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Sarah G. Fiore

University of Rhode Island, fioresarah617@gmail.com

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‘We Felt the Imprisonment of Being a Girl’: Uncanny Male Gaze in *The Virgin Suicides*

Sarah Grace Fiore

University of Rhode Island

Abstract

In Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, a choral voice of adolescent boys voyeuristically observes and romanticizes the repeated suicide attempts and personal tragedies of the Lisbon sisters. However, simultaneous to this fetishizing voice is one which suggests the boys’ uncanny sense of familiarity surrounding the girls. As the boys eerily state, “We felt the imprisonment of being a girl” (Eugenides 43). In *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud describes the so-called uncanny experience as one which presents a familiar instinct which has only become unfamiliar through repression (Freud 241). Thus, in a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of the text, the boys experience the girls as uncanny because of the way in which the sisters function as symbols of emasculation, a deep fear which is largely repressed yet still accessible as a familiar threat within the subconscious. This essay endeavors to illustrate the way in which the uncanny experience functions to reveal latent fantasies and even deeper fears of the male narrators in question. Additionally, I will apply the concept of Lacanian gaze, specifically where it applies to Laura Mulvey’s more specific “male gaze” concept, to further the understanding of how the boys’ distinctly male observance from afar functions to distance them from the fearful world of female suffering, and thereby repress the uncanny fear the girls’ presence elicits. Throughout the novel, it is important to note that the narrative witnesses the Lisbon girls only through the gaze of the male narrators.

As such, the boys' perception of the Lisbons' situation as uncanny or surreal serves to bear insight only into the boys' own repressed functioning instead of truly comprehending the suffering of the Lisbon girls. Thus, Eugenides' text points to fascinating dynamics of misunderstanding and miscommunication that occur between men and women as a result of romanticization and rigid constructs around femininity and masculinity.

Keywords: Gender/Women's Studies, Psychoanalysis, Freud, Lacan, Mulvey, Male Gaze, Uncanny

Introduction

In Jeffrey Eugenides' 1994 novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, a chorus of adolescent male narrators observes the depressed, suffering Lisbon sisters through the lens of sexual fetishization. The narrators present a series of traumatic circumstances that befall the girls, including the death of siblings, abusive parental dynamics, and suicidal ideation, yet all of these incidents are consistently filtered through a narration that prioritizes an erotic element to the girls' suffering. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the boys' gaze over the Lisbons reveals not only sexual preoccupation, but subconscious feelings of solidarity with these women, and even fear of what they might represent. It is here that I will apply Sigmund Freud's concept of "the uncanny," in which "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud 241). Through engaging with the novel through a psychoanalytic framework, I will argue that the Lisbons in fact represent the boys' familiar yet repressed fear of emasculation. Further, through engagement with Jaques Lacan's original "gaze" concept and Laura Mulvey's more recent "male gaze," I will demonstrate how the act of gazing upon the girls, specifically with sexual preoccupation, functions to subvert the sense of fear that the Lisbons elicit within the boys. This ultimately leads to

an intriguing commentary regarding societal understanding of the interplay between masculinity and femininity, and how both men and women suffer as a result of rigid ideas surrounding these constructs.

Part I: The Uncanny as Fear of Femininity

Before examining the more overtly fetishizing language that the male narrators use to describe the Lisbon sisters, it is first essential to note the more subtle fear that surrounds their understanding of the girls and speaks toward an uncanny experience. When the narrators first introduce the Lisbon sisters during the scene of Cecelia Lisbon's attempted suicide, they describe the paramedics' nearly spiritual fear of her: "With...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" (Eugenides 4). Here, the narrators establish the sense of fear that Freud's definition of the uncanny necessitates, as an experience which is "related to what is frightening--to what arouses dread" (Freud 593). As such, the narration does not simply make note of Cecelia's carnal womanhood, but establishes it as something that the ability to stun and disconcert grown men. It is important to note here that the boys often describe the girls' femaleness in a way that implies its olfactory unpleasantness and its spreading quality. In this instance, it seems that it is Cecelia's very "odor of a mature woman" that causes her fearfulness, and the boys later observe "the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space" (Eugenides 9) within the girls' home. With the word "effluvia," the narrators connote a slowly spreading infestation. Thus, the creeping dread in this connotation again implies a sense of dread or disease that the boys perceive around femaleness. This kind of fear of a pervasive femininity is especially ex-

emplified within characterization of Mr. Lisbon, whom the male narrators present as being distastefully trapped within the house during the girls' menstruation, and becoming fearfully emasculated because of it:

The odor of all those cooped-up girls had begun to annoy him. He felt at times as though he were living in the bird house at the zoo...because so many females roamed the house they forgot he was a male and discussed their menstruation openly in front of him (Eugenides 23).

