There is no doubt that the Lisbon sisters, who are the main characters in the novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, by Jeffery Eugenides, are connected to the Saints of the Catholic Church. The sisters share a bond that is “sisterly” in both the familial and pledged way, referring to the bonds that nuns grow to share. Throughout the novel, they, but especially Therese, are compared to nuns through shared features, their sisterly bond, and the stigma that follows nuns. These comparisons and similarities are cleverly crafted together by the novel’s author, Jeffrey Eugenides. Eugenides embodies in the sisters characteristics of the saints their names represent. For example, Cecilia, the youngest of the five sisters, who is the most closely associated with the saints, even sharing the same name with Saint Cecilia, the patroness saint of music. Although all five of the sisters are so closely linked to the Catholic saints, they are also new age recreations of them in that they have a darker, more gothic side, especially Cecilia.

**The Cecilias heard heavenly music**

One of the direct connections between Cecilia Lisbon and Saint Cecilia is their love for music. Saint Cecilia is the patroness saint of music because she heard heavenly music in her heart at her wedding ceremony, and she sang to God as she lay there dying. She is often pictured in artistic representations with a flute, harp, harpsichord, violin, or just singing. For
example, in picture one entitled “Singing with Saint Cecilia,” she is pictured beside a harpsichord. The Mosaic of Saint Cecilia, photographed by Mark Abeln, depicts Saint Cecilia with what is called a portative organ (Flickr, online), one of the instruments that she is seen with in many representations. In picture number three, The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia by Raphael Sanzio, she is pictured holding a broken portative organ, and also with many smashed instruments at her feet, including a violin, flutes, a triangle, tambourines, and bongos. Apparent in her heavenward gaze is her longing to hear only the Heavenly a cappella music being produced by the angels up above. The worldly music that was once produced by those broken instruments can no longer satisfy her. She has made sure that they no longer attempt to cover up the sounds made for her in Heaven.

Similar to the saint she characterizes, Cecilia Lisbon loved music. She ordered a record of Celtic music that she played all the time. Being a more gothic representation of the saint, Cecilia Lisbon would not be satisfied with music of the church, which her mother tried so hard to stuff down her throat. She, rather, liked to listen to her Celtic records, lying on her back, staring at the stars on her ceiling, wishing they would tell her something, or that she were somewhere rather than where she was.

She spent the rest of her day lying on the rug in her bedroom, staring up at her zodiac mobile and listening to the odd Celtic records she’d gotten through a mail order house. ‘It was always some soprano singing about marshes and roses.’

(Eugenides 41-42)
The connection between this particular painting by Raphael Sanzio and the above passage peculiar in the fact that Saint Cecilia has her gaze heavenward, as does Cecilia Lisbon as she lies on her back and watches the “stars” which go along with the zodiac hanging from her ceiling. But, while Saint Cecilia longs for the heavenly voices, is Cecilia Lisbon longing for the same? Or, is she wishing that there was some way she could read those stars to find a way into a new life? Also, when one thinks of Heavenly voices, they most likely think of a beautiful mix of soprano, alto, and tenor peaceful voices, singing praises to God. While the singer on Cecilia’s record is probably not singing of such lofty things, she has a high soprano voice that must have had a soothing effect on Cecilia Lisbon.

This soothing effect must have lasted for only a short while because shortly after we read about her lying on her back, contemplating the stars, we go on to read about her attempted suicide. So, that calls to question, was the music soothing? Or did it help her think and plot her next move? In either case, the description of Cecilia Lisbon’s attempts at suicide directly coincides with the legend of Saint Cecilia’s martyrdom. The story of the martyrdom of Saint Cecilia is as follows:

In the meantime, Saint Cecilia, by preaching had converted four hundred persons, whom Pope Urban forthwith baptized. Then Cecilia was arrested, and condemned to be suffocated in the baths. She was shut in for a night and a day, and the fires were heaped up, and made to glow and roar their utmost, but Cecilia did not even break out in perspiration through the heat. When Almachius heard this he sent an executioner to cut off her head in the bath. The man struck thrice without being able
to sever the head from the trunk. He left her bleeding, and she lived three days.

