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**The Demon Within: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Psyche in
Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin***

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Dedication

To every invisible battle I had,
To every moment I felt I wasn't enough,
To every sunset I looked at and wished,
To my heavy heart that had to grow up too fast,
To me because, finally, I did it.

It's like a part of my soul was yearning for expression, and now I'm finally using my pen to convey my gratitude and appreciation to everyone who was by my side during this journey.

Above all, I express my deepest gratitude to Allah for granting me the strength, courage and health, for inspiring hope, faith and guidance, without HIS acceptance of my prayers and desires to accomplish this task, and for sending me those who cherish and encourage me, I wouldn't have reached this point.

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To my lovely siblings, Ayoub and Insaf, thank you for being here, my Angels, Rana and Loudjain, I wish you were here, you'd be proud of your sister.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, whose steadfast support and encouragement have illuminated my path throughout this academic pursuit. Your boundless love, endurance, and faith in my abilities have served as the cornerstone of my achievements. To my dear sisters, whose love and companionship have brought joy and laughter to my life. To my best friend Nesrine, whose friendship and unwavering support have been a constant source of inspiration and motivation. Your presence in my life has made every moment more meaningful and memorable.

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses the psychological complexities found in contemporary fiction, specifically focusing on Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. This captivating novel was written and published in 2003 tackled the issue of the complex and unsettling relationship between a mother and her son, Kevin. First and foremost, this dissertation explores the psychological complexities in Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* using Freudian and Melanie Klein's theories. It analyses the character of Kevin and examines themes such as motherhood, nature vs. nurture, and the relationship between social influence and mental health. The research aims to provide insights into the psychological complexities of contemporary fiction and inspire further exploration of the ways in which literary works reflect and shape societal attitudes towards identity, morality, and the human condition. The study question guiding this research is: How does Shriver's novel examine the psychological complexities of a mother-psychopathic son relationship and provides insights about the role of nature vs. nurture and societal attitudes in human development? The dissertation includes an introduction, three main chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter provides background information on the concept of psychological complexities in contemporary fiction and an overview of the novel. The second chapter analyses the depiction of psychopathy and parental ambivalence in the novel, while the third chapter explores how nature and nurture influence the psychological complexity of the characters. The research aims to shed light on how contemporary fiction reflects the intricate aspects of the human psyche. The results of this study indicate that Shriver's novel explores the mother-son relationship through Freudian and Melanian theories, highlighting nature and nurture's interplay in shaping the son's psychopathic tendencies. The novel challenges readers' biases about evil and parenting's role in a child's personality development.

Keywords: motherhood, nature, nurture, psychopathy, ambivalence.

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Introduction

Literature is the magical room of poetic melodies and written prose, where writer's feelings weave, revealing the nature of human existence and the mysterious secrets about our thoughts and emotions. In Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, we are captivated by a story that explores the complex inner workings of the human psyche.

From ancient Greek tragedies to contemporary novels, literature has always been a medium for unraveling the psychological complexities of the human mind, from Shakespeare's exploration of human emotions to the modern psychological novels of authors like Virginia Woolf and Haruki Murakami. So, this concept is coexisting through contemporary fiction novels to please new-era readers' desires.

Lionel Shriver's novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, is one of the many attempts to explore this idea, in which she digs into the mind of the mother who is trying to cope with the violent actions of her son. The novel deeply depicts the psychological complexities by exploring the characters' inner thoughts and emotions. It raises the question of the nature vs. nurture debate, the impact of parenting on the child's psyche, and the underlying causes behind violent behaviors. The novel is a fine representation of how literature can capture the complexity of the human psyche. The characters' experiences reveal insights into their psychological motives for their behaviors and decisions. This case study is a powerful illustration of how contemporary literature can uncover psychological complications and provide a glimpse into the human mind.

The case study, published in 2003, is a modern and successful novel that gained international acclaim and became a bestseller. However, this thesis analyzes the message behind this great book and the events that led to its success. The novel's impact on society and its lasting influence on readers are explored in depth, providing a comprehensive understanding of its significance in the literary world. Through a detailed examination of the book's themes,

characters, and writing style, the thesis sheds light on the factors that contributed to its widespread popularity and critical reception.

Lionel Shriver is an aspiring American author and journalist who lives in the United Kingdom. She made her debut in 1986 with *The Female of the Species*. In 2003, she wrote *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005. The novel commemorates the tragic events that happened in the Columbine High School massacre. The story is a contemporary domestic horror that portrays the school shooting and explores the impact on the characters' lives. Through a series of letters to her husband, the protagonist, Eva Khatchadourian, tries to figure out the reasons behind the heinous acts of her son, Kevin.

The need to comprehend Kevin's aggressive actions and the motives behind them makes the Freudian theory and the Kleinian theory the most suitable approaches to analyze the novel. Psychoanalytic criticism is a literary theory that was developed by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. It focuses on the relationship between literature, the unconscious mind, and conscious actions and thoughts. It can also be used to study the motivations and behaviors of characters in a literary work.

On the other hand, the object relations theory developed by Melanie Klein is fundamental to psychodynamic theory. It highlights how the self and relationships are shaped by experiences in early childhood. The theory places emphasis on the internal world of infants, rather than their external surroundings, and underscores the significance of early fantasies in the establishment of early interpersonal connections. By using these approaches, the study intends to investigate what makes a child commit a school massacre, kill his own father and sister, and understand his thoughts, intentions, and his inherent tendencies towards violence and cruelty.

The novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* focuses on the psychological state of its characters, Eva and Kevin. Sarah Dillon's article "The Maternal Dilemma in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2013)" suggests that Eva's struggle to understand her son's actions arises from her own uncertainty about motherhood and fear of being a terrible mother. The novel's structure highlights Eva's inner struggles and feelings.

The novel's structure departs from a linear timeline, with the narrative shifting between various points in time throughout the first portion of the story. The narration is marked by flashbacks, discontinuity, and a lack of chronological order. The individual letters that make up the text do not follow a strict timeline, as the narrator describes her situation after a tragedy, reflects on her past with Franklin, and reminisces about her travels. This thematic approach, rather than a purely chronological one, focuses on the decision-making process that Eva and Franklin went through when considering whether to have a child, with various stories highlighting the various factors they anticipated.

Sarah Heaton's 2013 paper "The Ethics of Responsibility in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*" explores the novel's themes of responsibility and culpability, notably in parenting. The novel's structure, recounted through Eva's letters, reveals her internal struggle with bearing responsibility for Kevin's acts.

We Need to Talk about Kevin explores the psychological state of its two main characters, as well as concerns regarding guilt, blame, and evil. According to David Schmid's paper "The Banality of Evil in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2014)", the novel questions the notion that evil is inherent in individuals and instead reflects societal and environmental issues.

Michael Smith's "Nature vs. Nurture: The Role of Genetics and Environment in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2015)" looks at how genetic traits and environmental influences

shape the character Kevin in Lionel Shriver's novel. Smith agrees that neither nature nor nurture can fully justify Kevin's actions and characteristics. He proposes that both elements interact in complicated manners, influencing Kevin's identity and behaviors. Smith's research relies on scholarly literature that criticizes the novel's portrayal of these issues.

Sarah Cunningham's "Motherhood, Violence, and Responsibility in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2018)" explores the novel's representation of motherhood, notably Eva Khatchadourian's experience, in relation to the theme of violence played out by her son, Kevin. Cunningham approaches her work through a postcolonial lens, connecting Eva's challenges to colonial histories of violence and domination. She claims that Eva's participation in the development of patriarchal standards of motherhood prevents her from recognizing and responding to Kevin's increasing violence and enmity. Cunningham's study focuses on the novel's accusation of Western society's attitudes about motherhood and the implications of failing to challenge patriarchal norms.

Sellawati Djaya and Ika Destina Puspita's article "Persona and Shadow of Kevin in Lionel Shriver's Novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2022)" explores the persona and shadow characteristics of the novel's protagonist, Kevin, utilizing Carl Jung's archetypal notions. They claim that Kevin fails to maintain a good balance between his identity and shadow, resulting in harmful behaviors and clashes throughout the story. Their investigation finds that Kevin's persona is pleasant and intelligent, yet his shadow is characterized by cruelty, manipulation, and violent inclinations. The authors argue that knowing the relationship between Kevin's persona and shadow can provide insights into the motivations behind his troubling actions.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, "Theoretical Concepts on Psychological Difficulties in Modern Literature", covers the theoretical framework for portraying psychological difficulties in contemporary literature. The course covers key

psychological topics such as psychopathy, the impact of nature and nurture on human behavior, and the complexities of parent-child relationships. The study sheds light on the significance of these topics to the novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and analyses the characters' psychological states using existing literary and psychological theories.

The second chapter, "Portrayal of Psychopathy and Parental Ambivalence in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*", examines the portrayal of psychopathy and parental ambivalence in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. This examination dives into the complex relationship between Kevin and his mother Eva, including psychological aspects. This chapter examines the novel's representation of Kevin's behavior and its impact on Eva, as well as parental ambivalence and the difficulty of parenthood with a kid with psychopathic tendencies.

The third chapter, "Nature vs. Nurture: Shaping Character Psychology in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*", explores how nature and nurture influence the psychological complexity of the two major characters. It studies how the novel addresses Kevin's genetic traits, contextual effects, and the development of psychopathic tendencies. The chapter examines how parental upbringing, family dynamics, and societal circumstances affect the characters' psychological states, providing a comprehensive knowledge of the complex influences on their behavior and mental health.

Literature has long been a powerful tool for exploring the human psyche. Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* captivates readers by unravelling psychological mysteries. The story follows Eva Khatchadourian, a mother grappling with the aftermath of her son Kevin's horrific actions. The novel's structure shifts between various points in time, allowing readers to witness Eva's psychological journey as she navigates motherhood and the nature vs. nurture debate. Scholars have explored themes of responsibility, guilt, and the banality of evil using psychoanalytic theories like Freud's and Klein's. This thesis aims to

uncover the novel's insights into the human mind and the ways literature can serve as a powerful tool for exploring the depths of the psyche.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework for Portraying Psychological Difficulties in Contemporary Literature

Psychological issues have become a prevalent topic in modern literature and have a profound impact on readers. This chapter aims to explore the theoretical basis of these complexities by delving into the intricate psychological dynamics that influence human behavior. The discussion covers a wide range of topics such as psychopathy, the debate between nature and nurture, and the intricacies of parent-child relationships. By the end of this chapter, readers will have a full understanding of the psychological difficulties that are so widespread in today's society.

1. Psychopathy

1.1. Psychopathy in Psychology

According to Viding et al., the condition of psychopathy is characterized by a deficiency in emotions such as empathy and guilt, as well as a tendency to manipulate others and engage in extreme acts of premeditated violence. Those who possess this disorder are a burden on society, inflicting both financial and emotional damage upon their victims. (R871).

Andre Leites in her article *Psychopathy- Part I*, states that in Freud's view, psychopathy is a personality marked by a damaged superego, a lack of internalization of rules, norms and authority figures. However, the definition is not sufficient because it describes both psychopaths and sociopaths without discriminating the degree of their disorder (47-74).

Blair et al. suggest that emotional dysfunction is primarily caused by genetics rather than social factors. The genetic influence specifically affects the amygdala and frontal cortex, which can disrupt their ability to function properly. This can lead to difficulties in forming stimulus-reinforcement and altering stimulus-response associations, making standard socialization techniques less effective and increasing the risk of reactive aggression. While the

molecular level of this genetic influence is not yet understood, it has been observed to impact multiple neural systems, including the amygdala. (262–76).

In *Psychopathy and Indirect Aggression: The Roles of Cortisol, Sex, and Type of Psychopathy*, Vaillancourt and Sunderani classified Psychopathy into two types: primary and secondary (Blackburn, 1975; Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1991; Karpman, 1941; Lishner et al., 2011, Lykken, 1995; Mealey, 1995). Primary psychopathy is an inherent trait that affects how a person interacts with others and is characterized by a lack of fear, less empathy, and lower anxiety levels. Secondary psychopathy, however, is a lifestyle trait that is marked by impulsivity, situational and/or emotional anxiety, and increased empathy. These two types of psychopathy can be differentiated not only by cognitive and behavioral traits, but also by differences in physiology. For instance, primary psychopaths tend to have less physiological reactivity compared to secondary psychopaths (170–75).

In an interesting paper, *Psychopathy, Antisocial Personality and Sociopathy: The Basics a History Review* by, Mackenzi states the difference between two notions that are often used interchangeably, psychopathy and sociopathy. Hare (1993) distinguishes between actual psychopaths and sociopaths, stating that psychopaths are born psychopaths, whereas sociopaths are the result of their developing environment. G.E. Partridge (1930) developed the term "sociopathic personality" to emphasize the significance of environmental factors.

