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THE NARRATIVE OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of mass shootings—particularly in schools—leading to a correlated upsurge in related reporting by mass media. This level of violence and the subsequent coverage have become common to the American public, though many scholars criticize the media’s presence and bias in the process. Literary authors have also begun sharing their perspectives on the topics. Writers such as Jodi Picoult of *Nineteen Minutes* include a number of characters in their works to explore the contexts that could lead to school shootings. Further, Lionel Shriver, author of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, explores how the presentations of these narratives fail to show the public audience all of the facts and elements. While novelized literature contributes to the necessary, national discussion about school shootings, they also leave aspects untouched.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iii

Introduction Criticisms of the Media ..... 1

Chapter 1 *Nineteen Minutes* ..... 7

Chapter 2 *We Need to Talk About Kevin* ..... 31

Conclusion ..... 49

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 52

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## **Introduction**

### **Criticisms of the Media**

On April 20, 1999 two students executed a mass shooting at Columbine High School; since then, American culture has been saturated with words trying to explain and make sense of this event and those like it. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' school shooting at Columbine High School and the ensuing news coverage set the precedent for the media's approach to these tragedies. This overexposure and constant coverage cause a misconstrued acceptance of a simple narrative, as condemned by many modern media critics; however, recent years have seen an increase in fictional literature about school shootings. Does the up-and-coming genre add to the problematic view of tragedies as uncomplicated or do they offer a complex examination of a society that accepts it?

The narrative put forth by the media follows a basic path, reminiscent of a fairy tale. A villain—here two high school students—targets a specific area—Columbine High School—and causes chaos. Devastation ensues, but a hero, typically a police officer, defeats the villain. The community mourns, but moves forward until the next tragedy occurs. The problematic nature of this narrative lies in its simplicity; every character becomes an archetype. The media shares a sense of relief with the common suicide or “suicide by cop” that often ends the tragedy. They focus on unnecessary details of the perpetrator's life while consistently reminding the viewer that this person was a monster. By ignoring the greater complexities of real life, people easily neglect the foundational problems that led to the situation. If the public cannot recognize all aspects of these events, they can never understand and possibly prevent similar situations from

occurring. Journalists and their readers crave information, but never seek to complicate their view or find a different perspective.

Media and popular literature often dictate the trends of public opinion and modern culture, especially in the United States; however, news reports and novels consistently differ in their perception of justice during shootings. Reporters fail to consider the humanity of the perpetrator and his family, instead placing blame and hatred on these individuals. Novelists tend to consider all players—victims, criminals, and bystanders—as people with complex stories. Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* follow the aftermath of school shootings. Popular literature and media are marketed to the same general American population. Readers can then compare the trial of Picoult's Peter Houghton and Shriver's Kevin Plaskett to the outcomes of real American shooters such as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Nevertheless, both forms of work capitalize on fatal tragedies. Journalists and authors stand to make a profit by writing about gruesome events; however, the public consistently consumes what they are presented. The production and the intake of both reports and novels about school shootings are problematic, but adding a level of complexity could mitigate this burden. The general public's obsession with the topic and the benefits reaped by authors and journalists suggests the ongoing cycle of infamous violence. If the works focused on complicating the simple narrative and suggesting other viewpoints, people can better address how certain factors and situations may lead to shootings. While the public can never find a single, exact formula for events, understanding commonalities amongst the situations can aid them in recognizing troubling situations.

The Columbine school shooting was not the first of its kind, but news outlets provided constant coverage of the event. CBS first heard about the incident on a police scanner before

beginning 13 hours of reporting with no interruptions (Gunn & Beard, 198). Since then, journalists continue to examine and find more information to share, refusing to allow the general populace to fully move past the tragedy (199). They now blend traditional news and entertainment news, allowing fear to permeate all aspects of life (Althiede, 247). Media outlets create “the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life,” meaning the stream has affected the public’s overall perception of society (230). People now expect and fear risk at all times. The information provided follows the simple narrative; journalists cast all information about the perpetrators in a negative light while humanizing the victims, making readers identify with them. This causes the audience members to feel like potential victims for a coming enactment of the narrative.

As people receive more information on the path of the simple narrative, they come to expect a constant stream of information. Journalists and news outlets profit from this expectation and curiosity, creating an “industry of fear” (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 127). Corporate media has infiltrated the common view of the general public, allowing the simple narrative to become the expected norm. They have even begun replacing words like “concern” or “worry” with the more powerful “fear;” meaning readers see the word more often and identify it, leading to constant terror (Althiede, 233). The industry uses strong language to captivate and “dazzle” its audience while keeping them in a state of terror (Gunn & Beard, 199). If the public feels afraid, they will seek more information in hopes it will mitigate that fear; when they find no answers in one report, people simply will continue searching. Experts call the spectacle of reporting tragedies the “apocalyptic sublime,” meaning people witness ceaseless disasters and feel a sense of impending doom; however, their fear response causes them to seek out more of this information (199). This widespread fear exists as a phenomenon in only the last 30 years

(Altheide, 241). Reports of violent events in the past were focused on specific, isolated incidents; modern reporting creates the image of widespread violence and chaos. The media outlets create the industry of fear in their reporting of the apocalyptic sublime by cultivating the image of a larger, unexplainable terror that threatens all. Over the years, reporting has shifted to a focus on death and dying; school shootings lend themselves to this ongoing production and retelling of the narrative.

A part of this production also lies in the players: teenagers. Media consistently portrays young people as objects to fear while also emphasizing the need to protect one's own children (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 128). People fear for the lives of their children, wondering if they could grow into a victim or a perpetrator of violence (Althiede, 230). Journalists point to youths that commit violent acts and live on the fringes of society, like those in gangs or those who commit school shootings. Children become associated with fear, and safety in schools seems less guaranteed. Parents feel they should be able to control their children and feel afraid when they discover they cannot control what happens at school with other children (236). Reporters paint the young perpetrators as "weird" or "outcasts," making them into monsters and villains (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 129). This role placement puts these young people in the place of "other," further ostracizing them. It also shares the message "that our lives are dominated by fear, that fearful stuff surrounds us, that the world is really frightening" (Althiede, 245). The fear of this other can lead to changes "identity formation and role enactment," meaning that as people, especially young people, see this narrative, they view it as an accepted aspect of society and seek to emulate it (230). Simply, the constant exposure to violent roles may cause adolescents to accept and even strive for them. They identify with the "other" role—a common identification for high school students—and, emulating what they have seen on the news,

become violent. Other, outside circumstances would feed this dramatic leap, but this identification represents part of the overall problem that leads to more fear, school shootings, and profiting by the media. Ultimately, the cycle of shootings and reporting has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, by focusing on this “other” status, the media neglects issues surrounding living situations, mental health, and gun control (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 129). While some young offenders may have been ostracized or rejected by peer groups, many have not. Citizens cannot use indicators such as these as a rule for recognizing school shooters and young criminals. The media bombards their audience with what makes offenders different rather than what may have driven them to that point of mass shooting and exactly how the various factors unfolded. The information provided through the media fails to allow the public to create their own opinions and solutions.

Certain works of literature rectify the problems with journalistic media. By offering new perspectives and detailing events, though fictional, at length, readers can come to understand the situations and eventually form their own opinions. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Lionel Shriver questions how people assign and except blame as well as the roles of biology and caretaking in development; she also considers the bias of how Americans receive their information with the narrator, the mother of a school shooter. The novel conveys how no one noticed her son’s disturbance while criticizing the common narration told by the majority of literature and the media. Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* contains similar themes with the changing perspectives and attempts for understanding, but truly represents the need to accept and listen to one another. It complicates the narrative with these various perspectives, but largely follows the simple story that the media emphasizes, acting as an example of a novel Shriver would criticize. Picoult provides a cautionary tale against bullying and for knowing one’s

children, but still offers useful criticism for the legal and education systems that are often ignored. Both authors seek to promote conversation amongst the American public about school shootings, though they have different structures, narratives, and goals for their readers.

## Chapter 1

### *Nineteen Minutes*

Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* acts as a didactic narrative, warning readers to better understand the people around them while cautioning against bullying. The author accomplishes these tasks by sharing the different perspectives of multiple characters. They—and the reader—remain oblivious to all aspects of the narrative until the novel draws to a close. Characters even often work to obscure the truth from one another. This secrecy, along with bystander inaction as Peter Houghton is relentlessly bullied, contributes to a shooting that takes place at the fictional Sterling High School and the chaos that follows. The reader looking in and characters moving about the novel all feel the confusion, trying to understand what happened and why it occurred. A question many ask themselves surrounds responsibility: what or who caused Peter to act like this? Characters and the reader must work to understand the facts during the crime, Peter's trial, and the years leading up to these events.

In youth, Peter and his best friend, Josie Cormier, have a close friendship, but it deteriorates as they enter their teenage years. In elementary school, they meet daily with the support of their mothers; however, the women end the friendship after Peter and Josie are able to find a gun to play with at the Houghton household (81). Somehow, the pair were able to access the safe where the Houghtons keep their hunting rifles. This early interaction with guns begins a

rift between Peter and Josie that only expands from kindergarten through high school.

Nevertheless, they remain friends at school for a few years, though they cannot interact at each other's homes because of their mothers' feud. Peter "thank[s] God for that, because no one else really did" (139). Peter knows that his class has ostracized him, meaning that if he were to lose Josie's companionship, he would be alone. Their separation eventually grows as Josie works to improve her status in middle school and Peter continues to undergo bullying. Despite her association with Peter in the sixth grade, Josie wonders if she really appreciates him or only desires the knowledge that she has a higher social standing than him, making her "feel better about herself" (143). This desire for popularity ultimately leads to the end of Peter and Josie's friendship, though they interact infrequently in high school. Josie chooses to officially end their friendship after the pair experienced a spike in popularity. They have taken part in the teasing of a girl in their class, but, upon seeing her crying, Peter attempts to stop the cruelty of their classmates (159). He feels sympathetic towards the girl, having experienced similar ridicule in the past for his size and love of superheroes. Josie, excited by the inclusion, follows the popular students, defying Peter and further tormenting their classmate. Her active choice to align with this group leads her to "[walk] out of his life," ending their friendship (160). They rarely talk in the ensuing years, Josie choosing to associate with the more popular Matt Royston and Courtney Ignatio. Picoult shows how youths often strive for popularity, even though they often express dissatisfaction with it, once achieved. She seeks to illustrate the dangers of seeking status over happiness, especially at the expense of others. The reader comes to understand that rejection, like Josie's treatment of Peter, can have ill effects, contributing to Peter's mental state when he commits his crime.

