We Need to Talk about Shame

*The Concept of Shame in Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk about Kevin*

Daniel Rosén

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Luleå University of Technology
Department of Arts, Communication and Education
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Daniel Rosén

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The concept of shame</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood and shame</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame on you: communal shame</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This essay analyses Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) from a feminist perspective. The objective of the essay is to demonstrate that a feminist reading of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* sheds light on the concept of shame and generates a discussion on the implications of the expectations that are placed upon a woman when she becomes a mother. The essay draws on the work of cultural feminists, such as Elspeth Probyn and Adrienne Rich, to demonstrate how shame and motherhood are entwined in the novel. This approach illuminates how patriarchal patterns in today’s society can restrict women’s abilities to lead a full life by blaming and by making them feel ashamed of not only their own actions but also of those of their children.

The concept of shame is outlined as a gendered emotion, and the essay then examines the novel’s description of a mother’s responsibilities. These are then contrasted with the way in which shame functions for the community. The conclusion of the essay is that patriarchal structures are ever present in the novel and in society as a whole, and the location of shame in the mother, brought on by other members of the community as well as by the protagonist herself, results in the community being unable to heal itself.

*Keywords*: Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, shame, guilt, motherhood, feminism, patriarchy
Introduction

Fear, disbelief and sorrow are usually some of the first feelings that come up when a person suddenly finds him- or herself in a difficult situation. These are perfectly normal reactions to this type of occurrences and they are usually neither questioned nor further analysed. What can occur after the first shock has subsided is that the affected person starts to analyse what caused the incident, and in many cases the person starts to place the blame on something or someone, usually on a phenomenon which is separate from him or herself or on another person. Blaming someone else is usually easier than to take responsibility for what has happened or for the part that one has played in the chain of events that have lead up to the incident in question.

In Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003), a teenager by the name of Kevin has killed seven of his fellow students, one of his teachers and a cafeteria worker at his school, a tragedy which sends ripples of shock through the entire community. A few years after these events, Kevin’s mother Eva tries to make sense of what happened by writing letters to his father Franklin, from whom she is separated. Eva describes her version of the events, her view of her son and what she thinks may have lead up to the killings, as well as some of the effects of these events on Kevin but mainly on herself. On many occasions people around her directly or indirectly blame not only her son but also her for the outcome, and throughout the novel, Eva retraces her steps during Kevin’s upbringing. She recalls seeing the warning signs without knowing how to deal with them in order to stop her son, thereby blaming herself for her own inability to act. I wish to argue that by projecting the blame that should be placed on Kevin onto Eva and thus creating feelings of guilt and shame, the community around her and Eva herself create a hindrance for her recuperation as well as for that of the community itself, and the question of what stops Eva from coming to terms with the event and its consequences will be in focus throughout the text.

Eva is a woman, the mother of a killer, and society generally has certain expectations of how women should behave, feel and act. Therefore, the literary approach in this essay will be feminist critical theory, more specifically a cultural feminist approach. Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today* (1998) provides thorough definitions of the multifaceted term of feminism and its key aspects, such as patriarchy, traditional gender roles, sexism and social constructionism. Other key concepts related to the novel are those of guilt and shame, which will be further explained and explored through Elspeth Probyn’s *Blush: Faces of Shame* (2005). Moreover, the concept of motherhood portrayed in the novel will be analysed with the support of articles that specifically deal with the novel in question, for instance Vivienne Muller’s article “Good and bad mothering: Lionel Shriver’s ‘We Need
to Talk About Kevin”, which offers an analysis of what “good” and “bad” mothering can be in relation to the novel. The concept of mothering is directly related to the topic of guilt and shame that stems from the ideas on how a woman is expected to behave and act.

In the novel, the expectations about how women should behave are extended to include not only the female protagonist herself but also the actions of her son. Furthermore, not once do those who criticise and question Eva’s role in the event, including Eva herself, blame her husband for what happened. According to Probyn, “[s]hame brings the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind”, which could at least partly explain why Eva is so affected by the community’s reactions to the killings and why she is unable to let these events go (Probyn, 2005, p. 3). She needs an explanation, not primarily from her son but from herself about how things can have gone this far and how she as a mother has contributed to her son’s behaviour and actions.

Consequently, the objective of the essay is to demonstrate that a feminist reading of We Need to Talk about Kevin sheds light on the concept of shame which is described in the novel, in order to generate a discussion on the implications of the expectations that are placed upon a woman when she becomes a mother. In this essay, I draw on the work of cultural feminists, such as Probyn and Adrienne Rich, to demonstrate how shame and motherhood are entwined in We Need to Talk about Kevin. This approach will illuminate how patriarchal patterns in today’s society can restrict women’s ability to lead a full life through blame and by making them feel ashamed of not only their own actions but of those of their children. I begin by outlining how shame is a gendered emotion, then examine the novel’s description of a mother’s responsibility and lastly contrast these with the way in which shame functions for the community. This location of shame in the mother, I will argue, results in the community being unable to heal itself.

The concept of shame

Shame is a powerful feeling and it can be used as a forceful tool to try to control others. However, shame does not necessarily need to be brought on by other people, but it can just as easily stem from oneself and thus make a person both the victim and the aggressor of the action. Probyn notes that shame and guilt are often confused, given that they are related concepts but they are still not quite the same thing. According to Probyn, guilt is more publicly acceptable than shame, and the difference, in her words, is:

While both guilt and shame are excited by what others think of us, shame goes further. Shame is deeply related not only to how others think about us but also to how we think
Guilt is triggered in response to specific acts and can be smoothed away by an act of reparation. (Probyn, 2005, p. 45)

In other words, if we perform an action which has negative consequences for others and/or ourselves, we can feel both guilt and shame. However, if we pay a tribute to the person or persons affected by our action, perhaps by apologising, the feeling of guilt tends to fade away. The feeling of shame brought on by the event, per contra, can linger for quite some time, and the feeling itself can be equally strong each time we think of the event, even if we have apologised. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, this is manifested by an incident at the supermarket, where Eva spots Mary Woolford, the mother of one of Kevin’s victims, and leaves her shopping cart, pretending to go get something in another aisle in order not to bump into Mary. A little later, the girl at the cash register notices that the entire dozen of eggs that Eva has picked out have been smashed, but Eva refuses to have them replaced: she takes them home as they are and eats them scrambled (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 6). This is her way of dealing with her feelings of guilt and shame, a much easier way out than dealing with Mary Woolford and her own feelings of shame about her son’s actions.

