

VIOLENT-EYE LITERATURE:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVES OF  
CAUSALITY

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Leicester

by

Joanna Katherine Wilson  
Department of English  
University of Leicester

2017

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## Contemporary American Narratives of Causality

Joanna Katherine Wilson

### Abstract

During the 1990s, a number of violent homodiegetic narrators appeared in what I call “violent-eye fiction”, that which is written from the continually immersive first-person perspective of a violent protagonist. This sub-genre of transgressive fiction is used in this thesis to question whether a first-person protagonist can ever be a completely unsympathetic character, or whether narratives of causality reconfigure violent narrators into multifaceted, complex, and ultimately familiar individuals.

Structured around four chapters, the thesis takes a comparative and thematic approach that enables me to argue that violent-eye texts are ultimately narratives of causality by charting the progression of the violent-eye protagonist out of childhood, into adolescence, and ultimately into adulthood, with the first three chapters reflecting this movement. Aetiological violence is the subject of the first two chapters, with childhood trauma and mother blame explored in Chapter One through textual analysis of A. M. Homes’ *The End of Alice* (1996a) and Jeff Lindsay’s *Dark Dreaming Dexter* (2004), and adolescent trauma and absent fathers analysed in Chapter Two in relation to Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) and Don de Grazia’s *American Skin* (1998). Ontological violence is the subject of Chapter Three, in which adult violence and sexual desire are explored, particularly in relation to the problematic conflation in some novels of violence and homosexuality, including Joyce Carol Oates’ *Zombie* (1995) and Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* (1996).

Finally, Chapter Four looks at Stephen King’s *Rage* (1977a) and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a) in order to explore the absence of school shooters in 1990s fiction. This discussion brings the thesis full circle by returning to reassess the concept of the unsympathetic character and showing how the absence of school shooters from violent-eye fiction of the 1990s onwards arguably indicates that they fall into this category.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of Leicester for the provision of a full scholarship, and also to the Fran Trust, the American Studies Association of Norway, the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, the University of Leicester, and Umeå University, all of which have provided financial support that has enabled me to present aspects of this thesis at conferences, both home and abroad.

Sincere thanks go to Prof. Martin Halliwell for his feedback and supervision of this project, as well as Dr Sarah Graham, who provided me with some excellent tips on source material early on. Very special thanks go to Prof. Phil Shaw and Dr Catherine Morley for their support, guidance, and kindness. The expertise of Prof. Clive Hollin and Dr Brian Jarvis was instrumental in shaping the direction of this thesis, and I am very grateful for the time they took to discuss aspects of it with me. Gratitude also goes to Dr Berit Åström and all those who, at various conferences and workshops, have provided me with feedback and advice, along with Nicholas Everett, whose comments early on were much appreciated.

Most importantly, however, my deepest thanks go to my family. I am forever grateful for the constant support and love of my parents, Hilary and David, my husband Luke, my sister Emily, and my brother Robert, without whom none of this would have been possible.

And with profound gratitude to Pamela Scott and Joan Birkett for making Leicester feel like home even before I arrived here, and to John Scott for making both the city and the University of Leicester feel extra special. Knowing that I have followed in all their footsteps, and of course those of David Shuff, has always been an immense source of comfort and pride.

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## Introduction

For Gérard Genette, there exists in literary criticism an “improper although common” conflation between two concepts: the hero and the narrator (1980, p. 223). Whilst Genette’s exploration centres on whether the hero and the narrator can exist simultaneously as the writers of the work, a question that can also be raised is whether there is the tendency to assume that narrators are, by definition, heroic. Arguably, this question becomes all the more pertinent in first-person narration, as there is the presumption that even if such narrators are not entirely heroic, they are, as the narrative’s focaliser, a character for whom we should be rooting. This, in part, has led to the suggestion by some critics that it is only heroic or moral characters who can occupy a first-person position in the text, and that immoral or unpleasant protagonists are either untenable or unwanted. Such sentiments are found in the work of literary critic David Lodge, who in a summary on streams of consciousness states that “continuous immersion in the mind of a wholly unsympathetic character would be intolerable for writer and reader” (1992, p. 42). This argument is also reminiscent of philosopher David Hume’s assertion, over two hundred years earlier, that “where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characteristics of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure [the work]” (Hume, cited in Eaton 2012, p. 281). Hume goes on to say that “We are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded: And ... we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into [the vicious character’s] sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable” (2012, p. 281). Yet such claims about moral certainty become problematic when the popularity of novels such as Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991) are taken into consideration; although controversial, such late twentieth and early twenty-first century violent novels are widely read and often even dramatised in the form of motion pictures or television series. In light of this, the thesis explores violent first-person narration in American literature, interrogating the protagonists within in order to assess whether they are sympathetic and whether such texts can be read as narratives of causality.

The philosopher and art critic A. W. Eaton writes persuasively on the public fascination with what she calls the 'Rough Hero', a term borrowed from Hume in a critique of his above assertion, along with his claim that "we are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes" (Hume, cited in Eaton 2012, p. 281). Although broadly encompassing immoral or amoral characters in general, some of Eaton's examples include violent homodiegetic characters like Patrick Bateman, whose first-person perspective in *American Psycho* offers a continuous immersion into what seems at first glance to be the mind of a wholly unsympathetic character. Whilst arguably archetypal, Ellis' protagonist is not unique and certainly not the first nor last violent focaliser of a narrative, as will be explored in more detail later in this introduction. So whilst this thesis centres its discussion around violent homodiegetic narrators, at its core it questions whether there is such a thing within literature as an individual who is entirely unsympathetic.

This thesis explores these questions in relation to American literature through an analysis of the following core texts: Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* (1995), A. M. Homes' *The End of Alice* (1996a) and its companion piece *Appendix A* (1996b), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), Don de Grazia's *American Skin* (1998), and Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), along with two additional texts that test the parameters of the research's hypothesis, Stephen King's *Rage* (1977a) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a). The rationale for focusing on texts from the 1990s onwards, with the exception of *Rage*, will be discussed in more detail in due course, but is stimulated by the fact that the 1990s witnessed a rise in cultural preoccupations with violent crime in the United States and a corresponding increase in violent novels written from the perspective of a violent protagonist.

Since the vicious and potentially unsympathetic characters explored in this thesis are violent, this necessitates a definition of what is meant by violence within this context. Simply put, the violence under study is the "empirically verifiable damage" (Bachner 2011, p. 8) that one individual willingly inflicts upon the body of another. To borrow an example from Sally Bachner, the distinction here is between the "potentially verifiable" act of rape as a physical form of aggression, rather than the structural aspect

of violence on a systematic level that supports patriarchy (2011, p. 9). As such, the characters that this thesis explores are physically violent individuals, all of whom engage in varying acts of physical aggression and, specifically, who commit murder. The topic of murder is a useful aspect through which to approach this study, in part because it serves to link, unite, and thus clearly define these characters, and also because of its ability to represent violence in its most recognisable form. The characters discussed in this thesis are not selected for their tendency to lie, suppress, cheat, repress, or exploit other aspects of power as violence, but rather for their decisions to kill others, if not joyously then at least willingly, even though the motives for doing so are complex and often obscure, and can be the product of immorality, amorality, or a personal 'moral' code.

Twentieth-century literature, both British and American, encompasses a number of violent protagonists, with notable examples including Pinkie Brown in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), Norman Bates in Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959), and Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), the latter two also spawning subsequent novels. However, in order to address the questions outlined above, this thesis explores a specific type of character, the violent homodiegetic narrator, the protagonist who tells their own story and continuously immerses the reader in their inner thoughts and feelings about extreme and taboo acts such as rape and murder. Such characters are often perceived to be anti-heroes, for example by Robert Conrath (1994), yet, like the 'rough hero', this is an inappropriate term considering that the anti-hero is more associated with rebellion and can even be portrayed as a Christlike figure (Simmons 2008, p. 151) with redeeming qualities that offset, or compensate for, their rough exterior. 'Anti-hero' is frequently used as an easily applicable term, not only for describing extreme forms of rebellion but also for any protagonist who deviates from the purely moral and heroic, which means that such a label often combines and conflates a broad spectrum of characters and ultimately positions the Patrick Batemans of the literary world alongside others, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Ken Kesey's Randle P. McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), all of whom are flawed yet very different individuals. The term

'hero' itself is problematic, since there is very little that is heroic about violent first-person protagonists such as Patrick Bateman, who are frequently (albeit not exclusively) ego-maniacal, psychopathic, or cold-blooded killers, and often characterised by a distinct sense of something lacking, as will be explored in more detail later in this introduction (and in Chapter Three). As a result, Eaton's adoption of Hume's term the 'rough hero' is also rejected in this thesis, since despite the fact that in the postmodern world the enemy has become "harder to locate and looks more like the hero" (Halberstam 1995, p. 163), they are nevertheless not necessarily one and the same.

So, in light of the lack of a useful term for such a character, this thesis adopts the expression 'Violent-Eye' to depict such characters and their narratives, since the emphasis is not only on their perspective, and thus their 'eye', but also the self, and thus the 'I'.<sup>1</sup> This also enables a distinction to be made between violent protagonists such as Tom Ripley in a third-person narrative and violent first-person protagonists such as Patrick Bateman – a distinction that lies at the heart of this thesis in terms of thinking about the voice of first-person protagonists in contemporary fiction that facilitates the reader's continuous immersion into their minds. Yet for Genette, simply determining the difference between first- and third-person narratives is "inadequate" (1980, p. 243), and this led to his subsequent distinction between heterodiegetic narratives, those in which the narrator is "absent from the story he tells", and homodiegetic narratives, in which the narrator is "present as a character in the story he tells" (pp. 244-245). This thesis thus considers homodiegetic narrators of violence, individuals who do not simply observe the events of the novel from outside of it, but rather are active presences in the narrative, responsible for the violent actions that they narrate. As a consequence of the focus on voice, the specificities of violent actions are not at the forefront of this investigation, but rather the aim is to explore violent perspectives in order to consider whether there is such a thing as a completely unsympathetic character.

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<sup>1</sup> This term was introduced in the following publication: Wilson-Scott, Joanna (2017), 'Victims and Villains: The Legacy of Mother Blame in Violent-Eye American Literature', in Berit Åström's (ed.) *Missing, Presumed Dead: The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Returning to a brief justification for the adoption of the term 'violent-eye', I argue that such characters, having stepped out of the antagonist role and replaced the detective or hero as the narrative's focaliser, can be seen as the antithesis of the private-eye, although in certain cases such as Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) and *Pop. 1280* (1964), the detective and the perpetrator can be one and the same person. There are interesting questions of genre here, particularly the ways in which suspicion and investigation filter into fiction, even in novels that fall outside the detective genre. There are also interesting questions surrounding morality, but what is of relevance is not a prescriptive compartmentalisation of the violent-eye character into the categories of immorality or amorality, but rather an understanding that violent-eye fiction contains a wide array of individuals, from those with a strict sense of their own moral code to those with no sense of morality at all, and that what unites them instead is a proclivity for violence and the command of the narrative perspective.

This thesis particularly focuses on examples from American literature, in part because they are arguably more iconic than other national examples, often as a result of being reworked onto the screen, and also because American literature has long been associated with (narratives of) violence. Such a supposition may be in relation to what Jonathan Fast (2008) describes as a unique national "romance with guns" that involves the mythologisation and glorification of "gun fighters and gun play" (p. 234), or it could be the result of a long history of conflict, with historian Richard Slotkin reminding us that "the culture and literature we call American was born out of [...] confrontation" (1973, p. 25). Writing in 1966, David Brion Davis states that for over 160 years, American literature demonstrated a "peculiar fascination with homicidal violence" (1966, p. 29), an interest that has certainly extended beyond the 1960s. Starting her analysis of violence in American fiction from 1962 (with the publication of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), and during the same decade as Davis was writing, Bachner (2011) argues that "genocide, terrorism, war, torture, slavery, rape, and murder are the favoured subjects of the most celebrated postwar American novels" (p. 2). Bachner perceives the "peculiar prestige" of violence within American fiction as specific to the 1960s onwards, whereas Davis' work persuasively indicates a much lengthier fascination, and he cites authors such as Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) and James Fenimore Cooper

(1789-1851) as early examples. Yet the assumption that violence is a contemporary concern is nevertheless prolific. For Robert Conrath (1994), violent individuals such as mass murderers, serial killers, and spree killers “all engage in forms of extreme and prolific violence that have become late 20th-century American specialities, right up there with mud wrestling, fuzzy dice, and assault weapons in the playground” (1994, p. 144). Whilst this is perhaps a rather flippant assertion, it nevertheless further indicates that violence – both real violence and ‘play violence’ – is perceived not only to permeate American society, but to exemplify it. Whilst this thesis does not suggest that violence is uniquely American, or that the United States can be generalised as a violent society, it does acknowledge that violence within American literature is a prevalent topic and one that deserves further attention in relation to homodiegetic narratives, and this is in part a justification for the cultural focus of this thesis.

Within this wider cultural context, first-person narration has the ability to create both a confessional (although not necessarily repentant) and conspiratorial tone, whilst assigning the narrative perspective to characters more frequently recognisable as antagonists; this positioning forces readers to navigate the world of the novel and experience the violence presented in it through the eyes of the perpetrator, continually immersed as they are in the latter’s mind. Such a selective approach to the primary material necessitates three important distinctions.

First, narratives written from the perspective of inhuman or fantastic characters, such as British author Glen Duncan’s *I, Lucifer* (2002), or texts involving magical or supernatural elements (even those that are satirical), such as Chuck Palahniuk’s serial-killer narrative *Lullaby* (2002), are not included, as they shift the focus of this thesis from realism to fantasy, and prevent an exploration of the human, ordinary, and mundane aspects of violence. Second, only texts that offer such extensive immersion in the first-person perspective of a violent character are recognised here as violent-eye narratives, and thus texts such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) are not incorporated into the category despite the prevalence of violence and the brief transition to the first-person narration of protagonist and child-murderer Sethe late in the narrative (pp. 236-241). Whilst this transition enables readers to “become privy, through Morrison’s words, to

[Sethe's] unspeakable thoughts" (Bachner 2011, p. 1), their purpose and that of the novel is not to immerse the reader constantly in the mind of the violent character. Third, texts that blur the boundaries of narrative voice are also omitted, such as Joel Rose's *Kill Kill Faster Faster* (1997), which fluctuates between chapters written in the first-person and third-person, with the suggestion being that the latter is also the voice of the narrator, Joey, referring to himself. The distance created through the narrative technique not only serves to detach Joey from his own thoughts but also distances the readers from the continuous immersion into his mind, thus omitting the sense of confidentiality created in narratives such as *American Psycho*, in which Patrick takes the reader into his confidence, despite occasional references to himself in the third person. Here, Patrick is read as a character, in contrast with Elizabeth Young's assertion that he is a "cipher, rather than a 'character'" (Young 1992, p. 103) or a "textual impossibility" (1992, p. 119), "a discursively produced matrix of verbal utterances which have coagulated into the shape of a person, more a corpus of words than corporeal" (Heise 2011, p. 151). The approach adopted in this thesis follows Peter Ferry's argument that it is his first-person narration that establishes Patrick as an "urban flâneur" who reports on his particular social strata (2015, p. 82), and resonates with James Annesley's (1998) view of Patrick as "the natural product" of his society (p. 19), rendering him simultaneously a symptom of his world and a predator within it.

However, a distinction should be made here between blurring voices and shifting between them, since violent-eye narratives are not necessarily solely written from the first-person perspective of the violent character, but may include other perspectives, or third-person narration of other characters, or sometimes a shifting between different modes and levels of consciousness. However, the first-person narration is a dominant feature of violent-eye novels and provides extensive immersion into the mind of a violent character, such as in James Ellroy's *Killer on the Road* (1986), Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991), and Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), all of which shift between speakers to varying degrees, but with the violent-eye character's voice and perspective clearly discernible.

The distinct voice of the violent-eye character and his ability to talk directly to the reader creates a sense of the two being in each other's confidence and serves to establish an empathetic and even collusive link. This thesis argues that such narration also serves a dual and contradictory purpose by exposing the reader to unpleasant subject matter and violent mentalities, whilst simultaneously serving to humanise the protagonist through mundane dialogue and quotidian contexts. A tension thus exists between the emphasis on extremity and the emphasis on banality, the former of which leads to the plausible interpretation of such characters as wholly unsympathetic due to their actions and remorseless attitude. Yet ascertaining whether such characters are wholly unsympathetic requires a careful consideration of whether they are presented – or better yet, present themselves – as being violent ontologically or aetiologically: that is, whether they are born bad or whether they have been socially constructed to be violent and aggressive through environmental influences such as trauma. Thus, this thesis is predicated on understandings of causality and argues that in violent-eye narratives, rather than being presented as evil incarnate or the personification of abstract violence, the protagonists are frequently presented as being the almost inevitable outcome of abuse, suffering, or rejection, principally during their childhoods. In this sense, the texts are presented as narratives of causality, with analepses – or flashbacks – often used as a formal device both to reveal trauma and prompt the reader to reconsider the behaviour and motives of the protagonist.

On this issue, for Isabel Santaulària (2007), there are three possible causes for violence: societal decay, traumatic abuse, and own need. Focusing on traumatic abuse, it could be argued that violent individuals are positioned as the result of the diffusion of psychoanalytic categories and vocabulary into popular culture, as will be explored in more detail in the subsequent chapters. Yet narratives that continually immerse the reader in the mind of a violent character frequently include an element (or a variety of elements) that invokes pathos, avoiding the potential for the character to be wholly unsympathetic. In so doing, the novels succeed, often through analepsis, in humanising the characters through the use of both voice (and perspective) and also what Carla Freccero calls a “comforting etiology” (Freccero 1997, p. 51), an explanation for why they are violent and something that can be identified and, through appropriate choices,

avoided in the future. After all, a plausible reason for why individuals choose to hurt others is far less terrifying than inexplicable evil. Whilst explanations, or 'comforting aetiologies', also exist in the character descriptions of violent antagonists, such as Francis Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb in Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), respectively, this thesis argues that the use of the first-person enables the violent narrator to assert their alterity in relation to aggressive proclivities and capabilities, whilst also exposing their humanity.

This research thus leads to the conclusion that the majority of the texts under analysis are narratives of causality, novels that attempt to explore how an individual acquires the proclivity towards violence, and so of central concern to this enquiry is the presence of trauma, a clinical term that describes "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (Vickroy 2002, p. ix). Yet the thesis does not adopt a prescriptive approach to what counts as trauma, and nor does it pass judgement, but rather it accepts what is being presented in the texts as sufficiently distressing to cause such lasting disruption. As such, the term 'trauma' is used to refer to profound environmental disturbances. It should be noted that bad parenting is not being conflated with trauma, but rather the work seeks to explore how suffering in childhood is presented in the texts as a form of suffering that negatively and permanently affects the child and sets them on the path to becoming a violent adult.

As an example of violence situated as the result of trauma, in his analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Kenneth Millard observes that the rape of Pecola by her father, Cholly, follows immediately on from an account of the traumatic childhood of the latter, and thus the passage is "strategically placed to account for his behaviour", although not justify it, providing a "material account of how he comes to abuse his own daughter" (2000, p. 12). A similar use of childhood trauma as a means of positioning violence as "an almost inevitable consequence" (2000, p. 12) of a brutal childhood can be found in Harris' *Red Dragon* (1981), in which an analepsis of the abusive childhood of Dolarhyde, the eponymous antagonist, appears late in the narrative, serving to reposition him from simply being seen as a violent serial killer to a broken, neglected,

and emotionally devastated child, abandoned by his mother and father, bullied by his peers, and traumatised by his grandmother. In order to test the parameters and limits of ontological and aetiological explanations of what is often designated evil behaviour, Chapters One and Two will explore literary accounts of adult violence as explicitly or implicitly linked with parental abuse or failure.

Such narratives of causality within violent-eye texts also have the ability to account for a character's deviant and violent behaviour in a way that can be understood and rationalised outside of the interpretation of an evil and incorrigible nature. But while trauma is one thread of this thesis, the framework of trauma theory does not fully do justice to the often radically unstable status of the violent-eye protagonist. Not all the narratives have such a clear aetiological explanation for violence, and one such area is in relation to homosexuality. The hypothesis that will be tested is that homosexuality itself is positioned in some narratives as a cause of a violent nature, suggesting a highly problematic and alarming conflation between sexuality and violence that raises the issue of an innate disposition to both, and the insinuation that such characters are violent because they are gay. Further, a distinction will be made between the labelling of violent individuals without a clear aetiological explanation for their behaviour as evil and the emphasis on a sense of incompleteness, what is termed by Brian Jarvis (2007) as a "profound sense of lack" (p. 334) in response to a description of Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs*: "he's not anything, really, just a sort of total lack that he wants to fill" (Harris 1988, p. 165). The issue of the conflation between inherent violence and homosexuality and also lack will be discussed in Chapter Three, which – when coupled with the first two chapters – presents an overall study that explores representations of violent individuals as traumatised into being violent, predisposed to violence through putatively uncontrolled and deviant sexuality, or lacking something over which they have no control. Thus, the implication is that whilst sustained immersion in violent-eye narratives is tolerable for many readers, the notion of a wholly unsympathetic character remains limited.

In order to complicate this framework and to probe the confines of the violent-eye narrator in more depth, the final chapter suggests that, at present, the high-school

rampage shooter – the individual who enters his school and executes his peers and teachers – may test the limits of American society’s empathy and be positioned as a wholly unsympathetic character. Whilst there are clear historical reasons why the high-school shooter emerged as a literary character in the late 1990s, his extreme vilification is, in part at least, because he murders children, and also because he himself is still on the cusp of childhood, and thus his actions shatter the image of innocence. Consequently, the high-school shooter is largely absent from the violent-eye literature, which indicates that at the current moment in time, continual immersion in the mind of such a character may be considered intolerable.

### **Violent Voices in American Literature**

Violent-eye narratives exist under the umbrella of what Michael Silverblatt termed in 1993 as the “new fiction of transgression”, or transgressive fiction, which “emerged as a recognizable genre” in the 1990s (Hoey 2014, p. 26). Described by Molly Hoey as “vicarious yet intensely visceral” in nature (2014, p. 32), transgressive fiction involves the deliberate inclusion and often interlinking of unpleasant subjects such as violence and taboo sex (Mookerjee 2013). Violent-eye novels can also be found within the broader and sometimes overlapping genres of crime and the gothic, and so this research challenges the assumption that “most Gothic novels lack the point of view of the monster” (Halberstam 1995, p. 21), especially if we accept that the modern face of the monster is a distinctly human one; thus, the violent-eye protagonist can be read as a form of the Gothic monster, complete with voice and perspective. Although some such narratives as standalone texts have received enormous amounts of criticism and scholarly attention (especially Ellis’ *American Psycho*, which David Eldridge (2008) discusses as having caused some difficulty when attempts were made to contain or confine the novel within a specific genre), as a distinctive corpus they remain neglected. As a previously undefined sub-genre of the interstices of crime, the Gothic, transgressive fiction, dirty realism, horror, noir, and also blank fiction, violent-eye narratives have proved somewhat hard to categorise and even to trace, and so the texts discussed in this thesis must be acknowledged to be potentially a large representative sample of a

small but significant sub-genre: violent-eye fiction. For the purpose of clarity and categorisation, violent-eye fiction is suggested here to be polygenous, influenced as it is by the various different genres, yet perhaps best situated as a specific sub-genre of transgressive fiction, one that takes a homodiegetic approach to narrating violence from the perspective of a character who engages in aggressive and taboo behaviour. Within the English language, such texts can be found in US and British literature and within the context of the former they align with the argument that the United States witnessed a rise in preoccupations with violent crime in the 1990s. But as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this thesis focuses on violent-eye US literature, excluding texts such as those by British authors, including Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), John Fowles' *The Collector* (1963), Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Robert Swindells' *Stone Cold* (1993), and Jonny Glynn's *Seven Days of Peter Crumb* (2007), as well as Swiss author Urs Allemann's oneiroscopic *Babyficker* (1992; English title: *Babyfucker*). By citing these texts here, though, it is possible to clarify further what is meant by violent-eye narratives, texts that continually immerse the reader in violent first-person perspectives, and these novels are of relevance despite their exclusion in terms of the national focus of this research.

Continually immersive violent-eye narratives can be found throughout twentieth-century American literature, with early examples located in noir novels, exemplified by James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936). Written from the perspective of murderer Walter Huff, the novel presents violence as primarily the result of the manipulation of a weak man by a malicious and dominant woman, the *femme fatale* Phyllis Nirdlinger, rather than being the result of Walter's own proclivity for and enjoyment of violence. Instead of being explicit, the violence that takes place is alluded to, with details deliberately withheld by Walter, for example, "I won't tell you what I did then. But in two seconds he was curled down on the seat with a broken neck" (Cain 1936, pp. 51-52). Although it is possible for unseen violence to be even more effective and powerful than the sight of it (Young 2010, p. 30), this is not always the case, and the violence in *Double Indemnity* is certainly diluted, if not absent, meaning that whilst readers are continuously immersed in Walter's mind and whilst he has the ability to be

violent, the narrative nevertheless avoids violent imagery, deliberately so it seems.<sup>2</sup> Walter can therefore be seen as a prototype to some of the violent-eye narrators who were to follow, and it is arguable that such a sub-genre, whilst situated under the umbrella of transgressive fiction, has its literary origins in noir.

Almost two decades later, Southern crime writer Jim Thompson's hardboiled *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) offers a very important example for this thesis by fusing the detective and the killer into one person. The novel introduces readers to Lou Ford, a young deputy sheriff in a small Texan town, whose first-person narration reveals that despite his appearance as a simple, gentle, and "corny bore" (p. 2), a "nice friendly fellow who'd give you his shirt if you asked for it" (p. 2), Lou is in fact a violent, sadistic, and highly intelligent individual who hides his true nature through what was called in the 1940s a 'mask of sanity' (Cleckley 1941; see Chapter Three), a public performance of decency and respectability. Lou enjoys toying with people, taking advantage of their gullibility and belief that he is what he pretends to be: "Striking at people that way is almost as good as the other, the real way" (1952, p. 3). After all, Lou is a man of the law, the personification of legality, morality, and decency. Like most detectives, he is charged with the responsibility of catching the killer, and it is only Lou and the readers who are aware that he is thus tasked with finding himself. Unlike Walter Huff, Lou embraces and enjoys his violence, describing it in a matter-of-fact, almost mundane manner. For example, when narrating his violent assault of Joyce Lakeland, a young woman with whom he has a sado-masochistic sexual relationship, he vividly describes punching her repeatedly in the head: "it was like pounding a pumpkin. Hard, then everything giving away at once" (1952, p. 43). The graphic and repulsive simile that likens a woman's body to a pumpkin, a fleshy, pulpy, and insentient vegetable, creates a corporeal violence totally absent in Cain's *Double Indemnity*.

*The Killer Inside Me* exposes readers to a cold-blooded and violent mind, yet, in a move typical of later violent-eye narratives, Lou's recollections of his own sexual abuse as a child by Helene, his father's housekeeper and lover, serve to humanise him by situating his violence as the result of trauma. Helene encourages Lou to beat her, an

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<sup>2</sup> Censorship issues of the 1940s could have had a role to play in this.

early sexual experience that, when coupled with his awareness that he has been abused by her, leads to his adult desire to inflict pain on women:

[Helene] was gone, and I couldn't strike back at her, yes, kill her, for what I'd been made to feel she'd done to me. But that was all right. She was the first woman I'd ever known; she *was* woman to me; and all womankind bore her face. So I could strike back at any of them, any female, the ones it would be safest to strike at, and it would be the same as striking at her. And I did that, I started striking out. (1952, p. 195; emphasis original)

Thus Thompson created both a character and a perspective that combines the hardboiled detective, the murderer, and also the victim. Further, the novel suggests a fragmentation as a result of abuse, a splitting of the self into two parts, indicated in the title; Lou is not the killer, but rather the latter resides in Lou. This sense of violence as a separate yet internal entity is also found in later novels, including Stephen King's *Rage* (1977a), in which the violent-eye protagonist Charlie Decker reflects that his ability to fight back against a school bully was akin to allowing someone else to take control of him: "I shoved him aside. It was like being outside myself. It was the first time I ever felt that way. Someone else, some other me, was in the driver's seat" (1977a, p. 323). The metaphor of violence as something that dwells within the individual, specifically in relation to driving, is also found fifty years after *The Killer Inside Me* in Jeff Lindsay's (2004) violent-eye character Dexter Morgan, who frequently alludes to his 'Dark Passenger'. Importantly, Lou's sexual abuse by Helene is all the more profound as she is the closest thing to a mother he has, since his own died when he was born and Helene is a domestic female figure and the lover of his father (see Chapter One for more discussion on fragmentation, maternal abuse, and mother blame). This abuse leads to Lou's "sickness", and his first act of violence against a three-year-old girl whilst he himself is still a child.

In 1964 Thompson revisited the violent-eye narrative with another hardboiled noir, *Pop. 1280*, a novel written from the perspective of Nick Corey, the high sheriff of Potts County, who like Lou Ford is perceived as a likeable fool and again the personification of the law and morality. Equally, he is also revealed to be cunning, intelligent, and brutal, yet whilst Lou is cool and meticulous, enjoying violence for

violence's sake, Nick possesses a self-aggrandising tendency, apotheosising himself as a cleanser of sin:

I got to go on an' on, doin' the Lord's work; and all he does is the pointin' [...], all He does is pick out the people an' I got to exercise His wrath on 'em [...] All I can do is follow the pointin' of the Lord's finger, striking down the pore [sic] sinners that no one gives a good god-dang about. (p. 179)<sup>3</sup>

But like his predecessor, Nick is also the victim of childhood abuse, albeit not sexual. Instead of the mother figure, in *Pop. 1280* it is the father who is violent and abusive, and the memory of this haunts Nick:

Dog-tired as I was, I drifted into a scary dream, the nightmare that was always a-haunting me. I dreamed that I was a kid again only it didn't seem like a dream. I was a kid living in the old rundown plantation house with my daddy. Trying to keep out of his way, and never being able to. Getting beat half to death every time he could grab me. (p. 31; emphasis original)

Despite the emphasis on the father of the violent-eye narrator, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two, Nick's abuse remains intricately linked with the maternal figure, as his father perpetually and physically punishes him for causing the mother's death during childbirth:

The fact was, I guess, that he just couldn't stand for me to be any good. If I was any good, then I couldn't be the low-down monster that had killed my own mother in getting born. And I had to be that. He had to have someone to blame. (p. 32)

Thus, Nick grows up and develops into a violent adult under the notion that he came into existence as a killer, treated as a "low-down monster" from childhood.

Just over a decade later, in 1977, Stephen King published *Rage*, his first novel under the pseudonym Richard Bachman, a story about an American teenager who fatally shoots two teachers and takes his algebra class hostage, and which as a result of its connections with actual school shootings of the 1980s and 1990s is no longer in print. The violent theme of the novel is similar to an earlier short-story written by King entitled 'Cain Rose Up', published in the spring 1968 edition of the University of Maine's *Ubris*

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<sup>3</sup> The shift into more colloquial language could indicate, however, a facetious element to Nick's narration that would suggest a more sarcastic than confessional tone.

magazine (pp. 33-35) and later incorporated into King's short story collection *Skeleton Crew* in 1985. But unlike 'Cain Rose Up', in which protagonist Curt Garrish shoots at individuals from his university dorm window, *Rage* is a violent-eye narrative set in an otherwise unremarkable American high school, aptly named Placerville High in what can be interpreted as an attempt to establish the school and the town of Placerville as quaint, normal, and also ubiquitous prior to the shootings; the inclusion of the word 'place' creates a blank canvas upon which to ascribe the image of any small American town, suggesting that Placerville could be anywhere. As such, violent-eye protagonist Charlie Decker's high school becomes the model for all such small town American schools. In an almost prescient way, this evokes the similar small town vibe of Littleton, Colorado, prior to the events that took place in April 1999, and both *Rage* and the Columbine massacre will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four in order to test the thesis' hypothesis.

Moving closer to my period of study, less than a decade after the publication of *Rage*, in 1986 James Ellroy published *Killer on the Road*, initially under the title *Silent Terror*, a novel that later influenced Ellis' composition of *American Psycho* (Seed 2014). *Killer on the Road* documents the evolution of protagonist Martin Plunkett as a prolific and highly mobile serial killer, transforming the American road-trip into one of both freedom and destruction, and through the novel Ellroy is able to mirror the "rise of the serial killer in the popular imagination and in the media" (Seed 2014, p. 283). Despite the fluctuation between protagonist Martin's voice and additional voices (for example, news reports and excerpts from the diaries of others), it is important to recall that the novel is set up as Martin's autobiography, and thus everything included has been done so by him, to supplement his telling of his own story. After all, Martin's ability to narrate his own story is of vital importance to him, as observed by one of the few other voices included in the text: "He wanted to make sure that when he confessed, his statement would be printed verbatim. He was quite clear about that. It seemed very important to him" (Ellroy 1986, p. 2). This command of the narrative enables the readers to remain continuously immersed in the mind of Martin, even if the story he tells involves borrowing the words of others.

Like his predecessors, Martin's progression to killer is linked with childhood trauma. He claims that he is equipped with "enough childhood brutality to fuel an army" (p. 10), and although he apportions blame to his father, who he sees as a neglectful "custodian" who eventually abandons him at age seven, it is for his mother that he develops a "bitter hatred" (p. 21), seeing her as a "crazy", "nutty", "fruitcake" (p. 11). By "prowling through her belongings, looking for ways to hurt her" (p. 21), he discovers that she takes sedatives, and so swaps her pills for amphetamines. After witnessing the ensuing paranoid and manic state this puts her in, he mocks her and goes out, returning later to find she has taken a half-dozen bottles of Phenobarbital and has cut her wrists in the bathtub; waiting for the ambulance, he uses his hands to "gulp" down large handfuls of her blood. Thus, Martin's violence is linked with childhood trauma, to the extent that he orchestrates his mother's suicide, indulges in haematophagy, and escalates into a transient and ruthless serial killer.

In addition to these examples of violent-eye narratives, spanning the mid-1930s and mid-1980s, it is observable that within an American context, such narratives are predominantly found within the 1990s, a decade often viewed as an interregnum or interim between two major "eruptive events" (O'Donnell 2012, p. 404) or "two deaths" (Wegner 2009), the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001. The 1990s intrinsically seems to be a decade "without historical reference points" (Harrison 2010, p. 55), perhaps linked to 'end of history' discourses that permeated the decade (Fukuyama 1992). As such, popular culture had a significant effect on the establishment of an alternative to a more obvious historical consciousness, and it is perhaps the sense of a vacuum, coupled with a preoccupation with both reflexivity and finality, that contributed to the flurry of texts that arose during the decade that explored relatively uncharted waters and taboo subjects, places where most authors did not tread.

However, the retrospective tendency in the 1990s meant that for writers born in the 1950s and 1960s, the photographic memories of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and atrocities such as ultra-violent episodes in the Vietnam War, notably the My Lai massacre of 1968, along with the terror caused by the Manson

Family murders of 1969, were not only fertile ground for exploring the more aggressive and frightening aspects of human nature, but were also reminders that such aspects, characteristics, and even proclivities could be possessed by Americans. It is thus not surprising that the late 1980s and the 1990s witnessed a preoccupation not only with death but with trying to portray the mind and voice of the violent other, with Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) representative in its efforts to inhabit the mind of John F. Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. According to James Alan Fox and Jack Levin (2015, p. 46), "both fear and fascination surrounding serial killers were widespread" by the 1980s, and it is important to note that 1989 saw the execution of Ted Bundy. Conrath states that the serial killer reached "his apogee of popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s" (1994, p. 145), and Fox and Levin report that whilst one serial killer was featured on the front cover of *People* magazine in the 1970s, this number increased to over two dozen in the 1990s (2015, p. 6).

The rise in violent novels on taboo subjects written from the perspective of the perpetrator began in 1991 with the publication of two controversial novels involving brutal acts of sexual violence and serial killing, and which both contained elements of unreliability and imagination. Ellis' *American Psycho* is the more famous of the two, if not of all the violent-eye narratives discussed in this thesis, and caused outrage and threats of censorship upon release. A few months later, Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* was published, in which the narrator, also named Dennis in what perhaps could be considered a perverse form of self-tuckerisation, claims to commit brutal acts of sexual violence and homicide both in the United States and Europe. These themes were pushed further in a number of other texts published over the next ten years. Vicki Hendricks' noir thriller *Miami Purity* (1995), for example, follows the fortunes of ex-stripper turned laundry worker Sherry Parlay, whose attempts to improve her life involve cold-blooded murder, and the novel is a rare example of a female violent-first person narrative, although it retains a focus on the damaging effects of bad motherhood that will be discussed in Chapter One. In July 1991, the prolific serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer was caught and arrested, later providing the inspiration for Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie*, published in 1995, in which a Dahmeresque Quentin P. lobotomises young men in order to create his own 'zombie', someone who would say "I love you, Master. There

is no one but you, Master” (p. 49 and p. 169). In 1996 three more violent-eye narratives were published, all of which I will discuss in detail in this thesis: *The End of Alice* by A. M. Homes, which is an epistolary novel between an incarcerated paedophilic child killer and a young woman sexually attracted to a prepubescent boy, deliberately reminiscent of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955); Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, in which protagonist ‘Joe’ commits violence and murder through his alter-ego Tyler Durden; and Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse*, a novel that explores homosexual desire alongside murder, cannibalism, and necrophilia. Like Oates’ *Zombie*, Brite’s novel also fictionalises Jeffrey Dahmer as well as British serial killer Dennis Nilsen, imagining a meeting between the two (Finbow 2014, p. 142) in New Orleans. Of final relevance in this decade, in 1998 Don de Grazia’s *American Skin* explored the violent world of a skin-head gang from the perspective of one of its members, Alex, who whilst undeniably the least violent of the protagonists discussed in this thesis, nevertheless commits murder and, as a result of increasing isolation, vulnerability, and exposure to the criminal world, ends up working for the mob.

Since the turn of the millennium, public fascination with the violent-eye narrator has continued. Dennis Cooper’s *My Loose Thread* (2002) explores adolescent violence, depression, anger, and sexual confusion in the wake of the Columbine massacre, and which peripherally addresses school shootings, despite the violent-eye protagonist’s lack of involvement. A particularly high-profile violent-eye example is the popular fiction series ‘Dexter’, authored by Jeff Lindsay, which began in 2004 with the publication of *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, and which has subsequently evolved into both a lengthy book series, which concluded with the release of the eighth and final novel entitled *Dexter is Dead* (2015), an extremely successful television series, running for a total of eight seasons, and a comic series published by Marvel. Joining the last of the Dexter series in the 2010s, Stephen King’s short story “1922”, published in *Full Dark, No Stars* (2010), revisits the notion of the killer inside. Protagonist Wilfred Leyland James states that “there is another man inside of every man, a stranger, a Conniving Man” (p. 5), one capable of cold-blooded murder and to whom Wilfred attributes the decision to kill his wife.

It is noteworthy that all but one of these texts (Hendricks' *Miami Purity*) involve a male violent-eye character, and all centre around a white one, which could perhaps be an example of literature mirroring reality, since many of these texts deal specifically with serial killers, who statistically tend to be white males. As such, the relative absence of the female or the non-white violent-eye character is explained as there are fewer literary cases of female or non-white serial killers. Yet issues of race and gender are present in violent-eye narratives, in part because women and people of colour are at times amongst the victims of the violent-eye narrator. In particular, as I discuss, the boundaries of gender and sexuality are tested in violent-eye literature, with dominant and overbearing women often being positioned as the root cause of the violence of the (at times) feminised man. However, it should be noted that throughout the thesis, male pronouns will be used to refer to violent-eye characters, due to male prevalence in the texts.

In the remainder of this introduction and in three of my four chapters, violent-eye novels of the 1990s onwards will be analysed in order to draw attention to this overlooked sub-genre, and to explore vocalisations of violence as a means of both humanising violent-eye narrators and exposing their brutality, with a focus on whether these texts can be considered as narratives of causality, attempts to explain albeit not condone violence. In contrast, the final chapter will explore the perhaps surprising absence of the rampage school shooter from the list of violent-eye protagonists since the 1990s, questioning whether his lack of presence is indicative of a currently perceived wholly unsympathetic status.

### **The Ordinarity of Evil**

A study of violent characters who commit murder and inflict suffering on others necessarily involves a discussion of the subject of evil, since a character who “derives pleasure from pain and pain from pleasure” can and often is considered to be evil (McGinn 1997, p. 62). This is a daunting task, since evil “is not a scientific concept with an agreed meaning” (Staub 1989, p. 25), and given its metaphysical and theological connotations its very existence as a secular concept has been questioned (for example,

by Cole 2006). However, for Terry Eagleton evil individuals and acts do exist (2010, p. 13), especially in the twentieth century given the number of wars and genocides, yet to acknowledge this reality does not necessitate an acceptance that evil “lies beyond all explanation” (2010, p. 16). For the purpose of the current enquiry, Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality of evil’, coined in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) as a means of interpreting the actions and behaviour of the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, proves particularly fruitful. This concept has been widely discussed and, as Richard J. Bernstein highlights, frequently misinterpreted (2002, p. 18), in part because it is not always clear what exactly Arendt means by the term ‘banal’ (Clarke 1980, p. 417) as she did not take the time to develop the concept in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (King 2015, p. 17), and also because the concept is potentially problematic due to the claim that it reduces and diminishes evil by making it quotidian (Staub 1989, p. 126). However, it was and remains a valuable and influential theory. Crucial aspects of the concept are the element of thoughtlessness and the appearance of banality, but of relevance to this current thesis is Arendt’s suggestion that the banality of evil equates to “terribly and terrifyingly normal” individuals (1963, p. 276), those who are “staggeringly, disturbingly normal” (Cole 2006, p. 199) despite the atrocious and heinous acts they commit. This is echoed in U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s Evil Empire Speech of 8 March, 1983, in reference to the Soviet Union (which Reagan’s speechwriter borrowed from C. S. Lewis 1942):

The greatest evil [...] is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.

In line with Arendt’s reading, for Ervin Staub “evil that arises out of ordinary thinking and is committed by ordinary people is the norm, not the exception” (1989, p. 126), yet this has not always been perceived in popular and literary thought, which has often conflated evil with the monstrous or the otherworldly, to the extent that monsters can serve to obscure and eclipse human culpability and atrocity (e.g., Wilson 2015). In this sense, Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil serves as a “valuable counter-point to its mythology” (Cole 2006, p. 200), and as such provides a useful lens through which to understand the majority of violent-eye protagonists discussed in this thesis, who are

neither monsters nor ontologically exceptional, but are instead recognisably human, caught up in questions of “guilt and responsibility” (King 2015, p. 33), yet ones who choose to commit heinous, violent, and so-called evil acts.

