“Revenge is a dish best served cold”

-An old Klingon proverb

**Introduction**

I chose the above quote because it not only served (no pun intended) as the opening statement of my artifact, but, because it also serves as an excellent introduction to the concept that I will be exploring in my paper. Acknowledged or not most of human culture is made up of unifying concepts. These concepts or values grow from the hopes and fears of humanity as a whole and they underlay much of what we think and create. These concepts are known as fantasy themes and while they are bound to all forms of human culture they do vary from country to country or ever person to person. As forms of media movies are perhaps the most accurate barometers of which fantasy themes are most entrenched in a culture. This is because movies are generally reflections (intentional or not) of what the culture as a whole is focused on (Gass & Seiter). Be it rags to riches or good versus evil, movies are always show what ideals and values are currently culturally significant. That is why I chose the famous, or infamous, movie Kill Bill as my artifact for analysis.

This artifact is not exactly unknown but, while it has received a great deal of general film criticism, it has received little or no academic analysis and critique. Needless to say I hope that I have remedied this in my own small way through my own analysis in this paper. I utilized the fantasy theme analysis method of critique. I believe that the fantasy theme method is best suited for this artifact because it touches on many common (if not universal) fantasy themes. This method requites the critic to look at an artifact as many separate, but interconnected pieces and allows the critic to connect the artifact with other (potentially dissimilar) artifacts (Shields & Preston, 1985). There are numerous avenues to from which I could attack this subject. However, in particular the question that I intend to explore in the paper in this: What fantasy themes are utilized in Kill Bill and how do they demonstrate key cultural values within the United States? While I initially explored numerous fantasy themes within Kill Bill I ultimately decided to focus on one in particular: that of vigilantism and revenge. I believe that this fantasy theme within Kill Bill leads to one value in particular. The value of justice, that the guilty must be punished.

**Background/Literature Review**

Kill Bill is a story told out of order. Not only is the film split into two parts but it also constantly shifts chronologically. As an example, in the first volume the first victim that the audience sees is actually the Bride’s second. As I believe that these time skips are essential to the intended broken narrative I will be summarizing the plot as it is presented to the audience, not as it fits together chronologically. It is important to know that Kill Bill takes a great may cures from many different sources. In particular it is a homage to Japanese martial arts movies although it pays tribute to many other film genres (Tarantino, 2003). Kill Bill volume 1 begins with a murder. The Bride (the main character), who is obviously pregnant, lies badly wounded at her own wedding. She is being spoken to by an unseen man (the titular Bill) who briefly explains that he gets no pleasure from his actions. As the Bride attempts to tell him that the child is his he shoots her in the head.

The film then cuts to an unknown number of years later the Bride, who is revealed as having survived her wounds, drives up (in a notably garish truck) to a house in a suburban neighborhood. At the house she encounters and fights a woman named Vernita Green. The two women are evenly matched in their mostly unarmed fight. However, they are interrupted by the return of Vernita’s five year old daughter, Nikki, from school. The two women declare a temporary truce and proceed to the kitchen for some coffee and to clean their respective wounds. It is then that we (the audience) are told that the two women used to belong to a team of assassins called “the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad” which was under the control and employ of Bill. It was the Bride’s former team that attacked her at her wedding. As the two women discuss there they will meet to finish their “discussion” Vernita attempts to shoot the Bride. The Bride retaliates by throwing a knife at Vernita killing her. It is revealed that Nikki has witnessed her mother’s death. The Bride suggests that if Nikki, when she grows up, still wants revenge that she (the Bride) will be waiting and then leaves the house.

