

GOTHIC DISCOURSE IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES'S *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* – CHALLENGING SUBURBAN UNIFORMITY AND (RE)IMAGINING “THE OTHER”

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Abstract

This paper argues that Jeffrey Eugenides, in his debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, first questions and then challenges ‘the homeliness’ of the American suburbia by adopting an unsettling gothic discourse and by creating gothic subjects (the Lisbons). Gothic discourse includes the gothic tropes of confinement, persecution, alienation and contagion. My approach to the American Gothic tends to side with Siân Silyn Roberts who convincingly argues that this literary phenomenon questions the place of the individual in what he calls “a diasporic setting” (7). In eighteenth century Great Britain, Gothic fiction differentiates a literate middle class from “*the other*”, meaning *other* nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. The individual becomes a container of “cultivated sensibility” (Roberts 3). In America, this model was seriously challenged due to “a climate of ontological uncertainty and rapid demographic change” (Roberts 5). The cosmopolitan city, a place of invasion, of close proximity to *the other*, has become the perfect setting for gothic subjects, characterised by Roberts as mutable and adaptable. However, suburbia, with its apparent idyllic life, tries to uniformize the heterogeneous tendencies of the cosmopolitan city.

Keywords: *Gothic subjects, Gothic tropes, suburbia, uniformity, history, entrapment, isolation, the other.*

FROM THE BRITISH GOTHIC TO THE SUBURBAN AMERICAN GOTHIC

Defining Gothic literature has always been a challenge, the term continuing to be elusive, “umbrella-like” and chameleonic. Since its inception in the eighteenth century, it has suffered various mutations to meet the demands of an ever-

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changing readership and to accommodate literary trends and various cultural and phenomena it came in contact with. The Gothic is a genre that cannot be safely confined to a century, though if we were to talk about ‘the traditional’ or ‘pure’ Gothic, two words I completely distrust, we would have to go back to the eighteenth century and delve into the never-ending argument: is the Gothic subversive or merely sensational? Can it be both? If we decide to “romanticize” or even to “gothicize” the Gothic, we could consider it the antagonist of the Enlightenment, with its inherent focus on feelings and thoughts. But can we safely assume that early Gothic fiction undermined Enlightenment beliefs and thus side with a considerable number of critics who favour this interpretation [Jackson (2008), Punter (1996), Smith, (2007)]?

Eighteenth century Gothic writers, such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Gregory Lewis, in spite of their exploration of more sensational or lewd themes, are not entirely anti-Enlightenment. One cannot ignore their Protestant skepticism, their overt criticism of Catholic superstition and their conspicuous anti-medievalism. Baldick and Mighall claim that Gothic Criticism erroneously attributed to early Gothic fiction pre-Romantic and Romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages, thus ignoring Gothic writers’ tendency “to display a thoroughly modern distrust of past centuries as ages of superstition and tyranny” (271). In most Gothic romances, *the other* is the aristocrat, the foreigner, the exotic (Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*), the Catholic (Lewis’ *The Monk*), all somehow associated with ‘medieval’ practices seen in opposition to modern ones. Reason and common-sense prevail, evil and supernatural forces are banished or demystified. Therefore, it is not surprising that the early British Gothic reinforces Enlightenment’s ideas and ideals about the individual as a self-contained and rational being. Instead of being subversive or transgressive, this bourgeois literature addresses the concerns of the middle-class, sensationalising its fears and anxieties, much like tabloids today: “by reproducing individuals as containers of ‘cultivated sensibilities’ the Gothic distinguishes a literate middle class from other ethnicities, races and social groups with divergent cultural practices” (Roberts 3). Despite its archaic atmosphere, the eighteenth century British Gothic adopts a self-affirming realism that “banishes atavistic energies associated with a corrupt aristocracy, distant medieval past, or supernatural agency to leave the world inhabited by characters whose desires and motivations arise solely within themselves” (Roberts 3). This is a clean and sanitized world in which “evil” is confined within clear boundaries. But, even though these novels reinforce Enlightenment beliefs, they nonetheless display an almost morbid fascination for the exact themes they so ardently repudiate. I would not side completely with the interpretation that sees the Gothic as subversive, especially the early Gothic, but undoubtedly, it had its cathartic energies. It was perfectly acceptable to write about taboo subjects and sensationalize mundane happenings as long as you condemned them and order was restored in the end.

