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December 11th, 2018

Response

Modern Life and the Echoes of Murder

Stagger Lee is an old folk tale that has been remade countless times by many different artists throughout the ages. When Modern Life is War a contemporary punk band from the U.S tackle this traditional ballad they do so in an interesting and compelling way. Instead of being an advisory against the wayward life and in opposition to a dangerous outlaw, they instead hold the killer up and internalize the character. This is primarily done throughout the ballad by the narrative being told in the first person. The song starts, “My name is Stagger Lee!” and is sung with a loud and raucous way. Modern Life is War’s “Stagger Lee” explores the darker elements of American life and its violent traditions. By reflecting on the Stagger Lee’s struggle against common problems and by making him a triumphant anti-hero the ballad sung by the Pennsylvanian punkers reveal a darker side to American history. To me the most interesting kinds of stories are the dark ones. Films such as Logan (2017), which tells the story of an old and decrepit Wolverine, approaches a familiar story in a dark and unoptimistic fashion. In Logan, Wolverine not only fights the typical super villain but lives with regret and struggles with getting old and in the end the true villain he has to fight is in fact himself, literally. Like Stagger Lee, Logan is a dark narrative that raises up a anti-hero to fight the darker parks of everyday life.

We all struggle on a day-to-day basis, struggle with work, with other people, with relationships and money. In the Modern Life Is War’s song Stagger Lee faces off against many of these things. In the song it states that “my girl threw me out last week/ and I’m fucking broke” and “I’ve got nothing to lose tonight.” All of these lines are from first stanza establishing and it establishes the character and the character’s plight. The fact that the song is directly addressing the audience makes it more immediate and this coupled with the swearing really drives home the anger and danger in the voice of the character. The third stanza reveals that his ‘girl’ is cheating on him and he rushes out to face this brutal truth and shoot them. The repetition he has nothing to lose reveals the powerful sound of the music itself and the singing that is loud and angry. The band’s name itself alludes to struggle in modern life. Much like Stagger Lee in their song the band seems to be saying that the world is violent, treacherous and a constant fight. The fact that they reposition this American classic to reflect the darker and crueller elements of life really shows American life in a cold and brutal light.

We all know what an anti hero is, like Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name or any film noir detective story. What might not be known though is that traditionally ballads have a long history of telling the stories of outlaws and murderers. The US Library of Congress on their website disclose that outlaws were a common topic for the musical tales that were consumed by the masses. Therefore the fact that ‘Stagger Lee’ is a song that has reworked multiple times over many decades should come as no surprise. What is surprising though is the particular approach that this song takes on this title character. Stagger Lee in this song is a vengeful killer and his actions are deplorable but in this song this seems to be a good thing! Once again the fact that the song is in first person positions the audience with the killer. The second stanza he actually receives help from a man at the bar but instead of thanking him Stagger “smashes him in the teeth.” He then proceeds to walk in on his ex and shoots the two lovers. The song says “I see the fear in their eyes. I point my Colt .45 and I feel divine.” The fact that the final line of the final verse is “I feel divine” as he shoots his ex lover is a little disturbing. Instead of talking about the ramifications of the murder the song just ends with his elation as he kills. The final lines are “Stagger Lee, you’re a bad, bad man/ Oh Stagger Lee, you’re going straight to hell.” By positioning the killer as the main character and focusing on his nefarious actions and not the ramifications of them the song is following the darker side of life in American history.

The tale of Jimmy’s murder at the hands of Stagger Lee has been told many times before and is an American classic but none of the other versions are quite like Modern Life is War’s punk version. This version of the folk tale is a dark reflection on American life and its history. The song dwells on the everyday struggles of a man that is murderous and has hit his breaking point. By championing the struggles of such a devious man and placing the audience in his position of the killer the song truly does reveal the darker side of life.