During their time in high school, Peter attempts to reconnect with Josie, but she consistently rejects him, choosing to interact with the vain, popular crowd. Peter and Josie work together in a copy store during their freshman year of high school, the same year Josie begins dating Peter's worst tormenter: Matt Royston (202). Repeatedly harassing him for his lack of athleticism, extroversion, and girlfriend, Matt makes Peter miserable. Matt even encourages Josie to exclude and ignore Peter; as a result, she acts "confused" by his antics and uses him for her own gains (204-206). Peter longs for a deeper connection with Josie despite this, but she rejects him again, still choosing status over their friendship. When he tries to claim her as a friend in school, she panics and tells him "Don't...Don't ever talk to me again" (211). Peter defies her request because he still desires her friendship and affection. In an attempt to prove that she still cares about him, Peter sets fire to a Dumpster behind their workplace, putting himself and Josie in harm's way (216). Concerned about his behavior and his infatuation with her, Josie reports this to her boss, causing Peter's termination. Peter's extreme behavior here should cause concern; the risk he takes shows that he is capable of causing possible harm to himself and others to make himself feel better. Josie had been the only person to truly like him for his personality, meaning that the loss of that friendship damaged Peter more than anyone anticipated. Peter feels most violated after he confesses romantic feelings for Josie through an email, which Courtney intercepts and forwards to the entire school (316). Soon after, Peter is tricked into asking Josie on a date, before he realizes everyone knows his confession and teases him, including Josie who "in spite of what Peter had believed about her—was no different from anyone else" (321). Matt pulls down Peter's pants in front of the school, mocking him, and Peter leaves, heartbroken and betrayed. This violation of his emotions and body begins his psychological break; he is traumatized. Peter feels like no one, including Josie, cares about him

or would defend him. This sense of loss leads to Peter's eventual diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder that may have led to his crime.

Nevertheless, no one person notices the number of troubling behaviors Peter externalizes during his youth. Only after Peter murders ten people at Sterling High School, injuring nineteen others, is the evidence gathered and his traumas mapped. Despite their paths constantly converging, Josie denies ever being friends with Peter to the lead officer, Patrick Ducharme (124). She does not want their connection explored in fear of her role in Matt's death; during the attack at their school, Josie managed to obtain a gun from Peter and shoot Matt. Picoult builds suspense to this point, detailing the various relationships between Peter, Josie, and Matt. In questioning, Josie seeks to separate herself from Peter, a confirmed killer, as much as possible. She even lies by claiming to have forgotten the events that took place the day of the shooting. By obscuring the truth, Josie confirms Picoult's mission to show how transparency and understanding can prevent certain crimes or negative development. No one notices Peter's behaviors just as no one notices Matt and Josie's toxic relationship. On Josie's implication in Peter's crime, Alex—Josie's mother—claims that it was not Josie's fault, telling her “there are people looking out for Peter—whose *job* it is to look out for him. You don't have to be the one to do it” (267). While she may have influenced Peter, Josie is not responsible for his overall development. Because they are the same age, she has no ability to monitor or properly respond to his problems. Nevertheless, Josie still feels guilty for Peter's actions as well as her own. Picoult indirectly stipulates that if Josie, or another person in Peter's life, had taken more careful actions he may not have become a youth offender.

The parents of Peter Houghton, Lacy and Lewis, question how their son could perform this act and what could have caused it. The detective of the case, Patrick Ducharme, asks Lacy

Houghton to help him “figure out what Peter was thinking” (54). Unfortunately, even she cannot help. The Houghtons were just as alarmed and troubled as the rest of the residents of Sterling, New Hampshire. Lacy wonders how she could “change a boy’s bedding every week and feed him breakfast and drive him to the orthodontist and not know him at all” (59). She interacted with Peter everyday and had no idea he had a plan or the ability to commit mass murder. In her opinion, her relationship with Peter was “ordinary,” making his attack even more unexpected to her (59). She believed that any surliness could be attributed to his age, seventeen-years-old. Despite everything Peter hid from his mother, Lacy still felt willing to keep secrets for him and love him. After the attack, she found the making of bombs in his closet and attempted to throw away the evidence before the police arrived, trying to protect her family and “fix this herself” (60). As a mother, she wanted to obscure the truth for her own sanity and to save her son from a more disastrous fate. When Lacy later visits Peter in prison, she makes the active choice to love her son, deciding to “find whatever scraps of [her] child [she] could in what he had become” (125). Picoult positioned Lacy to show the randomness of senseless violence, or the difficulty in noticing possible indicators of aggression; however, flashbacks to Peter’s childhood show that Lacy did have a role in her son’s development, and she did miss certain aspects. She admits that she may not have been the best mother, but loving her son was never “even really a choice” (125). Lacy believes that her job is still to love her son, despite his horrific act. As the novel progresses, she comes to recognize her shortcomings, noting “kids are more like [their parents] than we think: damaged, through and through” (166). Lacy was damaged by the death of Peter’s older brother, Joey, while Peter was damaged through constant rejection, especially by Josie. Picoult later emphasizes Peter’s “damage” through his interests and habits, placing him into the stereotype of a school shooter. Picoult seeks to show the reader possible warning signs of

developing violent tendencies; these are portrayed as manifestations of his emotional and psychological damage. The author works to absolve Lacy of some guilt by portraying her as caring and loving without exception, showing that not all blame should be placed on the mothers of criminals, but still concedes that Lacy missed these signs.

Despite their constant distance, Peter's desire to fit in continues in his relationship with his father. The boy remembers his failures in sports, such as football, because of his size, lack of coordination, and poor vision (88). These differences in personality and skill lead to Lewis' dissimilar treatment of the boys. Lewis even eventually admits to favoring Joey over Peter, even understanding why people wanted his younger son dead (286). Peter and his father share a moment as Lewis cleans and explains the mechanics of a gun to Peter. This interaction acts as the first time they bond in Peter's childhood. Peter "love[s] the thought of leaving Joey at home" if they were to go hunting because he would not have to act and live up to Joey's standards of boyhood (88). He can act as his true self rather than wear a mask to hide his loneliness and struggle to live up to his parent's expectations. Regrettably, this positive interaction teaches Peter about guns and gives him easy access to them, allowing him to have a number of weapons in his attack at Sterling High School. Peter had stolen two of his father's five hunting rifles with the intention of killing certain students. Picoult uses this interaction between Peter and Lewis to argue for better positive relationships between parents and children as well as cautioning against guns in the home. Her position for stricter American gun laws becomes clear as Peter develops an interest in firearms and can obtain them easily, even in childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, after learning of the crime, Lewis wonders "what word, what platitude, what comment of his had led Peter to this...[or] might have stopped him?" (95). He quickly takes up the blame for Peter's shooting, but fails to visit him in jail for six months. He avoids his son

after the shooting, just as he ignored him in his childhood (348). Both Lewis and Lacy instantly blame themselves and introduce a question that runs the course of the novel: could the shooting have been prevented? They each apologize to Peter for their treatment of him, their failure to notice and address his struggles, but they and Peter understand they cannot change the past. Picoult suggests that better consideration for Peter could have altered events, but the confounding factors indicate that it is impossible to know which ultimately caused Peter's actions. Lewis and Lacy both feel they could have altered certain elements in raising Peter, changing his life outcome (96). All characters have influenced Peter in some way and have had an effect on his development, though some are more directly related to Peter's violent actions than others.

Lacy Houghton worked to provide and care for both Joey and Peter, despite their different lifestyles and personalities; Lewis, conversely, has a different relationship with each of his sons. Superficially, Joey seems like the ideal, first-born son and serves as the standard to which the Houghtons hold Peter. Before his death, their older son was athletic, humorous, artistic, and social: everything Peter was not (156). Their parents seem to value these qualities, constantly praising Joey for them. An aspect in which their positions shift concerns hunting. Joey would faint at the sight of blood, making him unable to accompany their father on hunting and shooting trips while Peter seems to proudly boast his ability to stand the sight (156). Despite his confidence that he could finally bond with his father through hunting, Peter becomes nauseous after witnessing his father kill a deer. The first time Peter goes hunting, he chooses not to kill a doe, an action that disappoints his father (158). In his eyes, Peter once again fails. Picoult means for the reader to understand how this association of displeasure in Peter's inability to kill carries through his adolescence. Picoult's position on weapons becomes clear with this

dynamic of guns following Peter throughout his life, first separating him from Josie and later distancing him from Lewis further. The pair are dissimilar, but both Lewis and Peter believe that they could connect through hunting, an endeavor leaves them feeling dissatisfied. Peter's desire to develop skills for weaponry eventually develops into an interest in playing and even designing violent video games in which the player shoots human targets. Lewis and Peter shared very little, though both were hopeful to bond over guns. When this never comes to fruition, father and son became more separated than before.

Throughout their sons' childhoods, the Houghtons constantly compare the boys, putting Peter under an immense amount of pressure and leading to his feelings of inadequacy. Peter always felt aware of this burden to succeed, noting at five-years-old "I'm not Joey" (69). Lewis, Lacy, and Peter are aware of the unspoken, disappointed "we know" that follows his proclamation (69). All of the Houghtons notice the difference in the boys' abilities, though they rarely directly acknowledge it. Peter spends his life trying to live up to this idealized version of his brother, obscuring the parts of himself that do not line up with that image. When asked about their relationship after his shooting, Peter yells that he "*can't* beat it" and "*can't* measure up" to the standards set by his parents based on Joey (185). He feels this pressure from his early childhood and past his brother's untimely death in a car accident about a year before the shooting. For example, in kindergarten, Peter hides his victimization in the bullying he endures at school from his parents, trying to appear strong like Joey. When Lacy discovers the truth, she tells him that he must stand up for himself or be punished. He must act "tough" like his brother, even if that means physical aggression against his tormenters (73). To better fit in with his classmates, Lacy and Peter's teacher determine that he has to fight back and reciprocate the cruelty that he endures. Once more, Peter's parents highlight aggression as a positive trait.

