

Investigating Eva's Trauma in Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* through Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT

Sometimes people easily judge other people's suffering as a single traumatic event without realizing that trauma can shape the victims' identity and emotional ability. Thus, this study aims to identify the main character, Eva's imbalanced personality, its types, and the impacts of trauma on her mental health and well-being as seen in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) movie. This study applied Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory (1923) to answer the research objectives, focusing on the structural model of the psyche and its relation to Eva's traumatic experiences. This qualitative research uses Lynne Ramsay's movie entitled *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, published in 2011 by BBC Films, as the data source. The data were in the form of scenes and dialogues related to (1) the nature of the main character Eva's imbalanced personality, (2) the types of traumas experienced by her, particularly in relation to her son Kevin, and (3) the impacts of the trauma on Eva's psychological and overall well-being. The researchers were the primary instrument of this study, conducting a close reading of the movie and analyzing the data through a psychoanalytic lens. The results of this study reveal that the main character's personality is dominated by her superego, which leads her to have acute, chronic, and complex traumas. These traumas resulted in PTSD, emotional distress, dissociation, and physical symptoms. Therefore, through the lens of Freud's psychoanalysis, combined with the trauma theory and film analysis, this study uncovers that someone's suffering should be seen as an ongoing psychological process. Moreover, this study shows that psychoanalytic theory can be applied to film, which then broadens the scope of psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Keywords: Freud, psychoanalysis, imbalanced personality, trauma, film analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Trauma can be defined as an overwhelming experience resulting from a sudden or catastrophic event, where the response to the event results in hallucinations and other disturbing phenomena that are often delayed and uncontrollable (Monir, 2019, p. 718). One potential outcome of such experience is post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. The DSM defines PTSD as the disorder of an individual who has had a horrific incident involving death, death threat, serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others resulting in intense fear, helplessness, or horror (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 176). Women, in particular, face an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a consequence of such trauma. This is because women are more likely to experience certain types of traumatic events and therefore are more vulnerable to develop PTSD (Olf et al., 2007; Tolin & Foa, 2006).

Cathy Caruth (2016) explains that in literature, trauma is shown as an event that the mind cannot fully process. Thus, it can resurface as sudden memories, repeated images, or confusion after being repressed. This suggests that trauma is not a completed experience, but rather an ongoing psychological phenomenon. Trauma then can be seen as a disturbance in the psyche because of the lack of closure of a traumatic event. On the other hand, as Caruth's literary trauma theory draws closely from Freud, their ideas overlap. Sigmund Freud (in Solms, 2024) defined trauma as an event that triggers psychological excitation or arousal beyond the ego's capacity to handle it effectively. This overwhelming intensity disrupts psychological functioning and leads to a persistent recurrence of traumatic memories, leaving it unresolved without the mind and even the body, understanding it and impacting them. Similarly, Laplanche and Pontalis (2014) define trauma as an event that cannot be fully processed and overwhelms the psyche because of the excessive psychological stimulation. As a result, the traumatized individual may struggle to assign meaning to the experience and therefore does not have a coherent narrative related to said traumatic event. This is why LaCapra (2014) explains that trauma can cause people to repeat painful experiences instead of working through them, as what is highlighted by Whitehead (2004) that there is difficulty in understanding and representing traumatic experience. When a traumatic experience is overwhelming and cannot be fully processed, it may remain fragmented or incoherent. To protect the mind from distress, the feelings and memories linked to the experience may be repressed as a defense mechanism. This belief echoes Freud's sentiment that a traumatic event could be pushed out of conscious awareness, but the repressed feelings and memories would continue to influence an individual's behavior and emotions (Freud in Solms, 2024).

Even though Freud later changed his ideas and developed a more direct trauma theory, his structural model of the mind is still helpful for

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trauma analysis today. As Freud explains in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the id, ego, and superego work together or come into conflict, especially when a person faces strong emotional stress. This model helps in understanding why trauma can create inner tension, fear, guilt, or confusion inside a character. It also shows how the mind uses defenses, such as repression, to hide painful memories, a process Freud first described in “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence”, published originally in 1894 (Freud, 2014). Because many trauma symptoms come from these hidden conflicts, Freud’s model helps us see how trauma affects both behavior and inner experience. For this reason, even if Freud later focused more on trauma itself, his structural theory remains important for studying how characters experience and cope with psychological wounds.

It is widely recognized that movies or films contain aspects and structures that lend themselves to literary analysis. Elements such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, and visual motifs help create the tone of the character’s emotions and guide how viewers read the character’s inner world or things that are not explicitly told (Hill & Gibson, 2000). Along with fiction, poetry, and drama, movies are classified as a literary medium since they employ both words and visuals to tell a story (Klarer, 2004, p. 56). Accordingly, movies and other mediums of literature often feature human experiences in their story, including the less appealing ones, such as trauma.

