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## **Of women and children. Bad mothers as rough heroes**

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### **1. Framing the rough hero**

In focusing her work on women and the ethics of care in crime narratives, Caroline Reitz uses the definition “global detective fiction” (Reitz 2014, p. 20), thus framing the genre in terms of that “global literature” that has been raising so much debate in recent times. It appears quite obvious that this notion and its many complexities are actually invading the raging debate about World Literature, from David Damrosch to Franco Moretti & Eric Hayot, from Gayatri Spivak to Claudio Guillém and beyond (Levine 2014), a debate that is far from concluded but about which I firmly agree with Apter: it must be taken into account that most Global Literature is written in English, though not necessarily resulting from an English-speaking culture (Apter 2013, pp. 20–38). With this considerations in mind, I want to borrow Reitz’s definition – global detective fiction – and some of her basic assumptions to reflect on the status of female characters as heroes in some current crime narratives, both literary and visual, and to analyse some “revised versions” of a specific aspect of femininity that used to be agreed upon, at least in patriarchal cultures. I want to speak of mothers and of their complex relation with their children: though my primary focus is on femininity, my argument implies a degree of reciprocity that makes it impossible to isolate one profile from the other. The discourse on mothers and children has deep implications for power, culture, representation, tradition, oppression and the desire to break free from several deeply-set social expectations.

The stories I’m going to select are all related to motherhood. All of them are “public” narratives and, to a large extent, fiction<sup>1</sup>. Most of them belong to the field of popular culture, while some are labelled as highbrow literature. All of them raise the issue of what crime is and state an unusual notion of heroism. They inflect motherhood not only as a private and highly

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<sup>1</sup> I would ignore, on purpose, the current fortune of true crime series narratives – such as *Making a Murderer* (Netflix, 2015) and *Amanda Knox* (Netflix, 2016), because they respond to a different kind of media strategy.



intimate experience, but also as a social problem, to focus the community's attention on the loneliness of mothers and children, the risks that this loneliness implies and the reactions it is bound to trigger.

Strictly speaking, not all the narratives I'm going to refer to may be included in the category of detective fiction, though most of them imply a dysfunctional community and a woman (or more) reacting to unfair treatment. What I want to show is that recent narratives certainly depict some new versions of female heroism, sometime dangerously flirting with evil, and certainly reacting to a lack of social justice. And they do recover a notion of commitment that had got lost in recent narratives.

## 2. Armed to the teeth

I start from a familiar story, stemming from Greek mythology, and whose impact on current Western cultures is normally underrated. The story is quite simple: Medea was an enchantress who fell in love with Jason. For love, she exploited her magic powers to help her lover to find and take possession of the Golden Fleece. After successfully completing their enterprise, the two settled in Corinth and had children. As sometimes happens in real life, Medea was then betrayed and deserted for another woman, and she took revenge in a very cruel and brutal way. She killed the children that Jason had fathered, after poisoning her lover's new wife. At a symbolic level, the infanticide resulted from a more complex tangle of reasons than the killing of Jason's new woman. It was in fact intended to remove any trace of her previous love and physically punish that part of herself – embodied in the flesh of her children – that had loved the wrong man. In perceiving the rift between the kind of life she would like to lead – including here a specific kind of relationship with her man – and motherhood, she took to an extreme line of reasoning: the end of a love also meant, for her, the removal of what that love had “produced” - not only feelings but also children.

The ritual described in the myth is often tragically re-enacted in the real world. In her report on murderous mothers, the journalist Adriana Pannitteri describes the patients of Castiglione dello Stiviere, a psychiatric asylum specializing in psychologically troubled and sometimes homicidal women, founded in 1939 and closed in 2013, due to cuts in health care. Pannitteri spent a long time, more than one year, together with these women, and concluded that:

Si sottovaluta invece quello che è il problema della malattia mentale, che è un altro aspetto, un'altra chiave di lettura del filicidio. Le donne che ho incontrato a Castiglione dello Stiviere e le loro parole mi spingono a pensare che la ragione profonda dell'omicidio di un figlio sia l'annullamento di se stesse. Quasi sempre, del resto, la madre uccide e tenta di togliersi la vita e dunque cancella e annulla quella parte di sé che rappresenta la nascita, le mani uccidono ciò che non sono riuscite pienamente ad amare, la loro stessa identità. Eliminando il bambino, spiegano i medici, cancellano la parte di sé che non riconoscono e non amano (Pannitteri 2006, p. 23).

