

The High School Shooting at Columbine Seen from Francie Brady's Perspective

EVA FJÄLLSTRÖM

Luleå University of Technology
Department of Languages and Culture

ENGLISH C

Supervisor: Billy Gray



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Eva Fjällström
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Table of contents

Introduction

Three young boys, two terrible deeds.....3

Friendship –a condition for happiness

The effect of having or not having friends.....6

“It really does begin with the family”

An insight to the importance of a well functioning family.....15

The limits of small-town society

Friendly neighbours or malevolent gossip?.....21

Conclusion.....25

Sources.....28

Introduction

Three young boys, two terrible deeds

In a small town in Ireland a young boy murders his neighbour. In a rural high school in the U.S two youths kill 12 of their fellow students. One event is fictional, the other unfortunately is not. It is impossible to know for sure why these acts of violence took place, but in analyzing and comparing the fictional with the actual it is possible to gain a greater understanding. In the novel *The Butcher Boy*¹ by Patrick McCabe, young Francie Brady kills his neighbour Mrs Nugent. In the real life tragedy which unfolded on April 20, 1999, in the state of Colorado, U.S.A, Eric Harris and his friend Dylan Klebold killed 12 fellow students and a teacher at Columbine High School².

One benefit from reading literature is that you often gain insight into the society in which the writing is set. In this way literature can open our eyes to realities that we would otherwise not have understood. In this essay the insight into Francie Brady's troubled life that we get from Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* will be the point of departure for understanding why the Columbine shooting took place. Before we look into which common factors may have affected both Francie and the boys in Colorado it is important to know their stories.

The novel *The Butcher Boy* by Patrick McCabe was first published in 1992. It was the winner of the *Irish Times* /Air Lingus Literature prize and was also shortlisted for the 1992 Booker Prize. It has also been made into a film, directed by Neil Jordan. Patrick McCabe has also published a children's story and five other adult novels and four plays. In the novel *The Butcher Boy* we follow the troubled Francie Brady during his adolescent years. The novel is set in small-town Ireland. Francie has had a difficult childhood with a depressive mother and an alcoholic and abusive father. Francie's mother commits suicide and Francie's father blames him. Francie's friend Joe is his main support in life and the only one who can keep him out of trouble, but when a new boy, Philip

¹ Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (London: Picador, 1992, edition by Picador, 2001)

² Judy L. Hasday, *Columbine High School Shooting: Student violence* (Berkeley Heights, N.J: Enslow Publishers, 2002)

Nugent, moves into town his friend starts to disassociate himself from Francie. Francie is sent off to a catholic boarding school after his mother's death but his life does not take a positive turn. If anything, it deteriorates. He is sexually abused by Father Sullivan and is given no opportunity to deal with any of his personal problems. When Francie leaves school he takes a job with the local butcher and does his duties very well, at least when he shows up. However he takes the loss of his friend Joe very hard and he sees the Nugent family as the main reason for his loss. If only they had not come to town, his life would have been so much better. The only solution he finds is to kill Mrs Nugent.

In Jefferson County, near Denver and Littleton, Colorado life changed for many people on Tuesday, April 20, 1999. The Columbine High School was the scene of one of the deadliest school shootings in history. Two teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebolt, entered the school with automatic weapons and killed twelve fellow students and a teacher. 24 students were wounded and the killers finally committed suicide. Their plan was to kill many more but fortunately the bombs that they had brought to school did not detonate.³ The school shooting provoked debate regarding many different issues. Different experts made public appearances and offered their personal solutions. Gun control laws were discussed as well as the situation in high schools and other issues such as bullying. The role of violent movies and videogames were considered. Even the lack of religion in school and society and the bad influence of singer Marilyn Manson were seen as reasons for the shooting.⁴ Before the shooting the two boys made several home videos and they also had a website where they kept a blog. Not all of this material is available to the public at present so the insight into Eric's and Dylan's minds is restricted. The main source that will be used to explain the

³ Judy L. Hasday

⁴ *Bowling for columbine*, documentary produced and directed by Michael Moore (2002) Distributed by MGM Distribution Co.

two boys situation is the transcript from their home videos that is available through the Jefferson County police report.⁵

Many articles and books have been written on the theme. Two films on the shooting have also achieved international exposure. In the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore uses the story about the two boys to draw a picture of what a violent country the United States has become and the film also tries to explain why this is so. The focus is on the gun laws and government, rather than the motives in this special case. Gus Van Sant on the other hand retells the story beautifully from a multi-perspective in his film *Elephant*. In this film a “normal day” at high school is presented to the viewer from several students point of view. Even though this is Van Sant’s interpretation of the boys reality, it gives a clearer and more profound picture of what reality they were facing. The following chapters in this essay will deal with the issues of friendship, peer pressure, and how being part of a group or outside a group generally can affect young people during their adolescent years. Additionally, the significance of the family situation of Francie, Eric and Dylan will be discussed, as well as the similarities and differences in their respective societies.