Several existing literary works have discussed trauma, including the book *A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy* by Sue Klebold, the novel *Push* by Ashley Audrain, and the movie *Defending Jacob* by William Landay. The issue of trauma is also reflected in the movie *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), directed by Lynne Ramsay and published by BBC Films. The 2011 psychological thriller movie was produced by Jennifer Fox, Luc Roeg, and Bob Salerno. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* delivers a haunting psychological and traditional thriller, especially in regard to Kevin’s cruelty and apathy evident in the murders he committed and his behavior toward Eva, which juxtaposes the detrimental mental spiraling and traumas Eva undergoes throughout the story.

Several studies have examined Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* from different angles. However, most focus on Kevin’s psychology, cultural ideas, or general family dynamics rather than Eva’s psychological trauma. For example, Suhendar and Hermawan (2018) analyze Kevin’s behavior through the framework of antisocial personality disorder, and how his possessed traits of the disorder are linked to both genetic and environmental factors on top of individual disposition. Their study emphasizes the moral implications of interacting with individuals who display antisocial tendencies. Similarly, Erica & Hendrawan (2024) examine Kevin’s psychology, especially his development of psychopathy throughout his developmental stages. On the other hand, Smyth’s (2020) shows how cultural expectations and postfeminist ideas of motherhood are challenged in *We Need*

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to *Talk About Kevin*, as the film presents Eva's maternal ambivalence toward Kevin rather than constant happiness in motherhood. Different from said researches, Desilets (2017) analyzes how trauma shapes Eva's identity and perceptions as a character, focusing more on themes and narratives. The research also echoes Gnostic ideas of the fundamental flaws of the world and that Eva has made to realize her disconnection of said world because of Kevin's crime. Therefore, none of the researches focuses on Eva's psychology, and how her psychological experience of trauma related to her son Kevin develops into PTSD using psychoanalytic lens. To address this gap, this research uses psychoanalytic and trauma theories to examine Eva's long-term trauma as it develops through her strained relationship with Kevin, and how it impacts and interacts with her psyche. Specifically, Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) portrays Eva and Kevin's complex relationship in a manner that is atypical of the perceived common relationship between mother and child. For example, Kevin shows animosity towards Eva through both verbal and nonverbal means. As noted by Fatimah & Mas'adi (2025), teenagers show verbal expressions of power that indirectly express psychological domination. This is also the case with Eva and Kevin, especially because Kevin has hated his mother since he was a baby. This study examines whether the one-sided antagonistic relationship might shape the types and outcomes of the traumas Eva endures. By exploring this dynamic, this research seeks to contribute to the need for understanding the effects of trauma resulting from familial relationships.

This study uses Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory (1923) as a base framework, along with Julia Kristeva's (2002) views surrounding motherhood to analyze Eva's imbalanced personality. Freud's theory helps explain how hidden and unresolved emotions or conflicts can shape one's behavior, and it remains relevant as notable literary trauma theorists, including Caruth (2016), draw on his concepts to explain how trauma shapes behavior. Therefore, psychoanalysis and trauma theory work together in this study. Herman's (2015), and Van der Kolk's (2014) theories are noted to examine the types and impacts of Eva's trauma. Additionally, the study employs the film study theory by Bordwell and Thompson (2008) to support the analysis. Without diminishing the significance of earlier research, this study builds on previous research on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory (Solms, 2024), while offering new insights into the connected psychological and traumatic dynamics in the film *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), with a focus on how Eva's psyche and trauma shape each other.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method that examined literary works, with the aim of describing data in words and paragraphs. As mentioned by

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Fiorentya & Wijana (2025), data serves as an important part in a research as it is what helps answer the research questions of a study. Here, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), directed by Lynne Ramsay and published by BBC Films, is the primary data source, and since this is qualitative research, the data of this study were drawn from selected scenes in the film, in which images, character behaviors, and dialogues correspond to the research objectives. These scenes were examined to identify indications of imbalance in Eva's personality, representations of the types of traumas she experiences, and depictions of the psychological impact of those traumas. Each scene that contained visual or verbal elements related to Eva's emotional instability, traumatic experiences, or psychological responses was coded and classified according to the three research focuses. This process ensured that the analysis remained directly aligned with the study's aims and allowed for a systematic interpretation of Eva's character as portrayed in the film.

The focus of this study is on analyzing Eva's imbalanced personality, its types, and impacts using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory (1923) to give understanding of the structural model of the psyche. Julia Kristeva's ideas of motherhood, especially abjection and divided mother, to explain Eva's strong feelings of fear, disgust, or loss of self (Kristeva, 1982; Kristeva & Goldhammer, 1985). Theory of trauma and recovery by Herman (2015) and theory of traumatic experiences and their impacts to the mind and body by Van der Kolk (2014) are used to tie and deepen the analysis, and the film theory by Bordwell and Thompson (2008) to give understanding of the visual and technical composition of the movie shots and stills.

Film grammar is used as an analytical tool to examine how trauma is visually represented in the film. The analysis focuses on mise-en-scène, cinematography, and visual motifs, including camera shots, lighting, framing, color, and the spatial arrangement of objects and characters (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Hill & Gibson, 2000). According to film theory, these elements can shape meaning and guide the audience's engagement with the narrative and showing how visual choices can communicate the character's state or psyche.

