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Men Will Be Boys: Regressive Nostalgia in The Virgin Suicides

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I am about to graduate from college, and the feeling of nostalgia has been lingering in the back of my mind. I've been reminiscing about my childhood, and wonder if I will miss the feeling of not having any responsibilities, and when my main concerns were going to school and making friends. "Looking back" on a memory from the past is something that everyone can relate to – getting that nostalgic feeling of remembering way back when, when life was different or may have been much simpler. Some memories are simply irreplaceable – whether you've lost a childhood keepsake, you miss your best friend from when you were in kindergarten, or even still mourning the loss of a loved one. That being said, the past is in the past, and most people can recognize that it's time to move forward. Some things are easier to let go of than others, but with time, it becomes easier to come to terms with leaving the past in the past.

While nostalgia is a feeling that most people can move on from, Jeffrey Eugenides' first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, takes the idea of nostalgia to the extreme. The first-person plural male narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* are stuck in a form of regressive nostalgia, and they cannot let go of events that occurred during their childhood. They regress to the point where they become their teenage selves. The narration takes place during the 1990s, while the narrators tell the story of the Lisbon sisters who all took their own lives in the 1970s. The "we" narrator telling the story makes it appear as if they had a close relationship with the sisters, when in reality, they did not. After twenty-or-so years obsessing over the girls, the men explain the phenomena of

slowly forgetting the past: “Though we felt for the Lisbon girls, and continued to think about them, they were slipping away from us. The images we treasured of them…began to fade” (Eugenides 180). This quote makes it come across as if they had an intimate relationship to the girls, in using phrases and words such as “slipping away” and “treasured.” The repeated use of the plural pronouns, the “we” and “us,” also provides a feeling of multiple disembodied narrators who clearly do not want to reveal their identities, and also emphasizes the fact that there are more than one of them. Their collective nostalgia and memory of the girls suggests more of an obsession than adoration. They do not want to lose their treasured possession of the girls inside their heads. The male narrators experience nostalgia during the 1990s as time moves on, and as they remember the Lisbon sisters from when they were alive in the 1970s. The use of the first-person plural narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* encodes a gendered relationship between the present day of the novel, the 1990s, as a male possessiveness over the 1970s as a female past.

The decade of the 1990s had a specific focus on nostalgia being represented in the media. As Colin Harrison points out, “Preoccupations with memory were widespread in popular film” (3). Among memory and nostalgia as popular topics during the decade, feminism was also something that was constantly being looked back on from previous decades. Harrison notes, “While men’s employment had fluctuated around 75 per cent since the recovery from the recession of the 1970s, women’s participation in the workforce had risen steadily each decade, reaching 60 per cent by the end of the millennium” (13). Eugenides’ novel takes both concepts of nostalgia and feminism and turns them in a completely different direction than what Harrison describes. The novel itself responds to feminism with backlash, and makes nostalgia regressive. Regressive nostalgia occurs when someone is literally stuck in the past, and cannot progress

forward. 1990s-culture was nostalgic in itself by looking back on decades such as the 1960s and 1970s, as this is also reflexive in Eugenides' novel.

The Virgin Suicides represents a backlash to 1960s and 1970s feminism: through the eyes of the male narrators, they take control of what they see as a female-centered past. In other words, the narrators walk through their own telling of the events which took place in the 1970s, hence manhandling the Lisbon sisters' past. Their present selves are middle-aged men, and they are still trying to piece together why the Lisbon sisters took their own lives. The Lisbon sisters, Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese, were ages thirteen through seventeen at the time of their deaths. The narrators are infatuated with them, both in the past and present, and tend to focus on their memory of the girls' physical appearance. At the beginning of the novel, the men recount the girls as "short, round-buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled that same dorsal softness" (Eugenides 5). They describe the girls right from the start as having young, childlike features, and view them more as bodies, and not actual people. This creates an opposition between the dead teenagers and the living middle-aged men, and questions whether they truly care about the girls, or if they just remain entranced by their looks.

