

Suburban Gothic Revisited
in Jeffrey Eugenides's
The Virgin Suicides

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Following in the footsteps of novels such as Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), and Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* (1989), Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) rekindles the flame of the Suburban Gothic by weaving a narrative that encompasses the reflections of a group of boys whose adult lives are unremittingly linked to an episode that dates back to their youth, in the 1970s, when they lived with their families in the suburbs of Grosse Pointe, in Detroit, Michigan.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the story is told with nostalgic undertones as the haunted narrators try to find a logical explanation for the suicide of the Lisbon sisters. They set out to revisit the past and start unburying the facts so as to find an explanation for those tragic events, in an attempt to come with terms with the fact that they were unable to predict or avoid such a bleak outcome.

The first girl who decides to put an end to her life, in the apparently peaceful Lisbon's home, is Cecilia. In her first unexpected suicide attempt, she slits her wrists, but the family discovers her body on the tub and she is immediately taken to the hospital. However, Cecilia tries to kill herself again and, this time, she succeeds. She throws herself out of the window of the Lisbon's house, thus falling upon the fence. The incident leaves the neighbours in a state of shock. In an attempt to disguise the truth of the facts, Mrs. Lisbon tries to dismiss it, explaining them that it was just an unfortunate accident. From that moment on, the girls start building their grief secretly and they become more united than ever, almost as if they comprised one entity, sharing one body and one soul.¹

¹ The boys refer to the Lisbon sisters as if they constituted "a single species". Please see Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (112).

In an effort to bring some comfort to the girls, the boys invite Lux, Bonnie, Therese, and Mary to the prom. They ally themselves with Trip Fontaine who has manifested interest in one of the sisters, Lux, and manages to approach the Lisbons, convincing the strict parents that it would be good for the girls to attend the school's celebration. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon acquiesce to the boys' request; however, they set up a rigid schedule for the girls to be home.

On the night of the prom the boys describe the girls as a happy party, despite their outdated and conservative dresses. At the end of the ball, after being elected queen and king of the prom, Trip and Lux leave the facilities where the ball took place and head towards the football field, so as to be alone. As a result, Lux arrives home later than what it had been initially agreed and the girls fall prey to Mrs. Lisbon's abusive behaviour. The rigid religious mother who feared the "dark urges of dating" (Eugenides 116) decides to take the girls out of school, thus locking them permanently inside the house. After this awkward decision, the boys try to communicate with the girls, but they are not successful. Consequently, they spy on them, thoroughly scrutinizing their domestic imprisonment that will have its epilogue in the death of the five girls. Despite all the efforts, the boys are unable to rescue them. As a result, they become forever haunted by the ghosts of the blond sisters and their bleak house across the street.

Considering this dreadful sequence of events, this essay aims at examining the tropes and imagery employed by Jeffrey Eugenides that contribute to entrench the novel amidst the Gothic genre. Indeed, by grounding his novel upon Gothic motifs, the author will turn the mild geography of suburbs into a dark place, threatened by untamed nature and tainted with death. The Lisbon house will then become the doomed house, bearing the scarlet letter that breaks up with the neatness and uniformity of the classic suburban landscape. In this dim scenario, only innocence is left alive in the boys' active imaginations.

1. Suburban Gothic Landscapes

In *The Virgin Suicides* Eugenides revisits some of the timeless Gothic tropes such as the haunted house, family tensions, untamed nature, monstrosity (the ghost and the vampire), the uncanny, and contagion. The

Gothic is a literary genre that allows a profound examination of all the problems and anxieties that afflict our society in a subversive manner, adopting a darker perspective and a harsh social critique, while embracing landscapes rife with uncertainty, fear, terror, and horror. In the specific case of *The Virgin Suicides*, the epicenter of the Gothic is lodged in the suburbs. Resorting to gothic tropes, Eugenides sets out to explore the hidden aspects that contribute to undermine the traditional idyllic nature of suburbia. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (2003) Leslie Fiedler contends that the American Gothic assumes a special relevance because it informs “a literature of darkness in the land of light and affirmation” (29).

The suburbs are culturally and socially connoted with well-being and prosperity, a real beacon in this land of light that Fiedler refers to; however, Eugenides’s reflection brings to the surface all the tensions, anxieties, and fears that are coiled underneath this utopian construct. According to Roger Webster, the suburbs are “a region existing on the margins of city and country, (...) a surface where the mundane and monotony prevail, consumerism and commodification determine lifestyles and time and space are reduced to the garden or television screen. Suburbia has no ‘history’” (2).

