

We Need To Talk About Eva: The Demise of the Phallic Mother

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Lionel Shriver's novel, We Need To Talk About Kevin fictionalises the experience of motherhood through a sensational storyline relating the events that led a teenager, Kevin, on a killing spree. Faced with the malevolence of her child, the narrator, Eva explores her internal conflicts, as her son's perceived evilness leads her to acknowledge her ambivalence towards motherhood. Through the novel, the essay investigates how the construction and destruction of identity is inherently linked to a limitative social framework. The main protagonists' non-conformist ambition leads them to encounter the limits of social signification, initially translated into an obsessive dedication to the de(con)struction of authority and ultimately to choose social self-effacement over empowerment.

Lionel Shriver's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (Kevin) is a retrospective account of the narrator's life up to and past the moment her son goes on a killing spree in his American high school. The novel was hugely successful and won the British Orange Prize in June 2005. Part of Kevin's success lies in its participating in a genre that also saw Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* rewarded with the Cannes Palme d'Or and prize for best director in 2003. The increasing occurrence of teenage high school killing frenzies and the intense emotional response they elicited called for new narratives to at least chronicle, if not explain, how the ordinary and somewhat colourless boy-next-door could possibly metamorphose into the monsters the tabloids depicted. Kevin is certainly one such narrative. But disguised behind a sensational story line, it explicitly paints an awkward picture given from the perspective of the killer's mother's, a narrator now looking to find answers and sympathy for her predicament. Shriver constructs her narrator, Eva, as a well educated, self-analytic, white, middle-class, socially affluent, career woman who 'does' motherhood by the book: she has researched her subject, found the ideal partner, given up work to dedicate herself to the task, etc.. This goes a long way to teasing sympathy and curiosity out of Western readers who can but identify with the benevolence and good, hard-working life ethics of the character. Surely the epitome of the good citizen and the good mother can only be innocent in the making of a serial killer. But Eva also admits that behind her good intentions hid an intense frustration with her 'mother' status, a feeling of having been cheated by society and a dislike for her son from the moment of his conception. Although Kevin is no feminist manifesto the

novel nevertheless presents strong feminist themes that cannot be ignored. We can see in Eva's despair the quintessential expression of a doubt about female anatomy and destiny. Parents and parents-to-be also found the narrative spelt out fears and/or disappointments they secretly harboured that having children was not all it was cut out to be. Shriver presents us with an impolite narrative dealing with social themes most would prefer to keep under silence. Partly, there is an irrational belief that suggesting nurture as that which fabricates evil in the individual may poison the good parent vibe that each of us would innately be endowed with, and incite us to poison the child. Evilness would be better left unthought, especially if one is a parent. Eva asks the question of whether her ambivalence vis-à-vis motherhood may have contributed to the making of a murderer. But the question is so entwined with Kevin's own existential ambivalence that it becomes impossible to answer. Through Eva's complex and contradictory description of the family unit, Shriver creates a microcosm of power struggles, engaging as she progresses with impertinent issues of women's desire, the place of the mother in the family and society, and parental responsibility in a culture imbued with women's natural duty of care and the even more chauvinistic belief in the mother's obligation to love the son. Indeed, Kevin carries a strong oedipal undertone: there is the obsessive attention the mother and son give one another; the storyline resembles a modern version of Sophocles' classic tragedy as the son kills his father and little sister to become the only one in his mother's life; the mother ultimately capitulates to embrace her son, etc.. Given the strong oedipal theme, it seems impossible to avoid a Freudian reading of Kevin. But my interest in Kevin and his struggle with the paternal realm will only be as a means to discussing Eva's phallicism and subsequent castration, alongside a questioning of woman's agency as mother in a society which plainly makes good mothering rhyme with disempowerment, and of Eva's desperate search for a new frontier to rival her life of unwanted domesticity.