Following this line of thinking, this research borrows from genocide studies, since although the violent-eye characters discussed in this thesis are individuals and commit their acts of violence autonomously, generally without the aid of a large group of accomplices or on a mass scale (with the exception of *Fight Club*), and not with the intent to annihilate a specific group of people, much can be learnt from the scholarly work on genocide in terms of the ordinariness of the perpetrators. James E. Waller (2008), in contrast with Staub’s aforementioned assertion that calling evil ‘banal’ diminishes it and is thus the opposite end of the “wishful thinking” spectrum to “incomprehensible evil” (Staub 1989, p. 126), suggests that acknowledging the ordinariness of such perpetrators “does not diminish the horror of their actions” but rather increases it (Waller 2008, p. 148). However, both Waller and Staub would agree that positioning violent individuals as monstrous others, stripping away their humanity and labelling them ‘evil’, not only mythologises evil but creates an artificial sense of alterity, comforting society in the knowledge that such monstrous others are not people like ‘us’. It is preferable, as Waller asserts, to perceive “Extraordinary Evil as an extra-human capitalisation [and] relate extraordinary acts to correspondingly extraordinary people” (2008, p. 148). As Judith Halberstam asks, what comfort would be gained from transforming Eichmann, or other similar individuals, into monsters (1995, p. 162)? Yet like Arendt, and also Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian Szejnmann (2008), Waller reminds us that ordinary people are capable of atrocity, people who are, ontologically, no different from the rest of society. It is not their exceptionality but rather their normality and ability to pass largely unnoticed that makes them so frightening (see Chapter Three for more on visibility). In relation to monstrosity, Linda J. Holland-Toll (2001) asks “what can be worse than a monster one cannot recognize?” (p. 86). For Mark Seltzer (1998), “there is perhaps something uncanny, even horrifying, in the sheer ordinariness – in the abnormally normal form” (p. 106) surrounding serial killers. It is worthwhile considering a quotation from Nick Spencer’s comic series *Bedlam* (2013-2014), in reference to the

“homicidal maniac” Fillmore Press, a Joker-esque villain who has terrorised the city of Bedlam as the criminal overlord Madder Red:

We don’t understand how one of our own can become this ... there must be some kind of explanation, we say -- something *different* about him. Something *exceptional*, in a horrible way. There must be some story, some reason to it. Because in some sense, strange as it may sound -- the idea that there *isn’t* -- well, that scares us maybe even more than the actual threat of him. (Spencer, Rossmo, and Irving 2013, Ch. 1, n.p.; emphasis original)

A further example of this in British fiction is the case of Frederick Clegg in Fowles’ *The Collector* (published in 1963, the same year as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*), who is described by his captive victim Miranda as “so ordinary that he is extraordinary” (p. 127), to which she poignantly adds that “the ordinary man is the curse of civilization” (p. 127). Arendt’s version of evil, as Eagleton emphasises, is mediocre rather than monstrous, that of a “minor official [rather] than a flamboyant tyrant” (Eagleton 2010, p. 123), and this is of benefit when researching violent-eye characters such as Frederick.

Using Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, this thesis argues that violent-eye narrators play an important role in this de-mythologisation of evil, since even if in possession of a heightened intellect (for example, Thompson’s Lou Ford and Ellroy’s Martin Plunkett), they nevertheless are presented as being mundane and often banal individuals, and at the very least human, which is not always the case in wider fictional representations of so-called evil characters. For example, in their study of cinematic representations of psychopathy (a term often conflated with evil), forensic psychiatrists Samuel J. Leistedt and Paul Linkowski rejected 274 out of 400 cinematic villains because “they were too caricatured and/or too fictional” (2014, p. 168). The authors also discuss the rise in popularity of what they term the “elite psychopath”, a character who displays “exaggerated levels of intelligence, sophisticated manners, and cunning, sometimes up to superhuman and supermediatized levels” (p. 171; this will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three in relation to Poppy Z. Brite’s protagonist Andrew Compton in *Exquisite Corpse*), citing Hannibal Lecter as one of the “best examples of this type of unrealistic but sensational character” (p. 171). However, they acknowledge a shift in cinema in early 2000 to more realistic depictions of psychopathy that include vulnerable and “more human” (p. 171) characters – the “minor official” rather than the “flamboyant

tyrant” – and a similar inference could be made in relation to characters presented as ‘evil’.

Writing over fifteen years earlier than Leistedt and Linkowski, Colin McGinn discusses the literary practice of depicting evil as synonymous with monstrosity, arguing that “we take the notion of evil as ugliness of soul and concretize it in the form of a monster of physically repellent aspect” (1997, p. 144), continuing by asserting that “the connection between evil and outer monstrosity is deeply entrenched in our thought and imagination” (1997, p. 145). However, it is arguable that as the perpetrators of evil have increasingly come to the forefront of narratives, to the extent that some are the sole focalisers of their respective texts, their visibly monstrous features have diminished and thus they are able to move more easily and secretively throughout their narrative contexts, since it is no longer so easy to identify the “domestic monsters amongst us – those who outstrip their fellows in the extent and quality of their evil” (1997, p. 145). For example, Patrick Bateman is a white-collar worker on Wall Street, obsessed with consumerism and so indistinguishable from his counterparts that he is frequently mistaken for being someone else, and is therefore “chameleon-like”, to borrow from Mark Seltzer (1998, p. 10). As evidence of Bateman’s normalcy, David Seed adds that he is, “disturbingly, more typical of his society than many would be willing to admit” (Seed 2014, p. 283). Violent-eye protagonists in American literature are also often presented as being physically attractive, which could be linked to the infamy of actual violent individuals such as Ted Bundy, whose putative handsomeness is well documented. For example, Patrick is described as having a “devilishly handsome skin tone” thanks to his proclivity for tanning (1991, p. 66), Brite’s Andrew Compton is a “handsome devil” (1996, p. 196), and Lindsay’s Dexter Morgan frequently presents himself as being the subject of female desire. Of course, since the texts under question are in large part (if not completely) first-person narratives then the issue of reliability is raised, as we often only have the narrator’s word that they are indeed physically attractive. However, despite their actions, they are rarely characterised as repulsive or grotesque monsters; within postmodern fiction it is the individual, with the “facade of the normal”, that has come to embody terror (Halberstam 1995, p. 162) and even evil.

Thus the overt and physically repellent monsters of early gothic narratives have been replaced by the office worker, the shop assistant, and the boy next door.

But a preoccupation with the physical appearance of such characters, whilst illuminating in relation to McGinn's thoughts on the fusion between evil and aesthetic revulsion, risks returning to an emphasis of the appearance of banality, rather than the overall quotidian nature of certain perpetrators of evil acts, those who are "terribly and terrifyingly normal"; violent individuals such as serial killers, according to Conrath, have a "remarkably banal and self-effacing profile" (1994, p. 144), with Seltzer describing them as "abnormally normal" (1998, p. 9). Within violent-eye narratives, voice plays a crucial role in exposing the mundane, ordinary, and ultimately human aspects of violent individuals, reminiscent of Eichmann's inability to speak "a single sentence that was not a cliché" (Arendt 1963, p. 48), a trait also present in Fowles' Frederick in *The Collector*, much to the disdain of the abducted Miranda: "What irritates me most about him is his way of speaking. Cliché after cliché after cliché" (Fowles 1963, p. 161). Yet despite their banality, so-called evil characters have stepped out of the shadows and the background, seizing control of the narrative and serving as focalisers rather than antagonists. As such, their inner thoughts are presented uncensored by external voices, and thus readers are continually immersed in the mind of a violent character, regardless of whether or not they are reliable. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, the confessional nature of such narratives creates an empathetic – yet not sympathetic – link between reader and narrator, as the former is forced to see things from the latter's perspective and to enter into the mind of an arguably evil individual. Whilst this technique is potentially controversial, it also conveys a sense of realism, as expressed, for example, in David Grossman's 1989 Israeli novel *See Under: Love*, in which the character of Obersturmbannführer Neigel breaks the fourth wall of the novel by turning to speak directly to the narrator, reprimanding him for "negligence" and saying "Isn't it true [...] that writers are supposed to enter all the way into their characters" (1989, p. 280)? By having this interruption, this sudden hiatus to the story, Grossman succeeds in focussing the reader's attention on the issue of whether Neigel, a Nazi, deserves both the reader's acknowledgement and a voice in the narrative, even though he is an immoral (or perhaps amoral) character, having executed a number of Jewish prisoners only

moments before speaking. As such, the thoughts and actions of violent characters, including violent-eye protagonists, are relevant not only to the narrative but to the fictionalisation of reality, which is not one-sided and reductive but instead multifaceted.

Crucial to the first-person narration of the violent individual is what McGinn refers to as a “shock of recognition”, achieved when we enter into the violent protagonist’s “most intimate thoughts and emotions” (1997, p. 150) and which leads to the realisation that similarities between ‘us’ and ‘them’ exist. McGinn looks to an earlier literary example by discussing this shock in relation to Mary Shelley’s Gothic horror *Frankenstein* (1818), in which readers are exposed to the Creature’s thoughts through his narrative seizure and subsequent control of the story part-way through the text. By entering the mind of a violent character, the reader is able to “take a journey into his interior and find there a familiar face” (McGinn 1997, p. 150), despite his physical monstrosity typical of the Gothic. The Creature is articulate and erudite, deeply concerned with his own existence and expulsion from humanity, and as such his command of the narrative renders him recognisable and human, despite his outward monstrous appearance and violent and murderous actions.

This shock of recognition can be applied to violent-eye narratives, since the readers are exposed not only to violent actions but also to the emotions and experiences of the perpetrators of such crimes, alongside the mundane and normal elements of their everyday life, the recognisably human aspects of their personalities. So whilst Patrick Bateman’s first-person narrative in *American Psycho* is, as David Eldridge suggests, “profoundly alienating” (2008, p. 22) when it comes to its explorations of violence, it is concurrently profoundly familiar precisely because of its mundanity, including the “seemingly endless litany of grooming products, restaurant menus and designer labels” (p. 22). This thesis argues that such shocks of recognition can in fact be manifold, since there is a problematic tension between the use of voice to both assert and undermine the humanity of the protagonist. By this it is meant that voice serves not only to emphasise the normality and banality of violent-eye protagonists through their recognisably human qualities and even frailties, but it also exposes the reader to the evil and monstrous acts they commit. As such, the reader is constantly challenged to

reformulate their interpretation of the violent-eye narrator, through fluctuations between the experience of inflicting suffering on others to quotidian thoughts and feelings about such mundane aspects as dinner dates or social interactions, shopping lists or everyday frustrations. Yet collusion is somewhat tempered by the unreliability of the narrator, as their first-person narration affords them the opportunity to lie, deceive, or be ironic.

Nevertheless, this unreliability arguably provides a more authentic voice, one that is prone to both honesty and dishonesty. Ultimately, violent-eye narratives force readers to engage with the perspective of the violent-eye narrator, with all the issues of reliability versus unreliability that this entails. As Lionel Shriver's protagonist Eva states in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, "I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit" (2003a, p. 270). Whilst this assertion is not strictly true, in that the first-person perspective can at least be interrogated, an awareness of the limitations of first-person narration is important. This is especially the case when considering analepses and memory. David Eldridge (2008) touches upon this in his analysis of both the novel and film versions of *American Psycho*, astutely indicating that the novel's confinement to "the misogynistic, self-obsessed mind" (2008, p. 24) of Patrick removes a sense of "objectivity" that the camera is able to provide in the film through an external "moral gaze" (2008, p. 24). Yet it is precisely this lack of objectivity that is interesting in violent-eye narrators, as their potential dishonesty and unreliability remain vital elements of the way in which they both see and choose to present themselves.<sup>4</sup>

### **Outline of the Thesis**

The pervasive trend of exploring the origins of violence, including the incorporation of such comforting aetiologies in literature, could be indicative of Richard Bernstein's claim that "we are living in a time when increasingly there is a temptation to undermine,

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<sup>4</sup> The way in which A. M. Homes' violent-eye character in *The End of Alice* (1996a) and *Appendix A* (1996b) sees himself in contrast with reality is particularly indicative of the tension between self-perception, self-deception, and other external perspectives, and this will be explored in more detail in Chapter One.

soften, or mitigate claims about responsibility” (2002, p. 29). But to understand what leads an individual to commit evil actions is not necessarily to remove responsibility and culpability, and this is where Bernstein’s reading of Immanuel Kant’s concept of radical evil, which emphasises the link between evil and individual freedom, is perhaps applied a little too inflexibly. Trauma, as has been discussed already in this chapter, is a frequent literary device and when included in narratives of violence creates comforting aetiologies that help to explain why a character behaves in the violent and aggressive way that they do whilst also serving to humanise them, removing the elements of both monstrosity and evil and thus rendering violent-eye characters as not wholly unsympathetic.

Of all the characters included in these texts, Patrick Bateman is arguably the quintessential example of the violent-eye narrator, the archetype of his kind. As both a cause and a consequence of this, *American Psycho* has received a wealth of scholarly attention, which is in stark contrast to other violent-eye narratives, such as Homes’ *The End of Alice* and Oates’ *Zombie*. As such, as an arguably “overappreciated text” (Ferry 2015, p. 77), *American Psycho* is not included in this thesis as a core narrative, but rather serves as a reference point, providing more opportunity for less studied novels to be explored in detail. The result of this selective and deliberate omission is that six texts – Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse*, De Grazia’s *America Skin*, Homes’ *The End of Alice*, Lindsay’s *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, Oates’ *Zombie*, and Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* – collectively make up the primary material of this thesis’ first three chapters, as they are all examples of violent-eye American narratives since the 1990s. Specifically, the novels by Lindsay and Homes are chosen for the presence of the pathogenic mothers within them, enabling an analysis of how mothers are used in violent-eye literature to explain the actions of their sons. Similarly, Palahniuk’s and De Grazia’s texts are included for what they have to say about the father figure, particularly in relation to his absence. Finally, Oates’ *Zombie* and Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* are both examples of violent-eye fiction written from the perspective of a gay protagonist, and so are chosen in order to explore the conflation of violence and homosexuality. The decision to omit certain texts, such as Cooper’s *Frisk* and Hendricks’ *Miami Purity*, is because their inclusion would open up lines of inquiry that are beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, the suggestion

that Cooper's protagonist has fabricated the violent events he narrates shifts the focus away from reality and confession and onto the subject of imagination and/or delusion. Similarly, Hendricks' female violent-eye character, whilst fascinating, raises issues of gendered violence that would be best explored more fully elsewhere.

In addition to its incorporation of the flurry of texts from the 1990s, the reason for this time-frame is related to the rise to prominence of trauma theory, particularly linked to the discussion of mothers in Chapter One. As will be argued, mothers are frequently positioned as the site of trauma in violent-eye narratives, yet this view is in contrast with the assumption that such mother-blaming had disappeared from American society by the early 1980s. Whilst Patrick Bateman is frequently perceived to be an example of a character who has no origins, who we meet *in medias res* as a fully-fledged violent-eye character who engages in murder and violence against both women and men, this thesis argues that the suggestion of trauma is nevertheless included, albeit implicitly and inconspicuously, as will be discussed. This is in contrast with James Annesley's (1998) reading of the narrative, which argues that the absence of an "existential background [...] closes down the possibility that the reader could explain Bateman's behaviour in relation to either his experiences or his relationships" (p. 20), and also Carla Freccero's reading; indeed, she coined the expression "comforting etiology" specifically in relation to her interpretation of its lack in *American Psycho*. Whilst this thesis acknowledges that such a back-story is severely muted in the novel, the first chapter in particular will challenge Freccero's reading, arguing that like many of the other violent-eye narratives discussed in this thesis, *American Psycho* contains elements of a narrative of causality, and the implication of a trauma related to his mother humanises Patrick and means that he is not a wholly unsympathetic character.

So, in order to explore the narratives of causality that permeate violent-eye texts, the body of the thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter One the impact of the traumatising or 'pathogenic' mother will be explored as a starting point, with a particular focus on A. M. Homes' *The End of Alice* (along with its companion piece *Appendix A* (1996b)) and Jeff Lindsay's first novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (along with brief consideration of its sequel, *Dearly Devoted Dexter* (2005)). As mentioned above,

the chapter endeavours to respond to the assertion that the practice of blaming mothers for the violent actions of their offspring, a theory that was particularly rife from the 1940s onwards, disappeared from cultural consciousness and popular thought in the 1980s, arguing that instead it remains a prevailing theory in relation to understanding the origins of male violence and one that is prevalent in popular culture such as violent-eye narratives. Further, it aims to explore the use of the mother in humanising the violent character, which repositions the latter as a victim rather than simply a perpetrator by demonising and dehumanising the former.

In Chapter Two the thesis follows the violent-eye narrator out of childhood and into adolescence, a time associated less with the mother and more with the father, and as such it explores the latter's traumatic effect on the creation of violence. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Don de Grazia's *American Skin* are explored as examples of novels in which the protagonists seem to have been failed by their fathers during their adolescence and, as such, unguided and alone, become perpetually liminal characters with a proclivity for violence. However, it is also argued that the mother, despite her corporeal absence, can remain a threatening presence, particularly in *Fight Club*, to the extent that she continues to be blamed for the actions of her sons. In fact, in the absence of the father she becomes an omnipresent mother, a role rich in negative connotations.

Having looked in detail at the relationship between trauma and violent-eye narrators, Chapter Three explores characters who do not emphasise a traumatic past. Such a depiction of an unavoidable predisposition to violence and the inevitable yielding to its temptations, while problematic in its own right, is compounded due to its conflation in some novels with homosexuality, and as such this chapter moves out of adolescence and into adulthood, exploring gay violent-eye protagonists by looking specifically at Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* and Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*. These novels are analysed in order to explore the suggestion of a link in contemporary violent-eye American literature between homosexuality and ontological rather than aetiological violence, potentially implying – particularly when addressed comparatively – that there is an assumption (however problematic) and a conflation between the putatively innate

predispositions towards homosexuality, deviancy, and violence. After all, homosexuality itself was historically conflated with criminality up to and including the mid-twentieth century, and thus the vilification of gay individuals is not new. Furthermore, throughout history homosexuality has been linked to the influence of the mother and, to a lesser extent, the failure or absence of the father, and thus this chapter builds upon the discussion presented primarily in Chapter One but also that of Chapter Two. The predatory nature of the violent-eye characters in the two texts can also be read in light of what has been termed “homosexual overkill”, which involves gay men’s reputed inability to control their sexual desires, and which when combined with representations of violence comes to suggest a particularly dangerous threat. This chapter thus serves to engage with and question certain social fears, identified by K. E. Sullivan as “cultural anxieties about proper masculinity, motherhood, and non-heteronormative sexualities” (2000, n.p.).

In addition, this chapter develops the notion of ontological violence by briefly exploring the portrayal of certain violent-eye narrators as lacking something vital for humanity, what Jarvis identified as the “profound sense of lack” (2007, p. 334) discussed earlier in this introduction. Mark Seltzer addresses this also, seeing “the complete yielding to nonpersonality [as] one of the serial killer’s signatures” (1998, p. 12). This notion can be found in violent novels such as *The Collector*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*, and in addition to being linked with psychopathy, it is often suggested as an alternative to either heterosexuality or homosexuality, and there is progression evident in the problematic and heteronormative manner of thinking: the violent individual is not assumed to be heterosexual so the assumption is that they must be homosexual, and when it is discovered that they are not homosexual then they are instead defined as a “nothing” or an ontological void. However, an issue in exploring this notion, and which limits an extensive addressing of it that would necessitate a separate chapter, is that violent-eye narrators do not frequently perceive themselves as “nothing”, and when they do, it is often fleetingly. Instead, it is a description more commonly used by other individuals to describe violent characters such as Frederick, Tom, and Jame. As such, substantial examples within violent-eye novels are lacking, although notable examples do exist, as will be presented in the chapter. Thus, the latter

stages of the chapter focus on the performance of normality, the concealing of the violent self through pretence, and the construction of what psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley (1941) referred to in the 1940s as the “mask of sanity” (along with the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek’s (2012) theory of the mask), as an extension of the distinct sense of lack. The performance is thus read as not only hiding violent proclivities but also as the attempt to construct an identity, to be a “something” rather than a “nothing”, and thus fit within societal notions of normality. Read as an extension of liminality, this attempt to be something through violent acts can also be interpreted as the need to reclaim a position within the structurally defined confines of society.

Whilst these first three chapters consider a relatively narrow range of factors (mothers, fathers, and sexuality, consecutively), the suggestion is not that they are the only determinants of violence in literature. Instead, they are assessed in part due to their prolific presence in violent-eye fiction, and also because, when approached alongside each other, they present the opportunity to chart the protagonist out of childhood, through adolescence, and ultimately into adulthood. This progression is central to the thesis’ preoccupation with treating the violent-eye protagonist as an individual rather than a construct or a monster. Other elements, such as economic and ideological factors, are of relevance yet beyond the scope of the thesis.

Finally, Chapter Four tests the parameters of the first three to address the noticeable absence of the American school shooter in violent-eye literature, and thus it explores the theoretical limitations of this thesis and the practical limitations of the sub-genre. In so doing, it includes two additional narratives: Stephen King’s *Rage* (1977a) and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a). The first novel is incorporated because the protagonist is a violent-eye school shooter, and the second analysed because it is an example of the tendency to talk about school shooters since the former novel was taken out of print. The absence of the shooter’s voice suggests that at present American culture struggles to view school shooters as victims in their own right, instead insisting on their wholly unsympathetic position as pure perpetrators; thus, they are potentially an example of what David Lodge was talking about in his argument referenced at the outset of this introduction. When school shooters are discussed in

literary and cinematic texts, emphasis is often placed on their banality, and in this sense they are similar to the other characters discussed in this thesis, yet what differentiates them – apart from their absence and thus lack of voice – is the lack of a defined aetiological explanation, or conversely the suggestion of manifold possibilities that preclude an explanatory or didactic reading, as in the case of Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* (2003), a film based on the Columbine Massacre of 1999. In order to separate 'them' from the rest of 'us', with the latter being a concept that now includes the violent-eye narrators discussed throughout the thesis, the closest thing to addressing this highly current concern in novels is by talking *about* school shooters from as near a proximity as possible or, more likely, comfortable. This is often figured in generic terms: the best friend, as in D. B. C. Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, or the parent, as in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, both published in 2003, with other examples including the girlfriend, as in Jennifer Brown's *The Hate List* (2009), or the teacher, as in Wally Lamb's *The Hour I First Believed* (2008). Alongside additional examples, these texts contribute to a cultural preoccupation with massacres such as those that occurred at Columbine in 1999. So, in order to explore the absence of the school shooter, this chapter looks at Shriver's and King's texts, both of which are first-person narratives. Whilst King's novel falls before the timeframe of this thesis, being published in 1977, it is nevertheless relevant to a discussion of the violent-eye narrator due to the fact that protagonist Charlie Decker is the only example thus far found of a violent-eye school shooter, and one who has been retrospectively muted by King's decision to take the novel out of print. Furthermore, it is arguable that the period in which *Rage* experienced its greatest relevance was the 1990s, as that is when it came to the forefront of controversy and prompted King's decision. As such, the violent-eye school shooter since the 1990s is not simply absent but glaringly so.

Modern western societies, by and large, invariably seek a reason for violence and atrocity, situating the likes of the protagonists in Chapter One as victims of the mother and those in Chapter Two as failed by the father (and arguably the mother again), resulting in the suggestion that late-century social conditions have created these characters. This potentially implies the comforting sense that because something could have been done to prevent their transformation into violent individuals, future

examples can be prevented, and the authors may or may not be suggesting this; the emphasis is not, however, on the authorial intent, but rather the persistent patterns that permeate violent-eye novels of the 1990s onwards. In contrast, the protagonists in Chapter Three are presented as violent because of their sexuality, and again this provides readers with an explanation for their violence, albeit a problematic and damaging one in that it risks perpetuating the association of gay men with deviancy and criminality. Yet it seems that unlike these other characters, it is the school shooter who is not someone that American society is ready to commit to understanding, and certainly not someone to whom they are ready to give a voice. As such, my argument culminates with a discussion about the sustained first-person perspective of a school shooter, which, it seems, if not intolerable then is at least undesired, indicated by the fact that – since *Rage* – no such violent-eye text has been found to exist.

The thesis concludes with a re-articulation of the study's major intellectual threads and a consideration of the future of the violent-eye protagonist in American literature. In particular, David McWilliam's (2016) argument is presented, in which he states that the fear of the serial killer dominated the 1980s (and thus the literature of the 1990s), and the school shooter reached his apogee in the 1990s (and thus the literature of the 2000s, albeit not violent-eye texts). Thus, the thesis looks ahead to what we can infer regarding future texts surrounding the terrorist, the individual who, as McWilliam points out, has come to eclipse both the serial killer and the school shooter at the epicentre of American social and moral concerns, and I conclude by questioning whether the terrorist is not only positioned as unsympathetic, but as distinctly un-American.

## Chapter One

### Modern Medeas: The Legacy of Mother Blame in Violent-Eye Fiction

**And I say that there is nothing greater than the mother of men. (Whitman 1855, p. 27)**

In its exploration of violent-eye protagonists in American literature, this thesis suggests that a common theme that unites many such literary characters is trauma. Such a suggestion is not in and of itself innovative, as trauma has long been associated with adult deviancy; to quote Mark Seltzer, “child abuse – wounded as a child, wounding as an adult – is one of the foundational scripts in accounting for the serial killer” (1998, p. 4). However, in line with Michelle Balaev’s (2012) pluralistic interpretation of literary trauma theory, and in response to her argument that there are “manifold representations of trauma in literature” (p. 115), this chapter takes a specific approach to violent-eye American novels. In doing so, it argues that mothers are frequently positioned as the site of trauma, and are thus often used to explain the aetiological origins of violent-eye protagonists, a role that has a number of important implications that I will discuss here. Primarily, literary mothers have the capacity to remind the reader that the violent-eye protagonist is not a monstrous other but a damaged child who has grown up. Historically, mothers have been demonised as morally bad or failures, and have also been dehumanised, established as objects to their subject children or labelled simply as evil. Furthermore, their association with childhood serves to further and more powerfully reinforce the image of the deviant adult as a victimised and traumatised child, even when the violent-eye protagonist’s own voice attempts to contradict this and reinforce their own aggressive tendencies.

This chapter will look at how mothers have been represented in American society since the mid-twentieth century, exploring key historical theories that have influenced social perceptions and, by extension, literary representations. In particular, this chapter will consider two violent-eye texts that explore the role of the traumatising mother of the protagonist: A. M. Homes’ *The End of Alice* (1996a) and Jeff Lindsay’s

*Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004). Both were published long after the theory of the pathogenic mother had currency, and are discussed together here because they testify, along with other novels, to the persistent yet insidious assumption that deviant individuals are created by bad mothers. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the two novels and the implications they raise for how mothers and their violent offspring are presented in American literature of the 1990s onwards, and how mothers are persistently used as aetiological explanations for violent men. First, however, twentieth-century perceptions of the American mother will be explored in order to understand the way she has been framed within social thought and the effect this has had on a legacy of mother blame evident in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American violent-eye fiction.

### **Mid to Late Twentieth-Century Perceptions of Mothers**

Throughout the twentieth century, mothers were analysed in relation to their ambiguity and perceived duality. The mid-century psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1945) discusses the mother's two aspects, both good and bad, and whilst Donald Winnicott (1949) famously emphasized the 'good enough mother', this nevertheless raises the suggestion of the 'bad enough mother'. Yet this duality eclipses the reality of motherhood, in which good mothers are occasionally bad and bad mothers sometimes good, presuming that such binary categorisations can even exist. For feminist sociologist Verta Taylor, the lullaby 'Rock-a-by, Baby' serves as the ultimate example of motherhood, conveying its dualistic nature: "How ironic that the classic American lullaby, by juxtaposing suggestions of care and harm, so thoroughly expresses the contradictions of motherhood" (Taylor 1996, pp. 1-2).<sup>1</sup>

Although this chapter focuses on the mother as a site of trauma, it should be strongly asserted that this is by no means intended to suggest that mothers invariably cause such distress or that it is only mothers that do so; traumatising mothers are not a

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<sup>1</sup> Ros Coward provides an interesting discussion of the previous maternal care demonstrated by mothers who eventually kill their children (1997).

ubiquitous phenomenon, which makes their frequent presence in violent-eye narratives worthy of further exploration. It is true that “[b]ad or ineffective mothers have been a staple in much of world literature” (Boswell 1996, p. 10), having moved “noticeably toward the center stage in American culture” (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky 1998, p. 2). So the question must be addressed as to why the mother is of such significance in the creation of literary trauma, more so than the father, siblings, grandparents, and peers, or school and other pivotal socialisation events. One answer could be that late twentieth-century American fiction mirrors psychoanalytic theories, which despite traditionally marginalising mothers, eventually moved them into focus with the arrival of object-relations theory (Doane & Hodges 1992, p. 7). American psychiatrist David M. Levy wrote in 1943 that “it is generally accepted that the most potent of all influences on social behavior is derived from the primary social experience with the mother” (p. 3). Over a decade later, Carl Jung stated:

I myself make it a rule to look first for the cause of infantile neuroses in the mother, as I know from experience that a child is much more likely to develop normally than neurotically, and that in the great majority of cases definite causes of disturbances can be found in the parents, especially in the mother. (Jung 1959, p. 17)

Nancy Chodorow echoed this sentiment in the 1970s, stating that “[t]he character of the infant’s early relation to its mother profoundly affects its sense of self” (1978, p. 77), and in 1990 Robert Bly focused this impact particularly onto the son: “The possessiveness that mothers typically exercise on sons [...] can never be underestimated” (Bly 1990, p. 12).

As such, the use of the mother in fiction as a catalyst for violence could be interpreted as a form of pop-psychoanalysis, a superficial scratching at the surface of common understandings of the mother as articulated through well-known theories such as Freudianism and the Oedipus complex. Whilst such a focus on psychoanalytic frameworks has arguably decreased since the 1980s, being less influential than in the mid-century, evidence for the persistent relevance of them can still be found in the literature of the 1990s onwards, including in Lindsay’s *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, where the interpretation of dreams is satirically questioned: “Ja, Herr Doktor. The knife ist eine mother, ja?” (Lindsay 2004, p. 63).

Beyond psychoanalysis, placing the mother at the centre of the traumatic experience serves to situate trauma in childhood in a more profound way than could be achieved through similar use of the father, suggesting a perpetuation of some of the mythic assumptions about mothers propagated during the mid-century. Traditionally, mothers were frequently associated with the home, the domestic sphere, as the following panels from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006; Fig. 1), set in 1960s Pennsylvania, adeptly illustrate:

--IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO POTENTIAL COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS--

(Fig. 1: Bechdel 2006, p. 197)

Here I am referring to what Michelle Rosaldo describes as women intricately linked with that which is domestic and men with that which is extra-domestic or public (1974, pp. 17-18). It is certainly evident that since the 1970s the lines between the domestic and the public spheres have shifted and blurred, and women are now far more able to surpass the boundaries between the interior and the exterior of the home with the rise of the working mother and the house husband, although the latter remains a "shadowy figure" (Reid Boyd 2005, p. 200; see Chapter Two for statistics on stay-at-home dads). However, the image of mother and child nevertheless remains more evocative and certainly more prevalent than that of the father and child, again evidenced by Figure 1, which depicts the father as a towering patriarchal presence looming above the children, whilst the mother is on their level, amongst them. The absence of the father's hands from the image starkly contrasts with the central focus of those of the mother; he is physically inaccessible and intangible whereas she is proximal and palpable, her tactile

connection with the toys reminiscent of her touch and physical presence in the lives of her young children.

Thinking more closely about fathers, within the coming-of-age novel, Kenneth Millard states that an important issue “is the way in which finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father” (2007, p. 15), and whilst initially this seems to reduce severely the relevance of the mother in the development of the child, in fact what it serves to do is to reaffirm the assumption of her dominant role within the period of pre-adolescence, that of childhood, by situating the father as exterior to it. Millard continues to state that adolescent sons, in particular, rely upon their relationship with their fathers as “a vital means to socialisation” (2007, p. 15), and this will be explored in more depth in the following chapter. It can thus be argued that within American literature, adolescence is frequently dominated by the father, childhood by the mother, and this is certainly prevalent in violent-eye fiction. This is also evident in feminist psychoanalytic theory, as illustrated by Estela Welldon, who observed that the secondary role of the father during the early stages of a child’s life changes in adolescence (1988, p. 11). To quote Sherry Ortner, “[m]others and their children, according to cultural reasoning, belong together” (1974, p. 77), and perhaps so too do fathers and their adolescents, again according to cultural reasoning.

Mothers thus have the capacity to remind us of their sons and daughters as children and not just adults. This is particularly poignant in the case of violent characters who are often demonised as evil or monstrous, as it serves to remind the reader of their humanity by evoking their once childlike state and relative innocence, not in the sense of arrested development (although this is not necessary precluded) but rather in allusions to the fact that they were not always violent and cruel. American cultural historian Amy Louise Wood (2015, 2016) discusses this in relation to the nineteenth-century case of Jesse Harding Pomeroy, the “Boston Boy Fiend”, who whilst a child was convicted of torturing and murdering other young children in the 1870s, and whose mother was used as a means of softening the public image of an otherwise vilified individual and reminding society that Pomeroy was not just a ‘fiend’ but someone’s child. However, in the case where the mother is neglectful, violent, abusive, abandoning, or

otherwise generally absent, the violent offspring is not only rendered human, childlike, and innocent, but portrayed as a victim.

Taking *American Psycho* (1991) as an archetypal example of violent-eye fiction, I argue that the novel can be read as a narrative of causality because of the implication that something is not quite right with Patrick's mother, in contrast with Carla Freccero's (1997) reading of Patrick as lacking a "comforting etiology", discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. Whilst there is no concrete explanation as to why Patrick is the highly violent individual who readers encounter in the narrative, the brief account of his mother (1991, pp. 365-366) suggests that she may be a pathogenic example.

Late in the narrative, Patrick goes to visit his mother, who he finds heavily sedated in her private room as a permanent resident of Sandstone, a hospital facility with bars on the windows. Despite being inside and during the day, she is sitting on her bed in her nightgown with sunglasses on, repeatedly touching her hair and licking her lips. Not only are the location and her demeanour unsettling, but Patrick's behaviour indicates that he is extremely uncomfortable in her presence. Whilst his shaking hands could be indicative of a murderous individual's distinct discomfort in the secure and physically restrictive environment of the hospital, not dissimilar in this context to a prison, the revelation that his dis-ease is a result of his mother can be found in his difficulty looking at her: "I'm not surprised at how much effort it takes to raise my head and look at her" (Ellis 1991, p. 365). In addition to the strain of doing so is the inclusion of the lack of surprise, which indicates that there is a history between the two that has fostered this atmosphere and difficulty. Whilst this vignette does not reveal any particular event in Patrick's life that could be considered traumatic, its inclusion could hint at the fact that all is not right in Patrick's family, suggesting the presence of an unhappy if not unpleasant childhood. After all, Patrick's mother is not of narrative significance beyond her ability to indicate a human and potentially troubled aspect of Patrick's past.

Of relevance, the description of Patrick's visit to his mother is an almost verbatim reproduction of a meeting that takes place between first-person protagonist Clay and his mother at the start of Ellis' earlier text *Less Than Zero* (1985, pp. 10-11). Instead of

sitting together in a hospital, Clay and his mother are in a restaurant, but despite this difference a number of other features present in *American Psycho* can be observed in *Less Than Zero*: the protagonist's shaking hands, his inability to look at his mother with ease, her repetitive hair touching and wearing of sunglasses indoors, and their mundane dialogue. Of note, the lip-licking of Patrick's mother replaces her predecessor's wine sipping, and thus there is the sense that despite the different contexts and situations, the two are one and the same, an almost archetypal Ellisian mother of the troubled protagonist. Thus the absence of "a psychologized narrative of origins, a comforting etiology" (Freccero 1997, p. 51) in *American Psycho* does not preclude a reading of Patrick as a damaged individual. Although the narrative does not include "a domineering mother" (1997, p. 51), as Freccero observes, it nevertheless suggests a troubled relationship between the violent-eye narrator and his (potentially pathogenic) mother, which is a common characteristic in such novels, even ones as satirical as *American Psycho*.

The use of mothers as the source of trauma in fiction and popular culture raises two persistent issues that centre on the mother and the maternal-filial relationship. These are intricately linked yet subtly different: demonisation and dehumanisation. By the former I am referring to the mother as rendered 'bad', monstrous, or a failure, whereas by the latter I mean the mother as objectified and depersonalised.

Ann Hall and Mardia Bishop assert that "the most oppressive label in American culture, 'the bad mom,' [is] the postmodern equivalent of the scarlet letter" (Hall & Bishop 2009, p. ix). Historically, there has been a tendency to focus on "the potential toxicity of mothering behaviors in relation to sons" (Singh 2004, p. 1194), with mothers having been blamed for a variety of disorders including autism (Bettelheim 1967; Kanner 1943; 1949), hypothyroidism, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis (amongst others; Gerard 1953), epilepsy, asthma, schizophrenia and, more recently, ADHD (see Singh 2004, p. 1194). Indeed, the origins of such expansive mother blame can be found in the 1940s, where four theories in particular led to the demonisation of mothers as potentially dangerous and harmful, to their children and to society in general.

The first of these theories, and arguably the one that delivered the greatest blow to mothers, supporting the myth that they lacked a positively nurturing role, came in 1942 in the form of Philip Wylie's *A Generation of Vipers*. In this controversial text, Wylie warns about "megaloid momworship [that] has got completely out of hand" (1942, p. 198), claiming that it was enfeebling American men:

Disguised as good old mom, dear old mom, sweet old mom, your loving mom, and so on, she is the bride at every funeral and the corpse at every wedding. Men live for her and die for her, dote upon her and whisper her name as they pass away, and I believe she has now achieved, in the hierarchy of miscellaneous articles, a spot next to the Bible and the Flag, being reckoned part of both in a way. (Wylie 1942, p. 198)

Importing this moral agenda, in one notable excerpt Wylie describes American women in the following manner:

the fiend, *the mother of all the atrocities we call 'spoiled children,'* the middle-aged, hair-faced clubwoman *who destroys everything she touches,* the murderess, [...] and so on and so on and so on, to the outermost lengths of the puerile, rusting, raging *creature* we know as mom and sis. (1942, p. 53; my emphasis)

The above excerpt is a good example of why *A Generation of Vipers* has come to be considered a "bewildering, unfounded, and unstructured rant" (van den Oever 2012, p. 6). Yet despite the vitriol, hyperbole, incoherency, and confusion that characterises *A Generation of Vipers*, Momism became a prolific theory from the 1940s up until the early 1970s. It was perhaps the levels of sensationalism that led to its overwhelmingly positive reception at the time, combined with the wartime concern that American men were becoming enfeebled and effeminate. The term Momism was extended further by Hans Sebald in the 1970s as "an epidemic of perverted motherliness" (1976, p. 2), with Momism referring to "the situation where a child incurs emotional pathologies because of exposure to a mother who is afflicted with a particular type of neurosis" (1976, p. 1). Mothers were "exhorted to pay particular attention to ensuring that their sons did not grow up effeminate" (Thomas 2001, p. 123), or "Momistically impaired" (Sebald 1976, p. 5).

Although Wylie's notions are no longer given much credence as a psychological theory, with *A Generation of Vipers* being considered by many as merely incoherent and

vitriolic, it nevertheless struck a nerve and had a profound impact at the time. Therefore, not only can the text be considered an example of the sentiments of its era, but it also paved the way for more anti-mother theories to come.

Published less than a year after Wylie's work, van den Oever has pointed out that David M. Levy's *Maternal Overprotection* (1943) came too soon to be able to directly address Wylie's theory of Momism, although it is widely seen to be "a substantiation of Wylie's conjectures" (van den Oever 2012, p. 7). Levy placed enormous importance on the role of the mother in the development of the child:

If a mother maintains toward the child a consistent attitude of, let us say, indifference and hostility, the assumption is made that the child's personality is greatly affected thereby. His outlook on life, his attitude towards people, his entire psychic well-being, his very destiny is presumed to be altered by the maternal attitude. (Levy 1943, p. 3)

The subject of Levy's work is not, however, the indifferent or hostile mother, but the overprotective mother, capable of creating "the infant-monster, or egocentric psychopath" (Levy 1943, p. 161). At the root of Levy's work was the desire to understand the reasons behind maternal overprotection and to comprehend and prevent its supposed negative effects upon the child (1943, p. 3).

Levy's work sharply contrasted with the third theory of relevance that arose during this decade regarding the potentially damaging and detrimental effect mothers could have on their offspring, found in the work of Leo Kanner, who was the first to define and research infantile autism. Expanding upon his work from 1943, in 1949 Kanner observed:

Maternal lack of genuine warmth is often conspicuous in the first visit to the clinic. As they come up the stairs, the child trails forlornly behind the mother, who does not bother to look back. The mother accepts the invitation to sit down in the waiting room, while the child sits, stands, or wanders about at a distance. Neither makes a move toward the other. Later, in the office, when the mother is asked under some pretext to take the child on her lap, she usually does so in a dutiful, stilted manner, holding the child upright and using her arms solely for the mechanical purpose of maintaining him in his position. (Kanner 1949, p. 422)

It is arguable that Kanner overlooked the fact that by the time they brought their children to see him, these mothers had perhaps realised that their affection was neither

desired nor even tolerated by the children unless solicited. However, what is intriguing is Kanner's exploration into parental neurosis as a catalyst for childhood illness. Furthermore, for Kanner this is a cyclical event, since the parents of children with infantile autism had themselves "been reared sternly in emotional refrigerators, hav[ing] found at an early age that they could gain approval only through unconditional surrender to standards of perfection" (1949, p. 423).

Unlike the other theories discussed in this section, for Kanner both parents were of interest, since while the mothers were cold, the fathers were distant, with many of them hardly knowing their children, being "outwardly friendly [...] but rarely step[ping] down from the pedestal of somber adulthood to indulge in childish play" (1949, p. 422). As such, what is crucial about this theory is that not only did it suggest that parental neurosis could be the aetiological root of infantile autism, but it also established the notion of parental coldness as a damaging effect on the development of the child:

Most of the patients were exposed from the beginning to parental coldness, obsessiveness, and a mechanical type of attention to material needs only. They were the objects of observation and experiment conducted with an eye on fractional performance rather than with genuine warmth and enjoyment. They were kept neatly in refrigerators which did not defrost. (Kanner 1949, p. 425)

Asserting that Kanner's work had a direct detrimental effect on mothers is potentially a little harsh, in that Kanner was equally critical of the distant father. Instead, Kanner's role in the demonisation of the mother was to lay the foundation for the theory of the cold and distant mother, or the Refrigerator Mom, capable of damaging her children through maternal ambivalence and her role as a bad or inadequate parent. This theory was expanded upon by the Austrian émigré Bruno Bettelheim, who sought to explore whether autism in children was environmental or innate. In his 1967 work *The Empty Fortress*, Bettelheim concludes that autism is not present at birth, arguing against the suggestion that it is "an innate disturbance" (1967, p. 399). For Bettelheim, there are two "opposite possibilities of what causes the damage", overstimulation or a lack of stimulation (1967, p. 399), reminiscent of the polarities of Levy's over-affection and Kanner's lack of affection, both expounded in 1943.

The final theory of relevance that arose in the 1940s was the idea of the schizophrenogenic mother, found in the work of the German-born psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, who in 1948 wrote that the aetiology of schizophrenia is a result of “the severe early warp and rejection [the schizophrenic] encountered in important people in his infancy and childhood, as a rule mainly the schizophrenogenic mother” (Fromm-Reichmann 1948, p. 265). However, maternal blame extends beyond biological disorders to the creation of so-called deviant children, with Phyllis Chesler perceiving the schizophrenogenic mother as “the mother who produces ‘promiscuous’ daughters, ‘homosexual’ sons, and ‘criminal’ or ‘neurotic’ children” (1972, p. 109), a highly problematic collective that fuses sexual orientation and liberation with criminality (for more on mothers and homosexual sons, see Bieber et al. (1962) and van den Oever (2012); see also Chapter Three of this thesis). The schizophrenogenic mother was widely accepted as a type from the 1940s until the 1980s, yet has continued to be propagated into the twenty-first century by some academics, including Janet Sayers, although in her discussion of examples that “abound of young men whose schizophrenic and suicidal breakdowns are linked to early loss of attachment to their mothers” (2001, p. 225), she fails to provide any examples beyond those of a book by Ronald Laing and an article by Moses Laufer, published in 1960 and 1976, respectively.

