

# Non-Violent Revenge — Analyzing the Elements of Revenge in Visual Works in the Context of the Era

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## Abstract

Revenge often signifies the retaliation of the powerless against the powerful in various relationships such as gender, society, peers, or family, enabling the audience to derive satisfaction from the triumph of the underdog. This enduring appeal is why revenge narratives have remained prevalent throughout literary and cinematic history. Recent discussions have questioned whether characters in many contemporary film and television productions are excessively “weak.” The emergence of numerous dark hero narratives such as *Empresses in the Palace*, *The Glory*, *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace*, and *The Knockout* has sparked extensive debate on violent revenge-themed visual media. In this context, drawing from a synthesis of literature and analysis of works like *The Great Jang-Geum*, *Like a Flowing River 3*, and *Roving Inspection Team*, this paper proposes the concept of non-violent revenge. Moreover, building upon the idea of non-violent revenge, it discusses revenge elements in visual media within the context of their respective eras, exploring new revenge ideologies and the societal significance reflected in visual media, thus envisioning new avenues for revenge aesthetics.

**Keywords:** revenge in visual media, non-violent revenge, ideology, new revenge aesthetics

## 1. Background of Non-Violent Revenge Theory

Non-violent revenge theory originates from the concept of “non-violent communication” in psychology, with its core bearing certain similarities. Revenge generally stems from the abuse of power, often referring to the resistance of the weak against the powerful in certain relationships, and is inherently violent. Due to social and cultural reasons, works centered around the “dark hero” are increasingly favored by audiences today, with promoters gradually focusing on the “darkening” of protagonists in their publicity efforts. This has led to widespread discussions about many works that are not centered around “dark heroes”. The

emergence of darkened protagonists is a rebellion against early mainstream works of the “forgiveness” genre, but it has also led revenge culture-themed film and television works to seemingly fall into a dichotomy of either “violence” or “forgiveness”. As society evolves, revenge culture also continues to develop, as evidenced by the ongoing interpretations and adaptations of traditional plays like *The Orphan of Zhao*. In traditional clan societies, Cheng Ying chose to sacrifice his own son in exchange for someone else’s son due to the concept of righteousness. However, with changing societal norms, traditional righteousness is no longer sufficient for audiences to understand Cheng

Ying's subsequent actions of raising the orphaned son for revenge. Therefore, one of the reasons why Chen Kaige's directorial version of *The Orphan of Zhao* (movie name *Sacrifice*) was successful at the time was also because of the director's adaptation of Cheng Ying's revenge motive. This also indicates that changes in societal norms will inevitably lead to different interpretations and representations of revenge culture in film and television works across different eras.

Today, the pace of social development far exceeds the rate at which new social ethics emerge. Traditional social ethics are no longer sufficient to address the problems arising from modern societal changes. In film and television works, the simplistic revenge concepts of traditional "righteousness" or "forgiveness" have gradually faded from the mainstream stage. While the emergence of "dark heroes" certainly has its reasons and significance in the current era, under the demand for the rule of law in modern society, resorting to "violent" revenge methods is often undesirable. Moreover, the aesthetic of revenge elements in film and television works should never be singular, and the interpretation of revenge culture is bound to continue evolving. Currently, in modern film and television works, non-violent revenge theory perhaps embodies more idealism compared to violent revenge. However, it is undeniable that this concept, similar to law, morality, and certain social norms, carries the color of a "better" idealistic call. Based on these backgrounds, as societal norms change, the concept of non-violent revenge may perhaps offer audiences a new "path" for the aesthetic appreciation of revenge culture.

## 2. Meaning and Differences Between "Violent" and "Non-Violent" Revenge

The protagonist of "dark hero" revenge works can generally be classified as violent revenge in today's film and television works. Traditional acts of revenge are often straightforward, akin to the ancient concept of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". In modern revenge films, violent revenge often refers to the protagonist's way of resisting the power of the dominant group, often becoming a new power controller, and then using the same illegal means to punish the former power holder. The protagonist, faced with the actions of those in power breaking the rules and abusing their authority, also chooses to seek revenge by breaking the rules, filled with a

"violent aesthetic." The act of killing the enemy is the fulfillment of the proverb "the dragon slayer becomes the dragon."

Violence, as a double-edged sword thrust at the opponent, inevitably has two sides. Protagonists who undergo "darkening" in such revenge narratives often share similar traits. They are often forced to compromise and give up many precious "things" (which could be companions, qualities, morals, treasures, etc.). While the protagonist may suffer and struggle, they must also firmly adhere to this path. Additionally, various like-minded companions typically surround the protagonist to compensate for their shortcomings. By the end of the story, as the new perpetrator, the protagonist often suffers from inner conflict, pain, and psychological trauma, which is why these protagonists often end up feeling empty and tired, as their inherent qualities reject the violent elements.

