Coming To Terms With The Sociopathic Child: Existentialism, Boredom, And Evil In Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin*

In many circumstances, the naming of a school shooter as a 'psychopath' or 'lone madman' is a way of deflecting attention from the specificities of white male middle-class violence. At best, psychopathy is a vague explanation of human cruelty and violence. For Eva, the narrative focaliser of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003), and the mother of a violent American school shooter, psychopathy is a 'cheap' 'sociological aphorism' (464). The novel is an exploration of the many ways that society explains evil, and existentialism comes to pay a crucial role for Eva, who seeks to understand why her son kills. Using Lionel Shriver's bestselling novel, I ask: does an existentialist frame offers a productive way of understanding human cruelty? Or does it contributes towards white male exceptionalism in the United States?

If you're unfamiliar with the novel, the book is set two years after the eponymous Kevin massacres thirteen of his school peers, his English teacher, his father, and his sister leaving his mother to mourn and make sense of the violence. Shriver structures the novel through letters that Eva writes to her dead husband. In these letters, Eva tries to make sense of why her son's violence. She writes, in her words, to 'go backward, to deconstruct', 'not in order to gather all the blame to myself' but to establish '*there*, *there*, precisely *there* is where I draw a line' (467). The epistolary form allows Eva to explore violence in a private, confessional textual space – one that is made even more private since the letters remain unsent. Writing allows her to try on multiple understandings of violence and is therefore useful for thinking through evil.

Kevin's violence is largely represented throughout the book as the result of a nihilistic response to the absurd. His English teacher (who Eva thinks has a rare insight into her son) believes that Kevin is despondent and angry because 'this is as good as it gets … there's nothing to do … Except tear it apart' (391). The angry white response to the absurdity of life is one of violence. But doesn't this paint school shooting as a pure act? And if it does, isn't that a problem? Shriver seems to find existentialist angst as a compelling explanation of white, male, middle-class violence – that is, until the end of the novel.

There are many ways that Shriver draws parallels between existential themes and evil. Kevin, for example, collects computer viruses because 'they're kind of elegant, you know? Almost–pure' (384). Without destructive forces says Kevin in a tone that Eva describes as 'affabl[e]': 'You type on your computer and go home and the refrigerator comes on and another computer spits out your paycheck and you sleep and you enter more shit on your computer … Might as well be dead' (384). The angle here is obvious; violence is an enriching, life-affirming, routine disruptive act. And while violence is certainly disruptive, and this portrayal captures the

entitlement and coldness of white violence, what it erases is the way that school shooting functions as a form of backlash politics and social control.

The targeted killing of specific groups or random open fire speaks less clearly of a nihilistic encounter with the absurd and more of a need for power and dominance. Killing others is a tool of dominion. It is a forceful way of controlling the lives of others. And it creates a momentary "utopia" for the killer where their supremacy and worldview is unchallenged. To aid the portrayal of Kevin as a violent agent of the absurd, Eva's letters use a linear trajectory that begins before she is even pregnant with Kevin. By recounting her pregnancy and Kevin's birth and childhood, Eva creates the appearance of causality. In deconstructing Kevin's childhood and paying specific attention to moments of bad behaviour or ill-will, it allows readers to see obvious 'signs' of Kevin's innate deviance or Eva's cold and violent parenting allowing readers to lay blame. Perhaps because of cultural tendencies towards binary thinking, and the novels sensational content, Shriver found that the novel split readers into two 'ferocious camps: one convinced that the boy was evil from day one, the other just as convinced that his mother's coldness was criminally culpable' (Shriver, 2011).

Eva has less of a binary perspective when it comes to her son. The range of descriptions and rationalisations of Kevin that she uses from mother blaming to determinism are prone to shift depending on the context she finds herself in. Eva will call her son a 'changeling', 'Evil Incarnate', and a 'sociopath' as a kind of cathartic speech act in her unsent letters but away from the pages of the novels she refuses to use or accept psychiatric or folkloric explanations (85, 291, 48). And when she is asked for her motherly and thus apparently privileged insight on her "demon child", she is antagonistic to requests, replying defiantly, 'I expect it's my fault, I wasn't a very good mother – cold, judgmental, selfish' (195). However, none of these rationalisations answers what she calls her own internal 'pleading refrain of *why*, *why*, *why*' (194). Existentialism, however, does.

