



## Analysis of the theme of Revenge in The White Devil by John Webster

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### Abstract

In John Webster's *The White Devil*, the topic of vengeance acts as a catalyst that accelerates the narrative and influences the characters' intentions. The drama examines the detrimental effects of revenge and its repercussions on both the avenger and the victim, against a context of political intrigue and moral decay. The heroine, Vittoria Corombona, becomes entangled in a network of deception and treachery, illustrating the intricacies of gender and power relations within a patriarchal culture. Webster utilizes a complex array of words and images to depict the cyclical essence of revenge, emphasizing how the yearning for retribution may result in a forfeiture of humanity. Characters like the Duke and the cunning Francisco exemplify the malevolent facets of retribution, illustrating its potential to corrupt and dehumanize. Through the terrible demise of these people, Webster examines the moral ambiguity of vengeance, implying that it is equally likely to engulf the avenger as it is to penalize the transgressor. Ultimately, *The White Devil* portrays revenge not only as a personal grievance but as a communal malady that promotes violence and disorder. Webster's examination of this issue compels the spectator to contemplate the wider ramifications of revenge, interrogating the morality of retribution and the feasibility of forgiveness in a society permeated by treachery.

**Keywords:** Blood, retribution, revenge, tragedy, vengeance

### Introduction

#### Introduction to the White Devil by John Webster

Introduction John Webster's *The White Devil* was written and first performed between 1611 and 1613. The play is a tragedy set during the Italian Wars between the Spanish and the Papacy. At the heart of the play is the theme of vengeance and the consequences of seeking revenge. Our central character, Vittoria, is motivated by jealousy and rage, and she seeks vengeance in the murder of her husband. Vittoria is only one of the characters who seeks blood for blood—an act of revenge<sup>[1, 2]</sup>. We also have the character of Brachiano, who seeks to kill Camillo, the man he hires to murder Vittoria. Additionally, there is Flamineo, who engages his family's assistance to plot further retributions. The quest for retribution leads to devastation for all of the characters involved. The characters' actions have landed them deep in the moral framework of revenge in a Dante-influenced world between heaven and hell, committing unforgivable sins. Though Webster is perceived as a violent and grotesque playwright, *The White Devil* isn't concerned with epic battles. It speaks more directly to human experience and existential terror<sup>[3, 4]</sup>. The characters in *The White Devil* are linked together by their realizations that there is no justice in the world, and because of that, they feel at liberty to create their own justice. This justice takes advantage of those who oppose them or who have wronged them. Categorizing the play as a revenge tragedy is exceedingly apt<sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

All characters involved act on their own personal passions and dishonor to defend their name. Without communication with those around them, the characters make heavy decisions to commence the revenge, although there is nothing at stake. *The White Devil* is a highly original piece of drama that is about revenge and retribution. Little violence actually occurs on stage, but the consequences of the characters' actions are apparent in the sudden, brutal, and untimely deaths of most of the main characters. Some

critics have seen this kind of tragedy as a heritage from the classical tragedians, while others react to it as written in the newest style. In invoking both influences of revenge and new tragedy, *The White Devil* attacks the substance of human nature<sup>[7, 8]</sup>.

#### Historical and Literary Context of Revenge in Early Modern England

Taking a historical perspective allows for a prosecution of the theme of revenge as it relates to an early modern English audience. It was paramount in their literature and governed over 6,000 statutes in common law. These omnipresent traditional judgments favored self-justice over the course of justice, particularly when the state's court failed to perform adequately. This constitutes the historical and legal landscape in which *The White Devil* operates. The characters live in this world filled with counter narratives, contrary stories, and morally inconsistent anecdotes that would justify their urge for vengeance. Only the characters expressing a continual distrust of these conventional standards based on evidence would be deemed morally suspicious. The imagery and personification of more abstract ideas of revenge and justice, where these extremely opposite abstracts are directly linked through images of clothing and clothing metaphors, is, therefore, a naval issue<sup>[9, 10, 11]</sup>.

