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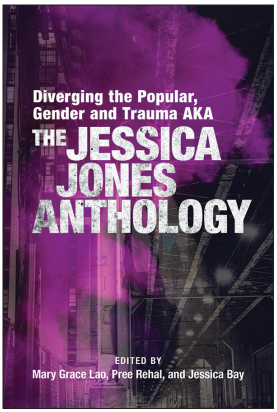

DIVERGING THE POPULAR, GENDER AND TRAUMA AKA THE JESSICA JONES ANTHOLOGY

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Undeniably Charming, Undeniably Wicked, and Our Shameful Kilgrave Crush

Mary Grace Lao

In a 2015 *Yahoo! News* article about *Jessica Jones*, Mookie Loughran writes, "As the manipulative villain of *Marvel's Jessica Jones*, Kilgrave's wish is your command. No really, he's a master of mind control. On paper, he's undeniably wicked, but in person, he can be undeniably, well, charming." Loughran's "Seven Stages of Your Shameful Kilgrave Crush" outlined the mixed feelings that fans (likely cis-heterosexual women) are apt to experience in the following order: disgust, curiosity, swooning, hope, pity, anger, acceptance. The oscillation between feelings of disgust and curiosity, hope and anger, alludes to a dissonance that the audience experiences, jumping between Kilgrave as sociopathic serial killer and rapist and Kilgrave as misunderstood but charming villain. Loughran argues that by the end of season 1 "Kilgrave's hold over you has worn off. You're exhausted from trying to make this relationship work. You don't root for him on the dock during his last twisted attempt to make Jessica love him, and you're relieved when it's finally over." The discussion surrounding fans' fascination with Kilgrave unsurprisingly was met with backlash, and with good reason, with some arguing that it romanticizes an abusive relationship.

Like Loughran, I experienced the same cycle of disgust, curiosity, swooning, hope, pity, anger, and acceptance as I watched Kilgrave. Numerous times throughout the first season, I asked myself, "Why am I so fascinated with this white man?" Guided by this question, this chapter examines how the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) constructs the supervillain and how these constructions normalize heterosexual relationships between men and women

that perpetuate a rape-supportive culture. I want to focus specifically on the following key terms that stood out as I read Loughran's article: "undeniably charming," "undeniably wicked," and "shame." Kilgrave's development as the "undeniably wicked" yet "charming" villain is reminiscent of some of the rape culture[1] narratives that continue to be perpetuated in mainstream popular culture, since his ability to manipulate his victims is invisible to law enforcement and the public. To understand shame, I look to affect theory, initially put forward by Silvan Tomkins (1962), who argues that affect is connected to our bodies, thoughts, and ideas. Building on this, Shelley Budgeon (2003) argues that rather than thinking of embodiment as a form of mind/body dualism, whereby women are seen only for their bodies and men for their minds, we should consider bodies "as *events* that are continually in the process of becoming—as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade" (50; emphasis in original). These emotions, Sara Ahmed (2014) argues, shape both individual and collective bodies, and in so doing create communities and affect political discussions. This culmination of "undeniably charming" and "undeniably wicked" leads to our feelings of shame that arise from watching David Tennant's portrayal of Kilgrave, which reminds us that women and survivors of sexual violence live with shame individually. In addition, we must also consider that this shared shame is a reflection of society's tendency to not believe women and survivors. Through a close reading comparing Kilgrave to similar "misunderstood" supervillains, I argue that creating a nuanced villain with a complex past addresses and challenges previous notions of who abusers and rapists are. The series brings to light important issues pertaining to the experiences of sexual violence survivors, and the raw emotional reactions to a villain, one whom others may not necessarily see as heinously evil or even "capable" of such an indiscretion.