I have some idea as to why Shriver found existentialism such a meaningful lens, and the British author Maggie O'Farrell compellingly explains how existentialism is productive. Discussing the inexplicable unfairness of life in her 2017 memoir, O'Farrell explains: 'You will for a while, expend some time and energy into finding out *why* this has happened' but eventually, 'You decide to give up on the *why* and instead concentrate on the *how*' (280, my emphasis). Reconciling ourselves to partial understandings and ambiguity is a necessity of life – although ambiguity and uncertainty doesn't mean it isn't vital to question why violence occurs, it simply means that no answer is definitive nor absolute. Equally, although existentialism begins with *why* and *what* (why are we alive? And what is the meaning of life? And so on), the secondary questions of existentialist philosophy are concerned with the *how*. How, for example, to live in the face of absurdity and the meaninglessness of the void?

But before Eva can get to the how, she exhausts herself trying to understand Kevin, and boredom offers Eva the single most useful way of understanding her son's violence. Boredom and evil have long been intertwined. The literary scholar Alison Pease argues that the term is palimpsestic, and although the meanings of boredom have shifted, time has not eroded prior connotations but led to layers of significance (Pease, 2012, 2). Historically, the term is linked to both sin and hollowness. Pease notes that 'from about the year 1000 [boredom was understood] as that which pierces, perforates, makes a hole, or makes something hollow … a primary meaning [that] conveys a violence' (2). There is of course also Søren Kierkegaard's maxim that 'boredom is the root of all evil', whose appearance of truth is dependent on an earlier version of boredom: *acedia*. Lars Svendsen, in his *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2005), argues that the 'Christian Early Fathers' considered understood *acedia* as 'a state of satiety with life, or tiredness' (50).

Today, the second item on the *Psychopathy Checklist-Revised* (the "gold standard" for diagnosing psychopathy) is a 'proneness to boredom' (Hare, 1991, 2). In 2013, an adolescent who shot a college student used boredom as an explanation, the shooter claimed: 'We were bored and didn't have anything to do, so we decided to kill somebody' (Boren, 2013). The citing of boredom as a motivation for murder indicates a rhetorical shift in the United States towards the notion of boredom killing as a compelling means of understanding school shooter violence (Scitovsky, 1999). This is deeply problematic; boredom as an explanation is not only simplistic but also profoundly insulting (allowing the Oklahoma murderers to commit symbolic violence as well).

In Eva's other attempts to understand him, she tries on four intersecting rationales that are reflective of broader existential analyses of the "Angry White Male' American school shooter. These rationales include economic security, achieving celebrity, creating story and identity, and a sense of displaced rage/perceived victimisation. Above all, Eva asserts 'I'm convinced that his leading motivation was ideological. … I have in mind the "purity" he admired in the computer virus' (422). Such "purity" has clear links between white supremacy and eugenics, even at the level of elevating and hiding violent and prejudicial motives through a higher ideological façade.

Kevin's economic justifications are worth a brief discussion because of their resonances with extratextual school shooters. In many circumstances, American (and Canadian) school shooters perceive their prospects as having been "stolen" by those who they perceive as of less deserving. Consider, for example, the Montreal Massacre in 1989, a shooting at the École Polytechnique engineering college where Marc Lépine shot 24 women and 4 men (who got in his way). Survivors note that Lépine was explicit about the gendered dimensions of the violence, shouting "You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists" (Gismondi, 2018). The shooter also

left a 'three-page handwritten letter in which he blamed women for the failures of his life' (Decker, 2015, 199). In the case of the Columbine High Massacre, both Dylan Thomas and Eric Harris harboured deeply homophobic, racist, and sexist prejudices, they were nihilistic, and Harris, in particular, demonstrated a quality of feeling as though the future was meaningless (See Cullen, 2009). School shooting has clear links with displaced rage regarding economic prospects and a victim-perspective that is antagonistic towards civil, disability, LGBT, and women's rights groups.

Despite these primary motives, Kevin ultimately admits to Eva the senselessness of the shooting, telling her when she asks to explain why to her: 'I used to think I knew … Now I'm not so sure' (464). Like Kevin, Eva also finds that a process of asking why has led her nowhere concrete. She says: 'I have come full circle, making a journey much like Kevin's own … by thrashing out between exoneration and excoriation, I have only tired myself out. I don't know, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace (467). To demonstrate her reconciliation with ambiguity and ignorance, Eva asks the rhetorical question: 'If I arrived at the right answer, would you come home?' (467). Of course, there is no understanding that will bring her husband back. There is only the question of how to live in the future Kevin made for her.

Does existentialism as a lens limit the usefulness of the novel in terms of understanding violence? Does it fail to capture the nuance of extratextual violence? On the one hand, concepts like the absurdity of life and the void, give a problematic grandeur to white, elitist violence. They also fail to capture the ways that white supremacy and patriarchal entitlement socialise men in such a way that a nihilistic victim-complex can produce horrific violence. But on the other, it speaks to the violent ways that existentialist philosophy (and ideas about ideological nobility, purity, and rationality) are interacting with whiteness, masculinity, gender, and class privilege in contemporary American society.

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