

Titus andronicus summary essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



After ten long years of fighting a war against the “barbarous” Goths, Roman general Titus Andronicus returns home with the bodies of his two dead sons and a crew of important war prisoners, including Tamora (queen of the Goths), her sons (Demetrius and Chiron) and Aaron the Moor. Before he places his slain sons in the Andronicus family tomb, Titus sacrifices Tamora’s eldest son, Alarbus, in order to appease the spirits of his dead children. (By the way, Titus had 25 sons before the war started, and now he’s down to four.) As Alarbus’s blood and guts burn in a smoky fire that “perfumes” the air, Marcus announces that Titus the war hero has been elected Rome’s new emperor, despite the fact that the late emperor’s two sons, Saturninus and Bassianus, each want power. Titus is getting old and just wants to retire in peace, so he names Saturninus, the elder son of the last emperor, as Rome’s new ruler. After a very brief (we’re talking like under a minute here) engagement to Titus’s virtuous daughter Lavinia, Saturninus makes Tamora his empress, and the former Queen of the Goths vows to use her new power to get revenge against Titus.

With her secret lover, Aaron the Moor, Tamora proceeds to make Titus’s world a living hell. First, Tamora encourages her sons, Demetrius and Chiron, to kill Bassianus and rape Titus’s daughter, Lavinia. After the rape, Demetrius and Chiron cut out Lavinia’s tongue and chop off her hands so she can’t identify them (verbally or in writing) as her attackers. Then Tamora helps Aaron, a brilliant mastermind, frame Titus’s sons, Quintus and Martius, for the murder of Bassianus. When Titus’s son Lucius makes a heroic attempt to save his brothers from false imprisonment and certain death, he’s banished from Rome. But the worst isn’t over for Titus. Aaron shows up at his

house and tricks Titus into believing that he can trade his hand for the lives of his sons. After lopping off his hand and sending it to the emperor, Titus receives a package – the heads of his sons, along with his severed hand. By gesturing to a classic tale in her nephew’s storybook, Lavinia reveals that she has been raped, just like Philomel in Book 6 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Then Lavinia puts a stick in her mouth and uses it to write out the names “Demetrius” and “Chiron.” Seeing this, Titus vows to get revenge.

While pretending to have lost his marbles, Titus tricks Demetrius and Chiron into hanging out with him, then slits their throats so he can make a tasty meat pie out of them just in time for a fancy dinner banquet he’s got planned. (We imagine he’ll be serving this with “some fava beans and a nice chianti,” Hannibal Lecter-style.) (Note to self: Never accept a dinner invitation from Titus Andronicus.) Dressed as a chef, Titus hosts a dinner party and serves up the human pie to Tamora, Saturninus, and the rest of his guests. At the dinner table, Titus kills Lavinia and announces that he wants his daughter’s “shame” and his “sorrow” to die along with her. Then he reveals the secret ingredient of his pie and stabs Tamora, killing her. Saturninus stabs Titus in return, then Lucius stabs Saturninus, leaving the stage littered with dead bodies. Titus’s only remaining son, Lucius, is named Roman emperor and promises to “heal” Rome after so much violence and bloodshed. Lucius’s first act as Rome’s new healer/leader? He sentences Aaron to be buried up to his chest and left for dead. Then he has Tamora’s corpse left outside for the animals to devour.

Characters and Characteristic

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Protagonist: Titus Andronicus

Antagonists: Tamora, Aaron, Saturninus

* Titus Andronicus:

Noble Roman general who has won a long war against the Goths but lost many of his sons in battle. Although he is at first a reasonable man, events of the play transform him into a bedlamite bent on revenge. * Saturninus:

Conniving son of the late Emperor of Rome who succeeds his father after Titus Andronicus, citing his advancing age, declines to accept the throne.

Bassianus: Brother of Saturninus; in love with Lavinia.

