

Movies that Influenced Us: V for Vendetta

“Symbols are given power by people. Alone, a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world.”

When it was first released, critics decided that V for Vendetta was a good movie, but it wasn't considered great. Since then, it has gained in popularity, become a symbol for protestors, infiltrated English classes, and influenced people everywhere. It certainly influenced me, and it stands tall as one of my all-time favorites. It's a movie I find myself going back to again and again, and it provokes excellent discussions whenever I present it to the high school film classes I teach.

IMAGE

“We are told to remember the idea, not the man, because a man can fail. He can be caught, he can be killed and forgotten, but 400 years later, an idea can still change the world.”

When V for Vendetta first hit theaters in March of 2006, I had no idea what a treat I was in for, or how profound an effect the movie would have on me in years to come. I was in college at the time, and the first Matrix movie was one of my favorites. I loved movies that had strong action sequences while still making me think, so I was looking forward to the Wachowski brothers' "uncompromising vision of the future," though my enthusiasm had been tempered a bit by the decidedly average The Matrix Revolutions.

Entering the theater, I expected something like a superhero movie only darker. Instead, I got a film that changed the way I looked at the world around me. V wasn't a hero. In fact, he was a terrorist. Early in the movie he even blows up a building in the name of his beliefs. In many ways, he was close to the terrorists that had so changed our country back in 2001. And yet, he had so many things to say that I absolutely believed in, and he was fighting against oppression. V for Vendetta was excellent entertainment, but it had messages about tolerance, belief, art, freedom, hope, and love. More importantly, it presented these ideas in ways that forced audiences to think about them and form their own opinions.

As the movie says near its beginning, it's not men, but ideas that change the world. And yet, V for Vendetta takes it deeper than that and emphasizes that ideas come from men, are fought for by men, and are ultimately given power by the people who believe in them. This is certainly the case with the movie itself: the Wachowski's believed in Alan Moore's idea (V for Vendetta began life as a graphic novel), revised it and brought it to the screen with James McTeigue directing, and then the critics initially said it was good but nothing special. With enough people behind it, that all changed, and I think it's now safe to say it's one of the best movies of the past decade.

I walked out of seeing V for Vendetta for the first time wanting to see it again. I had thoroughly enjoyed it, but its sheer complexity required a second viewing. Its sharp visuals, vivid red and blacks, and unique structure had convinced me it was a good movie, but I didn't yet know how good. At that point, I didn't know the profound impact it would have on me, but it had planted its ideas in my mind, and I found myself thinking about it often.

“Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy, and ideas are bulletproof.”

IMAGE

“I remember how different became dangerous... I still don’t understand it, why they hate us so much.”

I’ll admit it: when I first saw V for Vendetta, I was anti-gay. Now don’t get me wrong, I’ve never been one to put others down for their beliefs and I would certainly never promote anything that hurt others, but when asked, I was adamant that being gay wasn’t right. I had my reasons, and while I wasn’t actively working against gays, I certainly wasn’t helping their cause, and I didn’t want to associate with them. V for Vendetta changed all that for me.

I still wouldn’t call myself pro-gay, but I’m not “anti” anymore either. These days I would define myself as pro-free choice and I attribute that largely to the power of this movie. V for Vendetta explores many forms of oppression and its effects on people. Perhaps more importantly, it aptly demonstrates the importance of standing up for what we believe in, and the ways in which society moves forward through our revolutionaries. Back in 2006 when gay rights were rising to prominence, V for Vendetta showed why self-expression is important and that hurting others in any way is the true evil. Through its portrayal of Valerie’s struggles, it made me look at the gay rights issue in a new light.

The more I watched V for Vendetta, the more my views changed. I came to see the issue in terms of human expression, and that changed everything for me. It convinced me that we have to at least allow for new ideas, even if we don’t accept them into our own personal lives.

“Fairness, justice, and freedom are more than words, they are perspectives.”

IMAGE

“While the truncheon may be used in lieu of conversation, words will always retain their power. Words offer the means to meaning, and for those who will listen, the enunciation of truth.”

In 2010, I became an English teacher at a high school. By that point, I owned V for Vendetta and watched it frequently as a reminder to stand for what I believed in and what was right. When I began working at the school, I was surprised to discover that it was being used in English classes. V’s speech that he delivers to the people of London is now taught in many classes as an example of rhetoric, and he utilizes logos, ethos, and pathos throughout it. The movie itself is shown to demonstrate the importance of the arts and human expression.

And V believes in the power of words. In a society of non-readers and visual entertainments, V for Vendetta simultaneously pushes for a more liberal world while still emphasizing the importance of the past. V treasures art and literature, and his passion for it is directly reflected in his passion for justice. He holds up all forms of human expression as sacred and as artifacts of the beliefs and passions of mankind regardless of race, gender, or religion.

These are things I already believed in, and it is through these things that V for Vendetta opened my eyes to other ways of thinking. Being able to share these beliefs and watch this film open up the eyes of younger generations has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It is a movie that this generation’s teenagers can connect with and be entertained by, but it also teaches valuable lessons. If for nothing else, this, in my mind, makes V for Vendetta a truly amazing movie.

“Artists use lies to tell the truth, while politicians use them to cover the truth up.”

IMAGE

“People shouldn’t be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people.”

The mask used for V in the movie is now seen at protests the world over. Like V himself, it has become a symbol of people fighting against oppression. In the film, V transcends his humanity by standing up for the people, and who he is below the mask doesn’t matter. He promotes his ideas with a selfless abandon that demonstrates the power of his beliefs.

At the same time though, the film warns that if “You wear a mask for so long, you forget who you were beneath it.” And this is the aspect that makes me love V for Vendetta on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one. While it pushes ideas, truths, and beliefs, it also emphasizes the importance of the individual and the power of personal relationships. There is a love story at work between V and Evey, and for all of V’s big ideas, he says that, “a revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having.” It’s about working for the betterment of all and creating a world we enjoy living in. At its simplest, it’s about enjoying life. This is what makes V more than a terrorist. He doesn’t promote terror—he promotes living life with purpose, meaning, love, and joy.

It’s a vivid demonstration of why the arts are not mere diversions but the core of freedom and happiness. It shows that love transcends physicality, and that freedom of expression is at the center of what it means to be human.

“Is everything a joke to you, Gordon? Only the things that matter.”

IMAGE

“An inch, it is small and it is fragile, but it is the only thing in the world worth having. We must never lose it or give it away. We must never let them take it from us.”

Whenever I lose my sense of self, I turn to V for Vendetta and it restores not only my pride in what I’ve done, but my belief in humanity. For all of our craziness, we’ve come a long way as a species. For the world to move forward, we must not be afraid to speak up or to fight for what we believe in, but we must do it with heart and we must never forget that love and happiness are the core of what we’re fighting for.

When we realize that everyone is fighting for what they believe in and respect them for their belief and their passion even when we disagree, we’ve taken steps to ending fear and oppression and opened the doors to compromise. In a world where everyone can speak up without fear, we’ll have freed ourselves to take great strides into a better tomorrow.

This is what V for Vendetta did for me, and I hope it continues to influence people for years to come.

“Then you have no fear any more. You’re completely free.”

“There’s no certainty – only opportunity.”