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The Construction of Female Anti-Hero Identities Analyzing the Gender Roles of Eve and Villanelle in *Killing Eve*

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Abstract

This paper explores the groundbreaking portrayal of female anti-heroes in *Killing Eve* through an analysis of the gender roles and moral complexities of its central characters, Eve Polastri and Villanelle. The series dismantles traditional archetypes of femininity, replacing them with dynamic, morally ambiguous identities that challenge societal norms and narrative conventions. Eve's transformation from an unassuming intelligence officer to an ethically flexible anti-heroine parallels Villanelle's unapologetic embrace of power and chaos, creating a multifaceted narrative that redefines the anti-hero archetype. Their relationship, marked by obsession, attraction, and mutual recognition, transcends conventional tropes, offering a nuanced exploration of identity, power, and agency. By refusing to impose judgment on its characters, *Killing Eve* elevates female representation, allowing its protagonists to inhabit spaces of complexity and contradiction. This paper argues that the series not only expands the possibilities for female narratives but also disrupts traditional gendered associations with morality, power, and storytelling.

Keywords: *Killing Eve*, female anti-hero, gender roles, moral ambiguity

1. Introduction

The television series *Killing Eve*, adapted from Luke Jennings' *Codename Villanelle*, has redefined modern storytelling through its sharp wit, dark humor, and groundbreaking portrayal of female anti-heroes. At its core are two complex, multi-faceted women: Eve Polastri, a disillusioned intelligence operative searching for purpose, and Villanelle, a captivating yet merciless assassin whose flamboyant violence contrasts with her emotional depth. The dynamic between these characters is not only the beating heart of the series but also a profound exploration of identity, power, and the subversion of traditional gender roles. By presenting Eve and Villanelle as morally ambiguous anti-heroes, the series challenges societal expectations that women embody nurturing virtues, emotional restraint, and predictable morality.

Unlike the conventional depictions of women in media as either paragons of virtue or femme fatales, *Killing Eve* constructs two women who refuse categorization. Villanelle's unapologetic confidence, combined with her mastery of manipulation and penchant for violence, defies traditional notions of femininity. Meanwhile, Eve's psychological unraveling reveals a woman shedding societal constraints to pursue her deepest desires, even at the expense of morality and personal stability. Together, they create a captivating interplay of obsession, attraction, and competition, redefining not only their identities but also the archetypes they inhabit.

This essay explores the construction of these identities, analyzing how their roles as anti-heroes transcend stereotypes and embrace the contradictions of ambition, vulnerability, and moral complexity. Through their relationship, the series unpacks themes of power, agency, and the human condition, offering a fresh lens on gender and storytelling. Eve and Villanelle are more than adversaries or foils; they are pioneers in reimagining what it means to be a woman in a narrative landscape still dominated by traditional gendered tropes. Their

journey is both a rebellion and a revelation, challenging viewers to confront their own perceptions of morality, power, and femininity.

2. Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles

Traditionally, media representations of women have conformed to restrictive archetypes that emphasize nurturing qualities, emotional stability, and a sense of inherent morality. Women are often positioned as moral anchors or victims in contrast to male anti-heroes, who are granted complexity, agency, and the freedom to embrace morally ambiguous paths. *Killing Eve*, however, disrupts these conventions by placing Eve Polastri and Villanelle in roles that upend expectations, allowing them to inhabit spaces traditionally dominated by male anti-heroes. These characters not only dismantle established gender norms but also reconstruct femininity as a multifaceted and often contradictory force.

Villanelle epitomizes traits typically glorified in male anti-heroes—ruthlessness, emotional detachment, and a penchant for chaos. She exists unapologetically outside societal norms, embracing her power and freedom without moral hesitation. Her predatory instincts, razor-sharp wit, and unparalleled confidence make her a formidable figure, but what sets her apart is how these qualities intersect with her overt femininity. Villanelle's wardrobe, often a focal point of her persona, highlights the deliberate weaponization of her appearance. Whether in haute couture or disarming innocence, her presentation defies expectations by blending fashion, power, and deception. Her sexuality, rather than being a vulnerability, is wielded as a means of control and manipulation, a direct challenge to the notion that femininity equates to passivity or victimhood. Eve, in contrast, offers a subtler but equally significant deconstruction of gender roles. Beginning as a seemingly unremarkable intelligence officer, Eve's transformation into a morally ambiguous figure is gradual and complex. As her obsession with Villanelle deepens, Eve sheds societal expectations of femininity, such as prioritizing emotional relationships or adhering to strict moral codes. Her choices—ranging from professional compromises to personal sacrifices—mirror the trajectory of iconic male anti-heroes. Eve is not depicted as a beacon of virtue, but rather as someone deeply human, shaped by ambition, desire, and the lure of the unknown.