Indirectly, however, by creating all these horror scenarios, the Gothic shows how fragile our constructions of society are and how vulnerable we can actually be.

What happens when the Gothic travels to “new”, unknown continents, to America, for example? It travelled quickly across the ocean and became a very popular middle-class genre in what Roberts calls a period of “internal unrest and an influx of foreign immigrants” (4) – whose culture, customs, practices and backgrounds were completely unknown and hence, strange. Benjamin Franklin in his essay, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America” (1782) talks about the “Accession of Strangers” from Europe (3). Benjamin Rush announces “that nothing but vigorous and efficient government can prevent their degenerating into savages, or devouring each other like beasts of prey” (25). One cannot help but notice the “gothic” tropes used to describe the new wave of immigrants. These fears were so embedded in the *Zeitgeist* that new American authors confront themselves with a clash between what Roberts calls “transmitted cultural forms and new social settings” (4), that is, between a false sense of stable individuality and a very unstable and fluid milieu created by the influx of immigrants “a climate of ontological uncertainty and rapid demographic change” (Roberts 5).

If the British Gothic in the nineteenth century continued to set the individual against an environment of urban growth and reverse-colonization (*Dracula* is possibly one of the best examples of such a phenomenon), the American Gothic adapted itself to a very fluid, “diasporic setting”. The result of this mutation in the British Gothic is represented by what Roberts (7) calls “gothic subjects”, characterized by mutability, adaptability and, I would add, fluidity. They are a “constellation of different narrative personas” that follow, according to Tennenhouse, “the cultural logic of diaspora” (qtd. in Roberts 6). It became practically impossible to replicate the British tendency of self-contained individualism that continued to set itself against a changing world. The perfect setting for such fluid subjects is, undoubtedly, the American cosmopolitan city, a place of invasion, of close proximity with the other. The first cities of gothic encounters were Philadelphia and New Orleans. The individual, as depicted by the British Gothic, became unsuitable for such a multicultural and ethnically diverse city.

However, suburbia seems to uniformize the heterogeneous tendencies of the cosmopolitan city, trying to even out gothic subjects in a desire to create a utopian place where all people could live in harmony. If towards the end of eighteenth century, American writers started, according to Roberts, to use gothic images and motives “to represent the individual as an impossible fantasy wholly unsuited to an urban, cosmopolitan community of ... heterogeneous cultures” (10), later on suburbia revisited this fantasy of the self in complete harmony with the others, no matter their different backgrounds or histories. There are many

studies about the American suburbs from different perspectives: sociological, psychological, anthropological or historical. To this we include an extensive study of various representation of suburban life in fiction and films: *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (edited by Roger Webster, 2000). However, there is little about the suburban Gothic, except Bernie Murphy's book *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) and Kim Ian Michasiw's essay "Some Stations of Suburban Gothic" (1998). The former author offers a concise definition of the genre which he defines as a sub-genre of the American Gothic "that often dramatises anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and protagonists" (Murphy 2). The cliché that even the most peaceful looking neighbourhood can hide a terrible secret is exploited to the maximum. The suburban Gothic is similar to the domestic one, the danger comes from familiarity and the invader is in most cases internal, not external like in the early British Gothic. If in the domestic Gothic, the family represented the threat, when it comes to the suburban Gothic, the threat extends to the family next door.

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES AND DISTURBIA

Jeffrey Eugenides' début novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, has been analysed from various perspectives, most notably as a suburban novel, without the Gothic element in "Interrogating Suburbia in the Virgin Suicides" by Lisa Kirby (2007), as a postmodernist bildungsroman in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* by Kenneth Millard (2007) or as a magic realist novel in "García Márquez's Traces on Jeffrey Eugenides's 'The Virgin Suicides'" by Francisco Collado-Rodríguez (2005). In 2012, Martin Dines wrote an excellent article about the suburban Gothic in *The Virgin Suicides*, focusing mainly on the European past still haunting American suburbia, which thus becomes a place of trauma, conflict and ethnic differences.

Analysing Eugenides' novel from a Gothic perspective might seem far-fetched since the supernatural element is missing, however, the American Gothic with its sub-genres the Southern or Urban Gothic has convincingly taught us that this fiction is mainly atmospheric and 'the uncanny' may arise from ordinary situations. In fact, the book uses the features of a more "traditional" Gothic, such as confinement, persecution, alienation, contagion, invasion and fascination for taboos and "otherness" to create a very unsettling milieu right at the heart of suburban homeliness. Indirectly, through the eyes of the narrators, Eugenides creates "gothic subjects", the Lisbons, to call into question the idea of a tolerant, peaceful community. Consequently, he placed the action in the 1970s when

suburbia was very popular among Americans, but it was also met with criticism by many intellectuals.