Probyn defines the feeling of shame not as a drive, but as an affect, based on the findings of the psychologist Silvan Tomkins. A drive is “the biological and psychological imperative to perform a function the body needs to survive”, such as the sex drive, hunger or thirst, and it is concerned only with itself until the need in question is satisfied (Probyn, 2005, p. 19). Affects, however, are not as categorically constituted as the drives, since an affect can be brought on by any object, and an object which normally produces one type of affect, for instance joy, can also in other situations produce other types of affects, such as fear, anger or startlement. Probyn describes this difference as the drives having an on/off function, whereas the affects “provide a wide range of differentiation” (Probyn, 2005, p. 19). This translates as the drives being extremes and the affects being more like nuances. A person is either hungry or not, and the problem is fairly easy to resolve if somebody is hungry, whereas a person can feel different degrees of joy, distress or shame, and it is not as obvious how the situation can be remedied when an affect is concerned as it can for a drive.

Tomkins identifies nine affects and divides eight of them into pairs, which reflect the extremes of the same basic affect with a polar structure: disgust-contempt, shame-humiliation, fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, surprise-startlement, enjoyment-joy and interest-excitement. The ninth and last one, inventively named “dismell”, meaning disgust brought on by a bad smell, stands alone (Probyn, 2005, p. 22). The fact that the first eight affect pairs are dyads suggests that an affect is not absolute and must therefore be understood in comparison with similar feelings. In other words, there are many shades of grey between the terms in each affect pair.

Shame, as one of the nine affects, is also a bodily reaction, and Probyn calls it “the body’s way of registering interest, even when you didn’t know you were interested or were unaware of the
depth of your desire for connection” (Probyn, 2005, p. 28). The person who feels shame or who
shames someone may thus be completely oblivious to this relation, but shame is intimately connect-
ed to interest. We blush in a situation where we feel shame because we have an interest to be ap-
pealing to others, and the shameful situation hinders this aim. Probyn mentions Tomkins’s view on
the connection between shame and interest: “Two points stand out: that affects are innate and com-
pel us to view the human body as a baseline in all human activity, and that the bodily thing we call
shame presupposes and promises interest” (Probyn, 2005, p. 28). Therefore, shame is not a phe-
nomenon which has only negative consequences, but it can actually be seen as a positive and con-
structive feeling, given that it compels the person who feels shame to change his or her behaviour in
order to stay connected to the person who has been wronged. In Probyn’s words, “shame is an af-
fect of proximity. It is about bodies being close to one another and an acute sensitivity of one’s
sense of self” (Probyn, 2005, p. 34). This implies that if a person intentionally makes someone else
feel ashamed, this is an action which is actually meant as a wake-up call for the other person. Ini-
itially, it may be regarded as a way of pushing a person down by emphasising the negative conse-
quences of the action which that person has performed, but in a wider perspective, shaming can be
seen as a way of showing the other person that he or she is important to the initiator of the shaming.
Probyn summarises the complex as follows:

In shame, the feeling and minding and thinking and social body comes alive. It’s in this
sense that shame is positive and productive, even or especially when it feels bad. The
feeling of shame teaches us about our relationship to others. (Probyn, 2005, pp. 34-35)

This means that there is more than meets the eye when shame is concerned. Shame cannot be dis-
missed as a purely negative feeling, even if that is the first reaction when a person feels ashamed,
but the constructive and positive force that shame constitutes must also be taken into consideration.

To summarise, shame can be brought on by other people, as well as by oneself. It is an emo-
tion which, unlike guilt, tends to linger long after the event that brought it on has come to pass, and
there can be many different nuances of it, since it is an affect and not a drive. It is also a somewhat
complex concept, since it has not only negative effects. Shame is, in fact, intimately connected to
caring about another person, and keeping shame alive is therefore a way for the instigator of the
shaming to implicitly manifest an interest in the person who is being shamed. Human beings have
different roles in different situations, and depending on the nature of these roles, there can be higher
or lower demands on a person. One such role is to be a mother, and the effects of shame in connec-
tion to motherhood will be examined in the next section.
Motherhood and shame

The name of the protagonist of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is, as mentioned, Eva. Her name brings associations to Eve, the first woman according to the book of Genesis in the Bible and also the first mother. By offering Adam the forbidden fruit, Eve is depicted as the one who brings shame on the human race, and God’s punishment is to banish Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden out into a world where they have to work hard and where they are no longer immortal. The ultimate consequence of Eve’s actions is therefore that mankind needs to procreate in order to survive. This story and many others which portray women as sinful imply that motherhood and shame are intimately connected and have been for quite some time.

The long history of motherhood turns it into something more than a mere state or role: it can in fact be defined as an institution. Adrienne Rich, in her feminist manifesto *Of Woman Born* (1976), distinguishes two meanings of motherhood: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (Rich, 1995/1976, p. 13). For Rich, this means that a mother, when taking care of her child, has responsibilities not only to the child but also to her husband and the rest of society. In other words, there are expectations of a woman which all mothers ideally should endeavour to fulfil.

The reactions from the community around a mother correspond to mechanisms which Louis Althusser describes as ideological structures or state ideological apparatuses. Basically, these apparatuses are made up of different groups in society which contribute to the upholding of societal hegemonies, or, in Peter Barry’s words:

> political parties, schools, the media, churches, the family, and art (including literature) which foster an ideology – a set of ideas and attitudes – which is sympathetic to the aims of the state and the political status quo. Thus, each of us feels that we are freely choosing what is in fact being imposed upon us. (Barry, 2009/1995, p. 158)

Consequently, when people around try to force a person to act in a certain way because he or she has stepped outside the boundaries of what is expected of him or her, they are trying to make sure everybody stays in their own place in society. The rules are very much implicit and governed by the principles of social etiquette, which makes them more deeply rooted in society and therefore also more difficult to challenge or alter. Each individual learns the rules automatically and is taught to feel ashamed if he or she breaks them or even feels the desire to object to them. Because of this, motherhood can be seen as a state ideological apparatus, given that the ideas on how a mother should behave are internalised and thus self-policing. In Eva’s case, the internalisation of ideal motherhood leads to her feelings of shame and her inability to recover from the situation.
The image of the perfect mother hardly stems from the experience of knowing what it truly means to be a mother, but possibly rather from the fact that most people have a mother, biological or otherwise, with whom they have had a relationship during their upbringing and to whom they can relate when it comes to questions of what a mother should and should not do. Therefore, there are many unwritten rules for how a mother is to behave, act and feel, as if everybody automatically knew the true implications of being a mother in every single case just because most people have had the presence of a mother during their formative years.

