

# Passage

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## **“Just Like You Killed a Member of my Family”: Revenge in the Film the Killing of a Sacred Deer (2017)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Revenge is often manifested in aggressive attacks to seek justice. Many literary works, including films, have brought up this issue by emphasizing the cruelty of revenge. In this regard, this research intends to unfold another interpretation for revenge. It is presented by the vindictive character of the Film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017). In this film, Martin takes revenge on Steven implicitly. The analysis draws on the theory of revenge from McCullough (2008). As the theory highlights, taking revenge exposes the desires for revenge. The desires are natural responses from the vindictive person who gets offended by the transgressor. For instance, Martin wants to confirm the crime done by Steven and wishes Steven to admit it. Martin then begins to transform his desire into several acts of revenge: (1) implicit intimidation, (2) intruding Steven's private space, (3) casting 'spell', and (4) committing homicide. Further, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith's (2017) cinematic features also manifest evidence for these implicit attacks. Therefore, the analysis shows that Martin retaliates to Steven in implicit aggression. Martin reveals his vengeance in the film through his reasons and the manifestation of acts for revenge.

**Keywords:** *Film analysis, Revenge, The Killing of a Sacred Deer*

## INTRODUCTION

Revenge is commonly perceived as aggressive attacks committed by an individual, and many people tend to think that the acts should be avoided. Revenge is considered inappropriate, even a crime. However, revenge is a desire to attack caused by agony and is sought for satisfaction (Meriam Webster, 2021). Despite the attack, revenge or vengeance is a natural response for people getting back at an offense; it is “a common but an inevitable response” (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018, p.17). Using film analysis, this research intends to uncover another interpretation of revenge. Thus, it examines the causes and acts of revenge depicted in the film.

A film encompasses narrative and cinematic viewpoints to deliver a message. It represents the filmmaker’s approach to an issue. This research particularly exposes in regards to revenge. Based on Robson (2019), revenge correlates with a nature of justice in a clearer portrayal of a thriller and drama film. *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) is one of the cases. In this film, the

vindictive character does not present his revenge in bloody attacks. Instead, he focuses on getting back justice without apparent aggression to the offender. The vindictive character, Martin, wants to take revenge on the offender, Steven. It is because Steven executes malpractice on Martin's father. At the beginning of the film, they portray an intimate but vague relationship between an adult and a teen. For years, they deceive each other. Steven intends to conceal malpractice. Besides, Martin tries to observe and confirm it. As soon as Steven starts to avoid and reject Martin, it triggers Martin to take revenge. He returns malpractice with the uncanny illness experience infected to Steven’s family. They need to endure several unknown stages of illness that lead to death. Then, Steven needs to discover how to stop it. Thus, the analysis using film elements can help to reveal features like a popular form (Bordwell, Thompson & Smith, 2017). This research, therefore, aims to explore the reasons and the acts of revenge with the help of film analysis.

Then, this research provides the theoretical framework as its foundation. It is divided into two major sections. The first section elaborates the theory of revenge by McCullough (2008), and the second section discusses the film elements by Bordwell and Thompson and Smith (2017). The theory of revenge explains the desire, the aggression, and the murder for revenge. Meanwhile, the film elements in this research focus on the *mise en scene* and the camera positions, which examine angles and distances. Both of these help to unravel the reasons and acts of revenge in the film under study. Lastly, this research contains related previous studies about revenge discovered in films.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research is qualitative in nature; specifically, it involved textual analysis which drew on both the verbal and visual elements of a film. Creswell (2007) points out that textual analysis begins with an assumption and perspective toward a particular human issue. In this research, the issue being dealt with is

revenge, which is related to a tragedy experienced by a particular character. In particular, this research attempted to understand the reasons for the vindictive character's revenge and how this revenge is manifested in the acts of revenge. The film analyzed is *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. The study is expected to provide a more in-depth interpretation of the vengeance from the perspective of a vindictive character. The key theoretical framework used in the present study is McCullough's (2008) theory of revenge, and the methodological analysis was done through analysis of film elements as proposed by Bordwell and Thompson (2017), particularly in relation to *mise en scene* and camera position.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the analysis of revenge and film, this research found that *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) reveals two kinds of reasons and four manifests acts of revenge. Both findings occur through the revenge of Martin as the victim. The

malpractice gives Martin reasons for revenge as he has the desire for Steven's admission of guilt and for confirming Martin's suspicion regarding malpractice done to his father. Accordingly, he retaliates with acts that are manifested through implicit intimidation, intruding on Steven's private space, casting 'spells', and committing homicide. It is clear; Martin takes revenge on Steven along with reasons and acts.