After the Second World War, the American suburbs started to develop at a very fast pace, accommodating many young couples and fulfilling the dream of many Americans – to own a house. American soldiers were coming back from Europe and from the Pacific to settle down and finally enjoy the promises of the American dream. Not surprisingly, they were called “settlers” or ‘pioneers’ with all the positive connotations attached to these ambitious words. In the novel under discussion, the adolescent narrators often talk about their fathers’ past, which in view of the all-too-quiet present seems unimaginably distant and improbable. But with all this optimism, there comes the other side of the coin: what is deemed as “homely” may turn into its exact opposite, the “unhomely” or “the haunted”.

How can a place without history inspire so much fear and anxiety? How can it be haunted? The tropes used by the “traditional” Gothic and the anxieties they try to overcome are almost exclusively related to history (the medieval past, aristocracy, the corrupted Catholic Church). One of the main characteristics of suburbia is its apparent lack of history. It appears to be a “tabula rasa” where everyone can start anew without the burden of history. But this historic newness, as Eugenides’ novel shows, is but an illusion. Suburbia may not have a history in the proper sense of the word, but it is bursting with “histories” carried across the ocean, almost genetically embedded in the “settlers”.

Another common expectation about suburbia is that it encourages and promotes a peaceful domestic life in a safe community. But just like each family could hide a terrible secret, the idyllic community could be the repository of many unresolved tensions. Charles L. Crow (22) argues that the Salem witch trials still haunt the American imagination and that these inexplicable events point to the dangers lurking underneath the veneer of a peaceful community. Suburbia, later on, became the epitome of such a community brimming with deep anxieties and potential dangers.

Suburbia’s intermediate position between city and countryside, between the privacy and detachment allowed by the anonymity of the city and the familiarity of the small village communities, is also another feature exploited by this genre. The Gothic operates with indeterminacy – with the “maybe”, this in-betweenness creating anxiety. This borderline quality is given by the apparent “unnaturalness” of its landscape too. The mass suburbanization of the second half of the twentieth century changed and uniformized the landscape by destroying nature. This tamed or (un)natural nature became another fear exploited by the suburban Gothic. If cities are different, most of them bearing their own trademark, suburbia is more or less the same. Whether we are talking about west coast suburbia or east coast, a standardized Norman Rockwell-like picture comes to mind: a house with a car parked outside, neatly mowed lawns and white

picket fences. Its architectural uniformity and the bareness of its landscape create the uncanniness encountered in representations of suburbia in fiction.

In order to understand why such an ordinary place that fulfilled the dream of many Americans to own a house could acquire such ominous qualities, we have to go back to the elitist criticism expressed by many intellectuals in the past decades. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) calls post-war suburbia a “comfortable concentration camp.” For Herbert J. Gans, “suburbia was intellectually debilitating, culturally oppressive, and politically dangerous, breeding bland mass men” (qtd. in Michasiw 243). To these words (debilitating, dangerous, oppressive) we add “lower-middle-class kitsch” (Michasiw 243). The general consensus or rather “the pseudo-aristocratic position of the displaced European intellectual” (Michasiw 243) seems to be that suburbia goes against a very important American value, individualism, as it encouraged conformity and materialism.

Murphy enumerates the contradictory feelings associated with suburbia or “disturbia” a word coined by the psychiatrist Gordon in 1961: homely vs. haunted, nice neighbours vs. neighbours with a frightening secret, a safe place vs. “a place of entrapment and unhappiness”, a shelter from the overcrowded cities vs. “destroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources”, caring families vs. dysfunctional and abusive families, perfect clean house vs. “basements, crawlspaces and back gardens”, a place to start anew vs. a place haunted by history, an island safe from external invaders vs. a place where dangers come from within (Murphy 3).