To collect the data, the researchers conducted repeated viewings of the film and selected screenshots for close visual analysis, following qualitative visual methodology (G. Rose, 2016). In analyzing the data, several steps were taken, namely sorting the data based on the research objectives, re-reading the data to extract the pertinent information and eliminate unnecessary information, reclassifying the data, interpreting the collected data, and finalizing the data.

This study uses theoretical guides to answer the research questions. For the first question about the imbalance in Eva's personality, the analysis follows Freud's (1923) ideas of the id, ego, and superego to identify how her inner conflicts appear in the film. This analysis is supported by the ideas of Kristeva from her concepts of abjection and motherhood (Kristeva, 2002).

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For the second question about the types of trauma Eva experiences, the study refers to Feriante & Sharma's (2023) categorization of acute, chronic, and complex trauma. For the third question about the impact of trauma on Eva's psychology, the study uses Van der Kolk's (2014) explanation that trauma can disturb both the mind and the body and may lead to PTSD, emotional distress, dissociation, and physical symptoms. Moreover, Caruth's (2016) ideas are also used to analyze trauma from literary perspective. These guides help the researchers organize the findings and understand Eva's psychological condition clearly.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Eva's superego is more dominant in her personality, which causes her to fail to embody the role of a perfect mother. Kevin's manipulative actions strengthen Eva's sense of failure as Eva takes the negative interactions with Kevin personally, internalizing the perceived failures to be the results of her mistakes. Eva's strong superego keeps her from realizing that she is not entirely to blame for Kevin's actions. These insights into Eva's character help in the exploration of not only the research questions, but also the complex themes featured in the movie, namely motherhood and trauma. Based on the findings of this research, some data will be explained below.

1. Eva's Imbalanced Personality as Seen in Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011)

a. The Dominance of Eva's Superego

Figure 1:
Eva Leaving the Courtroom



Source: BBC Films. Time: 01:28:22 – 01:28:23.

Woman: "Run, bitch! You rot in hell!" (Ramsay, 2011)

In this picture, the shot used is a close-up shot with a straight angle. This shot highlights the face or hands so that the attention focuses on the

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character's expression (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). It focuses on Eva's emotions behind her expression and the tension within the frame. Eva, who had just left the courtroom, was surrounded by journalists and angry mobs. There was one woman who shouted at Eva with insult and condemnation, namely, "Run, bitch! You rot in hell!" (Ramsay, 2011, 01:28:22 – 01:28:23).

From a trauma perspective, hostile crowds can reopen or worsen emotional wounds. Public anger and shaming can act as a form of social trauma that increases a person's stress and fear (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2019). This connects to Van der Kolk's (2014) idea that trauma can disturb a person's emotions and lead to numbness or dissociation. In the picture, Eva's blank eyes reflect shame and tiredness to the point where she appears not to care about how she is treated badly. The emotional and psychological turmoil from the trauma from Kevin's action and the mob might be overwhelming and needed to be pushed down, causing a psychological shutdown rather than active resistance.

According to Holmes (2011, p. 16), the superego is formed through family life and enforces the striving for perfection by setting moral standards and ideals for the ego. When the superego in a person is dominant, that person feels excessive guilt and self-criticism. Eva's psyche is characterized by a dominant superego, which leads her to internalize and accept unreasonable words that lead her to be the target of societal hatred. This can be seen in Eva's reaction to remains silent and take the verbal attack as if she deserves it. Her inability to respond or defend herself suggests a suppression of her id which also repressed instinctive self-protective desires and emotional responses, such as outbursts. Moreover, Kristeva (Kristeva, 2002) explains that a mother often feels divided between the perfect mother and the real one who has struggles. Kevin's actions which resulted in the hostile crowd can make Eva identify herself as a failed mother, blaming herself for Kevin's actions and therefore taking the blame and hatred as if she deserved it.

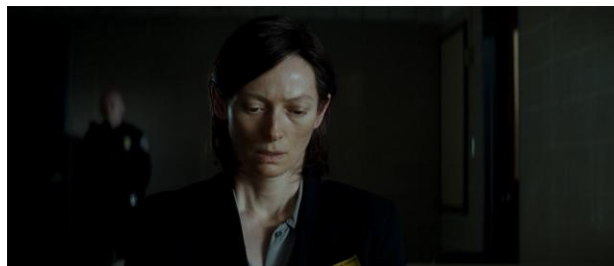
Eva's weak ego fails to balance the superego and id, resulting in her self-blaming and inability to challenge her dominant superego. This is conveyed through the close-up shot and framing of Eva looking isolated in the middle of unfriendly settings, highlighting her powerlessness. The dynamic of Eva's psyche creates a complex inner struggle, where Eva's psyche is torn between her moralistic self-criticism and her unexpressed emotions. The further explanation can be seen in the table below:

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Table 1:
The Dominance of Eva's Superego

Eva's three personality	Analysis of the picture
Superego (Dominant)	Eva's dominant superego allows herself to accept vitriol and hatred from the society and makes her think she deserves them.
Ego (Weak)	Eva's weak ego unable to balance the superego and id, which leaves her silent in the face of vitriol and hatred, resulting in her being too weak to challenge her dominant superego.
Id (Suppressed)	Eva's suppressed id prevents her from reacting aggressively and attempting to escape the situation. This shows that she is unable to act according to her instinctive desires, such as expressing emotional outbursts.