Holding a different perspective, Martin Dines contends that Eugenides subverts this belief, since the author envisions the suburbs as a space where repressed ethnic memories interfere with the blissful image of the suburbs:

Eugenides’s novel reconstitutes the postwar suburbs as a historical space, a site of conflict undergoing change. Eugenides’s gothic motifs—doublings, infestations, ruination, coalesce around the eruption of repressed ethnic memories into the cultural blankness of the suburbs. (961)

The neighbourhood boys are aware of this intentional attempt so as to eradicate the family ethnic roots, as the collective narrator observes that their grandparents “spoke foreign languages and lived in converted attics like buzzards” (Eugenides 55).² Furthermore, all the tensions and

² The names of some suburban families clearly disclose their ethnic origins: the Hessens are a family from Germany, the Karafilis are from Greece, and the Stamarowskis from Poland.

contradictions that threaten to put into question the serenity of the suburbs are therefore made occult or masqueraded. Cecilia's suicide is dismissed by Father Moody as an accident (Eugenides 37) and the local newspaper refuses to make any reference to it, because it didn't tie in with the overall positive contents of its pages. In an ironic tone, the narrator remarks, "In the local newspaper, 'The "Welcome, Neighbor"' section continued to feature newcomers attracted by our town's greenness and quiet, its breathtaking verandas" (Eugenides 93).

Both the repressed memories of the dwellers and their effort at masquerading sad incidents lend the suburban space an uncanny quality. The boys acknowledge these contradictions, as their collective voice remarks, "We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in" (Eugenides 55).

Aware of the utopian nature of suburbia, Eugenides selects it as the set of the story, gradually turning its pleasant and quiet landscape into something gloomy and dystopian that can easily fit the framework of the Suburban Gothic. As Bernice Murphy notes in *The Suburban Gothic in the American Popular Culture*:

(...) the Suburban Gothic is a sub-genre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident. (2)

This dramatic familiar incident contemplated in Murphy's reflection corresponds to the sudden deaths of the Lisbon sisters. The suicides that occur in the Lisbon household signal a separateness of the family Lisbon from the idyllic concept of suburbia; they suddenly become the strange family, thus incarnating the "Other". As Joanna Wilson refers in "The End of the Good Life: Representations of Suburbia and the American Nightmare", "Within these communities, neighbours are continually monitored to ensure adherence to strict social codes of behaviour: if one does not conform, one risks arousing the suspicions of one's fellow suburbanites, or even being ostracized from the community" (4).

Sara Wasson, in her article “Gothic Cities and Suburbs, 1880-Present,” also envisions the suburban landscape as a geographical area prone to the emergence of horror. The author claims that:

In suburban Gothic, city peripheries become sites of threat while the suburbs lack the setting, claustrophobic conditions that make industrialized cities such ripe settings for Gothic drama, they nonetheless hold ample opportunities for horror. Here, the confinement can be metaphorical: the space can be experienced as a site of oppressive normalization. (Wasson 36)

In this Gothic novel, the Lisbon family is depicted as a discrete Catholic conservative family. The father is a respected teacher while the mother is basically a stay-at-home mother. Mrs. Lisbon plays an important role in the development of the story, because of her severe restrictions upon the girls.³ These are not allowed to wear modern clothes, to use perfume, to read feminine magazines or to listen to certain kinds of records. Isabella Van Elferen, in *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century Until the Present Day*, highlights the role of the maternal within the Gothic tradition, stating that:

Although the Gothic hero-villain and the mother may be said to do the same work as both police their daughter's behavior according to patriarchal prescriptions, it is the latter terrorist, —the mother— who became extremely popular in the twentieth century. (32)

According to the boys, Mrs. Lisbon exhibited a “queenly iciness” (Eugenides 8). The narrator stresses that she was quite different from her offspring both in terms of her physical appearance and personality:

Whenever we saw Mrs. Lisbon we looked in vain for some sign of the beauty that must have once been hers. But the

³ Mrs. Lisbon is also an ardent religious Catholic woman, similarly to Carrie's mother, in Stephen King's Gothic novel. In both literary works, the prom marks a period in the girls' lives. Carrie's humiliation during the ball triggers her supernatural powers and the girl starts causing chaos all across town, until she dies. In the same fashion, it is the events of the prom night that determine the girls' domestic seclusion and their subsequent deaths.

plump arms, the brutally cut-steel-wool hair, and the librarian glasses foiled us every time. We saw her only rarely, in the morning, fully dressed (...). (Eugenides 8)

Contrasting with Mrs. Lisbon's authoritarian personality, Mr. Lisbon is portrayed as compliant, alienated and unresponsive. Joana Wilson argues that the father figure has undergone emasculation (8).⁴

When their first daughter, Cecilia, dies, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are incapable of reading the signs that something is wrong with the way they are bringing up their daughters. However, this detachment seems to endure as both of them stay somehow emotionally distant and remain unable to understand the real reasons that led their other daughters to a similar faith. In fact, afterwards, when the boys interview Mrs. Lisbon, they get quite astounded by her discourse which ultimately contributes to transform her into a kind of monstrous mother figure: "We felt that she, being the girls' mother, understood more why they had killed themselves. But she said; 'That's what's so frightening. I don't. Once they're out of you, they're different'" (Eugenides 143). The lack of identification with her daughters stands out in the cold observation she puts forward.⁵ Mrs. Lisbon seems disappointed in the fact that she was unable to produce a replica of herself. As the five sisters are all very different from her, or from the feminine version she idealized in her mind, she creates a sort of abyss between herself and them. On the one hand, she is incapable of identifying with her children, or to communicate with them, but on the other hand, the girls also refuse to recognize themselves in the role model she provides.

