has wrought.

But what separates the exacting of justice from the fulfillment of vengeance? What is justice about, anyway? How many of us ever stop to put a concrete definition on a concept that matters so much to all of us, and how many of us stop to wonder what our system of justice aims to accomplish?

It is a given, for example, that American society punishes certain crimes – not all, but some – with time spent in prison. We learn about this mechanism when we are very young, even if we don’t understand much about the process itself – about trials, lawyers, and juries; about how to transport prisoners, or how to ensure those who are sentenced don’t flee; about the rules and nature of a prison atmosphere itself (who has power, what prisoners do on a daily basis, etc.). Our understanding is pretty rudimentary: if you do something bad, you go to jail. And most people conflate action and self when they’re teaching their children about prison, so most grow up believing that *bad people go to jail*. And once you convince yourself, even without meaning to, that a person is bad – i.e., that someone is less than you, that they are subhuman in some way – it becomes very easy to accept just about anything that happens to them, to see it as necessary and justified. *Of course prisons are awful; they’re full of bad people.*

Reading something like *Sentenced to Serving the Good Life in Norway* probably fills you with skepticism; some past students have expressed disgust with a system that seems to sever crime from its worst consequences. (A couple instantly headed to Google, hoping to find evidence that Bastoy had crumbled in the years since the article hit the Web, and were disappointed to find instead that the prison had gone on to win awards.) At the very least, almost everyone reading the article shakes their head when asked whether such a system could work in America.

But stop and ask yourself: Why is it necessary to put people in prison? What’s the point? Rehabilitation? Education? Payback? A quarantine? A preemptive strike? Deterring those who would commit similar acts?

One could argue our justice system accomplishes – or strives to accomplish – any number of the choices I listed above. However, the symbol of our justice system isn’t described in that list. As we all know, the symbol for justice is a blindfolded woman with a scale in her hands.

American justice, at its core, was conceived as a means of balancing scales in the pursuit of an amorphous goal – fairness. The punishment must (or is supposed to) fit the crime. Our legal thinking holds that if said punishment fits said crime, the scale will be balanced.

Everything will be normal again.

Right?

My son's blood lining that trail –

My son's blood –

My son –

MY CHILD

You're an adult. You have a child.

Someone hurts you. Someone kills you.

Someone leaves your child, your little boy, your little girl, motherless, fatherless, parentless.

Would you want that child to kill for you if given the chance?

Would you want them to dedicate themselves to avenging your wrongful death?

Would you want them to move on?

In my experience, very young children tend to have extremely rigid conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, fair and unfair. Their cognitive development hasn't yet reached the point where they can easily grasp life's near-infinite complexities. Life is easier, in some ways. Your choices and judgments happen in a predefined box: if you fit, you're good, and if you're outside the box, then heaven help you.

Life's more difficult outside that original box. But you have to start there. Those formative years are formative for a reason. We don't pop out of the womb with a fully-developed ethical code. We turn to people we're taught to trust for guidance: parents, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, friends. We experience things for the first time, then internalize those experiences and process reactions in individual, sometimes unpredictable ways. Contradictions arise. Conflicts break out. We struggle with issues that pull us outside of that box because, truthfully, most of us really have no interest in leaving it at first.

But we all have to leave it at some point, or at least should try to leave it. I don't think it's possible to live a truly rich life in a child-sized box. The question that faces everyone, however, comes after you leave that first structure: What do you want your new box to be like?

The process by which we build that new box – the ways we consciously or unconsciously shape the morals that we'll use to navigate the world as adults – is usually so slapdash and messy (a bad experience here, a horror story there, a wild success elsewhere) that I've found it kind of uncomfortable to look at why I believe what I believe. Some of my morals spring from places that don't particularly make me proud, or from memories I'd rather forget most of the time. But that's why I feel like certain essay prompts and blog topics are so important, and why I try my hardest to force you to use real examples when you're justifying your arguments: at the end of the day, I'd rather you build the best box you can rather than reinforce a more comfortable one.

If there's a truth out there that's just going to upset me, I'd like to think I'd still have the strength of character to listen to someone say it first. I'd like to think, in other words, that I took the time to think things over before I start building my moral code.