Other examples exist within the 1940s of negative assessments of mothers, such as Edward A. Strecker’s (1946) *Their Mothers’ Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*, the title alone emphasising the perception of a particular link between the damaging mother, damaged son, and their negative impact upon the United States. For Strecker, the effect of mothers on their children was akin to keeping them “paddling about in a kind of psychological amniotic fluid rather than letting them swim away with the bold and decisive strokes of maturity from the emotional maternal womb” (1946, p. 31). Beyond the 1940s, theories of mother blame continued to be prolific throughout the 1950s and 1960s. However, the four early works discussed paved the way for these subsequent publications and, despite the varying terminology, for the purpose of this thesis I will use the term ‘pathogenic mother’, as this most appropriately conveys the concept of the mother as a disease, damaging her child by

being cold, needy, hostile, over affectionate, or neurotic, and by basically being not good enough.

So with its origins in the 1940s and proliferation throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it is widely believed that the 1970s saw the end of the “remarkable career of Mom” (van den Oever 2012, p. 23), with the practice of mother blaming never again reaching “fever pitch” (2012, p. 36), with Ros Coward (1997) even indicating that motherhood became romanticised again in the 1980s. This can be explained, in part, with reference to the increasing influence of second-wave feminism or the loosening of gender stereotypes, as well as the result of scientific studies such as that of Gordon Parker, an Australian psychiatrist who helped to discredit mother-blaming theories by revisiting the subject and concluding that “there is no *sui generis* schizophrenogenic mother” (Parker 1982, p. 460). However, this thesis argues that the concept of the pathogenic mother has not disappeared, but has merely entered the shadows, remaining implicitly present in violent-eye American literature.

Philip Cole argues that “[t]here can be little doubt that parenting – or lack of it – plays a significant role in a great many cases [of violent offspring], but the demonisation of particular parents is questionable” (Cole 2006, p. 140). Here he is referring to the specific parents of specific perpetrators, yet the analogy can be extended to the wider concept of maternal stereotyping: the demonisation of mothers without a great deal of empirical evidence is extremely problematic and should be queried. In the wake of the social and historical demonisation of mothers, cultural reflections also promote the morally bad mother. For Nicola Goc, the demonisation of the mother represents a persistent problem: “[t]he Cruel Mother motif has been a recurrent representation in plays, ballads, poems and novels for centuries and continues to survive” (2007, p. 149). Barbara Creed, in her discussion of twentieth-century horror movies, argues that the representation of a woman as monstrous is intricately linked with maternity, “almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (1993, p. 7). Yet beyond the overt danger of presenting mothers as bad or failures is the issue of dehumanising them, rendering their primary function as that of “objects in the subject-formation of their children” (Horsley & Horsley 1999, p. 371), “a figure in the design [but] out-of-

focus" (Kaplan 1992, p. 3). Whilst it is true that objects can at times hold tremendous value and be of significant importance, the emphasis here is on their secondary relevance in relation to the subject. In Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a), this relegation is the very thing that protagonist Eva fears when contemplating motherhood: "I was mortified by the prospect of becoming hopelessly trapped in someone else's story" (2003a, p. 37), demoting "myself from driver to vehicle, from householder to house" (2003a, p. 70). Linda Seidel describes the use of the mother in this manner as "a plot device to catalyze the men" (2013, p. xvi), and this can be seen in both *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *The End of Alice*, where the mothers are nameless and depersonalised devices used to explain their son's proclivities to violence.

Demonised mothers are also often dehumanised through the label of 'evil'. In her discussion of mothers who kill their children, Ros Coward (1997) addresses the suppression of discourses of trauma and abuse in favour of dialogues of good and evil, which she partly attributes to the increasing use and even exploitation of abuse in defence cases. This returns us to Richard Bernstein's assertion, referenced in the Introduction, that there is the increasing temptation to diminish "claims about responsibility" (2002, p. 29) in favour of an excuse. In response, examples abound of the designation of those who have committed atrocities as evil. Looking at Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the cold, distant, arrogant, selfish, and impatient aspects of Eva's personality position her potentially as the villain of the text, evil in her failure as a parent and as a result of her callous attitude to her son, which not only impacts upon her relationship with her child, but also her wider family and society in general. Yet such a reading is to assume, as Kristen Davis warns against, that parents have "blanket responsibility for how their children turn out" (2007, p. 245). This reassigning of blame involves the troubling view that parents are at fault not just because they are the creators of the violent individual but also because they should have been aware of "their child's secret intentions even *before* he or she" was (Davis 2007, p. 243; emphasis

original).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, to reduce Eva, or Kevin for that matter, to simply evil is to dehumanise them, rendering them an abstract concept.

Terry Eagleton draws attention to the case of a police officer labelling the two children who killed toddler James Bulger in the Northeast of England in 1993 as evil. This assertion was an attempt by the official to remove any possibility of exploring what social conditions gave rise to such abhorrent and violent behaviour, and thus understanding why two young boys would kill another; “[c]alling the action evil meant that it was beyond comprehension” (2010, p. 2). Coward cites the case of Susan Smith, which she claims “affected Americans in the same way as the James Bulger case affected the British” (1997, p. 111). Although herself the victim of childhood abuse and trauma, Smith’s decision to drown her two children rendered her evil in the eyes of the American public. In cases where mothers kill their children, Coward asserts that “evil is the only concept possible when children have come to embody society’s sense of itself as good” (1997, p. 114; see Chapter Four). So instead of being seen as damaged or failed at a time of crisis, bad mothers are transformed into modern Medeas, dehumanised via the label of ‘evil’. As Seidel warns, there is a tendency to assume that “bad mothers are bad women whose misdeeds produce tragedy, but whose human complexities need not be taken into consideration” (2013, p. xii).

Through the lens of violent-eye literature, I suggest that demonising and dehumanising mothers in order to blame them for the actions of their sons has continued into the twenty-first century: “hatred of the bad mother”, according to Seidel, “is still politically correct” (2013, p. xii), and in the literature of violence and voice, mothers still make monsters. So in order to question whether violent-eye novels can be considered narratives of causality, and thus the violent-eye protagonists as aetiologically deviant, this chapter will now analyse *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *The End of Alice*.

Both Homes’ and Lindsay’s protagonists are men who were traumatised by their mothers. The novels were published around the turn of the millennium, significant in

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<sup>2</sup> The memoir of Sue Klebold (2016), the mother of one of the Columbine shooters, is a response to the mother’s purported role in the violence of her child (see Chapter Four for more on school shooters).

that even the earliest novel, Homes' *The End of Alice* (1996a), came over a decade after the pathogenic mother was meant to have disappeared into obscurity. Together, the novels explore the persistent presence of the pathogenic mother as a method of explaining and understanding the origins of violence, while each individual text sheds light on specific aspects of this representation. Furthermore, the use of the traumatising mother allows us to view the violent-eye narrators as not wholly unsympathetic, further questioning whether such individuals exist in American literature and, by homology, in US society at large.

### **Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004)**

In 2004, Jeff Lindsay's novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* introduced readers for the first time to the violent-eye serial killer Dexter Morgan, a blood-splatter analyst with the Miami-Dade police department who leads a secret life as a brutal and sociopathic vigilante who satiates his need to kill by hurting only those he considers worthy of punishment. Although the perpetrator of violent actions, Dexter is also the victim of childhood trauma, which whilst intricately and explicitly linked with his mother, is nevertheless a vicarious experience. He is not physically or sexually abused, but rather witnesses the violent murder of his mother in the confines of a shipping container, where he remains for two days with his brother, sitting in a pool of her blood (and that of at least three other men) along with her fragmented body. His trauma is located not only in her death but also in her body and its visible fragmentation, and this is echoed later in his estranged brother's method of communicating with him through the use of dismembered prostitutes and also a disjointed Barbie doll. Although this doll is clearly reminiscent of childhood, which will be explored in due course, it is also representative of the idealised woman, which in the eyes of the son is often the mother, no matter how flawed she may be in reality, as we are reminded in J. T. LeRoy's novels *Sarah* (2000) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), two first-person narratives written from the perspective of a traumatised young boy abused by a mother he venerates. But fragmentation plays a far more important role in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, since the death and disarticulation of the mother causes the fragmentation of Dexter's psyche:

“Something nameless was born in this place, something that lived in the darkest hidey-hole of the thing that was Dexter” (2004, p. 253). His mother’s death is thus his birth as a violent and murderous person conflicted with a sense of dualism; he at times alludes to himself as ‘we’, and refers throughout the narrative (and subsequent sequels) to his Dark Passenger, the “obscure hitchhiker” (2004, p. 213) that is the personification of his desire to kill, reminiscent of Jim Thompson’s “killer inside” (1952; as discussed in the Introduction).<sup>3</sup> Lindsay’s text is unequivocal in its fusing of childhood trauma with psychopathology and violence in adults, to a problematic degree that implies all victims will become violent.

It is also clear that in the novel, the mother figure does indeed serve as the object in the formation of the protagonist as subject, since all we know about her is that she is a “somewhat careless” person, both when it comes to conception, according to Dexter, and in her choice to steal from drug-dealers, which leads to her death (2004, p. 261). She is therefore not a character but rather a device to remind the reader that the self-professed monstrous Dexter is not an other, but rather a fragmented and broken human, despite his repeated protestations to the contrary: “I took pride in being the best-dressed monster in Dade County” (2004, p. 92). Mothers have the capacity to render violent characters as sympathetic victims, in the case of Dexter evoking the image of a highly traumatised and orphaned little boy. This image of Dexter is compounded by frequent references to ludic experiences, childhood imagery, and the object world, including in the description of the location of his mother’s murder:

A little farther and the stacks of cargo boxes were just barely visible in the dark below the cranes, great untidy heaps of them, scattered across the ground as if a gigantic and very bored child had flung out his toy box full of building blocks. (2004, p. 238)

This brings me back to the subject of the dismembered Barbie doll, rich in Lacanian imagery:

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<sup>3</sup> This sense of dualism and the perception of more than one entity inhabiting one’s own body is reminiscent of what was previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder (see DSM-III 1980), which since the 1990s has been referred to as Dissociative Identity Disorder (see the DSM-IV 1994) and has remained prevalent in the American cultural consciousness ever since. For more on this, see the analysis of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) in Chapter Two.

One only has to listen to children aged between two and five playing, alone or together, to know that the pulling off of the head and the ripping open of the belly are themes that occur spontaneously to their imagination, and that this is corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces. (Lacan 1966, p. 13)

For Jacques Lacan, the combination of play and the ripping apart of bodies is linked with what he termed in *Écrits* as the *imagos* of the fragmented body, which include “castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, [and the] bursting open of the body” (Lacan 1966, p. 13). Thus, the dismemberment of the Barbie by Dexter’s older brother Brian is not only reminiscent of their mother’s own fragmented body and Brian’s violent killing of women, but also an example of typical childish play. In addition to Lacan, Klein noted the cruel punishment of dolls by children (1945), as did Donald Winnicott, who advised mothers not to “be surprised if you find the doll being severely punished for making a mess” (1949, p. 42).

This is also acknowledged in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, where Eva states that “most children have a taste for spoliation. Tearing things apart is easier than making them” (2003a, p. 292). In *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, there is a juxtaposition between innocent childish play and deviant adult violence expressed in the fragmented body of the doll. Here we have a complicated response to maternal death, which not only manifests itself in extreme violence but also highlights juvenility; Dexter and Brian are broken little boys, still playing with dolls. This, of course, is a reductionist conclusion, since they are not just innocent and traumatised little boys, but violent serial killers, fully aware of what they are doing. Brian is not simply dismembering dolls but also vulnerable women, an act of which Dexter both approves and enjoys, albeit passively:

I had never been more alone than I was in my admiration for the real killer’s work. The very body parts seemed to sing to me, a rhapsody of bloodless wonder that lightened my heart and filled my veins with an intoxicating sense of awe. (Lindsay 2004, p. 114)

Yet as Winnicott goes on to say in regard to the punished doll, it is the job of the mother to gradually restrain such acts of violence; for Dexter and Brian, there is no mother to do this.

For clinical psychologist Elie Godsi, violence can be seen as the result of “constellations of vulnerable, abused, frightened, confused, hating, insecure,

mistrustful and fragmented personalities combined with cruel twists of fate and often desperate and hopeless circumstances” (2004, p. 150). The death of Dexter’s mother proves to be the significant traumatising event in his life, establishing in both him and his brother more than just a proclivity for violence, but an actual need to kill. However, the fact that she is murdered in front of him when he is just three years old repositions him from simply being a violent killer (albeit with a moral code) into a traumatised little boy, contradicting his frequent assertions of his own inhumanity; here, traumatic experience and voice contradict each other. Furthermore, his normal childish urge to disarticulate and destroy is never controlled by a mother figure, and as such spills over into adulthood. Dexter’s immorality is thus a result of his traumatising mother; her role as a literary device, demonised and depersonalised in a sacrificial way, makes him human. Her own fragmentation is echoed by Brian’s disarticulation of women and dolls, and what results is a repeated cycle of destruction and a reliving of the event that marked the change from child to monster. Further, the use of a Barbie is also reminiscent of the popular assumption of the mother’s influence in making an effete son, one who chooses to play with a stereotypically feminine toy (for more on mothers, violence, and homosexuality, see Chapter Three).

Yet whilst the narrative suggests that the mother has had an overwhelmingly negative effect on her sons, there is also a suggestion of a genetic predisposition to violence, articulated through familial bonds, which creates a tension between aetiological and ontological violence. Siblings Dexter and Brian experience the same trauma at a similar age, yet Dexter is raised in a loving home and benefits from the support of a moral and nurturing father figure whilst Brian is raised in various foster homes without the benefit of this care. However, regardless of their environmental upbringing, both develop into extremely violent killers, and so the implication is either that they, as siblings, are naturally and genetically predisposed to violence or that the trauma they mutually experienced was so overwhelming that no amount of care, nurture, love, support, and moral guidance could overcome its negative effect. Both of these are conceptually dangerous implications, the first suggesting that individuals can be born with an innate propensity for violence that persists despite nurture, and the second condemning victims as irrevocably damaged once trauma has been experienced.

Both also situate the mother as the root cause in this case, as either the genetic or the environmental cause – or both. However, the preoccupation with the mother’s actual death and her fragmented body’s effect on her sons, along with a consideration of another character, Cody (particularly in Lindsay’s sequel *Dearly Devoted Dexter*, 2005), indicates that at the root of Dexter’s violence is the trauma inflicted by his mother.

In an attempt to perform normality and conceal his violent actions, Dexter dates a woman called Rita, who he describes as his “disguise” (2004, p. 53), a term that could be read as suggesting that Dexter is gay, in its reminiscence of the pejorative concept of a woman serving as a ‘beard’ or a mask for a man’s homosexuality, and one that at the very least suggests a conflation between violence and homosexuality (for more on this, see Chapter Three). In addition to Rita’s ability to help Dexter appear like a well-rounded member of the community and the fact that, like him, she is not interested in having a sexual relationship, what Dexter likes most about Rita are her children, Cody and Astor, both of whom have been traumatised by Rita’s previous marriage to their violent father:

Astor was eight and Cody was five and they were much too quiet. They would be, of course. Children whose parents frequently attempt to kill each other with the furniture tend to be slightly withdrawn. Any child brought up in a horror zone is. But they can be brought out of it eventually – look at me. I had endured nameless and unknown horrors as a child, and yet here I was: a useful citizen, a pillar of the community. (2004, p. 54)

The reference to Rita and her husband attempting “to kill each other with the furniture” serves to implicate Rita, otherwise the victim of severe domestic abuse, as blameworthy, removing her passivity and victimisation and suggesting an active albeit subdued role in the traumatising of her children. It should be pointed out that at this stage in the narrative Dexter is unaware of the exact nature of his trauma, knowing simply that it exists. Through his focalisation of the narrative, Dexter and the reader become aware of his past at the same time, learning that he did not endure “nameless and unknown horrors as a child” but rather one single yet protracted traumatic event – the death of his mother. The manner in which Dexter refers to himself as evidence of the rehabilitation of traumatised children – potentially facetious yet possibly indicative of the fact that he does view himself as rehabilitated thanks to his moral code that permits

him to only harm similarly violent individuals – suggests that Cody and Astor are in fact not likely to recover from the traumas they have suffered, since Dexter is not the adjusted, charming pillar of the community that other characters perceive him to be. Masked behind a façade of legality and amiability – what psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley termed a “mask of sanity” (see Chapter Three) – Dexter only performs normality, simultaneously engaging in violent actions and secretly existing as a vigilante serial killer who both needs to kill and thoroughly enjoys hurting other people. In the sequel *Dearly Devoted Dexter*, Cody’s own proclivity for violence comes to the fore through the killing of animals, in particular a fish and a dog. As such, through the use of Cody as a traumatised boy on his way to becoming a violent individual who takes pleasure from actively killing, along with Astor’s passive (and thus purportedly feminine) appreciation of this, it could be inferred that childhood trauma is presented as being simply too overwhelming, especially when coupled with the ludic references that permeate the novels and continually return both Dexter and the reader to the murder of the mother.

*Darkly Dreaming Dexter* thus explores the role of the pathogenic mother in the creation of violence, presenting such tendencies as explicitly related to maternally-induced trauma. In doing so, it provides a narrative of causality as a result of a clear comforting aetiology, ultimately suggesting that violent individuals are the inevitable result of overwhelming trauma caused by the pathogenic mother. This is particularly the case for boys, since all three traumatised boys within the novel and its sequel enjoy killing and causing the suffering of others, whereas the only girl, Astor, simply enjoys watching the violence take place.<sup>4</sup>

#### **A. M. Homes’ *The End of Alice* (1996a)**

Pre-dating *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by seven years, A. M. Homes’ *The End of Alice* is the story of Chappy who, like Dexter, is a highly violent individual. Whilst Dexter professes to like children in a seemingly benign manner, Chappy is obsessed with them. He is not

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<sup>4</sup> Whilst not within the scope of this thesis, this binary distinction between female passivity and male activity raises interesting questions, including the scarcity of female violent-eye characters within American literature.

a killer with a moral code who readers are encouraged to like, but is rather an incarcerated paedophile who reminisces about his relationship with a young girl named Alice in a fashion similar to that of Vladimir Nabokov's protagonist Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955), and yet who is also responsible for her death.<sup>5</sup> It is beneficial to discuss the text alongside Homes' other work *Appendix A* (1996b), since the latter is less a sequel and more a companion piece to *The End of Alice*, a literal appendix to the novel. Published in the same year, *Appendix A* contains an extended confession of Homes' violent-eye protagonist, as well as various paraphernalia relating to a criminal investigation including physical evidence and medical reports. It is, as its subtitle states, "an elaboration on the novel", and thus this chapter's analysis of the violent-eye protagonist uses both texts, approaching them as two parts of one whole.

Like Dexter, Homes' violent protagonist experiences a divide between his life before and after his experience of trauma. In his ninth summer, his mother is committed to a sanatorium, is released, sexually abuses him, and soon after commits suicide, leaving him to feel that his "life had been cleaved, irrevocably divided into a before and after" (1996b, p. 10). Reflecting back as a self-professed "old and peculiar man [...] punished for pursuing a taste of his own" (1996a, p. 11), Chappy fluctuates between seeing himself as a "good boy" (1996a, p. 120) and a "bad boy" (1996b, p. 22), linking the former primarily with his adult self, regardless of the crimes he has committed, and the latter with his childhood self, believing that he killed his mother: "I became her murderer, or so I have always secretly said to myself" (1996b, p. 10). His sense of complicity is further compounded by the unsupportive environment in which he is placed after her death: "That my family, my mother's family, never again mentioned her by name, never offered any explanation, was a detail I took as proof of my own guilt" (1996b, p. 10). Unlike Dexter, who experiences one overwhelming trauma, Chappy's traumatic experiences are manifold, including maternal

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<sup>5</sup> Whilst Chappy is not the name of Homes' violent-eye protagonist, it is used in this thesis to refer to him easily and in order to approach him as a violent-eye character rather than a nameless construct. "Chappy" is used in *The End of Alice* by Burt, the protagonist's second cousin: "'How are you, Chappy?' he says loudly, using my childhood nickname, a reference to a perhaps extreme affection for the product Chap Stick" (1996a, p. 42). The fact that the only name used is one explicitly linked to childhood (and to a particular kind of masculinity) is, of course, of relevance.

abandonment, sexual abuse, parental death, guilt, a cold and unloving grandmother, and neglect, a myriad of trauma that is more concordant with reality, since violent individuals are often exposed to a variety of traumatic and/or abusive experiences during childhood, known as poly-victimisation (see, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner 2009; Welfare and Hollin 2012).

Although Chappy experiences a number of traumas, it is his sexual abuse that clearly demarcates his life into before and after the event. Yet unlike Dexter he does not dehumanise himself, but rather actively presents his adult self in a positive way, seeing himself as unjustly vilified. Whereas Dexter presents himself as an innocent boy who was turned into a “monster” by a traumatic event, Chappy sees himself as a bad boy, responsible for his mother’s death, who ultimately becomes (in his own mind) a victimised adult. In his perception, he is not a paedophilic child murderer, but rather a “true connoisseur” (1996a, p. 120), whose incarceration is unfathomable: “that I am kept down, restrained like this, is beyond my comprehension, my sense of justice, of all things right and wrong, good and evil. I am a good boy” (1996a, p. 120). In this sense, he is all the more reminiscent of Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, a self-justifying, “maniacal, myth-making pedophile” (Goldman 2004, p. 88), who also does not view himself as such, and who like Chappy presents readers with “a kaleidoscopic narrative that is both the diary of a [...] ‘monster’ and a love story” (O’Donnell 2010, p. 12).

In his desire to present himself as a ‘good boy’, Chappy’s narrative is frequently preoccupied with providing insight into his own victimisation and suffering, and his sexual abuse by his mother is presented as both traumatic and fragmenting: “I am exhausted, broken off, floating. I am a boy, still a boy. Tired boy. Stunned boy. A boy who has just killed some part of himself” (1996b, p. 23). This sense of fragmentation is echoed in the language of the text, through the use of short, broken sentences, with ‘broken’ and ‘floating’ further indicating a separation. Furthermore, the repetition of ‘boy’ and the repeated affirmations that the narrator still belongs to this category also suggests a desperate attempt to cling to his previous sense of identity, even as it increasingly slips away. In contrast with a pathogenic reading of the narrative, Chappy does not think that it is his mother who has “killed” off this part of him, but rather that

it is he who is to blame. Prior to sexually abusing him, his mother had displayed her body, asking him “Did I ever show you what having you did to me?” (1996a, p. 113; 1996b, p. 16). She proceeds to show him her breasts as physical evidence of the destruction he has already had on her body: “You stretched me all out” (1996a, p. 113; 1996b, p. 17). In doing so, she transforms her body (and thus the mature female form) into a site of destruction, violence, and horror. Whereas moments before he had viewed her body with veneration, seeing her as “[t]he most beautiful woman, front and back” (1996a, p. 112; 1996b, p. 15), he becomes horrified and apologetic at what he is made to believe he has done to her. His mother’s presentation of her body as grotesque and a site of violence could be linked to Chappy’s aversion to sexually mature women.

This is further compounded by his experiences in the motel room after his sexual abuse at the bath house. Having spent the night in the same bed as his mother, Chappy wakes to find her gone (although only to the bathroom) and menstrual blood on the sheets, further reaffirming his belief that he has damaged her body: “My fault. All my fault” (1996a, p. 141; 1996b, p. 24). Decades later when Alice – the young girl with whom he has a sexual relationship – starts to menstruate in the motel room they share, she thinks it is a result of something he has done, damage he has inflicted on her body: “You’ve done something awful to me” (1996a, p. 246). After arguing, he repeatedly stabs her: “I can’t stop myself. I have in mind only the *beginning* and the *end*” (1996a, p. 250; my emphasis). The death of Alice is the destruction of the female form at the onset of puberty and maturity. Whereas Chappy believes that he has hurt his mother and caused her to bleed, Alice bleeds and then he hurts her, a mirror image of the beginning reflected in the end, with the motel as the communal site of trauma. In his view, he has spared Alice from becoming like his mother:

In a way I saved her, I hope you can understand that. I spared her a situation that would only get worse. She was a girl, unfit to become a woman. (1996a, p. 247)

Whilst the language he uses indicates that he believes his actions to be moral and merciful, he nevertheless acknowledges the violence involved: “She’s in pieces, splattered around the room. Rivers of blood form small tidal pools. [...] I’m embarrassed by the vigor, the extent of my outburst” (p. 250). However, even this sharply contrasts

with the official report of Alice's murder, which indicates a far greater level of violence than Chappy's first-person narration admits to, and which he is forced to face during his parole hearing:

Twelve-and-a-half-year-old Alice Somerfield is found dead in a motel room. Cause of death: multiple stab wounds – coroner counts sixty-four. Initial five on upper torso, jagged, indicative of struggle; remaining fifty-nine, smooth cuts, most likely occurring after death. Victim decapitated, her head positioned between her legs [...] Accused apparently continued relations with victim after her death. [...] Victim's blood [...] painted over [accused's] lower torso and genitals. (pp. 251-252)

The above quotation, a condensed version of the full graphic description of the mutilation and disarticulation of Alice's body, serves to indicate even in part the inconsistency between Chappy's account of her death and the violent reality that he is forced to face, along with the readers, at the end of the novel. His description of the scene is a visceral yet florid one, and despite the brutality inherent in his narrative there is also the evocation of a violent landscape, with rivers and tidal pools of blood shifting the focus away from his earlier description of Alice's body. This contrasts with the clinical account of her death, in which the destruction of her body remains central, and which provides information Chappy omits. Coupled with the revelation that he "continued relations" with Alice's body after killing her, the unreliability of his voice becomes all the more apparent, and perhaps further testifies to his own mental deconstruction and deterioration: "It is as if I've lost myself, broken away" (p. 250).

Chappy's mother, sympathetic in her own sufferings of mental illness whilst also demonised through her role as the bad mother and depersonalised as the object in the formation of Chappy as subject, evokes the image of a violent paedophilic child murderer as an abused and repeatedly traumatised little boy. The indication that Alice is becoming a woman, especially in the context of the motel room, is intricately linked with Chappy's early trauma, and thus even whilst absent the mother figure remains present (see Chapter Two for more on the omnipresent mother). Like Dexter, Chappy is thus humanised, with his actions explained although most certainly not condoned. Menstruation, the mature/maturing female form, and the motel room together serve as the intersection of his trauma and Chappy's eventual act of extreme violence, and

thus are symbolic of his disintegration and fragmentation into a broken, traumatised, yet highly violent man. Yet in evoking the image of childhood innocence and being positioned as the destruction of it, the mother is again located as the pivotal traumatising factor, the origin of violence and deviancy.

There is evidence in the novel to suggest that beyond the damaging effect of the mother, all is not right in Chappy's family, since the mother is not the first member to have committed suicide:

We circle the family home, the house that was ours for generations – until Aunt Sue hung herself off the front porch for all the neighbors to see and my grandmother thought it best to relocate. (1996b, p. 14)

This quotation suggests not only familial depression but also the loss of the family home and thus stability, as well as a legacy of shame regarding the suicide of family members, echoed in the aforementioned assertion by Chappy that his family never mentioned his mother's name after her death. Like Chappy, his mother is also a victim of this context, and the similarity between the two is emphasised in the text, reaffirming their close link: "You and your mama. One and the same" (1996a, p. 71). Not only are they apparently similar in nature, but they are also similar in actions, as both sexually abuse a child (or children in Chappy's case). Furthermore, there is also the suggestion that they have both experienced trauma as a result of the maternal grandmother, and thus there is the indication of inherited maternal trauma.

So in addition to his mother, Chappy's reminiscences of his childhood are heavily coloured by a bleak memory of a cold and unloving grandmother. This idea of a cyclical pathology, inherited from such a hostile grandmother through a mentally ill mother and ultimately to a violent and deviant grandson, is reminiscent of Kanner's theory in the 1940s of unaffectionate parents raised in cold environments themselves, albeit an extreme version. Not only does Chappy experience his own traumas during childhood, but he also shares those of his mother's childhood:

In the middle of June I disappear. I am taken from my own life and set down in the home of the near stranger, who by some bit of poor fortune birthed the babe that is my mother. And there in my grandmother's house, I am given the same treatment of disdain and distrust that she'd previously reserved for her only child. (1996b, p. 12)

Descriptions of the grandmother continually connote a harsh unpleasantness, with even the clothes she prepares for Chappy being “starched and pressed so stiff that [they are] sharp, painful in places” (1996a, p. 110; 1996b, p. 15). Such depictions contrast with images of the mother who, even though traumatising, remains soft and gentle in Chappy’s memory, and who throughout the narrative is frequently referred to via the use of fruit, which serves to portray her as fertile, plump, sweet, and wholesome: “Her body, round, truly a pear, a plum and then some” (1996a, p. 112; 1996b, p. 15). She was the Tomato Queen of her town, “Queen for a day in Morgan County” (1996a, p. 108; 1996b, p. 13), and met Chappy’s father at the Strawberry Festival, where he “towered like a tree” (1996a, p. 112; 1996b, p. 16). Her return home after her stay in the asylum is heralded again by fruit – “Apple pie. Mother is back” (1996a, p. 108) – and through all these references fruit comes to symbolically represent the mother. Like it she is soft and connotes summer and happiness: “She’s back. We will go home to our house and summer will start again. In my memory it is always summer. None of this will ever have happened” (1996a, pp. 112; 1996b, p. 16). But like fruit that ripens and dies, so too does Chappy’s happiness, and the warmth and joy of his mother is fleeting.<sup>6</sup> She too is fragile, vulnerable, and easily bruised, and her temporary absences and eventual suicide leave Chappy with his grandmother:

In my memory it is always summer, a certain summer. Morning in June. Breakfast. I go downstairs and find my grandmother in my mother’s place. My grandmother hovering over my mother’s stove. [...] My mother’s absence is not mentioned. (1996a, p. 31; 1996b, p. 11)

The grandmother is cold and harsh, someone who hovers and shouts, hides her grandchild’s favourite toy, and calls him “Boy”. Her role in the traumatising of her own child is reinforced again by fruit imagery: “She squeezes orange juice. My grandmother squeezes the blood out of an orange into a glass and sets it before me, thick with the meat of the fruit, with seeds” (1996a, p. 35; 1996b, p. 12). Rather than a comforting image of homemade juice, the description is harsh and violent, with the juice transformed into something visceral: blood and meat. With the mother already

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<sup>6</sup> The death of the father could be of relevance here, especially given the metaphorical links between the mother and fruit, and the father and the tree; separated from the tree, the fruit ripens and dies.

symbolised by fruit, the grandmother is positioned as something damaging and harmful, “bent over the oranges, elbow bearing down” (1996a, p. 109; 1996b, p. 14) in an oppressive and destructive manner. Thus the maternal trauma Chappy suffers is not just from his mother but also from his maternal grandmother. He is therefore traumatised directly by his mother, directly by his grandmother, and indirectly by his grandmother through an inherited trauma from his mother, with his violent tendencies suggested to be the product of their maternal failures.

In *The End of Alice*, the inheritance of trauma comes to the fore in a way far more coherent than in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, and in its attempts to present an aetiological explanation for a violent individual, the pathogenic mother is again used as a literary device to explore how a young and innocent child develops into an abusive, paedophilic, and deluded adult who ultimately rapes, murders, and dismembers a twelve-year-old girl. So with their adult violent tendencies explicitly linked to early maternally-induced trauma, both Chappy and Dexter are positioned simultaneously as both heinous and sympathetic, and thus they are not wholly unsympathetic. Further, by presenting the mothers (and even grandmother) as aetiological explanations for Chappy and Dexter’s violence, both *The End of Alice* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* can be read as narratives of causality.

### **The Legacy of Mother Blame**

An analysis of the two texts reveals a number of consistencies, some of which are problematic and that challenge assumptions made in the scholarly literature about the pathogenic mother, particularly the claim that she has largely disappeared from the post-1980s picture. It is important to reaffirm that the inclusion of the mothers in these texts serves a vitally important humanising purpose; both Chappy and Dexter are, through analepses of childhood abuse, trauma, and the deaths of their mothers, rendered more than just monstrous others, and their accounts become narratives of causality. They are ordinary and banal individuals, the victims of their unfortunate circumstances and the failures of the mothers, and are depicted as broken little boys unable to develop into healthy and ‘normal’ adults precisely because of this failure. Yet

an awareness of the mother's importance and her ability to mitigate blame is arguably something of which the violent-eye characters are presented as being conscious, and thus the inclusion of the pathogenic mother in their accounts becomes intentionally sacrificial:

Perhaps I am deluded, crazy to think that if I can make you understand, can recreate the events of a certain June and July, have you feel them as I felt them, then you will turn sorry for me, will do something for me, help me, relieve me. Perhaps you will then be willing to do what no one has ever done: exonerate and excuse me from this debacle that has become my life. (Homes 1996b, p. 11)

Chappy's desperate tone conveys an awareness of his own alterity, a comprehension that he is not understood or empathised with, but instead is held accountable for his actions. Combined with his steadfast denial of the extent of his violence throughout the novel, the need to be pitied and exonerated leads him to use those "events of a certain June and July", intricately linked with his mother and her various failures, to shift blame onto another person and away from him. Mothers thus become a means of obtaining understanding and empathy for the otherwise violent individual.

As violent-eye protagonists, both Chappy and Dexter are mundane individuals, violent in action yet simultaneously quotidian, characterised by their sufferings and lack of monstrosity. However, their humanity is predicated on their link with childhood and childishness, reinforced in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by ludic references to toys and play, most notably the use of building blocks to describe the site of the mother's death (the shipping container) and the Barbie doll. However, Chappy also exists in this object world, viewing himself as a boy and making frequent references to a specific toy, "a yellow toy truck with real rubber tires" (1996a, p. 31; pictured in *Appendix A* on p. 64) that he loves, and which he loses around the same time as his mother. Although he asks his grandmother where it is, she professes not to know, yet he eventually finds it hidden, kept "for weeks parked in the back of her closet" (1996a, p. 50). Whilst further indicative of her cruelty and callousness, this could also suggest her deliberate attempt to mature and masculinise him, forcing him out of childish dependency and into adult autonomy, further reaffirmed in the following quotation: "Go on, [...] out from under my skirt" (1996a, p. 36). However, the truck itself indicates a transition from childhood to adulthood, as it juxtaposes the artificial childishness of a toy with the real rubber

tyres of an actual vehicle, and thus can be seen as a pivotal artefact in Chappy's evolution from child to adult, especially as it is coupled with trauma in the form of loss and deception. As it is taken away from him, it instead contributes to a form of arrested development, in which Chappy remains trapped in childhood and preoccupied with a toy.

Like Dexter's origins, Chappy's childhood is constantly in focus and is thus of central relevance to the text, and within the context of the narrative is simultaneously commodified and rendered of cultural and historical relevance:

A fat old man has disturbed my day, coming [to prison] to tell me that he has sold my childhood to a museum in Cincinnati. I stand, and despite all my metallica, my chain-link fencing, I am able to pick up the chair I've been sitting on and hurl it at the glass. (1996a, p. 45)

Thus, the incarcerated Chappy further loses his childhood, something to which he desperately clings through his repeated claims to being a 'boy' rather than a man. His own youth and the happiness he associates with it (prior to his sexual abuse and the death of his mother) is something that comes to belong to other people, open for scrutiny and speculation, shifted from one place to another, as the following quotation from the "fat old man", Chappy's second cousin, indicates:

[Your possessions] must have gone from your mother's house to grandmother's and then off to my father's, and somehow they ended up with me. Anyway, we were cleaning out and came upon them, mostly things from your childhood, old clothes, mildewed books, rusty toys, a couple of your mother's pie plates that you made into tambourines, that kind of thing. Long story short, they were in the basement, we thought about having a big garage sale but didn't, and then a letter came from a new museum, the Museum of Criminal Culture. (1996a, p. 44)

Thus all of Chappy's childhood memorabilia come to be possessed by "that damned new museum" (1996a, p. 170), and so his narrative is further characterised by loss:

The pie is gone. I make a tambourine out of the tin, punch it full of holes and hang bottle caps off it. Mama dances around the yard while I bang my tambourine. Mother is gone – the tambourine has been sold to the Museum in Cincinnati. (1996a, p. 89)

My yellow truck has gone to Cincinnati. When I am released, sprung from this rat trap, I'll visit that museum and tell them the story of how my grandmother kept it hidden from me. (1996a, p. 50)

As products of maternal failure, both Dexter and Chappy remain preoccupied with toys and ludic experiences, even as violent adults, yet this does not serve to mitigate their violence; as Martin Halliwell (2013) has pointed out, the psychopath is “often criminal in behaviour but sometimes childlike and immature” (p. 74). Since readers are forced to see things from the violent-eye narrator’s perspective, they also are presented with lost innocence and arrested development, which is compounded by the presence and ultimate absence of the pathogenic mother, both of which are capable of being equally traumatic.

Of note is that both of the mothers in these texts are absent prior to the start of the novel. I have argued elsewhere (Wilson-Scott, 2017; see also Åström, 2017) that in violent-eye narratives of causality, the absence of the mother in literature is frequently of significant consequence, as the very act of absencing can be traumatising. In addition to the sense of isolation caused through the loss of the maternal figure, regardless of whether she is ‘good enough’, there is also the sense of a lingering trauma caused by guilt and/or grief. Dexter is irrevocably damaged by his mother’s violent death, whereas Chappy believes that he has caused the destruction of his mother’s body and her eventual suicide. Combined, what this suggests is that even when removed from their sons’ lives, traumatising mothers remain pathogenic. As will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, the textual absence of the mother does not necessarily equate to the removal of her damaging influence and in some cases actually amplifies it.

The use of mothers as traumatising figures that fragment their sons’ personalities and create deviancy is highly reminiscent of the pathogenic mother. By failing to provide a safe, loving, and nurturing home life, both Chappy’s mother and Dexter’s mother instead traumatise their sons, changing them from innocent little boys into violent and fragmented adults, obsessed with childhood (and children)<sup>7</sup> and who

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<sup>7</sup> Dexter professes to having a special connection with children, possessing what he describes as a genuine care and affection for them in a way he is unable to experience with adults. In contrast, Chappy’s relationship is one steeped in sexual desire and abuse.

engage in acts of violence, including murder. Both *The End of Alice* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* deal with notions of the mother as responsible for the eventual outcome of the child, both physically and mentally, conveying both pressure and blame. In contrast, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* somewhat levels the playing field by refusing to situate blame either with Kevin's predisposition towards violence and psychopathy or with Eva as the apathetic or callous mother, who affects the environment in which Kevin is raised. In doing so, the novel gives a voice to the mother character, muted and subverted in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *The End of Alice*, yet nevertheless situates her within the mother-blaming discourse.

All three novels analyse the potential toxicity of mothers in their children's lives, explicitly linking – or at the very least questioning – their pathological effect. There is potential evidence to assert that mothers are at the very least suspected, if not accused, of irrevocably damaging their sons, which is not simply a matter of familial harmony or stability but of social concern, as the consequences spill outwards into the wider society as a result of the violent actions of the traumatised sons. The alleged carelessness of Dexter's mother leads to her brutal murder, which becomes a trauma so immense for both Dexter and his brother Brian that no amount of subsequent care or nurture can undo the damage it has done, even the care of a father figure presented as a bastion of morality who is simultaneously loving and nurturing. Chappy's mother is presented as responsible for the trauma that he suffers as a boy, fragmenting him and changing him from an innocent child into a deviant adult, with a disgust for the mature female form that directly links to his mother's use of her body as an example of the destruction he has already caused as a child, and which prompts his subsequent sexual and violent deviancy. Such trauma is compounded by the removal of the mother, despite her significant flaws, and the positioning of the cold and hostile grandmother as the primary influence in Chappy's life. In this sense, whilst blame is still levelled at the mother, it is tempered by the suggestion that she has also suffered. This suggestion implies a negative cycle, which leads one to question whether the mothers blamed for the actions of their violent sons in American literature are presented as being victims in their own right. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Coward reminds us that the suffering of mothers (such as Susan Smith) is deemphasised and discredited in order to highlight

their blame, and whilst this certainly applies to the literature also, it is perhaps possible at times to explore the root of the mother's fault and find the source of blame elsewhere. However, in doing so the emphasis is often shifted onto the maternal grandmother, and thus remains intricately linked with the mother.<sup>8</sup> In addition to its matrifocal emphasis on Eva as the potentially "bad mother", Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* also references the maternal grandmother, who is herself traumatised and traumatising through her extreme agoraphobia, a burden that weighs heavily on Eva and shapes her thoughts on motherhood. So attempts to exonerate one mother frequently do so by finding another mother to blame, with the violent adult man remaining the consequence.

## Conclusion

Regardless of their problematic usage in the literature, mothers play a role in forming their sons as subjects by being positioned themselves as objects; to quote Shriver's protagonist Eva again, transforming themselves "from driver to vehicle, from householder to house" (2003a, p. 70). In the case of violent sons, mothers are frequently implicitly blamed for the corruption of the innocent child, and as such the mother becomes the personification of trauma. It is arguable that such a role is distinctly sacrificial, since by stepping (or being forced) into the background and becoming objectified and depersonalised, the mother enables the violent son to have his humanity emphasised and his monstrosity debunked. Violent-eye American novels such as *The End of Alice* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* can thus be read as narratives of causality, with the mother a detail in the narrative that explains the aetiological origins of the protagonist's violence. As the result of twentieth-century theories of the pathogenic mother, this is exemplified in the literature through abuse, suffering, absence, and fragmentation, and is manifested in the adult protagonist's preoccupation with childhood, a time intricately linked with the mother's involvement. This serves to humanise the otherwise violent and monstrous individual, whilst simultaneously

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* (1981), in which the maternal grandmother was a significant source of trauma in the violent antagonist's early life and thus perhaps also that of his 'bad' mother.

contributing to the legacy of mother blame in American literature. Mothers serve as explicit reminders that even the most violent individuals were once children, innocent, vulnerable, and susceptible to suffering, trauma, and fragmentation, and thus not wholly unsympathetic. Carla Freccero's "comforting etiology" (1997, p. 51) can therefore be found in the pathogenic mother, who rather than having disappeared from contemporary thought has remained a persistent means of explaining the actions of violent men.

Violent-eye American fiction certainly reaffirms the assertion that childhood trauma is the primary catalyst for adult violence, especially when that trauma involves the mother. Whilst admirably humanising the protagonist and presenting them as a victim and not a monster, the insidious aspect of this trend is its implicit suggestion that childhood trauma *will* lead to adult violence. The implication of adding the mother into this predicament is that in her capacity to represent childhood in a profound manner, she ultimately serves to lower the age limit of when a character is considered unredeemable: Chappy is irrevocably damaged at nine, Dexter at three. Yet whilst the pathogenic mother remains a frequent literary explanation for the violent son, as has been explored in this chapter, fathers also can at times come under scrutiny, particularly during adolescence, and this will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two

### Lost Boys, Absent Fathers, and Failed Rites of Passage

**Everybody has a mother. It's fathers that are in short supply. (Hendricks 1995, p. 119)**

Having dedicated the previous chapter to an exploration of the mother, particularly in relation to her role in establishing violent-eye characters as not wholly unsympathetic and their respective novels as narratives of causality, this chapter charts the violent-eye protagonist out of childhood and into adolescence. In doing so, emphasis is initially shifted away from the mother as the pivotal traumatising element of a violent individual's childhood and onto the father, who in violent-eye literature may or may not be present in the narrative, but whose impact is crucial during this time of life, as will be explored through Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and Don De Grazia's *American Skin* (1998).

