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**Narrative Techniques in the Novel and  
the Film *We Need to Talk About Kevin***

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## Introduction

Ever since the Columbine massacre in 1999, the issue of school shootings has only become more relevant. The copycat effect seems to ensure the continuation of such events, and in the aftermath, we are left wondering what it is that drives teenagers and young adults to resort to such devastating solutions. In Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* from 2003, a fictional school shooting provides the starting point for a further exploration of this complex issue. In this scenario it is the relationship between mother and son which is the main focus. Eva and Franklin, two very different people, meet, fall in love, and decide to have a baby. Already during the pregnancy, Eva finds it difficult to connect with her baby. A son is born, whom they name Kevin, and while Franklin enjoys the role as a father, Eva continues to struggle to connect with Kevin. She gradually becomes more convinced that her son is innately evil. After some years, Celia is born. Eva's experience with her second child stands in stark contrast to that of the first one. When Celia's eye is critically damaged, Eva blames her son, while Franklin is convinced that he is innocent. The opposing sides of the parents eventually result in a divorce. Three days before Kevin turns sixteen, he kills eleven people at his school, as well as his father and sister. Eva's life is spared.

The son's true motive for killing his family and classmates is never revealed. In fact, the novel refrains from giving any clear-cut answers to any questions about motive or blame. Instead it explores the factors that might play a role in triggering teenagers to commit school shootings. Over a year after the massacre, while Kevin is in the penitentiary, Eva starts writing letters to Franklin. Throughout these letters Eva revisits the past in an attempt to understand why her son decided to go on a killing spree. Furthermore, she tries to reflect on her own role in the events. As a writer, Eva seems surprisingly open and honest, which encourages the reader's trust in her account. At the same time, her account is also highly subjective, and certain aspects of her report are ambiguous. The question arises of whether one can fully trust her version of the story. After all, it only provides one side of it. The issue of blame is thereby presented as a complex topic, and a topic which has a problematic subjective nature. In 2011, a film adaptation also entitled *We Need to Talk About Kevin* was directed by Lynne Ramsay. Even though temporal restrictions has led to the omission of much of the novel's content, the synopsis above could have been used to describe the story of the film as well. The film also relates the story from the mother's perspective, but unlike the novel, it does not include a first-

person narrator. McFarlane (2010) writes about the relationship between novels and films that it is “narrative that makes the two mediums seem compatible, whereas it is in narration that their secret hostility may lie” (p. 19). In this thesis, I will therefore further investigate how the novel and the film present the story about Kevin, in the attempt to explore how this contrast between narrative and narration in novels and film transpires.

In order to do so, aspects within both narratology and adaptation studies need to be addressed. The field of adaptation is full of contradicting theories. There is no one approach to adaptation that everyone agrees upon. Traditionally, theorists tended to embrace a vertical view on adaptation. This included a fidelity-inspired description of adaptations, where focus lay on the adaptation’s ability to stay true to its source text, or the original. Many theorists have later dismissed this approach, and rather turned to a more horizontal view of adaptations<sup>1</sup>. André Bazin, for instance, predicted that the future critic will view adaptations and source texts as forming an “artistic pyramid”. Like the sides of a pyramid, each art form through which a story is presented will be seen as a version which adds to more abstract idea of the story (2000, p. 26). Sanders (2016), who views adaptation in terms of intertextuality, argues that adaptations and their source text(s) engage in a “mutually informing play” (p. 34). This means that adaptations communicate with and influence not only their source text, but other adaptations as well. In terms of status, both these descriptions give adaptations and their source texts equal positions in the relationship. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, an adaptation is “second without being secondary” (2006, p. 9).

Viewing film as a film and viewing film as an adaptation are two different modes of watching. Having read or knowing the novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is likely to influence the viewer’s interpretation of the film. Small hints that foreshadow what will come might be more easily recognizable for viewers who know the outcome than for those who do not. As Hutcheon (2006) states, “if we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly” (p. 6). Even though adaptations are autonomous works in their own right, Hutcheon points out that it is only when we consider their palimpsestic nature that we can theorize them as adaptations (p. 6). On the basis of these arguments, the thesis will present a comparative study of the two works, not in an attempt to consider the adaptation’s fidelity towards the novel, but to explore what the film actually does with the story. Since

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<sup>1</sup> Cartmell and Whelehan (2010) discuss the change from fidelity-inspired to more intertextual-inspired approaches in more detail (pp. 2-3).

several aspects of the novel can be recognized in the film, these will be commented on in order to shed light on how the film adaptation presents certain elements from the novel.

In his introductory book to film studies, Nichols (2010) provides a helpful distinction between what he calls the social and formal contexts of a film. Easily put, these categories revolve around the distinction between form and content. More specifically, the social context of a film refers to the “social and historical problems, conflicts, issues, and contradictions that provide a story’s thematic focus” (p. 14). Such features relate to areas that are not specific to film per se, but rather characteristic of the period in which the film appears. The formal context of a film, on the other hand, relates to more medium-specific qualities which for film might revolve around editing and sound design, genre conventions, actors, or principles for narrative structures (pp. 12-13). It seems safe to conclude that these terms can be used in considerations of literary works as well. Nichols further argues that the form of a film has “considerable bearing on how viewers experience and understand the content of a film” (14). Likewise, “films seen outside their social context... lack the density and complexity that an actual social context creates” (16). It seems, then, that a discussion of one category will inevitably also touch upon the other. Even though the focus of this study will be within the formal context, the analyses will also comment upon issues that belong to the social contexts of the works.

Since the aim of this thesis is to look more closely at how the novel and the film portray the story about Kevin, the analyses will adopt a narratological approach. One of the qualities that novels and films share is the ability to present a narrative. Therefore, as Lothe (2000) points out, time, space, and causality, which are important components in narrative, are central to both film and literary theory. Other narrative terms such as plot, repetition, and characters are also important for both mediums. It is the way in which these shared concepts are actualized which varies (p. 8). Within narratology, theorists usually distinguish between story and discourse. Abbott’s (2007) introductory chapter to narrative provides a simple but useful explanation of these concepts. The story of a narrative is what we get if we were to take the events of a narrative to the side and order them in a chronological progression, like the summary of the novel provided earlier on in the introduction. Discourse, on the other hand, denotes the way in which the story is presented. For instance, as was stated above, both the novel and the film filter the story through the mother, and thus offer a subjective account of the story. This latter categorization can further be divided into plot and narration. In this definition, plot revolves around the order in which the story is presented. For instance, a narration might start near the end of the actual story and reveal the story in retrospect (pp. 39-44). Narration, on the other



hand, concerns the way in which the story is *told* (not *presented* as the term discourse signals). Depending on the narrator, this might be executed in various ways (p. 39).

Regarding narration, focalization will be especially relevant for this study. This term was introduced by Gerard Genette, who used it to distinguish between narration by a narrator and focalization through a character, adhering to the questions of “who speaks” and “who sees” (1972/1983, p. 186). This means that the narrator, the one who speaks, can tell the story through the eyes of a character, the one who perceives (189). These types of narration will naturally be executed in very different ways in a novel and a film. After Genette, the further investigation into focalization has resulted in many different theories and approaches. Unfortunately, due to the scope of this thesis, these approaches will not be elaborated. Instead, the analyses will use two works as point of departures in the analyses: William F. Edmiston’s article “Focalization and the First-Person Narrator” and Edward Branigan’s book *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. As the titles suggest, Edmiston discusses focalization specifically in relation to first-person narration, whereas Branigan introduces an outline for focalization in films. Their ideas will be explained in more detail in each of the chapters.

Since this thesis takes a narratological approach, the issue of medium-specificity should be addressed. In his rather critical article, Leitch (2003) outlines what he considers to be fallacies within adaptation studies. One of the fallacies he notes is the assumption that “novels and films are suited to fundamentally different tasks” (p. 152). In other words, he criticizes the notion that a medium is good at one thing and not another. The aim of this thesis is neither to ascribe any qualities to either of the mediums novel or film, nor to attempt to highlight limits or advantages of any of the mediums. Rather, the aim is to investigate the means of expression used by the novel and film in question to relate the story about Kevin. Instead of medium-specificity, Stam (2000) proposes the notion diacritical specificity, which relates to a medium’s respective materials of expression (p. 59). For instance, film includes multiple tracks (picture, sound, music, text, actors) which often work simultaneously. Novels, on the other hand, rely on the written word. Characters in novels are verbal artefacts, whereas characters in films are combinations of diverse elements, for instance *mise-en-scène*, acting style, and voice (p. 60). These types of differences is what makes it an interesting point of inquiry to study the different and similar ways in which novels and films might tell the same story.

The thesis will be divided into two chapters, where the first chapter discusses the novel, and the second chapter discusses the film adaptation. In accordance with Abbott’s definition of discourse, both analyses will be divided into two main sections which subsequently discuss the works’ plot and narration. Both works are anachronic, meaning that they jump back and forth

in time. This results in a fragmentation of information that resembles the process of thinking. The first section will therefore look at the structure of each of the works in more detail. Since elements from detective fiction can be recognized in the novel's structure, this too will be further examined in the first section. Concerning the narration, the two works differ on a central feature: The novel uses Eva as a narrator, whereas the film uses Eva as a focalizer. Both works relate a dual portrayal of the Eva character, and a certain ambiguity around the course of events. However, the use of a narrator also draws attention to the narrator's reliability in the novel. The film, on the other hand, places emphasis on interaction and consequence. The second section of each chapter will therefore further explore the works' narration and focalization, especially in relation to features such as character portrayal and ambiguity.



# The Novel

A literary text relies on the written word as its means of expression, and there are numerous ways in which this means might be exploited. Shriver's novel takes on an epistolary form which means that the story about Kevin is related through a series of letters. This also means that it is a very personal account. In general, the novel seems more concerned with inner states of mind than action. This is signalled through, among other things, its structure. The first section of the chapter will therefore discuss the plot of the novel, or the order in which the story is presented. Furthermore, the account has an investigative side: The narrator seeks to understand her son's motive for the massacre, but also to contemplate her own responsibility for her son's actions. Since the narrator is both the investigator and part of the investigation, the readers will have to perform their own investigation of the narrator. The first section will therefore also discuss the novel's plot in light of classic detective fiction. In the second section, the analysis will focus on the narration, or the way in which the story is told. The epistolary form and the first-person narration involves a certain intimacy, but it also reveals a tension within the narrator. This has implications for the portrayal of the narrator which seems to include a contradiction. It also draws attention to the issue of identity. The second section will therefore study the novel's use of a first-person narrator in greater detail. Several aspects further serve to question the course of events and the credibility of the narrator's account. As investigators, readers seem to be faced with an unstable and ambiguous account which challenges pre-existing assumptions about motherhood, identity and blame. The concept of narrator reliability will therefore also be addressed in the latter part of the analysis.

## The Plot

In the first letter of the novel, the reader is introduced to Eva's living situation after the massacre. Shriver's novel thereby starts near the end of the story, more than seventeen years after the story really begins. Through the novel, the past and the story about Kevin is revealed through flashbacks. At the same time, the moment of narration progresses in time. The reader is therefore faced with another story that follows the dates of the letters (from the eighth of November 2000 until the eighth of April 2001). In this way, the novel can be seen to include two storylines. Even though the novel is presented in the form of letters, it bears close

resemblance to the diary form. Franklin, to whom the letters are written, is dead and consequently no replies are included. According to Cohn (1983), the diary is a fiction of privacy, and therefore the writer need not explain his or her existential circumstances. Furthermore, “a diarist’s past history normally emerges in the order it presents itself to his memory: fragmented and allusive” (p. 208). As will become clear, this is a main feature of Eva’s letters as well.