⁵ Jefferson County, police report from 4-28-99, Including transcript of home videos, Case Report No 99-7625-A, Reporting Officer: Zimmerman

Friendship -a condition for happiness

The effect of having or not having friends

Most people desire to have friends to share their happy and sad moments. To stay in company is usually considered better than to stay alone, and the word loneliness has definitely a bad connotation. These ideas are not new to humanity. Aristotle thought that friendship was the best thing in the world⁶ and Euripides said that “One loyal friend is Worth 10,000 relatives”⁷. However there are great differences in how people define friendship. The concept of friendship has surely changed over time with the development of society. Alasdair MacIntyre points out that for Aristotle friendship is what keeps the people in a state together. “Friendship is itself a virtue(...) (It) embodies a shared recognition of and pursuit of the good(...) Friendship is more important than justice. Justice is the virtue of rewarding desert(...) within an already constituted community; Friendship is required for that initial constitution.”⁸ In modern society, on the other hand, friendship is very often associated mainly with enjoyment. To spend time with friends often signifies to go out and have fun. Digby Anderson explains in *Losing Friends*⁹ that friendships of today are much more shallow than friendships of past times. According to Anderson there is not the same depth in the friendships between people today as there used to be and when people stay with their friends they do that to have fun rather than to share their inner feelings. He sees the fact that people move around more today as one of the reasons for this. Although friendship might have changed, having friends is surely important for more reasons than enjoyment, even in modern society. It is difficult to develop as a person in solitude and friendship is especially important for children and teenagers. Psychologist Steve Duck, offers in *Friends for life* a list of the functions of friendship. He states that it gives a sense of belonging and reliable alliance, emotional integration and stability, opportunities

⁶ Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

⁷ Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus, the Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 38

⁸ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981)155-156

⁹ Digby Anderson, *Losing friends* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2001)

for communication about ourselves, physical support and support to our personalities.¹⁰ Friends are able to give each other positive and negative feedback and it is in these situations that a person forms a proper identity. We reflect ourselves in the reactions we get from others and the final image we get of ourselves is a result of this. To obtain a positive self image it is essential to have friends who give positive response. With close friends it is also possible to create a relationship that involves trust which is an important ingredient in all human relationships.

Some are great at making and keeping friends but not all are this fortunate. To be gifted at making friends is surely something that will give direction to a person's life. The creation of a meaningful friendship means however, not relying only on one person, but involves several people in a certain environment. Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy* and Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, guilty of the High School shooting in Columbine, had some difficult experiences with friendship. This clearly affected them as individuals. Francie was very much isolated from people except from his friendship with Joe. Dylan and Eric on the other hand had each other but were harassed by other teenagers in their school. Inadequate and destructive friendships could have been some of the reasons that drove these boys to take violent action. Perhaps if the boys would have had different relationships with their peers these stories might have ended differently.

To Francie in *The Butcher Boy* his friendship with Joe is very important and the subsequent breaking of this friendship has devastating effects. From the day Francie meets Joe he wants to spend as much time with him as possible. Francie develops as a person and gets a stronger feeling of self. Phil Erwin states that: "Peer relationships give children the opportunity to learn and practice their social-interaction skills with equals. In the case of friendship this includes the skills included to co-operatively build and maintain close relationships, to manage communication, conflict, trust and intimacy."¹¹ Initially this is what happens to Francie. Francie and Joe have secrets, play games and even "mingle the blood of their forearms"¹² as a sign of their friendship.

¹⁰ Steve Duck, *Friends for Life* (Sussex: Harvester, 1983, edition by Wheatsheaf: Harvester, 1991)

¹¹ Phil Erwin, *Friendship in Childhood and Adolescence* (London: Routledge, 1998) 6

¹² McCabe, 49

Francie is able to forget about his difficult situation at home and to be himself when he is together with Joe. He remembers the first period with Joe in this way “They were the best days, them days with Joe. They were the best days I ever knew, before da and Nugent and all this started.”¹³ The friendship is unquestionably good for him but it has not been able to completely compensate for the missing pieces in Francie’s childhood. It has not made him strong enough to accept a new friend to the group. When the new boy, Philip Nugent arrives Francie only sees him as a threat and not as a potential friend. He is afraid that Philip will take Joe away from him. The reaction Francie has to Philip is not so abnormal. Similar reactions can often be seen among children who have to share something they used to have to themselves. Francie wants Joe’s undivided attention. What is abnormal in his reaction is the fact that he is not able to let go of the thought of Philip as a threat. Initially a certain degree of jealousy is not unusual, as long as it eventually develops into something else, maybe an extended friendship. From Francie’s perspective this view is impossible. One day he pretends to be friendly to Philip and invites him to the chicken house. Once inside he starts to swing a chain at him out of frustration until Joe arrives and makes him stop. Francie is desperate because he knows that he has violated Joe’s moral rules:

Joe was going to leave me and I’d be left with nobody no ma nothing. But the thing was –Joe didn’t leave me. He said that since the day we met hacking at the ice I was his best friend. He didn’t care what his ma or da said about me or my da or the Terrace but if I did things like that it would be all ruined.(...)You have to swear that’s the end of it.¹⁴

Joe clearly sets up limits for Francie showing him what is right and what is wrong. Francie is terrified to lose Joe since that would mean losing everything. What Francie clearly needs is someone to help regulate his life. Since Joe is so important to Francie, he respects him. By not leaving Francie, but by giving him a second chance Joe also shows his trust and his confidence in Francie. He shows that he is a true friend.