The idea of motherhood as an institution and the consolidation of women’s position in a family in the Western world has been formed by three major historical events, or as E. Ann Kaplan calls them: eruptions. She stresses the importance of the industrial revolution, which reformed society in the sense that most men no longer worked at home but went elsewhere during the day (Kaplan, 2013/1992, p. 17). This meant that women had to stay at home with the children, thus making motherhood a kind of profession, which in turn could be scrutinised and criticised. The second eruption is the First World War, which allowed many women access to the labour market, and which consequently can be seen to have brought on the movement for universal suffrage (Kaplan, 2013/1992, p. 18). These events posed a serious threat to the nuclear family, but women still remained at the centre of the family. The third major event is the Second World War, which along with the ever-growing technological development that followed created an increased demand of female work force (Kaplan, 2013/1992, p. 18). These milestones have been quite decisive for Western society in changing the views on women’s position in a family.

The unwritten rules of how women are supposed to behave are usually based on patriarchal ideas of women’s role in a family and in society. These rules normally imply that a woman is to keep in the background and take care of her husband and children, while a man is supposed to take firm action in order to provide for his family. Patriarchy can be defined as “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles”, and consequently most societies are patriarchies, with very few exceptions, if any (Tyson, 2006/1998, p. 85). This is particularly noteworthy in the Western world, since many people see most Western countries as relatively egalitarian societies. However, there is still quite a long way to go if true gender equality is the goal, and Western society is comfortably settled in the traditional way of defining what characterises a man and a woman.

Traditional gender roles “cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson, 2006/1998, p. 85). The biological differences in general physical strength have traditionally been transferred to the intellectual sphere as well, so that men have been portrayed as the stronger of the sexes in most aspects of life, whereas what is referred to as feminine is usually associated with actions which men generally have deemed themselves as too important to perform, such as taking care of children, cooking and
cleaning. Sexism, which can be defined as “the belief that women are innately inferior to men” is based on these ideas (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). This view is needed in order to perpetuate the system, which ensures men’s and women’s positions in society. In the words of Rich:

Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as “nature” itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, “alternate life-styles” for certain individuals are tolerated. (Rich, 1995/1976, p. 43)

To diverge from the pattern thus poses a threat to patriarchy, which explains the need to chastise those who do not accept the role that society has imposed upon them. In other words, these sexist and patriarchal ideas of what defines a man and a woman have become so deeply embedded in our lives that most people, men as well as women, accept them as general truths either explicitly or implicitly.

Those who do not automatically adopt this way of thinking but question it – in other words, feminists – speak instead of social constructionism, a type of “cultural programming as feminine or masculine” (Tyson, 2006/1998, p. 86). This means that the qualities which make a man masculine and a woman feminine are not innate but instead constructed by society, which as stated before usually promotes traditional gender roles and therefore has no real interest in abandoning this spirallike way of thinking. Feminists, per contra, believe that the biological differences between men and women should be seen as circumstantial and irrelevant when it comes to how a person is to behave in society.

The patriarchal expectations of a woman’s behaviour are still valid when she becomes a mother, and the question is whether they are not in fact further increased. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* provides a plethora of examples of this, mainly through the protagonist Eva. In many cases, her thoughts, feelings and actions go against the idea of the “correct” way to think and act as a mother. Fiona Joy Green defines the concept of the ideal mother as follows:

She is a heterosexual woman who stays at home with her children while her husband (the father of their children) works in the labor force to support them financially. Because of her “innate” ability to parent and her “unconditional love” for her husband and children, the idealized mother selflessly adopts their wants, needs, and happiness as her own. Her willingness to participate in her children’s schooling or in community activities is an extension of her maternal love. The perfect mother always has a connection with her children, never has an ill feeling toward them, and is completely responsible for caring for and nurturing all of her family members. The ideal mother never gets angry because she finds parenting to be the most meaningful aspect of her life. Providing love and care for her family fills her with boundless happiness and self-fulfillment. (Green, 2004, p. 127)

This definition of the ideal mother confirms that there are plenty of expectations about a mother’s conduct, not only regarding her responsibilities and feelings towards her children, but also when it
comes to her marital status and sexual orientation. Anything which implies stepping outside of these boundaries will undoubtedly provoke a reaction from other people.

The image of the ideal mother is quite difficult to live up to, to say the least, and Eva breaks most of these unspoken rules of motherhood. First and foremost, she is rather reluctant about becoming a mother, and as a woman, her deepest desire in life is supposed to be to have a child. Eva, however, finds quite a few downsides to becoming a mother, and she even lists ten of them – almost as an inverted version of the Ten Commandments –, among others having less time with her husband, having to think of what is best for someone other than herself, boredom, a useless social life and social demotion (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 30). The fact that Eva, while writing the list, inserts derogatory comments about herself for feeling this way, clearly indicates that these emotions are seen as unacceptable for a woman, which makes her feel ashamed for having them. Vivienne Muller, in her analysis of the novel, argues that “[t]he list identifies, by what it both includes and absents, an intractable and narrow paradigm of the good mother – that is the mother who exists selflessly and uncomplainingly for her child and for others” (Muller, 2008, p. 4). In other words, any woman who expresses this type of feelings is to be ashamed for not abiding by the sacred rules of motherhood and for thinking of herself first.

Eva is not the only one who reacts negatively to her own reluctance to being pregnant. Her physician is the first person to raise her voice when Eva fails to express utter joy at the news of her pregnancy:

“It’s positive,” she said crisply. When she looked up, she did a double take. “Are you all right? You’ve turned white.” I did feel strangely cold. “Eva, I thought you were trying to get pregnant. This should be good news.” She said this severely, with reproach. I got the impression that if I wasn’t going to be happy about it, she would take my baby and give it to someone who’d got their mind right – who would hop up and down like a game-show contestant who’d won the car. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 62)

These comments highlight society’s general view of pregnancy and becoming a mother. Apparently, if a woman does not react happily when she is told she is with child in normal circumstances, she needs to be reprimanded, because she is not behaving according to the rules. Moreover, the fact that the person to deliver these words of reproach represents a medical institution emphasises that these ideas of what an expecting woman is supposed to feel have an enormous impact on society.