Undeniably Charming

The MCU villains contrast with those of Marvel's parent company, Disney, whose classic villains have historically been portrayed as non-white with racially coded voices, while "good" characters tended to have American or British accents (Rabison 2016). By contrast, the MCU villains are portrayed in the more traditional Hollywood mould, with the charisma and good looks usually attributed to leading white men. The MCU also changed Kilgrave's origin story: In this series, he was formerly Kevin Thompson, who, as the result of a degenerative brain disease, was subject to painful treatment at the

hands of his scientist parents. The treatment cured his disease but resulted in Kevin's mind-control abilities (ep. 1.09, "AKA Sin Bin"). This new origin story is markedly different from the comic book version, where Zebediah Killgrave is a Yugoslavian-born communist spy introduced to readers in *Daredevil* no. 4 (1964), which appeared at the height of the Cold War. Zebediah Killgrave was subject to experimental nerve gas, which gave him his powers and his purple skin. Killgrave's Yugoslavian background and his purple skin fed into the fears many Americans had of the communist other at that time. Netflix's new origin story sets the stage for a British Kilgrave, replacing his purple skin with well-fitted, expensive purple suits and an affinity for fine dining. Tennant's portrayal of Kilgrave reflects similarities with his portrayal of the Tenth Doctor of the BBC's *Doctor Who* series, including adopting the same English accent, an accent that Lalwani, Twin, and Li (2005) argue is seen as more professional, affluent, and credible.

Kilgrave's characterization as charming, affluent, and credible perpetuates the rape-culture discourse of who constitutes an abuser and a rapist. This rhetoric is salient in light of #MeToo, where the question of credibility often falls on the victims and survivors rather than the perpetrator. For example, Brock Turner, who raped an unconscious woman behind a dumpster in January 2015, is a prime example of white male privilege: affluent thanks to his family's fortune, a (former) student at Stanford University, and an athlete and one-time Olympic hopeful. Julie Sprankles (2016) of *Bustle* wrote that various news headlines "focus on his accomplishments prior to his actions . . . which have no bearing on his actions that night," framing Turner as, for example, an "all-American swimmer" rather than an accused rapist during his trial. CBC's Lauren O'Neill (2016) argues that the way Turner was treated by the press would be different had he been Black, and she highlights the various Twitter users who criticized the press for posting his yearbook picture rather than a mug shot.

In addition to Kilgrave's changed origin story, the audience also sees, if only briefly, that he had the ability to be rehabilitated. We see this as he looks on uncomfortably when Jessica watches a video clip of his parents subjecting him to experimental treatments as a child (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?"). This initial glimpse into his traumatic past gives Jessica the idea that Kilgrave may not be an inherently evil person, and perhaps even has the potential to be a hero. In episode 1.08 ("AKA WWJD"), Jessica tries to convince Kilgrave that he is not an evil person, and she tries to get him "to do the hero thing." Jessica

brings him to the scene of a domestic dispute they saw on television with the hope that Kilgrave would use his powers for good and intervene without causing any deaths. Even Kilgrave seemed surprised at how good he felt upon returning to Jessica's childhood home, saying, "The look on that woman's face, the genuine awe and gratitude for me. Is that why you did the whole superhero thing?" The tone in which Kilgrave asks this question sounds positive and seemingly innocent.

This reimagining of Kilgrave's origins follows the MCU's tradition of misunderstood villains, generally played by suave British men. For example, in *Marvel's Thor* (2011), Loki (played by Tom Hiddleston), the adopted son of Odin, eventually falls from grace as a prince of Asgard upon discovering that he is a descendant of Laufey, the king of the Frost Giants of Jotunheim. The audience is meant to feel empathy for Loki, who had so much self-hatred as an outsider in Asgard that he sought to destroy a realm into which he had been welcomed into. Confronted with both Kilgrave and Loki, the audience feels a level of relatability, as both are misunderstood by their parents and both exhibit a pre-existing condition that made them different. In that sense, they became villains as a result of their circumstances.