This section elaborates how causes and acts of revenge are depicted in the relationship between Martin and Steven. Martin wishes Steven to experience the same amount of agony for losing a family member. It is indicated by the interpretation of their acts. It is in line with the theory of McCullough (2008) that Martin responds to injustice, conveyed through retaliation. Then, the film analysis depicts it when containing implicit reactions like emotion and expression. According to the theory of Broadwell, Thompson, and Smith (2017), *mise en scene* and camera operation are fundamental elements to interpret a film. They can disclose characters' intentions. Martin, as the

vindictive person, considers his revenge based on the reasons. Then, he presents it in acts of revenge to deliver his desire. This article is presented findings from one reason and one act of revenge.

### **The Desire for Steven's Admission of Guilt**

Martin's desire causes him to urge Steven's admission. Since the beginning, Martin implicitly shows his doubt of Steven's actions through his reactions. After his father died at Steven's operation table, Martin often meets Steven outside the hospital. For about six months, Martin maintains the relationship to keep an eye on Steven's attitude. Martin gets a customized wristwatch and money, even for a meal, on Steven's treats. Nonetheless, Martin sees other moves from Steven as pretences. It can be seen for example, in the scene of Steven lying about Martin's identity in a hospital. In this scene, Martin suddenly comes to the hospital because he wants to tell Steven about the new leather strap for the watch. However, while Steven continuously asks him to leave, Matthew, Steven's colleague,

interrupts them. Martin recognizes Steven's concealment tactic from fabricating his identity, even worse, by lying in front of his eyes. Instead of introducing Martin as the patient's family, Steven introduces him as an acquaintance, encountered a week ago and had parents. However, Steven has known Martin for about six months and his father passed away. Moreover, Martin notices his lie because of Steven's contradictory attitude. Steven has asked Martin not to visit him in the hospital. However, when Matthew comes, Steven tells Matthew that he suggests Martin to come to the hospital to see him. These lies spoken by Steven build Martin's conviction for Steven's guilt of malpractice.

Through the interpretation of cinematic elements, Martin has to undergo Steven manipulating his identity helplessly. From this dialogue, Martin has no opportunity to utter his objection. It is seen through Steven who neither stops talking nor lets Martin speak for himself. While the camera gets more focused on Martin, the speech of Steven becomes the background

sound. The camera shows Martin's concern which is presented from his reactions and the sound of Steven's speech. It attracts audiences to be in the same position as Martin, recognizing Steven's suspicious acts. The non-diegetic music starts in indistinctive high tone to cover Steven's speech, makes it like whispering. It implies how the music silences the speech. It highlights Steven's acts. He tries to low down his threat and hides it from Matthew who comes to him shortly. Then, the soundless ambience continues while Steven is fabricating Martin's identity. It points out the focus of reactions from Martin connected with the speech from Steven only and nothing else. It signifies that the talk is not about Steven but Martin. Only Martin knows the validity of his identity. Consequently, Martin feels burdened about it because of having no choice and chance to give a defence.

Further, Martin's getting suspicious of Steven is supported by the transformation of the camera size. The distance between camera and Martin changes from the

medium cut to the close-up. In the medium close-up, Martin shows a displeased reaction while staring at Steven. It seems like he is inspecting and questioning Steven's move while staring back to back between Steven and Matthew. While nodding, Martin presents his acts for agreement or pretence. The highlight of the close-up on Martin shows his looks of anger. His half-hearted smile shows his dissatisfaction. Even after that, he does not keep the smile longer, instead of turning back to downcast eyes. At this point, Martin sees Steven who dares to lie even in front of him. The blue colour on Martin's outfit highlights a sense of displeasure and discomfort about hearing Steven's lies. His darker blue outfit stands out surrounded by the bright white set. It urges the audience to focus on Martin's sorrow of expecting an apology from Steven.