According to Sutker and Allain, the idea that psychopathy is more closely linked to innate traits, while sociopathy is more influenced by external factors such as upbringing and societal pressures. Partridge's concept of deviance as a failure to conform to societal expectations emphasizes the role of environmental variables in shaping behavior, while Hare's focus on genetic and environmental causes of personality disorders sheds light on the complex interplay between nature and nurture in the development of deviant behavior. In this context hare also offer (446):

The difference between sociopathy and psychopathy . . . often reflect the user's views on the origins and determinants of the disorder. Most sociologists, criminologists and even some psychologists believe the disorder is caused by social conflicts and thus prefer the term sociopath. . . those who believe that a combination of psychological, biological, genetic and environmental factors all contribute to the disorder are more likely to use the term psychopath. (Hare 23)

A further differentiation that is mentioned in *Psychopathy versus sociopathy: Why the distinction has become crucial* (458–61), That the lack of empathy and morality are just a few of the traits associated with psychopathy that are mentioned in the PCL-R (Hare). In contrast, sociopathy implies having a well-formed conscience and a moral sense, but one that differs from the norms of society.

Psychopath is a term commonly employed to indicate a mental health disorder, but it is not a proven diagnostic. Instead, it is an informal utterance that refers to a condition known as antisocial personality disorder. In psychology, a real psychopath is someone with ASPD and uses manipulation strategies to harm others. The DSM-5, or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, does not acknowledge psychopathy as a formal clinical diagnosis.

Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) belongs to the cluster B personality disorders in the DSM-5, which also includes Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD), and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Since Psychopathy is not recognized officially as a mental health issue, experts diagnose ASPD instead. It can be difficult to diagnose and treat ASPD as people with this disorder do not usually acknowledge their problematic behavior and therefore, they do not seek treatment. (Lindberg)

Lindberg also mentioned that a complete assessment of an individual's thoughts, emotions, actions, and connections is necessary for a mental health professional to diagnose Asperger's Syndrome (ASPD). The disorder is identified by the presence of three or more DSM-5 indicators, which indicate a pattern of disregard for and violation of others' rights. These indicators include failure to adhere to societal norms, dishonesty, impulsive behavior, irritability, disregard for safety, constant irresponsibility, and a lack of remorse. This evaluation is critical because those with ASPD frequently suffer from other mental health and substance use disorders.

Throughout history, psychopathy has been defined as a personality disorder that affects a person's behavior and emotional responses. Its roots can be traced back to the 19th century, where it was commonly associated with violent and careless actions. Over time, the understanding of psychopathy has been shaped by influential psychiatrists such as Philippe Pinel, Benjamin Rush, and J.L. Koch. established the basis for comprehension by focusing on emotional and behavioral disruptions rather than intellectual deficiencies. The definition of "psychopathy" has evolved throughout time, ranging from "mania without delusions" to "moral insanity," reflecting different interpretations of the disorder. Lombrozo contributed to the understanding of psychopathy as a multifaceted interplay of biological, psychological, and social components by describing psychopaths as people who lack guilt, exhibit aggression, impulsivity, and disregard for societal norms.

Scholars such as Kraepelin, Birnbaum, and Kahn have contributed valuable insights into the nature of psychopathy, highlighting its association with degenerative brain changes, genetic predispositions, and the intricate balance between instinct, temperament, and character. The debate surrounding the boundaries of psychopathy continues, with discussions on its relationship to psychosis, the quantitative differences between healthy and mentally ill individuals, and the role of developmental factors in shaping psychopathic traits. Overall, the

historical evolution of the concept of psychopathy underscores its complexity and multifaceted nature, reflecting a nuanced interplay between biological underpinnings, environmental influences, and individual developmental trajectories in shaping this challenging personality disorder (Buzina 134-36).

1.2. Psychopathy in Literature

The depiction of psychopathy in literature has experienced significant growth, transitioning from early delineations of psychopathic characters as villains engaged in vicious acts to more recent descriptions of complex and likable protagonists. Writers have explored the theme of psychopathy by challenging traditional conceptions and probing into the mental complications of these characters. This development reflects a more subtle understanding of psychopathy in literature, offering perception into natural actions, empathy, and societal comprehension embracing this personality disorder.

As mentioned by Philip L. Simpson in his book *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* society's fascination with violent crimes and malevolent individuals is evident in entertainment media. Writers and readers alike are drawn to depictions of abnormal psychology, with a particular focus on psychopathy. This mental disorder seems to capture the most intrigue and fascination in popular culture.

Throughout the past century, fictional narratives have increasingly featured psychopathic characters, leading to a greater awareness of the condition in literature, television, and other modern cultural media. While it is not necessarily the case that literature and medicine are intrinsically linked, the interest in human psychology that drives literary exploration has naturally led to an examination of abnormal mental states such as psychopathy, which is informed by scientific understanding of the condition. (2000)

In an article entitled *Fictional Portrayals of Psychopaths in Literature*, it is mentioned that the concept of psychopathic characters emerged in European literature in the 14th century as a perversion of Renaissance humanism, a European worldview that prioritized individual human dignity, experience, and creative potential. The characterization of historical figures as "psychopaths" in antiquity is a retroactive speculation based on a modern view of human nature and individual psychology, which developed in the Late Middle Ages and reached its peak in the Enlightenment and Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. Our contemporary understanding of the psychopathic personality has been influenced by the trend towards existentialism in European philosophy and human sciences, which examines the moral and psychological vicissitudes of individual human experience in a perceived threatening or absurd environment.

In literature, psychotic characters have long captivated readers' imaginations, providing a glimpse into the darkest sides of human nature. Three literary masterpieces stand out for their captivating depictions of psychopathy: *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris. These works seek into the brains of complex and scary individuals, exposing the depths of their psychopathic inclinations in ways that both upset and grab readers.

Julia Kristeva believes that horror has the ability to uncover a distinct type of humanity. In her book, *The Powers of Horror - An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva defines abjection as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady," embodying a terror that conceals and a hatred that smiles. According to her, abject individuals like the criminal with a clear conscience or the killer who views themselves as a savior are simultaneously imploring and crushing. These characters are not just insane or evil, but are considered "psychopathic personalities" in today's diagnostic framework.

UNILAD, British Internet media company drops an article by Emily Brown the findings of a team of psychiatrists who analyzed hundreds of films to determine which character most accurately portrays a psychopath. The researchers, led by Belgian psychiatry professor Samuel Leistedt, studied 126 psychopathic characters in 400 films spanning from 1915 to 2010. They found that as clinical understanding of psychopathy has grown, fictional portrayals have become more realistic. Ultimately, the team determined that Anton Chigurh, the cold-blooded killer from *No Country for Old Men*, is the most accurate representation of a psychopath due to his normalcy in approaching murder and his lack of emotion or humanity. This study emphasizes the importance of gaining a better understanding of psychopathy over time.

In summary, the study of psychopathy reveals a multifaceted condition marked by emotional deficiencies, manipulative behaviors, and extreme violence. The differences between primary and secondary psychopathy, genetic factors affecting emotional dysfunction, and the distinction from sociopathy are highlighted. While not an official diagnosis, psychopathy often aligns with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). The historical development of psychopathy underscores its complexity, shaped by biological, environmental, and developmental influences. Literary depictions have progressed from simplistic villainous stereotypes to nuanced, psychologically rich characterizations, reflecting society's fascination with abnormal psychology and providing insights into human nature. The evolving literary exploration of psychopathy emphasizes the need for ongoing research and comprehension of this intricate disorder.

2. Nature Vs. Nurture

In *Nature Vs. Nurture? It's Both*, Deborah Holdship explains that "nature" denotes the genetic and biological factors that shape one's physical, emotional, and intellectual traits, while "nurture" encompasses the impact of learning and other environmental factors on these attributes. Advances in the fields of genetics, bioinformatics (the application of computational

and analytical tools to understand biological data), and epigenetics (the study of how cells regulate gene activity without altering DNA sequence) have reignited the debate on whether nature or nurture plays a greater role in determining an individual's strengths and weaknesses. This discussion holds significant implications for society, particularly in terms of its impact on intellectual ability, disease prevention, health enhancement, and successful aging.

2.1. The Evolution of Nature and Nurture Debate

The discussion of nature versus nurture centers on the impact of genetics and the environment on human growth. Certain thinkers, like Plato and Descartes, suggested that certain qualities are innate or emerge on their own, despite external factors. On the other hand, supporters of this stance hold that all of our characteristics and behaviors stem from evolution. They contend that hereditary traits are passed from one generation to the next, shaping the particular modifications that differentiate each individual.

John Locke and other prominent thinkers believed in the concept of tabula rasa, which suggests that the mind is a blank slate at birth that is gradually filled with experiences over time. This notion emphasizes the role of life events in shaping our personalities. Behaviorists contend that all actions and behaviors are conditioned responses. John B. Watson, for instance, believed that people could be trained to become anything they wanted, irrespective of their genetic makeup. Those who hold extreme perspectives are known as nativists and empiricists. Nativists believe that all behaviors and traits are inherited, while empiricists maintain that most behaviors and traits are learned through experience. (Cherry)

The origins of the scientific exploration of the hereditary qualities of humans can be traced back to Sir Francis Galton's book, *Hereditary Genius*, published in 1869. Galton, a relative of Charles Darwin, posited that individuals have the ability to shape the characteristics of future generations, much like how a guardian can influence an individual's physical and

mental health. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the reasons behind human existence and the role of affinities, such as sentiments, intelligences, tastes, and appetites, in shaping individuals and races. Galton acknowledges the carelessness of nature regarding individual lives and families but believes that humans, through their growing intelligence, humanity, and capability, can now modify the conditions of existence. He introduces the concept of civilization and hygiene that influence human well-being and that of their children. Galton further suggests that humans can bring other policies into action to influence the natural gifts of their race (351).

2.2. Interaction between Nature and Nurture

The process of development is reliant on a dynamic interplay between nature (genetic influences) and nurture (environmental influences) in biological terms. The connection between these two factors determines the timing and quality of their impact on each other. Leading to variations among individuals in real-life settings. Organisms develop unique traits based on these interactions, influencing how they interact within themselves and with their surroundings. Continuous interactions between individuals result in a cycle that fosters development through the exchange of feedback on personal traits. This phenomenon highlights the impact that social relationships have on organisms as they continually influence one another. Empirical methods are available to explore the historical, cultural, social, individual, and temporal aspects influencing development, shedding light on how organisms, through dynamic interactions, are both shaped by and shape their social environment (Lerner).

In an experiment that aimed to explore the influence of nature and nurture on child development and behavior, respondents indicated that both play an important role in shaping their behavior. Although many people attribute greater influence to the environment, they also acknowledge that genes can be affected by nurture, and vice versa. Certain predispositions,

such as violence, may be affected by society, and society can influence how genes are expressed.

The study also showed that there is no dichotomy between nature and nurture, since children develop within the family and parents develop parenting strategies based on previous experiences and reactions. It is important to recognize that both genetic and environmental factors are impactful on everyone, and that some individuals may require special treatment or additional assistance for violent and aggressive crimes. However, it is crucial to treat individuals as responsible while providing them with the necessary support.

In addition, the study emphasizes the importance of treating environmental problems and biology similarly, as individuals can modify their behavior. However, it acknowledges that nature and nurture cannot explain everything, as some individuals may still understand right and wrong despite experiencing abuse. Addressing these issues and providing support for those who commit crimes is crucial. While social factors can prevent bad behavior, it is essential to leave room for individual agency. Emphasizing nature over nurture can be dangerous, as children can have more control over their environment. Additionally, the factors of one's genetic makeup and inherent traits possess a reduced capacity for change, potentially influencing decisions regarding the justice system and societal opinions (Levit).

2.3. Examples of Nature Vs. Nurture

2.3.1. In Child Development

The debate around nature vs. nurture in child development is relevant to language acquisition. Chomsky posits that universal grammar is an innate capacity (LAD), while Skinner emphasizes environmental reinforcement and learning (nurture). However, the importance of exposure to a language-rich environment suggests that both nature and nurture play a role in child development. Both perspectives acknowledge the significance of both factors in language

acquisition (Mcleod). Albert Bandura's social learning theory (Hammer) is an example of an empirical approach to child development. This theory proposes that people learn by observing the actions of others. Bandura's well-known experiment involving the Bobo doll (Cherry) demonstrated that children can learn aggressive actions simply by observing someone else behaving violently.

2.3.2. In Personality Development

Research conducted by Melanie Klein demonstrated the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping an individual's personality and emotional development. As she explored the inner world of children, she highlighted the complex interplay between innate tendencies and environmental factors, emphasizing the importance of early relationships to mental health. A major focus of Klein's research was the early mental landscape of children, which she believed was profoundly shaped by their experiences and emotional reactions towards their primary caregivers. As a result, she challenged the prevailing notion that children's minds are underdeveloped and incapable of providing meaningful insight into their inner worlds, proposing that these early relationships form the basis for future interpersonal interactions and emotional reactions (Tokarev).