### Fragmentation, flashbacks, and gaps

Eva’s narration is marked by flashbacks and discontinuity. Especially throughout the first part of the novel, the narration continuously jumps back and forth in time. Memories from different periods are interweaved, and are further interrupted by thoughts and philosophical contemplations. There is no chronological cohesion between the individual letters either. For instance, in the first letter, Eva describes her situation after the massacre – the social sanctions she has experienced, and her food habits. In the second letter, she looks back on the time with Franklin before they had Kevin, and in the third letter, she recalls her travelling. As such, the first part of the novel is not primarily chronological according to time, but rather organized around topics or themes. Throughout the first letters, the topic revolves around the process Eva and Franklin went through when deciding to have a baby. Various stories are brought up by Eva which serve to illustrate the pros and cons they contemplated. One such story recounts the night when Franklin’s flight home was delayed. The narrator recalls the frustration she felt at the time, and the fear that Franklin would not come home at all. In the end, this story serves to represent one of the advantages of having a child: If Franklin should die, a child would preserve at least a part of him.

Before the story is concluded, however, it is interrupted by another story, an anecdote about the narrator’s brother. This shift is only signalled by the start of a new paragraph:

Your remnants mocked me: the jump rope limp on its hood; the dirty socks, stiff, caricatured deflations of your size eleven feet.

Oh Franklin, of course I knew that a child can’t substitute for a husband, because I had seen my brother stooped from the pressure to be the “little man of the house”; I had seen the way it tortured him that Mother was always searching his face for resemblances to that ageless photo on the mantle. (Shriver, 2003, p. 57)

Throughout the rest of the second paragraph, Eva considers how this situation affected her brother later in life, before she returns to the original story. By placing these stories next to each other, Eva is able to highlight a specific emotion. In this case, it highlights Eva's love for, and even dependence on, Franklin. It illustrates a certain desperation to keep Franklin, even though the solution – a child – would be an imperfect one. The structure thereby allows for thematic points to be made. The associative structuring of the memories also resembles the process of thinking, and thus reflects the novel's preoccupation with inner states of mind. It also illustrates a certain sensitivity in Eva. She is self-aware and able to critically reflect upon her thoughts and behaviour.

Viewing this structure in light of Wolfgang Iser's reader response theory, some interesting points can be made about its effects. According to Iser (2006), a text includes a variety of perspectives, which he calls segments. The text can and does switch between these segments, at which point there arises a blank. This blank creates a need to connect the segments, and this must be done by the reader. Only one segment can be in focus at the time, and Iser calls this the theme. In the process of connecting two segments, "the theme of one moment becomes the background against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on" (p. 394). In other words, what you read at any moment, is affected by and affects what you have read before, as the example above illustrated. If we accept Iser's theory, the intertwining of memories can be seen to guide the reading. When she disrupts the story of Franklin being late with the memory about her brother, the reader must make a connection between the two. In the first segment, Eva looks at Franklin's clothes, noticing their emptiness when he is not there to fill them. In the next segment, Eva jumps to the thought "of course I knew that a child can't substitute for a husband". In light of the second segment, the first segment seems to have triggered the idea that a child would be a more representative substitute of Franklin than his clothes if he were to die. However, she also realizes that a child would not be able to fill his empty clothes perfectly. In this way, the switch from the one memory to the other guides the reader's understanding of the memory in a specific direction.

Furthermore, Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) argue that another effect of such gaps can be to ensure identification with the narrator. Based on the assumption that the reader treats the narrator as a conversational partner, the reader will assume that the narrator is cooperating with him or her. When the information provided by the narrator is insufficient, the reader "will assume that there is a plausible inference that could be made to render the narrative comprehensible" (p. 73). In the attempt to understand the narrator's experience, the reader

applies his or her own experiences, and if the process is successful, then the narrator can be seen to have the same experience as the reader. The reader is thus able to identify with the narrator (p. 90). As was discussed above, the switch from one memory to the other creates a gap which forces the reader to find a connection between the two memories. If we accept Bortolussi and Dixon's proposal, then these gaps not only serve to guide the reader, but might also generate identification with Eva as a narrator. Though the reader might not have experienced the exact same situation of waiting for a call, most people can recognize the fear of losing someone close to them and the need to have something to remember them by. According to Bortolussi and Dixon, the reader will use the experience of this fear to understand Eva's experience, and might thereby be able to identify with her.

### A complex investigation

Abbott (2007) argues that the decision to start a narration near the end of a story, opens a gap which tempts the reader to learn what has happened (p. 44). When Shriver starts the novel near the end of the story, several questions arise about the events that have led to the situation the reader is faced with. Since the genre allows Eva to exclude explanations about her existential circumstances, the information provided for the reader is fragmented and incomplete. For instance, throughout the first couple of pages, Eva reveals her difficulty with being seen in public, that her name is connected with something bad, and that she feels shame. However, she does not reveal the source of her shame until the end of the letter. This piece by piece report is characteristic for the novel as a whole and contributes to creating suspense, and keeps the reader intrigued to learn more. It also draws attention to the investigative nature of the novel, which seems to draw on several elements from detective fiction. According to Hühn (1987), detective stories commonly revolve around an uninterpretable crime which goes against the "meaning-system of a community" (p. 453). The uncovering and defusing of the crime becomes crucial for the community. The plot progresses as attempts are made to ascribe meaning to the crime. In the Shriver's novel, we are indeed dealing with a crime that breaks with the community's norms. This is evident from Eva's struggle with going out in public. Although the massacre is revealed already in the first letter, the "genesis of the crime"<sup>2</sup> remains hidden for the reader and must be uncovered.

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<sup>2</sup> This term denotes the motive, the means, and the opportunity of the crime (Hühn, 1987, p. 454).

Also in accordance with detective fiction, Shriver's novel can be seen to include two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (Hühn, 1987, p. 452). In this case though, the investigation is not physical, but rather takes place in the narrator's mind as she revisits the past. In her last letter, Eva writes:

Throughout writing these letters to you – 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. (Shriver, 2003, p. 467)

The narrator is not only investigating the crime, but she is also engaging with the question of blame. As this passage reveals, Eva also contemplates her own role, and the genesis of the crime thus concerns Eva as much as Kevin. The investigation of blame is therefore double: The reader will follow Eva's investigation, while at the same time perform his or her own examination of Eva's account. This latter part of the investigation revolves around the reliability of the account, and this will be discussed in the next section of the analysis. In the detective novel, the success of the investigation and the resolution of the crime "restores the disrupted social order and reaffirms the validity of the system of norms" (Hühn, 1987, p. 452). In contrast to the detective novel, Eva's investigation is unsuccessful, as she is unable to find any satisfying answers that might restore social order. The social sanctions Eva experiences illustrate a community which has not yet put the crime behind it. Eva seems to accept that social order will not be attained, neither around nor within herself. In other words, the novel does not provide an answer to the question of responsibility. This lack of a solution forces the reader to trust his or her own investigation, and thus ensures reader's active engagement with the story and the questions it raises. It might be that this break with conventions, and lack of restored social order, means that it is our system of norm which is faulty.

As anyone acquainted with the stories of Sherlock Holmes or Poirot will recognize, a summary of the investigation is usually provided near the end of the story. This summary reveals the clues that have been discovered, the meaning of them, and also the development of the crime itself. Towards the end of the novel, Eva includes a description of the massacre, based on what she has read in the news. Although she was not there when Kevin murdered his classmates, the reconstruction includes quite a few details about what happened. We learn that Kevin was able to gather his victim's in the school's gymnasium, and how he was able to listen in on them without being seen:



Kevin was able to listen in on his prizewinners from the alcove, an inset shelf on the upper level; so long as he remained against the back wall, he couldn't be seen from below. The three stationary bicycles, treadmill, and rowing machine had already been dragged away from the alcove's protective railing. Transferred from the duffel, his stash of some hundred arrows bristled from two fire buckets. (Shriver, 2003, p. 436)

While this descriptive account of the massacre might serve a dramaturgic function, creating suspense and finally allowing the reader a description of what happened that day, it also serves another function. The narration often includes similarly detailed accounts of memories, in which the narrator recounts complete dialogues. Additionally, the writing seem to have a therapeutic function for Eva: "I know I wrote only yesterday, but I now depend on this correspondence to debrief from Chatham" (p. 67). The narrator thereby uses narrative as a tool, as a way in which meaning can be ascribed to otherwise meaningless events. Hühn (1987) recognizes the significance of storytelling in detective novels as follows: "The concluding narration of the crime, revealing the origin of the disruption ... may be taken as a powerful confirmation of the significance of stories and, indeed, of traditional literature, as fundamental social ordering structures" (p. 464). In Eva's case, her reconstruction is inadequate, and as a detective, she is no closer to an answer at the end of her investigation. If our most fundamental tool for creating meaning is not adequate, then perhaps this means that there is no truth to be reached.

## The Narration

Having established some of the prominent features of the novel's plot, it is time to move on to the narration, or the way in which the story is told. Discussing the use of direct discourse in general, Abbott (2007) distinguishes between direct discourse as personal expression and direct discourse as narration (p. 48). This distinction allows for a dual treatment of the narrator's account. When treated as narration, its reliability becomes a relevant aspect of inquiry. As personal expression, on the other hand, the narrator's statements reveal important information about her ideology and beliefs. Both of these instances will be addressed throughout this discussion. Another relevant concept which was introduced in the introduction, is the notion of focalization. Although Shriver's novel includes a first-person narrator, Genette (1972/1983)

argues that in the first-person narrative, the narrator can choose to focalize through her past self, restricting the information to what she knew at the time (p. 199). Parting way with Genette, and turning to Edmiston (1989) an elaboration on these ideas will provide some helpful terms for a further discussion of the novel's focalization. In a revision of Genette's terms, Edmiston defines three types of focalization: internal, external, and zero focalization. Simply put, the focalization is internal when the narrator sees events from the perspective of her past self, restricting her knowledge accordingly. If the narrator comments on a past event from her present point of view, on the other hand, the focalization becomes external. Zero focalization occurs if the comments the narrator makes include knowledge that it is unlikely that the narrator should have (p. 739-741). It is external and zero focalization which will be most relevant in the discussion of Shriver's novel, since they have significance for how the narrator might be perceived.

### Sympathy and repulsion

Edmiston's second category, external focalization, is the most prominent type of focalization in Shriver's novel. For instance, the narrator reports: "Much less could I foresee ... I would lose the man that I most wanted to talk to" (Shriver, 2003, p. 28). Such comments are frequent in Eva's narration. When the narrator comments on the past in this way, a distance arises between the writing narrator and the past narrator. According to Edmiston (1989), this temporal distance provides the narrator with an advantage as he or she can have acquired subsequent knowledge about the outcome of the event, and can use this information to manipulate the reader (p. 739). This possibility for manipulation will be addressed later on. For now, the discussion will revolve around how this type of focalization reflects on Eva as a narrator. In the citation above, it is clear that the narrator knows the tragic ending to her story, and this results in a rhetoric of hindsight. As will be demonstrated in greater detail below, this contributes to generate a somewhat unstable narration, and to creating a dual portrayal of the narrator.

When Eva comments on her past thoughts and view on life, it often results in a devaluation of her past self. For instance, she highlights inconsistencies in her in her way of thinking: "while I told myself that through an accomplished mother Kevin might find pride in himself, I probably just wanted him to be proud of me" (Shriver, 2003, p. 181). Eva further recalls how stories of school shooting continuously appeared on the news, and how she

carelessly and sarcastically talked about them. Contemplating this behaviour, she comments: “I’m making myself a little sick here, but I’m afraid I did spout this sort of thing, and yes, Kevin was probably listening” (p. 295). Both of these moments demonstrate a disagreement with the past self, as the narrator critically questions her past self’s true intentions and behaviour. There are also moments of unity, however, where the narrator agrees with her past self. At one point, Celia critically damages her eye in an accident with a drain cleaner. Eva had used the drain cleaner some days before, and the rational explanation, which Franklin supports, is that she forgot to put it away so that Celia was able to reach it. Eva, on the other hand, is certain that she put it away. Instead, she believes that Kevin is responsible for the incident. On this point, she sticks to her original story. The narrator thereby alternates between disagreement and agreement with her past self.

