

Reliability, Unreliability and Trauma

An Analysis of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

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<p>Tutkielmassani tarkastelen amerikkalaisen kirjailijan Lionel Shriverin teosta <i>We Need to Talk About Kevin</i> (2003) (suom. <i>Poikani Kevin</i>) trauman sekä kertojan luotettavuuden ja epäluotettavuuden näkökulmista. Teos koostuu päähenkilön ja kertojan Eva Khatchadourian kirjoittamista kirjeistä miehelleen Franklinille. Kevin ampui varsijousellaan kuoliaaksi yhdeksän henkilöä koulussaan sekä oman isänsä Franklinin ja pikkusiskonsa Celian kotinsa takapihalla. Evaa vaivaa se, että heillä on Kevinin kanssa hankalat välit ja kirjeitä kirjoittamalla hän käsittelee sekä suhdettaan omaan poikaansa että hänen tekemiään murhia.</p> <p>Tutkielmani tavoitteena on analysoida keinoja, jotka tekevät Shriverin kertojasta sekä luotettavan että epäluotettavan. Kertojan luotettavuutta lisääviä tekijöitä ovat Evan rehellinen kerronta omista tunteistaan perheeseensä liittyen. Näitä ovat Evan ja Kevinin väliltä puuttuva emotionaalinen yhteys, hänen ja Kevinin keholliset kokemukset sekä Evan turhautuminen ja viha työn ja perhe-elämän yhdistämisen vaikeudesta. Häntä harmittaa erityisesti se, että hänen oma työnsä matkaoppaita kustantaman yrityksen toimitusjohtajana on kärsinyt lastenhoidon vuoksi. Erityisesti Franklin on oletanut, että hän on äitinä päävastuussa lastenhoidosta. Toisaalta Shriver käyttää monia tekniikoita, joilla haastaa kertojan luotettavuutta. Näihin kuuluvat tarinassa olevat lukuisat aukot, joista merkittävin on sen mainitsematta jättäminen, että Kevin murhaa oman isänsä ja pikkusiskonsa. Tätä narratiivista aukkoa analysoidaan traumateorian avulla. Tunnistan teoksen traumanarratiiviksi, joille epäluotettavuus on tyypillinen piirre.</p> <p>Tutkielmani tavoitteena on osoittaa, kuinka perhesurman aiheuttama trauma tuo Evan pääosin luotettavaan, jopa rehelliseen, kerrontaan epäluotettavan kertojan piirteitä. Evan epäluotettavuus tulee ilmi hänen suhtautumisestaan miehensä ja tyttärensä kuolemiin. Hän ei kirjan alkupuolella pysty kohtaamaan ja käsittelemään heidän kohtaloitaan, minkä vuoksi hän välttelee mainitsemasta heidän kuolemiaan. Hän välttelee totuutta implikoimalla, että he voisivat olla vielä elossa, mutta vain asuisivat erillään. Kun Eva lopulta kohtaa ja käsittelee traumaansa puhumalla asiasta Kevinin kanssa, hän kykenee hyväksymään sen osaksi elämäänsä. Silloin Eva vapautuu trauman kokemuksestaan, eikä hän ole enää epäluottava kertoja, vaan hän kertoo avoimesti myös Franklinin ja Celian kuolemista. Tämän myötä Evan on mahdollista liittää perhesurma osaksi elämäänsä. Sen myötä hänelle tarjoutuu mahdollisuus luoda suhde ainoaan elossa olevaan perheenjäseneseensä, Kevininiin.</p> <p>Tutkielmani merkittävyys liittyy vaietujen aiheiden, koulusurman ja äityden, käsittelyyn kirjallisuudessa. Lisäksi analysoimani teos liittyy osaksi keskustelua amerikkalaisesta yhteiskunnasta ja sille ominaisista ilmiöistä. Samalla teoksessa on myös traumaattisista tapahtumista selviämisen näkökulma.</p>			
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1. Introduction

Events that cause psychological trauma are numerous and always subjective, and novels that deal with trauma have been recognized as trauma narratives. Therefore, I find it fruitful to study the effects psychological trauma has on individual stories. How does trauma manifest in life, and in fiction? How might someone deal with trauma? And most importantly, as a literary student, can trauma cause a narrator in a novel to be unreliable?

Unreliable narrators have already been studied and categorized. They can be unreliable by telling too little or telling lies; they can evaluate a situation wrong; they can be naïve and therefore unreliable; some hold unethical morals and thus we cannot trust their telling to be truthful. Some narrators try to be honest but fail because of their subjectivity. Trauma narratives have been recognized to be one cause for a narrator to be unreliable. Such a narrator's motives to be unreliable are personal rather than intentional; a trauma may cause a narrator to avoid or suppress certain topics or they might alter facts when attempting to avoid the situation.

In this thesis I will bring together psychological trauma and unreliable narration and study how trauma narrative can cause unreliability. In many cases, trauma is the underlying motive which causes a narrator to be unreliable. My focus of study is the narration of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The novel consists of letters the main character Eva writes to her husband Franklin. In those letters she is writing out her son's, Kevin, life story because she is trying to understand why her son would brutally murder his own father and little sister as well as nine people at his school. I argue that Eva's narrative unreliability is present in the massive gap she creates by omitting to tell that Kevin murdered Franklin and Celia until the very end. I argue that her unreliability is caused by the fact that she is traumatized by the events of her son murdering both her husband and daughter and while at the same time intentionally sparing her. Eva is unable to mention this until the very end of the novel, and in this thesis I argue that it is so because of the traumatic events that Kevin has made her endure. In addition to coping with trauma, Eva is struggling with the question: is it possible to love your own child even though he has done terrible crimes and hurt you in horrible ways?

We Need to Talk About Kevin offers interesting possibilities to study unreliability by focusing on its counterpart: reliable narration. The juxtaposition is evident in the novel as the narration is mostly reliable and only deviates to unreliability with Franklin and Celia's fates. In fact, Eva's narration is mostly extremely reliable, at parts even painfully honest. She openly writes about her feelings and thoughts that often represent her in an unflattering way; she writes about her ambivalent feelings towards having children, how difficult it was to create an emotional bond to Kevin, bodily issues that she has had to face while pregnant, giving birth, breastfeeding, and raising her children. Eva confesses that she has had negative feelings, she has felt shame, regret and resentment towards motherhood. All this raises her reliability, which is why the revelation that she has lied about something so important is so significant.

1.1 Introduction to the primary text

We Need to Talk About Kevin is the seventh novel by the American author and journalist Lionel Shriver. It was published in the USA in 2003 and soon became a best-seller and book club favorite. It won the Orange Prize in 2005 and is generally thought to be one of Shriver's best works, both in quality and in terms of novels sold. The novel consists of letters written by Eva Khatchadourian, an American entrepreneur who owns a travel book publishing company. Eva has spent a lot of time travelling the world on a tight budget and therefore writes travel guides for those who wish to do the same. She is married to Franklin Plaskett, who works as a location scout for advertisers, loves a good steak and is a devoted Republican. Together they have two children, Kevin and Celia. Eva was somewhat ambivalent towards having Kevin and she has struggled to create an emotional bond with him from the minute he was born. A contrast is created when their second child, Celia, is born. Where she is easy, happy, and eager to breastfeed, Kevin had been difficult, angry, and did not want to be breastfed. Throughout the novel the reader is aware that Kevin commits a mass murder at his school and is in juvenile prison at the time. Eva struggles to come to terms with what Kevin has done and she fears and blames herself that her maternal ambivalence has caused Kevin to become "bad". Partly because she feels that she is responsible for Kevin's crimes, she is almost relieved when one of the murdered student's mother raises a civil trial suit against her for parental negligence. Eva is found innocent of parental negligence; however, she has to pay for her own legal bills and is therefore forced to sell her thriving business and their enormous suburban house. This feels punitive to Eva and she feels like this is something she deserves.

She moves to a shabby two-bedroom apartment and takes a job in a travel agency where she sells packet vacations. Eva's days are spent working, drinking, seeing Kevin at the juvenile prison, and writing letters to Franklin. She writes the letters to her husband Franklin and it is revealed to the reader only in the very end that before mass murdering people at his school, Kevin has murdered his own father Franklin and his little sister Celia. The reader is only made aware that Eva does not live with Franklin and Celia anymore; the reader is guided to believe that perhaps they have divorced. When Eva writes these letters, she is aware that she can never send these, that no one beside her will never read them. Taking this aspect into consideration, the letters could be argued to serve a therapeutic purpose for Eva.

