

Revenge in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) - Is revenge ever morally justified?

Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* is widely considered a cinematic masterpiece. Existing scholarly deconstructions focus on prevalent themes of masculinity, violence, and exploitation. This work reinterprets the central narrative as a revenge story in three parts, using cinematic context; the occurrences and actions of the protagonist – the eponymous taxi driver Travis Bickle - to answer the question of whether revenge is ever morally justifiable.

Bickle as the 'Anti-Hero'

Early in the picture, the central protagonist: Travis Bickle, is introduced as an 'anti-hero'; a Vietnam war veteran living in the (then run-down) East Village area of Manhattan. He spends his days in his apartment drinking, taking pills, and eating quick food; leaving only to walk aimlessly around the city, frequenting the pornographic cinemas of Times Square. Bickle voices to the audience his disdain for the city and the morally reprehensible acts that routinely occur within. However, Bickle himself appears to engage in many of the acts he despises. Soon he takes a job as a taxi driver working "long hours" due to his inability to sleep. Before long, the narrative vehicle of the taxi is used as the lens to display to the audience many of the occurrences Bickle struggles to deal with: witnessing sex work, exploitations, drinking, drug use, and violence. Instead of Bickle distancing from these self-perceived stressors, he is now paradoxically closer to them in his role as the taxi driver.

Betsy as the 'Unobtainable Object'

Bickle soon meets Betsy – a woman whom he notices when driving his taxi. Betsy is a political campaigner for Palantine; a democrat official running for senator. Bickle begins to objectify Betsy as his saviour; framing her elegance, beauty, and intelligence as antithetical with the undesirable contexts within which he spends much of his time; her symbolism incongruent with the many 'despicable' acts he witnesses. Around Betsy, Bickle transforms. He focusses on how he can support Palantine, papering his apartment with promotional posters and offering to volunteer at Betsy's campaign office. However, these efforts are short-lived. Bickle takes Betsy on a date to a pornographic cinema, causing Betsy to distance herself from him. At this point Bickle stalks Betsy, eventually being chased from her office by the police and her colleague.

The Origins of Revenge

In the wake of his break with Betsy, Bickle spirals. Initially he seeks guidance for his "bad thoughts" from a fellow taxi driver: long-term night-worker 'Wizard'. However, Wizard's advice is nondescript; Wizard assuring Bickle he will "be OK". This leads Bickle to formulate a plan to "deal with" the world within which he exists. Bickle begins exercising in his apartment intensely, and meets with "Easy Andy" an unlicensed weapons salesman, who sells Bickle several firearms. Bickle spends time at a firing range honing his weapons skills. Whilst stopping his taxi at night to visit a convenience store, a robbery takes place. Bickle shoots and kills the perpetrator without hesitation. Initially he panics for the repercussions, stating his pistol is not licenced and asking if the man is dead – questioning his actions and their social implications upon the equilibrium of contextual morality. However, the balance of morality in Bickle's actions are quickly confirmed by the store owner, who reassures Bickle he has done the right thing. He takes Bickle's unlicensed gun and proceeds to hit the dead body of the

robber repeatedly with a steel pole – seemingly in affirmation (and emulation; justification) of Bickle’s violent actions.

Back in Bickle’s apartment, we are shown a now lean and muscular Bickle physically training and handling weapons with proficiency. Still angered by his split from Betsy, Bickle hatches a plan to assassinate Palantine at an upcoming rally, effectively taking revenge-by-proxy upon Betsy for shunning his advances, hoping to destroy the symbolism that brought them together: Palantine’s campaign. However, when Bickle arrives at the rally he is noticed by Palantine’s security and disappears into the crowd.

Iris as the ‘Damsel in Distress’

In the lull following the failed assassination, Bickle meets Iris: a child – a victim – manipulated into sustained sexual abuse, who he has encountered several times whilst driving his cab. Bickle is disturbed by Iris’s position and exploitation, and confused and disgusted when she takes him initially for a prospective client. He promises to help Iris. Through subsequent meetings, Iris begins to operate as a catalyst for focussing Bickle’s revenge efforts. Her dialogue often functions as a lens that refines Bickle’s gaze towards who to take revenge upon, for both his – and Iris’s – situations. Bickle perceives the abuse – the exploitation – of Iris to be the gravest of the reprehensible acts that he struggles to tolerate, interconnecting this with his earlier monologues surrounding the inevitability of the city’s corruption and his ongoing predicament on how to solve this. Bickle makes it his mission to extract revenge upon those who control and facilitate the manipulation and abuse of Iris. This time, revenge is presented as a direct – as opposed to proxy – act of vengeance, yet still connected to a deeper narrative symbolising finalism: the protagonist finally ‘rising up’ against the “scum” that plague the city, Bickle effectively blaming this presence for his own “bad thoughts”.

A Revenge Tale in Three Parts

The remaining narrative can now be broken down into a revenge tale in three parts. At this point Bickle still wishes to take revenge on the city and its inhabitants. However, his focus regarding Betsy has shifted. Bickle now wishes to take revenge on himself for his failure to impress Betsy – by embodying a self-sacrifice for the ‘greater good’ – rather than functionally damaging Betsy by proxy, which was his previous plan. He also still wishes to take revenge on those who enforce the acts that cause him (and others) distress. Bickle unifies these objectives into a singular goal: returning Iris to her parents at all costs. Fulfilment of this act represents a symbolic act of saviorism that Bickle could not attain from Betsy; thus, he now transfers the motif of ‘his saviour’ to Iris, despite conceptualising his position functionally as planning to *save her*. Iris is now objectified as Bickle’s sole pathway to *his own* salvation.

