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## Fe/male Mother of Two: Gender and Motherhood in Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk About Kevin

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FE/MALE MOTHER OF TWO: GENDER AND MOTHERHOOD IN LIONEL SHRIVER'S

*WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN*

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Bachelor of Arts in English: Literature and Language Arts

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December 2004

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MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

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Spring 2016

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**December 7, 2015**

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**ABSTRACT**

There are critical reviews regarding Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* that discuss many controversial topics in the novel. Of these reviews, most critics limit their arguments to the taboo topics of American school shootings and Eva's character as an ostensibly ambivalent mother. Unfortunately, there is little academic criticism on Shriver's most recognized novel and, among such analyses, two of Shriver's most crucial depictions are overlooked. Firstly, readers must acknowledge the impact that contemporary American society has on females and mothers. This novel shows how much a culture relies on societal "rules" that govern human expectations. Secondly, Shriver's character of Celia is often overlooked. Without taking Celia into account, Eva cannot be fully analyzed as a mother.

Eva's character can be defined as a conventional *and* unconventional female. We should also recognize Celia's importance, as well as the significance of each child's reaction when identifying Eva's conventional *and* unconventional mothering tactics. As I demonstrate, Eva is *not* an ambivalent mother, even though society labels her as such.

Shriver suggests that how a person mothers a particular child is influenced by that individual child's reaction to that style of mothering. Kevin responds more agreeably to Eva's unconventional mothering, while Celia flourishes with Eva's conventional mothering. For Shriver, contemporary society defines and critiques our expectations for gender and motherhood. Since Shriver's protagonist is both a female *and* a mother, Shriver suggests that the character of

Eva must endure more scrutiny from society. Ultimately, Shriver depicts a society that makes us do, say, and think the absurd, like condemning a mother for her teenager's murderous acts.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Lionel Shriver undercuts stereotypes regarding gender and motherhood through her character Eva Khatchadourian in her 2003 novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. This novel, like many of Shriver's works, addresses taboos, and the taboos in *Kevin* include American school shootings and maternal ambivalence. Although the issue of American school shootings is advertised on the jacket of Shriver's novel, the hidden or secret taboo that most readers identify next is that Shriver's narrator, Eva, is a "delinquent" mother, concluding that Eva is to blame for Kevin's wrongdoings, even though Eva declares her innocence at the end of the novel in her final letter to her dead husband. Yet, just because readers focus on Shriver's inclusion of Eva's ambivalent moments as a mother, I would like to adjust that focus to concentrate on the many maternal efforts Eva puts forth with Kevin, and to also prove her innocence regarding *Thursday*. Readers, critics, and reviewers, along with theorists of gender and motherhood studies, discuss school shootings and Eva's less-than-perfect mothering choices of her firstborn, yet ignore most of Shriver's depictions about the impossible societal expectations for gender and motherhood, as well as the paradoxical demeanors of Eva's two children, and the solid defense for Eva as an incredible mother to a problematic child in contemporary America.



Shriver crafts *Kevin* as an epistolary novel; Eva Khatchadourian, an Armenian-American, writes letters to her dead American husband, Franklin Plaskett. Though ostensibly written over a six-month period, the content within these letters covers twenty years of Eva's marriage to Franklin. Through these letters, Shriver's Eva often reveals her difficulty in liking their peculiar son, Kevin; Kevin chooses to reveal and conceal certain sides of himself to either parent, and Eva tends to write about the malicious side of Kevin, which she sees more than Franklin ever did. Eva attempts countless conventional tactics while mothering Kevin, but he is not a conventional child, and so these efforts of hers end up ineffectual. Yet, Eva's conventional maternal efforts with Celia, Franklin and her second child, work out effortlessly since Celia acts like a more "normal" child and reacts conventionally to Eva's conventional mothering. Shriver clearly shows that a mother needs to use a mothering style that is appropriate for each individual child. If the children differ in deportment, so should the mother differ in her approaches with mothering them. Eva's letters which include information about the fictional civil suit against Eva, pertaining to her "defects" in raising Kevin, clearly thematize Eva's self-reflection of her "guilt" throughout the novel.

Leading up to the day of Kevin's school shootings (which Shriver has Eva refer to as *Thursday*), Shriver's Eva thoroughly examines her own self, as well as her relationship with Kevin, through her letters to her dead husband. Even though parenting in contemporary America has evolved, Shriver chose a traditional model of a married male and female couple thus emphasizing societal expectations of what a female mother should be, say, and do within the family. Through the novel, Shriver makes it clear that those who follow traditional parenting structures will be judged according to traditional

roles and impossible standards. Shriver suggests that this traditional gender role in the family construct is more probable to be critiqued if a child misbehaves. I use the term *female mother* to emphasize the doubled weight of societal criticism Eva's character has to endure throughout Shriver's novel.

Shriver's Eva notes her "failures" as a mother when she matches up her efforts to societal expectations of motherhood, which causes her to echo the social construct of female guilt. Yet, readers come to find that Shriver's Eva believes that she is not to blame for Kevin's horrible actions throughout his life, including *Thursday*. Shriver suggests to contemporary female mothers that, even though there are plenty of cultural tendencies to blame an upper-middle-class mother for her offspring's errors, the mother should not be blamed by others, or herself, just because society and culture see such maternal blame to be the fitting explanation in contemporary America.

To most readers, Eva primarily conveys internal conflict regarding her relationship with Kevin among the first twenty-six letters of the twenty-eight-letter novel. She reflects, while writing to posthumous Franklin, on the countless times she felt guilty as Kevin's mother. These "guilty" feelings match up to Eva's mind echoing society's desire for the "perfect" mother. When Eva did not agree that she was society's definition of the "perfect" mother, she assumed it was guilt, when it really was her falling into this cultural impression of contemporary maternal guilt. After *Thursday*, more amiable emotions between Eva and Kevin are unmistakably identified, especially in the final chapter of the novel. Yet, most critics ignore the warm moments and friendly connections between Eva and Kevin within the first twenty-six chapters. One connection of mother and son is discussed through Eva's letter about Kevin's approval of Eva when she

returned one of his computer virus files she took from his bedroom. Once Kevin realized that Eva understood why he collected them, Kevin offered Eva, ““You know, if there’s anybody you don’t like...And you got their e-mail address? Just lemme know...Better warn them you got friends in low places”” (326-7) and Eva took this in, believing that “this is *bonding!*” with Kevin (327) since a conventional relationship does not work with her unique son.

Another mother-son understanding that Eva writes to her dead husband about is when she does not give Mrs. Mary Woolford any sympathy for Kevin calling her anorexic daughter fat. Eva realized then that, if she followed Mary’s request to scold Kevin for doing so, that ““the consequences of [her] daughter at school will be even worse”” (*Kevin* 302). Eva predicts that Kevin would tease Laura even more if he knew that Laura told her mom, and that *her* mom told *his* mom, since Eva recognized this pattern from Kevin’s past situations. Here, Eva reveals an understanding of her strange child, and proves that conventional parenting methods do not work with him, as they only make situations worse.

Clearly, the connections Eva includes in her letters to Franklin that have to do with her getting along with Kevin, are not characterized as conventional mother-child relationships according to Eva and society, but this is Shriver’s way of depicting unconventional motherhood, as well as unconventional children. Eva believes that “it must be possible to earn a devotion by testing an antagonism to its very limit, to bring people closer through the very act of pushing them away” (400). Once these connections are detected, we then learn that Shriver’s Eva does not always fit into conventional categories including gender and motherhood, but challenges them in her letters to her

dead husband through using voices of contemporary America. Eva hears the cultural tendency to blame herself, but ultimately knows she is not to blame. Shriver uses Eva's letters and her civil trial in order to criticize contemporary American culture that expects upper-middle-class female mothers to be conventionally perfect, despite the fact that not all children are the same, or respond in the same way to the current trends in parenting.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL DISCOURSE

*Kevin* is Shriver's most reviewed work, yet there is little academic criticism published about this work. Moreover, there are even fewer published articles about gender and/or motherhood regarding this text. In the reviews and articles, some critics and reviewers only argue about motherhood, and a few more psychoanalyze Kevin's character. None of these scholars address Eva's belief of her innocence in terms of the trial or of *Thursday*. There is no analysis of Eva and Celia's relationship in accordance with gender and motherhood and there is no discussion of how Kevin's odd nature since infancy, not his mother, is the cause of his wicked behavior throughout his life.

Most critics focus on plot events and overlook the significant detail of Shriver's stylistic choice to write in epistolary form. Critics, such as Emily Jeremiah, Jane Messer, Andrea O'Reilly, Elizabeth Podnieks, Sara Ruddick, Evelyn Somers, and Rosella Valdrè, focus on characters' actions, but neglect the implications of their characterizations (including, but not limited to the meaning behind characters' names, Eva's cultural background, and the fact that Eva has more in common with her son, Kevin, than she has with her daughter, Celia). Somers generalizes Shriver's depiction of motherhood as nontraditional (meaning Eva's actions include her seeming unaffectionate, harsh,

unnaturally maternal, etc. with her children, which differ from the traditionally accepted and expected societal norms), instead of identifying how Shriver classifies both traditional and nontraditional illustrations of motherhood, and mocks many traditional actions and reactions that are not as sensible now in contemporary America. Valdrè analyzes Eva as Mother, stating that Eva's ancestors were brought up in Armenia and, accordingly, Eva identifies herself in her letters as "forever...a foreigner" (*Kevin* 44) since she has spent so much time in other countries. Eva also includes in her letters that "Motherhood...is a foreign country" to her (19) when describing her raising Kevin. Additionally, her "neighbors now regard [her] with the same suspicion they reserve for illegal immigrants" (45). These references from Eva's letters depict a late twentieth-century voice for women who lack a connection with their own countries, as well as lack the conventional desire to become mothers. But another way to see Eva's discord with being an American is that she does not agree with all of the conventions regarding motherhood, especially when she is put on trial just for being Kevin's mother. To add to Valdrè's ideas of Eva as Mother, Messer claims that Shriver shows us that procreating, in order to fulfill gender and motherhood norms, is no longer a good idea. Messer alludes to the fact that Eva reproduces for the wrong reasons, thus making her a "bad" mother from the start.

Ruddick defines Shriver's depiction of Eva's mothering Kevin as "selfish for seeking autonomy beyond her children as whore/Magdalene ('bad') rather than being the "selfless, sacrificial, and domestic...angel/Madonna ('good') (Podnieks and O'Reilly 4) conventional mother. Following the protagonist's Old Testament name, Ruddick uses a Biblical allusion to describe Eva's maternity, and Tamar Hager also

references Genesis when Eve was told “In sorrow will you bear children” (36), which also relates to Eva bearing Kevin in a mournful mindset. Shriver’s allusions to the Eve in Genesis are more complicated than Ruddick’s explanation above.

Contesting the idea that Eva is a selfish mother by showing her many sacrifices and acts of selflessness, Shriver suggests that Eva, like other women, is a caregiver who is selflessly committed to her kids and role as mother. Eva obviously gives up more of her time and passions in life for her children than Franklin ever did. But according to Nikki Shelton and Sally Johnson, this pleasant description of motherhood is not accurate of Eva when reflecting a feminist view for maternity in the late twentieth century (326). Yet, P. Nicholson notes that contemporary mothers like Eva experience a “loss of autonomy and time; loss of appearance; loss of femininity/sexuality; and loss of occupational identity” (Shelton and Johnson 317). Eva sacrifices so much to be a mother, and so much more because she is Kevin’s mother. Again, the mothering of Celia is neglected, the civil suit against Eva is ignored, and so is Eva’s maternity post *Thursday*.

Critics and reviewers, including Messer, O’Reilly, Podnieks, Ruddick, Dr. Craigan Usher, and Valdrè, tend to define Eva’s maternal character as ambivalent, instead of noting her devotion and commitment when she repeatedly tries to achieve the impossible, which Shriver implies through Eva as Mother. Shriver does not create Eva as ambivalent, or an untraditionally “masculine” mother, but instead Shriver challenges gender and motherhood norms through Eva’s letters, proving that each child requires his/her own method of mothering. These reviewers and critics agree with how Eva describes herself to Loretta Greenleaf: “‘I wasn’t a very good mother – cold, judgmental, selfish’” (*Kevin* 165) toward her firstborn, while Eva describes Franklin to be the

“better,” more traditional, parent among the two. Because of this majority perception of the novel, critics and reviewers alike only see that Shriver refutes the anticipated conventional view of the utopian world of “happy” women becoming “happy” mothers, opposes the traditional idea that all women feel the need to become mothers, and challenges the idea that traditionally “feminine” mothers are the “better” parents as opposed to traditionally “masculine” fathers. Yet they miss the fact that Eva endlessly attempts to be the conventionally “good” mother to Kevin, but he detests conventionalism and this is the issue, not Eva. While trying to be a conventional mother to Kevin, Eva ends up mimicking cultural expectations by experiencing some superficial judgments of her behavior.

Shriver also has Eva tackle the taboo of maternal ambivalence. This message is usually analyzed in respect to classifying Eva’s character as an ambivalent mother since, through Eva’s character, Shriver depicts that motherhood is not everything to all women/wives/mothers anymore. This thought has been the case for decades, according to Sarah Odland Burke, who writes on post-World War II. maternal identity. Burke also notes how mothers cannot match societal norms if they follow gender norms (73). Moreover, Eva does express passion for her career throughout the novel; according to Michele Hoffnung’s analyses, putting work before family is only true of sixteen percent of women in the 1990s (712), thus backing Shriver’s depiction of challenging norms. But Shriver depicts that, just because Eva enjoys her career, does not mean that she cannot be a “good” mother too.

Hoffnung also notes that the more well-off mothers are, the more likely they are to have feminist approaches in the career world (713); these women tend to break the



proverbial glass ceiling, just like Eva. This also gives way to creating conflict with these mothers in dividing their time between career and family (Hoffnung 713), which Eva also experiences. Although, opposed to critical analyses, when Shriver's Eva disregards many conventional trends of motherhood, her relationship with Kevin improves. We might classify these thoughts and acts as ambivalent when it comes to *motherhood* (since Eva can be harsh at times, as opposed to Franklin's "softer" parenting methods with Kevin), but Eva reveals to Franklin that these moments are the most pure since Kevin reacts acceptingly. Eva tries to be the "best" mother for Kevin, attempting conventional *and* unconventional methods in order to appease her son, while Franklin *expresses* what he and late-twentieth century American society believe to be the more appropriate way to parent a child, which Kevin abhors. Shriver suggests that Franklin's expression of conventional paternity with Kevin is offensive to Eva, who learns to be more unconventional and contemporary as a woman and with Kevin due to his reactions to her efforts.

Dr. Craigan Usher, a psychologist and reviewer of Shriver's novel, calculates that this novel gives readers a clear warning for ambivalent women not to procreate. Yet, Usher does not mention what Shriver shows through Eva's countless conventional efforts and simply through the endurance of her son. Usher neglects the positive attributes within Eva and Kevin's relationship and he does not seem to respond to Shriver's other mother-child connection of Eva and Celia's relationship. Similar to Usher, Somers does not clearly define Shriver's character of Eva as Mother, and also disregards the fact that Eva is also Celia's mother. In addition, Gregory Phipps claims that Eva has no control over Kevin (109) and that she is uncertain of knowing who Kevin really is. Phipps' critique

shows us that Shriver depicts a mother who is emotionally, and sometimes physically, distant from her son, and, in essence, labels her an ambivalent mother instead of acknowledging Kevin as the impossible child. Phipps also does not discuss how adamantly Eva attempts to carry out conventional and expected motherhood tactics with Kevin for so many years. Another critic who was previously mentioned, Valdrè, also analyzes motherhood in Shriver's novel and critiques Shriver's character of Eva as Mother. All of these analyses of Eva's letters are linked to Shriver's portrayal of Eva's challenges with raising this extremely difficult child. Yet, there is more to Shriver's depiction of motherhood than simply that, and there is also another child to consider when dissecting Shriver's choices concerning Eva as Mother.

Critic Jane Messer refers to philosopher Sara Ruddick's thesis on maternal thinking and Shriver's novel. Messer concludes that if we put "Dejours' centrality of work and Ruddick's maternal practice theses together," then we have "maternal labor" (18). Messer provides readers with the idea to excuse Eva's failures and sufferings; maybe this is the new form of maternal work since work itself is contingent. To most critics, Shriver has Eva fail and suffer in her efforts to mother Kevin in a "socially acceptable" and conventional way, exposing the trials of parenting this odd child without much return.

