

We Need to Talk about Patriarchal Motherhood

Essentialization, Naturalization, and Idealization in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

This chapter considers how We Need to Talk about Kevin disturbs and deconstructs the patriarchal mandates of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization. In patriarchal motherhood, it is assumed (and expected) that all women want to be mothers (essentialization), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalization), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization). Although feminist criticism of the novel has examined various motherhood themes—including mother blame (Cusk), ideologies of good-bad mothering (Murphy; Muller; Robbins), maternal subjectivity and practice (Messer), and maternal ambivalence (Almond)—my reading of Kevin will seek to uncover “what lies beneath” the maternal angst discussed in the above criticism. I argue that the mother blame, “bad” mothering, and maternal ambivalence so evident in the novel and so central to discussions on the novel are the symptomatic manifestations of the essentialized, naturalized and idealized mandates and expectations of patriarchal motherhood. Eva is blamed and regarded as an ambivalent or bad mother precisely because she is seen as lacking the assumed innate desire and ability to mother as well as the happiness expected of women in and through motherhood. Kevin, thus, not only compellingly and convincingly conveys the discontents of patriarchal motherhood but, more importantly, it uncovers the cause of and reason for this maternal discontent: namely, the essentialization, naturalization and idealization of patriarchal motherhood. In moving beyond the representation of the symptoms of women’s oppression in motherhood—ambivalence, blame, guilt, judgement—to an understanding of their cause, the novel opens up the possibility for change in the novel itself and, hopefully, in the lives of the mothers reading it.

For the past twenty-five years, I have taught a women’s studies course on

mothering and motherhood that examines how patriarchal motherhood is oppressive to women and how women may resist it through empowered mothering. The course opens with a discussion on how normative motherhood is informed and maintained by ten ideological assumptions that cause mothering to be oppressive to women, which I have termed essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood. Essentialization positions maternity as basic to and the basis of female identity, whereas privatization locates mother work solely in the reproductive realm of the home. Similarly, individualization causes such mothering to be the work and responsibility of one person, whereas naturalization assumes that maternity is natural to women (i.e., all women naturally know how to mother) and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill. In turn, normalization limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode: nuclear family. Wherein, the mother is a wife to a husband, and she assumes the role of the nurturer, whereas the husband assumes that of the provider. The expertization and intensification of motherhood—particularly as they are conveyed in what Hays has termed “intensive mothering,” and what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call “the new momism”—cause childrearing to be all consuming and expert driven. Idealization sets unattainable expectations of and for mothers, and depoliticalization characterizes childrearing solely as a private and non-political undertaking, with no social or political import. Finally, biologicalization, in its emphasis on blood ties, positions the birth mother as the “real” and authentic mother. The students then go on to explore these normative mandates of patriarchal motherhood in various maternal theories as well as in selected women’s novels. One of the novels read by the students is Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

In this chapter, I will consider how *We Need to Talk about Kevin* disturbs and deconstructs the patriarchal mandates of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization. Again, in patriarchal motherhood it is assumed (and expected) that all women want to be mothers (essentialization), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalization), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealization). Although feminist criticism of the novel has examined various motherhood themes—including, mother blame (Cusk), ideologies of good-bad mothering (Murphy; Muller; Robbins), maternal subjectivity and practice (Messer), and maternal ambivalence (Almond)—my reading of *Kevin* will seek to uncover “what lies beneath” the maternal angst discussed in the above criticism. As Eva herself comments: “I feared what lay beneath. I feared at the bottom I hated my life and hated being a mother” (188). I will argue that the mother blame, “bad”

mothering, and maternal ambivalence so evident in the novel and so central to discussions on the novel are the symptomatic manifestations of the essentialized, naturalized, and idealized mandates and expectations of patriarchal motherhood. In other words, the maternal ambivalence Eva experiences as well as the blame and judgement that she (and many readers) assign to her mothering are created and maintained by these three ideological imperatives of normative motherhood. Eva is blamed and regarded as an ambivalent or bad mother precisely because she is seen as lacking the assumed innate desire and ability to mother as well as the happiness expected of women in and through motherhood). And that is why, in my view, the book disturbs so many readers: it shows that the sacred truths of motherhood—mothers love their children unconditionally, women are happy in motherhood, and women naturally know how to mother—are fictive or, perhaps more accurately, ideological constructions. But this is always why *Kevin* is such an important novel and required reading for those committed to challenging and changing patriarchal motherhood. *Kevin* not only compellingly and convincingly conveys the discontents of patriarchal motherhood but, more importantly, it uncovers the cause of and reason for this maternal discontent: namely, the essentialization, naturalization, and idealization of patriarchal motherhood. In moving beyond the representation of the symptoms of women's oppression in motherhood—ambivalence, blame, guilt, judgement—to an understanding of their cause, the novel, I believe, opens up the possibility for change in the novel itself and, hopefully, in the lives of the mothers reading it.