Bearing this context in mind, it is liable to see that Mrs. Lisbon's way of thinking seems to be in unison with Simone de Beauvoir's discourse concerning the figure of the mother:

⁴ In fact, the boys' collective narrative voice notices his "girlish weeping" by the time Cecilia dies (Eugenides 8).

⁵ Mrs. Lisbon successive pregnancies suggest a possible diagnosis of post-partum depression, a detail which is never discussed in the novel. The Lisbons were, in fact, a dysfunctional family. At some point in the novel, the alienation and distance of Mr. Lisbon towards the daughters appears to be evident, when it said that for him, "children were only strangers you agreed to live with" (Eugenides 59).

The mother's attitude towards her grown-up daughter is most ambivalent: in her son she looks for a god; in her daughter she finds a double. The double is a dubious personage, who assassinates his original, as we see, for example, in Poe's tales and in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. Thus, in becoming a woman, the daughter condemns her mother to death; and yet she lets her live on. (...) Many a mother hardens into hostility: she does not accept being supplanted by the ingrate who owes her life. (600)

In this way, as it is very typical of the Gothic narrative, the mirror that is supposed to establish identification between mother and daughter is shattered, and, in the particular case of *The Virgin Suicides*, it brings about the most disastrous consequences.

2. The Mysterious Dialogue between the Sisters and Nature

The girls appear in the novel closely related to nature. Indeed, both of them seem to share a common language, a sort of secret code that the boys are unable to decipher. Heather Eaton, in her article "Women, Nature, Earth," that dwells upon the reasons that lie beneath the relationship of women to the natural world, asserts:

(...) women and nature are connected historically through a conceptual symbolic association. (...) Euro-western cultures developed ideas about the world that contain a hierarchal and dualistic vision. Dualistic conceptual structures identify women with femininity, emotions, the body, sexuality, earth or nature and materiality; and man with masculinity, reason, the mind (...). (7)

Elizabeth Bronfen in her work *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* observes that, in fact, within an essentialist perspective, women have always been connected to nature.⁶ The author subscribes to

⁶ According to the narrator's account, Therese had a vivid fondness for the study of trees, "Therese was the one who was into trees. She knew everything about them. All the varieties. How deep the roots went" (Eugenides 184).

Eaton's point of view, when she notes, "One aspect of popular mythology (...) is that of casting objectivity, reason, distinctions, mind, scientific thought as masculine and feeling, fluidity, nature, the domain of scientific inquiry as feminine" (66).

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys can be seen as a symbol for rationality whereas the girls are associated with the wilderness and unpredictability of nature. This detectivesque desire to underscore the motifs that led to the girls' suicides makes them gather everything that they can find which might be connected to the girls, mainly personal objects and garbage disposals, granting them possession of a "strange curatorship" (Eugenides 186). Therefore, in the same way that scientists try to scrutinize the secrets of nature, so the boys strive to achieve a coherent body of evidence capable of lending them some sense of closure, some sort of comfort as to the truth that lies beneath the girls' demise.

This aspect stands out when the boys get access to Cecilia's journal. Although they identify in it references to nature, they do not seem to be aware of their meaning, as the following passage reveals: "Many people felt the illuminated pages constituted a hieroglyphics of unreadable despair, though the pictures looked cheerful for the most part" (Eugenides 41). In truth, the journal displays a mixture of ecological references intertwined with magic, as this passage illustrates:

Maidens with golden hair dripped sea-blue tears into the book's spine. Grape-colored whales spouted blood around a newspaper item (pasted in) listing arrivals to the endangered species list. Six hatchlings cried from shattered shells near an entry made on Easter. (Eugenides 32)

The journal also contains pictures, such as the one that shows a "weeping Indian paddling his canoe along a polluted stream, or the body counts from the evening war" (Eugenides 44). The memories that the boys hold of Cecilia show her likewise engaged in activities that are linked to the natural world: "She always wore the wedding dress and her bare feet were dirty. In the afternoons, when sun lit the front yard, she would watch ants swarming in sidewalk cracks or lie on her back in fertilized grass staring up at the clouds" (Eugenides 17). However, the most poignant event that contributes to reassert the girls' intimate connection to nature takes place when the elms that ornate the neighbourhood become infected with a fungus.

