

Emily Katona
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Professor Watson
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Welcome to Suburbia

Gothic literature began with Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto*, written in 1764. This novel sparked a new movement in literature that became extremely popular during the late 1700s and early 1800s. These novels share elements of terror, gloom and sometimes the supernatural. Even though the Gothic began so long ago, it is still widely used today. Now, we have switched from drafty castles to the suburban neighborhoods that are seen across the United States. Many authors use elements of the Gothic to create the same feelings as the original gothic writers established. One author, Jeffery Eugenides, uses gothic elements and brings them to the suburban landscape in *The Virgin Suicides*, which centers around a group of sisters who commit suicide and the group of neighborhood boys who become obsessed with them. After Cecilia, the youngest sister, commits suicide, Lux, Mary, Bonnie and Therese, become prisoners in their own home by their grief stricken parents. The Lisbon sisters want to desperately live their own lives, but their freedom and independence is smothered by their strict mother and father. Eugenides brings a gothic atmosphere to the suburbia, looking at a different side to the lifestyle. These girls feel they have no escape, and Eugenides shows their struggle through different gothic elements. Usually one does not think of the gothic when they see the uniform houses, immaculate lawns and friendly neighbors in the suburban setting. The Lisbon sisters, however, are struggling to stay afloat in their neighborhood prison and Eugenides shows the other side of suburbia by bringing in gothic elements, such as atmosphere, setting and the neighborhood boys' actions.

Most gothic pieces similar traits that develop in the texts. Most follow the same elements. The setting is usually in a dismal house or crumbling castle, surrounded by a barren landscape, swept by rattling winds and extreme weather. The houses or castles are usually in some sort of disrepair and are falling apart, adding to the gloomy atmosphere of these works. The atmosphere of these works is a sinister one, usually including a supernatural aspect. It is not uncommon for the Gothic to include haunted structures, ghostly sightings and other visions of terror. The women are always in some form of distress or either being threatened by a tyrannical male, and the hero of the Gothic is usually isolated from the rest of the world. Many contemporary pieces use the genre of Gothic. Bree Hoskin, who wrote “Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides*” discusses how the gothic has come to contemporary works, saying, “The literary work of Stephen King, films such as Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)...have explored the dark side of small town or suburban life through the use of Gothic tropes such as the supernatural, violence, death and entrapment” (Hoskin 217). While *The Virgin Suicides* does not have every single aspect of the Gothic novel, it follows many of the same elements, and Eugenides transforms the suburbs into the gothic suburbia.

One way Eugenides brings the Gothic to this novel is through the atmosphere he creates. The Lisbons and the neighborhood boys live in a suburb, like most Americans across the country live. This suburb, however, has a gothic atmosphere floating through its streets. In the beginning of the novel, Cecilia commits suicide by jumping out of her bedroom window and landing on the iron-wrought fence in her yard. Like Gothic novels, her ghost makes an appearance in the novel and her presence never seems to go away. The neighborhood boys are always thinking of Cecilia, thinking they see her in the neighborhood. Mr. Lisbon, the girls’

father, is the one to see Cecilia's ghost, as Eugenides writes, "Only as he left the bathroom, heading for the oblivion of sleep himself, did Mr. Lisbon see Cecilia's ghost. She was standing in her old bedroom, dressed in the wedding dress again, having somehow shed the beige dress with the lace collar she'd worn in her coffin" (Eugenides 58). Cecilia's presence is felt throughout the novel, like she never really left the world when she jumped to her death. Her ghost ties in with the traditional element of the supernatural in Gothic literature. The sightings of Cecilia are constant reminders of what happened in the Lisbon house, especially for the neighborhood boys who are longing for the love of the sisters. The suburbs are not supposed to be tainted with the horrors of the Gothic. They are supposed to be quiet, clean places to live, without the harm or devastation that is seen in *The Virgin Suicides*. Eugenides brings in a different reality of the suburbs, the reality that not everything is perfect and some yearn for to be free from their constraints and suffocating lifestyles. He uses the haunted atmosphere as a reminder that not everything is as it seems in this quiet suburb, and that some will find it hard to forget the events that take place there. The gothic atmosphere adds to the effect.