Cohn (1983) uses the terms dissonant and consonant self-narration to describe these types of narrative situations and states that most first-person narratives include both (p. 145). She further demonstrates how the inclusion of both types of narration in André Gide’s *Immoralist* has significance for how the narrator Michel is perceived. His wavering between dissonant and consonant self-narration turns him into a “self-deceiving narrator” who “can neither throw light on his past nor tolerate its dark ambiguities” (p. 159). Like Michel, Eva seems unable to shed any light on the past. The alternation between agreement and disagreement seems rather to demonstrate confusion in connection with the past. The narrator does demonstrate a certain self-awareness on this point. She willingly accepts a state of ignorance, and finds solace in not knowing the full extent of her responsibility. Even so, the inconsistency in Eva’s relationship with her past self leaves her narration unstable and ambiguous.

In the moments of disagreement between the present and past self, the portrayal of the narrator is harsh. Eva admits to having been a bad mother. She also reveals instances of both verbal and physical mistreatment of Kevin. For instance, Eva describes Kevin as having cried a lot as a baby. At one point, when he will not stop crying, Eva refuses to pick him up. Instead she leans on the crib rail and states: ““What’s your problem, you little shit? Proud of yourself, for ruining Mummy’s life?” I was careful to use the insipid falsetto the experts commend. ‘You’ve got Daddy snowed, but Mummy’s got your number. You’re a little shit, aren’t you?’” (Shriver, 2003, p. 125) Not only is her statement mean, but she hides her meanness in a motherese intonation. At another point, she slaps Kevin because he will not stop mimicking her sentences (p. 151). Later on, the degree of violence increases, as Eva results to throwing Kevin

across the room, causing a fracture in his arm (p. 229). Stripped of their contexts, these incidents reveal disturbing characteristics, which might serve to distance the reader from the narrator.

Furthermore, in many of the stories Eva relates, her preoccupation with herself and her own experience is striking. This is especially evident in her description of Kevin's birth. Before the birth Eva had decided not to take any sedatives. The birth is difficult, and eventually Eva changes her mind about the sedatives. Kevin's birth thereby comes to represent a defeat: "I associated Kevin with my own limitations – with not only suffering but with defeat" (p. 90). Her need to overcome the challenge of the birth is in other words stronger than the concern to deliver her baby safely. Also detectable from this example is Eva's apparent fixation with façade. This is further noticeable in her descriptions of others, which seem very much concerned with looks. Relating her encounter with one of the victims' mother, she remarks on the woman's old clothes and the fact that she has gained weight: "Something from the nether regions of the closet, I concluded, what you reach for when everything else is filthy or on the floor. As the woman's head tilted toward the processed cheese, I caught the crease of a double chin" (p. 2).

While these events suggest a narcissistic and cold persona, other aspects serve to encourage sympathy. In the previous section, it was suggested that the thematic structure contributed to generating identification with the narrator, as the reader would use his or her own experiences to understand the narrator when gaps arose in the text. Additionally, the narrator's ability to critically reflect upon her past actions and thoughts is likely to give her a certain credibility. The reader is thereby encouraged to sympathize with Eva in spite of her unappealing characteristics. Importantly, the first letter begins with introducing Franklin and the reader to Eva's living situation after the massacre. This includes the social sanctions she has experienced in its aftermath, and her feeling of exclusion from society. For instance, her house was at one point splashed with red paint, which proved especially difficult to remove: "Unlike latex, enamel isn't water soluble. And enamel is expensive, Franklin. Someone made a serious investment" (pp. 8-9). At another occasion, when she encounters one of the victims' mother in the store, she leaves her cart behind in order to hide. When she returns to her cart, and goes to pay, she discovers that the eggs she is buying have been smashed (pp. 3-4). If the reader identifies with the narrator, then this miserable portrayal is likely to invoke compassion. The clear separation between past and present might further complicate things. When Eva devaluates her past behaviour, the reader might find him or herself agreeing with the writing Eva, while at the same time dismissing the past Eva.

Furthermore, through the first-person narration, the reader is forced to follow the narrator's line of thoughts. Since Eva has control over the information and the way in which it is portrayed, the incidents of verbal and physical abuse are to a certain extent smoothed over. Before revealing the actual slap, Eva has built up an explanatory context. Beforehand, she had decided to quit her job to spend more time with Kevin. When she tries to deliver her news, and Kevin carry on mimicking her, Eva's frustration gradually increases. To get him to stop, she slaps her son across the cheek. When Eva indirectly fractures Kevin's arm, her frustration arise out of the fact that Kevin has defecated for the third time within a short interval, so that she must change his diapers yet again (later referred to as the diaper scene). Even if the slap and the throwing in themselves are an unforgivable acts, the narrator's contextual explanations might have the effect of extenuating the crime.

In this way, the narration generates a dual perception of the narrator. Looking to other first-person narrators who reveal disagreeable characteristics, we find similar complexities concerning sympathy. For instance, Estournel (2013) argues that due to the narrative situation, the pedophile main character in *Lolita*, Humbert, is able to gain the reader's trust: "In spite of his immoral actions, the narrator inspires trust since the whole story is seen through the prism of his subjectivity" (p. 2). In fact, Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) argue that "reading the narrative of a mentally unstable narrator may have the effect of increasing the reader's sympathy, tolerance, and understanding, placing the reader in the position of a privileged 'psychologist'" (p. 83). Although Eva's treatment of Kevin reveals an abusive nature, and her portrayal as a whole suggests a narcissistic and cold persona, the first-person narration invites the reader to react with understanding and even sympathy. As a result of this duality, the reader might oscillate between sympathy and repulsion in their reactions towards the narrator.

## Issues of identity

According to Bray (2003), the alternation between agreement and disagreement, or unity and disintegration of the self as Bray calls it, is a typical trait for the epistolary genre. He argues that this oscillation reveals a tension within the narrator, between her present and past self, which might further demonstrate an uncertainty about identity (p. 40). Eva's alternation between devaluation of, and agreement with her past behaviour can therefore be read as a struggle with identity. Treating the narrator's descriptions of her son as personal expression,

other aspects might further support such a reading. Throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly highlights the genetic connection between herself and her son. For instance, she repeatedly contemplates their physical resemblance: “If I found our son’s visage too shrewd and contained, the same shifty mask of opacity stared back at me when I brushed my teeth” (Shriver, 2003, p. 135). Not only does she recognize herself in her son, but she also expresses a dislike for their shared physis. She describes their shared physical characteristics as cunning and possibly dishonest.

Mother and son share several personal characteristics as well. After the slap, for instance, Eva writes: “I slapped him. It wasn’t very hard. He looked happy” (p. 151). In another episode, when Eva punishes Kevin by taking his squirt gun away, she is likewise pleased with his infuriation: “Inside he was raging. He hated me with all his being, and I was happy as a clam” (p. 177). In other words, they both seem to enjoy provoking each other. Relating to this, another shared activity they both seem to enjoy is roleplaying. When preparing to tell Franklin about the pregnancy, for instance, Eva recalls how she “tried on different approaches to a shopworn scene: coy, delayed; bemused, artificially offhand; gushing – *oh, darling!* None of them seemed to suit” (p. 63). As for Kevin, Eva often describes him as a performer, for instance when he accuses his teacher of having sexually abused him. They also put on roles for each other, and they both attempt to continue their roleplaying while Kevin is in prison. Eva summarizes their interaction in jail as follows: “If it took little time to get past my posing as the loyal mother who’s only concerned that sonny is eating his vegetable, we are still contending with Kevin’s more impenetrable pose as the sociopath who is beyond reach” (p. 48). Eva does not believe Kevin’s behaviour is the result of a psychopathic character, but rather that he is merely playing a role. When we consider these descriptions of Kevin as Eva’s personal expression, it seems that Eva experiences her son to be very alike herself.

At the same time, Kevin seems to pose a challenge for Eva. Already from the birth, Eva associates Kevin her own limitations, and as Kevin grows older, he makes her self-conscious. For instance, when Eva arranges for them to go to a restaurant, Kevin cleverly demonstrates the inconsistencies in Eva’s self-perception. While Eva talks about the United States and why she does not like it, Kevin listens in silence. When she is done, he illustrates how her harsh descriptions fits her just as well as those she criticizes (p. 328). In this case, Kevin directly confronts Eva with her bad sides. His physical resemblance seems to achieve the same thing, only in a more indirect way. While looking at pictures of her son, the narrator writes: “He was watching me and I was watching me, and under this dual scrutiny I felt doubly self-conscious and false” (p. 135). When the narrator looks at her son, she too sees her own faults. In other

words, he becomes a mirror which reflects her bad sides. There is a significant change in Kevin towards the end of the novel, and Kevin starts to remind Eva of Franklin. At the same time, they also seem to finally be connecting. This may indicate that Eva's rejection of her son is connected to a degree of self-contempt and a struggle with self-perception.

At the very end of the novel, the narrator describes her relationship with her son as having been a battle ever since he was born: "Since that moment we have fought one another with an unrelenting ferocity that I can almost admire" (p. 467). In light of the points made above, this battle might not be a battle with her son, but rather a battle with herself. Trying to love Kevin might be a question of loving herself. The fact that Kevin was able to kill eleven people including his family makes the close resemblance between mother and son problematic. It draws attention to Eva's responsibility for her son's actions, and might even suggest that she is capable of similarly bad deeds.

If Eva's rejection of her son comes from a certain self-contempt, then we might also read the battle as a struggle to conform to social conventions. Eva clearly expresses knowledge of what the politically correct behaviour and attitude towards motherhood is, or in other words, what the role as a good mother entails. The problem is that these expectations do not fit with Eva's personality and experience with motherhood. When she tries to conform to these conventions, for instance by saying to Kevin that she loves him, she is putting on a role. The decision to quit her job completely in order to stay at home with Kevin is another attempt to follow society's expectations. When she breaks free from these conventions, on the other hand, she feels in sync with herself, for instance, when she throws Kevin across the room. The struggle might thereby lie, not in self-contempt in general, but in perceiving oneself as a mother. The novel can thus be seen to problematize the notion of maternal instinct and its assumed innate quality; what if someone does not feel unconditional love for one's child? Does that make them an evil person?

Ambiguous, but unreliable?

Since the novel presents the reader with a very personal account from a narrator who has limited knowledge, the epistolary form itself opens up the possibility that Eva is unreliable. It was argued previously that the narration creates a dual portrayal of the narrator that invokes both sympathy and repulsion. The discussion of her reliability likewise results in an ambiguity.

Several aspects serve to question the narrator's reliability, but it is never confirmed that she cannot be trusted. The concept of reliability is a contentious area within narratology. Cohn (2000) argues that the discussion of reliability needs to distinguish between factual and ideological kinds of unreliable narration. Whereas the first category revolves around the factual correctness of the narrator's relating of events, the latter works on the level of ideology and values. Cohn's description of the second category indicates that there is an implied author with whose ideology the narrator conflicts. In other words, that there is a communication behind the narrator's back between the implied narrator and the implied reader (p. 307). If we were to view the discussion above in light of Cohn's suggestions, it is possible to conclude that the questionable characteristics Eva reveals, signals a conflict in ideology with the implied author, and that Eva thus becomes unreliable.