Figure 2:
Eva visits Kevin for the first time in prison



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:18:32 – 00:19:59.

In this picture, Eva's frame is in a medium close-up shot with a straight angle. As explained by Bordwell & Thompson (2008, pp. 190–191), the medium close-up is a shot of a human figure viewed from the chest up that occupies most of the screen, framing the object in a relatively large size. In a medium close-up, the viewer's attention is drawn to the character's face where their expression is clearly shown. Eva displays a restless expression and a downward gaze, with her eyebrows slightly furrowed show that she is anxious and mentally exhausted. Therefore, this visible anxiety is not only an emotional reaction but also reflects a deeper psychological conflict within Eva.

As stated by Danias & Koukopoulos (2025), the primary function in Freudian superego is to suppress any desires of the id that are deemed socially unacceptable and to encourage the ego to act by upheld morals or ideals

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standards. In this picture, Eva's dominant superego is evident in the way she carries her guilt and self-blame in silence, reflecting an imbalance in her personality. An overly strong superego can lead to constant self-criticism and regret, and this is shown in the shot by a dark background that symbolizes psychological and emotional pressures creating a heavy mood that exacerbates and reenforce Eva's old feelings of guilt. The dark background of the prison represents Eva's inner world, which is characterized by isolation and suffering, denoting the unresolved conflicts within and maybe even her emotional collapse resulted from the conflict of her relationship with Kevin which shakes her sense of identity (Kristeva, 1982). Below is the table which shows the dominance of Eva's superego.

Table 2:
The Dominance of Eva's Superego

Eva's three personality	Analysis of the picture
Superego (Dominant)	The expression shown by Eva reveals her worry stemming from excessive guilt, which is indicative of her strong superego.
Ego (Weak)	Eva's inability to overcome her suffering, as she remains trapped in moral anguish and fails to seek emotional relief, demonstrates the ego's failure to function effectively.
Id (Suppressed)	Eva's lack of resistance or emotional outbursts can be attributed to her dominant superego overriding her instincts.

b. Eva Wants to Be a Perfect Mother

Figure 3:
Eva being Frustrated with Kevin



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:33:11 – 00:33:15.

Eva: "Now Mommy wakes up every morning and wishes she was in France!" (Ramsay, 2011)

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In this picture, the medium close-up and straight angle effectively highlight Eva's emotions. Eva's facial expression, captured in a medium close-up, clearly conveys the tension that Eva feels between her and Kevin (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). The straight angle provides a neutral perspective, allowing the intensity of Eva's feelings to resonate with the viewer.

Eva's dialogue, "Now Mommy wakes up every morning and wishes she was in France!" (Ramsay, 2011, 00:33:11 – 00:33:15), reveals her frustration and annoyance with Kevin's disobedience. Her wish to be in France suggests a desire to escape her duties as a mother, showing how she feels trapped and overwhelmed. This reaction reflects her conflict between the id and the superego. According to Freud (1923), the id seeks personal comfort and freedom, while the superego pushes a person to follow moral rules and social expectations. Eva's complaint shows that her id wants freedom from stress, but her superego forces her to stay in the role of a "good mother," creating inner tension. Her expression of worry and anger showcases the emotional pressure she experiences due to her inability to control or understand Kevin (Hall & Lindzey, 1957, p. 44).

Kristeva's (2002) idea of maternal conflict also helps explain this moment, as Eva struggles between who she wants to be and who she is expected to be as a mother. Therefore, this picture shows the instability of Eva's superego, as she struggles to maintain her image as a perfect mother while grappling with her frustration and personal needs.

c. Eva's Imbalanced Personality

Overall, the aforementioned scenes show a clear pattern in how Eva is presented throughout the film. Through close-up shots, straight angles, and quiet framing, Eva is often shown as silent and restrained, which reflects how her superego dominates her personality. Instead of reacting or defending herself, Eva accepts blame and guilt, especially in moments connected to motherhood and public judgment. This repeated visual pattern shows that Eva's identity is shaped by strong moral pressure and self-blame, supporting Freud's (1923) idea of an imbalanced psyche and Kristeva's (2002) view of the conflicted mother. As a result, the film presents Eva as someone who is trapped between social expectations of being a "good mother" and her own emotional limits, conflict which arises from her superego and maternal guilt.

2. Types of Trauma Eva Experiences as Seen in Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011)

The researchers found that Eva's superego is more dominant than her id and ego. This imbalance is reflected in her overwhelming sense of guilt, which aligns with Herman's (2015) statement that guilt can be intense,

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especially when someone witnesses the death or suffering of others. Thus, the following discussion will delve into the various types of traumas experienced by Eva.

a. Acute Trauma

Figure 4:
Eva being Shocked into Silence by Kevin's Act of Killing



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:11:58 – 00:12:18.

