

## REVENGE AS MIMETIC DESIRE IN JUAN RULFO'S "TELL THEM NOT TO KILL ME!"

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### *Abstract*

In some stories, the development of the characters is motivated by desire. While modern ideas define desire as autonomous, René Girard analyzes desire as imitation from others. "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" is Juan Rulfo's short story that tells a story of a fugitive of murder that had to face the death penalty. He fled for thirty years thinking that everyone has forgotten his case, but then he was caught by the Colonel who was the son of the one he murdered. The death penalty was a revenge from a son to his father's murderer. This paper then focuses on exploring the ways revenge is seen as a mimetic desire in Juan Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!". Through the perspective of Girard's theory of desire, this paper shows that revenge becomes a direct reflection of murder that has been done before. The desire to murder is not spontaneous but determined by the former action. The desire to murder that is expressed by Colonel enables him to punish those who commit crime. 'The eye for an eye' is a statement that will not happen if one's own eye is not taken beforehand. Through Girard's perspective, Rulfo's story provides evidence that the Colonel's desire to revenge is mimetic of murder which results in the death penalty of the murderer. In conclusion, the Colonel's desire is not perceived as positive or negative but a mimesis to the previous other's deeds.

**Keywords:** Crime Fiction, Desire, Girard, Mimesis

### INTRODUCTION

Literature is not *ex nihilo* but relates to reflection of everyday life. Any single deed, such as murder and revenge, that a character does in literary works is always possible to happen in real life. As social deed, revenge is not only related to individuals since it is applied to other people (Antonello & Webb, 2015; Bloom, 2001; Haven, 2018). This deed but is shaped by psychological desire that demands a certain condition that avenge a prerequisite condition that achieve any suffering to the targeted person. Block (2004) and Cowdell et al. (2016) confirm that revengeful behavior is related to aggression and confrontation in stories. While aggression is the realization of anger that must be

expressed, confrontation requires total bravery to face certain emotional events in the past and to face the person who triggers the emotional events in the present time.

“Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” is Juan Rulfo’s short story that shows how revenge is done by a child to his father’s murderer (Rulfo, 1985). This is a short story that tells of a fugitive who killed someone, got captured, and then faced the death penalty. The fugitive had run for more than thirty years hoping that people would slowly forget his action. However, the child of the victim was still alive and ready to take revenge by using his power as a Colonel. Then, when the fugitive was finally caught by the Colonel, death penalty became his revenge to his father’s murderer.

Rulfo’s “Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” provides a setting that encourages the characters to become parts of the act of victimization. Girard (1978) stated that the cultural background of any culture, including religion, could not be separated from the aspect of victimization. In this case, according to Girard, any victim is needed since culture will never be developed without the main role of violence. It is done both through agents and structures, individually and socially, and even within values and practical aspects. Violence is getting normalized as any victim of it is also considered normal for the sake of flourishing of society. There must be someone left behind in any progress, and in that case is the casualty of violence. Girard emphasized that even in many vast cultures, such as ideological ones, murder is quite common as it also reflects matters of utilitarianism as well. It is indirectly considered as fine for any aspect to be banished as long as that event may bring good impacts, and even happiness, for greater numbers. It is a matter of collateral damage that must happen beforehand.

However, Girard (1978) argued that the violence and murder are tools to prolong any civilization intact. When culture is shaped by power, and it could only be done in a structured manner, the tones must be done within rituals in which sacrifice lies inside. The sacrifice is nothing but scapegoat in order to victimize the sufferer and justifies the ones who celebrate. Violence then is not applied individually but through a collective point of view in which one sacrifice is told to save many people. The more a victim suffers, the more sacrifice it makes, and the more it could save more people. Girard then underlined that the transformation of discord to harmony is perceived as mimesis of the sacred desire and is actualized through pacifying and regulating brutal force of violence.