Besides the role of nature and nurture in child development, there is also the inquiry -as whether it has a role as in personality development or not- the answer to this question relies on which personality development theory you apply (cherry) that are mentioned by Kendra Cherry's paper *Theories of Personality Psychology*:

- **Biological Theories of Personality:** The nature versus nurture debate is relevant to determining personality, as genes have a significant influence. Twin studies have been used to study heritability and have found that personality traits have a genetic

connection. Hans Eysenck, a leading biological theorist, has linked high levels of cortical arousal and avoidance of stimulation to introversion.

- **Behavioral Theories of Personality:** Behavioral theories by B.F. Skinner and John B. Watson focus on how people's environment affects their personality. These theories prioritize behaviors that can be seen and measured, while disregarding internal emotions and thoughts. According to behavioral theorists, conditioning, which is the process of learning new behaviors through environmental stimuli, plays a significant role in shaping an individual's personality.
- **Psychodynamic Theories of Personality:** Psychodynamic theory, as proposed by Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson, highlights the significance of early experiences and the unconscious mind in shaping an individual's personality. Freud's model comprises the id, ego, and superego, each with a unique function in forming personality. The two fundamental components of psychodynamic theories are Freud's psychosexual stage theory and Erikson's psychosocial stage theory. These theories emphasize the importance of conflict and resolution in shaping a person's life at different stages.
- **Humanist Theories of Personality:** When it comes to developing one's personality, humanist theories, advocated by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, emphasize the importance of individual experiences and free will. A core idea in humanist theories is the desire for personal growth, also known as self-actualization.
- **Traits Theories of Personality:** According to trait theories, personality consists of unchanging traits that affect behavior. This approach focuses on Eysenck's three-dimensional theory and the Big Five hypothesis. While Eysenck identified extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism as key personality traits, the Big Five hypothesis

suggests that personality is influenced by five broad dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

2.3.3. In Mental Illness Development

Mental illness is not a single cause but rather a combination of various factors. Brain chemistry plays a significant role in mental disorders, with imbalances in neurotransmitters often linked to mental disorders. Environmental exposures, such as exposure to harmful substances in utero, can increase the risk of developing mental illness in children. Genetics also plays a role in mental illnesses, with individuals with relatives with mental disorders like autism, bipolar disorder, major depression, and schizophrenia having a higher risk. Life experiences, such as traumatic events or changes in primary caregivers, can also contribute to mental illness development. Overall, mental health is influenced by various factors, including biology, environmental exposure, genetics, and life experiences (Morin).

The Diathesis-Stress Model is another instance that demonstrates the interplay between genetic and environmental factors. This model explains that mental illnesses occur when a person has an inherent tendency towards them, called a diathesis, and then undergoes stress, which leads to the onset of the illness. Furthermore, those with a predisposition to a particular illness may need less stress to bring it about, and vice versa (Sussman).

The ongoing debate about whether traits and behaviors are primarily shaped by the innate biology or by the external world has been a contentious topic in the realms of psychology, biology, and philosophy. This section explored the historical progression of this debate, analyzing influential thinkers' viewpoints and societal implications. Additionally, it discusses the dynamic interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental factors that influence child development, personality, and mental health. Furthermore, it demonstrated that both inherent biological makeup and the external circumstances play pivotal roles in determining

human development and behavior, and that comprehending this interplay is essential for addressing a variety of societal challenges.

3. Parent-Child Relationship Complexities

Child development is influenced by various relationships, but none are as crucial as the one with parents. Recognizing the crucial significance of an early parent-child bond on a child's emotional, mental, biological, and physical well-being has shifted efforts towards identifying the relational aspects of child development. Modern approaches to understanding relational health in child development highlight the importance of parent, child, and contextual factors in fostering and sustaining successful parent-child relationships (Frosch et al).

According to Jerome Kagan, parents can influence their children's behavior through three mechanisms: direct interactions, rewards, punishments, and knowledge transfer. These interactions have an indirect impact. Failure to discipline disobedience or aggression is associated with asocial behavior, while showing interest in a child's activities is linked with higher levels of responsivity. However, these initial impacts may have second-order effects later on. For example, a 7-year-old with a larger vocabulary thanks to parental support may see themselves as more capable than their friends, rejecting supremacy by others and undertaking difficult activities. By contrast, a 7-year-old who was not previously disciplined for aggressive conduct or who had violent or overbearing parents is more likely to be aggressive with classmates, causing peer rejection and eventually questioning their acceptability. These consequences can have a long-term impact on a child's growth and behavior.

Emotional identification with parents is an important part of how families effect children. By the age of four to five, children intuitively assume that certain of their parents' characteristics are part of their repertoire, even if this perception lacks objective support.

Children also take part indirectly in their parents' experiences, such as an infant whose father is well-known among his friends and family. The greater the identification, the more unique.

3.1. Parental Alienation

Melanie Klein's theory emphasizes the significance of the bond between mother and infant in shaping the infant's inner world and emotional growth. According to Klein, the infant's first erotic focus is the mother's breast, and affection results from satisfaction of the infant's physical needs. Eventually, the infant realizes that the two breasts, loved and despised, are part of one entity - the mother. Infants experience this integration as a traumatic event, resulting in unconscious fantasies and defense mechanisms like introjection, projection, and splitting. These early interactions with the mother impact the infant's future emotional development and interpersonal relationships, as they internalize the mother as a positive or negative entity, influencing their perceptions, emotions, and relationships throughout life (Caruso).

It is important for mental health professionals to be knowledgeable about parental alienation, particularly those working with children, adolescents, divorced adults and adults whose parents divorced during their childhood. Parental alienation is a psychological condition that occurs when a child, typically during a high-conflict divorce, becomes aligned with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects the other (the alienated parent) without a valid explanation. As a result of this process, the parent and the child who once shared a close and fulfilling bond lose the care and happiness that came with it. This loss can persist for numerous years, and may even be permanent. The authors of this article assert that parental alienation is not a minor issue that a family can easily resolve, but rather a grave mental ailment. In such a scenario, the child's dysfunctional actions stem from a misguided belief that the alienated parent is harmful or unworthy (Bernet et al. 76–187).

Parental Alienation (PA) is a phenomenon that arises from intolerance, derogation, prejudice, and profound dysfunction within an individual. This behavior is akin to a manifestation of excessive self-love and arrogance, which ultimately results in abusive tendencies. The Narcissistic Parental Alienator (NPA) engages in deceptive practices, manipulating their children to behave as proxy abusers. Narcissistic individuals are characterized by their ability to lie, control, and communicate in ambiguous language. Their refusal to abandon their misconceptions indicates a profound psychological inflexibility, and losing these illusions may result in a condition of life devoid of true living (Summers and Summers 399–428).

3.2. Parenting Child Abuse

Child abuse is a worldwide problem that can cause significant harm and trauma. According to the World Health Organization, child abuse occurs when a powerful or trusted adult, such as a parent or guardian, inflicts harm on a child through any form of mistreatment. This can include physical violence, emotional abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and verbal insults. Studies have shown that different types of abuse are often linked, so a child who experiences one form of abuse is more likely to experience another type. Child abuse, also known as child maltreatment, can have serious and long-lasting effects on a child's behavior, cognitive development, physical health, and emotional well-being (Dorfman et al. 747–752; Bosschaart et al).

3.3. Parenting Styles

The concept of parenting styles has long been the main interest of developmental psychologists. However, the challenge was in establishing the actual cause-effect relationships between certain acts of parents and later behaviors of children. Some children grew in quite diverse situations can have very similar personalities. Children who share the same house and

environment, on the other hand, might have completely distinct personalities. Regardless of these limitations, studies have discovered strong links between parenting styles and their impacts on children (Cherry).

In the early 1960s the psychologist Diana Baumrind suggested three parenting styles based on warmth and strictness. That are: authoritative, authoritarian, and indulgent. Later on, researchers have expanded on her concept by adding the neglectful (Cherry):

- **Authoritative Parenting:** An authoritative parenting style sets norms and standards for children, thereby encouraging a democratic atmosphere. When children fail to fulfill expectations, parents remain accessible, eager to listen, and caring. They keep track of their children's behavior, set clear rules, and employ supportive disciplinary methods. Their objective is to raise assertive, socially responsible, self-regulating, and cooperative children.
- **Authoritarian:** Authoritarian parenting implies strict rules imposed by parents, which frequently result in punishment. These parents are unresponsive to their children and refuse to explain their reasons for the rules. Baumrind characterizes them as obedience- and status-oriented, expecting their directives to be followed without explanation.
- **Indulgent Parenting:** Permissive parenting is a style that involves having low expectations for children's behavior and self-discipline. Parents who use this approach tend to be lenient and avoid punishment, instead favoring open communication and flexibility. They prioritize fostering self-regulation and often take on a more friendly than authoritative role with their children. Despite their lax approach, permissive parents are still affectionate and caring towards their kids.

- Neglectful Parenting: Or the uninvolved, even when the child's primary needs are met, uninvolved parenting includes minimal expectations, little attentiveness, and limited communication, which frequently leads to detached and sometimes negligent parenting.

3.4. Child-Parents Attachment

For this study, Baumrind's model of parenting styles (1996) was employed to examine how addiction in parents relates to their parenting style and attachment with their child. Attachment, which is a fundamental emotional connection for a child's personal and social development, is a built-in mechanism that ensures close proximity between a child and caregiver, and shapes their outlook and actions. When attachment is secure, caregivers can provide a secure space for children to explore and learn (Bahmani et al. 12409–23).

Unger and De Luca (223–234) found that individuals who experienced physical abuse in the past are more likely to develop avoidant attachment. Many studies have explored the relationship between parental attachment, child attachment, and how parents' attachment styles affect their parenting methods (Millings et al. 170–180). Children of insecure parents are more likely to have insecure attachment themselves (Roelofs et al. 555–566). On the other hand, parents with insecure attachment often choose to use authoritarian and emotionally distant parenting styles, while securely attached parents tend to favor authoritarian approaches (Doinita and Maria 199–204).

This part of the chapter has explored various aspects of parenting, including the complex issue of parental alienation, the serious problem of child abuse, the significant impact of different parenting approaches, and the crucial role of the child-parent bond. Parental alienation is a psychological state where a child becomes strongly allied with one parent and rejects the other without a valid reason, often leading to lasting harm to the child and the alienated parent. Child abuse is a widespread global problem that can cause severe trauma and long-lasting

effects on a child's behavior, cognitive development, physical health, and emotional well-being. The style of parenting used has been identified as a crucial factor in shaping a child's personality and behavior, with distinct impacts observed for different approaches, such as authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful parenting. Additionally, the child-parent attachment, which is a fundamental emotional connection, plays a pivotal role in a child's personal and social development, with secure attachment linked to positive outcomes and insecure attachment associated with negative outcomes.

Chapter Two: Portrayal of Psychopathy and Parental Ambivalence in

We Need to Talk about Kevin

Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* focuses into the complexities of human relationships through the subtle interactions of parents and their children. This chapter examines the representation of psychopathy and parental ambivalence, with an emphasis on the characters Kevin and Eva and their relationship. By examining the characters and their relationships, this chapter seeks to give insight on how Shriver employs these themes to offer commentary on the essence of human relationships and the consequences of parental involvement.

1. The Background of the Novel

Lionel Shriver, an American novelist and self-described libertarian, is well-known for making provocative views on a range of issues, including gender and cultural appropriation. In an interview with Reason magazine, Shriver expressed her libertarian views, saying, "The truth is that the libertarian rubric of 'You should be able to do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt anyone' is the core concept of the United States of America, and something that we should be proud of." (Mangu-Ward). Shriver's seventh book, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, explores the complexities of violence and the challenges of motherhood. The author's personal experiences as an empty-nester, combined with the harrowing theme of a school shooting, have profoundly shaped the narrative. (Lawless). The novel has been subject to deep analysis by academics in fields such as medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, and feminist critics (Messer).

The famous novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver has captured the attention of both scholars and the general audience. The book's 2011 film adaptation was a financial success, and it even reached the top of the London Times bestseller list (Shriver 479). However, the public's response has been divided, with some perceiving it as an assault on

family and parenting. For example, Smith described the book as "staunchly opposed to parenthood and children", labeling Kevin as a "monster" and Eva as "despicable". Conversely, there are readers who have found the novel to be thought-provoking, with some even claiming that it has altered their views on motherhood ("Review of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*").

The complex themes of motherhood, gender, and violence explored in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* can be illuminated through the psychoanalytic lens of Melanie Klein's influential theory. Klein's concepts, such as object relations, projective identification, and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, offer a valuable framework for exploring the intricate emotional landscape and challenges faced by a mother confronting the unimaginable actions of her child (Segal). Shriver's novel aimed to uncover the gap between individuals' personal realities and the expectations imposed by society. The themes of the novel convey a variety of emotions in the readers, demonstrating the complexity and depth of the narrative (Brady).

The story revolves around Eva, a mother who struggles to accept the devastating reality that her own son was responsible for a horrific school massacre. As she chronicles their journey in a series of letters to her husband Franklin, Eva expresses her profound disappointment and fear as she deals with the enormous impact Kevin's actions have had on their life.