The redemption narrative was also evident in Brock Turner's trial, at which his father, Dan Turner, presented a letter on behalf of his son. The letter pleaded for leniency, focusing on the accused's childhood aspirations in an attempt to frame him as someone who is remorseful for his actions. The letter claimed that Turner will be "deeply altered forever . . . for 20 minutes of action" (quoted in Gray 2016). Dan Turner, along with his letter, were heavily criticized as a prime example of rape culture (Gray 2016). As various people have pointed out on social media, Turner's past behaviour, coupled with his portrayal of himself as a non-violent individual, inherently overshadowed and erased the violent nature of his crime. Similarly, Dan Turner's claim that his son will be "deeply altered forever" suggests that this one action should not carry any consequences for his son, essentially framing rape as a mere misdeed or mistake—the "boys will be boys" excuse. In a similar vein, portraying Kilgrave's particularly traumatic childhood as the reason for his nefarious actions focuses on the needs of the rapist, rather than those of the survivors and victims of rape. It is therefore a form of gaslighting, as it reinforces the rapist and abuser as inherently good, despite a few "misdeeds."

Undeniably Wicked

The construction of the villain works in tandem with the development of the hero/heroine. In the comic book canon, the supervillain serves as a foil to the superhero, and their respective roles are more explicit. For example, the relationship between Professor Charles Xavier and Magneto in the *X-Men* series makes it clear that the traits evident in one are absent in the other. Although they are long-time friends who advocate for mutant rights, their approaches to this shared goal are markedly different. While Professor X seeks to create an allyship between mutants and non-mutants through non-violent means, Magneto believes that mutants must be allowed to live in peace "by any means necessary" (Singer 2000), even if that means destroying humans or anyone Magneto sees as a threat to mutants. Magneto's violent approach is undeniably wicked, and the trail of harm that ensues can be traced directly to him.

In *Jessica Jones*, the audience is made aware that Kilgrave is an evil individual, but we only see snippets of his wickedness throughout the first season. As Andrew Smith (2013) writes, "For many arch-villains, a hero is someone onto whom they can project their failures or who can be used as an excuse for less-than-meritorious actions" (104). Robin Rosenberg (2013) calls this kind of villain the vengeful villain: "the thwarted criminal whose actions stem from a personal vendetta" (108). We learn that, while Jessica had been purposely avoiding any confrontation with Kilgrave at the start of the series, Kilgrave had in fact been tracking her. In the course of that pursuit, Kilgrave leaves a trail of destruction, manipulating innocent people so that he can find Jessica. We see this at the police station, where Kilgrave forces the officers to point their guns at each other. While Jessica makes it clear that her relationship with Kilgrave was abusive, Kilgrave believed he was doing this out of love: "no, obviously, I was trying to show you what I see. That I'm the only one who matches you, who challenges you, who will do anything for you" (ep. 1.07, "AKA Top Shelf Perverts").

We see this confusion of love and dependence as Kilgrave's main reason for wanting to find Jessica. Upon looking more closely at his attempt at "the superhero thing" (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD"), we see not only Kilgrave's inability to differentiate between right and wrong, but also that his intentions are misguided and selfish. In this scene, Jessica and Kilgrave go to a family's house where the father, Chuck, is holding his family hostage. Jessica manages

to get Chuck's family out of the house to prevent any injuries or casualties. Once the rest of Chuck's family is safe, Kilgrave proceeds to try and convince him to "put the barrel of the gun into [his] mouth." While Jessica insists that they cannot kill him, Kilgrave justifies it by saying that "the man's clearly insane. He is never gonna be a productive member of society," even calling him a burden to taxpayers should he go to prison. Eventually, Kilgrave follows Jessica's orders by convincing Chuck to turn himself in to the police, albeit grudgingly. Although Jessica herself is a reluctant superhero, she is still bound by morality and a responsibility to protect the vulnerable (see Stang's chapter in this collection). Kilgrave's inability to empathize with a man in distress, and his quick judgment of Chuck as never being a productive member of society, reflect his lack of morality and his unwillingness to take responsibility.

