“We Couldn't Fathom Them at All”
The Complex Representation of Femininity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

Louise Wandland
D-Essay
Tutor: Maria Proitsaki
Abstract

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* tells the story of adolescent boys gazing at the five Lisbon sisters, who captivate the entire neighborhood with their blond hair and youthful beauty. The young women are positioned as objects, merely to be gazed upon by the male narrators, who by watching them seek to gain knowledge of life and death. Therefore, the novel risks adhering to a traditional, patriarchal theme, where men are the active subjects and women are the passive objects. By reading against the grain and focusing on the sisters' stories told in glimpses through the narrators' voices, however, it emerges that *The Virgin Suicides* carries a feminist message that runs counter to the objectification and silencing of the young women.

*Keywords*: Feminist theory, gaze, objectification, stereotypes, sexuality, suicide.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction.................................................................................................................................3
2. Theoretical Approach..................................................................................................................3
   2.1 Reading the Story..................................................................................................................3
   2.2 The Male Gaze......................................................................................................................5
   2.3 Female Gaze.........................................................................................................................7
   2.4 Stereotypes............................................................................................................................8
   2.5 Suicide in Fiction..................................................................................................................9
3. Giving the Sisters a Voice............................................................................................................10
   3.1 Telling the Story...................................................................................................................10
   3.2 The Gaze..............................................................................................................................13
   3.3 Stereotyping the Sisters.......................................................................................................17
   3.4 Female Sexuality in The Virgin Suicides.............................................................................19
   3.5 Suicide...................................................................................................................................22
4. Conclusion...................................................................................................................................23
5. Works Cited..................................................................................................................................25
1. Introduction

“Obviously, doctor, you’ve never been a thirteen year old girl.” Those words, uttered by the first of the five Lisbon sisters to commit suicide in Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, sum up the tone in the novel in which a group of adolescent boys try to solve the mysteries of the opposite sex by watching the Lisbon girls, five blond teenage sisters living in their neighborhood. The story they tell about the sisters is based on what they can see, and in their eyes the girls become the embodiment of mysterious femininity. Thus the novel presents us with an image of women as others, which is problematic as it denies women subjectivity and a voice to tell their own story.

However, a novel can yield more than one possible interpretation. Despite themes of male voyeurism and objectification of the female body, Eugenides' text arguably offers a feminist perspective. Debra Shostak notes that *The Virgin Suicides* has been interpreted as misogynistic because of “the male gaze turned on beautiful, doomed females,” but that by closely examining the narrators' perspective, one may conclude that the novel is anything but misogynistic (809). Behind the narrative, the reader can listen for the unrepresented voice of the sisters and hear the ways in which they rebel against their oppressive environment. By analyzing the main points where *The Virgin Suicides* appear to honor patriarchal norms, like the employment of the male gaze, stereotypical depictions of women, and problematization of female sexuality, it can be argued that the novel is a feminist text.

2. Theoretical Approach

2.1 Reading the Story

When interpreting a text one might find that it explicitly or implicitly says certain things about gender relations and that it either reaffirms or challenges patriarchal norms and values (Belsey and Moore 1). The way the reader assumes the subjectivity of the narrator and accepts his or her representation of gender is a process to a great extent influenced by the reader's own social and cultural experiences
There is, in other words, a relationship between the narrator's voice and the reader's response, and the reader has the choice of assuming the norms and ideals carried by the narrator uncritically, or finding a meaning that is implicitly conveyed in the text (Shostak 809). Pierre Macherey, student of Althusser, considered literature as a form of ideological production. To expose the contradictions within the ideology in which a text is produced, one must read “against the grain;” focus on what the text does not say, in gaps and silences (Bertens 71-72). Texts produced in western society tend to contain patriarchical values, but by reading against the grain counter-narratives can be revealed, offering “other places of possibility for the presentation of woman” (Walters 76).

Different ways for feminist critics to read a text might be to analyze how women are depicted in works by male authors, examine the criticism of female authors, or take a “prescriptive” approach in an attempt to set a standard of what is considered to be “good literature” from a feminist point of view. Shulamith Firestone suggests that works by male authors can be categorized according to motif, either as “Male Protest Art,” which glorifies male virility as a reaction to feminism, the “Male Angle,” which presents the “male reality as Reality,” and lastly, the “(Individually Cultivated) Androgynous Mentality,” which depicts the “still unresolved conflict between sexual and human identity.” When analyzing works in the third category, the criticism must not be directed at the author, but at the reality that is revealed in the work (qtd. in Register 6). Societies are after all complex and express conflicting beliefs and values, which is consequently reflected in the texts that are produced under these complex circumstances, so that the same text may simultaneously reaffirm and challenge patriarchical values (Cranny-Francis et al. 109).