1.2 The structure of the novel

The novel begins with an epigraph "A child needs your love most when he deserves it least". The quote is from a newspaper columnist and humorist Erma Bombeck who wrote about the suburban American housewife's life between 1965 to 1996. This is fitting for all stages of Kevin's life but especially fit at the end of the novel (chronologically the novel's present time) where Eva begins to get in touch with the fact that she does love her son, no matter that he murdered nine people at his school, his father and little sister. Contrary, because after the mass murder the only family Eva has is Kevin, he is the only one left to love.

We Need to Talk About Kevin is an epistolary novel, it consists of letters Eva writes to her late husband, dating for five months, the first one from November 8th, 2000 and the last from April 8th, 2001. The letters are written in a similar fashion; first Eva briefly tells about her current life, mundane happenings and events, followed by a retrospective view of some past event regarding her motherhood and relationship with Kevin and Franklin. The novel has clear distinctions between the time of the action and the time of the telling (Phelan 2005, 11). The retrospective sections take up most of the letters, from ten to twenty pages where the current sections tend to take up one to three pages. The retrospective sections follow a chronological timeline, starting from Eva's pregnancy and continuing to Kevin's time as a baby, toddler, kid and eventually teenager. Throughout the novel the time of the telling is separate from the time of the action; nothing is told simultaneously as it happens.

1.3 Thesis structure

In the theory section I will introduce the analysis that has been done on the primary work and state what this work will add to the previous studies. Further, the theory section will focus on how unreliability shows in novels and what types of unreliable narrators there are. As I have identified *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as a trauma narrative, I will then introduce relevant trauma theory. Finally, I will show how trauma theory may help us to understand unreliable narration. In the analysis section I will first analyze features that enforce Eva as a reliable narrator, her honest descriptions about motherhood and her feelings towards Kevin. Second, I will analyze the sections that make Eva an unreliable narrator. Finally, I will show how her trauma has caused her to be unreliable and how that unreliability is lifted when she confronts her trauma.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

In this section I will introduce the relevant literature. The section is divided into three parts: literature review, unreliability, and trauma narratives. In the third section I will bring trauma and unreliable narration together and introduce literature concerning unreliability in trauma narratives.

2.1 Literature review

This section contains a review of existing scholarly work relating *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. In addition to presenting, synthesizing and critically evaluating the existing literature, I will also link these to elements of my own analysis.

In her analysis of the novel, Jen Webb focuses on the relationship between Franklin and Eva. Webb raises discussion about the feminist nature of the novel which centers around the inequalities of family life. Eva is in charge of taking care of their kids and even though she is in charge of her own company, and therefore bringing in more money, Franklin expects her to free up time from work in order to raise their children. In fact, as the head of the family, Franklin makes most of the big decision in their lives, such as where and how they live and how they raise their kids (2009, 133). Indeed, Eva is depicted as conforming to the traditional successful, white, work-oriented, feminist woman. Franklin pressures her to prioritize motherhood over her professional life, and she struggles with that decision. However, it is important to mention that getting to choose between work and family is a privileged decision. In addition, Webb draws attention to the way Shriver criticizes the American dream and in parts, deems it as unattainable (134). Just as well, Webb sees Eva as a representation of both neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism as she sees herself as a global citizen and travels the world, especially the Third World, while benefitting from it financially (137–38). When it comes to Eva's reliability, or lack thereof, Webb identifies Eva's unreliability with the way she misleads the reader to believe they have divorced when in fact, Franklin has been murdered by Kevin (138). Webb states that this is due to Eva's narrative presence, to which I partly agree. I will expand this idea by adding Eva's trauma of losing half her family as the

major reason for her unreliability. Furthermore, Eva's unreliability is not intentional on her part but a consequence of her trauma.

Gregory Phipps (2015) focuses on the rampage school shooting aspect of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as sadly, school shootings are an infrequent, yet common, element of contemporary American society. This theme is prevalent on the textual level of the novel and therefore prone for analysis. Nevertheless, on a character analysis level I believe the school shooting is a secondary issue for Eva. I argue that Eva talks so much about the shootings is because she cannot talk about the familicide.

Vivienne Muller (2008) analyses *We Need to Talk About Kevin* through various aspects of motherhood and childhood from a psychoanalytical perspective. Especially present in her analysis is the idea that there is an ideal image of motherhood that most, if not all, mothers try to reach. Of course, this image is not attainable at all and the tragedy is the effort of trying to reach an unreachable goal. As a consequence, this pursuit makes women feel miserable and bad about themselves. Another point by Muller is the unbecoming a woman idea, meaning that when a woman becomes a mother, she ceases to be a woman (6). Muller writes that this unbecoming is presented in the novel in Franklin's changed behavior when Eva gets pregnant; for example, he begins to act more tender towards her during sex. Muller analyses Eva's narration when she begins thinking about socially forbidden things like: "that a mother might not naturally love her child, a child might not instinctively love the mother and a child might not be lovable" (10). It does not matter that the aforementioned, taboo, thoughts represent the reality, the idealized image of mothers where she loves her child unconditionally holds sway, thus leading to Eva's anxiety. Muller mentions the overall value system in the novel which is that mothers are the main caregivers of a child and are responsible for their upbringing. Therefore, they can be held accountable for the child's possible future mistakes, whereas the father is not kept responsible for their offspring's mistakes. I will point out that this accountability leads not only to Eva's civil lawsuit for parental negligence but also to her feeling like she is forced to prioritize her kids over her company. So far, however, little attention has been paid to the issue of narrator reliability and unreliability in the novel, and later on I will outline the ways these have been analyzed more broadly in literary studies.

Emily Jeremiah (2010) analyses the novel from a gender perspective, especially motherhood and masculinity. She focuses on the ways the novel challenges the idealizations of maternity,

and how it questions if all women even should become mothers (172). Jeremiah interestingly refers to the novel's views about pregnancy as an imposition that rules Eva: "It changes Eva's view of her own body, rendering it animalistic" (175). Naturally, pregnancy is a bodily experience in the most possible way, but Eva faces situations where Franklin rules over her autonomy on the grounds of worrying for the baby's safety. As for masculinity, Jeremiah points out that Eva does not see it as much better; she sees it as threatening and violent (177). Jeremiah writes that in addition to tormenting his teachers with essays built of three-word sentences, Kevin uses his sexuality in order to hurt and humiliate others, especially women (177). There is a period in Kevin's teen years when he masturbates with the door deliberately open so that her mother sees him when they are alone in the house. He also accuses his drama teacher of sexual harassment when he is 15.

Ortal Slobodin has studied maternal shame and how it manifests itself in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Slobodin defines shame as a "self-directed emotion in which subjects observe some aspects of themselves from an external point of view" (2019, 216). Shame arises from the feeling of being observed through someone else's eyes and being seen in ways one does not wish to be seen. She states that "shame operates in the interplay between the socio-cultural, gendered ideals of motherhood and mothers' representations of these ideals" (215). That there exists an ideal image of motherhood, which includes things such as constant supervision of the offspring, willingness to prioritize motherhood over work, and an overwhelming selflessness towards her family. However, the novel challenges some of those ideals by having a narrator who deals with disappointment towards motherhood, feeling ambivalent about mothering and finding herself disliking her own son (215). Slobodin focuses on the elements that convey maternal shame, since she believes those are "the primary mechanism through which negative maternal emotions (e.g., ambivalence, resentment, rage) are transformed into unbearable, hidden and forbidden experiences" (215). This becomes evident in the novel, since Eva decides to actively hide those elements of her motherhood especially from her husband. By being judged by her husband for her negative emotions, she decides to keep these things to herself. According to Slobodin, this leads to maternal shame and feelings of isolation (216).

According to Slobodin, maternal shame and guilt are used to ensure that mothers are invested in nurturing, especially in Western cultures (219). This shame is used by virtually all aspects of society: at the family level it is used by fathers and children; at the social level it is used

via regulations and norms to ensure that mothers are invested in motherhood (219). In this context it needs to be said that Eva's family is fairly privileged, and they have far better opportunities of achieving the ideal "good" parenting. For example, they have the financial means to hire multiple nannies so that both parents can continue to work, they can put their kids in good daycares and schools and can offer them hobbies and a safe environment.