If we take into consideration only the light side of the moon, ignoring the “disturbia”, the suburbia seems to fulfill the dream of security of many Americans. Apparently there is nothing to be afraid of, you know all your neighbours, streets, and all nature is tamed. But just like in the Domestic Gothic, the anxiety or the danger arises from this very security and the fear that you might lose it. Thus, neighbours whom are perceived as different are a threat to safety and accordingly marginalized and even gothicized. I use gothicizing, instead of fictionalizing because they indeed fictionalize them using gothic tropes. Mickasiw notes that the middle-class as it appears in the eighteenth century novel has moved to the suburbia or to the small town (253). Therefore, away from the city, the illusion of a monolithic identity, well-defined and knowable finds its way back in this diasporic setting that is America. Suburbia is an island where all newcomers are kept under close scrutiny.

There are two aspects to be taken into consideration when discussing this novel. The suburbanites, as they appear in fiction and in *The Virgin Suicides*, gothicize and marginalize those who seem to fall outside the pattern (immigrants, different ethnic or religious groups). Also, discourses about suburbanites, fictional or not, tend to gothicize and even to demonize them. These views, as stated, are mainly held by intellectuals, artists or pseudo-

aristocrats (as they were called by Michasiw) that dread the uniformity, artificiality and the apparent compartmentalization of life. It is interesting to speculate why Eugenides went for a collective voice – the voice of suburbia. We might indeed assume that he shares the elitist view that suburbanites are materialistic and more or less the same (sharing the same values, interests). But instead Eugenides went for a group of male adolescents, the off-springs of the suburbanites, in fact, the first generation brought up in the American suburbia, the sons and daughters of the first “settlers”. Even though they share the same background with their parents and are definitely influenced by them, they do have a distinct voice. Distinct but definitely not individualised, since these voices are all uniform, seemingly holding to the same opinion about the girls and the events surrounding their deaths. For Eugenides, a way of reinforcing the idea of suburbia as an impossible utopia is to choose a voice that is both part of the community and outside its premises – a voice that both reflects the anxiety of such a closed society and offers alternative lenses through which the reader could scrutinize it. However, the collective narrators are by no means free of bias. The way they see the Lisbon girls is shaped by their young age; that is why they sexualize and romanticize them.

GOTHICIZING THE OTHER

When talking about the Gothic, the other and the uncanny are part of the critical paraphernalia. Same goes for the suburban Gothic; but the other is no zombie, alien or vampire, it is the neighbour who does not seem to fit in. As previously stated, the suburbanites are close in mindset to the middle-class of the 18th century, thus any national, ethnic, racial, cultural or gender differences are gothicized. The immigrants are the best target, their (un)homeliness, as they come from different parts of the world, and the histories they carry with them both make them part of the collective imagination. Paul Baldino, the Italian neighbour is a case in point. The son of Italian immigrants, he is turned automatically into a mobster whose deep, dark circles make him look old beyond his years: “Already, at the age of fourteen, Paul Baldino had the gangster gut and hit-man face of his father, Sammy ‘the Shark’ Baldino” (Eugenides 11). Rumour has it that his family owns an underground escape tunnel that allows him to enter all neighbours’ basements, the Lisbons’ included, and freely spy on them. Paul Baldino, the son of a family that most certainly owns an underground trade, is the one to discover the underground life of suburbia with its sewers, basements and secret smells. This is the hidden life pulsating behind the neat façades and white picket fences. Allegedly, while exploring the sewer system of the neighbourhood, he discovered Cecilia in her bathtub, naked, “her wrists oozing

blood”(Eugenides 13), a gothic encounter meant to haunt the boys’ imagination indefinitely.

Dominic Palazzalo is another immigrant neighbour who excites the boys’ imagination: “aloft, he looked frail, diseased, and temperamental, as we expected a European to look” (Eugenides 20). The key word is “expected”, the boys hold different expectations, all based on stereotypes. Hence, Dominic is immediately cast into the role of the European “other”: sophisticated, mysterious, exotic and, most importantly, romantic.

