

The Virgin Suicides Study Guide

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Virgin Suicides Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	9
Chapter 3.....	12
Chapter 4.....	17
Chapter 5.....	21
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	32
Themes.....	35
Style.....	38
Quotes.....	41
Topics for Discussion.....	43



Plot Summary

The *Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides reads like a postmortem investigation into the lives and deaths of five young American girls growing up in a suburb. From the onset of the novel, the reader is made aware of the outcome. The story takes place in the early 1970s, somewhere in the heart of America. The novel is narrated approximately 20 years after the events by a group of middle-aged men who were then teenagers living in the same neighborhood and obsessed by the five ill-fated heroines of the book. The story unfolds at a lingering pace as it catalogs the slow decay of a community who gave up its power in exchange for a passive, manufactured brand of happiness.

The book opens with the scene of an ambulance coming in to pick up the body of Mary, the last of the five Lisbon sisters to take her own life. The scene is observed passively by a few young teenagers gathered inside a house across the street. The novel then proceeds as a flashback, recounting with ample detail the 13 months leading to this final, dramatic outcome.

Thirteen-year-old Cecilia Lisbon, the youngest of the five blonde daughters of a middle-aged suburban couple, was found lying in her bathtub with her wrists slit open. She is saved at the last moment by the paramedics. After Cecilia's brief stay in the hospital, the Lisbons invite the neighborhood boys to a chaperoned party. The young guests realize that fourteen-year-old Lux epitomizes their fascination about the Lisbon girls. During the party, Cecilia disappears and jumps to her death from her bedroom window. The paramedics remove Cecilia's body. She is given last rites and taken to a temporary mortuary freezer where her body waits for the cemetery workers' strike to end. The boys' obsession deepens when they manage to get their hands on Cecilia's diary and read it to each other. However, the motives for the girls' self-inflicted deaths remain a mystery.

The neighborhood fathers remove the fence and proceed to clean the area of the dead bugs for summer. The Lisbon family members remain oblivious to everything that goes on around them. Early in the new school year, Trip Fontaine, a Romeo for all the Juliets of the suburb, falls in love at first sight with fourteen-year-old Lux Lisbon. He manages to get invited into her home and earns himself an illicit kissing session inside his car at the end of the evening. After the escapade, Lux is grounded by her mother. Around that time, the local press publishes a belated article about the first suicide. The local television channel airs a program that interviews suicidal teenagers and a mail campaign intended to raise public awareness to the problem of teenage suicide follows. The girls' high school organizes a Day of Grieving as a mean of helping the students cope with the tragedy. Little is accomplished and the Lisbon sisters manage to avoid the event completely by hiding in the school's bathroom. A social worker hired by the school tries to help the sisters, but the effects are marginal and short lived at best. The girls are allowed by their restrictive parents to attend Homecoming with the other students. As a result, the luckiest of the neighborhood boys gets to date a Lisbon sister for the evening while Lux is accompanied by Trip. The two teenagers are crowned at the end of the evening as king and queen of the homecoming dance. Trip then takes Lux to the



football field, makes love to her and immediately dumps her. Lux is left to walk back home by herself and misses her mother's strict curfew by over an hour.

As a result of her daughter's disobedience, Mrs. Lisbon imposes a lock down on the house. She orders Lux to destroy all her rock records, and the girls are confined to the house. They stop attending school. The house is left uncared for, and the girls live in an increasingly dirty and decaying environment. Spying on the Lisbons' house, the boys are spectators to Lux's repeated sexual encounters with strange men on the roof. A few weeks go by, and Lux is taken to the hospital following a stomach ache. She faked the disease in order to get a pregnancy test. Mr. Lisbon is forced to quit his job as a teacher at the school after being vilified by the parents for his handling of the crisis at home. This furthers the decay of the Lisbons' house and, by now, an overpowering stench emanates from the building. It looks as though the girls are leading regular teenager lives, even though they are locked inside their home and are showing obvious signs of physical decline. An experienced local grandmother suggests that suicide is a logical option for the girls, and she admits to sympathizing with them. By springtime, the city workers, acting on an ordinance from the city, come to cut down the disease-ridden tree planted in the Lisbon's yard. The four girls interfere, and the workers are forced to postpone the removal indefinitely. Later that summer, mysterious messages from the girls to the boys begin to appear in the neighborhood. Both groups manage to communicate on the phone by playing popular songs to each other. At midnight on June 15, the boys act on a note left in their mailbox and enter the Lisbons' home. They are attempting to rescue the girls. Lux stalls them for a while and disappears. The boys then roam the house looking for the girls only to stumble upon dead bodies. Each of the four girls has attempted suicide, and only Mary survived.

The psychiatrist puts Mary on a combination of pills and therapy while the media tries to piece together an image of the tragic events. Neither result proves convincing, and the community as a whole considers Mary as good as dead. The Lisbons put their house up for sale. On the day the cemetery strike comes to an end, a month after her first suicide attempt, Mary's dead body is picked up by the paramedics. She overdosed on sleeping pills. The Lisbon parents leave the suburb for good and, while the cemetery is restored to its pristine state, the whole suburb starts to decay. Two decades later, the boys are now grown up men old enough to tell about their experience. However, they never grew out of their suburb and the unsolved mystery of the five virgin suicides still haunts them.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The *Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides reads like a post-mortem investigation into the lives and deaths of five young American girls growing up in a suburb. From the onset of the novel, the reader is made aware of the outcome. The story takes place in the early 1970s, somewhere in the heart of America. The novel is narrated approximately 20 years after the events by a group of middle-aged men who were then teenagers living in the same neighborhood and obsessed by the five ill-fated heroines of the book. The story unfolds at a lingering pace as it catalogs the slow decay of a community who gave up its power in exchange for a passive, manufactured brand of happiness.

The book opens with the scene of an ambulance arriving at the Lisbon's house to pick up the body of Mary, the last of five sisters to take her own life. The scene is observed passively by a few young teenagers gathered across the street. The novel then proceeds as a flashback, recounting the details of the 13 months of events that led to this final, dramatic outcome.

Thirteen-year-old Cecilia Lisbon, the youngest daughter of a middle-aged suburban couple, was found lying in her bathtub, her wrists slit open and her fist wrapped around a picture of the Virgin Mary. Her life is saved at the last moment by the paramedics and she is carried away on a stretcher wearing only a flannel nightgown. The resident psychiatrist at the hospital diagnoses her suicide attempt as a cry for help. He recommends that the parents provide a more open environment for the girls. The community, speculating on the reasons for the girl's failed attempt at taking her own life, can't do better but blame the parents, religion or even a broken heart from a local teenager. Dominic Palazzolo, a local teenager whom she had a crush on, had recently stunned the neighborhood by jumping off the roof of his relative's house in order to prove his love for another girl. He came out unhurt and had just moved out of the area a week earlier.

The neighborhood boys, a collection of teenagers from the area who are connected by a common infatuation for the Lisbon girls, are acting as the narrators. They recall that up to that point, only a few of them have had a chance to get inside the Lisbon's house. The first one was Peter Sissen, who had been invited in by Mr. Lisbon, a math teacher at the local school. During his visit, Sissen managed to wander in the girls' bathroom and collect some private information about the girls. He also managed to steal a bra that was left hanging on a crucifix by fourteen-year-old Lux, the second youngest Lisbon sister. Then, Paul Baldino infiltrated the house on his own, using a secret passage into the Lisbon's basement, and roamed the house in search of more secrets to report. That's when he found Cecilia bathing in bloody water and alerted the police.

Nothing seems to change in the life of the Lisbons through the following month as Cecilia returns home to recover. In an apparent nod to the psychiatrist's



recommendations, the girls are allowed to invite the neighborhood boys for a chaperoned party held in the family's basement. During the party, which feels awkward to the boys, the guests can barely make contact with the girls who are more preoccupied with themselves than with their guests. Cecilia remains stoic and quiet, wrapped in her vintage 1920s wedding dress. During this first close encounter, the boys realize that Lux stands out among her sisters and that she is everything that fascinates them about the blonde bunch. Lux is by far the most beautiful and sexy. She is "full of mischief." Cecilia suddenly excuses herself to disappear upstairs. Moments later, she quietly jumps through her bedroom window and dies impaled on the fence below.

Chapter 1 Analysis

"On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide ... the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope." With this opening line, the novel sets a tone that purposely defines the linearity of traditional storytelling. It starts by instructing the reader that every Lisbon girl already has taken "her turn at suicide," leaving open the question if each of them will succeed at the attempt. It immediately proceeds to crush all hope as the slow pace of the paramedics serves a warning to the reader - by now, everything about their suicides is already known and nothing will change. This draws an aura of fatality around the story that will persist and even thicken throughout the remaining pages. The first paragraph also sets the general tone of the novel, with its attention to details and its tendency to build lists and collections of objects. All the artifacts end up as meaningless as decorative props, much like the medical units carried by the paramedics represent to the dead body of Mary Lisbon.

For all its attention to detail, the novel still leaves some important questions unanswered. For instance, the reader knows the general timeline of the story, yet the exact date of the events is never revealed. The suburban city where the events are taking place is described with a lot of detail, but there's still no mention of an exact geographical location as the reader is left to guess the name of the mysterious city.

An even greater mystery is unveiled as the narrator's voice turns out to be a plural first person. This talking "we" establishes a point of view that is quite unusual for a narrative. Generally, the reader of a story will automatically identify with the narrator's voice when the latter is spoken through the subjective, first person mode. Indeed, as readers slip into the minds of the neighborhood boys, they get to see everything that the boys see and readers are informed of everything that they think. Yet because this "we" voice is a composite of several characters, and because each of these characters plays a different role in the story, readers are never informed with any precision as to whom they are or even how many are there. This is in striking contrast with the purpose of the investigation into the girls' life: "we" know what you look like and what you are doing, but what "we" want to know is what you are thinking and why are you doing what you do. This tension between what is seen and what it thought mirrors the one that exists between the opposite genders. It is as though the males of the story are simply visual



creatures, powerless to make meaningful sense of the women's whereabouts or to discover what lies beyond their mundane day-to-day actions. This is exemplified by Cecilia's answer to the encouraging words provided by the doctor upon her arrival at the hospital - "Obviously, Doctor ... you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

The tension between the sexes is a recurrent theme that spans throughout the novel. Mr. Lisbon is a somewhat effeminate man who's trying in vain to express his manliness. His fixation on televised baseball and his vain attempt to keep the boys interested in his toolbox during the chaperoned party are just signs that he is failing at this task. On the opposite side, Mrs. Lisbon shows little of the characteristics that are associated with females. She doesn't try to be attractive, doesn't wear makeup and doesn't even walk as a woman should. She uses her authority in the house much like a man should. She looks so remotely womanly that the narrators wonder how possible it is for such a creature to spawn five attractive girls like the Lisbon sisters.