The men looking at the Lisbon girls through a sexualized lens as adults further complicates the issue of why they are telling the story in the first place. In Susan J. Douglas' *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, she explains how "women are defined by our bodies, our identities located *in* our bodies, and those must be sexually alluring" (16). This suggests that the men view the girls' bodies in a sexualized discourse, and it explains why the girls would be described the way that they are in the text of the novel. With the sisters described as sexualized beings, the men inherently gender the girls from the past, and can only recall them as the young teenagers that they were when they died. They define the girls by their appearance, and with Douglas'

ideas in mind, that is how their legacy is remembered through the minds of the male narrators. With women and young girls constantly being defined and judged by their appearance, it is likely that the Lisbon sisters were very aware of their bodies. As Cecilia says to her doctor before she dies, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl" (Eugenides 3).

While the men begin to forget the girls year after year, their supposed love for them does not falter. To help them remember the past and to hold onto the memory of the girls forever, they have kept mementos of them. This is a common practice that plenty of people do when a loved one dies – they keep physical keepsakes of those who passed to keep their memory alive. While the men were not close with the girls, they still kept countless mementos from the girls' childhood. They call all of these possessions "exhibits" throughout the novel, which makes them not seem "creepy," but instead, professional. After twenty years of holding onto these "exhibits," they have begun to age just like the men. For example:

> …(#18) Mary's old cosmetics drying out and turning to beige dust; (#32) Cecilia's canvas high-tops yellowing beyond remedy of toothbrush and dish soap; (#57) Bonnie votive candles nibbled nightly by mice; (#62) Therese's specimen slides showing new invading bacteria; (#81) Lux's brassiere…becoming as stiff and prosthetic as something a grandmother might wear (Eugenides 241).

With more than eighty-one pieces of "evidence," the men have a strong hold on the girls from the past. The treasures they have collected from this quote are very personal and intimate objects from the sisters' lives, such as Lux's brassiere and Mary's old makeup. They are objects that the girls once physically touched and used, and they function as placeholders that the men use instead of the girls' physical bodies. As the men and their multitude of the girls' belongings begin to age with time, the girls will always remain the same. They will forever stay young in the

minds of the men, and the girls' belongings are what they use to keep these young images of them intact. With time though, these images and memories begin to fade. Keeping hold of the past in the present has kept the men captive for so many years, and they cannot let go of the idea of the Lisbon sisters, whom they have grown so fond of even twenty years after they have last seen them.

Since the men have not been able to accept the past and have kept a copious amount of mementos over the years, the idea of trauma arises. This is a possibility as to why the men act the way that they do. They are stuck in the past, and relive the events to cope collectively. Bilyana Vanyova Kostova raises questions to further complicate this idea: "Can the narrators' adolescent selves be seen as scapegoats, deliberately disregarded by the sisters twenty years earlier? Were they victims of trauma through their roles as witnesses of the suicides?" While these are extremely viable questions, it still does leave the question as to why there is so much focus on the boys' collective trauma, and not as much on the Lisbon sisters, who were the ones that committed suicide. This once again genders the past, except now it is not so much focusing on sexualization, but more so on why the boys' mental health is of more concern than the girls' mental health.

Working with the past and present in *The Virgin Suicides* is a continual theme throughout the novel, and how the 1990s and 1970s have a gendered relationship through the telling of the story by the "we" male narrators. This relationship between the gendered past and present focuses on ideas such as ownership, the environment, and objectification. In sexualizing the girls throughout the majority of the novel, and zooming in on the girls' appearances through the point of view of adult men, it offers a gendered ideology through the male gaze. The Lisbon sisters are

used as a way for the "we" male narrators to keep reliving the past, to continue their obsession with the girls, and to collectively not move forward with their own lives.

"Owning" the 1970s Through a 1990s Male Perspective

Looking back on the 1970s through the male narrators' perspectives, the term "the male gaze" helps explain why the relationship between the past and present are gendered. The term "the male gaze" stems from English writer and art critic John Berger, and later became popular amongst feminists in the 1970s by British film critic Laura Mulvey. The male gaze looks through the eyes of men and views women as objects of fetishization. Referring to forms of literature, Berger explains: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Jones 38). An example Berger uses to reference this idea is in the book of Genesis from the bible, specifically looking at the story of Adam and Eve – he focuses on nudity, and how "women have been seen and judged as sights" (Jones 38). When considering the term "the male gaze," it offers both judgement and objectification through the eyes of men viewing women. The male gaze goes hand in hand with voyeurism, and the general idea of being watched or stalked. The plural male narration in *The Virgin Suicides* aligns with the thought of wanting to "own" the past as if it were an object, and the male gaze is essential when understanding this possession. Instead of being nostalgic for the girls' bodies, they want to take control of them instead.