A traditional oedipal interpretation of Kevin would seek to extract from the narrative the story of a protagonist caught between his desire for the mother and his fight to suppress the father. In Kevin, the oedipal triangle is easily found. The character of Kevin is on a mission to destroy instances of authority, not so much because they threaten his desire for his mother, but because he sees them as inauthentic and 'dumb'. Kevin's oedipal fight is less about the traditional crossing of swords with obvious (and thus boring to him) markers of paternal authority than his engagement with more subtle

forms of paternal instances that appeal to the complexity of his intellect. The meticulously planned destruction of schoolteachers, fellow students, his father and his little sister result in his media notoriety as a spectacular killer, an image Kevin relishes and cultivates. But it also entraps Kevin as the iconic dissatisfied adolescent whose killings are no more than a desperate cry to be noticed. Yet, in his value system, the huge fame he gains from his actions is only a peripheral achievement and an offshoot to the real aim and the real audience whose interest Kevin wishes to catch. While he is dedicated to exposing the 'dumb-ing' and numbing effect of social organisation, Kevin is above all invested in a fight against what could be described as his mother's phallicism. Whether Kevin's destruction of Eva's phallicism is an intentional plot on the part of a son eager to strip his mother of her potency to find her maternal side or whether it is Eva who perceives Kevin as the annihilation of her phallicism remains unanswered in the novel. Both narratives co-exist and constitute the novel's intrigue. Shriver's narrative presents us with the construction of phallicism as anti-thetic to 'mother' and ultimately as destructive of Eva, as if 'being woman' required to choose between phallicism and motherhood, and the combination of both necessarily signalled a woman's demise.

The concept of the phallic woman is explained by psychoanalytic theory and derives from the theory of child sexual development. The very young child supposedly perceives the mother as an all-powerful entity, capable of conferring life and death onto the child. Assuming all individuals are invested in their own survival and that survival results in different patterns of behaviour at different stages of one's development, most of the newborn's energy is invested in its main activity, feeding. The 'maternal breast', a generic term coined by Melanie Klein (1988) and locating maternal care upon the body of the mother, is at this early stage where survival resides and where maternal agency is perceived. As the child matures, motor functions and psychological capacity modify the individual's apprehension of his/her environment. No longer bound to the maternal breast, libidinal investment changes focus and around the age of seven, the child notices that social conventions segregate individuals into two distinct categories, each governed by very different rules and granted differing means of empowerment. The basis of this difference hinges on the presence/absence of a penis. The young individual comes to understand the correlation between sex organ (penis) and its symbolic function (phallus). Thus the notion of 'phallus' emerges as that which empowers the individual. The passage from the notion of penis to that of phallus and

the good adjustment of the individual to their environment are dependent upon the assimilation of cultural imperatives the value of which change throughout history. The value we (Westerners) give to 'phallus' is a legacy of that which emerged in Antiquity. Laplanche and Pontalis (1994) surmise that the phallus is a transcendence of the penis. Through what could be termed 'rites of signification', the possession of the phallus is proof of the individual's successful passage from chaotic being to cohesive intelligence. The realisation of sexual difference and of the significance of 'phallus' dictates that the child's libidinal investment should turn away from the breast and towards the phallus, now the signifier of empowerment and survival. This necessitates a change in the way the child perceives the mother. The once all-powerful mother must be deposed and exchanged for the more helpless figure of the castrated mother. For psychoanalysis, the concept of the phallic mother arises out of the context where the child disavows the absence of a penis in the mother and attempts to re-attribute the penis to her body, a substitute penis, a phallus then. The phallic woman is thus an Oedipal reconstruction of the pre-Oedipal mother. We find her in various representations where the woman is construed as having a phallus. Her representation takes many forms but can be subdivided into three.

Close to the traditional theory I have just described, phallicism is found in the fantasy of a female holding the phallus inside her body. This is a legacy of Melanie Klein's 'combined parent' where the pre-oedipal child imagines the mother is 'complete' and possessing the penis inside her. The preservation of the phallic mother would be a refusal, on the part of the individual, to accept the mother's castration. Since Freud, psychoanalytic theories have by and large followed such views. They partake in a phallus-centred construction of men and women, which although useful by contributing a theoretical foundation that explains the possible origin of phallicism in the individual, are also limiting as it traps the individual in a polarised dialectic s/he cannot escape. The other two understandings offer more scope for development.

