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## CHAPTER THREE

### GOOD AND BAD MOTHERING: LIONEL SHRIVER'S *WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN*

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“When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not.”

—Addie Bundren from *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner 1930, 136

On Thursday the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1999, at the age of sixteen, Kevin Katchourian, a boy from a white upper middle-class American home, son of two high earning professionals, corrals seven hand-picked classmates, a teacher and a cafeteria worker in his school gym and from an upper alcove, dispassionately, methodically, shoots and kills each one of them with his cross-bow. Prior to this massacre, as we later learn, he has similarly dispatched his sister and father. Only his mother Eva is spared but it seems from her perspective that Kevin has carefully orchestrated this killing spree just for her as some kind of calculated act. Revenge for bad mothering? Desire for recognition? This is something we never quite find out, nor does Eva, the self-reflexive narrator of Lionel Shriver’s novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, whose letters to her dead husband Franklin two years after the killings, take the reader on a journey into one woman’s experience of motherhood in 1980’s America, and to the possibility, raised retrospectively by Eva herself, that her frustrated and fraught relationship with her son might have contributed significantly to the way Kevin turns out. In talking about Kevin, Eva also talks in great detail about herself and in many instances her story of first-time mothering speaks pertinently to the qualms, misgivings and frustrations of contemporary middle-class mothering, where decisions to have children are entwined ineluctably with a more expansive expression of the self than socially dominant models

of mothering allow.<sup>1</sup> Cynical, humorous, negative, self-absorbed and acerbically critical, Eva runs the risk of being, and in many instances is, an unlikeable narrator—one that many reviewers have quite happily found guilty of bad mothering.<sup>2</sup> Eva's qualified self-blame for Kevin's character is predicated on two founding principles which the narrative itself aggressively engages and which this chapter considers—the concept of the good mother and the idea of the good child, both of which are located on the terrain of the mother as the primary caregiver and the locus of unconditional love and nurture. In the 1980s in which most of Eva's mothering of Kevin takes place, this prevailing view of the good mother who ergo produces the good child contaminates Eva's comprehension of self and others in the social field. Likeable or unlikeable, victim or villain, Eva nonetheless reminds us that mothering is never 'good enough'.<sup>3</sup>

In her letters to Franklin, composed chiefly in 2000, the year that President Bush Jnr. winks his way into power, Eva writes that "it's far less important to me to be liked these days than to be understood", and that one of the reasons she is writing to him is to tell him "all the little stories" (13) he "didn't want to hear"(14) in their years together, especially those about their son Kevin, the boy who becomes a mass murderer: "I wake up with what he did every morning and I go to bed with it every night. It is my shabby substitute for a husband." (15) Foucault argues that confessions are incitements to discourses that add to, complicate or challenge prevailing ones. In this we are subjected to powers that produce our

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<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of Walter Benjamin's studies of urban life, Michael Keith notes that "the story and the novel, the newspaper and the photograph, the museum and the exhibition—all render visible particular forms of truth" (2000, 419). This chapter, in dealing with the representational, acknowledges the ways in which all texts contribute a truth effect in their engagement with ideas, practices and ideologies circulating within a culture at any given time and place.

<sup>2</sup> In a review of the book and the author, Nike Bourke argues that at a certain point in the narrative, Eva oversteps the line between good enough and bad mothering. Bourke concludes that *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is finally a "tale of excessively cruel mothering."

<sup>3</sup> My selective reading of Shriver's novel concentrates chiefly on the sections of the novel that deal with first-time mothering. It pursues the argument that the novel in this respect is demonstrative of the persistence in white Western culture of the exclusivity of the myth of the good mother, despite the variety of mothering discourses that now proliferate which take account of individual differences and circumstances in which mothering takes place (see the work of Andrea O'Reilly).

confessions and in the process express our own subjectivity. He writes that “the confession lends itself, if not to other domains, at least to new ways of exploring the existing ones.” (1976, 63) Eva’s “little stories” to Franklin are confessions of her fears and insecurities about becoming a mother (“Franklin, I was terrified of having a child”) and her later fraught experience of being a mother (37) in 1980’s America, an era in which Coward claims “motherhood was romanticized again, so much so that the ‘Kinder und Küche’ images of the 1950s now look like social realism.” (1997, 116) Often comically grotesque, Eva’s confessions call into being a subjectivity that explores these powerful and restrictive social scripts of motherhood and mother-child relationships which call her mothering to account.<sup>4</sup>