Prior to the Lisbon sisters' deaths, the remaining girls (Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese) are trying to cope with the loss of their youngest sister Cecilia after her suicide, as well as being trapped within their home by their overprotective parents. When this was happening, the group of men were still there, watching from afar. While the story of the Lisbon sisters is unsettling in itself given the content, the added factor of the male narrators being obsessed with them makes it

that much more disturbing. Aside from the fact that they were infatuated with the girls, they were also acting as voyeurs, which is where the concept of the male gaze appears.

The plural narrative, or "we" narrative, became more widely used in recent contemporary fiction. It has a "relatively long though little known history that extends for over a century" (Richardson 37). The "we" is intriguing because it is unknown just how vast or small the group of narrators may be. *The Virgin Suicides,* never mentions how many men are supposed to be telling the story, or when or if they switch on and off to narrate. The story "includes a number of subtle, self-reflexive allusions to the idea of a multiple, protean subject" (Richardson 52). This creates a more ominous effect, and implies that the narrator could be switching on and off, adding to the unnerving story in itself. The anonymity of the narrators also presents a feeling of uncertainty, likely creating a similar effect for how the Lisbon sisters may have felt if they knew they were being intently watched. The anonymity of the men in this story add on to this idea of "owning" the past. They get to remain anonymous, while the Lisbon sisters' story is very much out in the open, and the men are able to tell it the way they want.

The narrators' obsession with female bodies is portrayed while they intently describe the sisters' physical appearances. Immediately after Cecilia's successful suicide attempt, one would think that the male narrators would show a bit of compassion. This is not necessarily the case. The text reads, "Added to their loveliness was a new mysterious suffering, perfectly silent, visible in the blue puffiness beneath their eyes or the way they would sometimes stop midstride, look down, and shake their heads as though disagreeing with it" (Eugenides 49). In this quote, and in every quote that the narrators say for that matter, it cannot be determined whether or not this was an actual collective memory the narrators had, or if it was a figment of the past. In either case, even in the girls' grief, the narrators still find ways to study and watch their every move.

They are saying that now not only their beauty is fascinating, but their grieving of their dead sister creates another layer of intrigue and observation. Even in tragedy, the girls' "loveliness" is still a source of attraction. It also implies that the boys find the girls' suffering in itself to be attractive.

The narrators' voyeurism and elusiveness in this same quote suggests that even though the men were watching the girls during the time they were alive, they still watch them in the 1990s, by continuously looking back on the 1970s. The men were paying such close attention to the girls from the past, that they could not tell if they've been crying, explaining the "blue puffiness" under their eyes. This questions how physically close the men were when watching the girls, and where exactly they were watching them from when they noticed these details. It suggests that they were in close proximity to the girls for them to notice the "blue puffiness" underneath their eyes. The boys also mention that the girls' suffering is "mysterious," which is a bit odd. Their suffering shouldn't seem so "mysterious," since the reason why they are suffering should be quite obvious. They are suffering over the loss of their younger sister. Finally, it's telling how the boys notice how the girls would stop midstride when walking. Again, this raises the question as to where exactly they would notice this happening. Could they possibly have seen them do this through the windows of the girls' house? Since it is unknown where these observations were taking place, it implies that the men are not disclosing everything that happened – it is possible that they chose to keep certain events that happened in the dark, and they don't want to share those intimate details in writing.