The act of killing one's own child is of course an extreme decision that clashes with the Western paradigm equating the “good woman” to the “good mother”. Armed to the teeth, as Paul Valéry suggests, to get into their deeper selves (Valéry 2016, 26), these women represent a harsh objection to the patriarchal vision of womanhood. They reject the generally shared assumption that any aggressive, bad, uncaring attitude by a mother to her children is normally – and socially - considered as unnatural, precisely because maternity, and the spirit of self-



sacrifice and devotion going with it, is *natural*. A woman is not supposed to *learn* to be a mother: *she knows*. She spontaneously behaves as one when having a child. She needs no help. She needs no support. She's the Madonna, and ideally every woman is the mother of her own master and god.

At closer quarters, the woman's relation to motherhood appears ambiguous, and it may appear in the form of a punishment rather than a privilege. What I'm interested in here is instead the way in which the suppositions and presuppositions about women and infanticide are shown as such in the circuit of culture, which, as Stuart Hall states, "is about shared meanings" (Hall and Open University 1997, p. 1), or the kind of common knowledge moulding the symbolic universe we live by.

If we agree that storytelling is supposed to consolidate common sense, the opposite is also the case: roughly from the fifties onwards, in Europe as well as in the US, stories developing around a revised version of femininity have been proliferating. Most of them work on the accepted Western canon, reversing it in tales that acquire a totally different meaning. When she works on the canon of Western fairy tales, Angela Carter does not simply translate Perrault<sup>2</sup>, but also writes *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, and there she does not confirm the kind of stereotypes women are supposed to adapt to, but proposes different kinds of "female performances" exploiting the basic texture of traditional fairy tale (2006).

One of the consequences of revisions of the female profile that has become very prominent in recent times appears in the resistance of current crime fiction to unconditionally accept the aggressively masculine paradigm supported by Raymond Chandler, which used to dominate traditional hard-boiled detective fiction (Chandler 2008). This paradigm is becoming increasingly unable to translate into the current state of the art.

I would suggest that we are experiencing what I'd like to call a "Medea moment", resulting in several narratives – in global detective fiction – that openly replicate the Greek myth (Grazia Verasani, *From Medea*, 2004) or implicitly suggest it (Sophie Hannah, *A Room Swept White*, 2010). Whether the victims are totally innocent (as in *From Medea*), or troubled and troublesome (as in *A Room Swept White*), the act continues to be socially considered, without any discussion, as a murder against nature, the irrefutable evidence that the killer is out of her mind.

Infanticide is deemed the most extreme manifestation of a deviation from normative femininity in Western cultures. And it may take many forms. In her *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Sarah Kane provides an adaptation of another Greek myth - that of the mother falling in love with her foster son. Reworking Seneca's classical tragedy, Kane tells the same story of incest and socially unapproved lust, emphasizing the way in which Phaedra's obsessive love reverses to become rage and revenge when she is rejected. Her own suicide appears as a twisted though effective way of causing Hippolytus's death through Theseus's hands. Phaedra's husband, who is also Hippolytus's father, believes Phaedra's post-mortem story of rape and punishes his own son with death. At the same time, Phaedra's purpose in committing suicide is double-edged: as Graham Saunders states, "Ironically it is Phaedra's death that provides the incontrovertible proof needed for Hippolytus to be convinced of her love for him" (Saunders 2002, pp. 77–79).

In a way, women's problems with motherhood seem to point to the continual negotiation that women are obliged to suffer between private lives and social structures in specific cultures. The ways in which this negotiation is represented in crime narrative are, I believe, a largely

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Carter's translation of Charles Perrault's *Fairy Tales* was published in 1977. It was criticized because her translation appeared too "liberal".



uncharted territory, the land where being a mother is a complex affair, very far from the supposedly quiet and lyrical reality of maternity in the stereotypes of patriarchy.

In the circuit of Western cultures, despite the many changes produced by feminism, technology and a work policy more oriented towards the support of women and maternity, the core meaning of being a mother has remained so far basically untouched, and signifies something totally good, totally tender, totally satisfying and totally feminine. In a quite unforeseen way, this stereotype has increased the tension between private selves and social systems. Harm is not separate from care; quite the opposite. In time, the two attitudes have interwoven gradually, though inescapably, making for more and more complex disruptions in terms of the traditional female stereotypes.

