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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Dean Hitesman  Bachelor of Commerce and currently a law student at the University of Alberta   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  **Internet Movie Database:**  - [King Of The Pecos](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0027849/)  - [Unforgiven](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0105695/)  - [Seven](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0114369/)  **All Movie Guide:**  - [King Of The Pecos](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:27450~C)  - [Unforgiven](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:51847)  - [Seven](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:135792)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#comrev) |       The modern world is no place for revenge fuelled by emotion. We expect our anger to be repressed; we consider it a sin when it is not. One must ask why, then, we are continuously drawn to revenge genre films to fulfill our fantasies of vengeance. | |  | | --- | | **Setting the Stage for Justice in the Revenge Genre Film**  by Dean Hitesman  "Revenge" genre films tend to fit into neat little schemes. The storyline will involve the protagonist being wronged, usually in the first half of the movie, and the rest of the film will be a portrayal of this hero, or avenger, taking the law into their own hands to exact vengeance on those who have crossed him. The audience undergoes a great sense of satisfaction when vengeance is finally delivered because the audience has been brought on board with the avenger's cause and agree that what he had to do to exact vengeance is justified. It is necessary for the avenger to take the law in his own hands because the legal system in which the revenge genre film takes place is either perfidious and corrupt, or simply ineffectual and unable to uphold justice. An incompetent legal order is essential to our accepting the revenge genre film.  The 1936 Joseph Kane western film, *King of the Pecos*, tells such a story of revenge. In the beginning of the film, the antagonist trio of an exploiting capitalist Alexander Stiles, his lawyer Brewster, and his killer Ash take title to strategic watering holes between Texas and the Kansas cattle markets in order to gain control of a million acre empire. One of the key watering hole locations, that of Sweetwater, is located on land owned by a man who has settled there with his wife and their teenage son. When the man refuses Stiles' offer of one thousand dollars to buy the land, the man and his wife are shot, and the teenage son is brutally beaten up and left for dead.  Ten years pass and the boy, John Clayborn, who of course did not die, has become a man and a lawyer, played by John Wayne. He ends up representing a large group of independent cattle owners and takes on Stiles, represented by Brewster, in a civil trial aimed at gaining access to the water holes controlled by Stiles without having to pay the exorbitant tolls he demands. The Court finds that, based on homestead laws, Stiles is only entitled to one of his water hole claims, that of Sweetwater. Brewster is fired by Stiles for losing the trial.  The setting of the film being the late nineteenth century western frontier, law enforcement is undeveloped. Despite his losing of the legal trial, there is inadequate legal order to prevent Stiles from using force. No longer able to control the rancher's cattle through the watering holes, Stiles orders Ash and his men to gather all of their cattle by force. To escape Stiles and his men, Clayborn organizes the ranchers into a mass cattle drive that must stop in Sweetwater on its way to Abilene. When Stiles refuses access to Sweetwater, Clayborn and the ranchers kill Stiles and Ash in much the same fashion that Clayborn's parents were murdered years before. The young lawyer's revenge is complete, and he needed to use force beyond law in order to extract it.  *King of the Pecos* is not alone among westerns in its portrayal of justice. "Countless westerns not only from the thirties but from every decade deal either with the struggle between frontier anarchy and emerging social order or with the struggle between an evolved but unjust social order and the felt need to set things right by taking the law into one's own hands."([1](#30j0zll)) The untamed setting of the western film is ideal for the revenge genre as the inept legal order allows for the avenger to uphold his own sense of justice when seeking vengeance with minimal hampering from law enforcement.  Such is the setting in another story of revenge that is found in the more recent western *Unforgiven* which Clint Eastwood both stars in and directed. Eastwood plays the role of William Munny, a once ruthless killing cowboy, who has been tamed by his wife into a domesticated rancher and father of two. However, as the film begins we discover that Munny has fallen on hard times as his wife has passed of smallpox, and the life of a pig farmer has proved difficult. Munny becomes attracted to a bounty that has been placed on the life of two cowboys by the prostitutes in the town of Big Whisky - punishment for their cutting the face of one of the working girls.  The sheriff of Big Whisky, Little Bill, characterizes the film's underdeveloped and largely ineffective law enforcement. He offers to sentence the two cowboys to being whipped, but this proves unsatisfactory to both the whores and to owner of the brothel, Skinny, although for different reasons. The prostitutes do not see a mere whipping as being just punishment for something as gruesome and permanently scaring as the cutting of one's face. A whipping would not cause the cowboys to suffer enough for justice to be served. For Skinny, his interest is purely economical, and a scarred whore is of much less value to him. Thus when Little Bill changes the punishment to the payment of ponies to Skinny, Skinny is satisfied to have recovered his economic loss, while the prostitutes feel the need to take the law into their own hands by putting the bounty out on the two cowboys' lives.  While it is the prostitutes who are seeking revenge, the audience does not get the strong feeling of this being a 'revenge' genre film until later when Munny's good friend Ned, with whom he is seeking the bounty, is captured and killed by Little Bill. While we do feel some sense of justice is being inflicted on the two cowboys by the prostitutes' bounty, and we get the sense the Munny does too, death does seem a bit excessive for what they have done. What makes *Unforgiven* a compelling movie is that it is not a clear cut case of good vs. evil as in *King of the Pecos*. The movie going audience has perhaps matured beyond the westerns of the 1930s, demanding movies that force them to reflect on them afterwards. Little Bill is not all bad. He does make attempts to uphold the law, but we resent him for his treatment of the prostitutes as property, and we find his whipping and killing of Ned, a character who is developed in the film and whom we like, to be unwarranted and savage. Unlike *King of the Pecos*, it is an imperfect story of revenge.  