

Killing Eve

(Series 1, Episode 1)

AS Component 2: Investigating media forms and products

A Level Component 2: Media forms and products in depth

Focus areas:

- Media language
- Representation
- Media industries
- Audiences

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Killing Eve* is a **blackly comical spy thriller** that subverts many of the conventions of a traditionally masculine genre. The set product is the first episode of season 1, broadcast in April 2018 on BBC America in the USA, and in September 2018 in the UK.
- *Killing Eve* is produced in the UK by Sid Gentle Films for BBC America and BBC Three. The show ran for four seasons from 2018 to 2022. It broke records for weekly ratings in the USA, and became the second most-watched show on BBC iPlayer in 2018.
- The ‘**showrunners**’ for all four series have been female writers and directors, with Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*) scripting the first series. The show is based on the ‘Villanelle’ series of short novels by Luke Jennings, which were originally **self-published**.
- The plot of *Killing Eve* focuses on a ruthless female assassin, Villanelle, and the bizarre relationship she develops with the female MI5 agent, Eve Polastri, who is pursuing her. The show was praised for its portrayal of strong, complex, and dangerous women, and for its inversion of the *machismo* of the spy genre.

- *Killing Eve* has won a host of awards, including Best Drama at the BAFTAs, and numerous individual awards for Sandra Oh and Jodie Comer.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Consider the codes and conventions of media forms and products, including the processes through which media language develops as a genre.

Genres are ‘types’ of media product that present **codes and conventions** in a way that provides very specific **audience pleasures**. They are favoured by producers and institutions as they often represent a risk-free investment. Audiences’ (and creators’) relationship with genres is complex, involving a balance between familiar tropes and fresh elements that enable genres to evolve.

- *Killing Eve* could be classed as a **cross-genre** long form television drama. It has many characteristics of the spy and thriller genre. The plot of an obsessive agent pursuing a criminal nemesis is familiar from James Bond films and from TV shows like *24*. *Killing Eve* could also be classed as ‘**dramedy**’, a show that fuses serious drama and black comedy, such as *Orange Is The New Black*.
- *Killing Eve* could also be grouped with a sub-genre of female-led ‘**cat and mouse**’ thrillers – such as *The Fall* or *Happy Valley* – where a driven woman detective becomes personally obsessed with her quarry.
- Many critics praised the way *Killing Eve* subverted conventions of a spy thriller, mainly by replacing all the usually male characters with women, and by consistently surprising audience expectations with unexpected twists and character behaviour.

Some of the spy thriller character conventions that *Killing Eve* uses and/or subverts are as follows:

- The **protagonist** is a government agent, who breaks the rules but gets results. Eve Polastri would be good example of this stock character, with the twist that at the start she is a desk-bound functionary rather than a debonair superspy. Plus, the first time she breaks the rules it results in a massacre, and she is promptly fired!
- The **antagonist** is a ruthless criminal that the hero is pursuing, either to bring to justice or for vengeance. This character is the **binary opposite** of the hero and takes pleasure in chaos and carnage. In *Killing Eve*, there is a sense that Eve and Villanelle admire and even envy the characteristics of their rival, as well as sexually desiring them.
- Within the genre there is a stock female version of this antagonist, who is either presented as a seductive **femme fatale** (*Le Femme Nikita*) or a sleek killer in a tight bodysuit (*Black Widow*). Villanelle breaks this mould. She is depicted as an amoral psychopath, who leads a glamorous lifestyle of international travel and designer clothes. However, she never uses her sexuality to entice her victims. In the focus episode, she is quick to shut down the amorous advances of her victim in Tuscany. Though Villanelle is established early on as being sexually very liberal, the costume and way she is shot doesn't sexualise or objectify her.
- The 'Spymaster' character is usually a device to deliver plot exposition, and to act as a foil to the hero's reckless behaviour. In *Killing Eve*, there is the disapproving Frank (who later is revealed as a mole), but Bill and Carolyn actively encourage Eve in her pursuit. Carolyn is presented as a wry, witty but powerful key player, who may have her own agenda for recruiting Eve.
- Similarly, Villanelle's handler Konstantin isn't a coldblooded taskmaster but a jovial, almost cuddly father figure.
- The **narrative** is typical of the crime/investigation genre: a brutal murder prompts dedicated investigators to find clues (CCTV footage, travel documents, etc.) and interview

witnesses (e.g. Kasia), with a reveal of the killer's identity and/or a confrontation between hero and villain as the climax. **Enigmas** are usually created then answered, often leading to another enigma, (or a red herring), as the investigation continues.