The rethinking of the operational female paradigm that Reitz outlines in her “Nancy Drew, Dragon Tattoo” shows how vital an approach more aware of the social challenge implied in being a woman could be in understanding the future of detective fiction (Reitz 2014). This approach should take into consideration the unarguable fact that, in global detective fiction, the universe of good and evil is no longer dichotomic but rhizomatic.

In traditional crime fiction – as happens in the Bible, by the way – women may cover two evil roles, the Medea-like one and the Phaedra-like one. Accordingly, in crime fiction the figure of the woman has been inflected basically in two roles: the prostitute (sinful) and the mother (praiseworthy). The former easily becomes a negative profile, though normally not dangerous (i.e. a victim rather than a killer) and a normative representation of Foucault’s idea of a self-disciplined body, not simply female but also despicable, shameful and therefore not to be respected as a living entity. The mother is more complex. Originally incarnating the sacred body, responsible for granting the survival of the human species and required to “perform” (Butler) as a reproductive organism, she may easily become a deadly creature, taking revenge for having been oppressed and abused, physically and symbolically, by the community.

The witch and the prostitute are sharply separated into two radically different models, very easy to tell apart because their difference is *visible on their bodies*. “Skin shows”, as Halberstam argues (Halberstam 1995). And in the case of motherhood, “skin shows” quite obviously. This may account for the creation of a new kind of female hero whose key aspect is the rejection and/or reconfiguration of the notion of motherhood to regain control of her own body. This attitude is not necessarily experienced as negative. Rather it is perceived as an aspect of a more complex – and socially less acceptable – way of being a woman.

Basically, what is shown is that the myth of good maternity is an ideological and rhetorical construct. There is nothing is natural about it. And this position, though not openly supported, keeps on surfacing, mostly with no awareness whatsoever, in many narratives of contemporary times.

### 3. Performing as mothers

*The Killing* premiered on AMC on April 3, 2011, in the golden years of TV series on digital channels (Rossini 2016, 85–130). An adaptation of an originally Danish TV drama, the series was already quite popular when Veena Sud decided to propose an American version, in the same way as Orson Welles had reworked some masterpieces of the British literary canon for his radio program *The Mercury Theatre on Air* (CBS Radio, 1938)<sup>3</sup>. The story was approximately

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<sup>3</sup> The project consisted in a series of readings from XIX-century masterpieces, some of which were “reset” in the US. The most famous programme of this kind was the one that took place on Halloween



the same, but it was reset in the US and it had a more explicitly North American flavour. Therefore, Sud's *The Killing* is set in a dull grey and inhospitable Seattle (Washington) soaked with rain and mud; the main characters are slightly reworked and the plots are adapted to the American (and international) audience's tastes.

One of the reasons accounting for the immediate popularity of the series was said to be the main character's profile, an unusual detective, rather discontinuous with the formulae of the genre. Right from Episode 1, Sarah Linden (Mireille Enos) stands out as a strong woman, maybe too strong, extraordinarily smart in her job and an unbelievable disaster as a mother. A divorced woman, she is in charge – and she insisted on being the one in charge – of her tennage son Jack, who is in fact on his own most of the time. She misses school meetings, forgets about medical check-ups, often comes back home late at night and is in fact totally unable to transmit her love and care to her son. When she finds a man prodigiously ready to marry her and build a family, she pulls back at the last minute. Instead, she plunges headlong into an investigation that she was not meant to deal with. Even in her relationship with her mate, Homicide Detective Stephen Holder (Joel Kinnaman), she tends to perform a gender-neutral role and to reject any gender-specific behaviour, thus reacting to the pressure of the community, that would like her to conform to the brand-new model of a successful professional and a magnificent mother<sup>4</sup>.