2. Character Analyses: Kevin, Eva, and their relationship

2.1. Analysis of Eva's Character

Eva is presented as Kevin's mom, who remains closely tied to her husband who passed away, Franklin, through letters. She openly admits to having personal flaws, calling herself "vain, petty, materialistic, resentful, and occasionally aloof" (Shriver 10). Eva feels that sadness is a common element in her Armenian heritage, which may influence her attitudes and actions.

As a travel writer for *A Wing and a Prayer*, Eva seeks comfort in her profession, satisfying her craving for excitement through work trips. Deciding to have a child, Kevin, with

Franklin, in an attempt to meet a fresh desire and earn additional acceptance. However, Eva and Kevin's relationship quickly falls apart, with mutual hate evident from the start (Shriver).

Eva finds it difficult to understand why she doesn't feel a strong maternal connection to Kevin. As his actions create tension between her and Franklin, she grows increasingly resentful. Eva starts to struggle with the idea that she might be responsible for Kevin's criminal actions, particularly after being held guilty for her role in the Woolford Civil case and ordered to pay court fees. As Eva confronts the consequences beyond the break-up of her family, she is forced to reflect on her past decisions and relationships (Shriver 445).

Eva chose to become a mother at the age of 37, but it still doesn't seem like the right decision. Some of her early rationales include the following: "To have something else to talk about" (Shriver 2.98), "It might be fun to start a collection" (Shriver 2.78), "The very insurmountability of the task, its very unattractiveness, was in the End what attracted me to it" (Shriver 3.40), and "I wanted to have someone to miss [my husband] alongside" (Shriver 5.13). These could be seen as selfish motives for having a child, don't you think?

Eva is sometimes described as selfish. She is jealous of her husband's relationship with their kid and wants Franklin all to herself. This stems from her strong belief in Armenian culture, leading her to believe that her own identity and name are "more important" than her husband's (Shriver 6.40).

Eva's selfishness can help her in certain ways. As she says, "Sheer obstinacy is far more durable than courage, though it is not as pretty" (Shriver 7.25). Her unwillingness to compromise "hurts her marriage, but it comes in handy when standing up for herself after Kevin murders his peers" (Shriver 7.25). Eva has found motherhood to be challenging, but "she has accepted her role and made an effort to act in her children's best interests" (Shriver 445). The trial has cast doubt on her efforts, with claims that she is simply putting on a show of being a

devoted parent, rather than truly fulfilling that role. As Vivienne Muller suggests, “in attempting to conform to societal expectations of the ideal mother, Eva inadvertently shifts into the role of the negligent or bad mother” This type of double standard seeks to condemn people, making them culpable no matter what they do.

Despite admitting that she struggles with motherhood, Eva still holds herself accountable for not living up to her own expectations: “There may indeed be an element of theater in these visits. But they continue when no one is watching, because if I am trying to prove that I am a good mother, I am proving this, dismally, as it happens, to myself” (Shriver 47). Eva must be mirroring her own expectations of herself and society when she makes continuous remarks about what a terrible mother she is. Despite not being the one who committed the murder, she accepts the expectation from society to be a perfect mother and feels guilty for having raised a killer.

The officer’s strong response included directly blaming the perpetrator’s mother, implying she was to blame for her son’s actions. The alternative approach conveys a similar message, but in a more indirect manner - that she should feel ashamed of her child’s behavior, as those responding this way believe she bears indirect responsibility. This situation reflects Eva’s profound sense of responsibility for her child’s behavior. After the officer finishes speaking, she addresses him, admitting the gravity of the situation. Eva can’t believe what she hears: ‘I looked at him stupidly. I was so ashamed, I honestly believed they were going to keep me in jail’ (Shriver 451).

After the tragic incidents, once Kevin has been arrested, Eva reaches the location of the crime. She begins to understand the kind of hardship she will have to face in the days and weeks to come, following that horrific day when the law enforcement official arrives. She initially doesn’t want to be charged let through: “You don’t understand,’ I said, adding the most difficult claim of fealty I’d ever made, ‘That’s my son.’ His face hardened. This was an expression I

would get used to; that, and the melting you-poor-dear-I-don't-know-what-to-say one, which was worse. But I was not inured to it yet, and when I asked him what had happened, I could already tell from the flinty look in his eye that whatever I was now indirectly responsible for, it was bad" (Shriver 445).

She expects the police officer will blame her for the crimes committed by Kevin and she is truly surprised when he decides to release her. This situation highlights the excessive expectations placed on mothers, leading them to feel ashamed for their son's actions. Kevin, on the other hand, expresses no shame or guilt for his actions. In fact, "he tells Eva that the other inmates admire him for having the courage to kill and that he would do it all again if he had to" (Shriver 49-50). He expresses anger when he hears of other school shootings and always criticizes their conduct, probably because "he sees them as competition for the most heinous crime committed" (Shriver 198). Eva seems to take on the guilt that Kevin doesn't express, which reinforces her own feelings of inadequacy.

Despite experiencing a range of emotions, including responsibility, guilt, and shame, Eva still questions whether these feelings truly hold any significance in the end. By writing these letters to Franklin, she had the opportunity to reflect deeply on her situation, and this is her ultimate conclusion: "I have come full circle, making a journey much like Kevin's own. In asking petulantly whether Thursday was my fault, I have had to go backward, to deconstruct. It is possible that I am asking the wrong question. In any event, by thrashing between exoneration and excoriation, I have only tired myself out. I don't know. At the end of the day, I have no idea, and that pure, serene ignorance has become, itself, a funny kind of solace. The truth is, if I decided I was innocent, or I decided I was guilty, what difference would it make? If I arrived at the right answer, would you come home?" (Shriver 445).

2.2. Analysis of Kevin's Character

The main character Kevin is portrayed as an apathetic, silent, bad-tempered, and unfriendly individual who displays passive resistance towards his mother while pretending to be enthusiastic towards his father (Shriver). Despite the apparent hypocrisy in Kevin's behavior, his mother Eva is unable to find any concrete evidence that would prove his problematic character. Tensions within the family escalate when Kevin overhears his parents, Franklin and Eva, discussing a possible divorce. At the age of 16, Kevin commits a horrific act of violence, killing 11 people, including 9 of his schoolmates, a cafeteria worker, a teacher, his sister, and his father. When Eva asks him why he didn't kill her, Kevin replies, "You don't kill your audience" (Shriver 361). The novel explores Kevin's manipulative behavior, which he has displayed since a young age, and his ability to skillfully control his surroundings (Ackerman).

According to the text, Kevin's manipulative tendencies began to emerge when he was four years old during a lunch outing with his parents. During this incident, Kevin caused chaos by interrupting his mother Eva's words with loud noises. While Franklin remained silent, Eva became increasingly agitated and eventually "I slapped him. It wasn't very hard. He looked happy. [...] Now Kevin started to wail. His tears were a bit late, in my view. I wasn't moved. I left him to it" (Shriver 151). This passage suggests that Kevin deliberately provoked his mother's reaction, and when he finally received her "attention," he appeared pleased. However, when Franklin scolded Eva for the beating, Kevin started to sob, making him look like the victim while his mother was viewed as the rude person by those around them and his father.

The text further states that Franklin always assumed Kevin was an innocent child and therefore let everything his son did "get away with because 'boys will be boys'" (Shriver 226). Eva soon realized that Kevin was much more intelligent than most children his age and could tell that he was "deliberately trying to aggravate her with his actions" (Shriver). While Kevin didn't seem interested in learning math and reading, he continued to act "dumb" in front of his

parents because they believed that children his age should constantly ask “why” questions (Shriver).

Curiosity, as shown in the following text: He hated to admit he didn’t know something already, and his blanket playing- dumb routine was cunningly crafted to cover any genuine gaps in his Education. In Kevin’s mind, pretend-ignorance wasn’t shameful, and I was never able to Discriminate between his feigned stupidity and the real thing (226).

According to the text, Kevin only appeared naïve when he was alone with his mother Eva. Eva was exhausted from caring for her demanding child, who would misbehave by throwing food on the refrigerator (Shriver 235). One day, after Eva changed Kevin’s diaper, he intentionally defecated again to upset her. In her anger, Eva accidentally caused Kevin to fall from the changing table, resulting in a broken arm that required surgery (Shriver 235).

On the way home, Eva repeatedly apologized to Kevin, but he did not respond. She feared what would happen because Franklin had grown accustomed to trusting Kevin’s version of events over his wife’s (Shriver 235). When Franklin asked about the incident, Kevin falsely claimed he fell from the table while Eva was getting more wipes, the opposite of what actually occurred. However, Franklin immediately believed Kevin’s account (Shriver 235). The text states that Kevin was skilled at crafting a smooth, believable story, using just the right amount of truth to make his lie convincing, like a practiced liar (Shriver 235).

Kevin, as a young child, skillfully portrays remorse in a way that convinces Franklin that he is at fault. Franklin, however, considers it to be a mere coincidence. The more time Eva spends with Kevin, the more she notices how adept he becomes in manipulating Franklin without his father realizing what is happening. Franklin might have some awareness of Kevin’s true character but deliberately overlooks it to preserve the façade of an ideal family. As a result, Eva can only write the following text in her letter to express the truth: You’ll just have to take

my word for it- I know you won't that when you weren't home, Kevin was sour, secretive, and sarcastic. Every day was a bad day. This laconic, supercilious, unforthcoming persona of his did seem real (274).

Franklin has never imposed consequences on Kevin, believing that Kevin is capable of learning and growing at his own pace. Without being aware of it, this approach has inadvertently facilitated the growth of Kevin's negative tendencies, fostering an acceptance of misconduct and aggression. As a child, Kevin was habituated to criminal behavior, which poses a significant risk to his mental development, especially considering that he is psychopathic and lacks empathy. He began viewing movies featuring cruel scenes, and his parents did nothing to stop him. This is shown in the following paragraph: Kevin had discovered the secret: not merely that it wasn't real, but that it wasn't him. Over the years I observed Kevin watching decapitations, disembowelments, dismemberments, flayings, impalements, deoculations, and crucifixions, and I never saw him flinch. Because he'd mastered the trick (170).

Kevin's shadow, which has been overtaken by evil and cruel things, leads him to believe that the only way to get away from Franklin is to kill. Kevin killed his sister and father the next day after overhearing his parents' discussions about divorce. They were the people of his family who loved him the most and knew him the least. For his individual physical class, Kevin brought his crossbow and arrow to school, stood on the balcony, and shot students, instructors, and even cafeteria workers one by one with his arrow. He then remained there and watched as the rest of them died without feeling guilty.

Even after being imprisoned, Kevin no longer hides his shadow and bluntly states that he never liked his father as much as in a conversation. He had with a television journalist who wanted to document his murder: «Mister Plastic?» Kevin snorted. “I should be so lucky we'd have a fight. No, it was all Cheery chirpy, hot dogs and Cheez Whiz. A total fraud, you know? All like, let's go to the Natural History Museum. Kev, they have some really neat-o rocks! He

was into some little league fantasy, stuck in the 1950s. I'd get this, I love you, buddy! Stuff, and I'd just look at him like, who are you talking to, guy? What does that mean, your dad loves you and hasn't a [bleeding clue who you are? What's he loves, then? Some kid in happy days. Not me." (413).

Eva's earlier belief that Kevin killed Franklin in order to prevent him from gaining custody of him was confirmed by the revelation in the paragraph above. Kevin had been pretending to be a decent child in front of his father, but he grew tired of the façade and showed his true self only to Eva. This may explain why he did not harm her. When the journalist asked about the motive for the murder, Kevin, who was born with psychopathic tendencies, explained that he believed people needed tragedy in their lives to find meaning. His lack of morals and remorse led him to commit harmful actions without hesitation.

According to Jung in his work "The Practice of Psychotherapy: Essays on the Psychology of the Transference and Other Subjects", conflicts between individuals and within their environment often stem from a failure to acknowledge and address their own shadows. Embracing and accepting the darker aspects of oneself can lead to personal growth and a more fulfilling life. In therapy, exploring and integrating these shadows is a crucial aspect of the healing process. Kevin believes that committing a crime will add a new dimension to their lives, as stated in the following text: "You need us! What would you do without me, film a documentary on paint drying? What Are all those folks doing," he waved an arm at the camera, "but watching me? Don't you Think they'd have changed the channel by now if all I'd done is get an A in Geometry? Bloodsuckers! I do their dirty work for them!" (414).

According to Kevin's response in the paragraph above, he feels that action would attract uninteresting individuals. Kevin feels that taking action would only bring uninteresting people into his life. He believed that by wearing a mask to conform to his family's expectations, his life had no meaning. However, committing a heinous act allowed him to finally receive

recognition for his work and give his life purpose. His critique of society is thought-provoking, suggesting that empathy can help people understand the suffering they may potentially experience themselves, rather than believing life is meaningless.