Podnieks' and O'Reilly's *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Literatures* offers the most comprehensive analysis of Shriver's depiction of motherhood. These two women compiled essays and research from other critics concerning motherhood studies, as well as conducted their own studies regarding this field. They establish that motherhood studies came about in the late 1990s within

“feminist scholarship and women’s studies,” (O’Reilly 368). The overall objective of their text “is to map shifts from the daughter-centric stories...that have, to be sure, dominated maternal traditions, to the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades as the mother’s voice...has moved slowly...from silence to speech” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 2) and to “create a space for the articulation of maternal voices” (O’Reilly 367). It is obvious that *Kevin* is not a daughter-centric novel, but critical responses suggest that there is no daughter at all. Yet, if we examine how Shriver includes Eva’s motherhood of *both* children, and if we recognize how Shriver affixes maternal strength with Eva’s struggles while raising Kevin, Shriver’s message about societal expectations regarding gender and motherhood in contemporary America appear clearer.

Podnieks and O’Reilly create and divide their own genre of motherhood studies into four classifications: Absence, Ambivalence, Agency, and Communication (12), noting that any given woman might fit in all four categories, and usually are. Podnieks and O’Reilly chose critics to match an assigned motherhood category to a work/s that they all agreed complement the given category. One of these chosen critics, Emily Jeremiah, classifies Shriver’s Eva in the category of Ambivalence, even though this is the least fitting category for Eva. Jeremiah states that Shriver’s depiction of Eva as Mother falls outside of the dominant heterosexual gender norms in parenting, thus giving way to other Americans and other mothers’ acceptance and recognition of new and different ways of parenting. There is no reason for Jeremiah to challenge Eva’s sexuality, but we can agree that *some* of Eva’s mothering does not follow societal and cultural norms. Jeremiah examines the Plaskett-Khatchadourian family in this regard to “queering”

parenting outside the normative expectations of society, but she hardly mentions Celia in her theory. Without Celia, Shriver's cautionary messages about trying to fit into conventional norms with gender and motherhood are even more unnoticed by readers.

In her chapter on Ambivalence, entitled "We Need to Talk about Gender: Mothering and Masculinity in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*," Jeremiah divides her analysis into four subtopics: 1) "The Gender of Mothering;" 2) "Challenging Motherhood, Challenging Femininity;" 3) "(American) Masculinity in *Kevin*;" and 4) "Power, Blame, Ethics." Jeremiah recognizes that Shriver creates Eva as a nontraditional mother who essentially fails at being a good example for her family, but Jeremiah does not analyze how Shriver has Eva attempt as much as she can while raising Kevin and that she is able to mother Celia differently than Kevin, which, as I will prove, shows Shriver's depiction of Eva's fluctuation with both conventional and unconventional motherhood, exposing maternal voices of the late twentieth century. Jeremiah and Shriver's other critics avoid analyzing the more traditional, more feminine, more maternal, and more socially accepted mothering acts that Eva conducts while raising her daughter. Eva's varying stance on motherhood is what proves Shriver's implication that motherhood is contingent in contemporary America. Yet, we must analyze Shriver's critiques of traditional, conventional, normative motherhood through Eva's relationships with both of her children, as well as deduct that societal expectations cause Eva to battle with herself regarding her mothering mannerisms, in order to determine Eva's classification as Mother.

In his review, Usher admits that he does not understand why anyone would want to read this work since Shriver generates so many difficulties for Eva to endure from

being Kevin's mother. Phipps claims that Shriver's Eva does not have control over her son and does not know who he is. Messer and Ruddick explain "maternal labor," and Podnieks and O'Reilly inform us that Shriver's novel is a realistic matrifocal work while anti-son, thus defining Eva as a "bad" mother through Biblical references. Yet, through Eva's own self-reflections, readers can see that Eva's thoughts of being a "bad" mother are representations of societal beliefs, not her own. Phipps overlooks that Shriver challenges traditional expectations through Eva, which is exactly the component that creates Eva's connection to her son, while Messer and Ruddick avoid the fact that Shriver makes Eva out to be the "better" parent to Kevin than Franklin, and demonstrates Eva's less strenuous efforts of parenting Celia. Podnieks and O'Reilly disregard the fact that Shriver's work is son-centric with an unreliable narrator whose best Biblical allusion is to the mother of the world, Eve. All three of these critics exclude Shriver's message of family conventions in contemporary America; they overlook Eva's, as well as Shriver's depiction of Celia's presence in the novel. Celia's presence exposes Eva's maternal conventions, which are reciprocated by Celia more than Kevin.

Since readers and critics ignore Eva's multiple "acceptable" mothering tactics with Kevin and ignore Celia so much, many of them assume that Eva represents an ambivalent mother, especially since Eva describes herself as ambivalent in her letters. Instead, these critics fail to see that Shriver's Eva is actually an instrument for Shriver to proclaim how societal norms, specifically concerning gender and motherhood, are contingent upon external factors: the type of child determines the type of parenting techniques that "work" best for that individual, and that society shapes so much of what contemporary Americans do, say, think, and feel, that inner-turmoil arises for Eva when

her attempts at conventionally mothering Kevin repeatedly fail. Mostly with Kevin, and at times with Celia, Eva challenges the norms of gender theory and these very challenges expose Eva's true character of altering her mothering techniques to match the needs of her individual children in specific situations. For example, when Kevin continues to scream and cry as an infant, Eva mocks conventionality since her efforts continue to be unsuccessful with Kevin; she does this when she writes to her dead husband that she "was careful to use the insipid falsetto the experts commend" with her tone, yet the words she remembers that she spoke to baby Kevin were rather unconventional: "'What's your problem, you little shit? Proud of yourself, for ruining Mummy's life?'" (*Kevin* 109). Here, Eva expresses emotions of anger, frustration, and hopelessness of being a conventional mother, but in a conventional tone, so that the baby would still be soothed in a conventional fashion, according to societal norms. By doing this, Shriver proves that, even though Eva follows a conventional technique, speaking to her baby in society's recommended tone, Kevin still wails. It is not Eva's mothering that alters Kevin's personality; it is Kevin's choice to deny his mother's efforts. Yet, Eva does what she can to perform within society's traditional directives, such as fitting into the role of a traditional female mother. She speaks in this tone, and does plenty of other "unnatural" acts in order to fulfill societal expectations, regardless of her son's reactions. Since Kevin does not receive Eva's conventional attempts the way society predicts a child should, Eva is left to feel it is her fault in not performing conventions correctly. Yet, she is quite conventional with raising Celia, and during the days Kevin was really ill, since he accepted conventionalism then, that conventionality does work for her, and her children. Here, Shriver clearly shows that Eva's parenting is fine, but her different kids respond in

different ways. Readers and critics also tend to ignore that Shriver depicts Eva as a “better” mother to Kevin than she does with Celia. Shriver suggests that, because Eva has to put forth so much more effort to be a “good” mother to Kevin since he continues to deflect her conventional attempts, that she is a “better” mother with Kevin. Since Celia was always willing to accept Eva’s mothering tactics, raising Celia took less energy and frustration. After several conventional attempts with mothering Kevin, Eva challenged normative gender and motherhood more often while raising Kevin than Celia, with the added fact of having more time raising Kevin than Celia since he is seven years older, and since Celia dies young. Jeremiah at least recognizes Shriver’s application of unconventionality.

Most critics, including Jeremiah, Messer, O’Reilly, Phipps, Podnieks, Ruddick, and Usher, focus only on Eva’s unconventional tactics when mothering Kevin, when the most valuable critiques cannot be complete without recognizing standard voices of late twentieth century America, and without analyzing Eva and Celia’s relationship in comparison to Eva and Kevin’s relationship. Through her letters to her husband, Eva performs conventional *and* unconventional gender and motherhood norms with Celia, just as she exhibits both with Kevin, although she is more frequently unconventional with Kevin after she realizes conventional motherhood does not fare well with him. Critics immediately deduce that Eva has the exact opposite relationship with her daughter than with her son; critics infer that Eva and Celia have the “better” relationship (meaning, the more conventionally-reciprocated relationship) since Eva describes her maternal relationship with Celia as “too easy...Celia was plainly loveable...a girl so easy to please” (*Kevin* 224-5). Ironically, Shriver poses the reverse implication of these mother-

child relationships. Even though Celia was easier to raise, the fact that Eva does more for Kevin during her tireless attempts to be a “good” mom, she works harder to mother him than she does Celia, showing how much she does in order to try to appease her son. Shriver’s inclusion of Celia in this work is critical in order to decode the messages she has for her readers regarding different types of kids requiring different types of parenting methods, and also for critics to finally gain an accurate analysis of what Shriver says about gender and motherhood among societal expectations.

When we address challenging conventions of gender and motherhood, as well as attach Celia’s character to Eva’s motherhood and gender, Shriver’s message is apparent. While most critics perceive that Eva is punished when she challenges gender and motherhood norms, in actuality, Shriver suggests that veering away from conventional norms regarding gender and motherhood is more beneficial to both the mother and child when the child is unresponsive to conventional techniques. Shriver also suggests that unconventional methods should be more appreciated and accepted in contemporary America. Through this epistolary novel, Shriver suggests that the child’s character determines the necessary style of mothering. In fact, when Shriver’s Eva is assessed as a mother of two, it is not only evident that Shriver challenges motherhood norms, but she opposes gender norms as well; Shriver, through Eva’s relationships with her two children, challenges conventional gender roles and conventional norms for motherhood according to Eva’s individual children’s needs. Shriver suggests that if a child does not respond conventionally to conventional motherhood, then mothering that particular child unconventionally may cause a more anticipated response from that child.



Shriver's inclusion of Celia consequently displays Eva quite differently than how readers notice her with Kevin in the beginning portion of her letters. Because Shriver includes this daughter in Eva's family, attention is drawn to Eva's inconsistencies with gender norms as opposed to her performative gender with Kevin. If we look at the segments of Eva's letters that include her mothering Celia, it is evident that Shriver stresses the idea that humans, females, and mothers can, and do, vary; not only do they vary in their performative motherhood acts, but they vary in their gender norms as well, depicting the idea that mothers do not always follow or cite pre-existing societal models. In addition to the variables among mothers, we must also recognize the same amount of variables should apply to each child as well. Unfortunately, Celia is hardly ever mentioned when this novel is discussed, and when she is mentioned, most reviewers and critics conclude that Eva's mothering is more accepted, more normative, when it comes to mothering Celia. Even though Eva writes to Franklin that her conventional feminine side appeared more often with Celia than with Kevin, it is only due to Celia's reciprocation of Eva's conventional attempts. Shriver continues to have Eva challenge her gender norms even when Celia is part of the conversation in Eva's letters, which reviewers tend to overlook. J. Welch declares how "older mothers are usually richer mothers—they have enjoyed their careers, have developed the confidence to raise their children in their own way and feel less resentment surrounding the constraints that childcare places on adults' lifestyles and relationships" (Shelton and Johnson 317), meaning that Eva is able to be a "better" mother with Celia since she has reached a certain point in her life. While we can clearly see how loving and gentle Shriver makes Eva out to be when she is with Celia, Shriver still shows unpleasant situations when Eva

adheres to her gender norms in her letters. For example, Eva gets frustrated since Celia is afraid of so many everyday places, like the bathroom. In her letters, Eva recalls telling Franklin: “‘She’ll go to the bathroom by herself now,’ I resumed. ‘But she doesn’t like it in there. She never has. She wouldn’t *play* in there’” (*Kevin* 287). Moreover, Eva has to cook a certain way so that Celia is not disgusted with runny eggs on her French toast. Eva writes, “I was carefully frying Celia’s French toast completely dry, lest a little undercooked egg seemed like *slime*” (*Kevin* 362). These examples not only show how Eva describes the conventional maternal attention she gives to her daughter, but they also prove Eva’s conventional feminine compassion for Celia, as well as Celia’s acceptance of such conventionality. The unconventional aspect in this part of Eva’s letter is that Shriver includes a hint of a critical tone when Eva uses the word “*slime*,” indicating that Eva shares with her dead husband how she criticized Celia’s hypersensitivity to textures of food, as many children are within certain developmental phases.

With gender and motherhood combined, Jeremiah professes many statements regarding Shriver’s novel. Jeremiah professes that: Shriver tends to avoid Eva’s use of dominant heterosexual gender norms while parenting, not all women are the same or have to become mothers, Eva rejects motherhood like a second-wave feminist, Eva is a terrible mother, Eva is against boys, and Eva has self-guilt as a nontraditional mother who is not the epitome of a successful mother. Each of these matters that Jeremiah claims is worth discussing, yet Jeremiah never considers some other crucial arguments that need to be contended and never gives any analysis of Shriver’s narrative structure. Jeremiah fails to recognize the learning experiences Shriver creates for Eva as a mother and, in turn, for us as readers, that Eva *does* apply traditional, more socially accepted, motherhood norms,

and that motherhood is contingent, just like gender. One conventional act Eva describes in her letters is changing her diet in hopes that Kevin would take to her breast: “I didn’t drink. I eliminated dairy products. At tremendous sacrifice, I gave up onions, garlic, and chilies. I eliminated meat and fish. I installed a gluten-free regime, which left me with little more than a bowl of rice and undressed salad” (*Kevin* 86). Obviously, Shriver depicts how Eva sacrifices her daily diet purely for the good of her newborn, which is quite compliant with conventional motherhood of putting the baby before the mother. Once again, Celia is overlooked in Jeremiah’s discussion, even though Celia is incorporated in the many meanings behind this novel. Additionally, all of these examples exhibit self-sacrificing for upper-middle class mothers in contemporary America. Eva is not entirely unconventional with Kevin nor is she absolutely conventional in her mothering Celia. Rather, Eva attempts to respond differently, not only to fit the needs and desires of each child, but also each individual mood of each child, proving further the varying levels of contingency within gender and motherhood.

With *Kevin*, Shriver exposes more than just the majority’s belief of Eva’s representation of maternal ambivalence; Shriver chooses to challenge conventional female motherhood through Eva’s relationships with both of her children: “I pretty much gave up on whatever effort I had ever made to disguise my preference for one child over the other” (*Kevin* 303), referencing Eva’s fondness of parenting the easier, more receptive, and more unproblematic way as it was with Celia than with Kevin. This also exposes contemporary voices of busy and fast-paced American women and mothers who are dealt with problem children like Kevin. This choice not only adds to the complex character of Eva that Shriver creates, but also furthers what critics have problematically

begun. Many critics and reviewers mention gender and examine motherhood in Shriver's novel, but they miss Shriver's critique of the very expectations *they* are applying. Societal impact is stronger than we realize, to the point that Eva is brought up on trial for parental negligence, when society is to blame, not Eva. These critics have also yet to explore Butlerian theory with *Kevin*.

### CHAPTER III

#### BUTLERIAN THEORY

Shriver examines gender and self-identity through *Kevin*. Some of Judith Butler's theories are present among Eva's letters to Franklin. Butler, one of the most renowned gender theorists and philosophers, explores the complex concepts of gender and self-identity. According to Butler, gender is the effect of a stylized repetition of actions: gender is a cultural construct that refers to previously existing cultural models; gender does not repeat these models; there are notions of gender change; and gender is performative, meaning that gender enacts itself through bodily practices.

In Butler's tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, her 1999 preface of her 1990 text provides clarity into some of her earlier thoughts regarding gender. (Some of these reflections are apparent in Shriver's novel. Whether or not Shriver has read Butlerian theory, Shriver uses similar insights in her work.) Butler expresses the idea that "one is woman...to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame" (*Gender Trouble* xi). Shriver chooses to challenge this "dominant frame" through Eva's character. For years, society has placed the male author, protagonist, and point of view as normative, while deeming the female author, protagonist, and point of view as restricted. Shriver not only is a female author, but she constructs a female protagonist

who composes letters, making the entire novel from a woman's point of view. Using this feminine restriction as a Butlerian approach, we can then classify Shriver as restricting her plot events and creativity to female conventions. Yet, Shriver breaks these restrictions of gender even though she is a female author using a female narrator.

