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**Blaming the Mother: Motherhood in Doris Lessing's  
*The Fifth Child* and Lionel Shriver's  
*We Need to Talk About Kevin***

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## Introduction

“There are no bad children, only bad parents.” (Thurer 22)

Mother-blame and mother-guilt are the result of an ideology of motherhood that has formed in Western culture since the Victorian era. This ideology romanticises motherhood and disregards the mother’s reality, providing a skewed conception of maternity. This, then, creates unrealistic expectations on mothers, which causes a sense of blame, but also guilt when the expectations are not fulfilled. Due to this conception of motherhood, mothers have been scrutinised progressively for more than one century.

Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* (1988) and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) are two novels that bring attention to the ideology of motherhood and touch on the delicate issues of blame and guilt that mothers may experience. Harriet Lovatt’s son Ben in *The Fifth Child* and Eva Khatchadourian’s son Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* are both ill-natured and emotionally vapid. Additionally, Harriet and Eva do not get the necessary support and understanding in regards to their sons. In the novels their husbands, Franklin and David, and the society they live in seek to blame someone for the boys’ nature and behaviour, and that blame is directly attributed to the mothers. Since the novels are narrated from Harriet’s and Eva’s point of view respectively, the reader obtains insights about their ambivalence toward motherhood, the boys, their husbands and themselves.

What is interesting about these two novels is the contrast and resemblance of the two women’s situations. Harriet and Eva are two dissimilar characters, who, despite this share the same fate. Harriet envisages a nuclear family with eight children and sacrifices her career to stay at home and tend to the children’s every need in a small village outside of London in the 1960s and 1970s. Eva, unlike Harriet, is an independent woman living in the 1980s and 1990s who never wanted to become a mother. She is not ready to give up her exciting life as a businesswoman and move away from the flat in Manhattan, New York. These mothers have chosen two different ways of mothering, living in two different countries in different decades, but are nonetheless similarly subjected to blame and guilt.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the definitions of blame and guilt seem to be connected to each other, meaning that in general there cannot be one without the other. According to the *OED*, blame means that one finds fault with someone else, or reproaches someone else's actions. It can also mean "to address with rebuke" and "to accuse" ("blame"). However, one can feel stigmatised and therefore procure feelings of guilt without there necessarily being an actual person behind the blame. Guilt, then, can be seen as the result of blame, but there are also other factors to why guilt occurs as will be discussed later in the essay. The *OED* states that guilt means delinquency, failure, or neglect of a duty or an obligation, which in the case of this study would be the duty of motherhood. Hence, the mother is blamed and feels guilt when she fails as a mother.

The purpose of this essay is to examine why the blame is automatically attributed to the mother whether she is a stay-at-home mother or a working mother. In *The Fifth Child* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Harriet and Eva are blamed respectively because of societal values, which influence their husbands and families, but also the mothers' self-perception, resulting in self-blame and guilt. The first section will focus on the conception of the ideal mother by providing an overview of motherhood in general, looking at historical facts and how the perception of motherhood has changed since the end of the nineteenth century. The main discussion will be divided into three parts. The first part will focus on how the mother-blame is influenced by society. The second part will discuss the blame directed from the fathers and the families. Finally, the third part will concentrate on the mothers' self-blame and their guilt.

## **The Ideal Mother and Mother-Blame**

The Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century entailed a new way of life for the traditional family. The home was divided, serving only as a living-place and no longer as a workplace, and women were supposed to stay at home tending to the children; the men were absent during the day working (Bassin et al. 5; Eyer 37). Due to the change in social life, motherhood began to be professionalised, meaning that motherhood was given a

professional status because women in the middle and upper classes had child rearing as their sole responsibility (Bassin et al., 5). Motherhood was seen as “the only challenging, dignified, and rewarding work that women could get” (Bassin et al. 5). Furthermore, nuclear family values were emphasised through the idolised mother Queen Victoria. In *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari L. Thurer describes the metamorphosis of the “new” mother as becoming “virtuous, gentle, devoted, asexual, limited in interests to creating a proper refuge for her family and to tenderly guiding her children along appointed ways” (183). Thurer adds that the Victorian mother or the “True Woman” entered the “collective psyche” as the traditional mother (185), creating a portrayal of motherhood that is still present in modern times.

Because motherhood was becoming professionalised during the Victorian era, childhood subsequently became a more important and focused stage in life at the turn of the century (Bassin et al., 5), a stage of life that had almost not been given any importance previously. This paved the way for the early volition to standardise child rearing among mothers so as to avoid ignorance regarding the way they brought up their children, which would continue to expand throughout the twentieth century. According to Estelle Bassin et al., a motherhood movement founded by mothers began with a “child study society” in 1888 with the purpose of discussing complexities that arose with the professionalisation of motherhood (5; Eyer 46). However, with the successful development of the movement, mothers were also progressively scrutinised since the first scientific guidelines on how to rear children were now in progress.

The problem with the professionalisation of motherhood was that it became easier to blame the mother for mistakes and wrongdoings. As with any other profession, when a problem occurs with a product or an idea, the common logic might be to identify the source or cause of the problem, which in the case of child rearing would be the mother. She is responsible of the child and it is her duty to “mould” the child into an individual who functions in society in every aspect. However, should the child’s nature significantly deviate from the norm – as is the case with the novels studied in this essay – the mother will probably fail at her profession despite her efforts. Moreover, Bassin et al. state that male experts had begun to dominate the movement and by the 1930s the focus had

completely shifted from the child to the mother's influence on the child's outcome (5). Due to this new ideology of motherhood, decades of increasing scrutiny were to follow.

