How Sweet is Revenge?

Everywhere you look you’ll find a bad guy. Freddy Krueger was a terrible child killer. After a useless trial, he was released back into the public. To make him pay for his crimes, parents of the neighborhood burned and shot him. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols killed 168 people and injured over eight hundred by bombing the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh was killed by lethal injection for his crime, and Nichols received a sentence of life in prison. The former of these individuals is that of fiction and film; the latter from real life. Despite this, you can see the need for vengeance and punishment by those affected by these crimes. Where does vengeance and punishment arise from in American history? What effects do fear, revenge, ethics and morals have on the type of punishment inflicted? Punishment appears in the public eye daily whether it is on an episode of Law & Order, on CNN, or in an old mobster movie. Justice and retribution are age old ideas that have their beginnings in the past but, through politics and the media, have had resurgence in American life through their impact on everyday fears.

A number of ideas have led to the popularity of vengeance, including the American history of vigilantism. Citizens of the United States having been taking matters into their own hands when it comes to crime and punishment since before the
frontier days. Vigilantes, broadly defined as “a self-appointed doer of justice”, have taken their place in history from the early days of the United States to the wild west and beyond (“Vigilante”, Miriam-Webster). According to Zimring, “the vigilante by definition is suspicious of his government” and therefore carries out punishment rather than trusting it to officials (111). “Within the vigilante tradition, punishment is viewed as a community responsibility rather than an exercise of governmental power” and throughout America’s past, this has been made plainly obvious (Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006). One of the first American vigilante groups was the North Carolina Regulators. The Regulators were a “coalition of planters and small farmers organized in 1767. Because the assembly failed to provide the backcountry with courts and the means to establish law and order, the Regulators set up courts to resolve legal disputes and brought criminals to justice” (“North Carolina Regulators”). McConnell and Driggs tell a story of a group of nineteenth century men in the West who, after retrieving horses that had been stolen from them, declared war on “horse thieves and stage robbers. Frontier law, in other words, had been invoked to take the place temporarily of the law that had been broken down through the nefarious activities of the lawless” (1974). The majority of these vigilante acts involved an organized group or committee of citizens attempting to right wrongs they believed would otherwise go unpunished. Other bands of vigilante citizens in history sought vengeance against those that had wronged them in more unruly ways.

The mob is a subset of vigilantism, both of them sharing “a common trait: the use of violence to impose social control or to achieve popular justice” (Taslitz, 2002). However, unlike the organized vigilante committees formed to right a moral injustice,
mobs often come together more sporadically for an economic or political purpose. Mob vengeance also has its start at the beginning of United States history. The Stamp Act of 1765 led to a number of mob riots and events, including the Boston Tea Party. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, “suspected abolitionists were tarred and feathered in the South…” (Taslitz). Additionally, the topic of lynching is common in mob violence discussions. “The term ‘lynching’ usually refers to the killing of one or more people by groups of citizens without government authority” and can consist of anything ranging from hanging or shooting to beating and stoning an individual (Zimring, 2003).

Although usually thought of as a race-relation issue, lynching has happened for “reasons unconnected with race, such as the ‘necktie parties’ in western states for the summary disposal of thieves, rapists, murderers and desperados…” (Taslitz, 2002). In more modern cultural thought, however, lynching and racism of the early to mid-twentieth century seem to be synonymous. In a report by the Tuskegee Institute, they stated that there were 4,743 deaths by lynching from 1882 to 1968—of which 73% of the victims were African American (Zimring, 2003). This violence in the South spread outward, where race based riots occurred in Florida, Cleveland, and—perhaps the most widely known—the Watts section of Los Angeles. Whether discussing an organized vigilance committee or a mob, Taslitz says that the vigilante ideology “was that of popular sovereignty: the people are the real sovereigns; whenever those to whom they have delegated authority fail, it is the people’s right to take back that authority into their own hands” (2002). It is important to recognize where the origins of vengeance-style punishment arises from in order to realize its effects on American society today, including its place in American media and culture.
Popular culture, has taken these ideas of vengeance and punishment and put them to use on in almost every sector of entertainment. Revenge is sweet—especially in the movies, where anything can happen. In Urban Legend, the main character, played by Alicia Witt, is caught up in a joke gone wrong that ends in the death of an innocent man. The girlfriend of the man killed spends the entire rest of the movie trying to punish Witt’s character for what she did. Additionally, other characters killed throughout the film seem to be “paying” for the wrongs they’ve done, including wild drinking and sex. As stated earlier, in A Nightmare on Elm Street, Freddy Krueger gets his punishment for killing children. This theme doesn’t apply just to more recent films, either. In The Monster Show, author David Skal tells of a common theme in the works of early horror film director, Tod Browning—“the obsessive, blinding thirst for revenge” (201). However, support of vengeance in popular culture far outdates the cinema.

In American literature and folktales (most often in the form of urban legends), evidence of punishment and retribution is abundant. In “Staley Fleming’s Hallucination”, by Ambrose Bierce, Fleming tells a doctor of having hallucinations of a big black dog; the doctor believe the dog resembles that of Atwell Barton, a friend of Flemings that had been murdered mysteriously, but that the dog had died on the grave of his master. That evening the doctor stays to watch for any signs of the dog and in the middle of the night hears a thump from Fleming’s room. The doctor finds the man dead and covered in blood. Upon examination, the marks of an animal’s jaw are found on Fleming’s neck. It appears to the reader that Fleming actually murdered his friend and that the ghost of the victim’s dog had returned to avenge his master. In the urban legend called “Gag Me With a Siphon”, a thief attempts to siphon fuel out of a recreational
vehicle, but when he goes to put suction on the siphon tube he realizes that he’s put the tube in the sewage tank instead of the fuel tank, causing him to vomit extensively. Even the teller of this urban legend picks out the “poetic justice” of this tale (Brunvand, 201-202). The American public likes to see those who have done wrong brought to justice. Their opinions, however, face more conflict when this issue is brought to real life.

