

# No Room of Her Own

## *Struggling Mothers in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction*

Ingeborg Bruun Midtsem



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Ingeborg Bruun Midtsem

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Ingeborg Bruun Midtsem

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# 1 Introduction

This project started with a reading of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003). It made a deep impression on me and I found that I wanted to write about the problematic relationship between mother and child. Based on a recommendation from my supervisor I chose to study Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), which I had read before, and watch Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), which I had only heard of but never seen. All of these texts treat the subject of the difficult mother and child relationship, but I was surprised to see how much they actually had in common. All of them use space as a metaphor to reveal how the mothers feel restricted by lack of privacy and communication, and all of them show how the mothers must break taboos in order to live out their identity.

Works of non-fiction, like for instance Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels' *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (2004), Barbara Almond's *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood* (2010) and Janice Loreck's *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* (2016) explore the mechanisms at work in our society that have shaped the idea of how women should always be happy in motherhood or conform to the ideal of the feminine woman.

'I'm not grieving. I'm gestating. Fucking rage.' These words are uttered by Ruth, the protagonist in Alice Lowe's film *Prevenge* (2017). Dictated and controlled by her unborn baby, she goes on a killing spree to get revenge over the people who she believes are to blame for the accident that killed her boyfriend. Ruth is angry about having to give birth to his child when she still grieves her loss. She also feels that the baby threatens her identity when it says that it will make Ruth suffer if she does not do as it says. Ruth's rampage is a part of a bigger trend in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture, where women have started speaking up against the expectations and norms that women face. Lynne Ramsay's film adaptation of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) with Tilda Swinton and Ezra Miller as Eva and Kevin, and Lenny Abrahamson's *Room* (2016) with Brie Larson and Jacob Tremblay as Ma and Jack have contributed to the popularity and the visibility of the novels. These works, in addition to the primary works in this

thesis, show that since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have begun to open up about how women experience society's expectations.

In this thesis I argue that Eva, Amelia and Ma feel bound by the mother role. They lack space in their relation to their son and I argue that in order to be able to break free from this restrictive kind of motherhood they must break taboos and become unmotherly, and in that way return as a redefined mother, free from the expectations set by society.

## 1.1 Method

In the first chapter called 'No Room of Her Own', I close read the three texts in order to establish how the texts use spatial metaphors in conveying Eva, Amelia and Ma's experience of motherhood. I deliberately use the word 'text' for all the primary works in spite of one of them being a film. The reason why I do this, is that I perform the same kind of analysis of this work as the novels, 'close watching' it in a similar manner to the close reading of the novels.

The title I have chosen points to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. In the second chapter I perform a textual analysis based on close reading of *A Room of One's Own* in order to show how Woolf connects the idea of physical space with the idea of mental freedom, and how ideas of the woman's place are connected to the idea of the woman as a feminine being. In Woolf's text space is connected with women's status in literature as a representation of their status in society. Woolf shows the necessity of ridding oneself of the burden of gender norms, and I argue that the problems the mothers face are connected to their status as female parents. Between the mothers and the freedom of the androgynous space that Woolf imagines, there lies the notion of the feminine woman. Using excerpts from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* as well as the *Oxford English Dictionary* I show how mothers, as female parents, face different kinds of expectations than fathers do, and that these expectations are connected to the idea of the feminine woman. This idea sets a standard for motherhood that the women in the primary texts struggle to meet. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf reveals this idea to be a fiction. She removes the notion of femininity from the woman's room and argues that

only when women are able to do the same in their relation to the world, can they be really free to express their entire Self. I argue that the mothers must do the same in motherhood. They must remove themselves from the standard of motherhood, based, as it is, on the idea of the feminine woman. The 'good mother' is just as much of a fiction as the 'feminine woman', and like the latter it makes it difficult to be mothers on their own premises just as Woolf's fictional femininity stands in the way of expressing the Self.

In chapter three I argue that the way the mothers do this, is to step over the borders into the very inappropriateness that the motherhood standard restricts. I base this chapter on Julia Kristeva's theory on the abject as she writes it in *Powers of Horror*, and show how the mothers end up facing their trouble with femininity by first becoming the opposite of what the 'ideal' mother is. By using Barbara Creed's reading of the same text in her work *The Monstrous-Feminine* I illustrate how the abject is very much connected to the idea of the feminine woman, and, consequently, the 'good mother'. By stepping over the borders of appropriate mother behaviour and become unmotherly, they no longer conform to the norm of femininity, and they experience the freedom of being able to express the frustration that they have repressed. Eva and Amelia shout obscenities at their sons and are violent, and Ma takes an overdose of painkillers that makes her vomit. Internalizing the idea of the 'unfeminine woman' and the 'bad mother' only to expel it out of their bodies make it possible for them to rid their bodies, as well as their minds, of these expectations. Their bodies become free of the norms of the feminine gender, which allows them to express their Self and be mothers in a way that is not based on the expectations created from ideas about their biology. The result is that Woolf's hope for the women of the future is realized in the mother's claiming of their space and of their body.



## 2 No Room of Her Own

In this chapter I present textual analyses based on close readings of the three primary works. I show how I read the women to be struggling in the relationship with their sons because they lack privacy, and discuss how the works use spatial metaphors in order to establish this as a lack of physical space.

### 2.1 *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

#### 2.1.1 The Inevitable Outcome

Eva's narrative about bringing up Kevin is a mother's attempt at understanding why her son ended up as a killer. In the novel's present, Eva seems to think that what happened on that Thursday was unavoidable. 'Our son. Who is not a smattering of small tales but one long one. And though the natural impulse of yarn spinners is to begin at the beginning, I will resist it. I have to go further back. So many stories are determined before they start' (Shriver 14). She feels the need to go even further back than Kevin's birth in order to tell the story about Kevin. She explores her own part in the things that came to pass, but she does not take a stand on who is to blame. Instead she seems to find a kind of comfort in the belief that Kevin's later actions are inherent in him from the very beginning, and the narrative builds up under this inevitability. In Eva's reality, her son was always going to be a killer. This belief shines out of her retelling of earlier incidents in Kevin's life and of her own thoughts at the time. What Eva does is to construct Kevin's personality in her narration in an effort to take control of her own story.

She resents her son even before he is born because she feels that he threatens her understanding of herself. He threatens what her life used to be like as well as what her body used to feel and look like. Her body is suddenly given a different purpose in her understanding of herself, which angers her. 'Lo, everything that made me pretty was

intrinsic to motherhood, and my very desire that men find me attractive was the contrivance of a body designed to expel its own replacement' (Shriver 61). She blames him for the way it feels different, as if it no longer belongs to her, even though these changes are caused by hormones. The childbirth is difficult and Eva is convinced that Kevin does not want to be born, and that this is the reason why it takes so long to get him out. In fact, she is the one holding back and not wanting to push, because she still resists the idea of becoming a mother. During Kevin's birth Eva admits to herself that she hates him. '... I even hated the baby—which so far had not brought me hope for the future and story and content and "a turn of the page" but unwieldiness and embarrassment and a rumbling subterranean tremor quaking through the very ocean floor of who I thought I was' (Shriver 89-90). Eva is uneasy around her son from the very start and interprets all his difficult baby behaviour as signs of an evil personality. After Kevin is born she is afraid of him because she thinks of him as a person who is, and already has been, through no fault of his own yet, capable of doing a lot of damage.

Eva's relationship with her son is based on a deep-rooted mistrust. Apart from the fact that Kevin sometimes does bad things, Eva attributes his actions with a sense of malice or evil that really is her subjective opinion. For instance, when the three-year-old Kevin destroys his own birthday cake, the way Eva describes how he has done it, by 'plunging both hands mid-cake and spreading its whole body apart in a single surgical motion', reminds her of scenes in medical TV shows where a collapsing patient has his or her chest brutally opened up in order for the doctor to perform heart surgery. Kevin did not just play with the cake, Eva thinks, he 'ripped its heart out' (Shriver 138). What is important to note here is that this is Eva's subjective retelling of Kevin's actions. Though he behaves very badly, and maybe even destroys the cake because he knows that it is bad to do so, what Eva so strongly communicates in these lines is not motive for or result of her son's actions, but an underlying state of mind, a range of emotions, which she herself adds to the scene. What she witnesses reminds her of something else, which further influences what light she sees her son in, and the words she uses to describe the incident reveals how she sees him. 'A single surgical motion' suggests a coolness and lack of affect, and using these words she juxtaposes her three-year-old with a steady-handed surgeon. This, however, is where the doctor comparison stops. She calls the cake a 'body', but where a doctor tries to save lives, Eva claims that Kevin

has ripped the cake's heart out. What is important to remember is that Kevin's personality as Eva understands it and his actions are two very different things. Kevin is an agent in the world of the novel; he can move around and interact with people, and his actions are objective truths within the novel's 'reality', which is built up to represent our, the readers', reality. However, his personality, that is, the thoughts, moods, feelings and drives that make him perform the actions, is nothing but Eva's understanding of what her son is like. The form of the novel makes it impossible for the readers to really know who Kevin is on the inside. Rather it is Eva who constructs Kevin in her narration. This narration takes place a long time after the event and may be coloured by what Kevin ended up doing, but this kind of retelling of a three-year-old's actions gives us reason to believe that Eva thinks of her son as a cold-blooded killer long before ended up killing anyone. Because she never really wants a child in the first place, Eva wonders whether her lack of the 'motherhood gene' contributed to what would happen later.

*By the time I gave birth to Kevin at thirty-seven, I had begun to anguish over whether, by not simply accepting this defect, I had amplified an incidental, perhaps merely chemical deficiency into a flaw of Shakespearean proportions (31).*

This is the closest she gets to putting any kind of direct blame on herself, but more than anything it shows how she views Kevin's crime as predetermined. A point which further strengthens this argument is Eva's resolve to give more of herself to motherhood and her reasons for doing this. During her three-month journey to Africa to research a new volume of *A Wing and a Prayer* she gets time apart from her family and space to think, and she realizes that motherhood will give her only what she puts into it. 'I had to get pregnant with Kevin all over again. Like his birth, raising our son could be a transporting experience, but only if I stopped fighting it' (Shriver 141). In hindsight, however, she admits that her new resolve to give someone else the main responsibility of her business and to meet Kevin halfway is cosmetic. 'I thought it looked good,' she writes to Franklin (145), and this leads her to think that already back in 1987 she was planning her defence in what ended up being a court case about her mothering skills. The problem with Eva's narration is that we can never know what anyone thought at any point, not even Eva herself, because all of her reflections are made in hindsight, and she might have been more earnest at the time than she thinks she was

## 2.1.2 Motherhood and Architecture

Eva feels oppressed in motherhood and suffers from lack of space for herself. Shriver exemplifies this feeling of oppression in architecture. Eva puts a lot of meaning into how a house feels and whether or not she thinks it fits her personality. Franklin buys a new house for them without telling her, and she hates it from the moment she lays her eyes on it.

*A flat-roofed, single-storied expanse of glass and sandy brick, at a glance it resembled the headquarters of some slick, do-gooding conflict-resolution outfit with more money than it knew what to do with, where they'd give "peace prizes" to Mary Robinson and Nelson Mandela. . . . Every morning I woke to its glib surfaces, its smart design features, its sleek horizontal contours, and actively hated it (153-154).*

*[The] wide plate glass windows advertised an eternal open house. . . . The foyer dribbled into a living room the size of a basketball court, and then up a couple of low stairs was the dining "room," partially segmented from the kitchen with a divider to pass food through. . . . I had yet to lay eyes on one door. I panicked, thinking, There's nowhere to hide. . . . All the angles in our massive bedroom were askew, its ceiling slanted. The effect was jangled, and the evident distrust of standard parallels and perpendiculars, like the whole building's uneasiness with the concept of rooms, felt insecure. . . . You had bought us some other family's Dream Home (155-156).*

The house that Franklin has bought is the complete opposite of what Eva wants. Her dream home is an old Victorian house that is full of history but needs constant repairs, a house where their second-hand furniture and the souvenirs from her many trips all over the world do not look out of place. She wants a house that has many stories to tell, like herself, and which invites them to continue its story. In the house that Franklin has bought, however, Eva feels that there is room neither for her history, nor for their old treasures. She feels that the only stories it has to tell is of being built and of having its owners drift apart and get a divorce. She does not see how she fits in in its history because, its past apart, the future that the house promises is one that Eva does not want: '[T]he platform cried out for barbecues with neighbors I did not much like. The swordfish steaks would be raw one minute, overcooked the next, and I would care' (156). She is afraid that the lack of security and private space will eliminate the person she used to be and force her to become something she is not. In other words, she is afraid of being stuck in someone else's story. Eva, in the new, modern, all-too-perfect



house, feels like an old, colourful rug that does not fit in. Though the house is original there is no personality, and this is what unsettles Eva. It is too new and there is no love inside the walls. Like in her relationship with Kevin, the house on Palisades Parade is one where she cannot hide. No doors means that there is no privacy, just as Kevin's existence means that she loses contact with the person she used to be. The way she feels a mutual resistance during Kevin's birth, she feels that she and the new house are not meant to be: 'The house resisted me every bit as much as I resisted it. Nothing fit. There were so few right angles that a simple chest of drawers slid into a corner always left an awkward triangle of unfilled space' (Shriver 179). In this passage we see how Eva's old life does not fit into her new life. There are many things she used to do that she has had to forsake and she is afraid of losing herself when becoming Kevin's mother. The new house comes to represent all the things Eva has to forsake and the building is not unlike Kevin in the way that it shows lack of emotions and makes her feel uncomfortable. It is only in the similarities in the way Kevin and the new house are described, but Eva actually compares her children with homes in a more direct way at a later point in her narrative. Reflecting upon the difference between Kevin and Celia and how this was obvious to her the minute Celia was born, Eva writes to Franklin,

*I'm not sure if you could tell the difference instantly, though once Celia was fed, tied off, swabbed, and handed over to her father, you did return her rather quickly. . . . [T]he years ahead would later confirm my initial intuition: that you could tell the difference, and that the difference made you angry. I imagine you bristling with a similar resistance if, after living for years in our fatally middlebrow Dream Home, you walked into the Victorian one with the porch swing, dumbwaiter, and mahogany balustrade and learned it was for sale. You'd wish you'd never seen it, and something in you would hate it a bit. On tramping back into our hackneyed cathedral of teak, the scales would fall from your eyes, and you'd see only a slag heap of pretensions, your brave capacity for rounding up crippled for life (Shriver 262-263).*

The house consists mostly of open spaces and there are few rooms with doors. Eva has few places to be alone and hide from Kevin's gaze and the lack of privacy makes her feel paranoid. It creates awkward triangles of unfilled space, which is a fitting description of the little family. With Kevin in her life Eva feels uncomfortable, and something is missing between them. The fact that Eva hates their new house and that she was not in on the decision to buy it can be read as a metaphor for her attitude to motherhood as a whole. Even though it was very much her own decision to become a

mother—Franklin, after all, did not push her into motherhood—she feels that she has been handed something she did not ask for. In the same way that she wanted a child, but not one like Kevin, Eva wanted to move, but not to a house like that on Palisades Parade. In Shriver’s novel the Dream Home becomes a spatial metaphor for motherhood as Eva experiences it with Kevin. Both the boy and the building make her uncomfortable and paranoid, but Eva, in feeling the effect of both on her body, exposes the illusion of the Dream Home and of motherhood.

*I have a theory about Dream Homes. Not for nothing does “folly” mean both foolhardy mistake and costly ornamental building. Because I’ve never seen a Dream Home that works. Like ours, some of them almost work, though unqualified disasters are equally common. Part of the problem is that regardless of how much money you lavish on oak baseboards, a unhistoryed house is invariably cheap in another dimension. Otherwise, the trouble seems rooted in the nature of beauty itself, a surprisingly elusive quality and rarely one you can buy outright. It flees in the face of too much effort. It rewards casualness, and most of all it deigns to arrive by whim, by accident (Shriver 157).*

For Eva, it is not possible to create a new Dream Home because the very act of trying too hard makes the things that are supposed to make it perfect slip away, like trying to remember a dream. In the same manner, Eva knows that she is waiting for a feeling in her pregnancy and in her motherhood that will never come, simply because she tries too hard.

*For years I’d been awaiting that overriding urge I’d always heard about, the narcotic pining that draws childless women ineluctably to stranger’s strollers in parks. I wanted to be drowned by the hormonal imperative, to wake one day and throw my arms around your neck, reach down for you, and pray that while that black flower bloomed behind my eyes you had just left me with child (Shriver 31).*

The wonderful sensation of bearing a child and becoming a mother that ‘all’ mothers talk about never hits her. She does not have a positive attitude to pregnancy and she is never swept away by her own hormones into a blissful mother-to-be state.