From the second paragraph on, the novel settles into flashback mode, turning the clock back thirteen months, to the day of Cecilia's first attempt at suicide. The vague, multifaceted object of the narrators' obsession is unveiled when they attend the chaperoned party at the Lisbon house. This first encounter with the girls reveals differences that didn't exist before in their collective mind. From then on, the narrators are able to focus more efficiently on the object of their desire. Prior to the party, their obsession was just a collection of five attractive girls with blonde hair; now they appear different and unique, both similar and different at the same time.

Cecilia's suicide during that same party points to the impossibility of definitively knowing the object of one's desire without affecting it. The boys get to meet the five girls, but just as they get close enough to finally interact with the girls, it turns out there is only four of them left. This suggests that the whole novel could be an application of the quantum theory, where the act of observation itself is said to modify its object. In a way, the Lisbon girls are like the Schrödinger's cat in the theoretical experiment of the same name. Schrödinger's cat is a thought experiment that serves to illustrate the strangeness of quantum mechanics. Indeed, it is impossible for the narrators to know who the girls are because observing them might kill them. Observing the girls makes it impossible to know whether they are still alive or already dead. This connection to the quantum theory is verified by Paul Baldino, whose attempt to observe the girls more closely finds one of them in between life and death. It is verified again in the final episode of the story when the boys finally get close enough to do something meaningful about the girls (e.g., saving them from their dreadful environment). They are already either dead, or dying, or living, but about to die. The very act of getting close enough to an object of desire makes it impossible to know who and what that object really is... or was.

The first chapter introduces the usage of intertwined symbols of religion and sexuality, a pattern that will be recurrent throughout the novel. Cecilia's initial attempt at suicide finds her clutching a picture of the Virgin Mary, yet when she is found dying in her bathtub, she is naked with her wrists opened. This combination of symbols points to an ambivalent attitude toward virginity. Indeed, as Peter Sissen found out, she just had her



first period not too long ago - now she spills blood all over the bathroom and lays down in a bathtub full of water, naked and dying. Her favorite outfit, a slightly soiled vintage wedding dress from the 1920s, also points in a symbolic fashion to the opposite of virginity. A wedding dress is a piece of clothing meant to be worn only once, at the crossing of the fragile and irreversible border that stands between virginity and mature sexual activity. Indeed, Cecilia is caught somewhere in between two states, virgin and sexually active, alive and dead. She ultimately decides on the latter and dies wrapped in her wedding apparel, impaled on the picket of a fence, and only a few drops of blood are spilled. Her death puts an end to her virginity just as much as it does her life.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The paramedics come to the house for the second time and remove Cecilia's body after cutting out part of the fence. Oblivious to the drama, the neighbors keep busy with their summer activities. Deaths are rare events in the suburb except for household pets, and the local cemetery has been full for a number of years already. The cemetery workers' strike, which started a few weeks earlier, prevents a proper burial. Cecilia's funeral is held in a non-denominational public cemetery, awkwardly located in between two highways. The ongoing strike is the reason the burial ground is in disarray, but the ceremony goes forward nonetheless. Some of the parents in the neighborhood attend the funeral. However, most of the attendees, including the parents of the neighborhood boys, decide to leave their children at home in the hope of preventing a possible infection of their minds. The remaining sisters attend the ceremony but they remain silent and show little sign of grieving. Later, members of the community will see this as a forewarning sign of their impending suicides. After the ceremony, the body of Cecilia is taken to a mortuary freezer and stored until a proper burial can take place.

The experience of the death of Cecilia reinforces the boys' obsession with the mysterious girls with blonde hair. While on duty at the Lisbon's house, an assistant to the plumber finds Cecilia's diary and ends up giving it to the boys. The secret book was found unlocked. The diary covers over a year of events in the girl's life up to her premature death. The diary is filled with facts and joyful drawings, and it gives no clear sign or reason for the upcoming dramatic turn of events. The narrators try in vain to decipher the meaning of the suicide by studying her diary. Tim Winer, the frail science wizard among the boys, fails at the task of decoding further meaning to the pages. Still, passages from the book are often read aloud between the boys, to no avail. An interview conducted decades later with Mr. Lisbon brings little new material to the investigation. Cecilia spent the morning working on the decorations for the party, and then went to her room to listen to music. She then took a bath that started early in the afternoon and lasted for several hours. Fearing a repetition of her last attempt at suicide, family members kept checking on her but nothing happened. She stepped out of the bath and dressed for the party. Nobody found her stoic stance during the party unusual, since she was typically shy and silent when strangers were around. On her way upstairs, she stopped by the kitchen and drank some pear juice out of the can. Additional interviews with some of her neighbors who happened to be onlookers at the time ended up revealing nothing worthy of further examination. One neighbor claims to have seen Cecilia carrying a suitcase. Another neighbor claims that he saw her opening the window. Nobody witnessed the actual jump.



Chapter 2 Analysis

The story is set in a typical suburb, somewhere in the heart of the United States. The community lives in a collection of similar houses, planted in the middle of similar square yards, delimited by similar fences. Each home is host to a similar elm tree. Back in the early 1970s, the suburbs were planned as areas providing manufactured comfort and happiness to the wealthier section of the American middle class. The suburb is new, properly maintained, clean and shiny, well organized and secure. In other words, the neighborhood is built to maintain an appearance of virginity against the poor, dirty and dangerous city that lies beyond. However, as if triggered by Cecilia's death, the community starts to show early signs of decay. It appears that the self-inflicted death of one of its children caught the whole community off guard. Everyone acts as if all they could do is provide an automated, pre-packaged answer to the problems around them. Yet the suicide is a problem for which they have no answer. For the neighborhood boys, Cecilia's death is the first time they have to confront the death of someone they know. The community itself seemed unable to come to terms with the tragedy and insist on referring to the suicide as an "accident." They act as if ignoring the problem would make it vanish. Even the psychiatrist, whose training should have done a better job at giving the family an answer to their concern, can only state the obvious and issue a vague and unenforceable suggestion to the parents.

The cemetery hosting Cecilia's funeral is described as having a structure similar to the city it serves. Similar tombstones are set in the middle of parallel miniature and equidistant yards, and surrounded by a clean, virginal field. However, the workers' strike has left the cemetery unattended and uncared for. The cemetery is a distorted mirror image of the clean and well-maintained suburb. Clearly, the early signs of decay appearing in the cemetery foreshadow the later decay of the Lisbon's house and the eventual spread of that cancer to the rest of the suburban city. Ironically, by the time the suburb begins to decay at the end of the novel, the cemetery will have recovered its manufactured virginity.

Cecilia's diary, a book-within-a-book, plays mirroring tricks with the reader. In many ways, the diary is similar to the book the reader is going through. The narrators reveal that her diary is filled with mundane details about the girls' life and that it fails to deliver any meaningful clue pointing to the possible motives of her suicide. It leaves the neighborhood boys wondering about the purpose of a diary that doesn't care to reflect what is going its author's state of mind. The diary is also written in a way that mirrors the plurality of the narrators' voice. In it, Cecilia writes with a point of view that makes it difficult to decide whether she is speaking of herself or of the rest of her sisters. This point of view is a feminine counterpart to the "we" used by the narrators. While the boys report that they spent many evenings reading passages of the diary aloud and reflected on them, they never bother to quote these passages in the novel. Not surprisingly, the novel also reads like a diary, albeit an investigative one. Just like Cecilia's diary, the novel records mundane events of the girls' life which, in the end, will fail to explain anything that is not already known about the girls' tragic destiny.



A large part of the second chapter is dedicated to documenting the final moments of Cecilia's life. However, it turns out that everything she did on the afternoon of her suicide was no different from what teenagers do on a regular day. She helped with the party preparations, listened to music, took a long bath, dressed up for the party and drank pear juice from a can. Several witnesses from the neighborhood claimed to recall observing her after she went upstairs with precision, yet none of those could remember seeing her jump to her death. Again, observation and spying plays a crucial, yet silent role in the unfolding events, leaving the reader to wonder if the observation itself played a role in the death of the girl.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The suburban community floods the Lisbon's house with flowers and sympathy notes, only to find through the delivery boy's account that the gifts are being ignored. The flowers litter the floor, left to die on their own. Mr. Lisbon either buries himself in his work as a teacher or immerses himself into televised baseball. The few fathers who went to the house report that they were indeed greeted by Mr. Lisbon, but that he would only discuss the baseball season, making it impossible to discuss the death of his last child. Father Moody, the Catholic priest, is brave enough to pay a visit to Mrs. Lisbon, who by then has all but retreated to her room. The reverent is unable to reach out to her and discuss the suicide. All he can do is notice the disturbing state of disarray that the house is in because of a complete lack of housekeeping.

Some of the fathers decide to take the matters in their own hands and get rid of the fence that killed the youngest Lisbon daughter. Their effort is hampered by their lack of manual skills. None of the Lisbon family members participate in the activity. The men end up having to hire a professional in order to uproot the fence and finish the job. The community later joins hands in an effort to sanitize the area by cleaning up the corpses of fish flies littering the whole neighborhood that cover the walls of every house. The neighborhood boys decide to get together and clean the outside of Lisbons' house. Mr. Lisbon steps out of the house to thank them. He later recounts that as he went back inside his house, he realized that his children had become total strangers to him. He also confesses that he had been scared by Bonnie, whom he found standing next to the window of Cecilia's room wrapped in a bed sheet. He mistook her for a ghost.

In late August, the psychiatrist offers the Lisbons a new consultation through a handwritten note, but Mrs. Lisbon turns down his offer. Around that same time, Mrs. Lisbon emerges from her self-imposed retreat and starts asserting her power over the family. Schools starts in early September and the girls show up dressed exactly as they were the previous year, as if summer never happened. Lux Lisbon starts several short-term relationships with different boys, but otherwise the girls keep to themselves in school. Some of the neighborhood boys try to initiate contact with them, but they are just as soon turned down.