Another aspect of the gothic that Eugenides brings into the novel is the setting. The gothic suburbia can be seen in many aspects in the setting. The suburban landscape is shrouded by decaying nature and a crumbling house where the Lisbon sisters are trapped. Even the natural elements in the suburb have a gothic feel. The trees are decaying and dying, while fish flies smother their surroundings to reproduce and die. Eugenides uses the descriptions of the natural surroundings to help enhance the gothic feel in his novel. He vividly describes the fish flies, as he writes, "That was in June, fish-fly season, when each year our town is covered by the flotsam of those ephemeral insects. Rising in clouds from the algae in the polluted lake, they blacken windows, coat cars and streetlamps, plaster the municipal docks and festoon the rigging of

sailboats, always in the same brown ubiquity of flying scum” (Eugenides 2). These flies have an extremely short lifespan, and seem to die as quickly as they surround the town. This detailed description of flies literally encompassing everything in sight helps add to the gloom of the setting.

Another aspect of the setting which adds to the Gothic is the Lisbon home. After Cecilia’s death, Mrs. Lisbon becomes very strict with her other daughters. She tightens her grip on them, thinking that her harsh actions will save her daughters from the same fate as Cecilia. By keeping them in their house and refusing to let them go out, the sisters’ lives begin to deteriorate in their own home. As the sisters’ lives are crumbling, so is the house that is keeping them. Eugenides describes the house, writing, “The first slate tile slid off their roof, missing the porch by an inch and embedding itself in the soft turf, and from a distance we could see the tar underneath, letting in water. In the living room, Mr. Lisbon positioned an old paint can underneath a leak, then watched as it filled with the midnight-blue shade of Cecilia’s bedroom ceiling...In the days following, other cans caught streams, on top of the radiator, the mantel, the dining room table, but no roofer showed up, most likely, people believed, because the Lisbons could no longer bear anyone intruding into their house” (Eugenides 154). Not only does the deteriorating house symbolize the sisters’ fading lives, it also adds another Gothic aspect to the novel. As Hoskin writes, “The Lisbon house, becomes the haunted castle through which its darkened rooms and basement the neighborhood boys creep only to stumble upon the lifeless body of the Lisbon girls” (Hoskin 217). Eugenides is tying the Gothic house to the horrifying actions the young girls use to escape their perpetual prison. The house reflects the feelings of despair and a failing life that the Lisbon girls feel, and thus pushes them to end their young lives.

Eugenides uses the Gothic house to point out that terrifying events can still happen in the suburbs, even if one does not expect it.

A popular Gothic element is the damsel in distress, who needs to be rescued by a male hero in order to go on. Eugenides plays with this idea, by having the neighborhood boys try to desperately save the Lisbon girls from their house arrest, even if the Lisbon sisters did not ask for help. The boys are obsessed with the sisters, keeping artifacts of the girls' lives and dreaming of running away with the girls to far off places. While the girls do not act like damsels, they do reach out to the boys by sending them letters and signaling them with a paper lantern. The boys desperately want to save them, to take them away from their prison and set them free. The boys fit into a Gothic trope by wanting to save the girls, as Eugenides writes, "There was grand talk of tunnels, starting from the Larsons' basement and going beneath the street. The dirt could be carried out in our pant legs and emptied during strolls like in *The Great Escape*... We imagined all sorts of things, waiting for the girls to signal for us" (Eugenides 194). The longing to save the girls, and the girls' cries for help fit into the gothic aspect. Eugenides uses this aspect of the novel to show the longing the boys feel and how much they want the girls to love them. The obsession the boys share helps expand on the theme of the gothic suburbia.

Suburbia is usually seen as a comfortable lifestyle, with happy families and no complaints. When individuals, such as Eugenides, take a different look at the suburban life, one can see the cracks and darkness that can seep over suburbia. By taking certain elements of the Gothic, Eugenides takes a suburb and turns it into a chilling atmosphere, shrouded in mystery and the supernatural. Cecilia's ghostly sightings throughout the novel remind the neighborhood boys of the chilling events they can never forget. The decaying house reflects the deteriorating lives of the Lisbon sisters in their prison. The neighborhood boys desperately wish to save the

sisters who are sending them messages, asking for the chance to escape. These elements follow the elements of Gothic literature. The Gothic has now taken a turn to the suburbs, showing how a seemingly normal setting can turn to the terror of the Gothic.

Work Cited

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. New York: Picador, 2009

Hoskins, Bree. "Playground Love: Landscape and Longing in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*." *Film Literature Quarterly*: 214-220.