The men act as voyeurs during the present by reading the personal diary of Cecilia, the first dead Lisbon sister. This is an invasion of privacy, even if Cecilia is dead. The men explain: "We know portions of the diary by heart now. After we got up to Chase Buell's attic, we read

portions out loud. We passed the diary around, fingering pages and looking anxiously for our names" (Eugenides 38). This passage has a bit of a suggestive tone to it; the term "fingering pages" adds to the potential tie between death and eroticism. Then after choosing the term "fingering," they are specifically focused on finding their names within the pages of her diary. This is alluding to the men desiring some type of sexual relation to Cecilia, even if she is not present. Again, it is still unknown as to how many men are reading Cecilia's diary, which creates even more discomfort when decoding the narration. Going off of finding their names, it proves that all they truly cared about when looking through Cecilia's diary was to find out if she cared or thought about any of them. Long story short, she didn't. It is even said that she didn't write much about herself either. The men invested so much time into girls that could care less about them, and barely noticed them. A final point to this passage, is how the narrators know "portions of the diary by heart." The men having memorized portions of the diary after so much time has passed is another proof providing to the fact that they cannot let go of the past. It has been twenty years, and they still have sections of a thirteen-year-old girl's diary memorized. Once again, this shows that the obsession goes much deeper than a childhood crush.

After observing both of these passages, the "we" narration of the men works in a misogynistic and voyeuristic manner, in terms of their gendered relationship between past and present. From the ways in which they describe and objectify the girls, to how they consistently watch them from afar, it proves that the narration operates under the male gaze. The concept of boys or men stalking girls to potentially get what they want is a common trope found in films and fiction, and is often romanticized. It's arguable that this novel works in a similar way – at first glance the narration could come off as endearing, but after paying attention, the tone is inappropriate, especially with the knowledge that these are grown men reminiscing about dead

teenage girls. The narrators and even readers do not seem cognizant of their own misogyny and creepiness. As Debra Shostak explains, “From the boys’ erotically objectifying perspective, the suicides appear as romantic.” The gruesomeness in this novel is definitely romanticized, nodding to the link between eroticism and death. When thinking about how the men are still focused on the remaining Lisbon sisters’ appearances in dealing with grief after the loss of their sister, along with them going through a dead girl’s diary hoping to find their names, it is apparent that there is a lust to be questioned in their narration, even twenty years after the suicides occurred.

Shostak briefly touches on the passage in which the narrators are going through Cecilia’s diary, and further explains how it makes them “feel as if they know the Lisbons.” They have essentially created some type of false reality in their minds that they know the girls personally, when they actually don’t. Looking back on the past and keeping mementos and exhibits of the girls’ belongings does not make them have any sort of relationship to the Lisbons. For example, reading Cecilia’s diary made them feel special and closer to her. They idolize the girls so much, that it’s almost to the point where they don’t even seem like real people.

The “we” male narrators objectify the Lisbon sisters whenever they see fit – it is not so much the telling of the girls’ story, as it is the telling of their own. They are essentially taking control of a past that isn’t their own, and are objectifying the Lisbon sisters in the process. With so much focus on appearance, the narrators operate under the male gaze to tell the story, and cannot get over the nostalgic images of the Lisbon sisters in doing so.

Seeing Double: The Male Narrators Parallel to The Lisbon Sisters

With the diary passage in conversation with Shostak’s piece, the thought of gendered difference comes to mind. In the girls acting as figures of sexual desire for the narrators, it suggests that they are not re-living this story for the girls’ sake, but for themselves. Shostak says,

"the observing 'we,' casts the men – rather than the girls – as the protagonists of their story." There is much more of a focus on the mens' desires and feelings rather than the Lisbon sisters who are actually the ones dealing with issues internally, and ultimately take their own lives. The mens' whole narration shows how *they* handle and cope with the past, and how they take control events that happened in the 1970s, which had nothing to do with them. How is it that the boys are the main focus rather than the girls, who the story is actually supposed to be about? Shostak's piece helps in answering this question, by giving a reminder that the men are literally possessive over the girls. They want to tell the girls' story the way *they* want it to be told.

Further complicating the issue of objectifying the Lisbon sisters, there are multiple instances in the novel where it appears that the narrators cannot tell the sisters apart from each other, or simply talk about the girls as if they were one entity. It is mentioned fairly early in the novel: "Then, however, our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people" (Eugenides 23). Grouping the girls together as one person, this takes away from the girls' humanity and individuality through the eyes of men. Viewing the girls as one sexualized figure to the group of men, it strips them of their own identities, and essentially makes them one singular object. This idea of grouping the girls together as one also seems a bit uncanny since the men could also be grouped as one being – it is not clear who is individually narrating. Even though it is known that there are supposedly multiple narrators, it feels as if there is only one. With this in mind, the narrators and the girls could be seen as doubles of each other: "Seeing the girls as their doubles, the boys in fact do not see beyond themselves and their desires, and this is why, despite their intentions, they construct a mythic narrative rather than a history" (Shostak). As Shostak explains, even though the men are mimicking the girls, it is still viewed differently in their eyes simply because they have these

desires of the girls in their heads. As men, it appears as if it doesn't matter if their identities are known, but hypocritically, they do not mind viewing and objectifying the girls as one entity.