In the South Korean drama *The Glory*, the protagonist, Moon Dong-eun, strives to become a new "bully" in order to avenge the bullies. In this path of revenge, her revenge partner, Joo Yeo-jeong, a wealthy second-generation individual, not only provides emotional support but also confronts the antagonist when Moon Dong-eun is threatened. Kang Hyun-nam provides support in the form of manpower to confront the antagonist. After Moon Dong-eun becomes the new wielder of power, she inevitably harms other innocent individuals in lower positions. She feels sorry for Yeon-jin's daughter, who is innocently involved in the revenge plan, and guilty for forcing Kang Hyun-nam to separate from her daughter. Eventually, after the entire revenge ritual, Moon Dong-eun loses the purpose of her life until her boyfriend gives her a new revenge target once again.

In the Chinese drama *Empresses in the Palace*, which falls under the same category of revenge with a protagonist undergoing moral degradation, Zhen Huan's way of revenge involves entering the palace and continuously climbing to the pinnacle of power, eventually becoming a new wielder of power. After becoming a noble consort, Zhen Huan, as the superior, chooses to protect her sister by allowing Imperial Concubine Ying to enter the palace in her sister's place, ultimately leading to Imperial Concubine Ying becoming a sacrificial pawn in the power struggle. Similarly, when

Shen Meizhuang dies from postpartum hemorrhage, Zhen Huan and the emperor both mention sacrificing the imperial physician. Zhen Huan's demeanor towards the concubines in the harem indicates her status as the new wielder of power, and she exhibits the oppression typical of a new wielder of power towards those beneath her. When the emperor dies, he explicitly states that the country will soon be Zhen Huan's, hinting that Zhen Huan has finally become the new wielder of power who once oppressed her. However, it's worth noting that these protagonists are not villains, so they cannot derive genuine pleasure and happiness from revenge. After becoming the empress dowager, Zhen Huan doesn't feel happy but only expresses her desire to rest, contrary to her initial aspiration of marrying a good husband and living a peaceful life. Of course, television dramas often emphasize that these protagonists are compelled to take this path, but what remains unchanged is that after choosing to become the new wielder of power, they don't achieve everything they desire.

Non-violent revenge does not negate the violent genes in revenge, nor does it mean that the protagonist should "forgive." Instead, it aims to emphasize that the protagonist does not necessarily have to become a new wielder of power and will refrain resorting to illegal, oppressive, deceitful means, unrestrained, deceptive, or detrimental means to retaliate against the object of revenge. Instead, they confront the problem and continuously pursue their goals through self-improvement and enhancement of their professional skills within the bounds of the law or certain rules, seeking rational, legal, and relatively just channels and methods to achieve their objectives.

In *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, Ruyi finds herself in an environment where the upper echelons of power manipulate and clash with each other. In this setting, Ruyi is neither the most powerful nor the weakest. In such an environment, most people tend to seek power and then oppress those who are relatively weaker. Ruyi is oppressed by the power represented by the Empress, and the Emperor can only choose to "suffer" Ruyi's grievances as the relatively weaker party. When Ruyi is wrongly accused by the combined forces of the Empress, the Emperor chooses to send Ruyi to the cold palace. When facing Ruyi and Wei Yanwan, the Emperor chooses to punish Wei

Yanwan. Hailan was also once oppressed, but she also chooses to kill a guard to alleviate the suspicions of the higher power, the Emperor. In such an environment, Ruyi does not choose to oppress those in lower social classes. Her first choice is always to hope that her enemies can be publicly brought to justice, and the punishments she receives can also be openly discussed. Of course, *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* still has many controversial aspects. Ruyi is not a perfect protagonist; she hesitates, fears, lacks empathy for people of lower status, and cannot provide the audience with the satisfaction of revenge like a "villain-turned" protagonist. However, when facing conflicts with those in higher positions of power, she never chooses to sacrifice those in lower positions, nor does she abuse her own power to oppress the innocent. Protagonists who choose non-violent revenge often contradict their own personalities. They persist in doing what they believe is right, and they struggle when others break the rules for personal gain, feeling trapped by their own nature. This kind of personality is often more realistic.

In *The Great Jang-Geum*, *Jang Geum*, when faced with being falsely accused in a poisoning incident by her enemies, chooses not to retaliate but instead helps them prove their innocence. Her revenge is not aimed at distorting facts to make the villains pay but rather at making her revenge honorable and subject to discussion. She defeats her enemies openly and honestly by continuously improving her culinary skills and winning in a cooking competition. Besides enhancing her medical and cooking skills, she does not break the rules but chooses to expose the truth and implement revenge through legal means. She does not seek to gain power to crush her enemies but instead seeks to reveal the truth and successfully exonerate her parents. *Jang Geum's* goal is to improve her professional skills, empower herself, adhere to what she believes is right, and not compromise or evade responsibility.