The second form of phallicism in women is probably the most common. The phallus becomes an appendage to the image of the female. Here the construction of 'phallic woman' sees her use objects as prosthetic-penises. The prosthesis goes beyond the graphically representational strap-on. In the film *Alien* (1986), females are the perfect illustration of this: Ripley loads herself with ammunition and a machine gun that triples up as a fire and grenade launcher; similarly, Vasquez carries her oversized gun extended in

front her crotch emulating an erect penis. The theory that constructs and seeks to explain 'phallic woman' as the attempted effort to append the phallus to her body has some drawbacks. The female desiring the phallus would be no more than simulating male biology. She would be in effect desiring that anatomy, thus thinking her own inferior or incomplete (and that of man superior and whole). This theory could be convincing if it were not for the fact that, since Jacques Lacan, men are also constructed as desiring the phallus. From the death-bearing gun to the roaring engine, the male hero is repeatedly portrayed using objects as prosthetic-penises. But while both males and females are now seen as equally desiring the phallus, a second motive for man's superior phallicism springs up. Where the female's performance is understood as a masquerade of a biology that is ultimately not her's, the male's is understood as an extension of his own body reality. The object endowed with phallicism (here the gun or muscles), signifies something very different in both sexes: women fake potency while men embody it. To put it differently, the relationship between woman and phallic object is constructed as one of artifice while that of man is naturalised. 'Without my rifle I am nothing; without me my rifle is nothing' the marines of Jarhead (2005) repeats like a mantra, in the attempt to naturalise the bond that ties the soldier to the weapon. Hence, in phallicism as appendage, the value given to biological difference is replicated on the symbolic level. It is this second case that interests us in relation to *We Need To Talk About Kevin*.

That Eva is endowed with phallic attributes makes no doubt. Eva is the epitome of the superwoman. She displays a strong identification with the paternal metaphor; has rejected the maternal (her own mother as well as motherhood) in favour of paternal agents (work, partner). Yet the narrative suggests that leaving the maternal is done at a cost. She gains social gratification, but she still yearns for that 'other' thing she calls 'new territory'. Eva's 'new territory' is obviously anchored in a patriarchal vision of a very American concept: 'the new frontier'. The concept of the 'new frontier' can be constructed as the conquest of man, or at least as the capture of untouched land driven by 'the masculine'. The 'new frontier' has been the domain where men sought to discover, penetrate and inhabit a space constructed as 'new', virginal. My choice of sexual terminology is indeed not incidental and the colonisation of space as aggression performed upon land or space and all they contain is not new. It is because it is constructed as virginal -that is the worth of its pre-existence is expunged or diminished- that it can be conquered and populated. In her quest for professional and social achievement, Eva actively

follows in her forefathers footsteps. Her company 'A Wing and a Prayer' is no more than the linguistic 'territorialisation' of un-chartered territories that she then sells on to interested consumers for further colonisation. Eva's phallic attributes as a pro-active entrepreneur are easily recognised and praised by the establishment. So is her failure at finding full satisfaction as an explorer. Eva's thirst for the unknown echoes her peers' endemic drive to capture the un-chartered space and bind it to their needs. The perceived obligation to seek out the foreign and customise its differences could be the enactment of one's need to tame or at least understand those archaic spaces in oneself. The quintessential questions of origins and what makes us different from the next person can be played out in the process. The 'new territory' is not, in Eva's imaginary, the domain of woman, but the encounter with the un-chartered within the self that any individual regardless of their sex might wish to investigate. But the question of origin adds a further dimension in her case because of her project of motherhood. Where the foreign may raise issues of archaism in any individual, and call upon memories of the individual's relationship with the maternal, Eva has a more vivid experience than say Franklin has. I am not arguing for an essentialist view of 'woman' as that which biologically rhymes with archaism as research convincingly argues that it is not an issue of sex but of perception of sex (I am thinking of materialist feminism in particular). But I am arguing that Eva's project of motherhood is motivated and supported by her identification with a very western vision of the 'successful self'. I am also arguing that as she initially identifies with that vision, Eva comes to question the bond that ties motherhood to sacrificial.