### **To be or not to be a mother**

Writing about being a childless woman in the late nineteen nineties in America, Annalee Newitz asserts

...traditional ideas about parenting and mothering in particular, remain with us and generate painful contradictions in our daily lives. Women are “free” to remain childless, and yet the general reaction to the child-free woman in the United States is still one of polite dismay, and even not-so polite moral judgment. (1998, 335)

Like Newitz’s remonstrations, Eva’s letters detailing her pre-child relationships with her work and her husband invoke the social stigma and pressures felt by many women who are or who choose to be childless. Securely married to Franklin, Eva is a self-made entrepreneurial head of a financially successful travel agency which offers budget holidays for those on a shoestring. The job entails regular reconnaissance trips to different countries for months at a time; Franklin’s job involves searching out suitable locations for advertising shoots. This situation suits both of them, but they also entertain the possibility of having a child in a “stilted and abstract” way. In her late thirties, wanting “someone else to love” (23) besides Franklin, and with her trips to other countries losing their gloss, Eva finally decides to make the journey into the “foreign country” of

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware that Shriver’s text can be seen to add to those representations of the monstrous feminine/mother that abound in our culture, but I would argue that what is monstrous is the tenacity of those constructions of the good mother that underpin many social and media criticisms of mothers who do not measure up. It is this kind of portrait that serves, however misguided, as Eva’s cross and damnation.

motherhood (22). Like the comforting guides she composes for her clients' travels, the maps for successful and rewarding motherhood become Eva's anticipated guides for a similar kind of easefully mediated experience into this unknown territory. The sections of the narrative charting the early stages of this experience articulate with retrospective cynicism, self-deprecating humour and frankness, the failure of some of the abiding one-size-fits-all views of maternity and motherhood. For example the list of reasons Eva proposes for the "downsides of parenthood" (30) nominates, among other things, "unnatural altruism", "dementing boredom" and a "worthless social life". The list identifies, by what it both includes and absents, an intractable and narrow paradigm of the good mother—that is the mother who exists selflessly and uncomplainingly for her child and for others.

Based on this narrowly prescriptive and self-denying model of good mothering, it is little wonder that Eva cannot entertain the possibility that mothering and motherhood might be in any way empowering. Newitz observes:

Although one never has to explain why one *wants* to have children, I find that choosing not to have them requires justification. And this justification doesn't come easy; generally, it is not enough to assert that I just don't care to have children, or that I am too busy with work. People seem to be waiting for some darker reason, some hidden failure in my character or some trauma from my past which makes me incapable of childbearing. (1997, 335)

Eva's evaluation of her own list of objections to having children enjoys sardonic resonance with Newitz's perception of the social privileging of maternity and motherhood: "Clearly the reasons to remain barren—and what a devastating word—were all petty inconveniences and trifling sacrifices. They were selfish and mean and small-minded, so that anyone compiling such a catalogue who still chose to retain her tidy, airless, static, dead-end, desiccated family-free life was not only short-sighted but a terrible person." (31) Throughout the narrative, Eva sarcastically second guesses the socially approved of ripostes to her dissident view; in this way she conveys her understanding of the social benchmarks of acceptable mothering and motherhood, while at the same time disclosing their punitive capacities.

The existence of the maternal instinct as a psycho-biological phenomenon has been hotly debated especially by feminist cultural critics who point to the ways in which its validation has often been

used as a socio-political and psychological strategy to situate women in an essentialised relationship with their bodies and by extension, their destinies as mothers. Analysing the responses of a number of sociologists, gynecologists and psychologists in the 1950s to the cases and treatment of infertile women, Elaine May quotes from *The Journal of the American Medical Association* which stated that “Women totally lacking the desire for children are so rare that they may be considered as deviants from the normal.” (1998, 203) Eva’s ultimate decision to have a child in mid-eighties America is not entirely free from the long shadows such customary views cast, and her tacit acceptance of the biological urge theory underpins her claim that “For years I’d been waiting that overriding urge I’d always heard about, the narcotic that draws childless women ineluctably to strangers’ strollers in parks. I wanted to be drowned in the hormonal imperative.” (31) Eva’s confession that “when I hadn’t gone into maternal heat by my mid-thirties, I worried that there was something wrong with me, something missing” (31), emphasises the pervasive social conflation of the feminine with the maternal body.