Based on the explanation above, this study explores the assumption that revenge is a matter of imitation of other’s action of murder. This study perceives that murder and revenge are ways of the transformation from discord to harmony that are identical and regulate through the brutal force of violence. Since revenge is intended to bring such satisfaction to the doer and to give full disadvantages to the victim (Haven, 2018), this action is understood as a violent form of response. Motivated by the desire to respond to the murder of the father thirty years ago, in this story, the character attempted to murder the father’s murderer in a different way. Thus, the character was only imitating what the murderer had done to his father thirty years ago.

Aside from Girard's concept of mimetic desire, to support this study, several previous studies are found and provide model to use Girard's theory as the main perspective. The first research is a literary study entitled *Revenge, Resurrection and Redemption: Mapping the Mystiques of Mimesis in Stieg Larsson's The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Padgate, 2022). The second research is a cultural study undergone by McNeil (2023) entitled *The Mimetic Sacred: Girard and Bataille Transcending Desire*. The last research is a study in psychology and conflict, composed by Frost (2021) entitled *Mimetic Theory: A New Paradigm for Understanding the Psychology of Conflict*. Based on those previous studies, this study believes that it should provide a novel perspective in the application of the theory of mimesis (Girard, 1978) in understanding murder and revenge in Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!". This study then raises a question on how revenge is perceived as a mimetic desire in Juan Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!".

## RESEARCH METHOD

Developing the similar literary study as Dewi, (2020), Yuliasuti, Pujimahanani, and Pasopati, (2021), Padgate (2022) and Sarmi, et al. (2023) this study utilizes a short story entitled "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" written by Juan Rulfo (1985), published in *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, edited by Pickering (1985) as the data source. The data collected are in the forms of quotations from the short story that provide evidence and support of the existence of Girard's Theory of Mimesis, violence, murder, and revenge. The characterizations, the plot and settings of the short story are also involved to point significant support to the premises. The premises and logics used in Girard's ideas are also drawn to underline matter of mimetic desire. The discussion then focuses on exploring how revenge is an imitation of other's former action and is in line with Girard's theory.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Revenge as Transformation of Discord to Harmony

Rulfo's "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" utilizes setting and characterization that provide support on the concept of discord. The setting of draught in the story provides a support to the concept of discord and provide motivation for Juvencio to find harmony. The story tells of a man named Juvencio Nava who lived with his wife and his son, Justino. The man had cows that he grazed every day. One day he had to pasture his cattle in Puerta de Piedra, but the owner of Puerta de Piedra, Don Lupe Terreros, refused to let him use his pasture. He did not like what Don Lupe had said. But with the drought later his animals began to die off. Then, because of that, he began to break through the fence and drove his herd of skinny cattle to the pasture where they could get their fill of grass.

On the other hand, Don Lupe's harmony becomes a discord when Juvencio's cattle entered Don Lupe's private property and it provides motivation for be angry to Juvencio. When Don Lupe knew about this fact, he did not like it and ordered the fence mended. Until one day Don Lupe said to him in the following quotation:

*"Look here Juvencio, if you let another animal in my pasture, I'll kill it."*

*"Look here Don Lupe, it's not my fault if that the animals look out for themselves, they're innocent. You'll have to pay for it if you kill them." Then Juvencio killed Don Lupe because he did not want to share his pasture with Juvencio's animals. (Rulfo, 1985).*

In search for his harmony, Juvencio committed a discord by killing Don Lupe in March, and in April he was already up in the mountains, running away from the summons. Juvencio was so afraid that he would be imprisoned for what he had done. When his wife learned the fact that her husband had killed someone, she decided to leave him. When Juvencio knew that his wife had left him, he had not gone out searching for his wife. Then he decided to hide in his son's house on a land called Palo de Venado. Thirty-five years have passed since that incident. Juvencio was hiding in fear his whole life. He was confident that people had forgotten his crime, but there was a Colonel who tried to capture Juvencio. He asked for help from his son, but Justino refused since the Colonel's man did not want to hear any excuses.