Motherhood as a profession became more complex due to the rise of scientific thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which led to the "scientific" mother (Thurer 225). Thurer believes that the scientific mother felt obliged to use the expertise regarding child rearing that had developed since the rise of child studies and the new works by Sigmund Freud and John B. Watson in the field of psychology (226). Instead of relying on her own instincts regarding motherhood, the scientific mother "employed thermometers, formulas, milestone charts, and schedules, and they consulted numerous treatises on appropriate courses of action in their endeavours" (226). Thurer further mentions that scientific motherhood was established because of a then rapidly increasing wish among mothers to restructure and standardise child rearing (226; Eyer 48). By standardising child rearing, the mother did not have ultimate responsibility since the only right way of child rearing was agreed upon. The mother could therefore avoid eventual blame by following the set guidelines. Moreover, when mothers did not take child rearing as seriously as any other profession or when they did not apply the new ways of mothering correctly, a sense of inadequacy arose. This was the beginning of the mothers' sensations of guilt, because they opposed the scientifically right way of mothering.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the American Psychologist Arnold Gesell was mapping out the development of "normal" children, which created anxiety among the parents whose volition was to fit their children "into the pattern" seamlessly (Thurer 234-235; Eyer 49). When the child or the child's development was not considered normal according to psychologists and doctors, the anxiety supposedly increased because the parents might have felt targeted by the experts. The mother, in particular, might have felt guilty and felt like a target of blame since there were explicit guidelines on how to rear children and criteria of normality in children, which created an assumed infallible procedure of child rearing. The guilt and the blame were therefore a result of having seemingly "failed" as a mother, without taking into consideration possible disabilities or pathologies that reside within the child that might even be oblivious to the mother. Due to

the field of child studies that had developed through the years and the new ways of child rearing, the mother was increasingly targeted, which were to have its heyday in the middle of the century.

With the increase of child rearing manuals in the mid-twentieth century, the ideal mother was not only supposed to have the main responsibility for child rearing, “she was [also] supposed to find her own fulfilment in raising them,” and to not feel fulfilled was, as a result, a sign of her being abnormal (Thurer 246, 256). According to Thurer, not even the traditionalised and motherly Victorian Queen found fulfilment in raising her nine children. In a letter to her daughter, Queen Victoria wrote: “[childbearing] is indeed hard and dreadful” (qtd in Thurer 216). Diane Eyer endorses that the bestselling child rearing manual *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) by paediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock increased the pressure on the mother by erasing the notion of “bad” children, thereby attributing it mainly to the mother instead (6). Moreover, E. Wayne Carp adds that Spock’s influential book “shifted reliance from a network of women to dependence on male doctors, and undermined mothers’ self-confidence with feelings of worry and guilt” (128), as will be elaborated presently in relation to the novels. According to Thurer, Spock’s book was followed by a media blitz of television programs, advice columns, videos and magazines (260). Accordingly, as Eyer puts it, mass media idealised family-life (55). These media discourses told mothers what to do, which amplified the feelings of inadequacy:

[Media] inadvertently heightened mother’s [sic] sense of inadequacy, not only because of the sheer impossibility of completing the assigned tasks (and being fulfilled, no less!), but also because modern writers insistently reminded mother, directly or indirectly, of the portentousness of her responsibility. (Thurer 260)

Because the mother had sole responsibility for her children’s outcome, she was (and still is to some extent) automatically blamed for everything (270).

Media such as television programs, advice columns, videos and magazines have contributed a great deal to the reoccurring pattern of mother-blame. Looking through some of the many advertisements for different products and foods from the mid-twentieth

century in the United States and the United Kingdom that were directed to both men and women, it is noticeable that women are depicted in an exemplary way (*The Advertising Archives*). Happy mothers, sweet children and loving husbands dominate the scene. Douglas et al. note that even though representations of motherhood in media have changed through time, mothers have remained the scapegoats of society, apart from a short period of time in the 1970s when media showed leniency toward mothers (7). Additionally, Douglas et al. observe that the focus on maternity increased significantly in the 1980s: “Motherhood became one of the biggest media obsessions of the last three decades, exploding especially in the mid-1980s and continuing unabated to the present” (7). This contrast of the media’s focus on mothers is interesting in relation to the novels, because *The Fifth Child* is set mainly in the 1970s and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is set in the 1980s and 1990s.

