

‘What Makes a Monster?’ Female Villains and Violence in *Dark Places* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

Eavan Noonan

Abstract

The figure of the ‘bad’ mother has become more significant in 21st century popular culture - from the obliquely horrific mother of *Hereditary* to the comic *Bad Moms* there is a revitalised interest in deconstructing the image of motherhood. In *Dark Places* and *We Need To Talk About Kevin* both Gillian Flynn and Lionel Shriver discuss the cultural implications of being a ‘bad’ mother- being violent, uncaring and even murderous, and demonstrate that *why* someone is monstrous is often more complex than *what* the monster is in actuality.

Introduction

Judith Halberstam argued that monsters are definable by their wholly indefinable nature, ‘The monster always becomes a primary focus of interpretation and its monstrosity seems available for any number of meanings.’ [Halberstam, P.2] W. Scott Poole and his analysis of the American monster complements this definition while connecting this indefinable figure to the context of American history, ‘Monsters have been manufacturing complex meanings for four hundred years of American history. They do not mean one thing but a thousand.’ [Poole, P.7] The figure of the monster reflects the cultural anxieties of the society it’s situated in, which changes throughout time. In *Dark Places* (2009) Libby, a survivor of a

massacre that killed most of her family, grapples with both her place as a victim and learning that her brother was wrongfully imprisoned in an attempt to protect his girlfriend Diondra. In *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003) our protagonist Eve reckons with her part in her son's murders and her painful memories of raising him. In both *Dark Places* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* monsters are depicted as villainous women and their acts of violence can be reflected back on the society that created them. The latent anxieties of 21st century America regarding motherhood, female violence and pregnancy are explored through the monstrous figures of Diondra and Eva.

Domestic Noir

The domestic noir genre has become a crucial vessel for explorations of female monstrosity in the 21st century. The genre of domestic noir was itself created by a female writer, Julia Crouch, as a rebuttal to the categorization of her own work as thrillers. Left with a gap in the literary nomenclature for what her and her contemporaries were portraying, she coined the term 'domestic noir' and described it thusly, 'In a nutshell, domestic noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants.' [Crouch, *Genre Bender*] Gillian Flynn has become synonymous with the genre, specifically with her propensity for writing about violent and unsympathetic women. While *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is categorized under the thriller genre it can be argued that it too is a work of domestic noir, as the bulk of the novel is spent focusing on the domestic warfare between a mother and her son and is absolutely focused within the female experience of motherhood. The genre being fundamentally preoccupied with the 'female experience' could be read in part as a rebuttal to the 'maleness' of the history of crime writing. Lee Horsely wrote that 'In spite of its many early twentieth century female practitioners, the 'maleness' of the form itself is often seen

as a defining characteristic of crime fiction as a genre' [Horsely, P.246] While it would be incorrect to credit the domestic noir genre as the only one to include female centric crime stories⁹², it is interesting to note that this subset of crime fiction has been remade through a female lens. This facilitates the depiction of contemporary female crime stories and the female monsters who commit them.

Violent Mothers

As monsters reflect the anxieties of our culture at large it is interesting that within six years of each other these two novelists produced works with radically egregious mothers. Mothers who transgress across implemented boundaries of stereotypical expectations of motherhood are not discussed in contemporary society; if they commit crimes, it is out of maternal instinct or protection. Nicoletta Di Ciolla and Anna Pasolini discuss this misrepresentation of violent mothers in popular culture. 'Violent female behaviour continues to be understood mostly as an effect of persistent victimisation, and non-standard violent mothers continue to be framed in legal and public discourses into two additional dominant categories besides that of victim: 'mad' or 'bad.' [Di Ciolla and Pasolina, P.141] It is these 'bad' mothers, those who fail to produce the correct mode of performing maternity, are merely seen as evil and who embody the image of the monstrous mother that society has a latent fear of. The cultural hegemony of women as intrinsically maternal and nurturing beings is in fact in stark juxtaposition to comprehensive data that states that mothers are twice more likely to physically and emotionally abuse their children as their fathers are.⁹³ Di Piolla and Pasolina also note the