Popular narratives, as Raymond Williams used to insist, are the most reliable mirror of changes in the community. It may therefore be plausible that Linden's popularity is at least partly due to the female lack of satisfaction with the traditional notion of motherhood. Linden's resistance to conforming to / refusal to conform to the familiar profile of the good mother – even in its most recent combination with the twin notions of good wife and good professional – is however combined with the female character's framing in a genre that simply does not contemplate this articulation of the hero. It is true that Linden belongs to a not-so-short line of women detectives that has been developing since Miss Marple, but it is also quite evident that her combining the “male” virtue of rationality, physical endurance and total absence of fear with the centrality of her role as a mother, a role she *wants* to embrace though she proves unable to fill it in practice, is a new feature in an old character. This kind of female profile is revolutionary in crime fiction, because, as Reddy suggests, it disrupts the traditional ideological position operating in Chandler and held to be unchallengeable until very recently (Reddy 2003, p. 54). Moreover, such a profile questions the very concept of being a hero, since the notion of bravery and rectitude in punishing evil actions is combined with a highly arguable and possibly “immoral” private life (Chandler 2008, pp. 210–15). A bad single mother with a personal background of psychiatric disorders, Linden is far from being a model. She appears constantly troubled by her inability to adapt (to her professional context, to her role as a mother, to her would-be husband, even to her partner, nevertheless representing the most positive relationship she has all through the three seasons of the TV drama). Apparently icy-cold, she is in fact so troubled by the disappearance of Rosie Larsen that she lets herself be sucked into the investigation.

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1938, when Welles aired H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* pretending that the Martian invasion was actually happening in New York. And the audience believed his words (see Vallorani 2012, 83–95).

<sup>4</sup> The model seems to be increasingly popular in recent TV crime dramas, from *Criminal Minds* (US, 2005-2017), with JJ, a member of the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) who has a totally “institutional” and functional family, to *Candice Renoir* (Fr. 2013-2016), with a protagonist who is also the mother of four children. The popularity of such a paradigm is apparently related to a sort of nostalgia for successful motherhood even when the protagonist's job is challenging and has so much to do with death



On closer examination, her involvement appears far from unexpected. More or less explicitly, her reactions are related to the complex ways in which Rosie's kidnapping and consequent murder trigger a reflection on motherhood, the loss of a child, the inability to protect one's own offspring. The first and second seasons of the series cover the first two weeks of the investigation and approach the issue of the Larsen family's attempts to deal with their grief. At the same time, they introduce a comparison between Sarah's family condition (Jack Linden as a frequently deserted teenage son and Rick Felder, a *fiancé*, who wants to marry her, but is constantly deceived) and the family of the abducted and then killed girl (Mitch and Stan Larsen, and their children), who are presented as an apparently close-knit family, later revealed as dysfunctional and full of complexities. Rosie is a ghostly presence in the story, the chosen victim whose disappearance triggers a quest that is both physical and psychological. Within this context, Linden's pursuit of social justice happens to interweave personal and professional reasons, that sometimes impair her judgement but at the same time provide her with a deeper ability to "see" what would otherwise be totally invisible. Female detectives – states Caroline Reitz – are "always more than individuals. Care ethics presents a way to prevent social justice from always collapsing into personalized justice dispensed by, in Chandler's words, 'the best man in his world' (Chandler 2008: 219)" (Reitz 2014, p. 23). Though personalized justice tends to define Linden's behaviour in some specific contingencies, I would agree with Reitz and posit the notion of care ethics as the hub of this character, with specific reference to motherhood. In this respect, season 3 introduces new variables. In time, Linden has progressively become less and less reliable both as a mother and as a detective. Unable to overcome her repeated psychiatric breakdowns, she has finally accepted the separation from her son and this seems to ratify a very feminine resignation to falling victim of her own emotions. It may be relevant that Season 3 develops around the murders of some girl prostitutes, whose life and fate somehow reflect Linden's profile. A deserted child herself, she belongs to the limited number of "saved" girls, but she remembers very well the experiences she was obliged to go through. Curiously, the double inflection of the prostitute archetype is totally traditional, and contemplates the young destitute girl who is choosing to live on the street and sell her body for money, and the prostitute mother, who's unable to take care of her daughter because she is too interested in men. In both versions, the prostitute is a docile body (Foucault 1977, p. 130), that performs "established gender norms in an extremely repetitive way, routinely replicating what is expected from them, so that eventually this repetition produces the feeling that their performance is the enactment of internal identity" (Butler 2006, p. 128). The prostitute spontaneously adapts to a negative social rule / role (?) that makes her into a socially repulsive gendered subject whose behaviour is legally sanctioned, whose existence is hidden and secluded and whose voice is silenced. The prostitute's adaptation to the negative social role may also result from the inability to live up to expectations. When Phaedra falls in love with her foster son instead of automatically becoming a good mother after marrying Theseus, she proves unable to live up to the social and cultural expectations of the world she belongs to. And she becomes at the same time individually repulsive and the symptom of a community that is not working properly, the bearer of a meaning transcending her individual fate. In the same way, in *The Killing* S03, both Sarah Linden and the killed prostitutes end up by being catalysts. They are meant to reinforce a basic, never forgotten, hidden but ever-present principle: the natural order of things is that a woman finds a husband and obeys him, or any man nearby. If she doesn't, the transgression will be exposed and punished. And her punishment is her separation from her child, either in the form of desertion or in the form of a murder.