For fear of ‘evaporating’ (180), Eva feels the need of something and somewhere to call her own, as she explicitly expresses in her need of her own study. This is important for her because she is not in on the decision to buy the house, and because their moving happens to coincide with her year away from work to focus on her

mothering. She claims one of the few rooms in the house that has a door, but more than being able to retire, Eva needs a space where she can express her emotions. The case of the study shows this in that she not only claims that space for herself, but that she feels the need to use it as an expression of who she is on the inside. She decides to cover the walls of that room with old maps from her trips around the world in order to distinguish it from the other rooms of the house. Eva, having spent all her adult life travelling, associates global mobility with freedom. By putting maps on the walls, she not only makes it different from all other rooms in the house, she also turns it into a room where she is not stuck in the mother role. The two Eva's, Eva the Self and Eva the Mother, are distinguished by their travelling. This we can see from the fact that Eva, more or less voluntary, chooses to give up a job that keeps her traveling the world in order to give mothering a new chance; it shows that Eva considers motherhood to be connected with being stationary. The study, then, becomes her own room and she makes it represent her Self, the woman she is apart from the mother role.

*It was gorgeous! Dynamic, quirky, lavishly sentimental. Interstitial train ticket stubs, museum floor plans, and hotel receipts gave the collage an additional personal touch. I had forced one patch of this blank, witless house to mean something (Shriver 182).*

What Eva does is to give the study what her new house has not, namely the qualities of her dream home: dynamic, quirky and lavishly sentimental. She has turned the room into a museum of her past, a room where her old things and her values do not look out of place. In a house that makes her uncomfortable, that one room will provide a place of safety, a place where she is in charge of something. In this way we can see how both the study and the narrative are attempts at getting space under control. Eva likes maps because they give her the power to understand the space she is in and she takes pride in being good at navigating. 'So I associated maps with mastery and may have hoped that, through the literal sense of direction they had always provided, I might figuratively orient myself in this alien life as full-time suburban mother' (Shriver 181).

When Kevin vandalizes her study with ink, he not only destroys her personal space in that house that she has spent months decorating, he also vandalizes a big part of Eva herself, namely the interest that she has used to define herself. Eva needs the study as a place where she can go to see that she is still the same person that she used to be, to

assure herself that that part will never go away. Kevin, however, makes his way into this space and messes it up, not only physically but also figuratively. Her attempt at visiting her old life, so to speak, is futile, because Kevin has made sure that when looking at her study, Eva will never forget Kevin's presence in her life. The act of destroying his mother's maps is symbolic of their relationship because he constantly destroys her opportunities of navigating the space of motherhood. He ceaselessly lays out obstacles and pushes the boundaries of her patience, but this is normal children behaviour, after all. Some of Kevin's bad behaviour may be malice, and some might be ordinary children behaviour that can be corrected. But apart from this there is also an element in Eva's mothering of simply not being able to cope with any of Kevin's bad behaviour. She never really gets used to dealing with any kind of obstinacy on her son's part because she is already convinced that he does it only to frustrate her. When Celia comes along years later, she is always given the benefit of the doubt, even when Eva admits that some of her daughter's behaviour is unfortunate, like for instance her food aversions, which Kevin also has, and her clinginess. 'Celia was not *clingy*. She was affectionate' (269). Eva excuses Celia for her behaviour where she will not do the same with Kevin.

### **2.1.3 Communicative Space**

In Eva's narration, Kevin not only vandalizes her private space, he also messes up the communicational space between her and Franklin. The post-*Thursday* Eva lets it be known that she blames Kevin for coming between her and Franklin, and not just as a result of Thursday, but through his entire life. In her narrational space Eva shows how Kevin comes between them like a wedge that pushes them further and further apart and how he separates her and Franklin both physically and figuratively: 'Though there was a shallow back seat, Kevin's child seat was fastened between us, and I was sorry that I couldn't, as I used to, place a hand on your thigh' (Shriver 147).

*. . . early on we got on opposite sides of something. For many couples who quarrel, just what they are on opposite sides of may be unformed, a line of some sort, an abstraction that divides them—a history or floating grudge, an insensible power*

*struggle with a life of its own: gossamer. Perhaps in times of reconciliation for such couples the unreality of that line assists its dissolve. Look, I can jealously see them noting, there is nothing in the room; we can reach across the sheer air between us. But in our case, what separated us was all too tangible, and if it wasn't in the room it could walk in of its own accord (Shriver 14).*

Miscommunication is at the heart of her problem both in her relationship with Franklin and in her relationship with Kevin. While pregnant with Kevin, and after his birth, Eva finds it difficult to express herself to Franklin in a way that makes him understand how she is feeling about their parenting and her mothering. Eva does not feel at home in Kevin's presence, and because Franklin does not see how Kevin behaves when Eva is alone with their son, she feels alone in her role as parent. Their son makes it difficult for them to communicate because their attitudes to him are so different. Her awkwardness around Kevin is even worse when Franklin is around, because he does not have the same experience with Kevin's behaviour as Eva does. In this way the two parents' relationship with their son pushes them further and further apart from each other. They talk less and less, and Eva finds comfort in talking with their babysitter Siobhan. With her Eva can talk about how she really feels about Kevin, which she cannot do with Franklin. As Eva says, 'I was confiding in Siobhan because I was not confiding in my husband' (117). The fact that the first time Eva hears about Franklin's plan to find a house in the suburbs is not from Franklin, but from Siobhan, shows that Eva and Franklin's relationship has turned into one of miscommunication. Because they are parents to a small child who demands all their attention and who keeps dividing them they no longer have space between them to talk.

With Kevin, Eva's problem is that her own moral and society's norms stand in the way of her truly communicating with her son. She is frustrated with him but does not feel that she can express it in the way she needs. This in turn means that all her attempts at conversations with him are based on the wrong premises. This fact has further negative impact on their communication issues because Kevin knows that she is being false. What happens when Eva snaps and lets her true thoughts be known is that her frustration pushes her over the edge. But the source of her frustration is Kevin, and so in a way it is Kevin who eventually makes Eva break the motherhood taboo and shout and use violence:

*“. . . What’s your problem, you little shit? Proud of yourself, for ruining Mummy’s life?” I was careful to use the insipid falsetto the experts commend. “You’ve got Daddy snowed, but Mummy’s got your number. You’re a little shit, aren’t you? . . . Mummy was happy before widdle Kevin came awong, you know that, don’t you? And now Mummy wakes up every day and wishes she were in France. Mummy’s life sucks now, doesn’t Mummy’s life suck? Do you know there are some days that Mummy would rather be dead? Rather than listen to your screech for one more minute there are some days that Mummy would jump off the Brooklyn Bridge” (125).*

*Hurling our little boy I-didn’t-care-where-besides away, I had heedlessly given over . . . to clawing a chronic, tortuous itch. . . . When hoisting Kevin’s body in that fluid adrenal lift, for once I’d felt graceful, because at last there was an unmediated confluence between what I felt and what I did. It isn’t very nice to admit, but domestic violence has its uses. So raw and unleashed, it tears away the veil of civilization that comes between us as much as it makes life possible. A poor substitute for the sort of passion we like to extol perhaps, but real love shares more in common with hatred and rage than it does with geniality or politeness. For two seconds I’d felt whole, and like Kevin Khatchadourian’s real mother. I felt close to him. I felt like myself—my true, unexpurgated self—and I felt we were finally communicating (232).*

Kevin’s behaviour pushes her over the edge, he makes her cross the border into a space where she, if only for a moment, is free of norms, conventions, moral and rationality. She has so much frustration bottled up that it suddenly gushes out, but she is only able to get it out when Kevin pushes her and Franklin is absent. In this space there is only Eva and her feelings, and here she is truly able to express herself. The fact that she says Kevin’s whole name in the second passage mimics the way the media writes about him and his crime, with their love of his alliterative name. What this shows is that since the memory is being written down in hindsight, she is able to express that she actually, at that time, feels close to Kevin the killer. At times like these they speak the same language and their relationship is at its most earnest.

#### 2.1.4 'I Often Hate You, too, Kevin'

He does the same thing when he removes Franklin from Eva's life. She is alone, husbandless and daughterless, with no one left for whom to pretend that she is a different kind of mother. In the place that Kevin has ended up in after his crime, Claverack Juvenile Correctional Facility, Eva and Kevin can talk without filter. Although he does not say much and clearly shows his resentment, it is a communicative space where Eva does not have to pretend to be the mother she is not: '. . . my role as a mother who stands by her son no matter what is ultimately demeaning—it is mindless, irrational, blind, and sappy, hence a part I might gratefully shed' (48). When Kevin says to Eva, "don't be dragging your ass back here on my account. . . . Because I hate you," Eva does not behave like she knows a mother should,

*I had some idea of what I was supposed to say back: Now I know you don't mean that, when I knew that he did. Or, I love you anyway, young man, like it or not. But I had an inkling that it was following just these pat scripts that had helped to land me in a garish overheated room that smelled like a bus toilet on an otherwise lovely, unusually clement December afternoon. So I said instead, in the same informational tone, "I often hate you, too, Kevin," and turned heel (51).*

The breaking out of the loving, self-sacrificing mother role is the only right thing for Eva to do in her relationship with Kevin because their relationship is at its most earnest when she does not pretend to be unaffected by her son's behaviour. There is only Kevin left and they both know that there is no use for her to keep pretending. Only then does Eva enter the narrative space where she can tell her own story, and where she can express all her feelings without having to correct herself. She can write without filter whenever she needs to process old memories or new incidents.

Space is both room and opportunity. When someone says, 'I need some space,' they do not necessarily mean that they need to put more distance between themselves and other people or the walls of a room. Though it is connected with physical space, this turn of speech means, 'I need to take some time and mull things over in my head.' This way space can actually mean time, in the sense of being able to retreat into an abstract place in the mind. In *Room*, this is what Ma does when she is Gone, and what Eva does in the narrative of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The unfortunate events that led her to the novel's present have, if anything, given her space, in the sense of time, to think. She

is alone, without her daughter or husband, and her son is locked up. There are no family members demanding anything of her, and in her loneliness she has time to reflect upon her own story and what led her to her present situation. In addition to being removed from Kevin physically, Eva's narrative begins one year and seven months after *Thursday*. That means that even though she visits Kevin in Claverack Juvenile Correctional Facility every two weeks, she is also temporally distanced from that fateful day. This affects how she narrates her own thoughts and her experience of being mother to Kevin and Celia. It is a subjective retelling not only of Kevin's life but of her own life, and how that story is told will inevitably be shaped by *Thursday* and hindsight in general. That is why Eva's way of talking about Kevin's behaviour must be taken as present-time musings and rationalizations over past incidents and their consequences, and not as Eva's actual thoughts at the time. In short, the novel's narrator is not really Eva, but post-*Thursday* Eva.

The title *We Need to Talk About Kevin* signals dialogue, a two-way communication about a difficult subject. It draws on a much-used phrase in society and popular culture, a phrase which often breaks the surface in relationships where the water has gotten murky, and foreshadows an uncomfortable confrontation or a dreaded break-up. A thing to note, though, is that 'we need to talk' does not just mean 'we need to talk.' It means, 'I finally have to tell you about how I have been feeling.' This 'I' is important. It is a hidden pronoun, but it nevertheless deprives the original phrase of its 'we,' so that it loses its meaning as an invitation to a dialogue. In laying out the entire story from her point of view, Eva is trying to say all the things she did not have opportunity to explain before, and thus what we are dealing with is not so much 'we need to talk about...' as 'I need to tell you about...'. What we are left with is monologue. There is only one voice in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and that is Eva's, and the hidden meaning behind the title is, 'I need to tell you about Kevin.' Even the retelling of earlier dialogue and exchange of ideas is part of her monologue. In writing letters to Franklin she is creating the space she needs, a space where she can process what has happened while at the same time trying to close the space between them that started to grow between them ever since Kevin was born and which has become impossible to fix now that he is no longer alive. She creates a space where she is able to talk to Franklin again, but the space that her letters provide is a one that only



she fills. She knows that Franklin will never read her letters, but it is not for him that she writes them. She writes them for her own sake and they provide a narrational space where she is in control of what information may enter and what is left out. She has the defining power and she can talk without being interrupted by anyone. She writes on and off for a period of five months, and in the novel's present this allows her to enter that controllable space whenever she needs to think. Like the study is a way of telling a story about who she is, the narrative makes it possible for her to write her own story rather than just living in Kevin's, like she was afraid of all along (37). The space of the novel, then, is a one where Eva-as-narrator is in charge, and her narrative is not objective fact, but subjective fiction.

## **2.2 *The Babadook***

In this section I argue that the problems that Amelia face in motherhood are connected to the problems she faces as a woman, and that the notion of femininity stands in the way of Amelia expressing herself. *The Babadook* opens up a space where she is forced to deal with what has been repressed. In *The Babadook*, Kent visually connects the mother role with the women's role by removing all fathers. In doing this she creates a narrative space that only consists of female parents.

### **2.2.1 The 'Feminine' Mother**

The kitchen scene during Ruby's birthday party shows how Amelia must face the image of the perfect, feminine mother, and how she feels judged by the people around her. As a comment on the traditional gender roles the scene takes place in the kitchen, but these women do not look like people who spend most of their time in the home. The members of this group look like successful career women with well-paid jobs who can pay people to do things for them around the house, and they do not seem tired like Amelia. They give the impression of being somewhat disconnected from their children's upbringing, as is demonstrated by the fact that Claire has given her daughter a doll identical to one she

already owns. When Ruby points this out, Claire offhandedly tells her that the two can be twins and go shopping together. She has not put a lot of thought into her daughter's gift, nor does she seem to care that she did not get it right, and her comment also builds up under the idea that women should be feminine. Only one mother goes out to spend time with the children while the others continue, half-heartedly, to prepare bags of sweets for the children. When Samuel does not want to go and play with the other children, Claire rolls her eyes at Amelia and her friends look at each other meaningfully.

*FRIEND 1 [To Amelia]: Claire tells me you're a writer.*

*AMELIA: Oh... no, not really, not anymore.*

*FRIEND 2: What kind of writing did you do?*

*AMELIA: I wrote some articles for some magazines and did some kids' stuff—*

*CLAIRE [Interrupting]: You just need to get back into it, that's all.*

*FRIEND 1: It must be difficult. I do volunteer work with some disadvantaged women and, w— a few of them have lost their husbands and they find it very hard.*

*[Silence]*

*CLAIRE [To Friend 1, as if nothing has happened]: How's Richard's merger going?*

*FRIEND 1: Oh, good! I-I mean, his workload's just ballooned. I've got the kids twenty-four seven it feels like!*

*CLAIRE: Tell me about it!*

*FRIEND 1: I don't even have time to go to the gym anymore, it's ridiculou-*

*AMELIA [Spitefully]: That's a real tragedy. Not having time to go to the gym anymore, how do you cope? You must have so much to talk about with those poor, disadvantaged women!*

*(0:27:52-0:28:41)*

For Amelia, Claire and her friends represent all the perfect, traditional and stereotypical feminine mothers out there who have it easier than she does and she feels that they judge her because her son does not behave like the other children. The scene is put together in a way that makes us empathize with Amelia in how small they make her feel. It is shot with Amelia in one frame alternating with the other women in another, so that even though two of Claire's friends are also sitting at the table, we get the feeling that they are not sitting together but rather on opposing sides. This is a symbol of how Amelia sees that she does not have support from her sister—on the contrary, rolling her eyes at Amelia, Claire is the one who passes the harshest judgment on her. Amelia faces the group like a student before a panel of examiners. They are all dressed in feminine

dark clothes, their appearance flawless, and even though not all of them are talking they speak to Amelia as a unit. The group is filmed slightly from below, whereas Amelia is filmed from above, which makes them seem big and imposing and further enhances the notion of belittlement. This creates an image of Amelia being alone in facing the judgment of others, and in spite of their tone being polite they do not seem to be able to really see things from Amelia's perspective. Friend 1 means well, but her attempt at being understanding becomes awkward and condescending when she puts Amelia in the same group as the 'disadvantaged women'. The fact that she does voluntary work means that she has time on her hands to do meaningful things without even getting paid, and so she cannot really understand what Amelia is going through. To Amelia the woman's problems are luxury problems. This might actually be the case, but as Samuel's favourite quote runs, 'Life is not always as it seems' (0:20:44-0:20:27). We do not learn much about the women around Claire's table and they might face just as big challenges as Amelia does. The one thing we can be certain of is the fact that Claire is embarrassed about Amelia. She has told her friend that Amelia is a writer when she in fact works as a nurse in nursing home. There might be many reasons as to why Amelia got that job instead of keeping up her writing, but the film does not provide any straightforward answer. She does not seem to enjoy her present job, which gives us reason to believe that the change was made out of a necessity to get a steady income. Although this may be true, what is more important in this case is that for Claire, social status matters. She herself working in an art gallery, she would rather have a sister who is a writer than a sister who is a nurse. She is ashamed of Amelia and the way she in her view so obviously fails in making Samuel behave properly. There is probably more to Claire's friends than meets the eye and they might not look at Amelia the way she does, but the film does not let us give them the benefit of the doubt. As Amelia is the protagonist, we are meant to have the same impression as her. Though she feels that she is alone, the world of *The Babadook* is one where she is actually only one of many 'single' mothers, be they actually single or not. That means that Amelia represents a group of women who, in spite of their differences, all find motherhood challenging. The film paints a picture of a heteronormative world with traditional gender roles where the woman is still the primary homemaker and the one who has the main responsibility of raising children.

