

The question of  
outsiders as victims:  
analyzing the wasp  
factory and we need  
to t...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout the novels – Iain Bank's *The Wasp Factory* of 1984, and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* from 2003 – the authors depict the protagonists as subversive outsider figures, as they each have only one friend – Frank's Jamie, whom he can tell with ease “ I killed a few rabbits” (Banks, 1990 p93) despite his usual secrecy, and Kevin's Leonard, whom he threw “ detritus onto the roadway with” (Shriver, 2011, p307). It is suggested to the readers that the young murderers Frank and Kevin are outsiders due to their innate evil; however, the reader is also invited to challenge this assertion, with the possibility of the characters as victims. Though it is more subtly suggested within the novels, this is the stronger argument, as when thoroughly analysed it is clear that Kevin and Frank are victims – of their families and of society.

The protagonists of both novels can be viewed as intrinsically malicious boys, due to the age at which their immoral behaviour begins. In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank decided at merely 5 years old that he “ wanted to kill Blyth there and then” (Banks, 1990, p43) when his cousin “ sprayed our two hutches with flame” (Banks, 1990, p43). Just a year later, he killed Blyth in a most “ macabre” (Banks, 1990, p47) way, and described his murder as “ exciting” (Banks, 1990, p48). This suggests that his “ delight” (Banks, 1990, p48) at destruction was innate in him, as he was too young to have been fully socialised to violence. Therefore, ‘ the violent tendencies of the protagonist’ – as described by Rob Myers – are of his own creation, born in what The Nature vs. Nurture debate cites as ‘ the evolutionary roots of human behaviour’. Further evidence of Frank's wicked nature is in his other two murders – that of his younger brother, Paul, and another cousin,

Esmerelda. After Paul, he never showed remorse, only “acted my part” (Banks, 1990, p89) of “the tortured, self-blaming child” (Banks, 1990, p90) to fool others, with no apparent desire to confess, suggesting that he entirely lacked in morals, and was unaffected by the pain he creating for his father, who “brooded” (Banks, 1990, p90) at length. With the murder of Esmerelda, he thought “calmly” (Banks, 1990, p114) about how to orchestrate it, with no anxiety or uncertainty about whether or not to carry it out – when the idea enters his head, he feels with conviction that he must do it, explaining that it was “simply something that must be done” (Banks, 1990, p113). This compassionless response to his minds cruelty indicates, as Banks says, that he does not ‘possess a sophisticated moral framework within which to place’ his ‘violent thoughts’, leaving him to act on them. It is argued by the Daily Telegraph that Frank has ‘an obsessive personality’, which suggests he feels compelled to realise his thoughts into actions, which is what drives him to serial murder.

Similarly, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Shriver presents Kevin as ‘born not very interested in things’ who does not ‘really take on board the reality of other people or their feelings’, which in her description, is ‘evil’. This is portrayed on the incident of his birth, when he shows “a lack of enthusiasm” (Shriver, 2011, p96) and “distaste” (Shriver, 2011, p96) towards his own mother, as if her existence dissatisfies him. His aversion towards Eva intensifies quickly, and she notes at just a year and a half, he “smites me with the evil eye” (Shriver, 2011, p121). As Janet Phillips notes, he was ‘malicious from the moment of birth’, and ‘an extraordinarily horrible child’ before having been socialised, demonstrating the innate malevolence in

Kevin. This is a characteristic only he is accountable for, paralleling Frank; therefore making the protagonists victims of nothing but their own nature. Also similar to Frank, is Kevin's serial offences. Whilst his murdering is concentrated into a single episode, Kevin attacks in other ways, upon many other people throughout his lifetime, highlighting the pleasure he finds in being the malefactor. From a young age, he rejects his nannies, who say he "pulls...hair...very hard indeed" (Shriver, 2011, p122) and they think "he knows it hurts" (Shriver, 2011, p122). This indicates that despite his early awareness of pain, he purposefully causes it, suggesting he enjoys hurting others, as child and adolescent psychiatrist Alan Ravitz says that 'this kid didn't want anything but to wreak havoc'. Also early in his life, five year old Kevin "enticed" (Shriver, 2011, p220) his eczema covered nursery peer, Violetta, into "raking her upper arms" (Shriver, 2011, p218) until "she was covered in blood" (Shriver, 2011, p218) – a most grotesque act of defiance. This appeared to please Kevin tremendously, who left nursery that day with "his eyes...sparkling" (Shriver, 2011, p220), indicating that the gory scene had left him immensely satisfied. This displays evil in him so consistently in his early life, like it is displayed in Frank of The Wasp Factory, that it seems he cannot be a victim of outside influences – the nastiness is his clear natural state.

