



Exploring Moral Responsibility and Retributive Justice in Modern Crime Fiction: Analyzing S.A. Lelchuk's *"Save me from Dangerous Men"*

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Abstract

This paper critically re-evaluates S.A. Lelchuk's Save Me from Dangerous Men through the lens of retributive justice theory. It focuses on the novel's portrayal of Nikki Griffin, a morally complex private investigator who delivers punishment beyond the boundaries of formal legal systems. Nikki's actions often personal, intentional, and violent raise significant ethical concerns about the validity of extra-legal justice, particularly in situations where official institutions fail to protect victims of abuse. Rather than endorsing revenge, the narrative engages with the tension between justice and vigilantism. By drawing on both classical and modern interpretations of retributivism, the paper argues that Nikki's conduct reflects a form of moral agency and ethical responsibility. Furthermore, it examines how the themes of gender, power, and punitive authority intersect in the text, suggesting that Nikki's role as a female avenger subverts traditional crime fiction norms and critiques systemic failures in the justice system's treatment of women. Ultimately, this study positions Lelchuk's novel within larger philosophical and literary conversations, asserting that Save Me from Dangerous Men offers a compelling and contemporary reimagining of retributive justice.

Keywords: retributive justice, vigilantism, moral responsibility, contemporary crime fiction, gender and justice

In *Save Me from Dangerous Men*, justice is not dispensed through official legal channels or courtroom procedures; rather, it occurs in informal, often private spaces such as alleyways, parking lots, and direct personal encounters. The protagonist, Nikki Griffin, enacts a form of justice rooted in the principle of desert the belief that wrongdoers deserve to face consequences in proportion to their actions. This principle constitutes a foundational element of retributive justice. As Michael S. Moore articulates, retributivism holds that "punishment is justified by the moral culpability of the offender" (Moore 24). Nikki's

approach to confronting abusers, harassers, and other perpetrators aligns closely with this view, prioritizing the infliction of suffering proportional to the harm caused, rather than aiming for deterrence or rehabilitation.

The ethical justification for Nikki's actions reflects a Kantian, deontological framework, which maintains that punishment should be commensurate with the severity of the crime, irrespective of consequentiality considerations. Immanuel Kant famously argued that justice must be upheld even in the absence of a functioning civil society: "Even if a



civil society were to dissolve itself with the consent of all its members... the last murderer lying in prison would first have to be executed” (Kant 473). This assertion emphasizes justice as an end in itself rather than a tool for social utility. Nikki’s unwavering commitment to retributive justice regardless of the legal system’s capacity or willingness to act reflects this philosophical stance. Her actions thereby challenge prevailing legal norms that often prioritize procedural safeguards over the moral imperative to hold individuals accountable for their wrongdoing.

In contrast to retributive frameworks that emphasize state-sanctioned punishment, contemporary philosopher Erin Kelly critiques the prevailing tendency within modern criminal justice systems to treat punishment as the default response rather than as a measure of last resort. As Kelly observes, “we too often seek punishment as a default, rather than as a last resort” (Kelly 58). However, the context in which Nikki Griffin operates subverts this critique. Her interventions are not driven by an overreliance on punitive measures but rather by their conspicuous absence particularly in cases of gender-based violence. Consequently, Nikki does not embody punitive excess; instead, she emerges as a moral response to systemic neglect and institutional failure.

Traditionally, retributive justice is situated within formal, state-administered legal frameworks. Nikki, by contrast, functions outside these institutional boundaries, assuming the role of a vigilante an autonomous agent who administers justice independently. This extra-legal mode of action destabilizes conventional ethical paradigms and challenges dominant conceptions of legitimate justice. Although critics might argue that her methods undermine the rule of law, the novel justifies her actions through repeated depictions of institutional indifference toward vulnerable populations. Nikki’s declaration “I don’t trust the cops to care about women like her. I do” (Lelchuk 57) articulates a central concern in contemporary crime fiction: when official systems fail, individual moral agency may be invoked as a necessary corrective.

Nikki’s choices, however, raise persistent ethical questions: Is moral conviction alone sufficient to

justify bypassing legal procedures? Can individuals pursue justice without descending into authoritarianism or subjective moralism? Rather than offering definitive resolutions, Lelchuk presents Nikki’s actions as both morally compelling and ethically troubling. In doing so, the narrative invites readers to grapple with the complex moral ambiguities that underlie her pursuit of justice.

Retributive justice is primarily governed by the principle of proportionality, which mandates that punishment must correspond appropriately to the severity and nature of the offense. While Nikki Griffin demonstrates a capacity for violence, her actions are often tempered by discernment and self-restraint. In one instance involving a corporate abuser, she chooses to gather incriminating evidence rather than resort to physical confrontation. Reflecting on the perpetrator, she remarks, “He wasn’t a monster. Just pathetic. Sometimes shame is punishment enough” (Lelchuk 128). This moment underscores a core tenet of retributive ethics: punishment need not be severe or brutal, but it must be morally appropriate and proportionate to the wrongdoing.

Jeremy Horder emphasizes the legitimizing role of moral emotions in the context of punishment, arguing that “resentment, indignation, and moral outrage are not irrational impulses but reflections of a community’s ethical compass” (Horder 142). Nikki’s anger, far from being impulsive or excessive, is rooted in a deep sense of moral injury and empathetic alignment with victims. Her emotional responses are calculated and morally engaged, forming the foundation for her ethical judgments.

Nikki Griffin exists within a literary tradition historically dominated by male figures detectives, law enforcers, and lone vigilantes. Her character significantly disrupts these conventions. As a female agent of justice, she contests patriarchal structures both within the narrative and in the broader landscape of crime fiction. Regularly underestimated due to her gender, Nikki notes, “They never see me as a threat because I don’t fit the mold” (Lelchuk 85), highlighting how her subversion of expectations becomes a source of power.



Moreover, Nikki's gender influences the types of cases she undertakes, which often center on victims of intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, and contentious custody battles issues frequently marginalized in conventional noir narratives. By bringing these forms of harm to the forefront, Lechuk reimagines retributive justice through a feminist lens, presenting it as a vehicle for restoring agency and demanding ethical accountability in contexts where women are most often silenced or dismissed.

Despite her commitment to punitive justice, Nikki is not devoid of compassion. At various points, she reflects on the humanity of those she confronts. In one such moment, she observes, "There's a flicker sometimes, like maybe he knows what he did. And maybe that's enough" (Lechuk 177). Such reflections introduce moral complexity into the narrative, suggesting that retribution can coexist with empathy and even forgiveness. This aligns with Michael S. Moore's recognition that "even within retributivism, the demands of mercy can assert themselves" (Moore 93). Thus, Nikki's moral trajectory is not monolithic; it oscillates between righteous indignation and humane understanding.

Save Me from Dangerous Men reconfigures the notion of retributive justice within the framework of contemporary societal crises marked by institutional failure and ethical fatigue. Nikki Griffin embodies a

radical ethical stance: that justice is personal, that wrongdoing demands morally appropriate consequences, and that the pursuit of justice may, at times, necessitate actions beyond legal authority. Although Lechuk refrains from offering an unequivocal endorsement of vigilantism, the novel portrays it as a potentially necessary albeit morally fraught response to systemic neglect. In doing so, the text encourages readers to critically reassess the intersections of justice, morality, and legal authority, prompting a deeper inquiry into what justice truly entails when formal systems fall short of their mandate.

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