

Ashley Swaner

Dr. Weber

ENGL 215 - Classical & Early British Lit.

Wheaton College

19 December, 2024

Final Paper

Is Revenge Justice? - Retaliation in Classic Literature

In many of the texts we have read for this course there has been a similar occurrence in plotlines. Something bad happens to the protagonist (in this case related to the death of a loved one), they plot revenge against the one who wronged them, and then enact it - oftentimes killing the perpetrator. Examples of this can be found in: *The Aeneid* with Turnus killing Pallas, then Aeneas killing him in revenge; *Beowulf* with Grendel's mother killing Aeschere, then Beowulf killing her in revenge; and in *Hamlet* with King Claudius killing Hamlet's father, then Hamlet killing him in revenge (and accidentally causing the death of quite a few other people in the process). What does this pattern in these texts say about justice? Is the law of retaliation (or in other words, revenge) the lesson we should take from these stories? How should we look at this from a Christian perspective?

In bringing these three texts together, we can discover that revenge is not true justice. Through Aeneas killing Turnus we see that giving into revenge can destroy one's character, through Beowulf killing Grendel's mother we see the continual repetition of the cycle of vengeance, and through Hamlet's journey to get revenge on his uncle we can see that the cost of such a journey will be far greater than expected. This supports the Christian perspective on

justice. While we are called to act and stand up to injustice, revenge is not ours to take.

Vengeance is for God and His perfect justice, not for imperfect humans to enact.

In *the Aeneid*, Aeneas has finally made it to Italy (or Latium, which will become Italy) after his journey across the sea. He went through many trials to get there, but before he can marry the king's daughter Lavinia and have descendants who will found Rome, he has to fight a war against one of Lavinia's suitors Turnus. In this war, Aeneas makes friends with a young prince named Pallas who joins Aeneas' side. They grow close, and when Pallas is killed by Turnus in the war, Aeneas is devastated. Turnus and Aeneas duel to the death, to end the war once and for all. But at the end of their duel, after Aeneas has wounded Turnus and is about to kill him, Turnus surrenders unconditionally:

Turnus lowered
 his eyes and reached with his right hand and begged,
 a suppliant: "I deserve it all. No mercy, please,"
 Turnus pleaded. "Seize your moment now. Or if
 some care for a parent's grief can touch you still,
 I pray you—you had such a father, in old Anchises—
 pity Daunus in his old age and send me back
 to my own people, or if you would prefer, send them my dead body stripped of life.
 Here, the victor and vanquished, I stretch my hands to you,
 so the men of Latium have seen me in defeat.
 Lavinia is your bride.
 Go no further down the road of hatred.

He gives Lavinia over to Aeneas and acknowledges that as the victor Aeneas has the right to choose what he does with him. However, Turnus pleads with Aeneas, that for the love of a parent he should spare his life—as Aeneas knows what it is like to have a father worry about him. Turnus asks Aeneas to “go no further down the road of hatred.” Aeneas is swayed by this, but upon seeing that Turnus is wearing Pallas’s belt, becomes enraged. In grief he refuses to spare Turnus, and kills him on behalf of Pallas.

In choosing to pursue personal revenge, Aeneas has done what Turnus asked him not to do. Aeneas chooses the path of hatred. A man who was described throughout the text as an upright hero and a good man has let his grief consume him. There is no honor in killing a foe who has surrendered, but victory wasn’t enough for Aeneas. He felt that he needed to kill Turnus, not because he had to in order to achieve his goals, but because he became overwhelmed with emotion and decided to pursue revenge. In a fit of rage, he failed to be able to see that one act of violence does not rectify a previous act of violence. Instead, it adds another death to an already high human toll brought on by violence.

Moving onto *Beowulf*, revenge is not something that corrupts one's character. In fact, in Beowulf’s own words are, “It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.” Instead, revenge is an ever-continuing cycle. Grendel attacks and eats some of the Danes for being loud and singing worship songs. Beowulf comes in and kills Grendel for it. If the law of retribution was perfect, it should end there. The wrong is avenged! That is not the case, and instead, there is someone who wants revenge for the killing of Grendel:

Then this roaming killer came in a fury
and slaughtered him in Heorot. Where she is hiding,
glutting on the corpse and glorying in her escape,

I cannot tell; she has taken up the feud
 because of last night, when you killed Grendel,
 wrestled and racked him in ruinous combat
 since for too long he had terrorized us
 with his depredations. He died in battle,
 paid with his life; and now this powerful
 other one arrives, this force for evil
 driven to avenge her kinsman's death.

What is interesting in *Beowulf* is that Grendel's mother is also acting in revenge. The only reason she came to Herot in the first place is because Beowulf had killed her son. She kills Aeschere, a man very dear to the lord of Herot to avenge Grendel's death. Beowulf then kills her to avenge Aeschere's death. And as such a cycle is born. Revenge does not stop after one wrong is "righted." Instead it creates a new problem, by fueling an unbroken cycle of violence. Each time revenge is sought and obtained, the violence creates a new sense of being "wronged," which then itself must be avenged. Without the intentionality of breaking this cycle, it will continue on unhindered.