To explain how much of an impact mass media actually has on these mothers, a brief discussion of a specific Marxist theory on interpellation is necessary. According to Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser, a culture’s ideology informs us of our possibilities and impossibilities, but it also informs us of our identity. Moreover, Althusser’s concept of interpellation suggests a “process whereby a culture creates a space that a ‘subject’ then fills” (Lynn 151). Media is, according to Althusser, “hailing” or “calling” the subject, which in this case would be the mother, imposing an identity through the dominant ideology (Lynn 151). E. Ann Kaplan contributes to the theory by claiming that “[d]ominant institutions demand certain kinds of subjects at specific historical moments, and these institutions produce discourses that in turn produce the needed kinds of subjects” (257). This means that the hailing and calling of the mother as a subject influence her differently according to the time-period that she lives in. What is interesting, then, is that media would have had a different influence on Harriet in the 1960s and 1970s, and Eva in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

Interpellation also explains how the depiction of motherhood at the time possibly could have enhanced blame and guilt. When the subject (the mother) is registering the surreal version of a mother in advertising and magazines she may chose to strive for the “ideal”, or only to notice the absence of the “ideal”. As a result, she has a conscious or



unconscious idea of how the ideal mother should be, and could therefore feel guilt and be blamed when she does not live up to the expectations imposed by Western culture. However, she can chose to deny the subject position, but she is nevertheless responding to the “hailing” and “calling,” noticing the lacuna that she is supposed to complement (Lynn 151).

The development of the traditional mother through experts, manuals and mass media grew into the concept of the “supermom” in the 1970s and the 1980s (Eyer 8), representing the mother in modern society. “Supermom” is supposed to do everything that the Victorian Mother did, and in addition work full-time. Looking at a definition of supermom from the *OED*, it is safe to assume that the pressure on mothers has increased since the Victorian era and the mid-twentieth century: “supermom, n: An exemplary or idealized mother; *spec.* one who successfully manages a home, brings up children, and has a full-time career.” According to Laura Mattoon d’Amore, the notion of supermom derives from the idea of the superheroine, because of characteristics such as independence and strength. Mattoon d’Amore also writes that the construction of supermom, the working mother, was a result of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, which exerted awareness about women’s capacities, namely that women can do it all (1226). This mentality is presumably a strong contributor to the sense of guilt that Harriet and Eva experience when they do not live up to the expectations that they should be able to do it all. However, Harriet does reject the supermom creation by being a stay-at-home mother. Eva seemingly matches all the characteristics of the modern supermom, but fails in that she does not manage the requirements successfully. Interestingly, the definitions of supermom do not involve how the mother should feel, only what actions she is supposed to take, unlike the older notion that mothers should feel fulfilled to be ideal. Evidently, Harriet and Eva can strive to be supermoms, but they are nevertheless human, having human flaws, making human mistakes, which will be further discussed.

## **Mother-Blame and Societal Influence**

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva seeks to prevent the possible complications with her unborn child that could, and will, conflict with the happy family picture. Because of the fear of mothering an abnormal child Eva has an amniocentesis against her husband's will. She thinks that if it is not a healthy child, she will just throw the fish back in the water and have another try. With the amniocentesis, Eva has the possibility to know beforehand if the baby will have a certain kind of visible disability. This service provides her with the choice to not mother a child with disabilities, which she states that she does not want: "My approach to parenthood was conditional, and the conditions were strict. I did not want to mother an imbecile or a paraplegic" (72). However, as Eva points out, malice is not discoverable through amniocentesis, and she insinuates that she would have aborted Kevin had she known about his socio-pathology (73), thus avoiding a life of blame and guilt. Shriver draws on real-life predicaments in her novel, predicaments that are discussed 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" (203), which is one of many answers to why Harriet and Eva are central points of attention.

Harriet and Eva are the ones who seek and take primary responsibility to get their sons diagnosed, because with a diagnosis the responsibility is shifted from mother to child, meaning that the hypothetical problem is attributed to the child's nature and not to the mother's nurture. Blum proves that "family research remains focused on those whose children have traditional, visible disabilities such as cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, or intellectual disability – all with (relatively) objective markers and biological reality" (203). This is clearly depicted in *The Fifth Child* in the doctors' lack of interest in helping Harriet to find out what is wrong with Ben since they cannot fathom his disability, but also because it is not a centred disability for research as Blum points out. This serves as an explanation to why Harriet does not get any help when she consults Dr Brett and Dr Gilly. Instead, the doctors are explicitly blaming Harriet and ignoring Ben's nature: "[Dr. Brett] said, [i]t is not abnormal to take a dislike to a child. I see it all the time. Unfortunately" (Lessing 67). Although Dr Brett clearly notices how Ben differs from other children, he

stigmatises Harriet instead. Harriet also consults Dr Gilly who provides her with a similar theory: “I’m going to come straight to the point, Mrs Lovatt. The problem is not with Ben, but with you. You don’t like him very much” (124). Dr Gilly, as Dr Brett, is clearly registering Ben’s abnormalities, which she disregards, and rather judges Harriet instead. Likewise, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva does not get any help in diagnosing Kevin when she consults different doctors. The doctors in the novels antagonise Harriet and Eva because they are the experts and therefore the authority in the medical field. Additionally, Harriet and Eva have little knowledge of their own and are therefore easily blamed by the authoritarian experts. Concluding, it can be seen from the analysis that authority and expertise coincide with blame.

Also noticeable is that the action of blaming seemingly involves a sense of power. The blamer might have the impression of being a better person than the one exposed to the reproach. This is a perilous situation since it implicates an authoritarian behaviour in civilians. Eva’s community is, for example, perpetually blaming her for Kevin’s action at his high school to the point of her isolating herself from the public. At several instances she is confronted in menacing ways. For example, neighbours in the community throw red paint at her house. In like manner, Eva is also confronted in a violent way when a mother of one of Kevin’s victims slaps Eva when passing her in the street. These actions emphasise the fact that blame enhances the power to oppress Eva by verbally, and rather exceptionally, physically hurting her. However, the power to blame also satiates the need for her community to hold someone present accountable, since Kevin is absent.