For those who have read *We Need to Talk Kevin*, “possibility,” “change,” and “hope” are not the words typically used to describe this novel about a mother whose sixteen-year-old son kills his high school classmates and, it is later revealed, his own sister and father. But I would suggest that it is precisely Eva's candid, retrospective meditations on her mothering that allow for an authentic critique of patriarchal motherhood. Indeed, as Eva writes to Franklin (her husband): “It's far less important to me to be liked these days than understood” (4). Jane Messer explains: “that part of Eva's maternal work . . . is her privatized maternal thinking while mothering Kevin and which she later engages in to produce the narrative” (16). However, as Messer goes on to argue

these later letters of *uncensored protest*, argument, critical reflection come only after fifteen years of mothering Kevin. During which time she attempts to perform the social script of motherhood. Until *that Thursday*, she performs the tasks of maternal care with reservations, anger, mistrust and persistent ambivalence and even violence, but she always makes the attempt, and mutes and hides her ‘real’ feelings from Kevin and Franklin. (emphasis in original, 16)

Indeed, as Eva explains to Franklin, “I’d become accustomed to concealing things from you, but mostly thought crimes” (203). Attentive readers realize that what is at issue in the novel is not whether Eva fails at mothering but rather how patriarchal motherhood—in its mandates of essentialization, naturalization and idealization—cause all mothers to feel and experience maternal ambivalence, guilt, and blame. In making this argument, I am drawing on Adrienne Rich’s crucial distinction “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any women to her powers of reproduction—and children and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (emphasis in original, 14). I argue that the novel, through Eva’s retrospective uncensored protest, demarcates and distinguishes, as Rich theorized, the reality of patriarchal motherhood from the possibility and potentiality of mothering. Thus *Kevin*, to paraphrase Rich “is an attack on mothering as *it is defined and restricted under patriarchy* (emphasis in original, 14). The aim of this chapter is to explore the novel’s critique of patriarchal motherhood under its three mandates of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization. The conclusion will consider how the novel in its critique opens up the possibility for empowered mothering.

Essentialization: “There Was Something Wrong with Me, Something Missing”

With the patriarchal mandate of essentialization, it is assumed and expected that all women want to become mothers and that maternal desire is innate to all women. Since Eva is happily married, in her mid-thirties, and has a successful career, the time and circumstances are certainly ideal for her to become a mother. However, as Eva relates many times throughout the novel, she has never experienced the assumed natural feminine longing to bear and raise children. She writes:

For years I’d been awaiting that overriding urge I’d always heard about, the narcotic pining that draws women ineluctably to stranger’s strollers in parks. I wanted to be drowned by the hormonal imperative to wake one day and throw my arms around your neck, reach down for you and pray that while that black flower bloomed behind my eyes you had just left me with child. (27)

However, as she goes on to explain:

Whatever the trigger, it never entered my system, and that made me feel cheated. When I hadn’t gone into maternal heat by mid-thirties, I

worried that *there was something wrong with me, something missing*. By the time I gave birth to Kevin at thirty-seven, I had begun to anguish over whether, by not simply accepting this defect, I had amplified an incidental, perhaps chemical *deficiency* into a *flaw* of Shakespearean proportions. (emphasis added, 27)

The phrases “something was wrong with me” and “something missing” as well as the words “flaw” and “deficiency” signal Eva’s awareness that she lacks the maternal desire expected of women. In an earlier letter to Franklin, she writes that she “root[ed] around in [her] mental attic for [her] original reservations about motherhood” (25). In response to this questioning, she compiles a list of what she calls the “the ten downsides of parenthood,” including “unnatural altruism,” “dementing boredom,” “worthless social life,” and “social demotion” (25–26). Reflecting on what she terms her misgivings,” Eva comments: “They were selfish and mean and small minded, so that anyone compiling such a catalogue who chose to retain her tidy, airless, static dead-end desiccated family tree was not only short-sighted but a terrible person” (26). Yet later as she contemplates the list, she writes: “[I]t strikes me that, however damning, the conventional reservations about parenthood are practical. After all, now that children don’t till your fields or take you in when you’re incontinent there is no sensible reason to have them and it’s amazing that with the advent of effective contraception anyone chooses to reproduce at all” (26–27). Eva does not reject children per se, as is argued in most readings of the novel, but, more specifically, the essentialist mandate that assumes that Eva, as a woman, should *want* to have children. Although there are moments in the novel—as seen above—that Eva judges and defends herself for lacking the maternal desire expected of her, she continues to regard maternity as alien to her sense of self and being in the world. Indeed, as she explains to Franklin: “Motherhood, now that is a foreign country” (19). And later she writes: “My visions of childrearing ... all seemed like pictures of someone else” (32).