In this revealing passage, the boys demonstrate that they do not simply view the girls with sexual desire for their feminine beauty. Instead, they see this femininity as feral and almost threatening to their father's more civilized masculinity. Indeed, in characterizing the girls as wild animals at the zoo, "roaming" untamed, the boys present the idea of the sisters' primal dangerousness. In the same way that their femininity has in a sense assaulted their father, there is the suggestion that it has the potential to infest with a kind of animalistic drive. Thus, the narrators imply that the girls may in fact represent deeper, more primal instincts and fears in the male narrators.

Instead of simply being frightening for its own sake, Freud's definition of an uncanny experience is one that is fearful because of its confusion of what is familiar and unfamiliar within the subconscious mind. Although the boys have a sense of fear around the girls' seemingly alien femininity, Freud argues that what is truly fearful in an uncanny scenario "is in reality nothing new or alien" (Freud 604) but was once quite familiar and has only become less so through the process of repression. When examining the narrators' account carefully, it seems that the boys do in fact have a kind of uncanny empathy or familiarity with the girls' experience. This becomes abundantly clear when the boys read the girls' diaries, and find themselves empathizing with the girls' distinctly female experience:

We knew the pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt, and the ache of keeping your knees together in class, and how drab and infuriating it was to jump rope while the boys played basketball...Sometimes, after one of us had read a long portion of the diary out loud, we had to fight back the urge to hug one another or tell each other how pretty we were. We felt the imprisonment of being a girl...We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins (Eugenides 43).

This fascinating passage hearkens precisely to Freud's definition of the uncanny as a subversion of the familiar: the boys believe that they understand the girls in such a way that they have experienced their lives personally. In Freud's psychosexual context, this may imply that the boys feel this relation to the girls' femaleness because all people, male or female, are born of females, and thus the female body is a place of ultimate uncanny familiarity. As Freud states, "Men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* [unfamiliar] place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings" (606). In this kind of reading, this accounts for the simultaneous mysterious fear and sense of knowingness that the boys have for the girls. At any rate, the boys seem to exhibit a buried sense of awareness or ability to empathize with the girls. In describing themselves with the girls as "animals with identical skins," the boys acknowledge a primal sameness between themselves and the girls that implies that they in fact have a reserve of understanding for the female experience, and have simply repressed it. Yet perhaps most fascinating about this passage is the phrase "we felt the imprisonment of being a girl" (Eugenides 43). Although there seems to be a harmonious possibility in the boys' acknowledging their solidarity with the female experience, the boys are also aware of the harshness of existing as a woman. They make note of the physical entrapment the girls experience, as well as the discomfort they highlight that occurs as a result of existing in a

female body, including “the pain of winter wind rushing up your skirt,” and “the ache of keeping your knees together in class.” In understanding this, the boys make it clear that there is a rightful sense of fear to be had around becoming emasculated, and thereby feminized; to access their repressed understanding of womanliness, the boys must experience pain. It is with this knowledge that the boys embark on a subconscious process of ultimately distancing themselves from this possibility. For to be emasculated is not simply insulting, but an experience of undesired and unfamiliar discomfort.

Part II: Male Gaze as Subverted Emasculation Fear

Because their uncanny experience of the girls is ultimately one that is a fearful encounter, the boys’ use another complex psychoanalytic method to separate themselves from the possibility of identifying womanhood themselves: a gaze which asserts their separateness from the girls. The concept of gaze within a psychoanalytic context was first put forth by Jaques Lacan in his address “The Object Petit A.” Here, Lacan asserts that the viewer of an object establishes his personhood or identity by the fact that he does not possess a certain quality relating to the object in question which he spectates. In regard to a specifically male perspective, Lacan argues:

The object a is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking (Lacan 103).