### **The maternal body**

Eva’s physical and emotional experience of the maternal body is also mediated through socially approved of scripts (she’s read all the books), which direct women to dissociate their bodies from the sexual and to cultivate a morally accountable sensuality—that is one which is in the service of the child-to-be. Eva reflects on this reinscription of her body when she writes, “I came to regard my body in a new light. For the first time I apprehended the little mounds on my chest as teats for the suckling of young...the cleft between my legs transformed as well. It lost a certain outrageousness, an obscenity...the twist of flesh in front took on a devious aspect, its inclusion overtly ulterior, a tempter, a sweetener for doing the species’ heavy lifting, like the lollipops I once got at the dentist.” (60–61) The renunciation of the sexualized female body is enforced by the disciplining bio-power of others towards her. Eva’s gynecologist Dr Rhinestein “goes through a list of what Eva couldn’t do, eat or drink” (62). Eva reminds Franklin of the changes in his behaviour towards her body when she is pregnant: “You kissed me chastely, no tongue.” and later “You were nervous about whether we were ‘supposed’ to have sex, it would hurt the baby, and I grew a little exasperated. I was already victimized, like some princess, by an organism the size of a pea. Me, I really wanted to have sex for the first time in weeks, since we could finally fuck because we wanted to

get laid and not to do our bit for the race. You acquiesced. But you were depressingly tender.” (65) To become a mother, is to ‘unbecome’ a woman, a point Luce Irigaray (1985) makes when she critiques phallogocentric inscriptions of the mother which do not accommodate the concept of the mother qua woman.

### Naturally mum

Shriver’s narrative constantly needles the mis-fit between Eva’s individual experiences of motherhood and the social discourses of mothering which relentlessly seek to claim her, and to cause her to dissemble. She describes the experience of unbecoming a subject to become a mother as “...crossing the threshold of motherhood, suddenly you became social property, the animate equivalent of a public park.” (62) She also casts the various stages of maternity and mothering as a kind of false performance in which the real woman and any semblance of agency or subjectivity disappears. For example the day Eva finds out she is pregnant she takes the afternoon to “assemble herself into the glowing mother- to-be” (63) before Franklin returns home. “In the meantime”, she writes, “I tried on different approaches to a shopworn scene: coy; delayed; bemused; artificially offhand; —gushing—*oh darling!* None of these seemed to suit.” (63) Eva tenses constantly against the role demanded of her over which she has little control: “I felt expendable, throw-away, swallowed by a big biological project that I didn’t initiate or choose that produced me but would also chew me up and spit me out. I felt used.” (61) Eva’s corporeal experience of the birthing process is expressed in ways that draw attention to the socially expected performance of the uncomplaining and devout mother-to-be. Although she feels that certain scenes from the film *Alien One* capture the violent pains of labour more honestly, Eva obstinately plays the expected role, chiding Franklin:

You accepted my blasé response to cut fingers in the kitchen...as sufficient evidence that I would force a form the size of a standard rib roast through an orifice that had previously accommodated nothing larger than a bratwurst with equal stoicism. (86)

I am reminded here of Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender about which she writes “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (1990, 25), and it is formulated through a “stylized repetition of acts through time” (141) which creates a show of permanence and naturalness. Motherhood and mothering are likewise repetitions of

culturally coded and endorsed behaviours, “regulatory fiction(s)” (1990, 149) that naturalise the process. The trope of role-playing threads through the novel underscoring the performativity of the mother and child relationship sanctioned institutionally and discursively within American culture. On another occasion, this time when Kevin is a teenager, Eva creates an opportunity to play the ‘with it’ mother to his ‘angsty’ adolescent son when she invites him to dinner. The success of the evening is cruelly and comically punctured by Kevin’s public dressing down of Eva, in which he demonstrates his repugnance for, amongst other cultural acts, the artificiality/superficiality of the mother and son performance.<sup>5</sup> On trial in a civil suit for negligent parenting post the massacre, Eva is schooled to cast the best possible light on her parenting, even if it means telling lies; her lawyer suggesting that justice, like mothering, is a game, and that the best player always wins.