From this analysis, although Martin does not reveal his desire, his reactions to the offense are still noticeable. A vindictive character like him does not tell what he wants from revenge directly. It means that his desire for revenge needs a

thorough observation. Accordingly, elements of film support and highlight the delivery of implicit revenge's portrayal. These film elements make audiences unconsciously feel the same desire as the character through camera operation and *mise en scene*. It emphasizes that Martin, as the vindictive character, gets pressured by an injustice. Furthermore, his acts let the offense from Steven create hidden grudges. These grudges are the result from an unfinished business between the victim and the offender. In the end, these grudges trigger the victim for having a desire to get back the injustice. The desire also presents the reason of an attack. For Martin, he desires to make Steven admit his fault. It indicates that the vindictive character has an expected result at the end of their attacks. In this case, the vindictive character desires to take revenge for seeing the offender's guilt.

### **Casting 'Spells'**

Undergoing all of the pretenses, Martin eventually states his acts of retaliation to Steven. He asserts that if Steven does not kill one of his

family members, they will die. The retaliation occurs as the disease stages. They are getting paralyzed in the limb, refusing to eat until starvation, bleeding from the eyes, and ending with death. In this analysis, Martin's ultimatum is like casting a 'spell'. When it is declared, it occurs. Mysteriously, the disease infects Bob and Kim. During the infection process, Martin is not present except when he calls Kim. In the scene Martin's Call for Kim, Martin exposes his strength that can make Kim walk. Right after she picks up the phone, he asks whether Steven is in the room or not. Kim steps toward the window while looking down, waving at Martin. It is confirmed that only Martin's word can restore the infection. At that time, Bob also tries, though merely stands up because Martin does not give him a 'spell'. In short, Martin casts his 'spell' through the disease that infects Bob and Kim to see Steven suffer.

Although what he states is a threat, Martin usually delivers it with indirect aggressive acts. He implicitly attacks through infecting

the sickness. Once confessing his vengeance, Martin utters it without verbal or physical abuse. Rather than screaming madly, he elaborates why, what, and how his retaliation befalls. In this scene, the first stage infects Bob. Bob suddenly becomes paralyzed. However, his medical check-up does not find anything wrong. Only the statement from Bob that can signify what happened to him. It also indicates the sign for the disease's stage from Martin. Nevertheless, Martin considers that Steven is not aware of the situation. Steven still ignores and rejects him as his attempt to cut off their relationship gradually. Steven denies the unexplained health condition of his children is because of Martin's spells. Accordingly, Martin desperately explains his retaliation to Steven. From the first sentence, Martin represents that his action is revenge. He points out the reason is to get equity regarding the crime executed by Steven. It signifies that aside from agony, Martin has not received any satisfaction from the death of his father. Further, he knows that Steven will not accept his

statement. By uttering the word 'understand', Martin coerces Steven, to accept fact. He states that the decision is on Steven. . Martin emphasizes that the sickness is the symbol for his retaliation. The sickness is in four stages: paralysis of the limbs, starvation because of food refusal, bleeding from the eyes, and death. Thus, he counts the stages of the disease and mentions the third stage one more time. It is apparent that he calculates his retaliation in cold manner.

From the start, the scene shows Martin with full of intimidation and power. There are two shots present expression from Martin and Steven clearly. While the shot changes into the cafeteria, Martin's speech is continued emphasizing his coercion. He forces Steven to talk with him and commands him to appear immediately. It symbolizes his intimidation, portraying his determination and power over controlling Steven. Accordingly, Martin is presented with a powerful impression from a low angle. It denotes his hidden grudge supported

by the close-up cut and the below-lighting. The lighting also exposes sharp and thrills expressions through the face line. Martin's blue shirt appears darker than the setting, indicating his desperation. He talks out his threats at a fast pace. It symbolizes whether Martin is terrified and irritated toward what he utters. It is that for getting justice, Martin even needs to go this far, which is humiliating.