The film then jumps back in time. The Bride is revealed to be in a coma following her shooting, she is no longer pregnant. A one eyed women who is a second member of the Assassination Squad enters her hospital room. The woman (who is named Ellie Driver) attempts to administer a lethal injection but is interrupted by a call from Bill. Bill informs a very unhappy Ellie that the mission has been called off and that the team will only take further action of the Bride wakes up. Cut to four years later and the Bride awakens from her coma. She is aggrieved to discover that she is no longer pregnant. Her mourning is interrupted by the arrival of a hospital orderly (Buck), who is revealed to not only have raped her many times but has also accepted money from others who wanted to do the same. She kills him and the man with him and steals Buck’s truck (revealed to be the vehicle that she drove to kill Vernita). Once in the truck she swears revenge against the five people responsible for the death of her child: O-Ren Ishii, Vernita Green, Budd, Ellie Driver, and Bill. The Bride then picks her first target based off of who will be easiest to find. She chooses O-Ren who in the intervening years has become the head of the Tokyo mob and thus has not exactly kept a low profile.

Realizing that she needs a weapon, the Bride first travels to Okinawa to get a sword from the legendary sword maker [Hattori Hanzō](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hattori_Hanzo_%28Kill_Bill%29). He is initially reluctant to make a sword for the Bride as he has sworn an oath to never forge a weapon again. However, when the Bride reveals that her target is a former student of his (Bill) he acquiesces and makes her a blade which he views as the finest he ever made. Now armed, the Bride travels to Tokyo to confront O-Ren, she tracks O-Ren to a crowded nightclub called the House of Blue Leaves. Before confronting O-Ren the Bide encounters a member of O-Ren’s entourage (her lawyer) named Sophie Fatale who is not only another former protégé of Bill’s but who was also present at the Bride’s apparent execution (although she took no direct part in it herself). Seizing Sophie, the Bide calls out O-Ren and then cuts off Sophie’s arm with her new sword. The Bride has to then slice her way through O-Ren’s many bodyguards before she can finally engage O-Ren in a one on one swordfight eventually killing her. Following her assault on the House of Blue Leaves the Bride tortures Sophie for the locations of the other people on her death list before rolling Sophie down a hill to a hospital. In the concluding shot of the first movie it is revealed (through a conversation between Bill and the clearly terrified Sophie) that the Bride’s daughter is still alive.

The Bride’s third target is Bill’s brother Budd. She track Budd to his trailer home in the desert, but upon attempting to ambush Budd she is instead ambushed by Budd who shoots her with a shotgun full of rock salt before sedating her. While the Bride is unconscious he calls Ellie Driver (the fourth name on the Death list) and offers to sell her the Bride’s sword provided that Ellie come and pick it up herself. After the call Budd places the Bride in a coffin and buries her alive. However, the Bride is able to use her teachings to puncher her way out of the coffin and proceeds to walk back to Budd’s trailer. Meanwhile Ellie has arrived to claim her new sword, however, instead of paying Budd she murders him with a black mamba snake (this was the Bride’s code name when she was still an assassin) because she was angry that Budd had been able to kill the Bride while she failed to do so. Her anger is short lived because the Bride now breaks down the door of the trailer and assaults her before eventually plucking out Ellie’s remaining eye. The bride leaves her stumbling around in the trailer with the lethal snake.

Now, having revenged herself upon for of the Deadly Vipers, the Bride heads to Bill’s Mexican villa. Upon her arrival the Bride is shocked to see that her daughter (named B.B.) is still alive, after tucking her daughter into bed The Bride and Bill discuss the reasons for her leaving him. Ultimately, they both agree that too much has happened between them for there to be any conclusion to their story but a fight to the death which the bride wins. The Movie ends with the Bride and her daughter watching cartoons in a hotel room as the Bride tries to figure out what to do next.

**Method of Analysis**

Fantasy Theme Analysis is a method of critique that was invented by Ernest Bormann in 1972 (Shields & Preston, 1985). It was developed as an attempt to analyze how groups of people use “universal” stories to unify their world(s). Within the types of critical analysis its closest analogue is the Narrative Paradigm. However, while the narrative paradigm focuses on the entirety of the argument made by an artifact, fantasy theme analysis focuses on the evolution of the narrative themes (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). Fantasy theme analysis is, more simply put, an examination as to how the trees makeup the forest rather than focusing on the forest as a collective entity.