Performing motherhood/ parenthood requires personal compliance to the obligatory social libretto. Eva says: “I was mortified of becoming trapped in someone else’s story” (37) and how right she is. Eva flubs her lines, and, try as she might, cannot get into role. Eva projects her husband Franklin on the other hand as someone who knows his lines and finds little friction between how he sees himself and the part he and others play in the symbolic order. Eva constructs Franklin as the standard bearer for social objections that could be leveled at her. With his unabashed love of America, his unquestioning and earnest allegiance to the American mission, his unconditional and “leisurely access” to his son, his dismissal of Eva’s petty neurotics about mothering and her criticisms of America, Franklin is portrayed by Eva as a cross between Natty Bumppo and Tom Sawyer. Perhaps it is no irony that he shares the first name of one of America’s famous presidents. His faith in the American dream confirms its and his allegiance to one of its major stanchions—the family, in which the roles of wife, mother, and child are etched in utopian ink. Eva tells him:

The United States, you claimed, was on the existential cutting edge. It was a country whose prosperity was without precedence, where virtually everyone had enough to eat; a country that strove for justice and offered up nearly every entertainment and sport, every religion, ethnicity, occupation, and political affiliations to be had, with a wild

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted here that Eva is doing her best to maintain a connectedness with her son, a highly desirable aim of mother and son relationships as identified by Cate Dooley and Nikki Fedele in their article “Raising Relational Boys” (2001).

wealth of landscapes...If it was not possible to have a fine, rich, sumptuous life in this country, with a beautiful wife and a healthy, growing boy, then it was not possible anywhere.”(45–46)

At this point it must also be noted that Eva has little experience herself of effective mothering. Both her parents are from war torn Armenia, her father killed by the Japanese during the war, her mother a recluse dreading the outside world, unable to feel at home in American society. Eva’s mother remains sequestered within the home, forcing Eva to take over the mothering role. Ironically it is Kevin’s murderous actions that finally release in Eva a sense of desire for connection with her mother. While her relationship with her own mother complicates and even explains in part her attitudes towards mothering, it also arguably throws into relief the demanding (and superficial) performance of effective mothering called forth in the conservative milieu of mid-eighties American culture.<sup>6</sup>

### The good child

At the heart of the American dream as Edward Albee in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* reminds us is the son. Albee comments on his play that the allegorical son and the title of his play pose a provocative question “Who’s afraid of life without illusions?” Like George in that play, Eva in *We Have to Talk About Kevin* strips away illusions and gets into the marrow of mothering. Early in the narrative she confesses that her failure to be a successful, unselfish mother might make her partially to blame for Kevin becoming a mass murderer. Eva is of course not entirely convinced of this as she has done her homework on young mass murderers and knows that there is not necessarily any logical connection between their upbringing and their homicidal acts. Moreover her second child, Celie, unlike Kevin, turns out to be a compliant and loving child. What Eva does know however is the tenacity of the social verdict

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<sup>6</sup> It is easy, from the comfort of 2007, to assess Eva’s understanding of mothering as misguided to the extreme. This would be to overlook the cultural significance of the 1980s in which she conducts much of her mothering of Kevin; a time which witnessed the rise of the religious right and the social reification of the traditional roles of mothers and fathers within the home and family. The nineties ushered in a reduction in the shame and blame outcomes of mothering in the light of a proliferation of alternative models of mothering that took into account a more holistic, human, and heterogeneous view of mothers and children. Such a trend thankfully continues as we engage with changing social and cultural shifts in this present era of globalization.

that “*You gotta look at the parents!*” So while “son might turn out killer” is not on her “downsides of parenting” list (30), she feels some liability for this eventuality. In their introduction to “*Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in the Twentieth Century*,” Molly Ladd-Taylor and Laurie Umansky write that the child “‘gone wrong’ is considered sure-fire evidence of faulty mothering.” (1998, 5) In her article on the filmic representation and criminology investigations of sons who kill, Su Epstein concludes that there is collusion between cultural and sociological scripts by virtue of their tendency, sometimes inexplicably, to blame the mother. Epstein cites psychologist Joel Norris, who claims that “the mother’s anxieties may result in a colicky, unhappy baby who becomes the object of mistreatment and abuse by the mother who was unhappy about being pregnant. Such mistreatment is also a factor in the development of a violence-prone individual.” Epstein’s parenthetical comment on this claim is that “the serial killer remains a mother’s burden.” (1998, 260)