- In **long form TV drama**, the investigation will take place over an entire season, or seasons, with cliff-hangers or major plot developments at the end of each episode. *Killing Eve* follows this format – episode 1 ends with Carolyn recruiting Eve and setting up the ensuing hunt for Villanelle.
- *Killing Eve* also twists this conventional narrative by balancing the screen time between Eve and Villanelle, prompting the audience to empathise as much with the antagonist as they do the hero. Crucially, the main narrative thrust and promised denouement isn't the killer's identity (Villanelle is the first character we see) or the villain being brought to justice – it's what will happen between Eve and Villanelle when they finally meet (a confrontation that happens halfway through the season).

Consider the processes through which meanings are established through intertextuality.

- Throughout *Killing Eve* there are clear nods to espionage thrillers such as *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and the Bond stories – part of the audience pleasure comes from seeing these familiar tropes inverted, often through naturalistic dialogue and behaviour (e.g. Eve's need for a croissant to ease her hangover during an important briefing).
- Villanelle's character is reminiscent of the cold-blooded female killers from *La Femme Nikita* and *Atomic Blonde*, while her love of flair and performance recalls the murders in the TV version of *Hannibal*.
- Eve's bumbling scruffy image that hides her razor-sharp mind could be seen as a reference to *Columbo* and other 'shabby' detectives.

Theoretical approach: Narratology – Todorov

- Consider how *Killing Eve* fits into Todorov's five step narrative structure, and how it also plays with it.
- The equilibrium:** the first scene with Villanelle and the ice cream is striking but also shows the character's normal life (there is a cutaway to a spot of blood on her watch that hints of her violent persona) – but then there is no **disruption** to Villanelle's life until she is told Eve is tracking her in episode 2.
- In terms of Eve's narrative arc, we are shown her equilibrium – comfortably married with a boring desk job, before a clear **disruption**: seeing the Polish diplomat's murder and guessing it's a female assassin, which compels her to investigate further.
- The **enigma codes** that are typical narrative drivers in the spy/crime/thriller genre. Who is the killer? How will they be caught? Here, these are not used. We see Villanelle is the killer, and we assume the **resolution** of her capture will not happen until the final episode. Instead, the enigmas focus on character and relationships: who is Konstantin to Villanelle? Where did she come from? What made her this way? What will Eve do when she finds her? And what will be the outcome of the inevitable confrontation: will they fight, try to kill each other, or fall into bed?

Consider how genre conventions are socially and historically relative, dynamic and can be used in a hybrid way (A Level only).

- Waller-Bridge stated in an interview that "*people are exhausted by seeing women brutalised on the screen*", especially in the crime genre, where women mainly feature as a corpse: "*while a male detective stands over it, talking about his divorce.*"
- Killing Eve* was praised for putting women in the key roles that lead and define the narrative. This reflects social change, the increasing power of women in the workplace, and the conflict women feel between career success and personal fulfilment.
- Writer and producer, Sarah Phelps, said that Waller-Bridge's characters avoid the "*warped*

male fantasy" of the *femme fatale* and instead show women with "*dark and secret parts of their psyche*", independent of the male characters.

- The witty, wry script also serves to undermine the *machismo* of the spy thriller genre; by making *Killing Eve* a thriller-comedy-drama **hybrid**, the show can satirise the ridiculous elements of the spy genre whilst providing genuine emotional heft to the story.

Theoretical approach: Genre – Steve Neale

- Neale says that though genres may be seen as being limited by familiar tropes, they are also marked by difference, variation, and change. Crime/spy thrillers have a recognisable array of conventions that produce audience pleasures: from narrative ingredients such as the exciting cat-and-mouse pursuit, or the mystery that is so slowly revealed, but also more aesthetic pleasures like glamorous locations and costumes.
- However, Neale would say they also need to display something original to set them apart from other examples. Evolution is essential to sustain a genre; *Killing Eve* does this by providing a unique female perspective on a traditional plot and by constantly challenging audience expectations of where the plot is heading.

Consider how the combination of elements of media language influence meaning.