Some feminist critics are concerned with how patriarchy victimizes women, and how this is sometimes reaffirmed in texts produced by male authors. American feminist Kate Millett focused on how women are dehumanized in novels by male writers like Henry Miller and Norman Mailer,
especially in their representations of female sexuality. Millett argues that sex has political aspects and considers the attitudes of those writers to reflect the underlying political and complex relationship between the sexes in society (xix).

Other feminist critics prefer to examine whether dehumanized or victimized women are set in a position in which they can fight back. They argue that feminist literature should provide role models, for example by portraying women who are not dependent on men, but actively try to pursue their goals and develop their full potential as human beings, and therefore serve as inspiration to female readers (Register 20). The feminine is considered different from the masculine, and should be celebrated for being a positive alternative to the restraining laws of the masculine. Hélène Cixous refers to the hierarchical binary system in which the masculine is dominant over the feminine, but she also writes with appreciation of those often marginalized in society, “witches, hysterics and homosexuals,” as they might be “victims of patriarchy” but also “dangerous rebels” who refuse the patriarchal order—the “poetic spirits that cannot be tamed” (qtd. in Belsey and Moore 10).

2.2 The Male Gaze
In the 1970s, second wave feminists turned their attention to the way women are represented in mainstream media, usually as the objects of a male gaze. Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” although written to analyze the gaze in cinematic narrative and to show how film simulates the pleasure of looking, could be applied to other forms of media, as literary texts. Mulvey, who draws upon the psychoanalytical theory of the Gaze based on Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage, argues that the act of looking has traditionally been associated with men, while women have been assigned to be the ones who are looked at (11). Freud explained the concept of the male gaze in terms of voyeurism and fetishism. Women, according to Freud, mystify men due to their lack of penis. A man, in turn, may either “investigate and demystify” women by giving in to voyeurism, finding
pleasure in looking without being seen, which gives him power and control over the object, or turn
women into a fetish, so that they become reassuring rather than dangerous (14). However, Mulvey's
theory has been met with some criticism, most notably that it only incorporates the gaze of white men,
and that black men do not have the same freedom of looking (especially not at white women) as white
men. It has also been used, some believe, in a too generalizing manner to describe and analyze the
objectification of women (Walters 65). Still, since the male gaze in The Virgin Suicides is so
pronounced, I find that Mulvey's theory may be relevant to the analysis of the novel.

Undoubtedly, power dynamics are at play in who is able to look and who is positioned as the object
of the look. British painter and art critic John Berger argued that looking is hardly a neutral activity, but
carries indications of power, access and control. A man's power, according to Berger, depends on the
power his body expresses, whether it is sexual, economic, moral or physical, so that a “man's presence
suggests what he is capable of doing to or for you.” By contrast, “a woman's presence expresses her
own attitude to herself,” what can or cannot be done to her, because her presence, expressed in clothes,
gestures, voice, opinions, etc, is so inherent in her person that “men tend to think of it as almost
physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura” (Berger 46). This reflects the idea that men are the
active subjects holding the gaze, while women simply appear. “Men look at women,” Berger notes, and
“women watch themselves being looked at” (47). This influences not only the relationship between
men and women, but also how women relate to themselves. From a very young age, a woman learns to
be aware of constantly being looked at, or surveyed, and as a result comes to expect the gaze and even
turn her own eyes on herself. She thus becomes both surveyor and the surveyed, “two constituent yet
distinct elements of female identity” (45). Women, Berger notes, are depicted as different from men not
because of some inherent difference in the feminine from the masculine, but because the spectator is
always assumed to be male, and the image of women is designed to flatter him (64). According to
Joanna Russ, both men and women perceive their culture as male. As readers or spectators of film, women come to expect to identify with a masculine experience and perspective, and male perspective is then presented as the human, universal one (qtd. in Register 15). It could be argued that a text like *The Virgin Suicides* reaffirms this order and the assumption that all consumers of art and media are male and heterosexual, and that it is male desire for the female form that decides how women are presented.

### 2.3 Female Gaze

The theorization of the female gaze has been largely motivated by the implication that women cannot be anything else but passive victims under the male gaze, destined to participate in the objectification of their own selves. This, it could be argued, is neither an inspirational nor an empowering position for women. A more inspiring standpoint from which to examine the gaze is to trace resistance in the ways women react to being looked at, for example if they choose to act or present themselves in a manner that is not considered stereotypically feminine. Walters, however, cautions that even though some readers might find resistance in the way female literary characters meet the gaze, images are so often laden with “dominant cultural messages” that the majority of female readers “will feel the weight of dominant ideology” (111). Furthermore, there is an element of power and possession in the male gaze that is simply lacking in the female gaze, due to men’s and women’s different positions in society, where men have traditionally held privileged roles of power and authority over women in both private and public areas.

