**Online readers between the camps: a Text World Theory analysis of ethical positioning in *We Need to Talk About Kevin***

**Abstract**

Recent investigations into ethical experiences of fictional narratives have discussed the ‘positions’ that readers adopt in relation to the author, narrator and characters (Phelan, 1996, 2005, 2007; Stockwell, 2009, 2011, 2013; Whiteley, 2014). This article applies Text World Theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999) as a means of accounting for the ethical experience of Lionel Shriver’s *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003). Qualitative analysis of a sample of 150 online reader responses on the reading-based social network Goodreads(2015) reveals a range of ethical responses to the novel positioned between two interpretative ‘camps’ (Shriver, 2010) and the nature/nurture debate they reflect with regards to the character, Kevin. Drawing from this dataset, I explore how stylistic features of Shriver’s epistolary novel could be seen to influence readers’ ethical positioning in relation to the multiple perspectives presented at different levels of its narrative structure. As a result of the analysis, I propose that an account of ethical experience using Text World Theory may benefit from the concept of ‘construal’ in Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar (1987, 1991, 2008). By modeling readers’ variable attention to multiple minds, including their own, a cognitive grammatical model of construal may support an understanding of ethical interpretation as an interpersonal experience within particular reading contexts.

**Keywords**

Cognitive Grammar; epistolary novel; ethics; Lionel Shriver; mind-modelling; online reader responses; positioning; Text World Theory; *We Need To Talk About Kevin*.

**1. Introduction**

Lionel Shriver’s bestselling novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003) tells the story of Kevin, who at the age of fifteen violently murders seven of his school classmates and two members of staff. Told in a series of letters written by Kevin’s mother Eva to his father Franklin, the narrative represents Eva’s attempt to comprehend Kevin’s actions and the events that preceded them. The novel has been highly successful: it won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005 and was adapted into a film in 2011. Its success is reflected in the volume of debate it has generated amongst readers. Examination of reader responses to the novel in online forums reflects varied and often opposing standpoints in relation to its overarching ethical question: who is to blame for Kevin’s horrific crimes?

This article analyses a sample of reader responses as the basis for a stylistic account of this text’s ethical experience using the cognitive poetic framework Text World Theory (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999). Building on the model of ethical interpretation set out in rhetorical narratology (Phelan, 1996, 2005, 2007), Stockwell (2009, 2011, 2013) and Whiteley (2014) have argued that Text World Theory offers an account of the processing by which readers arrive at an overall ethical interpretation in terms of ‘ethical positioning’, which is ‘text-driven’ (Werth, 1999: 149) or rooted in the language of a text. Reader response research offers a valuable means of testing and developing the concepts and frameworks that stylisticians apply in their account of reading experiences (Miall, 2006; Peplow and Carter, 2014; Stockwell, 2005). In this article, I draw on reader response analysis to support a Text World Theory account of ethical positioning in *We Need To Talk About Kevin.* The analysis supports cognitive poetic accounts of ethics in previous studies, whilst suggesting the need for further investigation of particular kinds of ‘social reading’ with regard to ethical response (Peplow et al., 2016).

Having set out the cognitive poetic context for this study in Section 2, Section 3 describes the results of a qualitative analysis of 150 reader responses to *We Need To Talk About Kevin* collected from the reading-based social network Goodreads(2015). In Section 4 I analyse these responses to Shriver’s novel using Text World Theory. I outline the text-worlds constructed as a result of its epistolary style and, drawing on reader response data, discuss the ways in which readers are invited to engage with the various minds or perspectives within them. In Section 5 I discuss the implications of this analysis for the cognitive poetic understanding of ethical experience. Drawing parallels with Verhagen’s (2007a, 2007b) development of an interpersonal ‘construal configuration’ in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008), I make suggestions for future investigations of ethical experience using Text World Theory.

**2. Ethical positioning**

The ethics of literature concerns its ability to ‘reflect, engage and influence our beliefs and values’ (Whiteley, 2014: 395). Literary discussions of ‘ethics’ originate in rhetoric, in the perceived moral standing and credibility of a speaker that Aristotle defined as *ethos* (Aristotle, 1995). Our judgements of characters, narrators and authors in these terms, together with other cognitive (*logos*) and emotional (*pathos*) responses to them, are fundamentally similar to our responses to the real individuals, or minds, with whom we interact daily (Culpeper, 2001; Herman, 2013; Nuttall, 2015a; Palmer, 2004).

In rhetorical narratology, narrative is conceived of as a ‘multi-layered event’, in which a story is communicated between a teller and an audience (Phelan, 2007: 203, see also Booth, 1988; Rabinowitz, 1977). Phelan (1996, 2005, 2007) identifies ethical responses to literature as operating at four ‘layers’ of narrative: 1) the characters and their actions; 2) the narrator and his/her act of telling; 3) the implied author and his/her act of telling; and 4) the ‘flesh-and-blood reader’ and their act of reading (Phelan, 2005: 23). In *We Need To Talk About Kevin,* the most prominent ethical response invited is a judgement of the actions of the characters: Kevin, Eva and Franklin, and their responsibility for the murder of nine innocent people. Following Phelan, ethical responses to this text may also involve judgements of Eva’s representation of these events as narrator, Lionel Shriver’s telling of the story as a whole, and the reader’s own behaviour in reading the text. For Phelan (2005: 23), our responses at these different levels constitute ‘positions’, or emotional and ethical relationships that we establish with the characters/tellers within them. In this rhetorical account, it is the ‘dynamic interaction’ between all the different positions cued (Phelan, 2005: 23), or our simultaneous entering of multiple ‘audiences’ (Rabinowitz, 1977), that is said to give rise to our overall ethical interpretation of a text.