A dictionary of historical and legal terms of concern to find the secular roots in England identifies honor as "the right of a man to resonate". "He is how he seems, the *res gestus* of existence. He functions in many respects like the modern concept of 'good name', i.e., good repute amongst the people." The vengeance impulse was often justified by injury to personal honor or reputation. Revenge was thus thoroughly woven into the daily legal and emotional existence of these people, and in a religious worldview still permeated by the roots of secular moral acts, the motives to acquire secular revenge were numerous. Economic and

social forces of the system were transmitted in a complicated manner at the social level of revenge and social upheaval [12, 13]. The official concern of the professionals, such as the authorities and those involved with the statute, was addressed as a response to and a moral safeguard against the frequently discussed behavior, envy, anger, and pride. Within a legal context, the system of justice identified when they were of all vengeful rights and instances available to the public for individuals to see the purpose of legitimate justice. Conciliar activities in the area are therefore an external observance of the fact that revenge might also be an issue at individual and communal levels when the vengeance was changed. A city formed an individual society, arguing that divine justice alone sufficed in a universal Church, without in itself a practical rule. If a man is motivated to be willing to commit an offense in order that these legal processes, both as part of the overall justice or at times as a social desire, involving an individual who had been brought up to be virtuous, were considered to be regrets. These, that if they are chased by the animal; by acting on the dictates of human blood, they feared and condemned themselves [14, 15, 16].

### **Definition and Significance of Revenge as a Theme in Literature**

Revenge can generally be defined as the act of inflicting pain and suffering on someone else as a response to a perceived wrong they have done. This can range from pettiness, such as excluding someone minor from a party, to extremely severe and grotesque actions, such as murder. Revenge is not, however, the equivalent of justice. The difference between the two is best seen in a certain philosophical context, where the concept of revenge is deemed to not be an option and is considered a poorly conceived action intended to right the wrong done by someone against you, which would, in turn, create further wrongs. The principle of revenge, if derived from the eye for an eye logic of justice, quickly becomes one of simple anarchy where no one is safe. As a result, any form of literature that presents revenge as a positive action is thus severely misunderstanding reality in one way or another [17, 18, 19].

Because of this exact reason, revenge serves as a driving and extremely influential plot force in many narratives. Just the possibility of revenge from someone can change how a person is characterized and/or feels. After a character has to run away for trying to avenge a wrong, after being cheated out of his land and for making another character sing the household before sleeping with her, he becomes a leader of one of the bands because they want to seek revenge on people who have wronged them. In a certain play, the entire plot begins and moves along through the means of everyone trying to get revenge on a central character, and he does everything he does because he feels the need to get revenge on the world [20, 21]. Another work does an amazing job of showing the plot force of revenge all through a character, who first acts because he wants to get revenge on his own feelings of anger for being, what he perceives as, abandoned as a kid, but then his whole motivation changes to be about revenge. Even what ends up being about love is only really about revenge because the love was bred over the loss of those who were murdered. Finally, in another play, the opening scene is of a letter between two characters about a plan to get back at a prince while pretending to be his loyal

friends, for trying to befriend the prince who caused a tragedy. He has only one set of emotions towards him, and that is revenge [22, 23, 24].

### **Key Characters and Motivations for Revenge in the White Devil**

The current character analysis looks into the themes of *The White Devil*, focusing on revenge as a 'way of life'. Duke Francisco is driven to avenge the death of his brother Brachiano, whose wife Vittoria has been found guilty of poisoning Isabella. Francisco is therefore motivated by a mixture of fraternal love and private revenge. Although Brachiano suggests opening fire's common sluice, Francisco conceives his vengeance as a loving act: 'Fates are jealous that you should be possessed of aught they give you, / And therefore do they cross me with my friend.' Francisco's desire for revenge is fueled by his brotherly relationship with Brachiano, but his status is important too - he is a man of rank as well as a suffering brother. Breaking Juliet's command that confession to God, not revenge, remains the purest act, Francisco stresses that his need to have his brother avenged is natural [25, 26].

Vittoria vows to seek revenge upon her accusers. The reasons for Antonio's revenge thus explicitly lie in both personal factors - the loss of his social identity or honor - and the betrayal by his wife. Most obviously, in seeking his wife's love, Brachiano himself neglects his birth and honors: 'to be in league with malice, wantonness, baldness, / Or any such unnatural proclivities / Can never be a thing for great men. To smart one's birth or honors is not particular to great men and their wives, but Brachiano's rage connects Vittoria's hypocrisy to his own dishonoring, which is foreign to humbleness and obscurity [27, 28].