Butler notes that "Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all" (*Gender Trouble* xiv); Eva's sexuality has nothing to do with Shriver having Eva challenge her gender norms in the novel. So far, critics have not challenged Eva's heterosexuality, but some have hinted that Kevin could be a homosexual male. When Eva's non-traditional motherhood (such as being violent with Kevin, being the money-making parent, and seeming emotionally detached with her firstborn), is considered among contemporary American society, critics may take her gender into account by defining her as ambivalent instead of recognizing Shriver's insinuation of contemporary reality regarding challenging gender and motherhood norms. I am using the terms "performative" and "performativity" in accordance with Butler's definition that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (*Gender Trouble* xv). In other words, when we understand or consider gender as performative, we recognize that gender is an act that someone performs repeatedly following what is already "standard" according to society. These repetitious acts create the concept of gender and are contingent upon social customs. In *Kevin*, Shriver's Eva uses physical aggression with Kevin a couple of times. Eva writes about Kevin and her in the restaurant: "I slapped him. It wasn't very hard" (*Kevin* 128). Although this slap is not too shocking to Americans, since corporal

punishment was a standard practice until very late in the 1900s, it is noted in contemporary conventionalism with new mothers as one of the worst things a mother can do to her child. Also, Eva writes: “There’s no other way to say this. I threw him halfway across the nursery. He landed with a dull clang against the edge of the stainless steel changing table” and breaks his arm (*Kevin* 194). This act is certainly more violent and frowned upon in American parenting. Eva’s repetition of somewhat violent acts (the throw more than the slap) toward her son shows us that women, not just men, can be physically violent, and that not all women are physically weak; Shriver challenges readers with these ideas of gender and motherhood norms through contemporary cultural discussions of gender and Eva’s unconventional interactions with Kevin.

According to Butler, “‘normative’ ...describe[s] the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals... [This term is] synonymous with ‘pertaining to the norms that govern gender... [The term ‘normative’] also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom” (*Gender Trouble* xx). Butler admits that her 1990 “text does not address the normative or prescriptive dimension of feminist thought” (*Gender Trouble* xx). Since Shriver depicts her female protagonist as admitting her thoughts, feelings, and actions that go against her gendered norms, she tells her readers that women do have thoughts and feelings that challenge and/or stray from “the norms that govern gender.” Shriver suggests that mothers want to do the “best” for their children, which usually ends up following societal conventions with parenting, but that the individual children will do what they want regardless of which parenting techniques are used.

In addition, Butler argues that “‘female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion; its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘woman’” (*Gender Trouble* xxix). Since “woman” and “female” are unstable terms, then how can we explain how Shriver portrays gender through Eva? Theoretically, Eva writes about performing both conventional and unconventional gender norms, and so we can already classify Eva’s character into an “unfixed” gender. Butler also concludes that we never fully carry out our biological gender assignments according to cultural and societal expectations since there is room for conflict, challenges, and modifications. This conclusion is essential in order to understand why Shriver’s Eva performs conventional and unconventional gender norms.

First, Eva remains within her gender role, according to societal norms, at times; Eva writes Franklin that, “Women tend more toward chagrin... So I blamed me” (*Kevin* 40). This passage is Shriver’s direct message to readers that Eva sometimes chose to follow gender conventions since it was how she was “supposed” to react, according to societal expectations. But, Shriver includes Eva describing herself with a lapse in gender roles according to societal norms; Eva confesses to her dead husband in a letter that “I repudiated all my female friends, who... for months now had only nattered about stretch marks and remedies for constipation... Your eternally hopeful, encouraging expression made me *sick*” (*Kevin* 75). Here, Shriver has her female protagonist express her detestation of the idea of becoming a mother. Eva does not want to spend time with her female friends anymore because they only discuss topics associated with motherhood, and Eva is repulsed by Franklin’s excitement and support of her role in becoming a



mother. Since Eva was “resisting the birth” (75), which is unacceptable for her gender role in the eyes of societal expectation, Eva signifies unconventional gender.

Butler adds that, when we deter from our gender assignments, we are then punished; Butler claims that “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*Gender Trouble* 178). Shriver depicts such punishments explicitly through Eva’s character, since Eva endures much harassment from others for challenging normative gender roles, which she records in her letters to Franklin. These punishments emphasize that this sort of fictional harassment seems farfetched, but parallels the current cultural judgments of women. Shriver exposes this idea best when Mary Woolford takes Eva to court, blaming Eva for Kevin’s crimes since Eva is the female parent whom society tends to blame for children’s actions, comments, et cetera. Society expects perfection when it comes to upper-middle-class American mothers, just as society expects unattainable precision when it comes to our performative gender assignments.

Shriver has the public and the court system persecute Eva since she does not attempt to defend her own son in court; Shriver depicts a generalized view of contemporary American court systems and societal reactions against parents of children who misbehave. Shriver’s readers are aware of the fact that Eva knows that money is not an issue, which is all she would gain from winning her defense: “Mary Woolford...would have been forced to pay my court costs to the final dime” (*Kevin* 399), which not only neglects Kevin’s sentencing, but illustrates how irrational these societal reactions are. Shriver also has Eva recount in her letters to Franklin about their marital disputes that arose out of Franklin’s disapproval of Eva’s motherhood choices that go against the norms of her gender. Because Eva repeatedly writes about how she thinks the worst of

her son before knowing an entire situation, and Franklin agrees when Eva recalls that he told her that she “blame[s] him for everything that goes wrong around this house. *And* at his kindergarten...interpreting it as some mean-spirited, personal contest between [Eva] and [Kevin]” (*Kevin* 209), as well as other such examples, Shriver suggests that going outside the expected norm usually acts as a catalyst for negative consequences. Yet, this is not always the case; Shriver persists with Eva testing her gender role and defying conventional motherhood through her unconventional actions. This fictional lawsuit and Eva’s letters offer a critique of our cultural expectations for, and a judgment of, female mothers.

Yet, we also must observe that Shriver, at times, allows Eva to follow “normative” female gender performance in her letters. For example, Shriver changes Eva’s decision of fetal testing from her pregnancy with Kevin to her pregnancy with Celia: “I didn’t get the test. Oh, I told you I did” (*Kevin* 216), exposing Eva’s past lies to her husband through her letters, but also exposing how a “good” mother is expected to behave. Shriver shows us a traditional belief in which Eva wants to uphold: that Eva absorbs enough of the standard cultural expectations to believe that a “good” mother would “love and care for whoever... came out” (*Kevin* 216-7). Eva writes that her mind and heart want to be with her husband sexually: “The single thing I loved more [than how my life was before we had kids] was Franklin Plaskett” (*Kevin* 55). Eva writes passages like this at least ten more times in her letters to Franklin. It is possible that Eva represents a woman who puts her husband before herself, yet lives with the regret that her late husband may have doubted her position as a woman, wife, and mother. Either way, Shriver depicts that Eva does follow “normative” female gender performance. In her

letters, she indicates the normative gender, not only as a heterosexual woman, but as a female mother as well.

Eva writes Franklin that she wants to care for her son and how she “stroked his forehead with a moist washcloth...cleaned up the mess...read to him” when Kevin was ill (236-8). Shriver makes it clear that, the times when Kevin accepts the conventional, female nurturing role of Eva as a mother, Eva then fits into societal expectations for female mothers caring for their sick children. Eva, thus, faithfully carries out many of the conventional expectations for female wives and mothers, but it is her son who determines whether or not she should continue with such acts toward him. Eva mothers him successfully in a conventional manner only when Kevin responds to Eva conventionally. Shriver indicates that not all children respond the same way to mothering models, and so it is the children who determine the mothering techniques they prefer, and whether various techniques “work” or not is based upon personal opinion.

Shriver provides a vague concept of gender through Eva; this concept of gender is similar to Butler’s belief that:

if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized. (*Gender Trouble* 179)

Since Butler argues that performative gender generates a conscious belief of the performer and a social audience, Shriver shows readers that Eva’s conventional performances of raising Kevin, such as attempting to do and say what is expected of her

gender as Mother, are *not* compatible to her true self: Eva knows that twentieth-century theories of parenting suggested that “it was important to smile at infants to try to elicit a smile in response, I smiled and smiled, I smiled until my face hurt, but when my face did hurt I was sure he could tell” (*Kevin* 87); “I did try very hard to form a passionate attachment to my son...The harder I *tried*, the more aware I became that my very effort was an abomination” (87). Since Kevin did not react as society predicted he would, Eva thought she was the problem, not Kevin. Though, when Eva allowed herself to be unconventional and lose her temper with Kevin, he reacted the way a “normal” child would: “Yet in truth, when I commandeered Kevin’s squirt gun, I felt a gush of savage joy...the continuing possession of Kevin’s beloved toy engorged me with such pleasure that I withdrew it from my purse, forefinger on the trigger...Inside [Kevin] was raging. He hated me with all his being, and I was happy as a clam” (151). Here, Eva was unconventional and Kevin reacted as conventionally expected; he was mad when his mother took away, and teased him with, his squirt gun. Shriver implies that, even though society recommends that female mothers discipline a certain way, her unconventional taunting is what gets Kevin to react like a “normal” child, instead of acting neutral to every other act of discipline that he has experienced. Shriver makes sure that, in one of the times Eva goes against societal expectations, she is finally successful at disciplining her “strange” child.

Butler states that, “If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (*Gender Trouble* 180). This is exactly what Shriver tests with her character of Eva as Mother. Critics continue to condemn Eva as an ambivalent mother

according to her performative gender attributes, but they never recognize how devoted she was at trying to follow the conventional behaviors that society prefers. Since most of Eva's conventional behaviors fail with Kevin, critics claim that Eva fails as a mother. These critics tend to ignore her expressive gender attributes, such as attempting to be affectionate with her son, and enduring the many special requests from her needy daughter: Eva writes Franklin about how her smiles to infant Kevin "evaporated with revelatory rapidity when I turned from his crib" (*Kevin* 87), proving that, even though she tried to act like a conventional mother, she was well aware that carrying out such conventional acts continuously failed with her indifferent son; he never reacted with joy or comfort as is expected with most "normal" children. Shriver's Eva is a female mother who expresses unconventional gender and unconventional motherhood mostly with her son, while she is much more conventional with her daughter, Celia.

Eva writes to her dead husband about how she complied with Celia's wishes. While exposing Eva's compliance to Celia's neediness of "always having to leave the hall light on or getting up in the middle of the night to accompany her to the toilet" (*Kevin* 227), Shriver depicts Eva as a conventional mother, but Eva's conventionality is really only due to Celia's *response* to such mothering conventions. Yet, Eva also writes that her daughter's excessive fears proved that, according to Eva, Celia "didn't have guts" (226). This may complicate Eva's character of being the conventional mother with Eva, but it simply could be Shriver suggesting that gender is contingent, inconsistent, and unstable. Indirectly, Eva thinks herself to be braver than her daughter, Celia. Celia is fitting into society's expectation of the female gender to be a weak sex who needs protection, whereas Eva contradicts that belief numerous times throughout the novel.

Taking Butler's idea one step further, Shriver's novel not only seems to apply Butler's gender theories, but the novel also surfaces the reality that, because gender can be ambiguous, culturally defined, punishable when challenged, never fully internalized, and performative in order to have an identity, that since motherhood is one aspect of performative gender, then motherhood, too, can be ambiguous, culturally defined, punishable when challenged, never fully internalized, and performative in order to have an identity. The novel expresses a Butlerian awareness of the "constructedness" of "performed" conventions of femininity, with the understanding that conventional femininity includes traits of dependency and indecisiveness, interpersonal communication, self-harm, etc. Shriver and Butler depict that marginalization of challenging gender norms is a success, while adhering to conventionality is a failure.

Within the concepts of gender identity, and indirectly within motherhood studies as well, the novel suggests that Shriver seems to be aware of the idea of gender as performance (whether or not she has actually read Butler's work). Through Eva and her letters, Shriver challenges performative gender norms. Shriver has Eva experiment with conventional female norms, but when Eva performs these experiments, she ends up being punished by Kevin, Franklin, society, and even herself. When Shriver shows that Eva frees herself from gender and motherhood norms, Kevin attaches to her more, suggesting that, in some instances, breaking convention is more suited with raising Kevin. When we include motherhood with challenging conventionalism, Shriver again suggests that, in some instances, unconventional parenting is more successful for Eva when mothering Kevin, and when Eva expresses conventional mothering with Kevin, the outcome is usually negative. Yet, when we take Celia into account, Eva's gender and motherhood is

more conventional and the outcome is positive. It is Kevin's defiance toward conventional mothering, and Celia's receptiveness to such mothering, that directs Eva's choices in her mothering techniques. Also, in her letters to her dead husband, Eva's adherence to, *and* challenging of, her gender role with her kids helps Shriver create this unconventional protagonist who is strong enough to break away from societal expectations in order to do what works best for each individual child; when she mothers unconventionally, she overcomes falling into the blame of her culture and, in actuality, does not blame herself. According to her letters to her dead husband, Eva acts in ways that are conventional *and* unconventional with her children, and she reflects on whether or not she was to blame for Kevin's faults. Throughout these letters, Shriver suggests that contemporary American mothers should challenge cultural and societal conventions about gender performance and motherhood so as not to be consumed by others' unattainable expectations of perfection.

## CHAPTER IV

### GENDER

#### 4.1 CONVENTIONAL GENDER

##### 4.1.1 EPISTOLARY FORMAT

Shriver structures her novel in the epistolary format, and Eva's letters can be interpreted as a way of putting cultural assumptions and perceptions of women's guilt on trial. Shriver's readers and critics tend to classify Eva as an unconventional female, but Eva also fits the mold of a conventional female as expressed within her letters to her dead husband. In the first letter, Eva conveys that she is in a heterosexual marriage and enjoys spending time with her husband in conversation and in the bedroom, reflecting a conventional American wife. We are also exposed to Shriver's epistolary format on the first page of the novel, which then continues through her entire work. Epistolary comes from epistle, or letter, which parallels a section of letters that are in the New Testament of the Bible. Shriver seems to be aware of some of these Biblical letters that Paul the Apostle wrote to the Colossian people. Paul's letters to the Colossians were written in order to point out their wrongs and to inform them on how to better themselves. Shriver's novel depicts a similar motif of rectification since it suggests how contemporary society is amiss for blaming mothers for raising "bad" children and for



failing to perform as “perfect” conventional mothers. Such parental blame is mocked through Shriver’s decision to frame Eva’s letters as a response to the civil suit against her for bad mothering. The suit itself is of course a fictional representation of society’s tendency to blame the mothers. Even Kevin comments in a television interview that this trial is about their ““culture of compensation”” (*Kevin* 353) and not about being “good” parents. In addition to the epistles in the Bible, the epistolary novel is nothing new in terms of format for fiction. The epistolary novel originated as a safe method for women to communicate to other women about the truths of how they felt about different situations; the origin of this format already places Shriver’s Eva in the category of the conventional female for expressing her thoughts and feelings in written form. Even though Shriver challenges gender norms in this novel, she also recognizes that people may express performative gender roles both conventionally *and* unconventionally since gender is contingent.

To depict some of these conventions within an epistolary format, Shriver shows us that Eva falls into a traditional female role by making her, in a sense, voiceless while married to Franklin. Even though she and Franklin do converse throughout their marriage, Eva’s opinion is not always considered. This authorial choice is significant when paired with the conventional female; through Eva’s writing to Franklin, we are aware of Eva’s many thoughts, feelings, and experiences that she never told her husband while he was alive. Eva writes to Franklin that “I held my tongue” (*Kevin* 15), further supporting Shriver’s depiction of a voiceless female in a heterosexual marriage. By the end of the novel, readers are confirmed that Eva can no longer have a face-to-face conversation with her husband anyway, but the information provided before *Thursday* in

these letters is what Eva never voiced to her husband when she still had him with her (excluding, of course, the passages in which Eva actually writes phrases such as “I’m sure you remember...” (51), “You remember...” (146), “As you know” (154), “I’m sure you would remember that...” (322), “You remember how” (392), and others). In association with the new information that Eva tells Franklin in her letters, Shriver has Eva own up to some situations that she either hid from Franklin or realizes, while writing, that she was “wrong,” according to societal and cultural expectations (these segments begin with phrases such as “I confess that” (*Kevin* 62, 231), “I never told you, but” (73), “I admit” (245), “I never told you” (280), “I did not tell you” (322), “I have a confession to make” (351), and others). Through Eva’s epistolary confessions to Franklin, Shriver shows how Eva did not always have the strength to be honest with her husband in person, and that she hides behind her letters while finally admitting her wrongdoings (at least, “wrong” according to conventional society which is echoed in her mind at times), or simply divulging the truth to him. Eva’s passivity still supports the classification of Eva as a conventional female, while hinting at having some sort of fear of being straightforward with her male husband. Eva is not pleased with the fact that she kept quiet: “Don’t imagine that I’ve enjoyed my secrets” (*Kevin* 9). Shriver’s awareness of traditional gender roles is apparent when she depicts how conventional females may not always speak up because they feel inferior to men. Shriver’s Eva waits until her husband is dead for Eva to be able to “tell” him through her letters how she feels, how specific situations actually happened, and who their son truly was when Franklin was not around.

