



The Mall

2016-2017

Article

2017

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Recommended Citation

Roach, Kade (2017) "Loss of Unrecoverable Purity," *The Mall*: Vol. 1 , Article 25.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol1/iss1/25>

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LOSS OF UNRECOVERABLE PURITY

Kade Roach

Since its release in the early 1990's, many powerful statements about *The Virgin Suicides* have been asserted. Some of which have come from Francisco Collado-Rodriguez's essay, "Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise: Garcia Marquez's Traces on Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*." In a statement that stands tall among others, Collado-Rodriguez says the destruction of the earth is caused by the patriarchal ideology that has replaced the ancestral wisdom of Mother Earth. The neighbors in *The Virgin Suicides* await the suicides of the Lisbon girls in hopes that it will somehow bring about the continuity of life like primitive spectators in a mythical ritual (Collado-Rodriguez, 36). This statement is powerful because it's not an assertion that can be justly made from merely reading from the surface of the novel. It might sound a bit absurd at first, but if taken into careful consideration when going back through the novel, the statement proves to have merit. When one reads *The Virgin Suicides* to only find out why the girls commit suicide, a lot of details and descriptions Eugenides includes seem out of place and unnecessary. However, these details make complete sense when read with the idea of the world's dying purity in mind. In Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon girls symbolize purity and through their deaths, show Earth's purity can't be retained from the irresponsible environmental actions humans commit.

One clue that Eugenides includes to show the Lisbon girls represent purity is through the exhibits the boys keep. The Lisbon sisters have a different aura about them than the rest of the characters in the novel, which is even noticed by the other characters. They are differentiated from the other characters to the extent that a group of boys keep exhibits about them to help document their existence and maintain a vivid memory of them. The narrator frequently refers to these exhibits: "The next day...accompanied by a grainy picture of the girls embracing the tree (Exhibit #8)" (Eugenides, 178), "A photo survives of that night (Exhibit #10)" (Eugenides, 114), "We regret to say that this photograph, Exhibit #47, was recently found missing from its envelope" (Eugenides, 223), "(#32) Cecilia's canvas high-tops yellowing

beyond remedy of toothbrush and dish soap,” (Eugenides, 241). Some readers might not think much of the exhibits, as it is possible to think of the boys as only infatuated with the girl’s beauty, which leads them to keep some items about them. Although, it appears that Eugenides meant the exhibits to represent more than just superficial mementos. The high frequency to which they’re brought up and the significant amount of them, at least 47, seems to inquire that the boys have the exhibits in hopes of figuring out the mystery surrounding the sisters. It isn’t clear what the mystery is, even by the end of the novel, but the various exhibits imply the boys think the sisters may have been more than average teenage girls committing suicide for a higher purpose. Towards the end of the novel the narrator speaks of the current state of the exhibits and says, “We haven’t kept our tomb sufficiently airtight, and our sacred objects are perishing” (Eugenides, 241). Notice how Eugenides includes the words tomb and sacred objects to describe the exhibits and how they’re stored. This diction seems to indicate the exhibits are much more valuable to the boys than just some items they kept in order to remember their first crushes. The words “tomb” and “sacred objects” also suggest that there is something about the girls that is noble and holy, which the boys can sense and would suffice as a proper explanation for having the exhibits.

The exhibits are only one of the signs Eugenides places in the novel that suggests the girls are different from all of the other characters in a meaningful and impactful way. In order to symbolize purity, the girls must be different from all of the other characters that have numerous flaws, due to purity being a divine quality. Other clues that Eugenides includes to show the Lisbon girls symbolize purity is through his descriptions of the girls, that at times, give the sisters a magical feel. Throughout various times in the novel Eugenides carefully selects his diction to describe the girls as larger than life, such as in the very first chapter when he describes Cecilia being taken to the hospital, “Under the molting trees... the two slaves offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess brandishing the torch (waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips” (Eugenides, 4). By referring to the paramedics as slaves tending to Cecilia, Eugenides is symbolically giving her a noble feel. The details of the altar and the priestess give Cecilia a sacred and holy essence. The passage as a whole reads as if it’s talking about a sacred ceremony for a dying ruler. Surrounding Cecilia and the other sister with feelings of nobility, sacredness, and holiness makes it more plausible to believe they symbolize purity. One passage that inspires a noble and sacred feel is not nearly enough to try to prove the sisters represent purity.