If accepting Mulvey’s argument that the (cinematic) male gaze involves the Oedipal complex, a female gaze turned to the male form cannot exist. According to this theory, a woman gazes on the female character on screen as a means to relive the period before she realized she was not one with her mother and thus solidified her identity (Cranny-Francis et al. 164). Women, according to Mary Ann
Doane, are incapable of fetishizing male bodies, because woman is the castrated body part, and that body, with the obvious lack, cannot be “fetishized away.” The female spectator, then, either identifies with the female characters in a passive, masochistic position, seeing only her own lack, or with the male characters in an active, masculinized way, which places her in position of transvestism (qtd in Walters 59). Doane also argues that the reversal of the gaze, in which women take pleasure in looking at men, is not possible, because the female gaze only serves to reinforce the terms of the binary opposition, whereby male and female are considered a pair of opposites: if men are active, women are passive, if men are strong, women are weak, etc. Since male subjectivity is equated with the look, the concept of women gazing at men merely signifies the reversal of the gaze. This reinforces the “dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy” (60). In other words, when looking at and objectifying men, women take on a masculine role, a kind of transvestism, because the gaze is always associated with the active and dominant male.

Mulvey points out that “man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like,” and “cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (12). This, American philosopher Susan Bordo suggests, is because while women have come to expect and cater to the objectification of the gaze, men are supposed to be judged by their actions, not as bodies on display (170).

2.4 Stereotypes
What the narrators of The Virgin Suicides see, or think they see, when they look at the sisters, is to a large extent based on feminine stereotypes. A stereotype, usually based on appearance, connotes sameness, and thus stereotypes function by reducing classes of people, on the grounds of hair color, race, gender, sexuality, etc, to a few characteristics they seemingly share and by which they can be identified. Stereotypes relate to a perceived “real” quality which allows the human brain to swiftly recognize and classify others by using simple visual clues, but often the assumptions made about these
characteristics are inaccurate. After all, stereotypes are usually created by people outside of the stereotyped group, who take a few perceived “real” qualities to be inherent in all the members of the group in question (Cranny-Francis et al. 140). Stereotypes eventually become prescriptions for behaviors, and are thus used as modes of social control. Millett suggests that stereotypes of sexual category, femininity and masculinity, are based on the needs and values of the dominant group in a particular society and “dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates,” such as ascribing “aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy” to the male and “passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue’” to the female (26). In turn, the group circulating the stereotypes is given a certain power, the “power to name,” as this group can dictate how the other group will be viewed (Cranny-Francis et al. 142).

### 2.5 Suicide in Fiction

In literature, suicide often takes on the meaning of resistance. Still, because it is more common in lower social classes and women are more likely than men to report mental illness and attempted suicide, it is often regarded as an expression of powerlessness (Giora). Historically, suicide was considered an expression of female madness, though it was far more common in fiction than in reality, and more common with men than women (Gates). Since women as a group are ascribed characteristics such as passivity and docility, female anger is often discouraged. The repression of female aggression forces the fictional heroines to take the anger out on themselves, although Rachel Giora argues that after the feminist revolution in the 1970s, there was a slight increase in fictional stories in which women avenge their oppressors by murdering them.

Female writers often explored female suicide in terms of “suppressed rebellion” and escape from an oppressive environment. The two most common methods employed by women in Victorian fiction were drowning and throwing themselves out in the air. Women dying in water may be
interpreted as a return to the womb, female fluids, or tears. Air born women, on the other hand, connote more will and determination; the flying signifies “raising oneself, in status and morality” (Gates). The theme of suicide as suppressed rebellion and escape is central to *The Virgin Suicides*.

### 3. Giving the Sisters a Voice

#### 3.1 Telling the Story

The narration in *The Virgin Suicides*, unusual as it is in the sense that it is in first person plural, is important to the interpretation of the story as the plurality affects its reliability. The process of reading a text of fiction allows the reader to take on the subjectivity of the narrating voice (Shostak 810). In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrators’ identities are never revealed to the reader. All we know is that these are a group of boys who reside in the same suburban neighborhood as the Lisbon family, and spend a great amount of time watching and obsessing over the sisters. Because the narrative voice is plural, it seems to promise that it is more reliable than a singular voice would have been. However, the reliability that would seem to be inherent in the authority of the plural voice is questionable since the narrators are all equally puzzled by the actions of the sisters, illustrated in sentences starting with “we didn't understand why” and “we couldn't fathom” (810). Because the plural narrative voice is so uncertain, it leaves the reader with an obvious awareness of the unreliability of the narrators.