Significantly informing Eva’s denunciation of the essentialist mandate is a larger critique of the patriarchal role of mothers. In a letter, she explains to Franklin: “[I] was always horrified by the prospect of turning out like my mother” (30). In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich defines such a sentiment as “matraphobia”: “the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mother* (emphasis in original; 236). Matraphobia, Rich continues,

can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother’s bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree

woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers, and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (236)

Eva's mother was agoraphobic and as a child Eva, in her words, "was always running errands for which I was too young and that therefore daunted me" (31). But Eva goes on to say: "But let me be candid. I *am* much like my mother.... [I]n pushing me to be her emissary ... my mother managed to reproduce in me the same disproportionate anguish about minor interactions with the outside world (emphasis in original, 31). As she explains further in relation to her frequent travels for work: "I can't recall a single trip abroad that, up against it, I have truly wanted to take, that I haven't in some way dreaded and wanted desperately to get out of.... [The proposed trip] was a gauntlet I'd thrown down and compelled myself to pick up. If I was ever glad to have gone, I was never glad to go" (31). And later she writes: "Once I had habituated to rising to my own challenges—to proving repeatedly that I was independent, competent, mobile, and grown up—gradually the fear inverted: The one thing I dreaded more than another trip to Malaysia was staying home" (31). Significantly, she comments:

So I wasn't afraid of becoming my mother, but *a* mother. I was afraid of being the steadfast, stationary anchor who provides a jumping off place for another young adventurer whose travels I might envy and whose future is till unmoored and unmapped. I was afraid of being that archetypal figure in the doorway—frowzy, a little plump—who waves good-bye as a backpack is stashed in the trunk; who dabs her eyes and blows kisses as a backpack is stashed in the trunk, who dabs her eyes with an apron ruffle in the fumes of departing exhaust; who turns forlornly to twist the latch and wash the too-few dishes by the sink as the silence in the room presses down like a dropped ceiling, More than leaving, I had developed a horror of being left. (emphasis in original, 31-32)

In this passage, in its repeated tropes of conventional motherhood, there is not a rejection of mothering per se but of the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which denies mothers a selfhood and life outside of their identity and work as mothers and demands of them selflessness, constancy, and sacrifice in motherhood. Indeed, as Eva explains further: "I was mortified by the prospect of becoming hopelessly trapped in someone else's story" (32). She was, as she explains to Franklin "*absolutely terrified of having a child*" and that "this terror is what must have snagged me, the way a ledge will tempt one to jump off.

The very insurmountability of the task, its very unattractiveness, was in the end what attracted me to it" (emphasis in original, 32).

The question that remains and that will be considered in the conclusion of the chapter is whether or not the absence of maternal desire is caused by the expectations of patriarchal motherhood. Does Eva fear and reject becoming a mother or being the "archetypal figure in the doorway" of patriarchal motherhood? Whatever the cause of her apprehensions about and aversion to maternity, it is clear that Eva does not possess the maternal desire that is assumed to be innate to women and that is required under the patriarchal mandate of essentialization.

Naturalization: "I Was Playing My Part"

