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## Rationale for V for Vendetta

Susan Spangler  
*SUNY-Fredonia*

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## *V for Vendetta*

By Alan Moore and David Lloyd with Steve Whitaker and Siobhan Dodds

Rationale by Susan Spangler, SUNY-Fredonia

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### Grade Level and Audience

*V for Vendetta* is recommended for high school readers in English, history, or government classes.

### Plot Summary

Moore paints a bleak picture of a futuristic London in the opening scenes of *V for Vendetta*. In Book 1, “Europe After the Reign,” England is slowly recovering from war. A fascist government led by Adam Susan and “Fate,” a computer, has an iron grip on the country. Susan relies on his government ministers (whose agencies are named for body parts) to squash any sort of rebellion. These include Derek Almond, head of The Finger (police); and Eric Finch, head of The Nose (investigations).

Fighting against the fascists is V, a being of superhuman speed, agility, grace, and cunning. As readers eventually learn, V was held in Larkhill concentration camp and given experimental drugs that gave him extraordinary power but which killed all of V’s fellow prisoners. After escaping from Larkhill, V seeks revenge on his captors and the government that held him. He begins by blowing up the Houses of Parliament on November 5, an allusion to Guy Fawkes’ Gunpowder Plot of 1605. It is during the explosion that V rescues Evey Hammond, a munitions worker being attacked by Fingermen, and takes her to his home, the Shadow Gallery.

V quickly and efficiently dispatches his enemies. Lewis Prothero, former Larkhill concentration camp commander and the “Voice of Fate,” is driven insane when V burns his collectible dolls before his eyes. V forces Bishop Anthony Lilliman, former Larkhill spiritual advisor, to ingest a cyanide-laced communion wafer. Delia Surridge, the doctor who conducted the drug experiments, is injected with poison as she sleeps.

Book 2, “This Vicious Cabaret,” concentrates on Evey Hammond’s character development. As V’s houseguest, Evey has learned much from V but wonders about her role in V’s plans. V surprises Evey by releasing her, and she begins living with Gordon Deitrich, a small-time bootlegger. Gordon is killed by another petty criminal, and Evey seeks revenge by trying to gun the killer down. She is thwarted and captured, though, apparently by government authorities. Evey is routinely tortured for information on V, though she refuses to reveal anything. In her cell, she begins receiving notes, ostensibly from another prisoner, Valerie, who writes her autobiography on toilet paper and somehow sneaks it to Evey. Though Valerie was tortured, she remained strong, clinging to the one inch of her that the government could not take, and her words hearten Evey as she faces the same treatment. When Evey chooses to die rather than sign a false confession, she is suddenly set free by the guard. She wanders out of the prison and into the Shadow Gallery, where she realizes that her prison ordeal was an illusion orchestrated by V

“because [he] wanted to set [her] free.” Evey struggles with, but ultimately accepts her freedom, transformed by the prison experience. V hints that Evey will have a part in his “finale.”

Book 3, “The Land of Do-As-You-Please,” brings together the disparate threads of the narrative into a satisfying conclusion. V detonates several bombs around London and announces that the citizens will not be watched or listened to for three days. The leader, Susan, is convinced to take a motorcade through the streets to calm the people. Finch, on V’s trail throughout the book, correctly guesses V’s hiding place in Victoria Station. Susan is gunned down in the motorcade just as Finch shoots and mortally wounds V in the subway. He stumbles back to the Shadow Gallery to die in Evey’s arms, and when she realizes that V has prepared her to take his place, Evey gladly accepts his mantle, appearing at midnight as V. In the explosions that follow, Finch’s assistant, Dominic Stone, is wounded and taken back to the Shadow Gallery by Evey, ostensibly to begin his training as the next V. Finch, by this time the only remaining government minister, wanders off into the night, alone.

### **Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work**

As with most adolescent literature, *V for Vendetta* deals with identity issues. Investigators hunt for V’s real identity throughout the narrative, and Evey also struggles with that issue throughout her prison ordeal and again when she takes up V’s cause. The bigger issue, of course, is that V isn’t really a person. V is an idea, and “you can’t kill an idea.”

This novel capitalizes on American tropes (interesting that it is written by a Brit and set in England) that students will readily identify with, the underdog and the fight against injustice. Much like Atticus Finch, V is an underdog. How can one being possibly fight against a system of injustice? Can one person win against incredible odds? The idea of fighting against fascist governments has been a mainstay in American fiction since before the American Revolution and is continued today by the recent Tea Party movement. Thomas Jefferson hinted that governments need to undergo revolution every twenty years, and it is clear in *V for Vendetta* that revolution is needed for England.