Where punishment fits into the system for modern criminals is a highly debated topic. Crime in the United States has reached an astounding height. With over two million people in either Federal or State prisons or in local jails, the country leads the world in the number of prisoners (“Prison Statistics”, 2007). There are about as many opinions about what should be done with these criminals as fill U.S. prisons. Along with having the highest number of prisoners, the United States is also among the top four countries in executions; along with China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, these countries conducted 94% of all executions in 2005 (Infoplease, 2007). In a 2006 poll by ABC News and the Washington Post, 65% of those polled favored the death penalty compared to a 32% opposition; however, when asked “Which do you prefer for people convicted of murder: the death penalty or life in prison with no chance of parole?”, the opinions were much closer with 50% preferring the death penalty and 46% favoring life in prison (PollingReport.com, 2007). Many believe that America’s past of carrying out punishment and vengeance against those who have done “wrong” has had a strong effect on the way the country goes about criminal punishment today. Zimring believes that the correlation between vigilante violence of the past and the favorability of capital punishment is extremely strong, pointing out that “the lynch mob and the lethal injection are found in the same American neighborhoods” (118). He continues to point out that of
the 695 legal executions that occurred between 1977 and 2000, eight out of ten occurred in the South—a region with a strong vigilante/lynching history—compared to three total in the Northeast. Lynching “represents a still honored tradition of vigilante justice that has never been completely exorcised from American culture” and he uses this reasoning for the strong support of the death penalty in the South and West (90). Not only does the history of vengeance and punishment affect its continued influence, it also affects the fears of the American society in a variety of ways.

The severity of fear due to revenge or future crime is varied depending upon the individual. According to Callanan, the “fear of crime” and one’s belief on the severity of punishment are influenced by several factors, including “personal victimization, neighborhood levels of crime, vicarious victimization, political exploitation of justice issues, and the presentation of crime news in the media” (19). Other factors also seem to play into one’s view on the morality of punishment such as gender and regional history. It has been found that women are less likely to support the death penalty, but gender effects vary for sentence time depending on the type of crime committed (Callanan, 2005). In The Contradictions of American Capital Punishment, it is stated that “…the propensity to execute in the twenty-first century is a direct legacy of a history of lynching and of the vigilante tradition if it is still a part of the regional culture” (Zimring, 2003). However, when looking at current capital punishment issues, “many studies of death penalty opinions find that attitudes are based more on emotions and symbolism than on reason” (Callanan, 2005). In fact, in a 2006 Gallup Poll the question “Do you feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment of murder—that it lowers the murder rate—or not?” was posed; 34% of those polled thought it deterred someone from
committing murder while the majority—64%—did not (PollingReport.com, 2007). Results like these, when related back to the earlier poll identifying a majority in support of the death penalty, seem to show that even though a majority of American citizens support the death penalty, they also don’t think it’s preventing serious crime in the future. The question is then: why do it? The answer lies with punishment. The ethics of capital punishment and prison sentencing in the United States appear to be driven by emotivism (right and wrong based on emotions and feelings) and victims feel the need to have those that have done terrible things to them reprimanded for those crimes—whether that affects future criminals or not (Harris, 2007). Fear of retribution, however, also extends beyond capital punishment.

In the past two decades, instances of vigilante punishment have broken back into the public eye in a very unexpected location: schools. At Columbine High School in 1999, twelve students and a teacher were shot and killed by two fellow students who felt that they had been victimized and bullied. This year at Virginia Tech University, a similar event happened on a much larger scale; thirty-two were killed by a student. In a poll in 1999, following a school shooting in Littleton, Colorado, 55% of parents polled feared for their child’s safety at school, compared to 37% in 1998 and 24% in 1977 (“Poll”). However, it’s not only parents that are scared. In a survey of teachers in their first three years of teaching, “the informants reported being most afraid of guns or other weapons or other forms of dangerous violence” and “these fears were significantly correlated with their beliefs in the likelihood that these events would happen” (Williams & Corvo, 47). Events like September 11th have also created fear of retribution and vengeance.
On September 11th, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City; it has been surmised that these attacks were fueled by a desire by extremists to punish the United States for wrongs it had committed. Polls taken after this event can only reflect the fear of the American community after this event. In a Los Angeles Times Poll in 2001 asking “How much—if any—has the attack on the World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon shaken your own personal sense of safety and security?”, over 60% answered ‘A Great Deal’ or ‘A Good Amount’ (PollingReport.com). This fear also spread from terrorism to a fear of those of the Muslim religion. In a Cornell News poll in 2004, “about 27 percent of respondents said that all Muslim Americans should be required to register their location with the federal government” (Friedlander). While the development of fear to areas like this may seem ridiculous, the alarm that comes with possible vengeance and punishment is real in everyday American life.

Whether you are watching the latest horror flick, watching the evening news, or reading a good book, you can find vengeance and punishment all around you. In the United States, these are common themes throughout fiction and real life, drawing on the emotions, experiences, and history of our very diverse population. The morality of revenge is difficult to ascertain. If revenge is a non-violent act of “pay back”, then it seems as if it should be up to each individual to decide what is right or wrong. However, in order to maintain calmness in our cities and neighborhoods, it is imperative that violent revenge and punishment be left to governmental authorities, to make sure that no more than the person committing the crime is getting their due. Either way, these ideas have been on American soil since the Europeans first stepped foot here, have flourished
through vigilantism and mob vengeance, and have brought us to our current system of justice. It doesn’t appear that they’re planning on leaving anytime soon.
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