Trip Fontaine, the suburb's heartthrob and all around macho guy, slips in Lux's classroom by mistake while trying to avoid a confrontation with the principal. He immediately falls in love with Lux and promises his skeptic flame that he'll be invited to her house. Against all odds, his strategy works and he manages to be invited to the Lisbons' house. He spends the evening stuck on the family couch, forced to watch a Disney special on television. Mrs. Lisbon purposely shields him from her daughter by sitting in between the two, leaving him to stare at her feet. Once the program is over, Mr. Lisbon politely shows him the way out and he retreats to his car. Lux, wrapped in a flannel nightgown, appears seemingly out of nowhere and slips into his car. For a few



brief minutes, she provides him with some of the most exquisite moment of physical closeness he has ever experienced. She quickly escapes back to her home and leaves Trip stunned and wondering exactly what happened and why. Lux ends up grounded and by October, the Lisbon girls have for all practical purposes retreated into their home, except to go to school and to attend church on Sundays. Their house is now showing clear signs of decay and starts to attract the attention of the increasingly weary community.

The local media, which to that date kept silent about Cecilia's "accident," suddenly publishes an article detailing the human tragedy of suicide and the effects of the girl's suicide on the community. The local television channel airs a program that tries to analyze suicidal teenagers and rationalize their experience. The program includes interviews with regretful teenagers. A mail campaign intended to raise public awareness to suicide through statistical data follows.

Months after Cecilia's suicide, the high school organizes a special Day of Grieving, allegedly as a means of helping the students cope with the tragedy. During that special day, the suicide itself is only vaguely referenced by the teachers. The Lisbon sisters manage to avoid all the activities of the day by hiding in the school's bathroom. The school then hires Mrs. Kilsem, a social worker whose task is to help the students cope with social and psychological problems. This strategy seems to work for a while as the Lisbon girls participate and confide in her in private meetings. It even looks as though the sessions have a positive effect on the girls, at least for a while. Lux gets to participate in a school play and the girls seem generally more joyful. However, it is impossible for the narrators to learn what was discussed during those sessions, as Mrs. Kilsem eventually disappeared and all her files were lost in a fire five years later.

Trip Fontaine manages to convince the Lisbon parents to let him take Lux to the Homecoming night. In exchange, he accepts several conditions imposed by Mrs. Lisbon - all the girls have to have dates, the party will be supervised by Mr. Lisbon and the sisters must return home by 11 P.M. The three remaining sisters are matched with a lucky neighborhood boy. On Homecoming night, the couples ride together to the dance, stacked inside Parkie Denton's yellow Cadillac, borrowed from his father. The girls are joyful and appear perfectly normal. All signs of weirdness have vanished from the girls, except for their plain dresses, which fail to reveal anything interesting, and their hairdos that are similarly straight and drab. They joke and laugh together with the boys all the way to the school dance. During the Homecoming party, they drink, chat and flirt joyfully. A few of them even find time make out and drink illicitly while hiding under the bleachers. One of the girls admits that she is having the best time of her life. Later that evening, Trip and Lux are voted Homecoming king and queen. Soon afterward, the two of them vanish from the dance floor and are nowhere to be seen. The remaining couples leave a little before 11 P.M. in order to make it home in time for Mrs. Lisbon curfew. Trip takes Lux to the football field, where they make love over the goal line. As soon as he's done, in a typical macho fashion, he grows sick of her and leaves her to walk home by herself. Lux finally reaches home past midnight, thus breaking the strict curfew imposed by Mrs. Lisbon as a condition of her attendance to the party.



Chapter 3 Analysis

After the death of Cecilia, the narrators' fascination for the girls becomes a fully-fledged obsession. The boys who were simple onlookers driven by sexual desire have turned into investigators and spies. The community appears unable to make sense of the girl's death. They flood the Lisbons with flowers and sympathy notes, but there's evidence that none of these attempts are truly heartfelt. The senders either just sign the card or write down bland references to emotions that they admit they cannot even fathom. It is also clear from that point on that none of the neighbors have a clue as to what the real meaning of the suicide is or what it implies for the community as a whole. On the other side of the fence, the Lisbon family barely acknowledges the flowers and cards that are being delivered. They leave the flowers in the living room without caring for them, leaving them to rot as meaningless junk. The author leaves it to the reader to decide whether the Lisbons don't care about such cold, pre-packaged expressions of sympathy, or simply because they don't care enough about the event itself to acknowledge the grief of their community. The fact that the flowers are delivered by a specialized company further accentuates the distance that the neighborhood maintains between the Lisbons and themselves, as if keeping the Lisbons at arm's length would somehow prevent infection. The few neighbors that tried to reach out to the Lisbons in person were greeted by Mr. Lisbon's blurb about professional baseball, which points either to a lack of grieving emotions or to a plain denial of the latter.

The neighbors' first reaction is to try to remove the fence that "killed" the youngest of the Lisbons. This act of uprooting is just as senseless as the suicide itself, as it only shows that the community is oblivious to the fact that their whole neighborhood is a grid of fences. Logic would dictate that every one of those fences would have to be removed in order to prevent another suicide by a copycat. As if to underline the lack of meaning of this enterprise, it turns out that the fathers, who are not used to performing manual tasks, don't even succeed at the job and end up having to call a company to complete the deed. This episode furthers the sense that the community lives in an inescapable bubble of manufactured answers.

Throughout the third chapter, the novel develops the male characters and the declining role of men as fathers/husbands in this particular society. It does so by introducing Trip Fontaine, the epitome of male characteristics, as they were still perceived during the early 70s. Set on the eve of the feminist revolution, the storyline involves couples and individuals who are having a hard time coping with the shifting of roles and identities that is taking place in the world around them.

Trip Fontaine represents everything the women are sexually attracted to, with no consideration to women's needs. This allows Fontaine to have short affairs with countless girls and women in his area, without having to get involved in a true relationship. Once he was initiated by a divorcee during a vacation in a Caribbean island, he immersed himself in a lifestyle of sex and drugs. This eventually led him to a decline and finally to a detox center, located in the middle of a desert. This is where he is interviewed by the narrators. Trip's family structure is a defiance of the traditional



composition of the family cell. His father is involved in a stable homosexual relationship. Trip has no visible mother and even though he's still a teenager, he's left to do anything he wants with no apparent restriction or rule. The sexual orientation of his father is of course, the opposite of his own. Trip's promiscuous lifestyle is also the opposite of his father's stable relationship with Donald. Still, the two men are connected by a similar attitude towards life that is centered on pleasure and self-image. This is indicated in the novel by their love of sunbathing together by the family pool.

According to his own account, Trip Fontaine's perception of women is shattered by his meeting with Lux. He falls in love on first sight and admits 20 years later that he never quite gotten over her. Lux is the first (and apparently the only) girl he ever had to work to get. In defiance of Lux's warning, he manages to convince the Lisbon parents to let him in the house. The reader is led to suspect that contrary to what he later declared during the interview, Trip's invitation to the house probably had more to do with convincing Mrs. Lisbon than her husband. The author has already established that Mr. Lisbon has little say in anything that relates to the family. In a way, Trip's power of seduction is such that he even manages to conquer whatever is left of female instincts in Mrs. Lisbon.

There's not a single sign of love or affection between the Lisbon parents. They seem to live in separate worlds even though they share the same living space. This separation is accentuated by the fact that their roles appear to be partially reversed. Mr. Lisbon is effeminate and has an obvious hard time to assert his position in the family structure. Mrs. Lisbon is manlier than her husband is and she plays the role of a moral leader. However, this role reversal is incomplete; neither of the parents will take over the tasks left out by their counterpart once trouble starts to show. Mr. Lisbon does not even try to clean the house or cook to compensate for his wife's lack of care for the housekeeping tasks. Mrs. Lisbon does not work for a living, and in spite of her manly overtones, she doesn't bother with any manual tasks. Mr. Lisbon relentlessly watches televised baseball, an obvious reaction to the mindlessness of the Disney channel that the rest of the family is forced to watch. Baseball is Mr. Lisbon's way of asserting his male side, even though he does not play the game himself and only cares for the technical details of team management. Outside of his workplace, he barely interacts with the other members of the community. He acts as though he's ashamed of his role in the family. Mrs. Lisbon's character is entirely driven by religion and moral motives, and when the problems starts to show, she gives up on most of her duties as a mother to concentrate on imposing her moralistic view of the world onto the rest of the family.

Life in the suburb is so organized and bland that the only game in town is one of watching. The neighborhood boys watch the girls, the girls watch the boys, neighbors watch each other and everyone watches TV. It a spectator's world that leaves little time or room to do anything worthy of being watched. When Trip pays a visit to the Lisbons' house in the hope of convincing Lux's parents of his intentions and eventually earning a date with her, he ends up sitting by Mrs. Lisbon on the couch and forced to watch a Disney special on TV along with the rest of the family. He is shielded from the girl of his dreams by her mother, and the best he can do is to catch a glimpse of Lux's feet while he pretends to laugh at the childish humor on TV. For the Lisbon family, watching television is easier and safer than having real interactions with people. Watching



television also solves problems by preventing the viewer from getting involved with anyone who could potentially bring about trouble.

In the novel, the media as a whole does nothing but provide canned responses to the undergoing, sometimes tragic events. The local printed-paper is the first to react to Cecilia's suicide, albeit with an important delay. It arrives in the form of a weakly documented report that avoids the real facts and tries to tie Cecilia's suicide with a rising wave of teenager suicides throughout the country. A television program soon follows and the result is even vaguer about the specifics. It shows interviews with teenagers who allegedly tried (and obviously failed) at suicide. In the end, the television show brings nothing new to help the community, except provide one more spectator's escape from reality. A mail-based information campaign then floods the suburb's mailboxes with irrelevant information pamphlets filled with statistics about suicide rates. Since no one in the self-serving media dared to ask the right questions, the whole community is left without an answer.

Lux acquires a central role in the novel, starting in chapter three. The reader already knows from the boys' previous encounter with the girls that Lux embodies everything that attracts them to the Lisbon daughters. She is said to be both beautiful and "full of mischief," a combination of qualities that is sure to trigger any boy's sexual desire. In a typical fashion, her name takes a special meaning in the novel, one that foreshadows her role as a key player in the unfolding events. Names are often used as key metaphors in fictional literature. Lux is Latin for "light." Indeed the fourteen-year-old girl is not only the brightest star of the family from physical point of view, but she also appears to informally lead it, as she handles most of the relationships between the outside world and the remaining Lisbon sisters. She acts as the lookout for the girls before the party. She will be doing the same later when she uses the lights in her bedroom to communicate with the boys on a different occasion, and more specifically through the days leading to the June 15th rescue attempt. By the end of the third chapter, she is arguably the most active member of the family, a role that by the end of the chapter triggers the lockdown on the house.