In *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond writes that the *Kevin* "(r)aises especially difficult questions: What is a mother to do with a child she *cannot* love, a child she fears and hates? What is a child to do who cannot love his mother and knows she cannot love him? Can such a situation ever be resolved or remedied?" (emphasis in original, 112). Almond locates her discussion of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in the context of her book's larger thematic and theoretical interest in maternal ambivalence; what she terms the "monster within" and "the hidden side of motherhood." Ambivalence, Almond explains in her introduction, "refers to a conflicted mental state, in which one has both loving and hating feelings for the same person. It characterizes all human relationships, not just that of mothers and child. Being able to tolerate both kinds of feelings, at different times, without having one feeling destroy the other, is a sign of good mental health" (8). Writing specifically on maternal ambivalence, author and psychotherapist, Roszika Parker defines it as "a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings exist side by side" (18). Almond argues "that ambivalence *itself* is not the problem but rather the guilt and anxiety that ambivalence provokes" (emphasis in original, 24). Mothers fear, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "that hate will overwhelm love" (81). In *Of Woman Born*, Rich relates that her children cause her great suffering: "It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alteration between bitter resentment and raw edged nerves and blissful gratification" (81). Maternal ambivalence, as Rosika Parker elaborates: "is well established in psychoanalytic literature but because cultural expectations and assumptions presume and demand that a mother love her children unconditionally and selflessly the mother who exhibits or admits maternal ambivalence is judged harshly and is the object of shame and disbelief" (18). "That mothers have mixed feelings about their children," Almond contends, "should come as no surprise to anybody; but it is amazing

how much of a taboo the negative side of maternal ambivalence carries in our culture, especially at this time” (xiii). Moreover, as Almond explains further, “today’s expectations for good mothering have become so hard to live with, the standards so draconian, that maternal ambivalence has increased and at the same time become more unacceptable” (xiii). Indeed, hating someone solely based on her religion, ethnicity, sex or nationality, may be seen, in Almond’s words, as “being unreasonable or bigoted, but if you hate your children, you are considered monstrous—immoral, unnatural, evil” (2).

In its first person account of maternal regret, anxiety, doubt, and guilt, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a novel about maternal ambivalence and its mother-narrator, Eva, is viewed by many readers and critics as a bad, if not a “monstrous” and “unnatural” mother. Nike Bourke, for example, in his review of the novel describes it as “a tale of excessively cruel mothering” (qtd. in Muller 39). For many readers there is a clear cause and effect relationship at work in the novel: Kevin is a bad person because of bad mothering, which is the result of Eva’s maternal ambivalence. In her discussion of the novel, Almond reflects: “How does a child get to be this way (malevolent, resentful and vengeful)? Is initial ambivalence that destructive?” (124). Or, as critic Vivienne Muller wonders, “Is Kevin’s killing spree revenge for bad mothering” (38)? Lionel Shriver herself asks a similar question in one article: “Whether [Kevin] is hopelessly mangled by his mother’s coldness or is innately disagreeable in a way that fosters her dislike is a question the novel tackles but never quite resolves” (“Separation from Birth”). She elaborates further in another article, “This is the question with which the novel struggles, but which it ultimately fails to answer. That verdict is the reader’s job” (“Why Ruin Your Life”). And in the novel, Eva likewise comments: “I worry ... that I may too be laying the groundwork for claiming that Kevin is all my fault. I do indulge that sometimes ... gulping down blame with a powerful thirst.... But for me this greedy gorging on fault never works. I am never able to get the full story inside of me” (65-66). Significantly, in her many interviews and articles on the novel, Shriver discusses her own ambivalence about becoming a mother, explaining that she was “petrified of having children” and “foreswore motherhood” at the age of eight (“Separation from Birth”). In one interview, she associates becoming a mother with “the relegation of one’s own ambitions” and “a precipitous social demotion (“Separation from Birth”). Her greatest fear though, Shriver says, was the ambivalence itself: “I hadn’t wanted to be a mother since I was eight. What if I bit the reproductive bullet, and the queasiness failed to abate? What if even, it got worse? Imagine bearing a child and then realizing with the helpless irrevocable little person squalling in its crib that you’d made a mistake. Who really, in that instance, would pay the price?” (“Separation from Birth”). Significantly, as she explains further, she began writing the novel *Kevin* at the age of forty-two—“the imminent closure

of the reproductive window”—and while, in her words, “a series of barely pubescent boys had started shooting their classmates” (“Separation from Birth”). “Out of this intersection of private and public angst,” she continues, “I wrote my seventh novel in which a woman—a woman like me—overcomes grave misgivings about motherhood to take the plunge. Yet once her baby born, those misgivings burgeon to full-blown lament” (“Separation from Birth”).