Shriver suggests that she is aware of the passive role the female gender plays among gender conventions, and this is exactly what she illustrates through her epistolary

design. For one reason, that Eva herself admits, “I had found my only ‘help’ in writing to you, Franklin. For somehow I feel certain that these letters are not on the list of prescribed therapies, since you are at the very heart of what I need to ‘get past’ so that I might experience ‘closure.’ And what a terrible prospect is that” (85). With Eva’s reality, Shriver depicts a traditional wife who is dependent upon her husband or, at least, a female who laments the fact of no longer having her male counterpart, whether it is the end of a relationship by choice or death. Due to Franklin’s request to divorce Eva, or his belief that “‘It’s already happened’” (*Kevin* 348) as he told Eva, Franklin was prepared to live without Eva by his side, just as the traditional male is expected to be independent and strong-willed.

Another traditional gender norm that is shown through an epistolary layout is that women are able to use letter writing as a venue in order to “speak” without being interrupted, scolded, stared down, etc. Eva’s excuse for having many “secrets” is because Franklin “didn’t want to hear” them (11). Due to so many parenting disagreements, Franklin frequently scolded Eva when they verbally discussed their son:

‘Eva, kids don’t understand that grown-ups can be touchy about their looks.’

‘Are you sure they don’t understand that? You read this somewhere?’

‘Can we not ruin our first afternoon out together?’ you implored. ‘Why do you always have to think the worst of him?’

‘Where did that come from?’ I asked, looking perplexed. ‘It sounds more as if *you* always think the worst of *me*.’ (*Kevin* 127)

Because Eva and Franklin’s conversations on parenting turned into arguments, Eva began to keep her thoughts to herself more, like a traditional wife. Eva recounting this

conversation in a letter also is a way she can narrate how her husband degrades her, just as society does when she is taken to trial. These moments clearly address Eva's awareness of her adherence to gender norms, as well as Shriver's knowledge of this weaker form of her protagonist. Sometimes, Shriver has Eva, like the inferior gender role, not speak to Franklin at all because Eva began to expect being ignored, or worse, that he would not believe what she told him. Eva writes to Franklin: "'You wouldn't listen'" (*Kevin* 215), and "So you'll just have to take my word for it – I know you won't" (232), and that "I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit" (228). From these instances, Shriver models the idea that, because Eva uses the epistolary form, she succumbed to his views and decisions like a traditional wife while Franklin was alive, pointing toward the view of disapproval of a woman being inferior to a man.

Franklin's scolding also deals with Eva's fluctuation between performing in conventional and unconventional ways. The first two lines of the previous passage allude to Eva's awareness that Franklin clung to societal declarations about parenting, as well as his, and other contemporary parents', generalizations of children. Franklin labeled how all kids misunderstand adults' feelings, while Eva retorted how he must have read something about it, sardonically saying that his parenting research, as well as conventional generalization, is not always correct.

Shriver depicts another method of Eva as a conventional female wife through the epistolary form when Eva writes how Franklin does not care about her opinion. One instance is when Franklin decides to move their family to a suburb without considering Eva's view of the matter:

‘But I love New York!’ I sounded like a bumper sticker.

‘It’s dirty and swimming in diseases, and a kid’s immune system isn’t fully developed until he’s seven years old. And we could stand to move into a good school district.’

‘This city has the best private schools in the country.’

‘New York private schools are snobbish and cutthroat. Kids in this town start worrying about getting into Harvard at the age of six.’

‘What about the tiny matter that your wife doesn’t want to leave this city?’

‘You had twenty years to do whatever you wanted.’ (*Kevin* 107)

Shriver is clever enough to have Eva write to her deceased husband in order to “fill him in” on her true thoughts and feelings that conventional women do not discuss with their husbands. Within this same vein, Shriver also shows the distance between Eva and Franklin since Eva has to write to him when he is dead instead of discussing these experiences while they were actually experiencing the specific situation and, of course, while he was still alive. This excerpt also surfaces the cultural perception that a female mother must sacrifice her desires in order to fulfill what is “best” for her children. Eva writes how her suggestion about noting her preference was unworthy to Franklin, posing a conventional inferiority of the female gender.

Another conventional opportunity Shriver gives to Eva through this epistolary format is the ease to repent some of, according to Franklin and conventional society, her mistakes; Shriver has Eva apologize to Franklin in at least half of her letters. Eva’s apologies come from hearing guilt in her head, which appear from societal expectations around her. Most of these apologies are to Franklin, some via her narration and some

within her documented dialogue. Eva's logged apologies are Shriver's suggestions that conventional females prefer to write these down rather than speak directly to their husbands, which would essentially be more uncomfortable. Eva's need to confess via narration to her dead husband instead of to Franklin's face proves she avoided the more uncomfortable option by letter writing. For those apologies in the actual dialogue, Shriver demonstrates that Eva had to be somewhat remorseful in front of her husband in order to maintain her inferior position alongside him. Again, the epistolary format simply releases the conventional female repression of individuality, unconventional beliefs, and autonomy that Eva has kept inside her guiltless self in order to, somewhat, keep up appearances with Franklin and the rest of conventional society. Moreover, Shriver places Eva yet again subordinate to Franklin, with her incessant and pathetic apologies, thus reflecting Shriver's depiction of the status of a conventional female, as well as the male expectations for them.

Using this epistolary structure, Shriver's narrator not only "has the floor," proverbially speaking, but Eva can also edit, take time to think, and revise her work instead of giving a monologue in the heat of the moment, which may come out less successful than intended. Also, Eva cannot write exactly in the present time or she would only be able to discuss her physical act of writing. Due to the information being about the past, Eva is able to use the intelligence that comes with hindsight, and appear to be slightly wiser than she perhaps was during the time of the events about which she writes. Shriver even has Eva write to Franklin: "I *do* have the benefit of hindsight" (230), verifying that her perspective is correct in case he would disagree. In many letters, Eva writes phrases such as "Looking back" (*Kevin* 20, 69), "Yet even in retrospect..." (24),

“But in retrospect...” (329), and “I now know...” (372), showing that Eva is in a better position than she was when the correlating events actually occurred. This may appear at first that Shriver gives Eva more power than Franklin at this juncture, since Eva can use hindsight in her letters to him, yet Franklin is already dead, so Eva’s wisdom as a correspondent is going unread and unnoticed by her intended reader. Also, with only having Eva’s voice and perspective, readers may not deem Eva as a reliable narrator; the structure of this format hinders the female gender. Eva’s retrospect realizations are worthless to Franklin, yet beneficial to Eva’s character.

Lastly, Eva describes Kevin’s murderous acts on *Thursday* in the final letter of the novel. Eva mentions a few times as to why she does not discuss this day earlier in her letters:

I can’t imagine I’m supposed to *get over it*, like hopping a low stone wall; if *Thursday* was a barrier of some kind, it was made of razor wire, which I did not bound over but thrash through, leaving me in flayed pieces and on the other side of something only in a temporal sense. I can’t pretend he didn’t do it, I can’t pretend I don’t wish he hadn’t, and if I have abandoned that felicitous parallel universe to which my white confederates in Claverack’s waiting room are prone to cling, the relinquishment of my private if-only derives more from a depleted imagination than any healthy reconciliation that what’s done is done. (*Kevin* 230)

Eva describes how vicious this day was in her life, so it must also be quite challenging for her to relive through her writing. Additionally, Shriver depicts how difficult it is for a wife to let her husband down. Even though Franklin is dead, Eva still has a hard time letting him know about the malicious side of their son since Franklin only saw the “good”

in Kevin. Eva openly writes these very ideas to Franklin: “I haven’t held it back because I thought you couldn’t take it. I just didn’t want to think about it myself or subject you to it, though this very afternoon I was living in eternal fear that the episode would repeat itself” (393). Eva does not want *Thursday* to recur, even just in her own mind or on paper. Eva does not recognize the genuine love she has for her son until *Thursday*, thanks to her transient brainwashing from societal expectations. Unfortunately, society does not recognize this mother-son love in her civil trial.

Through Shriver’s choice of an epistolary format, she depicts how an unconventional female can feel voiceless in a conventional society and even next to her own husband, also conventional. Shriver has her female protagonist confess, apologize, and need the “benefit of hindsight” in order to clarify and prove that she is in opposition to her male counterpart. Eva can be categorized as a traditionally weak female through the epistolary format in terms of gender, but she uses these moments later in order to verify her innocence.

#### 4.1.2 MALE-DEPENDENCY

Through Eva’s letters to Franklin, Shriver includes a female dependency on males in her novel. Eva’s male-dependency is mostly on her husband since her father died before she was born and she hardly sees her brother (*Kevin* 23, 48, 109). Shriver maintains this conventional gender role when Eva writes to Franklin that “I couldn’t live without you” (347). To support this strong statement, Eva admits to having many conventional female weaknesses involving her inferiority to men. Eva reminisced about the days it was just her and Franklin: “this was a life I loved, and one into which children didn’t really fit. The single thing I loved more [than my traveling career] was Franklin



Plaskett...there was only one big-ticket item you wanted that was in my power to provide. How could I have denied you...You wanted to have a child. On balance, I did not” (*Kevin* 55). Eva is blunt in her recollection of not wanting to have children, but due to her love for Franklin, she agreed to bear one, which is what he truly wanted. Shriver could have had Eva stand strong and actually deny Franklin this one desire of his (although the novel would be quite altered). This one “gift” to her husband not only changed her life, but ended his. Shriver makes a poignant argument that disgraces women who have children to make their husbands happy: giving a husband such a “gift” could make the unwilling mother rather unhappy. But, since Shriver makes Eva and Franklin’s outcome so severe, readers may not heed caution, thinking the plot is too morose to actually happen in the real world. Unfortunately, readers tend to overlook Shriver’s message that Kevin is the problem not Eva; readers miss the fact that Celia is also Eva’s child and is nothing like her older sibling, Kevin, and so it is the difference among the children that causes unhappiness, not how the female raises them as society indicates.

Once Eva became a mother, her attachment to Franklin was more mental and emotional than physical and reciprocal like it was before having children. Eva longed for alone time with her husband: “you and I never went out just the two of us anymore...I was mostly disappointed that you didn’t ever covet the same *quality time* with your wife...I was jealous. And I was lonely” (*Kevin* 204). With Eva’s self-pity, Shriver depicts the low self-esteem that is common with traditional females who view their husbands as superior. Eva grows to be so jealous of Franklin’s exclusive time with Kevin that she equates this to his cheating on her: “I had created my own Other Woman who happened to be a boy” (347). Shriver scoffs at the mental deterioration that conventional women

experience when they conjure stories up in their heads to find an explanation for what is going on in their lives, which is obviously fabricated. But, this fabrication is not entirely created through Eva's mind, but it is her culture's views of female convention that haunt her mind.

Along with concocting stories, Shriver shows us a weak female (at least one who transiently falls into convention expectation) who changes who she is in order to please her husband, especially during the days following the husband's decision of getting a divorce: "I remember being on my best behavior, never raising my voice, never objecting when [Franklin] barely touched a meal that I'd have gone to great trouble to fix...I tried not to make too much noise" and Franklin made Eva feel "like a kid...forced...to formally apologize" to her own son (*Kevin* 203), and she followed through his preferences and his commands, albeit coerced. Eva even noted that she had a "tattling allowance" (297) with Franklin, and knew when she could/could not tell on Kevin. While Eva seemed to obediently mind Franklin's needs and demands, she claimed to be easily "sated" (256). Eva reflects back while writing to Franklin: "I could have left you with your son... but it never occurred to me to leave" (*Kevin* 299), but even if Eva *did* think of this, she most likely would never leave Franklin because she loved him too much. Shriver makes this impression apparent when Eva makes another realization regarding *Thursday*: "The truth is, if I decided I was innocent, or I decided I was guilty, what difference would it make? If I arrived at the right answer, would you come home?" (400). This thought of Eva's discounts all of the affliction she suffered because of Kevin; whether others blame *Thursday* on her or not, and whether or not she blames herself, it does not matter to her because it would never return Franklin to her. Shriver makes it clear though, that it is our

own culture's fault, not the mother's, for a child to be so unruly. Eva knows she is not to blame, but her statement of her needing Franklin back depicts the traditional female adoration of her husband; it is evident that Eva puts Franklin before herself and has temporarily falls into the pits of societal expectation. Shriver makes it quite clear that a weak woman who needs a man is not exactly appealing to her contemporary audience since her life goes downhill from being so submissive. Once Franklin is out of the picture, there is no doubt that Eva is then dependent upon Kevin, even though Kevin is certainly more dependent on Eva, as they are only left with each other.

#### 4.1.3 ANTI-BOY/MENACE

While Shriver has Eva represent her love, need, and dependency on the male gender, some critics view Eva as a second-wave feminist, in that she is anti-boy. It is true that Eva admits in her letters to Franklin that she is "grossed out" by boys: "And if I enjoyed the company of men – I liked their down-to-earth quality, I was prone to mistake aggression for honesty, and I disdained daintiness – I wasn't at all sure about *boys*... Even before I had one myself, I was well and truly frightened by boys... A boy is a dangerous animal" (*Kevin* 62). It is evident that Kevin is dangerous to many he encounters, but specifically to Eva, she acknowledges in her letters that, "In the very instant of his birth, I associated Kevin with my own limitations – with not only suffering, but defeat" (76). Shriver alludes to many instances of a woman expressing angst against the male gender. Even in comparison to Eva's birthing Celia, which she writes "went so smoothly" (221), is a blatant, gender juxtaposition on Shriver's part: boys cause trouble, make trouble, and are trouble. Eva even testifies in her civil trial that she and Franklin could not "find

anyone to put up with Kevin for more than a few weeks” (123) because he was so unmanageable.

Moreover, Shriver has Eva display the subordinate woman in her gender-divided home. Before Celia was born and Franklin put his foot down about moving to the suburbs, Eva writes that Franklin told her that ““there are two of us, and one of you”” (*Kevin* 108), referencing that the family vote was two males against one female. Yet, when Celia joined the family, Eva “had the exhilarating impression of having reset our troop strengths at a healthy par. Little could I know that, as a military ally, a trusting young girl is worse than nothing, an open left flank” (223). Unfortunately for a numerically gender-equal family, Celia was even more of a conventional female than Eva, and so would be of no help to settle family battles with her “feminine” vulnerability and naïveté. Shriver depicts that males and females recognize that those who express traditional female roles are inferior to others.

Along with Eva expressing an anti-boy approach in her letters, Kevin visibly adds to this belief because he is a “menace” growing up (Jeremiah claims on page 177 that Eva “associates boys with menace”). Kevin performs many (some alleged) acts of spite, such as destroying Eva’s map room with “spidery...red and black ink” from his squirt gun (*Kevin* 157), “seduc[ing] Violetta into clawing a layer of skin from the better part of her body” (368), consequently breaking open her eczema scabs, “whisper[ing] in the ear of let-us-call-her-Alice at that eighth-grade school dance” giving her a reason to make her leave the dance floor suddenly and self-consciously (368), “flip[ing] the quick-release on the front wheel of Trent Corley’s bicycle” so it would fall apart while riding it (368), and putting “the nest of bagworms” in Celia’s backpack (368). These acts of spite corroborate

with a sense of female negativity toward the traditional male gender. Shriver depicts Eva's disapproval with Kevin's performative gender, thus disparaging male gender conventions while possibly building up the female gender through a second-wave feminist lens.

We can note examples of Kevin's "aggressive sexuality" too (Jeremiah states on page 177 that boys are "threatening and violent... [since they] display an aggressive sexuality"): Kevin "jerk[s] off at home with the door wide open as wanton sexual abuse – of his mother – and not the normal uncontrolled bubbling of adolescent hormones" (*Kevin* 368); he wears tight-fitting clothes with his pant "legs reach[ing] mid-calf, exposing dark hairs sprouting on his shins; the crotch, whose zipper would not quite close, well sponsored his equipment...[and a] stretched Fruit of the Loom white [T-shirt], leaving the usual three inches of bare midriff (250-1); he also shares his "Hump 'em and dump 'em" philosophy with his parents (310). Having Eva describe Kevin's aggressive sexuality reflects Shriver's depiction of the conventional female's view of the overly sexual alpha-male.

Yet, Kevin's acts of "aggressive sexuality" do not all appear to be as threatening and violent as we may first deduce; Shriver creates numerous battles between Eva and Kevin, and they are not associated with adult male sexualized aggression since they began feuding before Kevin expressed any sexual characteristics. For example, Shriver depicts Kevin as having an aversion to Eva's breast milk: "the infant over my breast...his twisted face was disgruntled. His body was inert...Sucking is one of our few innate instincts, but...his head lolled away in distaste...I kept trying; he kept resisting" (81). Using words such as "twisted face," "distaste," and "resisting" depict Eva's association

of pessimism with the male gender. Eva certainly is affected with these reactions of her newborn son and falls into depression because of it, associating weakness with the female role again.