Like the dualistic concepts of motherhood, separated as it often is into the absolutes of good or bad, representations of fatherhood in American literature and popular culture can also be split into two traditional, oppositional, and stereotypical categories: the authoritarian and oppressive father, and the (sometimes foolish and bumbling) friend (see for example Åström 2015a). As Kenneth Millard states, and as quoted in the previous chapter, within American literature a positive and healthy relationship between the adolescent son and the father is crucial if the former is to find his place in society (2007, p. 15). However, if we are momentarily to accept Josep M. Armengol-Carrera's sweeping claim that fathers are "largely absent from American literature" (2008, p. 211) and, when present, that they "tend to be represented as a distant or punitive authority" (p. 218), or if they are instead the weak, inept, or foolish opposite, then this becomes extremely hard for the son to achieve. What exacerbates this challenge for the son is the traditional emphasis on his responsibility to conform or live up to "the expectations of the father, whether a new pal or an old-style oppressor" (Åström, 2015a, p. 303), rather than the father meeting the needs of the son.

This chapter thus explores the relationship between the father and the adolescent son in violent-eye American literature, and in doing so briefly charts the cultural history of the father in late twentieth-century America alongside an exploration of liminality, since adolescence is a time of transition, one marked by social and physical change and rites of passage. In contrast to Armengol-Carrera's aforementioned suggestion that there is a lack of fathers in American literature, Helena Wahlström contends that they are instead a "ubiquitous" figure (2010, p. 2). What makes the latter claim more compelling is that it can be extended to include the former, since the absence of the physical father does not necessitate the absence of the conceptual father and discussions of fatherhood: novels such as Annie Proulx's (1993) *The Shipping News*, with its paternal protagonist, and texts such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), with its absent fathers, all contribute to the lineage of American narratives of fatherhood, despite the varying visibility and presence of actual fathers within them. It is possible for the absent father to be present as "a performative effect of his absence" (Bueno, Caesar, and Hummel 2000, p. 3). In particular, this chapter focuses on the absent father and the negative impact this lack of presence often has on the son, and thus responds to David Leverenz's (1998) criticism that the term 'failure' in relation to fathers is "too vague and inclusive", potentially incorporating a range of negative behaviours or actions including "absence, shaming, bullying, emotional unavailability, incompetence, or the effects of the generation gap" (p. 228).<sup>1</sup> Fathers can also be deeply selfish, motivated by a blind and unrelentingly idealistic obsession that they allow to become a danger to their families, as in Paul Theroux's *Mosquito Coast* (1981) or Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), both of which compound the loss of life with the loss of America and thus the symbolic fatherland, further reaffirming the link between fathers and finding (or losing) a place in society.

The dynamic (or lack of it) between the absent father and the fatherless son is a unique situation, distinct from the father-daughter relationship, especially in the view of Armengol-Carrera, who suggests a correlation between "the father-figure's lack and

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this vagueness is precisely what is of importance when talking about the bad mother, who as we have seen is damaging when loving and when cold, when present and when distant, and thus is culturally positioned as pathogenic often simply for being the (feminine) mother of a son.

the daughter's progress" (2008, p. 212), citing texts such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) as examples of this. Such a claim can be challenged, particularly in light of diverse texts such as Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1879), Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), in which absent fathers have a detrimental effect on their daughters, yet as female violent-eye characters are, by and large, absent themselves within the sub-genre, a discussion of the father-daughter relationship is, in this context, unwarranted.<sup>2</sup> Instead, of central concern to this chapter is the result of the absent father's failure to guide his son through what is often conceptualised as the liminal period of adolescence and safely into adulthood, and the violent consequences that can ensue as a result of the trauma of both paternal absence and failed assimilation. After all, distant fathers, according to theories surrounding gender-identity conflict, "make for aggressive sons" (Goldstein 2001, p. 240), and violent-eye protagonists often have emotionally and/or physically absent fathers.

In addition to the trauma caused by the father's absence, which Robert Bly (1990) interprets as a form of grief at paternal remoteness, the transformation of the lost boy into the violent-eye adult is explored in this chapter in relation to what will be termed false-fathers, those who come to stand in for the absent father and fill a void for the abandoned son, yet who are not necessarily good role models or replacement guides. After all, as Berit Åström (2015a) warns in her article on postfeminist fatherhood in animated American films, "if a father does not make his son feel loved, the son may be open to exploitation by other father figures" (p. 304). Finally, the chapter suggests that within what I am calling violent-eye American literature, an underlying consequence to the absence of the father is the implication that what this can leave the son with is the overwhelming maternal figure, returning the argument again to the influence of the pathogenic mother. Reflecting on the previous chapter, the biological fathers of Dexter and Chappy have limited if any place in their sons' narratives, and it is the mothers who have defined and shaped their transition into violent individuals, with their failings and deaths serving as "the starting point of an adventure" (Åström 2015b,

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Sherry Parlay in *Miami Purity* (1995), as mentioned in the Introduction.

p. 595, in relation to the absent mother), which when read as a trauma is “a disruptive experience, yet one that propels the protagonist and the plot forward” (Balaev 2012, p. 116). Yet both of those mothers died during their sons’ childhood, and this is in contrast with the two texts that are of central focus to this present chapter, Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and De Grazia’s *American Skin*. Thus, the omnipresent mother and the feminisation of the son (particularly in *Fight Club*), along with the false fathers of each text and the ultimate need to reassert and perform masculinity through violence, are all intricately linked with the absence and failure of the father during the son’s liminal period of adolescence.

### **Absent Fathers in Twentieth-Century America**

So having focused this discussion of failed fatherhood onto the figure of the absent father, this too can be unpacked further, as the reasons for the lack of a paternal presence in the life of the adolescent son can be manifold. Fathers can be dead, at war, in prison, away at work, living with a new family, or starting a new life away from paternal responsibilities altogether. They can also be symbolically absent, present in flesh but nevertheless distant, as Alison Bechdel’s (2006) panels included in the previous chapter depicted, showing the mother as physically tangible and the father as distant, aloof, and authoritarian. Such a distance can be a product of the generation gap, which creates a gulf between father and son that is hard to overcome, particularly in relation to fathers who have experienced war and trauma. Fathers can equally be absent for no clearly defined reason at all, simply being presented as somewhere else, perhaps temporarily or sometimes permanently. This could in large part be linked with the notion that men historically are not domestic figures, regardless of the fact that the “house-wife mother and bread-winner father [are] actually a rather recent development”, appearing amongst the middle class in the late nineteenth century and becoming typical “only in the period between 1945 and the late 1960s” (Wahlström 2010, p. 12; see also LaRossa 2007). Whilst still outnumbered by domestic mothers, stay-at-home fathers have become more prevalent than in previous years, with figures from the Pew Research Center suggesting that the number in the United States had

risen to almost two million by 2014 (Livingston 2014; see also Kelly and Tropp 2016, p. xiii), double the amount of 1.1 million that they reported in 1989. However, the National At-Home Dad Network challenges this figure's accuracy, arguing that the Pew Research Center based their numbers "entirely on unemployment" (2017, n.p.) and thus conflated a lack of employment with the responsibility of childcare. Thus the stay-at-home father remains ill-defined and shrouded in obscurity, and in relation to literature, Wahlström (2010) reminds us that the "father as a domestic figure is still a relatively unexplored literary phenomenon" (2010, p. 29), the "shadowy figure" (Reid Boyd 2005, p. 200) mentioned in the previous chapter, and thus his potential for invisibility in narratives of the home and childhood (including adolescence) is not unexpected, particularly during the later stages of the twentieth century. In *Fight Club*, the father of the violent-eye protagonist is simultaneously not a domestic presence and a prolifically domestic figure, having abandoned his son by choice, leaving home to start what the narrator describes as a succession of new families elsewhere. Thus, whilst absent from the protagonist's life and domestic sphere during adolescence, the father remains firmly fused with the notion of family and the home, albeit multiple ones. In *American Skin*, it is the father's poor judgement and criminal lifestyle that leads to his removal from the home and subsequent incarceration, resulting in his absence, although other fathers in the text are absent for a variety of reasons, as will be addressed. The absent fathers in these narratives are physically distant, yet despite this they continue to be highly relevant in the emotional lives of their sons, and have a crucial impact on their ultimate progression towards violence as a means of asserting and reclaiming masculinity.

As the last chapter began its discussion of the mother from the 1940s, due to the rise in mother-blaming rhetoric during that decade and its lasting effect and impact throughout the twentieth century (including the 1990s), this chapter adopts the same temporal starting point. This is not only beneficial from a comparative perspective, charting the mother and the father alongside each other and across a level historical field, but also enables us to focus on the American father at a particularly pertinent time for representations of fatherhood, concepts of fatherland, and the absent father: the Second World War.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 led to the USA's immediate involvement in the war that had been raging in Europe for the previous two years. Although men with dependents were initially exempt from the draft, this exception was lifted in 1943, creating the absent father by the thousands as men were taken away from their families and sent overseas (Griswold 1993; LaRossa 2007). What for some families was just a temporary loss was for others permanent, and this sense of loss served to freeze fathers culturally into the role of the absentee for an entire generation of children. However, during this time another cultural ideology was grafted onto the image of the father, that of the "protector of his family", which sociologist Ralph LaRossa points out was nevertheless there during peacetime, just "under the surface" (LaRossa 2007, p. 93), despite the earlier cultural norm dominant towards the beginning of the twentieth century of the father as the playmate and companion of his children (LaRossa 1997; 2007). So during a decade when the mother was becoming increasingly seen as a pathogenic and damaging influence on a familial and societal level, particularly serving as a threat to her male offspring, fathers were elevated to the status of protector. It was precisely the father's absence that made the mother's presence seemingly so dangerous, since she became the sole parent, both the mother and the feminised father. Her femininity and its corresponding impact on the putatively effete son, popularised by Philip Wylie's *A Generation of Vipers* released in the second year of the United States' involvement in the war, was also juxtaposed with the strong and muscular male physique emphasised during this time (Jarvis 2004).

The end of the war marked the physical return of the American father (albeit not all of them), but not necessarily the emotional return. Many men were indelibly marked by their experiences in Europe and Asia, and whilst physical wounds and scars were something that could at least be observed and comprehended by families and friends back home, the emotional wounds were not so easy to identify and understand. Men traumatised by war would not be identified as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder until 1980, when the condition was first introduced to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders'* third edition (*DSM-III*). With overseas wars in Korea and Vietnam affecting and taking the lives of thousands more American men throughout the period spanning the 1950s until the early 1970s, this was a lengthy

amount of time in which the traumatic effects of war on men and the subsequent emotional distance were not understood. So physically absent through decades of war and emotionally absent upon return, the mid-twentieth century American father can be seen as one intricately linked with the threat of absence, a figure who even when proximal was not necessarily accessible.

The 1990s witnessed a significant rise in scholarly attention paid to fatherhood from a variety of different perspectives. In amongst these, the absent father became a pressing social concern for some, including David Blankenhorn, whose monograph *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1994) indicates in the title alone the weight he ascribes to the impact the absent father had on the nation. Two years later, David Popenoe's similarly pointed (1996) *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* also contributed a perspective on the detrimental impact of the absent father by arguing that his presence was a necessity to the wellbeing of young people. Such blanket approaches are of course problematic, as they assume that absence is by definition damaging, an argument that is limited in the context of abusive or violent fathers. Yet despite disagreements amongst scholars about the consequences and even the extent of absent fathers, such debates were influential during the 1990s, not only on policymakers and the research community, but also on public perceptions (see Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb 2000, p. 1174). Further, the impact of the absent father became prevalent in fictional accounts of troubled men, often interlinked with the now somewhat ubiquitous yet persistently broad notion of the crisis of masculinity. The 1990s also witnessed a rise in masculinity studies in general, and of notable relevance to this chapter is American poet Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990), which explored the need for men to embrace their primitive masculinity, to reject both femininity and machismo, and instead "to descend into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there, including the *nourishing dark*" (p. 6; emphasis original). The crux of Bly's reading of the myth of Iron John, as outlined at the beginning of his work, is "the importance of moving from the mother's realm to the father's realm" (p. viii), and thus integral to men's wellbeing is the rejection of the feminine and maternal

in favour of the masculine and paternal, further indicating the preoccupation with the role of the father in the life of the son in 1990s American society.

Returning to the issue of absent fathers in relation to their adolescent sons, this chapter now provides a brief overview of the liminality of the latter in terms of failed rites of passage and its links with adult violence. This is particularly relevant in light of Millard's point that a relationship with the father and a place in society are inextricably interlinked for contemporary fictional American sons.

### **Adolescence and Rites of Passage**

The lives of all individuals can be characterised by "a series of passages from one age to another" (van Gennep 1909, pp. 2-3; see also Sheehy 1976), in which change is experienced as "an ontological necessity" (Youssef 2012, p. 35), "implicit in the very fact of existence" (van Gennep 1909, p. 3). During transitions from one stage of the life cycle to another (see, for example, Erikson 1959, 1982), individuals often move through a liminal sphere, a space where they are neither one thing nor another; they are, to borrow from British anthropologist Victor Turner, liminal personae who are "'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time [*sic*] of structural classification" (Turner 1967, p. 97).

As one such passage, adolescence, that "uneasy mixture of the biological and the social" (Griffin 1993, p. 19), became increasingly a focus of American literature after World War II. Whilst a profound time of metamorphosis, it is not necessarily a ritualised occasion in many Western societies, as the time of life when a child becomes an adult is often hazy and ill-defined, and in "contemporary secular society, the whole of the teenage years is, to some extent, considered a liminal time" (Nuzum 2004, p. 210). As a framework for exploring adolescence, liminality is also relevant to discussions on the particular historical and cultural period that this thesis explores, since as discussed in the Introduction, the 1990s were a decade in which the United States was caught in between significant events and lacking major ones of its own. Thus, the literary adolescents (including liminal adults trapped in a permanent adolescence or an

emotional arrested development) of the 1990s can be seen as all the more liminal, in that this period of being “betwixt and between” was personal as well as being historical and cultural.

Like all times of change, adolescence is defined by a tripartite successive system of separation (from childhood), transition (through adolescence), and reincorporation (into adulthood) (Van Gennep 1909). According to anthropological theory, during the transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents require a guide in order to navigate their way into the “fixed point” of adulthood, with fathers often expected to assume this responsibility. Yet when fathers are absent, physically and/or emotionally, the ability of the adolescent to move smoothly into adulthood comes into question, and there is the distinct threat of failure: “[t]his radical departure from social life needs strictest supervision by an experienced elder to guide the process; otherwise, there is a real danger of becoming lost” (Oppolzer 2011, p. 9). Such failure to achieve reincorporation results in permanent liminality and compounds the trauma or grief experienced through the loss of the father, and within American violent-eye literature can serve as an aetiological explanation as to why a protagonist becomes violent.

Liminal beings are often characterised by dualistic tensions and binary oppositions, and as such are structurally invisible, neither one thing nor another. They are also frequently perceived as polluting, particularly in the context of Mary Douglas’ theory of dirt as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966); on this model, liminal beings have no place within structured society, so are therefore dirty and potentially contaminating. They are, as Turner summarises, unclean because they are unclear (Turner 1967, p. 97). The liminal space-time is one of manifold potential, “a realm of pure possibility” (Turner 1967, p. 97) aptly summarised by Graham St John as “culture’s revolving door – a framework enabling the possibility of more than one exit” (2008, p. 5), yet with the distinct threat of danger. The liminal space-time is not meant to be permanent, as the successful completion of rites of passage, under the careful guidance of assimilated members of the society, should enable the liminal being to move back into the structural realm and reincorporate into the group. When this does not happen as a result of failure, the consequences can be disastrous and permanent liminality ensues, fixing the liminal

being into a status of perpetual alterity and exteriority. Exploring the consequences of failed rites of passage in Shakespearean plays, Marjorie Garber (1981) argues that “instead of being incorporated into a new identity or social role, [failed liminal beings] remain static, imprisoned by their own natures and banished or rejected from the world of the play” (pp. 21-22). Whilst “imprisoned” and “static” may be appropriate descriptions of failed rites of passage in the Shakespearean context, they are inappropriate in the context of seemingly permanently liminal characters in general. Instead, literary characters who are failed during the liminal transition are often transformed into monsters through the eyes of others (or themselves), a condition that sometimes hovers between the human and inhuman. Rather than remaining stationary or trapped, these individuals can instead indulge in the freedom from societal rules that comes with their rejection from the community. Thus, they are liberated rather than imprisoned by their liminal status, to the extent that they are capable of committing acts of atrocity and extreme violence if they so choose, and this freedom is not to be confused with a positive outcome.

Within the context of violent-eye literature of the 1990s, the violence of permanently liminal beings such as the narrators of Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and De Grazia’s *American Skin* is specifically linked to the need to belong to the community of adult men, particularly by rejecting femininity and reasserting masculinity in a ritualistic fashion. In this sense, both novels are in line with Bly’s notion of masculinity being linked to a connection with the primal. The first-person narration of both novels exposes a vigorous and unrelenting preoccupation with the father and the concept of the masculine ideal, in terms of physique and behaviour. Liminal violence often involves the physical transgression of boundaries and thresholds, including the forceful penetration of space and bodies, and thus violent-eye literature provides an excellent lens through which to explore narratives of causality surrounding the development of a lost boy into a violent adult. Since transformation into an assimilated member of society has been impeded or denied the character as a result of the absent father’s inability to guide them through the liminal period of adolescence, an alternative quest for transformation is pursued through violence and the reassertion of belonging to a separate form of community that can exist between liminal beings, and which is meant

to be temporary. This was defined by anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) as *communitas*, which is a crucial element of the novels discussed in this chapter. However, this is not the same as being part of society as a whole, and although *communitas* can create a sense of belonging amongst liminal beings, even those who are lost, it is not to be confused with incorporation.

With these broad theories in mind, the remainder of this chapter will analyse two violent-eye narrators in American literature, 'Joe' in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Alex in Don De Grazia's *American Skin*. Both of the novels involve violent protagonists who are distinctly liminal, characterised by binary oppositions and a structural invisibility. The protagonists have been failed and abandoned by their fathers either before or during adolescence, and thus remain permanent outsiders, who in the absence of incorporation in society seek solace in fraternal communities, or *communitas*, with other lost and liminal individuals. Both of these examples of *communitas*, a fight club and a skinhead gang who live together above a nightclub, are by nature violent, hostile, and preoccupied with a sense of idealised masculinity that values strength, aggression, and camaraderie, and reject Bly's phenomenon of the "soft male" (1990, p. 2). This can be read either as a reaction to dominant social values, or an exaggerated form of them, encoded in hypermasculinity. The acts of violence (including murder) committed by both protagonists attest to the ability of the perpetually lost and liminal character to become violent, transgressing boundaries and penetrating thresholds, in this case the body, and both also seek to transform themselves from liminal matter out of place and emasculated boys into idealised men, strong, powerful, and commanding individuals who are to be feared and respected by their peers, using romanticised (albeit false) father figures who incorporate these qualities as role models and as remedies against feminisation and putative weakness.

### **Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996)**

In addition to being a violent narrative written from the first-person perspective of the violent and, ultimately, murderous protagonist, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is a distinctly liminal story and, as I will argue, one that explores the consequences of failed

rites of passage and thus perpetual liminality as a result of the absence of the father as a guide. As a quintessential liminal being, the narrator is nameless, engaging outside his white-collar work with a group of similar individuals (*communitas*) in a ritualistic capacity, one that is both brutal yet civilised due to the inclusion of a strict set of rules. This need for structure further enhances the fact that the narrator, as a liminal being, is structurally invisible, surrounded by death, a lack of kinship ties and, after the destruction of his condominium, a lack of property. Crucially, like all liminal individuals he is characterised by duality, thematically expressed through binary oppositions such as life and death, order and chaos, day and night, poverty and wealth, cleanliness and dirt, and minimalism and consumerism, to name but a few. However, the most important and overt aspect of his duality is his involuntary creation of an alter-ego, Tyler Durden, the result of “a disassociative [*sic*] personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state” (1996, p. 168), as it is described late in the novel when readers, along with the narrator, learn that the two characters are one and the same. Whilst the narrator, who for the purpose of convenience we will name Joe (after his own repeated use of the name, for example, “I am Joe’s Blood-Boiling Rage” (p. 96), “I am Joe’s Smirking Revenge” (p. 114), “I am Joe’s Complete Lack of Surprise” (p. 138))<sup>3</sup> works during the day in an unfulfilling corporate white-collar job, as Tyler he goes to work at night, and this split between being asleep and awake eventually leads Joe to consider “if I went to bed earlier every night and I slept later every morning, eventually I’d be gone altogether” (p. 174).

Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey (2004) provide an extremely insightful exploration of liminality in the cinematic version of *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher 1999), offering a Freudian analysis in the form of an Oedipal reading of the narrative, also provided by both Mike Chopra-Gant (2013) and Joshua Gunn and Thomas Frenz (2010). Although these texts discuss the film rather than the novel, they are of relevance here since in addition to the fact that the film is faithful to much (but not all) of the novel, the former also retains two important elements of the latter: the absence

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<sup>3</sup> Instead of implying something personal, ‘Joe’ serves also as a reference to the protagonist being generic, just an ‘Average Joe’.

of Joe's father, and the liminal existence of Joe. Where they deviate sharply, however, is on the issue of reincorporation, and as such when discussing failed rites of passage and permanent liminality I do so exclusively in terms of Palahniuk's novel, without borrowing from secondary literature pertaining to the film.

*Fight Club* is dominated by a sense of "masculinity in crisis" (Chopra-Gant 2013, p. 85) as a result of the absent father. In his (internal) conversation with Tyler, Joe discloses his own relationship, or lack of, with his father:

Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise. (1996, p. 50)

After their first fight together in the parking lot behind the bar, lying on their backs, Joe asks Tyler what it was that he had been fighting, to which Tyler replies "his father" (p. 53). If we read this with the knowledge that Joe is not only talking to himself, but also fought himself, then we can infer that Tyler is a projection of his father, or at least an idealised father figure; thus, in fighting Tyler, Joe is fighting his father. Tyler is primal, brutal, and frequently apotheosised by Joe, all the more relevant given the novel's frequent links between God and fathers: "What you have to understand, is your father was your model for God" (p. 140). Tyler is thus not only Joe's alter-ego, but a manifestation of his desire for a father: "I am Joe's Broken Heart because Tyler's dumped me. Because my father dumped me" (p. 134).

Returning to the issue of failed rites of passage, it becomes clear that as an adolescent attempting to transition into an adult, Joe is failed by his father. As a liminal being, he is not guided through his transition and thus by the time the readers meet him he is "a thirty-year-old boy" (p. 51), a permanent adolescent. This is most clearly emphasised in his recollections of the limited advice his absent father provided him:

My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what? My dad didn't know. When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn't know, so he said, get married. I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need. (pp. 50-51)

It is true that by suggesting marriage Joe's father is suggesting a typical form of reincorporation, an event that can mark the movement out of a liminal phase into a

normative one, and thus the suggestion in itself is one of arguably reasonable guidance. Yet, as will be argued, part of what Joe sees as the problem is the dominant influence of the feminine in his life, and thus he does not need “another woman”, as he is already, to borrow again from Bly, a “soft male”. Further, Joe’s response that he is a grown-up child emphasises that by this stage, his rite of passage through adolescence and into adulthood has failed, and thus marriage (as a form of reincorporation) is not an option for him. Millard’s previously referenced assertion that “finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father” (2007, p. 15), and that male adolescents require their fathers as “a vital means to socialisation” (2007, p. 15), is again of relevance. Because he is denied this, Joe is a permanently liminal character, and whilst Westerfelhaus and Brookey (2004, p. 312) see the destruction of his condo as the point at which he enters the liminal realm, I would argue that this “abrupt rupture” occurs at a much earlier stage in his life, especially given the implication that this is a self-destructive act committed through his creation of Tyler. The destruction of his home and personal effects, along with the increasing influence of Tyler, are thus indicative of his psychosis and descent into violence as a result of his perpetual liminality, and thus are not suggestive of its origins but symptomatic of its ongoing effects.

Westerfelhaus and Brookey see fight club and the ensuing Project Mayhem as suggestive of Max Gluckman’s ‘rituals of rebellion’, which “grant participants temporary license to violate selected sociocultural rules” (Westerfelhaus and Brookey 2004, p. 308). Conversely, I argue instead that the escalating levels of violence in which Joe engages are the result of the fact that he is free from social restrictions because he is a permanently liminal character. He increasingly takes advantage of the fact that, as a liminal outsider, he is not bound by the restrictions and rules of society, and nor is he static or imprisoned as suggested by Garber in relation to perpetual liminal outsiders. Through Tyler, Joe is therefore able to engage in escalating acts of violence, including castration and murder. Although Joe does not dare look into the freezer, he knows that it will be full of “dozens of little plastic sandwich bags [each containing] a pair of messy tidbits” (1996, p. 169), the frozen testes of individuals who threatened various fight club chapters. Despite not actually seeing the bags himself, Joe of course knows this

“because Tyler knows this” (ps. 12, 26, 185, 203). Likewise, upon witnessing the exploded remains of his office building, Joe knows without seeing or hearing that his boss is dead: “I know my boss is dead [...] I know this because Tyler knows this” (p. 185). It is important at this stage to note that in the absence of his own father, Joe’s boss was a potential surrogate:

The problem is, I sort of liked my boss. If you’re male, and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career. Except Tyler didn’t like my boss. (1996, p. 186)

One false father has thus destroyed another, leaving Joe further alone and unguided, and consequently increasingly violent and disjointed. When confronted by a horrified Marla, the woman with whom he – through Tyler – has a sexual relationship, it is news to him that he – again, as Tyler – has murdered a man named Patrick Madden, an “enemy of Project Mayhem” (p. 198). However, by forcing him to confront his actions, Marla enables Joe to break down the barrier between his life and that of Tyler, and to remember what he has done:

All of the sudden, I know how to run a movie projector. I know how to break locks [...] Now I can remember Patrick Madden, dead on the floor, his little figurine of a wife, just a little girl with a chignon. (pp. 198-199)

Despite Joe’s immersion in a male world, which rejects femininity and softness, as a troubled and seemingly isolated individual herself, Marla is able to move behind the curtain and reach him to a certain extent, and it is her influence that enables Joe to begin to deconstruct his own psychosis. It is ultimately Marla as the surrogate mother who is able to expose the false father, yet not to facilitate Joe’s reincorporation into society.

Considering Victor Turner’s assertion that rites of passage are “irreversible (for the individual subjects) one-shot-only affairs” (1974, p. 57), for Joe the only escape from the liminal realm now is death, indicated through the assertion that “only in death do we have names. Only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem” (1996, p. 201). At the end of the novel, having shot himself in the face, Joe is incarcerated in what appears to be a hospital, a place of “quiet, rubber-soled shoes” (p. 206), where meals and medication are brought on trays by “a heavenly host who works in shifts” (p. 207).

But even here Joe cannot escape his perpetual liminality, constantly reminded by the orderlies of his alter-ego: “We miss you Mr. Durden. [...] We look forward to getting you back” (p. 208). The incarceration of Joe and the apparent disappearance of Tyler cannot easily be read as a form of reincorporation into society and thus a movement out of the liminal stage. Rather, what has happened is that Joe remains liminal but has now lost his freedom to transgress social boundaries, although it is clear that the whispering orderlies, complete with black eyes and stitched and swollen foreheads, are now moving across such boundaries for him, even reaching him during his incarceration to say that “Everything’s going according to the plan” (p. 208). Even at the end of the novel, Joe remains nameless, which as Gunn and Frenz point out in relation to the film indicates that he remains psychotic and unable to “integrate into society” (2010, p. 270). Instead, he has killed Tyler, removing the false father, losing the false mother, and remaining the lost boy, trapped in a stage of adolescent liminality from which he is unable to break free.

So the absence of the father figure creates a character who is unable to progress beyond adolescence fully into adulthood, remaining a “boy” who, through his failed rites of passage, is able to transgress boundaries, particularly through his *communitas*, the group of similarly violent men who take part in both fight club and Project Mayhem. Joe’s position within this liminal world enables him to circumvent certain rules, exempting him from paying for goods, and moving unseen and unobserved as a waiter at high society functions. Both of the jobs he performs as Tyler involve a degree of penetration. As a waiter, or “service industry terrorist” (1996, p. 84), Joe tampers with the food consumed by the patrons, including urinating in soup and sneezing on fish. When “doing stuff to the food got to be boring, almost part of the job description” (p. 85), he attempts to obtain a hepatitis bug in order to contaminate the food. As such, Joe is indirectly penetrating the bodies of the customers, as they are essentially consuming him by consuming his bodily fluids. Furthermore, through work as a part-time movie projectionist he splices obscene images into family films: “Tyler spliced a penis into everything” (p. 31). Not only does he penetrate the film, but also the viewers, who witness the image without even realising, a feat particular well rendered and explained in Fincher’s film. Of note is that both of these forms of penetration are

primarily via the penis: urinating into food to be consumed and exposing images of masculine genitalia “four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium” (p. 30). This of course fits in with the novel’s preoccupation with masculinity. Beyond work, Joe also violently and physically penetrates bodily thresholds by castrating and murdering assimilated male members of society (for more on the overt theme of castration, see Chopra-Gant 2013; Gunn and Frenzt 2010), asserting his own masculinity through both violent penetration and the physical de-masculinisation of other men.

Joe’s violence is linked to his liminal status, which despite its discomfort allows him to indulge in all the freedoms that such a situation provides. But having dedicated a considerable amount of attention to the role of the traumatising mother in the previous chapter and the absent father in this one, I want to explore to what extent the mother has a role to play in understanding the aetiology of violence in Joe. As has been highlighted, the text places a great deal of emphasis on the absence of the father in the creation of a crisis of masculinity, and the maternal is certainly considerably downplayed in comparison, at least on the surface. Whereas scholarly attention (particularly to the film version) has commented on the paternal theme, the maternal has been largely – but not completely – overlooked. For Gunn and Frenzt, the issue is not so much paternal absence but rather “the failure of a paternal figure to bisect the intimate relation between an infant and its mother” (2010, p. 269), thus preventing, as noted earlier in relation to Bly’s *Iron John*, the inability of the son to move “from the mother’s realm to the father’s realm” (1990, p. viii). I have argued elsewhere (Wilson-Scott 2017) that the mothers in the novel are indirectly emphasised as the reason for their sons’ crisis of masculinity, beyond simply the intimate relationship during infancy, by being simultaneously absent and omnipresent. Looking around at the packed basement room during a fight club gathering, Joe observes that “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (1996, p. 50). Following on from the previous chapter, this is a vital revelation that the absence of the father is not in itself the most relevant issue to the crisis of masculinity presented in *Fight Club*, but rather that what it means is that women, often demonised in violent narratives as responsible for the violent actions of their sons, are again held accountable. The fathers are merely absent, whereas the mothers are left to do the actual raising. Here we have an extremely

problematic tension between the damage caused by maternal absence and that caused by maternal presence.

When read from a Wylarian perspective, the “generation of men raised by women” is reminiscent of the “generation of vipers”, with mothers responsible for effete and weak sons. As such, the covertly omnipresent mothers in *Fight Club* perpetuate the myth that it is women who damage men, since they are raising feminised men who are thus forced to engage in primal, savage, and brutal acts of violence in order to reassert their masculinity and remedy the damage. By bruising and scarring their bodies, they physically mark themselves as men: “Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself” (p. 52). Scars in Joe’s world equate to masculinity and strength, and he does not “want to die without a few scars [...]. It’s nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body” (p. 48). Thus Joe rejects the polished body, the soft physique that Bly also alludes to in *Iron John* as the “sanitized, hairless, shallow man” (1990, p. 6), instead wanting “to know more about himself”, to engage with his primal masculinity. *Fight club* enables men to feel alive and masculine, as evidenced through bold assertions such as “You aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club” (1996, p. 51). Although this starts off as a mutual and surprisingly civilised affair, involving rules and regulations in an attempt to create rites of passage within the comforting context of a *communitas*, it eventually evolves into terrorism, anarchy, and murder.

### **Don De Grazia’s *American Skin* (1998)**

Very little critical literature exists on Don De Grazia’s bildungsroman *American Skin*, set in the 1980s and primarily in Chicago. The protagonist, Alex Verdi, is 17 years old at the start of the novel, and forced to flee his rural idyllic home after his parents are arrested for drug dealing, his younger sister is taken into care, and the police show up at his school looking for him. At the outset of the novel, it is made clear that this is the extent of Alex’s family and thus there is no one else who can help him:

The Verdi’s daughter, 11, was brought to Cook County and placed in State care until relatives are reached.

'What relatives?' I mouthed, lips thick with cold. (p. 7; emphasis original)

Also made clear at the outset is the relevance of the father as the dominant figure in Alex's life. The only other person who eventually comes close is Tim Penn, the "undisputed King of the Skinheads" (p. 82), who Alex meets after arriving in Chicago: "Aside from my dad, who was in prison at the time, I looked up to Tim more than anyone. Aside from my dad" (p. 3).<sup>4</sup> Through Alex's reverent eyes, his father is initially presented as being a likeable and gentle character, a bearded beatnik who is a highly acclaimed haiku poet (unlike Palahniuk's Joe, who simply faxes his haikus around the office) and who relocates his young family to "an old farmhouse surrounded by thick woods, hidden meadows, and an overgrown orchard", complete with "Shetland ponies, some sheep, a gander, a goat, and an army of dogs" (p. 3). This last addition is the first indication that Alex's father is not all he seems, and readers soon learn that he is dealing marijuana; the dogs of course are not simply pets but protection. However, it is not until later in the novel that the more insidious side of his father is revealed, although never in an overtly condemnatory fashion since Alex's first-person narration always presents his father in a positive light, and he even refuses to ask for help when arrested for murder because he desperately desires his father's respect: "I'd always thought of my dad as simply a great man. And, I reminded myself, I would be a great man too" (p. 53); "I kind of had it in my head I'd be a great man the next time I saw [him]" (p. 277). However, his father is nevertheless a highly flawed individual. In addition to dealing drugs, which causes his own and his wife's arrest along with the complete abandonment of his children, he is also revealed to have strong and influential links to Chicago's organised crime. His role as a father is further questioned when it is revealed late in the narrative that Marie, a girl with whom Alex has been sexually involved, is in fact Alex's half-sister, abandoned at birth by their father who refused to acknowledge her as his own on the dubious and alleged grounds that Marie's mother was just after money and was promiscuous, and that Marie was too dark-skinned:

[The mother] sent me a picture once. The girl was *black*. I know, I know – she still *could* have been mine. Could have been. It just seemed so unlikely. She

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<sup>4</sup> This quotation also serves to foreshadow the events of the novel, in which the father is replaced by Tim, who is eventually replaced by the return of the father.

had plenty of lovers and I only slept with her that *one time*. (p. 280; emphasis in original).

Here the father's own naivety, irresponsibility, and failure are foregrounded. However, the most crucial element of the father in the novel is his failure to protect his adolescent son, and the subsequent violence of the latter, as it is the father's absence that is the catalyst for the events of the novel, with his removal from his son's life the point at which Alex has to fend for himself, unprepared and unguided. This also coincides with a stage in which Alex is positioned liminally, neither child nor adult. Thus, the father's arrest can be interpreted as a failure in his capacity as guide to a liminal adolescent. Rather than being nurtured, protected, supported, and guided, Alex is instead abandoned and rendered homeless, without property or money, and completely without kinship connections. As such, he decides to burn down the family home, a cleansing act that signifies rebirth but also his isolation and placelessness. Like Joe's destruction of his condo in *Fight Club*, it also marks Alex's transition out of society and towards a place in an alternative *communitas*, in the form of a skinhead gang living above a nightclub.

Once embedded within this new context and temporary *communitas*, Alex is particularly enthralled with the head of the skinhead gang, Tim Penn, who as mentioned is the closest thing to a surrogate father he finds, although their relationship is generally fraternal. Like Tyler Durden, Tim is an idealised male figure, powerful, strong, and well-respected in his own community, and who "even in pajamas [...] looked like a fucking gladiator" (p. 58). Alex frequently describes him in such a glorified manner:

The skinhead's broad-shouldered proportion seemed to tilt the scales of physical superiority his way. Though he had the long arms and legs of, say, a power forward, and looked as if he might have years ago passed through a brief adolescent stage of lankiness, he was nothing short of strapping now. And there was the calm of an alley cat in his movements that seemed to hold together all that length and strength effortlessly and harmoniously. (p. 15)

In addition to overt strength and the obvious contrast with Bly's "soft male", Tim is also described as a work of art, a creation designed to be the perfect representation of masculinity:

He wore thin, red suspenders and a sleeveless white T-shirt, displaying muscular, tattoo-covered arms. What stood out most about these arms were the prominent triceps, which seemed packed on, like extra clay – as if some sculptor, having already completed his vision of the male physique, felt compelled to use the leftover slurry in his bucket. (p. 16)

Buried amidst such exalted descriptions of the muscular male physique is the inclusion of a Douglassian understanding of dirt as matter out of place (Douglas 1966), as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Tim, although idealised and the epitome of masculinity, is nevertheless described as an alley cat and waste material in the form of leftover slurry. Although this latter description implies that he is more perfect than the perfect man, as the sculptor had already “completed his vision” prior to the addition of the extra triceps, it also has the connotation that this is only achieved through something negative, something leftover and otherwise unwanted. This reaffirms that although he has a place within his own *communitas*, which he welcomes Alex into, Tim is nevertheless outside of society as a whole. Reflecting back on his time at The Gorgon nightclub and with his fellow skinheads, Alex describes it as “that scary nocturnal Gorgon world of skins and punks and *other creeping street flotsam*” (p. 203; emphasis added). Although he frequently romanticises skinhead culture, he is also aware of how he is perceived by the rest of society, both whilst part of this subculture and when not: “Everywhere I’ve ever been, people looked at me like I was scum. Dirty” (p. 269). In one of the few, if only, descriptions we have of Alex made by another character (yet nevertheless relayed by Alex as the narrator, and thus unreliable to the extent that all first-person narratives are), we learn that he is perceived by his girlfriend’s mother as “an unstable Italian with bad teeth and tattoos” (p. 231). The reference to The Gorgon nightclub, when read in light of its allusion to Greek mythology, also indicates something that not only exists outside of the community but is dangerous to look at, something that should be avoided. Returning to the use of ‘slurry’ to describe Tim’s masculinity, there is the suggestion of something simultaneously solid and liquid, and this sense of robust fluidity serves to indicate that perpetually liminal characters are not necessarily static, again in contrast to Garber’s reading of permanent liminality in the Shakespearean context, but are instead able to move through society. Tim and

(eventually) Alex embody this sense of strength and fluidity, yet despite not being static, their progression and movement is often out of their control.

Both Tim and Alex are similar in their isolation, placelessness, and seemingly permanent liminality. Whilst in Chicago, both live in a ritualised community above The Gorgon nightclub, where heads are ceremoniously shaved and clothing and tattoos are used to ritualistically mark belonging within the group. Also living above the nightclub are a number of other skinheads, including Jason, Kirk, and Alex's half-sister Marie:

This is like Timmy's personal zoo: he sees some nutter he thinks is interesting, and Punch [the nightclub owner] gives them a storage closet to sleep in. Doesn't it seem like the bad cliché movie gang? [...] This place is a flophouse for freaks. (p. 49)

A close reading of the novel reveals that The Gorgon is not only a home for "nutters" and "freaks" but also a place for homeless, isolated, liminal, and, more crucially, fatherless people: Alex's father is in prison, Marie's father abandoned her at birth (and is also in prison during the events of the novel, since we learn that he is also Alex's father), Jason's father hanged himself in the garage when he found out he was going to prison, Kirk's father was with the circus, and Tim's father was a Vietnam war-veteran turned magician, who only showed up twice in Tim's youth to use him to promote his magic business on TV. As such, the theme of the absent father dominates the narrative, to the extent that almost every absent father trope outlined in the introduction of this chapter is covered: they can be dead, at war, in prison, or simply gone. As with *Fight Club*, therefore, emphasis is placed on the absent father, far more so than the mother figure. However, the maternal is also present in an unstable, unreliable and, in Tim's case, ultimately destructive form, since it is his mother's threats of suicide that ultimately lead to his own death, as will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

By finding solace in the shadow of Tim, Alex has chosen a poor guide and substitute father figure, since the former is himself an "archetype of American alienation" (Miles 2000, n.p.), and thus in no position to help Alex achieve reincorporation. Despite being an idealised male and thus a potential surrogate father, Tim is himself perpetually liminal and unable to move out of this zone. He sleeps on a suspended bed above a fish tank of Siamese Fighting Fish, symbolising a lack of stability,

a simultaneous fluidity and inability to progress, and a proclivity towards violence. As increasingly violent and lost individuals, both Tim and Alex are eventually incarcerated, and thus both the son and his false father figure repeat the pattern set by the absent father. Yet despite initially failing him, Alex's father is eventually able to make amends by helping him to get out of prison and setting him up with a job working for the mob. The return of the father heralds the end of the false father, who is no longer necessary as a means of epitomising masculinity and paternity. Not only is Tim denied the same help from either his or Alex's father, but it is ultimately his own role as a father to Marie's child that leads to his death, stabbed in his cell by white supremacists after they witness him crying and cradling his infant son in the prison visitor's room.

Having replaced the false father with the actual father, it is ultimately Alex who occupies the paternal role at the close of the novel, serving as a surrogate father to Tim's son and working to support his family. Whilst he remains in no way disparaging towards his father, their relationship in the post-incarceration years is clearly more strained, with the father commenting on Alex having a Cronus Complex: "Cronus: the Titan who castrated his father Uranus to become king. It is both a joke and his genuine theory about me" (p. 294). Alex eventually surpasses his father to become the head of the family, no longer a gorgon but an idealised titan himself, further reinforced when his father dies and leaves Alex as the sole adult male presence in his family's life. His years of fraternal *communitas*, subsequent alienation, and incarceration have marked his transformation from a lost and weak boy to a man working for the mob and earning a living to support his family. Yet he remains within a criminal world, unable to remove the sense of being matter out of place or his links with violence. Whilst no longer dressing to fit in with his skinhead *communitas*, he is nevertheless still performing a role and dressing to conform, which indicates he is not a post-liminal individual but rather permanently outside of society. With the death of Tim, Marie's new role as a mother, and the disappearance of the skinheads from The Gorgon, there is also the suggestion that Alex has permanently lost his sense of *communitas*:

The new crowd [at The Gorgon] is young professionals with moussed hair and leather jackets, Doc Martins they bought at Fields. Vintage Harleys lined up out front. Poseurs. I'm not putting them down, though; I try to look a certain way,

too. My teeth are capped and I don't go outside anymore without a suit on and if I meet a girl I even use a face-tanner sometimes. I'm just saying, The Gorgon is the kind of place a skinhead wouldn't be caught dead in. (p. 295)

Replacing his skinhead life and *communitas* with family obligations, Alex nevertheless reflects on The Gorgon and notes how things have changed, viewing the new crowd as simply "poseurs". Yet he is also aware that he too cultivates a certain image and an attempt to belong via the way he dresses, even using face-tanner in what could be interpreted as a mask (see Chapter Three). Alex constantly uses clothing throughout the novel to establish a sense of belonging, which indicates a persistent effort to fit in somewhere and develop a sense of community or *communitas*. At all stages of the narrative, he dresses in what can be read as a uniform, including the Gorgon days of tattoos, a bald head, street clothes, and Doc Martins, the prison days of stiff denim trousers and shirts, and the final face-tanner, suits, and capped teeth. This also sheds light on his continuing liminal status at the end of the novel, as the fact that he is still uniformed implies that he is still in the process of becoming, still trying to be something in order to belong. As a permanently liminal outsider, he is performing a role that, like all of the others, is associated with violence through his links to the mob and the gun he carries holstered. This shifting uniform implies a transience, an inability to settle, a constant redefinition of the self in the quest to belong, and thus does not indicate a post-liminal individual but rather a fatherless and lost violent-eye protagonist. It is noteworthy to point out that Alex comes full circle in the narrative, but only in terms of his liminality; he ends up fatherless in Chicago, the place where his isolated and liminal days began.