The sisters refuse the Parks Department workers to cut down the tree that is inside their yard. The way the boys depict the scene where the sisters defend their tree recalls an ancient druid ritual, as the narrator reports:

The next day, a short article appeared, accompanied by a grainy picture of the girls embracing the tree (...). They seem to be worshipping it like Druids. In the picture, you can't tell that the tree ends starkly twenty feet above their inclined heads. (Eugenides 184)

The tree has a strong emotional relevance for the Lisbons, and somehow it stands, in metaphorical terms, as a symbol for their lost sister Cecilia, who was the first of the girls to commit suicide. Furthermore, the girls knew that their younger sister made references to what was happening to the elms in the neighbourhood, and showed revulsion regarding the decision of the Parks Department. The boys are also acquainted with Cecilia's opinion, as the narrator observes: "In cynical entries she suggests the trees aren't sick at all, and that the deforesting is a plot to make everything flat" (Eugenides 44). From a feminist point of view, Cecilia's claim that men are trying to make everything flat is relevant because within a symbolic frame it points to the fact that men are trying to build a world according to their personal image that is physically different from the feminine, which is characterized by having curves. Curiously, the same metaphor is used by the American poet Sylvia Plath who, in her poetry, identified masculinity and lack of creativity with flatness. Moreover, in some of her poems, this flatness is clearly linked to maleness and power.⁷ Coincidentally, Plath died prematurely and also committed suicide.

Amber B. Vayo, in "What the Green Grass Hides: Denial and Deception in Suburban Detroit," argues that the elm tree figures in Eugenides's novel as the most prominent Gothic prop, as the elm serves "as a barrier between city and suburb, allowing a denial of race and economic unrest, but they also serve as a window dressing throughout the

⁷ The way Cecilia dies, impaled upon the fence, can be symbolically read as the triumph of patriarchal and phallic principles over femininity, reason imposing itself on nature.

suburbs to keep the neighbours from examining their own superficiality and unoriginal attitudes” (117).

In Eugenides’ novel, it is noteworthy that the transience of the natural world appears strongly linked to the Lisbons, as they are metaphorically compared to fly-fish, insects whose lives are very short. The narrator comments, “That was in June, fish-fly season, when each year our town is covered by the flotsam of those ephemeral insects” (Eugenides 4).

According to Vayo, the fish-flies also work metaphorically in the novel “as the artifice of denial creating a barrier between what is on the surface and seeing what is underneath it” (112). On the other hand, the insidious presence of these insects is reminiscent of the decomposing process of a corpse. In other words, the pristine body of Grosse Pointe is dissolving, and as it does, the vulnerable skeleton arises to the surface conveying its fragilities and inner contradictions.

3. The “Rotting House across the Street”

As the story of the novel progresses, the Lisbon house becomes misplaced among the singularity of the suburbs. After Cecilia’s death and after the girls’ confinement, the house assumes the form of a haunted castle or even a prison. This aspect unremittingly turns the Lisbon house into an iconic image ever-present in the Gothic tradition. Maggie Kilgour, in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, reminds us that whenever horror invades the domestic sphere, the house is literally or metaphorically transformed into a castle or a prison: “In the female gothic, the private world is turned temporarily into a house of horrors; the domestic realm appears in distorted nightmare forms in the images of the prison, the castle” (38).

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the house where the family lived prior to the girls’ domestic seclusion has nothing in common with its original shape. It is severely deteriorated through time, becoming reminiscent of a ruin that stands as a privileged space within the literary Gothic tradition.⁸

⁸ The image of the Lisbon house and its progressive decay sustains some resemblance to the iconic house of Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), a landmark within the American Gothic genre.

In this fashion, Eugenides transports the suburban house of the Lisbons to a kind of wilderness, making it assume the features of a classical haunted home. Similarly to the trees and the girls, the house appears to be afflicted by a kind of ailment.⁹ As a result of this ailment, it gradually starts displaying similarities with a ruin. In this respect, Lara Baker Whelan adds:

Taking the ruin as the main feature of the suburban Gothic that lingers from its eighteenth century origins, we find many texts that investigate a ruined suburban landscape as a space completely divorced from the cultural ideal it was supposed to represent. (101-102)

Indeed, due to its decay, the house becomes completely detached from the suburban landscape. Even though it remains there in a spatial dimension, it does not belong there aesthetically as it has just stopped reflecting back the suburban ideals and aspirations. It is rendered a beacon for something corrupted, oddly standing out in a clean and neat geography of suburbia as the narrator underlines:

(...) the Lisbon house began to look less cheerful. The blue slate roof, which in certain lights had resembled a pond suspended in the air, visibly darkened. The yellow bricks turned brown. Bats flew over the chimney in the evening (...). (Eugenides 88)

Allison Millbank's observation regarding the depiction of the ruin in Gothic novels, easily applies to the misplacement of the Lisbon house. The author notes, "in Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, the landscape is littered like a surrealist canvas with broken pillars and buildings which, isolated in time and space, have lost any relation to the world around them" (9).

The narrator also highlights that: "The window shades had closed like eyelids and the shaggy flower beds made the house looked abandoned" (Eugenides 139-140). In a skillful way, Jeffrey Eugenides sets out to

⁹ The boys actually envision the girls as getting sick inside a house which has turned into a ward: "When we thought of the girls along these lines, it was as feverish creatures, exhaling soupy breath, succumbing day by day in their isolated ward" (Eugenides 157-158).

transform the sophisticated house in the suburbs into something wild and outcast, “the rotting house across the street” (Eugenides 186). This is a house, as Millbank stresses, isolated in time and space, which has lost all the ties it had with the surrounding geography.