Another key point is that Eva is held accountable for her son’s action in the court of law. Eva’s attorney Harvey, who is supposed to defend her, insists that she assumes the responsibility for Kevin’s crime, and accepts the reputation of her being a bad mother: “He [Harvey] commanded me [Eva] to stop dithering about how it looked, accepting a reputation as a Bad Mother, and he clearly couldn’t have cared less about whether I really was a bad mother” (69). “Bad Mother,” is emphasised in this sentence, as if it were a fixed term for a cultural phenomenon. The general conception is that maternity works cohesively together with nature, meaning that maternity is seen as natural and therefore normal. According to Gerda Neyer et al., problems occur when motherhood is framed as

natural because it entails an association with natural love (165). Thus, when Eva is not being motherly or “natural,” she is not being normal. This leads to the assumption that she is a bad mother, and therefore also blameworthy. Maternity may be a part of nature; however, to feel motherly should not be associated with neither nature nor normalcy since it is fairly impossible to control what one feels, which will be further elaborated.

The perceptions regarding motherhood are rooted in the oppression of the mother’s intuition, and the resulting interference of the experts, which can be seen in the novels. At several instances, Harriet’s and Eva’s intuition is undermined due to the social construction of maternity and its empowering influence on the characters. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, when Eva is pregnant with Kevin, Franklin antagonises her for not doing what the experts of child rearing suggest. He is the one “powering through all those parental how-tos, about breathing and teething and weaning” (Shriver 64). Accordingly, he fails to listen to Eva, who is not putting the foetus at risk at any given moment, and scolds her for minor deviations from the experts’ guidelines. For example, when Eva is listening to music and dancing during her pregnancy, Franklin intervenes:

‘There’s no reason you can’t listen to music—although at a volume that doesn’t have John thumping his ceiling downstairs.’ You replaced the needle ... turning it down so low that David Byrne sounded like Minnie Mouse. ‘But like a normal pregnant woman, you can sit there and *tap your foot*’. (64)

Firstly, Franklin dominates Eva’s actions because he considers himself the expert because of having read the numerous manuals that dictate what a mother should and should not do. Secondly, he insists on Eva being “like a normal pregnant woman”, which refers back to the previous argument on how not being natural and normal is considered comparable to being a bad mother. Then, according to the experts, Eva during the pregnancy is already being a bad mother, which Franklin underlines. Because she is lively and active and not behaving as a pregnant woman ought to, Franklin conceives her as inconsiderate toward their unborn child, putting the foetus at risk by dancing.

Contrastively, in *The Fifth Child*, Harriet and David are more traditional in that they do not appear to consult child-rearing manuals. Instead, they concentrate on the

traditional values of how family life should be according to the ideology of Western culture. For this reason, David blames Harriet for not living up to the expectations of being the traditional happy wife during her pregnancy: “Harriet was weeping again, and he felt, knowing of course this was unfair, that she was breaking the rules of some contract between them: tears and misery had not ever been on their agenda! She felt rejected by him” (45). David feels that Harriet is breaking the rules because of his derived conception of maternity, which excludes reality. Hardship and negative factors such as tears and misery regarding motherhood are scantily depicted in Western societies, which render a false image that is not realistic. To emphasise the issue that Lessing draws on, Ruth Robbins asserts, “there are many gaps between the ideal of maternity as it is represented in our culture, and the actual experience of the maternal as a process” (92). This gap between the ideal and the realistic is so distant to Harriet and David that reality comes as a shock to them when they rather harshly discover the dark side of the happy family ideal and the exemplary mother, which, as mentioned, is present in the collective psyche because of society’s influence.

Drawing parallels between reality and fiction, the ideology of motherhood is also one of the reasons for Eva being scrutinised to a larger extent than Harriet. Because Eva is a working mother, she opposes the idea that good mothers should stay at home and tend to their child’s every need, as in the case of Harriet. But also because Eva becomes a mother in the late 1980s when, as stated, motherhood became increasingly focused in media, unlike Harriet who has her children during the 1970s when the media showed less interest in motherhood. Moreover, motherhood seems somewhat extolled in the United States as opposed to the United Kingdom. This is firstly because of the rather American term “supermom”, and secondly because of the conception of a collective mother-identity, which seems more common in the United States. Additionally, Judith Warner confirms that “[b]ritish mums may not indulge in quite as many emotional flights of fancy as American mothers do. They don’t so much seem to bond and find collective identity in what’s called, in America, ‘Being a Mom’” (4,5). Eva is Armenian, but she does live in the American society and is therefore included in the mother-centralisation. As a result, she is focused and blamed by society in larger measure than British Harriet.

