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### **Vinland Saga's advocacy for pacifism**

In 11th-century Norse society, war, honor, and bloody violence were strongly expected, and often glorified amongst Nordic Men. It had to do with a warrior's desire to enter Valhalla, a heaven for those who died in battle. The concept of honor was deeply tied to a man's ability in battle and desire for things like revenge and violence in the face of family loss, raids, duels, plunders, etc. This societal expectation on Nordic men creates environment where violence and war were seen as an opportunity of gaining higher social standing and entering Valhalla, further perpetuating a cycle of violence. Vinland Saga, an anime set in 11<sup>th</sup> century North Europe, initially also glorifies this violent and revengeful journey by portraying Thorfinn's revenge journey as cool and admirable. For the sake of avenging his father's death, Thorfinn from a young age wants commit murder and begins trailing his father's murderer, Askeladd, a smart and manipulative mercenary. Askeladd knew of Thorfinn's desires and never took him seriously, knowing that Thorfinn would only try to fairly defeat him in a duel for the sake of honorably avenging his father. For much of season one, the narrative is focused on the violent journey Thorfinn undergoes with all his battles and duels with Askeladd, an obsessive campaign. However, as the story progresses, Vinland Saga dismantles this idea of honor being tied to violence, presenting an alternative path that advocates for pacifism, not the glorification of

vengeance. While many other revenge driven narratives portray vengeance as fulfilling, Vinland Saga challenges this notion by portraying vengeance as an emotional and psychological burden, instead urging viewers seek a path of recovery through forgiveness, and pacifism rather than violence. This message resonates deeply with current political conflicts revealing how campaigns of revenge only perpetuate hate and delay any real justice to victims.

In Vinland Saga, the setting is so important for context. In 11th-century Norse society, a man's worth and social standing were often defined by his ability on the battlefield. Thorfinn, even before his father's death grew up on the culture of training men to become warriors. After his father's death, he trains himself to be a ruthless mercenary, violent against anybody, all to earn the opportunity to duel Askeladd, the very man who killed his father. Askeladd would only duel Thorfinn if he killed on Askeladd's behalf; this was their relationship. So blinded by revenge, Thorfinn threw away all his morals and began killing on behalf of his father's murderer. This speaks to how deeply rooted the ideology of revenge was in Norse masculinity and how it can be so blinding. As stated in *Mind and Materiality in the Viking World*, an analysis on masculinity during the Vikings era suggest that "Men must act amicably with their kinsmen and take revenge where necessary, in line with the Viking Age honor-based society" (Franks 32). Thorfinn wastes all of his youth year chasing this honor, this "justice" for his father. In doing so, he ruins his morality which pushes him farther and farther from true closure. This Nordic cultural obsession with vengeance mirrors current ongoing political conflicts such as Israel's campaign of vile violence against the Palestinian population. Since the tragedy on October 7<sup>th</sup> committed by Hamas, the Israeli state has exacted overwhelming and disproportionate violence against the Palestinians, masquerading it as "justice" in the name of revenge. Flattening people's homes, hospitals, schools, burring children under rubble and killing thousands of innocent

civilians can never be labeled as anything other than a genocide. It is so clear through these events that there is no moral justification for violent revenge campaigns, it can very often lead to cruelty and no closure. Like Thorfinn, Israel's escalation does not bring justice, it gives room for injustice in hopes of potentially fulfilling a revenge campaign. It breeds deeper hatred, suffering, and the conditions for future violence. Both narratives highlight the same truth: revenge does not lead to resolution.

Thorfinn's years of violent sins without revenge makes him increasingly hollow, detached, and emotionally unstable, which Askeladd fully manipulates. This all ties back to the idea that violence is not the path to closure, because Thorfinn can never win against Askeladd and the world through violence, no matter how skilled he is. Only through his strength to let go and willingness to stop the cycle of violence will he be able to find closure and focus on building himself and his community.