Text World Theory argues that we both produce and comprehend discourse through the negotiated construction of online mental representations, or ‘text-worlds’, for the situations presented in texts (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999). From this cognitive linguistic perspective, ethical judgement in literature involves the evaluation of an ‘alternative state of affairs’ in relation to our own (Stockwell, 2009: 160) and is thus best modelled in terms of the mentally represented worlds cued by the discourse. Incorporating developments in Deictic Shift Theory (Duchan et al., 1995), a Text-Worlds approach to ethics specifies the positions that readers adopt within worlds in terms of the ‘cognitive stance’ (Segal, 1995: 15) cued by specific linguistic choices. In this model, ‘world-building elements’ (e.g. deictic expressions such as *I*, *here* and *now*) invite a ‘deictic shift’ or ‘projection’ of our spatiotemporal viewpoint into a new deictic centre (Gavins, 2007: 40). The proximity or distance of cognitive stance in relation to entities within the text-world (described as character or narrator ‘enactors’, [Gavins, 2007]) has consequences for our emotional and ethical experiences of them. This ‘cognitive stance’ can therefore be directly compared with the ‘position’ described by Phelan (Stockwell, 2009: 160; Whiteley, 2014: 401). By modelling the projections linguistically cued by a text, Text World Theory offers an explanation of readers’ macro-level ethical experiences of texts in terms of the multiple, dynamic positions that they adopt at a micro-level during reading.

Furthermore, significant work has been carried out in developing an account of the cognitive processing involved in such projections. Within Text World Theory, projection is said to gain a broader sense, ‘not simply as the adoption of the spatiotemporal coordinates of another entity, but the imaginative reconstruction of psychological aspects of that entity’s perspective, including their world-view, attitudes, emotions, goals and so on’ (Whiteley, 2011: 27). This processing is said to draw on our cognitive capacity for ‘mind-reading’, described in psychology as our ability to infer the mental states of others (Baron-Cohen et. al., 1985; Malle and Hodges, 2005) and applied to literature in a more flexible, cognitive poetic sense as ‘mind-modelling’ (Stockwell, 2009; see other applications to narrative by Herman, 2013; Keen, 2007; Palmer, 2004). Applying such concepts to the ‘multi-layered’ account of narrative in rhetorical narratology, Whiteley (2011, 2014) proposes that our ability to engage with *multiple* minds or text-world enactors through ‘multiple projection’ may be an important aspect of our emotional and ethical engagement with texts.

An important step in developing any cognitive poetic framework is the testing of its ability to account for the experiences of ‘real’ readers in the world (Miall, 2006; Peplow and Carter, 2014; Stockwell, 2005). The call for ‘rigorous third-person observation’ in cognitive linguistics (Vandaele and Brône, 2009: 6) is echoed more broadly (e.g. Geeraerts, 2006; Hollmann, 2013; Nuttall, 2015b; see also Sanford and Emmott, 2012).

One means of observing real reading experiences is through what Swann and Allington (2009: 248) term ‘naturalistic studies’, in which reading behaviours are investigated in their usual environment in response to texts that they would typically read. Naturalistic reader response research of this kind has been shown to offer valuable insights for the development of Text World Theory, for example, Stockwell (2005), and Whiteley (2011, 2014) whose focus on ‘multiple projection’ constitutes an important direction for developing this framework’s ability to account for emotional and ethical experience. The analysis presented here continues and develops these studies through the qualitative analysis of a much larger sample of 150 online reader responses, using a systematic, software-assisted method for the observation of ethical responses.

Online book review forums such as Goodreads represent sources of naturalistic and easily collectable raw-data, which capture the responses of a large number of readers in a context outside of professional criticism (Gavins, 2013; Gregoriou, 2012; Harrison, 2013; Nuttall, 2015a; Whiteley, 2010). As Gavins (2013: 8) argues, while the participants in online discussions are likely to include professional critics and academics, the ‘reading contexts’ represented by these websites are non-academic and informal. Readers are invited to comment without formal or conventional constraint on their understandings, feelings and associations in relation to the text, and are encouraged to do so by the degree of anonymity offered by this mode of discourse. In terms of ethnography, therefore, the ‘reader’ considered in this kind of study is held to be a context-dependent role as opposed to a universal personality-type (cf. Goffman, 1997). By minimising the intervention of the researcher in data collection, the sampling of online reviews can be seen to mitigate the observer’s paradox to some extent. Rather than directing analysis towards pre-specified aspects of reading, such data are more likely to reflect the concerns of readers themselves (Swann and Allington, 2009: 249).

