

We Need To Talk About Kevin



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DIRECTED BY: Lynne Ramsay

CERTIFICATE: 15

RUNNING TIME: 107 mins

COUNTRY: UK/US

YEAR: 2011

KEYWORDS: representation of family, motherhood, causes of violence

SUITABLE FOR: 14–19 media/film studies, English, citizenship

SYNOPSIS

Eva is an outcast in her community. Her house is regularly vandalised, she is ignored at her job and she is routinely assaulted and verbally abused in the street. She reflects on the ruin her life has become and what she sees as the cause of her downfall – her son Kevin. From birth, Eva and Kevin's relationship is strained and difficult, years of manipulation and indifference resulting in hatred. Eva's husband Franklin believes Kevin to be a wonderful son, leading to tension in their marriage. Kevin also appears to intimidate and harm his younger sister Celia. When Kevin commits a horrendous atrocity at his high school, Eva's life is changed forever.

BEFORE VIEWING

We Need To Talk About Kevin deals in part with the difficult subject of mass murder. These appalling crimes occasionally hit the headlines (most recently in *The Dark Knight Rises* shootings in Colorado, US) and sometimes film, computer games and other media can be cited as influences on the perpetrators. Films such as *Child's Play 3*, *Natural Born Killers* and *A Clockwork Orange* have been banned or withdrawn from distribution because of their alleged influence of real life crimes and killings. Some films (such as the New Zealand drama *Out of the Blue*, starring Karl Urban) have attempted to deal with the subject of mass murder and others particularly with high school massacres (like *Bowling For Columbine* and *Elephant*).

- Do you believe that films, computer games or other media could influence someone to commit horrendous crimes? What are your reasons?
- What other factors might motivate someone to commit crimes such as these?
- Watch the following films or their trailers/selected sequences:
 - *Bowling For Columbine*
 - *Elephant*
 - *Out of the Blue*
 - *Beautiful Boy*

What styles of filmmaking appear to be used to tackle the subject? Do any of the films appear to lay blame on anyone/anything?

AFTER VIEWING

EDITING

Director Lynne Ramsay and her editor Joe Bini have employed elliptical editing in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*; scenes that occur years apart follow each other in different order – one minute we see Eva alone in her house after the massacre, the next she is with Franklin before they have children, the next second the whole family is in the kitchen. This in some way reflects the way the original novel was written – as a collection of letters written in the first person from Eva to Franklin that recall different points in their lives.

- What effect does this editing style have on the viewer?
- What visual clues are there to tell the viewer that we are now at a different point in the story?
- What other films have you seen that use this editing style?

KEVIN'S MOM – AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR?

A common device in literature and film is the 'unreliable narrator'. When a book or film is narrated or told from one person's (or several peoples) point of view, the protagonist's explanation of events can be called into question. In film particularly, the unreliable narrator can be exposed through stylised direction, acting or plot twists. This device is often used to intrigue, excite and shock the viewer and make them reconsider events they may previously consider true. While Eva doesn't literally narrate the film, events are definitely shown from her viewpoint. Popular film examples of the unreliable narrator include *Barry Lyndon*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Identity* and *The Sixth Sense*. Can you think of any others?

- What clues are there in the film that events are being exaggerated or over-simplified and that Eva is therefore an unreliable narrator? Consider the following aspects...
 - Franklin's attitude throughout the film
 - events leading to Celia's eye injury
 - Kevin's manipulative and cruel behaviour from such a young age
 - acting styles
 - mise en scène
 - Eva's culpability

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

It has been suggested that we currently live in a fractured society. Only twenty years ago there were only four main UK TV channels, one household telephone and basic games consoles. The whole family gathering round the TV, especially at the weekends, and everyone being together for an evening meal was commonplace. Today, there are so many TV channels, games consoles, handheld devices, websites, entertainment outlets and pressures on our time that families rarely spend 'quality' time together, even when they're all in the same house. Mum might be watching TV while Dad is on the laptop; meanwhile one child is upstairs playing X-Box while the other is messaging their friends on a mobile device. *We Need To Talk About Kevin* challenges the notion of the ideal nuclear family and suggests that lack of communication and failure to express feelings to one another may be part of the cause of problems within the average family.

- What do Eva and Franklin sacrifice in order to have children?
- On the rare occasions all four members of Eva's family are together, how do they interact? Who seems to be 'in charge'?
- Think about your own family. Do you ever spend a set time together? Do you find it helpful to talk about issues you might have with each other or do things tend to get bottled up?
- What important things do Eva's family not do that might have led to them falling apart?
- How has Kevin changed in the final scene? Consider costume, make-up, acting, plot and dialogue.
- What answers do Eva, the film or any other character offer in explanation for Kevin's violent acts?

Below are some suggested conventions of how family members are typically portrayed in film. You may disagree with some of the suggestions but that's fine. To what extent to the family members in this film fulfil the expected roles?

Mothers	Fathers	Teenage Son	Younger Daughter
caring nurturing sensitive strong sacrifices a lot for family looks after the home	over-worked not often at home stern principled pushy and competitive, especially with son	frustrated rebellious insular moody yearning for independence embarrassed by parents	innocent happy delightful fresh-faced and cute looks up to parents and older siblings

Would these descriptions accurately describe Eva and her family?

“OUT DAMNED SPOT”! BLOOD ON EVA’S HANDS

Red is a prevalent colour in the mise en scène. From the almost religious ecstasy of La Tomatina Festival in the opening scene, to Eva constantly scraping red paint off her house, and even in mundane household objects, there is hardly a frame without red in it. Ironically, despite the horrifying events in the film, barely any blood is actually shown – a characteristic shared with horror classic *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

- How might Eva be compared to Lady Macbeth?
- What notable red items or objects are seen throughout the film and what effect do these have?
- What does red signify in this film?
- Other films in which red is important include *Don't Look Now*, *Schindler's List* and *The Sixth Sense*. What thematic importance does red have in these films? Can you think of any films in which red (or any other colour) is used to signify themes or emotions?



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ACTIVITIES

1. Kevin is never seen during a normal day at his school. We do not learn of, nor do we see him interacting with his teachers, peers or classmates.

- Write a diary entry by Kevin charting a day at school.
- Storyboard or shoot a 'deleted scene' showing Kevin on a normal day at school. Does he have friends? What might he say if anything? Challenge yourself to design the sequence from Eva's perspective.

2. In groups, argue to what extent the following factors may have led Kevin to commit the High School atrocity. Use evidence from the film; but also consider factors the film may not have included

- Eva
- Franklin
- psychological imbalance/damage
- bullying
- nature vs nurture
- computer games
- modern society, culture and media
- divorce/family break-down

RECOMMENDED FURTHER VIEWING

- *Bowling For Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002) - a documentary about the Columbine Massacre
- *Out of the Blue* (Robert Sarkies, 2006) – the true story of the Aramoana Massacre of 1990, New Zealand's deadliest mass murder
- *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) – Palme D'or winning drama inspired by the Columbine Massacre
- *Beautiful Boy* (Shawn Ku, 2010) – drama starring Michael Sheen and Maria Bello with an identical premise to Kevin

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