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Revenge: Baltimore's Justice

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Revenge: Baltimore's Justice

Every television show has its iconic role, and for HBO's critically acclaimed darling, *The Wire*, that person is Omar Little. Played by actor Michael K. Williams, television critic, Alan Sepinwall, describes the character as someone who, "...fancies himself a bit of a ghetto Robin Hood, doling out free dope to the truly wretched cases." Omar phrases it a little more bluntly: "I robs drug dealers!" (*The Wire*). With a charm and charisma you would not expect, Omar becomes someone we root for throughout the series, always found as the thorn in various criminal power players' sides. His methods, though, are not always so different from theirs. We simply excuse them because of who he targets: the people who are putting addictive drugs on the street for profit, making citizens fearful to leave their homes at nights. With decisions that are as morally ambiguous as his retorts are quippy, it soon becomes clear that Omar is not as invulnerable as he would like to believe. With a lifestyle that has garnered him his fair share of enemies, it is not long before Omar finds himself out for revenge against one of them, and it is up to us, the viewer, to decide once and for all if his actions are justified.

It all goes downhill when Omar sets his sights on West Baltimore drug kingpins, Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. Not only are they angered when he and his crew steal their drug stash, but they then find out one of his crewmembers, Brandon, is also Omar's boyfriend (they are not very tolerant of homosexuals). In retaliation, Stringer, the brains of the operation, has another of Omar's people killed and follows a tip to find Brandon. Torturing him for information on Omar's whereabouts that he never gives, Brandon is left brutally dead in a public place. After this, Omar goes after the Barksdale gang's muscle men, killing some, wounding others. He even speaks out against one of them in court, a very taboo thing to do. At one point he gets close to killing Avon, but his shotgun misses.

Fortunately (or unfortunately), the feud does not end there. When Avon ends up in jail, Stringer uses this time to try and take the Barksdale drug trade in a more business direction, as opposed to the street side Avon had run. When Avon sends for a man from New York, a Brother Mouzone, to be their new muscle, Stringer is not interested, and decides to use Omar to get rid of him. He convinces Omar to go after him with the claim that it was Brother who carried out the violent acts against Brandon. Omar finds out the truth (if not until after first shooting Brother) and goes out with a new vengeance to bring down Stringer Bell. Forming an alliance with Brother, who now has his own reasons for wanting Stringer dead, they are able to corner him using information provided by Avon. It turns out that, after having been released from prison, he is not all too pleased about the changes Stringer has brought about. Omar and Brother kill Stringer while Avon ends up in jail again, for Stringer, coincidentally, had also grown to distrust his best friend, and gave him up to the police right before being murdered.

It is a complicated story but the theme that seeps through it all is revenge. That is exactly what Omar wants for what was done to his boyfriend, and he has no qualms about going after it in a way that is both clever and violent. He is hurting for hurt's sake, as described in Chapter 1 of Michael E. McCullough's book, *Beyond Revenge*. McCullough defines revenge as, "any attempt to harm someone or some group of people 'in response to feeling that oneself has been harmed by that other person or group, whereby the act of harming that person or group is *not* designed to repair the harm, to stop it from occurring or continuing in the immediate confrontation, or to produce material gain,'" (21-2). Omar neither wants to teach Avon and Stringer a lesson nor deter them from killing his future boyfriends. He just wants them destroyed for what they did. Omar may have made the first move, by stealing the drugs, but Stringer took it to the next level in having Brandon killed. Omar has been provoked and as McCullough says, "...provocation

that is perceived as painful and unjust creates avengers who have specific targets in their sights,” (28). His code prevents him from attacking innocent bystanders (“...when have you ever known me to out my gun on someone that’s not in the game?” (*The Wire*)), but he has no qualms about going after his provokers directly.

This sentiment is reiterated in Robert C. Solomon’s essay, “Justice and the Passion for Vengeance.” He has concluded that revenge is rational because it, “...is not just the desire to harm but the desire to harm for a reason.” Omar is very aware of what he is doing and a lot of preparation and planning go into his attacks. He simply does not see a problem with them. Kant is quoted in Solomon’s essay as saying, ““There is no sameness of kind between death and remaining alive even under the most miserable conditions,”” and that is completely reflective of Omar’s own beliefs. The only way to gain some sense of pay back for Brandon’s murder is to murder in return. Whether this is sound logic is up to individual opinion but, in truth, “the question is never whether vengeance is ever legitimate but rather *when* it is legitimate, when those standards and reasons [for vengeance] are in fact appropriate and warranted,” (Solomon).

As Solomon points out, typical revenge need not be as bloody as that depicted on fictional works. However *The Wire* is set in Baltimore, where drugs and gang warfare are not far off occurrences but realistic, daily events. Trudy Govier claim for revenge not being rational falls on the fact that, “Although there are cultures in which practices of seeking revenge are strongly entrenched, as in those featuring dueling or blood feuding, there are others in which wrongdoing is understood as a violation...” Therefore she concludes that revenge is not natural because it is exactly what you are taught to see as wrong to commit as a child. The fact that her conclusion falls apart so easily due to cities like Baltimore makes it not much of a conclusion at all. For children who grow up there, like in the questionable districts of any city, violence is not

abnormal but expected, happening outside their windows every day. Their families are part of it and to survive and prosper, they often follow in their footsteps. Positive role models can be difficult to come by and resisting that lifestyle can be much tougher than Govier implies, when everyone around you is a participant, telling you it is the only option for kids of that neighborhood.

