

V. Short Guide

V. by Thomas Pynchon

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Characters

There are so many people in *V.* that it is difficult to designate a main character, but most of the action concerns three central figures: Herbert Stencil, Benny Profane, and V. Herbert Stencil is the son of Sidney Stencil, a British agent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose search, as described in his journals, for a mysterious woman, V., motivates his son to continue the quest. The journal material also provides the source for the flashback sections. The elder Stencil died at sea near Malta in 1919. Through the journals, Herbert Stencil learns that his father had tracked V. from her first appearance as a girl in Egypt not only through Africa and Italy but also to Paris in 1913 where she was part of the avant garde.

Further evidence suggests that she was present in Malta during the German bombing raids of World War II and died there, disguised as a false and seductive priest. V. may even seduced the older Stencil and therefore have been the younger Stencil's mother. The book ends in Malta with Stencil pursuing more leads in the search for V. Stencil is less concerned with finding V. or the truth about her than engaging in the search. One possibility for the conclusion of the search is that V. is not the key to understanding all the machinations of which she had been part; no meaning is revealed and the quest is pointless. Another possibility is that if Stencil were to find V. and determine what her life means, he would lose the meaning of his own life, which has been defined, as his father's was, by the quest itself. The idea that process is more important than goal is a dominant Victorian principle, and in linking the son to the father's quest, Pynchon may be suggesting, that, like the old imperial notion of glory for its own sake (i.e. rapine and slaughter without justification), the search for meaning in the twentieth century is both passe and fraudulent.

As bleak as that assessment of Stencil sounds, it is preferable to the condition of another main character, Benny Profane, a sailor from the Navy destroyer *Scaffold* who meets Stencil by chance through their mutual friendship with New Yorker Rachel Owlglass (who appears to be in love with her car). Benny accepts chaos and meaninglessness and as a result bounces through a series of relationships and jobs, including shooting alligators in the sewers of New York (a lengthy vignette based on the New York myth of flushed Coney Island reptiles inhabiting the pipes below the city) and tending the robots SHROUD and SHOCK. Profane describes his activities as "yo-yoing," pointless moving from one location to another and back, such as his riding of the shuttle between Grand Central Station and Times Square for hours. One moves, but one really goes nowhere. In contrast to Stencil, who sees possibilities of meaning where there may be none, Profane is surrounded by associations, none of which he can pursue or even recognize — a true late-twentieth-century man.

V. is seen so totally objectively, so completely from the outside, that it is difficult to think of her as a character.

She appears to be more of a thing without recognizable human personality, a condition which she tries to approach first by disguising her own identity, then by replacing body



parts with jewelry, prostheses, and mechanical devices. V. represents an alternative to Profane's reaction to twentieth-century life. Benny is buffeted by the natural objects of the world; V. retains a measure of power by attempting to become one with the natural universe.

There are a host of other characters in *V.*, each of which supplements or contrasts with the roles of the three main characters, among them Paola Maijstral (named after a Mediterranean wind which affects her birthplace, Malta), who provides a link with V.'s last known appearance; Pig Bodine, a slobbish Pan-like sailor who embraces animality with greater relish than Profane; Hugh Godolphin, an associate of the elder Stencil who claims to have visited the magical land of Vheissu and thus adds another dimension to the Stencils' search for V.; Father Faring, a mad priest who ministers to the rats in the sewers of New York and whose favorite parishioner is a rodent named Veronica; and McClintic Sphere, a black jazzman suggested by the actual musicians Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, who contributes one of Pynchon's few hopeful comments, "Keep cool, but care."

Social Concerns

Although the main action of *V.* is set in the middle 1950s, interpolated material extends the time frame of the novel back to the end of the nineteenth century and allows Pynchon to view the entire twentieth century as a decline into decadence (the social and political equivalent of entropy). Another central feature of the novel is the opposition of the tendency toward dissolution and disorganization by various cabals and conspiracies, some noble, some sinister, some merely silly, all failures. Pynchon implies that the decay has gone too far to be arrested.

Techniques

Symbols abound in *V.*, starting with the title of the book, which is not *V* but *V.*, an abbreviation which stands for something else. It has been proposed that *V* stands not only for the character in the novel but for Venus (the shape of the alphabet letter suggesting erotic welcome), Vheissu, Venezuela, and a number of other *V*'s mentioned in the book. The path made by a yo-yo also describes a *V*, and mirrors frequently appear as representations of the "V" symbol, since a ray of light travels into a mirror and bounces back to the viewer in a "V" pattern.

The lengthy flashbacks are confusing to a reader who expects the novel to follow the conventional form, as it is often difficult to determine who is the narrator of these sections. Usually the flashbacks are presumed to have been based on Sidney Stencil's journals, but events are described of which he could have had no knowledge and are sometimes presented from the viewpoint of another character. The first flashback, to Egypt, is written from the perspectives of eight characters. In such cases, is the flashback narrator supposed to be Sidney Stencil, a fantasizing Herbert Stencil, or Pynchon? Pynchon's pushing of the novel form past its natural narrative limits later becomes a major feature of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).



Themes

The two major themes of *V.* are the tendency of twentieth-century society toward entropy (dissolution) on the one hand and conspiracy (control) on the other. Entropy, the unraveling of the universe through the equalization of energy, is sometimes assisted by the impact of conspiracy, as world powers dice and maneuver to gain control of resources and lines of communication.