### **3. The Reality and Contemporary Significance of Nonviolent Revenge Content in Film and Television**

Throughout the history of revenge-themed film and television, various types of revenge culture have intermittently emerged, with violent revenge content prevailing in today's film and television works, which holds a certain social significance.

In China, the interpretation of revenge in film and television works is also a reflection of contemporary issues. The prevalence of violent revenge content in today's film and television works holds a certain social significance. Throughout the history of revenge-themed film and television, various forms of revenge culture have emerged intermittently. The fundamental reason for the popularity of violent revenge works lies in the audience's need for catharsis from the pressures of reality in society. Faced with the revenge for the suppression of one's own power, earlier directors often depicted protagonists striving to attain a state of "super-ego" and resolve hatred through forgiveness. This atmosphere of absolute idealistic forgiveness reflects the zeitgeist, where even the most profound grievances ultimately succumb to the theme of "family harmony." In this sense, violent revenge works represent a rebellion against earlier idealized works. From a humanistic perspective, they also reflect the audience's regression to the emotions of the "id." This is one of the significant reasons why *Empresses in the Palace* stood out among works of the same period.

As a country that exports a large number of violent revenge film and television works, South Korea, in an article titled "Dark Hero Era" in the *Chosun Ilbo*, introduces the "blockbuster" revenge dramas and exposes a reality: people's distrust of South Korea's public power fairness and social justice. Therefore, people are more willing to see in dramas, "protagonists punishing villains in their own way, seeking fairness for themselves." Today, as economies around the world continue to develop and social contradictions intensify, and people's literature begins to gain greater discourse power, audiences hope to feel inspired and comforted by film and television works. Therefore, these works also represent the cries of the masses against the helplessness of the current reality. Professor Choi Hyang-seok from the Department of Sociology at Kookmin University said that people's accumulated grievances over the delay in achieving social fairness and justice are the social background for the popularity of "dark hero revenge dramas." However, it is worth noting that after South Korea gradually realized the popularity of such themes, it began to recognize that using breaking the rules to punish those who break the rules would not have a positive impact on society's development

but rather lead to negative guidance.

Starting from the works themselves, in the modern context where the actions of dark protagonists gaining "justice" through violence are widely praised, there are always criticisms of works with a different type of revenge theme. However, the concepts of violent revenge and nonviolent revenge are not fundamentally opposed. TikTok blogger Pingyuan Xiaohu proposed the concept of "elephant's revenge" in his commentary on the TV series *The Great Jang-Geum*. Comparatively, characters like Moon Dong-eun and Zhen Huan are more akin to lions among carnivorous animals, while Jang-Geum is more like an elephant among herbivorous animals. Lions may pounce and tear apart enemies, while elephants may repel enemies but never open their mouths to bite. Their relationship is more about preference for noise or quiet, with neither being right or wrong but merely a matter of nature. People who choose to be carnivorous animals may not always be happy, and those who choose to be herbivorous animals may sometimes dislike their own softness. The concept of nonviolent revenge offers audiences more choices. If you are of a carnivorous nature, you can choose to fiercely retaliate against those who harm you. But if you are of a herbivorous nature, you can also choose to achieve revenge in your own way.

In real society, nonviolent revenge is relatively idealistic compared to violent revenge. Therefore, some may perceive nonviolent revenge as forgiveness and concession, but its essence is still revenge.

In *Roving Inspection Team*, the male protagonist Feng Sen decides to seek revenge when his wife is murdered. After ten years of torment, he finally finds his enemy, Mi Zhendong. However, as the head of the prosecution team and due to his steadfast commitment to justice, he adheres to his principles and does not seek revenge privately, nor does he allow his son to seek revenge. Ultimately, the protagonist achieves revenge through legal means, fulfilling his goal.

In *The Lonely Warrior*, faced with the arrogance of criminals, members of the third squad, who are police officers, lose control of their anger for the first time, resulting in the death of the criminal. However, after their release from prison, they spend a decade tracking down the culprit and ultimately bring him to justice.

In film and television, protagonists often seek



revenge due to the abuse of power, but villains also engage in acts of revenge. Sometimes, audiences empathize with the villains' motivations for revenge. The line between revenge and crime is often blurred, and emotions alone cannot reliably distinguish between the two. Revenge is inherently subjective, dependent on whether the avenger's emotions remain internally consistent. Often, the imbalance of emotions drives victims to seek revenge. Furthermore, due to differing perspectives, the definition of harm varies among individuals. While revenge may be justified in many cases, violent retaliation often stems from inner feelings that lack fixed standards for assessment.