Eva's attraction/repulsion for the idea of motherhood shows her ambivalence with regards to the thing that has been lost in the game of social advancement, and that she may encounter again in becoming a mother, the encounter with the maternal. Before she makes the journey 'in the flesh' so to speak, Eva's libidinal energy is invested in discovering, territorializing and mapping unchartered geographical spaces. Eva's first encounter with motherhood is symbolic. She constructs the lost maternal as unknown places where she ventures, seeking to calibrate them against a set of conventions which, however original, are nevertheless a coding of her own culture. Eva tames the exotic for the purpose of domestic consumption. A gesture she finds a lot less exciting when it is turned upon herself. Indeed, we could put on a par her professional achievement with the domestication of the female body, that entity of the other-than-man that needs coding and reinserting

in a phallus-centred dialectic. Once her new territory takes the shape of motherhood, Eva is no longer dealing with a phallic object upon which she exercises her authority and orchestrates its mutation, connection, severance and exchange. Instead, she becomes the receptacle of another's phallic agency: Franklin's first and then Kevin's (I will return to this). In the loss of authority over her life project, Eva believes she must choose between 'motherhood' and social arena, as if motherhood was sacrificial. The thrust of the narrative hinges on this belief and her struggle from denial to resistance to acceptance. If we retrace again the steps that took her from successful career woman to housewife, we find clues as to her motivations for joining the cohort of mothers and housewives she disdains. Eva yearns for the exotic, the foreign, for somewhere else than here (Kevin, 392). She yearns for that 'new territory', the un-chartered place that will satisfy her thirst for phallic challenge. Kevin is said to become an answer to her desire for something else, for something different and at the same time the one foreign country into which [she has] been most reluctant to set foot (Kevin, 379). Kevin is a response to a social question supported by western values. For while she prizes herself in 'having' the phallus, Eva also displays an unsatisfaction that drives her to search for a better one, a bigger one, a more meaningful one, whichever way we might describe the race towards the perfect phallus. The promise of fulfilment compels her to overcome her reluctance and accept the ultimate challenge of maternity. As such, it is also doubtful whether her response is not itself a logical outcome to the social conditioning that dictates the form one's phallus may take. In this case, the issue is one of essentialism, as 'woman' is still coded as deriving satisfaction from maternity and motherhood, a coding challenged by Shriver's dramatisation.

Maternity is what Kristeva called 'the metaphor of the invisible' (1977: 31) in her famous 'Heretics of Love'. One of the failures of our modern times would be an 'incapacity of modern codes to tame the maternal, in other words primary narcissism' (1977: 31). The understanding of maternity and symbolic as antithetic, lies here. Primary narcissism is that time that Freud pinpointed in the symbiotic unity mother/child. This dyad is then disturbed and eventually broken by the intervention of the father during the oedipal phase. Freud could not or did not want to elaborate on the importance of this archaic moment for the development of the individual, preferring to make the father the all-powerful maker of the social subject. While some thinkers like Kristeva have, there has been overall a silence from theorists on the objectification of maternity and motherhood, even from those who