Juvencio insisted his son use his wits and told the Colonel's man that scaring him was enough. Justino said that it was such a vain act because they wanted to kill Juvencio. Justino did not want to go back there and told them because if he did, they would know that he is Juvencio's son. Juvencio was so stubborn and ordered Justino to take a little pity on him. Justino clenched his teeth and shook his head saying no. Juvencio asked Justino to meet the Colonel and to tell the Colonel how old Juvencio was and what he would get out of killing Juvencio. It was nothing. Juvencio said to Justino that the Colonel must have a soul. Juvencio also told Justino to tell the Colonel that he had to do it for the blessed salvation of his soul. Even though Justino did what his father said, it was impossible for Juvencio to stay alive because the Colonel still wanted to kill Juvencio.

The day when they brought Juvencio, it was a windy day. All Juvencio could do was just look down at the ground. Sixty years of him living and doing his best at hiding from the people that are trying to catch him have finally been over (Rulfo, 1985). Finally, they arrived at the village at the Colonel's house. One of the Colonel's men stopped in front of the door and informed the Colonel that they had arrested the fugitive. Then the Colonel explained everything including the fact that he was the child of Don Lupe (Rulfo, 1985).

After a long explanation, the Colonel ordered his man to tie Juvencio awhile so he could suffer and the Colonel would shoot him. Juvencio begged the Colonel for mercy. The Colonel then ordered one of his men to give Juvencio something to drink until he got drunk so the shots would not hurt him. Juvencio was then shot and died. The Colonel's man slung Juvencio's body on top of the burro, cinched him up tight against the saddle so he would not fall off, and away they went in Palo de Venado. Justino, Juvencio's son, came then stood in front of his father's body and said following quotation:

*"Your daughter-in-law and grandchildren will miss you," he was saying to him.*

*"They'll look at your face and won't believe it's you. They'll think the coyote has been*

*eating on you when they see your face full of holes from all those bullets they shot at you.” (Rulfo, 1985).*

The short story shows how the act of murder is way of the characters in search for harmony. The discord that was motivated by the search for harmony ended with another discord from another character that also searched for harmony within himself. Thirty years of searching for harmony because of his father’s death, the Colonel finally found his father’s murderer and finished Juvencio through discord to gain his harmony through revenge.

### **Revenge as Mimetic Desire**

*Tell Them Kill Them Not to Kill Me!* by Juan Rulfo provides evidence of the acts of revenge that are emerging from a mimetic desire. According to Girard, revenge is not spontaneous, but a psychological movement of metaphysical desire (Cowdell et al., 2016; Girard, 1978; Oughourlian, 2010). Mimetic desire, according to Girard, acts like an inexorable mechanism within human culture shaping mental states, intentionality, and phenomenology. Revenge happens because it has the size of the previous deed. The act of revenge done by The Colonel, Don Lupe Tereros’ son, is a psychological relief (harmony) through the open expression of strong emotions (discord). The occurrence of this action happens because there is something that provoked The Colonel to do revenge. This revenge has happened because Juvencio Nava had killed Don Lupe Tereros, The Colonel’s father. And because of this reason, The Colonel behaves in an extreme and unacceptable way and has very powerful feelings that he could no longer control. Mimetic desire is a primary example of a generative mechanism as defined by critical realism (Girard, 1986; Haven, 2018; Pasopati, et al., 2022). It casts a unique and discerning light on scapegoating as a prevailing occurrence in social life, irrespective of time, place, and culture. It brings another perspective of psychoanalysis in which desire is no longer autonomous and even original, but built from indication of others’ through monopoly of violence (Cowdell et al., 2016; Golsan, 2002; Whitman, 2003). Through *The Mimetic Theory* by Rene Girard, the act of revenge done by The Colonel is the nature of imitation as part of being mimetic.

A person’s desire does not belong to her or him and it is not determined by some special property of her or his own but is bluntly suggested whom another brings to be imitated. Indeed, this is a kind of phenomenology in which desire extends into epiphany to someone as being understood furthermore unconsciously (Bloom, 2001; Bry et al., 2011; Golsan, 2002). In this story, what The Colonel does in revengeful deed is rational as well since he imitates what Juvencio has done before. The Colonel unconsciously could not leave behind any idea of revengeful desire before he could realize it to Juvencio. While desire as stated by Freud is somehow irrational, what is supported by Girard is the Colonel’s desire that is totally rational. Its rationality does not come from autonomous points of human beings but how people interact socially (Girard, 1978; Oughourlian, 2010; Palaver, 2013), but through social interactions that are inevitable which make any kind of

imitation from others' desire is probable as well. As a human being, the Colonel's subjectivity of desire is related to the previous interactions between Juvencio and Don Lupe. Even though the social interaction happened years ago, such subjectivity owned by the Colonel as an individual is related to others as well (Dewi, 2020; Grobbink et al., 2015).