2.2 Unreliability

Porter H. Abbott has written on narration, narrators, interpretation and reliability, pointing out that when constructing a narrative, the choice of narrator is a device used to produce certain effects (2008, 69). According to Abbott, narrators have been studied in reference to voice, focalization and distance. Put simply, voice is a grammatical distinction between first-person narration, third-person narration and the rare second-person narration (70). Voice can be described as who we "hear" telling the story. Focalization is a term very close to point of view, as novels are often told from someone's point of view. Focalization refers to from whose perspective, through whose eyes and consciousness, we see things from. The focalizer can change during a narrative and it can be a character within the novel or one outside of it. A novel might consist of third-person narration as a whole while having different focalizers at different moments (73.) Distance refers to "the narrator's degree of involvement in the story she tells" (74). Some narrators are utterly involved in the story, as when the narrator is narrating their own life story, while others are not involved in the story almost at all. Distance can also be created by telling things from the past, whereas telling things which are still in progress shortens the distance (74.) Quite often the involvement is an emotional one (75). Abbott mentions that voice and distance affect the level of the narrator's reliability, which is a spectrum (76).

James Phelan points out that a character narrator is unreliable when his/her telling of an event, person, thought, thing or other object is different from the one we would get from the implied author (2005, 49). A narrator is unreliable if he or she "misreports, -interprets or -evaluates, or if she/he underreports, -interprets or -evaluates" (Shen 2013: "Unreliability", Paragraph 1.) In other words, unreliability may be due to telling false information or making false interpretations or it may be due to not telling enough. This distinction is from James Phelan; he contrasts mis- with under-, meaning being wrong and being insufficient (Phelan 2005, 34–

37; 49–53, here Shen, paragraph 4). These types of unreliability often co-occur; one might be misreporting because of misinterpreting or misevaluating (Shen, paragraph 4). Shen mentions too that “the narrator may be reliable in one way and unreliable in another” (paragraph 4). It is usual that a narrator’s telling of the events is accurate, but his interpretation or evaluation is inaccurate (Shen, paragraph 4.) Of these six types of unreliability, underreporting is most applicable to my purposes. Underreporting happens when “the narrator tells us less than he or she knows” (Phelan 2005, 52). Phelan distinguishes underreporting from reliable elliptical narration, where the narrator and implied author leave a gap in the narrative which they expect the reader to be able to fill accurately. Of course, elliptical narration can also be unreliable; then the narrator is telling too little and deliberately guiding the reader to fill in the gap in an inaccurate fashion. This type of unreliable elliptical narration would be misreporting. (2005, 52.) In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva leaves a gap in Franklin and Celia’s condition. The gap in the novel does not represent reliable elliptical narration because the reader is not able to infer the gap correctly; therefore, Eva is underreporting when she is vague about Franklin and Celia’s whereabouts. I would also say that Eva is not misreporting; she is not deliberately trying to guide the reader to believe that Franklin is still alive. I think she is vague about it because she cannot yet understand the events herself. To conclude, the important point is not so much to decide if Eva is misreporting or underreporting; the important part is that she is unreliable when it comes to Franklin and Celia.

Shen introduces two major ways to see unreliability among scholars; first, the rhetorical approach which “treats unreliability as a textual property encoded by the implied author for the implied reader to decode”; second, the constructivist or cognitivist approach which focuses on the interpretation and sees unreliability as dependent on actual reader’s different readings (Shen, paragraph 5).

In addition, Phelan introduces six different levels of bonding: “The estranging type increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, while the bonding type, conversely, reduces that distance. Since most previous work on unreliability focuses on the estranging type, Phelan concentrates on bonding unreliability, of which he identifies six subtypes: (1) ‘literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable’; (2) ‘playful comparison between implied author and narrator’; (3) ‘naïve defamiliarization’; (4) ‘sincere but misguided self-deprecation’; (5) ‘partial progress towards the norm’; (6) ‘bonding through optimistic comparison” (Shen, paragraph 14). This is an interesting theme and as a narrator

Eva has most in common with the bonding type, as she actively aims to reduce the distance between reader and narrator.

2.3 Trauma narratives

As a phenomenon, trauma is age old. In short, trauma can be defined as “an individual’s response to events that is of such intensity that it impairs emotional or cognitive functioning and can bring lasting psychological disruption” (Vickroy 2015, 6). The intensity of one’s trauma response varies from individual to individual according to their situations and ability to cope (6). Events that trigger a trauma response are varied, from war and rape to love and loss, death, and “the loss of self consequent on the commodification, objectification, and disrespect that accompany the debilitating enforcement of social norms” (6). Coping with trauma can be mixed with simultaneous desire to remember the event, in attempts to replay and resolve the past, and to forget the experience altogether (8).

On the other hand, trauma literature, that is literature written with a conscious awareness of trauma, is a rather contemporary genre. It involves knowledge about the psychological processes of trauma enriched with figurative language which reflects the causes and consequences of traumatic reactions. (Vickroy 2015, 3.) Trauma narratives offer contexts for understanding human behavior “that eludes our usual understanding and awareness in lived situations; we are typically unable to comprehend the impact of events as they occur” (6).

Laurie Vickroy has studied the ways of reading trauma in literary narratives. According to her, these types of narrative often contextualize trauma for their readers by embedding those narratives in situations of social and historical significance (2015, 1). In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the contextualized traumas are school shootings and familicide. Trauma can and often is a shared experience, as in historical or group trauma, when trauma is contextualized by racial, sexual, or class oppressions (1). The context of trauma can also be the aftermath of war, economic exploitation, or love (2). Vickroy states that “examining fictionalized trauma scenarios allows the development of insights into subjective endurance, crisis, and conflict and shows that the defensive responses of trauma link many types and degrees of wounding, informing a common humanity” (2). Trauma narrative allows for the coexistence of the singularities of character and the shared features of the traumatic experience (2).

Vickroy points out that trauma narratives can provide many viewpoints at the character's experience. These multiple thoughts and points of view attempt to engage the reader ethically to interpret these viewpoints. Thus, "they can create conflict and build suspense and interest; readers are urged to compare motives and behaviors" (2015, 3). In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the reader is invited into investigating the motives of Kevin and Eva with Eva as she is attempting to understand what has happened to her and most importantly, why.

Common literary elements that are found in trauma narratives which enhance the narrator's unreliability are "gaps, uncertainties, dissociations, and visceral details of living through traumatic experiences as a way of immersing readers in the characters' states of mind" (Vickroy 2015, 3). Of these features, I will focus on the gap in the analysis part of this thesis.

Later I will show how unreliability caused by trauma can be used to analyze *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and show how that brings new possibilities for interpretation. But first, I will show that Eva is mostly a reliable narrator and only deviates towards unreliability when she would have to talk about Franklin and Celia's deaths.

3. Reliability

The analysis part of this thesis will be divided into two chapters: reliability and unreliability. First, I identify and analyze the ways that Eva is a reliable narrator and why that is the most prominent one of the two. Then, for comparison I will identify the aspect that makes Eva's narration unreliable and finally show how that unreliability is motivated by trauma.

This chapter is divided into three subsections which each enforce Eva as a reliable narrator: first her honest discussion of maternal guilt; second her frank discussion about their marital relationship and problems; and third, how school shootings are talked about habitually throughout the novel, both Kevin's crime and generally about school shootings done in the US.

3.1 Honest discussion of maternal guilt

First, Eva is very open as a narrator and reveals personal details about her emotional life. This comes especially evident with her discussion of maternal guilt and shame.

Eva has been withholding crucial thoughts and negative emotions she has had about motherhood from Franklin, which she writes in the letters addressed to him. This aspect increases her reliability for the reader since she is able to admit, even confess, bad things about herself. I think this makes her seem like a reliable narrator, an honest one even, which increases the surprise reveal at the end when she supplies the missing information. She decides to do this because after she confesses to Franklin that she has negative feelings about motherhood, Franklin becomes furious and tells her to "don't you ever say that — — Never, ever tell me that you regret our own kid" (76). By being judged by her husband for her negative emotions, she decides to keep these things to herself. According to Slobodin, this leads to maternal shame and feelings of isolation (2019, 225).

Eva is aware of the fact that she is describing herself in an unflattering way when she talks about her maternal feelings, or lack thereof: "I recognize that the portrait I'm painting here is not *attractive*, and for that matter I can't remember the last time I felt attractive, to myself or

anyone else” (83, emphasis original). This honest talk about her true feelings, however embarrassing, plays into her seeming like a reliable narrator.