sensed the importance of it in the first place. The success of Kevin may partly rest on its fictionalising the riddle of motherhood. Eva's demise denotes the failure of modern times to give her satisfactory social representation as a mother. Kristeva saw two reasons for this failure: one is the reduction of the feminine to the maternal, successfully promoted by Christian cultures, in particular through the image of the impregnated virgin; the second is a reactive rejection of any association between woman and maternal by the feminist movement, when that association means the reduction of woman to such construction. Christian convention denies woman phallic visibility but in the imagery of the mother-with-child. Here lies one of the contentious corner stones of Freudian theory whereby women, feeling short-strawed in their lack of a penis would replace this penis with the desire for a child. The child effectively becomes the mother's phallus from the moment of its conception to that of its surrender (in the good-mother-scenario) to the social. Before and after this time, maiden, old or barren, the woman is without phallus and thus nothing more than a whole, a void without social purpose or meaning. Unsurprisingly, feminists of the second wave in particular preferred to reject such meaning of woman and preferred to promote woman's phallicism in areas other than maternity: fighting for the social advancement of women demanding equal opportunity for instance, or asserting the satisfaction of woman without man (lesbianism). Eva scores on both fronts. While socially successful, she admits her condescension towards mothers, condescension not unlike the feminist feeling of betrayal by women who choose to embrace a life of domesticity, that is a life regulated by hetero-normativity, organised around the control and descent of man. '[C]rossing the threshold of motherhood, suddenly you become social property, the animate equivalent of a public park' (Kevin, 52). From the moment she becomes pregnant, she fears society's disengagement with her phallic distinctiveness (her work, her drive to tame new frontiers), casting her out to a vaguely defined with-child type she refuses to become. Eva is effectively resisting castration, bartering with society to be allowed a half-way house between phallic and castrated, between having or not having the phallus, hanging on to the objects that made her phallic. Kevin should have become the phallus she lacks, making her whole for a time.

Eva's narration of 'Kevin' indicates she could have gone in this direction. The reader often gets the impression that it is Eva who sets Kevin up as her rival (rather than Kevin challenging her as she tells us), by making of him the privileged object of her desire. Throughout the novel, Kevin is

described in sensual and sometimes sexual terms. She is disturbingly curious about her son's sexual development. Examples are countless. She reasons that 'plain fucking at his high school was so prevalent..I doubt it excites him' (Kevin, 145). She expresses satisfaction at Kevin's rejection of 'average sex', no doubt mirroring her own desire for new frontiers. She conjectures on his potential homosexual practice but only as a means to assert his dominance over Lenny. Eva even makes herself the centre of Kevin's sexual excitement, effectively introducing the ultimate sexual taboo of incest into the picture, describing his pleasure when she witnesses his masturbatory activities. She takes an active part in inciting Kevin to see her as a sexual object. Under the cover of helping them bond, she organises a 'date' and dresses up in a dress on which the 'slit up the thigh is pretty high' (Kevin, 273), the same dress she wore to seduce her partner Franklin. Overall, the narration of 'Kevin' shows the ambivalence of the mother's sentiments for the son, sometimes demonised, sometimes sexualised, but never indifferent. Kevin is without doubt Eva's favourite object, the one she endows of much of her libidinal energy. In short, Kevin becomes Eva's substitute phallus pretty much as Freud had envisioned. But it is a phallus that does not satisfy her, to dire consequences. Dissatisfied with the loss of phallicism through motherhood, she slips into a fantasised relationship (Franklin's disapproval tells us that much) where she crosses sword with the only phallic object left to her: Kevin. The novel fictionalises the intersection between the symbolic disenchantment of the adult and the nascent ego of the child. The effect is a combination of hyper-performance interlaced with destructive moments where both Kevin and Eva's structures are put in jeopardy. The novel's intrigue is built over the fight between mother and son for the phallic object. More precisely, until the last moment when Eva capitulates before the son (I shall return to this), the novel describes a mother's battle against the de-phallicising of her self, when the son's gain of a phallus signifies the loss of the mother's. Eva refuses to be sacrificed. It is a battle she initially wins, but at the cost of her son's impaired relationship with phallic organisation. Eva should have acknowledged her missing phallus and Kevin should have replaced the missing phallus. Eva fails to see Kevin as a substitute because she senses that in the project of motherhood, the phallicism of 'mother' is in fact a masculine appropriation of the maternal (Kristeva, 1977: 31) played out on a woman's body. Eva's difficulty is that for once, her conquering untouched spaces does not signify her phallicising. Instead, her conquering motherhood signifies the opposite because the agents of her phallicising are

first Franklin impregnating her virginal womb, and second Kevin whose social becoming validates or discredits the 'good mother' in Eva.