By allowing Eve and Villanelle to break free of archetypal roles, *Killing Eve* redefines what it means to be a woman in a position of power and chaos. These characters do not simply exist in opposition to patriarchal structures; they forge entirely new narratives where femininity and power coexist without constraints, reshaping how women are perceived in morally gray narratives. Through Eve's moral descent and Villanelle's unyielding agency, the series expands the scope of what women can represent in popular media—characters who are neither confined to victimhood nor expected to embody unattainable ideals of purity or virtue.

3. The Evolution of Eve Polastri

Eve Polastri begins her journey as an unassuming MI5 operative, bound by the monotony of her work and a conventional marriage that reflects societal expectations of stability and domesticity. Her introduction paints her as competent yet unfulfilled, yearning for excitement and purpose. However, this dissatisfaction becomes the foundation of her transformation, sparked by her fascination with female assassins and their psychological complexity. It is not simply Villanelle's actions that captivate Eve, but the assassin's ability to live outside the bounds of morality and convention—a stark contrast to Eve's own constrained existence.

As the series progresses, Eve's evolution is marked by an unraveling of the traditional markers of femininity and morality that once defined her. Her obsession with Villanelle becomes both professional and deeply personal, leading her to make choices that defy her earlier identity as a conscientious and ethical operative. Her willingness to manipulate others, disregard protocol, and even engage in violence signifies her descent into moral ambiguity. This transformation subverts the trope of the virtuous female protagonist, placing Eve in a narrative space more commonly reserved for male anti-heroes.

Eve's metamorphosis also highlights a rejection of societal control over women's ambitions. Initially defined by her relationships—whether with her husband Niko or her professional superiors—Eve gradually becomes untethered from these influences. Her growing obsession with Villanelle serves as a vehicle for self-discovery, exposing desires and impulses she had repressed. This journey reflects a deeper commentary on how women, when allowed to pursue their ambitions without constraint, often face societal judgment and internal conflict. For Eve, this manifests as a gradual shedding of her former life, culminating in a personal and professional rebirth that is as liberating as it is destructive. Eve's evolution disrupts the dichotomy of hunter and prey. As her pursuit of Villanelle intensifies, their roles often blur, with Eve taking on characteristics of the assassin she seeks. She begins to mirror Villanelle's boldness and moral detachment, even as she retains a kernel of vulnerability. This fluidity of identity challenges the viewer's perception of Eve as a hero or victim, instead presenting her as a deeply flawed and human character.

Through Eve's transformation, *Killing Eve* deconstructs the archetype of the noble heroine, allowing her to grapple with ambition, power, and the darker aspects of human nature. In doing so, the series opens new avenues

for the portrayal of women, redefining their agency and complexity in narratives traditionally dominated by men.

4. Villanelle: Femininity and Power Redefined

Villanelle, the enigmatic assassin at the heart of *Killing Eve*, represents a bold redefinition of femininity and power. Where traditional media often depicts female villains as emotionally unstable, vengeful, or defined by trauma, Villanelle disrupts these tropes entirely. She is unapologetically hedonistic, self-serving, and driven not by vengeance or ideological motives, but by her own love of chaos and personal pleasure. Her character embodies a kind of freedom that directly confronts societal expectations of women, particularly in how they wield power and express emotion.

One of Villanelle's most striking attributes is her use of femininity as both armor and weapon. Unlike the traditional association of femininity with passivity or vulnerability, Villanelle leverages her charm, beauty, and elegance to manipulate those around her. Her wardrobe—a flamboyant mix of couture and outlandish costumes—is not just a statement of her individuality but a calculated tool for disarming her enemies and commanding attention. Each outfit becomes a reflection of her mastery over perception, as she navigates spaces where appearances often dictate power dynamics. By blending sartorial expression with her lethal efficiency, Villanelle reclaims femininity as a domain of strength, intelligence, and agency.

Despite her apparent emotional detachment, Villanelle is layered with complexity and vulnerability. Her fascination with Eve Polastri exposes a softer, more human side to her character. This vulnerability does not weaken her; instead, it makes her more unpredictable and multidimensional. Villanelle's obsession with Eve is not merely romantic or sexual—it is rooted in a profound recognition of a kindred spirit. This connection creates a unique tension, as Villanelle struggles to reconcile her desire for intimacy with her inherent nature as a solitary predator. This duality—the balance between cold detachment and obsessive affection—challenges simplistic portrayals of female villains as either heartless or overly sentimental.