Then, the narrators recall the events leading up to the suicides some twenty years later, which causes the story to exist on two planes; in the present as the boys, now grown up men, are telling the story, and in the past, where they were observing the sisters. The present day narrators give the impression of being objective in their account of the events as they acquire their knowledge about the Lisbon sisters through rather scientific research methods, such as observation and gathering of material (photo albums, journals, and other objects which had belonged to the Lisbon girls). They refer to the relics they collected after the sisters as “exhibits,” and provide the reader with seemingly reliable eye
witness accounts from dentists, doctors, and other neighbors. However, as Shostak notes, the narrators have little to work on since they base their analysis of the events on not much more than memories (808). The reader is reminded of the unreliability of memory when the boys ask a couple of ladies in the neighborhood what happened when they brought a cake to Mrs. Lisbon after Cecilia’s funeral. One of them indignantly recalls that Mrs. Lisbon just took the cake and put it in the refrigerator without offering them a piece, while the other claims that she invited them to have a piece each and graciously thanked them (15).

The above is important to note because it invites the reader to question the authority of the narrators in their representation of the young girls. In order to contest the view of the text as a confirmation of the idea that women are merely objects upon which men can project their dreams and desires, the reader must resist the norms conveyed by the boys and instead try to find the voice of the sisters. The girls’ perspective is not revealed to the reader, however, hidden as it is behind the voice of the narrators, and this in itself is an example of ideological—in this case patriarchal—narrative. As Shostak notes, the use of multiple narrators functions to amplify patriarchal authority by “enforcing the silencing and imprisonment of the sisters” (814). The narrators, all male, have the voice and therefore the agency to speak and determine how the sisters are viewed.

However, when focusing on the sisters, one may find that what they say shows them to be quite different from the way they are perceived by the boys. At the prom, the sisters are given a chance to prove that they are ordinary teenagers, an attempt that is ultimately ignored by the boys who are determined to see them as incarnations of feminine mystery. At the dance, the sisters are cheerful and full of life, enjoying a reprieve from the oppressing environment that is their home while engaging in adolescent activity. Aware that their peers view them as different, somehow marked by Cecilia’s suicide, Theresa says: “Cecilia was weird, but we're not,” followed by, “we just want to live. If anyone
would let us” (128). Here, the sisters do live for a brief moment, like the fish flies, which appear twice in the novel, that only live for one day. The girls talk freely, laugh, dance, drink peach schnapps. They come out in full force, showing that when given a chance, they are ordinary teenage girls looking for fun. They no longer live up to the image of pure, reclusive creatures the narrators work so hard to construct. Hence, the reader gets a brief glimpse of the sisters' unrepresented point of view and sees the girls as real, not mythical beings. This instance serves to emphasize the boys' inability, or even reluctance, to truly know them. After the prom, the boys promise their dates to call them, but they never do. They do not really wish to get to know the sisters, lest their fantasies, when faced with the mundanity of reality, would burst, which also implies that they are incapable of giving an accurate account of the sisters.

Perhaps the reader hears the voice of the sisters the clearest through Lux right before they end their lives, when they have lured the boys over to their house. While the boys believe they are invited on a rescue mission and are excited with the prospect of running away with the girls, saving them from their cooped up existence and saving themselves from a life of predictable suburban boredom by “driving them out of the green neighborhood and into the pure, free desolation” (207), their visit at the house ends in tragedy. Lux, the only sister in sight, walks up to one of the boys, Chase Buell, and unzips his pants, the rest of them watching and feeling as if one with him; “Lux undoing us, reaching out for us and taking us as she knew we could be taken” (206). This blatant attempt at seduction, Shostak suggests, is not the “return of the repressed” but rather a calculated attempt to punish the boys for their naïve and persistent inability to see the sisters as subjects with their own minds. Lux indeed takes advantage of their curiosity and voyeuristic tendencies to force them to witness their deaths (824). The sisters' revenge then is to force the boys to realize their delusion about them, the false knowledge which they had regarded them with: “We had never known her. They had brought us here to find that
The Lisbon sisters reprimand the boys for their failure to accept them as the human beings they are, again reminding the reader of the unreliability of their narration. Despite the allegedly authoritative nature of the plural narrators, the uncertainty of their memories and recollections of the sisters cause the narration to appear flawed, which presents an opportunity for the reader to focus instead on the voice of the sisters.