There are several terms that are necessary to one’s understanding of fantasy theme analysis. Firstly, it is most important to define what exactly is meant by fantasy. Fantasies are (in short) stories of events that involve the group or discussions of topics that often appear irrelevant to the current task (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). The group refers to the group of people that have created this fantasy; the group can be a big as the current human population or as small as two friends. But it must share a common “story” or fantasy to be called such for fantasy theme analysis. It is important to note that the usage of fantasy for the purposes of fantasy theme analysis is far different from the common usage. It is not a whimsical invention, but is instead a form of group talk (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). Another important term is that of symbolic convergence. Symbolic convergence refers to how humans collect their individual fantasies and condense them into a culturally shared symbol system (Malvini, 2013). It is in this way that our collective communication creates our reality.

The actual application of fantasy theme analysis is accomplished in several steps. The first (and arguably the hardest) step is to provide a careful and comprehensive description of the artifact. In this way one might summarize the “plot” of the artifact or identify key characters or events within the narrative of the artifact. At this point the goal is not to analyze the collected information, but is instead to create a comprehensive collection of information from which the critic can utilize for later analysis. The second step is to use the data collected during step one to identify patterns among the collected plots, characters, and settings. This is, by far, the most critical step of the fantasy theme analysis. This is when the critic identifies potential fantasy themes by examining the resulting patterns (Stoner & Perkins, 2005). One should note, however, that it is important not to begin analysis at this point. Step two is more about condensing the data collected in step one into more manageable or workable segments. Step three is where the critic begins his/her analysis, albeit in a basic form. This step involves reconstructing the discerned patterns to the original rhetorical vision. This step is allows the critic to uncover potentially hidden rhetorical visions that might not be apparent when an artifact is viewed at face value. The fourth and final step involves the asking probing questions of the uncovered themes by the critic. Questions such as: what was the motive of the hero, or those of the villain? What emotions are conjured? How are these emotions used?

**Report of Findings**

While there are numerous fantasy themes in any story let alone one as rich as Kill Bill I have chose to focus on only one, core, theme that of Revenge or Vigilantism. While I initially intended to explore numerous fantasy themes when I did some preliminary research into the theme of revenge I began to realize how deeply ingrained this value was in society and how it colored every single aspect of American culture. This discovery changed my focus and allowed me to explore a value that is perhaps overlooked.

The theme of revenge is the overarching theme of the film as might be suspected in a film about killing people for revenge. However, the Bride is not the only character motivated by revenge. In fact most of the characters in the movie have acted for or are heavily motivated by revenge. As previously stated the Bride is the character most obviously motivated by revenge. Her search for vengeance for her murdered child is the core plot of the movie. Another character who is motivated by revenge is Bill himself. Bill felt slighted by the Bride’s betrayal: “there are consequences to breaking the heart of a murdering bastard. You experienced some of them.” When the Bride left Bill following the revelation of her pregnancy she apparently “broke his (Bill’s) heart,” thus Bill’s actions are to get revenge on the Bride for her perceived harms to himself. Similarly when Budd buries the Bride alive it was out of revenge for “breaking his brother’s heart.”