As mentioned earlier, Kilgrave seemed pleased with himself after seeing that the woman and children he saved were grateful for his actions, leaving us to feel some glimmer of hope that he could potentially be a good person. However, these feelings were immediately suppressed when he put the onus on Jessica to help him become a hero:

> Kilgrave: The look on that woman's face, the genuine awe and gratitude for me. Is that why you did the whole superhero thing?
>
> Jessica: I don't know.
>
> Kilgrave: Or was that about balancing the scales? All that survivor's guilt you carry around, because of—
>
> Jessica: It doesn't work like that.
>
> Kilgrave: Why not? You're so outraged by all the people I've affected. Do the moral maths. How many more lives do you think I'd have to save to get back to zero?
>
> Jessica: Saving someone doesn't mean un-killing someone else.
>
> Kilgrave: Well, even so, we should do this more often. Think of all the people we could help, all the crimes we could stop. We'd be a hell of a dynamic duo.
>
> Jessica: You don't need me to do that.

> Kilgrave: Are you kidding me? That man almost blew his brains out, which I genuinely thought was the right thing to do. I can't be a hero without you.
>
> Jessica: My God. You're right. (ep. 1.08, "AKA WWJD?")

Rosenberg (2013) calls this kind of villain the sadistic supervillain: one who "induce[s] the superhero to wrestle with his or her conscience about what can be sacrificed for the greater good" (111). A notable example includes the Joker (from *The Dark Knight* [2008]), who did not have any other motives behind his actions other than to wreak havoc and derive pleasure from the suffering of others. Like the Joker, Kilgrave uses the people around him for personal pleasure. Kilgrave's use of emotional blackmail makes Jessica (and the audience) realize that he will blame Jessica for any future evil deeds because he is unable to differentiate between right and wrong. This, in addition to the initial confrontation at the police station, indicates that while Kilgrave may not be using his superpowers to control Jessica, he remains in control of her by manipulating the people around her, making her choose between her own safety and the safety of innocent people, "to protect them. Not out of choice," as he says (ep. 1.07, "AKA Top Shelf Perverts).

Shame

Kilgrave, as both unbelievably charming and unbelievably wicked, plays into the ways in which white men are portrayed when it comes to issues of sexual violence. On the one hand, there is the invisible trauma: the trauma that survivors of sexual violence experience, but which is not necessarily visible to the rest of the world. It is only when others fall victim to Kilgrave's manipulation that they can finally empathize with Jessica and the other women in the series. On the other hand, there is the treatment of love as a form of control over women's bodies. The persistent myth that rape is a crime of passion rather than a crime of violence and power continues to circulate in public discourse. It is deeply embedded in our culture, where young girls are taught that boys who push them or pressure them do so because such behaviour comes from a place of love.

Recalling Loughran's claim that "Kilgrave's hold over you has worn off. You're exhausted from trying to make this relationship work. You don't root for him on the dock during his last twisted attempt to make Jessica love him, and you're relieved when it's finally over," it is worth asking, Why, then, do we

feel shame? Perhaps the reason why it is shameful to watch or love Kilgrave in the way that fans of villains do is because we are not "supposed to like the villain." This experience of our shameful Kilgrave crush is one in which we recognize that it is wrong not in the sense of being a perpetrator, but as the viewer. Ahmed (2014) argues that emotions are less psychological states than the result of a shared set of social and cultural practices. Shame is an affective bodily experience that involve the deforming and re-forming of our bodily and social spaces (Ahmed 2014; Budgeon 2003), hence shame and identity "remain in a very dynamic relation to one another" (Sedgwick 2003, 36). For Ahmed, "If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practice of love*" (2014, 106; italics in original). This "icky" feeling is in fact the feeling of shame itself, but we also feel it because Loughran "called us out," so to speak.