There are of course different inflections of the same character, with some kinds of narrative choosing to show a Linden-model in a less problematic way. Robin Griffin (Elizabeth Moss) seems to suggest a different possibility. Woman Detective protagonist of *Top of the Lake* (Sundance TV & BBC Two, 2013). We first meet detective Griffin in the course of an investigation concerning the disappearance of a troubled pregnant twelve-year-old child. She stumbles into the investigation when she comes back to her hometown, in New Zealand, hoping to take a holiday but in fact getting involved in a criminal investigation that will interlace personal and collective issues. Pregnancy – regular, interrupted, rejected, secret and so on and so forth – is very much the focus of this crime drama, the first and only one so far directed by Jane Campion. Griffin was raped as a teenager and went to have her child in Australia choosing to give up her newborn baby for adoption at once. Tui, instead, is the natural child of a local drug lord, Matt Mitcham (Peter Mullan) who seems to have fathered most village children. Even Robin’s mother, when she was young, had something to do with Mitcham, though to what extent it is not clear. In this complex, symbolic tangle of fatherhood, imperialism, patriarchy and Western power, Griffin stands out as a peculiar female character, a woman who experienced rape as a terrible though liberating experience, that led her to become a different kind of woman, a tough cop, never afraid to face a man, though in fact unable to build a love relationship (in this sense being quite like Sarah Linden). At the same time, the past can’t be forgotten and it is quite clear that Griffin’s curt manners are a way to keep her secrets safe<sup>5</sup>. And the secrets mostly concern her hidden pregnancy and her basic inability to peacefully accept her separation from her child.

Implicitly, therefore, Griffin and her investigation recall the enormous cultural pressure exercised on women as “natural” mothers who are supposed to conform to a religious mythography largely influencing popular feeling about maternity. In no circumstances are they supposed to reject the “call to maternity” and the idea of motherhood as a “natural” feminine attitude.

What happens in fact is that the paradigm of the mother as a sacred profile does not fit into the contemporary Western world. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is a paradigmatic story in this respect. Both the novel (2003) and the film (2011) show the main character as a woman basically unable to successfully perform as a mother. Resistant to motherhood, Eva has drifted towards this social role without being fully convinced of the choice she was making, and this may have produced Kevin’s aggressive behaviour as a natural consequence of Eva failing to play the role of the perfect mother. The name itself – Eva - is not chosen by chance, echoing the fatally disobedient woman of the Bible, whose act determined the loss of the Garden of Eden. Eve disobeyed, she ate the apple and she was punished by becoming not only human but also a mother. Motherhood was therefore intended as a punishment, and it was coupled with the obligation to obey the husband’s rule:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be to* thy husband, and he shall rule over thee (King James Bible, Genesis: 3)

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<sup>5</sup> Similar experiences are lived through by a surprising number of successful women detectives in global crime fiction. The protagonist of McCall Smith’s series of the *Ladies’ Detective Agency*, Mma Ramotswe, is a victim of sexual assault, and then marries the man who raped her and bears his child. And Lisbeth Salander, in Stieg Larsson’s very famous *Millennium Trilogy*, is totally molded, as a character, by the experience of having been repeatedly violated.



In short, being a mother was neither a choice nor a symbol of distinction, but rather God's punishment, and it was meant to be intensely physical. It impressed a mark on the woman's body that "spoke" her sin and shaped it in the form of a child. The child was the sign spelling punishment, and he/she resulted from violence (the sexual act) and physical suffering (childbirth).

Despite the many changes produced by feminism in our Western cultures, technology and a work policy more oriented towards the protection of women and maternity, the core meaning of being a mother has stayed basically untouched so far, and it signifies something totally good, totally tender, totally satisfying and totally feminine.