The general notion of acceptable feelings regarding motherhood is brought to attention in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Eva experiences sensations that could be, voiced or unvoiced, perceived as nonmaternal by society and the experts in the child-rearing field. Considering how Franklin, especially, reacts to Eva's feelings and thoughts on motherhood, he makes her feelings and thoughts seem almost forbidden. For example, when Eva articulates that she would have reconsidered becoming a mother had she known how it would be, Franklin is infuriated: "'Don't you *ever say that*,' you said, your face beet-red. 'It's too late for second thoughts. *Never, ever* tell me that you regret our own kid'" (64). Evidently, it is impossible to control feelings and thoughts, which Eva should have the ability to communicate to Franklin, since they are common, and not necessarily a sign of bad mothering. John Deigh points out the complication that Shriver describes by claiming 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). This means that there are requirements imposed from a corner in society of how Eva, for instance, is supposed to feel about her husband and her children to satisfy the norm. This can be related to the mid-twentieth century manuals on how mothers should feel fulfilled in their role. Thus, when Eva fails to have the "right" emotions, she is more or less doomed to the title of Bad Mother.

## **Mother-Blame Within the Family**

With the previous discussion in mind, Eva voices her feelings when she thinks that she is alone with Kevin, feelings that alarm Franklin. Instead of trying to understand the emotions and thoughts that Eva is experiencing, he judges her:

I [Eva] was careful to use the insipid falsetto the experts commend. 'Mummy was happy before widdle [sic] Kevin came awong [sic], 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 you screech for one more minute there are some days that Mummy would jump off the Brooklyn Bridge— ' I turned, and blanched. I may never have seen quite that stony look on your face. (Shriver 105-106)

This quote is a clear representation of reasonable feelings that may occur when reality involving hardship and fatigue interfere with the idealisation of motherhood. Because Eva is not being typically motherly, Franklin does not cease to criticise her. He has his mind set on what kind of mother he wants Eva to be, and does not take into consideration that she did not want to be a mother in the first place. Moreover, he does not respect her individuality, which she is afraid of losing due to motherhood. As a result, Franklin does not let Eva mother in her own way, which might be the only way for her to mother and connect with Kevin, leading her to question herself and increasing the distance between her and Franklin.

Franklin desires the happy family dream, but, as mentioned, he does not take into consideration the fact that Eva would not fit into the pattern. O'Reilly advocates that "feminist women can consciously choose ways of mothering that move outside or beyond the narrow confines and demands of patriarchal motherhood" (Kawash 978). Franklin does not want Eva to experiment with motherhood; he wants the traditional mother for his children. He even states on one occasion that he does not want Eva to turn the tables on him (Shriver 59), meaning that he agrees with Eva, but still wants a traditional family life. So, when Eva is trying to bond with Kevin in her own way, Franklin blames her for being cold. Eva does have healthy "feminist" values such as her volition to share work, economy and child rearing equally between her and Franklin, which create a tension between them. This is due to the fact that Franklin has the traditional values of motherhood and family life that he has; thus, he cannot accept Eva's view on motherhood, and reacts to it by blaming her.

"Blame is more like holding an opinion than expressing it" (Squires 56). Blame can be regarded as a form of punishment, and that is how Harriet in *The Fifth Child* interprets the blame that is directed to her. However, blame, as Squires points out, can be implicitly directed in a way that is not obvious. For example, Harriet feels blamed by her

family without them necessarily articulating the blame, but rather they do it through gestures. At several moments in the novel, she feels blamed because of how David's breath changes, how the family members look at her in a particular way, or how she can hear the blame in the tone of someone's voice: "She [Harriet] knew when they had seen him [Ben], because of the way they looked at her afterwards. As if I were a criminal! she raged to herself" (Lessing 74). Interestingly, Harriet is actually using the word "criminal," which logically relates to punishment. However, the tables turn when Harriet decides to bring back Ben from the institution. Because of Harriet's action, the family is no longer "holding an opinion," but actually accusing her verbally of destroying the family. More and more the family sympathises with David, while referring to Harriet as "irresponsible," "selfish" and "crazy" (40).

Furthermore, because of Harriet's initial attitude toward family life and motherhood, and her aspiration to be a good mother, her family consistently question her. In accordance, Samira Kawash claims:

'[b]ad' mothers expose the dark underside of an essentialist view of motherhood: if mother-love and self-sacrifice are natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one's own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous. (983)

When Harriet, who is normally the loving mother, snaps at the children, the family look at each other judgmentally. She does not display any mother-love toward Ben before the other family members understand that there is a problem with him. These are reasons for the family blaming Harriet, which will be discussed presently. However, the reality is that a mother may snap, feel anger, or struggle to love her child, which Lessing displays.

In the novels, Harriet's and Eva's sanity is doubted as a result of their not behaving as mothers ought to. Franklin reproaches Eva for every concern or feeling she expresses concerning Kevin, but also for her personality and how she handles Kevin; everything that Eva does seems to be at fault. For example, he blames her for Kevin not wanting to breastfeed, for thinking the worst of Kevin, for consuming alcohol when they are trying to get pregnant, and eventually for the second child Celia's accident, in which Celia loses her