### 2.2.2 A World of Women

In this constructed women's space, nothing is done by chance. Take for instance the women's clothes. Amelia, whether she is at work or at home, is mostly dressed in the same kind of pastel-coloured, often collared, dresses, with some kind of cardigan on top. These clothes give the impression of a kind, safe and gentle person. The other mothers wear smart outfits in dark colours that are also quite feminine, but which makes them look more powerful. The world in *The Babadook* is not only a world of women, but one where women are feminine. Kent, then, makes a connection between women, femininity and motherhood, and the landscape she makes out of this connection is the one that Amelia must navigate. Amelia's clothes, of course, are not all that she is; she shows among other things that she can be firm with Samuel and take charge when it comes to his interests in school. However, they give her an appearance of one who has decided to be humble, one who is far removed from her temperament. The Babadook enters this traditionally 'feminine' space and shakes things up. Like the Babadook she hides a darkness underneath her clothes.

As we have seen, the traditional gender roles are demonstrated in the kitchen scene during the party, but the woman's role is referred to more explicitly in the scene where Amelia does the dishes at work, and she and her colleague Robbie joke about the woman's place in the home.

*ROBBIE* [Enters the kitchen]: *Ah, just where a woman should be—in the kitchen!*

*AMELIA* [Smiles]: *“Get to work, woman!”*

*ROBBIE* [Laughs]

*(0:05:05-0:05:14)*

Robbie and Amelia can joke about the traditional role of women because he is not the kind of man who would demand of a woman to stay in the kitchen. Having chosen to work as a nurse, which is a profession mostly dominated by women, and being sensitive to women's needs, he can be read as a representative of the male feminist seeking gender equality. In the film's few scenes with Robbie he comes across as a kind man who has a soft spot for Amelia, and who sees that she is having a hard time as a single parent to Samuel. He offers to cover her shift at work so that she can go home to her son, he brings her flowers and tries to act fatherly towards Samuel, but neither in the

relationship between Amelia and Samuel nor in the film as a whole is there room for this behaviour. Mother and son have unresolved issues that they need to deal with before there is even a chance that Robbie might be let in, and this is also the position that the film is taking. It deliberately turns its back on the subject of the father role, as if saying ‘Yes, we are moving forward, but we are still not done talking about mothers.’

In *The Babadook*, apart from Robbie and the hopefulness that his character constitutes, fathers, husbands and male partners are conspicuous by their absence, and this backdrop turns Robbie’s witticism into gallows humour. All women who are also mothers are only shown or described doing the parenting alone. For instance, a mother follows her son to school (0:04:48), the woman and her daughter in the supermarket have to ‘go home and see daddy’ (0:07:10-0:07:34) and the woman in the restaurant tries to keep a children’s birthday party under control (0:51:36-0:51:47). In the same manner we never see Claire’s partner and there are only mothers in Ruby’s birthday party, and Claire’s friend tells the others how her husband Richard’s job makes her the primary carer for their children, to which Claire agrees. This family arrangement is further underlined by the way the doctor talks to Amelia. After Samuel’s panic attack she wants the doctor to give them a prescription for sleeping medicine until they can get an appointment for a psychiatrist. He says, ‘I can give you a short course of sedatives just until the tests come back. Most mothers aren’t too keen on them unless it’s really bad...’ (0:32:15). In his choice of words, the doctor singles out mothers when he could have said ‘parents’, and by doing this he indirectly tells her that putting a child on sedatives is not the proper mother thing to, as well as taking for granted, and even creating an expectation of, the fact that taking a child to the doctor is a thing that mothers, not fathers, do. *The Babadook* paints a heteronormative picture of a society where the woman is still the primary homemaker in order to be able to comment on this society. It is possible to read this as creating a problem out of nothing, but the film needs to do this to show what women are up against. The way Amelia feels judged by Claire and her friends, regardless of whether or not they actually do, shows that she has internalized this constructed demand that is reproduced by the doctor, and that she fights an internal struggle against the standards of motherhood.

Amelia’s battle with the Babadook is a representation of this, as it, too, takes place within Amelia. She finds it difficult to speak about her problems and tries to

protect herself by avoiding the subject of her husband altogether, but this only makes her problems grow. There is a darkness inside Amelia that over time has grown so big that she finds it impossible to deal with, and the Babadook is a personification of this darkness. Still, the behaviour that the Babadook evokes has been latent in Amelia long before she lays her eyes on *Mister Babadook*. When the film begins, Amelia already finds herself in a nightmare, both literally and figuratively. The dream where she relives the car accident that killed her husband is interrupted by Samuel who has also had a nightmare, and who wants his mother's help to look for monsters hiding in his room. What follows is an exploration of dark spaces, and the overbearing expression on Amelia's face lets us know that this is something that happens on a regular basis (0:01:45-0:01:50). Later, it is the middle of the night and Samuel sleeps uneasily next to Amelia. His foot is restless, he has got a flexing hand placed on his mother's throat, and he grinds his teeth and emits a little moan. Amelia, who is not asleep, takes hold of Samuel's leg and removes it from its position over her waist before scootching away from him, close to the edge of the creaking bed (0:02:34-0:02:55). The scene shows how Amelia finds her son's presence too intense. The way Samuel is sleeping makes her feel that there is not room for the two of them in the double bed, and the fact that he has his hand placed on her throat is symbolic of the way Amelia feels suffocated in her relationship with Samuel. He is spooning his mother in his sleep, holding on to her with his hand and foot, but she moves as far away from his as she can. The opening sequence shows how Amelia feels that the mother role comes in the way of her being just Amelia. Samuel invades her dream and she must deal with him and his anxiety about monsters, which means that she does not get the opportunity to process her husband's death, even in her sleep. Her life as a whole is subject to the same pattern. She is an overworked single mother who has hardly any privacy and does not get time or opportunity to take care of herself and her needs. Amelia helps Samuel process his fear of monsters to some extent, by showing him, night after night, that the spaces he fears contain nothing he needs to be afraid of. She, however, does not have the energy to help herself explore her own darkness.

### **2.2.3 The Body and the Building**

Amelia does not get the opportunity to step out of the mother role for long, but she tries to steal moments for herself in between motherhood duties, whether it be a trip to the shopping centre when Robbie takes her shift, or with her vibrator after Samuel has gone to bed. The shopping centre trip and even the masturbation, the most private of actions, fail because Amelia has to deal with Samuel's behaviour in the first case and his fear of the Babadook in the second. Like I discussed in the section about Eva, the lack of opportunity translates into lack of space. Opportunity is, in a way, mental space, and Amelia has little of it. This causes pressure to build up inside Amelia instead of being released. In other words, there are unresolved issues creeping and crawling under Amelia's skin and this is manifested in the cockroach infestation in the kitchen. In light of the other important kitchen scenes in the film, it is no coincidence that Amelia finds the infestation in this particular room. It comments on the frustration about the situation she is in, where she has no partner to relieve her of the responsibility in daily life, and it connects Amelia's frustration with the frustration of the film's women in general. Because the women, as I have already established, are all very feminine and representatives of a heteronormative society where 'masculine' and 'feminine' and men and women's gender roles are divided, the space of the kitchen is not only a woman's space, but a 'feminine' mother's space. Not only this, but the hole that the cockroaches come out of has the shape of a vagina, which links the scuttling insects to the sexual frustration that Amelia experiences. Thus we see how a problem related to Amelia's private space inside her own body manifests itself in the walls of the house. With the bug infestation the house is juxtaposed with a body that is sick, more specifically Amelia's body, so that Amelia's problems have their counterpart in the house. That means that the journey that Amelia is taking is visible as the journey taken in the house, just as the battle with her own darkness is visible in the battle with the Babadook.

The bedroom and the basement are where crucial steps in the battle with the Babadook take place. The two times he attacks her she is in the bedroom, and her final confrontation with him also happens here. A bedroom is a place of rest and privacy, but also intimacy, so when the Babadook enters this space it shows how he does not respect the borders of her privacy. The basement is one room in particular that proves very difficult for Amelia to deal with. It is a place she is reluctant to visit and in the same

way that she does not want Samuel to bring up the topic of his father, she does not want to go down into that room. More than being a practical place to stow things away, it represents the place inside Amelia where her grief is stowed away. In the basement her husband's things are under the ground without being buried, just as Amelia has not processed her loss. Though Oskar lies in the cemetery, Amelia has not mentally buried her husband. She claims that she has 'moved on' (0:29:24-0:30:02), but this is a lie she has repeated so many times that she has started to believe it herself. Amelia's defence after Oskar's death is to avoid talking about her problems, and this can be read as a metaphor for the tendency to be quiet about women's problems, which Kent wants to challenge. Amelia's bedroom is in the top of the house, and so the battle with the Babadook represents a journey being made into the basement, up into the bedroom, down into the basement again, only to end up in the bedroom again. This physical journey symbolizes the mental journey that Amelia takes, where repressed things make their way out into the open only to be processed and buried in a healthy way.

#### **2.2.4 'The Babadook Growing Right under Your Skin'**

The Babadook, though latent in Amelia, exists first within the space of the book *Mister Babadook*. However, when Amelia reads it to Samuel, the monster becomes a part of their consciousness and he starts to claim a lot of space. 'Let me in!' he says in the book, by which moment he is already in the house. Both the house and Amelia are saturated with grief and unreleased pressure. 'You start to change when I get in, | The Babadook growing right under your skin.' says the Babadook in the book (0:37:00-0:37:04). He is new to the house but at the same time the basis for his being has been present for many years. The cockroaches coming out of the hole in the wall is a symbol of how the emotional wall Amelia has put up is starting to crack, and how what is crawling underneath forces its way out in the same way that the Babadook entices the readers to explore his darkness: 'Oh come! Come see what's underneath!' *Mister Babadook* says (0:37:06-0:37:11). She has tried to pretend that all is well, but the Babadook unsettles her while also making Samuel, in her view, more demanding. This tires her out and makes her break taboos and speak without filter, like for instance the



kitchen scene at Claire's. The Babadook also links up with the bug infestation. Both his nature and that of the infestation are such that if they are not dealt with, they will only grow and claim more and more space. One may not realise the extent of the problem until it has become quite big. The insects will either eat away at the structure of the house or weaken it just by dwelling there. It does not do to remove a few individuals, one must find the source of the problem. In the same way Amelia's avoidance of her emotional issues only keep growing when she does not deal with them; like the Babadook says in the book, 'I'll wager with you, | I'll make you a bet. | The more you deny | The stronger I get' (0:36:42-0:36:51). The Babadook sometimes moves like a scuttling insect, making twitching noises and climbing the ceiling like a fly, and readying himself for the strike in a way that is similar to a praying mantis. Amelia-as-Babadook adopts his scuttling, twitching movement and the restlessness and she acquires his agility and speed. Kent, in a way to stress the parasitic and infectious qualities that Amelia's silence has, makes a point of the insect motif. She plays with it almost, the way Amelia sees insects eating each other on TV, how their dog is called Buggy and their neighbour's last name happens to be the colloquial term for 'cockroach'.

*SAMUEL: Mrs Roach has Parkinsons. That's why she shakes like this.*

*AMELIA: Samuel, you don't have to say everything that goes through your head!*

*MRS ROACH: Oh, that's all right, love! He wanted to know. So we talked about it.*

*(0:40:10-0:40:23).*

Mrs Roach, like Amelia-as-Babadook, also has a twitching and trembling movement, but hers is caused by Parkinson's disease, which she is not ashamed to talk about. In the film Mrs Roach acts as a healthy opposite to Amelia, who avoids talking to Samuel about difficult things. The Babadook, the monstrous insect-cum-man, is a personification of her loss of Oskar, and so when she first gets paranoid and later possessed by it, it is her grief, a part of her that has been muzzled the entire time, that is talking. The Babadook makes her lose sleep, which in turn makes her step over the border into inappropriateness. Emotions and thoughts that she has tried very hard to hide away and that she does not want to admit to have had, now reach the surface and she spits them out like venom,

*SAMUEL: Mum, I took the pills, but I feel sick again... I need to eat something... I couldn't find any food in the fridge... You said to have them with food... I'm really hungry, mum...*

*AMELIA: Why do you have to keep talk, talk, talking? Don't you ever stop?*

*SAMUEL: I was jus—*

*AMELIA: I need to sleep!*

*SAMUEL: I'm sorry, mummy, I was just really hungry.*

*AMELIA: If you're that hungry, why don't you go and eat shit?!*

*(0:49:35-0:50:16).*

*AMELIA: You little pig! Six years old and you're still wetting yourself! You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not him, that died! . . . Sometimes I just want to smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out!*

*(1:08:56-1:09:24).*

Being a mother is associated with being a carer, an image Kent uses deliberately when she gives Amelia the job as a nurse. The way she normally behaves and the way Amelia-as-Babadook behaves are so radically different that it is particularly painful to watch a woman behaving towards her child like Amelia does. Amelia-as-Babadook is such a monstrous character because she does the opposite of what a mother is 'supposed to do'. She hunts down her son and tries to kill him, and she voices thoughts she is never supposed to have about her own child, let alone speak out loud. Amelia-as-Babadook is monstrous precisely because she challenges our culture's expectations and norms about how a woman and mother should behave. By making Amelia speak through the Babadook Kent hides behind it. The way she does it in the film enables her to wrap up the words in what is already monstrous, which in turn makes them, in a way, easier to pronounce and hear. Though Kent uses the film to show that women can be unmotherly, she uses the Babadook as a shield all the same, which actually shows what a big taboo it still is for women to be politically incorrect when they are just being themselves. The Babadook is a distinctly male monster, and this is important for our understanding of Amelia-as-Babadook. Kent puts the vile words in the mouth of a woman possessed by a male beast rather than having her voice them as a 'sober' woman, which shows that in order to speak freely, Amelia must shed the expectations about the feminine woman.

...  
*This is what he wears on top*  
*He's funny, don't you think?*  
*See him in your room at night*  
*And you won't sleep a wink.*  
*I'll soon take off my funny disguise*  
*(take heed of what you've read...)*  
*And once you see what's underneath...*  
*YOU'RE GOING TO WISH YOU WERE DEAD.*  
*(0:11:31-0:11:55).*

Like the Babadook who attacks her, who looks kind as he waves his hand at the readers but in reality hides his true nature, she, too, must attack that woman who looks gentle but who really hides a great darkness. That means going down into the basement, the house's counterpart to that inner darkness.

### **2.2.5 Shedding 'Femininity'**

The loss of the husband and father, like the basement in a house, forms the foundation of Amelia and Samuel's relationship in *The Babadook*. When Amelia has decided that this area is off limits, it is symbolic of her reluctance to process Oskar's death. Amelia and Samuel's different attitudes to the basement show their different attitudes to the memory or idea of Oskar. Samuel longingly seeks that place, looking at the old things and performing magic tricks in front of a picture of his laughing parents while dressed up as a flashy illusionist (0:20:44-0:21:00). Samuel believes in the 'impossible', like monsters and magic, and he is also convinced that his father may one day become a part of their family again, albeit as a memory. Amelia, on the other hand, does not have the energy to open the door to that space only to be reminded of the fact that he is not alive. There are only inanimate, dead objects, no living husband. The basement might be said to be a figuratively speaking 'masculine' space, filled as it is with the late husband's belongings. The Babadook tricks Amelia when she, hallucinating but not yet fully possessed by him, follows a sleepwalking Samuel down into the basement. There she finds Oskar standing in the semidarkness. In spite of it being night-time, daylight is coming in through the basement windows. He smiles at her and they embrace, she

kisses him and he kisses her back, she talks to him and he answers. However, it does not take long before he reveals himself as an impostor.