3.2 The Gaze

The boys rely largely on their eyes to know the girls. Shostak argues that the “visual inspection” of the sisters is based on a desire to find some kind of knowledge in the female body, in which case it becomes a bearer of underlying meaning (812). In other words, the sisters become symbols of the narrators' metaphysical probing. They gaze at the sisters as a means to learn something about themselves, which is perhaps why they refer to them as their doubles: “We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins.” When reading Cecilia’s diary, the boys seem to find a bit of sympathy for the sisters, understanding “the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy“ and the “pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt, and the ache of keeping your knees together in class and how drab and infuriating it was to jump rope while the boys played baseball.” Yet, their “understanding” of them cannot be likened to a connection with them or recognition of them as beings like themselves, because the boys also believe that the girls possess a knowledge of love and death that they themselves lack; “they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all.” This imagined “knowledge” means, the boys believe, that “the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them” (40). The boys are convinced that the sisters have an understanding of life and death that they do not yet have, but that by observing them, that knowledge might somehow become available to them as well.
Despite the boys' careful observation of the Lisbon sisters, however, it is clear that they do not really see the girls, but are watching them through a lens colored by their idealization of them and fantasies about them, and that these fantasies are in turn only generated by the sight of the sisters. After the girls have been incarcerated in the house and the narrators are no longer able to see them, they begin to slip from their minds. The boys can barely remember how they look; “The colors of their eyes were fading, the location of moles, dimples, centipede scars” (180). Furthermore, when they are no longer able to evoke an image of the sisters, they almost start to doubt their very existence, as if the girls had been dreams, and the meaning and excitement they had filled the narrators' lives with is forgotten. “How long could we remain true to the girls?” they ask; “How long could we keep their memories pure? As it was, we didn't know them any longer.” This shows how much the narrators rely on their sight to know the sisters, because if they cannot see them, they cannot know them. In fact, the girls' absence make the boys wonder if they had ever really known the girls, or if their vigilance “had been only the fingerprinting of phantoms” (182). The boys express little to no concern for the well-being of the Lisbon sisters; they only lament that their own romantic image of the girls, and the fantasies that came with it, begin to fade.

Another way in which the boys objectify the sisters is demonstrated in the way they fail to see the girls as individuals. To them, the five sisters appear so identical, with their “blond hair and puffy cheeks” and bodies that are all “short, round buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recall the same dorsal softness” (5), that when finally presented with an opportunity to see the girls up close at a house party, they are surprised to find that they are actually “distinct beings” with individual imperfections that are not quite in line with idealized femininity. Bonnie has “the sallow complexion and sharp nose of a nun,” Therese “the cheeks and eyes of a cow,” and Mary has “fuzz above her upper lip.” Lux, flirtatious and most sexual of them all—and consequently of most interest to the boys—is the
only one who lives up to the narrators' image of the blond Lisbon girls, radiating “health and mischief” (23). Yet, despite the realization that they are different from each other, the girls are denied true identities of their own. When reading Cecilia’s diary, the boys find that she “writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity,” so that it’s “often difficult to identify which sister she is talking about,” which “creates in the reader’s mind an image of a mythical creature with ten legs and five heads” (39).

When the boys take the sisters to the prom, they do not even bother to decide before hand who should take which girl—so little regard do they have for the girls as individuals: “Which ever Lisbon girl a boy pinned became his date” (118). By denying them individuality, Shostak notes, Eugenides “underscores the boys' determination to dehumanize and mythologize” the sisters, thus illustrating the narrators' failure to see the Lisbon girls as anything but objects (814).

The Lisbon sisters, as well as their mother, are aware of the gaze that follows them. Before church, Mrs. Lisbon “checked each daughter for signs of make up,” often sending Lux back in the house to put on a “less revealing top” (6). For their prom dance, she dresses her daughters in shapeless dresses to not draw attention to their bodies. Eventually, she locks the girls in the house to shield them from the eyes of the world in a misguided attempt to protect them. Even in their deaths, Mrs. Lisbon's eyes are set on their appearance. “Look at her nails,” she is heard saying about Cecilia, lying in her coffin. “Couldn't they do something about her nails?” (36). The sisters, in their turn, adorn themselves with bracelets, do their hair, and secretly wear make up. In other words, they keep up a facade that shows they expect to be looked upon, are both “surveyors and surveyed” (Berger 45), but they do not do it to the full; there is always a flaw in their appearance and their looks are often somewhat disheveled, like their tattered knee socks and untied shoes. They are, thereby, real beings, not perfect images of ideal femininity.

The narrators realize that the sisters look back at the world that watches them, an act which consequently renders them subjectivity. In the car on their way to the prom, the sisters have something
to say about the families in each of the houses they pass, “which meant that they had been looking out at us as intently as we had been looking in” (119). Lacan distinguished between the look and the gaze, as the latter is directed at an object that looks back at the spectator (Felluga). While the act of looking back is a prerequisite for the gaze according to Lacan, it also ascribes the sisters subjectivity. The reader is invited to wonder what motive the Lisbon girls had for looking out. What were they thinking and feeling about the world outside their window, one which they are not allowed to partake in? The notion that they are actively looking out at the world seems to reprimand the boys for objectifying them, as it renders the girls personality, even agency.