eye. However, what is mostly odd is that Franklin does not have any confidence in her, and her serious suggestions about Kevin being different. He is so consumed by the idea of a happy family that he is in denial about Kevin's problems and refuses to listen to Eva, with whom he had honest and reliable communications before the conception of Kevin. Accordingly, Franklin begins to doubt Eva's sanity, and instead of trusting her, he suggests that she seeks help: "You know I'm not usually big on shrinks. But maybe you should talk to somebody. I think you need help. That's not an accusation" (Shriver 292). Franklin's way of undermining and oppressing Eva's intuition and reason stem from traditional patriarchal motherhood, in which the society or the father's conception of motherhood is regarded as accurate. This results in a misplaced questioning of Eva's sanity, which is also the case for Harriet in *The Fifth Child*, who is referred to as crazy. David expresses his dislike of Harriet's "hysterical thinking" (29) before the birth of Ben. Then, after Ben's birth, she is afraid of revealing her concerns about Ben, given the risk of being accused of hysteria (59). Furthermore, as Ben becomes older, David's disparaging remarks about Harriet deteriorate; he exclaims that she "exaggerate[s] everything" (74), that the family need to be "firm" (90) with her, and he stays at home from work so "as to 'handle' her" (92). These examples, then, can be related to the phenomenon that is well rooted in the antiquated patriarchal perception of women as hysterical and mad.

Isolation is the result of blame and guilt, especially when it is directed from the family who are supposed to be supportive. Harriet's isolation from the family is rooted in the fact that she opposes them by insisting on Ben's rightful place in the family, whereas Eva's solitude is due to the fact that Kevin displays his true colours only to her and not to Franklin. Estranged from the family, Eva decorates a room of her own with maps of countries and places she has travelled to, which Kevin deliberately destroys. Later, when incarcerated, Kevin asks her why she kept them up: "I kept them up for my sanity,' I said. 'I needed to see something you'd done to me, to reach out and touch it. To prove that your malice wasn't all in my head'" (Shriver 174). Because Franklin does not trust and support Eva, she is isolated to the point of questioning her own sanity. Also, because Franklin blames Eva instead of listening to her, which results in his death, Eva is to spend the rest of her life in isolation and guilt.

A great deal of the blame is rooted in misconception as demonstrated, but also in non-communication. For example, Denis Landry proposes that Harriet suffers from postpartum depression, which, supposedly, began already after the birth of Helen (11). As her suggested condition is not diagnosed in the novel, she does not obtain the professional help that she needs, which results in the family misunderstanding her, and thus blaming her unjustifiably. However, it is plausible that the family is not so much blaming her for Ben as they are reacting to her change after every pregnancy. For example, when Ben is born, Harriet instantly takes a dislike to him, supposedly due to the hard pregnancy. Nevertheless, David tries to accept baby-Ben, to the point of defending him when Harriet voices her dislike toward the new-born: “‘Neanderthal baby,’ said Harriet. ‘Oh come on, poor little chap,’ said David, uneasy. ‘Oh God, David,’ said Harriet, ‘poor Harriet is more like it’” (Lessing 65). Harriet seems assured that the family blame her for Ben, when, on the contrary, they seem to blame her for the change that she is enduring along with the pregnancies, which would correspond with Landry’s statement. So the theory proposed here is that Harriet is certainly being blamed by her family, but not for Ben, as she thinks. It is instead her misplaced guilt that is the true problem in creating the distance between her and her children and husband. However, when she brings Ben back from the institution, she is blamed for the action of bringing him back into their family, and by doing so, destroying what was left of it:

She said, ‘He would have been dead in a few months. Weeks, probably.’ She said, ‘I couldn’t stand it.’ He said deliberately, ‘I thought that was the idea.’ She cried out, ‘Yes, but you didn’t see it, you didn’t see – !’ ‘I was careful *not* to see,’ he said. ‘What did you suppose was going to happen? That they were going to turn him into some well-adjusted member of society and then everything would be lovely?’ (105-106)

Harriet acts out of motherly instinct, protecting Ben by bringing him home, but does not receive any support from the family for doing so. She is instead antagonised, which leads to her isolation from the family.

Nonetheless, it is important to examine the accountability of the blame that Harriet and Eva are exposed to. Harriet, for example, takes anti-anxiety drugs during her

pregnancy, which is not seen as a loving and motherly act. Furthermore, she continues to drug Ben after having brought him home from the institution. Blum describes how taking prescription drugs is seen as unmotherly, and this might in part explain the resulting blame that is attributed to Harriet: “Mother-valor and mother-blame become mirror images when, on one hand, mothers who drug their children are monstrous, unnatural, and selfish, nearly as bad as those who drug their unborn babies” (222). The statement depicts a possible reason for the family blaming Harriet. Since the narrative is from her point of view, we cannot fully rely on how much she knows about the knowledge of the family. For example, she might think that the others in the family do not know how many drugs she actually takes when she is pregnant with Ben, which is stated in the narrative: “Now, afraid of asking Dr Brett, she begged tranquilizers from friends, and from her sisters. She did not tell David how many she was taking” (Lessing 49). However, it is plausible that David and the rest of the family know about Harriet’s medication, given the search for sedatives among family and friends, resulting in the family blaming her for Ben’s issues.