In the second season of *Vinland Saga*, the anime shifts focus to Thorfinn's emotional and psychological state after his long-desired goal of killing Askeladd is fulfilled, not by him, but by another. Even after years of waiting to kill Askeladd, rather than feeling vindicated that his father's murderer has died, Thorfinn is consumed by an overwhelming emptiness and rage at the fact that Askeladd was killed by someone other than him. This goes to show how his pursuit of vengeance has left him hollow, unable of finding closure despite Askeladd being dead. Much of his life had been driven by the desire to kill Askeladd, and now, with that driving force gone, Thorfinn is left with no aim. This shift in Thorfinn's character highlights how you can never be

satisfied if the only thing giving your life, is revenge; you will only waste time on a futile effort. This message is often not shown in traditional revenge narratives, but I think it's an important thing to realize. The quote from *Forgiveness and Revenge* by Trudy Govier closely mirrors Thorfinn's experience: "Campaigns for revenge can easily become obsessive. Rather than proceeding with her own life and projects, and enjoying relationships and projects for their own sake, the vindictive person concentrates energies on past grievances, rage, hatred of an offender, and destructive plots" (Govier 10). This perfectly encapsulates Thorfinn's existence. His entire existence revolved around a single destructive goal, and when it vanished, so did his sense of self.

The obsessive cycle of revenge is a very real danger to society. On a larger scale, we have seen the dangerous revenge-driven rhetoric that nations use to justify state-driven campaigns of violence. We can look at the United States' War on Terror after 9/11; the government responded with an extreme military operation that resulted in the deaths of millions of civilians across Iraq and Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. who had no connection to terrorism. The attackers were Saudi, but due to economic ties, the U.S. targeted easier, politically useful enemies, countries with no proven link to 9/11. The government pushed false narratives that was mass-consumed by the enraged public, and there was an overwhelming support for the attacks; people were thoroughly convinced that US was on the side fighting terrorists. Just like Thorfinn, the U.S. public, engulfed by grief and rage, supported violent retribution without considering the innocents that would be killed in the process, without considering the morality in returning violence with violence. The aftermath of this campaign? Unimaginable amounts of death and

displacements, rise of extremist groups like ISIS, rising anti-western resentment, and destabilization across the region.

The costs of Thorfinn's campaign obviously can't compare to the US's war on terror but on a smaller scale, it cost him his youth, mental health, family bonds, sense of morality, and much more. In the end, his life was only defined by the need to kill Askeladd, it had no other meaning. This is exemplified by the anime because after Askeland's death, Thorfinn just becomes a shell of a person. He is thrown into slavery, but he does not protest, he is mistreated as a slave, but he does not protest; he had practically given up hope in life after failing to avenge his father with his own hands. Govier further argues, "Indeed, this feeling can be a joy delicious and sweet—but it is often short-lived and achieved at a high cost" (Govier 9). Thorfinn's short-lived satisfaction in avenging his father is overshadowed by the immense emotional toll it takes on him. He achieves the moment of retribution only to realize that it has brought him no peace, no closure, only more suffering and an overwhelming sense of hollowness.

Additionally, in season two of *Vinland Saga*, Thorfinn's character development is facilitated by his experiences on Ketil's farm as a slave. Stripped of his identity as a warrior, Thorfinn is forced to confront the guilt from his victims in battle. He struggles with this guilt and emotional baggage every night on the farm which begins to take a toll on his mental being. As the season progressed, Thorfinn meets Einar, another slave at the farm that came after Thorfinn. Einar and Thorfinn would be partners on Ketil's farm. Einar was an important character who reminded Thorfinn of his past and made him confront it; as a victim of war, Einar would question whether Thorfinn has been a part of wars, if he has killed men, pillaged villages, etc. Thorfinn is again overcome by guilt as he reflects on his life and begins trying to make amends.

This was really the turning point where he becomes disgusted with violence and starts embracing pacifism. Gradually, he begins to reject the values of honor and revenge that once defined him, and instead, starts filling his emptiness with ideas for a kinder and better world that he wishes to cultivate. Thorfinn wants to make up for his past wrongdoings by creating a land based on pacifism, he wants to create a settlement, in distant lands free of war, slavery, plunder, etc., so that the people can live peacefully. This was a full circle moment for the story, Thorfinn had abandoned violence and started seeking other things in life that brought him fulfillment, showing how beyond the hatred, vengeance and desire to commit violence lies a greater sense of fulfillment.