Eva seems to accord with Norris’s profile. She is the mother who is unhappy about being pregnant, who has difficulty bonding with her child, who is constantly anxious and highly ambivalent about mothering, who has had to self-mother in the absence of a mother figure, who finds it difficult to love her prickly, sullen and recalcitrant child and later adolescent. On one never to be repeated occasion which horrifies her, Eva loses self-control and throws Kevin across the room, breaking his arm in her frustration at what she perceives to be his willful and deliberate refusal to toilet train at the age of six. Does she cross a line here as many say she has? Can this one act of physical violence have turned Kevin into a “violence-prone individual”? It is certainly something that Eva, in finally confessing this dark secret to Franklin, sees herself as unforgivable at the same time as pleading for an understanding of where she is coming from. “I have no end of failing as a mother” she writes, “but I have always followed the rules. If anything, following the letter of the unwritten parental law was one of my failings.” (46) In this comment, Eva reveals an interesting paradox; in trying to adhere to the “unwritten parental law” guide to the good mother she has in effect, turned into the bad one. As Eva reflects on her ‘dismal’ mothering of Kevin, she identifies not only the ways in which the word mother is heavily freighted with certain privileged cultural meanings, but also to the ways in which the child, and mother-child relationships are as well. Eva’s inability to experience an intimate and loving relationship with her young son, no matter how hard she tries, leads her to raise that most disturbing and forbidden of ideas—

that a mother might not naturally love her child, a child might not instinctively love the mother and a child might not be lovable. This is “bad” mother territory indeed. Now these aspects have been acknowledged and addressed as ‘realities’ in many current theories of mothering and motherhood, thankfully countering the beliefs of Freud and his male contemporaries, and indeed many of those who came afterwards, which posited that women who did not love their children were “degenerate” (cited in Balsam, 2005 ). Nevertheless the idealized images of the existence of a natural, innate loving bond between mother and child continue to hold sway, and by these images, Eva and perhaps many of us are bad mothers. Rozsika Parker contends, “None of us find it easy to truly accept that we both love and hate our children...much of the ubiquitous guilt mothers endure stems from difficulties in weathering the painful feelings evoked by experiencing maternal ambivalence in a culture that shies away from the very existence of something it has helped produce.” (1997, 17)

In his paper on ‘ The psychic Landscape of Mothers’, Daniel Stern nominates the first and most important component of what he calls “the motherhood constellation” as mothers “falling in love with their babies”. He asserts tellingly, “If in fact the mother does not think that her baby is the most extraordinary creature on earth, that is a bad sign for the immediate future. Clinically it is something that makes you worry.” (2005, 6) Lurking in this claim is the notion of an “authentic” mother which Diana Gustafsen argues is always the normative reference point for other types of mothers (lesbian, single parent, poor, etc). She uses the descriptor “unbecoming mothers” to designate the “process of moving from an authentic state of mother to a delegitimated category of bad or unmother.” (2005, 32) I am reminded here of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which depicts a dystopian society founded on state sanctioned phallic control of women’s reproductive capabilities; the category of ‘Unwoman’ is applied to lesbians or any woman who cannot reproduce through state controlled heterosexual coupling.

In the light of the weighty literature which privileges particular types of mothers, there is little accommodation for the mother who fails, especially as so much emphasis continues to be placed on the importance of ‘proper’ mother-child bonding as a template for the later development of the child. In this cultural narrative, the child is nearly always positioned as a kind of *tabula rasa* (innocent, unimprinted) on which the mother, custodian of the milky ink writes the foundational text of a desirable intersubjectivity, leading to later

effective social relations (Sterns, Benjamin, Caplan). Parker writes that “while mothers are accorded overwhelming responsibility for their children’s development, their authority is at all times circumscribed, subjected as they are to the critical gaze of a network of social structures.” (1997, 35) Eva’s narratorial framing of Kevin, and her confessions that her failed mothering might have produced Kevin the mass murderer, are predicated on deeply embedded and tacitly agreed on psycho-social structural narratives about the child, the mother’s relationship with the child and about the stages of child development through which parents are expected to guide their offspring. Like becoming a mother, these developmental models propose incremental categories of normative behaviours that validate and naturalise ways of becoming a child, later adolescent and eventually adult. Moreover in this social authentication process, the mother is co-opted as a kind of amanuensis. In being responsible for collaborative authorship of the child, she is automatically involved in monitoring her own “effective” mothering as part of the child’s normal development into adulthood. This is precisely what Eva discovers and does.