Such websites also facilitate consideration of the interpersonal context in which readings are produced in a form of ‘social reading’ (Peplow et al., 2016). Reviewers can read the comments of others before/while/after making their own. As in reading groups, therefore, their responses may be subject to sociolinguistic factors, such as politeness, group dynamics and a desire for social affirmation (Peplow, 2011; Swann and Allington, 2009). Unlike the spoken conversations observed in reading groups, however, a variable degree of planning will underlie these written responses. Produced at an uncontrolled length of time after, or during, a reading of the text, these responses may also be affected by ‘forgetfulness and post-hoc rationalisation’ to a variable extent (Short and van Peer, 1989: 25). Taking place in a different spatiotemporal situation, amongst different discourse participants, therefore, the ‘social readings’ presented and negotiated during online interactions should be seen as separate to those ‘solitary readings’ experienced by readers prior to their review (Peplow et al., 2016: 37). While such responses cannot be regarded as reflecting readers’ online cognitive processes during a solitary reading of a text, they nonetheless offer useful insights for general models of reader processing in cognitive poetics (Whiteley, 2011: 33) and the opportunity to expand these models to take into account interpersonal or social dimensions of reading (Peplow et al, 2016).

**3. Reader responses to *We Need To Talk About Kevin***

In a review of Shriver’s novel, Mullan (2008) observes that ‘Part of the success of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is that it has proved peculiarly *discutable*’. Commenting also on the novel’s reception in an Afterword to the paperback edition, Shriver observes a division in reader responses into two distinct ‘camps’:

I’ve been more fascinated by the responses to Kevin from so-called “ordinary” readers. Not only are many of these amateur reviews well written and reflective, but they divide almost straight down the middle into what seem to be reviews of two different books.

One camp assesses a story about a well-intentioned mother who, whatever her perfectly human deficits in this role, is saddled with a “bad seed”, a child evil from birth whose ultimate criminality only she seems to perceive but is helpless to prevent. […]

The second camp of readers appears to have read another novel entirely: about a mother whose coldness is itself criminal, and who bears full responsibility for her son’s rampage as a teenager. […]

I have found this division gratifying. Mission accomplished.

(Shriver, 2010: 473-4)

Setting out to investigate the ethical interpretation of this text empirically, I collected reader responses to *We Need To Talk About Kevin* from the Goodreads website(2015)*.* My dataset (summarised in Table 1) included posts from five active discussion threads, the titles of which indicated a concern with ethical and emotional responses to the characters and which were therefore likely to include relevant data for my study. In order to gain a broader picture of responses to the novel, I also collected a sample of the 30 ‘most interesting’ community reviews, as listed according the website’s ‘default sorting algorithm’.1 In order to preserve the benefits of naturalistic study I intervened as little as possible in this data collection, gatheringallexisting postswithin thefive discussion threads, and including **‘**all ratings’, ‘all editions’ and ‘all content’ in my criteria for sampling the top 30 community reviews. Altogether, my dataset was comprised of 150 reader responses from 117 participants, posted between 2007 and 2015.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Data source** | **Responses** | **Participants** |
| Discussion thread: ‘Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?’ | 65 | 39 |
| Discussion thread: ‘Did Kevin respect his mum after all?’ | 37 | 31 |
| Discussion thread: ‘Franklin vs. Eva’ | 8 | 7 |
| Discussion thread: ‘When Kevin was unwell…’ | 6 | 6 |
| Discussion thread: ‘After the incident with his little sister, would a parent still trust Kevin?’ | 4 | 4 |
| Community reviews: sorted by ‘most interesting’ | 30 | 30 |
| **Total** | **150** | **117** |

**Table 1**: Reader response dataset collected from Goodreads (2015)

This dataset was then uploaded to Nvivo software (2012) – a qualitative data analysis tool which supports the manual tagging and quantification of recurring themes, or ‘nodes’, in mono and multi-modal datasets. Several of the nodes used in my analysis were theory-driven, since they arose from my awareness of the critical commentary surrounding the text, and in particular, the ‘two camps’ of readers identified by Shriver, for example: ‘Kevin as innately evil’ and ‘Eva as responsible’. Other nodes, however, such as ‘(dis)agreement with other readers’ and ‘empathetic engagement with the characters’ arose from the data and the patterns I observed during manual analysis. While Nvivo (2012) supports quantitative analysis, the extensive amount of overlap in the tagging of my data, with many responses tagged for several different nodes, meant that a quantitative approach was unlikely to generate useful results. The recurring themes identified as a result of my manual coding facilitated a closer qualitative analysis of relevant groups of responses with respect to specific concerns and the identification of similar or contrasting readings for cognitive poetic discussion.

Qualitative analysis of this dataset reveals a range of reactions to the novel positioned between the two ‘camps’ identified by Shriver and the nature/nurture debate they represent with regards to Kevin. Responses that firmly attribute Kevin’s actions to an innate evil or sociopathic nature, as in response (a), and, on the other hand, to his mother’s poor parenting/neglect (b), are seen in my data:2

(a) The conclusion I got from the story, and what I felt all along, is that Kevin was just born that way and it was inevitable he was gonna end up how he did and it was nothing to do with his mother. (Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?)

(b) I just don’t get people who cant see how she contributed to Kevin becoming who he did. A loving nurturing mother would have made his potential blossom in a positive manner. (Franklin vs. Eva)

Also seen in my data, however, are responses which are undecided or, to use Shriver’s metaphor, positioned somewhere in between these ‘camps’:

(c) This book was so incredible at making me sympathize and empathize with each person’s perspective, though we only see these through Eva’s brutally honest memory, that it was impossible for me to lay blame anywhere, even though the potential for assigning blame was huge. (Community Reviews)

(d) I'm surprised how many people on here want to scapegoat Franklin. So he is overwhelmed with a family that isn’t the perfect one he envisioned and the only way he knows how to counter that is by playing the extra perfect father. That doesn't make him the source of the problem. I agree with [x] that Eva is not a trustworthy narrator and one must look past her justification to find the real story. There is no excuse for some of her behavior and had she been a better mother, results may have been different. That being said, Kevin is just evil. I don’t know how I could have raised a child like that, but I think I could have at least given him an ounce of love. (Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?)