The book begins in Norfolk, Virginia on Christmas Eve, 1955 and initially concerns certain crew members of a U.S. Navy ship back from the Mediterranean. The United States's presence in the Mediterranean is dictated by its interest in the oil resources of the Middle East and the short cut to those riches, the Suez Canal. In the first of several lengthy flashbacks, the reader is returned to late-nineteenth-century Egypt for a glimpse of the espionage activities of the agents of Britain, France, and some who are just available to the highest bidder. The same old imperial powers reappear for a last gasp on the world stage in the Suez crisis of 1956, also alluded to in *V.*, and Malta, the mid-Mediterranean transportation choke point, is also a part of the middle eastern struggle and the scene of much of the action, both realtime and flashback, of the novel. Another set of flashbacks to the genocidal campaign of the Germans against the native population of Southwest Africa in the early part of the century suggests that resources are not the issue in some cases, but that the exercise of power itself is the main feature of modern life. The oppressed fight back with conspiracies of their own, such as the effort of Venezuelan rebels to steal Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* from the Uffizi, seen in another flashback, but that effort turns out to be as laughable as it sounds. In this way Pynchon makes the reader aware that the history of the twentieth century has been, at bottom, a mad scramble for an everdwindling supply of resources. Those caught up in the struggle are concerned with supply and power, not, as logic suggests, conservation and compassion. Those who seem oblivious to the struggle are still affected by it, as they drift along in its backwash without motivation or interest.

An important corollary theme is the replacement of human body parts by artificial devices, or, to look at it in a grimmer way, the invasion of the body by foreign objects, a trend which leads to the replacement not only of parts but of human functions, including intelligence. This trend is amusingly and chillingly climaxed with a scene in which one of the main characters has a conversation with a robot and comes out decidedly second best. The *V.* of the title is a woman who gradually replaces her body parts with inanimate objects — a false leg, a jewel in the navel, a glass eye with a watch in it. In a further branching of this theme, the body is seen as just another object which may be repaired or adjusted like a car, a tendency exemplified in a scene in which a female character gets her nose bobbed in an operation which is described in seat-squirming detail. In another macabre episode, a character shows a child an electrical switch implanted in his arm which, when thrown, changes his behavior, and explains that everything is an electromagnetic phenomenon anyway. Pynchon implies through these and similar scenes that our concern with the physical universe and the "triumph" of science in the twentieth century has led us to think of ourselves as no more than objects, with the resultant loss of our humanity.



Another major theme which appears in all of Pynchon's novels, is the ancient one of the questing hero. Just as the political and military powers are searching for more resources and more power, several of the characters are searching for evidence of conspiracies, but not just conspiracies, which they know to exist, but the principles behind the conspiracies, for if those principles were found, they might at least bring meaning to a life which grows increasingly both more shallow and more bizarre. These personal quests turn out to be ironic, unsuccessful, and self-deceptive.



Key Questions

Pynchon's novels are so packed with details and references that there is no lack of things to talk about. It may be that younger students, raised on the cascade of associations poured out by such popular entertainers as Jonathan Winters, Robin Williams, and Dennis Miller, will be better able to understand Pynchon's approach to his subject and his technique than their teachers. But the teachers will be better able to identify and explain Pynchon's historical and literary allusions. Thus the best kind of discussion may take place, one in which everyone learns from everyone else. Here are some possible starting points: 1. Who do you think V. is? What is her function in the novel?

2. Have one member of the group research in detail one of the historical events Pynchon describes, such as the Suez crisis or the slaughter of the Hereros. How accurate is Pynchon's account? If he makes changes, why do you think that he makes the changes?

3. Identify as many "V.'s" in the novel as you can. As many examples of "yo-yoing."

4. Compare the adventure sections of the novel with such literary ancestors as *She*, *The Moonstone*, and the novels of Joseph Conrad.

5. It has often been maintained that Pynchon does not create believable characters. Defend or attack this thesis.

6. Some sections of *V.*, such as Father Faring's ministry to the rats in the sewers of New York, do not seem to advance the main plot. Do you think these sections should be removed or retained? Why?

7. Are Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil too passive to act as central characters? Why did Pynchon not write the novel from the point of view of Sydney Stencil or V.?

8. None of the plot threads are resolved in the usual way at the end of the novel. Why did Pynchon not wrap things up in a conventional fashion?

Since there is no conventional ending, why did he choose to end the novel where he did?

9. What do the flashbacks in time and space contribute to the novel? Why did Pynchon not present the story in chronological order?

10. The horrific and sexual elements in Pynchon's novels offend and turn away many readers. Is Pynchon deliberately trying to shock his audience?

Why? Gauge the impact of such scenes as Rachel's nose job and the Paris theater performance.



11. What is the role of women in V.? 12. Identify and explain some of the symbolic elements in the novel.

Literary Precedents

With its intense attention to detail, breadth of erudition, and themes of conspiracy, paranoia, and the lone intellect questing for answers, *V.* has been compared to the novels of Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Conrad. It can also be seen a mutation of the spy novel genre as practiced by, for example, Eric Ambler, the exotic mystery story such as Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* tales, or the romantic adventure tale in the manner of Willkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) or H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887).

Related Titles

Pynchon's short story "Under the Rose" is an early version of one of the first sections of *V.*, describing intrigue and pursuit of spies in late nineteenth-century Cairo. The Herero tribesman of Southwest Africa reappear as mercenaries in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

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