"Lux" is also the shortened form of the word "luxuria," which is Latin for "lust," the first of the seven deadly sins as catalogued by the Christian faith. In the context of the Bible, lust is defined as an inordinate desire for sex outside of or without marriage, standing opposite to the virtue of chastity. Her multiple sexual encounters during her school days, followed by her relentless search for sexual satisfaction on the roof of the Lisbon's house in the following chapter, puts lust at the forefront of the characteristics of the young woman. Lux is anything but a virgin and her suicide, just like the suicides of her sisters, can be interpreted as a dramatic rejection of virginity. In other words, the suicides are rebuttals of the purity and chastity imposed on them by their mother, by religion, and by the society in which they live.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As a result of Lux's disobedience, Mrs. Lisbon imposes a lockdown on the house. She also orders Lux to destroy all her rock records. The girls are confined to the house from then on and none will be able to attend school while the lockdown is in effect. During an interview decades later, Mrs. Lisbon states that this drastic move was only intended to allow the girls to recover from their sister's tragic death. Other witnesses interviewed by the narrators suggest that by that time, Mrs. Lisbon has also stopped taking care of her household altogether, leaving the family to resort to foraging for food in a dirty and decaying environment.

Besides Mr. Lisbon's daily commuting to his daytime job at the school, no family member is seen leaving the home. Soon after the lockdown however, the boys start to observe Lux having sexual encounters with strange men on the roof of the family house. The narrators have no clue as to how these men managed to get in the house, to meet Lux or even less how they could get on the roof without being noticed by the parents. Later interviews with some of the men involved in these affairs provide no further details on the specifics of the arrangements. However, the men reveal that they saw Lux as akin to an angel, even though she would often act as though she was bored with the sexual activity she was in. These sexual escapades go on for a few weeks, under the spying eyes of the mesmerized neighborhood boys who keep watching her through binoculars. The ambulance appears once again, this time to pick up Lux who's seemingly in pain. At first, the boys feared a new suicide attempt, but they later discover that she was faking the pain in order to get a pregnancy test. The test comes out negative and she is officially diagnosed as a victim of indigestion to save her reputation. Dr. Hornicker, the psychiatrist, visits Lux during her stay at the hospital. He publishes a new report in which the Lisbon girls are portrayed as victims of a post-traumatic stress disorder. He adds that there is a possibility that suicides are repetitive within a family, likening suicide to a viral infection. Word gets around and the suburban community starts to assume that Cecilia is somehow responsible for infecting her sisters. Vilified by the parents of the other students for not paying enough attention to his daughters' problems, Mr. Lisbon is eventually forced to abandon his teaching job.

During the winter season, the desolation accelerates around of the Lisbons house as the signs of the progressing decay become more apparent. Despite the harsh, wintry conditions, Lux continues to meet strange guys on the rooftop. By then the weekly deliveries of grocery have stopped and the only indication that there's still someone alive within the walls of the Lisbon house is the daily sight of Bonnie stepping out to recite the rosary. She looks frailer with every passing day and the boys start to worry about the girls' health. To make matters even worse, the air around the house permeates with a persistent and overpowering stench. In mid-January, Mr. Lisbon is observed stepping out of the house to hang belated Christmas lights in the yard.



Hoping to discover the state of mind of the girls, the boys start intercepting some of Therese's ham radio conversations. In the end, Therese's mundane conversations reveal absolutely nothing about the conditions of living inside the house. They also notice that the Lisbon mailbox is filling up with catalogs addressed to the girls. They decide to subscribe to the same mail-order catalogs, which are filled with fancy clothing apparel and exotic vacation locations. They try to imagine what it would be like to escape with the girls to some far away place and be happy with them around. However, even though they feel for their female counterparts, no matter how hard they try, they find it impossible to imagine what is going on in their minds. The reason is that for all they can see, and despite the obviously difficult environment that the girls live in, they appear to live just as any ordinary teenager does.

By now, the Lisbons are a common subject of conversation around the suburb's dinner tables. Even Mrs. Karafilis, Demo's grandmother, is inquiring about the girls' status. This old Greek woman had been living in the half-darkness of Demo's basement for a long time and until then never seemed to bother much with the whereabouts of the neighborhood. In her younger days, she had managed to survive by hiding and eating olive pits for a month while the Turkish army invaded her village. She had little sympathy for the comfortable living of the Americans and just couldn't understand why these people were always pretending to be happy. Still, the Lisbon girls were an exception and she said that she apparently had real sympathy for the girls. To her, suicide was a suitable solution.

Early in springtime, the city workers, acting on an ordinance from the city Parks Department, start to selectively trim some of the neighborhood's Elm trees in preparation of their removal. Apparently, the selected trees were identified as victims of the contagious Dutch elm disease, which was threatening to spread across an even greater area. The infected trees had to be removed. The Elm tree planted in the Lisbon's yard was one of the selected. The tree is trimmed of its branches in preparation for its removal. A few days later, the workers show up with their chainsaws in hands to complete the deed. At the last moment, the four girls spring out of the house and surround it, forming a human wall against the workmen's chainsaws. The workers backup and an argument ensues, until the workers finally give up and return to their truck, officially postponing the removal of the Lisbon tree indefinitely.

The boys are starting to feel like they lost the Lisbon girls for good. Suddenly, mysterious secret messages written on Virgin Mary plastic cards start to appear in the neighborhood. Lux's Chinese lantern flashes undecipherable messages. The boys finally resort to phoning the Lisbon girls and they manage to communicate by playing songs from records on both ends, though subsequent calls remain unanswered. A few days later, they note that the girls are apparently busy packing. On June 14, a note appears in their mailbox calling for them to be ready to act at midnight on the following day. Comes midnight on June 15, the boys make it to the Lisbon house and are greeted by Lux who makes them wait for the other girls, then disappears in her parent's car. The boys wait for a while then decide on roaming the house to find out what is happening, only to stumble upon dead bodies. They learn that the four remaining girls have



attempted suicide around the time of their failed rescue attempt, and that only Mary survived.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The dialogue established over the phone between the two groups and based on the playback of popular songs once again point to the impossibility of meaningful communication between the two sexes within the boundaries of manufactured dialogues. While the boys play songs that mean something to them, their intent is voided by the songs played back as answers by the girls: pre-packaged communications that seem to fit one party's intentions. In this mediated dialogue, the songs played apart completely irrelevant. Popular songs, like all man-made goods, acquire a personal meaning that cannot be communicated simply by good itself.

Mrs. Karafilis is a character that brings balance in the artificially young and virginal suburb where the Lisbon girls live. She is the only old person to have an active role in a story where it seems like everyone is either very young or middle-aged. She has a first-person experience of the hardship of the world, though she now lives in a place where people have been protected in a cocoon of security and stability for a whole generation. She had a close brush with death. She had to survive on her own through some very difficult times and she lost her loved ones. Of course, nothing of the sort can be said about anyone in the suburban community. With age and experience comes wisdom, a quality that is utterly lacking in the other characters, all having proved that they are incapable of coming up with a solution to a problem outside the realm of the pre-fabricated world they live in. Finally, she is outspoken about her sympathy for the Lisbon girls, something quite remarkable in a community where everyone tends to his or her own self-interest first, which limits the scope of neighborly empathy to gossip. The narrators imagine that she might very well have some sort of secret communication channel with the girls.

The removal of the elm trees, which are contaminated by a foreign infectious disease, is a highly symbolic episode in the life of the suburb. On a personal scale, the passage is an allegory of the girls' stance on life. Their surprising intervention, meant to prevent the cutting down of the tree after its leaves and branches had been trimmed, reads like a statement about life in general. You can trim all signs of life off them, but you should let them handle their own death. "Nature has a way of handling death on its own" sounds like an irrefutable argument coming from a girl whose life signs have already been cut off. Similarly, the tree episode is an allegory of the fate of the suburb, a forewarning sign of its inevitable decay. The city has tried to survive in a bubble, but that bubble's seal is broken and an infectious disease slipped in. Getting rid of the infected part will do no good in preventing the spread of the disease, as logic dictates that once the pollution cycle has started, it's already too late. In the end, a selective surgery by way of removal would only succeed at accelerating the whole process. The move by the city to remove the killer trees mirrors the removal of the fence by the fathers in the preceding chapter.



Indeed, the community is quick to blame the victims. This strategy provides them with an easy way of offsetting reality. It ultimately limits their ability to identify the real nature of the tragedy that is at stake. Blaming Cecilia's suicide on the fence that spiked her or on her father's shortsightedness, just like blaming the Lisbon's decaying environment on Cecilia, is a simplistic response. It will ultimately prevent the community from being able to deal with the same problems once they hit them.

According to Mrs. Perl's final article about the suicides, the rock band "Cruel Crux" — the only fictional band name to appear in the novel — wrote a song containing the words "virgin suicides" with reference to sexual activity. This band was supposedly among Lux's popular play list. Apart from being quite an unusual name for a 70s band (more akin to the names used by death metal bands of the 1990s), "Cruel Crux" could just as well have been the title of the novel. Indeed, it points to the cruel side effects of religion and to the symbolic sighting of Lux's bra hanging suggestively over a crucifix that showed up early in the novel.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The paramedics are again called to the Lisbon house, this time to pick up the dead bodies of Lux, Therese, and Bonnie. Another pair of more experienced paramedics is called in to save Mary's life. She is found barely alive on the kitchen floor. Mary's life is safe for the time being. After detecting a slightly low level of serotonin in Mary's blood, the psychiatrist decides that his previous assessment of the situation was inadequate. He prescribes a combination of pharmaceuticals and therapy in the hope of curbing the chemical imbalance. Mary follows the advice and after two weeks of treatment, her serotonin level is back to normal and she's declared fine. Meanwhile, a coroner and his two assistants are brought in from a different city to perform the autopsies on the bodies, as mandated by a state law. The coroner's report reveals that he is greatly saddened by this task. The coroner also says that the girls were the youngest and cleanest bodies he ever had to deal with. He confirmed the causes of death, which were already known, and found nothing suspicious about the cases.