The presumable horror the girls suffer at home, with all its repression and claustrophobia, thus becomes visible on the outside. The secret life of the Lisbon girls, their repression and their unhappiness become transparent to the public through their progressively derelict house, as it is showcased in this passage: “The house receded behind its mists of youth being choked off, and even our parents began to mention how dim and unhealthy the place looked” (Eugenides 145). Moreover, the neighbours’ reaction to the Lisbon house is gradually enveloped by superstition, as it was believed that stepping on the Lisbon’s porch was bad luck (Eugenides 95). To make this scenario worse the narrator adds that, at some point, Mrs. Lisbon stopped cooking for the girls, so the girls survived by foraging (Eugenides 147); the family burned their own furniture in order to warm themselves (Eugenides 208); and the living-room transformed itself into a rain forest, since the family did not bother repairing the household leaks. Hence, the house slowly metamorphoses into a sort of coffin. The narrator likewise remarks that the smell emanating from the Lisbon house “was the smell of wet plaster, drains clogged (...) mildew cabinets, leaking pipes” (Eugenides 208).¹⁰

As claimed by Matthew Sivils, in the article “American Gothic and the Environment, 1800-Present,” the manifestation of the Ecological Gothic occurs when there is a contrast between an idyllic and peaceful set with the secrets and horrors it withholds. Sivils argues that,

Ultimately, the power of the American environmental Gothic resides in its genius for playing upon the terror that resides behind a curtain of pastoral beauty, forcing us to recognize the ecological horror buried, corpselike, in the landscape. (130)

¹⁰ The narrator also compares the smell given off by the house to bad breath. This comparison metaphorically suggests the possibility of the door of the house being read as a foul mouth, as the following passage enlightens: “The smell was partly bad breath, cheese, milk, tongue film, but also the singed smell of drilled teeth” (Eugenides 165).

It is precisely the secret of what lies inside the suburban house that gives rise to the awakening of the ecological Gothic. Allegorically, the interior of the Lisbon house is rendered intertwined with the exterior, the first being a reflective mirror for the second. Eventually, it is this promiscuous relationship that ends up by unburying the corpse, the secret that the house hides within its walls. The metaphorical corpse is the idea of a family togetherness being decomposed, fractured, as a dysfunctional mother locks up their daughters in an attempt of stopping time so as to avoid her daughters to flourish into womanhood.¹¹ Unconsciously, she seems unable to cope with the fact that her children are turning into adolescent sexual women. By keeping them inside the house, she intends to preserve their innocence, as if they were butterflies pinned to a board.

As if emulating the girls' sadness, nature acquires a hostile character. It also deteriorates in the surrounding landscape, as the following passage exemplifies:

A spill at the River Rouge Plant increased phosphates in the lake producing a scum of algae so thick it clogged outboard engines. Our beautiful lake began to look like a lily pond, carpeted with undulating foam. (Eugenides 234)

The natural world seems to echo the Lisbon's sadness and discontentment. Nature responds negatively to the girls' imprisonment in their own home. The house and its yard begin to look like a piece of wilderness misplaced amidst the suburbs, a place now enveloped by monstrous bushes, as the following passage discloses:

(...) the Lisbon leaves went unraked (...) from time to time (...) we looked over at the Lisbon house, its walls accumulating autumn's dampness, its littered and varicolored lawn hemmed in by lawns becoming increasingly exposed and green. When they blew onto other people's lawns there was grumbling. These aren't *my* leaves. (Eugenides 92)

¹¹ Actually, the neighborhood boys notice that, at the Lisbon home, the photos of the Lisbon sisters "cease about the time Therese turned twelve," (Eugenides 229) a fact that indicates that Mrs. Lisbon was in a state of denial, wishing that her daughters would never grow up to become women.

According to Andrew Smith and William Hughes, in their pioneer research about this new trend of the Gothic fiction, entitled *Ecogothic*,¹² this branch of the Gothic genre can be said to be present when nature appears as “a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological” (3), thus appearing to operate as the repository for such anxieties.

Undeniably, the gradual deterioration of the house and the surrounding landscape reveal the effects of nature undergoing a crisis, since it metaphorically mirrors the Lisbon sisters’ psyche. It is in this vein that Jeffrey Eugenides’ approach to nature acquires its marked Gothic undertones and, as a result, seems to diverge from Emerson’s transcendentalism. In this context, Mathew Sivils acknowledges that what fundamentally differentiates the Gothic and the Dark Romanticism from the Transcendentalism resides:

(...) in how they answer the question whether this human melding with the environment is to be enjoyed or feared. Most works of nature writing invite us to see the natural world as a beneficent entity where mankind may seek answers to the mysteries of existence and find solace from an increasingly urbanized world. American Gothic, however, wants us to fear the non-human, to dread the vengeance of animals and the environment, and to dread the horrific fact that our bodies and minds are entwined with the land itself and will eventually decompose back into it. (124-125)

The unraked leaves that spread from the Lisbon’s yard evoke once more the trope of contagion. The dwellers of the neighbourhood feel the need to stress that those are not their leaves, in an effort to reassert themselves that the “illness” resides in the Lisbons’ home, not in theirs. They try to comfort themselves by trying to shield themselves behind a fragile security wall.