### **Revenge as a Driving Force in the Plot Development**

For most of the characters in the play *The White Devil*, revenge is the striking force that makes the play move forward. It seems that the major characters are chiefly characterized by their impulses; their reason and emotions are split. Tensions, confrontations, and disagreements between these characters produce conflict in the play. Revenge seems to be the driving motive for the characters to react according to their impulses of anger, hatred, envy, and death. Love, hate, and, lastly, the power portrayed in the form of bestial instincts are the consequences of revenge and betrayal. The play starts with the quest for vengeance in the form of seduction and marriage between Brachiano and Vittoria [29, 30].

Revenge, as a theme, is prevalent in the drama, leading to incidents and events solely on account of revenge. Not only is the plot driven by the action of revenge, but the play is full of tragic struggles and darkness accentuating the interaction of characters. The main theme or element of the play is that the story gravitates around the characters' impulses, which lead to the grotesque irony of revenge. In the play, there are a few moments representing or giving a turn of events in the cardinal scenes as they are interconnected. In these scenes, the characters are powerless before the ultimate crises and acts of revenge that follow them. The theme of power and betrayal interwoven with the theme of revenge enhances the dramatic intensity of the story. At the same time, in this chaos of imbalance, the structure of the play is revealed, where the story has been ordered by its very nature, dialectic impulses, so that

spectators are kept on tenterhooks. This is to say that each of these scenes is determined by the pursuit of vengeance [31, 32, 33].

### **The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Seeking Revenge**

The theme of revenge in *The White Devil* is awash in the psychological and emotional pitfalls and ramifications of enacting such a desire: the consuming nature of seeking retribution, the emotional toll in the wake of a violent act, the cycle of suffering it imparts, the isolation of a family associated with one seeking vengeance, and, ultimately, the moment before death when they are alone, the only person present their own accuser. This tragedy depicts a society in which characters drawn by revenge both punish and realize their desires with astonishing speed; almost as astonishing as the personal anguish and moral circumstance that accompany a violent act that brings the target closer to the punisher [34, 35].

One of the most awful things about revenge, it is silent here, is that when it is finally sweet to its seeker, the wrongdoer is finally and definitively out from under, while the seeker becomes trapped in the wrong they sought revenge for in the first place. So, it goes when tracing the desire for vengeance in the wake of wronging to a persistent aim; many of the characters in the play remain in a state of knife-edge need to push, acknowledging the opportunity before them while struggling through the impulse to hurl themselves at it. The real cost of their legal or illegal acts is twofold: there is, of course, their own unsafe future, as unbearable events loom soon, but there is also the sinking awareness of what the will to revenge exacts from a person. The revengers are "made different by their revenge"; taken in kinder terms, that occurrence is the great ambition of every character in *The White Devil* [36, 37, 38].

### **Revenge as a Form of Justice or Injustice**

*The White Devil* finely paints the desires of characters and the depth of wrongs suffered by individuals. It indeed complicates the question because their motivations sometimes appear to be instances of ill-gotten gains and other times injustices' retribution. This ambiguity is evident from the vengeful vows that characters such as Flamineo and Vittoria chant by recollecting their miseries and then resolve to efface those miseries by and by. The attention is drawn to who is innocent and who is guilty. Flamineo's justification does throw some light on the world around where, according to him, he is sophisticated enough to make a proper cognizance of himself and thus believes that there is no deception in revenge. He imposes justice because he admits the punishment because he deserves it. If I were laid by death, I have lived to do it [39, 40].

*The White Devil*, thus, carrying with it the theme of revenge, goes on to affirm repeatedly that the beast cloaked with the garb of sophistication destroys the nobles. For Flamineo, cruelty is a part of his bent. When he gradually forces Isabella to give in to the proposal of the Duke, he takes it as a matter of execution rather than instructions. The impact of these cruel events is such as to nurse in Flamineo's soul the feeling of revenge for the wounds received yet unjustly upon a soul that knows a trick to sound courageous. So, the wrong done by the Duke sounds louder, making the scene in response to injustice a point of ambiguous contact. The slippage is because the theme may

perhaps be both at the same time. Nobleness sometimes may appear in combination with cruelty. The bothersomeness of the wrath is visible when Flamineo takes the task as a means to erase his own scars and affirms that he is going to carry it out till his death [41, 42].