One example of Eva’s honesty is that she acknowledges that Franklin was closer to Kevin while she was closer to Celia. Right from the start, Kevin is closer to Franklin. Even at the hospital after birth Kevin is calmer when he is in Franklin’s arms: “Whereas newborn Kevin had squirmed miserably on my breast, he rested an arm around your neck, as if having found his real protector” (96). Eva feels jealous when she sees that Franklin is clearly choked up and amazed to have his son in his arms. Eva is doubly disappointed: that she does not feel overwhelmed with love like Franklin and that Kevin is not calm in her arms as he is in Franklin’s. This becomes evident in the way Franklin addresses Kevin as a child: “for you he was ‘our son’—or, once you started to give up on me, ‘my son’” (103). The changing possessive pronoun also reflects the distancing of Eva and Franklin. Still, the fact that Eva is able to admit this enforces her reliability.

Eva also admits that she didn’t really want children. On the day she finds out that she is pregnant, she is eventually able to recognize that she did not have merely ambivalent feelings towards motherhood; she was not interested in it. This becomes evident as she contemplates her feelings towards pregnancy and motherhood: “I think the ambivalence didn’t go away because it wasn’t what it seemed. It is not true that I was ‘ambivalent’ about motherhood. You wanted to have a child. On balance, I did not. Added together, that seemed like ambivalence, but though we were a superlative couple, we were not the same person” (66). Again, confessing these things does not present Eva in a positive light, which increases her reliability.

A further example of Eva’s honesty is that she admits feeling nothing at Kevin’s birth. Giving birth to Kevin did not go as planned; it was long and painful to Eva. She felt that she had somehow failed in it, for example because she could not handle the pain and asked for an epidural, yet at that point it was too late for it. Therefore, Eva associated Kevin with her own failures from the start, as we can see here: “In the very instant of his birth, I associated Kevin with my own limitations—with not only suffering, but defeat” (90). Eva describes that she felt cheated when she gave birth and found that she was unmoved by the experience. She describes it like this: “I felt—absent. I kept scrabbling around in myself for the new *indescribable* emotion, like stirring a crowded silverware drawer for the potato peeler, but no

matter how I rattled around, no matter what I moved out of the way, it wasn't there. The potato peeler is *always* in the drawer after all" (96, emphasis original). This made Eva feel ashamed of her reaction. So, while her tearing was being stiched, she made a vow: "I would never reveal to anyone on earth that childbirth had left me unmoved" (98).

Eva also comments about how surprised she was by how difficult it was to establish an emotional bond with her own child. Even when Kevin was a baby, it was difficult for Eva to form an emotional bond with him. This lack was not due to lack of effort: "I did try very hard to form a passionate attachment to my son. But I had never experienced my feeling for you, for example, as an exercise that I was obliged to rehearse like scales on the piano. The harder I *tried*, the more aware I became that my very effort was an abomination" (103, emphasis original). She cannot understand why it is so difficult for her to love Kevin, when in contrast loving Franklin is effortless to her.

During one of Eva's weekly visits to see Kevin, Kevin asks if she ever wanted to have him. Eva responds:

'I thought I did, I said. 'And your father, he wanted you—desperately.' — — 'You *thought you did.*' He said. 'You changed your mind.' 'I thought I needed a change,' I said. 'But no one needs a change for the worse' (67–8).

As their conversation progresses Eva confesses that she was surprised by how difficult it was to establish an emotional bond with her own child. She says: "'I couldn't have expected that simply *forming an attachment* to you,' I phrased as diplomatically as I knew how, 'would be so much work. I thought—' I took a breath. 'I thought that part came for free'" (68, emphasis original). She was certain that Kevin could sense that she was faking motherhood; the way she stiffened as she picked Kevin up and how she kept smiling at Kevin, because Franklin had read somewhere that it was important to do so, even though she did not feel like it, and how she burred and cooed when they did not come naturally to her (102).

One of the most extreme examples of Eva's honesty about her feelings about Kevin is that she can honestly say to Kevin that she hates him. When Kevin was a baby and Eva had trouble forming a relationship to him, Kevin's personhood became apparent to Eva. On the contrary, to Franklin Kevin was often a general, unidentified baby: "From the very beginning that child

was particular to me, whereas you often asked *How's the kid?* or *How's my boy?* or *Where's the baby?* To me he was never 'the baby'. He was a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small" (103, emphasis original). During one of her visits Kevin outs her mother that her visits to the prison are just a show for other people. That she does not come there just so see Kevin, but so that she appears to be a certain kind of mother to others. After the conversation Kevin says flatly that she hates her to which Eva responds, just as flatly, "I often hate you, too, Kevin" (51).

In addition to this emotional honesty which reinforces the reader's sense of Eva as a reliable narrator, she also very openly discusses physical, bodily issues. One of these is her frank discussion of her failure to breastfeed, which I see as a physical reaction to her emotional emptiness. When Eva gives birth and meets Kevin for the first time, she tries to breastfeed but fails: "Sucking is one of our few innate instincts, but with his mouth right at my enlarged brown nipple, his head lolled away in distaste. Though I'd been warned that I wouldn't lactate on demand like a cafeteria milk dispenser, I kept trying; he kept resisting; he liked the other nipple no better" (96). Eva feels that Kevin is rejecting her when he refuses to be breastfed and that makes her feel embarrassed. Her embarrassment comes from thinking that the newborn might have negative feelings towards her to which she feels rejected (101). She tries everything to ease the breastfeeding: she gives up dairy, onions, garlic, chilies, meat, fish, gluten. Her efforts were unsuccessful: "In the end I was starving, while Kevin continued to feed in his lackluster way on the bottle of microwaved formula that he would only accept from you" (101–2). The physical rejection she gets from Kevin is intensified when he rejects her milk from the bottle as well: "He could smell it. He could smell me. — — I was aching to give him the very milk of human kindness, and he did not want it, or he did not want it from me" (102). Eva took the rejection as concerning her whole role as a mother: "I shouldn't have taken it personally, but how could I not? It wasn't mother's milk he didn't want, it was Mother" (102).

A second bodily issue which Eva is very open about, reinforcing her self-presentation as a reliable narrator is potty-training, or the lack thereof, where the main theme is her failure to control her son's body which leads to an emotional struggle between mother and son. Kevin has not shown any interest in potty-training and has therefore worn diapers for six years. Eva believes that Kevin had done that on purpose in order to torture her. She believes that Kevin rationed his pooping, in order to make Eva change him as much as possible, sometimes twice

or three times a day. On the horrendous day Eva had already changed Kevin twice when she noticed that Kevin had once again pooped. Then, Eva says that she simply lost it; she started screaming “How do you *do* it? — —where does this *come* from?” (229, emphasis original) and she threw Kevin across the room, breaking his arm. Fearing that Franklin would get mad and that someone might take Kevin away from them, Eva was terrified of her action. Surprisingly, Kevin lied to the doctors and to Franklin, explaining that he had rolled off the changing table onto a dump truck (236). Eva did not correct Kevin and due to this, Kevin would exploit Eva’s remorse for a couple of weeks for sweets and his favorite foods, until he grew tired of it. Revealing this information is again, extremely unfavorable for her and she could face legal proceedings for it.

Another theme which increases Eva’s reliability is her openness about how difficult it is to balance between running her own company and parenting. For one, Eva reveals that she was forced to take more responsibility over Kevin. Because Franklin is a freelancer shooting location scout for advertisements and Eva runs her own book publishing company, they decide that Eva cuts back her hours so that Franklin does not lose his long-term clients. She understands their situation but has second thoughts about it: “I suspected that if our situation were reversed—you headed a thriving company while I was a lone freelance location scout—Eva would be expected to drop the scouting altogether like a hot brick” (107). These decisions come especially from Franklin as he often says that it is the mother’s duty to take care of the children.

Also increasing her reliability is Eva’s openness about the problems this causes with her company, because she has no time to get ahead in her profession. When Kevin was a baby, Eva had planned to run her travel book publishing company on the side, at least to some extent. However, Kevin cries so much that Eva cannot get any work done: “I’d brought home loads of editing work but had only got through a few pages” (109). It soon becomes evident that whenever Eva talks about her company’s business, Franklin encourages Eva to delegate tasks for her employees so that she can stay home. On the contrary, running her own company is a passion for her and doing less for it is clearly a big sacrifice. One evening, they are fighting about Kevin and Franklin suggests that they hire a nanny. Eva remembers that at work they talked about doing an African edition of the travel guides. Franklin gets upset about this: “‘I did not mean,’ you stooped, your voice deep and hot in my ear, ‘that someone else could raise our son while you go python-hunting in the Belgian Congo’” (110).

In an effort to solve these life balancing issues, Eva and Franklin eventually decide to hire a nanny, Siobhan, to help take care of Kevin; that way Eva can continue working. However, whenever Siobhan is sick, Eva is expected to change her work schedule and care for Kevin. After some time, Siobhan starts to take sick days on a regular basis, most likely because taking care of Kevin is exhausting due of the constant screaming. This naturally affects Eva's work: "These impromptu vacations of hers put me to great inconveniencies, since according to now-established logic of your tenuous freelance employment versus my fatuous security as CEO, I was the one to stay home" (119).