Thorfinn's commitment to pacifism was always tested throughout the second season; he vowed to never strike anyone, regardless of their actions against him. There is one moment in the Anime that best shows Thorfinn's commitment. When the Danish king was raiding villages to consolidate power, he sent an army to Ketil's large farm, where Thorfinn was a slave. The farmers were obviously in protest of this attack and decided to take arms and fight the overwhelmingly stronger Danish army. They quickly gave up after realizing their sheer disadvantage, however the head of the farm still wanted to fight. Thorfinn, disgusted by the ensuing violence, decided to confront the Danish king, walking into his camp unarmed. The guards were obviously not going to let him pass but Thorfinn was determined. He decided to challenge the strongest guard in exchange for an audience with the king; if Thorfinn could withstand 100 punches from the guard, they would let him through. Thorfinn took all the attacks and did not retaliate, earning the respect of the guards; this is where the iconic phrase "I have no enemies" in context of Vinland Saga was born.

During Thorfinn's conversation with the Danish king, Canute, it was apparent that both men want to attain peace. Canute believes peace requires control, dominance, and targeted violence; the ends justify the means mindset. Thorfinn believes the same can be achieved through forgiveness, empathy, and nonviolent means. This ideology has been successful throughout history; we can look at the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., who led a civil disobedience movement, using nonviolent protests to achieve political goals. Despite constant threats, arrests, and attacks, King refused to retaliate with violence believing that "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence..." and further increases resentment. Through this disciplined resistance, King became a huge figure in the civil rights movement, making real political and social changes. Similarly, Thorfinn was able to impress Canute with his ideas and dedication to pacifism. Despite having launched a massive attack, Canute chose to withdraw from Ketil's farm, out of respect and curiosity for Thorfinn and his methods of achieving peace. When I saw him withdraw from Ketil's farm, I was a little unimpressed because I couldn't see why he would do that after stationing his men, ready to take over. In hindsight, I think Canute also wanted Thorfinn's ideas for peace to win. Canute believes he was left with no choice other than attaining peace through total domination, regardless of the deaths and brutality in the process, but no human enjoys the deaths of innocent people; Canute can barely stomach the casualties himself. That is why he left Thorfinn alone, he wants Thorfinn's ideals to win; however, he will still continue to progress in his search for peace because patience is not an option for both men.

Thorfinn's journey encouraged me and many people to reflect on their lives and analyze whether there is or has been instances where forgiveness, and empathy may have led to closure then holding resentment or desire for revenge. In an interview on YouTube with the author, Makoto Yukimura, he states that "if Thorfinn can demonstrate the strength to choose a life of kindness, I want to inspire others to do the same" (Yukimura, interview by Garnt). I found this really interesting because throughout the first season, Yukimura illustrated violence in such a well-choreographed manner that many viewers, including me, were drawn to the anime for the violent battles. There were very subtle hints of the author's true message as we'd all later find out. In hindsight, this makes sense because the attractive violent encounters get the attention of more viewers, and the true intention of the author is exposed to more people. Additionally, Yukimura mentions he was unsure how people would react to the transformation, but he was surprised by the positive response that Vinland saga was receiving, even without the violence. I think this positive response was partly due to the slow process that Yukimura took to dismantle violence in his work. It started with the burden on Thorfinn from his past actions, illustrated by vivid nightmares of the murders committed by Thorfinn, showing the detrimental effect of violence. Next, Yukimura demonstrates the strength and endurance of pacifists in the face of oppression and the rewards they receive for their resistance. Yukimura demonstrated this through many events on the farm; the most prominent of them was defending the farm from King Canute's forces through non-violent methods, which I previously described. The interview helped me see Yukimura's vision and logic behind Vinland Saga and reinforced the ideas I had for the author's intentions.



To conclude, through Thorfinn's transformation, Vinland Saga questions the traditional values of honor and masculinity in Nordic culture and redefines strength as the ability to endure hardships, forgive wrongdoings, and seek means of alternate pacifistic methods of inspiring change in people.

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