⁹² This argument is summarized best in a recent article on Bustle, <https://www.bustle.com/p/thrillers-have-always-been-a-feminist-battleground-were-just-finally-noticing-it-again>

⁹³ See the British Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2013, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380090/women-cjs-2013.pdf

interdisciplinary research done on violent mothers that includes this data, amongst other research on maternal violence, but emphasise that this academic work has not yet impacted societal attitudes at large. [Ibid, P.141] This points to a widening chasm between how women behave in maternal roles and the general consensus of what motherhood is, a chasm both Flynn and Shriver narrow in their novels through the characters of Diondra and Eva.

Diondra and Eva's use of violence differs in scale and who they victimise; Diondra murders ten year old Michelle while Eva throws her own six year old child against a wall, but they parallel each other in the apparent relief such violence induces in both of them. After murdering Michelle and finding Libby and the mother dead, Diondra revels in the crime scene, 'chopping the walls, chopping the couch, screaming with her teeth bared' (*Dark Places*, p.402) which Ben recognises as bloodlust, 'That flare of rage and power that made you feel so strong.' (*Dark Places*, P.403) When Eva breaks Kevin's arm she describes it as a release, 'I had heedlessly given over, like Violetta, to clawing a chronic, torturous itch.' (*Kevin*, P.231) Flynn has written about the need for depictions of female violence in popular discourse, discussing how women devour news stories about violent women because of the lack of other mediums to discuss it, 'I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it's our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level.' [Flynn, (2015)] In depicting violent mothers who take joy from their chaotic actions Flynn and Shriver are disrupting the silence around such behavior and allowing for a sense of catharsis from the reader. These female monsters are all the more shocking for the perceived social transgressions they cross while committing this violence.

Eva is decried as a monster by both characters in the novel and certain academics analyzing the text. Eva is literally sued for her part in her son's murders by a mother of one of the victims, Mary Woolford, and has her house covered in red paint by angry neighbours in the aftermath of the rampage. Gregory Phillips wrote

that the character of Eva played a significant part in Kevin becoming a killer because he could sense her absence of love, 'The hidden truth of Eva's detachment involves her lack of emotional connection to her son, which is grounded on the blame she directs towards him for disrupting her sense of identity. The hidden truth of Kevin's detachment centers on his knowledge of her blame.' [Phillips, P.112] This history of expecting mothers to atone for the crimes of their children became increasingly popular during the rise of the serial killer in the 20th century. In which the media focused on the criminal's background and family life, 'tracing the emergence of the murderous impulse to childhood trauma or oedipal confusion.' [Poole, p.151] Ergo, if Kevin is an American monster, what is even more evil in American society is the monster's 'creator' - the mother. Eva as a monstrous figure signifies a larger comment on Western society at large; the 'monstrous body is pure culture' and 'exists to be read', as Cohen wrote [Cohen, P.4] and Eva can be read as an embodiment of maternal anxieties, the heightened nightmare that your child will inherit all of your failings. There is a moment in the novel where Kevin confirms that he knew from a young age about her acrimony towards him; when she tells him she kept the maps he spoiled on her walls because she 'needed to see something you'd done to me...to prove that your malice wasn't all in my head' he responds by 'tickling the scar on his arm' and agreeing. (*Kevin*, P.205) The scar is a result of her violent outburst, a physical representation of the hatred she admits to harbouring from pregnancy. In this reading he is a direct result of her own failings as a mother. There is a literalisation of the idea that the problems of the mother are passed directly onto her children, that they are totally products created by how their mother treats them and are both metaphors for the fear of failure in motherhood. The mother as monster- creator is a recurring theme in popular culture, precisely because it is much easier for the country to blame violence on an individual failing and not a universal one.