Crowds came to her, and collected her blood with napkins and sponges, whilst she preached to them or prayed. At the end of that period she died. (St. Cecilia online)

In this iconic moment, as Saint Cecilia lay prostrate and helpless in the baths at Rome is how she is represented in hard and cold marble on her burial chamber. Picture number five is of this statue in the Church of Saint Cecilia in Traverstere, Rome (Prayers to Saint Cecilia). Picture number six is a painting of Saint Cecilia in this same position. It depicts a close up of her face and neck with the deep wounds from the executioner’s axe (The Relics of Saint Cecilia). Out of this fourth century Greek religious/ romance story (St. Cecilia) morphs the description of Cecilia Lisbon’s first suicide attempt.

Already Cecilia’s suicide had assumed in retrospect the stature of a long-prophesied event...Her suicide, from this prospective, was seen as a kind of disease infecting those close at hand. In the bathtub, cooking in the broth of her own blood, Cecilia had released an airborne virus which the other girls, even in coming to save her, had contracted. No one cared how Cecilia had caught the virus in the first place. Transmission became explanation. (Eugenides 153)

Cecilia Lisbon attempted to take her life in the bathtub, which coincides directly with Saint Cecilia being shut in the baths to suffocate, she slit her wrists because she knew the heat alone would not kill her, which is like Saint Cecilia’s throat being slit three times, her first attempt did not work, and neither could the executioner kill Saint Cecilia when he tried.
Both stories also talk about “conversion” of sorts. In the story of the martyrdom of Saint Cecilia, it states that after preaching for some time, Saint Cecilia had “converted four hundred persons.” In the story of Cecilia Lisbon’s first attempted suicide, it says that her sisters “contracted” the deadly airborne disease by coming to save her. Christianity attempts to save the lives of people who believe. They are saved from the future destruction of the world by believing in God and Jesus. The airborne virus the girls contracted seems to correspond with the spreading of Christianity that was Saint Cecilia’s mission in life. By explaining the gospel to others, Saint Cecilia made a transmission of faith to anyone who would listen, likewise, “transmission became explanation” for the people of the town to explain away the suicides of the Lisbon girls.

Cecilia Lisbon absolutely refused to change out of the antique wedding dress that she wore night and day without fail. At the party, the boys took the opportunity to describe the dress for us.

Cecilia was wearing, as usual, the wedding dress with the shorn hem. The dress was vintage 1920s. It had sequins on the bust she didn’t fill out, and someone, either Cecilia herself or the owner of the used clothing store, had cut off the bottom of the dress with a jagged stroke so that it ended above Cecilia’s chafed knees. (Eugenides 24)

Cecilia Lisbon seemed to want to grow up, out of her pubescent “in-between” years. By wearing the wedding dress, paying no attention to anyone else in the room, and coloring her lips with red crayon, she was trying to make herself seem older and more feminine. This is in
connection with, and also opposing, the vow of chastity Saint Cecilia took, and chose not to deviate from, even on her wedding night.

Cecilia, a virgin of a senatorial family and a Christian from her infancy, was given in marriage by her parents to a noble pagan youth Valerianus. When, after the celebration of the marriage, the couple had retired to the wedding-chamber, Cecilia told Valerianus that she was betrothed to an angel who jealously guarded her body; therefore Valerianus must take care not to violate her virginity (Kirsch).

Cecilia Lisbon’s virginity and wedding dress reinforces the story of Saint Cecilia’s vow of chastity, even after they were married on her wedding night when it is a custom for the couple to consummate the marriage. In the Catholic religion, both nuns and the church itself, are referred to as the “bride of Christ,” symbolizing exceptional purity and symbolic union with the male aspect of the deity. Yet Cecilia Lisbon’s dress is soiled and hacked off above the knees, suggesting a perversion of this pure image.

Cecilia's choice to wear the dress to her death, after taking a marathon bath, suggests a kind of ritual sacrifice in which a pure maiden's death is offered to appease the gods. She has a “sacrificed virgin” complex to her. “Under the molting trees and above the blazing, over exposed grass those four figures paused in tableau: the two slaves offering the victum to the alter (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). Even though Saint Cecilia’s mission was cut short, she spent all of her last remaining days spreading the message she had devoted
her life to. She died doing what she loved. She was locked in the baths to die, but when that
did not work, they tried to sever her head. She was left there to die a horrible death of
bleeding out. She was martyred for her faith. I think Cecilia Lisbon thought she was also
being martyred for her faith because of the fact that she was holding the picture of Saint
Mary during her first suicide attempt.

