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Heroism, Terrorism, and the In-Between: The Validation of Violence in *V for Vendetta*

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“Remember, remember, the fifth of November. The gunpowder treason and plot. I know of no reason why the gunpowder treason... Should ever be forgot” (Moore 14).

IN ALAN MOORE and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta*, a graphic novel made up of three installments, the titular character V dons a Guy Fawkes mask in celebration of a man who is historically known as a terrorist. Every fifth of November, British citizens remember the Gunpowder Treason Plot, where Fawkes was arrested for attempting to blow up the Houses of Parliament. At first glance, Fawkes can be seen as a man who intended harm; however, there is much debate to whether he should be considered a terrorist, or a rebellious hero. For a man who used premeditated violence as a means of resolution, V slips into the same recognizable guise, but is it for the same reasons? The choices one makes, and the judgements that they receive, is dependent on the environment from which they originate or currently reside in. V, though representative of a supposed extremist and violent in his behaviors, exemplifies the traits of a traditional hero rather than a terrorist.

Guy Fawkes, the character model used for V’s character, is celebrated every November fifth in the United Kingdom, although the holiday’s purpose is debated. While some may honor the man, who was committed to his unyielding belief in revolution, others see the day as one to celebrate the failure in a terrorist’s actions. The divide, though weakened over time with those favoring the side of the former, still creates a dichotomy of how Fawkes should be recognized. This is a question that arises within *V for Vendetta*, as we support the protagonist of a man who embodies the ideals of

revolutionary change through his Fawkes costume and violent actions. In the context of the world in which these people live, V's purpose of using forceful engagement against his enemies is justifiable.

Norsefire, the dystopian government that rules over the United Kingdom in the world of *V for Vendetta*, exhibits violent actions of their own that requires the retaliation of V's character. Themes of prostitution, rape, and physical attacks introduce us to the world in the first couple of pages of the graphic novel. Deborah Bell, author of the book *Masquerade: Essays on Tradition and Innovation Worldwide* describes that the fictional government, "resonates with images of Nazi Germany. Anyone who deviates racially, ethnically, or sexually from the Norsefire norm is placed in prison or a concentration camp-style facility" (168). Evey Hammond, one of the protagonist's and later the successor to the mantle of V, prostitutes her sixteen-year-old body unknowingly to an undercover "Fingerman," a brutalized version of a police officer. This encounter evolves into attempted rape, before V gets involved causing the murder of several Fingermen. The sequence of these events happens consecutively and over the course of five pages, setting the tone and attitude that Moore and Lloyd's characters have against violence. Violence is to be expected in this society as one of the Fingermen states, "You'll do anything we want and then we'll kill you. That's our prerogative" (Moore 11). This privilege of doing whatever they please is a right only exclusive to those with power in this society, and it is obviously abused if these characters seek to take advantage of a young girl.

The plot of *V for Vendetta* mirrors Guy Fawkes' world not only through setting, but through idealistic principles, bringing elements of what Fawkes' believed in to a more contemporary world. This fictional world reflects a British historical backdrop that Moore alludes to constantly. The former prime minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher was disliked: "aggressive authoritarianism and populist nationalism were the elements of Thatcherism from which many on the Left drew parallels with fascism" (Gray 37). The graphic novel is a critique on conservatism and their influence on government, depicting the obvious misuse of power and maltreatment of citizens. To be titled a hero implies opposition, and therefore V should be considered a hero because he is opposed to the illustrated antagonistic government. Although, V recognizes his role as a hero differently than one would expect.