If we turn to Kevin's behaviour, we find that the character signifies the failure of phallicism to sufficiently satisfy his mother. Whether Kevin becomes like her because he is modelling himself on her or whether his persona reflects her desire remains unanswered in the novel. It is nevertheless striking how Kevin's ways echo Eva's sense of perfection. Although she divorces herself from Kevin's methods, we continuously sense her admiration for her son's superior intelligence: the meticulous construction of his self, the hyper-organisation of data, how he accurately perceives, analyses and uses others' vulnerabilities to his advantage, etc. In short, Kevin seems to have mastered symbolic performance to the extreme. He understands its mechanics and is able to deconstruct and manipulate the procedures of his own and others' symbolic performance. This enables Kevin to disempower the less sentient into the skill of symbolicity (that is everybody except his mother) and take authority over their symbolic narrative. But Eva's admiration is shadowed by the question of Kevin's motivations. Kevin's hyper-performing persona translates in his utter boredom. To Kevin, social performance is dumb. By social performance, he means being successful and happy according to pre-established criteria: getting straight As, riding a beautiful bike, dressing right, doing good parenthood, etc. More precisely, Kevin abhors the dumbness of those who buy into such performance unaware of their own conditioning. He proves his total control over his own through consistent deviance from the norm of that performance: he achieves straight B-grades, dresses with clothes systematically two sizes too small, plays good son to the father he dislikes and bad son to the mother he likes, etc. He demonstrates that he has not only grasped the rules handed down to him but also has become his own master, re-writing them in a logic of negation that makes a mockery of and invalidates the system that created these rules. This brings us to the motivations for Kevin's performance.

Eva suggests that Kevin's killings may be an attempt at bringing stimulation in a life with little excitement. Kevin is the product of an environment where his presence is not needed. He is surplus value to a society, a family that has more than what it needs to live well. His path is pre-determined: good parents, good environment, nannies, good education, etc. His job is to respond favourably to those. As his teacher intimates, Maybe he's mad that it is as good as it gets. [...] The country's very prosperity has become a burden, a dead end (Kevin, 333). It seems to me that Kevin suffers from

boredom in the place of the paternal symbolic. The father (his own but also all paternal agents, the school, the law, etc) proves too weak to contain Kevin. What needs to be contained has to do with the quintessential question of how we come to be. Kevin's actions systematically question the limits of the subject, what constitutes him and others as social beings. What Kevin attacks in others is telling and I will take two examples that I think typify his workings: the waitress with the 'poopy' birthmark and Violetta the girl with the itchy eczema.

Every time Kevin questions the limits of being, the thing attacked is detached from the character, magnified and offered as the marker of their battle with the socio-symbolic. If they win, they may have completeness; if they lose, they will be exposed as not quite whole. In short Kevin attacks the phallus. The birthmark and the flaking skin become locations for the limit that separates symbolic and biology. The waitress's birthmark is a reminder of her link with the organic (cruelly prompted by Kevin's choice of 'faeces' to describe the mark), not only in the skin lacking homogeneity but also in the connection with something beyond her control, the mark of her birth, of her making and origin as a biological entity. The itchy eczema is a step towards social agency as the girl can choose to satisfy physical impulse or social imperative. Under Kevin's supposed guidance, Violetta chooses 'a release that was wilder, more primitive, almost pagan' (Kevin, 185), even more satisfactory that she knows she is sacrificing herself to the 'grotesquerie of the consequences' (Kevin, 185): the deformity of her body into something diseased and socially repulsive. Both examples show Kevin's attacks on the limit between social and biological bodies. The sodomy of Lenny Pugh, Kevin's own broken arm, the attack on Celia's eye, his killings piercing the skin and organs of his victims can all be similarly constructed as Kevin's participation and pleasure in the loss of the social body in favour of the monstrous organic, the crude, raw, unprocessed flesh.

