

Django Unchained (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 45 min.

Our ratings: V -8; L -9; S/N -3.

Our stra rating (1-5): 4

*Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit
and oppression;*

under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.

Psalm 10.7

Django and King Schultz become
partners in bounty
hunting. 2013 Weinstein
Co.

Fans of Quentin Tarantino expect buckets of blood and smart, wry dialogue, and an insight or two in his films— and they will not be disappointed by his latest offering in which he refashions the traditional Western and romance genres. In Django Unchained (“the “D” is silent”) he combines a touch of Mel Brooks’ satirical Blazing Saddles, a dash of the 1966 spaghetti Western Django, and a generous dose of Sam Peckinpah with a 19th century version of the German myth of Siegfried and Brunnhilde—and comes up with a view of the South that is the mirror opposite of Gone With the Wind. However, I suspect that what will offend a great many viewers is the many times the “N” word is used—according to one reviewer who was bothered enough to count them, 109 times. As we will see, there no doubt that Tarantino’s rubbing our noses in this expression of racism is intentional. (I would love to have eavesdropped on a meeting of the film ratings board when they screened this film!)

The film opens in the year 1858 with former dentist Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), an immigrant from Germany, riding a funny little cart with a giant tooth mounted on its roof. He

apparently has been looking for the slave party heading toward Mississippi led by the Speck brothers. Coming upon them at night in a woods, he asks the slaves if anyone knows three Brittle brothers for whom he is hunting (we learn he is a bounty hunter using his dental cart as a cover). When the slave named Django (Jamie Foxx) says that he knows them, King tries to buy the slave, but the brothers have resented the foreigner and refuse to deal with him. The result is that King kills one, shoots the horse of the other so that its body injures and pins him to the ground. As he leaves with Django installed on the dead brother's horse, King frees the remaining slaves and tells them they have two choices—free Peck and return to slavery with him, or kill him and head north (he even shows them the North Star). As the two ride away, we hear a cry for mercy followed by a gunshot.

In flashbacks we gradually learn more of Django's back-story. He had been married to a slave named Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), named after the German mythological heroine by her German mistress. When the two tried to run away, they were caught by the Brittle brothers who beat and branded them on their cheeks upon their return. Their cruel master had then sold them to separate slave owners. Django had been on his way to his new owner in Mississippi when King had "bought" him.

When the two ride into a town, we hear the first of numerous comments that result from characters looking on in disbelief, "I never seen a n--r ridin' a horse." King gets right to business, creating such a stir in the saloon by bringing in a black man with him that the sheriff is summoned., With little warning King promptly shoots the lawman with his derringer. Then comes the US Marshall and virtually every armed man in town, to whom King explains that he is a bounty hunter with a warrant for the sheriff, once a murderer and thief, dead or alive. Because it's easier transporting a dead body than a live prisoner, King kills his quarry, collecting his reward when he turns over the bodies to a marshal.

King makes Django an offer—if he will go with him to Tennessee where the Brittle brothers are working on a plantation, he will set him free, give him the horse and pay him \$75. It's an offer he black man cannot refuse. They travel north and find the lavish plantation where the brothers are employed as overseers by Spenser "Big Daddy" Bennett (Don Johnson). They tell Spenser that they are master and valet looking to buy a slave girl. Allowed to look around, they quickly find and dispatch two of the brothers. The third one, trying to flee on a horse, King shoots with his sniper rifle. Spenser and others rush up, but reluctantly let the two go when shown the papers proving the brothers are fugitives from the law.

That night Big Daddy and a large posse, all wearing white hoods (seven years before the ex-Confederate soldiers founded the KKK in 1865), ride in pursuit of the bounty hunters. In the funniest scene in the film they stop, many of them complaining about the poor quality of their hoods. Several say they can't see because of the badly spaced eye holes, and they decide not to wear them. Then after more complaints and argument, they obey the boss's order and put them back on. The thug who had brought the hoods is so upset by the criticism that he rides away. The others ride up to the campfire where the dentist cart is parked. To their surprise the two they hope to kill are not there. But they are not far away, King firing into the cart, triggering a huge explosion that kills several riders outright and sends the rest fleeing in confusion and terror. (The explosive used here and later in the film might be another anachronism. I think they do call it dynamite in one scene—though the explosive was not invented by Alfred Nobel until 1867.)

Coming to admire Django (King shows more than once his hatred of slavery) and valuing the "natural" shooting ability of his friend, King makes another offer—join him during the winter in bounty hunting. He will give him a third of the rewards and will also accompany him to Mississippi to find Broomhilda.

Django agrees, and there follows a series of scenes of them in pursuit of fugitives, the ex-slave increasing his shooting skills, as well as growing more confident in himself despite the racism he encounters everywhere. King also helps Django with his literacy and social manners.