Additionally, The Colonel takes revenge due to his need of having a scapegoat for the death of his father. Such scapegoating mechanism and ontological illness of modernity that Girard observed is analyzed through ritual as a transformative catalyst of violence that invites further ethical praxis (Girard, 1978; Schumann & Ross, 2010; Tomelleri, 2015). The main idea behind the Colonel's prolonging suffering is because he knew who had killed his father, but he could do nothing. Once he caught the murderer, he needs to revenge him to calm his mind and gain harmony. It is due to the idea that revenge is about both act and desire (Palaver, 2013; Yeager et al., 2011). Indeed, the son of Juvencio will do revenge too so that avenge will never find its finality. However, The Colonel ignores that by underlining his want to realize his mere desire that is to avenge his father. Juvencio may think that the son could never achieve anything, but The Colonel proved him wrong. He succeeded in bringing judgment day to Juvencio. That deed indeed eliminates the conflict inside The Colonel's mind but it will never stop reality that any kind of revenge may come in advance to him either. Girard contends that scapegoat figures emerge as the resolution to a conflict and this conflict results from the interactions of mimetic desire. It is the result of a mere anthropological hypothesis; someone's desire is always copied from the desire of somebody else (Girard, 1986; Scubla, 2013; Zhernokleyev, 2019).

The Colonel does not have any original desire to kill others. His originality of deed comes before him that is the death of his father. Therefore, the scapegoat is prolonged as well. Juvencio killed Don Lupe to make a scapegoat for the conflict. He thought that Don Lupe's death was the ultimate answer for the friction, but he could not run away from the guilt he had felt for years. Scapegoat as elimination of conflict is temporary but needed (Dewi, 2020; Grobbink et al., 2015). It will settle the friction for a while, but the sin will always exist. It is in line with what Girard states about desire is about never ending violence. Departing from how Id wants to be realized and stopped by Super Ego, it must face another desire to be contested (Grobbink et al., 2015; Schumann & Ross, 2010).

Girard's idea focuses on mimesis through imitation of others. The desire lives through imitation almost always leads to conflict and later to violence (Girard, 1986; Oughourlian, 2010). Apart from certain intense beliefs, the scapegoat no longer appears to be merely a passive receptacle for evil forces. It is the mirage of an omnipotent manipulator shown by mythology to be sanctioned unanimously by society (Antonello & Webb, 2015; Keramatfar, 2022; Whitman, 2003). Once the scapegoat is recognized as the cause of the conflict, it becomes disposed of at will, either as punishment or reward, according to displeasure or pleasure. Desire is a process of mimesis that deepens conflict worsened by further victimization (Block, 2004; Girard, 1986; Reyburn, 2019). Desire is the mimetic crisis in itself, it is the acute mimetic rivalry with the other that occurs in all circumstances, especially the private one. In this case, public and private realms blur to each other where

desire of someone in his or her unconsciousness is also a matter of collective understanding (Antonello & Webb, 2015; Block, 2004; Bry et al., 2011). It becomes an open secret as an idea that everyone knows but no one would like to ask or even to tell.

The revenge done by The Colonel is a matter of critical realism as stated by Girard. Critical realism underlines any hidden idea behind empirical experience and actual observation (Houston & Swords, 2022; Oughourlian, 1996). Somehow, both of them could never be separated from the real, but it is at the same time not the real itself. The experience point is shown by what The Colonel feels when he loses his father. It is full of the perception that losing a father means losing everything either. He needs to struggle more by himself instead of merely depending on his father. The actual point is seen in the event that the father is killed by Juvencio (Rulfo, 1985). He was still a child and could not do anything but his seed of revenge was growing. Both points get alongside the matter of real aspect that is the revenge itself. The reality of revenge does not come *ex nihilo* but is shaped furthermore by both experience and actual understandings (Houston & Swords, 2022; Oughourlian, 1996).