### **False Fathers and Omnipresent Mothers**

Both *Fight Club* and *American Skin* suggest that violence is the result of failed rites of passage, itself the result of the failure of the father to guide the adolescent son through the liminal zone and back into society, as well as the trauma associated with the absent father. As such, both the protagonists develop into men obsessed with masculinity, violence, and the concept of idealised fatherhood, and cultivate a fixation with their own fathers that necessitates the creation or identification of substitutes.

Despite being abandoned by his father as a child, Joe nevertheless continues to seek his father's advice, calling him up to ask "now what", as discussed earlier. The fact that his decision to go to college is important because his father never went, coupled with his rivalry with the false father Tyler, indicates not only a need to impress but to compete with his father, to delegitimise his importance by surpassing him, something that Joe does not appear to achieve. This is perhaps more closely akin to Alex's father's suggestion of the "Cronus Complex", which Alex rejects largely because he never actually sees himself as his father's rival, despite the latter's theory. Instead, his father is his means of validation, his way of judging his own worth, as Alex attempts to explain directly to his father:

You're misinterpreting your own creation. [...] Everything I do is to please *you* ... you're in my head ... not as a rival – as an *audience*. [...] I'm not saying I'm happy about it! [...] It's a curse. I'm cursed with this Audience Of Dad. (p. 294; emphasis in original)

Thus Alex requires his father not simply to approve of him but to see him, to act as a witness in order to confirm his own value, and it is not until his father dies that he is able to "numbly" return to his own affairs (p. 295). Both Joe and Alex require their fathers in order to cease to be adolescent and to become men, and so the absence of the latter leaves them lost. In order to remedy the situation, violence is used as an overt means of hypermasculinisation, since in the absence of paternal guidance they are forced to return to more primal notions of what they think it means to be men rather than the complex and holistic reality of masculinity in the late twentieth century.

As liminal characters, Joe and Alex can be read as "blank slate[s], on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group" (Turner 1969, p. 103), although as failed liminal beings, "the group" is not society but rather their respective *communitas*, the fight club and the gang. Through the skinheads, Alex learns about the history of the subculture, and his body is physically and ritualistically inscribed with tattoos. Similarly, Joe's hand is ritualistically acid-burned in order to mark him as a member of his *communitas*. Whilst not specifically violent for the sake of pleasure, or what McGinn terms pure evil rather than instrumental evil (1997, p. 63), Joe and Alex at times derive pleasure from rage and violence, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

I tagged a first-timer one night at fight club. That Saturday night, a young guy with an angel's face came to his first fight club, and I tagged him for a fight. That's the rule. If it's your first night in fight club, you have to fight. I knew that so I tagged him because the insomnia was on again, and I was in the mood to destroy something beautiful. (Palahniuk 1996, p. 122)

It was a strange and terribly wonderful thing to be so maniacally angry as to forget fear. (De Grazia 1998, p. 112)

As the insistent phrasing of the first quotation emphasises, Joe does not simply want to fight, but to destroy something, with the reference to insomnia implying that an act of violence is therapeutic and will help him sleep better at night. Alex experiences the thrill of a fight against a rival gang, but unlike Joe who uses his superior fighting ability to destroy his willing opponent, Alex's inability to have much of an impact on the outcome of the fight leaves him feeling "desperately unproven" (1998, p. 117). Neither Joe nor Alex is violent simply for pleasure or because they feel the need or desire to inflict pain and suffering on others, unlike Dexter in Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*; this is simply an occasional 'benefit' depending on their mood, as evidenced above. Nor are their actions sexually motivated, in contrast to other characters discussed in this thesis, particularly Chappy's paedophilia in Homes' *The End of Alice*, or Quentin and Andrew's homosexual violence that includes lobotomisation, rape, and cannibalism, as discussed in the next chapter. Although Joe and Alex are violent individuals, they demonstrate a violence that is instrumental in nature, as their viciousness is anarchic, a rebellion against the society that has alienated them and an attempt to assert the masculinity that has been denied them, and it serves to rectify what they view to be their weaknesses: Joe's feminisation and proclivity towards consumerism, and Alex's juvenility, vulnerability, and emotional instability, demonstrated through frequent bouts of crying. Furthermore, their violence enables them to create or find a sense of *communitas* with other similar individuals, and to prove their worth as members and also as men, particularly in relation to Bly's concept of the primal man.

Joe identifies as an adult boy who has been abandoned by his father, left to become effeminised, and preoccupied with domesticity and consumerism. Whilst his obsession with products and shopping can be read as a critique of capitalism, it also serves to structure him as stereotypically feminine. Ultimately, he becomes jealous of

his own masculinised alter ego, whereas in contrast, Alex's weakness and vulnerability cause him to worship and attempt to be like Tim in order to become a "great man" and impress his father. As such, both of the protagonists' feelings of inferiority cause them to create or identify an idealised version of masculinity and paternity, and subsequently to emulate it. As such, through Joe's psychosis he transforms into *something*, reinventing himself subconsciously as his own "faux-primitive father" (Gunn and Frenztz 2010, p. 279), who is revered and idolised by the other men in his *communitas*. Tyler Durden is a powerful, respected, and ultimately violent leader of violent men. Alex, through his association with the "undisputed King of the Skinheads" (1998, p. 82), is also able to reinvent himself, to the extent that at the end of the novel he has become the man of the family.

The consequences of failed rites of passage thus lead to a distinct lack of identity, a structural invisibility, and a lack of belonging, which in turn lead to the quest to become something: Joe becomes Tyler, and Alex strives to become like Tim, ultimately succeeding to a limited extent by becoming the surrogate father for the latter's child. Both Joe and Alex also explore Buddhism, which influences the former to comment that "Nothing is static" (1996, p. 108). This sense of fluctuation and of change, integral to Buddhism, serves to emphasise that just because Alex and Joe are structurally invisible and liminal does not mean they are restricted in terms of movement and action. Therefore, they have the potential to be dangerous. However, Joe continues to say that "Everything is falling apart" (1996, p. 108), and when Alex is visited in prison by Mrs. Kabushita, his Buddhist guide, and jokingly asks her if the experience of his incarceration will be a "big benefit" (1998, p. 264) for him, she becomes quietly emotional and shakes her head to imply no. This is the first time she does not view the path ahead of him as a "big benefit", and thus both Joe and Alex demonstrate that just because their lives are not restricted by their liminality, this does not make them positive. The freedom to transgress societal rules that liminality provides can be both liberating and traumatising.

Returning to Turner's assertions that the liminal period is one of manifold possibilities, this outcome is arguably a tragic one, particularly for Joe who ends up committed to a hospital. As violent liminal beings in what seems like a permanent state,

failed by their fathers and society in general and prevented from reincorporating, they embody the negative and dangerous aspect of the liminal period. Furthermore, as intelligent individuals who, prior to their engagement with their respective *communitas*, did not appear to display violent tendencies, there is the implication that there could have been the potential for a positive outcome from their transition into adulthood, had it not been for the failure of their fathers.

So it appears that in violent-eye American narratives it is not just mothers who are blamed for the violent actions of their sons, but (absent) fathers also are at times positioned as the aetiological reason for such a transformation. However, as outlined in relation to *Fight Club*, the mother can still be positioned as blameworthy. As argued, the mother in *Fight Club* is responsible for weakening American men, particularly those abandoned by their fathers and thus without a masculine influence. Although physically absent in the novel, the mother is simultaneously and symbolically an almost omnipresent mother, permeating the text and reminding the reader that she is relevant, albeit not in a positive way. The absent mother is symbolized in the guise of Big Bob, the former body-builder whose testicular cancer has reduced him to a castrated, large-breasted, oestrogen dominant, emotionally fragile man, who provides Joe with the crucial ability to be both emotionally free and nurtured, offering him the space and ability to cry in his arms and thus sleep well at night. The mother is also found in Marla, since if Tyler is symbolic of the father through his idealised masculinity, then Marla in her capacity as his lover is a symbolic mother. This is expressed by Joe's direct comparisons of his parents with Tyler and Marla. When Tyler gives Joe a message for Marla, Joe comments: "I'm six years old, again, and taking messages back and forth between my estranged parents" (1996, p. 66). The mother is also present in Joe's business making and selling soap, since it transpires that he uses the collagen from the thighs of Marla's mother to render into tallow in order to make the soap (also indicating his connotation with purity and pollution). So here we have this important dynamic, imaged in the tension between the absent mother and the omnipresent mother. *Fight Club* reveals that even mothers who are subverted and marginalised can remain pivotal in the lives of their violent offspring. Mothers who are barely mentioned in the narrative and who are side-lined in favour of the lost father, in fact have an enormous relevance

and are even implicitly blamed for the violence of their sons, who are forced to reclaim a primal masculinity to remove the contamination of overt motherhood and their subsequent feminisation, emphasised through their weakness and obsession with consumerism and domesticity, and their soft and unscarred bodies. Likewise, men are forced to reinvent themselves through fight club, and the splitting of Joe's psyche into two individuals symbolises a rebirth into an idealised, albeit violent, individual. This of course is complicated by the simultaneous creation of the idealised false father (in the form of Tyler), whose emphasis on masculinity and violence serves to remedy the damage done by the omnipresent mother who has raised a generation of weak men in need of fight club as a means of reclaiming their masculinity and removing the perceived enfeebling effects of femininity.

The same reading of the covert yet dominant mother cannot be made for *American Skin*, in which the father and the idealised male remain the central focus. Alex has very little to say about his mother at all, and thus the emphasis remains on the magnitude of the failure of the father to guide and protect the adolescent son through the liminal period and back into society. One interesting point to make is that Alex's mother is of so little consequence to him throughout the novel that her relationship to him is at times expressed as only existing due to their mutual relationship with his father. In the epilogue, when Alex is ultimately reunited with his family after he gets out of prison, his parents are divorced but nevertheless spending Christmas together with Alex, his sister Stacy, Marie, her baby, and Tim's mother:

It's my first Christmas out [of prison] and I sit at Marie's dinner table after dessert. My dad, on a nearby couch [is] working on a novel, and devotes the rest of his time to the stock market. His ex-wife, now working at a bank, sits across the table listening patiently to a drunken Mrs Penn, a soft-spoken, sentimental lush. His blue-eyed daughters Stacy and Marie gulp coffee, laughing nervously in the intensity of their sisterhood. His grandson Timmy Penn sits still and radiant, like some little bronzed boy. (1998, p. 293)

The first feature to note in this quotation is that the father is of central relevance, and all the other characters are described according to their relationship to him, with the exception of Mrs Penn, the mother of the now-deceased false father, Tim. The second aspect is that with the exception of Alex's mother, these peripheral characters are all

named: Mrs Penn, Stacy, Marie, and even the baby, Timmy Penn. As such, his mother now exists solely in her capacity as Alex's father's ex-wife, not even given her own name or referred to as his mother. No longer married to the father, her relationship with Alex seems severed; from this description she is not only Alex senior's ex-wife, but Alex junior's ex-mother. Earlier in the novel, Alex comments on mothers, saying:

it's very scary for a baby to watch its mom leave the room they're in because the baby's brain can't, you know, comprehend the ... I mean, the room is like the baby's entire *universe*, right? So when the mom leaves the room, to the baby it's like she stops existing. (1998, p. 199; emphasis original)

What can be inferred here is that when Alex's parents were arrested and left his life for a few years, his mother stopped being relevant (presuming she ever was), whereas his father remained an important influence in his life. Alex loves his family, but it is his father who is the most important figure, the "Audience of Dad", and his unwilling abandonment of Alex leaves the latter lost and failed, like Joe, during a period of his life where he desperately requires guidance.

Referring back to the earlier conversation between Alex and his father about the latter's role as an audience in his son's life, Alex's reply about needing to please the father comes directly after his mother's statement that "If he's *got* any complexes, where do you think he got them?" (1998, p. 294; emphasis in original). Rather than responding to his mother's defence of him, Alex ignores her and directly addresses his father, instantly positioning him as the only parent of relevance not only due to the lack of acknowledgement of the mother and her support of him but also through his opening words: "You're misinterpreting your own creation" (1998, p. 294). Thus, Alex does not see himself – or chooses not to see himself – as the product of his mother, but exclusively of his father, which drives his need to become a great man and impress him: "Everything I do is to please *you*" (1998, p. 294, emphasis in original).

Yet despite the marginalisation of Alex's mother, in *American Skin* the mother figure is nevertheless presented as a threat to the liminal son. Tim's death is the direct result of his mother's actions, as he acquiesces to her demand that he acknowledge Marie's baby as his own on the grounds that she will commit suicide if he does not:

Timmy! You're gonna listen to me! You're gonna hold that boy right now or I swear to God I'm gonna kill myself. I'm gonna go home and jump out the window eleven floors! You think I'm kidding? I got nothin' to live for. My own son don't even respect me. (1998, p. 284)

His acceptance of the wishes of his mother, along with his recognition of his own fatherhood, leads to his murder by White supremacists, who see his embracing of the "living bundle of treason he had held up for all to see – the caramel-colored baby" (1998, p. 289) as unforgivable. The mother figure in the form of both Marie and Mrs Penn threatens the overtly virile Tim's masculinity and, ultimately, his safety, serving as the Achilles' heel of an otherwise strong and capable man. Unlike Alex, whose absent father's return comes hand-in-hand with protection, Tim has no father to help him get out of jail or sever the mother-son relationship, and so, surrounded by mothers, he is ultimately weakened and destroyed.

There is therefore the suggestion in both novels that whilst the absence of the father is traumatic, the primary danger is that this void is filled by the mother. The father is simply gone, and as a consequence the role of the mother becomes more prevalent, and risks oppressing the son (on Wylie's model of Momism) or making him effeminate and weak, which in turn necessitates the embracing of a primal masculinity realised through violence.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has aimed to explore the impact of paternal abandonment and neglect during the late childhood and adolescence of the violent-eye protagonists in two American texts of the 1990s, in order to explore how such a lack of guidance and support can be used to explain a character's development into a violent adult. As such, an anthropological framework was adopted in order to explore the concept of liminality and failed rites of passage, as this provides a lens through which to explore the absent father and the development of the adolescent son into a lost and violent individual. In the two novels under discussion, the abandonment of young sons by their fathers is the central and overt theme, which causes a crisis of masculinity and the need to violently assert a primal and brutal image of the self as the ideal male through the guidance of a

false father, either imaginary or real. Both texts involve a sense of duality interlinked with this concept of the ideal male, since Joe creates such a person in his alter ego, Tyler, and Alex finds it in his paternal/fraternal bond with Tim. The result is a complicated mixture of the idealised male being both a false father and a model for the protagonist, leading to the development of a “Cronus Complex” in which the son both emulates and at times rivals the father in order to achieve his own sense of masculine self and establish a place within society or, if unable to do so, within a *communitas*.

I have endeavoured to argue that perpetually liminal characters are not static and imprisoned but rather are liberated, albeit not in a socially beneficial way, and often traumatically so. They are able to transgress social boundaries and penetrate thresholds, principally in this chapter bodily ones, since both protagonists engage in murder and violence. They also strive to create a sense of belonging in order to manifest a sense of community. As such, Joe creates a brotherhood of violent men in both *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem*, whilst Alex joins a skinhead gang and adopts their ethos, behaviour, and dress style. This enables both characters to transform themselves, at least in their eyes, from nothing into something, yet only within the confines of a perpetual liminality.

This chapter has expanded upon Chapter One, not only due to its charting of the violent-eye individual out of childhood and into adolescence and ultimately adulthood, but also by questioning whether mothers still play a role in the violent transformation of their offspring in texts that seemingly focus on the role of the father. I have argued that in relation to *Fight Club*, the mother is in fact omnipresent, and that it is not so much the absence of the father but the overwhelming presence of the mother alone that causes the crisis of masculinity, which in turn necessitates the embracing of violence and primal brutality. However, the same cannot be said for *American Skin*, in which the father remains the dominant presence in Alex’s life throughout the course of the novel, to the extent that Alex’s relationship with his mother depends on his relationship with his father. The difference here, of course, is that Alex’s father returns whereas Joe’s does not. As a consequence, Tim is no longer needed as a false father and can therefore be discarded, which ultimately occurs as the direct result of his own damaging relationship with his mother that is not bisected by a father figure; thus the

pathogenic threat of the mother discussed in the previous chapter resurfaces, particularly in relation to her ability to enfeeble her son. Unlike the relationship between Alex and Tim, Joe's relationship with Tyler eventually becomes contentious and masochistic, with the false father and the idealised man threatening to eclipse Joe and causing him to engage in escalating levels of violence. For Joe, the false father – who has succeeded in reconnecting Joe with a primal sense of masculinity in an attempt to remove the effeminacy caused by the omnipresent mother – can be removed, yet only at the expense of Joe's freedom.

To conclude, on this evidence violent-eye protagonists are often permanently liminal characters, who have arguably been failed by their parents during a pivotal time of their life and thus left with an enormous crisis of identity and a need to reassert their identity violently in order to shape the way they are perceived. Having discussed representations of how violent-eye protagonists become socially deviant, exploring the roles of both the father and the mother in this and the previous chapter, respectively, and charting the individual's development from birth through childhood and adolescence, the next chapter will shift its focus on narratives of causality away from aetiological explanations of violence to consider representations of innate predispositions. Whilst such an unavoidable inherent and intrinsic proclivity towards violence is questionable in its own right, violent-eye protagonists who are aggressive ontologically are often simultaneously presented as homosexual. As such, the following chapter will disentangle this extremely problematic fusion of sexual orientation and criminality in violent-eye literature of the 1990s.

## Chapter Three

### Homodiegetic, Homosexual, and Homicidal Violent-Eye Narrators

**Desire and violence often share a representational lexicon, borrowing from a register of urgency that reaches out of appetite toward satiation. (Deborah Wills 2014, p. 67)**

Amongst violent-eye narrators, there are two consistent identity markers: gender and race. The texts discussed in this thesis all centre around a male protagonist, with the exception of Vicki Hendrick's Sherry Parlay in *Miami Purity* (1995), and all of them are white. Yet an acknowledgment of this is not to homogenise these characters into one universal type, as they have differing socio-cultural contexts, *modus operandi*, motives, personalities, and victim types. This latter aspect can in some instances be linked to different sexualities and the notion of desire, since some of the violent-eye protagonists assault, maim, and even kill the 'objects' of their lust, such as A. M. Homes' Chappy in *The End of Alice*. In three of the novels – a significant proportion of the texts identified here as violent-eye fiction – this is specifically linked to homosexual desire, and as such this chapter explores gay violent-eye protagonists within American literature of the 1990s. Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991) clearly falls into this category, but my focus in this chapter is on Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* (1995) and Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), in part to provide a more focused analysis and also because, unlike *Frisk*, they deal with the narrators' acts of violence rather than fantasy and imagined events. However, reference will also be made to *Frisk* as a comparative piece that explores a violent-eye protagonist's "interest in sexual death" (1991, p. 40) and the literary fusion of homosexual lust and violence. After all, it is the interstices of the two that are of relevance to this chapter, as "desire and violence often share a representational lexicon, borrowing from a register of urgency that reaches out of appetite and toward satiation" (Wills 2014, p. 67).

Retaining the focus of the thesis on violent-eye texts as narratives of causality, the question arises as to whether such characters are presented as violent *and* gay or whether they are presented as violent *because* they are gay. Homosexuality has long

been linked in American society with notions of criminality and deviancy, particularly during times of ideological conflict such as the early Cold War years when it was pathologised as a mental illness in the first edition of the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-I)* in 1952, where it remained until its removal from the *DSM-II* (1968) in 1973. Despite increased activism and awareness of sexual identity and orientation, homosexuality nevertheless remained heavily stigmatised, which in the 1980s and 1990s was strongly influenced by the AIDS crisis. The psychologist Gregory M. Herek (1991) observes that in a similar fashion to the widespread cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century, the AIDS epidemic was seen by some as indicative of divine punishment, and that rather than eliciting sympathy, it instead generated further hostility. At the institutional level, homophobia in the 1990s in particular manifested itself through policies and laws such as 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', instituted in 1994, and the Defense of Marriage Act, introduced in 1996, both under the Clinton Administration, which respectively targeted gay individuals in the US military and same-sex couples seeking marriage. Thus, despite what seemed on the surface to be a more enlightened social attitude towards homosexuality in the 1990s, as Herek notes, antipathy towards homosexual individuals remained widespread at both the institutional and personal levels.

Fear and hatred of the homosexual individual in the United States has a long history, but is not only a highly problematic issue but also a persistent one, especially since non-heteronormativities remain "blurred areas on our horizons" (Tithecott 1997, pp. 67-68). The accusation of inherent violence remains pertinent, and queer individuals remain stigmatised, to the extent that the subject provokes some extreme views, and the "point comes across loudly and clearly: homosexuals are violent, degraded monsters and their evil agenda is to destroy the very fabric of American society" (Benshoff 1997, p. 2). Whilst this quotation from Harry M. Benshoff is taken slightly out of context, as he is specifically referring to the agenda of an anti-gay Christian organisation, it nevertheless conveys the persistent American analogy that he broadly describes as "monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual" (p. 2). Estelle B. Freedman (1989) suggests that "the frequent overlap in use of the terms *sex criminal*, *pervert*, *psychopath*, and *homosexual*, raises the question of whether

*psychopath* served in part as a code for *homosexual*” (p. 213, emphasis original; see also Sullivan 2000). Whilst Michael William Saunders (1998) provides a compelling argument that it is the visibility of gay people that is interpreted as such a threat, arguing that it is recognition that represents “a threat to social order” (p. 2), I would counter that despite policies such as the (now repealed) “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, their invisibility is equally perceived as dangerous. After all, the fear of the hidden other is a fear of not being able to identify a present or proximal threat, as was the case during the Cold War. It is a fear that underlines the current bathroom laws in the United States, a fear that a reputedly deviant individual can enter a place undetected and pose a threat to those they encounter. It is a fear perhaps best dramatised in *The Simpsons* episode ‘Homer’s Phobia’ (Season 8, Episode 15), in which an outraged Homer discovers to his horror that his friend is gay, declaring: “I like my beer cold, my TV loud, and my homosexuals flaming” (Groening 1997). As Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile (2010) argue in the context of mid-twentieth-century Canada, “homosexuals who successfully concealed their secret [were seen as] just as dangerous as those who did not, but for different reasons” (p. 169). But what we can draw from these two arguments is that regardless of whether a homosexual man is visible or invisible, he often remains positioned as a menacing figure in American society.

Popular culture has long positioned the queer or trans\* individual as a threatening one, with accusations frequently levied against high profile examples of the latter such as Anthony Perkins’ portrayal of Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Ted Levine’s portrayal of Jame Gumb in Jonathon Demme’s cinematic version of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). K. E. Sullivan (2000) observes that a transgender body is a narrative trope that is usually “tied to some dark and horrible secret” (n.p.), and suggests in relation to Jame Gumb that what viewers are meant to find as horrible and monstrous about him are not his murderous actions but rather his desire to sew, dress as a woman, and wear makeup: it is his effeminacy that “marks him as *grotesquely* murderous”, to the extent that “the terms monster and transsexual collapse” (n.p., emphasis added). Richard Tithecott (1997) argues further that the villainy of Gumb “is reinforced by our conflating of transsexuality, transvestism, and

homosexuality and by his character being made up in part by the gay stereotype” (p. 72).

But it is not only gay or queer men who are culturally positioned as dangerous. Lisa Duggan (2000) discusses the cultural narrative of the “lesbian love murder”, which in the nineteenth century was influentially used to portray romantic love between women as “dangerous, insane, and violent” (p. 2). However, within the context of a thesis that focuses on violent-eye protagonists, who are by and large male, this chapter focuses specifically on gay men, who in American culture have long been positioned as pathological, capable when effete of weakening the masculine ideal, and seen as corrupting, both morally and physically. This, as stated earlier in this chapter, was in part the result of fears surrounding the AIDS crisis, where a lack of understanding of the disease and its transmission led to stigmatisation. During the 1980s, public opinion surveys revealed that fear of the disease was widespread, and there was a “willingness to support draconian public policies that would restrict [sufferers’] civil liberties” (Herek 1999, p. 1106). Gay men, who due to the prevalence of AIDS within their community, were often seen as potential carriers (rather than victims) of the disease, were socially positioned as threatening, and this had a significant impact on the subsequent homosexual monster rhetoric: “gay men are [presented as] contagions – vampires – who, with a single mingling of blood, can infect a pure and innocent victim, transforming him or her into the living dead” (Benshoff 1997, p. 2). As Jacqueline Foertsch (2001) notes, the “extreme infectiousness of HIV” was not simply biological but also psychological (p. 36). For Herek (1999), the reason why AIDS sufferers were so highly stigmatised was because AIDS as a disease through the 1980s and 1990s was untreatable, contagious, and visibly distressing (in its later stages), and also because it was seen by some to be self-inflicted.

Theatre scholar Jordan Schildcrout (2014, p. 1) reminds us that the “villainous homosexual has a long and terrible history” in American society and its entertainment. With generations of American (and global) children being exposed to the concept of villainy through ubiquitous mediums such as animated Disney films, in which a disproportionate amount of the antagonists are “gay-tinged” (Griffin 2000, p. 146)

effete bachelors or their androgynous and even butch spinster counterparts, it is unsurprising that the link between homosexuality and villainy has become and remains so fused. After all, the effeminate man or “the sissy indicates homosexuality obliquely” (Saunders 1998, p. 8), and is thus a ‘safe’ method of representation that is deemed suitable for young audiences by conservative and traditionalist standards. Gay villainy is not limited to only a handful of examples, but this brief consideration of the extent to which homosexuality has been conflated with deviance and violence in popular culture is relevant in order to explore the gay violent-eye protagonists discussed in this chapter, as they are not isolated examples but rather a specific type of the troublingly prolific cultural phenomenon that is the homo-cidal villain.

Thus far, this thesis has argued that mothers play the primary role in the shaping of trauma and ultimately violence in violent-eye American literature. Even when removed from the dominant position in their sons’ lives during the latter’s adolescence, there is the implication that the damage has already been done. Whilst fathers may fail their sons during the liminal period between childhood and adulthood, part of what is so damaging about this, as argued in the previous chapter, is that what the son is left with is an omnipresent mother, as in Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996), or a mother-son relationship that is not successfully bisected by the father, as in *Fight Club* and De Grazia’s *American Skin* (1998). This thesis thus makes a linearly temporal progression from childhood and traumatising mothers in Chapter One via adolescence and absent fathers in Chapter Two, into adulthood and sexuality in this present chapter, but still questions to what extent the parents – particularly the mother – have had an effect on the son’s development into a violent individual who enjoys hurting others. The very fact that the violent-eye protagonist is gay brings to the forefront of the narrative the spectre of the mother, the pathologic influence that Phillip Wylie saw as so damaging to men and the United States in general in the 1940s. Despite being relatively absent from *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie*, the mother’s cultural legacy as a pathogenic influence on men remains present, as in addition to the ways in which she is frequently linked to deviancy and violence, mother blame discourse is also well established in relation to effeminacy and homosexuality (see van den Oever, 2012). Whilst it is of course possible “for men to be effeminate without being homosexual and to be homosexual without

being effeminate” (Halperin 2013, p. 266), heterosexist mythology, as the film critic Robin Wood (1995) reminded us, has had the damaging effect of suggesting that “one is probably gay if one shows traces of effeminacy, had a close relationship with one’s mother, or hates and murders women” (p. 197).

The fear of the effeminate man stems in part back to the pathogenic mother and Wylie’s Momism in the 1940s (see Chapter One), along with the Lavender Scare proliferated by McCarthyism in the 1950s, which not only conflated homosexuality with sexual perversion but also positioned gay individuals as threats to national security, and as a hidden danger. The fear of the gay man was so profound at that time as to cause many Americans, including journalists and politicians, to suggest in the name of “morality and decency” that homosexual individuals were “more of a threat to national security than Communists”, as historian David K. Johnson (2004, p. 2) illustrates. It was Johnson who popularised the term ‘Lavender Scare’ to make a direct comparison with the Red Scare of Communism, whilst referencing the term “lavender lads” used to allude to homosexual men in the State Department (p. 216). Whilst emphasis tends to be placed on the role of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy in this specific period of oppression, it is important to emphasise that the persecution of homosexual individuals during this time was epidemic. Johnson warns that by overly focussing on McCarthy there is the tendency, “paradoxically, to keep the antigay purges in the shadows” (p. 4), and with them, the stigmatisation of the mother.

Homosexuality was the socially dreaded outcome of effeteness caused by pathogenic mothers. Thus, in the case of gay violent-eye protagonists, there is the risk that mothers can be doubly blamed for creating an effete and violent child, the two of which, as already outlined, remain strongly and alarming conflated in contemporary American society. As such, the fact that a violent character is gay means that the mother doesn’t need to be referenced, as she is already there as a shadow, implied in her son’s sexuality. Coupled with violence, this further reaffirms Eike Träger’s argument that the mother of the violent individual “can never be made absent altogether” (2017, n.p.). This chapter’s focus on homosexuality in relation to the pathogenic mother broadens the question of representation to whether the characters are violent and gay because

of the pathogenic mother. In order to address this and other queries, this chapter adopts Schildcrout's (2014) approach to representations of the homicidal homosexual man, seeing the figure as one that "must be interrogated rather than simply condemned" (p. 3), and so theoretically the emphasis is on approaching all characters as worthy of analysis rather than moralizing about the rights and wrongs of their representation or behaviour. It is highly tempting to label characters such as Jame Gumb as simply homophobic representations of a marginalised and persecuted group of people – indeed, many critics have done just this – but to do so not only ignores the subtleties of such representations in favour of their overt flaws but also suppresses the dialogue that they can promote and encourage. As such, borrowing from Wood's (1995) approach to film, this chapter questions whether the novels under study are about "homosexuality as a perversion, or about society's perversion of homosexuality" (p. 211). In contrast with the damaging invisibility of homosexual characters that has occurred historically in American popular culture, Saunders argues that negative and monstrous depictions "actually represent an intermediate stage of progress towards a more measured discussion" (1998, p. 7), something that this research takes into consideration.

So within this thesis' preoccupation with narratives of causality, this chapter primarily argues that homosexual violent-eye protagonists, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, are often presented as being ontologically violent and thus their actions lack a clear aetiology, since their sexual orientation appears to suffice. The concept of inherent violence in relation to gay men can be explored through the notion of homosexual overkill, used to explain but not condone the actions of the serial killer Jeffery Dahmer (Sullivan 2000), which suggests that violence is the result of homosexual desire that is out of control. It should be noted that Dahmer is a relevant case not only because he was both gay and highly violent but also because he was the inspiration for both *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie*.<sup>1</sup> In Cooper's *Frisk*, this idea of overkill, albeit imaginary as the murders and mutilations committed by the violent-eye protagonist

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<sup>1</sup> Of further relevance to Dahmer are accusations levied against his mother, for example by his school friend Derf Backderf in the latter's biography *My Friend Dahmer* (2012): "Joyce was a housewife who was *chafing* in that role [...] but she was *odd*. Very *moody* and *fragile*. It was obvious she was lugging around some heavy *baggage*. But there were a lot of *damaged moms* in town" (p. 40; emphasis original).

Dennis turn out to be fictional, is also expressed: “I’m sure I’ve idealized brutality, murder, dismemberment, etc. [...] especially when I combine it with sex. Then it’s – I’m – out of control” (1991, p. 78). For Sullivan, homosexual overkill is a highly problematic concept that, when applied to Dahmer, reduces violence to sexuality, suggesting that the former “is the outcome of homosexual desire run rampant” (2000, n.p.). Because such individuals are positioned as victims of their own desire, they are thus considered to be both helpless and passive in the face of it, and also suggested to be inherently and innately dangerous. The fusion of homosexuality and danger can also be linked with the gay panic defence, a current US legal defence (although banned in California as of 2014) in which a defendant claims that the assault or murder with which they are charged was prompted by fear of a homosexual individual’s advances, which again situates the homosexual individual as dangerous and the threat they allegedly pose as a justifiable cause of panic and even murder. In 1998, for example, this was used (albeit unsuccessfully) by one of the killers of Matthew Shepard, the young man who was beaten, tortured, and left for dead in Laramie, Wyoming. Gay men are thus often positioned as dangerous simply as a result of their sexuality, and so when they are violent, as in the case of Dahmer, this is fused with their sexual orientation. Within violent-eye literature, the suggestion is that of ontological violence, as there is no traumatic event used to explain the protagonist’s actions and behaviours.

In the two texts under study, there are no overt references to trauma or abuse as explanations for violence, no suggestion as to what may have caused the violent-eye protagonists to become aggressive. Indeed, as will be explored in more detail subsequently, Brite’s serial killer Andrew Compton questions his own evolution into a violent individual, asking “How had I ever done twenty-three killings? What had made me want to?” (1996, p. 5), coming to no conclusion other than his past was “utterly without distinction” (p. 5). This raises the larger question of whether homosexuality itself is being positioned as the reason, and whether such characters are being presented as violent *because* they are gay rather than simply being gay and violent. Positioned by society as ‘normal’, heteronormative killers such as Lindsay’s Dexter and Palahniuk’s Joe require some form of explanation as to why they are violent, whereas characters such as Oates’ Quentin and Brite’s Andrew, already positioned according to

mainstream heteronormative assumptions as deviant, do not. Their sexuality is sufficient explanation, it seems, for why they engage in societally deviant and violent behaviour. Coupled with this, the figure of the omnipresent mother, culturally positioned as lurking behind every gay or effete man, again comes into question as a result of her societal stigmatisation as the creator of both the homosexual son and the homicidal villain.

Whilst violence is often seen as a distinctly American quality, homosexuality is not, and this distinction is something that sets Oates' *Zombie* and Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*, along with Cooper's *Frisk*, apart from the other violent-eye narratives of the 1990s onwards that are discussed in this thesis. The narrators share similar qualities to protagonists such as Patrick Bateman in that their first-person narratives document their own proclivities for ultra-violence, including rape, mutilation, torture, and ultimately murder, but their victims are exclusively men. As such, their actions are motivated in part by homosexual desire, which is portrayed as being intricately linked with a proclivity for and enjoyment of killing.

The body of this chapter explores Oates' *Zombie* and Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*, respectively, before providing a discussion of some of the central themes that permeate and link the two. In particular, Oates' text is analysed in relation to possible readings of trauma during violent-eye protagonist Quentin's youth, yet there is the suggestion that an innately violent disposition predates these events, rendering them moot. The father's inability to accept his son's homosexuality is also explored, along with the ability of the violent-eye individual to hide both his aggressive behaviour and homosexuality from his family and society. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* deals more specifically and thoroughly with the issue of an innately violent disposition, and will be explored in relation to the conflation of homosexuality and violence through references to revelation. Additionally, this blurring is further explored through the use of violence as a way of achieving companionship, which is also a major theme of *Zombie*.

The chapter concludes with a comparative discussion of the two novels in relation to their gay violent-eye protagonists and an analysis of some other contemporary American texts, including Cooper's *Frisk*, which as mentioned earlier in

this chapter is side-lined in favour of the other two due to its preoccupation with violent fantasies rather than violent actions. As a means to thinking about the broader topic of the thesis, literary references to eyes are analysed as a result of their putative ability to reveal both violence and homosexuality, and penetrate out from underneath what Hervey Cleckley called a “mask of sanity”, the appearance of normality that belies hidden psychopathy. This issue raises the question of performance and banality, which in turn exposes the idea of an existential void ‘present’ in violent characters, including violent-eye protagonists such as Quentin and Andrew. This correlates with the stigmatisation of gay men based on the prejudiced view that they are not only putatively deviant but also lacking something necessary to normality. The discussion culminates with a return to the mother figure who, as argued throughout this thesis, even when absent in the narrative nevertheless remains a damaging figure in the life of her son, a shadowy presence in narratives of both violence and homosexuality.

### **Joyce Carol Oates’ *Zombie* (1995)**

As the violent-eye narrator of Oates’ *Zombie*, Quentin P. is, at least on the surface, unremarkable. Opening the narrative with a brief description of his own age and physical features, he quickly summarises his mundane and utterly normal appearance by considering his lack of exceptionality and uniqueness: “Distinguishing features: none” (1995, p. 3). Thus, Quentin is positioned at the outset of the narrative as a hidden threat. He is able to pass unnoticed, not only due to his own appearance and demeanour but also as a result of a deliberate cultivation of invisibility, something in which he takes pride: “Q\_ P\_ the invisible man” (p. 113). He drives a 1987 Ford van “the color of wet sand”, which “passes through your vision” (p. 4). He performs a version of normality, constructing an image of himself that hides reality, and in this sense he is a chameleon, who even when adopting a different personality still does so in an ordinary, unexceptional manner:

I was in Detroit where I go sometimes & stay in a hotel on Cass where I’m known as TODD CUTTLER a guy with curly red-brown hair & a moustache & he wears a leather necktie & looks kind of cool but also kind of a square, an asshole you could put something over onto if you tried. (p. 24)

In this way, he is reminiscent of Jim Thompson's violent-eye protagonists Lou Ford and Nick Corey, discussed in the Introduction, who choose to present themselves as gullible yet likeable fools, and also like Patrick Bateman, who is seen as being "the boy next door" despite perceiving himself as "a fucking evil psychopath" (1991, p. 20).

Quentin's understanding of the ability to be visually fluid and to pass unnoticed comes after he is mugged, an attack that leaves him badly beaten and bandaged. Looking in the mirror the next day, he does not recognise his own image, seeing instead a "fantastic FACE!" that prompts him to realise how malleable appearances can be:

I understood then that I could habit a FACE NOT KNOWN. Not known ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. I could move in the world LIKE ANOTHER PERSON. I could arouse PITY, TRUST, SYMPATHY, WONDERMENT & AWE with such a face. I could EAT YOUR HEART & asshole you'd never know it. (p. 60)

As a highly violent and sexual predator at the helm of a narrative that reveals through "typographical tics and oddities" (Marcus 1995, n.p.) his uniqueness, instability, and "psychic disarray" (Wills 2014, p. 76), Quentin is a "blank space" (Oates 1995, p. 73).<sup>2</sup> This invisibility mirrors concerns about the hidden other, the sexual threat that passes unnoticed until it is too late. There is nothing on the surface to indicate that Quentin is dangerous, and his actions are carefully concealed, especially after he has a close call with a young boy from the projects.

At the start of the narrative, Quentin has been convicted of sexually assaulting an African-American boy, but this is trivialised by society and the legal system since he is not given a prison sentence, although it is put down to being a racial offence, much to Quentin's disgust. The event is the source of great shame to his family, yet they accept his version of the events and grudgingly allow him to plead guilty despite not believing that he is. However, they and the rest of society are unaware that by this stage Quentin has already killed a number of men. His approach to selecting his victims is in no way arbitrary, but is instead carefully and meticulously calculated. Whilst it is intricately linked to homosexual desire it is not always uncontrollably governed by this,

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<sup>2</sup> Such "typographical tics and oddities" include capitalisation, the use of ampersands, and italics, amongst others.

as he rules out potential victims based on the fact that they are not “safe specimens” (p. 18), favouring instead people he views as “natural” zombies (p. 46) and who lack a caring family, although notably he does deviate from his own rules in a few cases when faced with individuals who ignite an obsession in him; this is reminiscent of the concept of homosexual overkill, as some of his attacks are frenzied and poorly planned.

His use of the clinical term ‘specimens’ throughout the narrative, coupled with the medical procedures he attempts in order to lobotomise his victims, illustrates Quentin’s inability to empathise with people and to see his victims as anything other than sexual objects. His narration reveals a vapid yet ruthless individual, banal not just in appearance but also personality, evident in his clinical, quotidian, and wooden narrative. His dialogue is at times rambling, with the frequent omission of commas creating a fluid yet uncontrolled account of violence that simultaneously exposes his normality and his brutality. The lack of control and the constant flux between a sense of calm and a sense of hysteria, further hinted at through his inconsistent use of capital letters and italics, is also suggestive of a tenuous grip on his own behaviour, evidenced through poor decisions that deviate from his meticulous planning and also a lack of control over his own voice: “I open my mouth to speak & there’s this voice comes out, it’s Q\_\_ P\_\_’s but like another guy’s too, somebody on TV maybe, or I’m imitating” (p. 45).<sup>3</sup> The degree of Quentin’s performance is thus indicated to be not completely within his control, to the extent that even his own voice is something unreliable, not just to readers but to Quentin also. Reading Quentin as Dahmer, this is echoed in Derf Backderf’s (2012) biography of the latter, in which he claims that by adolescence Dahmer had lost himself: “Whatever *personality* he once had was *gone*. He was either *in character, or drunk, or both*” (p. 119; emphasis original).

Whilst working as a caretaker and studying part-time, Quentin engages in carefully planned and executed abductions of young men. Although their deaths are the invariable outcome of these kidnappings, they are not always his intention, as what

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<sup>3</sup> Quentin frequently obscures his name through abbreviations such as “Q\_ P\_”.

he wants is to lobotomise his victims in order to create a completely compliant companion, a living yet corpse-like zombie that he could possess:

A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever. He would obey every command & whim. Saying "Yes, Master" & "No, Master." He would kneel before me lifting his eyes to me saying, "I love you, Master. There is no one but you, Master." [...] His eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing*. & nothing behind them *thinking*. Nothing *passing judgement*. (ps. 49 and 169; emphasis original)

Thus Quentin's violence is motivated by a desire for romantic company, but company on his own terms. As Deborah Wills (2014) observes, "the lyrical and the brutal collide" in Quentin's narrative, which exudes a "strange poignancy" in that his violence stems from a desire for company (p. 76). Finding it difficult to maintain an erection "with guys' AWAKE EYES observing [him] at intimate quarters" (Oates 1995, p. 29), the lobotomies are intended as a solution to this problem. As such, his violence is intricately linked to his desire and his sexuality. This is further reaffirmed by the fact that both his violence and sexuality are kept hidden, with the latter also suppressed by Quentin's father when the former is still a child. Upon finding body-building magazines decorated with his son's pornographic drawings, the father decides to burn them and not to tell his wife. Quentin's grandmother expresses the desire for him to marry and have children before she dies, and his sister Junie attempts to introduce him to her female friends. Thus, his homosexuality and his violent nature become intertwined through their shared secrecy.