But what was she sacrificing herself for? For whatever the reason, Cecilia Lisbon
understood that she would not be living on this Earth for much longer. In the following
passage, we again get the image of a sacrificial maiden as she is wearing the antique
wedding dress, but we also see a prophesy come from her. By clearing her initials in the
layer of bugs after she has talked about their short lives, it is like she is predicting that her
life will be just like that of the bugs. She is predicting her own death.

Mrs. Scheer, who lives down the street, told us she saw Cecilia the day before she
attempted suicide. She was standing by the curb, in the antique wedding dress with
the shorn hem she always wore, looking at a Thunderbird encased in fish flies. ‘You
better get a broom, honey,’ Mrs. Scheer advised. But Cecilia fixed her with a
spiritualist’s gaze. ‘They’re dead,’ she said. ‘They only live twenty-four hours. They
hatch, they reproduce, and then they croak. They don’t even get to eat.’ And with
that she stuck her hand into the foamy layer of bugs and cleared her initials: C.L.
(Eugenides 2).

She seemed prophetic in her nature. The passage says that she looked at the woman with a
“spiritualist’s gaze,” which evokes an image of a person who is in touch with a higher power,
and has a message to spread before their time is up. Cecilia felt like she was just another person in a long line of people who worked their lives away. She was spreading her message that things seem to run in a circle and life seems insignificant before she attempted her suicide. In the above quote, Cecilia probably already knew that she was going to try to kill herself. In the same way, Saint Cecilia knew she was going to die soon, so she preached her message as long as she could while she lay there bleeding in the bath at Rome.

Each Cecilia had supposed connections to Rome. The residence of Saint Cecilia was in Rome, and the baths in which she was killed were in Rome. Cecilia Lisbon was supposedly connected to Rome through her unrequited puppy love for Dominic Palazzolo, as observed by a fellow classmate, but never proven through her diary entries.

Amy Scraff, who knew Cecilia in school, said that Dominic had been all she could talk about for the final week before commencement. Instead of studying for exams, she spent study halls looking up ITALY in the encyclopedia. She started saying ‘Ciao,’ and began slipping into St. Paul’s Catholic Church on the Lake to sprinkle her forehead with holy water...Cecilia had unleashed her blood in the bath, Amy Scraff said, because the ancient Romans had done that when life became unbearable (Eugenides 18).

People from the neighborhood believed it was because of her hypothetical love for a boy from Italy, love which was not reciprocated, that Cecilia could no longer stand her life. They believed she was trying to get his attention by her suicide attempt, and when she did succeed, that he would come running back to save her because the event would make him
realize his love for her. Whether this was the truth or not, the people of the town did not know. Regardless, this behavior seems selfish and conniving, nothing at all like Saint Cecilia.

**Cecilia Lisbon is not a “Miss Goody-Two-Shoes”**

There are also many ways in which Cecilia Lisbon is not like Saint Cecilia. Cecilia Lisbon carries that mysterious aspect, just like her sisters, but the boys telling the story in the novel state several times that Cecilia is the weird sister. “A few of us had fallen in love with her, but had kept it to ourselves, knowing that she was the weird sister” (Eugenides 37). Saint Cecilia was not considered weird because she had pledged her virginity to God, on the contrary, she was venerated for her devotion. As the legend goes, she explained her decision to her husband, he was baptized and after seeing the angel that was her protector, believed her, and therefore left her a virgin.