Further evidence of Eva's honesty about her work and family time management issues is provided through a reported conversation with their nanny. Eva's travel guide company, *A Wing and a Prayer*, publishes travel guides for those traveling on a budget. Before publishing a new guide, Eva goes to long preliminary scouting trips, visiting places and hotels and restaurants. Eva plans to continue this when Kevin grows a bit; however, Franklin seems to have a different opinion about it. This becomes clear when Eva discusses travelling with their new nanny, Siobhan: "'After a year or so, I'll resume business as usual.' Siobhan stirred her coffee. 'Is that what Franklin expects?' 'It's what he ought to expect.' 'But he mentioned, like,' she was not comfortable with tattling, 'that your running off for months at a go, like—that it was over'" (117). Franklin and Eva have different opinions on how Eva should run her company and take care of their family. This causes them to have a lot of fights which has a negative effect on their relationship.

3.2 Honest discussion of marital relationship

In addition to Eva's honesty about issues connected to motherhood, which serve to reinforce her reliability, Eva is also depicted as being honest about the problems in her marital relationship, focusing on her conviction that Kevin is somehow always guilty, which leads to disagreements with her husband. Eva and Franklin start to have different opinions about Kevin very soon and both continue to enforce their own view as Kevin grows. This development might have begun when Kevin rejected breastfeeding and only took formula from Franklin. However, it was also enforced when Franklin went back to work and Eva stayed home with Kevin. With Eva, Kevin would cry and scream for six to eight hours

straight. When Franklin came home, he would stop and be calm and sleepy for the evening. Eva says that “Our son had *fits of peace*. And this may sound completely mad, but the consistency with which Kevin shrieked with precocious force of will the whole time he and I were alone, and then with the abruptness of switching off a heavy-metal radio station desisted the moment you came home—well, it seemed deliberate” (105). This difference of experience began to build distrust between them, as Franklin did not believe the intensity of Kevin’s crying when Eva was with him. She describes the different behaviors here: “Sure, after you’d got home, he’d sometimes fuss a little like a *normal* baby that he wanted feeding or changing, and you’d take care of it and he’d stop; and then you’d look at me like, see? and I’d want to slug you. With me, once you left, Kevin was not to be bought off with anything so petty and transitory as milk or dry diapers” (106). Later on, when they discuss it more, Franklin is unable to fully understand what she is going through with Kevin: “‘Listen, Eva, I’m sure he gets a little ill-tempered—’ ‘See?’ *A little ill-tempered.*’ I waddled to the kitchen in my blanket. ‘You don’t believe me!’” (108). Even their downstairs neighbor is threatening to move out because of the constant crying. This does not convince Franklin; on the contrary he accuses the neighbor, and the whole country, of being anti-child. Franklin is sure that the view he has of Kevin is accurate and whole, as we can see here: “‘See?’ Kevin had roused on your shoulder, then took the bottle peaceably without opening his eyes. ‘I’m sorry but most of the time he seems pretty good-natured to me.’ ‘He’s not *good-natured* right now, he’s exhausted! And so am I” (108).

Eva also reveals that as Kevin grows and she gives birth to Celia, she spends more time with baby Celia and less time with Kevin. Eva notices that a certain distance has emerged between them, since Franklin spends his free time with Kevin, taking him to ball games and museums whereas Eva takes care of the baby at home. From the distance, Eva begins to notice that Kevin has two very different personalities. Eva describes Kevin when Franklin was not home: “Kevin was sour, secretive, and sarcastic. Not just once in a while, on a bad day. Every day was a bad day. This laconic, supercilious, unforthcoming persona of his did seem real” (274). On the contrary, once Franklin came home, Kevin’s whole behavior changed: “When you walked in, his face changed. His eyebrows shot up, his head cocked, and he put on a closed-mouth smile high up on his chin, his lips meeting at his upper gum” (274). In Eva’s opinion, the sour Kevin was the real one and the happy Kevin was fake.

Perhaps the biggest disagreement that Eva and Franklin have on whether Kevin has done something bad or not is when Celia gets drain cleaner in her eye while Kevin is babysitting her. Eva is certain that Kevin has poured the toxin into Celia's eye in order to purposefully hurt her whereas Franklin accuses Eva of leaving the drain cleaner lying around from last weekend when their toilet got clog up. Franklin thinks that Celia probably played with the drain cleaner bottle and somehow got it in her eye and Kevin came to help her rinse it out. However, Eva is sure that she put the drain cleaner back in the closet after using it; therefore, she is convinced that Kevin has poured the liquid in her eye and left it there for maximum damage. Celia's eye is permanently damaged in the accident: she loses an eye and gets a glass eye prosthesis. Eva tells her thoughts to Franklin: "the doctor sad there'd be scarring! That se was burned, all across that side of her face! Time, it would have taken time! Maybe he did wash it out, but *when?* When he was *finished?*" (342, emphasis added)? Franklin disagrees immediately and responses: "Don't ever say that again! Not to anyone! Not even to me" (343)! Franklin is unable to even consider the possibility that Kevin might have done that on purpose. On the contrary, Eva is certain that Kevin has done it with nothing but intentionally. To conclude, Eva blames Kevin for the accident and Franklin blames Eva's inattention to put away dangerous housecleaning liquids. Eva is so sure that she put the cleaner away that she starts questioning herself: "I had replayed the memory of putting that Liquid-Plumr away so many times that the tape was worn, and I couldn't quite trust it. — — *Did* I put that bottle away? *Was* the injury too severe for the story the way Kevin told it" (346).

One element that creates tension and distrust between Eva and Franklin are their differing views about Kevin's true nature. The situation for Eva is very difficult, since she is unable to provide undeniable evidence that Kevin is indeed first, on purpose acting differently around Franklin and Eva and second, is to blame for numerous evil deeds around the house, the neighborhood and his school. Kevin has been associated with, but found innocent, to pouring acid in Celia's eye, tampering with a neighbor's kid's bike lock so that he falls, talking a girl with a rash into scratching it so hard her skin starts bleeding, accusing his drama teacher of sexual assault which causes her to be fired, throwing rocks from a bridge at cars, repeatedly masturbating with his door open so that Eva, and only Eva, sees him and gets uncomfortable, and the numerous times Kevin "plays" with Celia in that she might climb up a tree without knowing how to get down or them playing kidnapping and Kevin tying Celia up and leaving her for hours. With all these incidents, Franklin always supports Kevin, and he believes his explanations to why things have gone the way they did. On the other hand, when something

unfortunate happens, Eva *assumes* that Kevin did it, be it to loosen a bike lock or pour pipe opener in Celia's eye. There is no undeniable evidence for any of these incidents which leaves Franklin and Eva to infer, deduce, and assume what may have happened. The way Eva attempts to find cause of effect for the incidents is a good example of how Theory of Mind works. A concept by Liza Zunshine, refers to the cognitive process humans do when trying to figure out other people's thoughts, motives, and dreams behind their actions. Eva feels that Kevin is lying when he provides explanations for these suspicious events, so she is forced to rely on her assumptions of Kevin's true thoughts. These kinds of assumptions also apply to Eva imagining Franklin's reactions to her letters. In any case, all of this frank discussion of her marital difficulties also functions to make Eva seem like an honest and reliable narrator, as she is able to confess to her faults as a wife, and also mother.

3.3 School shooting present throughout the novel

Further evidence that presents Eva as a reliable narrator is that she is trying to tell her story in a matter-of-fact way, with some emotional distance. This becomes evident in the sections where Eva describes the school shooting at Kevin's school, but also in the way Eva and Kevin habitually talk about recent school shootings, which almost becomes a kind of small talk with each other.

The reason Eva is unreliable, underreporting, about Franklin and Celia's deaths is not just because of guilt and shame but also because of trauma and grief. Eva has no trouble telling about the students and teacher Kevin killed, she mentions them and their stories throughout the novel. Eva remembers the parents and their lives; she genuinely feels sorry for those losses and is able to voice that sorrow out because there is a distance between them.

In the novel, the crimes Kevin commits are described in detail in one chapter at the end of the novel, thus creating a sense of continuation as well as comparison. Kevin's crimes are contrasted with the level of preparation and possibly also intentionality. The school shooting has taken a lot of work and planning, whereas killing his father and sister seems to have been a spur of the moment thing. So why did he do it? That is troubling Eva; she cannot see the reasons motivating Kevin for the familicide.