Throughout *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys find that they must create their identity around the fact that they are *not* female; as they gaze on the Lisbons, the objects, they are reminded of the girls’ lack of phallus, which confirms their own sense of masculinity and maleness. As evidenced earlier, the boys find that in identifying too deeply with the girls, they risk aligning themselves with emasculation. This becomes especially apparent when the boys argue that inhabiting the girls’

suffering would be akin to the debasement of inspecting their own genitalia: “Trying to locate the girls’ exact pain is like the self examination doctors urge us to make...our most private pouch” (Eugenides 170). Here, the girls represent an oddly familiar threat to the boys’ perception of their own masculinity: by attempting to understand the girls’ pain, the boys feel they open themselves toward a kind of vulnerability that implies the emasculating experience of comprehending a mysterious female suffering. However, by maintaining a gaze, the boys fall into the role of subject, thus asserting distance from the Lisbons’ female experience, and any of the kind of fear that identifying with them may elicit. Shortly after the narrators envision this hypothetical threat of castration, they imagine the girls’ mysterious pain personified as a patient whom they inspect, but without comprehending its words: “All we can do is go groping up the legs and arms, over the soft bivalvular torso, at the imagined face. It is speaking to us. But we can’t hear” (Eugenides 171). In this telling passage, the boys acknowledge how in examining the pain as a doctor might, thereby gazing upon it from a position of power, it has become silenced. Thus, the act of gaze has distanced the male narrators from hearing or experiencing the girls’ suffering, and more importantly silenced the uncanny fear it provokes.

Beyond the act of gazing itself, the narrators of the novel regain their sense of control over the Lisbon girls’ threatening femaleness by fetishizing them and focusing largely on their feminine sexuality. In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey outlines the concept of the particularly “male gaze,” which applies to media that represents women through a self-serving kind of fetishization. As Mulvey explains, “The argument returns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat” (Mulvey 12). Because

truly attempting to identify with the girls in a human sense unleashes their anxiety around identifying with the female experience, the boys resort to observing the girls in a way that emphasizes the girls as fetish objects separate from themselves. This becomes apparent when it is in fact one of the boys whose spying causes him to find Cecelia Lisbon's body post suicide attempt, "with her spattered forearms and pagan nudity" (Eugendies 6). Here, we see how the boys filter the immense, emasculating fear that Cecelia's suffering elicits in them by eroticizing her "pagan nudity" despite her maimed body. This act recurs throughout the text, in which the boys continually apply a series of fetishes in order to fully silence the threat that femininity represents to them.

In each of the instances in which the male narrators describe the Lisbon sisters' tragedies, their attention to romantic or sexual ideals surrounding the girls prevents them from fully empathizing with the girls' experience. The narration continually uses religious, mystical, or celestial images to create a sense of distance from the girls that implies that their womanliness is beyond the understanding of the rational, concrete world. Upon witnessing the girls in their basement after the death of their sister Cecelia, they appear as "only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels" (Eugenides 25). Here, we not only see the gaze concept becoming literal, as the girls appear as a glare on a lens but notice that even in the wake of their immense suffering, the girls have little importance to the boys other than how they appear to the male narrators. Further, as angels, the male narrators place the Lisbon girls in a realm of otherworldly suffering far removed from what the boys themselves, mere mortals, can access. Of additional importance is the repeated emphasis on the girls' relationship with Virgin Mary iconography, especially when it is found that Cecelia is holding a card with an image of her when she attempts suicide (Eugenides 2). Once again, by aligning the girls with a virgin who allegedly gave birth, the boys situate the

girls in a context of otherworldliness, where their suffering is as distinctly female in the same way that the Virgin Mary is an archetypal image of pure, untouchable femininity. However, in viewing the girls through this romanticized, mythical gaze, there is still room for a kind of religious fear or unknowability, which speaks to the aforementioned sense of fear that occurs within the uncanny. In describing Lux Lisbon's malnourishment in the wake of her sister's death and her resulting promiscuity, she appears as a kind of demented angel, simultaneously fearsome and sexually irresistible:

A few boys mentioned the acidic taste of her saliva--the taste of digestive fluids with nothing to do--but none of these signs of malnourishment or illness or grief...detracted from Lux's overwhelming impression of being a carnal angel. They spoke of being pinned to the chimney as if by two great beating wings...Her eyes shone, burned, intent on her mission as only a creature with no doubts as to either Creation's glory or its meaninglessness could be (Eugenides 148).

In this passage, we see the return of imagery of sensory contagiousness to describe the girls. There is certainly a kind of surreal disgust in the idea of the boys kissing Lux to find that their own mouths are full of an unnaturally acidic taste of someone who is starving, in the same way that the boys earlier imply that the girls' odor is a spreading, primal force. In such a way, we see a return to the idea of suffering femininity as almost malignant or contagious, as something that may infest the boys through their sense of smell or taste. However, this disturbing detail brought to Lux's presence is immediately countered by the assertion that none of these physically unpleasant symptoms could detract from her impression of angelic otherworldliness. Here, the narrators pivot from their sense of uncanny fear around Lux to then fixate on a gaze which creates a fantasy around this being who elicits fear within them. In being confronted with someone who

suffers so deeply that her grief can be tasted, the boys choose not to dwell in that pain, or to try to empathize with it. Instead, they focus their gaze to view her suffering as otherworldly; if Lux is indeed an angel, her suffering occurs in a realm far beyond the understanding or empathy of mere human beings.

