

We Need to Talk About Kevin is an award-winning novel by American writer Lionel Shriver that has been turned into a highly-praised film. In the novel we hear how the narrator, Eva Katchadourian, is trying to come to terms with the actions of her son, the eponymous Kevin, who has carried out a high-school shooting. Written as a series of letters to her now absent husband, Franklin, she looks back over the time since Kevin was born and recounts what she perceives as the key moments in an unfolding drama of sadism and antagonism leading up to the massacre. **John Lynch** discusses some of the themes in the narrative and why it has been so successful even if it is considered to be profoundly disturbing in its account of a darkly dysfunctional family.

We Need to Talk About Kevin has been adapted for the cinema by the Scottish director Lynne Ramsay and is currently playing on screens across Europe. Although different in form from the book, the film has been well received for its unconventional portrayal of the relationship between a formerly successful career woman and her disturbed, and ultimately murderous, son, who engages in a Columbine-type rampage at his high school. Shriver is a well-respected writer and journalist and Ramsay is considered by some to be one of the most unique directors working today so perhaps the praise is not all that surprising. But why have critics so universally welcomed a narrative portraying such extreme behaviour? What societal fears does it articulate and in what ways does it, if at all, reassure us about these fears? Is it simply a horror movie that allows us the thrill of being scared in the knowledge that by the end the monsters will be back in the closet? Undoubtedly, there are elements of this menace present in the film as Ramsay ensures that every scene contains a red marker of the

impending massacre. However, this doesn't really explain why the film and novel has had such wide appeal.

At the heart of the film is a story about parenting and the fears inherent in having a child that one is never sure will be as lovable as the adverts lead you to believe it will be. Eva is never able (or perhaps willing) to bond with her child and this fracture can never be healed as he grows up. In this way the film connects with deeply repressed anxieties about motherhood, societal expectation of mothering, and giving birth. As a child, Kevin is well in control of his individual development, from potty training to counting number, and manipulates them to torment Eva as she is confronted with her own gaping sense of failure and ever present sense of unfulfilled ambition. The film articulates well a critical view of motherhood as a potential straitjacket of normalisation, with the implied happiness, exposed as a myth, and a Greek one at that. The violence that does take place in the film occurs off-screen and this adds to the sense of this as a performance played out as classical drama.

This leads us, arguably, to another reason why the film has been so well received, that is, the high school massacre that is the climax of Kevin's demonic reign. Since 1999 and the Columbine High school massacre in the USA in which two teenagers killed thirteen people and then themselves, there has been a determined attempt to try and identify the motives, influences and behaviour patterns of such individuals. From investigations led by the American Secret Service (experts at profiling potential presidential assassins) to popular psychologists, there has been a concerted effort to try and understand better this phenomenon. In cinema the subject has also been addressed most powerfully in Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* from 2003 as well as

Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. For these filmmakers, simplistic denunciations of negative influences such as video games, the internet, and the music of subversive performers such as Marilyn Manson, do not really begin to explain what it is that motivates these boys (and they are almost always male) to embark on such a murderous and suicidal course of action. Bullying, isolation and depression coupled with easy access to guns goes some way to an explanation, if not completely. And this is what is so fear inducing about these tormented teens - the lack of really knowing *why* they do what they do. Adolescence is a maelstrom of conflicting peer pressures where appearance and belonging are privileged over all else. As with the Columbine killers, Kevin lives in a well-to-do home and has a well intentioned, but oblivious, dad who ask 'How's it going buddy?' However, beneath the surface of normality grows a rage against the world and its superficialities that reaches psychotic levels of hatred driven by narcissism and childish nihilism.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin* it seems that there is a demon seed fed by the resentment of a mother unable to come to terms with the demands of a shattered lifestyle and thwarted ambition. This exposure of a dark underside to suburban life is convincingly done by Ramsay but I wonder if it doesn't push the gap between adults and teenagers further apart rather than connecting them in a more productive way. The one-dimensional monstrous otherness of Kevin is perhaps too easily reassuring even if Tilda Swinton's powerful performance as Eva is itself profoundly disturbing of maternal conventions.

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