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Vengeance

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills



Tony Cunningham on “Vengeance”

FEBRUARY 28, 2019



Many people were taken aback by Liam Neeson’s recent confession that forty years ago, he sought out some “black bastard” to pay dearly for the rape of a dear friend. He related the story during an interview about his new revenge flick, [Cold Pursuit](#), a reboot of a Norwegian film, [In Order of Disappearance](#) (2014), where Stellan Skarsgard played a grieving father who systematically avenges his son’s murder. Neeson plays the avenger role in *Cold Pursuit*, and it’s hardly a stretch

since many of his film characters have made people pay, and audiences have loved watching him employ his “[very particular set of skills.](#)”

Let me put aside two elements of the confession for my purposes. Ignore the fact that just any unlucky black man would have sufficed as Neeson’s target. Likewise, ignore the fact that forty years on, he felt comfortable referring to his target during the interview as a “black bastard.” Both these things raise important questions. Why should an innocent man ever suffice for payback? And in telling the story now, why was it important to identify the assailant’s race, much less add the “bastard” part? However, let’s imagine that Neeson told a different story, one where

he went looking for another white man, and not just any fellow, but the man who did the terrible deed he sought to avenge.

Generally, civilized people do not look kindly on revenge. They tend to see vengeance as a primitive urge that has no place in modern society. For one thing, revenge can sometimes inspire never-ending cycles of violence. Examples like the famous Hatfields and McCoys, where two families carried on a feud to make each other pay for almost thirty years in Kentucky and West Virginia, spring to mind with revenge. If you get me back, and then my people get you back, your people may feel the need to get my people back. And so it may go, on and on. When people take things into their own hands, the result can be utter chaos, with who did what to whom eventually being lost to us. All we're left with may be damaged bodies and souls.

Even when there is no grave danger of payback getting out of hand or running afoul of who truly deserves punishment, many people decry revenge in favor of justice, and they may take pains to distinguish the two conceptually, not just in the practical terms of who deals out the requisite punishment. On one telling, justice is principled, while revenge is always personal. Think for a moment about statues of Lady Justice, the kind you see around law courts. She wears a blindfold, and she holds scales in one hand and a sword in the other. The scales represent the moral order, with injustices throwing the scales out of balance and crying for proper restoration by way of reasoned consideration of the evidence. The blindfold represents impartiality in the cause of restoring that sacred order. And the sword reminds us that the State reserves the power to judge and mete out punishment. On this telling, whenever one person wrongs another, the interest of justice is always fundamentally impersonal in the sense that society seeks to heal the rift in the moral universe—what matters is that things be put back right. The principle's the thing. Should you wrong or harm me or those I love, justice makes no principled distinction between one victim and another. Good citizens should care about the wrong done to any citizen. Like Lady Justice, we should be blind to who is wronged since in the eyes of the law, we all matter, and we are all essentially the same.

Vengeance doesn't feel this way, though it shares a key sensibility with justice. Both justice and vengeance concern people getting what's coming to them. But whereas justice fixes on an impersonal principle, vengeance is deeply personal. In one of the oldest stories of vengeance in Western literature, Achilles kills Hector in single combat outside the walls of Troy after the Trojan prince slays Patroclus. In the moments before Achilles has his vengeance, Hector asks for a pact to allow the vanquished the requisite burial rites, but Achilles wants none of it.

“There are no binding oaths between men and lions—
wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—
they are all bent on hating each other to the death.
So with you and me. No love between us. No truce
till one or the other falls...”

And then as he is dying, Hector asks again, offering an impressive ransom if Achilles will allow his Trojan people to bury him. Achilles spits on the appeal.

“Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
Would to go my rage, my fury would drive me now
to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—
such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?
no man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom.”

Clearly, Achilles has no interest in restoring some balance to the moral universe. He is not acting as any impartial man of high principle. At that moment, he is a raging beast and he hates Hector with every fiber of his being. After slaying him, Achilles lashes the corpse to the back of his chariot and drags it in front of horrified onlookers around the walls of the city. In his profound rage and grief, Achilles drags the body around Patroclus’ tomb for days. Each morning, Achilles



awakes to see Hector’s body magically restored by the gods. His attempts to defile Hector’s body bring him no peace, and not simply because the gods protect the body.

And then the gods allow Priam, king of Troy, to steal his way into the Greek camp to beg for his son’s body. When Achilles sees him, he momentarily mistakes him for his own father, and the thought of Peleus soon to grieve for Achilles moves him and sets in motion a remarkable scene as Priam appeals to him as a father. Achilles returns the body and gives Priam his word of honor that he shall have the required days for the proper funeral rites. The war will not begin again until the Trojans have duly honored Hector. And with this solemn promise, Achilles regains his humanity, leaving behind his all-consuming anger and hate to see his enemies as human beings, a grieving father and a dead son.

We should be very glad for Achilles’ return. When he wades through Trojan blood to kill Hector, he does not come to kill a flesh-and-blood human being like himself. He cannot see the world through Hector’s eyes or imagine the tears that his people will soon shed for him. Achilles is a raging beast come only to make Hector pay dearly. We shudder at the thought of such a fearsome creature, one who will stop at nothing to kill his adversary. This is as personal as it gets. Understandably, dispassionate justice looks like a saving grace next to Achilles’ rage.

In [Ransom](#), David Malouf’s creative retelling of Priam coming to ransom his son, he creates a beautiful scene where Achilles sits with the body of Hector, cleaned and made ready for Priam to take home shortly.

He regards Hector’s body now, and the clean-limbed perfection of it, the splendor of the

warrior who has won an honorable death, is no longer an affront.

The affection of the gods for a man whose end it was part of his own accomplished life to accomplish he can now take as an honour intended also to himself. And that, he sees, is how it might have been from the start, and this the first, not the twelfth night.

What he feels in himself as a perfect order of body, heart, occasion, is the enactment, under the stars, in the very breath of the gods, of the true Achilles, the one he has come all this way to find.

He sits quietly in the contemplation of this.

As glad as we should be that Achilles finds his way back from the darkness of vengeance, we should also take care to understand that his darkness is the underside of love. His rage and wrath are driven by his profound love for Patroclus. Love is like that. Achilles’ anger isn’t pretty to witness, a sight no more bearable than witnessing the abyss of grief. And justice does well to spare us from doing the vengeful things for love that might just alter us permanently, unleashing forces from which we might never return if we were to indulge them. You might say that justice can mercifully spare us from ourselves because when we feel powerful urges to return bad for bad to those who wrong us and those we love, we experience the urges of loves that give our lives meaning and value. In denying or vilifying such urges, we deny elements of our humanity.

I understand Achilles all too well. At heart, the cry for vengeance is no more primitive than love itself. Life has mercifully spared me anything like Achilles’ fate, but I can imagine having loved ones taken from me or badly hurt, and if I do, I can’t imagine not feeling a deep need to give people what’s coming to them, just as I can’t imagine not mourning the loss or injury. Fortunate souls who have never suffered such things may find it tempting and comforting to imagine themselves above the urges of an Achilles or Liam Neeson as I have imagined him, but in that case, I would simply invite them to exercise their imagination a bit more.

Tony Cunningham

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