What is key here is the lack of an aetiological explanation for Quentin's actions. To my reading, there are two events that could be considered sufficiently traumatic to situate *Zombie* alongside the other violent-eye texts as a narrative of aetiological rather than ontological causality, and Quentin as deviant as the result of Carla Freccero's notion of a 'comforting aetiology', but, as I will argue, they fall short.<sup>4</sup> The first is the death of Quentin's friend Barry, and the second is the homophobic reaction of Quentin's father in the face of evidence of his son's sexuality, both of which occur when Quentin is eleven and twelve, respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to imply that they are sufficient to warrant violent behaviour in general, but rather to be used in violent-eye narratives as aetiological explanations for violence.

Like Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955), who mourns the loss of his "preadolescent" childhood love Annabel, and also A. M. Homes' young college girl in *The End of Alice* (1996a), who reminisces about the death of her first love when they are both children, the death of Quentin's friend Barry, who drowns in a swimming pool unnoticed due to the exuberance and noise of the children around him, reverberates in the former's adult sexuality. Quentin never comments upon his affections for Barry, but instead implies an obsessive lust: he keeps pictures of him, fondles a "grimy sock" (p. 100), and pornographically decorates a picture of a "young guy who looked like Barry might've been in a few years" (p. 39) in the magazine *Body Building*. It is his mother who articulates the possibility of trauma: "How many months, years later I overheard Mom say to one of her women friends on the telephone *Quentin is still mourning that poor child's death, I don't think he will ever get over it*" (p. 100; italics original). Yet Quentin does not breathe life into this claim or comment upon it in any way. Instead, his chance encounter with the teenage Jamie, who he names Squirrel, brings back memories of Barry and positions Jamie as the ultimate potential zombie:

I made my way along the hedge to get a better look & it went through me like a knife seeing his face. Enough like Barry's face to be his TWIN! Except Barry was younger in my memory of course & dark-haired, & this boy was older, tall & lean & quick & loud & his hair a fairer brown like streaked from the sun. (p. 99)

This initial encounter leads to an obsession with Jamie that immediately eclipses any more references to Barry. Although at first Quentin is in awe of their similarities, once these have been acknowledged he shifts the focus to how they are different, and thus Jamie cannot be read as simply an incarnation of Barry in Quentin's mind. Barry's death is fused in Quentin's lust, intricately connecting his homosexual desire with violence. As Quentin develops into a necrophile as an adult, his obsession with Barry could have been explicitly linked to the latter's death, a burgeoning interest in corpses and mortality rather an interest in Barry himself. Like Cooper's Dennis in *Frisk*, the sight of death could expose Quentin's nascent fusion of violence and sexuality: "the idea of death is so sexy" (Cooper 1991, p. 59). Further, despite his mother's claim that Quentin is in mourning, there is the insinuation from Quentin that Barry is no different from the other young men he lusts after:

I track SQUIRREL in the corner of my eye where he's clearing tables of dirty dishes etc. Perspiration gleaming on his upper lip. *If you would look at me. If you would smile. Just once!* But like Barry he does not see *me*. Like Bruce, he does not see *me*. (p. 125; emphasis original)

This positions Barry in between Bruce, a peer who a young Quentin sexually and physically assaults when they are both children, and the teenage Jamie, who he ultimately kills. It also implies a rejection by Barry, or his failure to see Quentin for who he really is.

The second reference to trauma is his father's rejection of his homosexuality, and Quentin's subsequent fear of judgement. A year after Barry has died, when Quentin is twelve, his father discovers the *Body Building* magazines and a naked Ken-doll hidden in the garage behind a stack of old newspapers. His father's face is "splotched & furious [and] livid with outrage" (p. 38), and he is visibly shaking as he confronts Quentin over the magazines:

*This is sick Quentin* Dad's mouth worked, panted, *this is disgusting I never never want to see anything like this again in my life. We won't tell your mother* starting to say more but his voice gave out. Together we burned the evidence. Back behind the garage where Mom would not see. (p. 39; italics original)

The father's homophobic response to his son's sexuality is amplified by his physical distress and lack of breath, to the extent that he is unable to continue speaking. As such, the implication is that for the father, homosexuality is something taboo and thus unspeakable. However, there is also the suggestion that there might be more to the drawings than simply a pre-pubescent outlet of blossoming sexual desire:

the insides [of the magazines] with more such drawings on centrefold models of male muscle-bodies & the young guy who looked like Barry might've been in a few years & many pounds heavier & a shiny pink upright banana lifting from his groin & parts of certain photos scissored out. (p. 39)

Quentin has not simply used his "fluorescent-red felt-pen" (p. 39)<sup>5</sup> on the images but has also used scissors. He hasn't simply added anatomical parts but has removed them. Thus, whilst he doesn't go into detail beyond the above quotation, the implication is that his father may also be responding to the surgical approach Quentin has taken

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<sup>5</sup> The fluorescent red of the pen could itself be a reference to blood.

towards the images, the desire to alter and maim rather than simply adorn and admire. For his father, burning these images and never speaking of them again are the only methods he finds of dealing with them. Yet, whilst this may serve as a purification ritual for him, for Quentin the magazines are just the beginning, and the event is something that permeates his adult narrative.

As a legacy of his father's judgement, throughout the narrative Quentin is particularly fixated on his father's eyes, capitalising references to them as he does for other topics that are either of importance to him or which prompt his hysteria, or both:

It was mixed up in my mind that Dad had seen me there in the dark HIS EYES PENETRATING THE DARK but maybe that was not so. (p. 30)

DAD'S EYES darting as I had known they would fixing on the one thing. A pause & then asking, "That locker, that's new isn't it?" & a pause. &, "What's in that that requires a lock, son?" (p. 33)

It is "DAD'S EYES a few inches away through the crack" of the door that Quentin chooses to illustrate with a small sketch, omitting any other part of his father beyond the eyes and glasses (p. 32). Quentin frequently voices his distinct dislike for "EYE CONTACT", and it can be inferred from this that whilst he fears his father's judgement, he is also concerned that his father will discover his true nature. After all, it is his father who comes closest to discovering his sexuality and also his violence, again intertwined due to their shared oppression and secrecy. It is his father who looks but ultimately does not see, and who asks questions but who ultimately does not want answers: "For finally Dad gives up for *he does not want to know*" (p. 36; emphasis original). Like the paternal failure explored in relation to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Don de Grazia's *American Skin*, as discussed in the previous chapter, Quentin's father ultimately fails to intervene in his son's life in a positive way, whilst simultaneously remaining a large presence. "MAKING NO EYE CONTACT" (p. 11) is of vital importance to Quentin, because "EYE CONTACT HAS BEEN [HIS] DOWNFALL" (p. 4), and this can be read as a fear of eyes as the source of revelatory information, which will be explored in more detail in relation to *Exquisite Corpse*.

Although both Barry's death and the father's reaction to and judgement of Quentin's sexuality can be read as potentially traumatic for the latter, he evidences a

proclivity for violence that predates both of them. At age seven he tangles the head and neck of his classmate Bruce, mentioned above in relation to Jamie and Barry, in the chains of a swing, and when accused of this by Bruce's parents he claims that it was instead Bruce who hurt him in this manner, adding that it was because he, Quentin, would not "touch his thing" (p. 63). Whilst his lie serves to appease his own parents and diffuse the claim of Bruce's, readers are aware that it is indeed Quentin who is the perpetrator. The chapter begins with Quentin fumbling in his room for where he had hidden a pair of glasses, round-lensed and in clear plastic frames, and concludes with Bruce's father asking Quentin "*what did you do with our son's glasses*" (p. 64; emphasis original), coupled with a sketch of them made by Quentin. Beyond the proclivity for violence that Quentin evidences at such a young age – threatening to strangle a child – is the implication that it is already intricately fused with his developing sexuality:

In school across the aisle his silky hair & face I stared at & the light winking off the lenses like there was a SECRET CONNECTION between us. Except there wasn't. Or maybe there was & he denied it. Pushing me away if I stood too close in cafeteria line. Bruce & his friends & I'd slip in behind them & pretend like I was standing with them sometimes pushing up against them, a boy's back. BRUCE BRUUCE BRUUUCE! I would whisper jamming my fingers in my mouth. (p. 62)

In this way his attack on Bruce can be read as an angered response to his own rejection, and a nascent fusion of sexual desire and violent tendencies. This makes an aetiological interpretation of Quentin's sexual violence difficult to establish, and we are left with the suggestion that he is being positioned as violent as a result of his sexuality: violent because he is gay rather than violent and gay, further reaffirmed by examples of homosexual overkill that deviate chaotically and frenziedly away from his usual careful selection of victims.

The removal of an aetiological explanation is further cemented by Quentin's thoughts about blame. He briefly considers situating the reason for his violent acts as the fault of another, suggesting in relation to Jamie that perhaps his own grandmother is culpable, as he only became aware of Jamie's existence as a result of doing yard work at his grandmother's house. However, he ultimately rejects the acceptance of such an aetiological explanation: "Maybe I am wrong to say it is Grandma's *blame*, I think

probably it is no one's. It is superstitious & retro to think in terms of *blame, fault, guilt*" (p. 93; original emphasis). Oates seems to be suggesting that Quentin is not aggressive and dangerous because something has happened, but rather he is violent because he is a violent man, a problematic suggestion that implies individuals can be innately evil. *Zombie's* position as a narrative of causality is thus predicated on Quentin's homosexuality, as this is intricately fused with his violent proclivities, since it is sexual desire that motivates him and the need for what he views as companionship, a problematic conflation also found, as we shall see now, in Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*.

### **Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996)**

Intended by Brite to be a "love story" that imagines a meeting between two prolific serial killers, *Exquisite Corpse* is an ultra-violent text that shifts its narrative perspective between its central characters. Like Quentin, Jay Byrne is a Dahmeresque and highly prolific serial killer who, whilst raising eyebrows as somewhat peculiar and "slimy", is generally viewed as simply a "harmless Kodak queen" (1996, p. 172) who enjoys taking pornographic photographs of young men. His peripheral involvement in the gay scene of New Orleans causes him to cross paths with Tran, a young man whose family have rejected him and whose recent relationship with his HIV-positive partner Luke ended acrimoniously, leaving him lost, alone, and vulnerable. As the violent-eye protagonist Andrew Compton notes, Tran is also an "ideal victim" (p. 184), reminiscent of Quentin's "safe specimens" (1995, p. 18) and "natural" zombies.<sup>6</sup> But it is Andrew who is of central relevance to this thesis: despite not being the only violent character in the narrative, he is the only one who narrates his own portions of the text, interspersed throughout the novel, but also framing it through his command of both the first and last chapter.

Dubbed the "eternal host", a title he refers to as a name he has "earned" (p. 69) through his many murders, Andrew is loosely modelled on British serial killer Dennis Nilsen. Despite being a Londoner, whose narrative begins in a "dank cell in Her

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of the ideal victim has its roots, in part, in the nineteenth-century English essayist Thomas de Quincey's (1827) musings on the "kind of person who is adapted to the purpose of the murderer" (p. 31).

Majesty's Prison Painswick" (p. 3), Andrew is a viable example of an American violent-eye protagonist, not simply because he is a character in an American novel but also because throughout the text and, importantly, by the end of the novel, he indicates a strong identification with the nation he has adopted as his new home, being "ravenous for news of the new world" (p. 141). The culmination of the novel is described as a beginning, a new stage of his journey. Having literally consumed the deceased Jay's flesh (and thus also "all Jay's boys" (p. 246), as Jay habitually engaged in cannibalism), Andrew leaves New Orleans as a "larva" safely cocooned in "exactly the sort of shell" he craves, a "minuscule and orderly" sleeper compartment of a train heading deeper into the vast American landscape (p. 246). Rejecting the city, his destination is the American desert, a land he imagines to be "as arid and relentless as [his] own heart" (p. 246), and in this manner he directly links himself with the land. In fact, his earlier departure from England is explicitly referred to as a "rebirth" (p. 72), an idea facilitated through his brief appropriation of the identity of an American man named Sam, a name that can of course be read as the personification of the United States through Uncle Sam. After murdering Sam in London, Andrew rubs his "finger across the nubbly raised letters of Sam's name [on a Visa card], trying to absorb his identity, his memories" (p. 68), and in doing so absorb an American identity and cultural history. He then purchases a plane ticket with Sam's credit cards and flies to the United States in a "seat Sam would never have to pay for" (p. 71), both assuming the other's place and keeping him constantly in mind, ultimately arriving in New Orleans having appropriated Americanness.

Unlike the other violent-eye protagonists described in this thesis, Andrew is more fantastical and sensational than realistic, and is thus what Leistedt and Linkowski (2014), as discussed in the Introduction, term an "elite psychopath", with "exaggerated levels of intelligence, sophisticated manners, and cunning" (2014, p. 171). He has an "enormous strength of will" (1996, p. 17), to the extent that he is capable of successfully imitating death in order to execute his initial escape from prison, willing himself into a "hovering state between consciousness and void" (p. 7), during which his heart stopped beating. However, like the more mundane and realistic Quentin, Andrew experiences a "pervasive loneliness" (p. 6), and what he seeks is a companionship with corpses through the death of others, a remedy to isolation that is on his own terms: "I liked my

boys as they were, big dead dolls” (p. 2). In this sense he is also like Jay, who consumes his victims in order to keep them with him forever: “All Jay’s boys became part of him. They would be with him forever, flesh of his flesh, loving him from the inside” (p. 115). By ultimately consuming Jay, Andrew is able to remove his sense of isolation: “I wanted only to keep Jay’s meat in me as long as I could, to process and assimilate [*sic*] as much of him as possible. [...] he would be with me always” (p. 246). But when cannibalism is conflated with homosexuality and used as a symbol of the closest sense of intimacy Andrew can achieve, there is the implication that his sexuality is in itself deviant. It is not just his violence that is perverted, but also his sexual orientation due to its intricate connection with cannibalism, haematophagy, and necrophilia. As such, the suggestion is that Andrew is not positioned as violent and gay but rather violent because he is gay, since it is his sexual desire that causes him to torture and kill other men.

This conflation between homosexuality and murder is strongly reaffirmed by the pervasive sense of Andrew’s innately violent disposition. Not only does *Exquisite Corpse* avoid providing an aetiological explanation for his actions, but his narration explicitly rejects the application of one:

It is claimed that habitual murderers must harbour some veiled trauma in their past: some pathetic concatenation of abuse, rape, soul-corrosion. As far as I can remember, this did not hold true for me. No one interfered with me, no one beat me, and the only corpse I saw during childhood was the thoroughly uninteresting one of my grand-auntie. I emerged from the womb with no morals, and no one has been able to instill any in me since. (p. 162)

In addition to his forceful assertion that he has not suffered as a result of any abuse, neglect, or trauma, Andrew claims that he is born without a sense of morality and that this is something that could not be rectified. Earlier in the novel he reflects that:

I was never one to moralize, and how could I argue ethics now? There is no excuse for wanton, random murder. But I came to understand that I didn’t need an excuse. I needed only a reason, and the terrible joy of the act was reason enough. (pp. 6-7)

This “terrible joy” is of course his sexual attraction to dead men. Thus, Andrew lacks any sense of Freccero’s (1997) comforting aetiology that explains the twenty-three killings he has already committed at the start of the novel and others he joyously

commits throughout. As a first-person and thus inherently unreliable narrator, it is of course possible to go beyond what he says in the search of an aetiology – after all, an analysis of Dexter’s bold and tireless self-profession of monstrosity does not mean that he is, as he suggests, inhuman, as discussed in Chapter One. However, a reader keen to locate Andrew’s deviance is met with little to substantiate an aetiological origin for his cruelty, especially when positioned alongside the implication that his deviancy is inextricably fused with his sexuality. It therefore seems far more likely that he is in fact an example of a character with an innately violent disposition, having been born without morality. He is positioned as ontologically ‘evil’: “I was different, and that was all. I had always known I was different” (p. 6).

It is this sense of difference that makes his chance encounter with Jay all the more powerful, as it is the first time he meets someone like him, someone he considers to be a kindred spirit and ultimately the love of his life (p. 150). Having only just arrived in the United States and being disappointed by what he had hoped to be the “wicked” French Quarter of New Orleans, finding it instead to be an ersatz and commercialised version of sex and excitement, Andrew heads to the bars of Bourbon Street in search of both modest inebriation and an “ideal victim” (p. 148). Nursing a vodka tonic and scanning the potential “companions”, he sits and waits for “some perfect boy ripe for the slaughter” (p. 150) to come forward: “I never approached anyone. It had always been the way with my companions. They saw something in me that they needed, and they came to me” (p. 149). He is soon joined by Jay, who readers know is also looking for a potential victim. Andrew notices two details initially about his new companion. First, he is beautiful, and second, he has cold eyes: “his eyes were colder than any drink could ever be: cold from the inside out, a weird mint-green colour like glacial ice. The smile did not touch them” (p. 151). But beyond the colour of Jay’s eyes is the implication, as discussed in relation to Quentin earlier in this chapter, that they expose his true nature. Although mesmerised by them, Andrew reflects later that Jay’s eyes – or at least his gaze – were revelatory: “If I hadn’t been intoxicated, I think I would have known what he was then” (p. 151). Looking into them later that evening, all Andrew is sure of is his own “faint reflection” (p. 154), as they share a “predatory kinship” (p. 243). But beyond the meeting of the eyes is the implication that Andrew is capable of feeling or

sensing Jay's true and hidden nature. Despite not knowing that Jay is also a prolific and highly violent sexual predator and serial killer, "on some instinctual, almost biological level" Andrew instantly recognises him (p. 154) as a kindred spirit, and it is here that the conflation between violence and homosexuality comes strongly into play.

Whilst discourse on the topic of homosexual signifiers is usually the realm of those preoccupied with a homophobic desperation to identify what they view to be the secret (and thus insidious) threat that lurks nearby, this nevertheless does not mean that a belief in being able to identify a gay man by a gesture, sign, or even a general mannerism or disposition (the so-called 'gaydar') is precluded. The notion of gaydar is culturally pervasive and reaffirmed in many contemporary instances of US popular culture. As such, it is possible to read the initial encounter between Andrew and Jay, narrated by the former, as loaded. Not only is there the implication that they are able to identify each other as violent – the "predatory kinship" – but the manner in which they do so is heavily laden and, to borrow Griffin's (2000) term, 'gay-tinged'. The "instinctual" and "biological" (1996, p. 154) feeling that Andrew has upon observing Jay is highly reminiscent of 'gaydar', which Scott G. Shelp (2003) defines as a widely-held belief amongst American gay men that "they have a unique ability to pick each other out in a crowd" (p. 1), although as he acknowledges, it is not just gay men that claim to have this 'skill'. Cheryl L. Nicholas (2004), who views gaydar as "a folk concept used by the cultural milieu around and within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community" (p. 61), discusses the role of the eye-gaze as a form of identity recognition amongst gay individuals, and thus the recognition Andrew experiences when looking into Jay's eyes can further be read as a form of gaydar.

But in his inebriated state, Andrew fails to fully recognise Jay as a kindred spirit at the time, despite the eye-gaze and biological instinct. What jolts him out of what is simply a drunken encounter with a beautiful man, who he reluctantly acknowledges is not good victim material and "no acquiescent brat to the slaughter" (p. 155), is the handshake they share, a tactile experience that allows them to identify each other:

'I'm Jay.' He reached across the table to shake my hand. His grip was cool, dry, and languid. When I shook hands with a potential companion, I always slid my palm over his palm and grasped his wrist, briefly encircling it with my fingers,

gauging his reaction to such an intimate, dominant touch. But now I was shocked to feel Jay doing the same to me. We both snatched our hands away and stared at one another. (p. 152)

Jay's initial "languid" grip could be interpreted as limp, a common and pejorative description used to portray effeminacy, but what is more revelatory here is the accidental exposure of the hidden identity. Andrew uses this particular handshake on potential victims – indeed, he later uses it on Tran and notices a "startled look" pass across the young man's face (p. 182) – and so when it is performed simultaneously by Jay he is able to identify the latter as 'someone like him'. Through a secret handshake, the two accidentally reveal themselves, but only to the other. With the encounter read not only as the meeting of two serial killers but also as a metaphor for gay identity recognition, the handshake becomes symbolic of a palpable and intimate exposure. Andrew and Jay share a "predatory kinship", a desire to hunt and kill other men, but this also evokes gay cruising, reaffirmed by the fact that this encounter takes place in a gay bar and under the pretence of buying a potential sexual partner a drink.

What is problematic about all of this is that it serves to conflate violence with sexuality. The implicit element of gaydar is used not to reveal homosexuality – Andrew and Jay are both drinking alone in a gay bar and actively looking at and for men, and so do not need to use such intuition to identify each other as gay – but rather to reveal violence in a covertly homosexual way, causing the two to be intricately linked. Jay and Andrew are not violent and gay, they are violent because they are gay, reaffirmed by the fusion between the two elements and the lack of an aetiological explanation for violence. As such, *Exquisite Corpse*, like *Zombie*, ultimately remains a narrative of causality, with homosexuality being positioned as the cause. This is not to suggest that the novels are implying that gay men are by nature violent, but rather that they contribute to the persistently troubling debate about whether homosexuality can in some circumstances stand as an explanation for violence (in place of a more overt aetiological origin such as trauma) within the resolutely heteronormative American society.

## Revelatory Eyes and Masks of Sanity

Both *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie* place great emphasis on the revelatory capacity of eye contact. Quentin is specifically bothered by it, and when read in relation to *Exquisite Corpse*, it can be viewed as a form of hiding oneself and of not being seen. Eye contact, for Andrew and Jay, serves as exposure to their inner violence and homosexuality, and so we can infer that Quentin is striving to conceal himself. Further, there is the implication of judgement in the eyes of others, particularly his father:

DAD'S EYES behind his shiny glasses. Looking at me like when I was two years old & squatting on the bathroom floor shitting & when I was five years old playing with my baby dick & when I was seven years old & my T-shirt splotted with another kid's nosebleed & when I was eleven home from the pool where my friend Barry drowned & most fierce DAD'S EYES when I was twelve years old that time Dad charged upstairs with the *Body Builder* magazines shaking in his hand. "Son? Son?" (1995, pp. 33-34; emphasis original)

Another man's alert eyes prevent Quentin from getting an erection, as discussed earlier, and this dislike for cognition and sentience in a companion is also discussed by Dennis in Cooper's *Frisk*:

His eyes have grown dull and sleepy, or maybe hyper, or scared, but *uncomprehending for sure*, like I need eyes to look before I feel comfortable around them. (1991, p. 53; my emphasis)

Yet Quentin actively wants to look into the eyes of his 'zombies', to the extent that he tapes them open after botched trans-orbital lobotomies. He is content in the knowledge that the eyes of a zombie can't see him and that they signal no judgement within, and thus this eye contact is also a method of connection. Prior to their deaths, his braindead victims are the only people with whom he is able to expose his true nature and desires, and thus there is no need to hide himself and his eyes. When comfortable, Quentin wants to be seen: "*If [Jamie] would look at me. [...] But like Barry he does not see me. Like Bruce, he does not see me*" (1995, p. 125; emphasis original). As starkly disconnected from society, Quentin is only able to relax in the company of objects, to let slip his performance in front of those who are no longer able to judge him. This is also clearly indicated in his decision to retain Bruce's glasses, hiding them in his room for later pleasure as they are both a tactile reminder of him and a symbolic yet safe

gateway to his eyes and thus a form of connection: “the light winking off the lenses like there was a SECRET CONNECTION between us” (1995, p. 62).

The belief in the revelatory characteristic of eyes in relation to homosexuality is not novel or limited to studies on gaydar or eye-gaze. In the 1960s in Canada, efforts were made, with the help of researchers from the United States, to devise a machine that would detect homosexuality or the potential for homosexuality in otherwise seemingly heterosexual individuals. This device became known as the ‘fruit machine’, and the hypothesis was that, when exposed to stimuli from various images, the individual’s pupil size would reveal sexual orientation: “a homosexual would be expected to show a larger pupil response to pictures of their own sex” (cited in Kinsman and Gentile 2010, p. 180). Federal funding for the project was eventually pulled in 1967, after questions arose surrounding the legitimacy of the scientific claims. However, the stigmatising image of “fruits” lingered and proved hard to shake off, along with the idea that sexual identity could be detectable through the close observation of eyes.

Eyes are also used in discussions of monstrosity, deviancy, evil, and violence, and their capacity to reveal these characteristics is frequently found in American fiction, and is hinted at in *American Psycho*. While Chapter One of this thesis explored the presentation of Patrick’s mother as a potential indication of unspoken trauma, a second implication is a reference to Patrick’s father, specifically through an image of him as a younger man framed on the mother’s bedside table. In his characteristic encyclopaedic fashion, Patrick offers a detailed description of his father’s clothes, but concludes with an indication again of something being not quite right with his parent, and the only reference to his father’s physical appearance: “He’s standing next to one of the topiary animals a long time ago at his father’s estate in Connecticut and there’s something the matter with his eyes” (1991, p. 366). The validity of Patrick’s observation is open to interpretation, but read alongside *Zombie* and *Exquisite Corpse*, it further adds to the important and frequent metaphor of eyes as windows to the self and their ability to reveal malice. In *Exquisite Corpse*, Andrew refers to his own eyes as being “faintly mad” (1996, p. 153), although perhaps due to inebriation, and they are later described as being “clear hypnotic blue” (p. 215). Eyes can represent a synecdochic distillation of

an immoral or amoral character, with the unique capacity to reveal the true, hidden nature. As Andrew comments:

murderers are blessed with malleable faces. Yet there is always that person in a million who will know me not for the distinction of my features, but the predatory kinship in my eyes. I had never doubted that Jay had seen it the night we met. (p. 243)

Thus, eyes can penetrate through a mask, which Hervey Cleckley in the 1940s termed the mask of sanity, to reveal the killer underneath.

The concept of the “exquisitely deceptive mask” (Cleckley 1941, p. 438) of the violent individual necessitates a consideration of performance, which is intricately related with the idea of exposure. In *Frisk*, Dennis is concerned that it is his face that will reveal his violent thoughts, and thus that his mask would slip: “I used to worry that ideas like those would show up on my face” (1991, p. 34). Many of the violent-eye narrators in this thesis engage with pretence in order to conceal their proclivities and pass unnoticed by the rest of society, with Dexter cultivating a specifically mundane public personality at the suggestion of his stepfather Harry:

There was nothing special about it [Dexter’s apartment] – I’d made sure of that. It was part of building my Harry Profile. Blend in. Act normal, even boring. Don’t do anything or own anything that might cause comment. So had I done. (2004, p. 120)

As mentioned earlier, Thompson’s Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me* and Nick Corey in *Pop. 1280* also act like amiable fools to conceal their violent tendencies. However, the idea of hiding the true self resonates profoundly within a dialogue about homosexuality, since concealing sexuality behind heteronormative performances has often been deemed necessary due to stigmatisation and persecution. Therefore, homosexuality and violence again become conflated, as both are positioned as something that is suppressed or hidden, lurking behind the surface, raising the question of the hidden other. Quentin not only conceals his violence and homosexuality, avoiding eye contact in fear of exposing himself, but he also constructs alternative identities, such as Todd Cuttler, and wearing actual disguises to strengthen the mask he already wears: that of a slightly dim-witted yet helpful caretaker. Andrew, as mentioned earlier, briefly moves undetected after his escape from prison by stealing the identity of Sam, and also goes

by the name Arthur when interacting with people other than Jay. Commenting on the latter, Andrew observes a mask-like quality, saying “He had a good deadpan gaze, but not good enough to fool me” (1996, p. 182). Yet in contrast with Dexter’s performance, Andrew’s reference to “malleable faces” and Quentin’s realisation that he can inhabit a “face not known” are examples of the idea of visibly constructing a different identity, of hiding or obscuring one’s face. Andrew claims that “Murderers are blessed with adaptive faces. We often appear bland and dull; no one ever passed the Ripper in the street and thought, *That chap looks as if he ate a girl’s kidney last night*” (1996, p. 24; italics original). This is reinforced in Mark Seltzer’s (1998) analysis of serial killers, in which he describes the common refrain, which he goes on to support, that such individuals are “dead average”, noting “how easily they blend in” (p. 10). Whilst this position may or may not be justified, it adds to the frequent assertion that serial killers are “average-looking” (p. 10). But these examples focus more on appearance rather than performance. A mask is not simply a visual aspect of a violent individual, but rather a behaviour or an act, one usually characterised by hypernormality or, as Dexter puts it, “pretending to be human” (2004, p. 20). This returns us to understanding and interpreting the subtleties of Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil, as outlined in my Introduction, which goes beyond the mere appearance of mundanity. In *Exquisite Corpse*, this is achieved through a discussion of Jay by another character, Soren, who is unaware that Jay is violent but finds him “slimy”, yet adding “There’s nothing really wrong with him on the outside” (1996, p. 172). This relates to Cleckley’s assertion that “the surface of the psychopath [...] shows up as equal to or better than normal and gives no hint at all of a disorder within” (1941, p. 437). Instead of an exterior flaw, something we can see on the surface, the violent-eye protagonist, like Cleckley’s psychopath, carries his deviancy internally. The focus is not so much on disguise, as Seltzer points out, but simulation (1998, p. 163). This refutes the link between evil and outer monstrosity and the grotesque, as discussed in my Introduction in relation to the theoretical work of Colin McGinn (1997) and Judith Halberstam (1995). Quentin and Andrew both suppress and mask their violent proclivities, intricately linked with their homosexuality and need for companionship. Thus, the violent-eye protagonist is not

visibly other but is instead characterised by “a substance that lacks ingredients without which normal function in major life issues is impossible” (Cleckley 1941, p. 441).

Combined with the sense of ontological violence that is presented in the two narratives analysed in this chapter is the concept of an existential lack, the idea that Quentin and Andrew are missing a vital element of being. As with other such characters, their violence is linked with an attempt to remedy this, which returns us to Isabel Santaulària’s (2007) claim, as briefly mentioned in the Introduction, that when violence is not the result of societal decay or trauma, it can instead be the result of the individual’s own need, caused by the absence of the necessary “ingredients” required to function normally (Cleckley 1941, p. 441). While not specifically related to homosexuality, lack nevertheless frequently appears in American literature as an alternative suggestion to being gay, as will be illustrated here. The notion of a void, a lack, or deficiency in violent individuals has been discussed elsewhere. For example, as mentioned in the Introduction, Brian Jarvis (2007) discusses “the profound sense of lack” (p. 334) of Thomas Harris’ Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs*, who is described in the novel in the following manner:

Jame is not really gay, you know, it’s just something he picked up in jail. He’s not anything really, just a sort of total lack that he wants to fill, and so angry. You always felt the room was a little emptier when he came in. I mean, he *killed* his grandparents when he was twelve, you’d think a person that volatile would have some presence, wouldn’t you? (Harris 1988, p. 165; emphasis original)

The antagonist of the novel is imbued with a sense of absence, existentially lacking something indefinable and furious as a result. Similar observations can be found in descriptions of violent-eye characters. For example, in British writer John Fowles’ *The Collector*, Miranda Grey describes her captor Frederick as “not human; he’s an empty space disguised as a human” (1963, p. 223). Similarly, in Patricia Highsmith’s non-violent-eye novel *The Talented Mr Ripley*, when voicing her concerns about Tom in a letter intended for Dickie Greenleaf, Marge Sherwood describes the former, who unbeknownst to her has killed the latter, in the following manner: “All right, he may not be queer. He’s just a nothing, which is worse” (1955, p. 106). All three examples refer to men whose sexuality comes into question: Tom and Jame, in particular, are suspected initially of being gay only to be subsequently labelled as ‘nothings’. Thus this sense of a

lack is caught up with homosexuality, positioned as an alternative to it or fused with it. Like homosexuality, lack as a sexual concept falls outside of socially defined heteronormativities but nevertheless cannot be easily labelled, as the implication here is that these individuals are not merely asexual. Lack is not simply related to sexuality, but refers to something more profoundly existential, a void that exists within killers which mainstream society relates to homosexuality.

As the previous examples indicate, the labelling of a violent individual as a 'nothing' is often done so by a third party, and is not therefore a self-reflection made by Jame, Frederick, and Tom. However, lack also exists in American violent-eye narratives, expressed as a form of introspection that heightens the conspiratorial tone that such first-person narration presents, and which enables the protagonist to occupy an analytical stance in relation to their own character. In Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280*, protagonist Nick Corey states, "It was a kind of hard fact to face – that I was just a nothing doing nothing" (1964, p. 8). Jeff Lindsay's *Dexter* devotes a number of lines of text in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* to his own sense of lacking something that other individuals possess:

Many times in my life I have felt like I was missing something, some essential piece of the puzzle that everybody else carried around with them without thinking about it. I don't usually mind, since most of those times it turns out to be an astonishingly stupid piece of humania like understanding the infield fly rule or not going all the way on the first date. But at other times I feel like I am missing out on a great reservoir of warm wisdom, the lore of some sense I don't possess that humans feel so deeply they don't need to talk about it and can't even put it into words. (2004, p. 126)

In his typically heavy-handed way, *Dexter* situates himself as outside humanity, referring to things he does not understand as "humania" yet also as "warm wisdom". What is key here is that he observes that he is lacking something, something that is "essential", leaving him with a deficit and helping to justify his sense of difference from the rest of society.

Taking Patrick Bateman in his simplest form, that of a violent-eye character – and avoiding the discussion surrounding whether, as Elizabeth Young (1992) suggests, he is a "cipher, sign, [or] a textual impossibility" (p. 119) – he too reflects on his absence

and a sense of a lack or void: “there is no real me [...] *I am simply not there*” (Ellis 1991, pp. 376-377; emphasis original). As Peter Ferry (2015) states, “Patrick’s questioning of his selfhood throughout the novel should not be viewed as a *negation* of his subjectivity” (p. 109; emphasis original). In *Zombie*, Quentin alludes to himself as being “a blank space” (Oates 1995, p. 73), and in *Exquisite Corpse* Andrew refers to emptiness: “An habitual killer needs a vivid personality, even if all that lies beneath the flash and scintillation is a howling emptiness” (Brite 1996, p. 149). Thus both Quentin and Andrew, along with Jay, kill other men in an attempt to fill the emptiness through companionship, with the latter two even engaging in cannibalism specifically in order to ensure that their victims become part of them: “It took me a long time to feel they were staying. I’d eat their meat and it would become my meat and I’d be alone again. After a while, though, I started to feel them” (Brite 1996, p. 177).<sup>7</sup>

There are historical roots for this, as Cleckley explored ‘lack’ in the 1940s in his highly derogatory analysis of homosexuality and its relation to psychopathy. In a truly pejorative manner, he views homosexual men as “Impelled by powerful urges but tragically misguided by their deviation, directed only toward biologic absurdity” (1941, p. 323). Not only does he conflate homosexuality with deviance, carefully situated in a discourse on psychopathy, but he also presents an image of gay men as being out of control, “impelled” by and “driven toward chaotic promiscuity” (p. 323), reminiscent of “homosexual overkill” discussed at the start of this chapter and in relation to Quentin and Cooper’s Dennis: “I’m – out of control” (1991, p. 78). Cleckley further blurs the boundaries between homosexuality and psychopathy by having both the gay man and the psychopath perform normality and thus wear a “mask of sanity”:

The distaste that deviation of this sort evokes from society and the almost inevitable efforts at secrecy and pretense which its victims adopt must act as powerful and incessant pathologic forces on the whole personality. Having to suppress, evade, and implicitly deceive so much about something so vital every day of their lives, it is remarkable that homosexuals can adjust successfully or with dignity in any place of living. (p. 323)

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<sup>7</sup> Quentin also mentions eating hearts.

He thus suggests that gay men who pretend for the sake of the heteronormative society develop a pathologically-affected personality, despite already demonstrating his belief that they are deviant and biologically absurd. Further, this is also linked with a lack in the form of a “deep and final frustration” that he views as inescapable, since he believes that the “simplest facts of anatomy demonstrate that an actual genital union, a full and literal sexual relation, is for these people obviously impossible” (p. 323). Thus, for Cleckley homosexuality is itself a deviancy, and when gay men are forced to suppress themselves along with their ‘lack’ in the form of an inability to achieve actual intimacy, they become further pathologised.

Whilst Cleckley’s work is somewhat dated in relation to a chapter on literature of the 1990s, it is important to note that his ideas remained relevant, especially since – as mentioned earlier in this chapter – homosexuality was listed in the *DSM* until 1973. In the 1980s, conflation between same-sex attraction and paedophilia further compounded Cleckley’s presentation of same-sex attraction as inherently dangerous, predatory, and out of control. Herek attributes this stereotype of the gay child molester in large part to a pamphlet published in 1985 by the Institute for the Scientific Investigation of Sexuality entitled “Child Molestation and Homosexuality”, which featured on the front cover the caption “Homosexuality is a crime against humanity” (Herek 1991, p. 68). Using research from the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Colasanto 1989), Herek observes that by 1989 this belief had decreased, although he indicates that in response to a Gallup poll, it was clear that the majority of Americans upon the threshold of the 1990s still accepted the stereotype of homosexuality being synonymous with paedophilia. Thus, homosexuality remained pathologised long after Cleckley’s publication, and his contributions to the discourse remain clear. However, of particular relevance here is his concept of the mask as a method of passing unnoticed, which remains valuable to understandings of social performance. More recently, masks were expanded upon in Slavoj Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing* (2012), in which the author presents the following hypothesis:

What if, deep inside, I am a sadistic pervert who dreams of beating up other men and raping women; in my real-life interaction with other people, I am not allowed to enact this true self, so I adopt a more humble and polite persona – in

this case, is not my true self much closer to what I adopt as a fictional screen persona, while the self of my real-life interactions is a mask concealing the violence of my true self? (p. 352)

Whilst masks can thus be used to conceal the violent “true self”, Žižek’s understanding is far more complex than that of Cleckley, acknowledging that “wearing a mask can [...] be a strange thing” (p. 516), and incorporating into his argument an understanding that “sometimes, more often than we tend to believe, there is more truth in the mask than in what we assume to be our ‘real self’” (Žižek 2012, p. 516). However, what is of relevance at this stage is that whilst masks in their literal form come in many shapes and sizes, they rarely cover the eyes, and thus their ability to conceal remains limited, as eyes can penetrate through the mask, exposing the truth behind.

The fusion of homosexuality and psychopathy remains sadly echoed in cultural understandings of violent gay men, enabling them to be presented as doubly deviant and to situate their violent proclivities as the result of their homosexuality. It is important to stress that neither *Zombie* nor *Exquisite Corpse* suggest that homosexuality itself is deviant, yet the issue remains that the violence of Quentin and Andrew is not situated in a comforting aetiology, but rather is inextricably linked with their sexuality: “murderous rage is queered, and queerness becomes the privileged signifier for psychotic violence” (Sullivan 2000, n.p.). Homophobic theories remained influential up to (and beyond) the 1990s in informing and warping cultural representations of homosexuality as pathologic and lending itself easily to explorations and explanations of violence.

### **The Mother Returns**

Taken together, *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie* indicate that homosexuality and violence are conflated in violent-eye narratives in a way that mirrors the labelling of homosexual individuals as deviant. This returns us to the figure of the mother, which as demonstrated in the previous chapter in relation to *Fight Club*, can have an overwhelmingly negative impact on the son’s life even when absent from the novel. So the absence of Andrew’s mother and the seemingly marginalised unimportance of

Quentin's mother, especially in relation to the far more dominant figure of the father in the latter text, cannot necessarily be interpreted as an irrelevance.

Culturally, American mothers and their gay sons remain closely connected, as Roel van den Oever (2012) has illustrated. In *Frisk* it is Dennis' mother who sends him cash by American Express each month, "out of guilt for [his] fucked-up upbringing" (1991, p. 90), and even if this is fictitious, like other events in his narrative, he is nevertheless situating his mother as the individual responsible for compensating for past parental inadequacies. Little can be said about Andrew's mother because, like the mother of Palahniuk's Joe in *Fight Club*, she quite simply isn't there. However, as argued earlier through the use of Träger's compelling claim that the mother of the violent individual can never be completely removed, we can question whether she can be found in the homosexual son. In contrast, *Zombie* does deal with the mother figure, and we can infer from Quentin's narrativisation of his relationship with his mother that the affection is one-sided, being exclusively her maternal love for her son and not his filial love for his mother. Although he does not meet his father's eyes in order to avoid judgement or reveal his true self, he expresses discomfort at touching his mother, indicating a more profoundly personal aversion:

Mom hugs me & stands on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. Her bones are like dried sticks I could break in my hands so I stand very straight & still not breathing to inhale her smell. What that smell is I do not know & do not name. (1995, p. 74)

Reflecting back on his childhood, this dislike for being touched by her is also evident, as the following memory of being eleven and consoled by his mother (in the midst of the accusation of having harmed Bruce) exemplifies:

Mom hugged me, & I was stiff not wanting to press into her breasts or belly or the soft place between her legs. (1995, p. 63)

In the first quotation he is principally bothered by her smell, an unusual problem given that his own apartment reeks of death and decay from the decomposing corpses and body parts that he keeps locked away. The smell is so bad that his father notices it from the doorway, although Quentin excuses it and quells his father's questions by suggesting it is dead rodents. So the implication is that his mother's scent is not necessarily an unpleasant odour, but rather something womanly. After all, it is the feminine parts of

her anatomy that repulse him, as even at the age of eleven he tries to avoid being pressed up against the parts of her body specifically linked with reproduction and nurturing: her breasts, belly, and vagina. He actively avoids referencing her fertility, choosing instead to describe her as having been “a plump woman once with soft big breasts like balloons filled with warm liquid” (p. 74). His deliberate use of “liquid” to describe her breastmilk belies a conscious rejection of the maternal figure. Interestingly, he relates to the reader his therapist’s discussion of “the GOOD BREAST & the BAD BREAST” adding that there “is the GOOD MOTHER & the BAD MOTHER” (p. 74), reminiscent of Donald Winnicott’s concept of the “good enough mother” and the polarities of mothers discussed in Chapter One. Whilst he does not comment on which of these his mother has been, the rejection of nurturing and life-sustaining ‘milk’ in favour of the vague and ill-defined ‘warm liquid’ implies the bad breast and thus the bad mother, even when there is no further evidence to support such a labelling.

Whilst both of his parents remain a presence in his life, with his father checking up on him and attempting to help him progress professionally, and his mother making dentist appointments and inviting him round for Sunday dinner, the concept of the bad father is only subtly raised and not theoretically explored. Instead it is the mother who is situated in a discussion of good and bad, and therefore it is questioned whether she was good enough. She is described as simultaneously loving and unloving, exemplified in the following quotation: “*You know we love you Quentin* Mom says like a tape when a button is punched” (pp. 74-75; emphasis original). She loves him yet fails to convey this in a sincere way, sounding instead like a recording, an ersatz version of motherhood. This juxtaposition is further emphasised by the separation of the sentence into italics and non-italics, with the former indicating quoted speech but perhaps also something to be doubted.

So the mother of the violent individual is again trapped between the polarities exemplified in the respective research of Leo Kanner and David Levy, discussed in Chapter One. There is no suggestion that Quentin’s mother played a role in his violent creation, yet she is still positioned as problematic. Unlike Chappy’s mother she hasn’t sexually abused her son, and she has not been murdered in front of him as happened

to Dexter's mother. Instead, however, there is the implication that she is tangled up in his homosexuality, expressed in his revulsion of her body and thus the female form. There remains in American popular culture the lingering obsession, to borrow from K. E. Sullivan (2000), "not only about proper masculinity and the threat of homosexuality but also about the relation of failed mothering and homosexuality to crime" (n.p.). In gay violent-eye narratives such as *Zombie* and *Exquisite Corpse*, the latter two remain problematically fused with the figure of the mother.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavoured to explore the complicated relationship between violence and homosexuality in violent-eye literature, taking Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* and Oates' *Zombie* as its primary material. In line with the findings of Chapter One, here it has been argued that mothers remain relevant to discussions of violent men, yet in this case more obliquely, in a manner similar to that presented in Chapter Two. The argument presented here is that even when absent, mothers remain culturally pertinent in depictions of homosexuality, and that when this is coupled with violence they are potentially doubly to blame.