* Tamora:

Queen of the Goths who is unrelenting in her desire to avenge the execution of her son Alarbus at the hands of her Roman captors. Near the end of the play, she unwittingly eats a meat pie made of the flesh of her dead sons. *

Aaron:

A diabolical Moor, beloved of Tamora. Aaron is evil personified, but he has a redeeming quality: love for his child. * Lavinia:

Innocent daughter of Titus Andronicus. She is the victim of horrible crimes, including rape, the amputation of her hands, and the excision of her tongue.

* Marcus Andronicus:

Tribune of the people and brother of Titus.

Lucius, Quintus, Martius, Mutius: Sons of Titus Andronicus. * Young Lucius:

A boy, son of Lucius.

* Publius:

Son of Marcus the tribune.

* Sempronius, Caius, Valentine:

Kinsmen of Titus.

* Aemilius:

A noble Roman

* Alarbus, Larbus, Demetrius, Chiron:

Sons of Tamora

A Captain, Tribune, Messenger, Clown

Goths and Romans

* Minor Characters:

Nurse, Senators, Tribunes, Officers, Soldiers, Attendants.

Plot Analysis

Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients: the initial situation, conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion. Great writers sometimes shake up the recipe and add some spice. Initial Situation

Titus returns to Rome a war hero and gets rock star treatment. After ten years of war with the Goths, Titus returns home. He's elected Emperor of Rome but he declines and says he just wants to retire in peace. Conflict

Titus sacrifices Alarbus, and Tamora retaliates. Titus insists on sacrificing Tamora's eldest son to appease the spirits of his dead relatives. Big mistake. Tamora vows to avenge this deed and, when Saturninus makes her his empress, she's suddenly in a position to make good on her promise. Tamora

and her secret lover, Aaron, turn Titus's life into a living nightmare. Together they mastermind the murder of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia.

Complication

Titus's sons are framed for murder and Titus is duped. Tamora and Aaron manage to frame Titus's two sons, Quintus and Martius, for the murder of Bassianus. Aaron also tricks Titus into lopping of his own hand by promising that Saturninus will spare his sons in exchange for Titus's body part. Climax

Revealed: Chiron and Demetrius raped Lavinia. Titus vows revenge! Lavinia gets her stumps on a book and gestures at the story of Philomel's rape from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to indicate she's been sexually assaulted. She then puts a staff in her mouth and writes out the names of Chiron and Demetrius, revealing the identities of her attackers. Naturally, Titus vows to make them pay.

Suspense

Guess who's coming to dinner. The suspense builds when Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius, bakes them into a pie, and invites everyone to a big feast.

Denouement

Titus serves up revenge. Bloodbath ensues. At the feast, Titus serves Tamora and his guests the human pie he so lovingly baked. Then he announces his secret ingredient and stabs Tamora. Saturninus stabs Titus in return, then Lucius stabs Saturninus. Conclusion

Lucius named new Roman Emperor: Let the healing begin! With Rome's emperor and its greatest military leader dead, who will lead Rome out of this

mess? Why, Lucius, of course! After being named emperor, Lucius says he's going to "heal" Rome, then punishes Aaron by having him buried up to his neck and left to starve.

THEMES

Revenge

Titus Andronicus is considered a "revenge tragedy," a genre that was made popular in the 16th century by Thomas Kyd (Spanish Tragedy) and Christopher Marlowe (White Devil). As such, it features a seemingly endless cycle of bloody vengeance that nearly destroys Rome and takes down the city's most important political figures. While the play seems to take grisly pleasure in its over-the-top acts of vengeance, it also suggests that revenge reduces everyone to the status of wild animals. Violence

Critic S. Mark Hulse figures that Titus Andronicus "has 14 killings, 9 of them on stage, 6 severed members, 1 rape (or 2 or 3 depending on how you count), 1 live burial, 1 case of insanity, and 1 of cannibalism – an average of 5.2 atrocities per act, or one for every 97 lines." There's so much revenge-fuelled violence in the play that it becomes ridiculous, and at times its grisliness has a comical effect. For some, this suggests that Shakespeare is mocking the genre of the revenge tragedy that was so popular in his time.