Eva’s mothering of Kevin as a growing boy bears witness to these self-scrutinising and social identity regulating practices, as much as it expresses her awareness of her dislocation from them, and the false sincerity they authorize. Eva notes Kevin’s aversion to her first attempt at breastfeeding, waiting to lactate and experience the “*indescribable* emotion”, that “everybody says” accompanies and generates maternal love. Instead of this she feels “the first stirrings of what, appallingly, I can only call boredom.” (97) Franklin’s attempts to comfort Eva for her failure in the breastfeeding stakes, reflect the sensible, rational Dr Spock approach; she reminds him “you would cajole that parenthood isn’t something that happens in an instant. The fact of a baby—when so recently there was none—is so disconcerting that I probably just hadn’t made the whole thing real to myself yet. I was dazed. That’s it, I was dazed. I wasn’t heartless and defective.” (97) Her addendum to his supportive comments however is telling: “I said them to myself. And they didn’t make a dent—in the sense that the whole thing was going wrong from the start, that I was not following the program, that I had dismally failed us and our newborn baby. That I was, frankly, a freak.” (98) As Kevin develops, Eva becomes increasingly vigilant about not being “a freak”, in her frustrated and overemphatic attempts to “form a passionate attachment” to her son. (103) These attempts generate an increasing awareness of mothering as an artificial performance, and of the child as an abstract concept that the reality often contradicts. She mentions

her attempts to smile until her face ached because Franklin had read that “it was important to smile at infants to try to elicit a smile in response”, but that Kevin “clearly knew that I didn’t feel like smiling because he never smiled back”; or that he detects the inauthentic note in her “bubbling and cooing” that as she writes, “did not come naturally to me.” (102) In Eva’s eyes and in her experiences with him, Kevin is not the generic child, the child in the abstract (the *kid*, *the baby*, *the boy*) that Franklin dutifully accepts in an “insouciant boy-thing way” (137), but rather “a mystery”, even “pre-extant” (137), “a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small” (103).

The sections of the narrative where Eva recounts her time with Kevin as a five and six year old comically and cynically critique those stages of child development that in Western societies mothers in particular are expected to carefully manage around the growing child. Kevin turns out to be that child that does not conform or respond to any of the milestone “stages” of development, making him an unmitigated source of frustration and embarrassment to Eva. As it was for her experience of maternity, Eva finds the maps to childhood are in the end useless guides which chart ‘difference’ to the prescribed norm a cause for great consternation, a site of the failure of mothering. At the Montesssouri kindergarten, Eva describes how Kevin spends his “first two months sitting slack on a stool in the middle of the room gazing dully at his puttering classmates. ...when pressed to play with the other boys and girls, he replied whatever they were doing was ‘dumb’”. (210) Where other children are drawing “fat-headed stick figures and landscapes with a little strip of blue sky at the top, Kevin is still scrawling formless, jagged scabble in black and purple crayon” which Eva desperately tries to admire: (*That has some much energy , Kevin...Is that a storm honey? Or maybe a picture of the hair and soap we pull out of a bathtub drain!*). (209) Kevin’s rebelliousness is contagious; he influences the children with his “undersocialised” behaviour at Montesorri so that by the time he leaves there are so many children in time out and regressed to the diaper stage, there are very few to teach in the designated educational corners. Kevin’s babysitters do not stay for long and leave convinced they should never have children. He has no cherished possession; he ignores the Junior Game boys and Tonka trucks his father buys for him; he fails to participate in the home crafted toy-making sessions his mother tries to engage him in, gaining some satisfaction only in their destruction; he unremorsefully squirts blue ink all over his mother’s office walls, newly papered with her precious travel maps; he squirts his water

gun at the crotches of the removalists until Eva takes the gun from him and breaks it. Kevin does not exhibit any remonstrations of love or affection for anyone or anything (*that's dumb, that's boring, I don't like dat, what for, what good is that?*), and he mocks his father and his mother by mimicking back to them the gibberish that parents feel they have to use in dealing with children. One example of this is when Kevin, serving his time in prison reminds Eva of Franklin's attempts to get him to use the toilet:

*"Kevvy-wevy!"* he cooed, falsetto. *"Honey sweetie! Look at Daddykins! See how he pee-pees in the pooper-dooper? Wopuldn'ty you like that too, Kevvy-woopsie? Wouldn't it be fun to be just like Dadd-boo, piddle your peenie-weenie over the toileywoiley?"* (203)