Figure 1. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* p. 10, panel 5

The first chapter in the graphic novel is titled, “The Villain,” however this does not imply that the protagonist, V, is a villain. The first page of the novel begins with scene-to-scene panels, portraying various locations of the Norsefire occupied Great Britain. Every panel, however is connected through the radio dialogue of “The Voice of Fate,” which is a news-type outlet for Norsefire. Besides this, there is no other spoken dialogue until after the title chapter is introduced. The chapter text box appears in the fifth panel of page ten, along with a full-person view of V in costume (figure 1). This panel should imply that V is the villain, as he is the only character in view, however by contrast, Moore and Lloyd are trying to push that the Voice of Fate, or the Norsefire government in general is the villain of the story. This subliminal push becomes more apparent in the chapter through the interactions of direct government officials, as V does not attack without reason, unlike those who have positions of power within Norsefire. Consequently, we can deduce that Norsefire is the named villain of this chapter and the villain in the larger scheme of the story.

At a more detailed look, however, we also observe V’s appearance through a mirror, implying that the reader has taken perspective through V’s eyes. This change in perspective makes us compliant to V’s actions, as we are invited into his viewpoint in an opportunity to understand him and his motives better. If Moore is not insinuating that the Voice of Fate is the villain, then he is suggesting that we are yielding to the actions of V, no

matter how violent. This suggestion is the epitome of Evey's role at the beginning of the graphic novel, as she innocently plays along with V until it becomes too much for her. Despite the overwhelming situations she encounters, she eventually learns to accept her role as partner to V, just like the reader must do in order to recognize the place V is coming from. We are as much of V in this story as V is himself, and though the insinuation that the Voice of Fate is the villain from the get-go is convincing, our involvement in V's "villainy" is implied.



Figure 2. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* p. 13, panel 8

Despite the hidden detail of who the true villain may be, we are thrown off the scent because V introduces himself as a villain to Evey. He says to her in the eighth panel, "Me? I'm the king of the twentieth century. I'm the boogeyman. The villain... The black sheep of the family" (Moore 13, fig. 2). The self-described villain, however, does this in an ironic sense.

He has recognizably saved Evey from a villainous situation, yet still titles himself as a villain. Synonyms for “villain” include “criminal” or more notably, “lawbreaker” which is a title deserving of V. Though negatively connoted, V is a lawbreaker in a land where law is without reason. The laws that Norsefire has put forth are tyrannical and regime-like, therefore V acknowledges how he is a “villain” in an untraditional sense. Due to this backwards logic of being a villain in a villainous society, similar to a negative cancelling out a negative, V is in a sense calling himself a hero. Without the accompaniment of the title “...The black sheep of the family” (Moore 13), this insinuation would be less clear, as V states he is the odd one out in this world. Therefore, we can now consider our involvement as readers as an act of heroism rather than villainy, as we can support the man in insurrectionary violence in a world that requires such action.

One of the more depraved events in the graphic novel is the government’s involvement of concentration camps, specifically the camp located near Larkhill, England. This is the same camp that created who V is today. The first book in *V for Vendetta*, *Europe After the Reign* focuses on V’s personal vendetta against those that did him wrong. He exacts revenge on the leaders in Larkhill such as mentally incapacitating Lewis Prothero (the voice behind Fate), murdering a pedophile priest, Bishop Anthony Lilliman, and executing Dr. Delia Surridge, who was the main scientist at the resettlement camp. These three characters are villains in their own right, however V’s violent actions against them are justifiable. Prothero, Lilliman, and Surridge were all integral to the creation of the ferocious, more visceral side of Norsefire. Their contributions to the camp ultimately contributed to society, as they incentivized the inclusion of concentration camps and the idea that they could create the ideal citizen through experiments. V was one of the men involved in these horrific experiments, and therefore is justified in his reason to seek revenge. Although V’s actions are violent, they are appropriate and reasoned unlike the overly despicable actions of Norsefire.