This theme is perfectly portrayed through Eastwood's character who himself is cynical of justice in the world. He says the incongruous line of "deserves got nothing to do with it" to Little Bill just before killing him as revenge for killing Ned, something Munny clearly did feel he deserved. Munny has developed this contemptuous stance towards justice through the events of his own life. A one time ruthless killer of women and children, "the fact that no one ever brought him to justice for his past evil deeds, makes him think the delivery of justice purely random, a matter of luck."([2](#30j0zll)) He sees himself as much more deserving of an early death from smallpox than his wife. The audience feels a sense of satisfaction when Munny shoots Little Bill, however that satisfaction is hindered by a sense of uneasiness that is not present in the much more simplistic good vs. evil of *King of the Pecos*.  William Ian Miller in his paper, *Clint Eastwood and Equity: Popular Culture's Theory of Revenge* [(3)](#30j0zll), asserts a class-based analysis of revenge. He describes an "antihonor, antirevenge political and moral discourse" in which revenge has been rejected by the upper classes as being "vulgar and unfashionable". This is not to say, according to Miller, that the upper classes were no longer concerned with getting even, rather "their revenges were transmuted and took place in economic arenas and in routine social activities like gossip and slighting rather than face-to-face confrontation." Miller attributes much of this discourse to a distinction that developed between revenge and retribution. While revenge came to be seen as improper, retribution remained justifiable. The distinction was premised on restitution being "a respectable reason for punishment of wrongs, administered as it must by the state in a controlled, proportional fashion", while in contrast revenge is "portrayed as crazed, uncontrolled, subjective, individual, admitting no reason, no rule of limitation."  Miller discredits this view and contends that in fact, there is no difference between revenge and retribution. The proponents of this division are attempting to set up an actual philosophical distinction. Their goal is to legitimate state punishment as being retribution and in order to do this it had to be distanced from revenge. Miller claims we are repressed, and revenge continues to live inside of us as "fantasies of getting even, of dominating, of discomforting those we envy".  One way we live out these fantasies is through the revenge genre film, such as the two western films previously discussed. This observation forces one to pose the question as to why the revenge genre film so typically involves the one seeking reprisal taking matters into their own hands rather than relying on the law. An easy answer for the western film is that the setting of undeveloped law enforcement dictates that this is the only way justice can be upheld, however I would argue that a better answer would be that it is the revenge genre that dictates the setting. The revenge genre is best served by a setting where legal order is either undeveloped, incompetent, corrupt, or most commonly some combination thereof. The reason is that this allows the hero of the film to seek out his revenge without being judged by the audience as being "vulgar and unfashionable", or perhaps more appropriately, allows the audience to live out their fantasy of revenge vicariously through the film without a sense of guilt for their feelings of satisfaction. The film's avenger cannot be judged for his acts of revenge, the lawless setting leaves no alternative, and there is no state to administer 'retribution'.  Perhaps a perfect contrasting example to the revenge genre western is that of the film *Seven*. The film is not a western, and thus does not take place amidst a wild, untamed, and lawless setting, but rather in the present day, legal-rule-filled modern world. The film follows a young detective as he desperately tries to capture a ruthless killer who is punishing each the seven deadly sins of gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, wrath, pride, and lust by systematically murdering those he sees as possessing them. In a dramatic conclusion, once the killer is captured, he reveals to the detective that he has murdered the young man's wife. The killer explains that since he himself envied the normal life of the detective, it seemed fair that he himself becomes the victim of envy. He then begs the dispirited and anguished detective to give in to his anger and desire for revenge by killing him on the spot, an obviously illegal act by a peace officer in our justice system. The detective tries desperately to fight his emotions, but he cannot restrain his anger and eventually obliges by shooting the killer, becoming the last of the victims, guilty of the sin of wrath. The final scene shows the young detective being taken away in a police car, certain to be disciplined by the justice system for his act. The film *Seven* does not serve us as a revenge fantasy. The audience, despite being sympathetic towards the detective, is left with the feeling that he made a mistake by giving in to his emotions and completing the killer's masterpiece of the seven deadly sins, ruining his own life in the process. While the first six sins, including that of envy by the serial killer himself, were punished by murder, the seventh sin of wrath contained in the young detective's revenge is punished by the law.  The modern world is no place for revenge fuelled by emotion. We expect our anger to be repressed; we consider it a sin when it is not. One must ask why, then, we are continuously drawn to revenge genre films to fulfill our fantasies of vengeance. If we consider revenge to be so vulgar and unfashionable, why do we feel such pleasure when the avenger is finally successful at the end of the film, instead of scorning him for his crazed and uncontrolled conduct? I feel much of an answer can be found in the settings of these films. We are willing to forgive vengeful conduct that takes place amidst an undeveloped legal system, where there is no state to administer punishment in a controlled, proportional fashion. But not in our modern world of judges and lawyers, laws and courts that uphold them, all apparently free of emotion.  If one's conduct does not warrant anger or outrage, for what are we punishing? When someone is asked whether justice was served, do they not question whether they feel the guilty party got what they deserved? The truth is that justice is as much an emotion as it is a legal principle, as to inflict punishment for an act that does not give rise in anyone a sense of anger or outrage is the real sin.  (1) Francis M. Nevins, "Through the Great Depression on Horseback: Legal Themes in Western Films of the 1930s" in J. Denvir, ed., Legal Reelism: Movies as Legal Texts (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996) 44 at 64.  (2) William I. Miller, "Clint Eastwood and Equity: Popular Culture's Theory of Revenge", in A. Sarat and T. Kearns eds., Law in the Domains of Culture (Ann Arbor: U. of Minnesota Press, 2000) 161 at 195.  (3) Ibid. at 161.  Posted February 10, 2005 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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