But mothers aside, the homosexual violent-eye narrators discussed herein lack a clear or "comforting" aetiology to explain their criminality. Instead, the sexuality and violence of Quentin and Andrew are intricately linked, explored through the ability of eyes to reveal both homosexuality and psychopathy, and to penetrate through carefully constructed masks and performances of normality. As such, the texts remain narratives of causality, yet in this case ontologically so: they are presented as being violent because they are gay. The question thus arises as to whether or not the authors are confirming or exposing the prejudices that have surrounded gay men in American society, and which have led to widespread and continued persecution. To return to the quotation by Robin Wood presented in the introduction to this chapter, are these novels presenting homosexuality as something that is perverted, or are they instead commenting on and exposing "society's perversion of homosexuality" (p. 211)? What complicates a response to this is that both texts are loosely based on Jeffrey Dahmer,

and thus the combination of violence and homosexuality is in part a fictional reflection of a real individual's life and crimes. In addition, the inclusion of other non-violent gay characters in *Exquisite Corpse*, particularly Tran and Luke, goes some way to mitigating the link between violence and homosexuality, yet this is again complicated, in this case by their entanglement in the spectacle and theatre of death: whilst Jay and Andrew are the actively violent actors, Tran is the passive ideal victim, and Luke is the ineffective witness, with all necessarily present at the ultimate act of murder. Thus all become caught up in the same dialogue of violence and sexuality.

So, in order to address Wood's distinction between the perpetuation of the perversion of homosexuality or the challenge to this putative perversion, the first-person narration of the two novels discussed in this chapter comes strongly into play. *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie* do not simply lack an aetiological explanation for violence, but they actively reject it, achieved through the narration of Andrew and Quentin. The first-person voice enables the protagonists to take an analytical stance towards their own character, and to question their own development, and in doing so they themselves ultimately reject an aetiological explanation for violence as "retro" in Quentin's case (1995, p. 93), and imply that they are innately predisposed towards violence, being born without morals as Andrew claims (1996, p. 162). What is key here is that throughout the novels, Oates and Brite are not commenting on society's stigmatisation of gay men, but rather are focalising narratives of homosexually-inspired violence through the lens of gay characters who stigmatise themselves. It is not other characters or simply the narrative context that implies Quentin and Andrew are violent because they are gay, but rather the protagonists themselves. Regardless of reliability, it is gay voices that are used to label violence as something linked with homosexuality. Brite's novel even goes to great lengths to remove the possibility of an aetiological explanation, rejecting this as simply a "pathetic concatenation" of various abuses and traumas.

This could be a literary response to what Richard Bernstein observes as a tendency to present excuses in order to mitigate and diminish "claims about responsibility" (2002, p. 29), as mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter One, since if Quentin and Andrew don't have an excuse, then it follows that they are wholly to blame.

However, the problem here remains that the violent proclivities are intertwined with their sexuality, and so whilst Oates and Brite may be intending to present their protagonists as culpable, what they are also succeeding in doing, intentionally or not, is situating violence as a result of uncontrolled homosexual lust, and thus contributing to the stigmatisation of gay men in America. This of course is compounded by the fact that of the three violent-eye novels written from the perspective of gay characters (including *Frisk*), all lack this aetiological explanation, and thus not only contradict psychological understandings of the origins of violence, but also are distinct from novels such as *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, and even *The End of Alice*, which deals with actual sexual perversion in the form of paedophilia. Combined with *Frisk*, *Exquisite Corpse* and *Zombie* establish a pattern in American literature of the 1990s, through the depiction of gay violent-eye characters as inherently deviant and violent because they are gay.

Whilst the politics of this position are extremely problematic, it is also possible that such pejorative representations of gay men are steps towards increased visibility of gay individuals in American culture in general. To quote again Saunders, monstrous and negative depictions can serve to “represent an intermediate stage of progress towards a more measured discussion” (1998, p. 7), but what is crucial here is that they must be intermediate. At present, gay violent-eye protagonists in American literature serve to conflate homosexuality and violence, and it remains to be seen whether such blanket depictions are challenged in the future.

With this conclusion, I draw to a close the textual analysis of violent-eye protagonists of the 1990s onwards, turning my attention in the next chapter to the absence of the school-shooter amongst this type in order to challenge the hypothesis that there is no such thing as an entirely unsympathetic character in American literature. I will argue that from the 1990s onwards, the school shooter as a violent protagonist became muted, and thus the parents, friends, and lovers of the violent individual serve instead as a lens through which to explore violence, creating a sense of distance. By not providing school shooters with a voice through which to narrate their own role in the

events of the text or to explore their own thoughts and feelings, it will be argued that at present their story is one that American society is not particularly ready to hear.

## Chapter Four

### Muted Voices: The Literary Absence of the School Shooter since Columbine

**To fully understand what has occurred – to get to the heart of it – one must hear the whole story.**

**(Fast 2008, p. 19)**

Thus far, this thesis has questioned whether there is such a thing as an individual who is entirely unpitiable, in part by considering David Lodge and David Hume's claims that narratives written from the perspective of wholly unsympathetic or villainous characters are undesirable and even, according to Lodge, unendurable. In doing so, this thesis has addressed the texts under study as narratives of causality, exploring their use of trauma as a means to aetiologically explain the actions of the perpetrator. In this manner, violent individuals become humanised rather than presented as monstrous others, and their actions are explained although rarely condoned. However, we have seen how this is challenged somewhat, and problematically so, by gay violent-eye protagonists, whose violence is sometimes presented as ontologically interlinked with their homosexuality, which results in a conceptually dangerous conflation between sexual orientation and sexual/moral deviancy.

This chapter returns to the question of whether or not the figure of the rampage school shooter, the individual who enters his school and executes his teachers and peers, is currently positioned by American society as unforgiveable and unsympathetic. The shooter is not a prominent figure amongst the list of violent-eye narrators of the 1990s and beyond, to the extent that this research project has not revealed such a text. Unlike the literature featuring serial killers such as Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* (1995) and Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), child murderers such as A. M. Homes' *The End of Alice* (1996a), or violently psychotic individuals such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), novels that deal with school shooters tend to mute the violent individual, positioning the narrative perspective from as close a proximity as possible (for example a parent or friend) without affording the character a voice of their own. As such, this

chapter will explore Stephen King's *Rage* (1977a) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a) in order to address the theoretical limitations of the thesis' focus on the violent-eye novel.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, I question whether the absence of the school shooter's voice in American literature around the turn of the millennium is indicative of an unwillingness, particularly since the Columbine Massacre of 1999, to accept such violent individuals as victims in their own right or even as part of the social fabric, choosing instead to position them as outside society, as individuals who deliberately "commit an act that [they know] will be framed as an episode of meaningless evil" (Phipps 2015, p. 103), and which will come to define them. By situating them as outside society and a framework of socialised values, they become permanently liminal characters, and are thus expelled not only from their community but also from their *communitas*, which as discussed in Chapter Two is an alternative form of belonging that is not designed to be permanent. By the very fact that they are silenced, the suggestion is that they are considered, at present, to be wholly unsympathetic. This current chapter thus questions whether the school shooter is dehumanised via the stripping of a voice, one that would otherwise enable them to tell their own side of the story, and that would also situate narratives of school shootings within the sub-genre of violent-eye fiction.

As both a construct and a physical space, the school is often depicted as a liminal place, characterised by constant flux and change and, in the case of the high school, intricately linked with adolescence and rites of passage. For Michael Kimmel (2008), the high school is the "boot camp" (p. 70) for masculinisation and what he terms the Guy Code, "a regime of peer-influenced and enforced behaviors" (p. 7). The school is also the site of both play violence and, increasingly in recent years, real and consequential violence. Like the ludic references that permeate *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *The End of Alice*, as explored in Chapter One, innocence and brutality can often go hand-in-hand, and they are juxtaposed and intertwined in the contemporary American high school, where the threat of physical violence can extend beyond punch-ups in the playground into death and destruction. This is observed in Stephen King's *Rage*, in which his small-

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<sup>1</sup> The explanation for the inclusion of a text from the 1970s will be provided later in this chapter.

town protagonist Charlie Decker suggests that to be “a kid [is] to live cheek-by-jowl with violence, with the common place fistfights in the gym, brawls [in town], beatings on television, [and] murders in the movies” (1977a, pp. 109-110). American children and adolescents, according to Charlie, “labor under a huge life of violence, both real and make-believe” (p. 110), all the more pronounced, perhaps, due to the rise in urban violence that the 1970s witnessed. However, Robert Conrath (1994), as mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, positions “extreme and prolific violence” as a speciality of the late twentieth century in the United States, and his specific reference to “assault weapons in the playground” (p. 144), whilst all too familiar now, has its origins in the school shootings of the 1980s and 1990s, which foreshadowed the Columbine Massacre in Littleton, Colorado on 20 April 1999.

Exploring literary violence within American society during the 1990s onwards, as this thesis does, requires consideration of Columbine as a highly conspicuous event that, at least in some respects, defined the closing year of the decade. The massacre brought American violence not only to the forefront of public awareness but also to the schoolyard, and both the massacre and the school itself became “drilled into the consciousness of the whole nation” (Grider 2007, p. 3). Prior to Columbine, violence in schools was not uncommon, yet the actions of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris in April 1999, whilst not the first nor the last of their kind, have established the Columbine Massacre as “the touchstone case, the case to which all observers must eventually refer” (Kimmel 2008, p. 89), to the extent that the word ‘Columbine’ has come to represent and signify school shootings (Young 2010, p. 35).

The horror the American people experienced in the wake of Columbine has led to a cultural preoccupation with the figure of the school shooter, often presented as dangerously isolated and unhinged. Literary representations vary, with some shooters expressing the “generic sort of alienation we’ve all become too familiar with” (as is the case in Douglas Coupland’s novel *Hey Nostradamus!* 2003, p. 102), with other perpetrators seen as “consumed with hate” (as in Jennifer Brown’s novel *The Hate List*, 2009, p. 47), yet without clear motive. These contrast with the varying forms of evidence that can be used to contextualise and explain these acts of atrocity. Gregory

Phipps (2015) discusses the simplistic approach often taken towards school shootings and the school shooters themselves:

In the standard, media-generated discourse, issues such as masculinity and high school stratification contribute to simplistic narratives about school shootings, most of which revolve around the assumption that the perpetrator is an outcast suffering from feelings of intense failure and emasculation. Graphic video games, music, and films also play roles in this narrative: supposedly, they desensitize the youth, stripping away empathy while cultivating fantasies of violent revenge. The media essentially create a persona that brings together a series of broad, collective concerns about adolescent life in contemporary America. (Phipps 2015, p. 100)

Such collective concerns make it hard to identify the person behind the attack, as the school shooter comes to embody extreme adolescent crisis and dysfunction in general, and can thus be used as a symbol of the dangerous outcomes of whatever social concern a commentator wishes to address. Phipps goes on to argue that by embracing rampage school shootings as a topic worthy of narrativisation and fictionalisation, literature tends to “complicate the mainstream discourse” (2015, p. 100).

In this vein, the muted voice of the school shooter is perhaps both a blessing and a curse, in that words are not unduly put in the boy’s mouth that would lead to an erroneous understanding of the mentality behind such atrocities and the complication to which Phipps refers, but equally no attempt is made to humanise and understand the perpetrator as a victim in his own right; the media-constructed persona to which Phipps refers thus goes unchallenged. Furthermore, the perpetrator’s identity is lost behind this created persona, one that Phipps argues is both a media construct and a deliberate wearing of Slavoj Žižek’s social mask (as discussed in Chapter Three) that “cements a social role that actually conceals [the shooter’s] individual personality” (Phipps 2015, p. 104). Boys like Harris and Klebold thus become “shooters”, and as such remain permanently liminal due to their inability to move away from this categorisation; they are extreme versions of the failed adolescent discussed in Chapter Two. This is particularly the case since the overwhelmingly horrific incident that they commit during their adolescence comes to define them and eclipses everything else, regardless of whether they live or die. Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan, published her text *A Mother’s Reckoning* in early 2016, which in one edition includes a front cover of both

her and her son as a young boy, loved and attended to by his mother, in what can be interpreted, in part, as an attempt to show the human and innocent side of a son who is exclusively known for his actions on one day in April 1999. Yet one moment or event can be sufficient to not only define an individual and eclipse all previous and subsequent (if any) events, but to trap them in a liminal existence. They are thus fixed in a socially constructed persona (for example, the 'bad mother' or the 'shooter') and labelled evil or a monster, and as a result of this blanket explanation their motives and actions become desperately hard to explore.

The fact that the Columbine Massacre "defies explanation [whilst] at the same time [...] demands it" (Kimmel 2008, p. 89) led in the first decade of the twenty-first century to numerous explorations in popular culture, including literature, on school shootings committed by students. Arguably the most well-known is Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a), which since its publication has been adapted into a critically acclaimed film released in 2011 (dir. Lynne Ramsay). D. B. C. Pierre's Booker Prize winning debut novel *Vernon God Little* was published in the same year (2003), and is joined by young adult texts such as Jennifer Brown's *The Hate List* (2009) and Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* (2010), as well as Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun* (2000), Canadian author Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003), Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* (2007), and Wally Lamb's *The Hour I First Believed* (2008), the latter of which deals specifically with the Columbine Massacre and its aftermath.

Dennis Cooper's *My Loose Thread* (2002), whilst not a fictionalisation of Columbine, makes frequent references to the massacre throughout the text, with the perpetrator of the eventual shooting demonstrating a clear affinity with his Coloradan predecessors, adorning his bedroom wall with a poster of them he made with the words "Coming Soon" at the top, and "saying things he thinks Harris or Kliebald [*sic*] would say" (p. 56), a connection with reality that is also found in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*: "he's obsessed with those Columbine kids" (Shriver 2003a, p. 284). Whilst the aforementioned texts centre their narratives around murderous rampages committed by students against their peers and, at times, adults (including teachers, janitors, and parents), they primarily do so by exploring such atrocities retrospectively through an

introspective analysis of what transpired or caused the events. Cooper's text, however, approaches the topic of school shootings by navigating the events that lead up to it as they occur, in a manner similar to that of Gus Van Sant's Columbine-based film *Elephant* (2003), concluding with the attack and what may or may not be the suicide of the shooter, heard by the protagonist who remains outside of the school: "Maybe the last shot was aimed at himself. It sounded like all the others" (2002, p. 121). This final sentence of the novel, in its emphasis on the shooter's (potential) death being "like all the others", serves as a powerful message that he is also a victim of his attack, and whilst Cooper's text does not position the shooter as the narrative's focaliser, shifting this role instead to another violent-eye character who does not take part in the attack (but who may be blameworthy through his passive inaction), the novel nevertheless explores the possibility of interpreting the school shooter as a victim.

A recent novel that comes close to the topic of school shootings is Matthew Quick's first-person narrative *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* (2013), set primarily in suburban New Jersey. Despite often being categorised in reader reviews and listings as a school shooting narrative, it is not so. This is in part because the 'shooter' is only violent in theory and not in practice, as he plans to but ultimately does not kill another male student. Further, whilst he takes his gun to school, the intention is to shoot his "target" afterwards, once the latter has returned home. However, the novel is an interesting and explorative first-person narrative written from the perspective of a lonely and neglected boy on the cusp of adulthood, caught between a deep sadness and bitter anger, as he negotiates his way through a school day armed with an old Nazi pistol and a seeming intent to use it.

In addition to novels, film and television shows have also explored school shootings with varying emphasis placed on the perpetrators, with notable examples including Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), Shawn Ku's *Beautiful Boy* (2010), and Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's first series of *American Horror Story* (2011), as well as documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and even popular songs such as Foster the People's "Pumped Up Kicks" (2010). One of the most recent examples is Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's Netflix series *The OA* (2016), which

exemplifies a shifting interest away from the school shooter, not just in terms of his perspective, but even his presence. The adolescent shooter appears only briefly in the final episode of the series, and the attack on the school cafeteria (reminiscent of the Columbine massacre), whilst narratively relevant in that it serves as a threat that forces the central characters to unite and stand together in the face of adversity, is thematically irrelevant, as the shooting could be easily and sufficiently replaced by any danger. The shooter is both nameless and voiceless, uttering no shouts, demands, or even threats, but what is more interesting is that he is also faceless, filmed only at a distance, from behind, or in abstract close-ups that show his feet, legs, and torso. The decision to omit his face from the scene is starkly indicative of a depersonalisation, one in which the adolescent perpetrator of a violent crime is not a boy but a shooter, a series of clichéd composite parts (for example, combat boots, weapons, and ammunition), and once the failed attack is thwarted, he becomes narratively obsolete and is promptly forgotten.

So despite the attention paid by the media and popular culture to school shooters, they nevertheless occupy a highly visible yet simultaneously invisible place in narratives of school shootings. The motivations behind their actions remain obscure, and thus the capacity to inhabit the minds of the shooters seemingly remains beyond imagination. In its exploration of the literary school shooter, this chapter develops the theories expounded in the earlier three chapters whilst simultaneously approaching the question of whether there is such a thing as an entirely unsympathetic character from a different angle. In order to do so, it explores what we can ascertain by exploring not only protagonists present within violent-eye fiction, but also those who are absent, using the school shooter as a means of going beyond the page to view further the limits of the subgenre. The school shooter is a highly visible violent archetype that has been of significant cultural concern in the United States, particularly since Columbine, yet as the agent of chaos and destruction he remains marginalised and side-lined within fictional accounts of school shootings. Three possible reasons for this are suggested in my discussion, which help to provide a better understanding of what is said and remains unsaid in cultural responses to Columbine.

The first reason is that this could be in part because of a concern that the perpetrator comes to eclipse the victims, taking centre stage in the horror that they create and establishing for themselves a highly visible notoriety – between them, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 people in the Columbine Massacre, yet their victims (itself a passive and possessive term) have largely, albeit with a few exceptions, faded into obscurity. As Stephen King observes of school shooters in his essay entitled ‘Guns’, “these are the guys we remember, not the victims” (2013, n.p.). Yet the same can be said of violent individuals in general, with serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ed Gein reaching an iconic status within American culture, and their victims relegated to mere statistics. But regardless of the shared similarity of the cultural preoccupation between violent individuals in general, the desire to shift the attention away from the school shooter is nevertheless an issue, evidenced in Douglas Coupland’s *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003). Set in Vancouver, Canada, the novel is an attempt to shift the perspective away from the shooter and situate it instead with the victims; in an interview with *The Observer*, Coupland suggested that “Killers get too much press already” (cited in Anthony 2003, n.p.). Broken into four first-person narratives, his novel gives a voice to Cheryl, a murdered teenager, who briefly tells the story of her own life and death in 1988, in a posthumously reflective manner similar to that of Alice Sebold’s earlier novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002).<sup>2</sup> The narrative then shifts to 1999 and the perspective of her young widow, Jason, before jumping to 2002 and Jason’s new girlfriend, Heather, and finally concluding in 2003 with Jason’s pious yet traumatised father, Reg. Whilst only Cheryl of the four is shot dead in the school cafeteria, all of these individuals, to varying degrees, are victims of the shooting, traumatised either directly or vicariously by the atrocities that took place. The narrative is a poignant story of a fictionalised school shooting from the victims’ perspectives, but it is in no way exceptional, since any concern about drawing the attention away from the shooter is, within the literary realm, perhaps unnecessary, largely due to the notable absence of

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the emphasis on Cheryl’s religion and subsequent status as a Christian martyr within the novel, she could be read as loosely based on Columbine victims Cassie Bernall and/or Rachael Scott, both of whom were reported by some to have expressed their faith in God moments before being shot (Bernall 1999; Nimmo & Scott 2000). Thus, in Coupland’s novel the emphasis is shifted onto a character reminiscent of actual victims who have been eclipsed within U.S. cultural memory by their murderers.

such perspectives on the page in American literature since the 1990s. Muting the shooter, even out of a fear that he or they are all people talk about (Coupland, quoted in Anthony 2003), risks a very narrow perspective and one that can preclude a more thorough tackling of a difficult subject. As Coupland's own character Jason says of news reports and photojournalism that appear in the wake of the fictional school shooting and which edit the images in order to present a specific message, "when you crop the photo, you tell a lie" (2003, p. 67). Equally, to remove the shooter from the narrative perspective and to present him or them as simply "nutcases with guns [who are motiveless] screwed-up geeks lost in a stew of paranoia, role-playing games, military dreams and sexual rejection" (2003, p. 88) risks limiting our understanding of the high school massacre and the adolescent shooter, whilst simultaneously demonising anyone who does not fit the mould and who falls outside of the norms, labelling them as potentially dangerous and not one of 'us'.

A second possibility for the muted voice of the school shooter in American literature of the 1990s onwards is the fear of the copy-cat, with Stephen King's *Rage* in particular being controversially linked to numerous 'inspired' attacks, most notably the Heath High School shooting of 1997. The argument here is the all-too-familiar one of cause and effect, which suggests that to read a novel like *Rage* is to risk being inspired to recreate the fictional events. In this sense, the novel is akin to Oliver Stone's 1994 film *Natural Born Killers*, which has also had a plethora of accusations levied against it as a result of its links to a wide range of murders, including the Columbine Massacre and other school shootings. Without wanting to get too embedded in the effects of literary or cinematic violence (for more on the latter, see Alison Young 2010), as this is not the theoretical focus of this thesis, it is nevertheless noteworthy that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were subsequently discovered after the massacre to have been using the acronym NBK (Natural Born Killers) as a code for their planned attack on the school, observed in diaries retrieved from the deceased pair's possessions (see Dutton, White, and Fogarty 2013). Such discoveries prompt the assumption that exposure to fictional violence can lead to real acts of violence, which regardless of whether valid or not can result in significant social concern and present an easy "remedy" to the problem: the muting of school shooters within the literature.

The third possibility is that rampage school shooters who execute their peers challenge cultural understandings of innocence. Due to their age, they fall within the blurry and liminal definition of adolescence, trapped between childhood, and all its connotations of virtue, and adulthood, and its links with vice. As with the case of Terry Eagleton's police officer, who as discussed in Chapter One was involved in the James Bulger case, sometimes it is easier to label children or adolescents who commit heinous crimes as evil rather than begin to explain what may have caused the violence, especially since by doing so it is easier to rationalise when "children have come to embody society's sense of itself as good", as asserted by Ros Coward (1997, p. 114; see Chapter One). After all, if analepses of childhood abuse or trauma can humanise violent-eye protagonists by showing their once innocent and vulnerable state, as argued in Chapter One, what is to be done when the individual is not yet an adult and thus already culturally positioned as innocent? The suggestion is that since they are not all good they must be all bad. Starkly positioning children and adolescents as either fundamentally good or inherently bad is not a new phenomenon, with the concept of the "bad seed" having currency throughout the mid-twentieth century in the United States, with literary examples notably including William March's novel of the same name, *The Bad Seed* (1954), Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), Thomas Tryon's *The Other* (1971), and David Seltzer's *The Omen* (1976), with Lionel Shriver exploring this since the turn of the millennium in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a), discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Since both the school shooter and his victims are young, it is all the easier to label the former as evil as he is structurally positioned as opposite to the latter, who are innocent. The school shooter is not just a teenager who kills, but a killer of teenagers; Matthew Quick's protagonist Leonard Peacock observes this distinction when preparing for his own intended shooting by referring to himself as a 'Teenage Killer', a moniker he describes as "a sick double entendre, as I am a killer who *is* a teenager, *and* – since my target is a teenager whom I must kill – I am also a killer *of* teenagers!" (2013, p. 3; emphasis original).<sup>3</sup> So, if the school shooter is labelled as evil by society, as the bad teenage killer of good teenagers, and as innately or intrinsically

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the word 'sick' in the context of the novel can also be read as a double entendre, as it conveys an adolescent's colloquial expression for excellence, yet also poor health or something macabre.

bad as is so often suggested, then it stands to reason that they are implicitly assumed to take on a wholly unsympathetic quality that would make continual immersion in their minds intolerable for readers, according to David Lodge's argument, mentioned in the Introduction, especially when combined with the concern that they are in some way influential and their behaviour contagious.

Returning to the fear that the shooter eclipses his victims, media preoccupations do tend to centre on the perpetrator, and this largely contributes to why the likes of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris are considerably more culturally visible than their Columbine victims, despite iconoclastic attempts to prevent an understanding of them as victims in their own right such as the destruction of memorials (for more on this, see Grider 2007) and by attaching the label of evil. Yet the fiction surrounding such atrocities indicates that American authors are already denying the school shooter a voice and a perspective. Whilst they remain highly visible in contemporary novels, the atrocities they inflict cause them to be muted, spoken about and spoken for, and positioned as personas rather than people. This is in contrast to other perpetrators of American violence such as the serial killer, as we have seen. An attempt to quantify and compare violence and atrocity is of course highly problematic, but it is important to stress that the serial killer and the school shooter have two aspects in common: the potential for high body counts and long-lasting public notoriety. Yet whereas voice is given to the former, such as in Oates' attempts to explore Jeffrey Dahmer through Quentin, giving voice to and, perhaps more crucially, attempting to understand what motivates the school shooter seems to remain taboo within American literature. As such, coupled with the issue of giving shooters a voice is the issue of treating them as human beings. Acknowledging that they were troubled boys and (frequently) victims of their own rampage does not require an understanding that incorporates a condoning of their actions, but instead widens our understanding of why some teenagers choose to kill others.

In order to address literary representations of the school shooter since Columbine, Stephen King's *Rage* (1977a) and Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a) will be analysed here. These two texts are separated by the events that

took place in Littleton in 1999, which despite not being the first school shooting or the most deadly has come – as David McWilliam (2016) argues – “to stand for a category of offence [...] in American popular culture”, with Harris and Klebold representing the “type of criminal, the school shooter” (2016, p. 184). Taken together, the analyses of the two texts will illustrate my argument that, despite the existence of narratives of school shootings, there is an evident literary unwillingness since Columbine to see the school shooter as a victim or to attempt to understand him within this framework, despite the fact that he himself is often a victim of his own rampage, being among the dead. By straddling the school shootings of the 1980s and the 1990s, particularly the Columbine Massacre, the selected texts illustrate a cognitive shift in American society. This is especially the case since the 1990s was, arguably, the decade in which American moral panic was preoccupied with school shootings, sandwiched between the fear of the serial killer in the 1980s and terrorism in the 2000s (McWilliam 2016, p. 184).

Chronologically, the first text is Stephen King’s novel *Rage* (1977a), the first to be published under the pseudonym ‘Richard Bachmann’. The story is that of Charlie Decker, who fatally shoots two teachers at his high school in Placerville, Maine – acknowledged in the Introduction as presciently similar to the small town of Littleton, Colorado – and holds his algebra class hostage. Pre-dating Columbine by over twenty years, *Rage* is an example of a violent-eye school shooter, but one who has been retrospectively muted by the author’s decision to take the novel out of print after it was linked to a number of school shootings in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly the Heath High School shooting in Kentucky in 1997; although King rightly does not view his novel as a cause of the violence, he does see it as an “accelerant” (King 2013, n.p.), and it was this that prompted his decision. As such, despite being outside of the temporal scope of this thesis, which focuses on the 1990s onwards, *Rage* is included as a text of relevance not only because it serves to indicate the pre- and post-Columbine approaches to the school shooter in American literature, but also because its period of particular relevance was the 1990s, where it surfaced as a controversial text linked to actual violent acts, and also because it was in the latter part of this decade that it was removed from print, thus marking the literary cessation of the violent-eye school shooter in American literature – for now.

The second text, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a), is indicative of a post-Columbine shift away from getting too close to the school shooter, and the need to explore him and his actions from a distance rather than allow him the opportunity to explain these for himself. In place of the first-person narrative of shooter Kevin Khatchadourian, Shriver's narrative is instead written from the perspective of his mother, Eva, whose potential culpability in the creation of the violent son may or may not render her a violent-eye protagonist herself, and who was explored briefly in Chapter One alongside the pathogenic mothers in A. M. Homes' *The End of Alice* (1996a) and Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004). *We Need to Talk about Kevin* transfers the focus away from the shooter onto a substitute or, in Eva's case certainly, a scapegoat, someone who is or was close to the shooter and thus is an authoritative voice, and also someone whose own failings are explored within the rhetoric of blame. In this sense, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is similar to other post-Columbine novels on school shootings, such as D. B. C. Pierre's *Vernon God Little* (2003), in which the best-friend of the shooter is the narrative's focaliser and substitute villain within the context of the novel, and Jennifer Brown's *The Hate List* (2009), written from the perspective of the girlfriend of the shooter, who is implicated by other characters as equally at fault.

Both *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Rage* complement the discussion in the first two chapters of this thesis, as Shriver's text is preoccupied with the role the mother may or may not have had on her violent son, whereas King's novel focuses on an oedipal tension between the shooter and his father along with an exploration of failed rites of passage. Taken together, they serve as a lens through which to view pre- and post-Columbine approaches to fictionalising school shootings, and indicate the correlation between the rise in shootings and the disappearance of the violent-eye shooter.

### **Stephen King's *Rage* (1977a)**

Unlike some of Stephen King's more well-known novels and short stories that explore inherently or supernaturally violent children, such as *Carrie* (1974) and 'Children of the Corn' (1977b), *Rage* is a reflective and realistic violent-eye narrative that explores a highly intelligent yet traumatised adolescent's breaking point on an otherwise routine

day, in what transpires to have been an escalating and overwhelming tension leading up to the event. On the day in question, Placerville High School senior Charlie Decker sets fire to his locker before shooting his algebra teacher and taking her class hostage, later killing a second teacher when he comes to evacuate the class after the fire alarm goes off. Like *Carrie*, the novel is an example of King's early interest in "tortured adolescents and violence running amuck within the sterile, orderly environment of schools" (Newhouse 1987, p. 49; for an overview of the school in King's writing, see Truffin 2008), along the same lines as his short story 'Cain Rose Up' (1968), in which college student Curt Garrish randomly shoots at people from his dorm window.<sup>4</sup> Like *Carrie*, there is also the explicit suggestion that problems at school are compounded and even amplified by problems at home, particularly as a result of traumatising parents. Yet, whereas Carrie White is the victim of an overbearing and fanatical mother, Charlie's trauma is far more connected with his father.

Having attacked John Carlson, his chemistry teacher, with a pipe wrench prior to the start of the novel, an outburst so violent that it left Carlson on the operating table for almost four hours and out of work for at least a month, Charlie is called to the office of Tom Denver, his headmaster, early in the morning. After a tense verbal encounter between the two, Charlie beings "to get it on", his term for the violence that ensues as the novel progresses:

This is where I started to get it on [in Denver's office]. I knew it, because the same thing that happened just before I gave Mr. Carlson the business was happening now. My hands stopped shaking. My stomach flutters subsided, and my whole middle felt cool and calm. I felt detached, not only from Mr. Denver [...] but from myself. I could almost float. (1977a, p. 54)

His violence, euphemistically avoided through expressions such as "getting it on" and "giving the business", is thus a form of freedom but also a disconnection, a calm yet detached sensation that presents Charlie as increasingly afloat and adrift. This is further reaffirmed by the escalating sense of absence in the novel, culminating with Charlie's

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<sup>4</sup> Both 'Cain Rose Up' and *Rage* are also linked by references to what could be the same character, an individual named Pig Pen, and so they could be read as intertextually linked and thus part of a larger narrative whole on the subject of shootings by students in places of education.

own detachment: “Now the squirrel was gone, good old Tom Denver was gone, and Mrs. Underwood was really gone. I thought it over and decided I was gone too” (p. 261). Like some of the other violent-eye protagonists in this thesis, such as Lindsay’s Dexter and Homes’ Chappy, Charlie is thus fragmented and broken, and his is a narrative of causality.

Unlike post-Columbine accounts of school shootings, Charlie’s violence and subsequent control of the classroom do not involve a physical assault on the group of students. Instead, it is a descent into organised anarchy, in that the students he is holding at gunpoint are not completely unwilling hostages. Not only does Charlie observe that the sheer number of them could easily overpower him, but at one point, lost in his own memories, he realises that he has let his guard down: “I suddenly realized I had been holding [the gun] by the barrel, pointing it at myself, not looking at them. No one had made a break” (p. 284). Either they had not noticed or they were not interested in freeing themselves, but either way the suggestion is a subconscious desire to be part of Charlie’s “getting it on”, or at least an interest in viewing the course of the events. The students in the class are not his victims, but rather his audience, his therapists, and his last desperate attempt to achieve some form of belonging, or a place in a *communitas* (see Chapter Two). Throughout the novel, only one student – Ted Jones – shows any signs of being aware that Charlie has transgressed and committed murder, with the others seeming to support Charlie. Even Irma Bates, a girl who cries and asks to leave, is eventually permitted by an increasingly jaded and exhausted Charlie to go to the bathroom, only to willingly return a few minutes later. Ultimately, the entire class “get it on” by violently attacking Ted, a brutal group assault in the spirit of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) that leaves him mentally and physically broken, no longer Ted but a “Tedthing” (p. 523), a drooling and catatonic boy “who hardly looked human at all anymore” (p. 514), capable only of “looking into emptiness” (p. 520). Whilst Charlie is credited by his peers for his transgression, Ted is punished for his refusal to join in (for an interesting account on this, see Phipps 2015) with what becomes a protracted exercise in group therapy, in which Charlie and his peers confess their secrets to each other in a reciprocal fashion.

It is these shared stories that allow Charlie to explain gradually to both his class and the reader the events that have led to his violent outbursts. He primarily shares stories of trauma, which despite eliciting disgust from Ted – “That makes me sick, you know it? Trying to blame something like this on your folks” (p. 184) – come to reveal analeptically an oedipal family relationship that situates Charlie at continuous odds with his father. Through these stories, Charlie reveals a number of traumatic events that have left their mark on him and that may have contributed in some part to his development into a violent young man who shoots his teachers, holds his class at gunpoint, and facilitates the violent group assault on Ted. At the centre of these is the figure of his father, the “Friendly Neighborhood Creaking Thing” (p. 480), who loomed monstrously in Charlie’s early life as a frightening entity. His earliest memory is that of waking up in the middle of the night and hearing a creaking sound:

There was something coming. I could hear it, down the hall. Something terrible was coming. Coming for me through the darkness. I could hear it, creaking and creaking and creaking. [...] After a long time – it might have been an hour, or it might only have been seconds – I realized the Creaking Thing wasn’t after me at all. Or at least, not yet. It was after Mom and Dad down the hall. The Creaking Thing was in Mom and Dad’s room. [...] After a long, long, long time, I can remember my mother’s voice, out of breath and irritable, and a little afraid: “Stop now, Carl.” [...] So I knew. I went to sleep, but I knew. The Creaking Thing was my father. (pp. 151-154)

Thus, monstrosity is synonymised with the father early on in Charlie’s life. Carl Decker is the source of terror and fear, and is not only seen by Charlie as a threat to himself but also to his beloved mother, Rita. Yet whilst the young Charlie comes to the realisation that the Creaking Thing is his father, what he does not realise it that he has overheard his parents having sex. The Oedipal triad is a major element of the novel, to the extent that Chris Pourteau (1993) uses the narrative to counter Bernard J. Gallagher’s claim that King is “nothing less than a closet Freudian who has chosen to abandon the Freudian emphases on infantile regression and the Oedipal conflict” (1987, p. 59). Instead, both Charlie and his father resent each other and their respective relationships with the mother. The father’s concern is also of his son’s emasculation as a result of this relationship: “He’s no baby anymore, Rita, it’s time for you to stop giving him the tit!” (King 1977a, p. 177). The oppressive father thus alludes to the pathogenic mother,

the Wylian Mom who is failing to allow her son to develop into a man, with the breast transformed from the good breast to the bad one (see Chapter Three in relation to Quentin's mother). Yet despite commenting upon this relationship between mother and son, the father can also be read as failing to sever it, and for failing to serve as a positive male role model. On the one and only hunting trip that Charlie and his father take together when the former is nine, the sight of his father gutting a deer causes Charlie to vomit, and looking up at his father he sees "contempt and disappointment in his eyes" (p. 44). But this is the culmination of the hunting trip, and it is not the sight of the deer that causes Charlie the most significant trauma.

As a distinctly masculine rite of passage, the hunting trip is an example of the failure of the father and his adult male friends to guide Charlie as a liminal being into their world. As one of the primary traumatic events that Charlie reflects upon later, the hunting trip causes him to fear his father more than he already did, as a result of an overheard drunken conversation that deals specifically with violence against women, including his mother. Waking up in the tent from a nightmare about "some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along" (p. 33), reminiscent of the early memory of his father, Charlie overhears a conversation between Carl and his friends, all of whom are drunk. In a nightmarish reality, Charlie sees their shadows cast upon the tent, "tall and alien-looking" (p. 35), and listens as they talk about sex with women. As the conversation progresses to infidelity, including a joke about Charlie's mother, the group of "talking praying mantises" (p. 36) listen as Charlie's father informs them that he would castrate anyone he found in bed with his wife. Charlie, increasingly terrified and desperate to urinate, which causes him terrible stomach cramps, listens as his father continues to say how the Cherokee would slit the noses of unfaithful wives, an image that haunts him through the remainder of the novel, and which when remembered years later causes his own inability to maintain an erection in his first and only sexual encounter with a girl named Dana.

Aside from the violent imagery, the themes of castration and the reference to Charlie's mother reaffirm the Oedipal tension, since it is Charlie who, unbeknownst to his father, gets into bed with his mother for an hour each morning after Carl goes to

work, and which despite not being sexual is nevertheless symbolic of him assuming his father's place in the latter's absence. Thus the conversation in the woods can be read as an unconscious threat to Charlie, and one that further severs his relationship with his father whilst reaffirming his closeness with and need for his mother: "Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother" (p. 41). What should have been a rite of passage leading to increased masculinity instead further renders Charlie as feminised. Yet the repeated reference to the hunters as praying mantises suggests not only an alien-like otherness but also that it is ultimately the men, despite their violent talk, who are weak. Like these insects, who are killed by the females after sex, the men are vulnerable and so their talk is just that – talk. Furthermore, it is not these drunk men, talking about mutilating their wives or blowing their "goddam cheatin' head[s] off" (p. 40) who go on to commit violence, but rather Charlie, the terrified little boy in the tent. Yet the event serves to contribute to Charlie's isolation, emasculation, and subsequent sexual failure, which leads him to question his own sexual orientation: "The cold certainty that I was queer crept over me like rising water" (p. 438). He is separated from the world of men, positioned instead as a "sexually ambiguous, alienated, uniquely gifted, and destructive" (Newhouse 1987, p. 50) teenager who is both a victim and a victimiser and who is "imbued with qualities, fears, and anxieties that seem typical of most modern teenagers" (1987, p. 50).

Tom Newhouse's argument that Charlie is "uniquely gifted" yet also "typical" can be read in light of Charlie's liminality and the characteristic binary oppositions of this state. As a lost and liminal individual, Charlie seeks to establish a temporary sense of *communitas* through his detention of the algebra class and his sharing of secrets. Liminal characters, as discussed in Chapter Two, are often nameless, and so Charlie demands his recognition and inclusion by insisting that the adults with whom he liaises call him by his first name. In a fractured intercom conversation with his headmaster during his hostage-taking of the algebra class, Charlie is very clear about this:

"Decker—"

"Call me Charlie. All my friends call me Charlie."

“Decker—”

I held my hand up in front of the class and crossed the fingers in pairs.

“If you don’t call me Charlie, I’m going to shoot somebody.”

Pause

“Charlie?”

“That’s better.” (pp. 124-125)

Rather than accepting the use of his family name (or better yet, his father’s family name) or demanding an honorific title, Charlie simply wishes to be called by his own given name, thus attempting to establish his place in the community even as his actions necessitate his removal. Dealing with themes of liminality and the violent consequences of failed rites of passage, *Rage* can thus be read alongside Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Don De Grazia’s *American Skin*, in which the failure of the father leads to the violence of the son.

Towards the end of the novel, Charlie regrets not having killed his father, viewing his actions at school as directly linked to this desire: “Now I wish it was him I’d killed, if I had to kill anyone. This thing on the floor between my feet is a classic case of misplaced aggression” (p. 491). The “thing on the floor” to which he refers is the body of his algebra teacher, Mrs Underwood. The link between the school violence and the trauma caused by his father is thus explicitly made, with the specific trauma of the hunting trip repeatedly established through the nausea and abdominal pain Charlie experiences at school, both on the day of the shootings and building up to it, which echoes the “terrible cramps” he experienced in the tent, the gutting of the deer, the nausea at the sight of it, and the threat of castration, and it is only by “getting it on” that Charlie is able to relieve the pain, sickness, and shaking hands. But during a fight in the garage with his father, before the events at the school, Charlie suggests that the man who traumatised him no longer exists, as he is separated from him temporally and so cannot be killed: “It occurred to me that the man I really wanted to hurt was safely out of my reach, standing behind a shield of years” (p. 490). Thus Charlie has no opportunity to retaliate against his father, the one who traumatised him during his childhood, and it is noticeable that both his attack against Carlson and his executing of Underwood are prefaced by their

taunting of either Charlie or his classmates, causing his stomach to begin to hurt. As such, they come to stand for the father, figures of authority yet ones capable of cruelty. This is rendered all the more obvious in the chemistry teacher due to his name, Carlson, a specific reference to Charlie's father Carl: as symbolically 'Carl's son', he is simply a younger manifestation of the oppressive father. The only other person who gets hurt is Ted, who again is linked to Charlie's father: "He could have been my own father, but that didn't matter. He and Ted were both remote and Olympian: gods" (p. 451). But in addition to their symbolic connection with fatherhood, both Carlson and Ted also serve as a distinctly fraternal threat to Charlie, both positioned as symbolic sons despite no evidence to suggest that they even know Carl. What this leaves us with is that Charlie, in attacking two individuals who not only remind him of his father but are symbolically positioned as his father's sons, is also indirectly attacking himself, lashing out at the symbolic son.

The "short, brutal saga of Charles Everett Decker" (p. 496) is thus an attempt to enter the mind of the violent individual and explore the reasons that lead to such destruction. The connection between childhood trauma, maternal overprotection, and failed rites of passage as a result of the father's inability to guide the son out of the liminal realm, combine to position Charlie as a victim of his own circumstances. With the oedipal tension between father and son and the ensuing trauma of the latter, *Rage* is an example of a narrative of causality, one that explains why an adolescent boy evolves into a school shooter. But like Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, as discussed in Chapter Two, *Rage* achieves this through the failure of the father, which in turn can lead to the overwhelming presence and responsibility of the mother (see Wilson-Scott, 2017).