I've shed some morals, beliefs, and preconceptions that I held as a child – or even as a young man – that I'd honestly like to get back. I've also struggled frequently with the nagging suspicion/fear that I was a better person when I was younger, and I'm honestly not sure if that's something I'll ever shake.

Regardless, I've tried to build a sturdy moral box for myself as I've gotten older, and it's come in handy frequently over the years. But when I see what happens with Grendma, I just don't know how to react to it.

Look, Aeschere doesn't deserve to die. I've been able to turn the other cheek in a lot of different situations during my short time on this planet. I refuse to defend Grendma for taking an innocent man's life. But you probably recoiled a bit when I called her a villain near the beginning of this post, and probably sensed that I didn't really mean it.

I don't know how you define the word (and I really don't care how Webster's defines it), but I always thought a willingness to be motivated by malevolence – by evil – was a precondition of villainy. And I feel really, really dishonest if I try to make myself believe that Grendma's more motivated by evil than by love. I feel really dishonest if I try to make myself believe that Beowulf's motivated more by some sense of nobility than by a need to notch another monster-kill on his record.

I look at what Grendma does, and I think to myself, *Monster*.

I look at what Grendma does, and I think to myself, *Mother*.

It's amazing how similar those words look in the pale moonlight.

And when Beowulf cuts off Grendma's head, it's amazing how hard I find it to cheer that murderer's death.

Edmund is perhaps the least sympathetic character in *The Tragedy of King Lear*, although he has plenty of competition for the title. His entire arc consists of a slow-rolling vengeance scheme; we do not see him in any other mode, save perhaps in the opening lines of the play. (Even then, it's easy to assume he's already plotting.) But his quest is quixotic. For all of his evident intelligence and cunning, Edmund can't exact revenge against the forces that have relegated him to a lower social standard. He can try to subvert them, of course – try to find some means of displaying his true worth. But taking everything from his family is an imperfect solution. (He's incredibly fortunate to have Lear's awful plan unfolding in the background; otherwise, he never would've curried favor with Cornwall.) He still would've ended up subordinate to others in the power structure of his society.

And what's noteworthy is that Edmund does not seem to care. He understands that Gloucester doesn't make the rules, and that Edgar has no say regarding who will receive his father's inheritance. If anything, he hates them more for trying to treat him like he's one of them, within reason. As awkward as Gloucester perpetually joking about his parentage seems to us today – and as humiliating as it must have felt for him then – it's amazing that Edmund's father acknowledges him at all, and that Edgar treats him like a brother. They do everything in their power to legitimize Edmund within the rules. And it's still not enough.

This relationship between marginalization/isolation/exile, differentiated treatment, and powerful resentment pops up in a lot of places. In *Norway*, the recidivism rate is discussed in these terms – how hard it is to reintegrate after being removed. The implication throughout the article is that our society primes certain populations to deviate from societal norms because they are not treated like normal members of society – that they are not given the same chance to enjoy a quality education, that they do not live in safe communities, etc. – and that we would be better served by changing the rules of the game outside of prison rather than trying to ensure that those who violate the rules of the game end up inside of it. In *Beowulf* and *King Lear*, isolation and marginalization literally turns characters evil – Edmund talks about how it’s in his very nature to be foul, and the OEP certainly doesn’t reference a time when Grendel was a pleasant creature.

Edmund clearly has been treated unfairly thanks to circumstances beyond his control. I’d argue the same is true of Grendel. And I wonder what it says about us that we scorn those who cannot overcome the artificial roadblocks we place in their way – why we assume they should be fine being treated as less than they are – and why we are so horrified when they violate what they consider to be unjust structures.

Is it morally right to adhere to standards, codes, and laws that disadvantage you? Is it morally right to follow a rule you feel is misguided just because it’s a rule?

On the other hand...what gives a person the right to decide which rules are correct and which rules should be broken? If everyone makes those calls for themselves...how will society survive?

I argue that we may take nothing for granted more easily – not even our loved ones – than our concepts of justice and fairness. But we can’t afford to do so. Those concepts fuel and shape everything from our society to our interactions with one another.

