

Psychopaths on TV are nothing new. From Tony Soprano to Walter White to Dexter Morgan, a staple of the prestige TV era has been these characters with blurry morals that are difficult to root for, a style that has come to be known as “the difficult man”. As the guy who literally wrote the book on Difficult Men, author Brett Martin describes this hero, or rather anti-hero, as “a monster but a person that we root for and care for despite his monstrosity.”

Ultimately the difficult man style challenges its audience, inching forward bit by bit to try to find that last straw. When is a character too difficult to root for? Take Breaking Bad. At every turn, Walt becomes worse and worse, slowly breaking down each excuse we’ve found for him over the years until we can’t pretend that he’s anything but a monster.

But in Killing Eve, on BBC America, the brilliant Phoebe Waller-Bridge takes that challenge on from a completely new angle. It follows Sandra Oh’s character Eve Polastri, a bored MI5 officer who suddenly gets pulled into a case in MI6, which - as the name would suggest - is a bigger deal. Now she’s chasing an international assassin across Europe who seems to be targeting high level government figures.

The show just finished its amazing first season in May of 2018, and while every bit of the show is fantastic, the standout feature is its co-lead and villain: the deadly assassin Villanelle, played by Jodie Comer. Despite all of the terrible things we watch Villanelle do, it can be hard to remember that she’s the bad

“Is it hard to be bad? Not if you practice”

Walter White “you’re goddamn right” Cut to black screen: sociopaths? Tony in “College,” Walt watching Jane die, Draper smoking, Dexter first kill, Al drinking

Blur

Overlay: Difficult Man

Brett Martin book: “A monster but a person that we root for and care for despite his monstrosity”

Person animation on a spectrum between “good guy” and “bad guy” inching more and more towards bad guy

Walt supercut

Killing Eve titles
Phoebe WB interview

Eve coming into work
Desk E1

Meeting carolyn

Running her team
Arriving in Berlin, Paris, Moscow

Cast interview

Villanelle being charming
Villanelle murdering

Villanelle smiling

guy in this show, because - well - she's not really like *any* character we've ever seen before.

Clip

So today, that's what we're going to look at: what makes Villanelle an especially intoxicating character, despite being a homicidal villain, and how she's different from the difficult characters we've come to know over the years. Warning, I'm going to be looking at Villanelle's actions in some detail, so even though I'm not giving you plot specifics, there are some spoilers ahead. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas At Play.

Before I get too far into Villanelle, a quick bit on Killing Eve. When you zoom out and look at the show's plot, it's a pretty conventional spy thriller: A lower tier government agent is brought into an off-the-books investigation. It's not that each plot point the show hits is a new and exciting bend on the genre, but rather it's the way Killing Eve hits them that's so refreshing. Every choice is made in the most eccentric way possible, always finding the time and space to enjoy itself. Like this scene in the second episode where Eve is introduced to her new secret headquarters with her new boss Carolyn Martens.

I once saw a rat...

We've seen secret headquarters unveiled a million times in this genre, but I'm not sure any has ever found the space to enjoy this kind of aside in the process. It catches us off guard. And it's this eccentric approach to every choice that's at the heart of what makes Killing Eve so fun and what makes Villanelle so endearing. She's really funny.

Villanelle in her tutu

Villanelle looking cool af

Why are you doing this? I DONT KNOW

Some Spoilers Warning

Open

MGFX: Killing Eve title at top, episode thumbnails (make your own or steal them from Lisa) beneath.
Premise: a lower tier government agent is brought into an off-the-books investigation.
Glow each thumbnail (each plot point)
Spin the thumbnails in a transition into a clip that's visually eccentric

Carolyn and Eve entering HQ

Wanted entering factory, Inception introducing Ariadne to the dream world

Eve reaction shot

Villanelle clip into:

Clip

She's this peculiar character that's always unpredictable, not because she's a murderous assassin - which she is - but because she's a child at heart. She finds childlike glee in everything, whether it's faking her own death to scare her handler...

Faking Death Clip

...or to celebrate a mission accomplished.

Take me to the hole!

Even the way she talks makes it hard to take her too seriously. She's constantly getting distracted in the middle of conversations - or even jobs - just like a child with a low attention span.

That was massively poignant

It gives us the sense that Villanelle is really just concerned with enjoying her life. She's a free spirit who doesn't really have any greater ambitions. She's not really concerned with who she's killing, why she's doing it, or the consequences. All she's looking for is:

I just want a good life, fun job

The best shows give you an transportive experience. They make you *feel* a place. In Killing Eve, that place is Villanelle's mind. It seems like such an interesting, and frankly fun, place that we want to understand it, to see the world as she does, and that makes it really hard to remember that she's the villain of this story.

Drinking from a tiny cup...

Smiling at a child

Enjoying testicle clamping
Enjoying clothes

Faking death for Konstantin

TAKE ME TO THE HOLE

Getting distracted in conversations

Enjoying sheets
Riding vespa

Hanging in the van with Nadia

E7

Countryside
Nightclub looking back at Bill
Villanelle eyes

But the show doesn't try to hide that fact either. In the first episode alone, she kills at least six people including several bystanders, uses a child as an accessory to the murder of his grandfather, and ruins a little girl's ice cream. Where other difficult men seem to struggle with the bad things they've done, Villanelle doesn't. She talks to her victims cordially before watching the life drain from their eyes and going on her merry way. She just loves killing.