Unfortunately, this advice goes to Peter's eventual logic when shooting students at his high school. Here, Picoult draws a parallel in what Peter should do in his youth to what he ultimately does in high school as a warning to readers against supporting violence, even in reciprocity.

Throughout the novel, the reader comes to learn of Joey's shortcomings, proving that he too has secrets and fails to satisfy the image he created, but was favored nonetheless. Lacy maintains that Peter "adored his big brother" during his life, despite their constant friction (173). Peter reveals that Joey often started and contributed to the bullying he experienced at school (186). Lacy believes her sons were idyllic, choosing to ignore their individual struggles: Peter's lack of friends and Joey's drug problem. Joey, prior to his death, used heroin, a fact that Lacy shares with no one, including her own family (175). She only reveals Joey's actions while trying to explain her role as a mother. Lacy discovers her oldest son's drugs after his death, while sorting through his possessions. Unwilling to allow anyone "to think bad about Joey," Lacy quietly disposes of his paraphernalia and continues grieving (175). She maintains her oldest son's perfection. Lacy even believes that Peter feels as devastated as she does, but the younger son admits that he is "glad he's dead" (186). His lack of sympathy here suggests that Peter views his brother as another, if not the original, tormentor. Even after his death, Lacy could not admit Joey's shortcomings, having ignored his behavior and poor relationship with Peter. These actions and beliefs show that she may have overlooked Peter's earlier behavior, or warning signs, in childhood. In trial six months after the shooting, Lacy claims to have noticed Peter's inability to fulfill the expectations Joey set for him, but never told Peter that she understood (419). Even if she had noticed, she never acted on her suspicions, making little difference to Peter and the novel's outcome. Like many of the students and faculty at Peter's school, Lacy became a bystander in this regard, only passively acknowledging his struggles and never acting. Picoult

notes that one must act beyond simply noticing upsetting attitudes and behavior; a person must intervene.

A month after the shooting, Lacy realizes that she never really knew Peter, only seeing what she wanted in her son. She never understood Peter. Lacy learns Peter “is not who [she] imagine[d] him to be. [They’re] strangers” (246). Only after Lacy “loses” Peter, who she thought she knew, does she realize her failure to notice her son’s ongoing struggles. Deeply hurt and feeling betrayed, she calls Peter “a beast she didn’t recognize” (247). By using this language, Picoult—through Lacy—labels Peter as subhuman. While his actions are terrible, simplifying his nature to that of a monster does little to complicate the narrative and prompt the reader to question the circumstances around shootings. It follows rhetoric similar to traditional media. Wanting to keep her only living son close, Lacy gives Peter a great degree of freedom and privacy, not monitoring his behaviors and activities (419). Lacy tries to apologize for not paying more attention or truly caring more, but Peter scoffs, saying “sorry doesn’t change anything” (256). Picoult once again emphasizes the need for observation and action in response to others’ hardships. Nothing Lacy says or does will change how Peter felt or what had happened at Sterling High School. Picoult stresses that prevention and noticing are the keys to taking effective action and helping troubled individuals. Lacy notes her own faults, but Picoult also claims that community members should not place all blame on Lacy; they too are implicated.

While Picoult spends much of the novel implicating the Houghtons and Josie for their lack of attention to Peter, the boy himself focuses on the bullies at Sterling High School, blaming them for tormenting him to the point of violence. His mother recalls that he was constantly victimized in elementary school, an experience he constantly undergoes in the ensuing years. As

Peter reflects on his placement in a maximum security prison, he claims he does not deserve it, believing the bullies at Sterling High “did this to [him], and now [he’s] the one who’s being punished” (133). He feels righteous in his mass shooting and that the bullies are to blame. In his own words, Peter may be the “bomb,” but they are the “match” that sets him off (252). This metaphor shows how Peter is aware of his disposition for aggression, but needs an external factor to trigger it. He believes that without his difficulties growing up, he would have never committed mass murder. But for the bullies of Sterling High School, this crime would have never happened. Peter may have had pre-existing psychological problems, but his experience leads him to become a murderer.

Many characters acknowledge Peter’s victimization and struggles in high school, leading Peter to feel justified in his attempt at seeking vengeance. Even Josie notes “people used to make fun of him,” but seems nonchalant about his harassment (123). Other students corroborate this through interviews with the police; before the shooting, Peter was forced into lockers, tripped down the stairs, and pelted with spitballs daily (352). Throughout his life, Peter never sees outside intervention from his parents, teachers, or fellow classmates. Those responsible, like the injured Drew Girard—best friend to Matt Royston—deny ever bullying Peter (352). Peter was tormented, but the students of Sterling High School view that behavior as a normal aspect of the hierarchical structure of high school. The popular teenagers—like Matt, Drew, and Courtney—made fun of those who failed to fit in—like Peter. Upset with this norm, Peter makes a list in his yearbook, marking his bullies, or those he eventually wants to kill, though he went beyond this set list in the chaos of his attack (111). He sees the ten people he kills as either bullies or bystanders, implicating them all in his experience. Peter’s perception of them leads him to view their murder as “a natural progression,” or something meant to happen. To him,

they die because of their treatment of him. On March 6, 2007, Peter arrives at his high school with a plan to change his status from prey to predator. He wants to attack his tormentors before killing himself because he does not “see any other way out” (144). Peter intends his shooting to serve as his final act before leaving his life situation, which he perceived as miserable. The structure of high school drove Peter to extreme violence and suicidality. Even after the shooting, Peter constantly believes that people are making fun of him, including the correction officers at the prison holding him (119). This mentality of victimization and hopelessness shows that his perception of bullying may have been too extreme, indicating a psychologically troubled youth.

Using this logic, Peter’s attorney—Jordan McAfee—creates a defense that parallels battered woman syndrome, or when a wife attacks or kills her husband after undergoing chronic abuse that causes her to feel constantly at risk. He refers to this theory as “bullied victim syndrome” (188). Jordan claims that Peter’s victimization led to hopelessness and he shot others in a warped sense of self-defense. Just like many battered women, the fictional Peter Houghtons claims he “would rather have died than spend another day thinking about what could have happened to him at school” (287). The pressure and stress of constant humiliation and victimization leads Peter to suicidal ideation, meaning he feels so hopeless he would prefer not to live. Jordan notes that because Peter felt so lost at the time of the shooting, like a victim himself, he feels no remorse for his actions (133). Peter cannot comprehend why his actions were wrong or why the community mourns the deaths of their victims. The boy’s experiences throughout his childhood cause him to develop into an “unstable” adolescent and feeling “constantly threatened” until he takes action to protect himself (136, 187). Jordan’s defense supports the notion that Peter’s victimization directly led to his violent outburst. During trial, Jordan brings in a psychologist, Dr. Wah, to describe Peter’s mental state. He sums up Peter’s constant

victimization in bullying and adults' inability or failure to help him (405). Peter came to distrust his parents and teachers, having to rely on himself during these instances, leading to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. When Peter opens the email he sent Josie about his romantic feelings for her—read by all of his classmates at Sterling High School—he disassociates, causing his emotions to separate from logic (406). The email reminds Peter of the most traumatic and most recent of his experiences while bullied. This incident parallels how abused women view their husbands as a constant threat and may believe they will kill them eventually, causing those women to seemingly aggress randomly. While this makes for a strong defense, it ignores the planning aspect of Peter's crime: his construction of a bomb, his obtaining of firearms, his making of a list, and the locations of attack.

The prosecution argues for planning, claiming that premeditation indicates an element of logic and skewed morality rather than extreme distress. Faulty judgment and immorality do not mitigate illegal acts, meaning the court would hold Peter completely accountable for his action; however, a finding in favor of emotional distress would indicate that Peter could not control his actions, lightening his punishment. The case against Peter relies on his rational ability to understand his actions and their consequences, despite what may have triggered them (415). They argue that, after the incident involving Peter's initial romantic confession through email, he began planning an attack on Sterling High School. In the weeks leading up to the shooting, Peter steals two handguns from a neighbor (327). He actively seeks the weapons out and successfully plans to take them; however, he may have only had the initial plan of committing suicide. Only Peter knows the degrees of planning and distress in his crime, though the legal system—like the reader—does find him trustworthy. Legally, both sides agree on a likely motive—bullying—but disagree on Peter's level of intent and decision making. If Peter planned and intended to shoot

and murder his classmates, he would be found guilty; however, if Peter was not of sound mind and did not take the time to plot his attack, he would either be found innocent or sent to a rehabilitation facility.

Throughout the novel, readers come to understand battered woman syndrome in the more traditional sense as they learn of Josie and Matt's relationship. Initially, the abuse begins subtly. After Matt pushes Peter down the stairs, Josie attempts to defend her old friend; in response, Matt mentions how he could ruin Josie's popularity and leave her alone (218-219). This manipulation follows Josie's desires explicitly as she constantly claims her peer relationships are most important to her. If she were to lose her status, Josie would view her life as not worth living, making Matt's threat very effective. Matt pressures and manipulates Josie's emotions further, pressuring her into having sex after her father rejects her (223). When she tries to object, Matt reasons "but I want you," showing that even though her father does not desire a relationship with Josie, Matt does (223). Josie needs comfort and support while feeling vulnerable, but Matt desires physical closeness through sexual intercourse. As time progresses, Matt's actions turn from threatening and manipulative to physically abusive.