Visual codes:

- Codes of clothing:** compare the costumes of Eve and Villanelle and what they tell you about the two women. Consider the scene in episode 2 where Villanelle steals Eve's suitcase – what she does with Eve's clothes, what it tells us about Villanelle's interest in Eve, how Eve responds when the suitcase is returned – you may wish to analyse in detail the scene where Eve tries on the dress.
- Gesture and expression:** consider the naturalistic 'workplace' behaviour of Eve, Bill, and Carolyn and how this subverts the melodramatic elements of the spy thriller genre. Then compare to Villanelle and how Comer has added layers of complexity to what could have been a one-dimensional 'evil' role.

- **Iconography and setting:** consider the set design and props used in Eve and Villanelle's homes. Eve's home communicates a 'comfy' domesticity, consider how could this also be seen as something that constricts Eve. Compare and contrast with Villanelle's Paris apartment which suggests wealth, indulgence, and freedom but also a sense of emptiness.

Technical codes:

- Consider the opening scene in the café with the little girl and the ice cream. We are placed immediately into Villanelle's point of view. Think about how close-ups, POV and shot reverse-shot are used to make us empathise with Villanelle, even if her facial expressions aren't immediately readable and her subsequent behaviour is shocking.
- Look at how **camera and editing** are used throughout Villanelle's scenes in the focus episode. Even though she is a vicious psychopath, the audience is encouraged to empathise with and even admire her (and in doing so, we also empathise with Eve's growing fascination with her quarry).
- Despite being a very violent show, *Killing Eve* has surprisingly little blood – mainly due to the limitations imposed by BBC America. Consider how the violent scenes are shot and edited, and how they achieve maximum impact without being explicitly gory.

Audio codes

Dialogue:

- The witty and sharp dialogue was highly praised by critics. The understated, naturalistic way the MI5 agents talk subverts the serious, jargon-heavy language in other spy thrillers like those by writer John Le Carré.
- The discussions between Eve and Niko are amusingly unsentimental ("*How would you kill me?*"). They indicate the close and easy relationship between the two – this comfort later contrasts with Eve's more passionate obsession with Villanelle.

Music:

- Almost all the songs used are by the band Unloved, who specialise in moody, 1960s 'noir' songs. Music supervisor Catherine Grieves says the feminine yet threatening tone gives another 'voice' to the darker sides of Villanelle and Eve.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Consider how representations may invoke discourses and ideologies and position audiences (A Level only).

- Both the original author (Luke Jennings) and 'showrunner' (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) made a deliberate effort to challenge female stereotypes and show the kind of female characters that had not been seen on TV before.
- By replacing what are traditionally male roles (rogue hero, vicious villain, spy team) with women, *Killing Eve* subverts the *machismo* of the genre. The male characters don't attempt to dominate the narrative (both Bill and Niko are supportive of Eve), and the female characters don't need to struggle against sexist bosses to assert themselves.
- Villanelle has particularly won a large fan following. Apparently disregarding her sociopathic violence, her fans see her as an empowered and fiercely uncompromising **anti-hero**, as well as a fashion icon. During the writing process, Waller-Bridge would refer to Villanelle's 'glory' – "*her subversion, her savage power, her glee in destruction, and delight in lovely things*".
- *Killing Eve* is boldly feminist, but it also asks challenging questions about the darker sides of female desire, sexuality, and relationships.

The effect of social and cultural context on representations and the effect of historical context on representations.

Representations of gender:

- The female characters in *Killing Eve* are portrayed as complex, three-dimensional people. They are frequently brilliant (Eve's intuition the killer is a woman), imaginative (Villanelle's

set-piece killings) and daring (Villanelle's elaborate plan to infiltrate the party in Tuscany). However, these women are also shown to have contradictory and dangerous impulses.