¹³ McCabe, 40

¹⁴ McCabe, 49

There is much controversy in friendship literature about the effects of physical separation on friendship. Digby Anderson states in *Losing Friends* that “My own experience is that true friendships are not threatened. They go on ice and when the friends are reunited the friendship continues as though it had never been interrupted.”¹⁵ When Francie is sent off to boarding school after an incident at the Nugents’ house he is sure that that is the end of his and Joe’s friendship. “There was a gaping hole in my stomach for I knew Joe would have heard all about Nugents by now. I had let him down. I had nobody now that was for sure and it was all my own fault.” Francie is not worried about the physical separation but about what Joe will think of the mess that he has made. After some days a letter arrives from Joe and Francie feels over-excited. What bothers him most is that Joe has been given a goldfish from Philip. He can not understand why he has taken this fish and he finds it impossible to let go of the thought of the goldfish. He sees the acceptance of the goldfish as a betrayal. However, when Francie gets out from the boarding school the friendship with Joe is no longer the same. The physical separation has made Francie and Joe develop in different directions. Francie is stuck in the past and wants everything to be as it was, while Joe has moved on. Their friendship has not just been “on ice”. When Francie wants Joe to do the voices like he used to Joe replies. “I can’t do them,(...), that’s a long time ago.”¹⁶ The friendship starts to fall apart and the complete breakdown comes when two older boys, Devlin and Buttsy come to pick on them. Buttsy goes over to Joe and says to him: “What are you doing hanging about with him? What does your old man say? Then Joe said it: I’m not hanging around with him. I *used* to hang around with him.”¹⁷ Francie feels betrayed and completely lost. For the first time Joe actively disapproves of Francie. Joe appears to be a true friend to Francie during the first years of their friendship but as they grow something happens. In adolescence many changes take place both physically and mentally. Francie wants to hang on to the “old times” because this is where he has experienced most security and happiness. Joe on the other hand wants to move on and do less childish activities even

¹⁵ Anderson, 62

¹⁶ McCabe, 108

¹⁷ McCabe, 111

if he still has a lot of sympathy for Francie. It's also possible that in growing up Joe has become more sensitive to what other people say and that the general disapproval of Francie has influenced him in his choice to reject him.

Phil Erwin says in his book *Friendship in childhood and adolescence* that "The collapse of a friendship can be a traumatic experience for children of almost any age, though the significance and nature of the experience may be closely tied to the child's level of relationship understanding"¹⁸ For Francie the end of the friendship is devastating since he doesn't have anybody else in the world. The restraining influence that Joe used to have on him is gone and his life fills with confusion. Even if Joe clearly has rejected him Francie is not able to let go. Francie sees Joe's new friend, Philip and his family as the reason for him losing Joe. They become the target of his hatred and confusion. For some time Francie finds other ways to deal with his loneliness but there is nobody there to offer direction or guidance. He starts drinking just as his dad did, and starts going to dances with the town alcoholic, "the drunk lad". He is fully aware of his status as an outsider even when he does this. "I went to the dances but I knew they wouldn't dance with me. I'm sorry but I don't dance with pigs they'd say."¹⁹

Francie is looking for a way to break out from his solitude but it is impossible. Whatever he does seems to work against him. He is still obsessed with the Nugents and he blames them for the difficulties he has in life. The only solution he sees is to get rid of Mrs Nugent since she is the one who caused his loneliness. Before he kills her he says to her "You did two bad things Mrs Nugent. You made me turn my back on my ma and you took Joe away from me."²⁰ As readers it is easy to understand what has pushed Francie to commit this crime even if we don't approve of what he does. There is a tormented logic behind this cold-blooded murder and it has very much to do with frustration and loneliness. It is possible to speculate on how Francie's life might have turned out if

¹⁸ Erwin, 113-114

¹⁹ McCabe,137

²⁰ McCabe,195

there had been a friend to support him. Francie is able to control his psychological instability and his aggression when he has somebody around who sets the limits. On his own he is a catastrophe.

As already mentioned, Joe had a calming effect on Francie and in the absence of this, his life took an unpleasant turn. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris on the other hand, did not have this effect on each other. On the contrary they triggered one another to do something they were well aware was wrong. Their everyday life was very similar, both boys were constantly harassed in school. Just like Francie they didn't have good relations with other children and this affected their behaviour. Vargo states that:

Satisfactory early peer relationships are important for later adjustment across a wide range of areas, including the capacity for intimacy in adult relationships, school achievement and dropout rates, anti-social and delinquent behaviour, suicide, criminality and psychological problems and disorders such as alcoholism and even psychosis.²¹

The affect of not having satisfactory relationships can obviously be devastating. In the home videos that Eric and Dylan made before the shooting they return several times to discuss how they were treated by others. Several names are mentioned as objects for the shooting and the two boys want to get back at them. Brooks Brown, a fellow student from the Columbine school, who experienced a similar treatment as they did said after the shooting: "Every day being teased and picked on, pushed up against lockers –just the general feeling of fear in the school. And you either respond to fear by having fear, or you take action and have hate. And defend yourself. And they chose a real disgusting way of doing that."²² Brooks Brown obviously understands what they have gone through but he does not agree with their solution to the problem.

Research has shown that harassment and bullying are generally very damaging for the victim and the offender especially during childhood and adolescence. "Both bullying and being bullied were associated with poorer psychosocial adjustment. (...)They demonstrated poorer social and emotional adjustment, reporting greater difficulty making friends, in their relationships with

²¹ Vargo, B. (1995) Are withdrawn children at risk? *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 11, 166-177

²² Justin Watson. *Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy* (Gordonsville, VA, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 81

classmates, and greater loneliness.”²³ Juvonen and Graham also concludes in *Peer Harassment in School* that: “It’s generally agreed that children who are frequently harassed are at risk for adjustment problems”.²⁴ Dylan and Eric were teenagers who did not have any documented psychological disturbances. They were not seen as especially dangerous before the shooting. They were interested in weapons and hunting but no one in their close surroundings saw that this, in combination with the treatment they got in school, could have fatal consequences. It is very possible that nobody close to them knew what they were going through. Although they were together and had each other, they were isolated from the larger group and seen as outsiders. Loneliness haunted them just as it did Francie. In the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*²⁵ they are described as “outsiders even among the outsiders”. Nicole Shleif and Amanda Lamontagne, two girls from their bowling class describe them as “weird” and “not very social” and say that when they played, they were crazy and “just chucked the ball”.