After the sisters have been incarcerated in the house, they all, but especially Lux, take advantage of the eyes they know are watching them, in yet another expression of subjectivity and agency which detracts from their status as objects. They send out messages to the boys by flashing the lights in their bedrooms, and they leave letters for them to find with messages such as “Dear whoever, Tell Trip I'm over him, He's a creep, Guess who” and “Down with unsavory boys” (187). Lux starts making love with strangers on the roof of her home, in the middle of the night but nonetheless in plain view, rebelling against the virtuous, good girl image. She knows she might be watched, and she shows her spectators that she does as she pleases with her body. Obviously, being locked inside the house has not dampened her spirit, nor her sexuality. Since she is described as the active one during these encounters —leading the men upstairs, positioning them, undoing zippers and buckles—she takes on the role of subject instead of being merely a sexualized object. In this way, she uses the gaze focused on her to express her own subjectivity.

_The Virgin Suicides_ seems to suggest that the gaze can indeed be reversed by showing how the sisters objectify boys. Males are after all not the only ones capable of objectifying the opposite sex, and males too can suffer the consequences of being, or not being, objectified. Trip Fontaine returns to
school after summer break no longer a chubby boy-child, but a tall, tanned handsome young heartbreaker, turning heads among high school girls and female teachers alike. The sudden and overwhelming female attention he garners causes a bit of concern to the other boys, who realize that their fathers and older brothers had lied when they said that looks do not matter for boys. They believed good looks “counted for nothing” until they noticed that the girls they knew, “along with their mothers, fell in love with Trip Fontaine” (65). The narrators further realize that no one was ever going to love them for their good grades only (66). From reading Cecilia’s diary, they learn “what it felt to see a boy with his shirt off, and why it made Lux write the name Kevin” on her bras and panties (40). This reversal of the gaze not only gives girls certain control and power, it also establishes them further as subjects.

3.3 Stereotyping the Sisters
The narrators rely on feminine stereotypes to garner information and understanding of the girls, which is clear when one of the boys, Peter Sissen, manages to get invited to dinner at the Lisbon house. The stories he brings back to the others are about the girls “giggling and whispering” in bathrooms, bedrooms filled with “crumpled panties,” “stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls” and the “effluvia of so many girls becoming women together.” Notably, he recollects only those parts that arguably confirm their femininity and femaleness, as the “deodorants and perfumes” and the “tubes of red lipstick and the second skin of blush and base” (7).

When the boys later on enter the Lisbon home, they seem somewhat surprised to discover that the Lisbon house is actually quite ordinary, and does not live up to the mythic notion of the sisters' residence as a feminine lair: “Peter Sissen's descriptions of the house had been all wrong. Instead of a heady atmosphere of feminine chaos, we found the house to be a tidy, dry-looking place” (22). Still, the boys hold on to their image of the sisters as mythic creatures, which is illustrated in how they perceive
the girls as a “patch of glare like a congregation of angels” (23), waiting for them at the bottom of stairs. Despite the ordinariness of the house, the boys choose to see the sisters as otherworldly.

However, the image of the sisters as the embodiments of feminine delicateness is problematic, as it involves an unrealistic portrayal of women. In the eyes of the boys, the Lisbon girls are dreamlike, pretty, fair and angelic, softly speaking to the world with “delicate chords” (21). The boys idealize them for their perceived femininity, an idealization that nonetheless is stereotypical and possibly damaging, because it “obscures the actual social condition of women” (Donovan 6). The sisters, with their blond hair and soft cheeks, become Lily—the “fair headed maiden, the symbol of feminine purity, woman as muse” (Donovan 5). For female readers, this idealization does not provide a satisfactory characterization or representation of women (7). In other words, most women find it difficult to identify with female characters described as goddesses.

There exists, of course, Lily's opposite—the harlot, a role that Lux may seem appointed to play, thus bringing attention to the Madonna/whore dichotomy in which women are presented as either innocent and virginal or sexual and somehow ruined (Valenti 11). Still, in the novel these two versions are blurred. At the house party, Cecilia is dressed in a shapeless vintage wedding dress, her lips colored “with red crayon, which gave her face a deranged harlot look” (24). She thus appears in the boys' eyes simultaneously as the two feminine archetypes, Madonna, symbolized by the wedding dress, and whore, symbolized by the red lips. The Virgin Mary, whom Cecilia clutches a laminated picture of against her chest at her first suicide attempt, is the archetypical virgin. Lux would seem her opposite, smoking, drinking, and having sex, and yet she is not positioned as the sinful harlot by the boys. Her “sinful” habits are rather expressions of a rebellious nature, her death not a condemnation but escape from social mores, embodied by a strict mother trying to restrain her. The novel, then, poses a challenge to the Madonna versus whore representation of women.
In fact, one might suggest then that *The Virgin Suicides* ultimately offers space for the sisters to express themselves beyond gendered stereotypes. In their immediate surroundings, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are examples of stereotype role reversal. Mr. Lisbon leaves all authority to his wife, he is effeminate, has a high voice and weeps like a girl (6). Mrs. Lisbon, on the other hand, rules her family with an iron fist. She takes “charge of the house” while Mr. Lisbon recedes “into a mist” (58). Moreover, the girls themselves contradict the stereotypes at times: a female classmate says that the girls “were really loud” (122), which goes against the image of suffering silent girls, and the sneaking out of the house and leaving messages shows them as inventive, active and brave.