There is also an underlying comparison between the bodies of the girls and the body of the house. Both of them are rendered prisons. The

¹² *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy constitutes a sharp example of the Ecogothic as the novel portrays a post-apocalyptic world where motherhood issues are also raised.

boys themselves perceive the limitations inherent in the female body when the narrator declares, "We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together" (Eugenides 43).

Cecilia's portrayal embodies this flawed and contradictory vision that society displays regarding the expectations inherent in the female role. On the one hand, when the boys notice her wandering about dressed in a white wedding dress she evokes purity, but on the other hand, the reference to her black underwear along with the red lips equate her with the figure of a "harlot." This paradoxical image of femininity indicates that Cecilia is herself a repository of contradiction. In a clever way, Jeffrey Eugenides transforms Cecilia in a sort of personification of the hidden inconsistencies that haunt the suburbs. Figuratively, she thus operates as double for the suburbs because she sustains its duplicity and, similarly to what happens to the young girl, the suburb will eventually succumb to this unsustainable state of denial.

Interestingly, and although the tone of the novel is more in tandem with Gothic traditional representations of the natural world, Eugenides, in paralleling the girls with nature as something inaccessible to the boys, somehow becomes closer to the Emersonian perspective, as the following passage shows: "The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence" (Emerson 6). The Lisbons, like the stars in the example given, trigger a reverence and adoration by the boys thereby remaining somehow far from their grasp throughout the whole novel.

4. The Vampiric Lux and the Ghostly Sisters

As previously observed, the Lisbon house gradually becomes very reminiscent of a castle in ruins. In this scenario, Lux is appropriately transformed into a vampire. Indeed, it is possible to state that there are two moments in the novel where the image of the vampire is evoked and both of them concern Lux. One passage bears evident reference to her teeth: "When she smiled, her mouth showed too many teeth, but at night,

Trip Fontaine dreamed of being beaten by each one” (Eugenides 79).¹³ Another reference appears in an occasion when she leaves home, at night, so as to say goodbye to Trip Fontaine. She is only wearing a white night-gown and this apparent resemblance to Lucy Westenra, one of the main female characters from Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897), quickly becomes evident, when she climbs into his car and practically rapes him, as it is illustrated in this passage:

(...) suddenly the air inside the car churned. He found himself grasped by his long lapels, pulled forward and pushed back, as creature with hundred mouths started sucking the marrow from his bones. She said nothing as she came on like a starved animal. (Eugenides 85-86)

Trip Fontaine’s fantasies concerning Lux always entangle violent images; he dreams of being flayed alive, or envisions her like a mythic being or ancient creature endowed with preternatural powers: “Years later, he was still amazed by Lux’s singleness of purpose, her total lack of inhibitions, her mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or four arms at once” (Eugenides 87). Not only Trip, but also the boys are afflicted by images in which Lux is identified with a supernatural being. After the girls’ confinement, the blonde girl becomes a constant inhabitant of their nightly reveries: “And, we’d to admit, too, that in our most intimate moments, alone at night with our beating hearts (...) what comes most often is Lux, succubus of those (...) nights” (Eugenides 147). Later in the novel, after the girls are taken out of school and consequently confined to the interior of their home, the narrator comments: “A few weeks after Mrs. Lisbon shut the house in maximum-security isolation, the sightings of Lux making love on top of the roof began” (Eugenides 141). She is described as an unnatural being, impelled by a strong death drive, given the fact that she remains there despite the adverse weather. In an image that strikingly evokes the vampire, Lux stoically endures the cold, luring boys to her

¹³ Actually, in the novel, the narrator curiously remarks that, “Mary, like her sisters, appeared to have two extra canine teeth” (Eugenides 63).

rooftop, hence metaphorically feeding on them.¹⁴ Her detachment and her absence of feelings are noted by the boys who become fast food for a hunger that cannot be satisfied and apparently does not grant Lux any satisfaction either. The boys who made love to Lux noticed that, “her collarbones collected water” (Eugenides 148) and the taste of “digestive fluids” (Eugenides 148) could be felt in her mouth, evincing clear signs of “malnourishment or illness” (Eugenides 148). Curiously, the boys seem to envisage themselves as mere objects under Lux’s control, as they report “that they had served as only the most insignificant footholds in Lux’s ascent, and, in the end, even though they had been carried to the peak, they couldn’t tell us what lay beyond” (Eugenides 148). Those boys observed that, “despite her eagerness, she didn’t seem to like it much and many boys described similar inattention” (Eugenides 148). Another resemblance that brings back the emblematic novel *Dracula*, and places the vampire among the suburbs, is the fact that the Lisbon house is depicted as a haven for bats. The boys notice that, when the evening falls, they whirl around the Lisbon’s house chimney.