### **The Concept of Vengeance in Different Cultural and Historical Contexts**

Vengeance or revenge, or "the deed of blood," is a concept central to the human narrative in diverse cultural and historical contexts. In ancient myths, in the Bible, as well as in Islamic and other cultural traditions, we keep confronting this gesture of injustice, mistake, and transgression, either against human or divine laws by another or by the other. Time and space bear ethical, moral, and metaphysical implications in evaluating the motives for vengeance. Historical facts and events of retaliation carry particular meanings and often shed light on a society's conventions and traditions. Much later, as the theme of vengeance is transferred to literature and legends, it acquires the universality of experience and thus becomes something familiar and understandable, a structure we feel interested and involved in, in contrast to judgments of justice or of the wrongs inflicted on humans or divinities [43, 44, 45].

In myths, legends, traditions, historical events, and literary works, the theme of vengeance seems to be illuminating; it refers directly to conventional good and evil deeds in various social settings. Maybe these features explain the rather universal reception of the literary and historical acceptance of the vengeance motif, amplified by writers known for their attraction to "theatrical exploits" and for their rebellious "humanism." Over time, three main positions thread their way through the entailment of vengeance: that the motive for most people to take up vengeance is that they want to correct a wrong or injustice; retaliation may also be an act fostering one's honor rather than hurting it of one's own accord; clemency reinforces civilization, surfacing as a sign of "sinner's remorse." These psychological and ethical views on vengeance implicitly underlie most literary and theatrical texts, which henceforward carry ethical implications as well [46, 47].

### **Revenge and Gender Dynamics in the White Devil**

Revenge in *The White Devil* is consistently underwritten by gender dynamics, considering fallen women and honorable men. A network of vengeful characters operates according to, yet challenges, the background of patriarchal society. The subtlety with which female characters strategize vengeance has occasioned conflicting critical readings. Isabella, in particular, is constructed by some as a victim of the dominating forces of her society, and by others as a shrewd agent and 'shrew with noble aspirations of freedom and power.' This essay adopts the position privileging female agency in a reading of *The White Devil*, particularly focusing on Vittoria's performative and physical strategies. Simultaneously, Vittoria is driven by a desire for vengeance and by love and ambition. Gender roles distinguish vengeance as the terrain of men, since men are expected to enforce retribution, while women are expected to be vindicated by men's retributive actions. Vindicators are underplaying their status [48, 49, 50].

In the corridor, a masque trusted hand clasped hand in daughter's husband's hand. Revenge, subtly expressed while controlled and disguised, reveals values of high

culture. The information network as gossip culture is gendered towards the feminine. The emasculated collector of court riches eavesdrops on his ladies' scurrilities. Reliance on female spies and the male mortification they spur. Male experience opens the play, but male society closes it. Yet it is initially only the ambitious women who speak with candor and defend what they are. Vittoria, with her brother and later confidantes, attacks the 'two-faced' virtues of a society designed to protect male interests. When Ambizioso mourns his discarded sister, Vittoria and Flamineo express honest grief. Their vituperation is not a mask but a defense. Vittoria pronounces the 'honors of the time, not me.' However, she declares that a system that cuts her mother off from the Queen is one to cause her to hate 'all womankind.' The sister's vengeance is the tongue of gender that begins to speak for and against each other [51, 52, 53].

### **Revenge and Morality: Ethical Considerations in Seeking Retribution**

The White Devil is a story set in an amoral society where actions are only confined to the society's laws but not morals. Revenge and its implications are the central theme of the play. Any crime and any psychological behavior of actors are offered to the audience of the play, causing intervention and doubts. Is revenge an individual response to an injustice applied to her or his subjectivity and objectivity, or is revenge an ethical behavior of the society to make 'justice'? In this discussion about the limits of 'justice-seeking' or 'revenge-seeking', characters in the play give their thoughts freely: The White Devil critiques retributive justice, dramatizing the ethical problem: 'Justice with violence? Can a devil frame a fair house on the earth with such goodly pillars?' Evil is overcoming the social norms, individual emotions are stopping legal processes, and legal systems neglect the public sovereignty [54, 55].