(e) I find it incredibly difficult to come down exclusively on the nature or nurture side of the debate with this one. There seems also multiple points of blame. Eva, who suffers an ambivalent relationship with her own mother undoubtedly has her issues to deal with and her treatment of Kevin is in my opinion sometimes abusive. Franklin too smothers Eva and Kevin, his non committal attitude towards his daughter perhaps symptomatic of his complete refusal to accept a family set up anything outside of the ‘norm’. Kevin too is an ambivalent character: Eva’s unreliable narration makes it impossible to discern his true personality or intentions. (Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?)

What is noticeable about such responses in my data is their tendency to describe an ethical experience of the text in the form of an account of the beliefs, thoughts and feelings of each of the characters. In (c), the reader explicitly cites the text’s invitation for empathy when explaining their inability to blame any one character. In (d), such empathetic engagement is rather suggested by the reader’s rich attribution of mental states to Franklin above and beyond those described within the text, and by the reader’s apparent deictic alignment, firstly with Franklin, as suggested by the use of present tense (‘he knows’), and secondly with Eva, through the first person pronoun (‘I don’t know how I could have raised a child like that’). Differing slightly, in (e), the reader describes difficulty in ‘com[ing] down exclusively on the nature or nurture side of the debate’ through a relatively uncertain account of each character’s mind, which is marked by epistemic modality (‘undoubtedly’, ‘perhaps’) for Eva and Franklin, and in Kevin’s case is ‘impossible to discern’.

In my data such active ‘mind-modelling’ (Stockwell, 2009) is also evident in readers’ understandings of specific scenes within the novel, for instance in (f) below:

(f) There's a point in the book where his dislike for his father becomes evident, when the entire family is discussing the shootings, and it's almost as if Kevin's anger is growing due to the fact that his father almost... underestimates him. And, I mean, he had definitely tormented Eva his entire childhood, I won't dispute that, but Eva never underestimated her son. His love for her is obvious towards the end. In the interview, he just seems so proud of her accomplishments, which is the one thing Eva seemed to really want. (Did Kevin respect his mum after all?)

In (f) the reader’s understanding of two different scenes (a family argument in the middle of the novel and a television interview with Kevin in the final chapter) features a complex modelling of multiple character minds in relation to one another. These data add support to previous work by Whiteley (2011, 2014), which has argued that we need to look more closely at the *relationships* between the different perspectives cued within texts. Based on reading group data, Whiteley observes that ‘In addition to psychologically projecting into multiple perspectives during literary reading, discourse participants synthesize the various perspectives present in a text to create such emotionally powerful scenes’ (Whiteley, 2011: 38). Applying the concept of multiple projection to ethical experience, Whiteley (2014: 408) attributes her own response to an extract from Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* to ‘the amalgamation of positioning relative to multiple entities at the text-world level’. In responses such as (f) this synthesis or amalgamation can be seen to operate not only in relation to individual scenes or extracts, but at the level of an entire text, across multiple enactors of characters at different points within the narrative.

I regard such data as providing insights into the processing involved in arriving at an ethical interpretation of the novel during the course of the online communication and the particular ‘social reading’ of the text that this represents (Peplow et al., 2016). Though influenced by other discourse-world factors, social readings can also be seen to ‘demonstrate the influence of features of the original literary text under discussion’, as in solitary readings (Peplow et al., 2016: 31). I discuss this in the following section.

**4. The text-worlds of Shriver’s epistolary novel**

The title of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* invites readers into a conversation. Readers are invited to construct a mental representation of a conversation between two characters within the fictional world – the ‘text-world’ (Werth, 1999). In addition, this title can be understood to directly address the reader, thus drawing them into the novel’s situational context, or ‘discourse-world’. In constructing mental representations of the discourse at both these levels, readers are invited to draw on their relevant knowledge and experiences. The back-cover of the 2010 edition of the novel describes the narrator Eva as ‘Uneasy with the sacrifices of motherhood’ and her son Kevin as ‘the boy who murdered seven of his fellow high school students, a cafeteria worker and a teacher who tried to befriend him’ (all further references to this edition are as *WNTTAK*). While activating readers’ personal experiences and attitudes towards parenthood, this blurb also invites ‘Kevin’ to be associated with a specific cultural knowledge frame pertaining to the series of high school shootings which took place in the USA shortly before the novel’s publication in 1999 (Cullen, 2009). The extent to which readers share such knowledge and experiences will determine whether they feel like an intended participant or ‘eavesdropper’ in the conversation they mentally represent (Gavins, 2007: 27; cf Goffman, 1997).

The narrative is presented in the epistolary style, in a series of letters addressed to ‘Franklin’ and signed by ‘Eva’. The opening of the novel reads:

(1)

November 8, 2000

Dear Franklin,

I’m unsure why one trifling incident this afternoon has moved me to write to you. But since we’ve been separated, I may most miss coming home to deliver the narrative curiosities of my day, the way a cat might lay mice at your feet: the small, humble offerings that couples proffer after foraging in separate backyards. Were you still installed in my kitchen, slathering crunchy peanut butter on Branola though it was almost time for dinner, I’d no sooner have put down the bags, one leaking a clear viscous drool, than this little story would come tumbling out, even before I chided that we’re having pasta tonight so would you please not eat that whole sandwich.