But I would suggest that this book is, ultimately, not about maternal ambivalence per se but about a mother for whom the ability to mother does not come naturally; thus, her mothering fails to adhere to the patriarchal mandate of naturalization. Just as the mandate of essentialization assumes that the desire to become and to be a mother is innate to women, the patriarchal mandate of naturalization assumes that maternal ability is likewise innate to women: mothers naturally love their children and know how to mother. Drawing on the work of socio-biologist and primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Almond argues that “loving motherhood is not automatically programmed into the female of species” (7). “The guilt produced by the pressure on women to be all-loving and all-giving toward their offspring,” Almond continues, “takes a powerful toll on both mothers and their children ... as women fail in their attempts to fulfill impossible standards of mothering, [t]hey feel angry and disappointed with themselves and, in turn, angry and disappointed with their children” (11). “Too many women” Almond goes on to explain, “suffer as they attempt to be perfect mothers, an effort driven in part to cover over their ambivalence. Modern ‘maternally correct’ mothers are literally driving themselves and their offspring crazy in their quest for maternal perfection, which can only be proven by the perfection of their offspring” (7-8).

However, I argue that it is not “the contradictory state of mind” (Parker) of maternal ambivalence that drives Eva’s quest for maternal perfection but, more specifically, the absence of a maternal desire that she and society at large expects of mothers in motherhood. In the novel, Eva comments: “I think that ambivalence didn’t go away because it wasn’t what it seemed. It is *not* true that I was ‘ambivalent’ about motherhood. You wanted to have a child. On balance, I did not. Added together, that seemed like ambivalence” (emphasis added, 55). The novel, in the words of reviewer Amanda Craig, “is an account of what it must be like to become a mother while having no talent for motherhood.” As Eva comments, “I felt absent. I kept scrabbling around in myself for this new *indescribable* emotion, like stirring in a crowded silverware drawer for the potato peeler, but no matter how I rattled around, no matter what I moved out of the way, it wasn’t there” (emphasis in original, 81). And later in the text, she admits: “I was confident that he (Kevin) could infer a subtly exasperated quality in my voice, when I burred and cooed that burbling and cooing did not come *naturally* to me and that his precocious ear could isolate in the end-

less stream of placating blather an insidious, compulsive sarcasm” (emphasis added, 87). As Eva emphasizes: “the whole thing was going wrong from the start ... I was not following the program ... I had dismally failed us and our newborn baby. That I was, frankly, a freak” (83). Lacking what she believes (and society believes) is natural to mothers, she must, in Susan Maushart’s words “fake motherhood” (463).

For Eva, motherhood is, thus, a performance. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender, I argue that maternity in the novel is similarly performed. Gender, according to Butler, is performed rather than biologically inhabited and, as she explains, such “performativity is not a singular act but always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12). Throughout the novel Eva’s mothering is continually described as performance. Reflecting upon the day she learned that she was pregnant, Eva writes: “I had the afternoon to assemble myself in the glowing mother-to-be.... I tried on different approaches to a shopworn scene: coy, delayed, bemused, artificially offhand: gushing—oh darling! None of them seemed to suit” (53). And when she is about to tell Franklin of her pregnancy, she says “I kept my back turned and arranged my face” (51). Later during the trial, the lawyer accuses Eva of “acting a part ... going through the motions” (39). Eva comments later: “There may indeed be an element of theatre in these visits [to the prison]. But they continue when no one is watching, because if I am trying to prove that I am a good mother, I am proving this, dismally, as it happens, to myself” (40). And in prison Kevin says to his mother: “You may be fooling the neighbours and the guards and Jesus and your gaga mother with these goody-goody visits of yours, but you’re not fooling me. Keep it up if you want a gold star” (43). The words and phrases used here—“assemble,” “arranged,” theatre,” “acting a part,” “trying to prove” and “fooling”—position Eva’s mothering not as natural ability but as cultivated performance. As she writes to Franklin, “I have no end of failings as a mother, but I have always followed the rules” (39). Remembering her attempts to smile at Kevin as the parenting books advised, Eva writes:

I smiled and smiled, I smiled until my face hurt, but when my face did hurt, I was sure he could tell. Every time I forced myself to smile, he clearly knew that I didn’t feel like smiling, because he never smiled back. He hadn’t seen many smiles in his lifetime but he had seen yours, enough to recognize that in comparison there was something wrong with Mother’s. It curled up falsely; it evaporated with revelatory rapidity when I turned from his curb. Is that where Kevin got it? In prison, that marionette smile, as if pulled up by strings. (87)