I am reminded of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1980), which analyzes the process whereby women sought out ideal romances to explore and understand the misogyny they experienced in the real world. In Radway's analysis, women who read romance novels in which the female heroines are put in positions of weakness do so because it echoed their real-world experience of weakness. Using Radway's analysis, we might also claim that the audience sees themselves in Jessica for similar reasons. We are meant to shoulder some of Jessica's invisible emotional labour. This strikes an all-too-common chord for women, whose own responsibilities when it comes to employment, house chores, caregiving, and providing emotional support for family and friends is often overshadowed by the effort and work of men. We are now simultaneously Jessica and ourselves: It is *our* relationship with Kilgrave and *our* purpose is to save him. *We* save him by giving men like him the benefit of the doubt as *we* attempt to convince ourselves that he is not inherently bad, but is merely reflecting his own childhood trauma and can therefore be reversed or rehabilitated. Here, I use *our* and *we* to refer not only to individuals composed of you or I, but to the audience and the bystanders as well.

Focusing on Loughran's keywords, "undeniably charming, "undeniably wicked," and "shame," I come back to my initial question: Why am I so fascinated with Kilgrave? I am fascinated because his portrayal mirrors what we often see in women's own daily lives, one that is inherent to a patriarchal society? Not only is Jessica herself forced to perform immense emotional labour when interacting with Kilgrave when he reappears in her life in season 1, but she continues to deal with the aftermath of killing Kilgrave in season 2, as she

is haunted by him through her own guilt. This experience of guilt culminates in episode 2.11, "AKA Three Lives and Counting," in which Jessica is shown alone and curled up on the floor immediately after killing Dale, the correctional officer who had been abusing Alisa, her mother. Her internal voice says, "You killed him. He's dead. You took a life. You're going to jail. You have to run, he would've killed you. Can't hide. You have to take the blame" (Lynch 2018). All of this occurs as a purple light gradually shines on her face and her internal voice is eventually replaced by Kilgrave's. The purple light and Kilgrave's voice are symbolic of the control that he continues to have over her, even after his death. Eventually, Jessica begins to "see" and speak to Kilgrave, as if he is her conscience.

The killing of Kilgrave serves as a metaphor for the killing of an abusive relationship, and it is the survivor who must now deal with the aftermath. As the audience, we may not feel the shame that we initially felt in season 1, but we can now empathize with the guilt Jessica endures throughout season 2 as she questions whether she is becoming a monster. Like Jessica, the survivor goes through a similar experience after being subjected to the abuse and gaslighting not just of their abuser, but also of the police, friends, and family who are skeptical, as well as media images that blame them because of the way they dress and behave. Confronted on all sides, they begin to wonder if they are the ones who are at fault, if there is something wrong with them, or if they should have acted differently.

Chris Deis (2013) argues, "superhero genre stories are political commentary, and the relationships of the characters—the superhero and the supervillain in this case—are examples of how popular culture can inform readers and audiences about deeper questions regarding identity, values, and politics in a society" (97). Though Deis's claim is based on the notion that the superhero and supervillain are fixed and "real" categories, in *Jessica Jones*, as in real life, the question of what is and is not moral is not as clear-cut as other television or comic series might have us believe. This is *Jessica Jones*'s political commentary: it challenges the ways in which abuse and gender-based violence are depicted and normalized in popular culture. And it does so by evoking our feelings of shame. By making obvious our shameful Kilgrave crush, series creator Melissa Rosenberg challenges us to think about the ways we (as a collective society complete with cultural practices) create and reinforce the narrative that men who are charming, credible, and affluent would never be capable of emotionally and sexually abusive behaviour, and if they do exhibit

such toxicity, it is simply a "one-time mistake." It is easier, after all, to picture rapists and abusers as people who deviate from the standard definition of the attractive, middle- or upper-class, cisgender, white heterosexual man. The shame we feel does not come from this Kilgrave crush, then; rather it is a shared shame stemming from our own tendencies to disbelieve women's stories of abuse and violence.

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NOTE

1 Rape culture is defined by Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (1993) as that in which "both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. This violence, however, is neither biologically nor divinely ordained" (vii).

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