Viewing the Lisbon sisters as the male narrators' parallels, it puts into perspective the narcissism that the narrators possess. They often do not even realize their own narcissism, which in turn explains Shostak's point that they are creating more so a mythic narrative rather than a history. Many of the details about the Lisbon's lives could be consciously left out, because they are so focused on the importance of themselves and the telling of their version of events. While the girls and men could be seen as doubles in the sense that they are both thought of as one being, the girls and men likely do not share similar ideals.

Environmental Factors and White Mala Suburbia in the Past and Present

The Lisbon sisters and the male narrators grew up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, or in other words, white suburbia. Growing up in a sheltered, run-of-the-mill suburban neighborhood, the environment had an effect on the sisters as well as the narrators. The narrators make note of the peculiarity that becomes of the suicides: "There had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes" (Eugenides 32). Having a mass suicide disrupt the apparent peace in the neighborhood was a domestic tragedy, especially having it been young girls. However, the narrators again turn the situation back to themselves, and say how they had never witnessed a funeral in their town during their lifetimes. The domesticity and male suburban superiority relate back to the idea of harboring a relationship with the past – the environment in which the girls and narrators grew up played a role in the outcome of all of their lives.

The Lisbon sisters home life was anything but ideal, and throughout the novel, it is made abundantly clear that the girls resented their parents for how they were raised. The girls' parents, extremely religious in their values, would scarcely allow boys into their home, and would rarely

let the girls go anywhere, especially after the death of Cecilia. From first glance, they looked like the typical suburban family one would see in any neighborhood. In Kasia Boddy's *Family,* she unfolds the concept of a "nuclear family," which typically consists of a married couple with their own children (314). What's interesting, is that Boddy mentions that nuclear families became less popular in fiction in the 1990s, and instead had families which included unmarried partners, an adopted child, a step-child, and so on. Boddy says, "Examples of all of these, and more, cropped up in 1990s-fiction, as literature embraced 'the messy, improvisational, pathwork bonds of postmodern family life' with new zeal" (314). Even though the Lisbon family did not make up any of these other categories, they certainly did not meet the expectations of what a "normal" household would contain. The parents would only ever let the girls leave the house to go to school or church, and the house itself didn't act as a sanctuary. The house was not well managed, and the narrators explain at one point in the novel that, "Only the Lisbon house remained dark, a tunnel, an emptiness, past our smoke and flames" (Eugenides 88). The girls were like prisoners in their own home, and felt as if they could not escape.

In contrast to the Lisbon household, there are often times when the male narrators will compare their home lives when they were young to that of the Lisbon's. For example, after the girls had each committed suicide, there was a garage sale with the Lisbon's belongings. The narrators explain, "Our parents didn't buy used furniture, and certainly didn't buy furniture tainted with death, but they browsed like the others who came in response to the newspaper ad" (Eugenides 224). There is a contrast that the men make between their family situations and the Lisbons, however subtle it may be: the male narrators come from traditionally comfortable homes, while the Lisbon's household was the complete opposite. By saying how their parents did not want to buy used furniture, especially "tainted with death," is an implication that their

parents view the situation as dirty and unbecoming. At the same time, they still browse the used furniture of the Lisbon's as if it were a spectacle. The narrators' home lives were vastly different from that of the Lisbon sisters, and there is a clear distinction between the two.