However, Hansen (2007) points out that such a treatment of reliability can be problematic. Since norms change over time, so might our perception of various narrators, especially in relation to values and ideology. Therefore, unreliability might not always be intended (p. 241). To talk about the concept of colliding ideologies between a reader and an implied author seems therefore to be misleading. Another aspect to be aware of, is that the experience of motherhood that Eva portrays is precisely that, an experience. Regardless of how uncomfortable the portrayal is, it represents a personal expression of an experience, and therefore it makes little sense to question whether it is true or not. This does not mean that an individual reading experience might not result in a devaluation of the narrator's credibility on the basis of colliding ideologies. Indeed, Hansen acknowledges the possibility that unreliability can depend on the reader's norms or frame of reference (p. 239). In the case of Eva, it is reasonable to assume that any reader's own experience with children will affect the way he or she perceives Eva. This coincides with Bortolussi and Dixon's assumption that readers use their own experiences to understand the narrator. If the reader is unable to do so, it seems reasonable to conclude that this would affect the reader's opinion about the narrator's credibility.

That being said, relating to Cohn's factual kind of unreliability, the novel includes more explicit features that create uncertainty about the course of events. Throughout the whole novel, Eva repeatedly contemplates the differences between herself and Franklin. For instance, Franklin is a patriot who naively worships American culture. Eva on the other hand, constantly criticizes what she believes to be the typical American life style and attitude. Their differing personalities are especially prominent in their treatment of Kevin. Several incidents involving Kevin are evoked by the narrator which serve to demonstrate the parents' differing perceptions of their son's nature. Celia's accident with the drain cleaner is one of the more serious of these



incidents. While Franklin indirectly blames Eva, Eva believes Kevin is the one who should be blamed. Neither of the two can convince the other. As such, the reader is left with two opposing arguments to negotiate. Furthermore, contemplating the incident in retrospect, the narrator writes: “Did you seriously think that after all this time I would change my story? *I put it away*” (Shriver, 2003, p. 333). The use of the word *story* instead of *mind* adds further ambiguity to the event. Stories involve a certain degree of construction. They might be true, or they might be fictitious. The question remains whether this use of the word is accidental, or whether Eva has in fact constructed a story.

Several such incidents appear throughout the novel, and in each case, Eva and Franklin stand on opposite sides with completely different experiences of what has happened. Franklin believes Kevin’s behaviour is normal for his age, and tries to seek out rational explanations, whereas Eva on the other hand, becomes gradually more convinced that Kevin is innately evil. In the end, they come to represent two extremes: Eva’s suspicions are endless, whereas Franklin’s complete trust in his son seems naïve at times. These oppositions draw attention to the fact that there are other ways in which to view the incident. Eva’s perceptions only represent one view. Consequently, the true course of events concerning these incidents remains uncertain and ambiguous.

Their differing perspectives serve another effect as well. The narrator believes their differences to be grounded in different world views, especially regarding children’s nature:

You and I may have differed on so profound a level as the nature of human character. You regarded a child as a partial creature, a simpler form of life, which evolved into the complexity of adulthood in open view. But from the instant he was laid on my breast, I perceived Kevin Khatchadourian as pre-existent, with a vast, fluctuating interior life whose subtlety and intensity would if anything diminish with age. (p. 137)

Ultimately, Eva and Franklin can be seen as representations of the competing arguments in the nature-nurture dichotomy which has dominated debates about human socialization. Franklin sees children as innocent, whereas Eva is open to the possibility that children might be innately evil. It should also be noted that there is no middle ground here. Their arguments do not result in a compromise, rather they seem to be pushing each other further towards their respective sides. Whereas Eva can be seen to read too much intention into Kevin’s actions, Franklin might be reading too little. In the end, they both stand to represent simplified and inadequate versions. From a broader perspective this can be seen to problematize the tendency to view complex

questions in the terms of a dichotomy, since such polarizations ultimately fail to recognize the complexity of the issue. It seems that a continuation of such polarization might only prohibit a better understanding of the motives behind and reasons for school shootings.

### The narrator's interpretation of her son

Yet another textual feature can be seen to challenge Eva's credibility. In his interpretation of *Lolita*, Hansen (2007) argues that Humbert's unreliability is detectable through his misinterpretation of Dolores. Humbert justifies his pedophile desires by ascribing certain young girls such as Dolores with nymphetic qualities. From his perspective, it is the girl's personality that seduces him. At one point however, as Humbert admires what he believes to be a young girl undressing, he suddenly realizes that it is not a girl, but rather a man's naked arm he is watching. The fact that he is able to apply nymphetic qualities to a man's arm reveals that Humbert's idea of nymphets only exists in his imagination, and is not grounded in an objective quality of certain girls. Humbert's world view is thereby undermined (p. 237).

Eva's interpretation of Kevin might be similarly questioned. For one thing, Eva seems to over-estimate Kevin's emotional capacity. As a baby, Kevin is treated as if he has a fully developed emotional register. From her perspective, Kevin could detect her faults already in the womb: "I became convinced that our little bundle of joy had found me out" she states (Shriver, 2003, p. 102). In the diaper scene, Kevin decides to keep the truth about the event secret from the doctor and Franklin. Instead, he says that he fell from the changing table (p. 235). Eva interprets this act as a strategic move. By resorting to physical punishment, Eva has given Kevin the leverage, as he might reveal her unforgivable act at any moment. Her description of their negotiation resembles a pact made with the devil: "Kevin and I looked at each other, just long enough to seal the pact. I had ransomed my soul to a six-year-old" (p. 236). The question thus remains of whether Eva's interpretation of her son is reasonable. It might be that Eva's belief that Kevin has found her out comes from her own feeling of guilt for lacking affection towards him. Kevin's decision to lie might have been an act of unconditional love for his mother.

Furthermore, Eva's portrayal of Kevin also seems to imply a lot about his way of thinking. For instance, she believes his disinterest and lack of enthusiasm is the result of an immense disappointment:

When we shrouded our grown up mysteries for which Kevin was too young, we implicitly promised him that when the time came, the curtain would pull back to reveal – what? Like the ambiguous emotional universe that I imagined awaited me on the other side of childbirth, it’s doubtful that Kevin had formed a vivid picture of whatever we had withheld from him. But the one thing he could not have imagined is that we were withholding *nothing*. That there was *nothing* on the other side of our silly rules, *nothing*. (p. 172)

Eva believes that uncovering this secret, “Kevin must have felt so fiercely cheated” (p. 173). This is a rather extensive analysis of someone else’s way of thinking. There are several such interpretations of Kevin’s attitude within the narration. This particular line of thoughts is introduced by the narrator earlier on, when she describes her own disappointment of her tenth birthday. She believes the disappointment to be the result of too high and undefined expectations. In the end, “there was no extravagance that would not have fallen short, because it would be finite and fixed” (p. 95). The same scenario is used to describe her experience of Kevin’s birth. In other words, this synopsis comes from Eva’s own experience of life. As such, she is interpreting Kevin to have the same emotional reactions as she does. It is therefore possible that the representation of Kevin is merely constructed through a projection of Eva’s own world view onto Kevin. If that is the case, then Eva might be guilty of the same misinterpretation of Kevin as Humbert is of Dolores. However, the evidence for Humbert’s misinterpretation is explicit: The fact that he is able to project his vision of nymphets onto a man’s bare arm, reveals that it is a product of his own imagination rather than an objective characteristic of the girls he calls nymphets. The evidence for Eva’s misinterpretation, on the other hand, has a more speculative nature.

Nonetheless, the credibility of Eva’s extensive analysis of Kevin might be questioned for yet another reason. In terms of focalization, it is evident that a first-person narrator has limited knowledge when it comes to the minds of the other characters. At the same time, Edmiston (1989) points out that the narrator has a huge advantage in that he or she can have acquired subsequent knowledge. Edmiston argues that the narrator’s “subsequent knowledge of the characters allows him to reconstruct their thoughts and to present them more or less as narrative facts” (p. 740). However, if this information is not justified, the reader is faced with an infraction, and the narration becomes zero-focalized. This means that the narrator provides information that it is evident that he or she could not have known about. Edmiston argues that this might “undermine the credibility and plausibility of the report” (p. 740). It is reasonable to question whether Eva’s detailed and extensive interpretation of Kevin might go beyond what is justifiable knowledge. On the linguistic level, the narration very often includes modal

constructions such as the one above: “Kevin must have felt so fiercely cheated”. This means that, strictly speaking, the information is not presented as facts. On a more general level, however, the interpretation might be suggestive enough to be perceived as an infraction. If so, Eva’s account might yet again be questioned.

Even though several aspects draw attention to the narrator’s reliability, neither of them confirms that the narrator is unreliable. This uncertainty is interesting in itself. The narrator of the novel and the mother of the perpetrator has faults, faults that have devastating consequences. Still, the intimacy of the account makes it difficult to simply dismiss her as a bad and untrustworthy person. It might be that the unstable narration and the questionable characteristics generate a need to look for signs of unreliability, because that would enable a distance between the reader and the narrator. When we are not able to simply dismiss Eva as untrustworthy, this distancing is not possible. This uncertainty thereby problematizes any attempt to simply blame school shootings on mental illness. Perhaps this uncertainty should be understood as critique of the tendency to remove a problem by declaring a person mentally ill. Like the polarized views of Eva and Franklin, this might be a too simple solution. Instead, if this disastrous and failed attempt at motherhood cannot be dismissed as the result of mental illness, it might be that we have to reassess our assumptions about motherhood, identity, and blame.

## Concluding Remarks

By looking closer at the novel’s plot and narration, I have tried to reflect how the structure and the use of a first-person narrator affect the novel’s thematic focus, or in Nichols’ terms, how the formal context affects the social context of the novel. In terms of plot, the novel is thematically organized, focusing more on emotions and thematic points than action. The structure thereby mimics the fragmented and vague nature of memories. This fragmentation opens up gaps which serve to generate identification with the narrator. It also means that the information provided for the reader is incomplete. Viewing the structure in light of classic detective fiction, the narrator can be seen to perform an investigation. The revisiting of the past becomes an attempt at understanding the motives for the massacre, but also the narrator’s own responsibility for her son’s actions. Since the narrator is herself part of the investigation, the readers will perform their own investigation of the narrator. The lack of a clear solution in the

narrator's investigation means a lack of restored social order, and might even suggest that there is no solution to be reached in the investigation of blame and responsibility.

Throughout the narration, the narrator alternates between agreement and disagreement with her past self. Even though she reveals disturbing characteristics, the first-person narration generates trust and identification. As a result, the narrator portrayal includes a strange duality, encouraging both sympathy and repulsion. This alternation might further be seen as a struggle with identity. The focus on similarities between mother and son draws a connection between the narrator's rejection of her son and self-contempt, which might further demonstrate a struggle with certain conventions of motherhood. It thereby challenges assumptions about the innate quality of maternal instincts. Several aspects further serve to question the course of events and the credibility of the narrator's account, for instance, the opposing views of Eva and Franklin. Ultimately, Eva and Franklin can be seen as representations of the competing arguments in the nature-nurture dichotomy. In the end, their polarized views seem to be equally inadequate to explain human nature. The narrator's extensive analysis of her son might further serve to undermine her credibility because it surpasses what is perceived as reasonable knowledge. It does not render her an unreliable narrator, however. The fact that we are not able to dismiss the narrator as unreliable might be read as a critique of the tendency to blame school shootings on mental illness. On the contrary, it might be that we have to reassess our system of norms.