Kevin had killed many people, including those Eva loved the most, her husband and Daughter, and she only saw satisfaction in him. Kevin appeared content with his actions, which were pure wickedness. When Eva finds the courage to question him why he did what he did in the following paragraph, he could no longer grasp his shadow and allow it dominate him: His eyes kept shuttering away, making contact in sorties, then flickering back. Toward The gaily painted cinder-block wall. And at last gave up, staring a little to the side of my face.” I used to think I knew,” he said glumly. “Now I’m not so sure.” (464).

The passage does not indicate that Kevin provided an explanation for why he became a killer (Shriver). Instead, it states that Kevin had “no idea who he was since his life had no significance” (Shriver). He had planned to “cease his fight to preserve his image from the start, and he had chosen to let the shadow he had been holding back go” (Shriver). The text reveals that Kevin had “accepted all forms of violence since he was a youngster” and his “unconscious mind delighted in the agony and suffering of his victims as a result of being struck by the arrow he had shot” (Shriver 466).

Ultimately, Kevin “chose to let his shadow to dominate him, leading to the murder because was tired of playing the role of a kind brother and loving son” (Shriver). He was no longer the “healthy and happy boy” his father had envisioned, and instead “opted to unleash his shadow by murdering numerous innocent people, happy with his actions and feeling no remorse” (Shriver 466).

2.3. Characters' Relationship

Being a mother was never Eva's dream, especially not of the horrible guy who went on a killing mission of staff members and other classmates in high school. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Laurie Umansky address the relationship between the idea of a kid who has "gone wrong" and the concept of imperfect mothering in their book *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in the Twentieth Century* (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 5). Su Epstein emphasizes this point of view as well in her paper on *How Maternally Blamed Boys are Portrayed in Movies and Criminology Investigations*. In it, she notes that there is a common propensity to hold mothers accountable for any problems that may occur with their children (Epstein 260).

According to Melanie Klein's object relations theory, a mother's ambivalent feelings towards her child during the early stages of development can have a profound impact on the child's psychological well-being (Klein). Eva's inability to form a loving bond with the infant Kevin, as well as her feelings of resentment and frustration, may have contributed to the development of his disturbed personality. As Epstein notes, psychologist Joel Norris proposes that a mother's anxieties during pregnancy can contribute to the mistreatment and abuse of the child, potentially leading to the emergence of a person prone to violence (Epstein 260).

Eva fits Norris's profile as a mother who is discontent with her pregnancy, faces challenges in forming a bond with her child, experiences anxiety and mixed feelings about motherhood, has had to provide self-care in the absence of maternal support, and finds it tough to love her challenging child as they grow into adolescence. On one occasion that she deeply regrets, Eva loses control and throws Kevin across the room, resulting in his arm being broken. This act of violence, born out of frustration with his toilet training resistance, has sparked debate over whether Eva crossed a line and potentially made Kevin prone to violence himself.

In Kleinian theory, the mother's capacity to tolerate and work through her ambivalent feelings towards the child is crucial for the child's healthy psychological development (Klein). Eva's inability to reconcile her love and resentment towards Kevin may have hindered his ability to internalize a stable, loving maternal figure, leading to the formation of a fragmented and potentially dangerous sense of self.

Eva is finally telling her dark truth to Franklin, seeing herself as unforgivable but also appealing for an understanding of where she is coming from. "I have no end of failing as a mother" she writes, "but I have always followed the rules. If anything, following the letter of the unwritten parental law was one of my failings." (46) In this comment, Eva shows an interesting paradox: in attempting to follow the "unwritten parental law" guidance to being a good mother, she has inadvertently become the terrible one.

As Eva focuses on her "dismal" mothering of Kevin, she recognizes not just how the word "mother" is strongly loaded with specific privileged cultural meanings, but also how the child-mother connection is as well. Eva's inability to experience a personal and loving relationship with her newborn son, no matter how hard she tries, leads her to raise that most troubling and forbidden of ideas: that a mother may not naturally love her child, a child may not instinctively love the mother, and a child may not be lovable.

This falls into the category of being considered an unsatisfactory mother. These elements are now recognized and discussed as "realities" in various contemporary theories on mothering and motherhood. This is a positive development, as it challenges the notions put forth by Freud and other male scholars, who suggested that women who did not love their children were morally corrupt (Balsam).

Nevertheless, the persistence of idealized notions surrounding the natural, intrinsic loving connection between mother and child continues to influence perceptions, potentially

leading to feelings of inadequacy for mothers like Eva. According to Rozsika Parker, the challenges of reconciling both love and resentment towards one's children are significant, with societal guilt often stemming from the discomfort of acknowledging maternal ambivalence in a culture that largely denies its existence (Parker).

The reluctant mother dislikes her son from the moment he is born and gives voice to the negative sides of motherhood. She is honest about her feelings for her son, her helplessness in coping with different situations, the exasperation and entrapment that parents usually don't talk about: "I had never so fully and consciously wished that I had never borne our son" (407). In an interview with the BBC following her Orange Prize win, Lionel Shriver remarked that such sentiments were still considered highly taboo in society, suggesting that she had stumbled upon one of the few remaining subjects that novelists could explore.

Eva similarly articulates her bitterness or uncertainty towards motherhood, highlighting how it can limit women's lives. In her letters, she reminisces how her blunt talk with her baby shocked Franklin: "Mommy was happy before widdle Kevin came along, you know that, don't you? And now Mummy wakes up every day and wishes she were in France. Mummy's life sucks now, doesn't Mummy's life suck? Do you know there are some days that Mummy would rather be dead? Rather than listen to your screech for one more minute there are some days that Mummy would jump off the Brooklyn Bridge" (125).

The non-maternal mother suspects her son of the worst deeds and sees evil in everything he does or says. Throughout her letters, she analyses his gestures from this perspective and with hindsight. He is portrayed as a cunning, vindictive, manipulative boy. Thus, in an uncensored and uncamouflaged discourse, Eva accuses him directly: "What's your problem, you little shit? Proud of yourself, for ruining Mummy's life?" [...] 'You've got Daddy snowed, but Mummy's got your number. You're a little shit, aren't you... (125)?

Due to the lack of meaningful communication between Eva and her son, she relies on symbols, signals, and enigmatic responses. Eva observes that Kevin adopts a false dual personality, behaving quietly, briefly, and dishonestly around his mother, while appearing falsely open and talkative with his father. His silence with his mother and verbosity with his father are tailored to suit his interactions. Kevin uses language to disguise his true self. As a baby, Kevin's silences are described as abnormal and oppressive: "While I was hardly complaining, Kevin's silence had an oppressive quality. First off, it was truly silence-total, closed-mouthed, cleansed of the coos and soft cries that most children emit when exploring the infinitely fascinating three-square feet of their nylon net playpen" (132).

Language is always scarce and "naked" (350), but his behavior is "unadorned" and "uncamouflaged" (419). Eva acknowledges the need to share her thoughts with someone, which in her case amounts to "spewing" digested ponderings, opinions and feelings in an angry or relentless way: "And then if I do start to talk it spews in a stream, like vomit" (192).

In Eva's letters, all the emotions and topics that Kevin couldn't discuss as a child, the painful subjects that were avoided, and the negative feelings that were suppressed come pouring out. With each letter, Eva fills her son's silence and her husband's absence. Thus, emptiness and loneliness are overcome little by little as confessions draw to an end.

Finally, talking seems to have been essential for Eva to finally come to terms with her grief and to admit that she loves her son: "Because after three days short of eighteen years, I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness I love my son" (468).

Eva's letters serve as a cathartic release, allowing her to address long-standing resentments, guilt, and justifications that she was unable to express earlier. The overwhelming

flood of words in her letters helps her purge her emotions and ultimately find reconciliation with Kevin, Franklin, and herself, bringing a sense of peace and closure to their relationships.

3. Maternal Ambivalence

The book portrays the ambiguity of maternal feelings, challenging the idea that motherhood is the only thing that defines a woman's identity. Eva's character embodies the complex emotions many mothers go through, reflecting the changing maternal identity after World War II, where mothers no longer strictly follow society's expectations of prioritizing motherhood. (Burke). Eva's commitment to her career mirrors the broader patterns observed, emphasizing the significance many women placed on their professional goals in the 1990s. Shriver's story emphasizes a woman's capacity to thrive both in her career and as a mother, challenging conventional norms (Hoffnung).

Eva's approach to caring for Kevin resembles ticking off tasks from a list, devoid of emotional depth, as depicted by Shriver: "He was dry, he was fed, he had slept... He had toys dangling overhead, rubber Blocks in his bed" (Shriver 90). Despite fulfilling basic needs, Eva's demeanor lacks warmth, emphasizing a disconnect from her son emotionally. She performs motherly duties mechanically, driven more by obligation than affection.

This representation tests the typical ideas of motherhood, as Eva battles to satisfy society's assumptions of maternal instinct and emotional connection. Franklin's frustration emphasizes the conflict between Eva's untraditional parenting approach and conventional patriarchal beliefs, with motherhood viewed as a biological responsibility. Eva's hesitance to conform to these standards results in societal criticism and self-questioning about her maternal skills (Shriver).

At the beginning of the novel, Eva is introduced as a 37-year-old career woman who adheres to traditional American values. However, despite her success and adherence to societal

norms, Eva feels disconnected from her mother at the beginning of the story. This disconnect suggests a deeper emotional void or unresolved issues in their relationship, setting the stage for Eva's personal journey and growth throughout the narrative (Shriver 31).

Despite her initial aspirations, motherhood alters her life drastically, leading to disillusionment and overwhelming responsibilities (Shriver 31). Eva's struggles deepen when she fails to bond with her son Kevin, facing criticism from her husband and community for her perceived failure as a mother. Tragedy strikes when Kevin commits a horrific act, resulting in multiple deaths, including Eva's younger daughter and husband. Despite facing societal condemnation and a lack of empathy, Eva remains steadfast in her duty as a mother, visiting Kevin in jail and grappling with the complexities of her past through heartfelt letters to her deceased husband. Eva reflects throughout her narration on her own upbringing, specifically her relationship with her own mother, and how that may have affected how she raised Kevin (Shriver).

According to L.K. Lopez, societal expectations impose daunting pressures on women, especially mothers, to conform to rigid norms within the patriarchal structure, leading to a fear of failure and overwhelming pressure (732). Eva's reluctance to fully embrace motherhood, despite not fitting the traditional mold, highlights the harmful effects of suppressing inner conflicts caused by unrealistic standards, as it can lead to unexpressed ambivalence, guilt, and self-blame (Lopez 732).

Unfortunately, society and mothers themselves do not often allow for the genuine experiences of motherhood to be acknowledged. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott emphasizes the importance of mothers being aware of their ambivalence towards motherhood, as children can handle feelings of resentment but struggle with the mother's repressed negative emotions hidden behind a façade of love and tenderness (*Mothering and Ambivalence* 28).

Melanie Klein's object relations theory provides insights into Eva's complex relationship with her son Kevin, as infants project various aspects of their psyche, both loving and hostile, onto their primary caregiver, often the mother (Segal 65). Kevin's lack of Eva's care and his persistent anger are likely a result of his internal psychological conflicts and projections which Eva intuitively senses and responds to with ambivalence. Klein's analytical framework reveals the severe psychological impact of Kevin's rejection on Eva, perhaps causing her feelings of failure and parental ambivalence (Segal 65).

In Lionel Shriver's novel, Eva's mixed feelings about motherhood stem from the societal and governmental restrictions that dictate how motherhood should be expressed. These pressures create a clash between conforming to societal norms and being true to oneself. The story explores ambivalence not only in motherhood but also in Eva's life before becoming a mother, influenced by patriarchal expectations that tightly control women's bodies, sexuality, and desires. Shriver illustrates how patriarchal norms impose terms on mothers, affecting all women's potential for nurturing. Women striving to meet the "ideal mother" standard often face emotions of failure and recognize the impracticality of satisfying these expectations, frequently leading to criticism, judgment, and social isolation (Shriver).

The narrative traces Eva's path as she first fits with society's expectations about parenting while battling with them. She rejects her body and refuses to become a mother, despite social pressures nonetheless. When she realizes how flawed these methods are, she rebels against the patriarchal society and takes back her freedom. Eva challenges male domination in the home and establishes her power as a mother through thoughtful letters to her dead husband (Shriver).

The contrast between the reality of motherhood and the Idealized image maintained by patriarchal narratives creates parental ambivalence, often concealed or masked due to societal taboos (Shriver). Suppressing this ambivalence, as psychoanalytic theories suggest, can

detrimentally affect both the mother and the child. Eva, portrayed in her letters to Franklin, grapples with societal pressures to conform to the idealized image of a “good mother” despite her inner convictions of inadequacy (Shriver). Despite the challenges, Eva views motherhood as a personal challenge, stating, “The very insurmountability of the task, its very unattractiveness, was in the end what Attracted me to it” (Shriver 37). She resolves to manage her ambivalence by “performing motherhood” from the moment she decides to conceive.