In short Kevin confounds those categorizations of the child and by extension the good child that are the foundational texts for parental and specifically motherly modes of comprehending and relating to children and their stages of development. By the standards that formulate the good child, Kevin is abject, but the abject, as Kristeva reminds us is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, 4), and in so doing can also bring some illumination to bear on those things and those contexts that make it so. In this respect, Eva, as she has for her self-reflexive analysis of her maternal experience, builds into her litany of Kevin's "abnormal" behaviour, her own critiques of the social "borders, positions and rules" that make Kevin the bad child. This is principally achieved through the comic edge in Eva's reconstruction of events which underscores the false note that rings out in the overdetermined, rigid and sometime romanticised portraits of children and the mother child relationship that circulate in the social ether. This occurs on many occasions as for example when she says to Franklin: "Maybe your generosity backfired by lining his playroom in what must have seemed a kind of plastic dirt"(in reference to the Tonka toys); or when Eva delivers a lecture to Kevin about respecting other people's property when he (and the rest of the class follow his lead) breaks a teacup from a prized miniature tea-set a girl called Muffet has taken to school for show and tell: "That wasn't very nice, Kevin," I said in the car. "Breaking Muffet's teacup." Then she adds, "I've no idea why we parents persist in believing that our kids yearn to be thought of as *nice*, since when we ourselves commend acquaintances as *very nice* we usually mean they are dull." Kevin responds—"she has a stupid name." (213)

While we might wish to classify Kevin's behaviour as anti-social, it is only in the sense that there is a constellation of social proprieties

around 'proper' childhood behaviour that he has contravened (Jenkins, 1998). Henry Jenkins reminds us that children's "culture is shaped at the global level through powerful institutions and at the local level through individual families. Through these everyday practices, the myth of the innocent child gives way to the reality of children's experience." (1998, 22) *We Need to Talk About Kevin* contributes to this in deconstructing, through Eva's observations, the "idealized conceptions of how children should be raised." (Jenkins, 1998, 22)<sup>7</sup>

Eva's construction of herself and Kevin in this narrative finally denies us the 'comfort' of the good child turned bad because of bad mothering. Perhaps in the end, it is not surprising (to us and to Eva) that Kevin's victims are all 'good' children, and in the case of Franklin, the 'plastic' father as Kevin calls him. Perhaps too it is not surprising that Eva the 'bad' mother is spared by her son in Shriver's comically disturbing novel,<sup>8</sup> because both have evinced similar aversions to playing the roles expected of them. At the end of the narrative, lonely and confused, Eva waits for her son to serve his time in prison. She contemplates the prospect of a reunion with Kevin and the possibility that out of the ferocious antagonism that was their relationship for seventeen years, some kind of closeness may have been achieved even in taking that antagonism to its limits, even "by the very act of pushing" her son away (468). This anticipation, issuing from a complex blend of hate and love, frustration and devotion, is not unlike Parker's optimistic views of maternal ambivalence. She argues that women's ambivalence about their mothering creates the possibility of more productive and creative relationships between mothers and their children, and that there is a "potentially beneficial outcome of the aggression mobilized by the coexistence of love and hate." (1997, 31) Newitz

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<sup>7</sup> Clearly there are many issues a reader can raise in relation to the point of view in this narrative. Eva shapes the story and our perceptions, inviting us to see incidents and people from her perspective. In the end we can only read her side of the story, and in doing this, can choose to condemn or redeem her, or perhaps a bit of both. My purpose here is to run with some of the ideas around mothering and motherhood that Eva raises, which contribute to the social debates on these topics.

<sup>8</sup> Parker raises the point that it is only through the 'safe context' of humour that women dare to raise the possibility that their mothering is ambivalent (1997, 17). This can be seen for instance in Australian cartoonist Mary Leunig's savagely satiric portraits of mothering and mothers and children; or in a more light-hearted vein in the work of Kaz Cooke (also Australian), who mediates the downside of mothering through her upbeat humour.

writes that she likes to watch films about mothers who murder their children because they are stories that “are also a way to murder the idea of ‘mother’” (1998, 336), to make other ways of being a woman in the social order possible. I would argue that Shriver’s novel works in much the same way in that it murders both the idealised image of the good mother *and* the idealised image of the good child—representations that continue to taunt and haunt **real** mothers.

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