

Blizzard of Vengeance: a look at Lady Snowblood

written by Geddy Cahoon | March 28, 2017



“Vengeance is her only reason for living...”

An asura, in Buddhist mythology, is described as a vengeful demigod that can never know true happiness – their desires and longings will always go unfulfilled, and though their existence is steeped in carnal pleasures, an asura will never truly be satisfied. This myth provides an apt description of the titular heroin in Toshiya Fujita’s 1973 revenge action-thriller, *Lady Snowblood*. With the film, Fujita (and lead actress Meiko Kaji, whose performance binds the film together) weaves a dark and visually magnificent tale of destiny, hatred, violence and the price of revenge.

Based on the 1972 manga of the same name, *Lady Snowblood* follows a woman named Yuki, who literally inherited her mother’s lust for vengeance when she was born. As a result, Yuki has trained from her youth to murder a group of criminals who raped her mother and murdered her mother’s son and father. In adulthood, Yuki has taken up the mantle of Lady Snowblood, a pale vixen who kills mercilessly. The driving force behind the film is revenge – Yuki’s mother reveals in one of the film’s many non-linear flashbacks that she gave birth to Yuki for no other reason other than to raise her to be a killer. Thus Yuki’s entire existence is based on this goal.

Throughout the film, Yuki acknowledges how empty she feels as a human being, and one of the film’s key thematic elements is the idea that like an asura, Yuki will never be fulfilled. She constantly eschews human emotion and feeling in favor of this vengeful conflict that was forced upon her before her birth. The narration explicitly states that there is a caring spirit under Yuki’s cold demeanor, but tracking down the killers is the most important thing to her – There’s never a moment where Yuki hesitates, or wavers before killing one of her targets. She is rigidly determined and unstoppable. So committed to this role is Yuki that she actually has something of an emotional breakdown halfway through the film, when she believes one of her intended victims has already passed away due to old age. Though her eyes often scream that she wants anything but this life, Yuki is hardwired to believe that killing these people is her destiny. Yuki is played

beautifully by the talented Meiko Kaji, in a role that would end up being iconic for the actress. Kaji's ability to silently evoke and express Yuki's determination and inner turmoil is commendable, and there is always a mixture of grief, anger and ruthlessness plastered across her face. Once Yuki accomplishes her goal, she is left with nothing. There is no dramatic moment or triumphant orchestral score when Yuki slays the last of her mother's attackers – she has only wasted her life, destroyed the lives of countless others, and now her own life is effectively devoid of purpose.

The film seems to hint, though, that Yuki may be able to start fresh – during the climax, Yuki is stabbed by the daughter of one of the men she murdered and is also shot by her last target before killing him. She collapses in the snow in the dead of night – She served her purpose, and thus her flame burns out. However, morning comes, and the final shot of the film is Yuki slowly stirring, rising up from the ground. The film acknowledges that though Yuki's mission was ultimately destructive and had no chance of a "happy ending," perhaps the idea of gaining closure on these injustices committed against her innocent family was somewhat valid, and she deserves the chance to keep living – no life is worthless, and just because you fulfill your destiny doesn't mean your journey is over.

Lady Snowblood is also very committed to the idea that children are tied to the actions of those that bore them. Often times, the children's only connection to their parents is through violence – Yuki's mother died delivering her, and the only bond they share is the haunting memory of her mother's assault (Which the film hints has somehow been spiritually passed on to Yuki) and the demonic drive for vengeance. Yuki exists merely as a tool for her mother's revenge with no say in the matter, and two of Yuki's intended targets are revealed to have grown children around Yuki's age who get sucked into the decades long conflict as well: the daughter of one of Yuki's victims is a sweet young woman who takes up prostitution to help with her ailing father's medical treatments. Yuki meets her, and is clearly pained to have to put this innocent person through the tragedy of losing a parent, but that in no way causes her to hesitate in committing the murder. Eventually, this girl stabs Yuki during the film's climax – She too has been transformed into a violent killer driven by revenge. A manga artist who aids Yuki in her search for the killers is also revealed to be the son of one of the perpetrators – He ends up meeting his end by his own father's hand while trying to help Yuki. This is central to the film: Regardless of the intent, this was a conflict that could only end with the deaths of anyone directly involved. Tragedy begets tragedy, and actions have consequences, even to those who had no choice but to become involved.

Though there is some discussion to be had, thematically and plot wise *Lady Snowblood* is really not particularly unique. It tells a pretty basic story of revenge, and it does tell it in an entertaining way – a good revenge story is one of the best story archetypes of all, and make no mistake: This **is** a good revenge story. As noted, Meiko Kaji delivers a stunning performance as Yuki, and the supporting cast members are acceptable in their roles, though many of them are a bit thin as characters. *Lady Snowblood* tells its tale very well, and handles the conventions of the revenge thriller genre adequately. The

film must also be framed in a historical context – *Lady Snowblood* is a classic example of the riskier and darker subject matter that was starting to creep into Japanese cinema in the 70's. The basic tropes and formulaic elements of the revenge thriller were not as widespread as they are today. The plot is really not very unique when viewed in this day and age, but there's nothing wrong with a conventional story when it's done this well.