Eric and Dylan say in one of the videos that “we’re proving ourselves”²⁶. Dylan also states: “I’m sorry I have so much rage, but you put it on me”²⁷. He complains about the fact that he had to move five times and that he was always “the new kid in school and always at the bottom of the ‘food chain’, and had no chance to earn any respect.”²⁸ It is clear that the situation had been very hard on Dylan, constantly changing schools and always needing to fit in but not managing to do so. Anger has over the years built up inside him. Just as for Francie when he is separated from Joe as he is sent to boarding school, the physical separation from friends has been difficult for Dylan. In one portion of a videotape he mentions “Jason”, “Chris”, “you guys are very cool”. At the end of the tape he is wishing he could have re-visited Michigan and “old friends”. At this point of the tape he becomes silent and appears to start crying and appears to wipe a tear from the left side of his face. He reaches

²³ Tonja R. Nansel & al (2001) Bullying Behaviours Among US Youth. *JAMA, The Journal of the American Medical Association*. 285, 2094-2100.

²⁴ Jaana Juvonen & Sandra Graham, *Peer Harassment in School, the Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001) 33

²⁵ *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore

²⁶ Jefferson County, police report, 4

²⁷ Jefferson County, police report, 4

²⁸ Jefferson County, police report, 5

over towards the camera and it is shut off.²⁹ It is possible that Jason and Chris were some true friends that he lost contact with because of his moving and he obviously missed them very much judging by his reaction when he thinks about them. It is also possible that he desires to hold on to the “old times” in the same way that Francie does. He remembers the happy days when life was different. The fact that he shuts off the camera when he starts to cry is a sign that he does not want to show his sensitivity. The image he wants to portray of himself and Eric is the image of two brave boys who are strong enough to take justice into their own hands. They keep saying that they are angry but never mention sadness or loneliness. Eric says on one tape “You made me what I am. You added to the rage. Being shy didn’t help. I’m going to kill you all. You’ve been giving us shit for years.”³⁰ To get back at who made them suffer is Eric’s and Dylan’s way of resolving the problem.

As a solution to difficult situations, Francie, Eric and Dylan all take violent action. There are several similarities in their stories. When Francie kills Mrs Nugent he is aware of the fact that it is not going to bring Joe back to him. He kills her as a revenge for all the misery she has caused him. For Eric and Dylan their own suicides were part of the plan, so the resolution is not to make their own future happier but only to make others suffer as they have. The goal is revenge on those who made their lives dreadful.

Research has, as shown, pointed out very clearly that friendship is important for the positive development of a person; however loneliness, isolation and harassment, on the contrary, are very damaging. For a young person who is in the process of creating a proper identity satisfactory relationships with peers are essential. The lives of the three boys that have been described here have not been filled with meaningful friendships. They have suffered from isolation, being set aside, and thereby lost out on a great part of their emotional development. From Francie’s perspective it is easy to understand why he did what he did. If we look at the shooting at Columbine High School

²⁹ Jefferson County, police report, 2

³⁰ Jefferson County, police report, 6

through his eyes, having suffered the same experiences as he has, even this, has a certain logic. The revenge of the outcasts is understandable, even if we are morally against it.

“It really does begin with the family”

An insight to the importance of a well functioning family

When a child is born the first contact he or she has is usually with the immediate family and it remains so especially during the first years in life. The child’s development is very much dependant on the family situation. The family is the most important context in which early social development occurs. In *Violence in children and adolescents* we can read that “The family is the most powerful single agent of socialization”³¹. If the family in which a child grows up is functioning well it does reflect upon the child’s development, as well as if there are problems in the family. Poor early socialisation can result in difficulties further on in life and Loeber states that: “Factors in the family are among the best predictors of later delinquency in offspring”³². The importance of the family is enormous, however different individuals react differently to the people that surround them and their environment. Children within the same family grow up and develop into different individuals. Some might have larger problems than others even if the background is very similar. One agent that can be very supportive, especially if the home situation is difficult, is that of friendship, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The childhood of Francie in *The Butcher Boy* is filled with problems. His mother is mentally unstable and his father is an alcoholic. Early in the novel Francie listens to his father who is raving in the hall and the kitchen drunk, accusing his mother of being the reason for his unhappiness. “God’s curse the fucking day I ever set eyes on you!”³³ Francie does not have the courage to go and protect his mother but he feels very guilty for letting her down. When Francie’s uncle Alo has been home for Christmas they start to argue again and Francie’s father blames Francie’s mother for disgracing the entire family when she was taken to the madhouse. She leaves the room and

³¹ Ved Varma, *Violence in children and adolescents* (London and Bristol, Pennsylvania: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1997)71

³² Loeber, R. (1990) Development and risk factors of juvenile antisocial behaviour and delinquency. *Clinical Psychology Review* 10, 1-41, 17