To explicate the Lisbon home itself, Keith Wilhite explains: "The narrators' layered description of the 'comfortable suburban home' mimics the belief that the exterior of the house should reflect the family it contains." The Lisbon home, as aforementioned, was anything but the "comfortable suburban home." The decay of the Lisbon home is also reflexive of the decay of the family itself – all beginning with the death of Cecilia. There are various examples throughout the text that the narrators detail, where the house itself and the nature surrounding the house begins to fade away. For example, after Cecilia commits suicide by jumping out of her bedroom window and landing on the iron fence below, the neighborhood begins doing fence removals. Again, the narrators position themselves in this example by illustrating how their own fathers assisted with the fence removal: "We had rarely seen our fathers in work boots before, toiling in the earth and wielding brand-new root clippers. They struggled with the fence, bent over like Marines hoisting the flag on Iwo Jima" (Eugenides 50). Since the narrators explain how they have never seen their fathers in work boots before, this implies that their families never have to get down and dirty, or again, that they live in comfortable, well off homes. This quote also goes even further back in time with the additional war reference.

An example of more literal decay occurs when the narrators explain how elm trees in the neighborhood had to be cut down because they had Dutch elm disease. In front of the Lisbon's house, there was a large elm tree which was supposedly Cecilia's favorite. When the Parks Department came to cut down the Lisbon's elm, the remaining Lisbon sisters were not ready to see it go. The text reads, "The girls surrounded the tree, linking hands in a daisy chain"

(Eugenides 175). While the obvious reason why they were so adamant about not wanting the elm cut down was because it was Cecilia's favorite, a further implication could suggest that this was a sign that their own family tree was dying, hence, the decay of the Lisbons.

As the family decays and declines as the story continues, the girls remain captive within their own home by their parents. The novel itself could be situated as a suburban gothic – Martin Dines go into detail about what makes *The Virgin Suicides* a suburban gothic novel, and what a suburban gothic novel consists of. A suburban gothic, specifically focusing on *The Virgin Suicides*, contains "doublings, infestations, ruination-coalesce around the irruption of repressed ethnic memories into the cultural blankness of the suburbs" (Dines 961). With the idea that *The Virgin Suicides* falls under this genre, this again brings back the significance of the male narrators, as well as the general environment, hence the "doublings" and the "infestations." Dines also mentions the necessity of mentioning the feelings of the narrators' parents as well. As opposed to their un-forgetting sons, the parents of the men were not nearly as shaken by the suicides as the narrators were. In reference to saying how the narrators would have trouble forgetting the Lisbon sisters, they describe how their parents "seemed better able to do this, returning to their tennis foursomes and cocktail cruises. They reacted to the suicides with mild shock…" (Eugenides 225). This again puts the narrators' home lives and the Lisbon's home lives on vastly different planes. From this quote alone, there is another suggestion that the narrators were living a much more "normal" upper-middle class suburban lifestyle in comparison to the Lisbon girls, who were rarely ever able to leave their home, and whose house was always in disarray. It is also arguable that the families of the narrators thought they had more important things to think about, rather than the deaths of multiple young girls.

With the novel positioned as a suburban gothic, there is one main reason that suggests why the girls were trapped within their own home as if they were heroines: their sexuality. As made abundantly clear by their parents, the girls were not allowed to date or be with boys. Boys were rarely welcomed in their home, and when they were, it had to be supervised by the girls' parents. After Lux's fling Trip Fontaine convinces Mr. Lisbon to let the girls go to homecoming with Trip and a group of boys, the night does not end well for Lux. She ends up breaking curfew by having intercourse with Trip on the football field of the school after the dance. In result, this gets all the other girls in trouble as well. This is when the strictness on the girls is raised to the next level – they are pulled out of school so they can never leave their parents' sight. However, as the saying goes, strict parents raise rebellious kids. Lux defied her parents by making love with a multitude of partners on the roof of their own house: "people began to see Lux copulating on the roof with faceless boys and men" (Eugenides 140). Having sex with a multitude of men on the roof of her house with her parents sleeping right below represents Lux reclaiming her own sexuality and going against her parents in the most extreme and risky way possible.

While Lux defied her parents and committed these sexual acts on their roof, the male narrators were still watching. The narrators even admit looking back to Lux when they lost their own virginities: "Years later, when we lost our own virginities, we resorted in our panic to pantomiming Lux's gyrations on the roof so long ago" (Eugenides 141). Even when having their own sexual experiences as men, they still reminisce and think about the images of Lux's intimate moments that they watched when she was a young teenager. Drawing back to the male gaze, imagining Lux's young body while the men were having sex with their own partners objectifies Lux in a way of using her for their own sexual desires. They even further admit that Lux is who they think about while they have intimate relations with other people.