For others, the play's violence is indicative of a young, inexperienced playwright setting out to emulate Seneca's dramas. Language and Communication

Language and writing are a big deal in Titus Andronicus, especially where women's voices are concerned. When Lavinia's tongue and hands are cut off

after a brutal sexual assault, she is completely powerless and unable to name her attackers. Once she finds a way to use a classic literary text (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) to communicate, literature rescues her from a life of silence and enables a kind of rebirth. Power

The play begins with the theme of dynastic succession, as two brothers prepare to battle for the Roman empery. For many, the theme of power is what prevents *Titus Andronicus* from being simply a gratuitously violent play. When Titus (like *King Lear*) chooses retirement over the duty of leadership, he leaves Rome vulnerable to political chaos. In the end, the play suggests that Rome can only be healed by a strong ruler at the helm. Family

Vengeance is a strange family affair in *Titus Andronicus*. When Tamora wants to get back at Titus for sacrificing her eldest son, she goes after the man's children. Titus's response is to trick Tamora into eating her two remaining sons. At the same time, the play is also filled with domestic violence and infighting. Titus kills two of his own children, and there are two sets of brothers who squabble over power and a woman. Race

At first glance *Titus Andronicus* presents the "civilized" Romans and "barbarous" Goths as racial opposites, but this is quickly overturned when the play blurs the differences between the two groups. The play also dramatizes some 16th century attitudes toward race and skin color. Aaron the Moor's dark skin is associated with evil, and he displays a hyper-sexuality that Elizabethans often associated with black men. At the same time, Shakespeare also raises the possibility that Aaron's motives for vengeance may originate in the way society views him.

Gender

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare examines stereotypical gender roles. In the play's opening scene, both female lead characters are treated like property to be exchanged and traded between men, who are valued for their military service and political commitment to Rome. At the same time, the play uses the virtuous Lavinia and the sensual Tamora to create a classic good woman / bad woman dichotomy to explore female sexuality and power. Sex

Titus Andronicus portrays a horrific view of sexuality that suggests there's an inherent ugliness in desire. Demetrius and Chiron view the act of rape as a speedier, more convenient alternative to courtship, and most characters see Tamora's adulterous affair with Aaron as an activity that "stains" Tamora's "honour" black like Aaron's skin color. What's more, at the center of the play is a pit, a "bloodstained hole" and "swallowing womb" that is an obvious and disturbing metaphor for Lavinia's raped and brutalized body.

SETTING

Rome, a Living Nightmare

Ever had a scary dream from which you couldn't wake up? Well, that's exactly the kind of setting Shakespeare creates in *Titus Andronicus*. The cycle of violence and revenge in the play is endless, and the world often seems like a nightmare, especially for the Andronicus family. At one point, Marcus looks upon Lavinia's mutilated body and declares, "If I do dream, would all my wealth would wake me! / If I do wake, some planet strike me down, / That I may slumber in eternal sleep!" It's also important to note that *Titus Andronicus* is set in ancient Rome, during the fictional reign of

Saturninus. As critic Frank Kermode points out, the specific historical time frame is a bit of a mish-mash, because Shakespeare draws from various periods in Roman history to create the play's setting. But, as scholar Katharine Eisaman Maus notes, Shakespeare manages to create a general kind of "Rome-effect" by constantly alluding to themes from classical Roman texts like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes*. Regardless of which century the play is supposed to be set in, we know that this isn't the Roman world we associate with the height of civilization. Instead, Rome seems like it's on the brink of collapse, plagued by atrocities like cannibalism, rape, bodily mutilation, and ritual violence, which threaten to tear the city apart (literally and figuratively).

MORAL VALUE

1. Don't be an avenger person.
2. As a human, we have to love each other, especially with our family, and we have to save them also from any dangerous things.
3. Do not act cruel to someone.