## The Film Adaptation

Having explored the novel's representation of the story, it is time to consider how the film adaptation deals with similar aspects. When comparing the two works' representations, the aim is not to investigate fidelity or to consider advantages and disadvantages of the film medium, but rather to explore what this particular adaptation has done with specific elements of the text. Ramsay's film adaptation stays close to the novel in that it deals with the same issues and topics. In terms of genre, the film has been recognized as everything from drama to psychological thriller by different reviewers. Indeed, the adaptation includes elements characteristic of the horror genre which contribute to creating an overall uncomfortable and tense mood. In terms of plot, the film includes a similar structure to that of the novel. It seems to be more concerned with inner states of mind than action, and through its circularity the structure highlights the main character's psychological process. Although the film does not include a first-person narrator, this process has an investigative nature which relates to the question of responsibility. The first section of this chapter will therefore look at the film's structure, both in relation to inner states of mind and the detective genre. When it comes to the narration, a significant difference between the novel and the adaptation lies in the film's exclusion of the letters. With the exclusion of direct thoughts and contemplations, there is a slight change of focus in the film, and other aspects of the story receive more attention. Instead of an emphasis on the narrator's characteristics and reliability, the film can be seen to revolve more around the main character's process and interaction with the other characters. The film's focalization will therefore be discussed in greater detail in the second part of the analysis. Importantly, issues of identity, motherhood, and ambiguity become prominent aspects in the film's narration as well, and the film's representation of these features will also be addressed.

### The Plot

The plot of the film, or the order in which the story is presented, is similar to that of the novel in many respects. Although it starts at an earlier point, the film adaptation also begins with introducing the reader to Eva's living situation after the massacre. In the novel, Eva has already got a job when she starts writing the letters, and her house has already been trashed with red

paint. In the film, these events are included in the present storyline and not as flashbacks. The film still includes a similar structure which intertwines two storylines of the past and the present. As the present storyline progresses, it is frequently interrupted by flashbacks. Though the chronology is difficult to detect at the beginning of the film, there is an overall progression in the flashbacks, which allows the reader to follow Kevin's development. Unlike the novel, the film includes another storyline of sorts, and continuously jumps to flashbacks of the shooting. These flashbacks do not follow the progression of the other flashbacks, but rather present themselves as a separate segment. Near the end of the film though, as the past storyline reaches the day of the massacre, they unite. The following discussions will demonstrate how this arrangement of events contributes to establishing the film's focus on states of mind.

### Fragmentation, flashbacks, and circularity

Similar to the novel's structure, the beginning of the film includes rapid jumps back and forth in time, as flashbacks interrupt the present storyline. In the beginning, the flashbacks are short. For instance, early on in the film, Eva attends a job interview at Travel R Us. While waiting to be called in, Eva looks around the agency office, noticing a poster on one of the walls. The film then jumps to a flashback in which Eva sits at her desk in her old office at the day of the shooting. The shift from the first to the second shot is particularly interesting: The camera shoots a close-up of Eva's eyes, while the sound of her voice is heard in the background. The camera then switches to a shot of a wall with posters, but this time, the wall belongs to Eva's old office. The camera has thus entered Eva's mind, and brought the viewer into one of Eva's memories. A cover shot<sup>3</sup> of Eva resting her feet on the desk further reveals the temporal shift that has taken place, for instance through Eva's changed looks. In the first shot, she wears a dark suit, and her hair is shoulder long and unkempt. In the latter, she wears a yellow blouse, and her hair is short and neatly styled. After only a few seconds the flashback is interrupted as the interviewer calls Eva's name, and the film returns to the shot of Eva in Travel R Us.

In much the same way as the novel, the film's structure seems to follow an associative order. Memories of the past seem to be triggered by associations, and this is reflected through the editing. In the scene where Eva arrives home at the night of Halloween, trick-or-treaters knock on the door. Being unable to locate any candy, she turns off the light and hides from

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<sup>3</sup> A cover shot is meant to establish the location and the characters of a scene (Beaver, 2007, p. 58).

view. The sound of fists banging on the door and children yelling seem to overwhelm her. Intertwined with this scene are shots from a scene where a young Kevin throws food at the fridge. The image of the food hitting the fridge evokes clear associations to the Halloween tradition of throwing eggs. As the sound of knocks and yells becomes louder, the situation intensifies. The shifts between the two scenes reminds of crosscut editing, which is commonly used create suspense, as the camera cuts “back and forth between two different actions” (Nichols, 2010, p. 45). In the typical train-car scenario, for instance, crosscut editing indicates that the approaching vehicles will eventually collide. Tension arise out of the decreasing spatial distance between the vehicles. In this scene, the distance is temporal, and the connection between the two actions takes place in Eva’s mind. The editing thus illustrates how temporal boundaries can be broken in the mind, and how the past is thus able to interact with the present.

The film’s preoccupation with inner states of mind becomes prominent in these instances. The intertwining of flashbacks and the present effectively demonstrates how Eva’s everyday life is filled with signals that remind her of the past. Symbolically, the Halloween scene might illustrate how the ghosts of the past haunts Eva, leaving her in a state of chaos and claustrophobia. The inclusion of the massacre flashbacks further illustrates how the massacre affects Eva’s life. The film thus seems to share some elements with art cinema films. According to Nichols (2010), art cinema films are more concerned with interiority, and commonly revolves around feelings and the exploration of consequence. The flashbacks do not merely portray past events, they also seem to relate their connection to the present. Unlike other car-train scenarios, the crosscut editing discussed above does not result in an impact. The lack of any resolution might suggest that there is no end to this interaction between past and present. As such, the film can be seen to explore the power the past has over the present.

In the novel, the letters have a therapeutic function for the narrator, and the search for explanations represents a psychological process as much as an investigation. The film too revolves around a process of sorts for the main character. As already mentioned, the present storyline starts with Eva’s house having been stained with red paint. Throughout the film, shots of Eva working to remove this paint recurrently appear. The process of removing the paint thus receives a metaphorical meaning as the physical representation of Eva’s psychological process. Like the letters, it represents an intentional act. The film’s overall structure further supports this focus on process. Both at the beginning and towards the end of the film similar shots appear. For instance, the film’s very first shot which shows see-through curtains gently blowing in the wind, reappears near the end of the film when Eva finds Franklin and Celia dead in the garden. In another shot, we see the numbers of a digital clock. At the beginning of the film, the clock



says “12.01”. When this shot reappears, the time on the clock shifts from “12.00” to “12.01”. Like the hands of a clock return to their starting point, so does the film. The structure thereby receives a circular movement.

Dalton (2013) argues that circularity is typical of feminine narratives, which often aims to reflect lived experience. They usually revolve around connection rather than conquest, and often include open endings (p. 23). The circular structure of the film can thereby be seen to reflect and highlight the inner processes that seem to take place in the mind of the main character. Content-wise, the shots discussed above embody different aspects of these inner processes. The shot of the see-through curtains, for instance, functions as a frame for Eva’s personal loss of her husband and daughter. The shots of the digital clock appear in combination with Kevin’s conception. The beginning of Kevin’s life thus receives significance: It represents the beginning but also the end of something. These shots can be seen to frame the issue of Eva’s responsibility for her son’s actions. In the last scene of the film, Eva and Kevin seem to reconcile. Eva has also successfully removed the red paint from her house. This gives the impression that something has been resolved. On the other hand, the clock repeating its circular movement might suggest that the process Eva goes through in the film also repeats itself. From a broader point of view, this feeling of repetition might also refer to the copycat effect of school shootings, which seems to ensure the repetition of such events. The emergence of a new day also means the possibility that a new school shooting might take place.

### An unintentional investigation

In the discussion of the novel it was argued that the novel’s structure included elements from classic detective fiction. This was due to the fact that there exists a crime, of which the genesis needs to be clarified. For the reader, two types of investigations could be detected: one of the crime and the events leading up to it, and one of blame which included the narrator’s reliability. The viewer of the film adaptation also becomes a detective of sorts. The present storyline starts with the trashing of Eva’s house. As such, it becomes clear that there has been a crime which has clearly upset the community. Furthermore, the film can be seen to include two stories: one of the crime and its genesis and one of the investigation. Due to the anachronical structure, only pieces of information are revealed at a time. The viewer, like the reader, thereby receives the task of patching the story together.

The film's opening scenes do not introduce the present storyline right away, but rather seem to have an atmospheric function. As already mentioned, the very first shot shows see-through curtains gently blowing in the wind in front of an open porch door. It is dark and the soft movement of the curtains give them a ghostly quality. The sound of sprinklers are heard in the background, which provides a hint that the curtains lead into the garden. In the novel, this is where Eva finds the bodies of Celia and Franklin, but that is not revealed in this shot. The shot only lasts for a few seconds, before shifting to the next shot which, in contrast, shows a large crowd of people covered in red tomato juice. They seem to be pushing each other around, and the sound of cheering in the background can easily be confused with screams of fear. The red juice unmistakably reminds of blood and the scene thereby resembles a blood bath. Eva eventually appears as one of the people in the crowd, and so the shot seems to be from one of her trips abroad. In the next shot, the present storyline begins. The camera shoots Eva as she wakes up on her couch. As she slowly pulls herself off the couch, she knocks a box of pills onto the floor. She walks outside and discovers the red paint that has been splashed across the front of her house. The camera then shifts to a shot of Celia who is sitting by a kitchen bench with her back to the camera. The shot eventually reveals that she has an eyepatch over one of her eyes.

The opening scenes are thus introduced through a type of discontinuity editing<sup>4</sup>. The different shots have no temporal connection, but rather work to relate a specific mood. Both the ghostly quality of the see-through curtains and the tomato festival are indicative of death. The juxtaposition of these shots draws a strange connection between the shots, a connection which remains strange and unclear. In the shot of Celia, a hand-held camera moves slowly towards Celia from behind while Celia is heard singing. This movement from behind creates a sense of suspense since Celia's face and actions are hidden from view. The revelation of the eyepatch further triggers a curiosity to learn what has happened. Together, these scenes thereby create a sense of mystery. The return to some of the opening scenes near the end of the film offers a sense of finally receiving an explanation. In terms of an investigation, the film's circular structure thus creates a sense of a resolution: Now that all the evidence has been provided, it is time to return to the crime and reveal what happened. This is further supported by the massacre flashbacks, which gradually reveal details about the actual crime. When the past storyline finally unites with the massacre flashbacks at the end of the film, a reconstruction of the

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<sup>4</sup> Editing that goes against any standard form of editing which seeks to attain continuity between shots (Nichols, 2010, pp. 39-40).

massacre is introduced. Though it is presented in a rather fragmented way, this reconstruction provides the viewer with a long-sought description of the massacre.

Regarding film's communicative quality, Nichols (2010) argues that when watching a film, the viewer is faced with so-called signifiers. This can for instance be an object, a sound, or a movement. It is the task of the viewer to attach a signified (a meaning) to such a signifier. Together, the signifier and signified form what Nichols calls a sign. Without prior knowledge a signifier may be meaningless, and its importance unknown. In such cases, Nichols argues that a gap arises, and "the felt need to supply a signified intensifies" (p. 32). As was illustrated above, the opening scenes include several signifiers that refer to events in the novel. From the perspective of adaptation, the novel thus provides prior knowledge for these signifiers. Attentive viewers might therefore recognize the signifiers in the opening scenes and be able to attach a signified on the basis of the novel. At the same time, some of the signifiers are more associative than direct representations of features in the novel, and the discontinuity editing contributes to create a new context for the signifiers. In this way, the film adaptation seems to retain a sense of suspense and mystery, while at the same time negotiating elements from its source text.

Unlike the novel, the film does not have an intentional investigator. Whereas the act of writing demands a certain degree of intentionality, memories recalled in the mind might not. The investigation of blame thus takes on a slightly different form in the film. Responsibility and guilt are still prominent issues in the film, signalled for instance, through social sanctions. It also comes to expression in a more metaphorical way. Throughout the process of removing the red paint from her house, Eva is constantly stained with the red paint. The return to shots of Eva trying to wash the paint off her hands implies that she has someone's blood on her hands, and might thereby signal a feeling of guilt. This activity of getting stained and washing clean can be compared to the narrator's process of "thrashing between exoneration and excoriation" (Shriver, 2003, p. 467). It thus illustrates the main character's multifaceted dealings with the feeling of guilt. At the same time, the narrator's decision to write down her story in the novel might be perceived as an act of defence. Since the main character of the film does not write out her experience, this process might be perceived as less a defence, and more a natural response to trauma.