Disrupting the Narrative Line

Shriver however goes to great lengths to deconstruct the totality of this blame and the simplifying nature of such a narrative line. Depicting this 'American monster' in a nuanced manner and acknowledging that the burden of motherhood does not encompass the entirety of the blame. Eva notes that 'Blame conveys clear lessons in which others may take comfort: *if only she hadn't* -, and by implication makes tragedy avoidable. There may even be a fragile peace to be found in the assumption of total responsibility...' (*Kevin*, p.78) Eva can try to take on this role of monster, 'gulping down blame with a powerful thirst' (*Kevin*, 78) but she can never totally explain why Kevin was the way he was, which she admits at the end of the novel. 'At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace.' (*Kevin*, p.467) Shriver emphasizes Eva's disillusionment with childbirth and her hatred of her baby, which can be seen as a reflection of the fears surrounding postpartum depression, which over 50% of American women are estimated to feel some form of in the immediate aftermath of childbirth.⁹⁴ 'I had to recognise that I had been resisting the birth...and yes, I even hated the baby.' (*Kevin*, P.89) Even Kevin himself in an interview for a documentary clears her of blame; '*Oh, lay off my mother...Shrinks here spend all day trying to get me to trash the woman, and I'm getting a little tired of it, if you wanna know the truth.*' (*Kevin*, P.414) At the end of the novel Eva is cleared by the judge and wins her court case, which can be read as an allegory for the text itself. In the eyes of the law, and in the eyes of Shriver, Eva is not a likeable woman, but she is also not the sole source of blame for Kevin's actions. Women who fail to live up to the loving and nurturing image of motherhood are not, in Shriver's analysis, monsters.

Due to the sheer number of school shootings in America, there is now a contemporary template for how the mothers of these

⁹⁴ See Hopkins, J., Marcus, M., & Campbell, S. B. *Postpartum Depression: A Critical Review*, P.487

killers behave in the aftermath. The mother of Columbine killer Dylan Klebold, Sue Klebold, has in particular spoken at length about her experience and her immense guilt. She gave a TED talk⁹⁵ and wrote a book titled ‘A Mother’s Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of the Columbine Tragedy,’ where she discusses the blame and sorrow she places on herself. In a Guardian article the reviewer notes that ‘Klebold said she still loves her son and does not believe he was a monster but cannot forgive herself for not realising something was wrong.’ [Brockes, (2016)] There is a certain grief and despair expected from someone in that situation by the public and it is a performance Eva refuses to give. Eva remarks of herself, ‘Throughout the trial I had been aware that I cut an unsympathetic figure. I had disciplined myself never to cry.’ (Kevin P.466) Eva is depicted by Shriver as a stubborn woman and her refusal to comply with what is expected leads her to be viewed as more culpable of blame by the press. ‘Indeed, my demeanor was repeatedly described in the papers as ‘defiant’, while my disagreeable characterisation of my own flesh and blood were submitted no-comment, to hand me out to dry. With such an ice queen for a mother, little wonder, observed our local *Journal News*, that KK turned *bad boy*.’ (Kevin p.467) Shriver depicts the treatment of Eva by the press starkly and demonstrates how the media can portray a mother as a monster if she does not comply with these societal expectations.

Weaponising the Womb

Diondra is depicted as a reprobate young woman, full of anger and constantly demeaning her younger boyfriend, Ben. She is significantly wealthier than the Days, which is a major point of contention for Ben and her insensitivity around the matter is noted several times by him. She laughs at his old clothes, telling him he smells after he works in the canteen and shows no sympathy towards

⁹⁵ My Son Was A Columbine Shooter. This is My Story.

https://www.ted.com/talks/sue_klebold_my_son_was_a_columbine_shooter_this_is_my_story, accessed December 5th 2018.