Villanelle's unapologetic approach to life sets her apart from traditional female characters. She does not seek redemption, nor does she operate under a framework of moral conflict. Her joy in her own power, coupled with her lack of regard for societal norms, offers a rare depiction of a woman entirely in control of her destiny. By presenting Villanelle as both deeply feminine and profoundly dangerous, *Killing Eve* challenges preconceived notions of gender and power, ultimately expanding the possibilities for female representation in modern storytelling.

5. The Complexity of Their Relationship

At the heart of *Killing Eve* lies the magnetic and volatile relationship between Eve Polastri and Villanelle. Their connection defies simplistic categorization, occupying a liminal space between rivalry, obsession, and intimacy. More than mere adversaries or lovers, they form a psychological bond that challenges traditional representations of relationships in popular media. This complex interplay serves as a medium for exploring themes of identity, power, and gender, as well as the contradictions and desires inherent in human nature.

From the outset, their relationship is defined by a mutual fascination that transcends their respective roles as hunter and hunted. Villanelle sees in Eve an intellectual equal and someone who, unlike most others, appreciates her craft and intelligence. This recognition shifts the usual dynamic of a cat-and-mouse chase into a more nuanced psychological game. For Villanelle, Eve is not just a target but a source of validation and intrigue. Eve, in turn, finds in Villanelle an outlet for her repressed desires—both professional and personal. Where Eve's life has been constrained by social expectations of stability, morality, and emotional restraint, Villanelle embodies an unfettered existence, one driven by personal ambition, hedonism, and a disregard for convention. This stark contrast draws Eve into a world of moral ambiguity and self-discovery.

The relationship also challenges conventional power dynamics, blurring the roles of predator and prey. At times, Villanelle's dominance as a skilled assassin positions her as the obvious powerholder, yet Eve's growing boldness and cunning gradually erode this imbalance. Eve's pursuit of Villanelle transforms her, imbuing her with a newfound agency and moral flexibility that makes her an equal rather than an inferior adversary. The fluidity of their roles—Eve as a hunter who is also hunted, and Villanelle as a predator who seeks emotional validation—creates a dynamic that resists binary oppositions of hero and villain, victim and oppressor.

Emotionally, their bond is equally complex. Villanelle, who appears emotionally detached and sociopathic in her interactions with others, reveals vulnerability in her obsession with Eve. She seeks Eve's attention and approval, even to the detriment of her professional assignments. For Villanelle, Eve represents the possibility of genuine connection, albeit one that is fraught with danger and volatility. Eve, for her part, grapples with her own feelings of attraction and repulsion. Her fascination with Villanelle is both liberating and unsettling, forcing her to confront aspects of her identity and morality that she has long suppressed.

Their relationship also functions as a lens through which the series explores gender and power. By centering a

narrative on two women who defy traditional gender roles and moral expectations, *Killing Eve* deconstructs cultural norms around femininity and emotional connection. The dynamic between Eve and Villanelle dismantles the notion that women must inhabit rigidly defined roles in relationships—caretaker, victim, or object of desire—and instead presents them as fully realized individuals whose connection is shaped by mutual recognition of their complexities and contradictions. The relationship between Eve and Villanelle is not about resolution or categorization but about embracing ambiguity. It is a dance of opposites that exposes the human desire for connection, power, and self-discovery. Their bond, at once destructive and transformative, exemplifies the profound complexity of relationships that defy societal expectations and narrative conventions.

6. Gender, Morality, and the Anti-Hero Archetype

Killing Eve challenges the entrenched association of morality with traditional gender roles, redefining how female characters navigate power, agency, and identity. Unlike the conventional portrayal of women as moral arbiters or passive victims, Eve Polastri and Villanelle exist in a narrative space where morality is fluid and personal. Their actions are not bound by societal expectations of virtue or femininity but are instead framed as human expressions of ambition, desire, and complexity. By aligning these women with the anti-hero archetype, *Killing Eve* shifts the cultural conversation about what it means to be a female protagonist.