Garey’s theory suggests that societal and state expectations influence women’s performance of motherhood, akin to “doing gender.” (Hansen and Garey 710). In the novel, Eva, a woman, performs performative motherhood to conform to societal norms, a scripted role she assumes rather than naturally embodies (Shriver 63). Despite her efforts, Eva feels the weight of societal expectations, leading to emotional malfeasance (Shriver 103). This struggle reflects broader societal gendered practices and idealized motherhood standards, as seen in Eva’s confession to Franklin and her self-reflection on her visits to Kevin in prison (Shriver 46, 47). Eva’s maternal ambivalence stems from conflicting feelings towards societal norms and her own desires, manifesting throughout her pregnancy and beyond as she grapples with the dichotomy of rejecting traditional norms while conforming to the ideal of a “good mother.” (Shriver).

Until that fateful Thursday, she approaches maternal care with reluctance, anger, uncertainty, chronic ambivalence, and even violence. But she always makes an attempt to avoid and hide her true feelings from Kevin and Franklin. Eva’s attempts to play the idealized good mother in the interest of the family only backfire when she realizes that she is not only unconvincing to her son and husband but even to herself, despite her best efforts. She feels exposed when she knows that Kevin can see through her carefully manipulated attempts to enact or embody the good mother. Kevin retorts on one such occasion: “You may be fooling

the neighbors and the guards and Jesus and your gaga mother with these goody-goody visits of yours, but you're not fooling me. Keep it up if you want a gold star." (Shriver 51).

She imagines how Kevin, while still a baby, had an inkling of the mask that she had put on. She explains: "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 did not feel like smiling, because he never smiled back. He had not seen many smiles in his lifetime but he had seen yours, enough to recognize that in comparison there was something wrong with Mother's. It curled up falsely; it evaporated with revelatory rapidity when I turned from his curb" (Shriver 102).

Maternal ambivalence is evident in Eva's struggle with societal expectations and her own self-discovery. She physically performs as a good mother, but psychologically opposes her role. This leads to a loss of autonomy and independence, as she ceases to exist as an individual. Vivien Muller argues that Shriver's narrative highlights the discrepancy between Eva's personal experiences and societal expectations, causing her to conceal her true self (Muller 43).

This section explores how Eva struggles to balance societal expectations of motherhood with her own emotions and experiences. She defies traditional norms by prioritizing her career and motherhood, challenging the notion that a woman's identity is solely defined by motherhood. Eva's distant relationship with her son Kevin illustrates the conflict between societal norms and personal authenticity in motherhood. The narrative also explores Eva's performative motherhood, revealing her inner conflict and sense of inauthenticity. Eva's journey underscores the importance of women reclaiming their true selves amidst societal expectations.

Chapter Three: The Influence of Nature and Nurture on the Psychological Complexity of the Characters in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

1. Genetic Traits and Psychopathic Tendencies

Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, delves into Eva and her son Kevin's damaged relationship, culminating in a horrifying act of violence. The novel pushes the reader to address a fundamental question: what genuinely defines an individual? Is it our inherited characteristics, or the caring environment in which we grow? Recent literature indicates that genetic features have a substantial impact on an individual's psychopathic profile, particularly in terms of psychopathic tendencies (Shriver).

Scholarly studies have demonstrated the importance of genetic predispositions, upbringing, and environmental influences in an individual's psychological development (Jones et al., 2016). Personality development begins in the embryo and continues throughout adulthood. The developmental process is influenced by multiple environmental factors, including continuing socialization within familial and cultural contexts. Furthermore, genetic influences originating from hereditary features also play a role in this process.

Researchers have extensively studied this complex human phenomenon. Research on personality formation has grown significantly, with an emphasis on numerous factors (Antonopoulou et al., 2021c; Antonopoulou et al., 2023; Gkintoni & Dimakos, 2022). These activities try to thoroughly analyze, interpret, and predict human behavior. Genetics significantly influence human development and maturity. During pregnancy, genetic sequences establish pathways that govern physical attributes, predisposition to specific ailments, and individuality (Giannoulis et al., 2022a; 2022b; Gkintoni et al.).

Although genetic variables are important, they do not have a sole influence on the course of development; rather, they interact with environmental influences. Environmental variables

include a variety of stresses that might trigger or modify genetic potentials and dysfunctions. Individuals are exposed to their environments from birth, beginning with their family and progressing to educational institutions, peer organizations, occupational settings, and other social groups they encounter throughout their life. The prenatal environment has a tremendous impact on human development since it can affect the child before birth. When a mother engages in dangerous behaviors such as smoking cigarettes, eating excessive amounts of alcohol, or using drugs, it puts the child's development at risk (Gkytoni et al.).

This raises the risk of experiencing developmental difficulties at various times of life, as well as potentially contributing to their commencement. The relationship between hereditary elements and environmental influences is characterized by a complex interplay rather than a simple correlation (Halkiopoulos et al., 2023a; 2023b). Personality development is a dynamic combination of genetic and environmental elements, with inherited influences having the potential to increase or reduce the impact of environmental factors (Sortwell et al., 2023). In contrast, environmental influences can influence the manifestation and consequences of genetic predispositions. Furthermore, it is important to note that an individual's genetic predisposition might affect the surroundings they create in their life, their exposure level to these events, and the impacts they are likely to receive (Tzachrista et al., 2023; Gkintoni et al., 2017). It is clear, then, that the process of human development is influenced not only by genetic or environmental factors, but also by their interaction and interdependence.

The analysis of Kevin's Inherited tendencies for psychopathic traits aligns with research suggesting that genetics play a significant role in the development of psychopathy. Studies have found a genetic component associated with psychopathic traits and related neuropsychological deficits. Basically, this means that people with high levels of callous-unemotional traits might have a genetic vulnerability that makes them more likely to develop psychopathic and antisocial behaviors (Viding and McCrory). This genetic vulnerability can lead to the development of

specific brain systems that work a bit differently than usual. For example, the amygdala, which is responsible for processing distress cues, might not respond normally.

The ventromedial prefrontal cortex and striatum, which are involved in empathy and decision-making, might not function properly either (Blair). It is also worth considering that psychopathology, including psychopathic traits, can change over time, especially from adolescence to adulthood. Research has shown that while genetic factors can influence antisocial behavior, the environment also plays a big role in whether or not these behaviors actually show up (Cosgrove et al.).

The correlation between genetic makeup and psychopathic behavior is supported by behavioral genetics research, which suggests that certain genetic factors are associated with the development of psychopathic traits. Key genetic contributions are implicated in the manifestation of callous-unemotional components and impulsive-antisocial behaviors which are typical of psychopathy. These traits are connected to specific neurobiological impairments, such as a diminished empathic response due to reduced amygdala responsiveness and deficits in decision making, and reinforcement learning related to dysfunctions in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and striatum (Blair, 2013). While there is a genetic component, the degree to which these factors contribute to an individual's psychopathy can vary.

Genetic predispositions interact with environmental influences and experiences, collectively shaping the individual's behavior and personality traits (Viding & McCrory, 2012). Therefore, understanding the full picture of someone's psychological complexity, such as Kevin's, requires not only a look into their genetic traits but also a comprehensive consideration of their developmental history, social context, and life experiences (Viding and McCrory; Blair; May and Beaver).

Identifying the particular genetic traits and assessing how they have expressed themselves in relation to psychopathic behavior could help in determining the extent of genetic influence over Kevin's psychological profile. However, it is also critical to acknowledge the substantial role that the environment plays in either mitigating or exacerbating the genetic risk factors (Viding and McCrory).

The intricate dynamics between genetic predispositions and environmental influences are pivotal in shaping psychopathic traits, as exemplified by the character Kevin. This section aims to elucidate the interdependent relationship between inherited characteristics and environmental factors in the development of psychopathy.

Firstly, genetic predispositions lay the foundational framework for potential psychopathic behaviors. Research indicates that individuals with high levels of callous-unemotional traits may have a genetic vulnerability that predisposes them to psychopathy and related neuropsychological deficits (Viding and McCrory). Specific genes have been associated with abnormalities in brain structures such as the amygdala and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which are critical for empathy, decision-making, and processing distress cues (Blair). However, these genetic factors alone do not deterministically lead to psychopathy.

The role of environmental influences is equally significant. For instance, Kevin's upbringing, characterized by his mother Eva's emotional ambivalence and detachment, could have exacerbated his inherent tendencies. The concept of the dual influence model highlights that genetic and environmental factors are not merely additive but interact dynamically throughout development. Epigenetic research further supports this by showing how environmental factors can modify gene expression, influencing brain function and behavior without altering the DNA sequence (Cosgrove et al.).

In Kevin's case, the lack of nurturing and emotional support in his environment likely intensified his genetic predispositions towards psychopathy. This underscores the necessity of considering both genetic and environmental elements when assessing the etiology of psychopathic traits. Contemporary research emphasizes that psychopathy results from the interplay of multiple factors, necessitating a holistic approach to understanding and addressing such behaviors.

In conclusion, Kevin's development into a psychopath cannot be attributed solely to his genetic makeup or his environmental context but rather to the complex and dynamic interplay between these factors. This perspective aligns with the current understanding in behavioral genetics and psychopathology, advocating for a comprehensive approach that integrates genetic vulnerabilities with environmental influences to fully comprehend the development of psychopathic traits. This holistic view is essential for devising effective interventions and preventative strategies for psychopathy.

2. Contextual Effects and Eva's Inner Dynamics

In Lionel Shriver's intense psychological thriller, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the main character, Eva Khatchadourian, struggles with a turbulent inner world while dealing with the catastrophic consequences of her son's tragic school shooting. Through Eva's reflective storytelling, the audience gains insight into the intricate mix of feelings, uncertainties, and existential dilemmas that shape her psychological journey (Shriver).

Central to Eva's inner turmoil is her ambivalence about motherhood, a feeling she had even before Kevin was born. Shriver's story shows that Eva "had never wanted children" and while she doesn't regret having Kevin, she admits she never felt a strong maternal love (Shriver 19). This inherent reluctance to embrace motherhood is intensified by Kevin's emotional detachment and troubling behavior from a young age, as Eva notes that "Kevin was a very

difficult child,” characterized by his distance, unresponsiveness, and cunning nature (Shriver 39).

Eva’s struggle to establish a meaningful bond with her son leads to a deep sense of guilt and self-doubt, as she repeatedly questions her role in Kevin’s development. She reflects on her perceived parenting failures, lamenting, “If only I had been a better mother. If only I had been more patient, more understanding, more loving” (Shriver 126). This intense guilt arises from Eva’s belief that her inadequacies as a mother might have played a part in Kevin’s troubling behavior.

Scholars have examined the intricate dynamics of Eva’s relationship with Kevin, with Duvall and Korol noting that “Eva’s ambivalence toward Kevin reflects her broader ambivalence toward the role of motherhood itself” (187). Similarly, Dodsworth argues that Eva’s “chronic ambivalence toward the maternal role” is key to understanding her psychological struggles (103).

Intertwined with Eva’s guilt is a profound resentment and envy toward other mothers who seemingly embrace the demands of parenthood with ease. As she observes the effortless connection between her husband Franklin and their son, Eva’s sense of isolation and inadequacy as a mother is further amplified, leading her to acknowledge that “I had never wanted children, and although I can’t say I regretted having Kevin, I was no more glowing with maternal love than I had been the day I gave birth” (Shriver 19).

The psychological impact of Eva’s troubled relationship with Kevin and her perceived failures as a parent culminates in deep disillusionment and an existential crisis. Throughout the novel, Eva comes to terms with her inability to prevent or control the horrific events that occur, leading her to question her core beliefs and values. She is tormented by the existential question,

“What is the purpose of existence if it can be snuffed out so abruptly, so randomly, so cruelly?” (Shriver 415).

This deep disillusionment and existential questioning are further intensified by the fragmentation of Eva’s identity and her experiences of dissociation. In dealing with the aftermath of Kevin’s actions, Eva feels increasingly alienated from her own sense of self, stating, “I don’t know who I am anymore” (Shriver 345). Scholars have observed that this fragmentation of identity mirrors Eva’s “struggle to integrate the traumatic events of her past with her present sense of self” (Nicki 56).

Shriver’s novel also provides insight into the formative influences that have shaped Eva’s inner dynamic, particularly her relationships with her parents. Eva’s relationship with her father is described as emotionally distant and lacking in warmth, as she recalls his “taciturn” and “undemonstrative” nature (Shriver 23). This emotional unavailability from her father likely contributed to Eva’s own difficulties in forming close emotional bonds, including with her son.

Eva’s relationship with her mother is more complex, marked by both moments of tenderness and profound conflict. Her mother’s critical and overbearing nature, as well as her apparent projection of unfulfilled ambitions onto her daughter, have likely shaped Eva’s insecurities and her reluctance to embrace the responsibilities of motherhood (Shriver 24-25). These unresolved conflicts and unmet needs in Eva’s parental relationships may have also influenced her own struggles with guilt, self-doubt, and the search for a coherent sense of identity, as Duvall and Korol explore in their analysis of the novel (189-190).