Matt's behaviors escalate and cause Josie to lose more of her agency in her own life. As Matt becomes more aggressive, Josie acts more obedient and passive, like many victims of abuse. When Josie refuses to leave a party with him, he grabs her, bruising her skin "as if she were a canvas and he was determined to leave his mark" (227). This violence shows Matt's increasing possession and need to control Josie, leading her to feel dependent on him. His growing aggression continues: Josie reveals that Matt hit her, injuring her ankle, because she "said something [she] shouldn't have" (239). Josie believes that she had to cater to his needs and deserved the punishment. She feels submissive as Matt continues to aggress and threaten her,

musings “it’s amazing I don’t kill you” while being intimate (234). He notes their size difference and his ability to physically overpower Josie. He locks her into the relationship by manipulating her emotions through psychological and physical abuse, including threatening suicide. He even has sex with Josie without a condom, neglecting to tell her his plan in fear she would refuse; by taking advantage over her intimately once more, Matt asserts his dominance in her life (313). Unfortunately, this act results in a pregnancy that Josie eventually miscarries, though she planned to have an abortion because of Matt’s apparent frustration. When she does lose the fetus, she cries in relief (329). Matt, too, is relieved, but asserts his dominance again, claiming he knew she was not actually pregnant, indirectly accusing her of lying. Every action she takes concerns Matt and his desires; she lives her life for him and the status he provides her. He undermines and abuses her repeatedly, causing her to become codependent and perpetually connected to him and his judgment.

These factors damage Josie, just as her rejection of Peter injures him, though each has a different reaction. When Peter corners her and Matt in the gym locker room, Josie takes a gun that had fallen out of Peter’s bag, prepared to defend herself and Matt (439). Matt begins yelling at Josie to “shoot him... Are you [*bleep*]ing stupid?...*Shoot*” (440). The stress of the moment and the reminder of Matt’s constant belittling causes Josie to panic, choosing to shoot Matt in the stomach instead. She perceives his threatening domination once more. Matt makes Peter and Josie feel lost and inferior by tormenting them physically and emotionally. Just as Peter’s psyche fractures from chronic bullying, Josie’s seems to follow suit in the high stress situation. Like Peter, Josie responds to feelings of hopelessness with violence. Josie, however, had no plan or intent to kill or injure Matt, mitigating the severity of her act and leading to her charge of accessory to murder. She turns to Peter for help as Matt slowly dies; Peter responds by shooting

him in the head. While Josie instantly feels remorse and regret, Peter continues his attack. Visiting Matt at his grave, Josie feels guilty for her “weakness,” wishing she could change what happened (346). Never wanting or intending to harm Matt, only reacting to his aggression, Josie displays the effects of battered woman syndrome; conversely, Peter fails to show any remorse for his actions, even after the shooting ends.

Considering Josie’s childhood and development until the shooting reinforces Picoult’s emphasis for parents to monitor their children more carefully. After the attack, Alex goes through Josie’s closet, searching for clothes. She eventually explores further, not attempting to find immoral or illegal paraphernalia, but “as a way of holding on to everything she’d missed” (289). Alex looks at Josie’s memories through costumes, school assignments, and art projects. These are all events she had missed because of her job as a defense attorney and, later, a judge. Furthermore, in their brief conversation the morning of the shooting, Alex reveals a light-hearted secret about napping at work, surprising Josie. Josie considers it “an event so startling you could not call attention to it without risking its loss” (8). In this moment, the reader learns of the strained relationship between mother and daughter. Even simple admissions are rare for the pair; they reveal little to one another. Alex reflects on the shift in their interactions, recalling her first day as a judge when Josie was five-years-old. Josie begins yelling in a store and, rather than yelling back as she usually would, Alex becomes aware of her public status as a district judge. As people watch Alex, she understands that she “had been given a mantle to wear, without realizing there was a catch: she would never be allowed to take it off” (83). Even young Josie thinks of her mother, giving a calm response, as an “alien creature,” foreign to the woman she had known for the past five years (83). The time-lapse across the novel confirms the strained, obscured relationship the pair share, but further reading shows they actually have a number of

similarities in their hidden lives. Eventually, Alex feels “comfortable in her courtroom, in a way she did not feel in the confines of her own home” (169). Her place of comfort has moved away from her family. She remains unable to connect with or hold conversations with her daughter. This schism prevents them from understanding their similar circumstances, despite their different reactions. The reader soon comes to realize that Alex and Josie, despite their self-suppressions around the other, are more alike than the surface suggests.

After her mother leaves the morning of March 6, 2007, the day of the shooting, Josie considers her own secrets she keeps from the people around her. She outlines that she knew “how she was *supposed* to look and *supposed* to act,” which runs counter to how Josie actually feels (8). These pressures force her to question her identity and contribute to her suicidality. In her introspection, Josie realizes that she was “a fake who had nearly forgotten what it felt like to be real” (9). This dichotomy in Josie represents her childhood friendship with Peter—the later school shooter—and her current place with the popular crowd—Peter’s would-be victims. In pursuit of popularity, Josie emphasizes her superficial qualities: her looks, laugh, and ability to gossip. She seeks perfection, the quality she saw her mother embodying and requiring; Josie wants to live up to Alex’s unspoken standards. In the process, Josie gains a boyfriend in Matt and friends in Courtney Ignatio and Maddie Shaw, leaving Peter in her past. These friends force her to maintain an image, even criticizing what she eats so she remains thin (17). This “fake” self and attitude have built up within Josie, leading to a larger secret of a suicide plan. She has decided that if her friends realize she was putting on an act as the superficial, perfect, “princess of Sterling High” and turned against her, Josie would kill herself (9-10). Essentially, she expects her friends to reject her, deciding that when “no one wanted to be around her anymore... Josie wouldn’t want to be around herself either” (10). This mindset parallels that of Peter’s, who

experiences large-scale rejection by his classmates daily. Because the two had grown apart, they too are unaware of their similar dissatisfaction with their lives. When her boyfriend arrives, Josie pushes away these thoughts of her fear of rejection, from her mother and her friends, choosing to ignore her distress. Unlike Peter, Josie has not been rejected to the point of emotional fracturing and aggression towards others.

The same morning, Alex comes into the courthouse and considers her place as a young, female judge. She describes entering the courtroom as “stepping onto a stage...at a Broadway opening” (14). Alex goes on to describe the eyes on her and the rush of nerves she feels, but the reader also understands the alternative meaning. She feels like an actor and the courtroom is her stage. Later in the novel, Alex remembers when she was a new attorney, a public defender, and pregnant with Josie. She recalls having to work “hard, in spite of her personal opinions about a client,” or if she wanted to find success, she would sometimes have to act against her conscience (27). Even when she becomes a judge, when Josie is five-years-old, she asserts that she would uphold any law, even if she did not believe in it (77). Repeatedly, Alex claims that she would hide her true opinions to fulfill the expectations of her career. When considering Josie’s absent father, a law professor named Logan Rourke, Alex feels that she did not have many choices. It was initially his choice for her to put the baby up for adoption, which she eventually rejected; however, Alex realizes she may have kept Josie only to prove him wrong (36). She feels pressure to live up to Logan’s expectations, only to act counter to them; nevertheless, her actions are still a reaction to his desires, not a desire from her own will.

While Josie feels pressured to look and act a certain way at school, Alex has felt that way for nearly two decades, acting in response to others and their expectations. Peter’s mother, a former close friend of Alex, calls her a “chameleon,” though even she does not know Alex’s real

personality, or what color the “chameleon was before it started changing” (37). Like Josie, Alex has mastered obscuring her true self, depending on the context. She even uses the same wording as Josie for her presented self: a mask (83). The face she shows the world, including her daughter, is different than her true self. Josie feels the effects of this façade, leading to their apparent emotional distance. Even Josie admits, “her mother was the one who’d taught Josie how to pretend in the first place” (117). Only when faced with the near-death of her daughter does Alex vow to change their relationship, claiming that, moving forward, they will “laugh and talk and confess” about the “things she imagined mothers and daughters” did (58). Josie notices this change scornfully, claiming it was “too much too late” and she was acting concerned out of guilt for their lack of connection (102). Unfortunately, Alex’s mind quickly jumps back to the case she must oversee. The trial for the shooting will come to her courtroom, postponing a reconnection with Josie. The reader wonders if she will commit, or keep finding justifications to avoid change and openness. Tragedy reveals this secretive, failing relationship to Alex, but she cannot connect with Josie; her daughter does not trust her. Alex’s focus on her career and Josie’s disdain for her mother’s concern prevents Josie from remembering and revealing her part in the shooting: she killed Matt. Only once Alex removes herself from the case and focuses on spending time with Josie does her daughter listen to her. Her advice to tell the truth leads to Josie admitting her role in Matt’s death and her conviction of accessory to murder. As Picoult intends, the reader understands that if the two could communicate better with one another, Josie could heal and her abusive relationship with Matt, or at least her implication in Peter’s crime, may have been discovered sooner.

Josie’s and Peter’s actions show how emotional abuse through bullying can have disastrous consequences, though many characters explore other “warning signs” for possible

school shooters, such as psychological profiles. After the shooting, news outlets contact a psychologist, Dr. Peabody, asking him about these markers. He claims that shooters tend “to be loners” and struggle in school, often living without connections (99). However, internally he notes that these factors, as well as interest in video games and hard rock music, do not consistently point to school shooters. Dr. Peabody seeks notoriety from the media rather than accuracy, allowing the narrative to perpetuate. News reports interject at points in the novel, exploring Peter’s life and interests, giving evidence for the signs Dr. Peabody refuses to discredit. Later, this psychologist hosts a grief session for the residents of Sterling, during which he calls Peter a “monster” (167). By reducing Peter to this villainous, inhuman status, Dr. Peabody ignores the complexities that should surround Peter’s upbringing and how those closest to him may feel hurt and traumatized. He disregards real problems of Peter and Sterling residents in favor of brief notions of comfort. One newscaster notes that Peter listens to punk music by Death Wish before she encourages the audience to monitor what youths listen to (109). She emphasizes that parents should remain updated on their children’s actions. In response, the Death Wish front man claims that “the problem isn’t with rock lyrics, it’s with the fabric of society itself” (110). This musician blames society for letting individuals struggle and become violent. To him, the problems lie not with the interests of shooters, but their circumstances. This can include proper parental supervision, showing Picoult’s desire to continuously emphasize the need for parents to remain aware of and involved in their children’s lives. The front man tries to defend himself, but the statements made by professionals like Dr. Peabody already biased audiences against the band, leading many to fear his band and those like it.