Ideas of critical realism are about agency, structure, and nature of causation (Houston & Swords, 2022; Schumann & Ross, 2010). These three parts are widely observed in the story of Rulfo. The actions of Juvencio and The Colonel are proofs that agency matters. As individuals, they have certain power to do what they can (Dewi, 2020; Syzdykov, 2021). They have capabilities to realize their desire to kill and to do revenge. Even they also enable them to shape scapegoats to temporarily erode the frictions. However, they could not leave the idea of structure (Golsan, 2002; Houston & Swords, 2022). It is a matter of mimetic desire that pushes those characters to do the worst deed. They do not realize that they are trapped with imitation of the desire of others (Satici et al., 2014). They just want to get rid of others but they do not think that what they do is imitation of what others have done before. What people really believe is that the former deed is a myth that needs to be realized in latter revenge (Golsan, 2002; Satici et al., 2014).

While Freud indicates the murder of the father as the ultimate main point, Girard specifies the victimization process as the desire comes to surface (Tomelleri, 2015; Troy, 2015). There is always a victim from what desire wants. This is so inevitable that any culture could no longer exclude violence from its intimate dialogue. Vicious or even destructive violence is always needed to initiate a cycle in which sacrificial rite is mentioned among people (Tomelleri, 2015). The communities then could never leave out any aspect of understood violence since it is needed to enrich cultural matters among idealistic matters. Then, it shapes further dualism as the community needs strength to hold each people together but down below it is built through understanding of needed violence as a common sense.

Mimetic Theory highlights that scapegoating is a product of desire, rivalry, and deflection. In the larger framework of Girard's theory, the perennial problem of violence in early human communities led to the practice of scapegoating a religious mechanism that evolved to contain the destructive fallout or conflicts (Girard, 1978; Oughourlian,

2010; Yuliasuti, et al., 2021). Revenge is both a matter of realization of id into ego and also supported by superego furthermore. Here, self is not autonomous in its desire but desired from what otherness has known before (Satici et al., 2014; Yeager et al., 2011). Natural originality is not possible at all since any kind of deed is derived from others' meanings before. For Girard, mimetic desire entails the fundamental paradox of a subject asserting his selfhood by way of imitating the Other in whom he sees a model of autonomy (Girard, 1978; Houston & Swords, 2022; Sarmi, et al., 2023).

The Colonel's revenge is not original but a direct reflection of murder that has been done before (Golsan, 2002; Palaver, 2013; Syzdykov, 2021). This is a matter of the nature of causation shown by cause and effect situations. There is a certain event but that does not stand alone. It is shaped by others and shape them as well (Houston & Swords, 2022; Satici et al., 2014). The desire to kill is not spontaneous but determined by former action. It happens to revenge too as desire is not positive or negative but mirror to other's deeds. It is not free-value either but merely imitation from what others had done before. In the short story, The Colonel is capable to punish for committing a crime since he used his power to imitate the killing done before. Moreover, the mimetic of murder results in the death penalty. It is out of any purity at all as it leaves out any autonomy and originality. 'The eye for an eye' is a revengeful statement that taking an eye of others will not happen if one's own eye is not taken beforehand (Bloom, 2001; Syzdykov, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The act of revenge done by The Colonel is a psychological relief through the open expression of strong emotions. This revenge has happened because Juvencio Nava had killed The Colonel's father. Due to this reason, The Colonel behaves in an extreme and unacceptable way and has very powerful feelings that he could no longer control. Through The Mimetic Theory by Rene Girard, the act of revenge done by The Colonel is the nature of imitation as part of being mimetic. Revenge is not original but a direct reflection of murder that has been done before. The desire to kill is not spontaneous and original but determined by former action. It happens to revenge too as desire is not positive or negative but mirror to other's deeds.

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