I have chosen to consider examples pertaining to the limit between organic and social but could have equally chosen to show how Kevin attacks the boundary between sanity and madness, again the place where social and anti-social (psychotic) are linked and drawn apart. Eva, at the end of her tether, hurls Kevin across the room; Siobhan, once fervently loyal to catholic morals, shies from the very idea of motherhood after babysitting Kevin; etc. He attacks any boundary that gives social performance a semblance of wholeness. Just aslike he damages the socially constructed body, he also aims to defeat the socially constructed mind.

Kevin repeatedly asks the question of what constitutes 'social' in opposition to the non-social: biology, mental illness. He seeks to undo the process by which the individual has negotiated the passage from the one to the other. In undoing the process of socialisation, he communicates an existential anxiety over subjective processes and over the value of social becoming. In concluding that it may be no more miraculous to pull the trigger of a bow or a gun than it is to reach for a glass of water (Kevin, 379), he may be voicing not only his philosophical disappointment vis-à-vis the artifice of social value, but also his failure to find his own humanity. In his affect-less representation of the world (Eva calls it his 'floppiness'), Kevin testifies to the collapse of his relationship with the process of socialisation. His battle is against the father and there is little doubt who is castrating whom in it. But it would be a mistake to construct Kevin solely as an emotionless psychopath invested in slaying phallic signifiers blindly. I would like to finish with a final point and show how beyond the dedicated effort at debunking and destroying phallic performance in general, it seems to me that Kevin aims at another 'castration' than that of the father.

Kevin's mockery of symbolic performance veils his desire to appropriate the phallus for himself. As he plans 'Thursday', carries out his master plan and is tried and imprisoned, we get the feeling that Kevin has effectively won one over paternal agencies and symbolically castrated the father. The last one standing is Eva. Kevin's attacks on Eva are another attempt at taking from her the phallus she defends, precisely because, however tenuous the link and however sarcastic she may be, her defensive attitude represents her attachment to social values. As the mother of a mass murderer, Eva finds that the same social values offer very little by way of protection in confronting what ties her to the crime and responding to society's accusations. Found guilty of fabricating a social monster through bad mothering, she is finally denied phallic privileges. There is little in Eva's re-collective narrative that suggests that she does not, at least partially agree with these views. Abandoned by the father, she chooses Kevin and all he represents.

If we leave aside the obviously sensational nature of Eva's motherhood experience, one might wonder how much of her demise mirrors current social reality. At the end, the novel would suggest that Eva has to choose between two positions: social standing and motherhood. Eva's choice is uncomfortably familiar. On the strength of 'research' proving that children get greater benefit from maternal care when that care is dispensed by the actual mother, there has been much publicity in the media recently, promoting a

return of the mother to the home during the early years of the child. That this should overlap with criticism addressed to the Government for the lack of maternal care for children whose mothers are in employment is not discussed. Moreover, 'research' in fertility is also encouraging women to have children earlier as the younger the body, the more chances of a successful pregnancy. The fact that these views coincide with rising concerns over the costs of fertility treatment for the NHS is again not discussed. Women are effectively encouraged to put their psychical and financial autonomy after childbearing and childcare. Such a return of a patriarchal construction of 'woman' and 'mother' are strongly opposed by researchers like Olivier and Kristeva who demonstrate that '[...] maybe the good-enough mother is the mother who has something else to love besides her child; it could be her work, her husband, her lovers, etc. She has to have another meaning in her life.' (Kristeva, 1997: 334). Yet, Eva's choice to have interests in things other than her son would make her guilty and by extension, the novel would suggest that women should choose between staying at home and having children, and being socially active. In short, the phallic mother causes the demise of the son and her castration is lawful reparation.