In the Chinese TV series *Like a Flowing River 3*, set against the backdrop of modern commercial development history, Yang Xun and Liang Sishen jointly opened a shopping mall. However, due to Yang Xun's lack of understanding and his own selfish mentality, Yang Heng engaged in illegal financial activities in the partnership. In essence, Yang Xun, as the powerful side in the project of opening the shopping mall, violated the rules and harmed the relatively vulnerable rights of Liang Sishen, who was not very familiar with the project. After the accounting issue was discovered by Liang Sishen's father, the Liang's family retaliated against Yang Xun. Transitioning from the power structure of the small project of the shopping mall to the larger social power system, the Liang's family, now a greater power, also retaliated against subordinates in the form of rule-breaking. For the Liang's family, this was seen as an injury and insult, prompting their desire for revenge. While their method of revenge did not involve directly killing Yang Xun, it nearly ruined his future (imprisonment, bankruptcy, debt settlement, etc.). Yang Xun was certainly at fault and deserved punishment. Under legal or similar relatively fair judgment standards, Yang Xun had not caused any serious consequences yet, and there were objective reasons for his lack of awareness (For example, due to his lack of education, during the stage of admitting mistakes, Yang Xun's upbringing regards kneeling as the highest form of etiquette. However, the Liang family interprets it according to their customs as a form of coercion.). Yang Xun accepted basic punishment, at the very least "not to the point of death." However, in the eyes of the Liang's family, the

end of the revenge process was when they subjectively felt satisfied with retaliating against Yang Xun. From the perspective of the avengers' inner standards, this revenge was not fair. For Yang Xun, losing the shopping mall, possibly going to jail, and accumulating debts were enough to crush his entire family and even "leave no hope for the rest of his life," but to the Liang's family, it was just a loss of money. All of this stemmed from the inherent inequality between the two parties. If revenge is solely judged based on the avengers' inner feelings, it could likely lead to uncontrolled and severely imbalanced retaliation. Just like carnivorous animals don't consider the feelings of their prey when tearing into them.

The emergence of social rules is to curb the vicious cycle of violence, and if everyone is a "carnivore", then there is no need for rules, and society will become a "jungle" where the strong rule. Under the current legal concept in China, films like *Roving Inspection Team*, *Judge Dee's Mystery*, and *The Knockout* actually emphasize that everyone has emotions, rules are not perfect, but if we only follow emotions to break the rules in order to punish the abuse of power, then this kind of revenge is just a pursuit of primitive impulse. Non-violent revenge places self before the ego and superego, surpasses primitive violence or forgiveness, and chooses to respect oneself and others. Social rules are established to guide the pursuit of a better future, even though life is realistic and cruel, it does not prevent us from yearning for a bit more beauty.

When audiences watch films and television shows, they may hope to be inspired, and the practicality of non-violent revenge lies in the fact that in real life, everyone has their own expertise and limitations, and not everyone can become a powerful figure. The talent of the "dark hero" itself has the characteristics of intelligence and sensitivity to power. In reality, most of us have our own attributes, and the essence of violent revenge lies in "violence", not everyone can calmly face the "violence" of others. Indeed, non-violent revenge also has its limitations in today's society. For example, it is too idealistic, not everyone has the patience and perseverance to shape oneself. Moreover, the ultimate result of this retaliation is not easy to achieve worldly success, and it is easy to be called "a saint" or cowardly by others. In films and in life, there is no absolute way. This concept aims to propose new development ideas for exploration, and

with the improvement of audience aesthetic levels, it is believed that the complexity and inclusiveness of character traits in characters are gradually increasing.

In conclusion, regardless of the form of presentation of a work, revenge culture is eternal. As the main form of communication in modern times, visual works in the revenge genre will also constantly generate new connotations and ways of interpretation. In response to the current trend of violent revenge works that have changed the past cultural atmosphere of "tolerance", "forgiveness", and "give and take" with "dark heroes" as the main characters, they are a critique of the oppression brought by various power systems in society, relationships between genders, workplaces, and interpersonal relationships. These "avenging enemies" give audiences pleasure and value systems, which also align with the current aesthetic standards that focus on the pursuit of self-worth and feelings. The praise of violent revenge works should not be the standard for judging other revenge-themed films and television shows. The concept of non-violent revenge also has significance in the real world, and works in this genre can enrich new avenues of aesthetic appreciation for revenge elements in visual works. Perhaps in the future, with the improvement of productivity and the advancement of social systems, new social ethics may lead audiences to have new deconstructive demands for revenge culture, and non-violent revenge content will also be an exploration of the new revenge culture. If audiences hope to gain spiritual strength and a sense of identity in visual works, works in the non-violent revenge genre can also provide spiritual support and guidance for audiences in the more passive group.

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