(*WNTTAK:* 1)

The text-world constructed by this opening features two character-enactors, the narrator (Eva), indicated by the first person ‘I’, and her addressee ‘Franklin’. The date ‘November 8, 2000’ locates these enactors temporally and, through inference, spatially in the USA. However, the letter format immediately suggests that these two enactors do not share the same precise spatiotemporal location and, like the discourse-world of the novel, therefore, this text-world is ‘split’ (Werth, 1999: 54-5). Since the letters continue throughout the novel with no reply from Franklin, readers are never given any world-building information as to Franklin’s time and place of reading. Owing to this epistolary style, the very existence of this addressee-enactor within the split text-world is merely inferred by readers based on Eva’s subjective written account.

Epistolary narrative represents a rich object of study for cognitive poetics, from considerations of ‘spatiotemporal absences’ (Herman, 1999), to what Bray (2003) describes as a dual-representation of consciousness enabled by the particular first-person narrative mode of the letter-writer. The following analysis seeks to incorporate both aspects of this form’s readerly processing as part of the comprehensive discourse model offered by Text World Theory.

The epistolary style of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* can be compared to the cases of ‘fixed focalisation’ in first-person narratives discussed by Gavins (2007: 132) and Whiteley (2011, 2014). Similarly, this narrative form might be said to prompt the reader to make a double projection or ‘double-leap’ of attention (Gavins, 2007: 133), firstly into the text-world of the situation in which the letter is written/read – what Romberg (1962) refers to as the ‘epic situation’ at the coding time of the narrative – and then into a further text-world representing Eva’s subjective version of events. These two text-worlds are referred to here as Text-World 1 and Text-World 2 and can be seen represented in Figure 1.

*[Insert Figure 1 here]*

Since it represents the content of Eva’s letters, Text-World 2 is ‘enactor-accessible’ only, in the sense that we are unable, as discourse participants, to verify its reliability (Gavins, 2007: 77). Nonetheless, since Eva’s letters are the sole source of world-building information in this text, readers are likely to use this information to draw inferences about Eva’s epic situation, and that of Franklin, and so flesh out their conceptualisation of Text-World 1. References to other objects within Eva’s surroundings as she writes: ‘So now I’m home – what passes for it. Of course you’ve never been here’ (*WNTTAK*: 4), ‘the little bedside table on which I have perched this laptop’ (*WNTTAK*: 6), allow readers to progressively enrich their conceptualisation of her situation. Within this description, the use of the present tense ‘I’m unsure’, temporal and spatial deixis: ‘now’, ‘here’, ‘this’, combined with regular shifts in spatiotemporal parameters as one letter ends and another begins, all invite readers to project into Eva’s deictic centre and to mind-model her beliefs, thoughts and feelings as she writes. Also significant are the deictic references to the narrative itself, exemplified in Extract (1): ‘narrative curiosities’, ‘this little story’. Throughout the novel, such self-conscious references to Eva’s act of telling, together with statements such as Extract (2), highlight the enactor-accessibility or potential unreliability of Text-World 2, and the limited knowledge and personal motivations that underpin it:

(2)

I intend to take ruthless advantage of the fact that this is my account to which you have no choice but to submit. I don’t pretend to know the whole story, because I don’t think that’s a story that you or I will ever fully know.

(*WNTTAK*: 270)

As exemplified by reader responses (c) to (e) earlier, the recognition of Eva as an unreliable narrator and the need to look for the real ‘story’ underpinning her account is a pervasive feature of readers’ responses to this text in my data. In terms of my Text-Worlds account, readers maintain a degree of attention to Text-World 1, and the reading and writing enactor-minds within it, alongside their developing mental representation of the narrative itself. This experience might be seen to be a feature of epistolary narratives more broadly, which, according to Bray (2003: 20), often feature a ‘fluctuating relationship’ between the subject and object of experience, or what Stanzel (1984: 212) terms the ‘narrating self’ and the ‘experiencing self’. In *We Need To Talk About Kevin* these selves can be seen to correspond to the enactors of Eva in the world she describes (Text-World 2), and that in which she thinks, feels and writes (Text-World 1).

As well as inviting readers to monitor enactors at these two levels of its discourse structure, the epistolary style also presents two distinct deictic centres for projection within each of these worlds. While Eva’s first-person narration invites us to project into her deictic centre ‘I’, her second-person address ‘you’ constructs an additional viewpoint for readerly engagement. Applying Herman’s (1999) account, readers may imaginatively project into two separate deictic centres (‘I’ and ‘you’) for Eva and Franklin and ‘blend’ (Fauconnier and Turner, 1996) these deictic fields in order to make sense of the communicative situation between these enactors within the split text-world.

As well as occupying distinct spatiotemporal locations, as the novel progresses these two enactor perspectives are increasingly depicted as contrasting, or distanced, in terms of their personalities, attitudes and beliefs. For example, when Eva expresses strong, negative attitudes towards pregnancy, motherhood, and in particular her son Kevin, she often follows these by asserting Franklin’s thoughts and feelings while reading her letter (underlining added):

(3)

You think I was mean to him, and that’s why he withdrew. I don’t think so. I think he wants me to be mean to him the way other people pinch themselves to make sure they’re awake. […] If you have any notion that I’ve brutalized our boy into *low self-esteem*, think again.I saw that same sullen expression in his eyes when he was one year old.