In another powerful passage, Eugenides makes a more direct reference to the sisters being more than normal teenagers when the narrator

says, "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). This statement is very compelling because it conveys the girls had a greater purpose in the world due to having great power and a selfless attitude. In this passage, Eugenides directly says they're powerful and even associates them with God, taking their sense of power to an entire new level and re-associates a feeling of holiness around them. He also gives a sense of virtuousness behind their actions by saying they couldn't live among self-concerned people. These added feelings from this passage give the sisters even more credibility to symbolize purity. Even long after their deaths, the boys can't seem to get the Lisbon sisters out of their minds. A reference is made to the boys receiving visits from the girls in their dreams when the narrator says, "Many of us continued to have dreams in which the Lisbon girls appeared to us more real than they had been in life, and we awoke certain that their scent of the next world remained on our pillows" (Eugenides, 233). This passage could be interpreted as just the boys dreaming of the girls they once loved, but if taking the other two passages into consideration, it makes sense that Eugenides could be hinting at a higher power the girls possess. The fact that he says the girls seem even more real in their dreams and mentions the next world leads me to believe that he could be referring to their power and very much reminds me of the way people speak of God, which reiterates the feelings of holiness and sacredness. A few pages later Eugenides even refers to the suicides as the exodus when he says, "The exodus was short-lived, however" (Eugenides, 240). In the exodus Moses leads the Jews out of Egypt and to freedom in a very holy and noble action. It seems that Eugenides made this reference to give the reader incentive to parallel the Lisbon sisters to Moses. In the girl's case, they are distraught from seeing the environment decay away before them, so in an effort to return Earth's purity, they commit suicide. They are pure beings, so in a way, they're sacrificing their pureness to return what was taken of Earth's. They are almost trying to lead the people around them to a better Earth. By describing the girls in these ways Eugenides gives them credibility to symbolize purity.

A final clue Eugenides includes to show the Lisbon girls are eligible to represent purity is the fact that they're virgins. Other than when Lux Lisbon eventually goes on asexual rampage, throughout most of the novel, all of the sisters maintain their condition of virginity. Being a virgin is directly associated with being pure. Being that only one of the five sisters loses her virginity before committing suicide, it would seem as a whole, the group of sisters maintain this sense of purity. According to this theory, Lux losing her virginity is a flaw, but the rest of the sisters maintaining their virginity seems to outweigh the cost of Lux losing hers. From the beginning of the novel to the end, it isn't difficult to notice the environmental conditions in which the

characters live vastly declines. One noticeable environmental decline is seen through the loss of trees. In the beginning of the novel, the neighborhood is filled with trees, but a beetle infestation infects them and the deterioration that follows is described when the narrator says, “The Parks Department continued to cut down trees, removing a sick elm to save the remaining twenty, then removing another to save the remaining nineteen, and so on until only the half-tree remained in front of the Lisbon’s old house” (Eugenides, 237). The sisters had to protest in order to temporarily keep their half-tree, which shows they were truly devastated with the declining environment.

Another aspect Eugenides uses to show the declining environment is through temperature change. In the beginning of the novel, the winters are harsh and cold. This changes as time goes on and the narrator does an excellent job depicting the declining winter scene: “Nowadays, because of shifting winds from the factories and the rising temperature of the earth, snow never comes in an onslaught anymore but by a slow accretion in the night, momentary suds. The world, a tired performer, offers us another half-assed season. Back in the day of the Lisbon girls, snow fell every week and we shoveled our driveways into heaps higher than our cars,” (Eugenides, 161). This passage is crucial because it directly mentions the factories as part of the blame for the rise in temperature and worsening conditions. This pins the loss of environmental purity directly on the people themselves. Eugenides even uses personification and gives the earth the human trait of being tired to show the effects of negative environmental change are taking a toll on the planet. A final aspect Eugenides uses to show the declining environment is through the nuisance of fish flies. The fish flies are introduced in the very first chapter of the novel when the narrator says, “That was in June, fish-fly season, when each year our town is covered by the flotsam of those ephemeral insects... they blacken windows, coat cars and street lamps... always in the same brown ubiquity of flying sum” (Eugenides, 2). Bugs coating entire cars and streetlamps give the setting an apocalyptic feel, which helps set a dire tone for environmental change. The worsening of the environment is a loss of Earth’s purity itself and sets the scene for the girls to commit suicide in an attempt to return this purity.

Eugenides writes about a suburb in Detroit that goes through negative changes in its environment, mostly caused by human actions such as the factories they operate, which doesn’t set well with a group of sisters. This group of virgin sisters, who are described in ways that at times seem holy and sacred, symbolize purity itself. In an attempt to restore what should have never been lost, they sacrifice their own purity of their lives. This is an effort that ends in vein, as the environmental purity of Earth never returns, even after their deaths. Eugenides does this to show the purity of Earth is something that can’t return once lost. The irresponsible actions of humans

that harm the environment are irreversible and are taking a toll on the planet. The Lisbon sister's story is one that calls for environment change and is made clear when the narrator says, "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, 239). In their refusal to accept the world's flaws, their attempt to restore purity may have failed, but it serves as a learning lesson to help save what is left of Earth's purity. Eugenides also mentions: "Capitalism has resulted in material wellbeing but spiritual bankruptcy" (Eugenides, 226), which shows that in order to save what is left of the environment, people will have to put their patriarchal ideology aside and start adopting standards that put the environment first, not their wallets.

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