Other, less biased individuals attempt to offer other opinions, but they only occur after the initial, conersing statements by Dr. Peabody and Death Wish have been released to the

public. Peter's psychologist Dr. Wah points to the problematic societal structure that led to the bullying behavior and Peter's response (409). This theory parallels *Death Wish*'s, though he provides more credibility through a scientific explanation. However, the words of Dr. Peabody were published six months earlier, making them the most salient to the public. Supposedly the least biased group, the FBI submits their own report, although a warning against generalization only appears at the end. The FBI's report on school shooters points to strained family relationships, detachment from peers, and a propensity for violent games and films (127-128). These markers have the support of the FBI, giving them credibility. They mix circumstantial problems—family and peer rejection—and the stereotypical interests—violent media—as warning signs for shooters. This report adds to the inconsistency surrounding one's ability to predict school shootings, itself acknowledging “many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the traits on this list” (128). It shows how, while some common features may exist across attackers, these situations vary. The America populace should be aware, but should not stereotype. Every person or group has a different notion of why Peter may have committed the act, but the public will listen to the narratives supported by the media and supposed experts.

Most telling of Picoult's reasons for writing this novel comes in the form of the lead officer working the case, Patrick Ducharme. He works relentlessly to convict Peter to give retribution and closure to the grieving town. Patrick pushes Josie, knowing she acts a “key” to Matt's death—he was the only person shot twice and Josie was in the room when it happened. Because his murder deviated from Peter's pattern, Patrick believes there is more to the case than Peter claims. Only Josie can tell Patrick what occurred at in the locker room in the moments leading up to Matt's death. She constantly lies and tells those around her that she cannot

remember that day, but Patrick pushes further. When Josie finally confesses to shooting Matt, he believes her. Her story, Peter's claims, and the physical evidence he found ties her to the crime. Unfortunately, this means that Josie had been lying about her psychological state and ability to remember. More generally, the officer feels like he has "to understand why Peter had done this in the first place. So that he could keep it from happening again" (127). This belief in prevention also indicates that a pattern in school shooters exists, reinforcing the idea of warning signs. Patrick is later involved in the refurbishing of Sterling High School, assisting the security protocols. The largest changes involve a two-story glass atrium where the gymnasium once stood and the removal of lockers for open cubbies (453). These modifications show a desire for openness and knowledge. Picoult suggests that if those inside the school knew one another and their habits better, Peter's attack could have been prevented. Physical transparency should parallel emotional clarity.

Picoult makes mention of these stereotypes of school shooters, playing off of them by casting Peter as a near archetype: no friends, bullied, uncommunicative, and having "alternative" interests. When officers collect his possessions in their investigation they find violent video games, gun paraphernalia, and even a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*—a novel found with a number of violent criminals (111). With these objects they also collect Peter's yearbook, which appears to have served as a hit list for his massacre; some faces are circled, including Josie's though hers is crossed out and marked "let live" (111). She also emphasizes Peter's suicidality, indicative of his hopelessness. Peter does kill himself in jail, after his conviction. He had seen his crime through trial and knows Josie's fate; as soon as the opportunity, he ends his life. Picoult casts Peter as a troubled romantic across the novel, pining for Josie and constantly rejected. This eventually leads to his breaking point, though he still intentionally spares Josie. By having Peter

fulfill many of the stereotypes and espouse the same logic as other shooters, Picoult indicates that her audience should be wary of those fitting the stereotype. Peter Houghton shows the hallmarks of school shooter perpetuated by the media, preventing Picoult from truly presenting a unique story for readers to consider. Additionally, she manipulates the timeline to draw out the suspense of her novel, causing readers to want to read more. By titillating—or “dazzling”—her audience in this way, Picoult falls into the same realm as much of mass media, as criticized by scholarly experts (Gunn & Beard, 199). The drama and stereotypical aspects also consider the same themes covered by mass media: fear and youths. Picoult presents nearly every character in her novel as a guilty party, fearful of the others in their lives. As Althiede claims, children are presented as volatile and their schools fail to serve as safe havens (236). By presenting her novel with these shallower insights and questionable practices, Picoult profits from real tragedies. She directly contributes to the “industry of fear” (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 127). By directly profiting from and teasing her witnesses with a dramatic story, Picoult contributes to the problematic culture that consumes this genre ceaselessly. Shooters are viewed as monsters, but written about like heroes because of the fame and notoriety extended to them. Picoult seeks to warn her readers against certain behaviors, but oversimplifies the narrative. Audience members must consider alternatives to this story while introspecting to their own fascination with the subject. Rather than simply acknowledging how various factors could have prevented a school shooting, readers must understand how they contribute to the society that glamorizes these events.

*Nineteen Minutes* works as a lesson for readers, or one possible scenario that Americans should work to avoid. Unfortunately, Picoult largely follows the simple narrative seen in media. She warns against bullying and supports better communication. By providing these factors as causes for Peter’s crime, Picoult reinforces the notion that acts of violence can be prevented. She

supports the idea of multiple factors influencing Peter's actions, but it seems like each element could have been altered, avoiding the shooting. The question of prevention overruns the novel, each character wonders how or if the action taken by Peter could have been circumvented. Additionally, readers may not understand that other narratives exist; not all school shooters or violent offenders have the same habits or life history. Future authors and journalists must understand and share the complicated lives and interactions people experience rather than glorifying and obsessing over the single story of a bullied teen lashing out.

## Chapter 2

### *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the author—Lionel Shriver—spends most of the novel undermining other novelists and the media in their consideration of the school shooting genre. The novel is told through letters from Eva, mother of school shooter Kevin, to her now-deceased husband, Franklin. They are dated November 8, 2000 through April 8, 2001—a year and a half to two years after Kevin murdered his peers. These letters are told retrospectively, detailing Kevin’s childhood from a perspective after the boy attacks his high school, murdering eleven people. Shriver deftly moves between placing the blame on Kevin and implicating Eva—and other adults—in his crime. The reader must ask the eternal question of nature or nurture ruling Kevin’s development and later actions. Is Kevin inexplicably psychologically unsound from birth, or is he a victim of bad parenting and a poor support system? Who, if anyone, should receive blame for his crime?

To complicate the question of blame, Eva tells the story of Kevin’s childhood and his propensity for odd or violent behavior, indicating a psychological factor may have had an influence. These factors are exacerbated by his poor familial relationships, preventing him from appropriately adjusting into a functional young adult. Eva admits that “every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish moment” is her fault, but Kevin’s attack on the school “is where [she] draw[s] the line” in her feelings of guilt (71). She accepts her shortcomings as a mother,

but her behavior alone should not have led to Kevin's crime. Her ability to nurture Kevin should not have created a killer, meaning there should be a natural, biological or psychological component. Eva, having been sued for her role in Kevin's development, claims that "births of single dangerous children are acts of God," meaning she could have taken no action to prevent Kevin's predisposition for violence (68). Nevertheless, Eva battles this question throughout the novel. After the shooting, Eva admits "I never liked him very much...I can't stand having [him] around" (143). She recalls Kevin's troublesome nature in spite of her attempts at parenting; the only positive interactions Kevin seems to have are with his father, which Eva views as Kevin lying. Kevin had been born inclined to violent behavior and dishonesty; however, his interactions with the people around him aggravate these pre-existing factors. Kevin's initial problematic nature and Eva's inability to warm to motherhood led to a mutual fierce dislike. Eva stipulates that she knew Kevin better than anyone, despite the pair's actual emotional distance throughout his childhood. She thought their daily interactions meant she could truly know her son better than others, though she still could not predict the extent of his aggression.

Eva constantly mentions how Kevin harasses her, causing stress and distancing her from her husband. After moving to the suburbs of New York City, Kevin destroys Eva's office: her one personal space in their new house. She had decorated the space with maps from her earlier travels around the world. A preschool Kevin does "understand that they signif[y] something to" Eva, though he fails to grasp why she finds them important (155). He thinks they are "dumb," but knows Eva values them and identifies with them after her explanation. As a result, he squirts ink on the maps using a water gun, making them "spidery with red and black ink" (157). Kevin destroys the study with the intent of hurting his mother, showing his early propensity for hurtful actions. Similarly, his treatment of toys differs based on subjective worth. The plastic toys

purchased with money are left unused while Kevin ruins the books and toys Eva made for him. The commercialized presents were “cheap” and meaningless, therefore unworthy of Kevin’s time; however, the handmade creations were colored on, submerged in water, and torn apart (182). Kevin only feels interested in an object if someone else has shown that they care about it, giving it worth that could be taken away. The argument here lies in Kevin’s intent: did he destroy the toys to spite Eva or was this destruction simply a part of his playing? Children often ruin toys accidentally, but Eva sees his maliciousness. Furthermore, Kevin intentionally avoided using the toilet until he was six-years-old, an act that Eva views as spiteful towards her (189). Only after Eva throws him across the room, “terroriz[ing] the boy,” does Kevin finally use the toilet (200). While Eva’s own behavior here may have played a negative role in his development, Kevin’s immediate ability to use the bathroom shows he possessed that skill before the incident. He simply chose not to until Eva forced him through aggression. This interaction may have shown Kevin how aggression can help one achieve a goal. Eva’s violence could have cultivated his early malice into violent behavior. These instances show how nature and nurture interact to produce a fractured mother-son relationship.

Kevin seems to constantly behave in ways to spite Eva throughout his life, including through his treatment of his younger sister, Celia. He resents her and torments her, though Shriver allows the reader to decide what constitutes a “normal” sibling relationship or if Kevin shows fundamentally different behaviors. Kevin convinces Celia into “playing kidnapping,” which includes eating awful concoctions of food until she vomits, and leaves her stuck at the tops of trees (229-231). Celia consistently forgives Kevin, believing “her big brother was a nice guy” (231). To Eva, her daughter cannot see the dangers Kevin presents. Franklin and Celia did not find Kevin’s behavior odd, but Eva explains how she finds it troubling. Either Kevin’s open

maliciousness is directed primarily at Eva or she notices his troublesome behavior better after the shooting. Later, Eva believes that Kevin literally takes Celia's sight by pouring drain cleaner on her face, resulting in disfiguration and the loss of one eye (289). Circumstances around this event remain objectively unclear, meaning no action is taken against Kevin. Eva blames her son vehemently, but Franklin believes that Eva left the cleaner on the counter, meaning she caused the "accident." Celia's natural assumption of goodness runs counter to Kevin's disposition around Eva for destruction and aggression. Eventually, Kevin goes as far as murdering Celia and Franklin, though his reason for these actions is left ambiguous. The intent in these acts against Eva shows a pattern of irrational actions at the expense of others. If Eva's interpretations are correct, these instances show Kevin's natural propensity for deliberately hurtful behavior throughout his life.