In terms of detective stories, the evidence provided for the viewer is presented in the form of flashbacks. This sometimes becomes problematic because the quality of some of these flashbacks is vague and allusive. One feature that contributes to this effect, is the lack of cover

shots and long shots, which makes viewer orientation difficult to achieve<sup>5</sup>. This is often the case when the flashbacks are intertwined with shots of the present storyline, for instance, when Eva recalls the night of Kevin's conception (referred to as the conception scene). The shots from the present storyline shows Eva lying in her bed. The film then jumps back in time to a close-up of Eva and Franklin kissing, after which it quickly returns to a close-up of Eva in the present storyline. As the film makes another jump back in time, the camera only shoots Eva's feet, running in the streets. When the film jumps straight to close-ups in this way, it is difficult to get a clear overview of the action. The lack of master shots thereby restricts the information provided for the viewer, and illustrates how memories might likewise only be able to tell part of the story. It also serves to highlight the subjective nature of the account.

## The Narration

Having established some of the aspects of the film's plot, it is time to consider the way in which the film tells the story of Kevin, its narration. For film, Branigan (1992) recognizes eight different levels of narration, four which make use of narrators and four which make use of focalization through a character. These levels of narration form a hierarchy, and might operate simultaneously. Several levels of narration can therefore be identified within the same scene (pp. 87-100). Ramsay's film adaptation does not make use of a first-person narrator like the novel. Instead it focalizes the story through Eva. Like Edmiston, Branigan distinguishes between internal and external types of focalization (p. 87). Whereas internal focalization designates what the character hears or sees, external focalization relies on what we can assume that the character hears or sees. Both types of focalization are present in the film.

In the job interview scene, for instance, the use of point-view-shots allows the viewer to see what Eva sees<sup>6</sup>. Before Eva is called in for the interview, the camera shoots Eva who is waiting in the agency's reception. After Eva has turned her head to her left, in the direction of the employees, the camera shifts to a shot of the employees. Since this shot matches Eva's angle of vision, the viewer is given the impression that he or she sees what Eva sees. On the other hand, when Eva visits Kevin in jail for the first time in the film, the camera is mostly focused

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<sup>5</sup> Long shots, like cover shots, can be used to provide an overview of a scene's characters, or action. They are sometimes necessary in order to achieve viewer orientation, in which case they are referred to as obligatory cover shots (Beaver, 2007, p. 149).

<sup>6</sup> In point-of-view shots, the camera perspective matches that of the character (Nichols, 2010, p. 42).

on Eva. The camera shoots and keeps shooting her, while Kevin enters the room in the background, walks up to Eva and sits down. As Kevin starts placing bits of nails on the table, the camera switches between shots of the nails and shots of Eva (this will be referred to as the nail scene). Kevin's whole face is never shown. In other words, it is Eva's reactions that the viewer witnesses. The external focalization thereby invites the viewer to imagine what Eva thinks.

Branigan (1992) demonstrates how the camera framing might represent a character's internalization of his circumstances, by spiralling around the main character's head in "jerky, swaying movements" (p. 104). In Ramsay's adaptation, there are several instances of hand-held camera movements, for example when Eva drives home from work on the evening of Halloween. It is dark, and trick-or-treaters are running around in the streets. Some of them look into Eva's car trying to scare her. A child dressed as a skeleton dances in front of the car, while crossing the street. The hand-held camera moves unsteadily as it follows Eva's viewpoint. Quick camera movements also result in blurred images, and objects going in and out of focus. Together with a narrow angle of vision<sup>7</sup> which prohibits a clear overview, this movement of the camera gives the impression of chaos and disorientation. The editing thereby mimics the main character's emotional state of mind. Together with the elements discussed above, this contributes to establishing the film's focus on experience and emotions, specifically those of Eva. It is also worth noticing that, within the present storyline, Eva has relatively few lines. Her emotions are rather expressed through facial expressions, body language, and editing.

### A tense relationship with the past

The flashbacks from Eva's past is a another type of internal focalization, what Branigan (1992) calls internal focalization, depth (p. 87). Branigan points out that a flashback does not have to be connected with a character, but might also be indicated by a narrator. However, there are clear indications in the film that the flashbacks are initiated by the main character. It is signalled, among other things, through the use of close-ups. For instance, when Eva drives to jail, flashbacks to the massacre are intertwined with close-ups of Eva. This indicates that the flashbacks belong to her memories. It is further signalled through the use of sound advance, which means that the sound from the following scene occurs before the image (Beaver, 2007,

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<sup>7</sup> The lens covers a small horizontal or vertical area (Nichols, 2010, p. 54).

p. 185). For instance, while the camera shoots Eva lying on the couch one evening, the sound of Eva talking is heard in the background. After a couple of seconds, the camera shifts to a flashback of Eva and Kevin sitting on the floor. As the source of the sound is revealed in the second shot, the temporal distance between the shots also reveals that this sound must have taken place inside Eva's head in the first shot. Yet another feature that connects the flashbacks to Eva, is the use of subjective sound<sup>8</sup>. When Eva drives home from the interview, the camera is focused on the window shield, and the sound of the window whiskers as they move back and forth is prominent. As the film shifts to one of the massacre flashbacks the sound of the window whiskers overlaps the two shots. Gradually, though, the sound turns in to the sound of heart-beat which presumably is how Eva experiences the sound of the whiskers. Together with a defocus transition<sup>9</sup>, this instance of subjective sound signals a move into Eva's mind and memory.

Branigan (1992) states that when a flashback is connected to a character, the character becomes a storyteller, and if the flashback is visually represented, the character functions as a diegetic narrator. The realization of the past character thus becomes the object of his narration (p. 101). This closely resembles the ideas of Edmiston and Bray about the first-person narrator, who might treat his past self as the object of his story. In the novel, the first-person narration expressed a certain tension in connection with the past as the narrator devaluated her past self. The film too, highlights a struggle with past memories. In the previous section, it was illustrated how the conception scene created a vague and disoriented portrayal of the flashback by jumping back and forth in time, and excluding the use of master shots. Several other features further contribute to providing the flashback with an atmospheric focus. Hand-held camera movements make the images go in and out of focus. The use of low-key lighting additionally serves to conceal certain parts of the shot, and fills the images with shadows<sup>10</sup>. The sound does not occur in sync with the image, but rather presents itself as a sort of voice-over which overlaps the image shifts between past and present. In combination, these features contribute to creating a dream-like atmosphere.

Furthermore, the images are saturated with red light. This use of the colour red might be both atmospheric and psychologically suggestive. Like the red colour in the tomato festival

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<sup>8</sup> Subjective sound is sound that is portrayed as the character would hear it rather than as an objective auditor would (Nichols, 2010, p. 65).

<sup>9</sup> In defocus transitions the lens focus is manipulated so that the scene becomes blurred. They are often used in transitions to dreams or fantasy sequences (Beaver, 2007, p. 67).

<sup>10</sup> Low key lighting means that only parts of the frame are well lit. This can serve a dramatic effect (Nichols, 2010, p. 58).

scene, the red light that fills the conception scene seems to indicate that something bad will happen. This impression is reinforced when the sound of an ambulance is heard in the background. The scene thereby receives an overall dark and uneasy mood which might in turn be indicative of Eva's attitude towards the memory. Like the narrator's rhetoric in the novel, the representation of this memory seems to rely on a degree of hindsight. As the narrator of the flashback, Eva knows the devastating outcome of Kevin's conception, and this might explain the foreboding nature of the portrayal. It also suggests that there is tension connected to this memory.

Another significant feature that contributes to creating tension is the occasional juxtaposition of image and score. For instance, when Eva is driving to the penitentiary to visit Kevin (for the first time in the film), shots from the massacre are mixed with those of Eva driving. In the shots from the massacre, students are trapped behind the doors to the gym. They are pounding on the door, screaming and trying to get out. The diegetic sound of the screams is muted, and instead, Lonnie Donegan's "Ham N' Eggs" is played in the background. This song has a slow beat and a light tone, implying that this is just a regular everyday situation. While this song might have been appropriate to the shots of Eva driving, it clashes completely with the shots of the massacre. The relaxed and easy tones of the song do not at all correspond to the desperation and fear of the entrapped students. This ironic juxtaposition between image and music serves to highlight the viciousness of the massacre.

As a whole, the scene suggests a problematic relationship with the past. In spite of the disharmonious mood suggested by this clash, the shots of Eva's face reveal a distanced and emotionless facial expression. Her lack of reaction might suggest that these images have been revisited more than once, and that their constant reappearing has left her unable to react. The event of the shooting seems to have left Eva's everyday life strange and alienated. This is further highlighted through the score of the Halloween drive discussed above. While the trick-or-treaters run around in the streets, Buddy Holly's "Everyday" plays in the background. This cheerful song about love definitely clashes with the chaotic and confused state in which Eva appears to be. As the word "everyday" chimes in the background, this seems to be Eva's everyday-situation: strange, incomprehensible, and haunted by the past. This sense of a haunted present is reinforced in the Halloween scene discussed previously. While Eva hides from the trick-or-treaters, flashbacks to Eva's verbal mistreatment of Kevin interrupt the scene. The ghosts of the past, here symbolically represented in the trick-or-treaters, do not only haunt her, they seem to be punishing her for her bad behaviour. Since the narration is focalized through Eva, we might assume that these instances of tension and disharmony result from an uncertainty

within Eva herself. Perhaps the uneasy experiences are triggered by a feeling of guilt. If so, they can be compared to the moments of dissonant narration in the novel where the narrator devaluates her past self.

### Sympathy and pity

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the novel's narration invokes both sympathy and repulsion towards the narrator. The mode of writing, the social sanction and the narrator's apparent sensitivity all contributed to creating a sympathetic portrayal of the narrator. However, certain events and reflections served for an opposite effect and rather invoked repulsion. The portrayal of the Eva character in the film includes many of the same aspects. According to Nichols (2010), point-of-view shots "increase our emotional identification with the character" (p. 42). It seems safe to conclude that the general focalization through Eva might encourage identification with the main character, in the same way that a first-person narration does in novels. Perhaps more so than in the novel, the film's portrayal serves to invoke pity. The film's increased focus on social sanctions, for instance, illustrates how Eva is constantly punished for her son's crime. In accordance with the novel, the trashing of the house and the egg scene are included in the film. New incidents have also been added, for instance, the sub plot relating to Eva's new work place in which one of her male colleagues makes advances at her. When Eva refuses to dance with him at the office Christmas party, he insults her, and asks her whether she thinks anyone else will want her now. Eva does not defend herself in any way, but leaves the Christmas party.

Mise-en-scene and Eva's physical looks further contribute to creating sympathetic portrayal. The Eva of the present storyline looks tired. She wears no make-up, and her eyebrows and eyelashes, being blond and almost invisible, contrast greatly with her black hair. At home, she uses baggy clothes which seem to have belonged to Franklin. The modest size of the house, and the old car further gives the impression that she is rather poor. Compared to the novel, in which the narrator comes across as smart and sensitive through her language, the Eva in the film comes across as slightly more pathetic and helpless. It is also worth noticing, that this portrayal contrasts greatly with the portrayal of Eva in the flashbacks, where she seems much more concerned with style and labels. The change in the main character's physical appearance



thus serves to reflect the impact of the massacre, and contributes to establishing a clear distinction between the past and the present.