With that trope comes the question of a responsible and humane government’s role in the daily lives of its citizens. The idea of individual freedoms balanced against society’s needs is prevalent throughout the narrative. What makes someone free is also a main issue that Evey Hammond and Eric Finch deal with.

V’s character is certainly a strength of the text. Readers will be drawn to V’s incredible speed, agility, wisdom, and composure. Though not one with superhero powers, V is certainly a superhuman. Teachers might also draw on V’s use of allusion throughout the text. References to classic literature such as to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and William Blake’s poetry are topped only by pop culture references to “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Rolling Stones and a children’s book by Enid Blyton. Like all effective allusions, they add meaning and depth to this work, and teachers will want to spend some time unpacking them.

## Possible Objections

In U.S. school systems, social institutions that thrive on order, absolute submission to stated rules, and authority, a novel in which anarchy is promoted and romanticized may prove problematic. V advocates responsible citizenry in an anarchy, though, and students could be encouraged to think critically about rules (or lack thereof) and their effect on social order.

V's complex and compelling character may also present a problem for teachers. V is a moral character, but his morals do not coincide with those of the mainstream government. He kills people, justifiably in his mind, yet he is labeled a "terrorist." Is murder justified if it is committed against fascists? This question is one that teachers are likely to ask their students.

Violent images of explosions and murder as well as frontal nudity run throughout the book and may upset readers. Sub-plotlines also involve issues of prostitution, domestic violence, pedophilia, sexual orientation, mental cruelty, and extra-marital sex, which will certainly raise eyebrows for some readers (and their parents). Given the plot lines in canonical literature, however, teachers may be able to minimize objections with references to well-accepted works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*.

## Ideas for Implementation

Teachers might begin by having students investigate (perhaps through a webquest) Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Understanding Fawkes' motivation for trying to destroy the House of Lords will facilitate a discussion on the need for elections and other opportunities for opposition to the standing government to be heard. The recent revolution in Egypt or Thomas Jefferson's famous quote, "God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion," in regards to Shay's Rebellion, are other examples teachers could draw on to show why change to government may be necessary or even advocated. Which countries in the world have political systems in which there is healthy political opposition to the current government leaders? Which do not? What are the qualities of a healthy political system?

Throughout their reading, students could be encouraged to draw connections between the government in *V for Vendetta* and other governments, fictitious or real. What can students learn specifically about the government in the narrative that they find oppressive? Students could also investigate various people/groups that have shown their resistance to governments throughout history (Sinn Fein, Greenpeace, the PLO, Thoreau, Gandhi, M.L. King, "Braveheart") and report on the success of these people/groups as a larger project or as part of a culminating assessment.

Teachers may also want students to independently investigate the allusions throughout *V for Vendetta*. They might choose from those in a complete list, compiled at <http://www.enjolasworld.com/Annotations/Alan%20Moore/V%20for%20Vendetta/V%20for%20Vendetta%20Revised%20-%20Complete.html>

Because "you can't kill an idea," students might want to continue the story with Evey acting as V and Stone as the apprentice. Students could speculate on England's future without a central

government and use the graphic genre or a storyboard as a medium for expressing their predictions. Will a new government rise? Could a true anarchy work? What will the new V's role be in England's future? Students could answer these questions and more in their predictions.

### Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Because *V for Vendetta* focuses on an oppressive government/dystopia, novels such as *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World* or *The Giver* could be appropriately paired with it. *Hamlet* also elicits quite a few comparisons using a revenge theme, search for identity, and evil government leaders. If used in a history or government class, discussions on the current Tea Party movement would be in order, or it could be paired with *Persepolis* to contrast *V* with a non-fiction account of an oppressive government and a revolution *toward* fascism rather than away from it.

### Awards

2006 Prometheus Award, for libertarian science fiction.

### Reviews

“This was Alan Moore's first major comics work, and it paired him with David Lloyd, an artist with a brooding (if occasionally murky), realist style that emphasizes the drab nature of this dystopian future. The result of their collaboration is an intriguing but flawed work.” – Darren Latta, contributing editor, UGO Entertainment

“...at the core of things, *V for Vendetta* is about the ideas it presents. In a three-book arc, Moore creates a cinematic story that entertains and, more importantly, will leave readers questioning their ideals for years after the last chapter is read. It is another fantastic entry into the world of subversive comics by the industry's best.” – William Jones, GraphicNovelReporter

This book has an eloquence and beauty to it, stemming from both the writing and the artwork, both of which are at the peak of their craft. The book remains one of Alan Moore's finest works, no mean feat considering we consider Moore to be up there amongst the all-time best writers to grace comics with their work.” – Grovel, graphic novel reviews

### Resources/References

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