Bickle collects his weapons and posts an envelope of money to Iris. He arrives at the location of Iris and her pimp – her abuser: “Sport”. Bickle proceeds to engage in a brief, disconnected dialogue with Sport, before shooting him in the stomach. He enters the building where Sport keeps Iris captive, and a gunfight commences. Bickle methodically kills all assailants and is himself gravely injured. The scene concludes with Bickle attempting to commit suicide – although his weapons are all now empty. As police enter the room where Bickle and Iris are situated, a blood-stained Bickle presses his forefinger to his temple; imitating shooting himself.

Through violent revenge Bickle is able to functionally realise the motif of saviorism by ‘saving’ Iris. However, reciprocally, Iris operates as the saviour to Bickle, having allowed him a point

of focus to direct his anger and frustrations, facilitating him to ‘step-into’ the saviour role himself. This is unlike Bickle’s brief relationship with Betsy. While Bickle objectified Betsy – and all she represented – as his saviour, Betsy required (or wanted) little from Bickle. Importantly, it is unclear the weighting that the two surviving actors – Bickle and Iris – each place on this ‘saviour’ label. While Bickle believes he is operating as a saviour to Iris, Iris appears (naturally) disturbed and traumatised by his actions, including his execution of Sport. The audience is left wondering which remaining actor benefitted more from the violent revenge – if any – and whether these concluding actions could indeed be conceptualised for any of the social actors as a process of ‘being saved’.

Post-Revenge Analysis

The penultimate scene reunites us with Bickle in his same apartment, after some months have passed. His voiceover reads a letter from Iris’s parents thanking him for his ‘heroic’ actions, and for returning their daughter. The camera pans the walls; highlighting the now-changed clippings displayed. These no longer show the Palantine promotional posters symbolic of his time with Betsy. Instead, the Bickle we are now shown appears to have returned to the original life we saw in the introduction; living in his small Manhattan bedsit, the walls now decorated instead with clippings of his ‘heroism’ as told by tabloid media; the implication being that the papers have chosen to brand Bickle as a hero and saviour, as opposed to a killer. For all intents, we are shown that Bickle has realised his position as Iris’s saviour and through the process of extracting revenge, has been saved himself from his past life and obsessions. His violent revenge actions – similar to his earlier participation in the convenience store shooting – have again been validated by wider society as contextually correct and legitimate.

Bickle’s ‘Last Look’

In the final scene of *Taxi Driver*, Bickle unexpectedly reunites with Betsy when she appears as a taxi fare. Engaging in conversation, Bickle appears calm and collected; downplaying his ‘heroic’ actions and subsequent injuries and recovery, he drops Betsy at her apartment. Driving away, Bickle double-takes a sudden glance into the rear-view mirror, his expression momentarily changing to one of fright and confusion; his face filling the screen. Bickle is not looking for Betsy, as some may interpret, he instead is looking past his own reflection; his eyes meeting his own (and that of the camera) for a split-second, before the scene cuts away. Bickle is questioning his own actions. Rarely have we seen the protagonist so distressed than in this final scene: not in the earlier gunfight, or when severely injured himself, nor when confronting the various threatening and unpredictable characters introduced earlier throughout the picture, nor when Bickle first recounted his disdain and disgust at the world around him and the characters that inhabit it, nor even when Bickle attempted suicide.

Such rare emotional portrayal is indicative that even when the actions of revenge are previously justified to oneself as a moral act, this justification is both fragile and temporary. The consequences of such revenge do not serve to close the loop of distress and rumination that operate (in this case) as the initial primary revenge motivator – and thus – the catalyst for justification of revenge. For these reasons, revenge is unlikely to ever be morally justifiable – or have lasting positive outcomes for any of the involved social actors. Rather than the concept of revenge serving as a justifiable moral act; a means to close an immoral loop, the act itself maintains the integrity and circulation of the moral turmoil that revenge is sometimes positioned to justify. For example: will others also in-turn attempt revenge on Bickle for his actions?

Concluding, revenge is a pliable metaphor; a changeable smokescreen social actors employ to justify their own, often morally unjustifiable, actions. Whether society chooses to accept or reject revenge on a case-by-case basis, the revenge – as outlined in *Taxi Driver* – carries no natural connotations that allow for its categorisation as morally justifiable when this revenge spectacle is compared to, say, the permanent incarceration of Sport and others, and the rescue of Iris in a manner not facilitating her further traumatising and harm at witnessing Bickle's violent rampage.

Author Biography

Nicholas Norman Adams (Nick) is an academic Research Fellow, based in Scotland. His research is interdisciplinary; examining the influence of societal gender constructs on human behaviour, particularly studying men and masculinities, health behaviours, risk-taking practices and men's mental health. He is also interested in the portrayal of masculinities within cinema, particularly with regards to themes of 'the masculine' and 'the anti-hero'. His research primarily utilises post-structural, intersectional feminist lenses, as applied to masculinities.