*AMELIA: I thought you were dead! I thought you were dead!*

*OSKAR: We can be together. You just need to bring me the boy.*

Amelia looks worried and backs away, surprised at her husband's strange choice of words. The daylight is gone and most of Oskar's face and body is enveloped by the darkness. His voice distorts more and more as he keeps repeating, 'You can bring me the boy.' (1:02:38-1:04:07). In her hallucination Oskar's space has been brought to life, but only for a brief moment. Her dream has come true only to reveal itself as her nightmare. Oskar might be in the walls, but the only thing of him that is present is his absence. It is the Babadook, Amelia's own darkness, and in consequence Amelia herself, who is the inhabitant of that space. Kent underlines this fact when Samuel, having gained the upper hand over Amelia-as-Babadook when she runs into his tripwire, knocks her in the head with a cricket bat and ties her down on the basement floor. She manages to get her hands free and strange Samuel. Writhing and twisting, Amelia fights her internal battle with the Babadook. Down there she is not a 'feminine' woman, but one who screams and growls, whose laughter is deep and throaty, the look in her eyes and her facial expression shifting between the monstrous Amelia-as-Babadook and the despairing Amelia as her body tries to kill her son, until she shoves Samuel away, rolls onto all four and spews out the dark matter of the Babadook, like ink, onto the floor. Thus she exposes the fictionality of 'Oskar's space' and reveals it to be inhabited by herself. Amelia-as-Babadook wears a nightgown instead of Amelia's normal clothes, a fact which underlines how the woman, like the Babadook, has been stripped of her 'funny disguise' (1:12:23-1:15:19). They are really the same woman, as Amelia-as-Babadook shows when Samuel screams, 'You're not my mother!' and she bellows, 'I AM YOUR MOTHER!' (1:09:24-1:09:33). Amelia has been stripped down to her bare, oozing grief and anger. He thinks it is not her, but she is just different because she is showing her son a side of herself that he has never seen before.

## 2.3 Room

### 2.3.1 The Two Rooms

In the section on *The Babadook* I wrote how the dark space inside Amelia is like a basement in the relationship between her and Samuel. In *Room*, the space of Room forms the foundation for the mother-son relationship in a more direct way because of the fact that Room is the only place in the world where Ma and Jack have ever been together. This means that Ma's experience of motherhood prior to their escape is inextricably linked to her confinement in Room. Ma has ended up in a living nightmare, and though Eva and Amelia also feel that they are stuck in a bad dream, Ma's physical imprisonment makes her nightmare quite different from what Eva and Amelia is going through. She has been kept locked up for seven years and raped almost daily by a man who has no mind to ever let her out. Under these circumstances Jack is born and he has never seen the outside. Donoghue builds up the structure of Room around Jack's point of view, but there is a difference between how Room is built and how Jack perceives that space. It is his entire world and because he does not have anything to compare it with, it is a big place. He treats the names of artefacts as given names. Thus the room they live in is just called Room, just like we usually call our planet 'Earth'. The rug is called Rug and the table is called Table, just like he is called Jack and his mother is Ma. Because there is only one of each there is no need for articles to distinguish between two of the same kind. Rather, the artefacts are referred to by pronouns and are thereby given a personality.

*Bouncy Ball loves to get lost in Labyrinth and hide, I have to call out to him and shake her and turn her sideways and upside down before he rolls out, whew. Then I send other things into Labyrinth like a peanut and a broken bit of Blue Crayon and a short spaghetti not cooked. They chase each other in the tunnels and sneak up and shout Boo . . . Toothbrush wants a turn but I tell him sorry, he's too long (Donoghue 17).*

Notice how 'a peanut' and 'a short spaghetti' do not have given names because they are foods that disappear from his consciousness and how he does not form a relationship with these things like he does to the stable, unchanging inventory of Room. By having Jack narrate the story, Donoghue makes it more bearable to read because the atrocity is filtered by his naivety. Jack does not know the truth about Room, but Ma's side of the

story and her perception of their space is different. Her Room is built to be a prison cell and Old Nick's intention is to mentally break down the person being held there. Because Ma has experienced the world outside, for her Room is cramped, claustrophobic and oppressive. Jack and Ma measure Room to be 121 square feet, roughly 11.25 square metres (Donoghue 24). It contains only a few essential pieces of furniture and the roof, floor and walls are covered with cork tiles that absorb sound. The only natural light comes from a skylight with unbreakable, soundproof glass and the door is locked with a security system.

Ma's physical space is very different from Eva and Amelia's because she is inhibited from ever leaving its confines. That means that how Ma is a mother to Jack and Eva and Amelia are mothers to Kevin and Samuel is not easily comparable because the women's lives are subject to different rules. Arguably this goes for all texts all the time, but in the collation of the three primary texts in this thesis *Room* is the one that markedly stands out when it comes to the premises for motherhood. The situation inside Room is not transferable to the outside world because it is a constructed deviation from that world, by which I mean that the mechanisms at work in that space are not the same as in the outside world. It is a fiction in the way that Old Nick has built an approximate vacuum for a woman to live in, with himself as the only visitor and a TV to bring impulses from the Outside. How the relationship between Ma and Jack develops is directly influenced by the space of Room, and though all relationships are always influenced by something, Ma and Jack's is different because there has always been just the two of them in one room.

Ma says that Room is not a home. An instance of this is when Noreen, a nurse at the Cumberland psychiatric facility, says to them, "Probably a bit homesick, aren't you?" "Homesick?" Ma's staring at her. "Sorry, I didn't—" "It wasn't a home, it was a soundproofed cell" (Donoghue 258). Even though Room will always be prison cell for Ma, and though she has little patience with people who imply that Room is a kind of home, she cannot get around the fact that Jack has a different experience. Whether or not Ma does it consciously, she does contribute to making Room homelier when she tries to normalize what is actually a seven-year state of emergency. Both to protect Jack from the horrors she faces as an adult and for herself to cope with her situation, she refrains from telling Jack the truth about Room. In any case she thinks that he would not

understand. When the novel begins he turns five and he asks questions about the relationship between Room and Outside that Ma cannot answer without telling Jack the truth about Room. Yet before this ball of truth starts rolling it is necessary that she finds a way of living as normal as possible. They decorate it with such things as drawings and cutouts from oatmeal boxes of great masterpieces of Western art and they use eggshells to add to Eggsnake under the bed, leaving their mark on Room in their day-to-day activities. Over time Ma and Jack has taken ownership of the cell, probably without having any particular mind to. When Jack is born it becomes Ma's task to make Room a safe place for Jack even though it is still a prison cell for her, and she has no other choice but to try and make it as much like a home as she can, albeit for him and not for her. Though Ma would rather be anywhere but trapped in Room, Jack's birth and his experience of Room is important for Ma's survival because it makes that space serve a new purpose. She feels saved by Jack because she matters again, and so everything is about keeping him safe (Donoghue 291). By doing that she also keeps herself safe, because he is the one who makes her keep going.

For this very reason Ma has a different approach to motherhood than either Eva or Amelia. Her experience is that her child is not a burden, but rather a blessing, something good coming out of something bad. In spite of the fact that Jack shares half his DNA with a man who has done terrible things to Ma, she does not associate him with Old Nick.

*"What am I like?" She taps Mirror where's my forehead, her finger leaves a circle. "The dead spit of me." "Why I'm your dead spit?" The circle's disappearing. "It just means you look like me. I guess because you're made of me, like my spit is. Same brown eyes, same big mouth, same pointy chin..." (Donoghue 8).*

*"[D]id you get the sense, over the years, that this man cared—at some basic human level, even in a warped way—for his son?" Ma's eyes have gone skinny. "Jack's nobody's son but mine." . . . "And you never found that looking at Jack painfully reminded you of his origins?" Ma's eyes go even tighter. "He reminds me of nothing but himself" (Donoghue 293-294).*

Though Ma becomes pregnant with Jack through rape, she has not let the fact that he was born out of, as well as into, a great sorrow come in the way of the mother-son relationship. She eliminates Old Nick from Jack's origins, as we see from Ma's answer to the interviewer. She focuses only on how he resembles her and how he is his

very own person, just as she claims Jack for herself when she refuses Old Nick to enter Room during Jack's birth: "I heard Door, the beeping, and I roared, 'Get out' . . . I was ready, this time I wanted it to be just me and you" (Donoghue 256).

### 2.3.2 Ma's Space

As I discussed earlier, space, in addition to meaning room, can also mean time and opportunity. Being imprisoned Ma has plenty of time. In fact, one of her biggest challenges is fill that time with activities in order for Jack's mind and body to develop properly and for herself to cope in her imprisonment. This means that though Ma has time, spends all her waking hours on Jack and little or no time on herself. She puts herself aside and is a mother all day, every day, which is underlined by that fact that we do not learn Ma's given name. Donoghue makes a point of never letting us know it, not even when Jack retells interaction between Ma and other adults where they say her name. At those times he says that they use Ma's 'other name' (Donoghue 199, 243, 299, 312). The way Jack narrates the story shows that there is almost no distance between him and Ma. They share everything inside Room, they keep each other company and process thoughts together. As opposed to Eva and Amelia, Ma talks a lot with her son, yet we as readers know that there is so much that Jack does not know, things that his mother cannot tell him because they are too horrible and that would not make things better if he did know. As Ma tells the woman doing her TV interview, "What was I meant to tell him—Hey, there's a world of fun out there and you can't have any of it?" The fact that Ma's knowledge of the outside world must be hidden from Jack means that Room's place in the world, which is also a part of what Room is, is hidden from Jack. It is like a room within Room that Ma does not allow him to enter because he is not big enough. Because the structure of Room makes it impossible for Ma to get away from her son and because there is so much she cannot talk about, Ma enters a state where she seemingly shuts out her surroundings. This is what Jack calls 'Gone', and it can last from only a few seconds at a time to a day or more.

*"Numbskull," I say, but not in a nasty way. "Next week when I'll be six you better get candles." "Next year," says Ma, "you mean next year." Her eyes are shut.*



*They always do that sometimes and she doesn't say anything for a minute (Donoghue 29).*

*Today is one of the days when Ma is Gone. She won't wake up properly. She's here but not really. She stays in Bed with pillows on her head. . . . Ma gets up to pee but no talking, with her face all blank' (Donoghue 74).*

Because Ma has no privacy, she sometimes puts up a wall between herself and everything in Room, including Jack, and goes to a space in her mind where she can be alone. Jack has come up with his own term for the state his mother is sometimes in and he understands that she is not present in his world in Room and there is no use trying to talk to her. When Ma is Gone she is not only in a place where Jack is not, she is also a different person from the mother he knows, which is underlined by the fact that the one time Jack hears her speak, her voice is not her usual voice.

*"Look." I point at the bed. "It's a day she doesn't get up." Noreen calls Ma by her other name and asks if she's OK. I whisper, "Don't talk to her." She says to Ma even louder, "Anything I can get you?" "Let me sleep." I never heard Ma say anything when she's Gone before, her voice is like some monster (Donoghue 299).*

In the course of the novel Ma is Gone twice and insofar as it is possible to establish a pattern after just two incidents, the common denominator is that this state is preceded by particularly challenging situations, both of which demand of her to process big ideas. The first time it happens on the day after Jack has voiced his theory about Old Nick, about how he goes into the TV to get things for them, but that it does not make sense that they never see him inside the TV. He questions the established 'truth' about Room and he expects Ma to react to his theory. She knows that he will not let the matter drop before she does, so she decides to tell him that he gets them from a real shop and that what they see in TV is pictures of real things. She knows that there is no turning back after that, but though Jack wants to know more, she does not want to tell him too much because she does not have the words to explain it (Donoghue 73-74). The following day she is Gone and after that she is back to normal, and a few days later she chooses to tell Jack about Outside, having had the chance to process her ideas on her own.

The next time she is Gone is the day after the TV interview. It ends badly when the interviewer more than suggests that Ma should not have kept Jack with her.

*“When Jack was born... did you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away? . . . To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he could be adopted. As you yourself were, very happily, I believe.” I can see Ma swallow. “Why would I have done that?” “Well, so he could be free.” “Free away from me?” “It would have been a sacrifice, of course—the ultimate sacrifice—but if Jack could have a normal, happy childhood with a loving family?” “He had me.” Ma says it one word at a time. “He had a childhood with me, whether you’d call it normal or not.” “But you knew what he was missing . . . Every day he needed a wider world, and the only one you could give him got narrower. You must have been tortured by the memory of everything Jack didn’t even know to want” (Donoghue 297).*

The interviewer puts a parasitic thought into Ma’s head that threatens to corrupt her one truth, namely that Jack needs her. She reminds Ma that she herself might not have the good childhood she did, had it not been for the fact that her biological parent or parents gave her up for adoption. When Ma is Gone the next day, Jack spends it with his uncle and aunt only to come back to the clinic to find that she has taken an overdose of painkillers. Gone is when Ma is the least mother to Jack, and it is during this state that she takes the overdose. When Gone she detaches herself from the mother role, at least on the face of it, and this unmotherliness as Jack experiences it is underlined by his characterizing his mother’s voice as that of a monster. Her fears it because he does not recognize that behaviour, much like Samuel does when he yells at Amelia, ‘You’re not my mother!’ at which she retorts, ‘I AM YOUR MOTHER!’ (*The Babadook* 1:09:29). Ma seems to lose contact with the side of herself that manages to stay grounded, which is the mother part of her. She enters a space where she either cannot or does not want to talk to Jack, or other people, as it turns out in the clinic. It is as if her body shuts her down to spare her from distractions. Whether Gone is voluntary or involuntary, Ma uses these situations to try to find a way out of a challenge, as we see from the fact that both times lead to a resolution. She gets to process her thoughts, but the problems she faces are about things she cannot talk about. For this reason Gone can be read as a reaction to not getting to talk about her problems.

### 2.3.3 ‘I’m Not in Room. Am I Still Me?’

Ma struggles with motherhood when she escapes, for the very reason that she is no longer in Room. Since Ma and Jack’s relationship has the very structure of Room as its basis, the relationship between them, as it is inside Room, is also non-transferable to the outside world. She must find a way to adapt to her new surroundings, just as she had to do when she woke up to find herself imprisoned. Like Jack thinks when he enters the outside world for the first time, ‘I’m not in Room. Am I still me?’ (172), Ma has to find out who she is on the outside. However, this necessary change happens to be proportionate to a distancing from Jack, because putting a distance between herself and Room in order to face the real world means turning her back on the conditions for her and Jack’s relationship. What Jack experiences is that on the outside, Ma becomes less and less the mother he knows.

*Ma sings me songs but there’s no more of them anymore. She smashed my head on the table in Room Number Seven. She took the bad medicine, I think she was too tired to play anymore, she was in a hurry to get to heaven so she didn’t wait, why she didn’t wait for me? (Donoghue 320).*

Ma finds that her survival mode from Room does not work in the outside world. After seven years of imprisonment with only herself to rely on, she has been spared the scrutiny of wiseacres and meddling of well-wishers, leaving her to do her mothering in relative peace. Away from that little space, however, comes the involuntary mirroring of her actions in everyone she meets. Having never been a mother anywhere but in Room, she does not know how to deal with what she experiences as a great pressure to do things right. All mothers, arguably, feel this pressure, including Amelia and Eva, but Ma does not have any training in not caring about it and whether she stands up against it or lets it overpower her depends on her day to day condition and who she is talking to. Take for instance these scenes where Jack wants to be breastfed:

*Ma’s talking for ages about Room and Old Nick. And all that, I’m too tired for listening. A she person comes in and tells the Captain something. Ma says, “Is there a problem?” “No no,” says the Captain. “Then why is she staring at us?” Her arm goes around me tight. “I’m nursing my son, is that OK with you, lady?” Maybe in Outside they don’t know about having some, it’s a secret (Donoghue 200).*

*“Can I have some?” I ask. “In a minute,” says Ma, “when they’re gone.” Grandma asks, “What does he want?” “It’s OK.” “I can call the nurse.” Ma shakes her head. “He means breastfeeding.” Grandma stares at her. “You don’t mean to say you’re still—” “There was no reason to stop.” “Well, cooped up in that place, I guess everything was—but even so, five years—” “You don’t know the first thing about it” (Donoghue 268).*

In these passages Ma lets other people know that they have no reason to have any particular opinion about her mothering. She says, ‘There was no reason to stop,’ but it is also very likely that Jack would be much less healthy if she had not breastfed him, which nobody she meets seems to consider. The norms of the world outside do not apply to the world of Room because Room is a constant state of emergency. That means that any comparison of Ma’s mothering to the possibilities of the outside world is not only impossible but also futile. Even so, in the outside world Ma’s insecurity grows when she again must face society’s norms. It is as if the freedom of the outside world also makes her criticize herself and the choices she made inside Room, even though she knows that she did her very best to make the most of their situation.