Shriver also incorporates years of a delay regarding Kevin's own progress in potty training. Eva notes: "We were already using the extra-large [diapers]...we were both getting desperate...this one developmental stage that our son seemed to have skipped was tyrannizing my life" (176); meanwhile, regarding this diaper problem, Eva writes to Franklin that he "fostered an old-fashioned masculinity that I found surprisingly attractive. You didn't want your son to be a sissy, to present an easy target for teasing peers" (176). Eva's response to Kevin's developmental delay is that she was beside herself, that her whole life was dictated by this obstinacy of her son, while Franklin worried if Kevin's kindergarten classmates would tease him. Shriver poses an obvious paradox among the genders: the female is affected internally while the male wants to prevent external gossip so as to protect Kevin's feelings from being hurt. Clearly, the female dealt with the more prominent problem of rearranging each day to make sure her son had a clean diaper, yet the male was only concerned with the possibility of other kids irritating his son.

This gender division is brought up again when Eva describes these developmental stages with Celia in her letters to Franklin. Eva writes how Celia did not have any difficulties potty training and she "always took to the breast" (225), contrary to Eva's experiences with Kevin. The juxtaposition of Kevin and Celia's development through Eva's perspective is another illustration of Shriver depicting the menacing side of the son while praising the female gender as the superior of these two genders. These reversed

views of opposite genders are rather archaic in contemporary America. Shriver may have chosen to include some examples for the simple message of making fun of these traditional gender norms. Shriver may also have included these instances in order to give Eva more dimension to her character, as Eva certainly is not a flat or stagnant conventional character.

With these comments, Shriver clearly poses Eva to represent the conventional female, but there are plenty of occasions in the novel that exist wherein Eva represents the unconventional female who challenges conventional gender norms. If these were Shriver's unwavering descriptions of Eva, readers would interpret that the novel simply mocks a conventionally weak and inferior woman/wife/mother. But, these conventions are fewer and less distinctive of Eva's gender unconventionality, creating a more contemporary and authentic protagonist. Through Eva, Shriver shows the falseness to women of conventional gender norms, such as being a voiceless female in contemporary America, and in her own home. Shriver also depicts the costs to women of conventional gender norms when she tortures Eva with a child, Kevin, who does not respond to her conventional attempts at mothering him, nor follows conventional paths in terms of developmental milestones. Shriver creates a conventional *and* unconventional female protagonist, suggesting that we cannot meet or conform to all societal expectations, no matter our gender.

## 4.2 UNCONVENTIONAL GENDER

### 4.2.1 EPISTOLARY FORMAT

Shriver complicates her authorial choice of an epistolary format in terms of gender when she uses letter writing to empower Eva's female character as well,

portraying the advantages of challenging, and calling attention to, gender norms through self-blame. For example, while Eva is able to write down all of her thoughts without interruption or judgment, we can infer then that the intended male recipient is voiceless, not to mention dead. Shriver gives Eva a technique to be “heard” instead of constantly being shut down by her husband. Through writing, Eva can also “speak up” about how her own culture turned against her by bringing her up on civil trial; Eva decided to write more about the trial than actually explain herself in court. Writing these letters is the “best” way Eva communicates with her husband throughout their entire marriage since Franklin cannot interrupt, ignore, judge, or scold her. Shriver makes Eva the narrator, the letter writer, the protagonist, the heroine, and the woman; Shriver celebrates the fact that this female character is of great consequence to her guiltless conscience while writing these undeliverable letters. Lacking others’ points of view and memories, Shriver authorizes Eva complete entitlement and “the benefit of hindsight” (230), which challenge the inferior status of a traditional female. Through these letters, Shriver proves Eva’s innocence through recounting issues with societal expectations and Kevin’s character, while Eva writes of her struggles as Kevin’s mother and her ease as Celia’s. Readers are forced to only know what Eva exposes in her letters and are prevented to know others’ memories, opinions, and beliefs without being filtered through Eva first. Shriver exposes a solid level of intelligence through Eva’s character while challenging the more common narrative format. Eva appears more autonomous due to her reflective, well-thought out personal accounts rather than the ordinary narrative structure.

Through her epistolary method, Shriver also demonstrates the power Eva possesses as being the writer-narrator who uses first person throughout the novel (except



of course when she refers to herself in the third person in some of her dialogue to Kevin, expressing conventional motherhood while Kevin is young). Eva is empowered as a female since she is the only one to narrate/write in first person and Shriver also gives Eva the sole voice of the family, society, America, Armenia, women, mothers, and wives. Such authority expressed in this epistolary format is Shriver's way of claiming some strength amidst unconventional females who constantly have to prove themselves against the conformity of society. Eva does not write her letters to fit a gender norm. She writes the truth, or at least what we must accept as true since it is the only perspective we have, without censoring her raw opinions and feelings. After Eva finds her daughter and husband dead, and knowing Kevin was the murderer, Eva writes that she feels "A culminatory shudder of grief; a thrill of guilty relief. For the first time since I could remember, I relaxed" (*Kevin* 348). For any woman who just lost her husband and daughter because of her homicidal son, feeling relief and a sense of relaxation is not what would be expected to come to that woman's mind, but Eva admits that this was how she felt. Here, Eva divulges her raw sensation that came with this experience with which Shriver adds verisimilitude to Eva's writings and portrays the strength of a nonconventional woman. The importance of Eva's honesty gives credibility to her character, which encourages readers to trust her as the narrator and to believe her perspective to be accurate. If her letters are reliable, then Shriver's message of cultural influence can be taken seriously.

As we read Eva's letters, we may have to view them as truth since we read directly what the protagonist thinks, instead of an unknown narrator. This way, Shriver gives Eva verisimilitude with her letters. Additionally it is significant that the novel is

through Eva's own words. The fact that Eva writes about many uncomplimentary situations, feelings, and experiences, Shriver shows the strength of the truth through a female voice. Shriver does not glorify womanhood or motherhood with her novel; she essentially exposes many unfavorable, unconventional, and even some embarrassing sides of gender and motherhood through this personalized format: "I'm tremendously sympathetic with the sort of diligent mother who turns her back for an eye blink...to discover that her little girl...drowned in two inches of water" (*Kevin* 157); "I've started to worry that in some backhanded way I've become attached to the disfigurement of my own life" (159); "I feared that at bottom I hated my life and hated being a mother and even in moments hated being your wife, since you had done this to me, turned my days into an unending stream of shit and piss and cookies that Kevin didn't even like" (188). None of these passages are attractive since they all convey fears that women and/or mothers may experience. Such personal anecdotes may not be true for all women/mothers but, through these instances, Shriver depicts some concerns that are present among contemporary Americans that late twentieth-century upper-middle-class parenting styles destroy women without even helping the children.

The power to write cohesively is also a part of Eva's career as a travel journalist. Shriver skillfully parallels Eva's career with how she communicates with her dead husband. This reflects Eva's autonomy as a working woman, the more profitable spouse of the two, an entrepreneur, and an experienced, educated writer; furthermore, Eva shares with us her expansive vocabulary as she is the letter writer/narrator, exposing more of Eva's intellect: "Balanced on the fulcrum between anger and anguish, I indulged a fit of pique, banging the drawer when I went for the aluminum foil" (*Kevin* 47); "My

vocabulary was peppered with imports” (88); “I bet you still don’t believe me about his fits of pique, though a rage that lasts for six to eight hours seems less a fit than a natural state, from which the tranquil respites you witnessed were bizarre departures” (88-9); “This impenetrable flatness of his, combined with a reticence extending well past the point that all your manuals forecast first attempts at speech, compelled me to consult our pediatrician. Dr. Foulke was reassuring, ready with the conventional parental sop that ‘normal’ developmental behavior embraced a range of idiosyncratic stalls and leaps” (112); “Ordinarily, they glazed with the glaucous film of unwashed apples – flat and unfocused, bored and belligerent, they shut me out” (348) all illustrate Eva’s intellect as an educated world-traveler who can recollect and apply cultural terms as well.

Shriver also extends Eva’s integrity as a female character through the epistolary form because Eva reflects on her own life as a wife and mother. Although some of her reflections are not very positive, Eva expresses her honesty, helping readers trust her narration more than question it: “after *Thursday* I came to terms with the fact that I’d made no effort to understand [my own mother’s life]. She and I had been distant for decades not because she was agoraphobic but because I’d been remote and unsparing. Needing kindness myself, I am kinder now...I have come to recognize...that geography is relative” (Kevin 110). Shriver makes it clear to readers that Eva comes to the realization that it was her fault as the child, and not her mother’s fault, as to why their relationship has been so weak; this idea has a direct correlation to Eva being blameless when it comes to Kevin’s disastrous episodes in life. This reflection of Eva’s is, also, a part of how *Thursday* has helped her mature as a woman and a mother. By having her own experience with a troubled child, Eva metaphorically put Kevin in her place, and

herself in her mom's, and her insight becomes apparent to her own self while writing to Franklin. Shriver skillfully allows Eva to grow as a woman (and as a mother) through these written self-reflections. Since Eva learns much about herself and others from writing her letters, Shriver attempts to raise our opinions of the unconventional female. Shriver also poses that, since Eva is the only perspective we have, we are to rely on her letters to learn about her character, marriage, gender, motherhood, etc. Shriver uses this creative way to boost Eva's worth, which forces readers to depend on a female narrator/letter writer for all information, while suggesting that an unconventional gender role is sometimes the "stronger" and more ethical choice than following the crowd.

This epistolary format is an essential component when discussing Shriver's demonstration of gender. Since Shriver clearly makes Eva out to be a female who performs conventionally *and* unconventionally through how this novel is laid out, Shriver has created an unconventional *and* conventional female protagonist. Shriver establishes this yin and yang of Eva's gender to show balance and equality in contemporary America, as well as confusion and inner-turmoil for Shriver's character. Through Eva's gender role/s, Shriver validates that gender is not black and white, as Butler concludes as well, but a colorful spectrum, upon which Eva glides in both directions. Shriver, through Eva, depicts female life as an ongoing challenge and as contingent, yet also full of opportunities (that is, if the woman wants to recognize them and defy her gender role to gain ownership of such opportunities). Eva's oscillating gender role is partly the reason why she is able to identify her innocent self among conventional blame in her culture and society.

#### 4.2.2 QUEERING GENDER

Shriver's novel challenges traditional myths of gender and motherhood among many of Eva's letters. One of the taboos Eva writes about directly is her feeling "unmoved" with birthing her first child (*Kevin* 83). According to Eva's culture and society, if the birth of a mother's firstborn does not follow the "requirement" of her "explicit expectations" (78), then, essentially, the mother goes against the conventional female gender. This is an important gender position that Eva recognizes as "following the program," and so she felt she failed as a woman because, since she "can't rely on herself to rise to an occasion like this, then she can't count on anything" (83). Eva's "expectations of motherhood *were* high" and she "felt – absent...scrabbling around in myself for this new *indescribable* emotion...it wasn't there" (81). This was an enormous disappointment to Eva, assuming that she failed as a woman and a mother since bearing a child did not change her like other parents have told her how birthing changed them. Eva concludes throughout the novel that she failed. Yet, she does not fail as a mother or a woman, she simply fails meeting all of societal expectations. Because of her not matching societal views, Eva was so afraid to let her true emotionless reaction known, that she "reached for a line from TV" (82) so that Franklin would think she was "normal" as a woman, wife, and mother, for following certain "requirements" and for exhibiting what might have been his "expectations" as well.

Shriver provides many lessons through Eva's unconventional birthing reaction. Eva writes that her friend, Brian, told her that "*when you lay eyes on them for the first time – it's indescribable*" (81). Disappointed, Eva notes: "I do wish he had described it anyway. I do wish he had given it a try" (81). Shriver critiques culture's myths and expectations about giving birth in that, if people truly cannot describe the birth of their

children, then there is no distinct expectation that can be met. Shriver goes on to mock the idea that, when Eva is at a loss for words, she borrows lines from television in order to sound like a conventional woman. This idea not only expresses the notion that Americans watch too much television, but it also portrays that people want to sound and react as society expects, so as not to be “a freak” as Eva calls herself for having what she views as an atypical reaction (83). Shriver is also mocking Americans who think that television is a form of reality. It is silly for Eva to steal a phrase from a character she saw on television instead of just sharing her own thoughts and feelings, but this is how Shriver portrays the discomfort women may have if they do not feel “moved” during the birthing experience. Shriver poses that, because Americans today feel the need to follow certain “programs” in order to be accepted by others, Eva *not* meeting societal expectations is the central lesson that not all women/wives/mothers experience the same exact situations in the same exact ways. If every human was conventional and normative, life would be dull. Shriver expresses the need and admiration for those who can be themselves without needing to do/act/say/feel like those around them.

In order to further Shriver’s lesson about the less-welcomed conventional woman, Eva has her second child. Even though this birth is described a bit more conventional for Eva, both Eva and Franklin are concerned that Celia is a hyper-“feminine” little girl. Eva admits she “might have enjoyed [the] kind of girl” who was “a boisterous, fearless tomboy...conquering the summits of jungle gyms, arm-wrestling boys, and declaring to visitors that she planned to be an astronaut” (226) and that Franklin was “always so sensitive about slighting Kevin that...You kept her a little at arm’s length” (224). This exhibits Eva’s openness to having an unconventional girl as her daughter, who might be

more reflective of who Eva is as a more unconventional woman, one who “rarely wore” lipstick as an adult (226), while Franklin was a bit more apathetic to this baby than he was with Kevin. Shriver shows us that the two males have formed a team, assuming a gender separation of two against two within their home. Conversely, it is quite possible that Shriver creates a strong emotional bond between Eva and Celia since they are the same biological sex. But, Shriver skillfully exposes Eva’s tone of disappointment regarding Celia’s conventional performative gender, but Celia’s “feminine” self does not upset Eva like her unemotional birth of Kevin did. Shriver illustrates how the more conventional child eases Eva’s mind as she does not have to worry as much about what society will think since she the assumption is that society will approve.

Eva’s unconventional ways, though, are still exhibited with Celia. Eva describes her own daughter as someone who has the undesirable norm of being “feminine” along with having a wavering identity when the “feminine” gender is concerned. According to Eva, Celia is “plainly loveable...sweet” (224) and, to Franklin, she was “too much of a girl-girl” while “her feminine diffidence and delicacy were foreign to [Eva] as well...Celia loved to don lacy frocks and dab on...lipstick...[had a] captivation with jewelry...[tried on] my high-heeled shoes...[had a] weakness, dependency, and trust...didn’t have guts” (226). These descriptions of Celia define the conventional young female, to which Eva does not measure up in comparison to Celia. Shriver uses the character of Celia to define the traditional female gender role while she uses the character of Eva to “queer” conventional ideas regarding gender, which Shriver also shows throughout the novel.

In the most basic way, Shriver gives a lesson on unconventional gender when Eva writes to Franklin of a past conversation regarding gender-specific toys and their opposite-sex children. Franklin advises Kevin:

‘I had a little sister... You want to play with trucks, and they’re always pestering you to play with doll babies!’

‘I played with trucks,’ I objected, shooting you a look; we would have to talk about this retrograde sex-role crap when we get home. It was a shame that, born back-to-back, you and your sister... a prissy girl... were never very close...

‘There’s no telling what Celia will like to do, any more than you can tell if Kevin may like to play with dolls.’

‘In a pig’s eye!’ you cried frantically.

‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? Spiderman? Action figures are *dolls*.’

‘Great, Eva,’ you muttered. ‘Give the little guy a complex.’ (*Kevin* 222)

This spousal quarrel in front of their young children is quite telling of Shriver’s depiction of gender conventions. Here, Franklin represents the conventional “macho” male who wants his son to follow in his conventional footsteps of associating certain toys to an assigned gender in order to correlate with that gender’s conventional attributes. Even though there are still some toy debates in contemporary America regarding gender specification, there is progress in making toys more gender neutral in colors, themes, and styles so that, no matter the gender, children do not feel they should/should not play with certain toys.

From this same excerpt, we learn that Franklin was not close with his sister, and we are only given the reason that she was “prissy,” denoting that both Plaskett siblings



grew up according to their gender conventions, and somewhat independent of each other. Franklin was also irritated with the possibility of Eva encouraging Kevin to like dolls because Franklin did not want his son to get a “complex.” In this context, the “complex,” to which Franklin referred, is nothing more than an ultraconservative belief regarding gender and sexuality. Franklin did not want Kevin to play with dolls because Franklin thought that could define Kevin as a “feminine” male who, essentially, could be gay. Shriver depicts that Franklin’s ridiculous contributions in this conversation are clearly outdated and nonsensical. Shriver simply depicts that Franklin represents traditional gender norms and he wants his son to follow suit.