³³ McCabe, 7

Francie's father says to himself: "I've always gone my own way,(...) Everything I ever did, my way – father or no father!"³⁴ Francie's mother is, as mentioned, mentally unstable and is therefore not able to give to Francie what he needs in terms of love and care. Francie's father is obviously still suffering from his own childhood and being left with no parents. As he has lost out on the child – parent relationship during his own childhood he is unable to create a positive relationship with his own son. He says that he has managed well even without a father but that is obviously not the case. The bottle has become his solution to all problems, or at least a way to forget about them. Francie is exposed to the continuing maltreatment between his parents, and this affects him strongly. Lewis states that: "(...) a childhood history of severe abuse and of witnessing family violence is significantly associated with ongoing violent behaviours in adulthood"³⁵. The family violence does not only affect Francie at the time of the events but it also influences his development as he is growing up. Not only does Francie have to witness family violence but he is also very neglected. When his mother is feeling well she tends to him in a loving manner but she is often physically or mentally absent. When she commits suicide he is left alone with his father, with whom he never had any relationship whatsoever. Furthermore Francie's father blames Francie for the death of his mother. He says "You did it"³⁶ straight to Francie's face. Varma states in *Violence in children and adolescents* that: "Parental conflict, poor or inconsistent supervision, and physical or emotional neglect are associated in general terms with later overall risk for delinquency."³⁷ Given that all of these factors are present in Francie's childhood it is not difficult to imagine the consequences.

Francie himself is well aware of the fact that his family is not functioning. The Nugents are his enemies not only because their son, Philip has taken Joe away from him but also because they represent everything that his family is not. They have a nice tidy house, a functioning relationship and are respected by society. Mrs Nugent bakes scones and polishes the house while her husband

³⁴ McCabe, 35

³⁵ Lewis, D.O., Mallouh, C. and Webb, V *Child abuse, delinquency, and violent criminality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 710

³⁶ McCabe, 43

³⁷ Varma, 71

goes to work in their nice car. At a certain point in the story Francie brakes into the Nugents home; not with the intention to destroy or make a mess but with the intention of “trying on their life” even if he does not admit this to himself. He eats their food, tries on Philips clothes and even lies down in the Nugents bed. He wants to feel how different life could have been.

In boarding school when Father Sullivan abuses him he does not object that strongly until he starts to ask him about his family. “(...) that was the first time I thought to myself: I don’t like you any more Tiddly”³⁸. Francie starts to tell about the Nugents and their house and Father Sullivan wants him to go on and on. Francie panics since he feels that he is betraying his own mother and after a while he is unable to control himself and attacks Father Sullivan with a paper knife. He imagines Mrs Nugent telling his mother: ”Do you know what he did? He asked me to be his mother. He said he’d give anything not to be a pig. That’s what he did on you Mrs Brady.”³⁹ Francie’s Achilles' heel is his family. He has not had an idyllic childhood but still he feels guilty for wishing for anything different. He does not want to let his mother down. In his mind he has built up an image of how, at least in the beginning, his parents marriage was a happy one. He remembers the story about their honeymoon and how lovely it was. After he leaves the boarding school he decides to go and look for the boarding house where they stayed, to see if anyone remembers them and has some nice memories to share with him; maybe as a last attempt to regain a happy family. When he finally arrives at the right place the woman who works there does not tell him what he came to hear. ”What can I tell you about a man who behaved the way he did in front of his wife. No better than a pig, the way he disgraced himself here. (...) God help the poor woman, she mustn’t have seen him sober a day in their whole honeymoon!”⁴⁰ Even in this last attempt Francie is left disillusioned. There had never been a happy time in his parent’s relationship and Francie feels even more strongly that he should have done more to support his mother. The guilt that he feels towards her also adds to the hatred that he feels against Mrs Nugent. As already mentioned in the previous chapter Francie

³⁸ McCabe, 90

³⁹ McCabe, 91

⁴⁰ McCabe,181

blames Mrs Nugent for two things before killing her: for making him turn his back on his ma and for taking Joe away from him.

The connection between Francie's dysfunctional family and his later behaviour is rather obvious. When it comes to Eric's and Dylan's behaviour there is some controversy regarding how their home situations affected their actions. Lionel Shriver writes in *We need to talk about Kevin*⁴¹ that behind every school shooting there is a family which is responsible. This is also a most common idea since the affect the family has on a child is commonly believed to be very significant. However, lead investigator of the Columbine case, Kate Battan has come to a different conclusion. At a press conference in September 1999 she stated that "It really does begin with the family, but I'm here to tell you, I sat down and I've spent a lot of time with the Klebolds, and they're nice people. It's not like they're these monsters that raised a monster. I mean, they truly are clueless about any warning signs that this was going to happen."⁴² Although the Klebolds have appeared as a nice family to Mrs Battan it is difficult to agree with the idea that the parents do not have any responsibility when it comes to the Columbine shooting. If we return to the research in the beginning of the chapter it is obvious that parents do have a large influence on their children and their behaviour. To underline this further, especially when it comes to violent behaviour, Farrington writes in *The development of offending and antisocial behaviour from childhood* that: "The predominant factors within families which contribute to the development of long-term aggressiveness and the risk of violence are in child-rearing and parenting processes."⁴³

In the videos that were made before the shooting both Dylan and Eric talk about their families. They both show signs of remorse, particularly towards their parents, in the same way as Francie does. As a final greeting Dylan states: "Hey mom. Gotta go. It's about half an hour before our little judgement day. I just wanted to apologize to you guys for any crap this might instigate as far as