The school shooting is presented in the kind of detached style one would expect from a magazine, of which Eva has read numerous versions. Eva is repeating the events in the order she had read them for a paper: “I’m simply reiterating a sequence of event strung together by *Newsweek*” (442). The events at the school are dramatized by adding dialogue between the victims and Kevin, possibly drafted from the survivors’ testimony. The description is distancing, since the narrator has not been present for the actual events. However, even though Eva is narrating the events, she adopts Kevin’s perspective for the most part; at times the focus shifts to one of the victims. On the other hand, the list-like and matter-of-fact descriptions create discomfort for the reader; the long section of the meticulous butchering of the students is uncomfortable to read, yet captivating in a way that one does not really want to read on yet cannot stop reading. Kevin has planned the whole thing out meticulously: he stole the school’s letterhead stationery and forged letters to nine students and his English teacher informing that they were chosen as winners for the Bright and Shining Promise Award, an award Kevin had made up. Each of the students possessed special talents for which they had been chosen, for example “cinematic studies” or “encouraging tolerance of difference”; the English teacher, Dana Rocco, had been selected for the Most Beloved Teacher Award (433). In the letter they had been asked to meet in the school gym after school and plan an assembly program for the prize ceremony. On the day of the massacre, Kevin went to school with his equipment: state-of-the-art bike locks and his crossbow, to which other students had become used to. This was because in addition to home practice, Kevin was allowed to practice independently in the school gym, with his standard bow or longbow of course but today he had brought his crossbow. The school security was stunned afterwards that a deadly crossbow had been allowed to enter the school. He had also brought an unusually large number of arrows with him which, again, other students had been accustomed to seeing. At school Kevin stashed his equipment in the gym as usual and attended all of his classes. He had his independent archery practice in the last period of the day, which he used to clear the gym of all equipment which could be used as protection, except six thin exercise mats arranged in a circle and locked all other exits with the bike locks except the main entrance. Then, Kevin took his place in the alcove above the gym and waited for his victims to arrive. As the students and the English teacher arrived, a cafeteria worker arrived to bring sandwiches Kevin had ordered. Unfortunately for the cafeteria worker, he stayed in the gym to practice basketball. When all were in, Kevin locked the entrance door with a bike lock, locking his victims in (431–8).

Then, as his victims were planning their fake award ceremony, Kevin began shooting arrows at them: “A soft, rushing sound. Just as there is a tiny pause between lightning and thunderclap, there was a single, dense instant of silence between the arrow’s *shsh-thunk* through Laura Woolford’s Versace blouse and the point at which the other students began to scream” (438, emphasis original). When they realized what was happening, they panicked. Most rushed to the doors, only to find them locked, some tried to help the ones that had been shot and some tried to talk Kevin to stop. With no protection available, some used the already dead or unconscious bodies of others to shield themselves. Two out of eleven survived because of this. The shooting itself could not have lasted more than ten minutes, and due to the lack of gunfire noises and that the gym was isolated, no one suspected a thing. Kevin knew that killing people with a crossbow was surprisingly difficult, so after he had shot all of his arrows, he waited for his victims to bleed to death. The massacre started around 3:40, at 5:40 a security guard came up and noticed that something was wrong. It was only at 6:55 when the SWAT team finally managed to burst the locked doors. Two were killed by the trauma of the arrows itself, seven had bled to death (438–44).

As soon as Eva finds out what is happening at Kevin’s school, she leaves work and drives straight there. She arrives just as Kevin is being marched into a police vehicle. Eva looks through the police car window to see her son and sees this: “He was looking for something in my face. He looked for it very carefully and very hard, and then he leaned back a little in his seat. Whatever he’d been searching for, he hadn’t found it, and this, too, seemed to satisfy him in some way” (447). Clearly, Kevin had been looking for if Eva was already aware of what he had done at home. In addition to her honesty about her maternal feelings and marital difficulties, Eva’s matter-of-fact and seemingly complete description of her son’s murders functions to increase her reliability. So, it comes as a surprise when the narrative reveals that Eva has been withholding an important part of the story, a topic I turn to next.

4. Unreliability

Abbott refers to the distance of the narrator and how that affects the reader's assessment of the information given by the narrator. Distance refers "to the narrator's degree of involvement in the story she tells" (Abbot 2008, 74). When analyzing Eva as a narrator, it is clear that her distance is non-existent; she is wholly involved in the story, since it is her story. There is a deep personal investment in her narration, both because the story is one very close to her, but also because it is told quite quickly after the latest events. Eva starts writing the letters a year after the murders, which from an autobiographical sense is quite soon. Of course, we need to bear in mind that most of the events in the novel are from over ten years ago. On the other hand, the story is still in progress and evolving even in the final pages. Considering all these features, it can be argued that Eva's narratorial distance creates a problematic point in terms of interpretations on reliability. However, I argue that the concealment of information is the only feature in the novel that marks Eva as an unreliable narrator.

4.1 Trauma-induced inability to reveal the whole story

Habitually throughout the novel, Eva points to an important event she is going to describe later on. These events usually present her in a negative way; they might reveal that Eva has kept things from Franklin, or, most often, that Eva has done or said something evil to Kevin. She believes that these events have led to Kevin's evilness and therefore she is partly to blame for his crimes. Eva intentionally points to these gaps and by doing so, creates suspense in the narrative.

It is interesting how Eva refers to these gaps and pieces of information she has withheld beforehand, so there is a sense of suspense. The reader knows that some important piece of information is not told and that it is going to be revealed to us soon. One important example of this is when Eva mentions to Franklin at the end of one letter that she has done something horrible to Kevin that she believes has made Kevin evil. Eva keeps mentioning the horrible thing she has done and explains that it is so terrible, and she regrets it so much and would undo it if she could. The references are like this: "I'm setting the table here, but hardly excusing what happened that July. I don't expect you to be anything but horrified. I'm not even asking your forgiveness; it's late for that" (224) and finally before the reveal "Okay —

out with it” (228). The reveal is the earlier described events of Eva throwing Kevin across the room in a spur of rage.

Abbott states that “all successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification” (2008, 57). As she stated before, closure is something readers look forward to and expect to get. Suspense and surprise are ways of controlling that, as well as holding the reader’s interest (57). She says that suspense and closure can be found on two levels in a narrative: “the *level of expectations* and the *level of questions*. (58, emphasis original).

Expectations rise from awareness to genre conventions and masterplots (58). That is why it feels satisfying when the ultimate tragic event occurs in a tragedy or when the monster reveals itself in a horror movie. The reader (or viewer) *expects* to have their expectations fulfilled, yet the actual details of that revealment often come as a surprise. Abbott refers to this surprise as a *violation* of the expectation (59). The fulfillment would not be satisfying if it came in the form we expected; the expectation needs to be violent somehow in order for it to be a surprise. At the same time, Abbott is aware that the violation of the expectation might work for some readers and do the opposite for others (59).

Suspense is defined as the acknowledgement of the possibility that there exist multiple ways to reach closure. Thus, surprise is the effect in the reader when this occurs in the narrative (Abbott 2008, 59). Abbott also points out that “there is a range of what they will tolerate in the way of surprise” (59). If Harry Potter had woken up in his closet under the stairs and found that he had dreamed he was a wizard and had gone to Hogwarts, readers would not have tolerated a surprise like this. Yet, we expect to be surprised (60).

To put it briefly, “if at the level of expectations we anticipate what will happen, at the level of questions we anticipate enlightenment” (Abbott 2008, 60). With expectations, we are looking forward to *something* happening; with questions we are waiting for a *specific* happening which answers our question. A good question could be: Why is Eva not living with Franklin and Celia anymore? I argue that many who read *We Need to Talk About Kevin* have this question in mind. In addition to this specific question, readers have an expectation to be revealed why it is so. The anticipation of fulfilling our expectation and answering questions creates suspense in the narrative (61). In short, we look for closure in narrative, answers to

questions and fulfillment to expectations (64). Expectations and questions raise the question, do all questions in a narrative need to be answered, all loose ends tied?

In a novel it is often nearly impossible to answer every question a reader may have and fulfill every expectation. The possible closure in the end of the novel brings one major conflict to a close and that is often raised above other conflicts as the major one in the novel. However, it can be surprisingly satisfying to not have a closure to a conflict. By doing that, the narrative can make us ponder about things related to the conflict, rather than telling us what to think about it (Abbott 2008, 63).