On the other hand, the fact that Eva verbally opposed Franklin’s conventional reaction proves another facet of Shriver’s protagonist’s depth and power as an untraditional woman. Eva not only stood up to the patriarch of the house, but she also defended the fact that any child can play with a doll of any style, no matter the biological sex or performative gender of the child. Shriver specifically chose to use the term “retrograde” to plainly state how archaic the belief is of attaching a gender or sexuality to a toy. The detail that Eva shared about her having played with trucks growing up is considered even more unconventional since her childhood would have been a few decades earlier. Shriver exposes to her audience that Eva was ahead of her time when it comes to gender neutrality for children and entertainment.

Through this novel, Shriver also shows that going against the traditions of gender is beneficial for Eva and, essentially, contemporary American society. One example is when Eva has no desire to sympathize for Laura Woolford suffering from anorexia when Eva recalls what she told Mrs. Mary Woolford in one of her letters to Franklin: ““Then

I'll refer you back to old schoolyard rhymes as to just what *little boys are made of*. I'd like to help you out, but practically? If Franklin and I say anything to Kevin, the consequences for your daughter at school will be even worse. Maybe it's better you teach Laura – what do the kids say? To *suck it up*''' (Kevin 302). Here, Shriver has Eva challenge societal expectations regarding the female gender. Eva does not sympathize with Mary or Laura as a conventional female would, but instead sides with her son who has no compassion for the Woolfords. Shriver is not implying to be indifferent to others' problems, but instead depicts Eva's unconventional reaction exposing how well she, as a female mother, knows her male son. Overall, Eva predicted that Laura would be worse off if Eva did what Mary asked and talked to Kevin about this, since that would only intensify Kevin's spitefulness. Eva may not have handled this situation as tactfully as Mary would have appreciated, but her unconventionality may have saved young Laura from enduring more problems with Kevin in the future, that is, the time there was left for her from this date until *Thursday*.

Shriver's examples of Eva "queering" her traditional gender clearly aid in Eva's self-identity and, in turn, guide her reflections in proving her innocence when it comes to Kevin. Eva may hear guilt in her head at times, but she is able to rationalize in a logical manner her feelings, decisions, and thoughts. The cultural tendency to blame herself for not conforming continuously haunts her, but Eva's free will of being her own woman helps set her free for societal control.

#### 4.2.3 LAST NAME

Eva won the argument for Kevin to acquire Eva's last name instead of Franklin's. This is an important detail that challenges traditional gender customs in America.

According to Eva's letters, Franklin told her that, if their child did not have his last name, then "It has the ring of a kid who's not related to me" (59), while Eva argued the exact opposite and added that "Men have always gotten to name children after themselves, while not doing *any of the work*... Time to turn the tables" (59). This argument between husband and wife is Shriver's depiction of contesting archaic gender traditions: wives took their husbands' last names with marriage and the children went by their fathers' surnames. Franklin offered that Eva could use *her* last name if the baby is a girl and *his* name if the baby is a boy; Eva recalls saying: "So a girl doesn't matter to you. If you were Iranian, she'd be kept home from school. If you were Indian, she'd be sold to a stranger for a cow" and so on (60). After all of their verbal combat, Franklin finally compromised that "If it's a *girl* it's a Plaskett" (61), with the understanding that if the baby was a boy, then he would be a Khatchadourian. The fact that Eva fought for Kevin, the male child to say the least, to have her last name, is a direct defilement of the tradition of passing down the father's name, yet her agreeing that a possible female child could have her husband's last name conforms to this gender-related tradition. This agreement is also an ironic struggle for keeping names in the family altogether. Without the gender-related tradition, parents would not know whether or not their names would continue beyond their own children since the kids could then choose whichever name to use for their own children. But, the contemporary way Shriver has us view is not to care past one direct generation of children; the parents are able to choose which last name their kids would use, and the kids are permitted to choose the surnames for their children, and so on. Also, Shriver's description of this pro-choice naming system also leaves options open for same-sex couples with children, again depicting unconventional gender

practices that are more common in contemporary America since same-sex parents are already following this contemporary naming system in choosing which name (if any) to pass down.

Supposedly, with this untraditional naming method, Shriver depicts a significant triumph for women, given that the son traditionally carries on the last name, but without following the tradition of Kevin passing down Khatchadourian, her surname may not continue, and, post *Thursday*, she may not want her name passed down since it may remind her of the guilt her culture places on her for what Kevin did and who he has become. Regardless, the Khatchadourian name lives on longer than the Plaskett name, through the Plaskett-Khatchadourian family, since Kevin literally killed off the Plaskett name while keeping two Khatchadourians alive among his immediate family. Eva notes this when she writes that their “son has done more to keep the name *Khatchadourian* alive than anyone else in [her] family” (61).

Shriver’s tactics of “queering” gender and challenging gender traditions is distinct, given that she uses Eva as a model for challenging gender norms. Shriver is realistic in that she shows both positive and negative reactions to these challenges. Also, she provides an array of instances when a gender challenge could be appropriate, and how to go about doing so. Shriver’s Eva is a dynamic female character who exposes some of the tests in the world in which gender may play a weighty role. Shriver also depicts how people are not purely a gender, but instead we are a mixed combination of conventional and unconventional gender roles, which help make our individualities as unique humans, not as males or females. Eva performs her gender in conventional *and* unconventional ways, guiding readers along her thought processes while she writes to her

dead husband about whether or not she is to blame for how Kevin turns out. The times Eva connects more with societal gender expectations, Eva feels the guilt society places on her, whereas when Eva connects to her gender unconventionally, she knows that she is not to blame. Contemporary culture tends to blame the female parent for children's faults, but Shriver shows readers that parental "successes" and "failures" are not contingent upon gender or the parents at all, but the children. Harvey, Eva's lawyer in her parental negligence civil suit, tries to prove just that.

## CHAPTER V

### MOTHERHOOD

#### 5.1 CONVENTIONAL MOTHERHOOD

Just as Shriver uses Eva to represent conventional and unconventional gender, Shriver also has Eva represent conventional and unconventional motherhood. Eva's conventional ways as a contemporary mother in America are usually overlooked, except for the occasional recognition of her being more physically and verbally affectionate with Celia. Even though Shriver's novel tends to cause dialogues about Eva's maternal ambivalence with Kevin, Eva's traditional motherhood norms with both of her children should be identified in order to gain a fuller sense of Shriver's message that some parents are simply dealt difficult children.

##### 5.1.1 CELIA'S CONVENTIONAL MOTHER

From Eva's letters that include information about her civil trial about her negligent parenting, it is interesting that Eva never writes about Celia. Shriver suggests that a significant omission in the case is that these two very different children are raised by the same mother, proving Eva's innocence even more. Going back to Celia's conception, Eva writes how her pregnancy with Celia matched many mother-to-be norms: "when I finally missed a period the following fall, I started to sing....purred about

[my] duties like a bubbling brook” (*Kevin* 213-4). Eva writes how she enjoyed this pregnancy and was excited to have a child, matching the expected behaviors of a conventional mother-to-be. Shriver depicts quite the opposite tone about Eva becoming a mother than the tone she had when she was pregnant with Kevin, also regarding the fact that Eva chose not to get the developmental test with Celia like she had with Kevin. Shriver portrays a distinct difference between the two pregnant Evas. It is possible that Shriver displays the idea that Eva was more prepared, ready, and mature, to have a child at this point in her life than when she first got pregnant with Kevin. Eva recalls in her letters when Franklin told her that he ““thought the whole idea of becoming parents was to grow up.”” Disheartened, Eva recalls replying to him: ““If I’d realized that’s what it meant to you, affecting some phony, killjoy adulthood, I’d have reconsidered the whole business”” (*Kevin* 64). Eva openly expresses that she did not want to be a parent just yet when Kevin came along, and so her excitement while pregnant with Celia expresses the opposite.

A more descriptive scene showcasing Shriver’s depiction of Eva’s traditional mothering style with her daughter is when the cops brought Kevin home from throwing bricks off a bridge and onto the highway. Eva writes Franklin that:

Celia wasn’t used to seeing you manhandle her brother, and she’d started to wail. I hustled her from the foyer back to her homework at the dining table, soothing that the policemen were our friends and just wanted to make sure we were safe, while you rustled our stoic son down the hall to his room. In such an excitable state, I had difficulty concentrating as I coaxed Celia back to her primer about farm animals. (262)

Eva was compassionate and attentive in her attempts to pacify Celia from worrying about her older brother getting in trouble by the police and by their father. Eva dealt with Celia delicately and with a sense of protection through a complementary response to Celia's timid and youthful persona. It is ironic that Eva tried to shelter Celia from the real world, pulling her out of sight from Franklin's yelling at and seizing Kevin by the arm while, when Kevin was that age, Eva no longer tried to prevent his exposure to the cruel truths of the world. Shriver openly depicts Eva as a conventional mother to Celia within this passage since Eva did what she could to shield her fearful daughter from Franklin's anger, from Kevin's misbehavior, and from the policemen's candid report. Shriver also displays another glimpse of Eva's "natural" tenderness with her daughter, most likely due to Celia's conventional need for such attention.

Eva writes several accounts about wanting to make Celia happy, as any conventional mother would hope to please her child. While on her mother-son outing with Kevin, Eva writes that "I supposed aloud that maybe we could buy Celia one of those super thin aluminum Razor scooters that had abruptly become so popular" and recalls telling Kevin: "'I wouldn't want Celia to feel left out'" (272). Shriver not only has Eva's "quality time" with her son shift to be about Celia, but Eva references that she took into account for what other people think of Celia along with not wanting her feelings to be hurt. Shriver depicts the contemporary convention of a contemporary American mother who feels the need to conform to what others deem appropriate or expected. Shriver has Eva worry about her daughter having the same faddish toys other kids have so Celia could be more accepted by others and less of a target to be made fun of or picked on due to her childish fears (textures of food, the bathroom, mildew) and mannerisms



(loving her broken toys over new ones, her hyper-naïveté). This overprotection of her daughter's feelings parallels the conventional approach Franklin had when he worried about Kevin being teased in Kindergarten for still wearing diapers. Eva expresses these traditional mothering styles with her daughter through her letters to Franklin.

Deciding against the scooter, due to Kevin's logical response that Celia would be too afraid to use a scooter, Eva resolved on getting Celia her own pet to make her happy on Christmas. Eva recounts this episode in her letters to Franklin:

I went to considerable trouble to locate a 'small-eared elephant shrew' as a Christmas present for Celia. When we'd visited the Small Mammals exhibit in the Bronx Zoo, she'd been enchanted by this incongruous little fellow...The importation was probably illegal – if not outright endangered, this tiny creature from southern Africa was identified at the zoo as 'threatened, due to habitat loss' – which didn't help my case when you grew impatient with the time it took to find one... Celia would have been bowled over by a roll of lifesavers. (279-80)

Evidently, Eva went to much trouble to get Celia an exotic and endangered Christmas present. Her tone does not express her animosity in going to such great lengths of securing this unique gift, yet instead emits a genuine affection for Celia. When Eva could have grabbed a cheap and common item, like Lifesavers, from the grocery store, she chose to make this purchase for Celia exceptional and quite personal to fit Celia's caring heart, going above and beyond Celia's requests to be pleased. Because Eva chose a more challenging present to obtain for her easily-pleased daughter, Shriver shows us how unnecessary and wasteful it is for parents to buy outlandish gifts for young kids, especially live pets that will eventually die and cause the children heartbreaks. Shriver

depicts the upper-class American mother who lavishly overspends for her child. This passage attests to Shriver's awareness that parenting expectations for upper-middle-class Americans raising children in contemporary America is costly, and those who choose to spend copious amounts by choice are foolish and more impulsive than rational. Readers are aware that Celia did not ask for nor need this extravagant gift, and so Shriver makes a point regarding an unwritten contemporary parental expectation for frivolous spending, providing physical proof of their love for their children. Shriver makes a jab at contemporary America needing to show off wealth and generosity through Eva's conventional mothering of Celia.

Eva includes many references to her physical warmth with her daughter. In this excerpt, Eva writes about one of her morning farewell rituals with Celia:

Although by now in a hurry, I had to say good-bye to Celia twice. I stooped and brushed her hair, picked a last bit of crust from her lower lash, reminded her which books she had to take today, and then gave her a big long hug, but after I'd turned to collect my things, I noticed her still standing there where I'd left her looking stricken, hands held stiffly out from her side as if contaminated with *drydirt*. So I hoisted her by the armpits into my arms, though she was nearly eight now and supporting her full weight was hard on my back. She wrapped her legs around my waist, buried her head in my neck, and said, 'I'll miss you!' I said I would miss her, too, though I had no idea how much. (364-5)

Even though Eva expresses some pessimism with Celia's separation anxiety tendencies, she was still willing to fulfill her daughter's wishes of another goodbye hug, or two, and lifting her almost-eight-year-old for a full monkey-cling hug. Eva's tone is agreeable in

respect to her disposal to Celia's anxiety. Her tone, too, hints at her appreciation for Celia's affection since this was her last moment receiving it before Kevin kills her.

While describing Eva's drawn out leave-taking of Celia, Shriver includes somewhat of an ironic tone as well. As much as Eva wanted to be on time for work, she still gave in to lengthening her goodbye ritual with her daughter, delaying her even more in her drive to work. Eva does not seem to hesitate whether or not to continue her hugs with her daughter as opposed to her leaving for work more promptly, just as any conventional mother would react. From being such a career-driven mother when Kevin was this age, Celia certainly had a different experience than Kevin had with their mother when he was that age. Through this passage, Shriver depicts the convention of mothers choosing family over work when the child wants and enjoys the mother being near. Eva is able to mother Celia in conventional ways because Celia responds in conventional ways.

#### 5.1.2 KEVIN'S CONVENTIONAL MOTHER

Although most of Eva's conventional mothering with Kevin is fake and forced (that is, concerning the times when Eva is not being unconventional with the mothering of her son), there are occurrences in her letters when Shriver depicts a more traditional maternal approach. These moments reveal Eva's "maternal instinct" with Kevin. Even though Shriver's novel suggests that this "instinct" is a cultural construct, Eva is given some hope when Kevin reacts to her conventional ways in a conventional way himself. Through her epistolary format, Eva writes that "form dictates tone" (*Kevin* 369), when she refers to Kevin's forged letters from his principal to his victims. This adds weight to Shriver's choice of choosing this type of format for Eva to be seen as Kevin's

conventional mother. The fact that Eva notes this detail in her son's plot is significant toward Shriver's message of Eva using conventional mothering with Kevin.

The most obvious letter that deals with Eva following motherhood norms in a "natural" way with Kevin was during the two weeks when he was very sick at age ten. This was the time when Eva was certain that Kevin was a completely fake kid with Franklin and when Eva did not have to rationalize or defend what she said, did, or thought concerning her son. Some conventional mothering highlights from these two weeks, according to Eva, are as follows:

I helped him up and lifted him to bed...he *put his arms around my neck*...he let me undress him...I tucked him in...I slipped the thermometer between his flushed lips...I stroked his forehead with a moist washcloth...I pulled his head onto my lap and he clutched my sweater...I cleaned up the mess [from his getting sick] and told him not to worry...children always prefer their mothers when they're sick...he liked my clam chowder...He even requested a toasted slice of *katah*...I had taken time off from AWAP, of course...I picked *Robin Hood and His Merry Men*. He loved it. He implored me to read *Robin Hood* over and over...I will never forget those two weeks... (235-8)

These two weeks are the most authentically conventional out of the eighteen years Eva and Kevin have had together. The first half of this selection is a condensed list of some of the caring acts Eva displayed toward her ill son; when Kevin was an infant, Eva listed how she changed him, fed him, held him, etc. but those listed in the above excerpt incorporate adjectives, reciprocated actions from Kevin, and instinctive care instead of attempted, forced, detached, or hesitant care. Shriver also alludes to the fact that Eva

regularly cooks and bakes since Kevin points out the soup of hers he prefers, as well as her homemade Armenian bread. Eva does not seem to throw a frozen meal into the microwave like contemporary Americans do so often, but instead makes foods from her heritage for her family, like a traditional ethnic mother is expected. Shriver makes it clear that Eva works hard at being a “good” mother. Also, Eva did not protest about rereading the same story to Kevin. For a mother who complained about how boring it was to raise a baby, readers may simply assume that only reading one story for two weeks straight might also get under her skin; it is obvious that Eva enjoys it simply because Kevin enjoys it. Shriver could be posing here that, when a child is “naturally” conventional, the mother will be conventional in return, and also when the order is reversed. Due to Eva’s calm, pleasant, and even grateful tone during this letter, readers see a different side to this mother, but it is only due to the new side of this child finally appearing to his mother. From this passage, Shriver suggests that what is theoretically “natural” may not happen every day in real life, or with every child, and that, what is “natural,” may be different for every child as well.