The reactions from the community around Eva are perfect examples of motherhood as a state ideological apparatus, since the people in Eva’s surroundings try to keep her in place by sending her the message that a mother should not think or act in a certain way, and Eva is ashamed of having feelings that contradict the norm. The people who enforce the idea of the “good” mother may very well be unaware of the role that they are playing, because the hierarchical structures are so deeply
embedded in society. Still, they are actively endorsing the status of those who are in power, which in the context of the novel and of society in general, are men.

Eva’s husband Franklin, whose name recalls one of the founding fathers of America, also has strong opinions on her emotions about being pregnant. He starts to treat her as if she were made of glass, for instance by telling her that she is not allowed to dance when she is pregnant. At the most, she can tap her foot along with the music, but not more than that (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 76). Franklin’s reductive and prohibitive treatment of Eva, along with his belief that he has the right to place controls over her body, reflect patriarchal ideas on how a mother should behave, and he is very much a part of the system, albeit not consciously so. Not only does the child that Eva is expecting make a claim on her body, her husband also tries to dictate what she can and cannot do, without considering that Eva and her body are one. Eva thinks his reaction is exaggerated and tells him she cannot follow his line of reasoning, which he interprets as selfishness from her side:

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Eva. I thought the whole idea of becoming parents was to grow up.” “If I’d realized that’s what it meant to you, affecting some phony, killjoy adulthood, I’d have reconsidered the whole business.” “Don’t you ever say that,” you said, your face beet-red. “It’s too late for second thoughts. Never, ever tell me that you regret our own kid.”

(Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 76)

Franklin’s reaction to Eva’s comment on reconsidering having a baby is very strong, possibly in part because the child in question is also his, but mainly because a woman is not supposed to express doubts about wanting a child. Once she is pregnant, she is expected to be happy about it and stay that way forever, but Eva breaks this unspoken rule, which provokes Franklin’s anger.

When Kevin is born, Eva has difficulties bonding with him. He does not want to feed from her breast, he cries a lot when he is alone with his mother, and after a while, Eva starts to suspect that her son tries to spite her, wanting her to fail as a mother. Kevin does not cry as much when his father is present, so Franklin does not see his son as a difficult child but as a rather happy one, which makes Eva struggle even more to form a relationship with her son. She feels as if Franklin thinks that she complains for nothing and she thinks he is disappointed in her:

You were angry at me. Fatherhood hadn’t disappointed you; I had. You thought you had married a trooper. Instead your wife was proving a whiner, the very peevish sort she decried amid America’s malcontented overfed, for whom a commonplace travail like missing a FedEx delivery three times in a row and having to go to the depot constitutes intolerable “stress,” the stuff of costly therapies and pharmaceutical redress. Even for Kevin’s refusal to take my breast you held me dimly accountable. I had denied you the maternal tableau, that luscious Sunday-morning loll amid the sheets with buttered toast: son suckling, wife aglow, breasts spilling their bounty over the pillow, until you are forced out of bed for the camera.

(Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 109)

Franklin’s disappointment, according to Eva, consists not only in having a wife who is not up to standard when it comes to taking care of their son but also in missing out on the intimate moments
of breastfeeding because of her inability to bond with her son. In short, Eva thinks he blames her for Kevin’s refusal to breastfeed, although Franklin never expresses this explicitly. He does think that she exaggerates, which is obvious when Eva tells him she is not feeling well and he ignores her completely, going on about how she needs to prioritise her son and forget about her work.

When Eva takes her temperature, the thermometer reads 104° F, and Franklin then accuses her of heating the thermometer under a lamp before coming to his senses and realising that she is actually ill (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 110-111). Basically, a mother is supposed to give everything up for her child, along with obliterating her personal needs, and she is supposed to be able to breastfeed. When these things do not come naturally to her, Eva feels as if she has failed as a mother. Jane Messer’s analysis of Eva’s views on maternal failure offers an alternative interpretation of this concept: “Failure is part and parcel of mothering work; regarding success as failure by misidentifying virtues is also a part of mothering, and conversely mothers may also value ‘destructive ways of thinking’ and behaving” (Messer, 2013, p. 14). In many cases, Eva focuses on the parts of her mothering which she feels are not working instead of acknowledging that there are also many sides of her as a mother that are positive and effective. Eva’s feelings of maternal failure may therefore not be equivalent to actual failure on the whole, but her perception of the situation remains the same. In this situation, Eva blames herself and thereby follows the standard rules of society for mothers: if something is wrong with a child, look to the mother first, which yet again goes hand in hand with the patriarchal and sexist view of how women are supposed to behave.

As the years go by, Franklin seems to continue to ignore the fact that Kevin quite elaborately treats his parents differently, showing them completely different sides of himself. With his father, he tries to behave well, but when he is alone with his mother, he shows his disappointment with what life is about with outbursts of negativity, cruelty and even violence. This behaviour creates a situation where Franklin always takes his son’s side, whereas Eva is the one who questions Kevin’s conduct. Many years later, when Kevin is a teenager and Eva and Franklin have also had a daughter, Celia, who is six years old, Kevin minds his sister when his parents are out, and Celia then somehow gets drain cleaner fluid in her eye. Eva immediately suspects Kevin is behind it, but Franklin blames Eva for the incident by suggesting that she forgot to put the drain cleaner away:

Finally, you knocked your head back on the padded headrest and stared at the ceiling. “I can’t believe you left it out.” Stunned, I didn’t respond. “I thought about not saying that,” you proceeded. “But if I swallowed it, I’d be not saying it, and not saying it, for weeks, and that seemed worse.” (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 340)

Apparently, a mother is supposed to feel ashamed and assume responsibility for whatever happens to her child, regardless of whether she is present or not when an accident occurs. No matter how hard Eva tries to explain that she did not leave the drain cleaner out and that Kevin was the one who
was there when it happened, Franklin keeps on blaming her. He compares this situation to when Celia’s pet elephant shrew mysteriously escaped from its cage, an event for which Eva also believes Kevin was responsible:

The only thing that’s going to make it easier is if you confront your part in this. Celia – even Celia, with that elephant shrew – admits it’s her fault. She left the cage open! And that’s part of it, what hurts, that not only did something sad happen but if she’d done something differently it wouldn’t have happened. She takes responsibility, and she’s only six! Why can’t you? (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 343)

What seems paradoxical in this situation is that Franklin talks about assuming responsibility for Celia’s accident, but he does not even come close to admitting that he could have played a part in what happened. Franklin apparently feels that Eva, as the mother of the family, is the only one of them who needs to feel guilty about their daughter’s misfortune. Clearly, this indicates that society has different rules for women and men when it comes to parenthood. The dominant opinion is that the mother needs to take greater responsibility for her children than the father, so when something goes wrong, the mother is the one to be put under the microscope.