Eva, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, carries all these implications in her being a mother. She struggles to come to terms with her son and the horrors he has committed. She goes on taking care of him notwithstanding. She fights against the neighbours, threatening her family life, and later, seeing her loneliness as the right punishment for her having been a bad mother. Most of all, the whole story gives relevance to something that, in cases of bad motherhood and/or infanticide, is never stated: the child may be bad, and at all not easy to handle.

#### 4. The bad child

Medea's children, minor figures in the myth, are the prototypes of innocent victims. And besides being a bit frothy, Hippolytus is not to blame for Phaedra's falling in love with him and then deciding to commit suicide, placing the guilt on him for something he never did. In the same way, in *The Killing*, Jack has no responsibility for his mother's misbehaviour: he patiently waits for Sarah's attention, which never comes. Kevin presents a different profile: that of a son somehow cooperating with – if not determining – his mother's faulty choices.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva is the hero and focus of the entire narrative. She is the first-person narrator in the novel and the dominant point of view in the film. There are slight differences between the two versions of the same story. More specifically, the 2011 British-American dramatic film adapted from Lionel Shriver's novel incorporates elements of the horror and thriller genres and chooses a more "institutional" kind of representation, which seems "kinder" towards women. Kevin, the child, *is* a problem. Even though his mother's reactions are reproachable, she implicitly has plenty of reasons to be a bad mother. Kevin's intractability seems to justify Eva's inability to be a good mother.

In both texts, however, the most impressive aspect of the female character is her appalling loneliness, resulting from her perceived anomaly as a woman and as a mother. On closer examination, in fact all through the story, Eva goes on protecting her child, though in a distorted way and with no comprehension whatsoever of who or what he is, and why he is wrecking her life. When she tries to talk to her husband to share her increasing concern about Kevin's problems, he proves unable to understand and see the impending tragedy and dismisses her words, making excuses for Kevin's behaviour. Once left alone with her son, finally in jail after killing most of his family, she still tries to support him, and to take care of him, despite what he has done.

The critical reception of the two texts, in particular of the film, gathers diversified positions. The emotional impact of the story, evoking many true-crime school shootings in the US, was very intense. And though reprehensible in many respects, Eva has her own way of sticking to the profile of the good mother, standing by her son whatever he does.

At the same time, the representation of motherhood provided in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is disturbing, negative, ambiguous, and ultimately helpless. When everything has already





happened, Eva goes over her life again and tries to discover if there was perhaps one key, terrible misjudgement or failing in her as a mother, which set her son off on the road to murder. She is gaunt, hollow-eyed, stunned: her eyes are almost blind, as if she can see only memories. And perhaps it is not that she created Kevin, but that Kevin created her. When she realizes this possibility, she comes very near to the truth, though the past cannot be changed. In fact, her only identity now is that of someone who gave birth to horror. Meaningfully enough, in the film, when Kevin's parents get so angry as to tell him that perhaps he hasn't understood the "context" of their quarrel, he provocatively retorts: "I am the context" (Bradshaw 2011).

Again, the main point with Eva – and what makes her neighbours so aggressive towards her, particularly in the film – is the basic assumption that a child's misbehaviour is his mother's fault. The child is, by definition in Western cultures, an innocent. He is a victim, deserving neither violence nor a premature death.

As it is easily understandable, the supposed sacrality of motherhood in Western culture is at stake here, with all the rage, frustration and deep disappointment that are bound to result from the realization that the given model is unattainable: mothering is beautiful and very lyrical, until you're left alone taking care of a crying, yelling creature that never sleeps, never eats when he is required to eat and never wants to be on his/her own. Seen at close quarters, then, the woman's relation to motherhood appears ambiguous, and is given the form of a punishment rather than a privilege. Any traditional tale in the Western tradition follows in the Bible's path and seems to prioritize the pain rather than the joy of maternity. The supposedly sacred and fully natural drive leading the woman to take care of her child will come later. Right at the beginning, maternity is conceived – ideally – as a punishment, designating the woman's body as the site of sin, metamorphosis, and the basic tool for God's and, implicitly, male rule. The female body – it is implied – is naturally sinful and therefore to be disciplined. At the same time, it also becomes a basic resource for the community. Once eternal life in the Garden of Eden is lost, the community of mortals has a problem with survival.

And this is another side to the female role in society: the woman's body is *the* tool, because new births are needed to compensate for the dead. However despised and sinful, therefore, the woman's body has a function that is instrumental to survival.