⁴¹ Lionel Shriver, *We need to talk about Kevin*, *Vi måste prata om Kevin*, (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2006)

⁴² Dave Cullen, Goodbye, cruel world. *Salon News* <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/12/14/videos/index1.html>, read 10/10/2006

⁴³ Farrington (1995a), The development of offending and antisocial behaviour from childhood: Key findings from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 36, 929-964

(inaudible) or something. Just know I'm going to a better place than here. I didn't like life too much and I know I'll be happier wherever the fuck I go."⁴⁴ Eric then states "yea...Everyone I love I'm really sorry about all this. I know my mom and dad will be just like fucking chocked beyond belief. I'm sorry alright. I can't help it."⁴⁵ The two boys do not blame their parents for any of the discomfort that they are feeling. Eric even states that "my parents are the best fucking parents I have ever known. My dad is great. There is nothing you guys could have done to prevent any of this"⁴⁶ These statements are however somewhat paradoxical. Eric claims that his parents are the best parents in the world, but if they really were, the question is if this would have happened? Would they not have had better contact with their son and a deeper understanding of what he was going through? For a teenager the best parent is usually considered to be the one who does not interfere too much. As an adult this conception often changes. When a teenager becomes adult, he or she might appreciate and understand the limits that were set up by the parents and also understand the reasons for their interference. The fact that Eric considers his parents to be "the best" might only be a sign that they left him alone. It does not necessarily mean that they did what was best for their son.

Even though both boys state their love for their parents on the videos they also talk about how distant and easy to trick their parents are. As mentioned earlier, physical or emotional neglect are associated in general terms with later overall risk for delinquency. For a parent to be distant and easily convinced is a clear sign of emotional neglect. Eric states in one portion of the video that: "I could convince them that I'm going to climb Mount Everest, or I have a twin brother growing out of my back. I can make you believe anything."⁴⁷ Several parts of the transcript from the videos include descriptions of how Eric and Dylan film their pipe bombs and guns in their own homes. It is also described how they kept them in their bedrooms rather poorly hidden. The fact that the boys were able to keep the material in this way indicates that they were not worried about their parents

⁴⁴ Jefferson County, police report, 3

⁴⁵ Jefferson County, police report, 3

⁴⁶ Jefferson County, police report, 4

⁴⁷ Jefferson County, police report, 3

discovering the weapons. Dylan also discusses, in another portion of the tape how Eric's parents took away a plastic box that had had "explosives" etched on the side of it, but that they only took the bomb out and left him with the box.⁴⁸ This is perhaps the most damning incident since if a bomb did not provoke a reaction there were surely many other things left neglected. The warning signs were there but only for those willing to see them.

Eric imagines in one part of a tape his mother's reaction after the shooting and how she is regretful. "If only we would have searched their room. If only we would have asked the right questions"⁴⁹ By this statement it is possible to understand that Eric was aware of the fact that something was missing in his relationship with his parents but that his mother would only understand this far too late. "If only we would have asked the right questions" indicates that all forms of profound communication was absent.

Francie had very apparent problems in his home environment with parents who were incapable of taking care of him. When it comes to Dylan and Eric the situation is more complex. There are no such obvious signs of deprivation as abuse or alcoholism but emotional neglect and poor communication can also be devastating for a child's socialisation and development. Kate Battan states that Dylan's parents are "not these monsters that raised a monster" but it is not necessary to be a monster to fail at bringing up children. In a society that promotes individuality more than anything, parents have to offer an emotional platform for children to grow from. The home environment has to be a secure place filled with love and understanding. Parents who fail in this aspect of parenting are not necessarily "monsters" but still have negatively affected their children. Abusive or oppressive circumstances might be present in what the outside world perceive as a perfect family, even if traditional signs such as alcoholism are more easy to detect. It is impossible to rule out the parents as contributors to the Columbine attack, in the same way that it is impossible to rule out Francie's parents as contributors to Mrs Nugent's death.

⁴⁸ Jefferson County, police report, 6

⁴⁹ Jefferson County, police report, 4

The limits of small-town society

Friendly neighbours or malevolent gossip?

The Bronfenbrenner theory ⁵⁰ can be used to explain how an individual develops and is influenced by the surrounding environment. According to this theory the individual is mainly affected by the immediate environment; for a child that consists of the home, the school and the environment experienced during spare time activities. These environments are, in turn, affected by the surrounding society in which they appear. The society delineates how the relationship and coordination between different environments can function. The base for an optimal development for an individual is a well functioning immediate environment where communication and common values are present. It is also important that the values represented in the immediate environment coincide with the values of the surrounding society. If there is not a balance it creates insecurity for the individual which affects development. The Bronfenbrenner theory focuses primarily on the fact that it is important to look at the whole situation and not only focus on details when evaluating a person's physical and mental development.

In the previous chapters friendships and family situations have been discussed. These are important factors in the immediate environment and similarities have been found between Francie Brady's reality and the reality of the boys in the Columbine case. On the other hand there appear to be large differences between the surrounding societies in the two cases. The events described occurred in two countries, Ireland and The United States, with different histories, cultures, laws and regulations. Two countries separated by masses of water and with few things in common. Nevertheless, if we look beneath the surface at the towns where these boys lived it is possible to find astonishing similarities. The similarities found can be defined as the typical "small town mentality". Small towns have certain things in common, even if they might be situated in different countries. People generally know each other rather well, and this creates a certain familial

⁵⁰ Gunnarsson, B. *Lärandets ekologi* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1999)

atmosphere. If somebody is in trouble people who know each other might be more willing to help. On the other hand, gossip and difficulties for people who do not fit can be quite problematic.