Nonetheless, choosing to live on the street does not come without its consequences, nor does Omar's revenge come without consequences on his crew and himself. These consequences are of the kind Trudy Govier would warn about in her essay, "Revenge and Retribution." Discussing another revenge story, Govier is disturbed by the fact that, "Rather than proceeding with her own life and projects, and enjoying relationships and projects for their own sake, the vindictive person concentrated energies on past grievances, rage, hatred of an offender, and destructive plots." Omar becomes obsessed with going after the Barksdale gang at increasing risk to himself and his people, who are third parties wrongly caught up in this mess. They want to rob drug dealers like they used to and go after weaker targets, ones less prepared for Omar's arrival than the Barksdale operation, but he will not listen. This leads to another one of his crew, Tosha, getting killed by friendly fire as they are escaping a raid gone wrong. Many who seek vengeance become, "obsessed with thoughts of revenge... bring[ing] great harm to themselves and others in their quest for it," and Omar is no less immune to these injuries.

Indeed, another almost victim is Omar's beloved Grandmother, who raised him growing up. Every Sunday he attends church with her and, on one particular Sunday, Stringer decides to give the ok for a hit to be placed on him. Even the shooters are apprehensive about this assignment because it is in direct offense of the street rule that puts Sundays and church as off limits. Both Omar and Avon have been raised by this statute and would never dream of anyone

violating it. By tackling his grandmother, Omar is able to prevent injury to all but her Sunday best hat but that doesn't stop him, or the outraged Avon, from being livid at this unbreakable rule being ignored. Stringer never had as much respect for the code of the street as the others, and in the end, he is the one who finds himself killed.

McCullough talks about this code of the street mentality that occurs in urban areas in chapter three of his book, titled "Revenge is a Solution". In this way of life the need to maintain honor and reputation is a matter of life or death. When people hear Omar whistling "Farmer in the Dell," they run, because they know those who cross him rarely, if ever, leave as victors, unscathed. Some kids even look up to him as a hero, a fact Detective "Bunk" Moreland calls him out on, saying, "...I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes me sick, motherf*cker, how far we done fell," (*The Wire*).

The only people who have any chance or readiness to make a move against him are superpowers, like the Barksdale crew, but due to his reputation, Omar is not afraid to cause upset and rock the boat every once in a while. This is very clearly demonstrated when he acts as a witness on trial against Bird, a member of the Barksdale crew. Technically, he never saw Bird commit the crime he is on trial for, yet he knows he killed the jury member, along with various others. Therefore he testifies he saw the whole thing occur. Part of his motivation for doing this is to do the right thing because Omar does have a code and killing innocents like jury members is a definite no. Still, a lot of his motivation comes from causing another injury to the Barksdale crew. By taking out their muscle men, he is hurting their reputation and making them more vulnerable to attack from other drug organizations, which is extremely undesirable in a society where reputation is everything.

In conclusion, it is strange how forgiving we can be when revenge appears on television. Our willingness to accept violence that would disturb us when depicted on the news is startling, and I include myself among the number who finds themselves shockingly happy when a disliked character gets his or her comeuppance. I feel a lot of this stems from the fact that we are made knowledgeable of a character's motivations over an arc of episodes on the show. We grow to see things from their perspectives and it humanizes them. On the one side, this is a positive development towards tolerance and not judging a book by its cover. On the negative side, we are condoning violence. Luckily, the acceptance does not by necessity carry over into the real world, but it makes it difficult for us to fully understand our stances on revenge. I am not by nature a violent person. I get angry, hold grudges, but it is all an inner fury that does not manifest itself in anything physical. I wish violence were stopped but I am very aware that it is not that simple.

In the case of Omar, his revenge hurts others. Some of these victims are unfortunate. Others are immune to the law and this is the only way they can be hurt. They deserve punishment and have committed terrible deeds, but they would get away with them if not for individuals like Omar, who are not afraid and cannot be bribed to stay on their side. *The Wire* is a fictional program, but it is probably not all that far off from the real situation in Baltimore. The question is whether we keep waiting for the police to clean up this formidable social issue on their own or allow revenge and vigilante action. While I still stand by my wish that no one should get hurt, I do not have an alternative to offer that will satisfy that sense of anger towards having been wronged. Forgiveness does not solve the problem, or prevent it from continuing to happen. The heinous killing of Brandon needed to be addressed, but whether killing Stringer was the right move is less clear. My intent may be to provide a definitive, concrete opinion but that is not possible. Revenge falls under a gray area, and as such will never have an easy answer.

Omar's and Stringer's are here to stay until somebody comes up with another answer to a continuing problem: if not revenge, then how do we get justice?

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