

## *V for Vendetta*

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The concept that has interested us the most in this semester of studying “Philosophy: Death and the Meaning of Life” is Todd May’s narrative values account. May describes narrative values as the themes of life that characterize how we experience our existence. These values provide us with criteria so we can critique the individual life and debate whether or not it is meaningful. They are concerned with life as a whole, and what reoccurring themes are present over our existence although we do not consciously attempt to achieve these things. May mentions the example of Jimi Hendrix’s intensity because he was always pushing the limits of life, without fearing or worrying about the consequences of his actions. Hendrix’s life was not intense because he determined one day it would be; his actions and personal engagements with music, sex, adventure, and drugs led to a life full of intensity.

We believe film has a special ability to entertain us while introducing ideas we may have never considered before. We have chosen to analyze the two main characters from the 2005 film *V for Vendetta* to judge if the narrative values displayed by them would justify their lives having meaning. This film brought up philosophical questions in the form of morality vs. meaning since it focuses on a terrorist’s attempt to “liberate” the city of London from its oppressive government.

*Spoiler Alert: We will draw on specific, and sometimes important, scenes from the film in order to argue which narrative values we believe V & Evey’s lives exemplify. If you have not seen the film, we encourage you to do so, but just be aware that there are some spoilers in what we are about to say.*

## V's Narrative Values:

Given a basic understanding of Todd May's theory of narrative values, it would be interesting to break down the life of an antihero to see if that type of life could actually have meaning. Well, the only way to be able to determine the meaningfulness of a life is to actually know the background story of said life. So to start, we are going to give you a brief synopsis of the character "V".

"V" is depicted as an Antihero, I say this because of his unrelenting and often violent will to accomplish his vendetta for revenge and his desire to right the wrongs committed in society. This Vendetta was inoculated during V's unfortunate detainment at the Lark Hill Resettlement Camp. During his imprisonment, he was subjected to horrific experimental procedures. He eventually was able to escape imprisonment by literally blowing himself and the entire facility up. The escape scarred his entire body permanently. After that point, he vowed to go after those responsible for what happened to him. Each of those people has since moved on to higher roles in the government, and yet, V still vows to go after each one, until he settles the score.

On page 83 of Todd May's novel "A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe", May says "...The assessment of narrative values – In our own lives or in those of others – is rarely a simple affair. It requires perception, reflection, weighing, and judgement." This basically means that given the nature of narrative values a life can be very moral and not have meaning & vice versa. We are going to be focusing on a couple of narrative values that are and are not displayed by V over the course of the movie. At the end of this analysis, we will determine if V lived a meaningful life.

Courage:

Quote: “People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people.”

To set the scene, the setting for V for vendetta is a fictional fascist London that is controlled to the point of oppression, completely by the government. The citizens shy away from conflict in fear of losing everything that they have worked for. That’s where the narrative Value of Courage comes into play, “V” alone has the courage inside of him to fight back against his oppressors. He knows that he is fighting the good fight and will fight it alone if need be.

Intensity:

Quote: “A building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone, a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world.”

This quote from V alone would justify saying that intensity is a definite narrative value in his life, but through a better understanding of May’s theory, we know that a narrative theme cannot be displayed by a single event.... Luckily that is not the only event. V’s whole demeanor is intense from the way he is not afraid to utilize his keen martial arts/ knife wielding skills, to how he often gives monologues on violent topics with the elegance of a well-versed writer.

Subtlety:

Quote: “You wear a mask for so long you forget who you were beneath it.”

This quote speaks to the fact that V dons the mask of Guy Fawkes during the movie. Wearing a mask could easily be interpreted as a symbol of subtlety, in contrary though through his active engagement in seeking revenge through violent gestures & brash ideologies it would be ignorant to say that subtlety is a major Narrative Value for his life. But we cannot forget that Narrative values can be the aesthetic aspects of life. Such as the donning of a mask to not only pay tribute to the man who created the idea that guides his life but to hide the reason why the idea guides him in the first place.

The Verdict:

After much consideration of Todd May's Theory of Narrative Values, V's life can be viewed as meaningful. Even though he went down a morally cloudy path, his choice to actively engage in bettering his life effectively gave his life meaning.

Evey's Narrative Values:

Perseverance: Evey displays perseverance because she shows the ability to fight through difficult situations and use them in order to grow and become a stronger person. We learn in the film that Evey has lost her brother, mother, and father because of the oppressive government. Her brother died from an illness that was purposely inflicted by the government in order to create dependency amongst London's citizens; and Evey's parents were kidnapped and killed for protesting against the government. Evey claims that she lives in fear because of what has happened to her family and she wishes she had the courage to stand up to the government like her parents did. She survives the torture V puts her through and claims she is no longer afraid of

death because she no longer lives in fear. Her imprisonment forced her to cope with her own personal demons and allowed her to grow into a strong-willed character.