In the spring they arrive in Mississippi where they track "the slave who speaks German" to "Candie Land," a plantation named after its owner Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). They make contact with Calvin in a Greenville brothel "The Cleopatra" where Calvin Candie, alleged to be a Francophile, stages a series of "mandingo fights," bare-knuckled battles in which the victor puts the vanquished to death. Calvin is known throughout the area as breeder of the best fighters. What follows when they journey to Candie Land and Django at last finds his true love, I will leave to you to discover.

However, I do want to describe Stephen, the black head of staff and apparent manager of the estate, so chillingly depicted by Samuel L. Jackson. Next to Calvin he is the most powerful man on the plantation, able even to order the white overseers around. Like a court jester, he is even free to poke fun at his master and give him strong advice in a tone of voice that no white man would dare use. In a sense he is that lowest of the low among black slaves, a man who has become more white than his master. It is he who observes Broomhilda's reaction to Django and suspects that the two know each other. Thus he becomes the big obstacle to King and Django's plan to buy Broomhilda at a cheap price and leave peaceably. He might better have kept his knowledge to himself, because... Tarantino gives us a comic book look at the Old South that repudiates the rosy view given by *Gone With the Wind* and works by other sentimental apologists who look at slavery through the songs of Steven Foster.

That hated "N" word is used so often that it almost begins to sound routine, as it indeed was until fairly recent time—though I can remember my parents saying "colored" or

“Negro” when speaking to strangers. The frequent use of the slanderous label might also have arisen out of Tarantino’s having watched hundreds of Westerns during his formative years—and scarcely in any of them was there a cowboy or soldier who was black. This despite the fact that there were from ten to fifteen thousand black cowboys and several regiments of black cavalymen, called “Buffalo Soldiers.” That was a West ignored by novelists and filmmakers. Thus Tarantino, working like a white Spike Lee, pays honor in a perverse sort of way to the presence of blacks in the real West. I wonder if the filmmaker has watched Bill Cosby’s wonderful series *Black History, Lost, Strayed, or Stolen?* I’ll bet the video store he worked in had the set of VHS tapes on which it was released.

This film will not be for everyone—I have heard from several viewers who have winced at its violence and language—but for those who can, it offers plenty of food for thought. It does not come as close to the masterful *Pulp Fiction* in theological insight, but for thinking about racism it is almost as good as a Spike Lee film.

For Reflection/Discussion

This probably contains some spoilers in the last few questions.

1. What did you find disturbing in Mr. Tarantino’s newest film? Which was the more disturbing—the violence, or the language, especially the frequency of the “N” word?
2. Compare the way the deaths are depicted in the shootouts in this film with those in the old traditionalist Westerns? How does one way cover up the violence so that most viewers never have to think about it? (Note that in the war film *Three Kings* the filmmaker even more graphically shows us what a bullet does to the human body.)
4. Do you think that Tarantino goes overboard in his depiction

of violence, especially in the last sequence at Candie Land? Maybe he has a fixation on violence, or—?

5. How is King Schulz a mixture of the bad and the good? Despite his ruthlessness, how is he an agent of grace for Django?

6. How do we see Django grow and change as the story develops? In what ways is he like Siegfried in the story that King tells? How does the question uttered by one of the captives in the slave wagon (shown at the very end of the end credits) add to the mythic status of Django? In fact, how is the bloody denouement at Candie land and the two lovers riding away mythic rather than realistic?

7. What do you think of Calvin Candie? How deep is his layer of culture? How do we see him exercising his power? What has power done to him?

8. What has happened to Stephen over his lifetime? In what sense is he more whiter than his white owner? How might this have been his way of coping with his captivity? How is he like his master in regards to power?

9. Do you agree that there are reasons for the writer/director's over-use of the "N" word? Black slaves were usually "invisible" in pre-Civil War days. How does Django stand out? (We might say "rise above" his status, as so many characters remark.) How might his refusal to abide by the status quo get him into trouble in the future? What do you think he might do in regard to the coming Civil War?

10. Compare Tarantino's film with *Gone With the Wind*. For many decades this was the accepted view of the South and of the "devoted" slave. What do you think of Tarantino's revised version?

11. With a few exceptions, how have Westerns depicted blacks—or were they absent from most of the traditional ones?

that starred such heroes as John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Gene Autry, Randolph Scott, Tom Mix, etc.?

12. How have black actors fared in Hollywood from the days of Shirley Temple and Stepin Fetchit to the present? For an excellent dark comedy that deals with stereotypes of blacks see Spike Lee's Bamboozled.

13. Does the film ever suggest that there are alternatives to violence? Why does King refuse to shake Calvin's proffered hand near the end? Might it not have been better for him to accept it rather than to stick with his scruples?

14. Do you see any place in the film in which the New Testament ethic might be followed? What do you think is the film's view of human nature: capable of changing, or fixed? In regard to this, think of Djangle's qualms over shooting the outlaw now turned farmer. What does King do to talk him into shooting the man, even with his son working beside him in the field? How might God be seen as present—and if so, where?