In the earlier scene, Eva and the people behind her witness a murder committed by Kevin in the school gymnasium. The camera frame utilizes a medium close-up and straight angle to focus on Eva's shocked expression as she witnesses Kevin's violent act. According to Bordwell & Thompson (2008, pp. 190–191), a medium close-up emphasizes the character's emotions through their facial expressions. As the scale is relatively large, this shot also produces a dramatic effect. The warm red lighting and chaotic background also increase the intensity of the feeling of fear, confusion, and even horror (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Hill & Gibson, 2000). Eva's blank stare, frozen posture, and inability to speak show that she is overwhelmed by the event.

According to Feriante & Sharma (2023), acute trauma usually comes from a single, sudden, and frightening event, in which the individual may experience a fight or flight response for that singular event, as the trauma response usually is resolved after. However, as in the nature of a traumatic experience, this can cause conflicts in the psyche. Freud's theory suggests that the superego becomes stronger when a person feels deep guilt or moral responsibility (Freud, 1923). As a result, Eva's superego becomes more prominent as she feels morally responsible for the cruel actions of her son Kevin. This leads to a strong superego and intense guilt which dominate her psyche in her process to comprehend the disturbing incident she experiences for the first time in her life. Thus, the shot is not only highlighting the horror of Kevin's action, but also of Eva's conflict of the psyche.

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b. Chronic Trauma

Figure 5:
Kevin's Reaction to Eva's Reprimand



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:33:11 – 00:33:15.

Eva: “Kevin, stop that. That’s enough. Let Mom and Daddy talk.” (Ramsay, 2011)

In this picture, Kevin is captured by a straight angle and medium close-up shot in the middle of a conversation between Eva and Franklin. This draws the viewer into his immediate emotional space while maintaining enough background detail to signal his distance from Eva (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). While the background is blurry and emphasizes Kevin’s expression, he remains relatively emotionless. The warm domestic lighting also further contrasts the tension of the moment and Kevin’s reaction. The lack of response is actually underlining Kevin’s deviance to Eva. As Kevin’s behavior constantly annoys his mother, Eva had previously told Kevin to stop by saying, “Kevin, stop that. That is enough. Let Mom and Daddy talk.” (Ramsay, 2011, 00:33:11 – 00:33:15). However, Kevin ignores the reprimand and repeatedly disturbs her mom until Eva finally gets angry and hits Kevin’s hand.

This incident illustrates chronic trauma within their mother-child dynamic. According to Feriante & Sharma (2023), chronic trauma develops when acute trauma is not resolved or if the threat is perceived to be ongoing or occur repeatedly, whether from a singular event or multiple. This creates long-term emotional strain that may develop into PTSD. Similarly, van der Kolk (2014) explains that recurring interpersonal stress disrupts a person’s sense of safety and contributes to persistent feelings of fear, guilt, and self-blame, especially within close relationship. Thus, the tension in the relationship between Kevin and Eva triggers a continuous conflict and amplifies Eva’s guilt as a mother who should have been more patient with Kevin. Eva’s dominant superego exacerbates her guilt, making her think that her actions are immoral, further compounding her internal problems.

How to Cite (in APA 7th Edition):

c. Complex Trauma

Figure 6:
Kevin Holding a Toy Gun on The Table



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:44:59.

With the use of long shots where the character's position is noticed but on a small scale (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191), the background and surrounding of the character still dominates. The environment then reflects the emotional tension between him and Eva. The screenshot shows Kevin stands out in the long shot frame, where his position is in the middle with a straight angle that can be seen parallel to his surroundings, the *mise-en-scène* is paramount. While the straight angle keeps the scene neutral, but the chaotic *mise-en-scène* filled with paint on the windows and walls, shows how Kevin invades and disrupts Eva's personal space. This visual choice supports that setting can express a character's inner conflict (Hill & Gibson, 2000).

Kevin glances at Eva because he knows he has damaged something meaningful to her. This conscious behavior of Kevin encroach upon what is supposed to provide safety for Eva and violate its purpose. This behavior can be understood as a manifestation of complex trauma which is a recurring, cumulative, and prolonged event typically within close relationships (Courtois, 2008; Feriante & Sharma, 2023). This describes Kevin's attitude of sabotaging something that Eva is guarding, simultaneously betraying Eva and eroding her sense of security in her home. At the same time, Eva's dominant superego causes her to struggle with feelings of guilt and failure in educating her child. Caruth's idea of trauma returning in repeated moments helps explain why Eva reacts with fear and guilt each time Kevin destroys her space (Caruth, 2016). At the same time, Kristeva's concept of abjection appears in Eva's emotional distance, as Kevin's actions make her feel both connected to him as a mother and pushed away by his hostility (Kristeva, 1982).

How to Cite (in APA 7th Edition):

Figure 7:
Eva admits her feelings about Kevin to her husband



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:50:56.

Franklin: “Eva, he’s just a boy.” (Ramsay, 2011).

After the incident involving Kevin's behavior, which consistently disturbs Eva, she confides in her husband Franklin. The use of medium close-up and straight-angle shots highlights the closeness between Eva and her husband when Eva rests on Frank's lap, yet the frame also shows her emotionally distant and uneasy (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). In this scene, Eva is seen questioning Kevin's behavior towards her. However, her husband's response is dismissive, merely stating, "Eva, he's just a boy."