The justification of Martin's words as casting 'spells' comes from Kim and Bob, who are infected by three stages of the disease. The first stage of the disease is paralysis. It infects Bob and Kim when they suddenly fall without any symptoms. Bob has to go to various check-up to find out the cause of his paralysis. Anna assumes it relating to his psychology. Anyhow, the result is nothing. While walking from the escalator with Anna, Bob's fall is shot from the bird-eye level. It appears in a sharp movement that exposes nothing and nobody affecting the fall. Paralysis also happens to Kim while she is singing. She mysteriously falls on her own



even though she is surrounded by people. The long shot exposes that no one or nothing even touches Kim. Both tragedies to Bob and Kim confirm that the paralysis does not show any symptoms beforehand. After that, Bob and Kim do not want to eat. In the close-up shot, Steven coerces them to swallow any food. Nevertheless, their statements of having no hunger are more solid than demand from Steven. Thus, Bob and Kim's refusal to take food is the manifestation of Martin's retaliation. He firmly rejects and overpowers Steven.

Whenever Martin receives Steven's unaccepted behaviour, the disease extends further. The first two stages last shortly after Steven has revealed the cause of malpractice to Anna although he does not admit it yet. It indicates that he does not recognize the situation. Moreover, Steven plays innocent by repeating the second mistake. Although he looks realize about revenge or malpractice, he still pretends not to know. It is because he considers that admitting his crime can ends his career. Therefore, the stage of

bleeding eyes infects Bob. The scene when Bob's eyes bleeding depicts him in a vulnerable state. He wears a nasogastric tube, for feeding him food and medicine, and sits in a wheelchair. He is shot in the medium cut with a yellow shirt while his eyes bleed. The tragedy is highlighted more by Kim telling his dying condition. Bob tells many delightful stories to impress Steven. He recognizes that he nears death and begs to be saved. Then, this is the last warning from Martin. Only after this stage does Steven take Martin's threat very seriously.

In conclusion, casting 'spell' from Martin occurs as his act of revenge. It leads to Martin's satisfaction to reach justice. His threats about the disease turn out real without logical explanation. The stages of the disease symbolize Steven's punishment for his crime. When the paralysis occurs, he signifies that Steven cannot go anywhere anymore. He needs to deal with it. The starving further Steven's powerlessness, while the bleeding eyes symbolize the damage of the entire body. Seeing the three stages

have taken place, Steven is in distress for seeking the solution to stop the tragedy. If he is still unable to he will lose everything as the last stage will be the death of his family, which is the most tragic picture. Martin desires to deliver equal agony; further, coercing Steven to be aware of his transgression. These attacks indicate that the vindictive character tends to have a well-prepared plan. He observes what attack affects the offender in Steven's case is his family. For revenge, it indicates the act as a 'serve cold' because of executing after a long-time preparation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research attempts to uncover reasons for revenge and ways in which this revenge is manifested in the film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017). The analysis reveals that Martin, the vindictive character, has two key reasons for taking revenge: (1) he wants Steven to admit his guilt and (2) he wants to confirm his suspicion regarding the malpractice done to his father. Martin executes his retaliation implicitly to Steven as

the transgressor, in the sense that there is no explicit attack done by him to Steven. Rather, the acts of revenge are done in the following ways: (1) implicit intimidation, (2) intruding Steven's private space, (3) casting 'spells', which finally leads to (4) Steven's act of homicide, taking the life of his son by his own hands. Both Martin's reasons and acts of revenge have been motivated by his ultimate desire to seek justice, so that Steven can feel the same agony of losing a beloved family member just like Martin agonizes in losing his father. The reasons and acts of revenge in the film are mainly revealed through the cinematic aspect.

In essence, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) has successfully portrayed another dimension of revenge through the acts done by the character. The characters are portrayed as having a relationship; yet, there's a grudge between them. One character becomes a vindictive person that takes revenge on the transgressor. The vengeful person takes revenge utilizing varieties of actions, although implicitly. And this

finding becomes one of the highlights of the film, in which revenge is portrayed in an unusual way—restraining direct attack on the transgressor.

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