- BBC America executive producer Sarah Barnett said: *"We're profoundly shifting away from the invisible, unconscious assumption that the big stories have men at their centre and everything else is a subset of that."*
- In Bond films particularly, the way women are sexualised and objectified has been met with criticism. Even in 'cat and mouse' thrillers such as *The Fall*, the strong female detective is hunting a dominant male killer who victimises women. The depiction of women as strong, capable – and capable of great violence – in *Killing Eve* is a deliberate attempt to challenge these representations. Consider the violence in *Killing Eve* – think about who the aggressor is, who the victim is and how this affects issues of representation.
- In 2017, the #MeToo movement (begun in 2006) set out to expose sexual harassment and misogyny in the entertainment industry. The movement also challenged the patriarchal structure of film, TV, and music institutions.
- Theorist **Liesbet Van Zoonen** suggested that representations of women (and other minority groups) would become more positive and authentic if there was more diversity in the production teams of media industries. *Killing Eve* has female executive producers, producers, and principal writer/directors, which may explain its progressive depictions of gender.
- The male characters in *Killing Eve* also challenge **masculine stereotypes**. Bill, though Eve's superior, is gentle and distinctly 'unbossy' (*"You could get into trouble if I was a more serious man"*); he also brings his baby to the office. Niko is a teacher who also acts as a 'house-husband' to Eve, doing the cooking and cleaning and other domestic responsibilities. Konstantin, Villanelle's handler, seems more like a caring 'uncle' than a dominating authority figure. Consider how these challenge more traditional masculine qualities.

- You may also want to consider representations of **ethnicity** and **age**: Eve is a child-free, middle-aged, professional woman of Asian heritage, married to a British-Polish man – this is unusual in TV drama but especially in the spy/crime genres.

Theoretical approaches: Feminist theory – bell hooks (pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins)

- bell hooks identifies **patriarchal** power as a problem in society. She said patriarchy victimises both men and women, forcing them into stereotypical roles.
- The male and female characters in *Killing Eve* directly challenge this. The disapproving boss, Frank, seems a little pathetic in his attempts to be authoritative, and it is made clear in the first episode that it is Carolyn who holds the genuine status and authority in their workplace.
- The victims of violence in the show are mostly men, many of whom are killed by Villanelle. In later episodes, it is made clear she has a penchant for castrating her male victims – quite literally removing their phallic power.
- In addition, Niko and Bill appear happy to avoid a dominating or traditionally masculine role. Both characters are nurturing, compassionate and happy for the women to be in charge. Consider the other male characters in the show and how they too defy stereotypes.

Theoretical approaches: Gender performativity – Judith Butler

- Butler asserts that gender is not a fixed biologically determined characteristic, but rather a fluid **social construct**. She suggests people 'perform' a gender role composed of clothes, hair/make-up, posture, and other behaviours.
- In *Killing Eve*, Villanelle revels in extremely feminine (and spectacular) designer fashion. Yet in later episodes she also dons a beard and long coat to imitate Konstantin, which displays her fluid approach to gender.
- Eve, by contrast, wears baggy, unglamorous and defeminised clothes – it's only her unruly "incredible hair" that hints at the wild femininity within.

- When Villanelle replaces Eve's 'frumpy' clothes with chic and sexy designer dresses, she is inviting Eve to perform her gender in a more daring and sexualised way. The fact this is for another woman's pleasure, not a man's, adds another feminist layer to the portrayal of gender.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Media industries

Consider the processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups, and individuals in a global context.

- The show is based on the 'Villanelle' novellas written by Luke Jennings. Jennings originally wrote them as part of the Amazon's Kindle Singles project to publish short novels by new authors as e-books.
- Sally Woodward-Gentle optioned for the books and hired Phoebe Waller-Bridge as showrunner.
- *Killing Eve* was originally commissioned by BBC America and was produced in collaboration with BBC Three.
- BBC America is partly owned by BBC Studios (a commercial arm of the BBC that produces international content) and AMC (a USA cable TV network). As a subscription cable TV channel that accepts advertising revenue, it is markedly different from the Public Service Broadcaster role the BBC plays in the UK. Having US financial backing will impact on the show, such as having a famous American actor, Sandra Oh, play Eve.
- The show was produced by a UK independent company, Sid Gentle Films. It was mainly shot in the UK, and in locations around Europe and Russia.
- *Killing Eve* is an excellent example of a 'word-of-mouth' hit. Though critically acclaimed, the audience responses on social media are credited with fuelling a record-breaking 82% rise in viewing figures after episode 1 aired in April 2018 the USA. By the time the show premiered on BBC Three/iPlayer in September, it was already highly anticipated.
- The first episode was the second most-streamed TV show on BBC iPlayer in 2018 (narrowly beaten by *The Bodyguard*).