Figure 3. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* p. 54, panel 6

V exhibits intensely violent behavior throughout the graphic novel but shows a principled justification with each action. V murders Lilliman through a poisonous Communion wafer, however gives him a proper, spiritual send off. V wants Lilliman to understand his actions, and although V states, “I am the devil” (Moore 60), he says this to man who has been hypocritical in his faith. Lloyd alludes to this earlier in by reflecting a pair of devil horns off of V’s wig (fig. 3). V is not the devil, despite this allusion, but rather he is the “boogeyman,” the “black sheep,” and the man who is not afraid to be different in a world where different is considered dangerous. The devil is connotatively considered dangerous; therefore, the symbolism and analogy are appropriate. Likewise, the devil is often a symbol for chaos, which a theme actively present throughout the story, as V seeks total anarchy and detachment from governmental order. In a sense, V is the judge, jury, and executioner for a man who has lied, cheated, and broken his faith

without remorse. Lilliman's death is quick, which is something that many prisoners are Larkhill could not afford.

Compared to Surridge's death, V takes a more humane approach as he injects her with a painless, unknown poison: "I killed you ten minutes ago, while you were asleep" (Moore 75). V though unflinching in his decisions to kill, does not murder without reason or cause, and does so in ways that seem to cause less pain. Debatably, the most pain that we see V inflict on an antagonistic character is not through physical violence, but rather through mental impairment. V perpetrates an event that causes Prothero to become incurably insane, thus debilitating his personhood and ability to act as the Voice of Fate. Since he does not kill Prothero, V can understand the differences between when it is necessary to kill, and when it is not, alluding to some type of moral compass in his character, something that is vital to the ideals and standards of a hero.

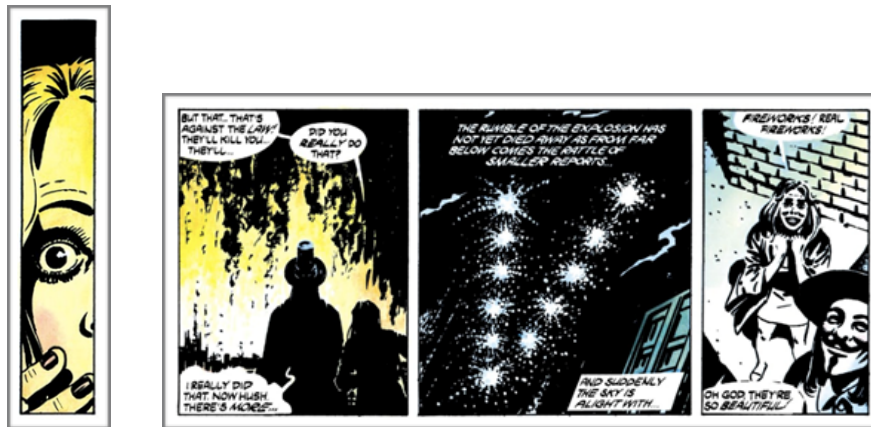


Figure 4. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, V for Vendetta p. 14, panel 3

The first act of violence we witness of V is in his heroic act of saving Evey which is then overshadowed by his preplanned attack on the Houses of Parliament. This brings in the first question of whether or not V is a terrorist or hero, especially since we have not been entirely exposed to the horrors of the Norsefire dominion up to this point. We are essentially

put into Evey's perspective, shown through a close up of her eye, watching the Houses explode in awe (fig 4). We begin to trust the man who saved her, but then watch helplessly as he destroys some of the most important buildings in the country. Evey, shocked by the event, says, "But that... That's against the law! They'll kill you..." (Moore 14). Her first thought is that the government is going to kill V, which is rational as any person blowing up a group of significant buildings could be considered a terrorist. While this may be a person's first rational thought, Evey is then transfixed by the fireworks that appear just moments afterward: "Fireworks! Real fireworks! Oh God, they're so beautiful" (14, fig 4.1). Her expression of horror from the act of violence has become totally reversed at the sight of fireworks, which is something, assumedly, that she has not seen in her life before this time. Fireworks are often used as symbols for celebration, and therefore Norsefire must have banned them to deny the rights to their citizens.