Franklin's experience, however, differs greatly, either indicating his obliviousness or Eva's distress at motherhood. In infancy, Kevin would "fuss like a normal baby" around Franklin, but would shriek ceaselessly around Eva (89). She views this difference as a betrayal and as if the baby Kevin is "scheming" to divide his parents. Because of the shooting, this theory of early malevolent planning makes sense to the reader; however, Shriver means this to indicate Eva's own psychological and emotional problems. In her distress, she feels her own child was against her. This attitude towards her son continues through Kevin's childhood and adolescence, perhaps further influencing Kevin's behavior. Readers should know that, as a baby, Kevin would not have had the ability to intentionally treat his parents differently. His reaction is likely born out of some discomfort with Eva and her subsequent treatment of Kevin prevented him from warming to her. As Kevin grew, he knew that he made Eva uncomfortable and eventually seeks to ostracize her. He essentially became her bully while acting as his father's ideal son.

The difference in familial relationships biases both Franklin and Eva—the two most likely to notice Kevin’s problems—into having varying set assumptions for their son. Eva believes that Kevin lives to spite her while Franklin views him as a typical boy. At Kevin’s birth, Franklin seems to take to fatherhood easily, handling the baby willingly and effortlessly. Kevin—only minutes old—screams as Eva holds him, but calms in Franklin’s arms, “having found his real protector” (82). His positive reaction to Franklin causes Eva to respond with anger, fright, shame, and jealousy; she fails to feel the emotions she believes mothers should experience (83). Franklin views Kevin as satisfying his expectations while Eva feels underwhelmed and disappointed. This early development of relationships may have tainted Eva’s later relationship with Kevin. The boy’s childhood is couched between Eva’s lackluster emotions at his birth and his violent act of mass murder. Eva, telling the tale while influenced by her knowledge of Kevin’s shooting, may recall aspects of Kevin’s life more harshly. She recalls these events with the knowledge that her son is a murderer; these letters represent her search for her implication or Kevin’s reason. From birth, Eva presents Kevin as externalizing only negative emotions, indicating his natural antisocial or aggressive temperament. Meanwhile, Franklin projects his ideals and vision for his family onto his son, cherishing his role as a father and believing he can influence his son for the better.

Franklin saw his son as the epitome of boyhood. As the boy ages, Eva describes Kevin’s entire face and personality shifting when his father is present; Kevin seems to manipulate him. Rather than the mask of indifference he wears around Eva, Kevin’s “eyebrows shot up, his head cocked, and he put on a closed-mouth smile high up on his chin” when Franklin would walk into a room (232). Franklin and Kevin discuss their routines and play games together, acting like a stereotypical father and son pair. Eva constantly remembers the worst aspects of her experience

of motherhood with Kevin, but Franklin appears to enjoy their time together, believing his son could do no wrong. This difference of opinion largely prevents Eva from taking any action to correct Kevin's worrisome behavior, allowing him to continue acting as he wished until his arrest after the shooting. When Kevin enters his teenage years, Eva recalls a conversation about the increase in mass murders she had with Franklin and Kevin before the teenager's crime. While she blames the media spectacle and an easy access to guns, Franklin ironically finds the parents of these shooters culpable (312). He thinks that he and Kevin have an open, close relationship, assuming Kevin would come to him with any problems, thereby preventing violent actions like shootings. His blind faith in his son prevents him from seeing Kevin's behavioral problems and even foreshadowing his own death. Kevin's hatred of Franklin's idealistic attitude leads to a schism in their relationship and, in part, to the boy's patricide. Franklin's inability to see Kevin's actions as fiction drives his son away further. Kevin hates the role set for him and his father's blindness to his acting. If Shriver seeks to indicate parental blame, she places much guilt on Franklin's obliviousness and inaction. Franklin, however, would blame Eva for her inability to bond with or show affection to Kevin.

While Eva presents numerous examples of Kevin's strange behavior to Franklin and the reader, she cannot explain why few others saw this pattern. Franklin constantly admonishes Eva for blaming Kevin for seemingly small faults. During his son's infancy, Franklin begins his habit of defending Kevin. When Eva complains of Kevin's constant screaming and poor temper, Franklin refuses to believe her, blaming her skewed "perception" of events (92). When Eva becomes pregnant with their second child, Franklin resents her and her pregnancy on Kevin's behalf. He knows Eva resents Kevin and is "disappointed" with her experience of motherhood (208). Franklin rebukes Eva for her attitudes and cannot comprehend her desire for another

child. He rages about how she dislikes interactions with Kevin, how he speaks, how he plays, and how the community dislikes him. To Franklin, Eva and their neighbors are the problematic figures rather than his son. After their daughter is born, Franklin categorizes Kevin's treatment of Celia as "perfectly normal" teasing for siblings when Eva raises concerns (229). Later, when Celia's eye must be removed after being damaged by liquid drain cleaner, Eva blames Kevin while Franklin implicates his wife (289). Either Eva accidentally left the cleaner on the counter or Kevin intentionally poured it on her. As Eva places guilt on Kevin, Franklin begins shouting, upset yet unsurprised, and believes she is making excuses. He refuses to listen to her theories about Kevin. To save her failing marriage, Eva tries to "act normal" and play the part of a "good mother" (293). These attempts are meant to placate her husband, but—if Eva's suspicions are correct—only allow Kevin to get away with increasingly violent and drastic behaviors. To avoid conflict, she becomes compliant to his perception of their family. Franklin assumes that Kevin was born a good person, meaning any problems in his life must have resulted from the boy's failed relationship with Eva. He would argue for issues in nurturing if he were to notice Kevin's problematic behavior.

Eva spends the majority of her letters to Franklin providing evidence to support her claims for Kevin's psychological problems and associated behavior. In doing so, she mitigates the effects her actions may have had on the boy's life. For example, she shares how Kevin would scream for hours each day, dissatisfied with the world around him. Eva would witness his "fits of pique" and "rage," while Franklin would experience a calmer, quitter Kevin while home (89). However, Eva's claims about aspects of Kevin's childhood are supported by the actions and dialogue of some others, such as Kevin's nanny, Siobhan. Without her input, readers can view Kevin's upbringing from two opposing perspectives: one from Eva and one from Franklin.

Siobhan's behaviors provide evidence for Eva's view and offer her more credibility to the reader.

The nanny eventually quits her position, asking Eva for a job at her travel company (104).

During her resignation, she details how Kevin has challenged her with screaming, throwing objects, and his lack of emotional connection to anyone. Her most severe reaction to her time working with Kevin stems from her new vision of her future: she "used to want a big family" and "now [she's] not so sure" (103). Eva remembers Siobhan as an affectionate, naturally maternal woman when they met, but the nanny's experience with Kevin changes her perception and beliefs about having a family in general. These reactions from Siobhan, as well as the many nannies that came before her, support Eva's view that Kevin was a difficult child. These behaviors indicate some sort of psychological abnormality or distress from birth, lightening Eva's blame.

Even professionals in Eva's life claim that Kevin develops typically and she has no reason for concern, implicating themselves when Kevin commits mass murder; they side with Franklin's assumption of a normative child. Concerned for her son's physiological or psychological wellbeing, Eva brings Kevin to his pediatrician—Dr. Foulke—for a litany of tests, from hearing checks to autism exams. Dr. Foulke seeks to assure Eva, telling her that Kevin is showing "normal developmental behavior," though perhaps slower compared to others his age (112). The young boy should continue to develop normally, eventually meeting the same milestones of his peers. These platitudes silence Eva for a time, though she retrospectively despises the inaccuracies conveyed to her. She comes to understand that Kevin's behaviors are "not a passing developmental stage but a permanent condition" (157). Eva sees Kevin as fundamentally different from other children, especially her daughter, Celia. He lives in a permanent status of hostility. The differences in experience with her children implore readers to

consider if Eva's perception altered her handling of Kevin, treating him more harshly and affecting his development. This would indicate that nurturing played a larger role in Kevin's ultimate crime. Kevin's disinterested temperament never waivers, though he improves his acting abilities to appear "normal." Eva wants a diagnosis for young Kevin, something to cause her to "at least feel sorry for Kevin," but receives no answers (113). If Eva pities her son, she thinks, she could grow to love him more. Kevin is not what she expected, but she is provided an assertion that he suffers from no emotional or physical problems, meaning there are no interventions they can perform. She wants a flaw so she can treat Kevin's problems, but gets little assistance. Dr. Foulke's lack of diagnosis indicates that he either has missed Kevin's psychological problems or Eva is biased against her son, looking for problems. If the former, Shriver points to the larger societal issue of diagnosing mental health. Kevin acts disinterested during testing, but still met the threshold for "normal."

Opposed to their bonds with Kevin, Eva and Franklin reverse their relationships and assumptions in regards to their younger daughter, Celia. Eva wants a second child to prove to herself that she could love a baby and be a "good" mother; as she tells Franklin, she wants "to find something out...about [her] soul" (215-216). After such a negative experience with Kevin, Eva seeks to try again. She craves a child to love, believing it could never be Kevin. Franklin views her surprise pregnancy as a betrayal to him and their son; his resentment towards her allows Eva to act as she chooses and take ownership of their daughter. This agency gives Eva confidence and allows her to enjoy her pregnancy with Celia more than the one with Kevin. Shriver frames Eva's pregnancy and bond with Celia so the reader cannot distinguish if their quality relationship derives from Eva's autonomy, Celia's gentle temperament, or a combination of both. Equally, the reader wonders if Kevin's criminal and violent tendencies reflect an inner

distress, poor familial relationships, or, again, an amalgamation of factors. Interestingly, Shriver does not introduce the girl until about halfway through the novel. Despite the girl's presence in her mother's life, Celia rarely interacts with Kevin.