The Lisbons, though not nationally, ethnically or racially different, are immediately seen as “others”. First of all, they have five daughters, all around the same age, all sharing the same rooms and bathroom, this being enough to arouse the imagination of some pubescent boys. Second of all, the Lisbons keep themselves to themselves, separate from the community. Later on, after Cecilia’s suicide, they isolate themselves further. Such behaviour is automatically viewed as suspicious, drawing unwanted attention. This self-imposed isolation will give way to gothic scenarios of entrapment. In the eyes of the collective narrators, the girls are the damsels in distress imprisoned by their mother, cast in the role of the Gothic villain. Such a plot is not far from the truth, as the mother clearly abuses her daughters emotionally. A third reason is their Catholicism. Apparently, they are the only catholic family in the neighbourhood. Moreover, they are devout Catholics, bearing a name that calls up Europe (Lisbon). The Catholic as the other, more precisely the devout Catholic, is a classical Gothic trope (in the film, the mother, played by Kathleen Turner, wears austere clothes making her look like a nun). The fact that they go to church every Sunday sets them apart from the community; “none of us went to church” (Eugenides 8), was one of the boys’ first observations about the Lisbons. Cecilia, apparently more of a mystic than the other girls, seems to have developed an uncanny fascination for Catholic customs: she goes to Paul’s Catholic Church to sprinkle holy water on her forehead and she keeps a laminated picture of Virgin Mary. This last item is going to be forever associated with the girls and their untimely death, an association echoed by the title as well. Ms. Perl, a nosy journalist, all too eager to sensationalize the girls’ story, claims that the girls were “attracted to the pagan aspect of the Catholic Church” (Eugenides 177-178). Another neighbour, Uncle Tucker, not the most reliable witness due to his drinking problems, says that Mrs. Lisbon was listening to church music as she opened the door to her daughter Lux after the party: “It was the kind of music they play when you die” (Eugenides 135). All these accounts are far from reliable, telling more about the community and less about the Lisbons. The gothicizing of one’s neighbours is not limited to the neighbourhood boys only, all the community takes part in it.

If in more traditional Gothic novels, the figure of authority is the father, in this novel, the mother is the matriarch. She appears to be a rigid Catholic who wants to control her daughters, being constantly suspicious of the outside world.

When Lux arrives later than she was supposed to after the Homecoming party, the mother decides to withdraw the girls from school and keep them under her watch. She is perceived by the boys as the guardian of the girls' budding sexuality, the antagonist of their Gothic romance. However, towards the end of the book, they notice an uncanny resemblance between the mother and her daughters: her eyes had "the same colour gaze ... icy and spectral and unknowable" (Eugenides 240). The "unknowable" and the "mysterious" are part of that "no man's land" that could be creatively filled with Gothic projections.

Besides neighbours, children or adolescents are also "gothicized". Firstly, they seem to live their lives apart from the community and, most importantly, apart from their families, just like a distinct organism growing separately from its source. Mr. Lisbon has a revelation of his girls' otherness after Cecilia's suicide, but this time as he was looking at Therese: "At that moment Mr. Lisbon had the feeling that he didn't know who she was, that children were only strangers you agreed to live with, and he reached out in order to meet her for the first time. He rested his hands on her shoulders, then dropped them to his sides" (Eugenides 59). When the doctor asked Cecilia why she had attempted suicide given her young age, her answer, "Obviously, Doctor ... you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl" (Eugenides 7), ironically highlights the gulf existing between adults and their children.

The sameness of suburban life creates anxiety and who could better respond to this anxiety than adolescents? Both Cecilia and Lux appear to rebel against the standardized life of the community. Eugenides' novel, though set in the 1970s, was written in the early 1990s, the MTV decade, a period in which films or music videos with and about adolescents proliferate. Both the 80s and 90s showed a preoccupation with teenagers' problems, with the grunge or slacker generation and its inability to adapt. But, as Michasiw notices, these gothicized adolescents or "urban primitives" come from the inner city, with all their "neotribal rites of tattooing, piercing, and branding" (244). The suburban teenagers are "free of demonizings", though, according to the same author, these children who spent their lives in this intermediate place, both rural and urban "ignorant equally of nature and civilization", can be easily turned into "a new set of Americans ... bored and lonely, alienated, atomized, and depersonalised" (244). The boys' growing attachment to the Lisbon girls is symptomatic of a generation that cannot find its place in the impersonal American suburbia. This is the generation that would most likely identify with loners, such as Cecilia, or with sexual rebels like Lux, both being considered different, original and an alternative to the stifling community.

"The child or teenager under threat is a common plot trope of the Suburban Gothic" Murphy claims (2). As mentioned before, the girls are victims of domestic abuse, but they are also victims of the neighbours' indifference: "unfortunately, we had problems of our own" (Eugenides 46), said a neighbour

across the street. This indifference and cowardice did not prevent them from deriving some pleasure out of spying on the Lisbons with what may be called “gothic fascination”.