*“You never got Play-Doh for one of your Sunday treats?” [Dr. Clay] asks. “It dries out.” That’s Ma butting in. “Ever think of that? Even if you put it back in the tub, like, religiously, after a while it starts going leathery.” “I guess it would,” says Dr. Clay. . . . “We made flour dough, but it was always white.” Ma’s sounding mad. “You think I wouldn’t have given Jack a different color of Play-Doh every day if I could have?” Dr. Clay says Ma’s other name. “Nobody’s expressing any judgment about your choices and strategies.” “Noreen says it works better if you add as much salt as flour, did you know that? I didn’t know that, how would I? I never thought to ask for food coloring, even. If I’d only had the first freakin’ clue—” (Donoghue 242-243).*

On the outside Ma sways between the feeling that she did a great job raising Jack in a prison cell, and the feeling that there are so many things she should have done differently. She is angry about what happened to her, but she also passes judgment on herself about the limitations to her knowledge. On the outside she is faced with all the possibilities she and Jack could have had, which makes her momentarily lose sight of the fact that she did the best with what she had. Dr. Clay does not judge Ma and she knows this. Her rant is directed at herself, which reveals that Ma is facing an internal battle with her guilty conscience over things that are not her fault.

# 3 How Ideas of Space Shape Ideas of Motherhood

In the previous chapter I showed how the texts are constructed around the women's physical space in order to show how they mentally speaking have to break out of this space to redefine themselves as mothers. In this chapter I show how Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) also uses spatial metaphors to show the process of thought, linking spatial mobility with the process of thought. The development that takes place in the narrator's mind as she forms her opinion is made to connect with cultural changes and shifts in the literary landscape. I argue that both the narrator and the mothers seek to enter a space where old norms and conventions about gender do not matter, an androgynous space that helps them to reconnect with their Self.

## 3.1 Space in *A Room of One's Own*

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf uses spatial metaphors to explain how women's place in society will not change unless they have the same material means as men. Having been asked to hold a lecture on the subject of 'Women and Fiction', she says that she is at a loss in the clarification of the terms 'women' and 'fiction'. From the very start she knows that she will not be able to reach a conclusion, for 'women' and 'fiction' and 'women and fiction' can mean many things:

*[It] might mean . . . women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light (3).*

Rather than trying to conclude, she hands her audience an opinion, which is that 'women must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (4). This means that in order for a woman to have freedom she must have space. In the woman's own room she does not have to worry about her family life interrupting her thinking,

and because she has money of her own she can spend the time in there as she chooses. The woman's room is where she has time for herself and where she does not have to worry about other people's, that is, men's, expectations or judgment. In other words, the room provides space, not just physical but also mental. It is privacy. It is a place where she need not feel upon her the gaze of men. However, to 'write fiction' is more than actually writing fiction. It represents an expression of the inner life, as opposed to what happens in factual prose, that presupposes an opportunity to think and reflect upon that inner life. Writing fiction gains thus a different meaning, namely intellectual freedom, or as Woolf puts it, 'freedom to think of things in themselves' (Woolf 45).

### 3.1.1 The Fictitious Narrator

In an attempt at explaining how she came to hold this opinion, she takes her audience on a journey through her thoughts. She creates a narrative voice that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. Woolf says 'I', but it is not her own personal pronoun. The minute she starts her journey of thought a narrative voice takes over, whose name does not matter. 'Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any other name you please – it is not a matter of any importance)' (5). The important thing is what happens in her narrative space, not the person who is in it. In her narrative space of the lecture she is able to give herself the space to show the audience her thought process that led her to her opinion. Like Eva does in her narrative in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, she mixes real incidents and thoughts she had at the time with thoughts about these thoughts and incidents that she makes in hindsight. The incidents that the narrator in *A Room of One's Own* relates, though, are even more fictitious than Eva's hindsight-filtered retelling because they are made up. 'Lies will flow from my lips' the narrator says (5). She uses fiction in order to reveal the truth, at least a part of the truth. That is, after all, what fiction is about:

*[F]iction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the*

*middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in (48-49).*

She creates a three-dimensional space in her narrative in order to tell a story about a journey of thought. Her fictitious 'I' helps her to keep her eyes on what is important, the story itself, or, if you will, the 'thing itself', because she is not talking about herself as Virginia Woolf. By doing this she shows that what kind of person you are does not really matter as long as you are not able to use all your faculties to express what can be found inside the Self, that is, if your narrative space or the space of thought, is to cramped or restricted to be able to express the Self.

The room that she argues that women need is used both as a representation of material means and as a figurative space in the mind. It is, as I have explained in the earlier chapter, about having the opportunity to think freely. Interruptions in its many forms hinders thoughts to form freely, as the narrator shows by visualizing her thinking process as fishing.

*Thought . . . had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until – you know the little tug, the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked (5).*

In this passage the narrator gives the process of thinking a material counterpart, her stream of consciousness imagined as a real stream of water, her line of thought imagined as a fishing line at which end a thought might form like a fish taking the bait. By imagining thought as fish, she shows how what she finds to be an originally small and insignificant thought can be put back into the mind, like a small fish is put back into the river, in order to let it grow and become more significant and worthy of one day being caught again. The narrator intends to try to catch the fish again after it has gotten bigger. However, in her excitement at reintroducing the thought, or fish, and seeing how it moves up and down in the water and creates a 'wash and tumult of ideas,' she finds it impossible to sit still and finds herself 'walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot.' She is interrupted in her path by a man gesticulating at her, his face expressing 'horror and indignation' (6). The grass she is walking on turns out to be the turf of the

college grounds. The man is a Beadle, and she, being a woman, must keep to the gravel. Only Fellows and Scholars of the college are allowed on the turf.

*As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which had been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had had sent my little fish into hiding (6, emphasis added).*

In this passage the narrator imagines a scene that visualizes what she argues about women's obstacles *A Room of One's Own*. All elements are chosen deliberately to show how women, in their lack of their own space, have trouble expressing their Self. The narrator connects thinking with movement, so that when her movement is restricted so are her thoughts. Her line of thought is not just visualized in the fishing line but also in the path of her feet. She is so preoccupied with her exciting thoughts that without knowing it, she trespasses on the college grounds, the world of men. Peace is only restored when she moves back onto the gravel where women are allowed to walk as well. 'Turf is better walking than gravel', she says, which symbolizes how comfortable she regards the space men are allowed to roam, whereas the women's space is uncomfortable like gravel and neither inspires nor make possible the thinking of significant thoughts. The fact that they have protected their turf and maintained it 'for 300 years in succession' represents how they have kept women on the outside of their college grounds ever since the 17th century, a figurative way of saying that women have been actively prevented from entering their comfortable space of thought for as long as they have existed. The 'horror and indignation' of the man chasing her off the grass represent the hostility women face from the other sex when they attempt to write or speak what is on their minds. All these obstacles that are represented in the narrator's movements must be removed one by one, and the rest of *A Room of One's Own* exemplifies how women have tried to make this happen.



### 3.1.2 Claiming the College Turf

At the heart of Woolf's argument lies the concept of mobility and lack of restrictions, both physical and mental. The physical space that the narrator moves around in and the blocking of her path that she experiences are directly linked to her thought processes and the way her lines of thought are interrupted. But the physical space and the space of her thoughts are also representative of a part of the social world that she as a woman is not welcome in. Her trespassing on the college grounds is symbolic of her trespassing into the realm of men, and the fact that she later is not allowed in the college library unless she is accompanied by a Fellow of the college or with a letter of introduction from a member of the college, shows how women are prevented from seeking the same kind of knowledge as men, which in turn makes it difficult to gain equality. The physical space of the bookshelves in the British Library represents the literary space in culture and this is in direct relation to who is allowed to take part in the political debate. From one section to the next, and from one literary period to the next, women slowly but surely cover more and more shelf space in and more and more ground in the literary landscape. This also implies that there are more women's voices in the political debate.

In the first rows of shelves in the library she finds only works by men. In spite of having neither money or a room of their own, women have tried to claim space in the landscape that used to be considered only men's to inhabit, but it took a long time before the space got big enough to stand on. The narrator uses the thought experiment of Shakespeare's imaginary sister, with a genius equal to that of her brother, to show what might happen if a woman tries to enter this space. The girl is not sent to school like her brother, but this not keep her from secretly writing poetry. When she is to be married against her will she runs away to London at the age of just sixteen, seeking her fortune at the theatre. She is met with ridicule, but the actor-manager takes pity on her, and when she finds that she is with child she decides to kill herself rather than live a life where she cannot express herself (55-56). The narrator says that even if she had not killed herself, but had managed to claim a small inch of the men's turf, she would have been so 'thwarted hindered by other people' that her own instincts would torture and pull her asunder, so that 'whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination (57-58). The attempt to enter man's space would lead to her internalizing their hostility and end up at odds with

herself. In an effort to avoid this, many women writing even as late as the nineteenth century choose to write anonymously, hiding behind the names of men. Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin) 'all sought to veil themselves using the name of a man'. The narrator finds this to have had little effect, for in her opinion their writing are still proof of 'an inner strife' (58). In order for an artist to free whatever is in the mind, whole and entire rather than cramped and thwarted, he or she must be like Shakespeare, for '[i]f ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded . . . it was Shakespeare's mind' (66).

Roaming the shelves of the library in British Museum, journeying through one literary period after the other, the narrator finds that the only woman writing in the nineteenth century in a way that comes close to what Shakespeare does, is Jane Austen. 'Here was a woman around the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought' (78-79). The narrator thinks that perhaps the reason why she manages to do this is because, though her circumstances makes it difficult for her to write, it is not in Jane Austen's nature to want what she did not have; '[h]er gift and her circumstances matched each other completely' (79). When she looks at other women's works, she thinks that is not enough to have claimed a space wherein to write if their writing show traces of too little confidence and too much self-consciousness. The women who are successful in their writing are the ones who write effortlessly and without loss of integrity, who does not feel the need to perform masculinity and sentence-wise 'veil themselves using the name of a man' (58). She gives an example of a typical heavy and intricate 'man's sentence' as it could have been written around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

*It was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use. Charlotte Brontë, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands. George Eliot committed atrocities with it that beggar description. Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it. Thus, with less genius for writing than Charlotte Brontë, she got infinitely more said (89).*

The narrator argues that women must not define themselves by how men write, argues the narrator, but rather define their own literary space. Let us picture a woman having claimed just enough space on the turf of the college grounds to place her two feet. If she

stands there and apologizes for her presence and dares not be herself, but instead copy what the men around her do and say even if it means speaking ill of women, she would not make a difference and she would not make herself heard. By the same token, a woman standing in the same spot but who draws too much attention to the big news that here is in fact a woman, and is bitter about having only just now been allowed onto the turf, will be too preoccupied with her difficult feelings to be able to express her genius in a way that will make the others listen and take her seriously. Her Self will not be present in her words, they will be watered down by anger and resentment, making them hard for her audience to swallow. Woolf's narrator is impatient with *Jane Eyre* because Charlotte Brontë does this kind of thing, which means that she loses her integrity in that work. She feels that Brontë is not fully present in her own writing, and that this disturbs the continuity.

*[I]f one reads [the pages] over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. . . . She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. . . . She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted? (81).*

*Now, in the passages I have quoted from Jane Eyre, it is clear that anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. . . . she was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'. . . . It does not matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself (85-86).*

The narrator shows, using Charlotte Brontë as her example, that the claiming of space, in this case literary space, is about more than having the opportunity to write. She argues that the writers must not apologize for inhabiting that space, and they must leave their anger behind when they write (85). In this period only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë write as women write, they alone, she says, are deaf to the voice of the gesticulating Beadle of the college and his likes,

*that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them (87).*

### 3.1.3 ‘Chloe Liked Olivia’

Coming to the bookshelves with contemporary literature, she is pleased to see that men and women have written just about an equal share of the works. Women have claimed more of the shelf space and more of the literary landscape, in other words, more of the college turf, and they write other kinds of literature than their predecessors. Amongst these books she finds a novel called *Life's Adventure* ‘or some such title’ (93) by Mary Carmichael, an author the narrator has invented for *A Room of One's Own*. Mary Carmichael’s text is different. The narrator cannot get hold of her style of writing, ‘whether she is being herself or someone else’ (94). She finds that Mary Carmichael breaks with the norm of writing when she writes ‘Chloe liked Olivia.’ The fact that one woman holds an opinion about another woman, and that they are not shown in their relation to men, shows how much too simple all the other great women in literature have actually been written. Because women in those works are shown in their relation to men, the descriptions of the women are not based in reality, but on men’s limited understanding of how women are, for

*how little can a man know [of a woman's life] when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose. Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of women in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity – for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank, was prosperous or unhappy (Woolf 96).*

Even though fictitious women become more complicated than this in later literary periods, the narrator finds it obvious that ‘a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman is in her knowledge of men. . . . It is becoming evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity’ (Woolf 96). Chloe and Olivia share a laboratory together, and this makes them two women who are more complex than other fictitious women. The narrator reflects upon how Mary Carmichael must work in order to get down on the page what happens when these two women are alone in that room, what they say and how they move, when they are not being watched by the other sex.

*She will need to hold her breath . . . if she is to do it; for women are so suspicious of any interest that has not some motive behind it, so terribly accustomed to concealment and suppression, that they are off at the flicker of an eye turned*

*observingly in their direction, the only way for you to do it . . . would be to talk of something else, looking steadily out of the window. . . . But, alas, I had done what I had determined not to do; I had slipped unthinkingly into praise of my own sex (Woolf 98-99).*

In her reading of Mary Carmichael's novel the narrator shows the elusiveness of the nature of women, and how, by attempting to write about it, she loses sight of what is important in that literary space, namely the free and effortless expression of the Self. She loses sight of the 'thing itself' and starts talking about her own sex. The reason why it is so difficult to talk about, is that there is not one or ten or a hundred ways to be a woman. It is not possible to pin down what the word 'woman' contains. That is why it easily overshadows everything else. The 'Chloe liked Olivia' passage is really an attempt at showing that the way women are viewed is a fiction. 'There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women' (99). The narrator shows in this example that it is not possible to really define what a woman is. Mary Carmichael, though, the descendant of all those earlier female authors who have clawed and dug out the woman's space in the literary landscape and paved the way, has mastered what the narrator calls the 'first great lesson', namely to write as a woman, 'but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages [are] full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself' (108). The narrator declares that Mary Carmichael will be an even better writer in another hundred years, with a 'room of her own and five hundred a year,' when she can 'speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in' (Woolf 109). But why should she need to leave out so much of what she chooses to write about? After all, the narrator thinks that Mary Carmichael does a good job being present in her own writing, but that there is still some way to go before it is exactly as it should be. She does not give straightforward account of what it takes to get there, but in the next scene she introduces the idea of androgyny. Having come back from the British Library the narrator sees a man and a woman coming from different sides of the street and enter a taxi-cab together, right under the window of her room. This gives her a sense of satisfaction which makes her wonder whether it might not be right to do as she has done, to think of the two sexes as distinct from each other. 'It interferes with the unity of the mind,' she says (112). She believes that no person, whether they be male or female, are either male or female, but a bit of both. Men, too, look past their sex in favour of fluidity in order to write freely and

effortlessly. Shakespeare, the narrator's prime example of the well-nigh perfect author, dares to be in contact with the 'feminine' part of his mind. This leads to an elevation of his style of writing that would have been impossible if he only wrote with his 'masculine' half, because he would not have been using all of himself (120).

### **3.1.4 The Androgynous Space**

In the article 'Solitude and Community: Virginia Woolf, Spatial Privacy and *A Room of One's Own*' (2009), Wendy Gan argues that Woolf's text is part of a bigger movement among women in the early twentieth century to get their own studies like men have, but that the difference between Woolf and the others is that she does not argue the need for a workspace but for a 'flexible and multitasking room of one's own' (73). The woman's privacy will not be private in the manner of the man's insular study, but rather a neutral room where the women 'police access to their private spaces, locking others out or letting them in. The exclusivity of the masculine study is thus transformed into the flexibility of the room' (76). It is all about inviting in whomever they like and also being able to, and allowed to, make them leave. In this respect the female privacy, in Gan's reading, is not about seclusion, which mostly is the case with the masculine study, but about fluidity. *A Room of One's Own* is, she writes, 'focused on providing both solitude *and* community' (77, emphasis added). Further, she argues that this vision is mirrored in the very narration of *A Room of One's Own*. The entire text is a thought process which shows how the narrator ends up with the opinion that starts the lecture. Woolf's is not an authoritative style of narration. There is no 'direct transmission of facts and ideas' but rather 'a report of the narrator's meandering, both physically and mentally' (77).