Alongside the vampiric features that characterise Lux, the resemblance of the Lisbons sisters to ghosts is also noticeable. This image emerges very clearly in the passage where the boys encounter the girls at school:

They passed beneath the great school clock, the black finger of the minute hand pointing down at their soft heads. We always expected the clock to fall, but it never did, and soon the girls had skipped past the danger, their skirts growing transparent in the light coming from the halls far end, revealing the wishbones of their legs. If we followed, however, the girls would vanish, and, looking into classrooms they might have entered, we would see every other face but theirs (...). (Eugenides 100)

In the neighbourhood boys’ imaginations, the Lisbons become ethereal female figures that do not belong to the side of the living nor the side of

¹⁴ In *Dracula*, after being bitten by the vampire, Lucy also becomes promiscuous and afflicted by a strong appetite for blood. Lux undergoes a similar transformation after the prom night. In this context, the name Lux stands as an abbreviation for luxury.

the dead. Symbolically, by portraying the girls in an ambiguous fashion, Eugenides intentionally tries to stress both the sisters' atemporality and inaccessibility.¹⁵

5. Contamination: The Fear of Breathing Toxic Suicidal Vapours

In *The Virgin Suicides*, there is the underlying idea that the girls, like the elms in that suburban area, were the victims of some sort of malady. The fear that this malady would spread to the other elms actually mimics the fear of the neighbours concerning the contamination of their daughters by the Lisbons' "suicidal infection." Cleverly, Eugenides appropriates another Gothic trope to reinforce the dark nature of this account: the threat of an impending contamination.¹⁶ As Fred Botting contends in *Gothic*, this fear of contamination, in its literal and metaphorical dimension still endures, as it remains a current manifestation of the literary Gothic and horror fiction. As Botting underlines, this dread of contagion can be related to physical aspects or conversely are associated to metaphorical and psychological aspects. In the first case, anxieties that are connected to the terror of a spreading disease are explored while, in the second situation, it is the propagation of an ideology or emotional state that is feared (Botting 177).

Indeed, this terror of being contaminated afflicts all the Lisbons' neighbours, as the suicides of the sisters were seen by the local community as kind of infection, a potential disease emanating from some kind of mysterious source that was lodged inside the Lisbon girls. The narrator states that Cecilia's suicide:

¹⁵ Eugenides envelops the Lisbons in an almost mythic atmosphere. Later in the novel, the local community starts to believe they were actually seers (Eugenides 244). The newspapers treat their deaths as if they were victims of a suicidal pact involving Satanic rites and black magic (Eugenides 176). They inhabit the boys' imaginations as a kind of teenage witches "who were all synchronized in their lunar rhythms" (Eugenides 23).

¹⁶ Bram Stoker's *Dracula* also tackles issues that intimately concern the topic contamination both in literal and figuratively terms. In this novel, the vampire is the vehicle of transmission of the disease.

(...) was seen as a kind of disease infecting those close at hand.
(...) Transmission became explanation. The other girls, safe in their own rooms, had smelled something strange, sniffed the air, but ignored it. (Eugenides 157)

The novel shows that the boys were well aware that this fear had no rational basis to be supported. They promptly dismiss the possibility of the existence of any illness that could have been infecting the Lisbons. This is openly referred by the narrator the night the boys are allowed to take the girls to the prom: "Even up close, the girls didn't seem depressed. They settled into the seats, not minding the tight fit. (...) they began chattering immediately" (Eugenides 123).

Unintentionally, the narrator attributes their fictional disease to "the problem that has no name", a term coined by Betty Friedan, in her referential feminist manifesto called *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan attributed the causes of feminine depression to the way they were brought up and to society that only had to offer these girls a husband and a home.¹⁷ Most girls at the time had the ambition of taking up a career and this kind of thought was frowned upon by society. The boys could perceive that feeling of doom that emanated from the sisters, their crescent disappointment concerning a world that was progressively moving away from nature and, to a certain extent, from femalehood. As the narrator remarks: "In the end, the tortures tearing the Lisbon girls pointed to a simple reasoned refusal to accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws" (Eugenides 245). Like the elm trees and the seasonal fly-fish, the girls seemed incapable of dealing with a world that was rife with scientific theories, technological advancements, that was gradually retrieving from its natural essence.

¹⁷ This observation made by the narrator reinforces the fact that the future was something imposed by society, and the feminine fate was somehow already sealed: "There is no discussion of how they feel or what they want out of life; there is only the descending order— grandmother, mother, daughters— with back yard outside under rain, and the dead vegetable garden" (Eugenides 145).