Figure 5. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, V for Vendetta p. 64

Figure 5.1. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, V for Vendetta p. 64, panel 1

Evey later becomes V's successor, but first must come to terms with V's methods of his accomplishments. Chapter Nine of the first book is titled, "Violence" and contains one of the most pertinent scenes of the graphic novel regarding the chapter's namesake. The chapter title appears in the first panel with a clear view of Evey insisting, "It's wrong, V" (Moore 64, fig. 5). Moore and Lloyd set up this panel to indicate that Evey finds violence specifically wrong. Though violence is what ultimately saved Evey from an earlier murder, she as a young girl and citizen, is blinded by Norsefire's authority and does not fully yet comprehend their terrible actions. She needs V's help in understanding why violence is necessary. After aiding in V's murder of Bishop Lilliman, Evey struggles with her moral compass: "Killing's wrong. Isn't it?" (64). The two sentences, her statement and question, are divided by two speech bubbles which show a dramatic pause in between Evey's speech that an ellipsis could not provide (fig 5.1). An ellipsis would have shown a break in speech, but since Moore and Lloyd opted out of this, we are not shown the length of time in between when Evey has a break in conscience. This breather in-between her speech lets the reader reflect on whether or not killing is actually wrong, and especially in the case of Bishop Lilliman. To this question, V responds, "Why are you asking me?" (64). V enquires Evey as to why he would have the answers when they both live in a world that kills, murders, and abuses unnecessarily and without reason. Therefore, the answer is available to us as V implies that killing is not wrong when it is the proper and only response to something that is even more violent.

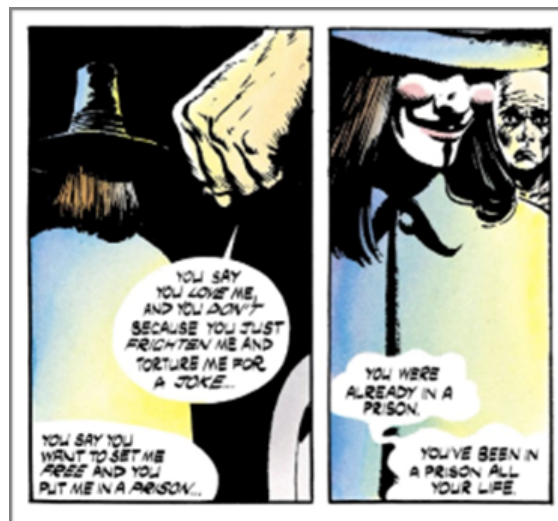


Figure 6. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* p. 168, panels 6-7

One of the biggest forms of violence in the graphic novel is not against V and the government, but instead between V and Evey. Evey, after being imprisoned in a government concentration camp discovers that V has set her up in order to “free” her from society. Upon discovering the truth, Evey is rightfully upset by V’s cruel conduct towards her. His treatment included locking her up for an indefinite amount of time, starving her, shaving her head, and waterboarding her. Eventually Evey becomes resilient, without fear, and decides she would rather die than sell out V’s whereabouts. V claims he did so out of love and that she has been imprisoned her entire life and only now has he just freed her (fig. 6). Violence is what cured Evey of her imprisonment, as she learned how to free herself completely in a world where no one is free. Evey would not have been able to realize this on her own, as she had to endure what V endured to understand why violence is necessary in the world they live.



Figure 7. Alan Moore, David Lloyd, V for Vendetta p. 83

V's violence in the graphic novel often is in response to an action committed by someone or something involving the government, although the common phrase, "You cannot fight fire with fire," does not particularly apply to this novel. A person in a sense can fight fire with fire, but they should not, as the phrase implies that the situation will end without any solution. V is committing acts of violence, but they are never unwarranted. V is consistently seen as the fire starter in the novel, but he is not who first stokes the flames of violence. Rather, those at Larkhill and the entirety of Norsefire in general are the kindling that fuel the fires that V physically starts. In other words, Norsefire creates metaphorical fires that V fights with literal fire. Specifically, V first starts the physical fire that kills many people at Larkhill (fig. 7), however his main goal was to escape rather than inflict pain. It was the doctors, soldiers, and authority figures at Larkhill that inflicted the excruciating pain that drove V to be the man he becomes. One of V's main methods of inciting violence is through explosions which cause immense fires, whether through the Houses of Parliament, the Old Bailey, or the preplanned attack on Downing Street. Though a person cannot "fight fire with fire," V manages to do so through a literal, and physical means. In fact, there is a musicality to V's violence in a way that is expressed through Lloyd's art, implying a sort of peaceful quality to V's passionate actions. Rather than looking upon V's actions negatively, they are depicted as something beautiful and melodic (fig. 8).