In general, the characters of the play create a social system where personal wishes do everything to reach the goal. Other thoughts, family relations, or friendships are off over their life imperatives. The main issue in the play is about justice and perceived revenge. Vittoria: 'Some fellows, Udge, do live that trade in railing, and are made believe no man can be saved that wears a velvet suit. Let what I now speak sink into your ears: When I appear there, I have overheard their meetings; and being skilled in continual practice, I know their desperate spirits. Why? They shall get nothing by it, but only shade their folly in my sufferings. Be not misled, my lord. They plot all this, are several directions; their ends are private: Minced revenge is the bitterest.' [56, 57].

### **The Theme of Revenge and its Relation to Other Themes in The White Devil**

In the White Devil, revenge is the major focus. As such, it is no surprise that it is related to a number of other themes. Revenge and betrayal, revenge and the fatal flaw inherent in the ambitious, and revenge and the inherently strong connection to passionate desires are all symbiotically linked. However, an analysis of the play can gain further insight by examining the correlation between ambition and revenge and their sinister aspect of commemorating betrayal. This essay will attempt to examine these connections in some detail [58].

Revenge as a pursuit of power is indispensable in the pursuit of corruption for the reader and valorizes betrayal as a function to abridge a time-tainted, corrupted world. The exploration of these ideas delegitimizes the portrayal of a pure-hearted character of Giulia and Isabella's vengeance by revealing their villainy. A one-way examination of the theme would not allow the audience to leave unprejudiced of a negative connotation of the theme as a whole. The play demonstrates that one who is fueled by the desire for retribution for their betrayal could only have committed an even worse act in the first place. Betrayal is also often a passage a character takes to carry out vengeance [59, 60].

The desire for vengeance often also stems from ambition. Ferdinand's ambition is not limited to mere attainment of position. It denotes a lifelong pursuit of power from an early age that would be best achieved through the murdering of those in the way. It is not wealth that Ferdinand is unhappy he has not inherited; it is power and the recognition that comes with it, direct kin to ambition. Ferdinand's ambition moves him to seek revenge against the brothers whose marriages have slighted him against his fortune, contesting Ferdinand's grievance [61, 62].

### **Symbolism and Imagery Associated with Revenge in the Play**

The play is imbued with a number of visual elements that enhance the thematic exploration of vengeance. One consistent motif is that of decay. This imagery reveals the corrupting influence of obsession with revenge and the destructive power of an Elizabethan Machiavellian court. Further clues into the meaningful signposts of the imagery of decay are apparent as Flamineo and Vittoria, believing they are about to get what they want, laugh in Act III. That they are observed to be "like pictures ill enough set forth" carved in "unsmooth porphyry" suggests an unpleasant sight. The use of a monosyllabic rhythm adds emphasis to the words, gestures, and events anticipated by the characters; it also applies rhythmic irony. For the characters attempting to rise above their unfortunate situation or thinking that they are able to do so, they are really conveying themselves as ordinary in death and damnation. This would humorously clash when confronted with the characters' own actions [63, 64, 65].

Blood is another important visual element and symbol. It stains Vittoria and Brachiano's hands as a reflection of their involvement in a bloodstained affair. It is also used later in the play to symbolize stagecraft that attempts to alter the course of affairs, such as when Francisco forces the Cardinal to look at Giovanni's blood in a show of bravery, and why Monticelso invites Vittoria to call on the Cardinal's innocent blood in the frustrating final scene of the play to get the last word and not to feel too much for his loss. Anastasia and Isabella both make reference to blood as a course of punishment. Isabella speculates that "I carry sauce wherewith I must be basted!" referring to the taste of blood as an enhancing flavor and that of blood from ruined girls made cheap. Anastasia implores her husband thus: "and let my brain, her fore thereby be clogged more deeply, play about thy inwards like a dice," meaning in effect, his death to be physically bloody and psychologically tormenting for not confessing the affair and repenting, but especially for the consequence of this "scattered brains dough-baked to blindness." Many directions for the need of blood in the

course of punishment are included as aforementioned, and the truth that all comes from women in this play shows the ironic statement that the very being of woman is the byproduct of man, but just as likely to punish her for the tastelessness of having that which is not permanently hers to give. Other references to blood are similarly presented [66, 67, 68].