But, as she says later: “The harder I tried the more aware I became that my very effort was an abomination . . . I was guilty of emotional malfeasance” (87). The word “malfeasance” is particularly revealing in understanding Eva’s mothering as performance. It refers to “wrong doing (illegal or dishonest behaviour) by a public official (a person holding public office or having official duties, especially as a representative of an organization or government department)” (*Oxford Dictionaries*). This reference to a public official, used in the context of Eva’s mothering, foregrounds, as Adrienne Rich argues in *Of Woman Born*, that motherhood is a public, and, more specifically, a patriarchal institution. The term emotional malfeasance, thus, signifies that Eva’s inability to mother is more than just a personal failure; it is, according to the laws of patriarchal motherhood, illegal behaviour. Lacking both the maternal ability and mother love that is assumed to be innate to all mothers, Eva must perform mothering and fake motherhood. Indeed, as Eva writes to Franklin: “I beg you to understand just how hard I’d been *trying* to be a good mother. But trying to be a good mother may be as distant from being a good mother as trying to have a good time is from truly having one” (emphasis added, 195).

Idealization: “Childbirth Had Left Me Unmoved”

Susan Maushart opens her book *The Mask of Motherhood* with a quotation from Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*: “There is a strange discrepancy”, writes Friedan, “between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we are trying to conform” (qtd. in Maushart xi). This problem, Maushart contends, remains “in most cases, precisely the same today” (xi). She explains:

The content of women’s daily realities has changed enormously, as has the nature of the images to which we seek to confirm. But the identity crisis—the mismatch between expectations and experience, between what we ought to be feeling and how we do feel, between how we ought to be managing and how we do manage—remains as painful as other and as intractable as ever. (xi)

Looking specifically at women’s experiences of motherhood, Maushart examines the contrast and the contradictions between women’s expectations of motherhood and their experiences of it. She argues that mothers today “increasingly bring to the experience expectations that are not simply inaccurate, or ill-informed, but downright disabling. Maybe even delusional” (xiii). The mask of motherhood, Maushart explains, is an “assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, and all knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and com-

plexity of our lived experience” (2) To be masked, Maushart continues is “to deny and repress what we experience, to misrepresent it, even to ourselves” (1-2). A woman, as Shelia Kitzinger notes, “who catches sight of herself in the mirror—as it were, unmasked—sees a very different picture. And the message is clear: she is a failure” (qtd. in Maushart 8).

In the above sections on essentialization and naturalization, it was shown how the novel unmasked motherhood by showing that maternal desire and ability—assumed to be innate to women—are, in reality, culturally constructed and performed. In this section, I will look at how the novel unmasks the idealization of motherhood in contemporary culture to explore what Maushart calls “the mismatch between expectation and the experience” (xi) or what may be termed the cognitive dissonance between the reality and image of motherhood. Shriver’s narrative, as Muller explains, “constantly needles the mis-fit between Eva’s individual experiences of motherhood and the social discourses of mothering which relentlessly seek to claim her, and to cause her to dissemble” (43). The novel, I argue, examines how the mask of motherhood confers an idealized and, hence, unattainable image of motherhood that causes women, such as Eva, to feel guilt, resentment, and anxiety about their own messy and muddled experiences of motherhood. In her article on *Kevin*, Ruth Robbins references Wordsworth’s birth myth in his “Imitations” ode to explore “the many gaps between the ideal of maternity as it is represented in our culture, and the actual experience of the maternal as a process and as a series of relationships engaged in by real women and their real children” (172). She argues that absent in Wordsworth’s idealized and transcendent male view of birth are “the often gory details—the trails of blood of mucous and other matter, and the physical pain- which accompany ... ‘real’ birth, and the mess of any child’s early years” (173). *Kevin* provides, to use Robbins’ words, “a corrective vision that modifies the cultural ideal [of motherhood]” (160). In so doing, the novel, again to borrow from Robbins’ “breaks the frame, crosses generic boundaries; it messes with genre, with mess... being the operative word” (177). In this, *Kevin* performs what I have called elsewhere “an archaeology of maternity” to unearth and excavate the truths of motherhood hidden beneath its mask (*Mother Matters*).