The Lisbon sisters' home environment was not a safe or content one. Their home life affected their way of living every day they were alive, piling on to their own despair, and ultimately, could have been a factor in their deaths. Living in the upper-middle class suburbs that they did, the Lisbon home was of much contrast in comparison to the neighborhood that they lived in. The narrators make this known by comparing the Lisbon's upbringing to their own, explaining how their upper-middle class lifestyle was much different than the Lisbon's. The Lisbon girls' and the narrators' environmental factors played a role in what was to come in their lives, and specifically how the Lisbon's would be viewed for years to come, even in death.

The Fatal Attraction of Innocence, Purity, and Possession

The sexualization of the Lisbon sisters in the eyes of the men is evident. However, with the girls' environment and upbringing in mind, there is evidence to suggest that they are not the hypersexualized beings that the men describe them to be years after their deaths. With the Lisbon girls being so sheltered by their parents, they were not able to experience much in their short lives, let alone relationships with boys, which again, was forbidden by their parents. There are depictions of innocence and purity encapsulating the girls, which the narrators tend to fetishize and keep possession of. The girls embodying these pure, angelic figures is another way in which the men find them attractive.

Keeping the girls' innocence in mind, a common trope found in film and literature is when men are attracted to girls that are "inexperienced," and want to use them for their own sexual fantasies. There are also usually no complications for men to accomplish this. Steinberg explains: "Sexual conquests are always fun, pleasurable and forgiven for young male protagonists" (221). The male narrators in this novel are never questioned in their "conquests" of the Lisbon sisters, and are able to still carry on their obsession, even as men. There are several

instances in the film adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* directed by Sofia Coppola where this trope is visible as well, and even more so than in the book. Lux is positioned in the novel, and especially in the film as the dominant and most sexualized of the sisters. When Lux is first introduced in the film adaptation, she is seen finishing a popsicle, which immediately centers her as an object of sexual desire. Shostak explains that in comparison to Lux, the other sisters "seem innocent and self-contained." With Lux and her sisters as the epitome of the joining of innocence and eroticism, it acts as a combined attraction for the narrators.

Purity in itself is a symbolic figure for the Lisbon girls. While Lux is the more dominant sister in the film, the novel is mainly where the narrators group all of the girls together as one singular female. This occurs in the text when the girls go to homecoming in their mother's homemade dresses for them. Mrs. Lisbon's Frankenstein dresses made the girls look like "pioneer women," and the dresses themselves are said to have looked like "four shapeless sacks." On top of this, they looked "frontierish, with lace-trimmed bibs and high necklines" (Eugenides 114). This situates the girls as appearing other timely, and even Pagan looking. Even though the narrators describe how undesirable their dresses were, this apparently did not deter from the girls' sensuality. Trip Fontaine reveals his feelings as an adult, saying, "You could feel how slim she [Lux] was under all those drapes. It killed me" (Eugenides 126). Even in frumpy, shapeless, and unappealing dresses, the girls are still being sexualized in their purest form, and the narrators reminisce about it as the middle-aged men that they are in the present.

Religious imagery permeates the girls' appearances, especially Cecilia – she always tends to be surrounded by religious symbols, even in death. Cecilia was usually seen wearing her antique wedding dress, which was a staple in her wardrobe. When she was in the hospital after her unsuccessful suicide attempt, she even refused to wear the hospital gown, and was

"demanding that her wedding dress be brought to her" (Eugenides 13). Her wedding dress was a part of her she could not shed, and acted as a safety blanket for her and gave her comfort. Even when she did successfully commit suicide, she did so wearing the wedding dress. Cecilia's wedding dress positions her as appearing beyond her years, and ironically marries the opposing themes of death and purity. Aside from her wedding dress, Cecilia was also found in the bathtub after her first suicide attempt with a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary that she held against her chest. Later in the novel, the narrators mention that more pictures of the same Virgin Mary card Cecilia had, started to pop up in various locations. Again, the narrators believed this to be the girls trying to "signal" them in some way, making it about themselves. The religious imagery in conversation with sexual fantasies and death puts the girls in an even more vulnerable position for them to be sexualized by the male narrators for years to come.

