

# Outline

**Thesis: Through the use of various literary devices such as character relationships, settings, and symbolic tools, the film *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* illustrates the female victimization due to broken societal and familial structures, their endeavor to overcome this hardship, and how these efforts helped shed a brighter light on the future generation.**

## I. Introduction

- A. All three movies of Park Chan-wook's revenge trilogy, which is composed of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Sympathy of Lady Vengeance* (2005), have a main plot revolving around the act of revenge.
- B. However, the finale of the trilogy, *Lady Vengeance*, has a peculiarity that no viewer would fail to notice, compared to the other two films.
  1. Whereas the two preceding films have male protagonists who have a fight till death with a male antagonist, *Lady Vengeance*, as is predictable from the title, has a female protagonist who tracks down a male antagonist.
- C. Since nothing in a film, from title to background music, is there without a purpose, one can only expect that this anomaly in pattern contains a deeper meaning than what meets the eye.
  1. Thus, there would be a reason why the protagonist Geumja decides to wear shocking red eye makeup.
  2. There would also be a reason why the female supporting characters' stories are told in such detail, using flashbacks.

## II. Body Paragraph #1

- A. **In the film, several conflicts happen due to a broken societal or familial structure, in which the females suffered the most consequences.**
- B. The main reason Geumja took the blame for the crime that Mr. Baek, the antagonist, committed was because he threatened Geumja about her daughter.
- C. To track back even further, the reason she fell into the grasp of Mr. Baek in the first place was that she was a pregnant teen who substantially lacked in financial or familial support.
  1. The biological father of Jenny, Geumja's daughter, was far out of the picture in the first place, and the only help she could turn to was the substitute teacher (Mr. Baek) that called the teenage Geumja "sexy" some months ago.
- D. The sexual exploitation that this minor would have experienced after moving in with Mr. Baek was obvious as seen in the scene where the naïve Geumja was first greeted by the looming presence of a naked Mr. Baek.
- E. Ultimately, the vacancy of the father of the child and the lack of societal support pushed the young Geumja into single motherhood and sexual exploitation, which only led to the main plot of the film: Geumja being subject to Mr. Baek's oppression and framed for a murder she did not commit, consequently being estranged from her daughter.
- F. The victimization of women is further illustrated through the female inmates as well.
  1. Some of the inmates' stories are told in the film in a detailed manner, and most of the inmates were incarcerated for crimes related to men, such as

- the murder of a pimp, or the killing of a cheating husband.
- a. Indeed, these women were jailed for murders that they themselves committed.
  - b. However, the cause for these murders were spurred from the actions of the men, such as infidelity and prostitution.
2. It is also noteworthy that the only woman (among those whose stories were told) who was accused of a crime irrelevant with men – a burglary – had a very healthy and loving relationship with her husband.
    - a. Although she was jailed, the only part of jail that bothered her was the fact that she couldn't be with her husband.
    - b. She did not mind being trapped in a confined structure as long as she was with her love.
- G. The fact that the detective on Geumja's case failed to help her, even though he knew she was not the true suspect, also reflects how the incompetency of a male character resulted in the victimization of a female character.
- H. As such, through the depiction of the various female characters of the film, the film suggests how the incompetency and violence of a broken societal structure cornered women into a place of no protection.

### III. Body Paragraph #2

- A. **The film also illustrates the gender stereotypes that the society tries to cage women in, which can be seen as another form of oppression.**
- B. Beauty and kind-heartedness, characteristics that women are traditionally encouraged to have, are the two main themes that are constantly brought up in the film.
- C. Geumja is portrayed as an extremely beautiful woman. Even when she was initially arrested for the murder of the boy Won-mo, there was a media frenzy about how innocent and pretty she looked. It was almost as if her face was of more importance than the crime she was accused of committing.
- D. The theme of beauty is also shown through the mise-en-scène of the scenes.
  1. Many scenes were structured to look symmetrical, such as the scene where all the parents of the killed children (it turns out that Mr. Baek was a serial killer and Won-mo wasn't the only victim) sit side by side to wait for their turn to torture Mr. Baek.
  2. As such, even while ugly conducts such as murder or torture are happening, beauty is imposed upon the scenes through symmetry or background settings.
    - a. Another example of this would be how the sophisticated classical music of Vivaldi was set as the background music when Geumja kills two hit-men who were sent by Mr. Baek after she was released from jail.
  3. In the same respect, the stunning use of the colors red, white, and black is also repetitively shown throughout the movie.
- E. The second traditional stereotype of "kindness" was also depicted by how polite, to the extent that she even seemed sacrificial, Geumja was in jail.
  1. She would volunteer to take care of an ex-spy with Alzheimer. She would pray every night and even take care of the sick inmates.
  2. She acted like a mother saint in jail, which brought admiration and praise from others.
- F. This sacrificial, quiet demeanor almost reflected the traditional and static view

of how mothers are “supposed” to be like. All these qualities of Geumja are praised by the public to be “good” qualities.

- G. Many men desired Geumja because she was beautiful, and many people considered her to be a good person because she cleaned up the messes of others and seemed all-forgiving.