[…]

Did you know that Americans stare at pregnant women? […]. Along with the fascination, even enchantment on their faces, I also spotted the incidental shiver of revulsion.

You think that’s too strong. I don’t.Ever notice how many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonization by stealth?

(*WNTTAK:* 68-9; italics in original)

Throughout the novel, questions, assertions and commands such as those seen in Extract (3) strongly invite readers to project into this addressee position, and map these responses onto our own during reading. Through the rich mind-modelling prompted by such cues throughout the novel, readers are invited to build up a rich representation of this addressee-character ‘Franklin’ and the ‘generic’ worldview that Eva attributes to him (*WNTTAK*: 103). Presented side-by side with Eva’s own ‘far-flung and obscenely specific’ attitudes (*WNTTAK*: 104), these two perspectives represent invitations for readers to identify with one or the other to some extent.

Notably, as the novel continues, these two perspectives increasingly reflect alternative interpretations of Kevin’s behaviour in terms of nature and nurture. Through invitations for engagement with both of these perspectives, Shriver’s text can be seen to actively construct the two ‘camps’ that she describes in her Afterword. The way in which readers respond to these invitations, or the position they adopt in relation to these two camps, can be predicted to depend upon their individual discourse-world personalities and experiences. For Gavins (2007: 86), ‘the closer the resemblance between the life of the text-world enactor and the life of the real-world reader, the more likely it is that the reader will be comfortable inhabiting the new projected text-world persona’. Readers with firm beliefs in the primary importance of good parenting, for example, are likely to readily adopt Franklin’s perspective and feel strongly, and perhaps personally, addressed by the ‘you’ at such moments. On the other hand, readers with belief in the possibility of children being born sociopathic may find themselves occupying a position closer to that of Eva. As seen in Section 3, however, a number of readers in my dataset describe an ability to empathise with *each* of the characters to some extent. Whether readers identify more strongly with one or the other, the presentation of these two positions side by side throughout the narrative can be seen to invite an *awareness* of both in parallel during and after reading.

Returning to my reader response data, this awareness of both perspectives can be seen to underpin the complex understanding of specific scenes that readers such a (f) (seen in Section 3) describe as part of their overall ethical response to the novel during their online interactions. Demonstrating this more clearly, readers in responses (g) and (h) actively engage with both Eva’s and Franklin’s perspectives in making sense of Kevin’s behaviour:

(g) If you really think about the events in Kevin's life, particularly his early life, they can be interpreted two ways. The eczema incident, for example...all we know is that Kevin is found with the girl in the loo. He might be trying to dissuade her from scratching - he might be pleading with her to stop - he might not understand the gravity of what the girl is doing to her self. he's SIX for God's sake. (Franklin vs. Eva)

(h) I personally believe that Franklin has a better understanding of Kevin. He is less biased (he didn't hate him from birth). Therefore I think that the accident may well be an "accident". Having said that I do believe that Kevin took immense pleasure in allowing Eva to believe her own story. (After the incident with his little sister would a parent still trust Kevin?)

One scene that attracts such parallel interpretations is seen in Extract (4). Prior to this scene, Eva, frustrated with Kevin’s lack of progress in potty training at the age of five, has thrown Kevin off the changing table and broken his arm. The extract describes their return home from the hospital to be greeted by Franklin.

(4)

Already accustomed to trusting your son’s version of events over your wife’s you had gone straight to Kevin. This once you were mistaken. Had you asked me, I promise – or at least I like to think – that, with bowed head, I’d have told you the truth.

“I broke my arm.”

“I can see that. How’d it happen?”

“I fell.”

“Where’d you fall?”

“I had poopy pants. Mommer went to get more wipes. I fell off the changing table. On – onto my Tonka dump truck. Mommer took me to Doctor Goldbutt.”

He was good. He was very, very good; you may not appreciate how good. He was smooth – the story was ready. […] And however short, his tale was laced with elegant touches: Using *Mommer* when he had eschewed the cutesy sobriquet for months lent his story a cuddly, affectionate cast that fantastically belied the real story; *Doctor Goldbutt* was playfully scatological, setting you at ease – your *happy, healthy boy* was already back to normal.

(*WNTTAK:* 235-6; italics in original)

Here, readerly awareness of an alternative perspective to that of Eva, highlighted by ‘your son’s version of events’ in the first line, can be seen to cue two very different understandings of Kevin: as a normal child or exceptionally cunning individual. The way in which readers conceptualise such scenes might be predicted to depend upon the extent to which they empathise with the contrasting experiences, personalities and beliefs presented for Eva and Franklin throughout the text, as seen in Extract (3) earlier. For readers who strongly empathise with Eva’s thoughts and feelings throughout the novel, their understanding of this scene may coincide with Eva’s. However, readers who feel directly addressed by the ‘you’ alongside Franklin during reading may form a very different understanding of this scene in which Eva is paranoid and fundamentally wrong in her understanding of her five-year old son.