Also worth mentioning are the historical elements of the film's narrative. *Lady Snowblood* takes place in Meiji-era Japan, specifically at a time when the military-industrial complex was beginning to take hold of the country at the turn of the twentieth century. A fear of conscripts grips the peasants in the film's flashback scenes. In fact, the reason Yuki's mother and her family are attacked is due to the belief by denizens of a small village that her husband was a conscript. For the most part, every tragedy in the film can be traced back to this militarization of Japan: Yuki's mother's husband was suspected of being a conscript and murdered. The murderers were able to swindle their fellow villagers by conning them into thinking they could avoid conscription by paying a fee. This all leads to Yuki's mother being raped, committing murder, being imprisoned, and then getting impregnated to have Yuki to carry on her conquest of revenge. Even the final member of the film's quartet of villains is revealed to have become a prolific arms dealer in the 20 years that have passed from the massacre of Yuki's family to her present day mission. The film seems to posit the relatively simple message that war does nothing but make things miserable for those not in the upper echelons of society. These historical elements were assumedly much more potent at the time of the film's release – they still strike something of a chord today, but I feel that a lot of the greater intention behind these thematic choices may be a bit lost on today's viewers. One of the film's final shots depicts the last of Yuki's victims falling off a balcony at a gala for the criminal underworld, staining both the American and Japanese flags with his blood. It seemed too deliberate to not be intentional, but I'd be lying if I said the meaning behind it wasn't lost on me.

Another observation of *Lady Snowblood* that bears mentioning is the film's depiction of sex. It would have been quite easy for this film to feature loads of gratuitous nudity and sexuality. One of the reasons Yuki is such an effective killer is that her attractive and ladylike demeanor lures her targets into a false sense of security. I'll be honest in saying that I was expecting the film to have a scene where Yuki seduces one of her victims with her body, or waiting for a forced romance to develop between Yuki and the previously mentioned manga artist, but neither came. For the most part, *Lady Snowblood* actually portrays sex in a relatively negative light – Yuki's mother is raped, one of the killers has a daughter who has turned to selling her body, and Yuki's mother was only able to have Yuki by acting a nymphomaniac and practically forcing herself on every male she came across while incarcerated. Sex is displayed as something grimy and ugly – A means to an end, and never something done for pleasure in this film. It truly adds something special to the titular character as well – Yuki is always portrayed as elegant, beautiful and gorgeous. The one time she's seen as a symbol of sex for some horny villagers, they all almost end up murdered. It is very interesting to see an attractive female lead character in a film like this,

with no forced romance and no real instances of her using her body to further her goals. Though we do see that with Yuki's mother in the film's flashbacks, it's presented in a very discomfoting way. There may be some larger commentary to be found in the idea of the film being a rejection of the perception of women as mere weak objects – anyone in this film stupid enough to judge Yuki, or her mother, or even the aforementioned prostitute daughter, as nothing more than a sex object is bound to be played for a fool, usually in a very grisly way.

There are interesting points of discussion in relation to the film's narrative and themes, but where *Lady Snowblood* truly shines is the film's visuals. Simply put, this is one of the most gorgeous movies ever put to screen. The colors are eye-poppingly bright and beautiful, the shots are all exquisitely composed, and the well constructed sets lend a dreamy and ethereal quality to many of the film's scenes. The first time we see Yuki as an adult in the film, she's traipsing through a fresh snowfall in a small village. Her skin is milk white, her kimono the same except for a few bursts of yellow, and she wields a purple umbrella which conceals her blade. This is all set against the blank white snow falling on a dark and dreary village temple, creating a fantastic contrast of colors to open the film and instantly keeping your eyes glued to the screen its entire duration. One extremely interesting visual component of the film is the blood. *Lady Snowblood* is ruthlessly violent – Fujita never shies away from showing executions, dismemberments and disemboweling in full detail. However, even the violence in this film is beautiful to behold. Fujita and crew appear to have used bright red paint for *Lady Snowblood* in lieu of the typical fake blood used in most films. It really makes the scenes of brutal violence pop, and gives them an eye-pleasing visual quality. I was enraptured every time someone got maimed or killed in the film, because the blood effects are that stylish. It was an interesting choice and I'm not sure if it had to do with stylistic or budgetary concerns, but it adds to the movie's pulpy, comic book feel (it is based on a manga after all).

Every shot in *Lady Snowblood* is framed with great care – It seems there was never a set or a scene where everything wasn't carefully arranged and composed for the greatest effect, from the actors to the objects in the background and foreground. Even if you aren't watching the film specifically with that kind of eye, you can't help but subconsciously realize how meticulous every detail is. Some of the scenes are set against pure black backdrops, almost lending the film the feeling of a stage performance. The cinematography often reflects the way the characters are feeling through the absence of light – There is a great scene of Yuki's contemplative face on a stark black background as she ponders her inner turmoil. The scenes of Yuki's mother in prison are presented in a very claustrophobic way with little light. You feel a very intimate understanding of the characters – Everything has been stripped away, leaving you trapped with them. These characters are carrying a lot of darkness, and their surroundings show it. Other times, the bright colors contrast the despicable happenings – The scene of the annihilation of Yuki's mother's family take place in a bright, sunlight village and the film's climactic battle of bloodshed occurs during a grand masquerade ball.

Essentially, the visuals elevate *Lady Snowblood* from good to great. From deep blue rocky seaside cliffs, to kimonos and snow painted with bright red blood, to the dark and claustrophobic interiors, *Lady Snowblood* is sincerely a visual classic. The film is like watching a moving piece of art in a more literal sense than many films I've seen. It pays tribute to its comic book roots while also creating a distinct look all its own.

Lady Snowblood is absolutely worth viewing for anyone who considers themselves a fan of cinema – It is a landmark entry in the annals of Japanese film, and is one of the most visually stunning movies ever created. I honestly found myself more interested in *Lady Snowblood's* appearance and cinematography than its plot. Though it serves up a tale that may seem a dime a dozen in the modern day, it is undeniably influential and unique for its time, and the visuals have aged exceptionally well. As a story, *Lady Snowblood* is good. As a piece of visual art, it is a masterpiece. Those two elements combine to make something truly great, and there's little chance of someone walking away from *Lady Snowblood* disappointed.

Criterion's "The Complete Lady Snowblood" is the ideal way to experience this masterful film.