Moving onto *Hamlet*, the warnings against revenge come in every point throughout Hamlet's journey, and the people he hurts along the way. He receives a message from his dead father saying it was Hamlet's uncle that killed him and married his wife. The Ghost of his father then tells Hamlet he must avenge his murder and kill the one who has done this. After this, Hamlet becomes devoted to avenging his father's death. He is cruel to Ophelia, who was caught in the crossfires of his plan for revenge. He then accidentally kills Polonius, the father of Ophelia (whom Hamlet loves) and Laertes. Because of this, Ophelia goes mad and drowns. This incites

Laertes to desire revenge against Hamlet for the death of both his father and sister. King Claudius attempts to poison Hamlet out of fear of his madness, but ends up killing Hamlet's mother (and his wife) in the process. Laertes (whose blade is poisoned) dies on it. Hamlet is also poisoned by this blade, but is able to poison Claudius before he dies. The kingdom of Denmark is then lost to Hamlet's family, and taken over by Fortenbras.

Hamlet gets his revenge in the end, but in the process has lost everything (and everyone). In avenging his father he has done far more damage than just "an eye for an eye." Even the lives of those who had nothing to do with his father's murder were destroyed. Hamlet had inadvertently killed an innocent whom he had loved:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
 Could not with all their quantity of love
 Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?

The journey the desire for revenge will take a person on is one that comes with more losses than gains. The Tragedy of Hamlet is not just the death of his father at the hands of his uncle. Rather, it is that Hamlet becomes consumed with this death to the point that it causes him to not only self-destruct, but also take everyone in the court with him. The end result can be witnessed in the final scene of Hamlet, where a literal bloodbath of corpses lies across the stage. Revenge is not clean; rather, it creates collateral damage that is not only unintended and unwanted, but also all-consuming.

Finally, when discussing the Christian perspective on revenge it is important to establish when one should act in the face of grief and injustice. As we can see in Mark 11:15-17, as a response to the injustice Jesus witnessed he acted:

“On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’”

Jesus saw the injustice taking place and took it into his own hands to correct it. The anger Jesus felt at this situation was not due to personal insult or injury, but due to a greater failing in those around him. When we see injustice, we are to act to stand up for what is right and protect those who are oppressed. However, in acting we must be sure it is not for personal reasons or for revenge. While there may be genuine wrong done (especially in the killings that take place in our texts), it is commanded in Romans 12:19 that this retribution is not in our hands:

“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

God’s justice is perfect, and it is his to enact. We as humans are not to take revenge, or fall into the justice of retribution. That part belongs to God and God alone.

Moreover, we see in Matthew 5:38-42 that Jesus proposes a new way of dealing with a situation where one feels wronged by another person:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Jesus' approach here is exactly the kind that will put an end to endless cycles of violence.

Mahatma Gandhi, who was not a Christian but who was deeply influenced by Jesus' teachings in the Bible, is credited as saying "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." This reflects the truth that everyone, according to Romans 3:23, is guilty of sin. If everyone received the punishment for committing offenses that are due to them, the entire world would—as Gandhi suggested—need to have their eyes taken out, because every human being is guilty. Jesus is able to instruct us to turn the other cheek because it is only in and through him that forgiveness of sins is possible. Everyone is equal in their guilt and in their need for forgiveness, which Jesus offers. For those who have been forgiven, the only right response to offense is to forgive (or turn one's cheek) as well. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:15, "If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive yours."

One can easily square these scriptural truths with the lessons on revenge in the texts we reviewed. We see from all three texts that seeking revenge just begets an endless cycle of violence. There will be no end to this violence because everyone is guilty, and in the seeking of revenge, the person who is looking for revenge himself commits acts that motivate others to seek their own revenge through violence. We can clearly see that in all three stories, and the moral lesson (through the warnings of various characters in all three texts) is made clear before the culmination of the violent cycle is visible. When characters fail to heed those warnings, the violent cycle that results is on display for all to see in terms of its totality and brutality. In other words, in each of the texts, we can see—to use Gandhi's words—that the whole world ends up blind when someone tries to take an eye for an eye.

As Christians, we have the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit to break the cycle of violence by taking action like Jesus instructs. This doesn't mean not standing up for what is right

(e.g., flipping tables in the temple) but it does mean not engaging in further violence (for example, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter cut off the servant's ear and Jesus rebuked him, saying that those who live by the sword will die by the sword). Christians are called to live by the life of the Spirit, not the life (and death) of violence and revenge. In more 'modern' works of literature, such as *Les Misérables*, we can see the life that comes from forgiveness and breaking the cycle of violence, when the priest forgives and even protects the criminal (Jean Valjean) who stole from him. Such works build upon the literary canon that points out the senselessness of revenge, but use an explicitly Christian storyline in literature to point readers to forgiveness—not revenge—as an antidote to offense, sin, and wrongdoing.