That Eva should capitulate at the end of her fight with the son for the phallus would be the disappointment in the novel. From a feminist perspective, there is frustration that a woman who crosses sword with societal organisation to defend her 'womanhood' against disempowerment should lose this fight and be penalised for it. Indeed, at the end of her ordeal, it is unclear whether it is Kevin or she who is punished for his crimes. For while Kevin is imprisoned, he also gains the notoriety he had hoped for and the maternal attention he sought. In a very metaphoric way, Kevin gets what he wants: paternal and maternal recognition. Although free, Eva's demise continues after her son's sentencing, as she loses her social status and is rejected at the margin of the socially acceptable, mother to the mass murderer, to the monster made flesh, necessarily a monstrosity herself. Hence, Eva is defeated doubly in her fight, once by the son who castrates her and once by patriarchal organisation who refuses to 're-phallicise' her. Subsequently, the self-analytic, feisty narrator who accompanied the reader for a big part of the book seems to suddenly turn to putty in the hand of her son and in the face of social hatred. If we saw in Eva the heroine of an unusual epic battle between motherhood and social expectations, she disappoints us at the end, as she abandons ship and leaves us with no hope to ever reconcile woman's split status. Instead, Eva gives up on her authority, accepts her castration

and becomes the quintessential self-effacing mother who patiently awaits the return of the prodigal son. Ultimately, the narrator seems to prove that no matter her efforts, 'woman' has to choose between motherhood and empowerment, as if the two could not co-exist. Possibly, the redeeming aspect is the fact that Eva chooses to speak up and offer the narrative of her story. But it is a poor, clichéd compensation reminiscent of so many women-authors whose only consolation for social erasure was the production of victimised and/or outlaw narratives. In the case of Kevin, outlaw narrative fails to adequately challenge preconceived images of motherhood, but succeeds in depicting the fight the heroine puts up in her plea to gain acknowledgement if not sympathy for her predicament. Eva's sometimes assertive, sometimes hesitant, sometimes contradictory retrospection of events does much to render the conundrum of motherhood. But the revolution stops here. The reason (or one of the reasons) Kevin achieved success was not because of the originality of a narrative saying something new with regards to motherhood. On the contrary, I have argued that Kevin successfully repeats and exposes agreed representations of 'woman' and 'mother'. Kevin achieved fame because of the sensationalism of the story. Had the author chosen to make of Kevin a more average delinquent, would the novel have achieved notoriety? Probably not and quite appropriately, the book is entitled *We Need To Talk About Kevin* rather than 'we need to talk about Eva'. But it is a frustration that what drives the novel's intrigue is not so much the serious question of motherhood and authority, a question in need of attention in a dissuasive socio-political climate now encouraging mothers to go back home, but rather the spectacle of mass murder.

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Over a year later, Kevin's mother, Eva, begins to write letters to her husband, Franklin. They have been separated since Kevin's crime. Having a psychopath for a son will put some strain on a marriage, that's for sure. In her letters, Eva tries to work out what went wrong. Who is to blame for Kevin's actions? Eva herself, the cold and distant mother? Kevin, who seems to have been evil from birth? Or Franklin, the overenthusiastic, enabling father? Eva walks us through a timeline of her life. Kevin is born, and she feels no love for the child who won't nurse. She's The controversial film *We Need To Talk About Kevin* raises the question: Can children be evil? Marlow Stern watched the movie with child psychiatrist Alan Ravitz. WARNING: Some spoilers. Another interesting aspect of the film is the way the mother handles the aftermath of the school shooting. When the film opens, she's living in this tiny house, harassed by her neighbors since she decides to stay in the same town, self-medicates, and even tortures herself further by working for a travel agency. Parents need to know that *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a bleak drama that centers on a disturbed teen who commits a heinous act. The film's focus is on his mother and how she deals with the aftermath; it also portrays the tense atmosphere in their home as her son grows from a toddler to a high schooler, getting progressively more hostile. There's some swearing (including "f--k" and "s--t") and a few brief sex scenes (plus simulated masturbation), as well as several moments of intense violence, some of which involve a child and others of which include some blood.