The dialogue not only gives the audience a clue about Kevin's character (D. B. Rose, 2015, p. 127) but also shows Frank trying to provide stability for Eva by downplaying Kevin's attitude by attributing it to his age, so that Eva would not overthink it. However, this lack of validation is a form of emotional neglect and is significant as Courtois (2008, p. 86) emphasizes that complex trauma is a trauma that is repeated with the involvement of betrayal or neglect by someone close, such as family member. Frank's dismissive answer causes Eva to feel invalidated and hurt, because her genuine concerns are being ignored by someone who should be acting more caring and empathetic to her and her cause. Coupled with her conflict with Kevin, Eva's distress can mount and grow overtime, adding to her deepening emotional struggle in which her fears and sense of maternal failure are amplified and her worries and concerns are dismissed while being considered as the wrong feelings (Kristeva, 1982).

d. Eva's Trauma Experience

Eva's trauma is shown as not isolated, but develops through a pattern of shock, dissonance, and repetition. The film features acute trauma, chronic trauma, and complex trauma, highlighting the intricacies of Eva's traumatic experience. Visually, this pattern is reinforced through recurring techniques such as neutral camera angles, controlled framing, and tense domestic spaces, which allow ordinary settings to communicate underlying psychological

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threat (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Hill & Gibson, 2000).

Courtois (2008) further explains that trauma becomes more damaging when it happens repeatedly within intimate relationships, as seen in Eva's role as both mother and victim. As a result, the film presents trauma not as a single incident, but as a long-term emotional condition that slowly reshapes Eva's identity, relationships, and sense of safety. This condition also erodes Eva's sense of self because, as noted by Amboy & Basid (2024), if their rights are not fulfilled, a person cannot be considered "present". To be respected and feel secure are parts of the requirements for a healthy relationship, and to be deprived of these rights can cause Eva to not feel or be whole as an individual.

3. The Impacts of Trauma on Eva's Psychology as Seen in Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011)

Eva has experienced three types of traumas, namely acute, chronic, and complex trauma. Herman (2015) states that traumatic memories are frequently broken up and cannot be recollected in a coherent narrative manner, which renders trauma unstructured. At the same time, the memory of the tragic event retains and invokes vivid feelings and visuals. The fragmentation coupled with the intense emotional attachment, results in traumatized people who have strong feelings towards certain recollections but do not have clear or complete memories and emotional context. In the case of Eva, she has exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional distress, and dissociation on top of physical symptoms.

a. PTSD

Figure 8:
Eva sees her own face in the mirror



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:05:51.

In the picture, straight angle and close-up shot highlight Eva's face when she looks in the mirror, not only making her emotional state easy to read, but also showing a glimpse as to how she sees herself and feels inside (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). The blurry mirror reflected a sense of distortion of the self, be it the identity or the state of the emotion and psyche. The straight angle, which focuses the camera parallel to Eva,

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creates a direct, almost confronting view which conveys intense emotions triggered by Eva's reflection in the mirror and memories of Franklin's words, "You have to know how to dance like a princess". This scene illustrates Eva experiencing PTSD, particularly intrusive symptoms through flashbacks of happy memories of Frank and Celia before Kevin killed them (Herman, 2015, pp. 24–36). Her blurred reflection, downcast gaze, and tense expression suggest that her trauma overwhelms her sense of reality, making her feel trapped between memory and the present, debilitated by the hauntings of her past. This response fits Caruth's (2016) idea that traumatic memories return in a fragmented, uncontrollable way, while Courtois (2008) notes that complex trauma makes these intrusions even stronger because the source of harm comes from someone emotionally close. As a result, Eva appears haunted, unable to escape the emotional weight of her past.

Figure 9:
A Mother and Daughter Singing and being Joyful



Source: BBC Films. Time: 01:07:08.

This picture, shot in a long shot and straight angle, shows a mother and a daughter walking together at night. Their figures are parallel to the audience's view and are almost at the screen's height, making them prominent. Despite that, the backdrop is meant to take, and it is, precedent in this shot. The frame places emphasis on the surrounding environment instead of the figures (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). This creates distance between Eva and the mother-daughter pair, not only physically but also emotionally. When Eva watches the happy pair, instead of feeling happy for them, the scene instead gives her an intrusive flashback to her own memory with her daughter Celia having finished shopping together. In the past, Eva and Celia shared a strong bond, until Kevin killed her daughter and her husband, Frank. Notably, a straight angle should give a more neutral and realistic shot (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008), yet Eva's trauma come to the surface to remind her how she used to be happy, but now she can only reminisce the beautiful memories in the somber afternoon atmosphere. This is one of the symptoms of PTSD where trauma can return unexpectedly and uncontrollably (Caruth, 2016) and through what others may regard as ordinary can bring forth painful memory of trauma (Herman, 2015), which can be linked subconsciously with the aforementioned traumatic

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events.