On a completely different note, the film devotes an entire segment to the origins of O-Ren Ishii. As a child she witnessed her parents being murdered by a Yakuza boss. She gets revenge by seducing (he was a pedophile) then stabbing him with a sword. “Look at me, Matsumoto. Take a good look at my face. Look at my eyes. Do I look familiar? Do I look like somebody... you murdered?” Her statement here was so that she could watch the recognition in his eyes before he died. She then proceeds to slaughter his remaining henchmen. What is interesting to note is that it is implied that the Yakuza boss was acting out of revenge himself for reasons that are never stated. Even Ellie’s murder of Budd was out of revenge. This is particularly obvious in her statement here: “Now in these last agonizing minutes of life you have left, let me answer the question you asked earlier more thoroughly. Right at this moment, the biggest "R" I feel is Regret. Regret that maybe the greatest warrior I have ever known, met her end at the hands of a bushwhackin, scrub, alky piece of shit like you. That woman deserved better.” Despite Ellie’s personal loathing of the Bide she had a great deal of respect for her and she felt that the Bride deserved to die at better hands than Budd’s. At this point all of these collective acts cannot be a coincidence. They paint a very clear picture of the endless circle of vengeance even without my final example. Perhaps the clearest example (apart from the Bride herself) is that of Nikki the child of Vernita Green. The movie heavily implies that one day she will seek revenge for her mother’s murder in a similar manner to the Bride’s rampage.

This theme’s value originates from the American cultural value of justice. However, this fantasy theme of revenge represents a justice value that has become tarnished by the realization that the system by which the guilty are supposed to be punished suffers form a great many flaws and that not everyone who is guilty will be punished in the manner that they deserve, and that sometimes people must take justice into their own hands. In many ways this belief dates back to the founding of the US as an independent nation. It was an act of rebellion by the people, by *individuals*, against injustice (in this case taxation without representation) that led to the autonomous nation now known as the United States of America (Brown, 1975).

With a revolution as a base line it is no surprise that such actions are ingrained in the public consciousness. From a certain perspective this can be seen in the American penchant for vigilante justice in entertainment, more specifically in the establishment and popularity of superheroes. Superheroes represent an individual who, for a variety of reasons gain the ability to dispense justice in a manner outside of the law. In fact one might say that in these stories their power becomes their right to dispense justice as they see it. “With great power there must also come—great responsibility (Lee, 1962)” this quote from the original Spiderman comic is one of the more famous pop culture quotes and it illustrates my point. In this case Spiderman’s power makes his suited to fight for justice outside of the bounds of the law, in other words: vigilantism. Similarly many law enforcement dramas on TV show that many believe that the rules that govern law enforcement often cripple it. On shows like Elementary, White Collar, Castle, and Bones many episodes revolve around the characters within these shows having to bend or even break the law to get the criminals. Often this is because the criminal hides behind the very laws designed to catch him.

**Evaluation/Conclusion**

The unified fantasy themes that make up human civilization are as many and varied as the situations that they represent. In this paper I focused on one fantasy theme and its value in a single culture, that of vengeance. We all long to bring justice to our enemies, that is to say sane people don’t take it as far as slicing them up with a sword, but I dare someone to claim that they have not at least thought about seeking some form of revenge for whatever harms have been laid on their person. While we know that we would never seek justice outside of the law we still long for the opportunity to do so. I have connected this aspect of society to numerous forms of media such as comics and television, but it does not stop there this theme is found in television adds, books, and in many even more unlikely places

As a final thought I would like to explore a statement I made earlier. As I pointed out Kill Bill draws from many sources and many cultures. For example its plot is heavily inspired by the Japanese film Lady Snowblood (Tarantino, 2003). My point is this: while I have put the value of revenge and vigilantism into an American context it is not a value that belongs solely to the United States. In this case I felt that it was necessary to focus my analysis so that the concept could be explored in a single context but I would not like my readers to leave thinking that this value is expressed solely in the United States. In fact this value can be seen (in various forms) in many, if not all, cultures. This value permeates every aspect of human nature and in this way it becomes both the most broad fantasy theme imaginable but also the smallest and most personalized. What we truly differ in is how we seek our vengeance; some utilize passive aggression while others turn to more “conventional” methods. But, each and every human on this planet it touched by thoughts (if not actions)of revenge. However, most of these thoughts are small and in response to petty grievances. But, as I have stated I believe that it is a core aspect of human nature and that in a civilized setting it is often expressed through the most quintessential aspect of human civilization: our stories.

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