GOTHIC FASCINATION AND THE ADOLESCENT BODY

When Georges Bataille writes about transgression in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, he states that “men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it” (68). Sibylle Baumbach takes over Bataille’s idea and extends it to the Gothic novel which deals with both seductive and dangerous energies (147). The same two energies are present in Eugenides’ novel – a morbid fascination for a taboo, the taboo being suicide, or more specifically the suicide of five very young women. There is something transgressive and voyeuristic about the neighbours’ constant spying on the Lisbons. To this, we add the narrators’ erotic fascination with the girls and their bodies. They are both witnesses and spectators to the sisters’ tragedy, but most frequently they are spies taking a voyeuristic pleasure in peeping into their private lives. As they confessed, they want to share the Lisbon daughters’ delirium, desiring complete identification with them and their pain. Just like forensics, they collect medical records, pictures, testimonies, diaries in their wish to decipher the motifs behind their suicides and to reconstruct the narratives of their deaths.

But what is worth noting is that the boys cannot or will not particularize the girls, in spite of their differences. For them, they continue to be one mythical creature with ten legs and 5 heads (Eugenides 42). Only Cecilia and Lux stand out – the virgin and the “femme fatale” – though these clichéd images of the Gothic genre overlap in their imagination. Cecilia, the first to kill herself in a very ghastly way and initiate indirectly the suicide pact, wears a “vintage 1920” wedding dress which she refuses to take off even when she is hospitalized after her first suicide attempt. She plays the role of the Gothic bride, the revenant, that still haunts the boys’ imagination even long after her death. Before her suicide, Cecilia, wearing the same wedding dress, now smeared with blood and hospital food, colours her lips with red crayon which, according to the boys, gave her a “deranged harlot look” (7).

Definitely, what is more intriguing than adolescence is female adolescence. The girls and their changing bodies fascinate the narrators. In Gothic fiction, the transforming body causes anxiety. In *Dracula*, for example, the transformation of a woman into a vampire is seen as both sexually arousing and threatening. The Lisbon girls are slowly transforming into women, all at the

same time, in the same house, and their “intermediate” position, neither girls, nor yet women makes them even more puzzling: “girls were really women in disguise ... they understood love and even death...they knew everything about us though we couldn’t fathom them at all” (Eugenides 44). Their bodily fluids, their blood, menstruation, and smell become “objects” of intense fascination. The boys watch their changing moods closely, thus the girls are hysteric, languorous, mysterious, all stereotypes associated with womanhood. This is a typical example of the male gaze gothicizing the female subject.

But it is Lux that best embodies the female monster whose sexuality turns predatory. When Trip describes his first sexual encounter with her, he uses words such as “ravenous mouth”, “animal”, “beast ... struggling to get out of its damp cage”, “fur and an oily substance like otter insulation” (Eugenides 86) to describe her sex. However, only later is Lux truly gothicized when, imprisoned in her house, she sneaks out on the roof to meet her countless lovers. She is described by the boys, who are spying on her through the binoculars, as the “succubus of those binocular nights” (Eugenides 147). All her sixteen partners see her as “a carnal angel”, who, because of malnutrition or grief, lost so much weight that “the basins of her collarbones collected water” and her saliva tasted of acid. If in Cecilia’s case the image of the virgin bride overlaps with that of the red-lipped harlot, in Lux’s case, it is the beast and the angel meeting in one person. In both instances, Catholic images proliferate: winged-angels, Virgin Mary and crucifixes, making one think about the Goth culture. Certainly, the two girls as they are re-imagined by the boys are clichéd embodiments of Madonna and Lilith, these projections telling more about the boys’ state of mind than about the girls’ situation. What is clear is that the girls are intensely gazed at; they were, according to the boys, “like something behind glass. Like an exhibit” (Eugenides 221). After their death and after their parents moved out, the house became a museum for the neighbours’ curious eyes. Mrs. Lisbon, on her arrival home, after Mary’s funeral, looks towards the neighbours hidden behind the curtains, safely in their homes, as if to acknowledge their part in her private tragedies. In the “disturbia”, the private and the domestic become public property: “The most characteristic response to uncanny events is to close the curtains and keep quiet about it” (Murphy 3). The neighbours do keep quiet about it, but they do not close the curtains, they keep on watching like passive observers as the family and the house deteriorate.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Another Gothic trope is the haunted, isolated house or the house turned into a prison for the female protagonists. The image we have of the suburbia does not seem to accommodate fantasies of isolated houses; still the fascination for the