Francie did not receive any social support from society. He is aware of the fact that he and his family do not live up to the norms set by society. The small town where he lives does not offer any opportunities for anyone who is different and since everybody knows each other there is nowhere to go or to hide without being recognized. The gossip spreads fast and Francie is always judged before he has any opportunity to prove himself. Mrs Nugent represents a society that judges people from their past. She thinks that she and her family are superior to everybody else. When she calls the Brady family “pigs” she clearly reveals her way of thinking and she does not have any space for compassion or empathy. For her, the Brady family are losers and will always remain so. Furthermore, when Francie goes to the store after his mother’s death he meets some ladies who ask him about how he and his father are getting along. They put on an act of friendliness and consideration but Francie detects their dishonest intentions and laughs at them. “The smiles I had to laugh at them too –they weren’t like smiles at all more like elastic bands pulled tight. Twang! And back they’d go”⁵¹ They are hypocrites and far from genuine in their caring manners. Francie also thinks about the fact that even if nobody really cares, many people interfere and he clearly dislikes it. ” (...) that’s the trouble with the people in this town they can’t mind their own business can they *they can’t mind their own fucking business!*”⁵² Francie is notorious in his home town and there is nothing he can do to change it. As long as he stays there nothing is ever going to be different and that is obviously something Francie has to carry with him wherever he goes. The sensation of being a loser without having the possibility to ever change is clearly not a positive factor in the development of a person. It brings nothing but a feeling of hopelessness and despair. However, it is not only the people Francie meets everyday who put on a mask of being something that they are not; the town itself and the people who govern it try to present an image of the town as being something more than it really is. For the visit of Queen Victoria a fountain and a new road were

⁵¹ McCabe, 102

⁵² McCabe, 164

built even though the queen, in the end, never actually arrived. Francie thinks about the fountain and the new road as monuments to what the town wants to be but will never achieve. There is plenty of irony in Francie's thoughts. "And the drunk lad could piss into it (the fountain) on his way home from the tower. He sure could. So well done town and Queen Victoria I said to myself."⁵³ The drunk lad is like Francie an outcast who is looked down upon. Nevertheless he is the only one who has any use for the fountain. The image was polished so that the queen would get to see a wonderful small town but underneath everything remained the same.

Francie's immediate environment was not functioning well and was also in conflict with the surrounding society. Instead of helping, the society in which Francie lived judged him and made life even more difficult.

When it comes to the boys in *Columbine* there is nothing in the videos they made that can be directly connected to the society in which they lived. They show a general hate towards the world and several specific people but they do not make any specific comments on Littleton. However it is possible to get an idea about the Littleton society from the documentary *Bowling for Columbine*⁵⁴. In the documentary Matt Stone who has created the cartoon *South Park* together with his friend Trey Parker talks about his experiences of growing up in Littleton. The two of them were also "different" but they turned their anger into a cartoon instead of a carnage. Matt describes Littleton as "Just absolutely, painfully, horribly average"⁵⁵ and he also describes how difficult it was not to be normal but somewhat different in such a "normal" town. He also remembers how the teachers in school tried to scare you into conforming and doing well in school by saying "If you are a loser now, you're gonna be a loser forever."⁵⁶ The small town mentality of not sticking out was also present in Littleton. Some people were calling Dylan and Eric "gay" and Stone believes that this rumor was never to leave them. Whatever you are now you will be forever. The general idea that

⁵³ McCabe, 103

⁵⁴ *Bowling for columbine*, Michael Moore

⁵⁵ *Bowling for columbine*, Michael Moore

⁵⁶ *Bowling for columbine*, Michael Moore

was proposed by society was according to Stone. “Don’t fuck up. Cause if you do, you’re gonna die poor and lonely.”⁵⁷

Journalist Laura Fraser who also grew up in Littleton share Stone’s idea. She describes Littleton as “on the surface, a prosperous, happily homogenous community”⁵⁸ and as well as Stone she has experienced an unwillingness to accept anyone who is different. As an example very few of the local realtors would rent or sell houses to blacks. She describes the situation in school in this way: “You had to be a jock or a cheerleader or you were a brain or a freak, which meant you were an outcast, a target. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold weren’t the first alienated kids to crack.”⁵⁹ The Littleton society was full of unwritten rules for what was accepted and what was not. These rules were very strict when it came to sticking out and being different and this also affected the atmosphere in school and how the pupils behaved there. Eric and Dylan had as already mentioned difficulties in fitting in and were not helped by society in any way. The way people treated them was the way sanctioned by the surrounding society so what kind of help could they expect to get?

Not all people in small towns crack so it is impossible to say that the main reason for the boys’ actions was the fact that they lived in small towns with narrow-minded people. However it is easy to understand that for a person who is already suffering from other difficulties it is harder to stand up to a society that does not accept you for who you are since you are in some way different. Francie was an outsider and so were Dylan and Eric. They were followed by a feeling of not fitting in wherever they went. When Francie went to the store he knew what people thought of him in the same way as Dylan and Eric did when they went to school. As the Bronfenbrenner theory points out it is important to look at an individual’s entire life situation to understand how he or she develops and reacts. The surrounding society, whichever it might be, sets up rules that reflect upon every individuals’ immediate environment in one way or the other.