Courage: This narrative value has a lot of similarities to perseverance when it comes to Evey's life. A lot of Evey's perseverance can also be defined as courageous. Besides what I have already mentioned, the opening scene shows Evey being confronted by officers enforcing curfew. When one of the officers makes a sexual advancement towards her, she pepper sprays him and attempts to fight back. Also, I consider Evey's decision to pull the lever so that parliament will explode to be a courageous one as well. Although this action can be morally debatable, Evey does what she truly believes is needed in order to liberate the citizens of London from their oppressive government. Over the course of the film she shows a sense of courage that carries her through all of her tumultuous experiences.

Rebellion: Evey is rebellious throughout the movie, and her sense of rebellion grows exceedingly as her character develops. Rebellion is one's willingness to fight against something (usually in control) regardless of the consequences. The opening scene shows Evey willingly going out after curfew to meet a colleague even though she knows it is against the law. Also, when V attacks the TV station headquarters that Evey works at, she pepper sprays an officer in order to allow V to escape. She even rebels against V in an attempt to tell the priest about him so that the authorities can capture him and provide her with some protection. Evey's ultimate act of rebellion is when she decides to carry out V's plan and destroy parliament in order to send a message to government that the people will no longer accept their oppression. The overall theme of the film

is rebellion, hence the name *V for Vendetta*, and Evey's rebellious attitude shifts from subtle to obvious by the end of the film.

Evey's exhibition of narrative values demonstrates how, from Todd May's point of view, her life could be seen as meaningful.

On the other hand, when looking at the soldiers Todd May describes in *A Significant Life*, the meaningfulness of V and Evey's lives is questioned. The two main characters in *V for Vendetta* show a lot of similarities to the two soldiers that Todd May talks about in *A Significant Life*. One soldier is entirely dedicated to his evil plan while the other is reluctant to engage in the evil activity but feels compelled to participate. These two attitudes toward evil activity so clearly reflect the actions of V and Evey.

Like the example of the first soldier, V is so committed to his plan and so emotionally involved. The government imprisoned him in a concentration camp before an explosion freed him. After this, he becomes dedicated to getting revenge on the ones who imprisoned him, killing everyone involved. His vendetta is very personal and he is willing to die in order to succeed.

Evey, on the other hand, is somewhat dragged into the situation. She was saved by V one night after being grabbed on the streets. Evey then returns the favor and saves V at the news station, but is knocked out and taken by V in fear that she will give him up. V forces her to stay with him until his terror is over. At first she does not fully agree with what V is doing and wants nothing to do with it. When she is asked to help V kill a priest at the camp, she agrees, but ends up telling the priest that V is coming to kill him and runs off. She displays the same qualities that

the second soldier displays. She is very reluctant to participate in these acts of terror and remains skeptical throughout her involvement.

Evey's attitude shifts, however, when V puts her in a mock concentration camp. The entire thing is staged, but Evey does not know this. She is tortured and questioned about V but does not give up any information. When she is released she notices that her feelings have changed. She no longer fears death and her emotions are no longer a hindrance. She leaves V but returns on the day of his final act of terror. After V kills the chancellor and dies in Evey's arms, Evey's attitude toward V's acts of terror changes. She is left with a final decision: to finish what V started or not to. In the end, Evey, filled with emotion over V's death, sends the train full of explosives into Parliament and destroys the building, giving people hope. Like the first soldier, she becomes committed and engaged in the act of terror. She is no longer skeptical and full of guilt like the second soldier. She completes the final act of evil without any hesitation.

V and Evey end up fulfilling their plans to bring justice to the entire country and give hope to those who suffered under the cruelty of the government, but did these actions make their lives meaningful? According to May, not only do their actions not bring meaningfulness to their lives, but they actually detract meaning from their lives. May says that "While morality cannot add to meaningfulness, a severe immortality what I have called evil can subtract from it." Even though their actions were for a good cause, V and Evey's actions were undoubtedly evil, as they resulted in the deaths of many people. May also says that evil bends narrative values away from meaningfulness. He says that while narrative values are admirable when used for morally worthy actions, they shift their worth from supporting to undermining meaning when associated with evil. For these reasons May might not think that V and Evey lived meaningful lives.

The fact that there are conflicting views of V and Evey's lives and their meaningfulness, even among one philosopher's ideas, illustrates how elaborate the search for human purpose is. Through learning about different philosophers and their views on the meaning of life a complete answer may not have been reached, but we have a more educated outlook and have been able to narrow the field, even if it's just by a little bit.