#### IV. Body Paragraph #3

- A. **However, the film goes on to show how the women struggle to fight back against their negative circumstances, either by using these enforced stereotypes, or by working against them.**
- B. Geumja commissions a gun with elaborate decorations for her revenge. She says that “everything must be pretty” when it comes to her revenge. The gun is beautiful and powerful, but the shooting range must be point blank. So when she kills the two hit men sent to her by Mr. Baek, she kills with elegance and poise even though the situation itself was frantic and mind-rattling.
- C. Thus, she uses beauty, something society enforces upon women, to go against the society’s expectation that women can only be the prey of social oppression and not fighters.
- D. Geumja works with “politeness” in a similar manner.
  - 1. She earned the nickname “Kind-hearted Ms. Geumja” while she was in jail for being kind to everybody and volunteering for hard work others avoided to do.
  - 2. Her true identity, however, is reflected through another nickname, “The Witch”, she gained in jail for killing off a fellow inmate.
  - 3. The murder is shown to be a just conduct by Geumja since that inmate was notorious for sexually assaulting other female inmates. However, the nickname that is given to her shows the true cold-blooded, “eye for an eye” nature of Geumja.
  - 4. The façade of “kind-heartedness” even turns out to be a calculated move to manipulate others to feel indebted to her so that they wouldn’t refuse to help her with her revenge plan after she gets out of jail.
  - 5. After she is released, she even puts on red eye makeup so that “she doesn’t look kind” to other people.
    - a. Many people who help her out because of the previous “kindness” she showed to them comment on how she has changed, as she dons an indifferent and cold-hearted persona.
- E. Again, it can be seen here how she initially uses a societal gender stereotype to gain her true goal which is revenge on a male.
- F. The female’s struggle against society is further illustrated, in a more explicit manner, through the stories of the other released inmates.
  - 1. One of the inmates make a living on her own through sculpting commissioned art pieces of a woman holding a ripped off male head.
  - 2. Another inmate, after starting from the bottom, opens her own boutique through independent hard work.
- G. It is notable that certain facets of the movie point towards anti-male symbolism, such as how Geumja got into jail because she fell victim to a male psychopath with twisted sexual desires or how the aforementioned sculptures are explicitly shown with an anti-male sentiment.
- H. However, these symbolisms do not necessarily mean that the message of this movie is “the female overcoming of male oppression through the

- antagonization of the opposite sex”.
- I. Rather, these symbolisms point towards the thesis “females endeavoring to overcome societal oppression”, period.
    1. It is only that, in the film, this “societal oppression” is reflected through the depiction of female oppression by males.
  - J. This is understandable since women were still subject to gender stereotyping and the concept of “female inferiority” when this movie filmed (during the early 2000s.) Thus, the actions of Geumja and her fellow inmates inside and out of jail depicts the female characters’ efforts to rebel against the negative outcomes of the sexist hold that society had on them.
- V. Body Paragraph #4
- A. Then did this effort Geumja succeed in liberating herself? **Unfortunately, Geumja was not able to conclusively gain the redemption she yearned for. However, the film still shows hope for a better future through Geumja’s daughter, Jenny.**
  - B. “Liberation” to Geumja would have meant salvation and redemption from the sin that she committed, which was (although involuntarily) assisting in the murder of the victim child, Won-mo.
    1. If it were not for the grasp that Mr. Baek had on Geumja, she would not have gone to jail and furthermore be separated from her daughter.
    2. Thus, finding redemption and salvation, and even perhaps Won-mo’s forgiveness signifies Geumja’s liberation from the oppressive cage of female victimization.
  - C. After her revenge rampage comes to a close, she stands in the bathroom to wipe off her iconic makeup. There, she sees the illusion of Won-mo in the age that he would have been if he were still alive. She walks up to him, feeling much better about herself, and opens her mouth to finally apologize to him. However, Won-mo gags her mouth with a bundle of cloth, stopping her before she could even speak.
    1. This action symbolizes Won-mo’s rejection of Geumja, and ultimately her failure in finding salvation.
  - D. However, the film does not end with this scene signifying the ultimate loss of female liberation. It finds new light threw Jenny.
    1. The initial reason Geumja went to jail was to protect Jenny from Mr. Baek.
    2. Consequently, unlike Geumja, Jenny gets adopted into a very decent Australian couple who comes to love her very much.
    3. As a result, Jenny ultimately does not become subject to a disrupted family structure, and is able to be kept protected from the corrupt reality of society.
  - E. In the final scene, Geumja offers Jenny a tofu-shaped white cake, saying that it symbolizes “a life without sin”.
    1. Although Geumja, who failed to earn redemption, rejected the tofu in the opening scene of the movie, Jenny licks the icing of the cake without hesitation.
      - a. This shows that although Geumja’s attempt at fighting against societal oppression failed at self-emancipation, she was ultimately able to save her daughter.
  - F. The hardships and struggles of Geumja, and all the other female characters of

the film, were not in vain. In the end, they had succeeded in opening a hopeful era for the future generation.

## VI. Conclusion

- A. ***Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* is a story about oppression, struggle, and redemption.**
- B. The long-lived oppression of women made Geumja to be seen as an underestimated character.
  - 1. The media never expected a woman as beautiful and innocent to be able to commit such a horrid crime.
  - 2. Mr. Baek never expected Geumja to come back from jail to plot her revenge.
  - 3. And yet, not only Geumja, but all the other female characters of the film were able to struggle for liberation, many of them succeeding in doing so.
  - 4. Although Geumja was not one of the successors, she passes on her obligation for freedom to her future generation, leaving a symbol of hope.
  - 5. Thus, in the end, viewers can all feel sympathy for Lady Vengeance, but also ceaseless respect for her quest towards true salvation.