According to Billings & Nicholls (2025), PTSD is a mental health condition that an individual may suffer after exposure to a traumatic event that involves persistent symptoms which cause significant distress or functional impairment. This is characterized by symptoms such as intrusive thoughts or memories related to the trauma, avoidance of things that may remind them of the traumatic event, low mood and negative way of thinking, changes in behaviors, and heightened arousal that is debilitating. For Eva, the repeated exposure to traumatic memories and the associated feelings of guilt and shame may contribute to the development of her PTSD, which can significantly impact her life and its quality. The long shot and evening setting support this reading by placing Eva as an observer of a life she can no longer access, with the night being the closure of a day symbolizing the closure of a chapter in life, reinforcing the lasting psychological impact of her trauma.

b. Physical Symptoms

Figure 10:

Eva's Mind Wandered as She Lays in Bed



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:13:20.

In this picture, Eva is shown lying awake in bed, suggesting difficulty sleeping and physical restlessness, which are common physical symptoms of trauma. Van der Kolk (2014, pp. 95–100) explains that trauma is often stored in the body and can appear through physical symptoms, including regular pain, sleep problems, and digestive issues, as well as emotional and psychological symptoms.

In the moment capture by the screenshot, Eva hears her husband Frank's voice saying "I love you" in her mental scape (Ramsay, 2011, 00:13:20), indicating a belated return of trauma, wherein painful memories resurface uncontrollably rather than through conscious recall (Caruth, 2016). The use of a close-up shot and straight angle intensifies Eva's tense facial expression and restless eyes, drawing attention to her physical discomfort (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). This discomfort is emphasized in contrast to the pillow, highlighting her contrastive feelings in a place where she should feel comfort. The bed, which normally represents rest and safety, instead becomes a site of distress, showing how trauma disrupts even private

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and intimate spaces. This visual contrast supports Van der Kolk's argument that trauma interferes with the body's ability to feel safe, causing Eva's body to remain alert despite the absence of external danger (Van der Kolk, 2014). Her inability to rest reflects how trauma continues to affect her physically long after the traumatic events have passed. This is a physical manifestation of Eva's trauma, where she is experiencing insomnia caused by her emotional longing for her husband, on top of the complex internal experiences.

Figure 11:
Eva's Fidgeting Fingers



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:19:31.

According to Van der Kolk (2014), trauma is often expressed through the body, including nervous movements, muscle tension, and restlessness, especially in stressful situations. This picture shows Eva's physical anxiety through her fidgeting fingers as she prepares to see Kevin in prison, indicating how trauma affects her bodily responses before she can express emotions verbally. Rather than showing emotional distance alone, the gesture reflects hyperarousal, a state of constant physical and emotional alertness which is a common physical symptom of trauma. This bodily response also reflects what Caruth (2016) describes as trauma returning through uncontrolled physical reactions rather than clear emotional expression.

The use of close-ups emphasizes the emotional expression and body language, drawing attention to specific body parts, such as the hands or face, (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). Here, Eva's fingers are highlighted to convey her anxiety in meeting Kevin again. The high-angle framing makes Eva appear small and vulnerable, reinforcing her lack of control and emotional insecurity in this moment (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 190). This visual emphasis supports Van der Kolk's claim that trauma survivors often remain physically alert and tense, even when no immediate danger is present. Eva's restless fingers therefore function as a visual sign of unresolved trauma that continues to affect her body during her interaction with Kevin.

Eva's anxiety in interacting with Kevin also shows her reluctance to mend their relationship due to her trauma that disrupts trust and emotional safety. This agrees with Van der Kolk's statement that said individuals who have undergone trauma often struggle to build and maintain meaningful

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relationships as they struggle with building trust, leading to isolation and loneliness (Van der Kolk, 2014). This picture shows Eva's strained and nervous reaction to the situation of seeing Kevin in prison, as seen by her restless fingers. Eva finds it challenging to build trust with Kevin in the aftermath of the tragedy that traumatized her.

c. Dissociation

Figure 12:
Eva Disassociating from The Reality around Her



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:28:59-00:29:19.

In this picture, the medium close-up and straight-angle camera position shows Eva, who is positioned in the foreground, to be not present mentally, apparent in her facial expression and slightly downcast eyes (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 190–191). As explained by Sar & Ozturk (2006, p. 18), people who have suffered trauma often use dissociation as a coping strategy, which causes them to feel cut off from both their surroundings and their identity. Eva's blank facial expression and stiff posture, coupled with the lighting in the gloomy background, reflect her sense of alienation from the world around her. This is further emphasized by the office boy is cleaning with a loud vacuum cleaner behind her, yet she seems to be undisturbed, too lost in her own head. The office boy in the blurry background reinforces the impression that Eva is in a state of dissociation, in which external stimuli fail to reach her awareness. This reflects Caruth's (2016) theory that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment but returns later in a numbed and fragmented form, a response also described by Van der Kolk (2014) as the mind distancing itself from overwhelming experiences in order to survive.

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d. Emotional Distress

Figure 13:
Eva Laying on the Couch, Staring at Nothing



Source: BBC Films. Time: 00:25:43 - 00:26:08)

In this picture, Eva appears emotionally overwhelmed and disconnected, showing clear signs of emotional distress rather than active response. Eva lies sprawled on the couch, staring into space, suggesting emotional exhaustion and numbness amidst the drastic change in her life. According to Van der Kolk (2014, pp. 82–83), trauma typically causes emotional stress, resulting in feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. A traumatic event can leave a lasting impact, making it difficult for the victim to experience positive emotions. Furthermore, trauma can affect behavior and social relationships, and lead to persistent worry and unhappiness.