girls' body extends to the house as well as if the latter were an organic extension to the former. If initially, it was described as "a comfortable suburban house" (Eugenides 5) no different from the other suburban dwellings, it slowly gets coloured by the boys' imagination. Although a suburban house, thus relatively new, it starts developing its own history. The bricks have the look of "a church-run orphanage" (Eugenides 24), the furniture is colonial and in the dining room there is a painting of pilgrims plucking a turkey. All these references send us back to early American history and its colonial past. It is interesting to see how this new, history-less place, suburbia, is in fact laden with dormant history. The immigrants, Greek, Italian carry Europe on their shoulders. But, most importantly, it is the subtle presence of American history that is unsettling. For Leslie A. Fiedler, "the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror" (XXI), relentlessly haunted by its colonial past. The author claims that the American experience is "a Faustian pact", "a bargain with the devil", the bliss and freedom promised by this new land being all based on others' misfortunes. Once again, suburbanites were called settlers, automatically making one think of the first settlers and the American frontier. Oddly enough, when the girls are allowed to go out for the last time, their hairdos have "the stoic, presumptuous quality of European fashions enduring wilderness". They looked like "pioneer women" in their "frontierish" dresses "with lace-trimmed bibs and high necklines" (Eugenides 118).

Even their suicides bear the mark of history. When Dr. Hornicker tries to explain the girls' suicide, he uses the metaphor of the Russian roulette, but with their gun fully loaded and one bullet for "historical malaise" (Eugenides 247). Also, the general belief was that their pain is "historic" and the melancholy of the mother is deemed by one neighbour, Joe Hill Conley, to be older than America: "'She came from a sad race,' he said. 'It wasn't only Cecilia. The sadness had started long before. Before America. The girls had it, too'" (Eugenides 120). A sadness rooted in history that might actually be caused by history itself. History or the haunting past is another Gothic trope which Eugenides reworks in his narrative. The girls have to wear the burden of history or the burden of the original settlers' sin and thus their suicide has a redemptive quality. Certainly, this is a Dark Romantic theme, formerly exploited by Hawthorne and Melville, with the past taking the form of some hereditary curse. Genetic and historical determinism bear resemblance to Greek tragedies. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Old Karafilis, another immigrant, is considered to be the only one to have an intuitive understanding of the girls and their unbearable sadness. The belief that there is something about the girls' suicides beyond any human understanding, "a dark force" or "some monolithic evil" gothicizes the girls, but also conveniently frees the family and the community of all blame.

Besides being transformed by the boys' imagination into a place full of history, after Cecilia's suicide, the house turns into a prison for the Lisbon girls.

Tropes of entrapment, isolation and alienation are often encountered in the Gothic novel, usually symptomatic of domestic abuse. The family shuts its doors to the community to better control and shelter the daughters from any corrupting influences. The neighbours, in their turn, single out and stigmatize the Lisbons. The father was dismissed from his teaching job because “a person who could not run his own family, had no business teaching their children” (Eugenides 162). Now completely isolated from the other neighbours, the imprisoned girls become the perfect museum exhibits and thus, as stated, the perfect subjects and the objects of Gothic fascination. All the boys could see were “the girls’ incarcerated shadows, which ran riot in our imagination” (Eugenides 144).

The house slowly deteriorates echoing the growing alienation of the Lisbon girls. It becomes a dark “tunnel”, “an emptiness”, almost turning into an extension of the girls’ bodies and just like a dying body, it gradually falls apart being covered by dead leaves and dead fish-flies. Its smell is overpowering and intoxicating, both repelling and arousing at the same time. The comparisons used are very organic, the house smells of “trapped beaver”, “fancy mushroom salad” and the boys “sucked in like mother’s milk” (Eugenides 165). Later on, the girls invite the neighbourhood boys for the last time to their house, leading them to believe they will help them escape their prison. During their last visit to the house, they discover that the basement where Cecilia’s party took place was kept unchanged, frozen in time to capture the exact moment before her suicide. This stasis or feeling of permanency is another unsettling Gothic element. The rest of the house seems also frozen in time and, according to the boys, it “had the feel of an attic where junk collects” (213). This is a most interesting comparison, because in this attic-like house, they will discover the girls’ dead bodies. Thus, they will clearly see that “they made us participate in their own madness” (Eugenides 248). This association between madness and the attic reminds one of *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, a book which exposes gender stereotypes associated with the woman “other”. However, most importantly, the boys became the Lisbon girls’ captive spectators, now ironically forced into the role they so eagerly assumed for themselves.