Comparatively, Eva’s reactions and behaviour occasionally cause Franklin to reproach her justifiably. For instance, Eva slaps Kevin in a restaurant because he is noisy. Also, she does not feel any remorse for the action since she is convinced that he is deliberately acting out:

I slapped him. It wasn’t very hard. He looked happy. ‘Franklin, he was getting louder. People were starting to look over.’ Now Kevin started to wail. His tears were a bit late, in my view. I wasn’t moved. I left him to it. ‘They’re looking over because you hit him,’ ... ‘[i]t’s not done anymore, Eva. Not here. I think they’ve passed a law or something. Or they might as well have. It’s considered assault.’ ‘There’s a consensus—that violence is no way to get your point across. Which it sure as heck isn’t. I don’t want you to do that again, Eva. *Ever.*’ So: I slap Kevin. You slap me. I got the picture. (Shriver 128)

It is important to emphasise that Kevin’s character is exceedingly inconsistent. Franklin never sees the other side of Kevin that Eva does. Kevin is after all a sociopath, but the narrative does not confirm whether his pathology is a result of Eva’s mothering or simply

in his nature. Nevertheless, Franklin is entitled to reproach Eva in this situation because the laws on corporal punishment support him.

Moreover, due to the pressure on mothers to raise flawless children, it is insinuated that Eva is highly perceptive of the other restaurant guests' opinion of her mothering. Douglas et al. argue that "motherhood has become a psychological police state. [E]veryone watches us [the mothers]" (6), ready to judge and to intervene. On the one hand, Eva is judged when Kevin screeches uncontrollably, and she is trying to calm him down verbally. On the other hand, she is judged when she physically punishes him in desperation to cease the disturbance forced on the other guests. Evidently, the situation is unsolvable in the matter of pleasing everyone present, which leaves her with the sole option to leave the public area. This situation is a contributing factor to Eva's choice in distancing herself from the society in order to escape the psychological police state, which eventually leads to her absolute isolation.

## **Self-Blame and Guilt**

Guilt can be seen as a result of the blame attributed to the mothers, whereas self-blame seems to be linked with culpability, meaning that the mothers feel that they deserve the blame attributed to them and the resulting guilt. As mentioned, Eva blames herself to a larger extent than Harriet, who instead experiences sensations of guilt. Deigh explains that guilt can be described as moral. Moral guilt can be a wish for another's death or misfortune; nevertheless, this feeling of guilt is rational even though the person has done nothing wrong (315). For example, a mother takes care of her infant who is sick and will not cease crying loudly. The mother is devastated and worn out, wishing for the baby's silence. Then, for five short seconds, she visualises herself leaving the baby and the home altogether, or maybe even something as severe as suffocating the baby's cries with a pillow. The mother does not act on the visualisation, but feels guilty for just having thought about it.

To demonstrate, in *The Fifth Child*, Harriet experiences moral guilt on two occasions. On the first occasion, Ben is standing in the open window in the baby room where he could fall out at any moment, and Harriet thinks to herself: “What a pity I came in ... and refused to be shocked by herself” (73). On the second occasion Harriet is running after Ben in the streets: “She was weeping, panting, half-crazed, desperate to get to him before something terrible happened, but she was praying, Oh, do run him over, do, yes, *please...*” (77). Harriet does not do anything wrong even though she wishes for the death of Ben. However, her guilt is clear in the latter example where Harriet is described as half-crazed and desperate to get to her son. On the one hand, in the former example, she refuses “to be shocked at herself,” which could be interpreted as her not feeling any guilt for her comment. On the other hand, she is probably shocked at herself and does experience moral guilt, which is probably why she refuses to be shocked at her feelings, to make them less severe. Harriet’s feeling can be described with the help of Deigh’s theory as her recognising the hatefulness in the thought and therefore experiencing feelings of guilt as a result (319).

Eva is considerably more self-aware than Harriet, which, instead of guilt, increases her self-blame. She recognises her contribution to the way Kevin turns out, and states on several occasions that she was not a good mother, even a “rotten mother” (Shriver 165, 250). One explanation to Eva’s severe self-blame is Franklin, and Kevin’s high school victims’ mothers’ reproach. Blum uses Singh’s investigation of thirty-nine New England mothers in order to fathom the self-blame which “revealed that tendencies for self-blame were encouraged or reinforced by husbands and other mothers” (205). The statement can be used in relation to the novels to show that self-blame is reinforced firstly by Franklin who reproaches Eva more severely than David does with Harriet. Secondly, the unrelenting blame from the other mothers in Eva’s community contributes largely to Eva’s self-blame. Another explanation is the fact that Eva is extraordinarily ambitious and is used to success, unlike Harriet who seems more fragile. William Neblett states, “self-esteem and self-respect can be *deficient* and are often allied with the ability to feel guilt excessively (and even obsessively)” (659). On the contrary, Eva is the typical example of a person with high self-esteem and self-respect, which, additionally, serves as an argument

to why she blames herself to a larger extent than Harriet instead of feeling mainly guilt as the latter.

What is more, Harriet and Eva experience pangs of guilt when their children are exposed to danger. However little they seem to care for Ben and Kevin, they protect their children. Harriet, for example, forces her way into the institution where Ben is being held, and disregards the authorities' instructions not to enter and not to bring him home. Correspondingly, Eva protects Kevin although she struggles to love him:

When you're the parent, no matter what the accident, no matter how far away you were at the time and how seemingly powerless to avert it, a child's misfortune feels like your fault. You're all your kids have, and their own conviction that you will protect them is contagious. So in case you expect, Franklin, that I'm simply setting about one more time to deny culpability, to the contrary. Broadly, it still feels like my fault, and broadly, it felt like my fault at the time. (Shriver 285)

In this case, it is probable that Eva protects Kevin out of guilt for the way he has turned out as an individual. Through the entire novel, Eva assumes responsibility and blames herself for Kevin, which is partially a result of feeling guilty. Even after Kevin kills Franklin and Celia, who Eva loves more than anything, she visits Kevin every week in his confinement. Moreover, she prepares a room for him in her home for when Kevin will be discharged. Given these points, it can be concluded that these are actions of guilt for supposedly being a bad mother, but also the guilt of a possible scenario of abandoning Kevin.