These pleasantries do not last long among these two characters reciprocating conventional manners with each other, although, Eva has plenty of moments when she is portrayed as Kevin’s normative mother. Soon, we will discuss some of Eva’s repetitive unconventional mothering methods of Kevin, which include her tending to see ambiguous situations due Kevin’s involvement. This is unconventional since mothers are traditionally expected to believe that their children behave, reflecting the “good” parenting they receive, such as how Franklin reacts in these situations. She even writes about what she recalls him telling her: “Most parents...apply themselves to

*understanding* their kids, and not to picking apart every little - ” (265). But, Eva overhears that it truly was not Kevin’s doing and admits that she “felt ashamed of my false accusations” (268). Shriver shows a common reaction of a late twentieth-century upper-middle-class American mother, in that society would expect Eva to feel guilt in this situation, especially since the guilt correlates with wrongly going against her innocent child. Since Eva’s character has already been established that she writes things down that may not put her in the best light, readers are able to take this admission as genuine. Shriver allows her protagonist to confess fault, so much so that Eva “decided to ask Kevin on that mother-son outing, just the two of [them]” (268).

Some other pieces within Eva’s writing that also portray her as a typical mother occurs the day of this mother-son date. Eva “noticed that Kevin hadn’t worn a jacket. It was chilly, too, and overcast. ‘Why didn’t you wear a *coat*?’ I exploded” (270). Parents scold their children about what they are, or are not, wearing. Shriver is representing traditional parents who, no matter their dispositions at the time, expose the fact that their children are not dressed appropriately for the weather. Because of this, Eva drives back home so Kevin can get a coat, also exhibiting a conventional mother who not only wants her child to be warm, but also exerts her authority of having her prerogatives met.

Dovetailing from this archetypal comment and action, Eva “caught” Kevin with “the carcass of a whole cold chicken...of which he was still devouring” when Eva says, “‘I’m about to take you to dinner...Why are you eating the better part of a roast chicken before we go?...Put that away *right now* and get your coat’” (274). Shriver, again, wittily embraces the epitome of a classic mother who tries to keep her cool when her kid does something so brainless, like eat right before going to dinner. Shriver’s putting the phrase

“*right now*” in italics also demonstrates Eva’s tone of impatience and irritation with her son, showing that these reactions are quite “normal” for mothers. Readers may picture Eva saying those words behind clenched teeth, or perhaps loudly screamed, imagining themselves with their own mothers in a similar past experience. These brief quotes not only illustrate Eva’s conventionality as Kevin’s mother, but they also signify Shriver’s ability to capture accurate depictions of familial interactions.

One of the most significant acts of conventional motherhood is the automatic concern Eva had when she heard about a shooting at Kevin’s high school: “I worried for his well-being. Not for an instant did I imagine that our son was the perpetrator” (369). Eva’s fearful reaction and her assumption that the shooter was not her son both support “healthy” maternal conventions in Eva’s character. The “natural” anxiety of losing a child is apparent in this letter and the common American thought that a contemporary American tragedy would never happen within her family. This idea of American false security is present when Franklin blames ““the *parents*”” for these school shootings on the news and Eva adds how these ““Kids pick up things on TV, they listen to their parents talking”” (312-3), which is Shriver’s ironic way of depicting American naïveté since both of Kevin’s parents criticize these American families of teen shooters, yet unknowingly at that time, will become those parents as well. Additionally, while Eva is tried in court for parental negligence, her blasé attitude on the stand surprisingly is noted to reflect “a set type” (123), suggesting that Eva fits into a pre-defined category as a “negligent” mother. Furthermore, Kevin fits into the American cliché of a high school shooter since he is half Armenian: “everything becomes a race issue in this country” (65); ““Of course, for ages *black* kids and *Hispanic* kids have been shooting each other...A few *white* kids, *middle-*

*class* kids,...*suburban* kids go ballistic, and suddenly it's a national emergency'" (249), portraying Eva's perspective on race and socio-economic class relations to American school shootings. Here, Shriver slips in a cultural depiction that, due to Eva's Armenian ethnicity, Kevin fits more into the classification of a non-white kid, being more prone to being a shooter according to American demographic statistics. This detail feeds into the convention of society pointing blame toward those parents who raise "bad" kids.

In association with Eva's conventional motherhood practices, Shriver may also be alluding to an unconventional mother obtaining therapeutic value from writing these conventional motherhood experiences down. Eva is basically documenting that she felt like she was doing something "right" for a change, meaning she was more "natural" in performing more conventionally as a mother. Here, Shriver critiques the cultural myths of "naturalness" when it comes to mothering children. What is "natural" is to react or respond in the manner the original act is given. For example, when she mothers Kevin in a conventional way, then Kevin should react in a conventional way, and when she mothers Kevin in an unconventional way, then it is expected for Kevin to react in an unconventional way.

Overall, Eva is not trying to prove her conventional ways as a mother, but her lawyer Harvey hoped to do just that. Shriver uses Eva's civil trial to structure Eva's letters which include both conventional and unconventional methods regarding motherhood. During the trial, Harvey "was intent on evoking every parent's latent fear that it was possible to do absolutely everything right and still turn on the news to a nightmare from which there is no waking" (148). His alibi for Eva is that she could be the "best" mother to her son but he still would have committed the same crimes. Harvey's



plan of defense for Eva, in a sense, embodies Shriver's message that Eva is not to blame, but Kevin is. Additionally, Kevin's perspective on Eva's trial, which he stated in one of his television interviews, is that the trial itself was "Totally bogus," and that the premise of suing a mother for raising him was just as ridiculous for kids suing their parents "because they came out ugly" (353). Shriver clearly mocks contemporary American culture for wanting to place the blame on others, no matter the irrational reasoning. In a way, Kevin accepted the blame when he nullified his mother's guilt in the matter, furthering Shriver's suggestion that Eva's trial and blame are nonsensical.

## 5.2 UNCONVENTIONAL MOTHERHOOD

### 5.2.1 CELIA'S UNCONVENTIONAL MOTHER

Even though Eva writes about many conventional motherhood memories that she shared with Celia, she includes that she is "trying to prove that I am a good mother" (40), since cultural myth would suggest otherwise according to her efforts with her last child, Kevin. Since it was so hard for her to appear to Franklin as a "good" mother to Kevin, she feels the need to try again with her second child to get his approval, suggesting that she would earn conventional acceptance from society as well. But, because Celia reacts in conventional ways to her parents, Eva has no problems parenting her in conventional ways. Of course, Celia is never discussed when Eva writes about being on trial for parental negligence, showing how jaded the American court system can seem.

As a toddler, Celia was emotionally needy, clingy, and scared of so many everyday objects that Franklin had no patience with her and, while Eva had a bit more patience than her husband, would sometimes fall short of being conventional from dealing with so many of Celia's needs. When Celia became school-aged, Eva expressed

traditional motherhood when she helped Celia with her homework, yet Eva's tone proves this conventional act to be more contemporary:

I tried to drill into her: You just memorize that the capital of Florida is Tallahassee, period...Celia couldn't imagine it was that simple, that there wasn't a magic trick, and she doubted herself, so that taking the state capitals test she would immediately question 'Tallahassee' for the very reason that it popped into her head...Celia's faith, as emphatic in relation to others as it was deficient in relation to herself, assured her that no one would ever insist that she study the manifestly useless. (*Kevin* 228)

Eva feels bad that Celia makes things harder for herself and also believes that Celia sees the best in everyone, which Eva knows is not going to benefit Celia later in life. Eva assumes she has Celia figured out. Here, Shriver depicts how contemporary American mothers feel bad for their kids who have a tough time with school; many contemporary American parents of children with special educational needs enable their children instead of challenging them to grow like any other child. Also, Shriver, through Eva, mocks the contemporary American philosophy that "there's-no-such-thing-as-worse-or-better-but-only-different" (176) in regards to children in the education system. Because of this philosophy, "Helicopter Parents" became common in present-day America and are easily identifiable in the educational world. Shriver exhibits this through her character of Mrs. Mary Woolford. Parents did not used to fight verbal battles for their teen-aged children, but Mary Woolford does for her daughter Laura. Eva predicts that Kevin will make things worse for Laura if the parents get involved, and so Eva chooses not to tell Kevin of Mary's visit. Likewise, Franklin believed Eva coddled Celia instead of giving her space

to grow; Franklin categorized Eva as a conventional parent who is overly involved with Celia's education and frequently fusses over her. Yet, Shriver depicts Eva pitying her child for not being as autonomous as her own mother. Furthermore, Franklin was quite as attached to Kevin when he was Celia's age. However, Kevin pretended to reciprocate Franklin's conventional attachment while Celia's conventional reciprocity is all she knows.

Eva recalls another time when she mothered Celia in an unconventional way. After Celia lost an eye from a bottle of "Liquid-Plumr" (283), Eva writes to her dead husband that: "out of a sense of parental obligation... did ask her... 'When you got hurt? What happened?'" (*Kevin* 305). This "parental obligation" implies that Shriver describes Eva doing something against her usual actions, especially since Eva "was every bit as shy of discussing the matter... [and] neither of us had any desire to relive that day" (305), but Shriver makes a point that Eva asks Celia as a mother doing something simply because of her role as Mother, and not out of a "natural" prospect of being a parent. Eva depicts this situation as taboo, yet it is quite normative for a mother to ask her own child "What happened?" after an injury. The fact that Eva writes she asked Celia what had happened out of "parental obligation" reflects Eva's playing a role instead of just reacting to her child after being injured. Shriver depicts that mothers are conscious of when they are traditional and when they are not and Eva recognizes her unconventionality in this situation with her injured daughter.

As mentioned in the "Gender" section, Celia was not a fan of "*slime*" on her French toast. This same breakfast recollection can be analyzed as another unconventional time when Eva mothered Celia:

I was carefully frying Celia's French toast completely dry, lest a little undercooked egg seem like *slime*...I sifted a generous dusting of confectioner's sugar over the toast, stooping by Celia's soft blond hair to mumble, 'Now don't dawdle, you don't want to be late for school again. You're supposed to eat it, not make friends with it.

I tucked her hair behind her ears and kissed the top of her head... (362)

Reiterating the fact that italicizing "*slime*" denotes an insensitive tone coming from Eva, this hints that Eva is slightly bothered by her daughter's special requests. Even though the conversation sounds very typical, as most kids go through a picky-eating phase, Shriver suggests that Eva perceives Celia's hyper-sensitivity to the various textures of food is somewhat excessive. Although Shriver still has Eva accept and accommodate this request, Eva's unconventional reaction does not bear much weight. Additionally, it is evident that Celia is late for school often because she spends time befriending her breakfast foods. Shriver depicts how contemporary mothers do not enforce their children's promptness in America, in this case, for the school day. Shriver illustrates a mother who accepts her daughter's tardiness instead of imposing strict rules on timeliness. Shriver alludes to the contemporary American mother who rationalizes her child's deficient choices. Also, if Kevin were repeatedly late to school, readers would not anticipate Eva putting as much care into his breakfast or soothingly remind him to watch the time.

Another example of Eva being an unconventional mother to Celia is that Eva predicted Celia's glum future as a mother who is an unconventional realist and not a conventional idealist:

...I considered the possibility that, while lovely to my own eye, Celia was fetching in a way that outsiders might be apt to overlook. She was only six, but I already feared that she would never be beautiful – that she was unlikely to carry herself with that much authority. She had your mouth, too wide for her small head; her lips were thin and bloodless. Her tremulous countenance encouraged a carefulness around her that was wearing. That hair, so silken and wispy, was destined to grow lank, its gold to give way to a dingier blond by her teens. Besides, isn't true beauty a tad enigmatic? And Celia was too artless to imply concealment. She had an available face, and there is something implicitly uninteresting about the look of a person who will tell you whatever you want to know. Why, already I could see it: She would grow into the kind of adolescent who conceives a doomed crush on the president of the student council, who doesn't know she's alive. Celia would always give herself away cheaply. Later, she would move in – too young – with an older man who would abuse her generous nature, who would leave her for a more buxom woman who knows how to dress. (281)

Here, Eva writes to the deceased Franklin about how she saw no promising future for her daughter. Her tone is sympathetic, clashing with the conventional motherhood expectation which would be more of an optimistic tone. Eva reveals to Franklin how she never thought Celia would make much of anything as an adult; an unconventional mother expects her own daughter to also be unconventional, and so Eva's assumption that Celia would not be a successful career woman who is autonomous and self-sufficient like herself is a bit unexpected. Eva instead exhibits unconventional mothering since she

predicted Celia to grow up to be a very dependent young woman who would end up losing out on opportunities due to her traditionalist way of thinking and acting. Shriver depicts the disadvantages of being a conventional female through Eva's unconventional take on motherhood. Eva was concerned for Celia; Eva presumed that Celia would make nothing of her life and would be some man's proverbial trophy wife instead of her own individual person. Shriver suggests that Eva's prediction of Celia's lack of a future symbolizes Celia's premature death, as well as her absence of being mentioned in Eva's trial on being a mother. Eva does not express many unconventional manners while mothering Celia since Celia is a very conventional little girl. Shriver shows us that the children's reactions to different mothering styles influence the mothers' approaches to mothering each child in an individual way.

#### 5.2.2 KEVIN'S UNCONVENTIONAL MOTHER

There are countless examples in Eva's letters to her dead husband that show her unconventional mothering tactics when it comes to mothering Kevin. Eva struggled with being a conventional mother due to Kevin's lack of conventional response since Kevin's conception. Eva recalls her troublesome times with Kevin as a newborn:

It wasn't mother's milk he didn't want, it was Mother. In fact, I became convinced that our little bundle of joy had found me out. Infants have great intuition, because intuition's about all they've got. I felt certain that he could detect a telltale stiffening in my arms when I picked him up. I was confident that he could infer from a subtly exasperated quality in my voice when I burbled and cooed that burbling and cooing did not come naturally to me and that his precocious ear could isolate in that endless stream of placating blather an

insidious, compulsive sarcasm. Moreover, since I had read – sorry, you had read – that it was important to smile at infants to try to elicit a smile in response, 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 crib. (86-7)

When Eva writes that Kevin “had found me out,” when she attempted multiple conventional forms of mothering him that did not go as expected. The culture's tendency to place guilt on the mother makes everything Eva's fault, instead of noting how the child is unconventional in response. Eva's tone here gives way to fearing her own baby due to his lack of response. She shares her paranoia that her baby intuitively knew that Eva was not a “good,” traditional mother according to cultural norms. Shriver depicts that a woman in contemporary America may gain anxiety of losing her autonomy and identity once she becomes a mother, assuming that, according to conventional norms, the mother is expected to sacrifice her life for her child's. Additionally, Eva did what she could to express normative maternal behaviors, such as smiling or cooing, yet since it was forced instead of welcomed, she feared Kevin noticed her phony mothering schemes. Shriver depicts that attempting practices that are the exact rivals of a mother's own intuition is damaging to the mother. Although, it must be noted that Eva still attempted conventional methods of mothering a child who repeatedly rejected her efforts, and so her smiles became forced as she lost hope of being a “good” mother, as defined by society, each

time her son refuted her endeavors. Due to her culture, Eva grew apprehensive that she was a mother who did not conquer conventional motherhood customs which then grew into a mistrust of her own child.

Eva continued to care for Kevin like a worker who checked off tasks on a to-do list. She knew what had to be done to make a baby comfortable, but when Kevin did not reciprocate with gratitude or acceptance from her care, she displayed an aversion to him: “He was dry, he was fed, he had slept. I would have tried blanket on, blanket off; he was neither hot nor cold. He’d been burped, and I have a gut instinct that he didn’t have colic; Kevin’s was not a cry of pain but of wrath. He had toys dangling overhead, rubber blocks in his bed” (90). Eva’s tone is considerably matter-of-fact. There is no element of emotion, discerning a poignant distance between her and her son. Yes, Eva does what a traditional mother should and would for a crying baby, but she carries these duties out without actually showing the baby that she loves him. Shriver portrays an image of an unaffected mother meeting the physical needs of her child (i.e. changing, feeding, burping, etc.) but does nothing to attend to him in an emotive sense because Kevin does not want that from her. Eva does what is necessary for her individual child. The novel shows that her parenting is not “bad” since there are no issues with her mothering Celia. The variable is the child, not the mother.