6. Conclusion

The teenage boys realize that this sort of disease that caused the deaths of the Lisbons was something that overcame the geography of the suburbs and spatial reality itself. It was a disease whose virus was encroached in the heart of the American Dream. According to the narrator's view, the tragedy of the Lisbon household was believed to have spread to America:

Something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. Our parents thought it had to do with our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn't even had. (...) The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens. (Eugenides 231)

The suburbs, operating in the novel as an effigy for conformity, prove to be no place for girls like the Lisbons to flourish, because they are too synchronized with nature. They refuse the artificial gender constructs and fictional lives inherent in the suburban ideal. They have fertile imaginations and a potential to be creative, different. The too-ordered and symmetrical landscape of the suburbs is rendered no match for their creative and dreamy thoughts. In this way, the girls' asymmetry then becomes a disease within the symmetry of the suburbs. Their wild mindset is too asymmetric to fit in the neat geometry of the suburban landscape.

In the end of the novel, Eugenides transforms the girls into martyrs, as the sisters are elevated to the status of saints, "like something behind a glass like an exhibit" (Eugenides 221). As a matter of fact, the coroner responsible for the autopsy describes the Lisbons' bodies as pure, stressing "the incredible cleanliness of the girls' bodies (...) showing no signs of wastage or alcoholism" (Eugenides 221). Intelligently, the symbol of the Virgin present in the cards the sisters use to communicate with the outside world before their demise, conflates with their earthly natural bodies.¹⁸ By

¹⁸ A short time prior to the suicides, the sisters communicate with the boys through the spreading of these small cards with the image of the Virgin Mary. Remarkably, when Cecilia tries to kill herself for the first time, she is described serenely floating in the bathtub, holding a laminated picture of the Virgin (Eugenides 4).

turning them into a “congregation of angels” (Eugenides 25) upon Earth, Eugenides pays homage both to the sacred feminine and nature.

In the novel it is implied that the boys always kept their youth alive owing to the fact that they could not ever let go the memory of the Lisbon sisters. This strong event has inexorably anchored them to the past and although they live in the present and are adults, there is always this place where they go back to, where they can be in communion with their inner child. It is through the memory of the Lisbon sisters that they can reach their own secret places, their own private heaven. It can be said that the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides*, and the male voices who integrate his narrative, have left their boyhood ghostly lingering in those Michigan cursed suburbs, forever linked to the Lisbon house and to the tragic fate of the sisters that dwelled in it.

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ABSTRACT

The Virgin Suicides (1993), by Jeffrey Eugenides, offers us a look at an ordinary American suburban neighborhood whose quietness is disrupted by the Lisbon girls' suicide. The first sister who commits suicide is Cecilia. A year later, her sisters Lux, Bonnie, Therese and Mary follow her example. The neighbourhood teenage boys, who are mesmerized by the sisters, are heavily stricken by these events. The plot revolves around the boys' mission which is to disclose the motifs underlying the sisters' premature deaths. Their investigation is thwarted because the girls remain forever out of their reach. In the same manner that it is impossible to underscore the dark reasons at the origin of the suicides, the boys are incapable of rescuing the girls from their tragic end. Following Cecilia's death, the quiet house in the suburbs starts to metamorphose into a haunted and doomed space, thus disfiguring the harmonious geography of the little Michigan suburb. The challenge of this essay is to analyse the impact of this shift, and how it contributes to posit *The Virgin Suicides* in the Gothic tradition. In order to fulfill this task, Gothic tropes such as the monster, the haunted house, familiar tensions, femininity and nature will be under the scope so as to shed light upon one of the darkest novels featuring life in the apparently quiet American suburbs of the 1970s.

KEYWORDS

Lisbon sisters; Gothic; femininity; haunted house; suburbs.

RESUMO

The Virgin Suicides (1993), de Jeffrey Eugenides, debruça-se sobre um bairro situado no seio dos subúrbios de uma localidade Norte-Americana, cuja calma é interrompida devido aos suicídios das filhas da família Lisbon. Após o suicídio de Cecilia Lisbon, as restantes irmãs, Lux, Bonnie, Therese e Mary seguem-lhe o exemplo. Estes trágicos acontecimentos irão deixar marcas profundas num grupo de jovens que habita na vizinhança e que sempre nutriu admiração secreta pelas

irmãs. O enredo da obra centra-se justamente na tentativa, por parte desse grupo de rapazes, de desvendar os motivos que levaram à morte das raparigas. Logo após a morte de Cecília, a casa dos Lisbon sofre uma metamorfose, tornando-se num espaço assombrado e amaldiçoado, contrastando com a normalidade inerente à paisagem suburbana. O desafio deste artigo é, por conseguinte, analisar o impacto desta transformação e a relevância que este processo assume ao ser responsável pela incursão da obra no território do Gótico. De modo a cumprir o seu objectivo, serão examinadas algumas temáticas recorrentes típicas deste género literário, tais como a figura do monstro, da casa assombrada, as tensões familiares, a feminilidade e a natureza, e que contribuem para uma interpretação original daquela que constitui uma das obras mais escuras que versa a vida aparentemente calma dos subúrbios Americanos dos anos 70.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Irmãs Lisbon; Gótico Suburbano; feminilidade; casa assombrada; subúrbios.