On many occasions, Eva expresses feelings of shame caused by Kevin’s actions, and she often blames herself for what happened. In fact, the entire correspondence with Franklin functions as a way for Eva to go through the events that led up to that awful Thursday in order to see what went wrong and why, and every now and then, she points the finger at herself, something of which she seems to be quite aware: “Then, while I do hope this correspondence hasn’t degenerated into shrill self-justification, I worry equally that I may seem to be laying the groundwork for claiming that Kevin is all my fault” (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 78). This comment indicates that Eva knows that at some level she assumes responsibility for what happened, but her choice of words, particularly the verb “to worry”, also points to her doubts about her own guilt. Then again, as mentioned in the previous section, guilt and shame are two different things, and to feel shame about something is perfectly possible even when a person no longer feels guilt for the same situation. Eva shares her own thoughts on what blame is and why other people seem to need to blame her for Kevin’s situation:

Blame conveys clear lessons in which others take comfort: if only she hadn’t –, and by implication makes tragedy avoidable. There may even be a fragile peace to be found in the assumption of total responsibility, and I see that calm in Kevin on occasion. It is an aspect that his keepers confuse with remorselessness. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 78)

In other words, people feel the need to find someone to blame in order to feel better about the situation and also about themselves. By stating what a person should or should not have done in a particular situation, people try to master the event and indicate that they would have been able to manage the situation much better if it had happened to them. The problem is that nobody can possibly know exactly how he or she will react until the occasion presents itself, which in the end makes
blaming someone else an act which is based upon an entirely hypothetical situation. Eva stresses the fact that Kevin has taken responsibility for what he has done, and she seems to wish that she could do the same thing, in order to find some peace of mind.

Eva has had her share of setbacks because of what Kevin did, and it has affected her in more ways than she can even understand herself. For instance, Mary Woolford takes Eva to trial after Kevin has been sentenced, accusing her of parental negligence, which in Mary’s book is what has driven Kevin to commit the murders. Yet again, Eva is blamed for what her son did, merely because she is his mother. Society clearly has very high standards for a mother’s sense of responsibility. Eva writes to Franklin about her visits with Kevin in prison, how the image of her as a mother was portrayed during the trial and her own shortcomings as a parent:

You’re astonished. You shouldn’t be. He’s my son, too, and a mother should visit her child in prison. I have no end of failings as a mother, but I have always followed the rules. If anything, following the letter of the unwritten parental law was one of my failings. That came out in the trial – the civil suit. I was appalled by how upstanding I looked on paper. Vince Mancini, Mary’s lawyer, accused me in court of visiting my son so dutifully in detention during his own trial only because I anticipated being sued for parental negligence. I was acting a part, he claimed, going through the motions. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 46)

Becoming a mother has been a difficult experience for Eva, but she has taken on the role of being a mother and has tried to do what is best for her children. During the trial, however, all of her efforts are thrown back in her face, and she is accused of putting on a show for others to think that she is a good mother. In Vivienne Muller’s words, “in trying to adhere to the ‘unwritten parental law’ guide to the good mother she has in effect, turned into the bad one” (Muller, 2008, p. 9). This technique of double punishment is used to try to subdue a person, so that no matter what an individual does, he or she is to be blamed for his or her actions. Eva admits that being a mother is something with which she has had to struggle, but she still admonishes herself for not living up to her own standards:

There may indeed be an element of theater in these visits. But they continue when no one is watching, because if I am trying to prove that I am a good mother, I am proving this, dismally, as it happens, to myself. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 47)

These repeated comments made by Eva herself on what a bad mother she is must be seen as a reflection of the unspoken rules of motherhood that society has placed on her. She is as much a part of the system as anyone else, so she tends to feel ashamed for having raised a murderer, although she is not the one who has killed anyone.

When the killings have taken place and Kevin has just been apprehended, Eva arrives at the scene and starts to get a hint of the kind of treatment that she will have to endure for a very long
time after that dreadful day, when the police officer in charge at first does not want to let her through:

“You don’t understand,” I said, adding the most difficult claim of fealty I’d ever made, “That’s my son.” His face hardened. This was an expression I would get used to; that, and the melting you-poor-dear-I-don’t-know-what-to-say one, which was worse. But I was not inured to it yet, and when I asked him what had happened, I could already tell from the flinty look in his eye that whatever I was now indirectly responsible for, it was bad. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 445)

The two reactions described in this situation are actually two sides of the same coin. The more aggressive one, manifested by the police officer, is a direct way of shaming the mother of the perpetrator of a crime, whereas the other one is a more delicate way of conveying the same basic opinion: that she should be ashamed for what her son has done, because according to the people who react this way, she is indirectly to blame for his actions.

In the same situation, one of the clearest examples of Eva’s feelings of responsibility for her son’s actions is manifested. She talks to the police officer in charge, and when he is done, he suggests that she should go home. Eva cannot believe what she is hearing: “I looked at him stupidly. I was so ashamed, I honestly believed they were going to keep me in jail” (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 451). She expects the police officer to hold her personally responsible for the crimes that Kevin has committed and is genuinely astonished when he lets her go. This is plainly yet another example of how the expectations placed upon a mother are set incredibly high, so that she feels ashamed of what her son has done.

Kevin, on the other hand, does not express any shame or guilt for his actions. In fact, he tells Eva that the other inmates worship him for having the guts to kill and that he would do it all again if he had to (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 49-50). He expresses annoyance when he hears of other school shootings and always finds fault in how they have been performed, probably because he sees them as competition for the most hideous crime committed (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 198). Eva seems to assume the blame that Kevin fails to express, adding to her own feelings of shortcoming.

Despite these manifestations of feelings of responsibility, guilt and shame, Eva still doubts that they really matter in the end. By writing these letters to Franklin, she has had the opportunity to think things through, and this is her conclusion:

I have come full circle, making a journey much like Kevin’s own. 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? (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 467)
In this sense, the question of guilt and shame has not brought Eva any closer to redemption but almost the opposite. She is still in limbo after these tragic events, and nothing she does will ever change what has happened. She finds herself alone and estranged, marked by the stigma of having raised a murderer. Her husband Franklin is no longer present in her life, which means that she has nobody to cling to, except for her son, who has caused the entire situation. The question of what difference Eva’s innocence or guilt would make is highly relevant, given that things can never be the same again, no matter what final position she takes in the matter. Still, the feeling of shame never leaves Eva, partly because society keeps reminding her that she needs to take responsibility for her part in these events. The next section will focus on the community in which Eva lives and how its members try to impose shame on the protagonist.