*When the narrator enters her private room or study after a frustrating morning at the British Library, we are allowed to follow her into this private space as the reportage continues giving us details of what is and what is not on her bookshelves, what books she picks out to read, when she halts reading to ponder, what she deliberates over and when she returns to her reading. The impression is that of being present with the narrator in the privacy of her room and her innermost thoughts (77).*

Gan argues that even though Woolf makes an effort to bring in other views, *A Room of One's Own* is a monologue. It is still a lecture and it is important that it remains so because, like with the woman's private space, the narrator must protect her privacy *while at the same time* create a relation to the world outside. Both the private space and the private process of thought must be at once shared and protected. As Gan writes, 'We are both inside and outside that room of hers' (78):

*The vision of A Room of One's Own, in keeping with its deliberate rhetorical attempt at inclusiveness, is thus not that of the female author in splendid isolation in her study excluding all. Rather the female author is involved in a series of negotiations between private and public, aware of her need as public figure to allow (and yet control) access to her private world. At the centre of these negotiations is the flexible room of one's own with a lock on its door where a woman can exercise choice and autonomy in how private or public she wishes to be (78).*

The power and freedom lie in being in control of the entrance to the outside world, and in this way the hard boundaries of the masculine, private space of the study are softened. Laura Marcus argues in her study about Woolf that her narrative is characterized by its inconsistency. By starting off on a 'but' and continuing to discuss the subject of women and fiction using a free-associative method, places emphasis on the journey taken by thought. The way walking is placed in a relationship with reading, writing and thinking, the physical journey both represents and enables a mental journey. She moves to and fro, her path as well as her lines of thought constantly interrupted, and this also characterizes her narration. It moves back and forth, interrupting itself, and the conclusion 'is in no way the neat summation of the text's arguments; *A Room of One's Own* both intrigues and frustrates critics and readers in large part because of its inconsistencies' (Marcus 45-46). Yet keeping in mind the reading of *A Room of One's Own* that Gan presents, this inconsistency is a manifestation of the kind of freedom Woolf argues in favour of, namely a woman's freedom to trespass into the public sphere of men as well as being inconsistent about what purpose her private room shall serve. In Gan's reading the study becomes a visualization of the androgynous space as Woolf imagines it, a flexible space with not only 'negotiations between private and public', but between the feminine and masculine halves which leads to a true expression of the whole Self. For the narrator, androgyny, the merging of masculine and feminine in

complex unity, seems to be the solution to writing freely and effortlessly about the ‘thing itself’ without thinking about one’s sex.

*If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought (Woolf 113-114).*

She writes down, on her piece of paper, as her first thought on the subject ‘Women and Fiction’ that ‘it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex’ (120). Woolf’s narrator wants women to claim a space that is just for women, only to reject the femininity of that space. She draws attention to the way men and women are different in order to show how both sexes need to be represented in literature, on the bookshelves and in the political debate. However, this is just a means to a different end, for what Woolf’s narrator really wants is for us to end up in a society where we do not pay attention to our sexes. Once the space has been claimed one can start moving away from the idea of the sexes as distinct from each other and look instead at what they can perform as a unity.

In the article “‘Here Was One Room, There Another’”: The Room, Authorship, and Feminine Desire in *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*’ (2014) Christina Stevenson argues that

*Woolf’s conceptualization of the room—specifically the space of the study—works to reclaim space for feminine creativity by reconfiguring the relationship between the room and the writer in order to imagine an author who does not simply occupy space but who is indistinguishable from it (113).*

About the narrator’s voice in *A Room of One's Own*, Stevenson argues that ‘Woolf’s room does not house a self-confident author. In fact, it doesn’t appear able to house anything at all’ (112). With basis in Victoria Rosner’s writing on gender and domestic architecture and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Stevenson shows how Woolf reveals the secret of the masculine study and thus exposes the myth about the naturalness of male privacy in that space. She reads Woolf’s entering the study differently from Gan, and says that by entering that masculine space, Woolf can be said to perform masculinity, ‘donning the apparel of authorship and



consequently detaching its advantages from exclusively male occupants. In an act of transvestism, Woolf dresses herself in the man's study and usurps its authority' (117). Because the thought process of the narrator, that is the narrator's narration, is the only space where the fictitious 'I' exists, I agree with Stevenson in that the narrator is indistinguishable from the space. However, I do not agree that entering that narrative space means dressing herself in the man's study. Yes, she detaches the advantages of the space, or the study or whatever one chooses to call it, from exclusively male occupants, but I argue that she reveals that the space or study is in fact sexless. The way she connects 'androgyny' to a state of mind rather than biology, signals that what Woolf imagines when she writes, 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex' (Woolf 120) is a space that is flexible and fluid, without thoughts about feminine or masculine, only the 'I'. Stevenson presents a reading of *A Room of One's Own* where she shows how Woolf's argument about fact and fiction also applies to the room itself. The fact of the room, she says, 'is entangled with a symbolic, fantasy space' (Stevenson 117), that is, *fiction*. This means that the femininity of the room is tied to façades rather than to the figures that occupy that space, and Woolf uses the image as women as mirrors reflecting man's figure to illustrate women's function in the patriarchal world. Woolf, in Stevenson's reading, sees the woman as an apparatus rather than an individual, and by tying the woman to the surface of a looking-glass she demonstrates how the female figure disappears, 'escaping full cognition' (118). By helping to situate the man in *his* world, the woman enables the creation of a fiction. Woolf writes,

*when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth. . . . Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here . . . I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence . . . 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being (4).*

Here we come back to Stevenson's argument about Woolf's empty room. The room is a surface without depth just as Woolf's 'I' is a mask that hides an absence. Stevenson calls it 'all fiction with no fact. . . . [It is] an impossibility in the empirical world' (121). There is no such thing as a room made up entirely of walls of feminine creativity. That means that 'femininity' is false, but that is not the same as saying that women do not exist. Rather, as Stevenson puts it, 'their existence as feminine women is built upon a

fantasy' (121). Woolf, in her reading, shows how the room is only a space of surfaces, reveals the fictionality of femininity. This I agree with, insofar as Woolf wants to free the woman's private space of femininity.

### **3.1.5 'Freedom to Think of Things in Themselves'**

Looking past sex means looking past convention and norms that are associated with one's sex, in other words 'gender', markers of which are culturally constructed. However, it is only possible to not think about one's sex when it is not cause for discrimination, or in any way stands in the way of self-realization. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wants to look past the feminine and the masculine. What she seeks is that women be free to inhabit that space on equal terms as men, and that this in turn gives them freedom to express their Self. This Self need not be characterized as masculine or feminine, but flexible and fluid as the very room itself. Only when thinking of 'the thing itself' can one extract what is hidden within the Self. Woolf's narrator argues that the successful author has an androgynous mind, but Woolf, with *A Room of One's Own*, argues that the successful society is an androgynous society, one half male and the other half female, working together without being conscious of their sex. There is no such thing as a feminine space that women inhabit. There is a space inhabited by a Self who happens to be female, but this space is equally different from the next space inhabited by a woman as it is from a space inhabited by a man. The space that the man inhabits does not have to be masculine, for the idea that all men are masculine is, like femininity, a fiction. However, she ends up discarding her first written sentence in favour of the one that opens the lecture, because she realizes that nobody, neither men nor women, will be able to write anything about the 'thing itself' if they have not the material means to think about things in themselves. Without a physical space they will not be free of interruptions, be they from family, guests or other figurative Beadles, and they will not be able to keep their eyes locked on the big fish and it will get away. Without a place for privacy the space in the mind will stay cramped and restricted, so much so that they will only be able to express how unpleasant that space is, instead of expressing free, artistic thoughts. Likewise, unless they have a stable income the mind is not free to think the

significant thoughts, because there will not be free time to think of anything but how to make money. When women have money they are also more equal to men, and it is only when there is a balance like this, a kind of society's androgyny, that one can stop thinking about one's sex. This is why Mary Carmichael must have another hundred years, a room of her own and five hundred a year. Only then will she be able to fill the space of half her discarded written material and fill it with things that have nothing whatever to do with sex, and come back, in a way, as the perfect androgynous writer. For this is the goal that Woolf's narrator can see in the distance, a hundred years ahead: men and women having an equal share of the literary and intellectual landscape, occupying it in harmony without ever being conscious of their sex.

## 3.2 The Mothers' Androgynous Space

### 3.2.1 The 'Feminine' Mother

Not unlike the narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, the mothers in the primary texts have to reach a kind of androgynous space in order to be mothers on their own premises. They have to rid themselves of the femininity that is connected with being a good mother. Femininity is connected to motherhood because it is often taken for granted that women are good parents. Motherhood, then, connected to femininity. In 1976, Adrienne Rich writes in the book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* that

*[t]he meaning of "fatherhood" remains tangential, elusive. To "father" a child suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To "mother" a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning and nurture, which does not come by instinct. A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighed choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate", usually in poverty, always outside the law (12).*

It is 41 years since Rich wrote these words and many things have changed about how we see motherhood and fatherhood. For instance, legislations about same-sex marriage and acts on registered partnership have opened up for families that do not fit the traditional heteronormative pattern. The legalization of surrogacy in many countries, as well as acts on co-fathering and co-mothering, mean that we have to change our definition of 'motherhood', and the same goes for foster parenting and adoption. The title 'mother' is no longer as rigidly connected to the woman who gives birth to the child. For many people it has come to be associated with the nurture part of the parenting, without having to entail, like Rich writes, the nature part of 'intense physical and psychic rite of passage' of pregnancy and childbirth. One might assume that Rich's definition has been upgraded and expanded, seeing as it was written at a time when the family structures were not so varied as they are today, but there is still a prevalent attitude in our society that performing the role of 'mother' is still very much associated with the notion of a continuing presence, a carer and nurturer. What makes it difficult to distinguish is that our word for this role or behaviour is so strongly connected with the *female* parent, so that we are used to thinking that the woman is the one who is best suited as carer and nurturer. In couples where the parents are the same sex there are no obvious gender roles and it is not possible to divide the parents into 'mother' and 'father'. That, however, does not mean that there is no one doing the kind of parenting that we formerly associate with those terms. Rather, these constellations reveal how the traditional division is obsolete, because they detach the role of parent from the person's gender. In these couples, and within the parents themselves, there is a flexibility in the attitude to parenting that is sometimes hindered in couples consisting of a man and a woman because the idea of the masculine parent and the feminine parent can get in the way.

A quick look at the definitions of the words 'mother' and 'father' shows that although the words have come to include an expanded meaning of female and male parenting, there is still a difference in what the words signal about gender roles. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that 'mother' as a noun is '[t]he female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth; (also, in extended use) a woman who undertakes the responsibilities of a parent towards a child, esp. a stepmother.' It can also be '[w]omanly qualities (as taken to be inherited

from the mother); maternal qualities or instincts, esp. maternal affection' ("mother, n.1 (and int.)."). As a verb it can mean '[t]o be or become the mother of, give birth to; . . . to be the source or originator of, give rise to, produce' or '[t]o bring up, take care of, or protect as a mother; to look after in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way' ("mother, v.1.") About the word 'father' the same dictionary says that it, as a noun, means '[t]he male parent of a human being; a man in relation to his child or children' or '[a] man who undertakes the responsibilities of a parent towards a child; a man who adopts a child as his own; a stepfather' ("father, n."). As a verb it means to '[t]o be or become the father of; to beget' or '[t]o act as a father to; to look after' ("father, v.").

As we can see from these entries the words 'mother' and 'father' as nouns are similar in the way they both mean to undertake 'the responsibilities of a parent towards a child,' but notice how the noun 'mother' is also connected to womanly qualities, maternal qualities or instincts, and affection, whereas there is no meaning of neither male qualities, paternal qualities or instincts, nor affection connected to 'father' as a noun. As a verb 'mother' is connected to giving birth but also to the act of being or becoming a mother, so in this respect the dictionary also includes mothers who have not given birth to their children, in the same way that 'father' as a verb can mean to be or become a father without having to be biologically connected to the child. However, the verb 'mother' also includes the meaning of bringing up, taking care of and protecting as a mother, and to look after someone *in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way*, whereas 'father' means to look after someone, period. There is no reason why female parenting should be described with the adverbs 'kindly' and 'protective', and definitely not 'excessively', when male parenting is not given this description, any more than the description of male parenting should lack these characteristics when female parenting is being elaborated upon, for a male parent can also look after someone *in a (sometimes excessively) kindly and protective way* without being said to 'mother' someone. In either case these verb definitions discriminate both male and female parents. In addition, the definition of the verb 'mother' also suggests that women walk a tightrope in the mother role because it sets the standard of the act of looking after that implies the possibility of failure to meet that standard, as well as signaling that the same actions easily can become negative. The difference in these entries about the parenting

of a child serves to reproduce a distinction between female parenting and male parenting that support the notion of a feminine and masculine parent identity. These examples show that femininity, read as a set of expectations and norms connected to the female biological sex, has bearing on how we expect a good mother to behave. The ‘feminine mother’, then, equals the ‘good mother’.

### **3.2.2 The Motherhood Expectation**

The failure to meet the standard of the feminine mother is shown differently in the three texts, but the way they are expected to accept suffering in their motherhood shows how all of them face the notion of the female martyr that is connected to the ‘good mother’.

#### **Eva’s Lack of the ‘Motherhood Gene’**

In Eva’s case, one of her problems is that she has always waited for the hormonal bliss of wanting a child, ‘the narcotic pining that draws childless women ineluctably to stranger’s strollers in parks’, ‘to be drowned by the hormonal imperative’ (Shriver 31). This means that she feels that there is something wrong about her and she feels cheated. When she expects there to be a development in her attitude to motherhood, that the ‘motherhood gene’ will suddenly be turned on, and this fails to occur, she is, within herself, challenged on the norms of the feminine mother.

Eva is also challenged on her femininity when Mary Woolford, a parent of one of the youths that Kevin killed, takes Eva to court on the basis of parental neglect. In fact, it is an incident with Mary Woolford in the supermarket that moves her to start writing to Franklin in the first place. To the outside world Eva has failed at meeting the standard of the feminine mother and has gotten a reputation as a ‘bad mother’. For Eva’s lawyer Harvey it becomes crucial to repair this image in order to clear Eva of this charge, and the way he does it is to reproduce the idea of the mother as martyr.

*“Ms. Khatchadourian, . . . the prosecution has made much of the fact that you ran a company in Manhattan while leaving your son to the care of strangers, and that*

*when he turned four you were away in Africa. . . . But after this trip you hired someone else to oversee the day-to-day business of your firm, order to be a better mother to your child? . . . Didn't you take over as his primary caregiver? In fact, aside from occasional baby-sitters, didn't you cease to bring in outside help altogether?" "Frankly, we gave up on hiring a nanny because we couldn't find anyone to put up with Kevin for more than a few weeks" . . . "But you were concerned that he needed continuity . . . You no longer went into the office nine-to-five. . . . [Y]ou loved your work, correct? It gave you great personal satisfaction. . . . So [it] was a considerable sacrifice, all for the sake of your child?" "The sacrifice was enormous," I said. "It was also futile." . . . We had rehearsed enormous, period; he shot me a glare (145).*

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich writes that motherhood is associated with martyrdom in the way pain is 'embedded in the ideology of motherhood' (157), and that '[t]he identification of womanhood with suffering . . . has been tied to the concept of woman-as-mother. The idea that woman's passive suffering is inevitable has worn many guises in history.' She gives the example of Eve, whose punishment for going against God's will is to suffer in childbirth. Another is the Virgin Mary, 'the eternally suffering and suppliant mother' (168). By the time Rich herself gives birth to her three sons between 1955 and 1959, pain during labour is no longer 'inevitable'. All three labours are done under general anaesthesia even though only the first of them may have justified the use of this kind of medical intervention. Rich finds this arrangement to suit her, as labour had always seemed to her 'something to be gotten through, the child—and the state of motherhood—being the mysterious and desired goal' (175). However, she still finds herself apologetic about her own labours when talking to women who have given birth without any kind of anaesthesia, which Grantley Dick-Read's book *Natural Childbirth* from 1993 has made popular.

*I was told: "It hurt like hell, but it was worth it"; or, "It was the most painful, ecstatic experience of my entire life." . . . [A]mong those who were awake at delivery, a premium seemed to be placed on the pain endured rather than on an active physical experience. Sometimes I felt that my three unconscious deliveries were yet another sign of my half-suspected inadequacy as a woman; the "real" mothers were those who had been "awake through it all"' (176).*

Whether or not pregnant women in our days feel the same kind of pressure to experience pain during labour in order to be 'real mothers' I will not discuss here, but what we can see from Rich's writing on the suffering of mothers is that Eva's lawyer, in

his questioning of Eva during the trial, works very hard to make Eva appear as feminine as possible to gain the jury's sympathy. He wants to create an impression of his client as a mother who has sacrificed a great deal in motherhood, and that *because* she has suffered she is a better mother. For the martyrdom is connected to femininity, which in turn means that martyrdom makes her a good mother. Harvey wants to make his client appear as a brave mother who only tried her best, one who is kind and protective of her son in spite of his hostility, and who chose, martyrlike, to give up her job in order to be a better mother. Eva, however, finds it difficult to play this part even when they practice at making her not speak her mind. She does not manage to conform to the norms of femininity that is expected of her in this situation. She finds life with her son difficult, but she is not supposed to say this out loud because it means she is not a good mother.