Historically, the anti-hero archetype has been dominated by male characters—flawed, morally ambiguous individuals who reject societal norms to pursue their desires. Characters like Don Draper in *Mad Men*, Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, or Dexter Morgan in *Dexter* are celebrated for their complexity and willingness to embrace their darker impulses. These characters operate within a framework that allows them to be both relatable and reprehensible, a balance rarely afforded to women in similar roles. Female characters, in contrast, are often confined to rigid binaries of goodness or villainy, their actions judged more harshly by societal and narrative standards.

Villanelle subverts this dynamic through her unapologetic embrace of violence and chaos. Her killings are not motivated by revenge or ideological crusades but by her own enjoyment and skill. She is a character who does not seek redemption, nor does she suffer for her transgressions in the way traditional narratives often demand of women who stray from societal norms. Villanelle's lack of moral conflict makes her a revolutionary figure in the landscape of female representation, where women are often depicted as struggling under the weight of their choices. Instead, Villanelle wields her flaws as sources of power, rejecting the idea that her gender should dictate her morality. Eve's journey into moral ambiguity further reinforces this subversion. Initially positioned as the ethical counterbalance to Villanelle's amorality, Eve gradually abandons her adherence to rules and societal expectations. Her transformation is not merely a descent into darkness but a reclamation of agency. In embracing her own desires and ambitions, even when they lead her into ethically murky territory, Eve becomes a fully realized anti-heroine. Unlike traditional female protagonists, whose power often stems from their ability to sacrifice or endure suffering, Eve's power comes from her willingness to engage with her darker impulses. This mirrors the narrative arcs of male anti-heroes but carries a distinct resonance as it confronts societal expectations of women as moral and emotional anchors.

What makes *Killing Eve* particularly groundbreaking is its refusal to impose judgment on its characters. Neither Villanelle nor Eve is punished or redeemed for their actions. Instead, the series frames their flaws and moral ambiguities as integral aspects of their identities, neither excusing nor condemning them. This narrative choice allows the characters to exist as fully human—flawed, complex, and contradictory. By positioning Eve and Villanelle as anti-heroes, *Killing Eve* dismantles the gendered norms of morality and narrative structure. It carves out a new space for female characters, one where they can be celebrated for their imperfections and complexities rather than confined by societal expectations. In doing so, the series not only expands the possibilities for female representation in media but also challenges viewers to reevaluate their own perceptions of morality, power, and gender.

7. Conclusion

Killing Eve is more than just a captivating drama about a spy and an assassin—it is a cultural touchstone that redefines female representation in media by placing complex, morally ambiguous women at its core. Eve Polastri and Villanelle stand as revolutionary figures in their refusal to conform to traditional archetypes, embodying anti-heroic qualities that challenge societal expectations of morality, gender roles, and power dynamics. Their stories are not framed by redemption or judgment but by an unapologetic embrace of human complexity, creating a narrative that is both subversive and transformative.

Eve's journey from a disillusioned MI5 officer to a morally ambiguous anti-heroine reflects a larger commentary on the constraints society places on women. Her evolution underscores the importance of agency, ambition, and self-discovery, even when these pursuits challenge conventional definitions of morality. As Eve sheds her roles as wife, subordinate, and moral compass, she reclaims her identity in a way that mirrors iconic male anti-heroes.

Yet her transformation is distinctly unique, as it explores the tension between societal expectations of femininity and the liberating, often destructive, consequences of rejecting those expectations. Villanelle, meanwhile, disrupts stereotypes of female villains by embracing her power without justification or remorse. Her unrelenting charisma and emotional complexity push back against the trope of the one-dimensional femme fatale, offering a portrayal of a woman who is unapologetically herself. Her flamboyant self-expression and lethal skill set are not weaknesses but sources of empowerment, redefining femininity as a force that can coexist with danger, intellect, and emotional depth. Villanelle's refusal to conform, whether to societal norms or traditional narrative arcs, makes her a groundbreaking figure in modern storytelling.

The relationship between Eve and Villanelle transcends easy categorization, challenging viewers to question conventional power dynamics, gender norms, and the binary opposition of hero and villain. Their mutual fascination, oscillating between attraction and rivalry, creates a dynamic that is as unpredictable as it is compelling. This complexity provides a space to explore broader themes of identity, desire, and the blurred boundaries between morality and immorality. *Killing Eve* is a celebration of narrative disruption and character depth. By allowing Eve and Villanelle to occupy the morally ambiguous, psychologically intricate spaces typically reserved for male anti-heroes, the series broadens the scope of female representation. It demands that viewers confront their own biases and assumptions about women, morality, and power, leaving an indelible mark on both storytelling and cultural discourse.

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