The gap Eva lefts in the narrative reflects her trauma which leads to her withholding the information that Kevin killed Franklin and Celia as well. Therefore, she is constantly vague about them and this creates suspense. So, it seems that Eva has less difficulty thinking that Kevin killed those people. However, what she struggles with is that Kevin killed Franklin and Celia too. She cannot mention it until the end, and I think this is because of grief and the terrible trauma that Kevin has made her endure. It is incredibly important to notice that Kevin could have murdered Eva if he wished. When Eva asks why she did not get hurt like Franklin and Celia, Kevin replies:

“Don’t you feel sorry for me?”

He shrugged. “Got out of this safe and sound, didn’t you? Not a scratch.”

“Did I?” I added, “And why was that, anyway?”

“When you’re putting on a show, you don’t shoot the audience,” he said smoothly, rolling something in his right hand.

“You mean leaving me alive was the best revenge.” We were already way beyond revenge-for-what.” (460)

Therefore, it is an important decision that he decided to spare her for a reason. Kevin needed Eva to witness what he has done. Kevin even gave her a chance to say goodbye to Celia once more: “I was on my way out the door when he called, ‘Sure you don’t want to say good-bye to Celia one more time?’ ‘Very funny,’ I said behind me, and closed the door. I thought he was just riding me. In retrospect, he was giving me very sound advice that I really ought to have taken.” (427)

The unreliability of the narration is marked a gap in the narrative. It is Franklin and Celia's fates; why are they no longer living with Eva? It is not stated why it is so, only hinted towards this gap. Eva is contemplating if she should go to therapy:

it didn't seem wise to confide that thus far I had found my only "help" in writing to you, Franklin. For somehow I feel certain that these letters are not on the list of prescribed therapies, since you are at the very heart of what I need to "get past" so that I might experience "closure". And what a terrible prospect is that. (100)

Here it is obvious that Franklin is no longer a part of Eva's life, yet the reason for it is kept a secret. This builds up suspense, which is then released as a surprise when we are told that he has been killed by Kevin.

In addition to gaps in the narrative concerning Franklin and Celia's fates, Eva is being vague about them. One incident is present in the letter Eva writes to Franklin where she finally confesses that once when Kevin was six and still in diapers, Eva threw Kevin across the room. There Eva is confessing her flaws to Franklin. Throughout the letter she numerously refers to the horrible thing she is about to tell, which builds up suspense. With the insight that Franklin is dead at the time the letters are written, Eva's vagueness does not seem that vague anymore. She is telling quite frankly why she does not need to worry about gaining Franklin's understanding; it is not relevant anymore. While building suspense, Eva writes honestly as she describes her feelings: "my lie [that Kevin fell instead of Eva throwing him] needed me as much as I needed it, and so demanded the constancy of wedlock: *Till death do us part*" (208, emphasis added) and "I'm not even asking your forgiveness; *it's late for that*" (224, emphasis added). The reader might interpret these that it is too late for forgiveness because Eva has physically assaulted Kevin so many years ago or because Kevin has already done his crimes at the school and is at prison while Eva lives alone in a small apartment now.

An unreliable narrator is a narrator whose sincerity the reader questions and finds that they cannot believe they are telling the truth. When it comes to Eva as a narrator, I believe she had been constructed to hold strong elements of both reliability and unreliability. Her unreliability consists of two features: gaps and withholding information. Gaps are everywhere in the novel; Eva *tries* to describe her life with Kevin in much detail as possible, but this kind of narrative always needs to decide what to include, and what to exclude, from the telling. Eva has picked events that in her opinion describe Kevin's evil nature; however, 16 years is a long time, and something is sure to have been lost.

Withholding information is a feature of unreliability where important information is revealed later that would have been revealed if the narrator were attempting to be honest. These kinds of surprise ending novels are numerous where some crucial piece of information is revealed only in the end which changes the whole reading of the novel in a crucial way. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the surprise is that in addition to killing nine people at his school, Kevin has also murdered his own father and little sister by making them living targets in his archery range at home. Knowing this, Eva is a widow and, in a way, has lost both of her children. Eva hints towards this throughout the novel by stating that she lives alone now and that she misses Franklin and Celia and wishes they could still be together. In the very first letter she writes to Franklin, she comes home from the store and thinks: “So now I am home—what passes of it. Of course you’ve never been here, so allow me to describe it for you” (4). It is evident that Franklin does not live there. In addition, Eva often writes that she misses them, such as some gesture that Franklin used to do, or she anticipates his responses to her letters. However, it is not explained what happened to Franklin and Celia until the final pages and a common assumption on the part of the reader might be that Franklin and Eva have gotten a divorce. In fact, just weeks before the murders, Franklin asks for divorce. Kevin happens to overhear their discussion and Eva believes that this was the thing that made Kevin carry out his mission. That Kevin would have to live with his father, to whom Eva believes Kevin has been showing a fake personality, in contrast to the one shown to Eva which is Kevin’s “true” image, and therefore despises the possibility of having to live with his father. In addition, Kevin is about to turn sixteen in a couple of days before the murders and as a minor, is not charged as an adult and therefore receives a shorter sentence.

In the same letter, dated April 5th, 2001, where the incident at school is described, there is a postscript, dated April 6th, 2001, where we are told what happens when Eva gets home. Eva’s drive home is described as mechanical and that she took her time and drove slowly. Even in the house she searches it room by room calmly and with no haste. She is surprised to find Franklin and Celia’s dishes from breakfast on the table, as normally Franklin puts them away. Gradually her suspicions raise, and she starts feeling fearful: “I walked through it [the house] twice. Though I had checked the rooms before, the second time through I felt only deeper trepidation. — — Finally, shaking, I returned to the kitchen.” (452). Before she turns the lights on at the backyard, she stalls: “I must have kept my hand on that switch a good thirty seconds before I flipped it. If I had to do it over again, I’d have waited a few moments more. I would pay good money for every instant in my life without that image in it.” (453). Eva turns

the lights on and finally sees what Kevin had been looking for in her face: if she already knew that he had killed them with his crossbow in their backyard as if hunting for deer. After breakfast, Franklin let Kevin and Celia play in the backyard before school. They often “played” together in that Kevin would shoot arrows in his own archery range and Celia afterwards would gather the arrows and bring them back to him. Only this time it looked more like they had been playing William Tell. Eva writes that “her body was affixed to the target by five arrows, which held her torso like stick-pins tacking one of her crimped self-portraits to a class bulletin board” (453). When Franklin heard Celia scream, he dropped the dishes he was making and bolted outside. Franklin began to run to Celia but Kevin rained him with arrows; one angled through his throat and protruding from the neck, one in the chest, one in the calf, and one in the groin (452–6). As Eva is constructing the events here, she adopts Franklin’s viewpoint, as we can see here: “with our daughter pinioned to an archery target with an arrow through her chest, while our firstborn pivoted on his mound and sighted his own father down the shaft on his Christmas crossbow, you simply didn’t believe it” (454). Eva does not express any signs of sorrow or shock when she is writing about this, quite contrary she focuses on Franklin and his possible feelings and reactions. Eva imagines Franklin’s shock and disbelief when he notices that Kevin has shot an arrow at Celia. When Eva goes to the backyard and sees Franklin, she notices that the expression on his face is disappointed.

4.2 Narrative climax: Eva confronts her trauma

Once Eva was taking her usual Saturday visit with Kevin in prison, he had not been there long, they talked about a new inmate who had murdered his next-door neighbors for complaining about his loud music. Then, Kevin states that the other inmate did not know what he was doing as he was so young. Eva asks if Kevin knew what he was doing and he replies: “‘I knew exactly what I was doing.’ He leaned onto his elbows. ‘*And I’d do it again*’” (50, emphasis original).

One of the most important moments in the novel is right before Kevin turns eighteen, he finally seems to comprehend what he has done and accepts guilt and regret for it. This moment is elevated to an even more notorious position when it is contrasted with a meeting Kevin and Eva had when Kevin had just gone to prison. This discussion is placed in the

narrative almost right after the detailed description of the school shootings and familicide. About three months after Kevin's crimes, Eva goes to see him in prison, and she brings up that she has been sued for parental negligence. Kevin is irritated by this, because he sees that she is trying to get some of his credit. Eva responds: "that's a fine how do you do, isn't it, after I lose my husband and daughter? To get sued? He grunted something about my feeling sorry for myself. 'Don't you?' I said. 'Don't you feel sorry for me?' He shrugged. 'Got out of this safe and sound, didn't you? Not a scratch.' 'Did I?' I added." (460, emphasis original). Here Kevin is focused on the fact that Eva did not get any physical wounds and is therefore, in Kevin's words, safe and sound. It is important to notice here that Kevin seems to erroneously believe that the only wounds that hurt people are physical ones. Whereas Eva, on the other, is raising the issue about her emotional and psychological wounds Kevin has caused her. I argue that then, three months after his crimes, Kevin is unable to comprehend the full depth of his doings, the torment he has made his mother endure.