In spite of this, it is clear that the central families in both novels play crucial roles in the deviance of the protagonists, making them victims of their nurturing – and their lack of. Frank's mother in The Wasp Factory is most significant as she "deserted" (Banks, 1990, p135) the family "almost immediately after my birth" (Banks, 1990, p135) and is therefore absent

from his childhood and took no part in Frank's upbringing. It is Agnes who causes his resentment of women, due both to her abandonment and to her "expecting" (Banks, 1990, p135) and "presumptuous" (Banks, 1990, p135) nature, which he experiences during her brief return. According to psychologist William Pollack, studies have shown 'that many boys experience problems as a result of separating too early from their mothers' care', which is evident in Frank, a boy acting on what Banks notes as 'psychotic' and 'harm-minded' beliefs. Not only this, but recent studies on British families highlight that 'there is considerable evidence' for children 'with one parent figure missing' being 'more likely' to involve themselves in 'antisocial behaviour' such as violent crime. These studies illustrate that Frank's violence is a result of his mothers' desertion, therefore proving his position as a victim of his situation.

Correspondingly, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva does not provide an especially positive mother figure for Kevin, despite her physical presence during his infancy and later boyhood. It is natural for children to learn basic behaviour from their mothers, as they are their primary socialisation, and Kevin plainly acquires many of Eva's harsh traits. In particular, Kevin's violence is undoubtedly a learned skill, as at 6 years old, he is thrown "halfway across the nursery" (Shriver, 2011, p229) by his own mother. Studies show that 'violent behaviour is learned' and often 'early in life', through 'watching people around them', which suggests that Eva's actions influenced Kevin's "Thursday" (Shriver, 2011, p14) massacre. In addition, Kevin appears to associate this act of violence with love and honesty, as he describes it as the "most honest thing you ever done" (Shriver, 2011, p204),

which therefore shows that he saw violence as an effective form of communication, leading to his murders – as Ezra Miller, actor of Kevin in the film of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, explains that ‘ he wants her to really have to come face to face’ with the reality of their relationship. That the role of the mother is linked to the protagonists’ violence is irrefutable, which therefore makes the outsider figures of Frank and Kevin victims of their family situation. Furthermore, the two novels indicate the role of society in the brutality of the protagonists, who are victims of cultural standards. This can be seen in *The Wasp Factory*, as Frank’s brutality is blatantly a result of what he is exposed to. This socialisation process is clearly shown through Frank’s keen interest in “ War” (Banks, 1990, p23), and his knowledge of what makes “ a good War” (Banks, 1990, p23), which is a result of his watching television programmes on wars. This easy access a young boy has to view such violence is incredibly damaging, as research suggests that ‘ viewing of violent scenes’ are making ‘ teenagers behave more aggressively’, which Dr Jordan Grafman concludes ‘ might make aggression feel more “ acceptable” ’. Furthermore, most programmes on war depict soldiers as heroes, and impeccable examples of masculinity, which unquestionably appealed to Frank – who as a child “ used to have fantasies about saving the house” (Banks, 1990, p24) if there were a “ fire” (Banks, 1990, p24) – and his interest in heroism.

In addition to this is Frank’s underlying desperation to conform to the stereotype of the male gender, due to his “ unfortunate disability” (Banks, 1990, p14) – which he later discovers is his natural state – leaving him feeling inferior in his masculinity. As Jackson Katz and Jeremy Earp argue, in