Once more, Eva shows bias, this time for her daughter and against her son and husband. Eva's joy in her daughter predisposes her to view the good, loving aspects that color Celia's personality. At Celia's birth, Eva notes that Franklin spent less time holding her and proceeds to conjure reasons as to why, claiming that her "deception had been righteous" because of her perfection (221). By asserting Celia's excellence, Eva defends her own position for having a second child and initial secrecy about the pregnancy. Eva reasons that Franklin must regard his "attraction to [his] daughter as a betrayal" to his son (221). Because of Celia's presentation as "perfect," Eva validates her decision to trick Franklin into having another baby and her closer relationship to Celia than Kevin. Eva portrays the child that prefers her, the one she has more ownership over, as faultless. Nevertheless, just like her view of Kevin's childhood, Eva's view of Celia is colored by her ultimate fate. While Kevin's life is told retroactively after his murder spree at his high school, Celia's is shared after her death. The day he attacked students at his high school, Kevin also murdered Celia and Franklin. Eva does not mention Celia in many of her letters and does not reveal that she died until the novel nears its close. Her inability to acknowledge these events shows Eva's emotional turmoil. Kevin's role in her loss would poison him further in Eva's view; her least favorite family member killed those she cared for most. She shares Kevin's history of concerning and delinquent behavior, searching for evidence for her son's reasoning.

Kevin alone can sum up his personal experiences in childhood, though he cannot accurately discuss how much of his behavior is caused by his personality from birth or from his

life experiences. During an interview, Kevin reveals that he was putting on an act for his father, corroborating Eva's assumptions. He feels that his father never understood him and never really loved him. Kevin questions "what does that mean, your dad 'loves' you and hasn't a [bleep]ing clue who you are? What's he love, then? Some kid in *Happy Days*. Not me" (353). To Kevin, Franklin loves the idea of a son more than his actual son. Shriver wants the reader to consider the blend of parental effects and natural tendencies. Here, the author places weight on Franklin's role by having both Eva and Kevin condemn his attitudes. This suggests that poor nurturing from Franklin has affected Kevin's development.

Kevin has a strained relationship with both of his parents, though each claims to understand him best. On the day of the shooting, Kevin verbally lashes out at Franklin, claiming to not care about any of the activities they do together (363-364). When Kevin kills Franklin, he succeeds in ending their false relationship, freeing himself from his domination. While Kevin appears to superficially prefer interacting with his father, his final actions suggest the opposite: he would rather spend his future with only Eva. This is further evidenced by Kevin's reaction to Franklin and Eva's potential divorce, the custody agreement easily agreed upon. Kevin should live with Franklin and Celia with Eva. Kevin eavesdrops on this conversation before entering the room "the furnace doors" of his eyes "swung wide to bare the jets" of his anger (348). He explains that he knows their imminent divorce is his fault, but Eva guesses Kevin's anger also stems from having to live with his father, or "Dad the Dupe" (350). These instances present other reasons why Kevin may have committed his crime: did he resent the role his father put him in? Furthermore, did he hate the prospect of maintaining this role indefinitely without Eva?

Following this potential reasoning, Kevin kills archetypes of social groups at his high school, seeming to resent their comfort in their roles. After years of indifference and a lack of

noticeable personality, Kevin's shooting made him "somebody" (164). His murder defines who he is to the world and, seemingly, to Kevin himself. Unlike the students he kills, he "doesn't have to worry about whether he's a freak or a geek, a grind or a jock or a nerd," (165). Shriver, like Picoult, highlights the common high school desire to associate with a certain group; while Picoult describes the high school cliques as actively rejecting Peter, Kevin chooses to stand apart. Nevertheless, Eva believes that Kevin wants to have an identity like his victims, "coveting the infatuation itself" (247). Because they each enjoy an aspect of their lives, claiming ownership over that aspect, these individuals leave themselves vulnerable to Kevin's disdain. Eva sees Kevin's action as his "appropriation" of these interests through an "ownership of destruction" (247). By killing them and halting their endeavors in their respective areas, Kevin could control them. Eva considers this as a possible reason for Kevin's shooting, wondering if Kevin scorns all roles, viewing them as weaknesses and points of exploitation. Following his later logic, Kevin commits the attack to challenge their interests and to insert entertainment into the routine lives of Americans.

Kevin, however, expresses his own reasoning through dialogue, though many view his answers as ambiguous. As Eva claims, Kevin constantly seems disinterested in the world around him throughout his childhood; this indifference contributes to his logic for killing eleven people. While in a juvenile facility, Kevin accuses the American public of only observing and consuming; they spend their time "watching...people like me. Pretty much the definition of something happening is it's bad" (Shriver, 354). People live monotonous lives, broken only by "apocalyptic sublimines," actions that create an adrenaline-filled sense of doom (Gunn & Beard, 199). To Kevin, the only way to break up the monotony of life is through a bad act; by extension, the only way to cease his constant boredom must be through aggression. Kevin is not

only outlining his own feelings of indifference, but his desire for more excitement and intellectual rigor. He feels dissatisfied with the world around him and—as a commentary on the unconscious discontent he feels those around him must also experience—Kevin lashes out.

Unfortunately, Eva's position as the narrator gives readers only a partial view into Kevin and his life circumstances. Her behavior indicates her own psychological distress. Only as the novel closes does the reader learn that Kevin has murdered his own father and sister before killing eleven more at his high school. Eva recalls the negative aspects of Kevin's childhood, her parental experience running counter to Franklin's. While Kevin most likely shows troublesome behavior to an objective party, the reader cannot ignore this difference. Shriver intends for her audience to understand how violent actions cannot always be prevented; at times, they occur randomly and without reason. This goes against the theory that "dangerous students give themselves away. They can be spotted, ergo, they can be stopped" (316). Because of media saturation and novels like Picoult's, many Americans have come to believe in the validity of "warning signs." Shriver rejects the notion set forth by Picoult that mass shootings can be averted through understanding and communication. Kevin shows some troubling behavior, but does so inconsistently to people other than Eva, meaning any indication of a psychological problem is overlooked. This underscores the randomness often associated with shootings. Psychology, family, peer groups, and general life events complicate circumstances. Because individuals cannot control these factors, Shriver argues, Americans struggle to avoid these tragedies.

As Eva writes these letters to Franklin, she visits Kevin, trying to better understand him; meanwhile, Kevin lives in a juvenile penitentiary where inmates either fear him or harass him. Kevin's interview reveals that he, like Shriver, hates the materialistic, consuming culture in

America and, wanting to be part of the spectacle, kills his peers (354). As Kevin approaches his eighteenth birthday—meaning he will move to an adult facility for five more years—Eva asks him why again. Now, Kevin’s answer changes as he says “I used to think I knew...Now I’m not so sure” (397). His experience in prison challenged Kevin’s beliefs. As evidenced in his youth, Kevin either did not care about or did not understand the world around him. After being forced to analyze himself and his actions through solitary and meetings with psychologists, Kevin realizes he does not understand himself. Eva describes his inability to maintain eye contact with her as he explains this, meaning Kevin now feels apprehensive in his act (397). Only here, as Kevin feels confused by his past and terrified for his future, does he show remorse, crying and hugging Eva, perhaps even muttering “I’m sorry” (398). While Kevin transforms, Eva also changes her views. She has gone back to deconstruct various aspects of her life, shifting her feelings for her son. Now that Eva has lost her husband and her daughter, she feels “too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting... [she] love[s] her son” (400). She abandons their constant friction and acknowledges that she may have a basic instinct to love her son, her only family left. Only after Kevin has broken down and admitted his own vulnerability can Eva feel like the two can build a connection. She desires affection, even from the son she once despised.

Now that they exist as the only two members of their family, they welcome each other in their shared state of guilt. The courts find Kevin guilty of all counts of murder, but find Eva innocent in her implication in his crime (398). Nevertheless, her community and the media consider her guilty. About a month after Kevin’s murders, Eva’s neighbors vandalize her new house; she awakes to find “crimson paint splashed all over the front porch” making it “slathered with hatred” (7; 9). Her community rejects her and marks her house with red splatters of paint,

symbolizing the blood shed by her son, indicating their disdain and blame for Eva. They scorn her, marking her as an outsider. The parents of Kevin's victims have differing approaches to Eva: Mary Woolford despises Eva while Thelma Corbitt pities her (140). Representing the majority, Mary Woolford—mother of Kevin's victim Laura—had a “consuming conviction” to receive retribution from Eva (139). She leads the lawsuit against Eva for parental negligence, constantly insults her, and holds her nurturing accountable for Kevin's actions. To find her own closure, Mary blames Eva alone. Eva, however, does not believe that the law suit will help Mary move past the tragedy, claiming “the problem [is] not who was punished for what. The problem [is] that her daughter [is] dead” (67). Kevin is easily convicted in court, but that does not satisfy Mary or many of the other victims' parents. The progression of events seems too simple for the pain she and the others feel, causing her to attempt inflicting suffering on Eva. The media often takes her perspective when covering Eva's role in Kevin's shooting, classifying Eva as “mother to one of those ‘Columbine boys’” (45). Journalists group Kevin with other school shooters, simplifying the narrative even in Shriver's fiction. They ignore his differences and streamline his narrative to fit the now common story perpetuated since the real Columbine High School shooting. By taking a stand against Eva, Mary and mass media indicate their belief that Eva's parenting has played a role with their blame, showing their favoring of the power of nurturing on development.