The film also reveals Eva's more questionable characteristics. The verbal abuse scene, the slap scene, and the diaper scene are all included in the film, though slightly altered. These incidents are likely to evoke apprehension, and might have a distancing effect on the viewer. However, like in the novel, the context of the incidents might extenuate the crime. Especially in the diaper scene, Kevin's facial expressions give the impression that he is trying to vex Eva on purpose. Furthermore, what the viewer does not get which the reader does, is Eva's contemplations about the situation afterwards, which reveals rather disturbing thoughts and presumably misleading interpretations. The lack of such explicit contemplations might give an impression of a more passive Eva. At the same time, the main character possesses a rather impassive body language. It is not until the end of the film that she is finally shown to be crying. It was suggested above that her lack of emotion might be the result of exhaustion. On the other hand, it might also give the impression of a cold self-possession. This might in turn have a distancing effect, instead of that of invoking sympathy.

It seems that the complex nature of film narration with its simultaneity of levels of narration has the effect of creating multiple possibilities for how the narration is perceived by a viewer. According to Branigan (1992), flashbacks too might be understood in different ways. For instance, they might be perceived as "a summary of the character's present words as they are written, thought, read", or they might come across as "'objective' glimpses of the events upon which the recollection is based" (p. 176). In other words, they might be perceived as a representation of the character's experience of the memory, or they might be seen as an essentially objective representation of what actually occurred. Branigan further states that a text will adapt "to whatever the spectator first believes about the story" (p. 176). In the flashbacks, Kevin is portrayed as sly and mean. He intentionally treats Eva and Franklin differently. If this is perceived as an essentially objective portrayal, then that might contribute to invoking sympathy for the main character. If this is perceived as an representation of the main character's experience, however, then the credibility of the portrayal might be questioned, and rather have a distancing effect. It might also be that this uncertainty about the accuracy of the flashbacks will not be solved, and rather contributes to create an ambiguous portrayal of both Kevin and Eva.

## Issues of identity

Like the novel, the film also signals a struggle with identity in connection to motherhood, which can be derived from an emphasis on the similarities between mother and son. These similarities are, among other things, highlighted by the use of shots. For instance, in the nail scene, an extreme close-up of Kevin shows him retrieving the nails from his mouth and placing them on the table in front of Eva. Without any contextual connection, similar shots of Eva appear after the egg scene. Having made an omelette with the broken eggs, she is forced to go through a similar act of retrieving bits of egg shell from her mouth. An extreme close-up of Eva's mouth shows her retrieving the bits of shell from her mouth and placing them on the edge of her plate. These closely related shots of mother and son not only highlight the resemblance between the two, but it draws a connection between the two that goes beyond looks. Since they are shown to engage in a similar activity, the question arises of what other similar activities they might engage in.

Other shots connect the two characters more directly. At the beginning of the film, Eva dives her face into a basin of water. As she shakes her head, her face changes into Kevin's face. A similar sequence reappears near the end of the film. These shots effectively highlights the physical resemblance between mother and son, and even seem to suggest that they are interchangeable. At another point, Kevin appears on television in what appears to be an interview. While he is talking, Eva's face is reflected in the television screen. In other words, the image of mother and son are placed next to each other while Kevin relates his view on entertainment. Again, their physical resemblance is unmistakable. In the novel, the similarities between Eva and Kevin were seen in connection with self-contempt, partly because the narrator seemed to project her own world views onto her son. In the film, this connection rather seems to draw attention to the question of blame. The focus on their interchangeability and shared genetics effectively questions Eva's responsibility for her son's actions.

It was argued that mother and son shared a tendency to put on roles in the novel. This is detectable in the film as well. It is especially in relation to motherhood that the main character seems to be playing a role, a role that does not come naturally to her. For instance, when Eva tries to teach Kevin to roll a ball, she uses exaggerated motherese intonation and facial expressions. When Eva utters the phrase "I love you kiddo" after the diaper scene, it seems forced and mannered. As for Kevin, his acting is clearly noticeable in the difference in his behaviour with Franklin and Eva. In the flashbacks to Eva's maternity leave, Kevin cries while Eva takes care of him. When Franklin comes home from work and picks him up, on the other

hand, he is quiet. In another scene, Kevin's whole body language quickly changes when Franklin arrives home. Beforehand, he has smeared a slice of bread with jam onto the living room table in front of Eva, while sending her a sly look. When he hears Franklin at the door, Kevin's face suddenly changes, and breaks into a big smile. He excitedly exclaims "Dad!" and runs to greet Franklin. As such, their similarities are noticeable in their behaviour as much as their looks.

Eva's detachment from motherhood is further detectable in the portrayal of the pregnancy and the birth. In the pregnancy and birth scenes, Kevin comes across as strange and alien, much due to the score which with its atonality<sup>11</sup> lacks harmony and reminds of scores often used within the horror genre. Furthermore, in the flashbacks to the pregnancy, Eva looks at herself in a full-length mirror. Her face is expressionless, but the music suggests a feeling of alienation and detachment from the reflection. The same goes for the shot where Franklin prepares a baby chair. In the birth scene, the camera shoots Eva's face through a reflection from the hospital lamp. The image thereby becomes distorted and vague, which together with the strange music makes the birth come across as unnatural. Like the conception scene, it seems to predict that something bad will happen. The use of reflections in these scenes also draws attention to the issue of self-perception. The role as a mother does not come naturally to Eva, and when she tries to force it, she does not seem to recognize herself. This impression of roleplaying contributes to creating a sense of battle between mother and son, a battle that will be discussed in more detail below.

## Ambiguity

An important difference between the novel and the film is of course the first-person narration versus the character focalization. In the film, Eva is not the narrator, but rather the character through which the narration is focalized. Although we, according to Branigan, may define her as the narrator of her flashbacks, Ferenz (2005) argues that in film, only the pseudo-diegetic narrator can be properly unreliable, because only this type of narrator can have sufficient authority over the narration to be blamed for its unreliability (p. 135). The film character's reliability is therefore not questioned in the same way as that of the first-person narrator. For the film, it might be more accurate to talk about Hansen's notion of an "exploration of an

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<sup>11</sup> Atonal music is music that lacks a tonal centre, see "Atonal musikk" (2013).

alternative world” to describe the filmic situation (2007, p. 238). What the film does, then, is to invite the viewer to witness the experiences of a mother whose son is responsible for the gruesome massacre of eleven people.

Even though we might not talk of reliability in the same way, various features still produce uncertainty about the course of events. For instance, visual hints raise the suspicion that Kevin might be responsible for the disappearance of Celia’s guinea pig, as well as the accident with the drain cleaner. When Celia’s guinea pig goes missing, the assumed conclusion is that Celia forgot to close the door to the cage so that the guinea pig escaped. While Eva explains to Celia that her guinea pig has gone to live in the garden, the camera focuses on the sink in which Eva is rinsing the dishes. In a close-up of the drain, the sink eventually overflows. Noticing this, Eva turns on the disposal which makes a strange sound which reminds of a dying guinea pig (at least for those who remember the scene from the novel). After a moment’s surprise, Eva turns to look at Kevin who is playing outside in the garden with Franklin. As the camera shifts to a shot of Kevin, his laughter stops and his expression becomes serious when he realizes that he is being watched. These visual hints thus draw a connection between the guinea pig, the drain, and Kevin. However, since nothing more is said about the event, this theory is neither confirmed nor dismissed. As such, the editing contributes rather than resolves the ambiguity of the situation.

The differing views of Eva and Franklin further contribute to generating ambiguity. Naturally, due to temporal limitations, the film has omitted many of the incidents in the novel that serve to highlight their differing point of views. Their opposite experiences of Kevin are nonetheless still prominent. Like in the novel, it is detectable, for instance, in the portrayal of Celia’s accident with the drain cleaner. In a shot placing Eva and Franklin at the hospital after the accident has occurred, Eva states her theory about Kevin’s involvement out loud. Franklin is surprised and disappointed by her suspicions, and suggests that she see a psychiatrist. In the following scene, Franklin forces Eva to tell Kevin that he must not blame himself. This scene visually highlights the novel’s description of Kevin eating a lychee. Having peeled the lychee, an extreme close-up shows Kevin carefully crushing the lychee with his teeth. His mouth being slightly open allows for juice to spatter out of his mouth. The lychee’s resemblance to an eye ball is unmistakable. Again, the suspicion towards Kevin is not confirmed. Eva strongly reacts to Kevin’s behaviour, and leaves the room. Franklin, on the other hand, does not seem to notice. The viewer is thereby left with two opposite views on what happened, which ultimately creates ambiguity.

A tension arise out of their oppositional perspectives, and this is effectively illustrated in the use of shots and the characters' body language. For instance, when Eva verbally mistreats Kevin, she eventually realizes that Franklin is standing behind her. The camera shifts to a shot of Franklin who looks serious and disappointed. With a shake of the head, he turns away from Eva, a clear indication of his disapproval of her behaviour. Another similar reaction appears in the aftermath of Celia's accident and Eva' accusation against Kevin. After Celia has returned from the hospital, Kevin asks if she wants to pick up his arrows while he is practicing archery. Before Celia can respond, Eva says no. Franklin, who seems to detect her Eva's distrust of Kevin in her quick reply, looks at Eva and leaves the living room in silence. This tension creates ambiguity, but it also highlights the polarization of their opposite views. They are both so certain about their own experience with their son that there is no way of meeting in the middle. Again, the limitations of such strongly polarized views become apparent, as neither of them seems able to grasp the whole picture.

The differences between husband and wife also serve to question conventions. Significant to the contrasting portrayals of Eva and Franklin are their looks. Eva has black, straight hair, dark eyes and a narrow face. Franklin, on the other hand, has curled, brown hair, small eyes, and a round face. Additionally, there is a considerable difference between their types of engagement with Kevin. For instance, Franklin and Kevin interact through games: either playing ball outside in the garden or playing videogames. Eva's engagement with Kevin usually occur within an educational setting: teaching him to roll a ball, to talk, or to count. When Eva does take Kevin out for fun, playing miniature golf and visiting a restaurant, it results in discomfort. In many ways, this portrayal complies with traditional gender roles. Franklin is portrayed as the typical American dad, playing ball with his son. Eva, on the other hand, tries to be the stay-at-home mom. Considering the devastating outcome of the story, these roles seem to fall short in this scenario.

### The battle for power

It is the relationship between mother and son which is the main focus of both the novel and the adaptation, and the battle between mother and son that the narrator describes in the novel is also prominent in the film. It was argued previously that the conception of Kevin is portrayed as a dark and foreboding event. The pregnancy scenes and the birth scene further contribute to

highlighting a troubled beginning to the relationship. Again, the intertwining of past and present plays an important role in the portrayal of the past. In one of the flashbacks to the pregnancy, Eva sits in a changing room among other pregnant women looking uncomfortable and out of place. The narration then shifts to shots from the nail scene. Neither mother nor son say anything during the nail scene, but a twist in Eva's face, indicates that Kevin's act of retrieving nails from his mouth makes her uneasy. The sense of discomfort relating to the pregnancy is thus emphasized by the action of the present storyline. This combination of past and present also suggests a continuation of this discomfort, that Kevin has made Eva uncomfortable ever since he was conceived and continues to do so while in jail.

Following the nail scene, is the birth scene. In the transition between these scenes, a strange linkage is made between the prison and the birth through the use of sound. The nail scene ends with a prisoner being held down by prison guards while he screams and struggles to get free. As the camera shifts to the shot of the birth, the prisoner's screams are subtly replaced by Eva's screams from the birth. During the birth, the words "stop resisting, Eva" are heard in the background. This indication of resistance and the association to imprisonment gives the impression that the birth represents a loss of freedom for Eva. In the following shot, Eva is sitting in the hospital bed with her hands lying limply in her lap and a distant look on her face, while Franklin plays with Kevin on a chair beside the bed. The film thus offers a similar impression of the birth as the narrator's description in novel: "I associated Kevin with my own limitations – with not only suffering but with defeat" (Shriver, 2003, p. 90).