⁵⁷ *Bowling for columbine*, Michael Moore

⁵⁸ Laura Fraser, Of course it happened here. *Salon News*, 1

<http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/1999/04/23/hometown/print.html>, read 10/10/2006

⁵⁹ Laura Fraser, 2

Conclusion

It is difficult to understand what can push young boys to commit such violent crimes as Francie, Dylan and Eric did. Their actions reveal much anger and despair at a very early age. Singer Marilyn Manson was seen as a promoter of violence and a contributor to the shooting at Columbine by some experts but the reasons for the shooting were certainly much more profound than that. From Francie Brady's perspective we get an insight into what kind of problems can lie behind what can appear to be purely an action of madness. Francie did not have an easy life from any aspect. His whole life situation was coloured by problems and insecurity. The importance of friendships, the family situation and the influence of the surrounding society are the main issues that have been emphasized in this essay. It is also on these issues that connections have been made to the Columbine case and to the situation that Dylan and Eric experienced.

To begin with, friendship or the lack of meaningful relationships can be considered very crucial both in Francie's case and in the Columbine case. In his friendship with Joe, Francie found for the first time in his life a place where he could feel safe and be himself. Joe offered him a relationship that was supportive and he also clearly delineated rules for what was right and wrong. Francie did not have anybody except Joe to rely on so when their friendship collapsed Francie lost everything. Research has, as presented in the essay, clearly shown that friendship is essential for a person's wellbeing as well as for emotional development. Isolation and loneliness on the other hand have been shown to have the opposite affect. As well as Francie, the two boys in Columbine had difficulties when it came to friendship. The two of them were friends but they were excluded from the larger group and were often bullied and harassed. In *The Butcher Boy* the connection between a meaningful friendship and a general wellbeing is very clear. It is therefore easy to understand why the loss of such a friendship can push somebody to do something so serious as to kill another person. Eric and Dylan probably experienced a similar frustration when they were excluded from the group. This frustration pushed them to kill fellow students in a very cruel manner. If the boys would have had functioning relationships with their peers probably some of the dissatisfaction and

anger that they felt could have been dissipated. The outcome might have been different than that of death and obliteration. The common solution that they found to resolve their personal issues was to cause suffering to other people. None of the boys had a better future for themselves in mind. It all had to do with desperation and revenge. The revenge of the outcasts.

Furthermore apart from meaningful friendships, the family situation has also been proved to be very important for a person's development; especially for children and adolescents since the first and most frequent relationships they have with other people are with the immediate family. Francie grew up in a home situation where domestic violence and neglect was a part of day-to-day life. His mother was mentally unstable and his father was an alcoholic. The platform for growing up and developing into a responsible adult was seriously damaged. Francie's childhood conditions were far from perfect and this affected him in many ways. He had a very deprived concept of self which made him unable to stand up to and deal with the problems that he had to face. He did not have any guidance to assist him but was completely left on his own. If he would have been more secure and stable in himself as a result of family support, he probably would have been less damaged by the loss of Joe and more capable of handling any kind of defeat. For Eric and Dylan the home situation appears to have been somewhat better or at least different. There are no such obvious signs of misery as mental instability or alcoholism in the picture. Scratching beneath the surface it is however possible to detect that something was wrong. In neither of the cases could the families offer an emotional platform strong enough to prevent their children from committing terrible crimes. For Eric and Dylan their parent's emotional neglect and lack of communication was devastating. Their parents claim that they did not see any warning signs of what was about to happen but their complete abdication of parental participation and responsibility prevented them from being aware that something was wrong. Francie's parents can be seen as contributors to the death of Mrs Nugent just as Eric's and Dylan's parents can be seen as contributors to the Columbine massacre. The family situation is very important and from Francie's perspective we can

clearly see the consequences of a family that is not functioning well. If this observation is transferred to the Columbine case the conclusion is identical.

Finally the surrounding society has been shown to have a significant affect on the individual, as the Bronfenbrenner theory points out. This perspective mainly focuses on how individuals are affected by the environments they find themselves in. These environments are always influenced by the surrounding society. The towns in which the boys lived were similar in some aspects. They were small towns where people knew each other well and helped each other as long as they did not stick out or violate any of the unwritten rules. Francie never fitted in so he got no help from society. Similarly Dylan and Eric experienced childhood in a town that did not promote the individual's right to be themselves.

As more acts of violence find their way onto the front pages of our newspapers, we have become accustomed to reading headlines such as "Man goes wild and kills five". A superficial response to such a headline might be to dismiss it with the observation "he must have been mad". When the Columbine shootings were first reported many people felt it was just another example of "crazy kids gone wild" but if we look at the Columbine shooting or any of the extreme killings of recent years from Francie Brady's perspective it is possible to understand how a person who is lost and frustrated can be pushed to do something as serious as to kill another person. What can appear to be an act of madness can be better understood as resulting from the absence of guidance leading to a lack of basic stability and security. Supportive friends and a caring family are essential to all individuals, especially adolescents, and the consequences if there are no such relationships can, as we have seen here, be very devastating. It is important that we open our eyes to all the Francie Bradys that we have in society. Many people need to be seen differently and earn a different understanding. There is a lot of compassion to be learned from young Mr Brady's story, as long as we are willing and able to do so. This is important, not only in preventing terrible crimes but also simply to create a meaningful future filled with understanding and respect.

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