Conversely, Thelma Corbitt approaches Eva with sympathy; she does not actively blame anyone for Kevin's crime. She views their experience as “hell...but it was everybody's hell, this big, shoreless, sloshing sea of toxic waste” (140). Thelma includes Eva in her consideration of suffering parents. She views Eva as also having lost the son she knew. Despite Kevin having killed her son, Denny, Thelma believes that Eva has “it harder than any of them” because she

could not move on past the experience (141). Kevin and his actions would always have a presence in Eva's life, preventing her from moving on. Thelma forgives Eva easily, perhaps believing that a biological component influenced Kevin's actions. Eva feels the most frazzled and vulnerable in front of her because she has come to expect blame from others. Despite the court's ruling in her favor and Thelma's forgiveness, Eva does not feel liberated, still sensing that she must pay some sort of reparation to stop feeling "hideous...and desolate" (399). These feelings of guilt do not ebb until she sees Kevin at his lowest, finally understanding and loving him. She recognizes him as a vulnerable human, her son. Eva decides that her guilt in Kevin's shooting no longer matters, it will not change the past; however, Eva can move forward with her son once he is released from jail.

As she exposes what actually occurred during Kevin's mass murder, Shriver destroys the expectations readers have formed based on mass media reports and literature in this genre. Throughout the novel, Eva refuses to fully acknowledge the true event, referring to it only as "Thursday." The reader expects a typical school shooting, like those they have witnessed through literature and media, including the past crimes Eva recalls learning about through television. As the novel closes, Shriver changes the narrative. Rather than a rampage, as told in the historical Columbine shooting and Picoult's fictional *Nineteen Minutes*, Kevin has a calculated plan of attack. Picoult's novel came after Shriver's, but her plot follows the tale set by the media; she does not notice the problems that Shriver looks towards. Kevin sends invitations to his victims: nine students and one teacher (369-370). Kevin plans for these individuals, typical overachievers or archetypes of their social groups, to meet in the gymnasium at a certain time. After they arrive, Kevin locks the doors and takes his place on a balcony above the floor. This plan indicates Kevin's psychological problems further; he experiences no single incident that

causes him extreme distress, a common reason indicated by journalists and authors like Picoult. Elements of calm planning are rarely emphasized in their coverage. Kevin has a history of violence, culminating in this plot against his classmates. He stands against the norm, abhorring it in his daily life and in his Thursday crime. Shriver designs Kevin to reject the expectations of the American public as influenced by the media and other authors. Furthermore, rather than a rifle—handheld or assault—Kevin uses a bow and arrow (360). Many stories, whether literary or media based, focus on the more common firearm to push for more strict gun laws. By having Kevin use a bow and arrow, like the titular character of his favorite book *Robin Hood*, Shriver prevents a continuation of that legal narrative. Kevin's actions pervert a seemingly innocent children's story, shocking the reader. Shriver comments on the genre taking a collective stance against firearms by instead choosing to acknowledge the many societal and psychological shortcomings the United States ignores. These unexpected elements point to Shriver's emphasis on social and media criticisms, rather than the obvious didactic elements found in other works.

Shriver seeks to undercut the media and works like those written by Picoult. She begins her narrative by leading the reader to believe they are going to read a similar novel: a school shooting performed by an emotionally volatile, lonesome teenager. Kevin defies expectations. He is not bullied, has a few friends, and even seems "average" to others in his life, excluding his mother. Eva even claims "the poor-persecuted-misfit, we-must-do-something-to-stop-bullying-in-schools number wouldn't go very far" as a defense in court (361). She believes these defenses hold little weight and entirely do not apply to Kevin. His attack takes place in the gymnasium with invited victims, rather than a chaotic shooting through the school. While he has a list, they have little personal connection to him. The choice of weapon even represents an exception: he uses a bow rather than a gun. By defying the expected narrative, Shriver forces her audience to

consider what they consume from the media and novelists like Picoult; the story is often more complicated than initially presented. While Shriver seeks to note the problems with the genre, Picoult falls into many of the pitfalls. Even though her work was published about four years after Shriver, Picoult successfully follows the formulaic storyline like the writers and journalists before her. Furthermore, readers must understand the multi-faceted aspects of guilt in these types of crimes. Picoult largely looks the individuals and their role in the mass shooting at Sterling High School. Instead, Shriver lets the reader decide whether nature or nurture had a greater impact on Kevin's development, though Eva eventually stops blaming herself. Realistically, Kevin's outcome was the result of a variety of factors. His aggressive predisposition, combined with Eva's lack of maternal instinct, leads to their strained relationship. Kevin's temperament and environment interact across his childhood and teenage years, leading to his eventual crime. Readers open her novel expecting to read a story typical of the genre, like that of Picoult, but receive a tale that shares a complex story about shortcomings in motherhood, childhood, and American society.

## Conclusion

While commonalities can be found, readers of literature and media must understand the complexity of school shooting events. Different attackers will have varying home lives, interests, and psychological dispositions. Some may have a personal vendetta and others will simply want to inflict pain. Media—from television news to print articles—often oversimplify the events while seeming to glorify the attacker into infamy. Unfortunately, this coverage has also led to an over-saturation of information, meaning audiences are constantly bombarded with facts from the same, simple narrative of school shootings (Gunn & Beard, 199). This reinforces the unreliable signs of school shooter; when the next attack occurs, individuals still feel shocked and devastated, despite any “information” they may have previously received. Mass coverage helps no one. Authors like Jodi Picoult seek to expand elements of this simple narrative, attempting to reveal what may lead to these tragedies. She offers details through characters to present a possible scenario. In contrast, Lionel Shriver criticizes the media industry and literary genre, noting that audience members have come to seek out these stories, finding them titillating. She violates expectations to hold a mirror up to her readers so they can learn the errors in this dynamic between journalists, authors, and their audiences. Traditional, informational news has become overwrought with entertainment news, where facts are presented to excite readers and viewers (Althiede, 247). Rather than reporting the truth, media profits from their audience’s stimulation, including terror. Additionally, Shriver provides an unreliable narrator, prompting readers to question the source of their information and its credibility. Mass media outlets seek to profit from simple, yet stimulating, narratives; as a result, they may fail to report facts accurately. Where Picoult seeks to advise, Shriver showcases human faults.

Picoult exemplifies many of the aspects grounding the genre of fictional literature about school shootings by offering a theoretical reason for these crimes and warning her readers. As a best-selling author, her work reaches a wide audience. She and the novelists that preceded and followed her share the narrative of a troubled youth acting out by performing a school shooting. Picoult complicates the plot slightly by humanizing the attacker and those closest to him, but she fails to note the various possibilities and complexities that accompany crimes. She favors a surprise ending rather than the influences biology and experience have on a person's development. Each character expresses their feelings of guilt, prompting the reader to reflect on his or her own treatment of others. Picoult's purely circumstantial reason for school shootings largely ignores a psychological or biological problem on behalf of the shooter. Shriver seeks to change the expectations established in the genre, primarily by including no obvious aspect of didacticism. Though her novel came before Picoult's, Shriver responds to the simple narrative shaped by other novelists and many journalists. She argues that circumstances and predisposition influence a person's outcome.

Readers will not achieve new understandings about humanity, development, and crime if they constantly consume the same rhetoric. According to critics, this limited focus only produces feelings of doom and terror (Althiede, 230). It perpetuates the industry of fear at the expense of Americans' sanity and understanding (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 127). When their audience feels fear and seeks more answers, mass media and novelists profit. Many writers—both of news and fiction—continue to benefit from these narratives while promoting limited change. Picoult works to teach her readers wariness, but in doing so, encourages them to fear their children and their peers (Althiede, 230). Fear generates little effective change and will not promote active conversation; instead, it traps readers into consuming more works in pursuit of

unattainable answers. In response, complex stories, like *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, offer a dynamic view of the many factors that can lead to violent behaviors. Nevertheless, even Shriver promotes an element of fear, though she generalizes it to the ability of any person becoming hostile and aggressive. The worry she instills in her readers extends to all people, not only teenagers. While Picoult's work considers one possibility for a school shooting, Shriver questions how experience and disposition can influence a person into becoming extremely violent. Shriver also looks towards the biases of those who tell these stories. Both authors ask important questions and encourage readers to think critically about their society. Picoult focuses on the treatment of others and Shriver entreats readers for better recognition of the factors that lead to aggression.

With varying degrees of success, Picoult and Shriver authors contribute to an important, ongoing discussion that must occur in the United States as the rate of mass shootings continues to rise. The American populace must not accept a simple, single story and should instead look for the dynamic, complex features that may make up the factors that lead to these crimes. They must understand that commonalities may exist, but each happenstance has unique elements. Readers must analyze and consider the factors that contribute to crimes and the validity of their information. No one can create a set profile or know every circumstance, but by addressing mental health issues, societal expectations, and firearm possession and violence, progress can occur.

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**EDUCATION**

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- The Pennsylvania State University*
- The College of the Liberal Arts
    - English Major
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  - Study Abroad Experience
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    - Dean's List (All Semesters)
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**CLUBS AND EXTRACURRICULARS**

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- American Mock Trial Association (AMTA)*
- Present a cohesive argument of a yearly, fictional case problem against other universities
  - Oversee and educate newer members as Team Captain (2016-2017)
- Rince Na Leon*
- Practice, compete, and perform with other Irish dancers at chartable and cultural events

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**VOLUNTEER WORK**

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- The Penn State IFC/PanHellenic Dance Marathon (THON)*
- Raise money to offset the cost of treatments and other financial burdens for families battling pediatric cancer
  - Support dancers in a 46-hour dance marathon every February
  - Previous positions
    - Dancer Relations committee member (2013-2014)
    - Rules and Regulations: Event Safety committee member (2014-2016)
      - Family Relations Specialist: 2014-2015
      - Fundraising Leader: 2015-2016
      - Public Relations/Entertainment Specialist: 2015-2016
    - Donor Alumni Relations: Alumni Engagement committee member (2016-2017)
    - Independent Dancer Chairperson (2016-2017)

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**EMPLOYMENT HISTORY**

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- West Chester YMCA (2012-2016)*
- Brandy's Playground: Babysitting Associate
    - Supervise and care for the children of YMCA members, aged 0 to 6 years
    - Maintain a safe and clean environment the children to learn and play
  - Y-Zone Associate
    - Oversee and entertain 7- to 14-year-olds in various indoor and outdoor activities
  - Daycare and Preschool: Substitute Teachers' Aid
    - Assist in managing the midday activities for the 3-year-old preschool students