Cecilia Lisbon had a strange obsession with black. She dyed all of her underwear black, which, in this part of the country, is considered something naughty. “In the top bureau drawer, Lucy found seven pairs of underpants, each dyed black with Rit...We had long known about Cecilia’s black underwear because whenever she’d stood up on her bicycle pedals to gain speed we had looked up her dress” (Eugenides 37). Saint Cecilia highly valued her virginity because it was pledged to God. Cecilia Lisbon was a virgin, but she had a side to her that wanted to know what it was like to grow up, to no longer be stuck inside the body of a “tween-aged” thirteen year old. She was dark and daring and did not care what other people thought of her. She was a free spirit that was certainly tied to Christianity, but also had direct ties to something darker.
One thing the boys talk use as evidence while presenting their case in the book is Cecilia’s diary. They describe it as being hand illuminated with drawings of various things. They pay special attention to Cecilia’s doodles in magic marker, which include bubblegum angels, grape colored whales, curlicues, and Candy land ladders. They also say the diary is like a medieval Bible. The combination of Cecilia’s doodling hand illuminations and the reference to the Bible goes back Cecilia being an updated version of Saint Cecilia and the other Catholic saints.

Dominic Palazzolo was mentioned only once in that tiny rice paper journal illuminated with colored Magic Markers to look like a Book of Hours or a medieval Bible. Miniature designs crowded the pages. Bubblegum angels swooped from top margins, or scraped their wings between teeming paragraphs. Maidens with golden hair dripped sea-blue tears in to 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. Cecilia had filled the pages with a profusion of colors and curlicues, Candy land ladders and striped shamrocks. (Eugenides 29)

This description of Cecilia’s journal is reminiscent of the choir books that were used in medieval times, such as those on display in the Piccolomini Library in the Duomo di Siena, or the Cathedral of Siena, Tuscany, Italy (Siena Duomo, Online). Picture 5 depicts one of these beautifully illuminated choir books that can be seen in the library at Duomo di Siena. If a person looks closely at one of the books, they will see the vibrant colors, gold leaf, Biblical
symbols, and ornate swirls and flowers. Cecilia’s diary, with its swooping angels, dying
whales, crying maidens, hatching chicks, and curlicues and colors are all suggestive of
specific Biblical stories, and Bible stories dealing with life, new life, or death. For example,
swooping angels could refer to the chorus of angels that appeared to the shepherds in Luke
2: 13-14 “Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising
God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom
his favor rests” (Zondervan) The dying whale could refer to the story of Jonah and the whale
in Jonah 1:17, “Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the
belly of the fish for three days and three nights” (Zondervan). A crying maiden could refer to
Mary Magdalene outside of Jesus’s tomb when she thought they had taken His body away in
John 20:11, “Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying” (Zondervan). Hatching chicks makes
one think on Easter because they are new life, which is the day on which Jesus rose from the
dead. The drawings in Cecilia’s diary are very closely connected with the Bible, as are the
choir books in Piccolomini, which are full of representations from the Bible.

The connection between the Lisbon sisters and angels, nuns, or the saints they seems
to embody is one that is commented on and drawn out throughout the novel. The youngest
sister, Cecilia Lisbon seems to be directly connected with Saint Cecilia through many
different aspects in life and in death. There are elements of Saint Cecilia that can be seen in
just about every part of Cecilia Lisbon, outside of her love of black underwear and darkness.
Cecilia is a new age version of the saint Cecilia. She shares characteristics such as age, links
to Biblical stories, a taste in music, and in a sort of martyrdom, but she also brings to light
the inner darkness that seems to start in her, and spread to her four sisters. At the beginning
of the book, the sisters are pictured as normal, everyday girls raised in a Christian household,
but throughout the novel, the sisters begin to want more than that. They begin to want to
discover and experience new things. They lash out at the religion they were taught as
children, and consequentially, they commit what is considered the ultimate sin by killing
themselves. They saw this act as more of a sacrifice of themselves, a gothic ritual that Cecilia
started, and the rest were completing. All of these connections between the sisters and
nuns, angels, saints, the Bible, and the Catholic Church were no coincidence. They were
expertly crafted and interwoven by Jeffery Eugenides in his novel *The Virgin Suicides*: he
shows these five sisters as martyrs of sorts, in connection with the actions of saints and
nuns, for childhood, innocence, and breaking free from the social norms.
Representations of Saint Cecilia in Art


2. Mark Abeln. *Mosaic of Saint Cecilia*

4. Illuminated Choir Book in the Piccolomini in the Siena Cathedral, Siena, Italy
5. Prayers to Saint Cecilia

6. The Relics of Saint Cecilia
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