Frank's voice haunts Eva, repeating the words “You're gonna be a good-looking boy”, causing Eva to ruminate that if Kevin had been a well-adjusted child, as parents typically hope, this tragic event would never have occurred. This intrusive memory reflects Caruth’s (2016) view that trauma returns through unwanted repetition rather than conscious reflection, trapping the survivor in unresolved meaning.

The long shot frame, combined with a straight angle that makes the shot parallel, emphasizes Eva’s isolation by making her figure prominent with the background dominating the surroundings and visually reinforces Eva’s isolation and emotional collapse. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008), long shots reduce emotional closeness by placing characters within their environment rather than centering their inner life. Here, Eva sits listlessly and consumed by her thoughts, with the surrounding space dominating the frame and overshadows her, this both reflects the chaos in her life and makes Eva appear small and powerless, which mirrors her loss of control after the trauma. This visual distance aligns with Courtois’s (2008) concept of complex trauma, where ongoing guilt and emotional abandonment lead to withdrawal and inner collapse. In addition, Caruth (2016) explains that as trauma can be overwhelming to process at first, the incomplete procession may cause trauma to later return in ways that are indirect, such as through silence or sudden emotional reaction. This is why

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trauma is often shown through images, gaps, and absence, rather than through direct explanation. Eyerman (2019) further explains that trauma can be reinforced by social and emotional isolation, causing the subject to withdraw inward.

Figure 14:
Eva Crying into Kevin's Favorite Shirt



Source: BBC Films. Time: 01:41:16.

As Bordwell and Thompson (2008, pp. 190–191) observe, close-ups center a certain element that the film wanted the viewer to be focused on, while a straight angle presents the subject in a direct and intimate way. Here, the shot's focal point is the deep sadness in Eva. She is depicted crying with her face almost entirely covered while kissing Kevin's shirt which he used to always wear. This intimate gesture symbolizes the lingering, and even enduring, affection Eva has towards Kevin. This affection persisted despite the complexity surrounding Eva and Kevin's relationship. Consequently, such contradictory feelings can cause emotional distress in Eva. This is also suggested by her face being almost fully covered, which can show emotional withdrawal and an inability to face reality directly.

As Van der Kolk states, people who experience trauma-related stress feel anxious, depressed, and hopeless (2014, pp. 82–83). These negative feelings are experienced almost all the time by Eva, causing her emotions to build up and leaving her emotionally exhausted. This turmoil inside her is manifested physically through tears, releasing some emotional tension and providing temporary relief. On the other hand, Caruth (2016) explains that trauma is not fully processed but returns through repeated emotional reactions or feelings rather than clear understanding. Eva's tears therefore function as a bodily expression of trauma, where grief and love coexist without resolution. The scene communicates trauma not through dialogue or action, but through silence, touch, and stillness, emphasizing the lasting emotional burden Eva carries.

d. The Impacts of Trauma on Eva

Eva's trauma affects her psychologically, emotionally, and physically, rather than existing as a single, isolated response. Her experiences of PTSD, bodily tension, dissociation, and emotional distress reflect Herman's (2015)

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view that trauma disrupts memory and prevents coherent emotional processing. Through techniques such as close-ups, long shots, and neutral camera angles, the film visually conveys Eva's isolation and inner turmoil without relying on explicit dialogue (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). These representations support Caruth's (2016) argument that trauma returns indirectly through fragmented memories and emotional reactions, while Van der Kolk's (2014) work explains how trauma continues to manifest in the body. Together, the analysis shows that Eva's trauma persistently shapes her identity and limits her emotional ability.

CONCLUSION

The study on Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) shows that this movie successfully explores Eva's psychological twists through a nuanced description of her superego-dominated personality, which then worsens due to Kevin's manipulative nature. Through the movie's narrative technique and the use of camerawork, the audience is drowned in Eva's subjective experience, making her emotional repression and distress palpable. Therefore, this movie perfectly portrays a mixture of complex problems between maternal guilt, social expectations, and trauma experiences.

Therefore, this psychoanalytic film analysis of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), which focuses on the portrayal of Eva's trauma, demonstrates how individual identity can be shaped by one's experiences of trauma, especially when they are prolonged and unresolved, and how such experiences can have an impact on their relationships with others, particularly within the family. By combining Freud's psychoanalysis (Solms, 2024) with trauma theory (Caruth, 2016; Van der Kolk, 2014) and film analysis (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008), this study shows that Eva's suffering cannot be understood as a single traumatic event, but rather as a cumulative and ongoing psychological process reinforced by loss, guilt, and social hostility. Thus, this study shows how psychoanalytic theories and concepts can be applied to film or visual media, broadening the scope of psychoanalytic literary criticism.

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Naila Aisyah Utami: Collecting the data and writing the draft. **Nandy Intan Kurnia:** Writing, reviewing, editing, and validating the manuscript.

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