3.4 **Female Sexuality in The Virgin Suicides**

The representation of female sexuality in *The Virgin Suicides* might seem problematic, considering that it is the girls' burgeoning sexuality and their “fructifying flesh” (6) that lead to their doomed existence as prisoners in their own house. The sisters' bodies are at the same time beautiful and sick, involving something dangerous and uncontrollable in the female body, starting at puberty. After all, Cecilia ends her life at the thirteen, an age that is broadly associated with the onset of puberty.

The female experience of menstruation in particular is of great fascination. When Peter Sissen finds a spotted Tampax in the girls' bathroom, he calls it not gross, but “a beautiful thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something” (8). The blood, a tell tale sign that the girls are turning into women and therefore becoming sexual beings, is spectacular and worthy of admiration, but perhaps also mystifying like a modern painting undoubtedly can be to the uninitiated. The five days a month when the sisters all at once have their period are hard on Mr. Lisbon, who has to “disperse aspirin as though feeding the ducks” and suffer their “dramatic womanliness.” At times he feels as if he were “living in the birdhouse at the zoo” with all the females roaming the house (21). The girls are thereby likened to objects of art as well as animals, the uniquely female experience of menstruating making
them non-human.

At the same time the title of the novel invites the reader to reflect on the sisters first and foremost in terms of their sexuality by referring to them as virgins. The terminology of virgin “cloaks a purely physical condition with ideological judgment,” argues Shostak, which indicates “both religious status and social prohibitions.” Thus, the non-sexually active person is reduced to being a “sexual object prized for its untried status” (154). This, of course, only concerns females. When Trip loses his virginity to a much older woman, he is transformed into a man “so cool and aloof,” giving off “the sense of having graduated to the next stage of life, of having thrust his hands into the heart of the real world” (73). Lux, on the other hand, is doubly punished for losing her virginity. First, she is abandoned by her lover Trip, who years later admits to the narrators that after making love to her he “just got sick of her right then,” despite liking her (134). Secondly, Lux’ encounter with Trip results in her coming home past curfew, and the sisters are grounded—even taken out of school—as a consequence (137). Trip's getting tired of Lux could perhaps be attributed to the same reason none of the narrators call the sisters after the prom; he too had fallen for the mythical image of the girls, and now, by stripping Lux of her virginal status, she becomes demystified.

Female sexuality is interpreted by the boys as otherworldly. After being incarcerated, Lux starts making love with anonymous men on the roof of her house, braving ice and chilly winter rain like a “force of nature, impervious to chill, an ice goddess generated by the season itself” or “a girl in danger, or in pursuit, of catching her death of cold” (144-145). After leading the men up to the roof, “urgent and bored at once” (142), Lux gives the impression of being a “carnal angel, pinning her lovers to the chimney as if by two great, beating wings,” her burning eyes “intent on her mission as only a creature with no doubts as to either creation's glory itsmeaninglessness could be” (143). Years later, it is the image of Lux on the roof that the narrators return to in their minds, “always with her feet snagged in
the gutter, always her single blooming hand,” regardless of what their “present lover's feet and hands are doing.” She comes to them on lonely nights as a “succubus” (142). Lux then, is at once a higher being, an angel, who is sent to bring pleasure to men, as if making love to them is a selfless act of kindness, and a succubus, a demon.

Lux’ sexuality, when not repressed like her sisters', is depicted as complicated, leading to both a pregnancy scare and STDs, which could be interpreted as a warning that female sexuality is likely to lead to trouble and should be repressed. Letting a woman's sexuality loose is like letting out a beast, as Trip experiences in the car with Lux when she resembles “a creature with a hundred mouths” who “started sucking the marrow from his bones” and comes on “like a starved animal,” her genitalia “the ravenous mouth of the animal leashed below her waist.” He feels as if two beasts live in the car, “one above, snuffling and biting him, and one below, struggling to get out of its damp cage,” suddenly leaving him “more dead than alive” (82), his dramatic recollection of the event highlighting female sexuality as a fearsome, animalistic force.