Significantly Maushart devotes three of her chapters to the specific masks of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. “Our society,” Maushart writes, “propagates a myth of pregnancy that is almost preposterously positive” (88). She elaborates: “For every woman who revels, goddess-like, in her pregnant body, there is another who feels downright grotesque. The prevailing Mask of Expectant Motherhood suggests there is something aberrant about such women, as if the failure to bloom hints at some intrinsic perversity of spirit”. (90). Describing her own pregnancy, Eva comments: “Any woman whose teeth have rotted, whose bones have thinned, whose skin has stretched knows the

humbling price of a nine-month freeloader.... The whole time I was pregnant with Kevin I was battling the idea of Kevin, the notion I had demoted myself from driver to vehicle, from householder to house" (58). In a letter to Franklin, she confides:

There is no use pretending now, [childbirth] was awful.... In fact I never told you this before, but the emotion on which I fastened to push was loathing.... I despised being spread out like some farm exhibit with strangers gawking between my canted knees ... I hated myself for ever having agreed to this humiliating theater.... And yes, I even hated the baby which had brought me unwieldiness and embarrassment and a rumbling subterranean tremor quaking through the very ocean floor of of who I thought I was. In the very instant of his birth, I associated Kevin with my own limitations –not only with suffering but defeat. (emphasis in original 75-76)

Maushart writes:

Where previous generations of women approached childbirth expecting the worst—and usually getting it, today's generation suffers from an even crueller indignity. Having been led to expect the best, the disjuncture between anticipation and experience is a yawning psychic chasm from which we emerge not only battle-scarred but angry. For many women, that anger is self-directed: it is experienced as guilt, a sense of shame that we have failed to perform to standard. (114-115)

For Eva, childbirth was "nothing like books" (Maushart 115), and she experiences neither joy nor accomplishment in birthing her son, as the idealization of birth promulgates, but rather a sense of "loathing" and "defeat."

As Eva's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth unmask motherhood so, too, does her experience of breastfeeding. Writing on this, Eva discloses

At first I thought I was doing something wrong ... But no; I would place the nipple between his lips ... He had sucked a time or two, but turned away, the bluish milk running down his chin. He'd cough, and perhaps I imagined it, he even seemed to gag.... He wouldn't even take my milk from a bottle, writhing from it without a sip. He could smell it, He could smell me. (86).

"Mothers today," Maushart explains, "have been given a hopelessly sanitized version of the physical travails involved in normal breastfeeding" (212). Maushart

argues that most mothers “perceive themselves as ‘failures’ at breastfeeding—with predictably disastrous results for their self-esteem. They have been brainwashed to believe that breastfeeding will come naturally, even effortlessly, that as nursing mothers they will experience profound physical and emotional satisfaction; that their ‘perfect’ milk will produce ‘perfect’ babies” (202). Believing in and seeking to conform to the mask of effortless breastfeeding, Eva construes the normal challenges of nursing Kevin as indication of her own personal failings, not only as a nursing mother but as a mother herself: “I shouldn’t have taken it personally but how could I not? It wasn’t mother’s milk he didn’t want, it was Mother” (86).

Throughout the novel, Eva perceptively and profoundly unmasks motherhood as they are enacted in the idealizations of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding: She writes to Franklin:

All very easy for you to want to be *Daddy*, to buy into all the stuffed-bunny schlock, when I was the one who had to blow up like a sow, I was the one who had to turn into a goody-two-shoes teetotaler sucking down vitamins. I was the one who had to watch her breasts get puffy and bloated and sore when they used to be so neat and close, and I was the one who would be ripped to ribbons ramming a watermelon through a passage the size of a garden hose. (emphasis in original, 75-76)

In this passage, Eva potently counters the sentimentalization of patriarchal motherhood, which disguises and denies the lived embodiment of reproductive labour. In her article “Why Ruin Your Life?” Shriver elaborates,

Eva experiences pregnancy as an invasion. When her newborn son is first set on her breast, she is not overwhelmed with unconditional love; to her horror, she feels nothing. She imputes to her perpetually screaming infant a devious intention to divide and conquer her marriage. She finds caring for a toddler dull.... And worst of all she detects in Kevin a malign streak that moves her to dislike him.

Speaking truthfully and authentically about the messy and muddled realities of mothering, particularly as they are experienced in pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, the novel challenges and corrects the patriarchal mandate of idealization, which expects and requires mothers to find joy and purpose in motherhood. Indeed, with the novel *Kevin*, to borrow from Rich in *Of Woman Born*, “the words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through” (25).