his lower class upbringing. Ben notices this, 'And he wondered what that said about her, seeing her boyfriend scrape around for change and saying nothing, did that make her nice? Or mean.' (*Dark Places*, P.195) As Bernice Murphy notes, 'Rich girl Diondra's cruel mocking of Ben's desperate economic situation provides an early indication of her monstrous self interest.' [Murphy, p.162] In fact it is Diondra's money that seems to attract Ben to her and the respite she allows from his chaotic family home and two jobs. 'School and farm and farm and school, that's all his life was before Diondra.' (*Dark Places*, P.58) Ben, so without any agency of his own, is drawn to the power her wealth brings. Diondra holds her older age, wealth and pregnancy as a form of power over Ben - she is a terrifying amalgamation of all of his anxieties. 'He'd knocked Diondra up and now she owned him' (*Dark Places*, P.249) There are parallels between Diondra and Flynn's infamous female villain, Amy Elliot, who artificially inseminates herself with her husband's sperm to gain control over him and coerce him into staying with her. Pregnancy as a form of ownership of men is a specifically female brand of monstrosity. By weaponising a womb these women are exploiting their very womanhood in a perverse manner, utilizing their gender in order to gain control. Diondra is a monstrous woman using both her wealth and her own body to secure her control over Ben.

Pregnancy has been used as a mode of bodily horror in American popular culture in a plethora of manners; from the demonic foetus in *Rosemary's Baby* to the gruesome birthing scene in *Alien*. The image of the foetus as monstrous other is a well established horror trope. Poole noted that, in America, 'The human body itself, especially the female body, came to be seen as a monster or at least a monster-birthing machine.' [Poole, P.70] Both Diondra and Eva's pregnancies are described in grotesque and frightening terms but crucially they are described as not actual monsters, but as literal fetuses wreaking havoc on their bodies. Depicting a foetus as a monster demonstrates the bodily anxieties of pregnancy itself, the fear of the unknown that pregnancy entails. As *Rosemary*

Betterton wrote, 'But what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood?' [Betterton, P.81] The crucial difference between Diondra and Evas pregnancies is that Diondra is described through the perspective of frightened fifteen year old Ben, the father, and thus his own judgment could be misconstruing the actuality of the experience. Nonetheless, Diondra does seem to fear her child, screaming that there is 'a cannon going off in her womb' (*Dark Places*, P.244) and referring to the foetal development rather sardonically as 'the quickening.' (*Dark Places*, P.244) The truly gruesome descriptions come from Ben himself, who views the foetus as truly gothic; 'He thought *let me go let me go let me go* as if the thing were going to grab him like some late-night slasher movie and pull him inside her. That's how he pictured it, a thing. Not a baby.' (*Dark Places*, P.245) Eva's pregnancy is told intimately from her first person perspective, where she laments the prison of her own pregnancy from the beginning. She felt 'expendable, throw-away, swallowed by a big biological project that I didn't initiate or choose, that produced me but would also chew me up and spit me out.' (*Kevin*, P.61) The childbirth itself reminded her of 'horror films.' (*Kevin*, p.88) Both writers depict the figure of the foetus in monstrous terms, amplifying the anxieties surrounding pregnancy and being a parent.

What the monster *is* is often a less interesting question than *why* that monster exists and why we as a society chose to fear it. Cohen wrote that "These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place....they ask us why we created them." [Cohen, P.20] By exploring the concept of monstrous foetuses, pregnant women and violent mothers both Flynn and Shriver unearth why contemporary society have such specific fears about them. Monsters exist through their very indefinability, but through examining the cruel murders in these novels and exploring both the people who committed them and the situations and people around them who lead to their violence, Shriver and Flynn give an actuality and honesty to the crimes of

America. They also demonstrate the power of the media; in both of these texts there is an attempt to depict a false monster in order to tell a compelling narrative to the American people. The complex anxieties modern America has towards its own nation, gender, the nuclear family and motherhood are all thoroughly explored in these two novels through the very human monsters Shriver and Flynn have created.

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