Rather than constructing a mental representation of events from just *one* of these perspectives, readers such as those seen in (g) and (h) engage with *multiple* perspectives in making sense of such scenes: whether it is to regard one as more accurate than the other, or to view both as accurate to some extent, or not at all. In Text World Theory terms, such reader responses might thus be seen to construct two (or more) different versions of the same situation in ‘focalised epistemic modal-worlds’ (Gavins, 2007) during the course of the online review. These worlds can be seen to correspond to the beliefs of the two enactors within Text-World 2, who by the end of the novel, as Eva herself states: ‘had come to occupy parallel universes’ (*WNTTAK*: 203). Although these parallel modal-worlds are constructed during the online interaction and are not necessarily reflective of readers’ online experience of the text itself, this similarity across responses in my data can nonetheless be viewed as text-driven, and accounted for in terms of stylistic choices in the text. I propose that the cues for projection into two different perspectives for Eva and Franklin, working cumulatively throughout the novel, invite a wider inferential construction of these enactors’ knowledge frames and beliefs beyond those cues provided by the text, which readers can draw on in arriving at an ethical interpretation of the novel during subsequent discussions.

Furthermore, recognising the unreliability of the narrative as a whole means that readers can attend also to the perspectives of the enactors of Eva and Franklin in Text-World 1. Readers such as (i) below describe an awareness of the silent addressee-enactor of Franklin as potentially having a *further* alternative perspective on Kevin, and indeed, on Eva’s representation of his and her own perspectives:

(i) We must remember as well that we don't get to hear Franklin's version of events. Eva has an outsiders view of his relationship with Kevin, she doesn't see what goes on with Franklin and Kevin when they are alone and she doesn't really know how either feels about the other. Eva paints a portrait of herself as quite a cold mother, but her assessment is coloured by Kevin's crime and her need to find the reason for it. Perhaps Franklin would disagree with Eva's version of events in that regard too. (Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?)

This reader can be seen to make inferences about the enactor of Franklin, or silent addressee ‘you’, in Text-World 1, independent of the world-building information provided by Eva in her narrative. Alongside the ‘narrating self’ and ‘experiencing self’ described by Bray (2003) as corresponding to ‘I’, the two selves corresponding to ‘you’, or its deictic functioning in relation to both Text-World 1 and Text-World 2, further invites projection and mind-modelling. Importantly, the mentally represented ‘version of events’ that results from this processing is later negated by the text itself. In the final section of the novel, we learn that Franklin was murdered by Kevin two years prior to Eva’s first letter, thus requiring an adjustment of the parameters of Text-World 1, or what Gavins (2005) terms a ‘world-repair’. Interestingly, despite an apparent awareness of this final twist, reader (i) attends to this negated perspective in coming to an ethical interpretation of the text during the online interaction. Such responses suggest that, in the discussions following a solitary reading, readers may override aspects of the text-world cued by the text in order to enrich their understanding and ethical response to the situation presented.

While the ability of readers to engage with multiple ‘audiences’ (Rabinowitz, 1977), ‘voices’ (Bakhtin, 1981) or ‘embedded narratives’ in texts (Palmer, 2004) has a rich background in narratological theory, the nature of the cognitive processing underpinning such engagement is as yet unclear (Polvinen, 2013; Sanford and Emmott, 2012: 53-6). In Section 5 I discuss the basic importance of such processing in everyday communication as set out in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008). Returning to my reader responses in light of this framework, I argue that readers’ descriptions of their ethical experiences within this specific reading context can help to expand the wider cognitive poetic understanding of ethics using Text World Theory.

**5. Ethical positioning as construal**

Recent work in cognitive poetics has argued that Text World Theory may benefit from concepts drawn from the compatible and closely-related cognitive linguistic framework of Cognitive Grammar (Harrison, 2013; Nuttall, 2014, 2015a; Stockwell, 2009). Of particular benefit for cognitive poetics is Cognitive Grammar’s account of the basic cognitive ‘construal’ mechanisms underpinning everyday communication. Construal describes our ‘ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways’ (Langacker, 2008: 43) and applies to all encounters with language, including that of both a producer (e.g. an author) and receiver (e.g. a reader). While developed for analysis below the sentence-level, this model can be easily adapted for application to the negotiated conceptualisation of the situations presented in literary texts.

Particularly useful for the purposes of the present analysis are uses of this model to discuss the *intersubjective* dimension of language processing, or what might be termed, drawing parallels with Systemic-Functional Grammar, its ‘interpersonal function’ (Halliday, 1994). Developing Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar, Verhagen (2007a: 58) models linguistic construal as an interpersonal configuration or ‘viewing arrangement’ consisting of at least two ‘conceptualizers’ in a communicative context, who jointly attend to the situation conceived. This basic configuration (seen in Figure 2) can be compared with the discourse-world and text-worlds jointly constructed by discourse participants in Text World Theory (e.g. Figure 1).

*[Insert Figure 2 here]*

Rather than emphasising the world-boundaries which separate these worlds and readers’ shifts between them through time, the construal configuration represents readers’ attention (at any one moment of reading) to the various conceptualisers or minds within them. Construals may vary in terms of ‘prominence’ – the degree of attention to individual entities within the conceived situation (Langacker, 2008: 66), and ‘subjectivity/objectivity’– the degree of attention to the conceptualisers relative to this situation (Langacker, 2008: 77). Importantly, in this model, our conceptualisation of *all* language involves a degree of intersubjective awareness of the different minds at each of these levels, and this awareness may be *modified* by linguistic choices during the course of a discourse.