Part of justice’s function, the ritual and tradition of it all, is to take emotion out of what’s a fundamentally emotional process. It’s tough – incredibly tough – for people to look clinically or dispassionately at something so emotionally visceral.

But we have to strive for logic, for intelligence, for rationality. You’re blessed if you have the ability to look at events that other people misunderstand due to intellectual laziness or wild passion, and it’s why we’re spending so much time on matters of belief and philosophy this semester. If you force yourself to fight past your initial feelings when you look at a challenging statement, you may discover something new on the other side. I find that it’s much the same with life.

You’re an adult. You have no children.

Someone hurts you. Someone kills you.

Would you burden your remaining loved ones with the weight of vengeance?

Would you feel unloved if they didn’t take that burden on themselves?

In our heart of hearts, we know that revenge, at its core, is about satisfaction – not justice, not even balance, but personal satisfaction. We cannot rest until we know a victim has been avenged. Once the victim has been avenged, we can be satisfied that justice has been served, and that things will be reset to normalcy (as best they can).

How do we avenge our victims? Do we go back and prevent them from being hurt? Well, no – we can't do that yet. (That's a little too *Minority Report* for now...)

But if we can't prevent harm from befalling that victim, why punish the criminal? It's not as though punishing him or her will stop them from hurting that person – they can't be stopped, because the wrong has already been committed.

Well, we punish the criminal because we can't travel back in time. Our justice system is our way of moving forward through time, preventing another wrong from being committed in advance. In the process, we can exact some sort of penance for the crime they have committed. Justice. Payback.

When we put someone behind bars, we're supposed to feel like we've done our jobs. It's supposed to be cathartic. By that logic, a murderer's death should be the ultimate catharsis. We can rest assured knowing he or she will never end another life. The killer has been killed; if one takes all economic (and a load of philosophical) concerns out of the equation, we can feel that balance has finally been restored.

So why do victims' families still look haunted after justice has run its course?

In our heart of hearts, we know that revenge, at its core, solves nothing. It's a zero-sum game, a response to something that cannot be undone.

However...is revenge "bad"? Is revenge "good"? How can you tell?

Why do we think thoughts we're ashamed to express when someone tries to hurt us, or tries to hurt someone close to us? (This is a different kind of "why.") Responses like "We want to hurt them because they hurt us" or "It's natural to want revenge" are shallow, and don't answer – perhaps intentionally avoid – the real, tougher, darker question: *Why do humans respond to pain by causing more? Why possess such an illogical, needlessly destructive instinct?*

Why, when faced with the idea that someone is hurting a person who we care about – but not us ourselves – do we essentially revert into Grendel's mother, our most primal and bestial form? And why do we curse her for acting on the urges we would share in her place – and probably wouldn't control any better?

Why is revenge so seductive, and why can't we seem to leave this urge behind, no matter how many times we're told it's wrong by people we respect, or no matter how rapidly and completely society evolves? Is it simply a matter of physics, of causality - actions and reactions that are out of our control, that leave us as helpless players in some universal game? Or is it something else entirely?

Can injustice ever be alleviated by punishment? If so...why haven't dark acts been eliminated from our world? If not, why are we drawn to do the opposite?

Should we rethink our ideas about justice? How should we grapple with the difficult challenges of our ever-changing world? (If you're in SFHP: Remember that I asked you this question as you read the scene with the dragon-fight!)

Can you think of a scenario – a real scenario – where justice can be served through revenge? Beowulf and the Danes seem to think that the scales have been balanced once Grendel and Grendma have been beheaded. Have the scales been reset? Or are the scales forever out of balance once someone upsets them?

Is there any way to stop a conflict between two parties who constantly react to the most recent wrong the other party has committed? Once the scales have been tipped...does an object in motion stay in motion?

Think hard about what justice, honor, and revenge mean to you.

Think hard about the place of each in today's society, about their roles in our lives, about their effect on our national philosophies and psychology.

Think especially hard about how the three have been fused within your mind - whether as a result of our national discourse, the latest action movie, or your life experiences.

Do you trust your views? Do you trust your heart? Do you trust your judgment?

If so...if you're in Grendel's mother's place, if someone tears your child apart – even if he brings it on himself – how will you feel?

And how will you react?