An antagonism continues to colour the negotiations between mother and son throughout the film. Several of the events described by the narrator in the novel are included in the film, such as the diaper scene, which was described in the previous chapter, and the squirt gun scene, where Kevin splashes Eva's room with red ink using his squirt gun. In both cases, the camera captures sly looks from Kevin, which indicates that he is being mean with intent. After the diaper scene, when Kevin conceals the truth about the event from Franklin, close-ups of Eva and Kevin reveal a silent communication between the two, which reminds of the negotiation described by the narrator in the novel: "Kevin and I looked at each other, just long enough to seal the pact" (Shriver, 2003, p. 236). The scenes following this event reveal a cautious Eva, who yields to Kevin's wishes and demands. For instance, while driving in the car, Eva asks Kevin if they can stop by the store. In a close-up of Kevin's arms, Kevin carefully touches the scar on his arm left by the fracture. When Eva sees this, she agrees to drive home. Like in the novel, their relationship seems to revolve around a negotiation of power.

The impression of a battle between mother and son is further supported by the score. Several scenes which portray a type of struggle between the two include the Chinese lute score “Shi Mian Mai Fu”, which translates to “ambushed on ten sides”. As the title suggests, this score is meant to depict the sounds of battle (School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS], n.d.). The score includes sudden shifts and changes in intensity and volume. Like a battle, it is unpredictable. This score appears, for instance, when Eva is trying to teach Kevin to count to ten. Kevin refuses to repeat after Eva, who presumably believes him to be struggling. After a while however, Kevin suddenly counts all the way up to fifty, thus undermining Eva’s pedagogical attempts. Eva’s response is to give him an advanced mathematical question in return, seemingly out of spite. The score also appears in the squirt gun scene, giving the impression that Kevin’s actions are in fact an attack, and not an accident. With its unpredictable rhythm, the score not only supports the depiction of a battle, it also indicates that what the viewer is watching is unpredictable.

Also contributing to the emphasis on battle and hostility is the focus on roleplaying which was discussed previously. The most explicit image of role-playing is perhaps the shot from the massacre at the end of the film: With one hand clutching the bow, and the other arm outstretched, Kevin takes two deep bows in front of a non-existing audience, as if having delivered his final lines in a play. Mixed with these shots are shots of Eva returning from the garden where she has discovered Franklin and Celia. She moves slowly, in the dark, as if defeated. This gives the impression that the shot of Kevin represents a climax of sorts, the final and decisive blow of the battle, or the delivery of his final lines in his play.

There are moments when Kevin seems to give up the roleplaying, and these are also the moments when Eva and Kevin seem to connect. One of these moments occurs when Kevin is sick, at which point he lets Eva read for him and cuddle with him. This change of behaviour might be interpreted in several ways, but in terms of roleplaying, it can be seen as an expression of exhaustion: that he is too tired to play his part, or, in other words, to continue the battle. The reconciliation at the end of the film also represents a moment in which Kevin seems to give up his acting. His looks have drastically change, his hair is shaved off, and his face is scarred and bruised, and for the first time, he expresses fear. In this final scene, Eva and Kevin hug before Kevin is taken away. This hug can be read in various ways. It might be an act of forgiveness for Eva’s part, or it might suggest that Eva finally feels affection towards her son. Either way, if this is a moment where Kevin finally shows his true self, then this might also be seen as a final renunciation of the roleplaying. Just before this reconciliation scene, a master shot of Eva walking out of her house and leaving for the penitentiary reveals that the red paint is finally

gone from the house. In other words, the process of removing the paint has been successful. This suggests that Eva too has undergone some kind of change. If both mother and son can be seen to finally give up their roleplaying in this final scene, then this ending gives the impression that mother and son have been playing a dangerous game, a game of which neither fully understood the consequences.

## Concluding Remarks

Throughout this analysis, it has become clear that several aspects of the novel, both regarding plot and narration, are recognizable in the film. At the same time, certain features seem to draw the film in a slightly different direction. Like the novel, the film portrays the story of Kevin through Eva's perspective, but instead of direct thoughts, the film focuses on her emotional state of mind. It is an unpleasant emotional state, one that seems to be haunted by the past. It also challenges the main character's self-perception and critically questions her responsibility for her son's actions. Like in the novel, the focus on inner states of mind is reflected in the film's anachronical structure which jumps back and forth in time as memories are triggered by associations. Relating to the investigative nature of the story, the removal of the paint from the house and Eva's hands can be seen to embody the same process of accepting and denouncing responsibility that the narrator describes in the novel. This process is also reflected in the film's overall circular structure. Eva's responsibility for her son's actions is further drawn attention to through the emphasis on the genetic connection between mother and son. Like the dissonant narration in the novel, the film also relates a tense relationship with certain memories. This is signalled through the intertwining of past and present, as well as the disharmonious juxtaposition of image and music.

The portrayal of the main character is dual. While certain elements contribute to creating sympathy and pity, other aspects reveal questionable characteristics which might have a distancing effect. Compared to the novel, in which the narrator comes across as smart and sensitive through her language, the Eva in the film comes across as slightly more pathetic and helpless. The interaction between the characters is further characterised by roleplaying. Through the contrasting personalities of Eva and Franklin and their differing engagement with Kevin, attention is drawn to traditional gender roles which in this scenario are anything but successful in fostering a healthy and happy child. Furthermore, concerning the mother-son



relationship, the film adaptation emphasizes the sense of a battle which is described in the novel. Together with the emphasis on roleplaying, this gives the impression that mother and son seem to have been playing a dangerous game without fully understanding the consequences of it. The film's plot and narration can thus be seen to highlight an exploration of interaction and consequences.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to look closer at how the novel and the film *We Need to Talk About Kevin* relate the story about Kevin. This was partly in response to McFarlane's statement about novels and films which suggests that narrative makes the mediums compatible, whereas narration may involve a secret hostility. Concerning plot, both mediums share the possibility to present events in some kind of chronological or consequential order, and as the analysis has shown, the novel and the film adaptation include similar structures. Both works relate the story through the mother, and focus on inner states of mind rather than action. This is supported by the anachronical structure that intertwines two storylines of present and past. In both cases, the structure has an investigative nature which also involves a psychological process for the Eva character. The lack of a solution in the narrator's investigation might suggest that there is no satisfactory answer to the question of blame. Although there is a sense of an investigation in the film as well, the emphasis on circularity draws attention to the main character's psychological process. This further gives a sense of repetition, either of Eva's personal process, or, from a broader perspective, of the occurrences of school shootings.

While the analysis of the novel ended with a comment on the narrator's interpretation of her son, the analysis of the film ended with a comment on the interaction between mother and son. This change of focus might be traced back to the adaptation's narrational transition from voice to perspective, or from Genette's question "who speaks" to "who sees". In the novel, the storylines are interrupted by thoughts, comments and philosophical contemplations. Much of the focus of the novel thereby lies on Eva's world view and interpretation of Kevin. Consequently, the analysis conclusion revolves around the perception of the narrator. The first-person narration in the novel results in a dual portrayal of the narrator, and while certain aspects serve to question her character and her credibility, the intimate nature of the narration encourages sympathy and identification. This problematizes the tendency to base blame on mental illness. Even though the film focalizes through Eva, her credibility is not questioned in the same way. Instead, there is an emphasis on interaction and consequence. The interaction between past and present seems to result in a bizarre and haunted reality for the main character, as she is constantly reminded of her son's terrible crime and her own responsibility for his actions. With an emphasis on role-playing, the interaction between mother and son is further depicted as a battle, in which the massacre becomes Kevin's final attack. The film can thereby be seen to explore the consequences of the interaction between mother and son.

It should be highlighted that the change in focus is not a result of a diacritical-specific feature, but might instead be an effect of the change in narration from a first-person narrator to a focalizer. What the first-person narrator says, reflects her personality, and the novel therefore draws attention to the narrator as a character and as a story-teller. The focalization reflects an experience, or an alternative world, which the focalizer cannot take full responsibility for. In the film, Eva's emotions and state of mind is not signalled through words, but rather through body language, and the editing. In the novel, on the other hand, we are presented with numerous opinions and statements from the narrator. This difference may also contribute to the change in focus. Many of the examples that have been discussed illustrate how the film's use of other devices than words might reflect similar moods as those produced by the novel's narration. For instance, in both versions of the story, the contrasting personalities of Eva and Franklin results in ambiguity. In the film, this contrast is illustrated visually, through looks and body language, whereas in the novel it is often directly described. In both cases, it results in an uncertainty around the course of events. Likewise, the Halloween scene in the film which gives the impression that Eva is haunted by the past and punished for her past mistakes can be compared to the moments of dissonant narration in the novel where the narrator devaluates her past self. The scenes where Eva's hands are stained by red paint and then washed clean can further be compared to the narrator's process of accepting and renouncing responsibility.

Returning to McFarlane's statement that a secret hostility between the two mediums may lie in the narration, hostility seems to me a much too loaded word. There is no question that the means of expression differ between the two mediums, but in terms of adaptation they rather seem to work alongside each other, and perhaps even to enhance each other, offering both different and similar ways of representing human experience.

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## Abstract

This is a study of Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, and Lynne Ramsay's film adaptation with the same title. The aim of this thesis is to examine and compare the ways in which these two works relate the story about Kevin. This is not an attempt at measuring the film's fidelity towards the novel, or to establish any rules about medium-specificity. Rather, the aim is simply to explore the ways in which the film adaptation transforms the narrative situation of the novel. McFarlane states that it is "narrative that makes the two mediums seem compatible, whereas it is in narration that their secret hostility may lie" (2010, p. 19). As a response to this, the thesis studies differences and similarities in the two works' plot, structure, and narration, discussing possible effects of certain features within these areas. The study finds that the film adaptation includes a very similar structure to that of the novel. Concerning the narration, the adaptation uses a focalizer rather than a narrator like the novel. This results in a slight change of focus, moving from the narrator's discourse and ways of expressions, to emotional experience, interaction, and consequences. At the same time, though, other means of expression in the film are found to have similar effects as certain features in the novel, for instance relating to issues of ambiguity, relationship with the past, sympathy, and maternity.



## The Thesis's Relevance for Teaching

Throughout writing my thesis, my interest for the English subject has only increased, and my competence within literature, film, and adaptation studies has greatly improved. The field of adaptation has become a much bigger interest of mine and I believe this to be a relevant area for the students as well. Texts, films, blogs, websites, and video games all communicate with each other, and make adaptation not just a field for academic study, but an important part of our everyday life. Considering all the Marvel and DC Comics adaptations that have been released over the last decade, for instance, we how big a role adaptation plays in youth culture today. I therefor believe that adaptation can be a good point of entry when working with literature and film which might help trigger teenager's interest in both.

One of the competence aims in the English curriculum states that students should be able to discuss and elaborate on English language films. While working with the film adaptation, I have learned more about the communicative nature of films, and I have developed a much deeper understanding for how form relates to content. I have also become more aware of the differences and similarities between literature and film. This will undoubtedly be helpful in any work relating to film in the classroom. As for literature, the English curriculum for upper secondary states that students should work with different types of English literary texts from different parts of the world. Although Shriver's novel might be too advanced, even for an upper secondary level, my improved skills within literary studies in general are transferrable to other literary texts. I have for instance, become much better acquainted with the epistolary genre, and with issues of reliability and subjectivity in literary texts. This can also be connected with a discussion of source criticism and today's challenge with so-called fake news.

As for the topic of school shootings, it was decided last year that all Norwegian schools should practice for possible school shooting scenarios. It would therefore be highly relevant to discuss this topic also in class. The mere fact that we write books and create films about school shootings is also an interesting point of discussion, since this illustrates the central position literature and film have in society. Since the United States have had so many incidents with school shootings, such a discussion would also fall within the competence aim which states that students should be able to discuss culture and social conditions in English-speaking countries. Such a discussion might revolve around the American gun control laws and the Second Amendment, and how these differ from Norwegian laws.