Analysis Of Titus Andronicus As A Shakespearean Revenge Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedies are often inclusive of murderous, vengeful motivations. Titus Andronicus is nothing short of a typical tragedy in its revenge-ridden plot. This revenge tragedy is especially profound in its portrayal of woman. Early works of literature often depict women as submissive and reliant upon salvation from man; however, Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus follows a female character who ruthlessly defies these assumptions in her vengeful executions. Hundreds of years later, Quentin Tarantino directed a film titled Kill Bill, rendering a merciless female protagonist who seeks violent revenge. While Titus Andronicus and Kill Bill differ in era, language, and plot, both play and film follow strong female characters who seek unrelenting retribution out of maternal instinct.

Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus features Tamora, Queen of the Goths, who is taken prisoner by Titus Andronicus. In celebration of the new emperor, Titus orders for the ritual sacrifice of Tamora's firstborn son, Albius. Following his death, Tamora says to Titus,

'Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,

A mother's tears in passion for her son;

And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,

O, think my son to be as dear to me! (1.1)

Tamora's revenge in Titus Andronicus is highly reliant upon this passage in its clear indication of the pain Tamora bears as a mother losing her child. Tamora's maternal instinct drives her to avenge her son's death by seeking revenge on Titus and his family. The opportunity to execute these plans takes action when rightful heir to the Roman throne, Saturnitus, takes Tamora on as his empress, marking the beginning of Tamora's sinister revenge. Tamora says to her new husband,

'I'll find a day to massacre them all

And raze their faction and their family,

The cruel father and his traitorous sons,

To whom I sued for my dear son's life' (1.1…-…)

This is Tamora's first expression explicitly stating her desire for revenge, with the word 'massacre' foreshadowing the monstrosity that will prevail as the play progresses. Tamora's words are a clear expression of a mother's undying love and dedication to punishing Titus by inflicting harm upon he and his loved ones.

In comparison to the other female character in the play, Lavinia, Tamora shows vast superiority

and deviation from the expectations of women at this time in her relentless plans of action. Tamora shows little remorse for womankind when she supports and aids in helping her sons successfully rape and mutilate Titus' daughter, Lavinia. However, this scene contradicts Tamora's initial motive of motherly instinct; it exhibits brutality in her willingness to put the lives of her other sons at risk, clearly demonstrating the extent of her revenge. Though the question of whether or not Tamora's actions of revenge are excusable is widely debated, there is no question of Tamora's clear deviation from typical societal standards of women in this era and her deeply malicious actions as a mother avenging her firstborn son's death.

Films and literature alike have longed portrayed female protagonists as inferior while emphasizing patriarchal stereotypes. However, pop culture has undergone a shift in depictions of women with the substantial growth in productions following a strong, independent female character. Kill Bill follows Beatrix, formerly known as 'The Bride.' Beatrix is a masterful assassin who falls pregnant by Bill, the leader of a group of elite assassins called Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. Fearful that her child will be raised in an environment exposed to extreme crime, Beatrix fleas to El Paso where she meets an average man who owns a record store. The two hastily become engaged. This alone contradicts numerous assumptions of a weak female character; rather than allowing herself to continue living a life of intense danger, Beatrix seizes the opportunity to create a better life for herself and her unborn child.

On the day of Beatrix's wedding, Bill wreaks havoc, killing everyone at the wedding and shooting Beatrix in the head. Unbeknownst to Bill, she survives the shooting, falling into a four-year coma. When she wakes from the coma, she discovers that her child was born via cesarean while Beatrix was unconscious. Beatrix's maternal instinct triggers a strong desire to avenge the destruction of her wedding, her near death, and most importantly, the kidnapping of her child. The film's objective is to display a mother's relentless instinct in this bloodshed portrayal of a ruthless assassin's revenge. Without hesitance, Beatrix begins to compose a list of those she plans to kill, all of whom contributed to her downfall, specifically Bill. Beatrix takes retaliation to the extreme in her desire to inflict immense pain upon those who have wronged her with a clear ambition to take her child back. Viewers see Beatrix's first act of revenge when murdering her nurse upon recalling several spotty memories in which she remembers the nurse making money by allowing men to rape her unconscious body. Beatrix shows masterful violence in her ability to murder without remorse. With each assassination, Beatrix is one step closer to receiving rightful revenge and finding her child.