While analysis of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* using Text World Theory has modelled the ways in which readers’ mental representations of the discourse are defined during reading, readers’ experiences of its multiple perspectives, or positions, and their contribution to an overall ethical interpretation of the text, might be better understood in terms of readers’ attention to its various embedded conceptualisers during and, as is more likely to be the case in my reader response data, *after* a reading. Modelled in these terms, readers’ active comparison of multiple perspectives on situations such as that seen in responses (g) and (h) can be understood in terms of their scalar prominence as part of a holistic construal configuration, while awareness of an addressee perspective in Text-World 1, as seen in (i), can be understood as a re-focusing of attention upon this conceptualiser, or an increase in the subjectivity of the construal.

Furthermore, this model highlights the fact that the discourse-world (or ‘ground’ as it is known in Cognitive Grammar [Langacker, 2008: 78]) is equally open to change, with linguistic choices variably drawing attention to Shriver’s perspective, our own, or that of other readers, in the course of the text. While the discourse-world in Text World Theory is dynamic by definition, the implications of this dynamism has yet to be fully explored. Increased attention to the various conceptualisers involved in the discourse-world and their changing relationships as part of a constantly evolving ‘current discourse space’ (Langacker, 2008: 466) would better equip this framework to account for different types of social reading (Peplow et al., 2016), and their location in the ‘series of acts of reading’ (Swann and Allington, 2009: 252) which emerge as part of a real-reader oriented cognitive poetics.

Such awareness of other discourse-world minds has particular relevance for an account of narrative ethics. As Phelan argues, a further layer of ethical response involves positioning in relation to other real-world minds: ‘that of the author who has constructed the narrative and those of other readers (2005: 19; see also Booth, 1988). In my reader response data readers’ awareness of their fellow discourse participants: the ‘we’ (i) and ‘people on here’ (b, d) that they position themselves in relation to deictically, the readings that they ‘dispute’ (f) or ‘agree with’ (d), and the wider ‘debate’ (e) in which they are located, is a recurring feature of readers’ online construals of the text. Furthermore, in responses such as (j) below, readers appear to draw on the experiences of other readers in modifying their own ethical response:

(j) I have a friend who has children; at the beginning of the book, she blamed Eva, but at the end she thought it was a combination of things—and in fact blamed the husband more. I don't even know anymore if Shriver meant to blame someone or just wanted people to TALK ABOUT KEVIN!! And for us to think about what goes into making such a kid (Sick or evil? Nature or nurture?)

These patterns in my data can be related to specific stylistic features in Shriver’s text. Through its very title, Shriver can be seen to invite us to attend to ourselves and others as conceptualisers as part of our construal. Through the one-directional epistolary form, and the communicative failure emphasised by its closing twist, the interpersonal nature of ethical judgement, or the importance of *talking* and thereby negotiating a conceptualisation of the situation presented, is itself raised for readerly attention. In addition, this reader response data calls for further investigation of the role that mind-modelling of *possible* and *actual* readers plays in ethical experiences of texts more broadly. In developing its account of ethical experience, a Text-World approach should attend to both the stylistic choices that influence readers’ attention to conceptualisers at various discourse levels in texts, as well as the different ways in which this construal, or interpersonal viewing arrangement, can be ‘reconsidered and reconstituted’ in acts of social reading (Peplow et al, 2016: 30).

**6. Conclusions**

Text World Theory offers a systematic method for the analysis of readers’ ethical experiences in terms of ‘ethical positioning’ and the stylistic choices that influence it in individual texts. This article has tested the ability of this framework to account for a sample of reader responses to a novel which has provoked significant ethical debate. In doing so, it has aimed to demonstrate one application of online reader response research and its potential insights as a growing source of data for stylistics and cognitive poetics.

Drawing on the distinction between ‘solitary’ and ‘social reading’ set out by Peplow et al. (2016), online review data was regarded in this article as providing insights into the processing involved in arriving at an ethical response to the novel during the course of the online communication. My analysis has argued that certain recurring patterns in reviewers’ social readings of this text are text-driven, or rooted in the cumulative effects of the novel’s epistolary form. Through the application of Text World Theory, the range of ethical responses to Shriver’s novel between its two interpretative ‘camps’ were accounted for in terms of the ‘multiple projection’ (Whiteley, 2011), or attention to multiple perspectives, invited through its use of the epistolary style.

Finally, I explored the implications of this reader response analysis for the cognitive poetic account of ethics more broadly. In light of this data, I proposed that Text World Theory can benefit from the interpersonal model of construal seen in developments of Langacker’s Cognitive Grammar. By modelling the awareness of other minds involved in *all* conceptualisations cued by language and the modification of such attention through specific linguistic choices, this model represents a source of insights for discussions of ethical response in Text World Theory, and the widening of its analytical focus to new kinds of social reading contexts.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1. The default sorting algorithm on Goodreads determines the ‘most interesting’ reviews based on several factors: ‘length of the review, number of people who liked it, recency of the review, popularity of the reviewer (i.e. number of people who have liked reviews by that person across all books)’ (Goodreads, 2015).
2. All quotes from my data throughout the article are reproduced as they appeared publically on Goodreads (2015). On account of the sensitive/personal nature of some topics discussed in the reviews, readers in my sample have been anonymised. For reference and retrievability I have included the name of the publically accessible discussion thread from which the data was collected.

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