the media they 'portray male violence as a normal expression of masculinity'; proving Frank's interest in war is based on boosting his sense of male self. Moreover, Frank is marginalised by society, due to his different behaviours and his relation to Eric, the boy who "set fire" (Banks, 1990, p62) to and eat "pet dogs" (Banks, 1990, p62). They "would run from me... shout rude things from a distance" (Banks, 1990, p62) and give him a "funny look" (Banks, 1990, p63) if they were near him, as they instantly assumed he "got up to the same tricks" (Banks, 1990, p62) as his brother. This led to Frank keeping his "brief visits to the town to a taciturn minimum" (Banks, 1990, p62), and staying in isolation on his island, where he had "reassurance and safety" (Banks, 1990, p180). This demonstrates how Frank feels treated "cruelly" (Banks, 1990, p180) by the world, and that he believes that other people and the culture surrounding them have a negative effect. This profusely supports his belief that he "had to" (Banks, 1990, p112) commit the murders of his family members, particularly that of Esmerelda, whom he felt with certainty that he was protecting her from "the insidious and evil influence of society" (Banks, 1990, p111). It also makes clear why he killed Blyth and Paul: they were outsiders to the island. Blyth, had been brought up away from the island, and Paul was the son of an unknown man, for his mother never explained. Undoubtedly, Frank thought that they were inherently under the influence of society, which he saw as a threat to the natural order of things. His interest in what Judy Carrick describes as 'ritual and tribalism' is a protective force against outsiders, making society culpable for Frank's isolation, and therefore his crimes.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Shriver parallels this depiction of society as a catalyst of the protagonists' misbehaviour. Kevin, as an American citizen was constantly exposed to the concept of the American Dream, which, whilst originally was about hard work and perseverance, over years became hedonistic ideology. His mother, Eva, reveals to him the country's shortcomings: how it lacks a "sense of history" (Shriver, 2011, p2), preferring to indulge in its own interests, never others. This is a view reflected in the "sour" (Shriver, 2011, p274) and "sarcastic" (Shriver, 2011, p274) Kevin, who suggests that Americans do not truly care, as they "study the same African-American Americans during African-American History Month" (Shriver, 2011, p276) each year. This, in combination with the various high school shootings extensively covered on the news during his adolescence – including a boy who "killed a teacher and two students" (Shriver, 2011, p72), someone who "shot dead a boy at his middle school who owed him \$40" (Shriver, 2011, p72), and a sixteen year old who "killed a student and his principal" (Shriver, 2011, p72) – desensitised Kevin to the feelings of other people, as he was surrounded by individualism. This played a critical role in Kevin's development, as despite sociological studies showing that at approximately four years old children begin to develop a comprehension of rules, his sense of morality never truly forms. This meant that for Kevin, his "maleficence" (Shriver, 2011, p440) was not made difficult by his conscience, as he was only tuned into his own interest. His reasoning for choosing who to kill was simply about "who got on my nerves" (Shriver, 2011, p416) as he had to "get something out of it" (Shriver, 2011, p416). This demonstrates a lack of sophisticated principles, cultivated in egotism and corruption, which



inevitably affected Kevin's behaviour. The sensationalism in American society is also a significant factor in Kevin's reasons for the massacre.

Due to the American Dream evolving into an obsession with fame and fortune, the culture surrounding Kevin when he was growing up was one which did not allow his unusual personality to thrive, instead focusing on those interested in "acting" (Shriver, 2011, p433), "personal grooming" (Shriver, 2011, p433) and "sports" (Shriver, 2011, p433). This caused resentment in Kevin, an intelligent but misunderstood boy, and a desire to be noticed, even with an ill repute. This is shown in his television interview with "Jack Marlin" (Shriver, 2011, p411), in which Kevin evidently enjoys being "the star" (Shriver, 2011, p411), as he locks his "hands behind his head" (Shriver, 2011, p413) in a clearly confident and satisfied position. Here, he explains part of his reasoning for the murders as wanting to have "plot" (Shriver, 2011, p417) and a "story" (Shriver, 2011, p417), declaring "TV and video games and movies" (Shriver, 2011, p417) as motivators to become a "watchee" (Shriver, 2011, p417). Research suggests that these could be part of what made him 'behave more aggressively', as the violence portrayed as entertainment can 'blunt brain responses' to the horrific nature of these scenes – which undoubtedly happened to Kevin, who played gun based video games with Franklin as a child, as a source of fun. This association with violence as normal and enjoyable was never challenged in Kevin, who found great pleasure in his murders, proudly hissing "maleficence" (Shriver, 2011, p440) whilst he "put an arrow" (Shriver, 2011, p440) to each classmate. This further indicates that he is a victim of American society, as Frank is of gender stereotypes.

Throughout the novels *The Wasp Factory* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the subversive outsider figures are subtly presented as victims of their circumstances, as their family situations and cultural surroundings undoubtedly affect their behaviour. Though it can be argued that this affects everyone, the debate on Nature vs. Nurture suggests that both inherent characteristics and upbringing are crucial in the way a person develops, and that many genes 'cannot be activated without certain environmental inputs'. This proves that although both Frank and Kevin were innately different to what is considered normal, their stranger traits cannot be blamed for their deviance, and that this is a clear result of their surroundings, for the people around them did not understand their differences and unwittingly led to patterns of destruction.