

# The meaning of violence: an analysis of tarantino's pulp fiction



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Nowadays, it seems that violence is present everywhere we turn. We see it in television, books, movies, music, and in the news. It has gotten to the point where nothing shocks us anymore; we take violence for granted. One might even say we derive a sort of sick pleasure out of watching people run from the police or shoot each other with automatic weapons. This begs the question, why is violence so interesting to us, and how do authors and directors portray violence in their works?

In the following paragraphs, I will examine the meaning of violence in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in relation to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino is able to make the viewer laugh at even the most violent acts, but on the same token, he is able to take a different scene involving the same characters and make it genuinely disturbing. One way he achieves this is through his careful construction of the characters' personalities. At the beginning of the first "story," we see Vince (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel L. Jackson), walking through an apartment building.

At first glance, you probably wouldn't peg them as your typical hit men. They seem rather eclectic, almost goofy, but at the same time they come across as shockingly normal. They are not rich or good looking. They drive a 1974 Chevy Nova, and sport greasy hair and cheap suits. There is nothing "dangerous" about them. The characters are very atypical for their jobs, and the audience develops camaraderie with them. In the same way, Tarantino is able to detach us from the victims of the violence by either not developing their characters or making them seem stupid or evil.

For example, the guys Vince and Jules kill in the apartment seem like slackers and slobs, eating their Big Kahuna burgers and laying on the couch. Viewers don't feel sorry for slackers and slobs. The second way that Tarantino manipulates the meaning of violence is through the use of dialogue. For example, in the opening scene, Jules and Vince are talking while driving in the Chevy Nova. Vince is telling Jules that in Europe, they call a Quarter Pounder a "Royale with Cheese," because they use the metric system, and that Europeans put mayonnaise on their fries instead of ketchup.

When they get out of the car and walk into an apartment building, they gossip about how Marsellus Wallace, their boss, supposedly threw a man out of a fourth floor window for giving his wife a foot massage, leaving him with a speech impediment. Then, in a strikingly nonchalant manner, Vince and Jules enter the apartment and shoot four people to death. Another example of Tarantino's use of unexpected dialogue is when Vince and Jules are riding in the Nova after taking the hostage, Marvin, who is sitting in the backseat.

They are having a casual conversation about divine intervention when Vince turns around to face Marvin and asks, "What do you make of all this Marvin?" Marvin stutters "I don't even have an opinion..." and suddenly, Vince's gun fires, blowing Marvin's head to pieces inside the car. Normally, when you witness an innocent man's head get blown off inside a car leaving a bloody mess, your first reaction would be that of disgust and horror. However, the normalcy and ambiguity of the dialogue in this scene contrasts so sharply with the act of violence that the viewer's first reaction is genuine surprised laughter.

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Tarantino's third tactic is the use of situation. "Sitcoms" have enjoyed immense popularity on television for decades, and for good reason. Situation is a powerful comedic and dramatic tool. For example, John Travolta's character Vince is always in the bathroom during the movie's most critical moments, which eventually costs him his life in the end. When Marsellus Wallace's wife overdoses on heroin, he is in the bathroom. When the cafe is held up by the British couple, he is in the bathroom. And eventually, when Butch comes back to his apartment to retrieve his father's watch, Vince is once again in the bathroom.

When he comes out, Butch kills him with his own gun. If we hadn't established that Vince was doomed to be in the bathroom at critical moments, this wouldn't have been funny, but it definitely was. On the contrary, Tarantino can manipulate violence to be serious and disturbing. The scene where Butch and Marsellus Wallace are forced into the back room of the pawn shop is far from funny. By putting laughable characters into a violent situation, Tarantino creates a study in contradictions that is intriguing, yet appalling, to the viewer. In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, we see violence in an Ancient Greek context.

The first major act of violence is the entire premise on which the play is based- the kidnapping of Helen and the subsequent Trojan War. The second is Agamemnon's sacrificing of his daughter Iphigenia to the gods in exchange for favorable sailing winds. The third is the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra. These last two incidents are preceded by generations of betrayal, the most heinous being that of Atreus, who cooked his brother's children and served them to him. As demonstrated in Pulp Fiction, these acts

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of violence are self-perpetuating; one act leads to another, which leads to another.

The construction of character is also critical to the meaning of violence in *Agamemnon*. Although the reader understands that Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia was a disgusting and despicable act, we do not excuse Clytemnestra for murdering him because, like the characters in *Pulp Fiction*, her personality is carefully manufactured by Aeschylus to be conceived as wicked and conniving. Agamemnon's is manufactured to be someone we relate to and feel sorry for, even though he did something totally inexcusable.

Just as Quentin Tarantino manipulates the comedic quality of violence in *Pulp Fiction*, Aeschylus manipulates the erotic quality of it in *Agamemnon*. For example, Clytemnestra seems to get some sort of sexual thrill out of seeing Agamemnon "pour out a sharp stream of his blood and strike (her) with the dark bloody shower (1390-1392)." Just as we find ourselves laughing when Vince Vega accidentally shoots the hostage in *Pulp Fiction*, we find ourselves strangely intrigued by Clytemnestra's gory description of her crime.

In conclusion, both *Pulp Fiction* and *Agamemnon* are incredibly dark and violent stories. They share many key similarities, such as the author's manipulation of the human desire for violence through the use of character, dialogue, and situation. In both stories, violence perpetuates violence, whether it is Vince and Jules' ill-fated attempt to deliver the infamous suitcase to Marsellus Wallace, or the generations of betrayal in the House of

Atreus. Violence will always draw an audience, and Quentin Tarantino and Aeschylus use it to their creative advantage in Pulp Fiction and Agamemnon.