### Revenge in the White Devil and its Influence on Later Works of Literature

Elsewhere in literature, particularly in works of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, many fictional scholars influenced by the subject of revenge have conceived the relevant problematic according to the conventions established by Webster. To list just a few examples, we might note the similar, continued preoccupations with revenge in stories as diverse as an adventure novel, a romantic play, an epistolary novella, or a film. All of these works focus on the classic state-of-exception situations of the vendetta narrative tradition, forcing audiences to consider how revenge stories have continued to draw upon the conventions established by Webster [69].

In his essay, indeed, it has been suggested that Webster's "hero-villain" has provided the template for figures of seductive malevolence over the period since various notable characters, and that it was Webster's "accidental achievement to have created so perfect a prototype of the villainous side of our nature." If a certain work featured two particularly Websterian examples of what is described as the "classic [...] viceroy and the virtual viceroy" roles in a revenger play, with loose ties to Webster's familiar Duke and his friend, another work features one of the more modern and contestatory kinds of victim-knave that have developed a sense of an "alternative reading" of Webster's play [70, 71].

### Critical Reception and Interpretations of the Theme of Revenge in the White Devil

The study of the theme of revenge reaffirms The White Devil's attraction to revisionist critics concerned with challenging orthodox, humanist Renaissance views and attitudes to tragedy. From its first reviews, turning on the controversy over whether the play justifies revenge, occupation with this theme has been considerable. Prospero says Vittoria's sin 'Was great; 'tis just it should have you great'; but he suffers both as do those whom he has revenged. This leads to an ambiguity we have seen in the passages, i.e., whether or not faith in the righteous judgment of God has itself become a crime. The push-pull syndrome has not, by itself, helped us much. The critics seem to be speaking of entirely different men: The Catholic casting all cares on God whom he loves; the Calvinist drags the God who is indifferent down to his unrepentant enemy's level [72, 73].

Thus in 1927, it ends the discussion of the diverse ways in which the play has been interpreted with the assertion that The White Devil 'eludes tolerance; it has no referent'. As noted, representation of the subject of revenge, a shifting and equivocal lynchpin for the play, is stolen from one character by another, which turns on its own internal problems and is likely to generate various and opposed readings of its ideological content. In many instances in the years since, increasing preoccupation with the play's

generic characteristics has had the effect of enlarging the number of readers likely to detect the contours of such a subject within Webster's text. Moreover, growing interest in the social and cultural conditions of The White Devil's genesis in the 1580s means that such readings, while they may no longer be constrained by the urgency that speakers of the faith have perceived, enrich our sense of the possible resonances of the play [74, 75].

### Conclusion

In conclusion, a detailed investigation of the theme of revenge in The White Devil reveals an in-depth and enduring relevance to the understanding and appreciation of the play. Often seen as a symbol for vindictiveness, retaliation, or poetic justice—antithetical to Christian doctrine—revenge is a delicate theme. The idea of revenge is not one of easy answers. Even when it can seem black-and-white, it is difficult to throw oneself fast to one interpretation without first giving a clear exploration of context, society, and character. The play's depth and richness are to be found in the complexities and contradictions in the representation of the revenge motive. Played by almost every character in the play, revenge is exposed as a source of motivation and justification. Its constantly mutating and degenerating nature only bolsters the realistic representation of trauma.

In this, revenge fulfills a hidden comic gift of poetic justice, both ironically pitting morbid criminals against each other and rewarding through fatal experiment their Machiavellian tit-for-tat criminal self-interest. It is this multi-layered interpretation that ultimately guarantees that The White Devil deserves a surprising place in literary criticism: 'make no mistake about it – The White Devil is one of the great plays of the Renaissance. It is a play worth reading and reading again, not only to ponder its themes and ideas but to ponder the artistry on every page. It is a very precious part of Webster's oeuvre, an indispensable link in our critical survey of crime and punishment in European literature. Revenge – weird, nauseating, transcendent, and very, very perverse – of such is The White Devil made.' In the vast literature on revenge centered on this one play alone, it is easy to see that this specific topic is all but exhausted. No critic approaches this play without stopping at the question of revenge: new criticism continually revises, develops, and augments the interpretations of others before it.

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