Shame on you: communal shame

After the shooting, the community where Eva lives reacts negatively towards her, which can be noticed in its members’ interaction with her, verbally, physically and legally. This is a manifestation of Eva’s wrongdoings as a mother and an expression of the community’s opinion that she must be held responsible for her son’s actions. The immediate consequence is that Eva finds it difficult to be seen in public long after the incident occurred:

It’s still difficult for me to venture into public. You would think, in a country that so famously has “no sense of history”, as Europeans claim, that I might cash in on America’s famous amnesia. No such luck. No one in this “community” shows any sign of forgetting, after a year and eight months – to the day. So I have to steel myself when provisions run low. Oh, for the clerks at the 7-Eleven on Hopewell Street my novelty has worn off, and I can pick up a quart of milk without glares. But our regular Grand Union remains a gauntlet. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 2)

Eva’s fellow citizens clearly show that when a person does something that they consider wrong, all the things that he or she has done right before do not matter anymore. The focus shifts towards the negative view, which takes over the general image of the person, who consequently needs to be put in his or her place, according to the community, thereby consolidating the patriarchal patterns in today’s society.

However, there are other reasons for the community’s reactions, apart from manifesting the opinion that Eva has done something wrong. Alexandra Kallman, in her paper on the blame put on the mothers in We Need to Talk about Kevin and The Fifth Child (1988) by Doris Lessing, gives an alternative explanation for the community’s reactions towards Eva: “the power to blame also satiates the need for her community to hold someone present accountable, since Kevin is absent” (Kallman, 2014, p. 9). It is certainly true that when something awful happens, many people try to
find something or someone to blame, and if the actual culprit is not available, they may attempt to find the next best thing or person to retaliate against.

A physical manifestation of vengeance is an incident that takes place about a month after the killings, in which Eva wakes up one morning to find the front porch splashed with crimson paint when she goes out to collect the morning paper (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 8-9). Since Kevin has been apprehended, this action is clearly aimed at his mother, the only one who is still around to see the effects of the paint. Eva says she could have hired somebody to remove the paint, but she prefers to scrub it off the porch herself. Apparently, the fact that Kevin comes from a relatively affluent family has been emphasised in the papers, so Eva wants the neighbours to see her do it herself (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 10-11). This is another example of Eva’s way of dealing with her shame. It is much easier for her to make herself go through all the hard physical work of removing the dried paint than to deal with her feelings of shame, which are much less tangible. Moreover, it can be seen as a way for Eva to punish herself for what Kevin did, so yet again she assumes the blame for her son’s actions.

Sylvie Gambaudo discusses the community’s need for blame and punishment by asking who is really held accountable for Kevin’s deeds:

[A]t 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 [sic] refuses to ‘re-phallicise’ her. (Gambaudo, 2011, p. 167)

This means that society feels the need to punish Eva for what her son has done, which goes hand in hand with the patriarchal need to control women, and it has extended from involving only men to members of both sexes trying to subdue women, which again corresponds to Althusser’s state ideological apparatuses (Barry, 2009/1995, p. 158). This has become a normal thing to do for so many people, so the members of the community where Eva lives do not reflect upon what the consequences are for her, who had nothing to do with the actual killing. Most people seem to think that she gets exactly what she deserves.

One reason for the community’s general view of Eva is how she is portrayed in the media. The press seem to go out of their way to describe her as a cold-hearted beast of a mother, who sees nothing wrong with her son’s atrocious acts. This is how Eva conveys the media’s image of her, just after the incident with the paint on her porch:
Taking in our neighbors’ artwork, I could feel my face set in the same “impassive mask” the New York Times described from the trial. The Post, less kindly, depicted my expression throughout as “defiant”, and our local Journal News went even further: “From Eva Khatchadourian’s stony implacability, her son might have done nothing more egregious than dip a pigtail in an inkwell.” (I grant that I stiffened in court, squinting and sucking my cheeks against my molars; I remember grasping at one of your tough-guy mottoes, “Don’t let ’em see you sweat.” But Franklin, “defiant”? I was trying not to cry.)

(Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 9)

Journalists play an enormous part in the demonisation of Eva as the mother of a killer. As expressed in the quotation, the true reason for Eva’s composed behaviour is that it is the only way she can deal with these tragic events without falling apart completely. Basically, pointing the finger is much easier than to try to see things from another person’s perspective, and the media help spreading this image of Eva as an unwavering, stone-faced ogress who refuses to take responsibility for her son’s actions, which is another example of the community’s punishment of a mother for having brought up a murderer.

Consequently, what Kevin has done has led to Eva’s utter exclusion from the community, and it is all due to events which were beyond her control. She feels completely alienated and struggles to understand what has happened to her:

Home is precisely what Kevin has taken from me. My neighbors now regard me with the same suspicion they reserve for illegal immigrants. They grope for words and speak to me with exaggerated deliberation, as if to a woman for whom English is a second language. And since I have been exiled to this rarefied class, the mother of one of those “Columbine boys,” I, too, grope for words, not sure how to translate my off-world thoughts into the language of two-for-the-price-of-one sales and parking tickets. Kevin has turned me into a foreigner again, in my own country. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 53)

This is one type of reaction when people realise Eva is Kevin’s mother. They do not know what to say and prefer to avoid the matter until Eva is no longer present, but they cannot hide their unease in spite of trying their best. Still, the fact remains that they do not treat Eva as any other person, even though they are not overtly aggressive towards her.

The other extreme is, of course, when people comment directly on the matter, trying to get to the bottom of what is bothering them: why Kevin decided to kill his victims and how Eva could have allowed it to happen. After a while, Eva grows weary of this type of situation, and she cannot quite grasp why so many people feel the need to blame and shame her for something which in the end is beyond her reach:

But this incessant badgering, this pleading refrain of why, why, why – it’s so grossly unfair. Why, after all I have borne, am I held accountable for ordering their chaos? Isn’t it enough that I suffer the brunt of the facts withoutshouldering the unreasonable responsibility for what they mean? (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 194-195)
Seemingly, seeing Eva suffer is not enough for most people in her community. Instead, they feel the need to delve deeper into her misery and make sure she knows that she has played an important part in creating the monster that has gone on a killing spree. The irony of this situation is that these people are unaware of the fact that they are actively contributing to creating another monster: the all-responsible mother of the killer. Still, that is how state ideological apparatuses function: they work implicitly and below the surface.