Harriet and Eva experience sensations of guilt on different grounds. As discussed, Harriet feels guilt when she does not live up to the unattainable expectations. This means that she does not only feel guilt for Ben, as Eva feels guilt for only Kevin, but also because she does not live up to the perfect mother picture. According to Deigh, “[g]uilt is the appropriate feeling one experiences in response to one’s having ignored these requirements, broken these rules, disobeyed these dictates, etc.” (314). Harriet is under the impression she has opposed the “rules” of family life and the requirements of motherhood, and is thus feeling guilt. On the contrary, Eva blames herself for following the rules of parenting: “I have no end of failings as a mother, but I have always followed

the rules. If anything, following the letter of the unwritten parental law was one of my failings” (Shriver 39). In other words, Eva rues that she did not impose her intuition regarding Kevin. The problem originates from the standardisation of child rearing, which was intended to serve as a method of avoiding mother-blame, not contribute to it.

Another form of guilt is rooted in the post-war and modern conception of the omnipotent mother. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva is supposed to take care of the children while working full-time, resulting in guilt when she is working and guilt when she is not, creating a strong ambivalence to the working mother versus the stay-at-home mother aspect: “I was once more working a little late. The new arrangement with Robert [the babysitter] made me feel less guilty for putting in an extra hour” (286). On the contrary, Harriet chooses to stay at home due to her traditional values, contradicting the “supermom” phenomenon. Nevertheless, she procures sensations of guilt for not having enough time for all of the children, and for the fact that David is exhausted, being the sole provider of the family, when Harriet is capable and qualified to work as well. With this in mind, it seems as if guilt and self-blame are present both in conventional and modern motherhood.

As noted, it is only Harriet and Eva who blame themselves for their children’s issues. Evidently, Franklin remains oblivious to Kevin’s issues until his death and can therefore not blame himself, for Kevin at least. However, David is aware of Ben’s abnormality, but does not present emotions of guilt or self-blame. Deigh explains that for the feeling of guilt to occur, there must be a “bond” or a “connection” between, in this case, the mother or the father and the son. Harriet, as she states, is “full of guilt as usual” (Lessing 85), and Eva is severely punishing herself for Kevin’s outcome: “I’m determined to accept due responsibility for every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish moment ... *this* is my fault” (Shriver 71). These examples serve as an argument that whatever non-maternal thoughts, feelings and actions Harriet and Eva might experience, they still have a bond to the children, or else the feeling of guilt would not present itself. This would also explain why David is indifferent toward Ben; he has not created a bond with Ben and can therefore not feel guilt.

## Conclusion

This essay has aimed to clarify the underlying causes to why the mothers in *The Fifth Child* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* are perceived as blameworthy by the society, their families and themselves. The mother-blame and mother-guilt depicted in these novels respectively reflect society's construction of the ideal mother. The characters, mainly the fathers, have a rather good notion of what a good mother should be like, and this notion is not a memory from the Victorian era; it is based on influences from society and the collective conception of an ideal mother. This is one of many reasons to why Harriet and Eva are depicted as scapegoats by society and their families; they do not live up to the implicit expectations imposed on them and are therefore blamed and guilt-ridden.

Another cause is the mass media, doctors, and child rearing experts that function as effective influences in Western society, and their amplifying of the ideal mother contributes to the blame attributed to the mothers in these novels. The influence these experts exert on the mothers and the fathers is palpable. Harriet's and Eva's judgement and intuition are to a great extent subdued due to child rearing manuals and doctors dictating shoulds and musts, which they do listen to, and resultantly their mental health is questioned.

The blame attributed to Harriet and Eva varies in severity due to different societal reasons. Firstly, the idealisation of motherhood is more centralised in the United States than in the United Kingdom. Secondly, Eva is openly depicted as a bad mother because of the severe crime committed by Kevin, whereas Harriet is "only" targeted by her family and doctors. Thirdly, it can be deciphered from the novels that working mothers are somewhat neglecting their children. Finally, the different decades in which the novels are set seem to be prominent to the difference of attributed blame.

In conclusion, mother-blame and mother-guilt in *The Fifth Child* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* are built on society's values. The essence of these societal values is rooted in the conception of motherhood as natural. More precisely, these values exist



because of biological reasons, namely that biologically only women can give birth, and it should therefore be natural to want to mother and feel motherly, which is a notion that does not always correspond to reality. Because Harriet and Eva are not motherly, they are perceived as abnormal by society, their families, and even themselves, which is why they become blameable. As long as motherhood is seen as natural and normal, mothers will never be free of the related blame and guilt, regardless if they choose to be a traditional stay-at-home mother as Harriet or a contemporary working mother as Eva.

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