During Eva Khatchadourian’s turbulent journey in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Shriver presents not just a narrative, but a deep dive into the human psyche following trauma. Through Eva’s challenges with motherhood, guilt, and existential questioning, Shriver urges readers to confront their own doubts and vulnerabilities amid life’s trials. The insights provided

by scholars further enrich this exploration, shedding light on the wider implications of Eva's experiences and the complex dynamics of maternal identity. Additionally, Shriver's portrayal of Eva's relationships with her parents emphasizes how family dynamics shape individual development and resilience. Ultimately, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* goes beyond mere storytelling to offer a moving reflection on resilience, identity, and the enduring quest for meaning in the face of immense adversity.

Through this multifaceted exploration of Eva's inner dynamic, Shriver's novel delves into the complex psychological effects of trauma, the challenges of motherhood, and the search for meaning in the face of unimaginable tragedy. By weaving together Eva's ambivalence towards parenting, her crippling guilt and self-doubt, her resentment and existential reckoning, and the formative influences of her past, the author paints a poignant and haunting portrait of a fractured psyche grappling with the aftermath of unspeakable events.

3. The Role of External Factors in Shaping the Characters' Psychology

Bohner and Grant (9) said that "Character is the most important element, as least as far as grabbing the interest of general reader. Often on a first reading of a story, the characters are what determine if we enjoy the experience of reading the story or not". It means that the character is more than a mere tool to advance the plot, it is the essence and core of the story. When readers engage with the character, they also engage with the novel's themes, concepts, and overall significance. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, Kevin and Eva are the protagonists or the central characters that carries the thematic weight of the work.

3.1. The Parental Influence

In *Implausible Psycho: We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Mark Fisher mentioned that Shriver famously struggled to publish the novel because potential publishers were concerned about the novel's main character, Eva, being "unsympathetic." Being an "unsympathetic

character" appears to imply that you are not the type of women who appears to fit in the magical world of advertising. Eva is capable of generating sympathy from readers and spectators alike in both the novel and the film. Her ability to do so is what create discomfort while reading the novel. Eva is considered "unsympathetic," not because we can't relate to her, but rather because she shows "unacceptable" opinions regarding parenting.

As Eva wrote in one of the letters "Now that children don't till your fields or take you in when you're incontinent", "there is no sensible reason to have them, and it is amazing that with the advent of effective contraception anyone chooses to reproduce at all.". Despite her hostility, Eva feels ambivalent about motherhood. Her "cold" demeanor is seen as a deficit in the emotional attachment and performance expected by the dominant societal norms around parenting. The novel can be viewed as a "mother's horror story", It may be every mother's worst fear; or, conversely, it may be a wish-fulfillment fantasy for those who don't want children (Fisher).

The novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, explores the societal expectations surrounding motherhood, particularly the notion of what emotions are considered acceptable for mothers. Eva's feelings, which may be perceived as unconventional or even unacceptable by some, are met with disapproval from Franklin, implying that certain emotions are taboo. However, these feelings are common and do not necessarily indicate poor parenting. The concept of emotional commitment in relationships, as discussed by Shriver and John Deigh.

This latter has clearly claimed that "[t]o satisfy the requirements [of emotional commitment in a marriage or family] one must have certain feelings and not have others, and whether one has the former or is free of the latter is typically not within one's power" (322)., highlighting the complexity of meeting emotional requirements in marriages and families. This mirrors the mid-twentieth-century emphasis on mothers feeling fulfilled in their roles, suggesting that mothers who fail to exhibit the "right" emotions may be stigmatized as "Bad

Mothers. Franklin desires to have a happy family, but as mentioned, he neglects to consider the fact that Eva would not fit into the pattern. According to O'Reilly, feminist women have the option of choosing ways of mothering that go beyond the narrow confines and demands of patriarchal motherhood (Kawash 978).

For his children, Franklin does not want Eva to experiment with motherhood; he prefers her to be a traditional mother. At one point, he states that he does not want Eva to turn the tables on him (Shriver 59), implying that he agrees with Eva, but still wants to maintain a traditional family structure. As a result, Franklin blames Eva for being cold when she tries to bond with Kevin in her own way. There is no doubt that Eva has healthy "feminist" values, such as her desire to share work, economy, and child rearing equally with Franklin, which creates tension between them. The reason for this is that Franklin inherits the traditional values of motherhood and family life he has; thus, he cannot accept Eva's view on motherhood, and retaliates by blaming her (Kallman 10-15).

3.2. The Lack of Maternal Bounding

The novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* covers the formation of Kevin, a young child whose mother holds a hatred for him since his birth. To Eva, Kevin is an undesired son who came into the world unintentionally to ruin her good profession as a tourist guide. Kevin's gypsy mother finds it difficult to love him, as she thinks "Kevin was hard to love in the same manner that it was hard to eat well in Moscow, find a cheap place to stay in London, or locate a commercial Laundromat in Bangkok" (266). She blames baby Kevin for her imprisonment in their house to babysit him.

Kevin, as a result, becomes a problem child: complex, arrogant, extremely intricate, and strongly opposed to his mother. Kevin, a baby, refuses his mother's milk and resists child-training, which Eva believes is intentional. Through behaviors like "throwing all his toys out of

the playpen, and then he screams, and he will not stop screaming until they are all back, and then he throws them out again" (122), he advertises his 'evil' presence and innate repressive form of hatred against his mother. He also shows a great dislike for the things his mother enjoys. For example, when Eva creates a private chamber papered with maps and decorated with foreign masks, she finds out that "it not simply invaded but vandalized by Kevin, its fantasy of other places forever disfigured and smeared with paint" (Thornham 12).

The novel is a good example of how trauma memory affects the psyche's formation. The mark left from such a memory remains in both mother and son, having a deep influence on their individuality. Kevin's egoistic, detached character is heavily influenced by his mother's ignorance to him. Kevin grows increasingly lonely as the days pass. "He's never known what to do with himself...his day is agreeably regimented from breakfast to lights out" (193). During this period, he is solely focused on the news of school shootings around the country.

3.3. Societal Trauma

As the parent of a murderer, Eva feels guilt over what her son has done because she fears her failures as a mother may have contributed to Kevin's actions. These letters are written by Eva to explore her guilt and to suggest that, when one's child is certainly guilty of a crime, forgiveness is impossible. As a result, Eva, who has been isolated from society by her son's actions, is also critical of society's willingness to place blame on the mother. The paradoxes in her letters lead to oscillate between self-justification and self-criticism.

Eva feels disconnected from her home surroundings after Franklin's death and the school shootings. Nobody wants to deal with her, so she becomes the object of their rage. Her apartment is covered with bright red paint (8), the eggs in her grocery bag are crushed (4), and she is dragged to civil court to be held responsible for Kevin's actions (81). "Kevin has turned me into a foreigner again, in my own country" (53), expressing her isolation from her

community. Her letter writing in her cold, unwelcome apartment creates a sense of anxiety, loneliness, and unsettling (Louw 67-77).

Eva's community has a negative attitude towards her, revealed by their verbal, physical, and legal actions. This is a representation of Eva's errors as a mother, as well as the community's belief that she should be held responsible for her son's crimes. Eva is now hesitant to appear in public after the incident:

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

When a person acts incorrectly, their previous actions become irrelevant according to Eva's fellow citizens. This results in a bad perception that reinforces patriarchal norms in society. Eva's overall image is harmed by this attitude. It shows how quickly people are willing to judge and condemn someone based on a single incident, rather than looking at the full context and their past actions (Rosen 17).

3.4. Societal Expectations' Effect on Characters' Mental Health

Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a stimulating look at the complicated links between motherhood, societal pressure, and mental health. Shriver's narrative of Eva and her son Kevin explores how cultural expectations can affect an individual's sense of identity, contribute to feelings of isolation and shame, and worsen mental health concerns.

The expectations placed on mother is one of the main ways in which societal pressure affects mental health in the novel. Motherhood presents challenges in assigning blame for mistakes, often involving the mother as the source of the problem in childrearing. Eva faces judgment from her husband and society for her perceived failures as a mother. Her feelings and thoughts were outside societal norms, and when she expressed this to her husband, he frustrated, claiming that it is too late for second thoughts and that they should never regret their own child. After delivering Kevin and having him medically evaluated, Eva became an even greater focus of interest and scrutiny. As mentioned in Linda M. Blum's article, in which Blum claims that in a family with a disabled child the mother "tend[s] to be the primary caregiver of such children" (Kallman 203).

The societal pressure to conform to traditional maternal roles takes a toll on Eva's mental health, leading to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and inadequacy, as she confesses, "I was a bad mother, and I knew it." Shriver's poignant words capture the internal struggle of a woman grappling with the expectations placed upon her by society and her own perceived shortcomings as a mother, highlighting the emotional turmoil that often accompanies the journey of motherhood (Shriver 12).

Kevin's psychopathy is evident in his ability to manipulate those around him. He uses his charm and intelligence to play his parents, Eva and Franklin, against each other to achieve his own ends. This complete disregard for others' feelings and well-being is a hallmark of psychopathic behavior. Another key trait of Kevin's psychopathy is his grandiose sense of self-worth. He boasts about his mass murder and the infamy it has brought him, showing a lack of empathy for his victims and their families. This self-aggrandizement is common among psychopaths, who view themselves as superior to others. Kevin's lack of remorse and shallow affect further demonstrate his psychopathic tendencies. He feels no genuine emotion or regret

for his actions, including the heinous crime he committed. This lack of empathy and emotional connection goes against societal norms of compassion and accountability.

Kevin's tendency to act on impulse and his quick temper are major concerns. He frequently behaves recklessly and violently, with little regard for the consequences or the welfare of those affected. This lack of self-control and respect for others goes against accepted social norms and poses a serious threat to public safety ("The perfect fictional psychopath: *We Need to Talk about Kevin*").

Kevin's development is determined not only by his genes, but also by the social environment in which he grew up. Cultural standards, social pressures, and exposure to violence can all have a significant impact on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 411-423). Kevin's childhood environment may have been conducive to empathy and prosocial behavior, but it may also have been characterized by violence, neglect, or general social isolation. These background influences interact with Kevin's genetic predispositions, amplifying or mitigating their effects (Rutter et al. 843-867). Thus, Kevin's development transcended his genetic makeup, showing the critical role of his upbringing in shaping his personality and behavior.

Research shows that exposure to violence within the community increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior, especially among children with a genetic predisposition (Farrington 27-48). In Lionel Shriver's disturbing novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, she delves into the complex psychological depths of her characters, notably the tense relationship between Eva and her son Kevin. The story goes beyond a simple nature vs. nurture debate and instead explores the complex interplay of background influences, family dynamics, and personal characteristics in shaping the characters' behaviors and emotions. A child's development is determined by more than just biology. Social background, including factors such as socioeconomic status and community perceptions, play a crucial role (Evans 77-92).

Shriver portrays Kevin's family as a middle-class suburban American whose socioeconomic status affects their interactions within the community and their responses to social expectations. Eva's actions and decisions are influenced by outside influences as she attempts to balance motherhood with the social demands of being a caring and devoted mother (Hays).

Plus, the narrative explores the impact of community attitudes. Kevin was rejected by his classmates and misunderstood by adults, and experienced isolation and alienation. Shriver shows how these impressions, often based on preconceived assumptions or limited understanding, shape his interactions and lead to his feelings of alienation, which can lead to resentment toward society (Crocker and Major 281-301). *We Need to Talk about Kevin* delves into the complexities of interactions within families and the parents' perspective. Eva is portrayed as thoughtful and self-critical, struggling with feelings of shame and inadequacy in her role as a parent. Her self-doubt causes her to question her actions and actions, especially those involving Kevin, and questions her abilities as a mother. Kevin's father, Franklin, takes a more optimistic stance, viewing Kevin's behavioral problems as typical teenage rebellion rather than a symptom of deeper issues (Shriver 88).

Eva's tense relationship with Kevin stems from her hypervigilance of Kevin's behavior and her attempts to location these issues, which in turn creates tension between them. Kevin's perception of Eva's fear exacerbated the situation and led to increased hostility and manipulation (McHale et al.). Franklin refuses to acknowledge Kevin's disturbing behavior, and Eva's lack of support from Franklin further isolates her, leaving her feeling powerless and unsupported. Research shows that differences in parental perceptions can have a negative impact on children's well-being (Smith et al. 953-963). Conflicting views between parents can lead to confusion and uncertainty in children and may worsen behavioral problems (Smith et al. 953-963).

3.5. The Columbine School Massacre Reflection on Kevin's Psyche

The way mental illness is depicted in literature has evolved over time, mirroring the changing attitudes and beliefs of society. From ancient tales like Homer's "The Odyssey" to modern novels, literature has delved into the intricacies of mental health, balancing realism and romanticism. Early depictions, such as in Shakespeare's works, viewed mental illness as a source of existential anguish. Later, Gothic literature sensationalized madness, while stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Mrs. Dalloway" offered more compassionate portrayals. Literature has played a pivotal role in cultivating empathy, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for greater awareness and compassion. Today, contemporary works continue to explore mental illness, shedding light on personal battles and societal expectations. The literary representation of mental illness serves as a mirror to societal attitudes, shaping perceptions and fostering dialogue, empathy, and social change ("Echoes of the Mind: The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Literature and Its Reflection of Societal Attitudes.").