Bearing in mind both Rich's reading of 'mother' and 'father' and the definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the picture that is painted is that our heteronormative culture is more used to, and accepting of, a situation where the mother cares for the child and the father is less involved, than a situation where the opposite is the case. Men, in other words, tend to be more easily excused or written off as bad parents than women are, who, even if they are not placed before a jury like Eva, still have to face being judged on their parenting.

### **Ma and Maternal Martyrdom**

Ma's struggle with femininity is shown both in and in Old Nick's kidnapping and in the TV interview. Ma's captor has kidnapped Ma in order to use her a sex slave. All the time Ma has spent in captivity Old Nick has not shown any interest in getting to know her and personality or history, which indicates that he has not been stalking her prior to the abduction and chosen her specifically. He is not interested in keeping her locked up like a treasure and pretend they are a couple. What Old Nick wants is to use her for sex, and on the day of the kidnapping he picks because he reduces her to 'woman'. In this case that means that he reduces her to what he assumes is between her legs. There is reason to believe that any woman would have been eligible, and the 19-year-old Ma was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Old Nick does not care about Ma gender orientation or sexual orientation, whether or not she already has a romantic partner, or



even a child, or whether or not she has a contagious disease that he might get. He expects her to conform to an outdated idea of the feminine woman, which she underlines in her telling the interviewer that she was polite to Old Nick in order to protect Jack. “I did it on autopilot, you know, Stepford Wife.” (Donoghue 291). This points to an idea of the woman as feminine, as a being who does what she is told and never steps out of line. It also points to the very much ‘marital’ dynamic of her entrapment. Her captor, having carried the sedated Ma over the threshold to Room like a bridegroom with his chosen woman, comes most evenings around 9 p.m., and the whole situation reads as a perverted retelling of traditional, heteronormative family life with stereotypical gender roles, where he is the working provider and she dependent the stay-at-home carer. In Room Old Nick creates a world where Ma’s body does not belong to her, hence her need to escape into Gone.

In the TV interview Ma is challenged with expectations about what she as a female parent should have done when Jack was born. The interviewer uses phrases like ‘many of our viewers are curious’ and ‘this may startle some of our viewers’ (290-292) and in this way, asking Ma questions on behalf of her viewers, she renders concrete many expectations about motherhood. She takes the responsibility of digging into Ma’s motives and thoughts, so that what might have been started as question or even accusation submitted by a viewer ends up as her argument, and her own opinions about what Ma tells her shines through in the interview. Because she is the one voicing the viewer’s concern she is also the one who lets all those voices into the room. She ends up representing all women out there who might have an opinion on how Ma raised her son inside Room, so that it is almost as if the room were filled with all those viewers. Together she and the viewers form a unit, and the impression that the scene gives, then, is one not so unlike Amelia in her sister’s kitchen, sitting before the ‘panel’ that is Claire and her friends.

*“When Jack was born—some of our viewers have been wondering whether it ever for a moment occurred to you to...” “What? Put a pillow over his head?” . . . Heaven forbid. But did you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away?” “Away?” “To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he could be adopted. As you yourself were, very happily, I believe. . . . [S]o he could be free. . . . It would have been a sacrifice, of course—the ultimate sacrifice—but if Jack could have a normal, happy childhood with a loving family? . . . [Y]ou knew what he was missing” (296-297).*

In this excerpt we see how what starts as the viewers' question ends up as the interviewer's own business. *She* is the one who considers giving Jack away to be 'the ultimate sacrifice' and she is the one who keeps arguing in favour of the case when she experiences that Ma does not follow her reasoning. It gives the impression that she herself has had these thoughts about Ma's situation.

*"Were there days when you felt you were being, ah, forced to bear this man's—"* Ma butts in. *"Actually I felt saved."* "Saved. *That's beautiful. . . . Was [giving birth alone] the hardest thing you've ever done?"* Ma shakes her head. *"The best thing."* *"Well, that too, of course. Every mother says—"* "Yeah, but for me, see, Jack was everything. I was alive again, I mattered. . ." (291).

In the figure of the interviewer Ma comes face to face with the expectation of the maternal martyrdom. When Ma says that giving birth to Jack is the best thing that ever happened to her, she dismisses this as something every mother has to say when a child is born. A woman is 'supposed' to say, like the women Adrienne Rich meets after her own labours, that '[i]t was the most painful, ecstatic experience of my entire life' (Rich 175). A woman is 'supposed' to find it equally painful and rewarding, and the interviewer finds it difficult to believe that Ma really finds Jack's birth as comforting as she says it is, and she also assumes that Ma was bored with Jack (293). What her reactions to Ma's motherhood attitude reveal, is the notion of how women, as mothers, is *supposed* to find motherhood hard and they are expected to get bored as mothers, but that they, as good mothers, are also supposed to just endure the pain and boredom. The interviewer says indirectly that Ma has been selfish and that a good mother would have given up her child in order to give it freedom, even if that means having to miss that child every day for the rest of her life. In the meeting with the interviewer Ma cannot win, for the impression that the other woman gives is that a woman has to suffer at least a little in the relation with her child in order to be a good mother. The TV interviewer seems to *want* Ma to suffer a bit with Jack, as if being a good mother means having to make some sort of sacrifice. In this way she reproduces the idea of the maternal martyr.

## **Amelia versus the Stereotypical Mother**

In *The Babadook*, as I established in the previous chapter, femininity is manifested outfits, as well as in vocations and in the expectations to motherhood. Kent shows a kind of distilled world of women, where one stereotypical box after the other is ticked. The woman who stays at home while the husband is at work; the woman doing the grocery shopping; the woman attending a children's birthday party; and the woman taking her child to the doctor, which is turned into a woman's duty. None of the women shown break even slightly with the stereotypical norm of the feminine woman, neither in their appearance, nor in their activities. The world we as viewers are presented with is the one Amelia sees, and so we are meant to be presented with a world where everyone is the same and nobody steps out of line. Because of men's absence, Kent is able to present an image of what might happen when women are alone, like Mary Carmichael does when she writes about Chloe and Olivia. In *The Babadook*, the women really face the same kinds of challenges and they are not very different in their upbringing; Amelia, like Claire, who has forgotten she has bought the same doll for Ruby twice, is also absent-minded and does not remember that she has bought firecrackers for Samuel over the Internet (0:20:02-0:20:08). However, the world of women also helps reveal how judgmental women are of each other in their attitudes to motherhood. Though Claire and her friend are not particularly happy about the household arrangement, they give the impression of bearing over with it even when it might not be the best thing for their careers. Their femininity, then, is also established in their willingness to accept a kind of martyrdom. Claire seems to expect that Amelia still wants to have a better career, even though she finds it difficult to make ends meet in her present situation. For Amelia, however, this is not possible. She is not able to accept that mother entails suffering, and this makes her unable to conform to the standard of feminine motherhood as it is presented in *The Babadook*. She blames her nightmare of a life on Samuel, and is not able to be in control of her life until she removes herself from convention and lets out all her nasty and unfeminine thoughts that have been repressed. In order to be a good mother she must first be allowed to be herself, and that is not possible as long as she keeps quiet about something as important as the loss of Oskar. After having put up an internal fight with the Babadook and sent him out of her body, she is able to stand her ground in the bedroom and tell him that he is not real (*The Babadook* 1:18:18). She

reclaims her bedroom and her basement and the rest of her house, and finds back to a place in herself where she can speak her mind.

The mothers in the primary texts are only able to find their own space when they step out of the mother role. They need to enter a space where they are unmotherly in order to redefine what motherhood is, free of the heavy burden of old expectations about the mother that is feminine. This is the same thing that Woolf's narrator seeks for women. She speaks in favour of a space where it is possible to doff the gender norms, much like one would a dress that is too tight. Both the physical space that is needed to think, but also the mental space where their thoughts can be found, need to be redefined as a *flexible* space for the Self, one that can change and be as inconsistent as the Self. This way there is room for the whole of the Self in all its complexity.

## 4 The Breaking of Taboos and Crossing of Borders

In this chapter I argue that in order to enter the androgynous space that is free of expectations about gender, the mothers break with the norms and expectations about the female parent. In order to claim the space they need, they break taboos and internalize the abject, themselves becoming the abject, which enables them to expel the abject 'I' and remove themselves from the space where the true Self is being restricted.

### 4.1 Femininity and Abjection

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) Julia Kristeva writes that the abject is 'opposed to I'(1), meaning that the abject is that which the I, the subject, is not. In order to define itself, the subject must define borders against everything that the I is not, between, for instance, the clean and unclean and the living and the dead. The abject, the unclean aspects of life, threatens the existence of the self. It is harmful in the way that it 'disturbs identity, system, order' (4), but at the same time the abject is enables, because it is necessary for the subject to use borders to understand and define itself. Kristeva writes that the corpse, or cadaver, derived from *cadere* which means 'to fall', is 'the utmost of abjection' (3).

*[It is] cesspool, and death; . . . as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently cast aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit that life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not, and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled (3-4).*

In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed uses Kristeva's theory of the abject as a basis for her work, where she studies the representation of women in horror films. She argues that women are in fact represented as monstrous in quite a lot of them, contrary to what many other theorists on the horror genre have claimed. She opposes those who say that women in horror stories are primarily victims or that when women appear as monstrous, they are not feminine, but masculine, which suggests that 'femininity', by definition, excludes all forms of aggressive, monstrous behaviour' (5). Creed analyses five different horror films, each representing one of five faces of the monstrous-feminine in relation to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and her theory on the abject and the maternal, and argues that 'when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions' (7). She says that she has chosen to use the term 'monstrous-feminine' instead of the term 'female monster', because the latter 'implies a simple reversal of 'male monster' (3).

*The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity (3).*

Where critics before her have either discussed female monstrosity as being a part of male monstrosity, claimed that a woman can only be terrifying when she is represented as 'man's castrated other' or argued that 'there are no 'great' female monsters in the tradition of Frankenstein's monster or Dracula,' Creed finds her niche when she intends to present a 'sustained analysis of the different faces of the female monster' (3). She reads Kristeva's essay and connects it to the maternal figure in horror film. She explains how the abject is placed on the side of the feminine where it constitutes an opposition 'to the paternal symbolic' (37). She also draws our attention to how the abject represents the things that disturb the identity, the things that must be expelled in order to construct and distinguish the Self as clean and proper.

## 4.2 Amelia and the Abject

Of the three primary works in this thesis, Kristeva's theory is most important for understanding of *The Babadook*, even though the abject are also important for understanding how the women connect with their Self in the other texts as well. As we have seen in chapter one, the Babadook is really just a representation of something that already exists within the walls of the house and within Amelia herself. However, the fact that this something is finally manifested in a monster that can be interacted with and fought down, enables Amelia to deal with what she could not deal with before. It makes her say the things she is not supposed to say, and this way she can confront that part of herself. In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed analyses *The Exorcist*, a film which shares elements with *The Babadook* in the way that Regan, the protagonist, is a monstrous figure. 'She spews green bile, utters foul obscenities' in addition to a whole lot of other tabooed actions that Amelia-as-Babadook does not do:

*[She] tries to fuck her mother, causes inanimate objects to fly, rotates her head full circle on her neck, knocks men to the floor with one punch, tries to castrate a priest, murders two men, and in her spare time masturbates with a crucifix (31).*

Amelia-as-Babadook kills their dog Buggy and attempts to kill Samuel, and Creed says that in *The Exorcist*, 'possession becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject' (31). By having internalized abjection through the possession, the abject can also be spoken by the subject, who can come to terms with it (42). This is what happens when Amelia is possessed by the Babadook.

When Amelia works so hard to stay away from the basement and the grief of Oskar's death, it is an attempt at creating a border between her life and his death. His things, then, can be read as having the same meaning as a corpse, they are the substitute for a corpse. The basement serves the role as mausoleum, at once sacred and frightening. It is the one part of the house one is not supposed to enter, and by locking up his things down there, Amelia is trying to create a border between 'clean' and 'unclean', between the living and the dead. When she discovers that Samuel has found the key to the basement and scattered his father's things around before playing the magician in front of their photo, Amelia reacts as if Samuel has just opened Oskar's

grave and propped up his father's body in a sitting position in order to have a make-believe conversation. Because Amelia treats the things as an extension of Oskar's body in the cemetery, she treats them with respect but is at the same time uncomfortable around them, like being in a room with someone you love who has just passed away. Amelia feels that Samuel does not respect the memory of Oskar when he treats the things differently than she does, but in fact Samuel also regards the things as a representation of his father. That is exactly why he does play with them the way he does, in order to form a bond with someone he has never met, and in fact have a kind of make-believe conversation with him. Figuratively speaking he enters the mausoleum to get to know his father. When Amelia refuses him this opportunity, it also affects Samuel's opportunity to get to know himself through his origins, which is further enhanced by the fact that she the very same day has declared that he will not get to have a birthday party because he has misbehaved. The celebration of Samuel's origins is thus doubly rejected because Amelia is afraid of connecting death with life. In the way the violation of someone's dead body is a violation of the memory of who that person was, Amelia is horrified when she finds that Samuel has taken the photograph of her and Oskar and put it on her bed and scribbled out his father's face with a black marker, obscuring it, and has drawn over his mother's eyes and mouth so that she looks like a demon. This demonization of his mother in the picture shows how he blames her for eliminating his father from their family. He does not blame her for his death, but for not trying to bring him to life. The scribbling out of the photo is a symbolic scribbling out of the memory of Oskar, and Samuel's 'argument' is that it is not *he* who destroys the memory of Oskar, it is his mother.

Kristeva writes that abjection is caused by the things that disturbs identity, system and borders. Abjection is 'immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you' (4). The Babadook, then, who defies descriptions, his being at once material and immaterial, can be read as abject. He knocks the door before entering the house, but he does not respect being kicked out. In the beginning of the book he smiles and waves at them. His funny disguise hides a dark interior, a scheming being who, as Samuel says, 'wants to scare you first' (0:20:09-0:20:13). He possesses Amelia, using her 'body for barter instead of



inflaming it' when instead of harming her all at once he uses her to show how he grows of he is not confronted. He is Amelia's resolve gone wrong, an old safety turned into her worst enemy, 'a friend who stabs you.' Figuratively speaking Amelia has found a way to cope that involves stashing away all her mess into the room that has her name on the door, so that it has become impossible to open it without having everything fall out and clear up the mess before entering. As a result she avoids the one space that could have been all hers, and is left to try and have privacy where everyone keeps interrupting her. The Babadook is the one who forces her door open while simultaneously representing the mess that comes crashing out. Being a projection of Amelia's grief over losing Oskar he is also 'death infecting life', an infection which is also physically manifested in the cockroaches. Oskar's death stands in the way of Amelia and Samuel's life, which can be seen not only in the way Amelia's grief stops her from forming a close bond with her son, but also in the way Amelia relives Oskar's death in her nightmare. The fact that Samuel's voice makes its way into her dream and that it calls for 'Mum' is a demonstration of Amelia's lack of privacy and her frustration with being unable to step out of the mother role. She searches for somewhere to hold on to just after Samuel has called for her, which shows how she is put off by having to deal with being a mother just as she is about to lose her husband. The dream is haunted not only by the accident but also by motherhood. Samuel invades her dream and forces her to deal with him and his anxiety about monsters and thus she does not get the opportunity to process her husband's death, even in her sleep. She experiences that Samuel gets in the way of Oskar's death, even though what has actually happened in the relationship between them is that Oskar's death has overshadowed Samuel's birth.

*If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than the abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being (Kristeva 5).*

When Amelia has been made aware of the Babadook's presence, she slowly starts moving closer to the borders of the abject, that is her darkness. In the beginning she is

able to identify the borders she is crossing, like when Samuel says he needs food with the pills and Amelia says, ‘If you’re that hungry, why don’t you go and eat shit?!’ Afterwards Amelia goes into Samuel’s room and apologizes, which shows that she is still able to identify the borders she is crossing (*The Babadook* 0:49:34-0:51:0). After this, however, she starts to lose it even more. Having been scared by the Babadook in the car, her body starts becoming affected by him. She roars at Samuel when he tries to touch the violin Amelia has collected from among Oskar’s things, and Samuel is filmed from Amelia’s point of view, sitting frightened in a chair at the other end of the room. A slight twitching in the frame mimics the movement of the Babadook, which reveals that he is growing under her skin, and it is repeated later in the night when we see the ceiling from Amelia’s point of view, the frame twitching again. A rustling sound mixes with a whisper that seems to be in Amelia’s head, before a strange, distorted voice suddenly exclaims, ‘There’s someone in the house!’ (0:54:38-0:55:32). Moving downstairs to find that Samuel is whispering in the phone, Amelia takes it from him and sees that it is Mrs Roach.