The sisters' sexuality is in any case used against them, their bodies hidden, their sexual explorations punished—and yet their sensuality and sexuality are arguably merely expressions of adolescent curiosity and excitement. That the narrators' focus on the sisters' bodies as somewhat dangerous and animalistic is after all probably due to their own inexperience and insecurities. Initially the girls seem to take great enjoyment in teasing the boys; tickling the boys' hands when shaking them, and at dinner kicking Peter Sissen under the table, “from every direction, so that he couldn't tell who was doing it” while gazing at him “with their febrile eyes” and smiling at him (7). However, an integral part of their beings was tragically repressed, even taken from them, and their suicides are an angry cry for attention to their situation and to the social rules that regulate female bodies.
3.5 Suicide

The suicides are not used as a dramatic end point, but rather the promise of the story, since the reader is informed in the very first sentence of the novel of what is to come: “On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide...” (1). It is the suicides that make the story remarkable, and provide the reader with a desire to solve the mystery of why they decided to end their lives. Yet the novel does not attempt to answer that question. The residents in their suburban neighborhood interpret the suicides as an expression of teenage angst, which is revealed by a grown up man at a party who with the words “Good-bye, cruel world!” jokingly throws himself in the lake. “You don't understand me,” he laughs, “I'm a teenager. I've got problems!” (231). Furthermore, although Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon try to protect their daughters by shielding them from the world, notably that what killed the sisters were mundane household items, found inside their suburban home; a rope, painkillers, an oven. Obviously, to Eugenides the home is no more a suitable and safe place for women than the public sphere.

The suicides further the Lisbon sisters' state as unobtainable, mythic objects in the boys' minds. When Cecilia takes her life by throwing herself out of the window, it is an act that suggests self-assertion and determination. To the narrators, however, she is purely physical when she falls, merely a body “falling in the speed of a rock.” To them, it “didn't matter whether her brain continued to flash on the way down, or if she regretted what she’d done;” in fact, “her mind no longer existed in any way that mattered” (27). There is no sympathy to be found in the boys, only fascination. The suicides make the sisters romantic, inaccessible symbols of all the mysteries of the world that cannot be solved or answered.

Yet, the suicides can be seen as a final act of rebellion and determination. The light the boys see in Lux' eyes before she leaves them to take her life, interpreted by the boys as desire for them, might, Shostak notes, rather be interpreted by the reader as a sign of determination, and a sign that she has
found herself. The proof of Lux' status as subject is that she and her sisters will finally exert their own will over themselves, by choosing to end their lives and acting on their decision (824). Thus, the suicides do seem to be about violently resisting a situation in which they are rendered powerless.

4. Conclusion

*The Virgin Suicides* may appear to be a novel about a group of boys gazing at, and objectifying, a group of young girls, while carrying the message that women are the mysterious others whom men will never fully fathom. However, by resisting the voice of the male narrators and instead actively focusing on the sisters, it emerges that Eugenides is, in fact, not condoning the othering and objectification of the girls. Given that the girls are suffering under the social mores which deny them independence and sexual autonomy, their deaths could possibly be viewed as a protest against the subjugation of women. The sisters are presented with a playful adolescent curiosity about sex and boys—tickling the boys' palms, writing boys' names on their underwear—and it is only when this gets noticed by their repressive mother that their sexuality is punished and, especially in Lux' case, becomes troubling. The punishment the sisters endure for engaging in sexual activities is more about social rules than female sexuality and bodies being complicated and dangerous by nature. It is not female sexuality that is dangerous, but society's perception, and fear, of it. Most importantly, Eugenides allows for a voice of the sisters, one that begs the reader to see how wrong the boys are for denying them subjectivity. The girls reveal themselves as human, not mythical creatures as seen through the gaze of the boys. They eventually take authority over their lives by committing suicide.

By muddling the two feminine archetypes, the virgin and the whore, the novel objects to the cultural tradition that holds these two roles valid in the portrayal of women in literature and media in general. The “pure” Cecilia is the first to die and is thus not rewarded for her innocence, while her sexually active and flirtatious sister Lux is never punished for her promiscuity, but instead because she
is not allowed to act on her desires.

In the end, the boys suffer for their objectification of the sisters too. So obsessed with them do they become, that twenty years later they are “happier with dreams than wives,” unable to find anything, or anyone, to live up to the mythical and fantastical image of the sisters they had created in their minds (164).

Perhaps the Lisbon sisters are the “poetic spirits” who refuse to be tamed, as Cixoux might have put it (qtd in Belsey and Moore 10). While they are represented through a male perspective, which ascribes them certain qualities based on their gender and renders them an air of mysterious otherness, it would still be unfair to them not to notice the ways in which they resist the suggestion that they are mere empty vessels for the boys’ fantasies.
5. Works Cited


Shostak, Debra. “A Story We Could Live With: Narrative Voice, the Reader, and Jeffery Eugenides