The local newspaper then publishes a series of articles written by Mrs. Perl, the same investigative reporter who had authored the previous paper about the suicides following Cecilia's death. She interviews many people, friends and witnesses, and writes about curious coincidences and foreshadowing events, and in the end, she paints a picture of the events that is as unbelievable as if the scenario had been concocted from a Ouija board. The other media outlets then raid the neighborhood and in their desperate attempt to add their grain of salt to the story, they interview more people, shoot more camera footage, and unearth more vaguely intriguing artifacts and photos, all to no avail. The boys are convinced that this attempt by the media does nothing but a grave injustice to the memory of the girls.

To the relief of the community who obviously wants the Lisbons to leave, Mr. Lisbon decides to put the house up for sale. He hires the English teacher from the high school to clean up the house and restore it to a sellable condition while the couple moves temporarily to a hotel. During the cleanup, multiple items belonging to the Lisbon family and deemed worthless by the English teacher are thrown away. The boys hurry to collect the important artifacts and photos so that they can be added to a collection of exhibits that is stored in the tree house. The valuable goods are sold during a garage sale. While the interior of the house is restored, the exterior remains in disarray and the house was eventually sold at a substantially reduced price to a young couple who still lives there two decades later.

While Mary is still alive, the plaque on a commemorative bench donated by a group of parents reads: "In memory of the Lisbon girls, daughters of our community." The Lisbon family moved back to their empty house and camped in the master bedroom while Mary, now out of the hospital, slept in a sleeping bag in her old bedroom. A few days later, she takes a voice lesson then leaves without paying. The boys attend the coming-out party



of a local girl, get drunk and party all night. Upon returning at daybreak, they look toward the Lisbon house and notice the flashing lights of the EMS truck parked in front of the Lisbon house. The paramedics find the body of Mary in her sleeping bag, dressed in a suit and with makeup on, full of sleeping pills.

On that same day Mary dies, the cemetery worker's strike ends. The girls are finally reunited on their burial day but no one except the Lisbon couple, the priest and a cemetery employee attends the funerals. Later on that day, the Lisbon parents leave the suburb for good. The whole area starts to show signs of gradual decay, as if the suburb now rid of all remaining elm trees had itself become a victim of a contagious, uncontrollable disease. The boys grow up but never truly grow out of their suburb and the mystery of the five suicides haunts them into their older days, still unsolved.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Dr. Hornicker runs out of ready-made solutions to explain the girls' deaths. After finding a small deficiency in Mary's blood sample, the psychiatrist retreats to the last rampart of his specialty and prescribe a combination of pills and therapy in one last attempt to save the girl's life. Once again, he fails to realize that this is just another way of blaming the problem on the victim. By then, everyone in the neighborhood knows that the exercise is futile. The community installs a bench in memory of the dead Lisbon sisters, even though one of them is still alive. Like the paramedics, the community has abandoned the child to her destiny. The inability to understand or explain the events surrounding them has forced the community members to give up even trying to prevent them. Once again, the author uses the irony of the mirroring effect to kill Mary using sleeping pills.

Mrs. Perl's inquiry into the suicides is yet another attempt to shift the blame onto the victims. In her first article, she blamed Cecilia for spreading a contagious suicidal attitude to her sisters. Later, she will blame the dead girls for orchestrating their own death. In order to prove her point, Mrs. Perl builds an improbable scenario that freely mixes elements of music, religion and astrology. Unable to pinpoint the source of the trouble, she tries to rebuild the events from the scattered pieces of evidence she gathered from the neighborhood. This process, which also reflects the ongoing investigation of the narrators, only manages to bring more mystery to the case. Her investigation is self-serving; she is unable to look beyond the artifacts she collected and she never gives a thought about her own role in the events.

Mary's suicide attempt mirrors that of her youngest sister. Both tried and failed their first attempt, only to succeed a month later. Both were found dead dressed as they wanted to live - Cecilia wearing her vintage wedding dress and Mary the clothes and makeup she wish she could wear while she was living. They both washed extensively. Mary took long showers, while Cecilia stayed in the bathtub for hours on end. Their obsession with washing is a ritual performed as an attempt to retain or maybe even regain a virginal state of purity.



Characters

The neighborhood boys

The neighborhood boys are young teenagers from the same suburban neighborhood where the Lisbon girls live. Though the exact composition of the group is not explicitly revealed, these male teenagers are behind the collective "we" narrating of *The Virgin Suicides*. The boys give the novel its unique point of view. Aside from being early teens with little experience of the outside world, these neighborhood boys have several points in common. First among these common points is an uncontrollable fascination for the shrinking circle of blonde teenagers that live in their suburban neighborhood. This attraction is driven by a curiosity that is obviously sexual, at least during the first half of the book. However, this curiosity evolves along with the story and turns into an all-out investigation set to discover the secrets of their blonde neighbors.

For the greater part of the novel, the neighborhood boys are silent, powerless observers of the girls. Except for a few occasions, none of them gets to interact much with the object of their desire on an individual basis. They remain collectively puzzled by the girls' behavior and they secretly watch over them from afar, trying to get into their minds through whatever evidence they can get their hands on. Eventually, the reader will be led to conclude that the narrating voice is recounting the story from a time that is located roughly two decades after the events. When they do get to interact with the girls, the result is usually as passive participants in a drama in which they feel like powerless pawns. The group is invited twice to the house: first by the parents, at which time Cecilia falls to her death through her bedroom window, and last by the Lux and the girls, for a doomed rescue mission that turns out to be catastrophic.

Mrs. Lisbon

Mrs. Lisbon is the mother of the Lisbon girls. Her age and first name are never revealed, but she's probably in her late forties or early fifties. Physically, Mrs. Lisbon does not look like her daughters at all, and nothing in her appearance would lead an observer to associate her with her children. Her heavy body type, gray hair and her glasses indeed make it hard to imagine how she could have been the mold for the nice girls that she is raising. Her housekeeping habits are average at best and her motherly love is never expressed except negatively, through the rules she imposes. Mrs. Lisbon has little interaction with the suburban community she lives in and almost never reaches outside the confines of the family's home.

Mrs. Lisbon is a devoted Catholic of the most traditional faith. Through her actions and her attitude, she forces her beliefs and values onto the rest of the family. She is a dominating character and she imposes her rules on the family. Her opinions on everything, from television watching schedules to regular church attendance, weigh heavy on the Lisbon's life. She forbids the girls from wearing any kind of revealing



clothes or even makeup. Cecilia's first attempt at suicide carries a clear indication that she is rejecting those radical values in the shape of the picture of the Virgin Mary that she was holding when found. However, Mrs. Lisbon refuses to follow Dr. Hornicker's advice to give the girls more leeway in expanding their social life outside the house that they live in. Still, she gives in to pressure from her husband and decides to throw a chaperoned party in honor of her recovering daughter and to let the neighborhood boys in for the occasion. The event takes a dramatic turn when Cecilia decides to use this opportunity to take her own life.

After Cecilia's death, Mrs. Lisbon retreats to her room and spends the next few weeks in bed. Even as she recovers, she seems to have abandoned any attempt at restoring the house to a livable space and the environment starts to deteriorate rapidly. She caves in to the community's demand and finally allows her daughters to attend a Homecoming party thrown by the school. When she finds that her strict demands are not respected by Lux, Mrs. Lisbon decides to lock down the house and retrieve the girls from school, apparently in the hope that this will give them time to "recover" on their own. The house and the surrounding yard then start to deteriorate even more rapidly. Mrs. Lisbon plays no obvious active role in the novel from that moment on, but the reader is led to assume that she's still responsible for enforcing the strict system that rules over the decaying household of the Lisbon. The narrators managed to interview the then divorced mother two decades later, but she only grants them a short interview without letting them inside her home, thus only adding to the mystery of the suicides.

Mr. Lisbon

Mr. Lisbon, whose first name is never revealed, is the father of the Lisbon girls. He works as a math teacher at the same high school attended by every teenager in the neighborhood. He is an avid baseball fan and is an assistant to the soccer coach. His position as a teacher at the school allows the girls to receive free tuition at the school.

Mr. Lisbon is thin and his physique does not display any obvious male qualities. At home, he feels drowned by his female counterparts where his male abilities appear to be useless. While he wishes for more recognition, he is unable to assert himself and he is completely dominated by his wife, Mrs. Lisbon. His ability to impose his decisions in the house is quite limited and the family environment leaves him feeling inadequate and overwhelmed. He spends most of his free time watching baseball on TV.

At work, Mr. Lisbon seems to enjoy his duty and he takes a lot of pride in the little innovation he can bring. He built a mechanical replica of the solar system that he carefully adjust daily to match the actual planetary position. Following the Homecoming, apparently oblivious to the house shutdown imposed by his wife, he retires to himself at work and eats his daily lunch on his own in the classroom. The parents and the other members of the academic environment start blaming him for his loose grip on his family following Cecilia's suicide. A few weeks after Mrs. Lisbon impose a lockdown on the house, he either leaves his post or is fired by the authorities (the actual reason is not made clear.) He retires to the house, having no further role to play in the unfolding story.



During an interview with Mr. Lisbon performed two decades later, the narrators reveal that the Lisbon parents have since divorced.

Cecilia Lisbon

Cecilia is thirteen-years-old. She is the youngest of the Lisbon sisters. Her character is central to the first chapter of the novel, which is mainly a chronicle of her attempts at suicide. Like all the Lisbon girls, she has blonde hair but otherwise she looks much like any other teenager of the same age. She is usually seen wearing a vintage 1920s wedding dress that does not quite fit, the same dress she is wearing when she dies.

She is very shy and she constantly bites her nails. She is not very self-conscious and she is rather oblivious to the world outside of her immediate family. She is fond of vintage Celtic music and listens to records that she orders through the mail. She keeps a diary that chronicles her life and that of her sisters in rather mundane terms. Her own sisters keep referring to her as the weird one.

Her first, unsuccessful attempt at suicide is performed by slitting both her wrists in the family bathtub upstairs. Her second and final attempt happens during a chaperoned party thrown for her by her parents, which the neighborhood boys attend. She participates in the preparation of the party, but during the latter, she keeps to herself sitting on a barstool without interacting with anyone. She then excuses herself from the party and goes off to kill herself by jumping off the bedroom window. She dies impaled on the fence, her eyes wide opened, clutching a picture of Virgin Mary.

In the remaining chapters, the readers are constantly reminded of Cecilia's absence as a void in the girls' lives. The room where the chaperoned party was held is left untouched by the family. When the boys finally return to the house a year later, they discover that absolutely nothing has changed and everything was left as it was when the suicide happened. The family never recovered from her death. The suicide acted as a delayed trigger for the remaining deaths.