Consider the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products.

- As television becomes a more global industry, **international co-productions** are becoming common. Big streaming giants like Netflix have 'rescued' BBC productions like *The Last Kingdom*, providing a cash injection for struggling titles. BBC has also collaborated extensively with HBO on big-budget shows like *His Dark Materials*.
- The BBC has a global reputation as a quality media brand which less well-known channels/platforms would be eager to collaborate with.

Theoretical approaches – Cultural industries: Hesmondhalgh

- One of Hesmondhalgh's key ideas is that the radical potential of the internet has been limited by the domination of large cultural institutions (which are increasingly indivisible for technology giants like Google, Apple, and Amazon).
- Though BBC Studios is a division of the BBC – a company that produces and distributes a wide range of media products – the challenging and imaginative elements of *Killing Eve* have not been restricted. The subscription model of BBC America and the PSB model of BBC TV actually seem to offer more creative freedom.

Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms.

- Between 2016 and 2022, BBC Three – on which *Killing Eve* had its UK premiere – was an online-only streaming service. This provided the channel with a greater opportunity to fulfil its mission statement to provide "innovative programming" without being confined to traditional broadcast schedules.
- This remit, and the success of *Killing Eve* in attracting a wide audience, seems to disprove Hesmondhalgh's ideas about cultural industries.

- After the success of the first two series, the show was moved to the more mainstream BBC One broadcast schedule and episodes were released weekly (resisting the ‘binge-viewing’ trend of many shows).
- **Negotiated meaning** – the audience accept some of the intended meaning but reject others. Some viewers may enjoy the depictions of strong, intelligent women but feel uncomfortable with the explicit violence.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

How media products target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences.

- Whilst the genre typically targets a male audience, the focus on female-led narrative opens the target market beyond just genre fans. The success of *Fleabag* had also established Waller-Bridge as a provocative and authentic voice for young women. This pitches the show above other BBC thrillers.
- BBC America insisted on using an American actor for Eve, capitalising on Sandra Oh’s fame in the romantic comedy drama *Grey’s Anatomy*. This helped market a show set almost entirely in Europe to a US audience.
- Viewing figures for BBC America show that *Killing Eve* was particularly successful with the 18–49 demographic. Its stylised violence, distinct aesthetic and complex adult themes make it appropriate for this age group.
- The feminist ideology and subversion of genre conventions would clearly target an educated, politically progressive, and culturally engaged audience.

Theoretical approaches: Reception Theory – Stuart Hall

Hall asserts that individual audience members will interpret media texts in different ways according to their established **values and beliefs**. He believed there were three modes of ‘reception’, where audiences **decode** what they consume.

- **Dominant/intended meaning** – the audience accepts the intended meanings and ideology of the text’s producers. In the case of *Killing Eve*, this would be viewers who agree with the empowering portrayal of women. They would also find the subversion of genre tropes clever and amusing.

- **Oppositional meaning** – the audience reject the intended meaning and instead formulate their own interpretation. More conservative viewers of *Killing Eve* might be made uncomfortable by the sexual relationship that begins to develop between Eve and Villanelle. They may also be annoyed by the subversion of genre conventions that they enjoy.

Theoretical approaches: Fandom – Henry Jenkins

- Jenkins asserts that fandom is deeply personal and creative relationship with media products. He believes that particularly genre films and TV can unite marginalised people and even be appropriated for political purposes (e.g. the use of the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* by Hong Kong democratic protestors).
- The sexual chemistry in Villanelle and Eve’s relationship has resulted in a wave of ‘FemSlash’ fiction; non-professional writers produce alternative versions of the ‘canonical’ story and publish them online.
- Consider what fan responses tell us about the way audiences engage with long form TV drama narratives and themes.
- Novelist Jennings has spoken extensively about the *Killing Eve* fanbase and the resonance the show has with female – particularly LGBTQ+ – audiences.
- He said: “*Their messages on Twitter were passionate and moving. They claimed the show as their own, they told me. They identified profoundly with Eve and Villanelle, and they felt validated and made visible by the women’s relationship... It was always about female power and female desire, and for LGBTQ+ fans, many of them living troubled and secretive lives, the show had become a refuge, a rallying cry, and a social manifesto.*” (Quoted from this Guardian interview: <https://bit.ly/2Efl41N>)