Unlike a terrorist, which seeks to impose fear and panic, V is a hero who inspires hope among the masses. The government tried to pin the word terrorist on V to try and turn the people against him, however the population saw the hero differently. In chapter one of book three, *The Land of Do-As-You-Please*, a little girl spray paints V's symbol on a brick wall along with the word "bollocks" on the pavement (fig. 9). The title of this chapter is "Vox Populi" which translates to "the opinions or beliefs of the majority." In this case, Moore and Lloyd are implying that V's ideals are struck by the majority of the population and they believe in his cause to the point where even an adolescent girl is involved in the governmental insurrection. People in the United Kingdom have adopted V's symbol as a way of communicating with one another that they stand with this man who they believe to be a hero and not a terrorist. Similarly, in today's world, superhero iconography has become increasingly popular in world areas of heavy political discourse. In particular the political discourse in Hong Kong

has been strong for a long time and Hongkongers are starting to adopt images, icons, and symbols of well-known superheroes to represent their distaste for government. Dan Garret, a professor at the University of Hong Kong notes the popularity of using well-known fictional figures to represent well-known figure heads. Government figure heads, and political leaders who are unpopular within the general populous are depicted as recognizable supervillains, much like Adam Susan, the party leader of Norsefire in *V for Vendetta*. Though Susan is not overtly or publicly degraded, he is eventually assassinated in public because of his dictatorial rule. During events titled the “Hong Kong Revolutions” Garret writes, “Hong Kong manifestations of *V* online visuals quote the catchphrase of contemporary revolutions: ‘People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people’” (118). This quote sums up what *V* believes in and ultimately inspires among the United Kingdom populous.

The word *vendetta* defines a person or group seeking vengeance or revenge on another person or group, and though this fits *V*’s role in the story, a personal *vendetta* is not the catalyst for his actions. Paul Moffett in his article *U for Utopia: the dystopian and eutopian visions in Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s V for Vendetta* writes, “It is unclear, within the book, whether *V* is motivated by the desire for social change or by a desire for personal vengeance, and the ‘*Vendetta*’ of the title suggests that his primary motivation is the latter. But if his motivation is personal vengeance, that might be a more defensible position” (Moffett 52). This opinion is reasonable, however arguable as *V* much rather holds a societal *vendetta* over his country and seeks to violate what has already been violated for him: his personhood and citizenship. This is not to say that he does not have a personal *vendetta*, he does, however this personal aspect of his vengeance stems from the societal piece. *V* would have no reason to have a personal crusade against the government if they were not despicable to begin with.

V, before he blows up The Old Bailey, says to the stone Madam Justice, “I’d say to my father, ‘Who is that lady?’ And he’d say, ‘That’s Madam Justice.’ And I’d say, ‘Isn’t she pretty?’” (Moore 40). This is one of the very few times that we have insight to *V*’s past life before Larkhill and his time as *V*. The ambiguity of his past life is left uncertain as *V*’s story is less about his individuality and more about his accessibility and universality as an idea and hero, however this anecdote implies that he once had respect and appreciation for his country and government. Although this is an innocent