Nevertheless, not everyone in the community treats Eva as a pariah. Before the funerals of Kevin’s victims, Eva calls the parents to ask if she would be welcome at the service, and most of them either insult her overtly or just hang up the phone. However, Thelma Corbitt, the mother of one of Kevin’s victims, says that she is more than welcome, if she can find the strength to come, and she expresses admiration for the courage it must have taken for Eva to call her (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 164-165). This is a rare expression of empathy with Eva’s situation, which goes totally against the reactions of other members of the community, and this situation is most unusual to Eva:

Then she said she wondered whether I didn’t have it harder than any of them. I backed off. I said, that couldn’t be fair; after all, at least I still had my son, and the next thing she said impressed me. She said, “Do you? Do you really?”

(Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 165-166)

Thelma’s question not only alludes to the fact that Kevin no longer lives with Eva, it also, and perhaps primarily, comments on the fact that people will never look at him the same way, and this includes his mother, Eva. In Thelma’s opinion, Kevin is beyond help and Eva will never get her son back the way he once was now that he has committed murder. Eva is probably painfully aware of this, but is even more distressed by the fact that she feels that Kevin has never really connected to her in the first place.

Notwithstanding, Eva continues to visit Kevin in prison, and on one occasion, she meets Loretta Greenleaf, who is the mother of one of the other inmates. They start talking about their sons, and Loretta is a bit taken aback when she realises Eva is the infamous Kevin Khatchadourian’s mother. She also asks the constant question of what she thinks drove Kevin to commit the murders. Eva quickly replies:

“I expect it’s my fault,” I said defiantly. “I wasn’t a very good mother – cold, judgmental, selfish. Though you can’t say I haven’t paid the price.” “Well, then,” she drawled, closing up that two inches and swiveling her gaze thirty degrees to look me in the eye. “You can blame your mother, and she can blame hers. Leastways sooner or later it’s the fault of somebody who’s dead.” Stolid in my guilt, clutching it like a girl with a stuffed bunny, I failed to follow. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 195)

Loretta’s comment follows the most prevailing logic in the community: there is always somebody else to blame: the mother of the mother, repeated to infinity. This is quite a convenient defence
mechanism if a person wants to avoid dealing with his or her own responsibility for something, but Loretta means no harm with her remark. In fact, she knows better than anyone upon whom people place the blame when a young boy commits a crime, and when the prison guard calls her to let her in to see her son, she sums it all up:

“It’s always the mother’s fault, ain’t it?” she said softly, collecting her coat. “That boy turned out bad cause his mama a drunk, or a she a junkie. She let him run wild, she don’t teach him right from wrong. She never home when he back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not home after school. And nobody ever say they some kids just damned mean. Don’t you believe that old guff. Don’t you let them saddle you with all that killing.” “Loretta Greenleaf!” “It hard to be a momma. Nobody ever pass a law say ’fore you get pregnant you gotta be perfect. I’m sure you try the best you could. You here, in this dump, on a nice Saturday afternoon? You still trying. Now you take care of yourself, honey. And you don’t be talking any more a that nonsense.”

(L. Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 195)

Loretta’s words convey a highly common thought when a child commits a felony: the mother is to blame, but the father’s role is downplayed. Patriarchal norms state that the mother is responsible for the upbringing of her child, whereas the father and even the child itself are much more easily acquitted, and the community upholds these unwritten laws by treating the mother as if she were the one who had committed the crime. In Tyson’s words, “patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive ( Tyson, 2006/1998, pp. 86-87). By criticising, blaming and shaming Eva, the community helps to uphold the societal hierarchies between the sexes, and by blaming herself, Eva also contributes to the perpetuation of this hegemony.

Finally, after all the pressure she has been under from the community, Eva needs to know whether Kevin also feels that she is responsible for the situation, so she decides to confront him during one of her visits in prison:

“All right,” I said, no-nonsense. “I need to know. Do you blame me? It’s all right to say so, if that’s what you think. Is that what you tell your psych consults, or they tell you? It all traces back to your mother.” He snapped, “Why should you get all the credit?”

(Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 202)

Kevin’s reaction illustrates his refusal to feel regret about the murders, and in a way, he does answer his mother’s question. Not only does he not blame Eva for what he did, he is also reluctant to share the limelight with her. He wants to take full responsibility for the killings, because he wants other people to know what he did and to fear and even admire him for it. The fact that Kevin has received a copious amount of mail expressing not only hatred but also forgiveness and interest seems to corroborate this. Eva describes the situation in the following manner:
I was uneasy with the unsolicited tide of forgiveness that washed over the shipwreck of our family in the wake of Thursday. In addition to mail promising either to beat his brains out or to bear his babies, Kevin has received dozens of letters offering to share his pain, apologizing for society’s having failed to recognize his spiritual distress and granting him blanket moral amnesty for what he has yet to regret. Amused, he’s read choice selections aloud to me in the visiting room. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 385)

Apparently, there are many people who automatically come to the conclusion that when Kevin committed these murders, he was either temporarily insane or driven to do it because of a poor domestic situation or because of society’s inability to include him. Kevin’s own part in the drama is usually downplayed, and people look for other parties to blame than the actual culprit. That is probably where Kevin’s plan backfired, because he did not count on so many people placing the blame on others than him, primarily on his mother.

Another example of the community’s attempts to hold Eva responsible for her son’s actions is when Mary Woolford sues her for parental neglect. This is after Kevin has been sentenced, so the issue is whether Eva can be held accountable for the crime that her son has committed. To her great surprise, after a long process, Eva is acquitted:

For Eva, the verdict is a win and a loss at the same time. The court has proven that she has not committed any crime by bringing up her son in the way that she has, but she still feels beaten down by the entire situation and by the community’s persecution of her. She has been dragged through the mud by her neighbours, by other members of her community, by the press and she has also been taken to court in an attempt to demonstrate that she is partly responsible for the murders that her son has committed. Although the outcome of the trial is officially positive for Eva, the entire process has worn her down. The community has also failed to gain anything from treating her this way, because by dragging the situation out, the wounds that these murders have caused remain open.