Eva, fully aware of cultural norms when raising a child, also did not understand that, with blocks above his crib, Kevin could not be happy. Shriver plainly shows that Eva does not go much beyond the basic fundamentals of meeting a baby’s needs, quite opposite of her getting Celia that elephant shrew for Christmas, yet Eva did not do anything nearly as elaborate in attempts to appease her firstborn child. Kevin makes it



apparent throughout the novel that nothing makes him happy or gets him excited, and so Eva had no reason to buy extravagant gifts for her son; he never wanted her to anything like that for him anyway. Shriver depicts Eva as more of a career-focused woman while she raises young Kevin because that is all Kevin wanted from his mother. While being interviewed post *Thursday*, Kevin gloats about Eva's accomplishments in the career world: "She's been all over the world...Started her own company...Pretty cool" (*Kevin* 353). Shriver suggests that cultural blame makes Eva feel inadequate as a mother because she does not match societal norms in this role.

Along with the passage of Kevin's infancy, Eva writes a similar experience about her mothering Kevin once nanny Siobhan left for the day:

I returned to our son's marathon and looked down at his writhing dudgeon. I was not going to pick him up. No one was there to make me and I didn't want to. I would not, as Siobhan had suggested, check his diaper, nor would I warm a bottle of milk. I would let him cry and cry...Mother was not going to get in a flap about whatever might be the matter. (105)

In opposition with the previous infant excerpt, here Eva did not even attempt to go through her checklist of normative human needs and instead chose to "not...get in a flap about whatever" was going on with Kevin. Eva has a tone of carelessness regarding her baby's crying because, at this point with Kevin, she knew he did not need anything; he simply was being obstinate. The irony is that, even though Mother and Son were both unhappy, they were both doing what the other wanted from them. This passage of Eva ignoring Kevin's crying instead of tending to him allows an insight into contemporary parenting with a sense of defeat. Eva has run out of patience and cannot uphold fitting

into the role of a conventional mother with her uncommonly unpleasant child. Shriver teaches us that there are plenty of mothers in contemporary America who lose patience with their young children to the point of neglect, at least according to culture's definition of neglect.

On this same page, Eva remembers what she told her crying baby: “‘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?’” (105). Eva’s falsetto tone is socially acceptable when speaking to her young child. Even though it is forced, her conventional tone would normally be agreeable to a baby’s ear. Although her tone is acceptable to the norms of society for mothers, the content of what she says is unconventional to say to a child. Shriver depicts that not all contemporary American mothers are conventional. Even though she has Eva use a conventional tone with her child, Shriver mocks this convention as Eva verbally assaults her own child.

Shriver clearly implies that Eva is a career-driven mother when Eva writes down a conversation she had with Siobhan, Kevin’s nanny, about Eva’s job: “‘I haven’t given it up,’ I said. ‘After a year or so, I’ll resume business as usual,’” and that Franklin “ought to expect” Eva to return to work after maternity leave (98). Here, Shriver depicts the contemporary, autonomous career woman of America who defies her traditional gender role without planning to stay home once her prearranged maternity leave ends. Eva continues to write Franklin that Siobhan argued back, “but you run a whole company” (99), conventionally thinking that Eva should not return to work since her work position is so demanding and, now that she has a child, she should not continue operating a

company, especially since it requires Eva to travel often. Even though most contemporary American mothers work while raising their children, there are also those who follow the traditional motherhood norm and choose to stay home once they begin having children, adhering to the traditional role of a mother. The other notable matter with Siobhan the nanny, as well as Kevin's multiple other caretakers who left, validates the fact that Kevin is an unusually difficult child. Shriver makes it clear to readers that Kevin, not Eva, is the issue at hand.

Another example of Eva's atypical way of mothering Kevin, still from when Kevin was a young child, is when Eva writes:

Kevin graduated from kindergarten in June, and we were stuck with one another all summer. (Listen, I got on Kevin's nerves as much as he got on mine.)...Kevin had still not learned how to play. Left to entertain himself, he would sit like a lump on the floor with a moody detachment that turned the atmosphere of the whole house oppressive. So I tried to involve him in projects, assembling yard and buttons and glue and scraps of colorful fabric in the playroom for making sock puppets. I'd join him on the carpet and have a cracking good time myself, really, except in the end I would have made a nibbling rabbit with a red felt mouth and big floppy blue ears and drinking-straw whiskers, and Kevin's arm would sport a plain knee-high dipped in paste. I didn't expect our child to necessarily be a crafts wunderkind, but he could at least have made an effort. (189-90)

With this recollection of Eva's, Shriver makes it clear that Eva as a mother is complaining about her son not putting forth much effort in a craft activity while Eva herself endeavors to be a conventional mother with him. Her tone of dissatisfaction with

Kevin's actions with this project counteracts Eva's intention of pursuing a conventionally maternal activity with her son. Along with dissatisfaction, Eva exhibits a reproachful and irritated tone when trying to mother Kevin, showing that she is unsupportive of her unconventional son, yet Eva independently created her own sock puppet without assisting her child in creating his. Shriver depicts that, when an American woman has an unconventional child, she tries to raise him to be more conventional, yet since Eva is unconventional herself, her craft activity does not match her maternal approach and so Kevin does not attach to it either, being unconventional himself. Since Kevin only responds to Eva's raw unconventional self, when Eva performed normative motherhood acts, like making sock puppets with her son, he detached from her and the activity because they both represented conventionality. Again, Shriver illustrates that unconventional children need to be raised in unconventional ways.

When Kevin grew older, Eva continued to challenge motherhood norms with Kevin. Throughout history, disciplining children has been a conflict among parents. Eva did not hesitate to hit Kevin. Eva recounts this event when she writes: "I slapped him. It wasn't very hard. He looked happy... 'Franklin, he was getting louder. People were starting to look over.' Now Kevin started to wail. His tears were a bit late, in my view. I wasn't moved. I left him to it... So: I slap Kevin. You slap me. I got the picture" (128). Eva directly points out in her letter to Franklin that she recognized a cycle of events in their family of three: if she is negative toward Kevin, then Franklin will be negative toward her in return.

Shriver depicts a couple of insights into contemporary America in terms of conventional motherhood with this passage. First, Eva loses her patience with her son

and slaps him in public. Eva is more concerned about Kevin embarrassing them in public than the possibility of physically hurting her child. Eva's reaction to this part of the passage portrays the American anxiety of being judged by other Americans. Franklin worries about what people will think from Eva slapping her son, while Eva worries about what people will think from Kevin's mimicking everything his parents say. Either way, as the novel shows, public blame tends to point toward the parents, not the child. Next, Shriver illustrates how conventional mothers are unaffected by their own children's tears. This can be taken in various ways: if a child cries often, not all tears may be worthy enough for a mother to provide full attention and emotion for the child; when there is a long enough lapse between the cause of tears to the production of tears, a mother may believe that her child is faking tears to gain attention; some mothers may wait before tending to their children when the fathers are present to give them an opportunity to play the comforting role, or the mother chooses to take a break from playing the comforting role and prefers the father to take over when he is present, etc. Regardless of the outcome, Eva recognizes that this situation was not culturally acceptable.

A final passage representing Eva's unconventional ways when mothering Kevin is another example of Eva disciplining her son. This time, she takes a toy away from him that he misuses:

Yet in truth, when I commandeered Kevin's squirt gun, I felt a gush of savage joy... the continuing possession of Kevin's beloved toy engorged me with such pleasure that I withdrew it from my purse, forefinger on the trigger, riding shotgun. Strapped between us in the front seat, Kevin lifted his gaze from my lap to the dashboard with theatrical unconcern. Kevin's bearing was taciturn, his

body slack... Inside he was raging. He hated me with all his being, and I was happy as a clam. (151)

Eva gets exhilarated from upsetting Kevin. Though Eva's reaction may first appear as unconventional, Eva's evoking any authentic emotion from her son is an accomplishment, conventional or not. Kevin exposed his anger toward Eva and she expressed her raw confession of bliss in her letter to Franklin. Her tone in this excerpt is honest and direct while she asserts the facts to Franklin.

When Eva confesses to Franklin in her letters as she does here, irony is present in regard to her mothering choices. She chose to take the squirt gun away to punish her son's misuse of the toy. Eva is contented that she was able to discipline him in a way that upset him. This passage describes Shriver's message that contemporary mothers are supposed to commiserate their children's sad and mad emotions in order to comply with American conventionality. Shriver has Eva react unconventionally with depicting a mother's sense of power and control over her son being a victory instead of a setback in their relationship.

Just as with gender, Eva challenges motherhood norms throughout her letters to Franklin. Shriver adds to her message of this book with showing how Eva uses both conventional and unconventional mothering with both of her children, and that Eva must match her individual children in order to be "successful." Shriver depicts that, motherhood is contingent upon variables within society and within the particular family. As society changes, so do performative expectations of motherhood. With Kevin, Eva lacked confidence and was not willing to alter her identity (paralleling Shelton and Johnson's research), thus earning the label of an ambivalent mother (as Jeremiah stresses

in her analyses of Eva). Yet, with Celia, Eva was able to feel more positivity with motherhood since Celia responded to culturally conventional mothering better; Eva identified with being a capable mother and enhanced her sense of self. Eva grew to be more selfless in mothering Celia, which is a probable reason why she and Kevin got along better as Kevin got older; Eva had to grow into her role as a mother. Also, as years passed, society changed its norms as well, so Shriver may also suggest that it took a while for society to reach more of Eva's mothering methods, meaning that sometimes individuals are more up-to-date than societal norms. Even though Eva occasionally calls herself a "bad mother," she is simply writing down how much cultural expectations persuaded her mental being. Eva's two children are very different and so they respond differently to methods of motherhood. Kevin responds to a more unconventional way of mothering, while Celia reciprocates better with conventional ways.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Shriver challenges gender and motherhood norms throughout her epistolary novel to depict the voice of a contemporary American female who becomes a mother. It is through Eva's letters, which respond to the cultural question of her guilt, that clarify Shriver's message of contingency within both of these literary canons. Although most critics and reviewers, especially Jeremiah, recognize how Eva is an ambivalent mother, they tend to neglect Eva's countless efforts at mothering Kevin in conventional ways, his lack of response to conventional mothering; they also overlook her conventional mothering of Celia in its entirety. Shriver's novel portrays the idea that, by now, unconventional gender and motherhood acts should be appreciated and expected by the resolution of Eva's not being guilty. A contemporary American woman may have her first child in her thirties instead of the traditional twenties, have her spouse stay home to raise the family while she continues to progress in her career, or choose not to have children at all and defy traditional "feminine" roles altogether.

Additionally, Eva's gender is rarely discussed. Yet, when we apply Butlerian theory to Shriver's work, it is evident that gender and motherhood are closely tied together with motherhood being a section within gender. When Eva writes about



challenging her performative gender norms, then societal, familial, and personal consequences follow, most of which she describes as negative: Butler argues that we receive negative consequences when we stray from our normative gender roles, which confirms that Shriver is probably aware of Butlerian theory, whether by having read it or having heard of it indirectly. When Eva writes about being at fault for breaking Kevin's arm, she writes that her six-year-old son owns her soul, she was ashamed of herself, and that Franklin scolded her, yet Kevin accepted her violence and kept her secret. Instead of a negative reaction from the recipient of her violence, Eva recalls in her letters that Kevin rewarded her. Shriver shows that Kevin is a very unusual child who reacts in unusual ways to Eva's mothering methods. Also, we have examined how gender, as well as motherhood, is able to be determined as ambiguous, culturally defined, punishable when challenged, never fully internalized, and performative in order to have an identity. In Shriver's novel, Butlerian theory is paired with motherhood studies.

Shriver depicts many situations which entail Eva and conventional gender norms. Through Shriver's epistolary format, she creates a "voiceless" protagonist who is able to carry out confessions and apologies to her husband only through written form, and after he is dead, showing how a traditional female wife does not have the courage to say these things face-to-face to her husband, or at least chooses not to in order to be compliant and submissive to her husband and conventional society. With Eva also being reliant on the male gender, Shriver depicts the conventional female role when Eva has a baby to make her husband happy, is jealous that her husband spends more alone time with their son than with her, and has a traditional "feminine" adoration of her husband. The letters in which Eva includes passages about her male-dependency portray a weak and needy

gender. Lastly, Shriver's choice to expose a second-wave feminist's view on a female protagonist being anti-male also portrays a conventional gender role. Shriver depicts how traditional females are inferior to males and that traditional males express an "aggressive sexuality." Yet, for some reason, most critics and reviewers ignore these various images of the conventional gender role Eva follows and, instead, they show that the letters take on the convention of blaming the mother.

As for untraditional gender roles, Shriver depicts the positive and negative reactions that may occur when we challenge conventional gender norms in contemporary America through Eva's letters to the deceased Franklin. From Eva representing the voice of all women, wives, mothers, Americans, and Armenians as the female narrator/letter-writer, to us readers, being forced to depend on her for information, Eva is autonomous. Eva "queers" cultural gender norms when she writes about her defense of gender-neutral children's toys. Eva challenges traditional gender customs when she writes about making a stand for her baby boy to have her last name, thus defying conventionality. Shriver displays many venues, through Eva's letters, in which contemporary Americans can challenge gender norms and also experience the positive and negative responses from doing so.

Along with gender, Eva writes about society's views on how she uses both, conventional and unconventional, styles with mothering her two children. With Celia, Eva writes about her joyful pregnancy, maturity in becoming a mother again, an ease in pacifying and sheltering her daughter, as well as a desire to spoil her. With Eva's delicate fondness of her daughter, Shriver portrays a view of contemporary American mothers who follow maternal traditions of being emotionally close, protective, and wanting to

gratify their children. With Kevin, Eva writes about her conventional approaches in parenting, including the two weeks Kevin was ill, when she was ashamed for assuming Kevin threw bricks when it was indeed Lenny, complaining about Kevin being coatless in December, and for his gobbling down chicken right before she would treat him to a nice dinner. Shriver tones down the overly-conventional parenting when the focus is among Eva and Kevin, exposing a more appealing and digestible convention of a mother-son relationship, due to Kevin's preferences of unconventional ways. Of course, Eva's unconventional ways with Kevin prevail across each of her letters, complicating the classification of Eva's maternal methodology, and ruining her reputation among society.

Even though Eva is easily labeled the conventional mother when her relationship with her daughter is studied, Eva also exhibits various unconventional approaches with mothering Celia. Shriver depicts a mother who gives excuses and is permissible for her daughter's excessive tardiness, and even a mother who envisions a pathetic future for her own daughter due to her daughter's extreme conventional mannerisms. Through Eva's letters, these unconventional mothering thoughts of Eva's shows that it is impossible to be an authentic individual and be fully conventional. With Kevin, Eva obviously has many more examples of her untraditional ways of mothering because those match Kevin's demeanor more. From testing her own conventionality out while Kevin is a baby, to being unemotional and careless while raising him, Eva did not earn affection from conventional parents who witnessed her mothering of Kevin. She is violent and malevolent with her son, acquiring her own pleasure from achieving such acts. Shriver depicts cultural clichés of an ambivalent mother but also exposes the truth that some kids are harder to parent than others.

Throughout her letters to Franklin, Eva writes about performing unconventional and conventional motherhood styles with both of her children. She exposes her performative gender, yet challenges traditional gender norms too, also regarding her relationships with both of her children. It is generally accepted for readers to claim that Eva is more conventional with Celia and more unconventional with Kevin. From this statement, we can then declare that the motherhood style and the child's personality tend to match, though this is not what Shriver suggests. Shriver challenges her readers to recognize that gender and motherhood are contingent. Some of these contingencies may reflect the persona of the particular child. Shriver depicts that contemporary America has no valid reason to blame parents for situations their children execute on their own. Shriver makes it clear that Eva's maternal guilt is conventional for a contemporary American mother, as is society's blame of her for being Kevin's mother. Shriver depicts that American conventions regarding gender and motherhood do not always produce beneficial outcomes for those involved. Shriver also depicts that it is "healthy" and "normal" to incorporate conventional *and* unconventional methods of performative gender and motherhood, given that all children are different. Eva may perform more conventionally with Celia and more unconventionally with Kevin, but the fact that she executes both approaches with both of her children proves Shriver's depiction that no one can be solely conventional or unconventional, since societal norms change, based on multiple variables. Through Eva's letters to Franklin, Shriver depicts that, no matter how parents raise their children, gender and motherhood remain contingent, and that parents in contemporary America should challenge cultural and societal conventions as needed. Unlike most reviewers and critics, who neglect Eva's unconventional mothering of Celia

and conventional attempts with Kevin, Shriver shows that it takes both of Eva's parenting styles and performative gender roles with both of her children in order to expose Shriver's defiance of American cultural and societal conventions, and that not all children's outcomes are the mother's fault. Shriver indicates that we should not put mothers on trial, but we should challenge our own conventions when our children call us to parent them in the specific way that is best suited for their individual needs.

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