Lux Lisbon

Lux is fourteen-years-old. She is the youngest surviving Lisbon sister after Cecilia takes her own life at the end of chapter one. Lux is both slim and sexy. She is also very attractive. The narrators readily admit that she is the one that represents everything that attracted them to the Lisbon girls in the first place. Her name, which is unusual and sets her apart from the other Lisbon girls, means "light" in Latin. It can also be interpreted as an abbreviation for "luxuria," the first of the seven deadly sins recognized by the Catholic faith. Luxuria is Latin for lust.

She is a controlling character and is often the lookout for her sister. From the middle of chapter three and until the very end of the novel, her character takes a central role, relegating the other girls' characters to relative obscurity. However, despite her somewhat promiscuous lifestyle, she is not genuinely opened and does not entertain



more relationships outside the boundaries of the family than her sisters do. She has a smoking buddy in the form of another female student, but she does not confide in her, as the relationship is limited to a common hideout for secret smoking inside the school walls.

Lux is constantly playing her sexual appeal to sidestep the rules imposed by her mother, Mrs. Lisbon. She's been secretly smoking cigarettes since she was twelve-years-old. While she attends schools, her relationships are limited to short term sexual encounters with boys on the fringe, such as bikers and drug users. During an interview occurring decades after the last suicide, Trip Fontaine revealed that Lux was his only true love, the one girl he never gotten over. She was the only female he ever had to chase to get to and he sees her as the "shining pinnacle" of the Lisbon family. Lux was Trip's Homecoming date and they were both crowned king and queen of the Homecoming on that particular night.

On the night of the Homecoming, Lux is dumped by Trip Fontaine and has to return home by herself. She gets home a little past midnight, thus failing the 11 o'clock curfew imposed by her mother. This breaking of the rule is the reason Mrs. Lisbon uses to remove the girls from school and impose a lockdown on the family house. After the lockdown, she is often observed by the narrators having sex with strange men on the roof of the family house, even during the winter months. Subsequent interviews with the male actors of these brief encounters reveal that Lux was often staring at the sky, which suggest that she was emotionally detached from the sexual act. On July 15, she uses her sex appeal one last time to trick the boys into waiting in vain for her sisters to get ready. She then convinces the boys to allow her to wait for them in the family car parked in the garage. She is later found dead inside the car from carbon monoxide inhalation.

Bonnie Lisbon

Bonnie Lisbon is a blonde fifteen-year-old girl who's noticeably taller than her sisters are. She has light skin, and she's quiet and very pious. Beside Lux and Mary, Bonnie is the only girl that can be observed regularly by the boys after Mrs. Lisbon's imposed shutdown on the house. She often appears on the porch reciting the rosary, as one of the rare signs that something is still alive in the Lisbon house. On homecoming night, she is Joe Hill Conley's date. On that particular night, she appears friendly and outgoing. The body of Bonnie is the first discovered by the narrators on the night of the failed rescue. On June 15, the same day that Therese and Lux die, she commits suicide by hanging from a beam located in the basement of the house.

Mary Lisbon

Mary Lisbon is sixteen-years-old. She is poised, polite and very self-conscious. She spends a great deal of time in front of the mirror, taking care of her hair and polishing her looks. Her blonde hair is noticeably darker than that of her sisters. She's also has a slight mustache which she's been trying her best to hide. She pays attention to her



appearance and wears a brightly colored sweater every time she comes out of the house to pick up the mail, even though everything around her seems to fall to colorless ruins.

The novel opens with the arrival of the paramedics on the scene of Mary's suicide. Mary is the last of the Lisbon girls to die, having failed her first attempt on the night of June 15. During that first attempt, she tried to kill herself by sticking her upper body in the family's oven and waiting for the gas to run its course. She is ultimately saved by the paramedics and survives her sisters for a month. During that period, she's the only daughter of the Lisbon left alive, even though the community seems to consider her as good as dead. Her final weeks were spent sleeping and showering. She also makes an unannounced appearance at a voice class, which she then leaves without paying her dues. Her second, successful attempt at suicide occurs a month later. She uses an overdose of sleeping pills to kill herself and she is found carefully dressed and ready to be taken away. Her widely anticipated death coincides with the end of the cemetery strike, an event that up to that point prevented the five girls from being together again.

Therese Lisbon

Therese is seventeen-years-old, the oldest among the Lisbon sisters. She is perceived by the narrators as being a little awkward when compared the other girls in the Lisbon family. She is nerdish and not very handsome. According to the boys, she has a heavy face with the cheeks and eyes of a cow. Her physical abilities are also quite limited by her "two left feet." She is a good performer in school and she is mostly interested in science. She uses a ham radio to communicate with the outside world after the lockdown, but the mundane conversations that the narrators managed to intercept reveal nothing meaningful about the situation in the house or the possible motives for the foreshadowed suicides.

Her scientific knowledge allows her to respond to the city workers during the Elm tree incident by underlining the flawed logic of the cutting policy. With the help of her sisters, her intervention insures that indefinite postponement of the cutting of the Lisbon's tree. She dies from a combination of sleeping pills and gin on the night of June 15.

Trip Fontaine

Even though he's one of the neighborhood teens populating the suburb, Trip Fontaine is not part of the neighborhood boys who are narrating the story. He lives with his father in the same suburb, but his sexual activity and his lifestyle on the fringe keeps him apart from most of the other boys of the neighborhood. Because of this situation and that for obvious reasons he keeps most of his whereabouts secret, much of the information about him was gathered not through observation, but rather through an interview conducted decades after the suicides. By then Trip Fontaine is undergoing a detox treatment in an establishment somewhere in a desert. He is described as a victim of the excesses of his own lifestyle.



Trip Fontaine is a teenager whose blooming masculinity attracts females like steel to magnet. He was initiated to this lifestyle by a middle-aged woman whom he met while on a trip to Acapulco with Mr. Fontaine and his boyfriend Donald. Trip Fontaine then develops into an overwhelmingly sexual male character. His popularity with girls and his countless sexual adventures are in sharp contrast with the immature sexuality and general shyness of the narrators. Beside his sexual lifestyle, Trip Fontaine has a regular drug smoking habit that makes him take regular trips to his car while in school. He falls in love at first sight with Lux after slipping in her class to avoid the principal, manages to be invited to her house and finally takes her to the dance on Homecoming night. He takes her to the football field and makes love to her before dumping her abruptly, which triggers a chain of events that lead to the lockdown on the Lisbon house. During the interview, he still recalls Lux as the one girl he'd never quite gotten over.

Peter Sissen

Peter Sissen was the first of the neighborhood boys to set foot in the Lisbons' house. He had helped Mr. Lisbon set up a mechanical model of the solar system in his classroom. As a reward, he was invited to the Lisbons' house for a dinner with the family. During the meal, he excused himself to the bathroom and entered the one located upstairs. He then searched the area for secrets and later reports them emphatically to the rest of the boys. He discovers a soiled tampon, proving that one of the girls was having her period. He also managed to steal Lux's bra, which was found hanging suggestively over a crucifix. He was chased away from the bathroom by Lux. After the meal, he went back to the boys and bragged for weeks that he had discovered some very important secrets about the girls.

Paul Baldino

Paul Baldino is the fourteen-year-old son of a suspected local gangster, Sammy "The Shark" Baldino. Paul dress, acts and brags like a gangster himself. Because of his situation and his attitude, he was both feared and respected by the other boys. After telling everyone that he would get in the Lisbons' house and discover more secrets, he manages to infiltrate the house through the sewer system, possibly through a secret escape route that the narrators believe was installed by his father in his yard. While exploring the house for more secrets, he stumbles upon Cecilia lying in the bathtub with her wrists slit open. This timely discovery temporarily saves the youngest of the Lisbon sisters from certain, self-inflicted death.

Joe Larson

As one of the neighborhood boys, Joe Larson plays little active role in the story. However, his house is located directly across the street from the Lisbons' house. The boys often gather and hide in his house, sometimes even climbing on the roof, to observe the girls without being seen.



Dominic Palazzolo

Dominic Palazzolo is an overly romantic boy of Italian descent who only appears during the first chapter of the novel. He speaks almost no intelligible English but has fallen for Diana Porter, a wealthy girl living in the same suburb. Inspired by his love for the rich girl, he jumps off the roof of his house. Luckily, he walks away from the event unharmed. Soon afterward, he has to move back with his parents to a different state.

Chase Buell

Chase Buell is one of the neighborhood boys. His house, located close to the line of trees that borders the suburb, is often used as a gathering place. The boys meet in the attic and on the roof to discuss the girls' whereabouts, read Cecilia's diary or plan their future actions.

Joe the retard

Joe the retard is a handicapped boy living in the suburb. He was invited to the chaperoned party at the Lisbon house which he attends with the help of his mother. He provides a temporary distraction for the boys who reflect on his condition.

The paramedics

The paramedics are a pair of recurrent characters throughout the novel. They drive the EMS truck that comes to either rescue or pickup the girls. The two men appear on five different occasions throughout the novel: to rescue Cecilia from her first suicide attempt, to retrieve Cecilia's body from the fence, to carry Lux to the hospital following her fake burst appendix episode, to pick up the bodies on June 15, and finally to pick up Mary's body after he suicide. One of them is tall and thin, the other is overweight with a face covered with razor bumps. Both are professionals who do nothing beyond what their job definition tells them.

Dr. Hornicker

Dr. Hornicker is a reputed psychiatrist who works for the local hospital. He is a minor character for which no physical description is provided. Following Cecilia's first suicide attempt, which he diagnosed as a cry for help, he tries to counsel the family into providing a more open environment for the girls. This suggestion is ignored by Mrs. Lisbon. After Cecilia's death, he concludes that the remaining sisters are suffering from post-traumatic stress and warns that suicides are often repetitive within families. The final pages of the novel present Dr. Hornicker's analysis of the event, but this time the reasoning is flatly rejected by the narrators. They consider his diagnostic typical of the over-rationalization of the scientific community in reaction to traumatic events.



Mrs. Perl

Mrs. Perl is a local reporter who writes a few articles following the girls' suicides. She uses Cecilia's suicide to raise awareness to a perceived national trend of teenage suicides. She later publishes a series of articles about the death of the remaining girls as she tries (in vain, according to the neighborhood boys' analysis) to provide an explanation to these unfortunate events. She represents the self-serving, faceless mass media that mushroomed during the early part of the 1970s. She never appears in person in the novel and no description is otherwise provided.