In all this, at which stage does the woman become a human being? When exactly is disenchantment about maternity to be finally voiced? Increasingly often, directly or indirectly, the investigation on the ambiguity of motherhood seems to emerge more clearly in popular narrative than in mainstream literature and film. And keeping within the narration of a tragic event like a school massacre, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* has been anticipated by a number of other similar narratives. One of them is *Rage* – written in 1965, when Stephen King was still a high-school student – the novel was published under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman in 1977. It tells the fictional story of a school shooting acted out by a troubled boy, Charlie Decker, who has an apparently normal though actually dysfunctional family background. The novel is primarily focussed on the boy himself, though in the background one can easily spot the profile of a mother who has not been up to her role, therefore implicitly producing her son's problems. After killing his Algebra teacher and while keeping his class hostage all through one long, very hot afternoon, Charlie Decker relives his family life, cynically reflecting on the many psychological abuses he suffered. In this respect, *Rage* is a "black novel", meaning by this a story portraying "mankind driven to madness in a bar or in the dark; (...) the black novel is some updated effort to fill the gap by describing openly what makes people scream, and that is why I don't want it confused with the business end of the pulp novel industry or the middle-class effusions of old ladies with one eye fixed on the royalty



statements. The black novel has nothing to do with any of that. Its objective is to take people into the vile psychic weather outside their front doors where everything and everyone has been flattened by a pitiless rain that falls from the souls of the people out there. It exists to get people to see what true despair – the small, dark isolated rooms of existence with every exit barred, bricked up – really is” (Raymond 1992, p. 136).

Stephen King would probably reject this interpretation<sup>6</sup>. A few weeks after the book had been issued, he had it removed from publication when he realized that it could influence – and had in fact influenced – teenagers to commit murders. In a 2013 essay, however, though maintaining that he did not consider *Rage* great literature, he admitted that the novel said something true about the horrors and violation children had to face at school and, increasingly often, in their families. Implicitly, the mother figure sketched in the novel is given some responsibility for Charlie Decker’s evil decision to commit a school shooting. Her expectations, her inability to see Charlie’s real personality, her constant attempts to transform him into a “normal” child, show how far she is from understanding who her son really is. In this case, the reader does not know anything about what happens to Charlie after his arrest. In this respect, *Rage* has the same focus as Michael Moore’s documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) or Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003). All of them elude the subject of the aftermath which is the focus of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. This makes the mother’s responsibility clearer, pointing out that “the villain is the mother of course, like the Blessed Virgin absorbing reflected adoration of the crucified Christ” (Bradshaw 2011).

Somewhere in between *Rage* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974). The novel takes the representation of teenage suffering a step farther. Here the mother has much more explicit responsibility in the protagonist’s break down. Carrie would have been a fairly typical teenager – blonde-haired, brown-eyed, very shy, insignificant and unattractive – if her shyness and loneliness were not transformed into a pathology by continuous oppression from her mother, Margaret, who keeps beating her and locking her into a “prayer closet” to satisfy her own religious fanaticism. Carrie’s reactions, though extreme and doubtlessly evil, are interpreted as a drive towards survival, the need to elude this maternal oppression that has never been a shelter, but the exact opposite. Quite obviously, Carrie’s mother creates the kinds of circumstances that are likely to push her too far, removing any possibility of a way back and transforming her private battle with herself into “a much greater struggle — the universal human struggle against the general contract, whose terms are unfillable, and where defeat is certain” (Raymond 1992, p. 97)

No doubt, Carrie’s mother belongs to the category of those women who don’t want to be mothers, and so react to their children as if they were the enemy. Of course, their behaviour is marked as unnatural, and for the sake of the community, they are labelled as “exceptions”, “monsters”, “aliens”, different types of beings. Seldom is the same kind of blame put on the children. As in the case of Kevin or Charlie Decker, the child may spell trouble since birth. What stands out in both cases is what I would define the “reciprocity of evil” in the mother/child relation. In popular narratives focussing on one of them, the other is bound to be drawn into play and to gain centrality as the narrative goes on. In most cases, no rescue is possible. Coherently with Chandler’s interpretation of the new guidelines to crime fiction in the hard-boiled novel, a brand-new kind of rough hero is born, though Chandler himself would have never imagined that this rough hero could result from a complex puzzle of bad mothers and evil children.

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<sup>6</sup> King asked his publishers to remove *Rage* from publication after the novel was linked to four real-life school shooting incidents.



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