GOTHIC CONTAGION AND INVASION

Another reason why the neighbours might choose to be just passive observers and further isolate the family is the fear of contagion and invasion, both Gothic tropes. Some of them even thought that Cecilia “had released an airborne virus”, “a black-hatted assassin” which attacked her sisters with its “black tendrils of smoke” and “evil shapes” (Eugenides 234). Contagious suicide was an easy explanation for the tragedies that followed. However, all of suburbia seemed to have been affected by the events in mysterious ways. All kind of strange

occurrences disturb the monotony of the community. First the fish-flies invade the neighbourhood and then they cover the houses with their dead bodies. Surreal images of decay multiply as suburbia falls under the spell of the girls: “over a year from the time Cecilia had slit her wrists, spreading the poison in the air. A spill at the River Rouge Plant increased phosphates in the lake, producing a scum of algae so thick it clogged outboard engines. Our beautiful lake began to look like a lily pond, carpeted with an undulating foam” (Eugenides 234).

Also, at about the same time, the neighbours have their elm trees cut as they suffered from Dutch elm disease, a fungus brought from Europe by boat. This is another subtle reference to Europe and its legacy. Just like the Lisbons’ inexplicable sadness, the present situation of suburbia (one of the facets of the American dream) seems to be rooted in a troubled history that still haunts its inhabitants. The suburban landscape is a place of trauma, well-hidden under the mask of forced happiness. Old Mrs. Karafilis finds it difficult to understand “why everybody pretended to be happy” (Eugenides 177). After the cutting of the trees, the boys “got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was” (Eugenides 243). In fact, they voice one main criticism against the suburbia: it destroyed nature as it extended, so we might safely assume that it is the suburbia that is contagious. To all these instances of contagion and invasion we add the cemetery workers’ strike that started about the time Cecilia killed herself and ended when “the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide” (Eugenides 3). For one year, dead bodies piled up in refrigerators or had to be buried somewhere else. All those almost apocalyptic images: the fish-flies, the algae, the snow “shoveled into heaps higher than cars”, the dead bodies, the elm trees apparently announce the “demise of our neighbour” (Eugenides 243). It is as if the suburbia were a dead body slowly decaying. If initially the Lisbon girls were seen as the scapegoats “infecting the whole suburbia”, later on they were turned into seers that prophesied all these changes.

The girls, by being different, opened the boys’ eyes to the falsity of the suburbia, to its uniformity and lack of imagination. Just like the trees, after disappearing, the Lisbon girls expose to the naked eye the drabness of the landscape. “[The] suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion” (Mumford qtd in Kirby), once the illusion is dispelled, suburbia shows its barren face. “We got to see how unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden, and the old ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us feel unique.” (Eugenides 243) The words used to describe it: “unimaginative”, “bland uniformity” reflect the same criticism voiced by its opponents back in the 60s and 70s. The girls’ “otherness” functioned as a revelation for the narrators. The artificial image of the suburbia, its conformity, materialism and falsity crumbled before their eyes. To register such dramatic changes or the demise of the

suburbia, as it was known by the boys, Jeffrey Eugenides uses Gothic tropes, such as the haunted house, the unsettling other and “diasporic” contagion.

CONCLUSION

The best way to draw attention to the utopian desire to uniformize and standardize people within communities is to create a foil character or “the other”. Therefore, the Gothic discourse with its features is used to unsettle the suburban self-sufficiency. But *The Virgin Suicides* is also about the impossibility of actually knowing “the other”, of understanding and rationalizing the other’s behaviour. The self is stubborn and fluid; hence, wanting to assign him/her an unknowable and self-contained identity and to rationally explain his/her motives, even though you might share the same background (community, school, communal activities), is a utopian endeavour. All selves are to a large degree gothic. What really puzzles the boys is not so much the unknown motifs behind their suicide, but the fact that the Lisbon girls stubbornly distanced themselves from the community, asserting their individuality against all others. Their refusal to fit in and to turn their “gothic subjects” into decipherable, knowable selves or what the collective narrators call “their selfishness” will haunt the suburban boys forever. It is no surprise that the book was considered a painful coming of age novel.

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