Additionally, the Lisbon's are a white family, as is the majority of the town in which they were all raised. There is a tendency to associate whiteness, especially young white women, with the theme of purity. The narrators explain the Black population within their extremely populous white neighborhood: "Brave Blacks had been slipping in for years, though they were usually women, who blended in with our maids" (Eugenides 95). Making this assertion when living in a primarily white town suggests that the narrators are shocked that there is a Black population even in their town, and that Black femininity is something that is taboo to them, or even below them. While they idolize the white Lisbon sisters throughout the whole of the novel, the narrators don't even bat an eye to discriminate against the small Black community within their town. In positioning the Lisbon sisters as these angelic and pure figures, it acts as a reminder that there is a lack of women of color in this novel, and if there would be biases against the Lisbon sisters if they were in fact not white.

Making the religious symbolism any more apparent, the title of the novel literally has the word “virgin” in it. When explicating the word “virgin,” the first thing that might come to mind is someone who has never partaken in sexual intercourse. However, in the context of this novel, it can be inferred that the term “virgin” does not necessarily mean not having had sex – it is quite clear that Lux is not a virgin. Instead, the word “virgin” can be associated with other ideas that have been mentioned, such as purity, innocence, and inexperience, which does make more sense in terms of this novel. While Lux has had sex, it is suggested that the other Lisbon sisters have not, meaning that they all died before they were “fully women.” Aside from having a sexual connotation, virginity could also just suggest that they haven’t experienced anything in life, completely separate from sexual encounters. They died at such young ages, and were not able to grow up and have other important life experiences. The title *The Virgin Suicides* alone connects back to the suggestion that the girls are figures of purity, and emphasizes that they were young in their nature.

In sexualizing the Lisbon sisters for the majority of the novel, the aspect of purity, when it is suggested by the narrators, appears more as a fetishization rather than on observation. Since their obsession has stood the test of time, their narration of the girls’ lives takes away from their actual innocence, and instead uses their purity in a hypersexualized tone. The nostalgia is warped in the minds of the men, and their narration appears as if they forget that they are talking about the lives of five very young teenage girls. The male narrators take hold of the girls’ purity, and claim it as their own to hold onto forever.

Conclusion

The finality of *The Virgin Suicides* is final in every sense of the word – toward the end of the novel, the Lisbon sisters commit suicide. The narrators detail finding each of the girls

scattered throughout the Lisbon home, either already dead or clinging onto life. Mary is the only sister to have survived the mass suicide, only to successfully commit suicide about a month later. The narrators, being the ones to have found the girls after thinking they were saving them, likely made them think that they had the responsibility to tell the story. Unfortunately, as Shostak puts it, the narrators come off as narcissistic in their attempt. The penultimate page of the novel reads: "The essence of the suicides consisted not of sadness or mystery but simple selfishness. The girls took into their own hands decisions better left to God. They became too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind" (Eugenides 242). The narrators' tone in these final pages is condescending in nature, and further places them in a position of power when it comes to the girls. Shostak says that they "see the girls rather than themselves as selfish." They still hold onto the girls as if owning them, and ultimately put the blame onto them rather than their surroundings.

Ending the novel in such a way, the men not only finalize the girls' lives, but also their own personal telling of the girls' story. They own and regress to the past of the girls and use the novel itself as another way to possess them in a physical form. If they cannot have the girls, they have the text to speak for itself. While the Lisbon girls cannot live, their story will live on forever – just not in a way *they* may have wanted it to. If the girls were able to tell their story, it is very likely that they would have told it in a much different way. If the story was not told from a plural male perspective, but by the girls themselves, it is possible that there would not be such an emphasis on their physical appearance, but more so on their own personal traumas.

The narration of this novel is so valuable to look back on, simply because it can now be recognized as something that was told through a misogynistic viewpoint, and not something that should be romanticized. *The Virgin Suicides* is not only considered a coming-of-age story, but

one that showcases the owning of women's bodies and stories, and men claiming them as their own personal playground. The gendering of the 1990s and 1970s as male and female assists in proving that the male gaze is not only sexualizing females' physical bodies, but is also sexualizing memories and the past. *The Virgin Suicides* lives on as not only a teen drama, but more importantly, as a lesson in gendered nostalgia.

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