Reflecting on when he was twelve years old, Charlie observes that "by that time Dad had pretty much given up on me and I was my mother's responsibility" (p. 300). Although his mother does not become omnipresent or the sole parent, as his father is still around, she is nevertheless burdened with the onus of raising her son alone, if not in actuality then at least symbolically. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that the poor relationship between father and son could be her fault, since through his close relationship with his mother, Charlie fails to connect with his father. Charlie reminisces

about smashing all the windows of his house as a small child, which prompts starkly oppositional responses from his parents. Whilst his father overreacts and physically hurts him, his mother ultimately rewards him and simultaneously severs the paternal-filial bond. She comforts her son and banishes the father:

It's all right, honey, she was saying, but I was watching my father, who had turned and was stomping away like a surly little boy. It wasn't until then, until I had seen with what practiced and dreadful ease he had been banished, that I began to dare to hate him back. While my mother and I were having cocoa in her sewing room, I told her how Dad had thrown me on the ground. I told her Dad had lied. It made me feel quite wonderful and strong. (p. 179)

The connection between mother and son is strengthened at the expense of the father, and simultaneously Charlie is rewarded by Rita for his destructive behaviour. But beyond this, Carl and Charlie's roles are reversed, with the former positioned as the "surly little boy" and the latter becoming the "strong" companion of Rita. Charlie's father is thus absented from his parental role, yet is forced to resume it – albeit poorly – after his son's attack on the chemistry teacher years later, which causes the mother to become "hysterical" and reliant upon medication.

Overall, the result is a failed liminal being, and as a school shooter Charlie Decker is distinctly humanised. His voice is a powerful element of the novel, and his perspective enables readers to enter the mind of the violent individual and "find there a familiar face" (see McGinn 1997, and also the Introduction to this thesis), one that is not entirely unsympathetic. By telling his own story, Charlie affords readers the opportunity to explore the thoughts of the school shooter, and to see things the way he does. Through Charlie, King is able to present what events are significantly and negatively memorable enough to require articulation to the wider peer group in the midst of a violent yet simultaneously mundane outburst, providing a narrative openly preoccupied with causality. However, the subsequent removal of the book from print after Michael Carneal executed a number of individuals at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky in December 1997 means that the American school shooter has lost his voice and his ability to be heard and understood within the literary realm. Yet this does not mean that he is not of literary interest, but rather that instead of talking about himself, he is now talked about by others.

### **Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003a)**

With the twin focus of the previous section on the father and failed rites of passage, closely related to Chapter Two, this section necessitates a more specific return to the mother of the violent individual, who was the focus of Chapter One, as Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is a novel that explores a school shooting from the perspective of the perpetrator's mother. For Sarah A. Smith, Shriver "rendered her exploration of motherhood futile by linking it to such black events" as high school massacres (2003, n.p.; quoted also in Jeremiah 2010, p. 172), since it becomes an exceptional rather than a mundane case of maternity. Yet as Emily Jeremiah points out, "the fact that [protagonist] Eva's an extreme case does not render her, or Shriver's, insights any less valuable (or uncomfortable)" (2010, p. 172). In the context of this thesis, it is precisely this link between motherhood and violent sons that is central to my discussion, as well as the meeting point between the exceptional and the mundane. In contrast with the other two novels focused upon in Chapter One, Eva as the first-person protagonist of Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is not absent, and nor is she sexually abusive. Rather, she is the mother of a teenage boy who, in a premeditated killing spree, rounds up and executes a number of students and staff members at his high school, after murdering his father and sister at their home. This massacre leaves Eva alone to piece together the events leading up to "that day", questioning her own involvement in the slaughter and the very real possibility that it was linked to her status as "a rotten mother" (2003a, p. 296).

Throughout the text, Eva fluctuates between considering herself to blame and absolving herself of responsibility, which includes repositioning Kevin as being his father's son: "[our daughter] Celia was mine, and Kevin was yours" (p. 280). Yet she is unrelenting in her description of Kevin as ontologically at fault, as "Evil Incarnate" (p. 291), even acknowledging her tendency to provide yet another "mean, slanderous example of how [Kevin] was heartless from birth" (p. 278):

on the birth of both my children, I could immediately discern a dominant emotional tone, like the top note of a chord or the foreground color of a canvas. In Kevin, the note was the shrill high pitch of a rape whistle, the color was a pulsing, aortal red, and the feeling was fury. (p. 260)

However, her own confessions regarding her fears and apathy towards motherhood create the sense that she may have provided for Kevin a cold and hostile environment, similar to Leo Kanner's theory of unemotional mothers, and clearly distinct from Charlie Decker's overprotective mother.<sup>5</sup> Yet since Eva is an unreliable narrator, and readers are aware that the epistolary story is told exclusively from her perspective in letters written to her (deceased) husband Franklin, therefore we have only Eva's word for the events that take place: "I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account, to whose perspective you have no choice but to submit" (2003a, p. 270). The sentiments expressed here do not convey a request or a plea, but rather a command that the readers (both Franklin and the literary audience) listen to her side of the story. The "ruthless advantage" to which she refers can also be read in relation to the muting of Kevin. He does not get to tell his side of the story, neither the events that transpired nor those leading up to it, and thus Eva's advantage is just that, a beneficial opportunity to speak both about and for her son, framing the narrative and focalising the perspective as she chooses.

Diverging from the other novels discussed in this thesis, in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* Shriver gives voice to the mother of a violent individual, not by using her simply as a device or even a peripheral character, but as the narrative's focaliser. In this sense she overshadows the violent character, positioning him in her story, something she states that he dislikes: "He does not like it when tangential characters collect on his cachet" (2003a, p. 287). This is not to say she does not serve a functional role in exploring the origins of violence within contemporary American society, but rather that she is allowed to question this role herself, an important distinction. Whereas the mothers of Dexter and Chappy are nameless, Eva's name is reiterated throughout the text, including her scrawled signature at the end of her letters to Franklin. This physical evidence of Eva's letter writing also serves to impart to the reader a sense of physical proximity with her. She is not in the background, separated temporally and spatially from the reader in a similar fashion to the mothers of Dexter and Chappy, both deceased

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<sup>5</sup> The potential for a woman to not be inherently maternal has been subsequently explored, albeit tangentially, by A. M. Homes in her novel *May We Be Forgiven* (2012): "[she] was afraid she'd be too cold as a parent; she thought she had no capacity to really love and that a child would suffer" (2012, p. 331).

at the time of the narrative and therefore existing only in analepses and reminiscences, or the mother of Charlie, who only exists as a narrative device in his memories. The fact that Eva's name is written by hand evokes the image of her holding a pen to the letter, touching the paper, being physically present in the narrative, unlike her son. This creates a sense of intimate proximity to Eva, perhaps if not encouraging an element of sympathy then at least insisting that it is Eva who is in charge of the narrative and reaffirming that it is her voice that is central. This is an important narrative decision given the marginalisation of mothers within violent-eye fiction. Kevin's voice is filtered through hers, with his perspective interpreted and his dialogue recounted by Eva. Yet this command of the narrative does not facilitate a prescriptive reading of the novel in terms of causality, and nor was it meant to.

*We Need to Talk about Kevin* starkly divides readers "almost straight down the middle into what seem to be reviews of two different books" (Shriver 2003b, p. 473). In this way, it is reminiscent of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which divided and continues to divide readers into two parties, those who perceive the unreliable narrator as a victim of malevolence and those who see her as deranged and ultimately responsible for the death of the child in her care. This dichotomy in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is translated as Eva as a victim of Kevin's malevolence and Kevin's malevolence as a figment of Eva's imagination. Either way, the ultimate outcome in both the stories is the death of children. Whilst different in terms of both genre and era, similar themes appear between the two texts, including the question of childhood innocence, as well as Shriver's repeated use of the phrase "turn of the page", all examples of which are either italicised or placed within quotation marks, indicating a conscious decision to create a novel that, like *The Turn of the Screw*, is divisive and thus the source of much academic debate. Yet despite its ambiguity and divisiveness, Shriver never intended for her novel to be read as prescriptive:

I have found this division gratifying. Mission accomplished. The novel does implicitly ask "Has Kevin been mangled by his mother's coldness, or is he innately horrid?" Yet I hope that this question is no more resolved in the book than crude oppositions like "nature versus nurture" are ever reconciled in real life. (Shriver 2003b, p. 474)

So, in positioning Eva as potentially the pathogenic cause of Kevin-as-made-killer, Shriver equally presents her as victim to Kevin-as-born-killer. But if we are to read *We Need to Talk about Kevin* as suggesting the possibility of both factors, then there is also the dangerous assumption that Eva could be doubly responsible, as she is the common denominator in both his nature and nurture: “Kevin had proven defective, and I was the manufacturer” (2003a, p. 164). After all, Franklin is presented throughout the novel, albeit from Eva’s perspective, as a warm and loving father with his “dorky Norman Rockwell vision of Daddydom” (2003a, p. 127), whereas she is a self-confessed bad mother: “I felt driven to distinguish myself from all those normal mommies, if only as an exceptionally crummy one” (2003a, p. 174). If Kevin is cold, callous, and unemotional, then he is all the more like Eva and thus is likely to have inherited and/or learned these traits from her. Even if Kevin is interpreted as ontologically evil, simply genetically predisposed to violence and psychopathy, then the focus of Eva as the mother of this violent character suggests that he may be this way indirectly rather than directly because of her.

*We Need to Talk about Kevin* vitally gives voice to the mother figure in American literature, but it still situates her within the discourse of mothers making monsters. It is not the father, teachers, or other societal elements who are questioning their role in the origin of Kevin’s psychopathy, but rather the mother. And in a rare turn of events, by giving the mother her voice it is the violent character that becomes muted. But as has been argued, this muting is not uncommon when the violent individual is a school shooter, and appears to be characteristic of post-Columbine narratives. Like Douglas Coupland’s *Hey Nostradamus!*, this muting of Kevin can be read as an authorial decision to shift the focus away from the shooter and on to someone else. Yet, unlike Coupland’s novel, this substitute serves as a proxy for the shooter, as they are someone who allows readers to explore the shooter from a safe distance without being continually immersed in his mind and embracing his perspective. However, Shriver’s novel presents the mother as ‘evil’ by association, forcing her into a sacrificial role in which she comes to stand for her violent son whilst simultaneously being blamed for – or at least questioned about – his actions.

Relegated to the margins and thus isolated textually, Kevin is purely a construct of Eva's recollections and perspective. Framed in this manner, he is presented not only as devious and potentially evil but as a contrived individual, someone who endeavours to present a certain image of himself in order to gain prestige: "we are still contending with Kevin's more impenetrable pose as the sociopath who is beyond reach" (2003a, p. 48). Through Eva, Kevin is described as overly concerned with his own notorious image as a "celebrity who's been on the cover of *Newsweek*", and who endeavours to prove to his mother that "in lockup [...] he is no tinhorn delinquent, but a notorious fiend of whom his less accomplished fellow juveniles are in awe" (2003a, p. 48). With Eva as mediator, everything readers learn about Kevin is tempered by a mother who, as has already been established, is not prone to championing her son. However, in acknowledging Kevin's need for notoriety, Eva also acknowledges her own distance from what he is thinking and feeling, indicating the limitations of her perspective on an adolescent school shooter:

And he said something like, "Are you kidding? They fucking worship me, *Mumsey*. There's not a juve in this joint who hasn't take out fifty dickheads in his *peer group* before breakfast – in his head. I'm the only one with the stones to do it in real life". (p. 48; emphasis original)

What is crucial about this insight into Kevin's thoughts is their tremendous unreliability, prefaced by Eva's own acknowledgement that the words are not verbatim and also that the sentiments are those of her vague recollection. This is compounded by the issue that she is not necessarily hearing the truth from Kevin, since such insight is achieved only through conversations with his mother, in which he is seemingly more preoccupied with creating the myth of his own notoriety rather than openly conversing: "I had only his word, of course, that far from being shunned Kevin had achieved a status of mythic proportions among hoods who had merely hijacked cars or knifed rival drug dealers" (p. 49). So Kevin is someone talked about, both by himself in his own apparent boastfulness and mythmaking, and by his mother, who has "only his word" and who does not present herself as either motivated to understand him or as reliable. As Sue Klebold (2016) acknowledges in her narrative about her son Dylan, mothers – even when close with their sons – do not necessarily understand them or know what is going on, and Eva is both an unreliable source and a poorly informed one. She has very little idea of who

Kevin is and what is real about him, choosing instead to present him as either evil or hollow: “Kevin was a shell game in which all three cups were empty” (p. 277). As his perspective, thoughts, and feelings are absent from the text, it is not clear whether or not Kevin is indeed “empty”, reminiscent of the “lack” discussed in Chapter Three, so all that can be concluded is that Eva thinks he is, at least at some points in her narrative. Through her, the school shooter is removed from the forefront of the text, repositioned as part of a “puerile pantheon” (p. 285) of violent adolescents who commit deadly rampage attacks against their peers. Kevin, through Eva, is obsessed with prestige, fame, and being the centre of the story he has created: “I’m not playing a part. I am the part” (p. 286). Unlike Charlie Decker, whose actions seem motivated by a close proximity to the end of his tether and thus are a form of self-destruction, evident in the accidental pointing of the gun at himself, Kevin is more preoccupied with a self-apotheosis and a self-commemoration, the carving out of a place within the cultural fabric and a rising up through the ranks of the “pantheon”, even if it comes at the price of his freedom. Yet again, in contrast with Charlie, Kevin is not the centre of his story, and he is thus typical of the muted post-Columbine school shooter in American literature of the 1990s onwards, frozen into the figure of the shooter rather than humanised as a deeply troubled boy, and denied the opportunity to express his thoughts, feelings, concerns, and memories through his own voice.

### **Muted Voices and Textual Isolation**

Since the removal of *Rage* from print, literary school shooters have not only become muted but have also become textually isolated, relegated to the margins of the narrative. Within American literature of the 1990s and since the turn of the millennium, these figures are narrative devices and agents of chaos, presented as potentially evil and thus dehumanised, and used as a form of character development for someone else, be it the parent, best friend, girlfriend, or so on. Read in this light, they are similar to the mothers of violent-eye protagonists, discussed in Chapter One, who are positioned as subjects in the object formation of their children, and included in the narrative as a means of explaining the latter’s violence. Yet unlike the mothers, who are scapegoated and

blamed for actions they did not commit, school shooters are unequivocally to blame for their actions, and their violence is not necessarily the product of a bad parent. To quote Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as Eric Harris did in his journal, "Good wombs hath borne bad sons".

The removal of a voice equates to the removal of a perspective, and so unlike the post-*Rage* years of the late 1970s and 1980s, in which school shooting narratives were not predominant, there appears to be a trend since the 1990s in engaging with the theme of shooting whilst simultaneously stepping away from understanding the boy behind the shooter, not only in relation to what motivated him to commit such an act of atrocity, but also in failing to see him as a tragic element of the horror and grief he has caused. This textual isolation mirrors public attitudes towards school shooters, in which these violent young men are demonised and rendered unworthy of sympathy, isolated from the public grieving process. In cases where the perpetrators die alongside their victims, either by their own hands or through police intervention, the issue of whether or not they themselves were victims comes sharply into focus.

Anthropologist Sylvia Grider observes that in the wake of Columbine, "there was no precedent in American history for memorializing murderers or assassins along with their victims" (Grider 2007, p. 7). She goes on to discuss the hostility the local community felt towards Klebold and Harris, who ended their rampage by taking their own lives, and she offers an example of a local pastor who was forced to resign after conducting the funeral of one of them at his church, which had greatly distressed his congregation (2007, p. 6). The lack of an extenuation of sympathy or consideration for shooters is touched upon in Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!* also:

I remember after the massacre I heard that people were praying for the killers, and that made me furious. *It's a bit too late to pray for them now, wouldn't you think?* I was livid for years afterward. (2003, p. 125; emphasis original)

The acceptance of the shooter as a deceased individual requiring a burial or prayers, and leaving behind a bewildered and grieving family, is not something that Coupland's novel suggests, and nor was it something that the congregation discussed in Grider's article could accept. Not only are shooters culturally positioned as unworthy of sympathy, this seems to be compounded by the fact that they are young. As discussed

earlier in this chapter, this links to the positioning of the shooter as evil in contrast to the victims as innocent. Further, the lack of voice and perspective in the literature resonates with this inability to view shooters as worthy of understanding.

Reflecting back on actual and literary examples of school shooters, particularly Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris in the former category, and Charlie Decker and Kevin Khatchadourian in the latter, this chapter argues that all school shootings are monumental acts of self-destruction, and supports Jonathan Fast's argument that they are forms of ceremonial violence (2008). In cases involving the physical death of the shooter, the opinion sometimes offered in select examples is that the attacks are committed as an elaborate form of suicide, in which the death of others may not in fact be the primary motive (see Klebold 2016).<sup>6</sup> This may involve the shooter killing himself (or each other in joint attacks) or inciting others to do it for him, often known as 'suicide by cop' or 'blue suicide', in which the perpetrator forces police to take lethal action against him. Although unsuccessful in his attempts to die, Charlie Decker can be read as attempting to provoke others in this manner. He is not only a troubled and violent adolescent but also suicidal, engaging in an elaborate form of confessional, ceremonial, and ritualistic violence before attempting to end his own life. A subconscious desire to die can be found in his initial attack on the chemistry teacher, who could be considered his symbolic doppelganger: one is Carlson and the other is Carl's son. This desire to die is more openly revealed in the accidental pointing of his own gun at himself, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, but is all the more obvious in his response to the eventual arrival of the police, who upon entry to the classroom are directly baited by Charlie to shoot him:

Philbrick [the head of the Maine State Police] stepped through the door [and] I made as if to grab something behind Mrs. Underwood's desktop row of books and plants. "Here it comes, you shit cop!" I screamed. He shot me three times. (1977a, p. 523)

Antonio Preti (2006) frames school shootings (alongside other acts of violence) within this context of a desire to die, referring to what he calls "suicide with a hostile intent"

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<sup>6</sup> Sue Klebold (2016) interprets the actions of her son Dylan in this manner, but notably does not extend this view to the actions of his companion, Eric Harris.

or “suicide by provocation”, acknowledging a link between this and a form of suicide known and used by the Romans called *iactatio*, which was designed and committed “to make an enduring impression on the public [and] seen as an unauthentic act of ostentation” (2006, p. 28). School shootings can therefore fall into this area of both elaborate suicide and desire to leave an enduring impression, one that is ostentatiously and violently achieved, to the extent that the notoriety of the shooter, along with what he may or may not have been attempting to achieve with his violent attack, comes to dominate the aftermath, but only in a superficial sense; he is remembered, but only as a shooter. This idea of impression within the context of school shootings can be interpreted as a need to be seen and acknowledged, to be publicly recognised, perhaps in relation to the notion of lack as discussed in Chapter Three, and therefore alongside being an act of self-destruction, school shootings are also acts of self-commemoration.

In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the shooter’s motive is not to die but rather to become (in)famous through an elaborate performance. When Eva asks Kevin why he did not kill her along with the other members of their family, he responds, “When you’re putting on a show, you don’t shoot the audience” (Shriver 2003a, p. 460). However, his notion of a rampage shooting as a form of performance, or ceremonial violence as Fast describes it, is indeed insightful, and holds currency in relation to discussions on liminality. For Fast, school shootings are a form of turning suicide into a “public ceremony”, in a manner that appears to be “a throwback to something very ancient and primitive, where the supplicant plays the part of a god, and indulges in a forbidden or privileged activity prior to his own execution or banishment from the tribe” (Fast 2008, p. 19). The shooter not only seeks his own death, but the death of others as a form of ritualistic brutality that goes hand-in-hand with a sense of self-apotheosis, a desire to be godlike.

Whilst suicide may be a motivating factor for many shooters, including Charlie Decker, it is not the case for others, as with Kevin. Yet this does not mean that a desire to self-destruct isn’t present, but simply that this is not manifested as a desire to physically die. Death, metaphorically speaking, is not simply a cessation but a transformation, an end to one incarnation and the beginning of another – hopefully

better – one. This is inherent in adolescence and other liminal periods, which involve metamorphoses, and also linked to the desire to rise above one's social group and obtain power. Yet shooters, whilst they may see themselves as greater, godlike, and strong, are not generally perceived as such by others, who instead tend to view them as violent, murderous, and evil. In such cases where the shooter does not die, he nevertheless sets in motion a course of events that necessitates a non-physical self-destruction, as by the end of the attack the boy he was the evening before no longer exists. Gone is the loving son, the boisterous friend, the ambitious student, the lazy pianist, the keen baseball player, and all the other areas of an individual's multifaceted personality; all that remains is the figure of the shooter, along with whatever previous elements of his personality – real or artificial – serve the agenda of painting him as a dangerous outsider who had displayed, unnoticed by those around him, all the hallmarks of an atrocity waiting to happen. As a result, the shooter, whether dead or alive, is transformed into a monstrous other, something to expel from the community, along with his family, despite their own needs, shock, grief, and devastation.

The actions the shooter commits serve to eclipse any previous positive traits, and both banishes him from his community and freeze-frames him into a construct and an idea rather than a person; he becomes a perpetual liminal outsider, having failed the rites of passage associated with adolescence and instead indulged in his own ritualistic performance. This permanent persona, similar to that discussed by Phipps (2015), involves being trapped by a specific guise and hidden by a ceremonial mask of atrocity rather than sanity. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Eva muses on the subject of permanence in relation to school shooters, indicating that they will eternally be defined and trapped by their violent actions: "Culprits are stuck in what must be a tyrannical rehearsal of the same old tale. Kevin will be climbing the stairs to the aerobic-conditioning alcove of Gladstone High gym for the rest of his life" (2003a, p. 49). In this, Eva comes close to affording Kevin some degree of sympathy, in that he too is perhaps a victim of his own violence. Despite being unable to tell his own story, if we are to accept Eva's perception then there is the indication that Kevin will always be confined and defined by his brutality, even if he eventually comes to regret his actions.

Towards the end of the narrative, Kevin is about to turn eighteen, and with this marks the end of his childhood and the creeping threat of transfer from juvenile prison to Sing Sing. It is at this point that Kevin begins to appear frightened and even childlike for the first time in the novel, even if only through Eva's reflections: "Three days from adulthood, Kevin is finally starting to act like a little boy – confused, bereft" (2003a, p. 462). Whilst this observation initially indicates Eva's scepticism, through her choice to describe Kevin's new demeanour as part of an "act", she continues by both questioning him and looking at him a little more closely, observing physical evidence to suggest that life for Kevin in prison might not be as filled with prestige and the respect of others as he has suggested in the past:

I looked at him in wonder. He was shaking. Over the course of the last two years, he has acquired a maze of tiny battle scars across his face, and his nose is no longer quite straight. The effect doesn't make him look tougher, but disarranged. The scars have smudged the once sharp, Armenian cut of his features into a doughier blur. He could have been drawn by an uncertain portraitist who constantly resorts to an eraser. (2003a, p. 462)

Kevin's face reveals in the absence of his words the abuse he suffers in juvenile prison, and his trembling body exposes the anxiety he experiences at the prospect of his imminent transfer to the more severe and frightening environment of an adult maximum security correctional facility.

The allusion to smudging, dough, uncertainty, disarrangement, and the eraser all combine to present a picture of a crude alteration from something sharp and clear into something indistinct, indicating the eradication and blurring of Kevin. His battle-scarred face is no longer his own, but rather marked indelibly by violence, serving as a mask that occludes the boy he was. Eva continues to document their encounter, adding that as she went to leave Kevin "clung to [her] childishly, as he never had in childhood proper", and possibly muttered "*I'm sorry*" (p. 465; emphasis original). But no amount of remorse, presuming Kevin firstly does feel it and, secondly, that he has expressed it, allows him to be anything other than "KK", the infamous school shooter and murderer of his own father and sister. Whilst he survives his own rampage attack, Kevin, like Charlie Decker, nevertheless experiences a form of self-destruction in the form of a permanent transformation and liminal banishment.

My argument here is that not only do school shooters engage in acts of self-destruction, regardless of whether or not they survive their own attack, but also that this leads to a form of metamorphosis. However, two transformations exist: the one the shooter hopes to achieve (for example, the vengeful god) and the one he actually achieves (the remorseless shooter). Characters such as Charlie Decker and Kevin Khatchadourian cease to become boys and instead, out of the ashes of the chaos and tragedy they have caused, emerge as shooters. They are then cemented into this role, defined by the actions of one day, forced to forever climb those stairs and seen as perpetual outsiders. In the literature, there is seemingly a desire to present adolescent school shooters as other, to remove the possibility of understanding in favour of exclusive condemnation. In his essay entitled 'Guns', Stephen King observes that when real life shooters are identified, "we get to look at a yearbook photo in which the guy looks pretty much like anybody [but the] search is already under way for a photo where he will look like your worst nightmare" (2013, n.p.).

This is where the issue of voice becomes so relevant, as it is only Charlie of the two characters discussed in this chapter that is able to counter this overt demonisation and begin to explain – although not justify – his actions, providing a narrative of causality and eliciting, to a certain degree, a measure of sympathy for himself. The subsequent muting of shooters within literary narratives of school shootings reinforces a thorough expulsion from society, one that is not even inflicted upon the serial killer (such as Lindsay's Dexter or Oates' Quentin) or the child murderer (such as Homes' Chappy). Literary characters who commit school shootings, such as Kevin in Shriver's novel, Jesus in D. B. C. Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, Nick in Jennifer Brown's *The Hate List*, and Mitchell, Duncan, and Jeremy in Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!*, all lack the opportunity to speak for themselves. But not only are they muted in the literature, but there is the suggestion that individuals who go on to commit such violence see themselves as already muted or unheard. The ceremonial and highly conspicuous staging of a school shooting, when read as a spectacle of self-expression that may involve an elaborately conspicuous suicide, indicates that the violence in itself is a form of prosthetic voice. The muting of school shooters within literature could therefore be compounding an existing problem, in which adolescent boys already feel silenced. Ultimately, the

retrospective silencing of Charlie Decker, the textual isolation and marginalisation of Kevin Khatchadourian and his literary contemporaries, and the suggestion that – even before their violence – they were already a muted group, means that the whole story is not only being avoided but perhaps even stifled.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with a quotation taken from Fast's *Ceremonial Violence* (2008), in which the author claimed that "to fully understand what has occurred – to get to the heart of it – one must hear the whole story" (p. 19), yet this is not something that happens within American literature. Perhaps at present, the school shooter is all too real and frightening close. The serial killer remains a shadowy and almost unrealistic figure, and one that has been mythologised on both the page and screen through countless examples, some of which are so elaborate (for example, Hannibal Lecter) that they can safely be relegated to the world of the imagination. In contrast, the school shooter remains alarmingly quotidian and is often described as the boy next door. Frequently depicted as a lonely and marginalised member of the school community, and at others times as simply indistinct, he is all too real. Perhaps more frightening than the threat of the hidden violent individual in the neighbourhood, the school shooter is the hidden violent individual in the home. He is not the stranger or the neighbour, but the son and the brother. To give him a voice is firstly to acknowledge he exists as a human being and not simply as a weapon of destruction or an agent of violence, secondly to raise the suggestion that he himself may have been a victim, and thirdly to address the troubling concern that society does not know why exactly he comes to exist and what to do about him. But regardless of how difficult this may be, it is vitally important to see him as both human and victim, as he is both, and within the literature it is only through engaging directly with him that this can be achieved. Michael J. Roque argues in favour of more research into school shootings in order to establish "firm policy conclusions" (2012, p. 304), and with this in mind the muting of the school shooter becomes an issue not simply of literary interest but of sociological concern. By choosing to omit the perspective of the shooter and thus preventing a consideration of his side

of the story, he is all the more distant and hard to reach, becoming someone or something unfathomable. By omitting the human and vulnerable side of him, and having him simply a narrative device or an agent of chaos, he slowly slips further away and into the distance.

In light of such difficult issues, it seems that the reason for the shooter's absence in violent-eye American literature is because it is easier to present him as evil and therefore incomprehensible, someone whose voice and perspective are neither solicited nor tolerated. This chapter concludes the thesis by not only pointing out the literary absence of the school shooter since Columbine, but also that this can be read as a cultural reaction to the traumatic events that have taken place in schools across the United States, particularly from the 1990s onwards. The result is the silencing of a voice that, whilst not pleasant, nevertheless needs to be heard in order to begin understanding the bigger picture and addressing the problem at hand. Yet at present, rather than being seen as a deeply troubled boy who has committed an act of atrocity, instead the school shooter is perhaps the closest thing to a wholly unsympathetic character that exists within post-1990s American literature, and as such continual immersion in his thoughts and feelings are, at least for now, considered intolerable.

## Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, the texts discussed in this thesis combine to form a sub-genre, with overlapping themes and cohesive narrative patterns. As works of literature and also brutal accounts of violence, many violent-eye novels testify to what Patrick O'Donnell interprets as “the human imagination’s astonishing capacity to alternate freely between beauty and monstrosity, and to find one in the other” (2010, p. 13). My chapters show how violent-eye novels are dualistic, fluctuating between the beautiful and the horrific, and the banal and the exceptional. At the heart of each one is the violent-eye protagonist, whose first-person narrative exposes both the man and the monster. It is a conspiratorial and confessional narrative, yet often without the element of repentance or remorse. It is a narrative preoccupied with exposing the reader to continuous immersion into the thoughts of its violent and murderous protagonist, an individual more commonly found in the form of the antagonist. And through such continuous immersion, narratives of causality rise to the surface, offering explanations for the violence within.

The first two chapters explored the use of analepses of childhood and adolescent trauma in violent-eye fiction as a method of presenting the protagonist as deserving of sympathy, and thus not wholly ‘bad’. Such an aetiological explanation is often localised in the mother during childhood and the father *and* the mother during adolescence. However, ontologically violent characters do exist, albeit problematically so when coupled with homosexuality as argued in Chapter Three. Yet despite the suggestion in some narratives that the protagonists are innately violent, aetiological violence as a result of trauma is a more dominant theme. Mark Seltzer (1998), as mentioned in Chapter One, summarises this as “wounded as a child, wounding as an adult”, and argues that child abuse is “one of the foundational scripts in accounting for the serial killer” (p. 4). This would explain the prevalence of trauma in violent-eye fiction, yet it does not justify the extent to which the mother is blamed for the evolution of the violent-eye protagonist from damaged child to violent adult.

Although explicitly the focus of Chapter One, the pathogenic mother remains relevant throughout this thesis and is frequently omnipresent in the narratives of violent individuals. She is directly traumatising in *The End of Alice* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, defined as the subject in the object formation of the violent son. She is implicated as responsible for corrupting the innocent child and turning him into the violent man, and yet where there is the suggestion that she herself might be a victim of trauma, emphasis remains on the maternal figure due to the shifting of blame onto the grandmother, the pathogenic mother of the traumatised daughter, who in turn becomes the pathogenic mother of the violent son. Yet even when sons grow up and enter adolescence, a time more associated with the father, the mother remains relevant, as I argued in Chapter Two (and in Wilson-Scott 2017), and as discussed in Chapter Three she is also implicitly found in the figure of the homosexual man, as a result of her association with his putative effeminacy. Thus, there is the “belief that a mother is to blame for her son’s aberrations and crimes” (van den Oever 2012, p. 5), and this is a persistent conviction, challenging the assumption that mother blaming has faded and even disappeared from American cultural consciousness since the 1980s. Not only has she traumatised her boys in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *The End of Alice*, but she has weakened her sons in *Fight Club*, repulsed her child with the bad breast in *Zombie*, and must take the spotlight and stand in for her violent son in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The pathogenic mother is a presence in all four chapters of this thesis, woven in as a common thread amongst novels about violent men. To borrow from Walt Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself*, “there is nothing greater than the mother of men” (1855, p. 27), yet when interpreted alongside violent-eye narratives, the “greatness” or significance of these figures can take on a distinctly pejorative element: there is nothing more significant than the mother of violent men.

An acknowledgement of the persistent presence of the pathogenic mother, however, does not preclude the application of blame elsewhere. Trauma can originate in the actions or inactions of the father, or in an individual’s sense of incompleteness or lack. But aside from its origins, what is of further interest is the stage of the novel in which the trauma, whatever it may be, is revealed. Within violent-eye narratives, an important distinction can be made between analeptic trauma and contextual trauma.

The first refers to novels in which the already violent-eye narrator is met *in medias res*, and thus trauma is alluded to as something existing in the past, revealed and approached only through memory. The second type is here loosely termed contextual trauma to refer to that which occurs during the events of the novel. Whilst Homes' *The End of Alice*, King's *Rage*, Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, Oates' *Zombie*, and Palahniuk's *Fight Club* all fall into the first category, only de Grazia's *American Skin* falls into the latter, with the novel commencing with the loss of Alex's family and home. Whilst trauma does not have to exist in a narrative for it to be considered violent-eye, with Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* and Oates' *Zombie* serving as examples, there is nevertheless a strong and recurring theme of analeptic trauma found within the sub-genre.

What makes such trauma of particular interest is twofold. First, it attests to issues of reliability, in that analeptic trauma involves memory rather than being documented by the narrator as an event that takes place during the novel. Second, it serves to establish a greater tension between the vilification and victimisation of the violent-eye protagonists. Analeptic trauma precludes a prescriptive reading from the outset that establishes the protagonist as worthy of sympathy, as the path towards their corruption and eventual violence in narratives with contextual trauma at the outset is an incremental one, easing the reader into the notion that the initially victimised character might eventually possess undesirable qualities and transform into the victimiser. The use of analeptic trauma reverses this process, and forces the reader to accept the protagonist first and foremost as a violent individual, with their sympathetic aspects gradually revealed through analepses. As a consequence, violent-eye narratives involving analeptic trauma immerse the reader more thoroughly and immediately into the violent mind. Not only is this characteristic of the majority of the texts in the sub-genre, especially when we add to the list Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* and *Pop. 1280*, Ellroy's *Killer on the Road*, and Ellis' *American Psycho*, but it also tests the assertion that continuous immersion in such minds would be intolerable. Furthermore, it serves to place far greater emphasis on trauma, which becomes revelatory rather than anecdotal, sometimes contradicting the wider narrative context. It is the 'analeptic short story' within the larger narrative whole that forces readers to reposition their understanding,

casting new light on a situation or a protagonist and challenging existing assumptions. Trauma thus revealed has the ability to expose a sympathetic element of a previously unsympathetic protagonist.

So, to return to my premise, is there such a thing as a wholly unsympathetic character? I suggested at the outset that there is not, and evidence can be found in many of the novels to corroborate this proposition, primarily in relation to trauma. Not all humans may be able to empathise with others, but all humans are deserving of empathy. Violent-eye texts, as has been argued, are simultaneously narratives of causality, in which the protagonists are revealed, either contextually or analeptically, to have suffered – often deeply and gravely – a trauma that sets them on the path towards adult violence, with the eventual brutality often a direct response to or even product of the childhood suffering. Chapter Three proposed that where such an aetiological explanation is lacking, the suggestion is an ontological violence that is unavoidable, and intricately linked with homosexuality. Despite how pejorative and problematic this suggestion is, the focus remains on an individual who simply cannot help themselves. As a result, emphasis shifts from dialogues of good versus evil. Instead, the mundane and quotidian narrative presented by the first-person perspective, which reveals not only atrocious horrors but all the foibles and banal aspects of the protagonist's personality, serves to provide the reader with the familiar face and the shock of recognition to which McGinn (1997) referred, as discussed in the Introduction. But in order to thoroughly question the existence of the wholly unsympathetic character, it is insufficient to analyse only those narratives that continuously immerse the reader in the mind of the violent individual, and thus fall within the remit of violent-eye fiction. It is not enough to look at violent-eye characters alone, but rather it is necessary to consider whether there are individuals who are not included in this category, and if so, then why.

Chapter Four looked at the muting of the school shooter since the 1990s, and the tendency to talk about him in narratives written from the perspectives of others rather than hearing his thoughts directly, uncensored and unadulterated. The shooter has been revealed to be largely absent from violent-eye literature, which indicates that such a figure may be considered wholly unsympathetic. The young adult who kills his

peers is not a violent-eye character because, we can assume, continuous immersion in his mind may be considered to be intolerable, precisely because he is viewed as undeserving of sympathy. This is not to suggest that real-life school shooters are wholly unsympathetic and that they do not warrant understanding, but rather that they are culturally positioned as beyond society's ability to empathise, for now. The absence of the school shooter also suggests that they are not to be listened to, and thus the muting of the school shooter since the 1990s becomes all the more profound, especially given the potential for such individuals to already see themselves as unheard, unacknowledged, and even silenced.

So having charted the violent-eye protagonist through childhood in Chapter One, adolescence in Chapter Two, and adult sexuality in Chapter Three, the absence of the school shooter in Chapter Four not only tested the parameters of the sub-genre and questioned who, at present, can be considered deserving of sympathy, it also concluded this analysis of violence and voice in American literature of the 1990s onwards. Taken together, these chapters show that violent-eye novels are narratives of causality, which removes the suggestion of a character as ever being wholly unsympathetic. Perhaps David Lodge is correct that such a narrative would be intolerable, yet the absence of the school shooter's narrative from the sub-genre is not necessarily because such a perspective would be unendurable. Rather, by giving such stigmatised individuals a voice through a literary avatar, readers would be forced to grapple with the tension between monstrosity and humanity – as they are in all violent-eye novels – and it is arguable that the latter would be the greatest challenge and prompt the most concern, as it would necessitate breaking down preconceived notions of violent murderers and induce readers to see them as deeply troubled boys. Future novels may indeed tackle this issue of representation, but for now the violent-eye school shooter remains muted in American literature.

Beyond the scope of this thesis but of future scholarly interest are three, to my mind, intriguing lines of inquiry, which as offshoots of this larger study could serve to both complement and expand upon research on violent-eye literature. The first is the frequent trope within violent-eye narratives of the doppelganger, or the fraternal other.

Whilst this is perhaps most clearly realised in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, through the involuntary creation of Tyler Durden as Joe's double, the fraternal other is also found in *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (Dexter and his brother Brian), *American Skin* (Alex and Tim), *Exquisite Corpse* (Andrew and Jay), and *Rage* (Charlie and Ted), as well as other violent-eye narratives such as Ellroy's *Killer on the Road* (Martin and Ross) and, indeed, Ellis' *American Psycho*, with Patrick frequently mistaken for a variety of fraternal others. Whilst not all of these relationships are purely brotherly, I use the term 'fraternal other' primarily because all of the doppelgangers – itself a somewhat misleading term in this instance – are male and of a similar age to the violent-eye protagonists, and are positioned as fellow conspirators or opposites. These doubles are diverse in their manifestations, with some imaginary, some idealised to the point of semi-deification, some heroic, some even more villainous than the narrator, some simultaneously paternal and fraternal, and others romantic. What they all attest to, however, is a sense of duality, which when approached comparatively would further facilitate an understanding of violent-eye fiction. Why is there the need for the fraternal other? Does he indicate, even obliquely, a split in the narrator's psyche? Is he perhaps indicative of the violent-eye protagonist's own insecurity, as by focussing on the fraternal other, the narrator essentially holds up a lens for comparison and scrutiny? Or is he a means of transferring prestige and power, someone to provide a sense of legitimacy coupled with intimacy? Perhaps he enables the narrator to retain a sense of reality, a grip on the world through an individual who embodies qualities he wishes he possessed. Can the fraternal other also be seen as a moral compass, serving when villainous to render the narrator, by comparison, as more relatable, and when heroic (or even just good) to situate the narrator as all the more violent and deviant? Finally, as all of the fraternal others in these novels are eventually removed, often through physical death, does this symbolise a form of self-annihilation? Through the frequent presence – and eventual absence – of the fraternal other, more can be said about the violent-eye protagonist, and such doppelgangers are worthy of analysis in their own right.

Secondly, in Chapter Four brief reference was made to Matthew Quick's first-person narrative *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* within the context of school shooting novels. Not only was the text deemed to fall outside of this category, as Leonard

eventually decides not to shoot his former friend, but it was also not included as a violent-eye novel for the same reason: ultimately, Leonard is not violent. It is the eventual absence of violence from the narrative, despite the suggestion of it throughout, which prevents inclusion in the violent-eye category. Yet reflecting upon the thesis as a whole, this may be a limiting approach to take. Novels such as *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* offer continuous immersion in the mind of a violent individual, not because the protagonists are violent in action but because they are violent in intent. Criminal law can perhaps be of use here, thanks to the distinction between *mens rea*, or the guilty mind, and *actus reus*, or the guilty act. Whilst a combination of the two is required for criminal liability, they are not the same thing. So is the mentality of Leonard any less violent than, say, Charlie Decker in *Rage*? The most significant distinction between Leonard and Charlie is that the latter's narrative includes a documentation of his actual violence, his guilty actions, but the guilty mind is present in both, and thus the continual immersion within it. A development of this thesis would be to explore in more detail issues surrounding genre and inclusion, and question whether a novel can be considered violent-eye if it includes the guilty mind but not the guilty act. This would also feed back into questions of morality, as it raises the issue of whether some violent-eye narrators, due to their amorality, lack the guilty mind. Within violent-eye literature, are the guilty mind and the guilty act of equal importance? Do both need to be present, or is violent intent sufficient? Whilst I would argue that at present the sub-genre is tightly coded, consideration should be given to whether there is scope to widen the parameters of what can be considered a violent-eye narrative.

Finally, within the context of violent-eye literature, and following on from the absence of the school shooter discussed in Chapter Four, what can be said about the terrorist? Whilst he is found in nascent form in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, through the nihilistic anarchy of Project Mayhem, the post 9/11 violent-eye version is largely absent. John Updike's (2006) *Terrorist* brings us close, as his third-person narrative "takes the reader into the mind of a home-grown jihadist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy" (Morley 2016,

p. 4), but what of the first-person narrator?<sup>1</sup> Is he muted, like the school shooter, or is he problematized due to American notions of good or bad, and considerations of what counts as American? After all, the terrorist is not only positioned as unsympathetic but frequently as un-American, despite the presence of home-grown terrorists throughout the twentieth-century and beyond. Yet with this figure, we can look ahead and speculate on the future of violent-eye fiction. Borrowing again from David McWilliam (2016), American moral panic in the 1980s and 1990s was intricately intertwined with the serial killer and the school shooter, respectively, but this changed after the turn of the millennium, when the terrorist came to occupy centre stage in American dialogues of fear. So, can we expect to see the terrorist appearing more in violent-eye fiction? Can we presume to find more, or any, narratives written from his perspective? If the school shooter associated with the moral panic of the 1990s remains muted, is this likely? Could the absence of the terrorist be a simplistic and fearful rejection of a figure that challenges American understandings of what exactly it means to be American, and who falls into this category?

To conclude, the violent-eye protagonist is a distinctly human figure, yet is an individual defined by both his familiarity and his alterity. He not only stands amongst the legion of violent characters in American literature, but speaks for them, reminding the reader that there is always another side to the story, even if it is not a pleasant one. Perhaps violent-eye literature is a response to what Seltzer identified in the 1990s as an “insatiable public demand [...] for accessible, entertaining information of psychological disturbances” (1998, p. 110), but equally there may be something more at play here. For Deborah Wills, “perhaps the most unsettling aspect of [...] unsettling texts is that, within them, such [violence] is depicted as neither unnatural nor singular, but as deeply woven into the cultural fabric” (2014, p. 80). As argued in Chapter Four, cropping the bigger picture leaves a distorted image, one that does not take into consideration such a cultural fabric as a whole. To borrow again from Jonathan Fast, “to fully understand

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<sup>1</sup> Following on from the discussion above about intent version action, it is also relevant to note that Ahmad, like Leonard Peacock, ultimately decides not to commit violence.

what has occurred – to get to the heart of it – one must hear the whole story” (2008, p. 19). This, potentially, is where violent-eye literature, especially as narratives of causality, is of its most significant importance. It is only by giving a voice to all, even those with ugly or even horrific things to say, that society as a whole comes to be reflected, and the bigger picture revealed. And through this, there is the potential to understand better “what has occurred”, and perhaps even to begin to address pressing socio-cultural concerns and mitigate violent trajectories that result in cyclical patterns of suffering.

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