The Columbine High School tragedy, as a real-life example, has had a profound influence on contemporary literature, with numerous works exploring the complex themes of school violence, mental health, and societal perspectives. The devastating incident on April 20, 1999, where Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold took the lives of 13 individuals and wounded 24 others before ending their own lives, marked a pivotal moment in American history, forever altering the way we perceive and address the issues of school-based violence and mental well-being. In the years that followed, a variety of literary works have grappled with these themes, providing a nuanced understanding of the human psyche and the societal factors that contribute to individual experiences of psychological distress (Cullen).

The Columbine massacre has had a profound and lasting impact on popular culture. Its legacy has inspired numerous creative works, including books, movies, and video games, which explore the tragedy and its aftermath. The term "Columbine" has become a chilling

shorthand for school shootings, a grim reminder of the devastation that can occur when troubled individuals turn to violence (“Columbine High School massacre”).

The perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, have also become a subject of morbid fascination, with a subculture known as "Columbiners" creating fan art, fan fiction, and even cosplaying the pair. This phenomenon speaks to the complex and often troubling ways in which such events can become embedded in the public consciousness, sometimes in unsettling or even problematic ways.

The tragic stories of Kevin and Dylan serve as poignant reminders of the devastating consequences that can arise when individuals with untreated mental health issues are failed by the very systems meant to support them. The Columbine shooting, in particular, had a profound and lasting impact on American society, sparking a wave of artistic and literary works that grapple with the complex themes of violence, mental health, and the societal forces that shape human behavior.

These two young men, though their specific circumstances may differ, can be viewed as emblematic of troubled youth who turn to acts of violence, reflecting the intricate interplay between mental illness and the social factors that influence individual choices. Literature has long grappled with the nuanced depiction of mental health, often navigating a delicate balance between realism and romanticism, empathy and stigma.

By examining the lives of Kevin and Dylan, we are confronted with the harsh reality that our society has, in many ways, failed to provide adequate support and resources for those struggling with mental health challenges. Their stories serve as a poignant call to action, urging us to critically examine the systemic gaps and shortcomings that allow such tragedies to occur, and to redouble our efforts to address the root causes of violence and ensure that no one falls

through the cracks ("Echoes of the Mind: The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Literature and Its Reflection of Societal Attitudes.").

By integrating these insights, Shriver emphasizes the critical role of relationships within the family in shaping the characters' experiences and perspectives. In her novel, Shriver adeptly delves into the intricate nuances of individual characteristics and their profound effects on the psychological makeup of her characters. Through the portrayal of Kevin, Shriver skillfully illustrates traits commonly associated with psychopathy, such as a lack of empathy and a propensity for manipulation, which manifest from a young age (Shriver 27). These inherent traits, possibly rooted in genetic predispositions, lay the foundation for understanding his psychological development and subsequent behaviors (Caspi et al. 1113-1146).

The story also explores how the characters' psychological paths are shaped by their upbringing. Eva, burdened by her upbringing and struggling with the challenges of being a mother, is overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and regret as she reflects on her parenting decisions and their impact on Kevin's growth (Shriver 62). The novel unfolds against the backdrop of a suburban environment characterized by societal pressures and community perceptions. Kevin's palpable estrangement from his peers and Eva's isolation within the community serve to exacerbate their sense of alienation and contribute to the escalating psychological tensions within the narrative (Shriver 115). Scholarly research has demonstrated the significant impact of the interplay between genetic predispositions, upbringing, and environmental influences on an individual's psychological development (Jones et al. 214-230).

Conclusion

This thesis provides a comprehensive examination of Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, delving into the intricate interplay between inherent traits and environmental influences that shape the characters' psychological development and behavior. Through a psychoanalytical lens, the research investigates how predispositions, family dynamics, and societal pressures converge to impact the characters' mental well-being and the complex parent-child relationship at the heart of the story.

By exploring the nuanced perspectives of both Kevin and his mother Eva, the analysis sheds light on the multifaceted role of parenthood, the clash between individual desires and societal norms, and the profound influence that community perceptions can have on personal connections and the overall narrative. Ultimately, the study encourages readers to contemplate the myriad factors that contribute to the formation of individual identity and lived experiences, underscoring the novel's exploration of the nature-versus-nurture debate in contemporary literature.

In this case study, and through Eva Khatchadourian's viewpoint, Shriver tackled themes like isolation, guilt and responsibility while underscoring the clash between desires and societal pressures. Eva's journey, as a mother is juxtaposed with prevailing standards to underscore how cultural norms influence maternal experiences.

Kevin's journey reflects the interplay, between his traits and the influence of his surroundings. The societal norms, social expectations and exposure to violence have all contributed to shaping his life's path. Shriver skillfully explores how community perspectives can profoundly impact an individual's journey highlighting the impacts of alienation and misunderstandings. The tangible sense of isolation experienced by Kevin and Eva within their

community emphasizes the profound influence societal perceptions can have on personal connections and the overall narrative.

Drawing upon insights on environmental factors, Shriver enriches her story with complexity and depth, encouraging readers to explore human behavior and how environmental factors affect psychological well-being. By digging into Eva's self-reflection Kevin's psychological complexities and the intricate tapestry of family bonds, Shriver presents an exploration of the complexities inherent in the nature, versus nurture debate urging readers to contemplate the countless elements that shape individual identity and lived experiences.

The first chapter we tackled the complex realm of parenting, examining critical issues like parental alienation, child abuse, and the significant influence of diverse parenting styles. Parental alienation is a psychological condition where a child forms a strong alliance with one parent, rejecting the other without valid reason, often leading to lasting harm for the child and the alienated parent. Child abuse is a widespread global problem that can inflict severe trauma and lasting impacts on a child's behavior, cognitive development, physical health, and emotional well-being. Parenting approaches, such as authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful, have been identified as crucial factors shaping a child's personality and behavior. Furthermore, the child-parent attachment, a fundamental emotional bond, plays a pivotal role in a child's personal and social development, with secure attachment linked to positive outcomes and insecure attachment associated with negative outcomes.

The second chapter is about Eva's journey, as she navigates the intricate balance between societal expectations of motherhood and her own personal experiences. She boldly defies traditional norms, prioritizing both her career and her role as a mother, refusing to let her identity be solely defined by the latter. The narrative explores Eva's distant relationship with her son Kevin, shedding light on the clash between societal conventions and personal authenticity in the realm of motherhood. Furthermore, the text examines Eva's performative

approach to motherhood, revealing her inner turmoil and sense of inauthenticity. Ultimately, Eva's story underscores the importance for women to reclaim their true selves amidst the overwhelming societal pressures they face.

In the last chapter we have analyzed the complex interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental influences in shaping Kevin's psychopathic traits. The analysis has shown that while genetics play a significant role in the development of psychopathy, environmental factors such as parental influence, societal expectations, and life experiences also play a crucial role in shaping an individual's psychological complexity. Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* provides a profound exploration of Eva Khatchadourian's inner dynamics as she grapples with the devastating consequences of her son's tragic actions, highlighting the complexities of motherhood, guilt, and existential questioning. The novel also explores the complex dynamics between Kevin and his mother, as well as the societal trauma that Eva experiences as the parent of a murderer. The Columbine High School massacre has had a profound impact on contemporary literature, serving as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise when individuals with untreated mental health issues are failed by the very systems meant to support them.

During the course of this study, we encountered limitations specifically related to the relationship between Kevin and Eva. One significant limitation was the lack of works directly addressing the theme of genetic traits and the nature versus nurture debate within the novel. Another one related to the lack of portrayal of the effects of societal factors on mental health in the novel was not widely explored or depicted in literature, making it challenging to find relevant resources that specifically focused on this topic. However, as a psychological phenomenon, we found a wealth of resources in the form of books and articles. The field of psychology and psychiatry provided us with a broad range of theoretical frameworks and clinical studies to draw upon.

Lionel Shriver's, *We Need to talk about Kevin* (2003) is a fascinating book offers a rich and multifaceted exploration and looks at gender roles from many angles that can be studied from feminist, patriarchal, and philosophical views. The feminist perspective looks at the pressures on mothers and how the main character, Eva, deals with traditional gender ideas. On the other hand, the patriarchal view shows how women are restricted by societal expectations, especially in motherhood. Finally, a philosophical viewpoint can be used to explore fate, free will, and morality in the novel. These themes make the book a good starting point for deeper study into its ideas, how it tells its story, and what it says about society.

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ملخص

تناقش هاته الأطروحة التعقيدات النفسية في الروايات المعاصرة، وبشكل خاص، في رواية ليونال شريفير. "نحتاج للتحدث عن كيفن". (2003) تطرقت هذه الرواية الأسرة الى العلاقة المعقدة والمقلقة بين الأم والابن كيفن. باستخدام نظريتي فرويد وميلاني كلان، تم اكتشاف مختلف المواضيع الموجودة في هاته الرواية، وتم تحليل شخصية كيفن، وفحص موضوعات اخرى، كالأومومة، الطبيعة والتنشئة، وعلاقة التأثير الاجتماعي على الصحة العقلية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى توفير رؤى حول التعقيدات النفسية. يكمن الهدف الرئيسي في توفير رؤى حول التعقيدات النفسية للأدب الروائي المعاصر وإلهام اكتشاف أعمق للطرق التي تعكس بها الأعمال الأدبية المواقف المجتمعية تجاه الهوية والأخلاق والطبيعة البشرية. والسؤال البحثي الذي يوجه هذه الدراسة هو: كيف تدرس رواية شريفير التعقيد النفسي لعلاقة الأم بابنها المريض عقليا وتقدم نظرة ثاقبة لدور الطبيعة والتنشئة والاتجاهات الاجتماعية في نمو الانسان؟ تتضمن الأطروحة مقدمة وثلاثة فصول رئيسية وخاتمة. يوفر الفصل الأول معلومات خلفية عن مفهوم التعقيدات النفسية في الأدب الروائي المعاصر ونظرة عامة على الرواية. يحلل الفصل الثاني تصوير الاضطراب النفساني والتناقض الأبوي في الرواية، بينما يدور الفصل الثالث حول تأثير الطبيعة والتربية على التعقيد النفسي لشخصيات الرواية. تهدف هاته الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على كيفية انعكاس الأدب الروائي المعاصر على جوانب المعقدة للتجربة البشرية. تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أن رواية شريفير تستكشف العلاقة بين الأم والابن من خلال نظريات فرويد وميلاني، مع التركيز على تفاعل الطبيعة والتنشئة في تشكيل الميول السيكوباتية لدى الابن. تتحدى الرواية تصورات القراء المسبقة عن الشر ودور التربية في تنمية شخصية الطفل.

الكلمات المفتاحية الأومومة، الطبيعة، التربية، المرض النفسي، التناقض.

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine les complexités psychologiques dans les romans contemporains, en particulier dans le roman de Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, publié en 2003. Ce roman fascinant explore la relation complexe et troublante entre une mère et son fils, Kevin, qui soulève des questions fondamentales sur la maternité, la nature de l'humanité et la responsabilité parentale. En utilisant les théories freudiennes et de Melanie Klein. Cette thèse analyse le personnage de Kevin et explore des thèmes tels que la maternité, la nature par rapport à l'acquis, et l'impact de l'influence sociale sur la santé mentale. La recherche vise à explorer comment la fiction contemporaine reflète les attitudes sociétales sur l'identité, la moralité et la condition humaine, inspirant ainsi des études plus approfondies. La question d'étude guidant cette recherche est : Comment le roman de Shriver examine-t-il les complexités psychologiques de la relation mère-fils psychopathe et fournit-il des informations sur le rôle de l'hérédité contre l'environnement et des attitudes sociétales dans le développement humain ? La thèse comprend une introduction, trois chapitres principaux et une conclusion. Le premier chapitre présente des informations générales sur le concept de complexité psychologique dans la fiction contemporaine et offre une vue d'ensemble du roman. Le deuxième chapitre examine la représentation de la psychopathie et de l'ambivalence parentale dans le roman, tandis que le troisième chapitre explore la façon dont la nature et l'éducation influencent la complexité psychologique des personnages. Cette recherche vise à mettre en lumière la façon dont la fiction contemporaine, à travers l'analyse du roman de Shriver, reflète la complexité de l'expérience humaine et des forces qui façonnent nos perceptions de l'identité, de la moralité et de la condition humaine. Cette étude révèle que le roman de Shriver explore la relation mère-fils à travers Freud et Mélanie Klein, soulignant le rôle de l'hérédité et de l'environnement dans la psychopathie du fils. Le roman remet en question les préjugés sur le mal et l'éducation.

Mots-clés : maternité, hérédité, environnement, psychopathie, ambivalence