Miss Kilsen

Miss Kilsen is a social worker hired by the local high school several months after Cecilia's suicide. She acts as a counselor to the students. Little is revealed about her personality. Her real identification and credentials turned out to be false, and the narrators were unable to track her down for a possible interview. The Lisbon girls probably attended several meetings during which they confided to her. Sadly, all the records pertaining to these meetings were lost in a fire.

Father Moody

Father Moody is a Catholic priest who pays a visit to the Lisbon house after Cecilia's death. Despite his position in the religious hierarchy that he represents, his opinions are not taken into account by Mrs. Lisbon. He later tries to visit Lisbon family once their house starts to degrade, but this later attempt is unsuccessful.

Mrs. Karafilis

Mrs. Karafilis is the grandmother of neighborhood teen Demo Karafilis. She lives in the basement of the Karafilis house. Her dramatic experience as a survivor of a Turkish massacre during her youth led her to despise the American lifestyle. Consequently, she displays very little interest for the suburban life that surrounds her. Mrs. Karafilis nonetheless cares for the Lisbon girls' fate. She sympathizes with them and says that their suicidal attitude isn't surprising. This leads the narrators to suspect that she and the Lisbon girls either communicate secretly or share a common outlook on life at a deeper level.

Kevin Head

Kevin is one of the neighborhood boys. He's a successful teenager who plays football and occasionally hangs out with Trip Fontaine. He accompanies Therese to the Homecoming.



Tim Winer

Tim Winer, known as "the brain," is gifted with an intelligence that compensates for his inferior physique. The neighborhood boys need him to plan, analyze and explain the world that surrounds them. Most notably, he provides insight when he's called upon to analyze the handwriting on a note left by the girls.

Tom Farheem

Tom Farheem is a neighborhood boy who overcomes his shyness and manages to be the first one to enter the house on the night of the failed rescue.

Parkie Denton

Parkie Denton is one of the neighborhood boys. He offers to drive the couples in his father's yellow Cadillac on the night of the Homecoming dance. He accompanies Mary on that night, when she reveals that she is having "the best time of [her] life."



Objects/Places

Cecilia's diary

Cecilia's diary was found by a worker and given to the neighborhood boys. The boys read it out loud many times over as they try in vain to decode the deeper meaning of its content.

The 1920s wedding dress

The 1920s wedding dress is a slightly modified vintage piece of clothing worn by Cecilia. The dress is soiled, ill fitting and had been shortened to her knees.

The big city

The big city is a nameless location near the suburb. The city is both feared and purposely ignored by the isolated suburban community.

The bra

The bra that was stolen from the Lisbon house by Peter Sissen belonged to Lux and was found hanging suggestively on a crucifix.

The Bon Secours Hospital

The hospital, located on Kercheval and Maumee, is where the paramedics take the girls when they get sick or injured.

The Buell's house

Much like the Larson's house, the house of Chase Buell's family is used as a gathering place by the boys to evaluate their options, plan their actions, and discuss their latest findings.

The Elm tree

The Elm tree grows in the yard of the Lisbon family. Every yard in the symmetrical suburb has a similar tree. All the Elm trees are affected by the Dutch Elm disease and are destined to be cut down by the city.



The EMS Truck

The EMS truck is an ambulance (Emergency Medical Services) that appears regularly in front of the Lisbon house, each time driven by the same pair of paramedics. Each arrival marks a new episode in the tragedy that is slowly unfolding.

The exhibits

The exhibits are a collection of artifacts and photos that the boys keep inside two suitcases hidden inside a tree house. They are numbered from 1 to 97 for the purpose of the investigation.

The high school

The local high school is located in the suburb. The school is private and attended by all the children in suburbia.

The Larson's house

The Larson's house is where the neighborhood boys gather to secretly observe the Lisbon girls.

The Lisbon's house

The house of the Lisbon family is located in a suburb of a big city. It looks similar to every other house in the same suburb and is delimited by a yard surrounded by a fence.

The local cemetery

The local cemetery is a burial place of the same religious denomination as the Lisbons. However, the cemetery employees are on strike for all the duration of the events covered by the novel, so the place is left unused.

The picture of the Virgin Mary

The picture of the Virgin Mary that is printed on a plastic card is an advertisement for a Catholic organization. It first appears in the hand of Cecilia after her first attempt at suicide. Later, the pictures will serve as notes from the girls directed at the neighborhood boys.

The solar system model

The solar system model is a mechanical model installed in Mr. Lisbon's classroom which is set daily to reflect the position of the planets. It will be eventually destroyed by the teacher who replaces him as a math teacher.

The suburb

The suburb is an unnamed array of houses and yards arranged symmetrically. The suburb is where most of the characters live.

The television set

The television set is the main object of distraction in the Lisbon house. The television is used by the family to watch Disney programs and by Mr. Lisbon for baseball games.

Trip Fontaine's car

Trip Fontaine's car is a shiny muscle car that he uses to go to school. The car is a tool of seduction, a symbol of Trip's freedom and a hideout for his drug smoking interludes during class.



Themes

Religion

Religious symbols play an important role in the story of the Lisbon girls. Mrs. Lisbon, the girls' mother, is a deeply religious character who imposes her will onto the rest of the family. The girls are not allowed to wear any makeup or to wear revealing pieces of clothes. They are only allowed out of the house to attend school during the week or church on Sundays. Her belief on the dogmas of the Catholic faith is represented by the image of Virgin Mary printed on a plastic card. Obviously, she would rather keep her daughters virgins and at home. However, the evolving society that the Lisbon lives in is making her attempt at preserving her daughters' virginity quite futile. Cecilia constantly wears a wedding dress, announcing in defiance of her mother that she is on the verge of giving up her virginity. After her first attempt at suicide, Cecilia is found in the bath with her wrists open and one of the Virgin Mary cards inside her fist. She dies impaled on a fence wearing the wedding dress, as if her suicide was but a honeymoon with death.

Rejecting principles and traditions is part of growing up and the confusion that ensues is not without consequences. However, the early 1970s saw an explosion of such rejections happening everywhere and in every part of day-to-day life. Though the suburban community is isolated from the outside world and feeds on the illusion of being self sufficient, cracks are starting to appear on the wall built between reality and their manufactured happiness. Lux is increasingly promiscuous and does everything she can to reject her catholic upbringing: she smokes, she has sex, she teases boys and she listens to rock music. She does the opposite of what her mom wants her to do. Her brassiere was hanging suggestively over a crucifix when Peter Sissen found it. The brassiere left hanging on the cross is a symbolic rejection of a religious symbol. The crucifix represents the sacrifice made by Jesus in exchange for human redemption. The religious symbol is reduced to nothing more than the mundane purpose of a nail on the wall.

In the days preceding the failed rescue, the girls use the Virgin Mary cards as a mean of communicating with the boys. Again, this desecration of a religious symbol indicates the inevitable decay of a world based on beliefs in images and symbols. The cemetery worker's strike is yet another sign that the changes in the world are disrupting religious traditions. During the strike, the sacred place intended to honor the departed are left in disarray. The mundane needs of the workers override the symbolic sanctity associated with the cemetery.

Manufactured reality

The suburb is a closed universe that guarantees that the members of its community will remain happy, safe and secure as long as they stay within its boundary. The big city is



seen as a dangerous, noisy, poor and decaying place to live. The suburb is a bubble, an insulated area for the wealthier class where nothing threatening ever happens. Living in the suburb insures that everything is safe and predictable. Every house looks the same, everyone acts the same way and every need is fulfilled by well-organized services that deliver the necessary goods to the door.

The novel describes the manufactured reality of the suburb as something eerily homogenous. Every object is devoid of meaning because each one resembles the next. Everything it provides comes packaged and shaped to be ready to use. It leaves no room for added human value or meaning. Before she kills herself, Cecilia drinks pear juice right from a can. The act of drinking fruit juice from a can is rather mundane but it serves as an illustration of the coldness of the simulated universe Cecilia has grown in. When the fathers from the neighborhood unite to try to remove the fence, the narrators note that the men are not used to performing manual tasks. The fathers are unable to complete the task and end up having to call in a professional to uproot it. This illustrates the fact that they have no real power over their environment. They gave up their power in exchange for simulated happiness.

Every object collected by the neighborhood boys as a piece of evidence is devoid of meaning. Throughout the novel, the narrators try in vain to find a meaning in the multiple photographic images and artifacts that they have accumulated around the time the events took place. However, all these exhibits are so mundane they cannot be used to reconstruct the puzzle of the Lisbon girls. Two decades have passed and all the wisdom they gained through the years turns out useless. They recall their efforts to decipher the meaning of Cecilia's diary by reading passages aloud, but the book adds nothing to their knowledge of the girls. The diary is just another manufactured object; like the can of pears that Cecilia drank from, the book is designed to hold meaningless tidbits of information for no purpose other than collecting them.

Spectatorship

Starting with the narrators, everyone in the novel is a spectator. The characters play a constant game of spying on each other. Everyone watches television. The neighbors are watching each other. The neighborhood boys are watching the girls. The teachers and the principal are watching the students. The community is watching the Lisbon family. The media is watching the suburb. The reader is watching everyone watching everyone else. This game of spying goes on even though nothing worth spying on ever happens. In addition, when something happens - when a girl commits suicide - no one is there to see it and no one can explain it.

In order to understand the mystery behind the suicides, it may be useful to understand a simple key component of the quantum theory of physics. This element is called the Schrödinger's cat experiment. The Schrödinger's cat is a theoretical experiment devised in 1935 to illustrate the apparent conflict between the microscopic and macroscopic levels of reality. The Schrödinger's cat experiment is replicated by the author to emphasize the role of spectatorship in life. In the original experiment, a living cat is



isolated inside a steel chamber, along with a device that could at any given moment trigger the release of a poisonous substance and kill the cat. An observer cannot know whether the cat inside the chamber is alive or dead just by looking at the container. According to the quantum law, this means the cat is dead and alive at the same time. This is also referred to as the superposition of states through "decoherence" — which in this example is the process of isolating the cat from any external interference. The situation where the cat is both dead and alive at the same time leads to what is called the observer's paradox: the cat is only either alive or dead once the observer opens the chamber to look at the cat. The conclusion is that the act of observation (or measurement) affects the outcome. In other words, there is no outcome unless it is observed.