perspective, especially from a child. V understands this and claims that he has found a new love, “Her name is anarchy” (41). V’s attraction to lawlessness is due to the overbearing authority the government holds over its people, and therefore he supports the idea of anarchy, which connotatively implies chaos and more likely, violence. V then importantly states, “. . . justice is meaningless without freedom” (41). There is no freedom currently within the United Kingdom, and therefore the government deserves forceful justice in the form of murder and violence. Norsefire does not grant its people a basic human right and consequently must pay the price of V’s vendetta. Nazli Avdan and Gary Uzonyi, professors of political science at University of Kansas and Duke University respectively, write in their joint article *V for vendetta: Government mass killing and domestic terrorism*, “Utilizing data from the Global Terrorism Database, 1971–2011, the study shows that mass killings significantly increase domestic terrorism [which] contributes to emerging scholarship examining how state policies influence terrorist activity.” Essentially, Avdan and Uzonyi look at trends in global terrorism and specifically the effect the government has on these groups. The evidence suggests that a government has high influence in creating terrorists, which is most likely due to their strict laws and regulations that inspire revolution. V is an example of a man created out of the violence of his country, however he is not a terrorist.

Moore and Lloyd imbue some metatextual experimentation within their paneling specifically regarding the role of a hero. Historically, and up to this point, comic books were dominated by the ideas of heroes who fought for truth, justice, and a standard of morals. Moore actively sought to disturb this notion of a “superhero” by creating one without superpowers (rendering him more of a hero than superhero) that resorted to violence rather than peaceful tactics. Of course, superheroes are not immune to turning to violence as they often stop their respective supervillains from hurting innocent people by first hurting them. Nevertheless, superheroes were rarely seen committing acts of murder; enter V. V’s role as a hero is left ambiguous because of his affinity towards murder rather than traditional comic book violence and we witness numerous scenes of V taking part in various murders of diverse methods. A traditional superhero comic has a three by three grid, holding nine evenly spaced panels on the page. V for Vendetta utilizes this traditional superhero grid at a very crucial part in the story: V’s death. On pages 249 and 250, Evey debates whether or not she

should unmask V to find out his true identity (figs. 10 & 11). She cycles through the possible identities of who he could be, but ultimately decides she knows who V is: herself. The paneling is evenly spaced and assumes the traditional superhero grid of three by three at a moment where perhaps the most important aspect of a superhero comes into play. A hero's identity is something that is kept secret as superheroes like Batman or Superman must keep their public identities of Bruce Wayne or Clark Kent under wraps. Throughout the whole novel, the reader has not been clued in to any detail of who V really is. This is because V does not have an identity because he is an idea, a heroic idea. The use of metatextual paneling provides the ultimate send off for the novel's protagonist, solidifying his role as a hero.

The symbol of V has since been propagated through popular culture, garnering a following of those who believe revolution is necessary, no matter the cause. While Guy Fawkes masks are seen universally around the world, like the superheroes used for propaganda in Hong Kong, Warner Brother's studios created a live action film in 2005 that fueled the fire of revolutionary desire even further. The film sticks heavily to the graphic novel, though takes many liberties that quiets down most of the violence that is intrinsic to V's character. Instead, Hugo Weaving's portrayal of V is romantic and gentler in his ways compared to the more forceful novelized version. This does not mean that the cinematic V is pacifistic by any means, but rather to make V more empathetic and relatable to his cause, director James McTeigue and writers, the Wachowski's, toned down the excessive violence. This is done on both ends, as *Norsefire* is less violent as well and we see less scenes of graphic violence in the film than we do in the novel.

V's violent actions are ultimately necessary and inevitable in the backdrop of the neo-Conservative United Kingdom. If the country's government did not use violence as a tactic of keeping order, then V's actions would be seen as hostile and unwarranted, however this is just not the case. *Norsefire*, with little justifiable reason, killed thousands upon thousands of innocent people for things they could not control including race, sexuality, and religion. They sought to keep control over those who had no control over themselves in some terms. Though violence was integral to V's character, it helped put into perspective the type of world V for Vendetta was set in, as violence became the only answer. V did not exhibit an excess of violence, nor did he demonstrate deliberate cruelty, as he often showed care and most always reason when killing his victims.

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