The previous quote is followed by the description of Kevin crimes' anniversary day. The novel reaches its climax when Eva goes to see Kevin in prison just before his eighteenth birthday and transfer to an adult penitentiary. There, for the first time, Eva confronts Kevin and asks him why he did what he did. Here it is evident that Eva is not asking why Kevin killed his school mates; she is asking why he killed Franklin and Celia. She says she misses Franklin and Celia a lot and continues: "I realize that journalists, and therapists, maybe other inmates ask you all the time. But you've never told me. So please, look me in the eye. You killed eleven people. My husband. My daughter. Look me in the eye, and tell me why." (463-4) The question is clearly difficult for Kevin, he is avoidant and nervous before he answers: "I used to think I knew," he said glumly. "Now I'm not so sure." (464). This is the first time that Kevin is expressing any feelings of guilt about his crimes, and facing that is clearly emotionally unpleasant for him. What's more, Kevin even apologizes as Eva hugs him goodbye, although Eva is not sure if she heard him as he muttered the words.

Abbott discusses closure; usually narratives tend to have a conflict of some kind which is resolved in the end. Readers are prone to expect this; when there is a good closure, we tend to call the ending a satisfying one and where it is unsatisfying, we tend to think of it as bad (2008, 56.) Novels often have more than one conflict, but the conflict that gets resolved in the end, with the final words, is elevated for being placed in that position (2008, 56.) In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, it is the relationship between Eva and Kevin; Eva's resistance to admit

to herself that she loves her son after everything that he has done to her. The novel's final paragraphs are devoted to resolving this conflict:

In asking petulantly whether *Thursday* was my fault, I have had to go backward, to deconstruct. It is possible that I am asking the wrong question. In any event, by thrashing between exoneration and excoriation, I have only tired myself out. I don't know. At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace. The truth is, if I decided I was innocent, or I decided I was guilty, what difference would it make? If I arrived at the right answer, would you come home? (467)

Abbott introduces the idea that some gaps in narrative are more important than others (2008, 92). These types of gaps are called cruxes. They affect significantly on how "we interpret the work as a whole" and this is depended on how a reader interprets the crux (93.) An example Abbot gives of a crux is the origins of Heathcliff in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. I argue that in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* one major crux is the nature versus nurture dilemma; is Kevin evil from birth due to bad genes or is Kevin evil due to Eva's bad mothering and indifferent emotions towards him? How the reader interprets this dilemma affects significantly to the way they interpret the work as a whole. I claim that it is possible to interpret the crux either way without overreading the narrative; in fact, the narrator deems the whole dilemma as meaningless in the end so the reader could do the same. Abbott also mentions that "the longer or more complex the narrative -- the more nearly impossible it is not to let important elements slip in interpretation" (2008, 98). *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a very complex narrative, so it is expected that some elements are lost. In fact, in the excerpt above Eva mentions that the answer to the nature vs nurture dilemma is meaningless to her since no matter the answer she believes it would not have changed things; whether Kevin is a murderer due to her bad mothering or Kevin was evil from the start, in the end Franklin and Celia would have still been killed. Eva is questioning if the route one takes even matters if the end result remains the same and for Eva it does not make a difference. By stating that the question of nature vs nurture is pointless she liberates herself from trying to solve that question. In addition to that, it also liberates her from the emotional conflict of first, accepting and rejecting guilt from Franklin and Celia's deaths and second, accepting and rejecting love towards Kevin who murdered Franklin and Celia. Therefore, Eva's motivation for being an unreliable narrator is resolved and as she is able to accept what has happened, thus she is finally able to be honest to the reader as well.

Eva despises the same features in Kevin that she dislikes in herself, such as their facial features (Shriver 2003, 135) and their tendency to roleplay situations, such as when Eva is preparing to tell Franklin she is pregnant, she tries out different voices (63). Eva struggles to accept these similarities; it takes self-awareness to be able to notice and accept that your child has inherited or adopted same features that you may not like about in yourself, yet in the end she manages to see past it (Gran 2018, 17). I believe this is connected to the main crux of the novel as well; while Eva is coming to terms with her own faults, she is simultaneously coming to terms with her love for Kevin and his crimes. This becomes evident in the final paragraph of the novel:

This is all know. That on the 11th of April, 1983, unto me a son was born, and I felt nothing. Once again, the truth is always larger than what we make of it. As that infant squirmed on my breast, from which he shrank in such distaste, I spurned him in return—he may have been a fifteenth of my size, but it seemed fair at the time. Since that moment we have fought one another with unrelenting ferocity that I can almost admire. But it must be possible to earn a devotion by testing an antagonism to its very limit, to bring people closer through the very act of pushing them away. Because after three days sort of eighteen years, I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness, I love my son. He has five grim years left to serve in an adult penitentiary, and I cannot vouch for what will walk out the other side. But in the meantime, there is a second bedroom in my serviceable apartment. The bedspread is plain. A copy of *Robin Hood* lies on the bookshelf. And the sheets are clean. (467–8)

Vickroy states that “similarly, in trauma fiction, even if pain is ameliorated, and the individual is in a stronger, more self-aware position, some tensions remain” (2015, 4). In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in the final pages Eva has gained self-awareness and has accepted the traumatic events as a part of her personal narrative. She acknowledges the existence of a conflict between that she loves Kevin and that Kevin murdered Franklin and Celia. However, she chooses to quit trying to solve that conflict and accepts that these conflicting truths can and do co-occur now in her life.

Eva mentions that at the time when she was facing a civil lawsuit for parental negligence and even though she was found not guilty she still had to pay her lawyer. Knowing that it would

cost a lot and therefore she would have to sell her house and company, at the time she felt like she was punished and that she deserved it. Even though she was found not guilty for the parental negligence charges, she herself felt that she was guilty of being a bad mother to Kevin. However, as the novel develops and she writes more and more letters, she is gradually able to let go of that guilt.

In this chapter I have analyzed the literary effects of the juxtaposition of reliable and unreliable narrator. I proved that Eva is mostly a reliable, even honest, narrator who deviates from the truth only when she would have to face her trauma and talk about her husband and daughter. Eva seems honest when she openly discusses and confesses her deeper, and sometimes darker, emotions concerning motherhood and the difficulties of mother-son relationship when both kind of hate one another. She manages to free herself from her trauma by first, confronting Kevin about why he killed them and second, by deeming closure an unattainable thing for her. Although, with a subject like school shooting or familicide, ultimate closure might not ever be fully possible since nobody can fully understand them.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed the ways that a reliable narrator can be depicted as having unreliable qualities due to their traumatic experiences. Eva is an example of the fact that most narrators are not strictly reliable or unreliable; rather some might be trustworthy on some topics and events and unreliable on others. In other words, it is not a matter of a strict dichotomy but rather a spectrum. What's more, it is important to have these kinds of longer narratives of trauma and taboo subjects, for reasons such as raising awareness about these topics as well as empathetic responses.

To conclude, the delaying of the revelation of Franklin's and Celia's murders has at least two purposes. First, the delaying of the revelation creates suspense in the narrative. A feeling of suspense often leads to increased reader interest and higher commitment to the narrative. It also raises questions and expectations to which one seeks answers as well as fulfillment. Second, the delay is a narratorial expression of the narrator's psychological state: in Eva's mind there is a metaphorical blank space where Franklin and Celia would be until she learns to face the brutal reality of her son killing his father and sister.

Shriver has constructed her narrative in such a way that it is impossible for the reader to infer whether Eva herself is really aware of what she is doing. This question about how intentional her unreliability is intriguing, and as I have discussed above, I think this openness functions to create suspense as well as indicate the depth of Eva's trauma. Further researchers might examine the significance of the novel's epistolary form and Eva's confessional writing style in connection with these themes.

Shriver's novel is important not only for its depiction of the psychological impact of trauma on an individual, but also for the impacts of school shootings and familicide on American culture more broadly. Unfortunately, school shootings have become an undeniable part of American life. It is unclear why they are so prominent in America, even if loose gun laws are a part of the blame. It is extremely important that the problem is made as visible as possible and the reasons and possible solutions to it are pondered in the media, as well as popular

culture. By gaining more insight into these horrible events, we might gain more understanding and be that much nearer to a possible solution.

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