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Popular Culture and the Plutocrats

Americans today of the middle class and below understand the 0.1 percent in much the same way that they have for generations. They look to the popular culture for representations of how the “other half” live and often how they should feel about the inequality they find there. Television and streaming services are still the most affordable form of visual entertainment and reach the largest group of people. Therefore, in this paper, I will look at the widely available series *Revenge* in particular as a representation of the 0.1 percent in popular culture and a commentary on the self-interest of the wealthy in a post-recession America.

Revenge is a 2011 television drama about a young woman, named Amanda, who is set on retribution against the Grayson family for framing her father for terrorist activity. As is always true for the Graysons, they framed Amanda’s father out of greed as their company received major gains offering aid after the terrorist acts they helped orchestrate, illustrating that “the richer you are, the more covetous you become” (qtd. in Freeland 82). Taking a page out of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the show is set in the Hamptons area of Long Island where the wealthy families of New York are known to gather to spend their summers, including, in this case, the Grayson family. The setting helps further the idea that the wealthy and especially the 0.1 percent are acting on an “unfair playing field” than the rest (Freeland 84).

The pilot episode of *Revenge* offers a striking juxtaposition of the difference in the lives of the wealthy and the working class. As Freeland says, “the most coveted status symbol isn’t a yacht, a racehorse, or a knighthood; it’s a philanthropic foundation,” and this is exactly where the viewer finds the Grayson family matriarch, Victoria Grayson, in the pilot; she is throwing an art

auction as part of her charity, raising money for domestic violence prevention and cancer awareness, which takes place, fittingly, on the family yacht (Freeland 70). While charity efforts like this are admirable, *Revenge* makes a poignant comparison by intercutting the Grayson auction, including its melodramatic sub plot over marital infidelities, with the Porter family, who own a local bar, and their struggle against the bank that is threatening to foreclose on their business (Pilot). In many ways, this juxtaposition shows how out of touch the wealthy can be with the average American even as they are trying to make the world a better place. It makes the viewer question the sincerity of the philanthropic act and wonder if it is more about “social acceptance and immortality” than “moral rewards” (Freeland 71).

Status, social acceptance, and “the problem of positional goods” are the main sources of conflict for the Grayson family throughout *Revenge* (Freeland 82). Starting with their prized beach front property and Hamptons address, the Grayson family is perfectly set up to socialize with the right people. They consistently hold events where intellectual and influential people can gather and share their “enthusiasm for innovation and ideas,” with the intent being to gain political, personal, or financial gain (Freeland 69). This idea of knowing the right people also extends to education. As Chrystia Freeland says, “the biggest perk of being born rich...is being expensively educated,” and, of course, the Grayson family has the influence to get their son into Harvard (49). Meanwhile, the youngest Porter, Declan, just wants to finish school, so he can move past the prospect of working at the family bar when he graduates high school, unlike his older brother (Duplicity). In many ways, *Revenge* represents much of the Grayson’s way of life as “unjustified privilege,” which relates to real wealthy families who have every opportunity to further their family’s position, while others struggle to make it out of poverty and into the middleclass (Freeland 84).

Increasingly, over several decades, the idea of inherited wealth has given way to the understanding that many of today's most wealthy individuals have built wealth through hard work and initiative early in life. As Freeland says, "being self-made is central to the self-image of today's global plutocrats" (Freeland 45). However, this concept often comes with a certain amount of entitlement for the wealthy. In *Revenge*, this can be seen in how Victoria Grayson uses her working class background and struggle to survive a home with a grafter, single mother as justification for the acts she commits to maintain her wealth, including blackmail, treason, and murder (Lineage). The idea of earned success is powerful and those who gain wealth on a certain level of meritocracy feel justified in rewarding themselves – often lavishly because they have the sources (Freeland 46). This kind of merit based argument is mirrored in the continued blue collar life of the Porters, who continually struggle to make ends meet at their bar, where the only reward they can afford themselves is the night off of work, which is usually done begrudgingly.

When there is such a large gap between the way one group of people in a society live and another, "Figuring out how the plutocrats are connected to the rest of us" becomes an extremely difficult task (Freeland 67). *Revenge* shows both sides of the divide and attempts to show its audience what those connections are and how they affect one another. The series depicts an unfair privilege that can never really be reached by anyone without the wealth or connections of the super-elite. It also represents the plutocrats' worst qualities of self-interest and greed as motivation for their actions. The series' main theme of injustices committed against the everyman by the wealthy and influential is clear; however there is also an equally clear message, which comes right out of bitterness over the recession and the financial crisis that caused it. Referencing the desire for accountability of the super-elite, Amanda says in a voiceover at the start of the series, "This is not a story about forgiveness" (Pilot).

Works Cited

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