*AMELIA: Gracie, I’m so sorry...*

*MRS ROACH: Has someone broken into the house? Sam said that—*

*AMELIA: No, no, no, we’re fine. Samuel’s just been very disobedient again.  
(0:56:36-0:56:46)*

The fact that Samuel has called their neighbour to ask if they can sleep at her house, and that he has told Mrs Roach that someone has broken into the house, gives us reason to think that even though Amelia does not open her mouth when the distorted voice is heard, it is in fact she who yells it in her sleep. Without noticing it, the Babadook takes over her being until she loses sight of who she used to be. She moves closer to it one step at a time, like a person moving slowly into the shade of a figure, the shade covering more and more of her body until she finds that *she* is the figure, and that she has cast the dark shadow all along. This is what happens in the basement scene when Amelia finds that her own two hands are used to strangle Samuel, and the same hands try to push him away, out of her own grasp. The insect motif reaches full circle when Amelia, possessed by the parasite, manages to expel his dark matter and in so doing sheds her old skin, like Kristeva’s expulsion of the “I” (3). In the final confrontation she has become a woman who is able to stand between Samuel and the Babadook, protecting him from the roaring

darkness as the walls crack around them, and roar back, ‘You’re nothing! . . . This is my house! . . . You are trespassing in my house! If you touch my son again I’ll fucking *kill* you!’ (1:18:18-1:18:54). She has found ‘the impossible within,’ as Kristeva says (5), and is confronted with her loss of Oskar that led her to being possessed by the Babadook in the first place. In order to be able to express herself she must take ownership of her loss, claim the space it inhabits, and herself become the loss that his things represent. It is possible to argue that Amelia has to become more masculine in order to achieve this, but it is fairer to say that she must fill that space with a part of herself that she has chosen not to listen to. The notions of feminine and masculine, then, do not suffice when talking about the process of claiming this space. When I argue that the mothers must enter an androgynous space, I do not use it in its literal sense of a mix between masculine and feminine, but rather as a space where these characterizations are no longer important, like the space Woolf’s narrator seeks. Amelia, in taking her loss seriously, manages to open the door to her space and clear up her mess so that she can use all of herself and in turn be a better mother to Samuel.

### **4.3 Ma and the Abject**

Ma’s journey in *Room* is not as obviously connected to the abject as Amelia’s journey in *The Babadook*. She does not take her frustration out on her child and break the same kinds of taboos as Eva and Amelia do when they speak nastily to their sons and use violence. However, she breaks a different kind of taboo when she attempts to kill herself. The fact that Ma tries to commit suicide after their escape shows that she finds life on the outside difficult, so much so that in her darkest moment she is prepared to leave Jack and her family behind. Though she only wants what is best for Jack and never wants to hurt him, this instance of unmotherliness does harm her son.

In Kristeva’s theory the abject is connected to borders, and so too in *Room*. Ma has always made it her top priority to keep Room as clean as possible. Because Jack’s immune system is not properly developed cuts and wounds can easily get infected, which in Room would be fatal. Keeping things clean means keeping them alive, but now she crosses the border into the unclean, the abject, in order to try to get Jack out

through the door. Ma uses vomit and faeces to pretend that Jack has fallen ill so that Old Nick has to take him to the hospital right away, where he will be able to get help.

*I run to Toilet and do more poo and Ma stirs it up. I want to flush but she says no, Room has to stink like I've had diarrhea all day. . . . She's rubbing [vomit] on the pillow, on my hair. . . . She's wiping her vomit on my T-shirt, even my mouth. It smells the worst ever, all sharp and poisonous (147).*

Ma's plan, however, does not work. Old Nick is too scared to take Jack outside, but Ma has a plan B, which she initiates the next day. They pretend that Jack has died from diarrhea. As a 'corpse' Jack is abject inside Room and must be carried outside by Old Nick. In Old Nick's constructed world, no living creature can exit Room. She tells the TV interviewer that she has tried different strategies before Jack is born, "I kicked and screamed. One time I hit him over the head with the lid of the toilet. I didn't wash, for a long time I wouldn't speak." (290). The act of not washing is a way of approaching the border of the abject, but it is not enough to get Ma out of Room. There is only one person who has managed to get outside and that is Ma's stillborn daughter. Ma knows that the only way to exit Room is to really become abject, at least on the face of it, to cross the border between clean and unclean and the living and the dead.

In the same way that becoming abject helps them out of the physical border of Room, Ma must become abject in order to escape the mental room she has ended up in on the outside. The interviewer, in pushing Ma on the choice she made in keeping Jack rather than having him given up for adoption. She will not let the matter drop and makes Ma internalize the judgment of the interviewers and all the people she represents. The way she challenges Ma makes her doubt the one thing she always felt was right, and the next day she enters the space where she is Gone. Jack thinks, 'I didn't know she'd have days like this in the world' (298), but Ma has been faced with what others have judged to be an act of unmotherliness and that day she becomes that unmotherliness. By attempting suicide she crosses the border between the living and the dead and she becomes the abject, which is connected with the earlier episode and also underlined by the fact that her overdose has made her vomit. Like the way Amelia spews out the dark, inky matter of the Babadook who has disturbed her identity, Ma has vomited the parasitic thought planted there by the interviewer, a thought we can interpret as being abject. Because her overdose does not end up killing her after all, she is able to expel

the “I” that has internalized the unmotherliness. That way she also manages to escape from the mental room she became trapped in. In her near-death experience Ma rids herself of the abject, which means that she can shed the expectations to her role as woman and parent, and which makes possible her and Jack’s development together outside of Room. Ma reclaims her body from Old Nick’s expectations of the feminine woman, as well as freeing her mind of the TV interviewer’s expectations of the same.

## 4.4 Eva and the Abject

As I have shown in the first chapter, Kevin enables Eva to enter a space where she is free of all norms. The following excerpt illustrates how this is in fact made possible by the abject.

*There came an afternoon in July that, per, tradition, Kevin had soiled his diapers once and been cleaned up with the whole diaper cream and talcum routine, only to complete the evacuation of his bowels twenty minutes later. Or so I assumed. But his time he outdid himself. . . . I sniffed another telltale waft. . . . “How do you do it?” I shouted. “You hardly eat anything, where does it come from?” A rush of heat rippled up through my body, and I barely noticed that Kevin was now dangling with his feet off the carpet. He seemed to weigh nothing, as if that tight, dense little body stocked with such inexhaustible quantities of shit was packed instead with Styrofoam peanuts. There’s no other way to say this. I threw him halfway across the nursery (Shriver 228-229).*

Kevin wears diapers until the age of six and Eva is convinced he does it only to spite her. Her son’s behaviour as she understands it infuriates her so much that she is violent towards her son, doing the opposite of what she is supposed to do as a mother but at the same time doing the only thing that feels right for her. In scenes like the one above she regains the integrity she loses when she becomes pregnant with Kevin. Her body becomes abject with that growing child inside her, the way it ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (Kristeva 4). Eva does not like what pregnancy does to her body and how she feels that people stare at her out of revulsion. She indirectly compares her own pregnancy to those in *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Alien*, *Mimic* and *X-Files* in order to show how her culture tends to view pregnancy as an infestation: ‘... I didn’t make these movies up, and any woman whose teeth have rotted, whose bones have thinned, whose skin has stretched, knows the humbling price of a nine-month freeloader’ (Shriver 70). In trying

to use popular culture to make an argument about how pregnancy is considered repulsive, what she actually does is revealing how she feels infected and that she identifies with the women in these films. Even before Kevin is born, Eva uses horror films to convey the level of infestation she experiences. 'The whole time I was pregnant with Kevin I was battling the idea of Kevin, the notion that I had demoted myself from driver to vehicle, from householder to house' (70). With a dark creature having taken up residence in her, she is herself like a haunted house. For Eva, becoming a mother is happening at the expense of her Self. She does not really want a child, but she does not manage to accept this part of herself. She cannot help but feel cheated of the feeling women are supposed to have about procreating. In Creed's reading of Kristeva the woman's body, 'because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject' (Creed 11).

Kevin can be said to fit with Kristeva's definition of the abject. In the correctional facility he tells his mother, "I knew exactly what I was doing. . . . *And I'd do it again*" (50). He is 'the criminal with a good conscience, . . . the killer who claims he is a savior' (Kristeva 4). Whether or not he is abject I will not discuss further, but the fact is that when pregnant with him, Eva feels that her body becomes abject, that she is not herself and that whatever is inside threatens her identity. This feeling does not go away when Kevin is born, for as a mother Eva is still not allowed to be herself, or rather, she does not allow herself to be herself. The 'veil of civilization' (232) that makes life possible comes between her Self and herself as mother, so that she still lives a life like in a horror movie. When Kevin pushes her over the edge, however, the veil lifts and she becomes the abjection, which also, for a moment, frees her of it. In the same way, he both forces her and allows her to stay in this unveiled world when he kills his father and sister. Without her other family Eva becomes her own loss, much in the same way that Amelia becomes her loss when she expels the Babadook. She becomes the grief of losing her husband and daughter, but also gives space to the person she always mourned, her old Self, of whom she lost sight when she became pregnant. Eva only finds her narrative space after she realizes what her attempt at being the brave and overly positive mother actually does to her relationship with Kevin. Both of them know that she is not being true to herself, which means that her voice is used to express things that are not part of who she is. Like Woolf, who says that fiction in her case contains

more truth than fact does, Eva uses the fiction of her own narrative to express her true Self.





## 5 Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown how the authors use spatial metaphors in order to establish how the women experience motherhood. I have argued that mothers in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *The Babadook* and *Room* suffer from lack of space in motherhood and that in order to break free from this restrictive kind of motherhood they must break taboos and become unmotherly, and in that way return as a redefined mother, free from the expectations set by society.

Spatial metaphors are used differently in the three texts, and in the first chapter I performed a close reading and analysis of each text in order to establish how space has bearing on the relationship between mother and child.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva feels that she cannot talk with Franklin about how she feels about motherhood, neither before Kevin is born nor as he grows up. She has feelings about her own son that do not correspond with what she expects of motherhood, but since she is not getting the chance to process them with her husband she ends up feeling out of place as a mother. Shriver uses the spatial metaphor of the house on Palisades Parade to show two things in particular, namely the miscommunication between Eva and Franklin, which leads him to, well-meant, buying the house without talking to her first, as well as the level of anxiety that Eva feels in her relationship with Kevin. In the way she feels out of place as a mother, she feels out of place in the house, and the physical space comes to represent the oppressiveness that Eva experiences when she cannot process her feelings. The way Kevin also ruins his mother's study, a room that Eva has worked hard to transform into a representation of herself, shows how Eva feels that Kevin's presence in her life threatens her understanding of herself. In this way Eva's lack of space can be interpreted as lack of opportunity to live out her identity. The narrative space of her letters to Franklin, and consequently the space of the novel, is a place where Eva can correct this imbalance. There, like a space with a door, she can take control of her identity in a way she is not able to in her relationship with Kevin or in the house.

In *The Babadook*, both the house that Samuel and Amelia live in, as well as Amelia's body, are used as spatial metaphors for the struggle Amelia faces. In first

establishing how Amelia must navigate a world with strict norms for women, the building is used to visualize how Amelia's issues are connected to femininity, represented in the female body. The basement of the house and Amelia's attitude to this space represents the lack of freedom she experiences as a woman and mother. I have argued that a journey is made through the house in Amelia's battle with the Babadook, her inner darkness. Amelia's reluctance to talk about the problems she faces as a mother is visualized as a room inside the house. This means that the mental restrictions have a tangible counterpart, a physical space that it is possible to reclaim. When Samuel ties her monstrous mother down inside this room, Amelia is forced to be confronted with a space she has shied away from.

In *Room*, physical space is used to show how Ma, as a mother to Jack, has no opportunity to be anything but Ma. The space of Room comes to represent Ma's motherhood because it is the only place in the world where she and Jack have ever been together. The space in Room is smaller than the mother's physical space in the other primary texts, which mirrors the close bond between Ma and Jack. It is a stark contrast to the outside world that Ma and Jack must navigate in after they escape, which shows how this closeness in the relationship is difficult to maintain when the world gets bigger. The physical space of Room is contrasted in Ma's coping mechanism of being Gone, a mental place where she is able to process her thoughts. When Ma is Gone she is not in Room, which means that in this state she removes herself from motherhood. Ma faces a crisis in motherhood when she and Jack escapes Room, because in order to face the real world she must distance themselves from the very premises for her mothering of Jack.

In the third chapter, 'How Ideas of Space Shape Ideas of Motherhood', I show through close reading, how Virginia Woolf also uses spatial metaphors in *A Room of One's Own* to talk about the situation for women. She declares that women must have money and a room of their own if they are to write fiction. She advocates mental freedom, and by imagining her journey of thoughts as a journey through physical space she points out the necessity of being able to move around without restrictions, whether it be talk of out in the physical world or in the space of the mind. Woolf wants women to be able to enter a space where they do not have to deal with old 'truths' about and expectations to their sex. Instead she proposes a mix of the masculine and feminine in

the androgynous, which really is more of a releasing from both of these gender characteristics.

By presenting excerpts from Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* I show how mothers have been and still are viewed as the 'good' parents just because they are women, and that this expectation has roots in the idea of the feminine woman. I also apply this to the analysis of the primary texts in order to show how the women are met with the expectation that mothers should be sacrificing themselves for the sake of parenting just because they are women.

In the fourth and last chapter, 'The Breaking of Taboos and Crossing of Borders', I show, using Julia Kristeva's theory on the abject, and Barbara Creed's own analysis of the abject as connected to the feminine, how the mothers in the primary texts must break taboos and cross borders in order to shed the expectations of the feminine woman and mother. By becoming the abject, as Kristeva imagines it, they become the very essence of the unmotherliness as it is defined by the gender norms, and by having first internalized it, the women make it possible to rid themselves of it through their own bodies. In the first chapter I discussed how the women feel that they lack space because they cannot communicate with their children. When they cannot communicate they repress their feelings, which makes leads them to come out in unhealthy ways. Eva and Amelia shout obscenities and get violent, and Ma, in attempting suicide, tries to remove the one thing from Jack's life that she knows that Jack really needs. When the women experience that they cannot say their feelings out loud, I propose we read this as representing the tradition of being quiet about problems that women face. This means that they, in the act of expelling the abject, also reclaim their own body and their Self, both of which have been ravaged by the expectations of the 'feminine', 'good' mother.

In the third chapter I wrote how the 'feminine mother' equals the 'good mother'. In removing themselves from what is appropriate motherhood behaviour the mothers step outside of femininity. In the same way that they redefine their own space for parenting they also redefine their own kind of androgynous space, having shed the expectations of femininity and 'good' motherhood behaviour.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf gives her title an optimism that points in the direction of the change she wants for women. She declares what is needed in order to achieve mental freedom and does not excuse herself. What she does is to be an example

of the freedom she believes women, and men, for that matter, can have. Even though she writes a text about gender, she is not bound by the restrictions that are associated with her sex. She creates a fictitious 'I' in order to distinguish between what is said and who is speaking. In this way she is close to becoming the very author Mary Carmichael can be in a hundred years' time. She has managed to cast off the limitations of the feminine gender in the style of writing, so that she writes with all of the Self, and is able to focus on the unrestricted process of thought. Woolf has, in this way, managed to enter the androgynous space and is trying to help other women get there too.

When I have chosen to give my thesis the title 'No Room of Her Own', I point to the connection between my primary texts and Woolf's text. However, where Woolf's title is optimistic, my title gives a somewhat pessimistic idea of the situation the mothers find themselves in. After all, I argue that the women manage to break free of the norm of the feminine and of the 'good mother' behaviour and find their own space in the multitude of other people's restricting opinions and beliefs. Therefore it might have been more appropriate to choose a title that reflects this development. Even so, I find the title to be fitting because, as Woolf draws our attention to, it is essential to point out the problematic situation before it is possible to make a change. Thus the title reflect what Shriver, Kent and Donoghue do when they put the silence of women on the agenda. It also reflects how the women in the primary texts have to be made aware of what their problem is before they can get rid of it and be free to be themselves.

Though I feel that my thesis statement is well illustrated by the secondary texts that I have chosen, I am of the opinion that in a thesis like this it will always be valuable with more secondary literary material than I have presented here. It would, for instance, have been interesting to further analyse the primary texts in light of other relevant texts about the experiences of motherhood and womanhood, like Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels' *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (2004) and Barbara Almond's *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood* (2010). There are also exciting texts on women and the horror genre apart from Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* that shed light on women and taboos, like Janice Loreck's *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* (2016).

There is also a problem in the scope of this thesis that all three mothers represent many majorities, or at least do not make a point of representing minorities. Under different circumstances it would be beneficial to have a more diverse collection of texts in order to have a more nuanced approach to studying the expectations that women must face.



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