**Conclusion: “Don’t You Let Them Saddle You with All That Killing”:
Beyond Mother Blame and Towards Authentic Mothering**

At the end of one of Eva’s visits to Kevin in prison, he says to her, as she is leaving: “Don’t be dragging your ass back here on my account. Because I hate you” (43). Upon hearing his remark, Eva reflects:

I had some idea of what I was suppose to say back: *Now I know you don’t mean that*, when I knew that he did. Or, *I love you anyway, young man, like it or not*. But I had an inkling that it was following just these pat scripts that helped land me [in prison visiting her son]. So I said instead, in the same informational tone. “I often hate you too Kevin.” (emphasis in original, 43-44)

Within this passage, Eva realizes that it is the dictates of patriarchal motherhood and *not* her mothering that are to blame, as well as her refusal to “follow the pat scripts” and say what she is “suppose to say.” I argue that Eva, to use Rich’s terminology, is moving from the institution of motherhood to the potentially of mothering; to become, again in Rich’s words, a “mother outlaw.” More specifically, this passage marks the achievement of what I have termed “empowered mothering” (*Rocking the Cradle*). In the first instance, empowered mothering functions as an oppositional discourse of motherhood; more specifically, it signifies a theory and practice of mothering that seeks to challenge the dominant discourse of motherhood and change the various ways that the lived experience of patriarchal motherhood is limiting or oppressive to women. Most pointedly, as I have argued, the overarching aim of empowered mothering is to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, autonomy, and advocacy-activism denied to them in patriarchal motherhood (*Rocking the Cradle*). In this moment, Eva speaks truthfully and refuses to follow the “pat scripts” of patriarchal motherhood. She has, in other words, achieved the maternal authenticity of empowered mothering. Authenticity, as Elizabeth Butterfield explains, “is an ethical term that denotes being true to oneself, as in making decisions that are consistent with one’s own beliefs and values. In contrast, inauthenticity is generally understood to be an abdication of one’s own authority and a loss of integrity” (700). In the context of empowered mothering, maternal authenticity draws on Ruddick’s concept of the “conscientious mother,” and my model of the “authentic feminist mother” (*Maternal Thinking*), and refers to “independence of mind and the courage to stand up to dominant values” and to “being truthful about motherhood and remaining true to oneself in motherhood” (Butterfield 701; O’Reilly, *Maternal Thinking*). It is only after *that Thursday* when Eva stops “following the rules” (39)

of patriarchal motherhood that she can act and speak truthfully as a mother and become authentic in her mothering.

It is also during one of Eva's visits to the prison when the mother blame of patriarchal motherhood is similarly recognized and challenged. When asked by one of the mothers "What drove Kevin to do it?" Eva confesses: "I expect it's my fault. I wasn't a very good mother—cold, judgmental, selfish. Though you can't say I haven't paid the price" (165). In response, the mother remarks:

It's always the mother's fault, ain't it? That boy turns out bad cause his mama a drunk, or she a junkie. She let him run wild, she don't teach him right from wrong. She never home when he back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy's a drunk, or his daddy not home after school. And nobody ever say they some kids just damned mean. Don't you believe that old guff. Don't you let the saddle you with all the killing. (165)

The mother, Lorretta Greenleaf, goes on to say: "It's hard to be a momma. Nobody ever pass a law and say 'fore you get pregnant you gotta be perfect. I'm sure you try the best you could. You here, in this dump, on a nice Saturday afternoon. *You still trying* ... And you don't be talking any more a that nonsense" (emphasis added, 166). Eva's relief at her empathy and words is so intense that she squeezes Lorretta's hand back "so hard and so long that she must have feared I might never let go" (166). With Lorretta and others at the detention centre, as Messer writes, "Eva feels she no longer has to translate her thoughts into the language of the suburban mundane that she can speak without having to explain" (18). Lorretta's denouncement of the concept of mother blame along with Eva's enactment of authenticity in her prison visits with her son provide a powerful challenge to and critique of patriarchal motherhood and, thus, makes possible a change to this institution. And in so doing, allows for a counter-practice and identity of empowered mothering. To paraphrase Rich's words, Eva now refuses to be a victim and has gone on from there.

In her article "Why Ruin Your Life?" Shriver writes:

I think *Kevin* has attracted an audience because my narrator, Eva, allows herself to say all those things that mothers are not suppose to say.... Though some readers have been put off by my narrator's unattractive confessions, a remarkable number of people have expressed to me their gratitude that someone in modern literature has put motherhood hitherto off-limits emotions into print.

She goes on to say that “While we may have taken the lid off sex, it is still out of bounds to say that you do not like your own kids, that the sacrifices they have demanded of you are unbearable, or perish the thought, you wish you never had them” (“Why Ruin Your Life?”). Indeed, in contesting, countering, and correcting patriarchal motherhood, in particular its mandates of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization, the novel moves beyond critique to the possibility for change. In so doing, the novel affirms that what we need to talk about is not Kevin but rather the patriarchal institution of motherhood.

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