The experimental setting described above is the key to the strangeness of the novel. In the world of *The Virgin Suicides*, the steel chamber has been replaced by the suburb when it applies to the community and by the house when it applies to the girls. The suburban community is indeed totally isolated from the rest of the world. The same could be said about the house, which is isolated after Lux's escapade. The Lisbon girls, and by extension the rest of the suburban community, replace the cat in the experiment: the narrators cannot tell whether the girls are dead or alive until they can observe them at close range, after entering the house. The poison is leaking from the vial and the elm trees disease is the first sign that something is wrong in their closed environment.

Spectatorship turns into voyeurism when Lux turns into an exhibitionist and starts to have sexual encounters with men on the roof of her house. The boys are fascinated by her activities and they start spying on her with binoculars. The media, which is meant to be watched, acts like a hawk and descends on the community when the events turn tragic. In a desperate attempt to raise their ratings, they raid the suburb in search of something to show. Yet they fail miserably at making sense of the events. Because they are part of the problem, the media does not produce anything worth watching.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written with an unusual plural first person point of view. The "we" that tells the story is the collective voice of a group of teenagers whose exact identity is at best imprecise. Indeed, the group composition appears to be shifting subtly as the story progresses. Interestingly enough, the voice evolves along with the timeline and that "we" slowly involves the reader as part of the voice, as if the narrators were addressing each other as well as the reader. This gives the reader the impression of belonging to the group and having been there, too.

The unique point of view eventually involves the reader as one of the boys. The feeling of being part of the story creates a haunting vision of the world. As they look backward and examine their childhood, the narrators discover they did not change very much as persons. They realize that they are the product of their memory, even 20 years after the events. The novel's point of view creates a universe full of holes to be filled by the reader. The plot raises unfinished questions and multiple answers are left blank. In the end, it is up to the reader to solve the mystery of the Lisbon girls: what allowed the tragic events?

The first person point of view is an important key to the novel's mystery. As it turns out, the spectators are ultimately responsible for the death of the girls. Indeed, the obvious strangeness of the suicides is only solved when the story is read like an application of the Schrödinger's cat experiment. Everyone involved in the story is in fact, a spectator: boys watch girls, neighbors watch neighbors, etc. Through the process of identification, the reader is slowly dragged into the group of narrators and the author ultimately shifts the blame of the suicides to the reader.

Setting

The story takes place in the early 1970s somewhere in the middle of the United States, in an unnamed suburb built next to a big city, which also remains nameless. The author, Jeffrey Eugenides, was raised in the state of Michigan, so we can safely assume that this is probably the state that served as a model for the fictional suburbia. The *Virgin Suicides* story spreads over 13 months. It begins in June and ends in July the following year. Suburbs from the 1970s were a collection of relatively new houses built according the same model of buildings and following a very simple and efficient urban plan. The suburb's community is generally wealthy and the city they live in is self-contained. No one is ever seen leaving the suburb and it seems like everyone is staying away from a city that is poor and risky, opposite to the wealth and safety of the suburb.

The Lisbon girls live in a house that is similar to every other house in their neighborhood. The Lisbon house is a two-story building erected on a yard that is



surrounded by a fence and where an elm tree grows. The house looks exactly like the other houses around the neighborhood, but it gradually decays as the story develops. Each house in the suburb seems to look the same and to serve the same general purpose. Each seasonal event, such as the fish flies invasion or the fall of the leaves from the elm trees, is an occasion for the community to get together and perform common tasks.

The neighborhood boys usually gather in one of the boy's home to spy on the Lisbon house. They also built a tree house in a vacant lot, where they hide the artifacts that they collect evidence of the girls' lives. Either the boys move from one house to the other for sleepovers and gatherings, or they go to school. They never leave the suburb.

The Lisbon girls attend the private school along with all the teenagers in the neighborhood. Mr. Lisbon, the girls' father, works in the same school at a math teacher. The novel gives no detail about the building itself, but it is large enough to host the Homecoming dance and to allow the students to go around unnoticed or establishing headquarters in a bathroom to escape the event of the day. Cecilia is taken to the local hospital after her first suicide attempt. Lux visits the hospital after faking a stomachache in order to get a pregnancy test. Mary is taken to the hospital on the night of June 15 after her failed attempt at suicide. No description of the hospital is otherwise provided. The suburb also hosts a cemetery, but the burial place is full and closed due to a cemetery workers' strike.

Language and Meaning

The language used by the author is casual and often poetic. The language reflects a mix of interpretation and emotions as they are recalled two decades after the events took place. Dialogues are kept to a minimum because the story was assembled from bits and pieces of personal recollections gathered from the experience of the narrators and interviews with some of the actors of the drama. The tone is neutral, neither joyful nor dramatic, and includes numerous funny passages that are typical of teenage humor. The novel relies heavily on foreshadowing to accentuate the impression of inevitability. *The Virgin Suicides* is a dense and beautiful piece of literature that can be read multiple times, each one unearthing a new layer of meanings and subtle reflections.

The recollections of the narrators and their interviewees are transcribed and assembled in little chunks of somewhat fuzzy memories. The timeline is uneven, cracked and bumpy like an old coat of paint. Questions are only answered in ways that leave even more questions opened. The characters are never described directly - they are slowly rebuilt from different points of views and the author leaves it to the reader to reconstruct their images. This process of reconstruction imposed on the readers mirrors the process by which the narrators had to reconstruct the story of the girls.



Structure

The novel is comprised of five chapters of different lengths. The chapters are named simply by numbers "one" through "five." Chapters 1, 2 and 5 are short, while chapters 3 and 4 account for over 60% of the bulk of the novel. The number of chapter is the same as the number of sisters in the Lisbon family. This equivalence fools the reader into anticipating that the suicides will happen in an orderly way, following the chapter structure. Chapter 1 starts and ends with Cecilia's suicide, but the subsequent deaths only occur much later in the book.

The story is delivered on a straight timeline, except for the first paragraph that sets the pace and the tone and introduces the remaining prose as a long flashback, an effect that mirrors the fact that the narrators are recounting events that happened two decades earlier. The pace of the description is deliberately slow and uneven, but each detail is important and plays an important part in the overall plot. Several readings might be necessary to fully appreciate the subtle shifts and digressions that keys to the mystery of the suicides.

There are two important sets of break points in the story that are subtly related to the intrigue. The first set of break points occurs during school breaks, namely holidays and summer vacation. The second set of break points occurs when seasons change. Important changes occur at every one of these break points.



Quotes

"Cecilia, the youngest, only thirteen, had gone first, slitting her wrists like a Stoic while taking a bath, and when they found her, afloat in her pink pool, with the yellow eyes of someone possessed and her small body giving off the odor of a mature woman, the paramedics had been so frightened by her tranquility that they had stood mesmerized." Chap. 1, p. 3

"'It's sad to think about those girls,' he said. 'What a waste of life.'" Chap. 1, p. 19

"Mr. Libson kept trying to lift her off, gently, but even in our ignorance we knew it was hopeless and that despite Cecilia's open eyes and the way her mouth kept contracting like that of a fish on a stringer it was just nerves and she had succeeded, on the second try, in hurling herself out of the world." Chap. 1, p. 31

"The man lashed the fence, in sections, to his truck and - getting paid for it - gave Mr. Bates the worst lawn job we'd ever seen. We were amazed our parents permitted this, when lawn jobs usually justified calling the cops." Chap. 1, p. 55

"We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them." Chap. 2, p. 44

"Their recent shock was undetectable, but sitting down they left a folding seat empty as though saving it for Cecilia." Chap. 3, p. 64

"Other than to school or church the Lisbon girls never went anywhere." Chap. 3, p. 89

"They passed beneath the great school clock, the black finger of the minute hand pointing down at their soft heads." Chap. 3, p. 100

"Gripping one another, pulling each other into the frame, they seem braced for some discovery or change of life. Of life. That, at least, is how we see it. Please don't touch. We're going to put the picture back in its envelope now." Chap. 3, p. 119

"Parkie Denton tooted his horn, a short hopeful blast, but just as the girl put her palm to the glass, the light went out." Chap. 3, p. 140

"A cloud always seemed to hover over the Lisbons' roof." Chap. 4, p. 141

"And we'd have to admit, too, that in our most intimate moments, alone at night with our beating hearts, asking God to save us, what comes most often is Lux, succubus of those binocular nights." Chap. 4, p. 147

"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. We went outside with our hair wet in the hopes of catching flu ourselves so that we might share their delirium." Chap. 4, p. 158

"Actually, none of this might have been spoken. We've pieced it together through partial accounts, and can attest only to the general substance." Chap. 4, p. 181

"A year had passed and still we knew nothing. From five the girls had reduced themselves to four, and they were all - the living and the dead - becoming shadows." Chap. 4, p. 187

"She came up to Chase Buell. She came so close her breath stirred his hair. And then, in front of us all, Lux unbuckled his belt. She didn't even need to look down." Chap. 4, p. 211

"More and more, people forgot about the individual reasons why the girls may have killed themselves, the stress disorders and the insufficient neurotransmitters, and instead put the deaths down to the girls' foresight in predicting decadence." Chap. 5, p. 244

"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." Chap. 5, p. 245

"In the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name." Chap. 5, p. 246

"It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us, up here in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together." Chap. 5, p. 248



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the point of view. How "unusual" is it, compared to the subjective first person and the objective third person? Why is it difficult to identify who's talking? Who are the narrators talking to?

Identify the signs that foreshadow the progressive and inevitable decay of the environment that the narrators are constantly pointing to. What is the meaning of the order of appearance of the signs of decay?

Compare the roles in traditional family structures to those described in the novel. Identify the different family structures in the novel. What role does the family play in the handling of a crisis such as suicide? Do you think perception of the family as a cell changed since the early days of the 1970s?

Discuss the role of the school in the story. What influence, if any, does the school have on the life of the teenagers? How effective is the reaction of the school to the ongoing events? Do you think a different management of the crisis could have prevented the drama?

Discuss the purpose of the media. Does the media reaction influence the string of events? How different is the media described in *The Virgin Suicides* from the media reporting that is happening in your community?

Discuss the importance and role of the community. Did the neighbors do everything they could to prevent the final suicides? How should a community handle a tragic situation like the one described in this novel? Discuss how you think your community would react to a suicide.

Discuss the mirror effect used in the narrative. What is the importance of repetition in the novel? How many events are mirroring each other throughout the story? Discuss the importance of differences between mirrored events.