So far, we've tiptoed around the elephant in the room. No matter how many versions of the difficult man we've seen, they've mostly had one thing in common: they're difficult *men*. Sure, there have been violent anti-heroines, but they often use a man to channel those tendencies. But Villanelle does. And she uses that difference to her advantage

She's able to carry out her first kill by sliding under the radar. She leverages her beauty in the second kill as well, hiding in plain sight as someone who looks like she belongs anywhere, and then luring her target in close. Other times, she uses tampons as a way to divert the attention of men and uses a hug to get the details on her next mission. Of course, her femininity is far from her only skill, she's great with all manners of weaponry, reconnaissance, and creative in her means of murder. Which is definitely a fun little tidbit on her resume.

But her femininity definitely adds to her allure. We're not nearly as used to seeing a difficult woman as we are a difficult man, and that absolutely colors how we see some of her actions. As she develops a crush on Eve that turns into obsession, she very much turns

Hospital room
Hairpin kill

Ruins the ice cream

Enjoying making perfume

Kill that starts episode 2
Watching life leave eyes

Wearing dresses and shit

Villanelle coming out of the women's room with Eve in E1

Eve interviewing the girl in Polish
Eve explaining to Martens

Seducing the tuscan guy

Bathroom kill

Tutu hug
Guns, knives, hiding in the suitcase, running over Nadia

Poisoning bathroom girl

into a stalker. She steals Eve's things, sends her clothes and perfume, follows her around, and shows up in her home. She's a predator playing with her food, whether that's murderous or sexual.

From any male psychopath, this behavior would be menacing and Villanelle certainly is scary, but her crush on Eve comes off almost more cute than anything else. Even in a scene where the threat is explicit, like the first time the two meet, we focus just as much on the sexual tension and innuendo as we do on anything else. She's so unusually charming that we can't help but get pulled in.

And we're hardly the only ones. One of the main themes of Killing Eve is obsession. Eve is obsessed with serial killers in general, but specifically Villanelle and it's the reason she's brought onto the case in the first place. And as Eve becomes more obsessed with Villanelle, Villanelle becomes more obsessed with Eve.

Eve's fascination with Villanelle makes her a surrogate for the show's audience and for audiences at large. From the very beginning she has a sort of admiration and respect for what Villanelle is able to do.

She deserves to kill whoever the hell she wants

But beyond that, Killing Eve draws tons of parallels between our two main women. Both are women in male worlds, whether it's in law enforcement or hitwomaning. They each have handlers, at first both men in Konstantin and Bill and then both in shadowy figures whose motives remain a mystery when Carolyn

On Eve's laptop
In Eve's home
Following her shopping
Looking at Bill

Tony stalking the car dealership girl
Eve holding a knife to Eve's throat

Villanelle saying something at the dinner
that's funny

Eve using knife on herself

Carolyn taking interest

Eve reading V's file
V watching her from across the street

Eve saying cool

MGFX: next to each other, line in between
V killing, Eve talking to Frank in that second
meeting

Eve with Bill, V with Konstantin
Eve with C, V with K

replaces Bill. Both Eve and Villanelle are doing what they love.

This showcase of similarities blurs the lines between hero and villain, even when we keep getting confirmation that Villanelle is a monster. Eve keeps getting sucked into the Villanelle trap like we do with so many difficult men. Maybe Villanelle has a tragic backstory that will explain everything. She doesn't. And if she did, it wouldn't change anything.

Eve, and we as an audience, keep expecting something in this equation to change. Either Villanelle will become less likable and cross some kind of line, or that we'll come to understand this tortured soul and save her. But Killing Eve isn't interested in playing that game, and has put all of its cards out on the table. Villanelle will always be likable and enjoyable. She can't cross a line because she's already way too far past it. And she isn't a tortured soul that needs saving. She's the kind of person who admires the carnage of a shootout for its artistic merits.

Killing Eve is more interested in making us decide, rather than steer us toward a specific argument.

There are a lot of theories for why we sympathize with these kinds of characters. Some think that it's our conditioning to relate to whoever the main character of a story is. Others think that it has to do with our inner and deviant desires. Me? I think it's - at least in part - because we like to watch people doing things expertly.

There's a sort of universal respect for seeing the best in action, whether it's Don Draper coming up with insanely smart ad campaigns

Eve and V both enjoying their work

Line fades, the two images zoom in to fill screen
V kills someone

Eve talking to Anna

Eve disappointed

V pouting

V playing with tuscan kid

V near tears with Konstantin

V smiling
Tuscan kid finds grandfather

Escape scene

Eve conflicted in moscow

MGFX explainer:

or Walter White cooking up the purest meth in North America. And because of that, we want to root for these characters. We'll make excuses. We'll look the other way. We'll hide our infatuation. And Villanelle is no different. She's amazing at her job, as heinous as it is.

Pulitzer prize-winning TV critic Emily Nussbaum introduced the idea of the bad fan in 2013: fans who root for these terrible people and tear down those who try to stop them. Are we bad fans for falling for Villanelle? Maybe, but I think that question ignores how hard the answer here is.

Thank you so much for watching! Please, like, subscribe, and share this video. I absolutely loved Killing Eve, and even though it's probably not the most popular show out there, I think it's probably my #1 or #2 of 2018 so far so I just had to make a video about it. I didn't spoil the ending so if you haven't seen it, I really encourage you to, there's so much to love about it beyond Villanelle. As always a huge shoutout to my patrons on Patreon who make this channel possible. If you like my channel, head over there and throw in a buck to help make it the best channel it can be. And if you're looking for more stuff, I've been recapping each episode of The Handmaid's Tale this season over on my blog so take a gander at that. Thanks again!

V highlight clip