Mary Woolford, who has taken Eva to court, can be seen as a spokesperson for the community, and she seems to go out of her way to make Eva suffer, in order to make her feel the terrible loss that she herself has suffered because of what Kevin did. This kind of behaviour puzzles Eva, and she cannot quite see what good taking her to court will do:

Honestly, I had to fight the impulse at the civil trial to take her aside and charge gently, “You can’t imagine that you’ll feel better if you win, do you?” In fact, I became con-
vinced that she would find more consolation in having what proved a surprisingly slight parental negligence case dismissed, because she’d be able to nurture the theoretical alternative universe in which she had successfully unloaded her agony onto a callous, indifferent mother who deserved it. The problem was not who was punished for what. The problem was that her daughter was dead. (Shriver, 2011/2003, p. 80)

Mary Woolford and the rest of the community seem adamant to shame Eva publicly as well as privately, which makes people focus on something which does not make much of a difference in the end. Placing the blame on Eva does not at all help the community to move on or to heal from the situation, but instead the process is kept alive, moving in circles rather than onward.

However, although the court formally acquits Eva, the judge still orders her to pay for her own court costs, which means that she is not entirely exonerated. Eva reflects upon the possible reasons for this outcome:

I had broken the most primitive of rules, profaned the most sacred of ties. Had I instead protested Kevin’s innocence in the face of mountains of hard evidence to the contrary, had I railed against his “tormentors” for having driven him to it, had I insisted that after he started taking Prozac “he was a completely different boy” – well, I guarantee you that Mary Woolford and that defense fund she raised through the Internet would have been forced to pay my court costs to the final dime. Instead, my demeanor was repeatedly described in the papers as “defiant,” while my disagreeable characterizations of my own flesh and blood were submitted no-comment, to hang me out to dry. With such an ice queen for a mother, little wonder, observed our local Journal News, that KK turned bad boy. (Shriver, 2011/2003, pp. 466-467)

These events clearly illustrate the patriarchal patterns that are at work in today’s society. A mother is supposed to defend her child at any cost, so when Eva breaks the unwritten rules of motherhood, she must be punished for it. The community sees it as its duty to react against anyone who steps out of line and breaks the pattern, which is why people act out towards Eva both verbally and physically, as well as legally. Still, the question is what good in the end it does to alienate Eva. Nothing will ever bring back the people who were murdered, and things will never be the same. Surely, a more constructive way to operate would be to try to include Eva into the community and attempt to make her see that her son’s actions are not an absolute reflection of herself. However, that would take an enormous amount of effort, so it is much easier to point the finger at Eva and to say “shame on you” without offering any constructive solutions to the situation, thus consolidating the patriarchal patterns in today’s society.

Conclusion

Lionel Shriver’s We Need to Talk about Kevin can be described as a thought-provoking novel which deals with many debatable issues, such as school massacres, parental responsibility and punishment.
The aim of this essay has been to illuminate how patriarchal patterns in today’s society can restrain women’s ability to lead a full life through blame and by making them feel ashamed of not only their own actions but of those of their children. This has been achieved through a feminist reading of the novel by linking the concept of shame to that of motherhood and by describing the attempts of specific individuals as well as the community as a whole to control the protagonist, who has, in the eye of the community, overstepped the boundaries of how a “good” mother should behave.

Shame is defined as an affect, as opposed to a drive, which means that it can exist in various degrees, in contrast to a drive, which is either fulfilled or not. The difference between shame and guilt is that the latter can be dealt with by apologising to the offended party, which usually helps to lessen the feeling of guilt. Shame, however, can be felt equally strongly even after an act of apology, and it can emerge years after the incident that caused the feeling occurred. Although the first impression is that shame is an altogether negative emotion, it serves as a wake-up call for the person who is shamed, and the person or persons who cause the shaming do it in order to manifest interest in the one who is shamed, which means that there are some constructive aspects in shame.

Shame and motherhood are connected in an as early source as the Bible, where Eve commits the original sin, thus forcing herself and Adam to leave the Garden of Eden and have children in order for the human race to survive. Since the name of the protagonist of We Need to Talk about Kevin is Eva, there is a clear link between motherhood and shame also in the novel, and the unwritten laws of patriarchy uphold the idea that mothers have responsibilities not only to their children but to society as a whole, and that they need to be held accountable if they do not abide by the rules.

The novel illustrates these patriarchal mechanisms in society through several characters, among others Franklin, Eva’s husband, who repeatedly reproaches his wife when she puts her own interests before their son’s, even before he is born. He also finds it impossible to accept that Eva has difficulties in bonding with their son and wants her to try harder. Moreover, he blames his wife when their daughter loses her eye in an accident where Eva was not present, which further accentuates the pressure on mothers to take responsibility for what their children do.

Other characters who contribute to upholding the demands on a mother’s behaviour are Eva’s physician, who scolds her for not jumping for joy when she finds out she is pregnant; Mary Woolford, the mother of one of Kevin’s victims, who sues Eva for parental negligence; and the police officer who apprehends Kevin after the murders have taken place, whose immediate reaction when he understands that Eva is the murderer’s mother, is to give her a hard stare. Still, Eva is probably her own most harsh critic, since she continuously mentions her flaws and shortcomings as a mother throughout the novel. This demonstrates that the patriarchal rules about how women should and
should not behave are well settled in society. Not only men but also other women, including Eva herself, feel the need to shame her for her son’s actions.

The community in general gives Eva a hard time long after the murders have occurred, by giving her snide comments when she goes shopping, by splashing paint on her front porch, and the media also hang Eva out to dry by portraying her as a terrible mother in the press. In the end, the community gains nothing from putting Eva through this type of treatment, since the negative emotions are kept alive without resolving the situation, and the community can therefore not heal from what has occurred. All this, along with the civil suit for parental negligence, slowly wears Eva down, so that even when she wins the civil suit, she cannot feel good about it. She understands that regardless if she takes the blame for what Kevin did or not, nothing will ever be the same again. Blame is a destructive force which leads nowhere, and a more constructive way to deal with the situation would be to avoid criticism and instead try to include Eva into society. However, the patriarchal rules that govern society are difficult to shake, which explains the treatment that Eva goes through after her son has committed the murders. It is easier to point the finger than to help a person, and the mother is usually the one to be scrutinised if her child does something wrong. Consequently, patriarchy is still very much alive in today’s society, no matter how far we think our community has developed over the years.

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