Part III: The Consequences of the Gaze

Although the boys subconsciously use a fetishizing gaze to manage the threat of the girls' uncanny femininity, the narrators somewhat paradoxically claim that they are ultimately concerned with understanding the girls' mysterious misery. By the end of the novel, the boys confess that they feel as if they have been led on an investigation with no clear answer in sight: "We couldn't help but retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts, and see that none of them had led to us...We will never find the pieces to put them back together" (Eugenides 249). This falls in line with another dimension of Mulvey's conception of male gaze, where the male viewer deals with the fear of emasculation that a woman poses by attempting to "demystify" her, or through "preoccupation with the reenactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery)" (Mulvey 5). The irony is naturally that this preoccupation is truly one with the male spectators' own paranoia and neuroses, and has nothing to do with the woman herself. Although the boys claim to have a desire to understand the mystery surrounding the girls, the true mystery will always lead back to the boys themselves: that the girls failed to exist in a way that could bring the boys reassurance or comfort. In such a way, the boys seem aware that their understanding of the girls has occurred entirely within their own self-serving gaze; they know that they are the ones who hold the power to "find the pieces to put [the girls] back together again." The story we have been told has been one of male psychology and not about the Lisbons at all,

because the narrators have not given the Lisbons themselves the chance to speak, or “put *themselves* together again.” The boys seem to demonstrate a dim awareness of this irony:

Thinking back, we decided the girls had been trying to talk to us all along, to elicit our help, but we’d been too infatuated to listen. Our surveillance had been so focused we missed nothing but a simple returned gaze...Inside their house they were prisoners...And so they hid from the world, waiting for someone--for us--to save them (Eugenides 199).

As I have demonstrated through the psychoanalytic mechanism of their gaze, the boys’ observations of the girls have a clear point of fixation that in fact prevents them from focusing too deeply on the more disturbing implications of the girls’ interiority. However, the boys here notice that they not only have failed to think more deeply of the girls’ human suffering, but that the girls themselves may have been trying to communicate with them with “a simple returned gaze.” It is here that the narrators suggest a possibility of the true dangerousness of this kind of gaze in male psychology: in that it silences women by forcing them to become objects who are not privileged to speak for themselves.

By the novel’s tragic close, there is a strong suggestion of how destructive the boys’ gaze has truly been to its unfortunate recipients, and how the boys’ fear of the girls as uncanny ultimately fosters an inability for communication or understanding between both parties. This kind of fatal miscommunication comes to fruition when the boys attempt to “save” the girls from their misery by planning to take them away from the house where they are trapped by their overprotective parents (Eugenides 206). However, instead of finding the girls ready to leave, the Lisbons instead choose to commit a mass suicide in a myriad of ways for the boys to witness. It is here that the boys describe what seems to be a genuine emotional experience of the girls, or at least an

unsentimental understanding of the role they have played in their lives. In describing Bonnie Lisbon's hanged body, there is a noticeable lack of formerly fetishistic language:

We gazed up at Bonnie, at her spindly legs in their white confirmation stockings, and the shame that has never gone away took over. The doctors we later consulted attributed our response to shock. But the mood felt more like guilt, like coming to attention at the last moment and too late, as though Bonnie were murmuring the secret not only of her life itself, of all the girls' lives (Eugenides 215).

In committing the ultimate act of desperation for the boys to witness, it becomes clear to the narrators that they have failed to truly attempt to understand the girls as they really were. In this moment they notice Bonnie for all of her mundane reality; instead of angelic orbs of light or Madonna-like veils, they notice her common, girlish stockings. Thus, they begin to feel the sense of shame that is a direct result of refusing to see the girls for who they truly were as human beings, which was the "secret" that was ironically always within their grasp to understand if they had ever tried. In noting that Lux has killed herself in the very car in which the boys originally thought they would escape with her, they seem to subconsciously understand that perhaps the girls' source of misery was not so elusive after all, and might in fact be their own doing: "She had escaped in the car just as we expected. But she had unbuckled us, it turned out, only to stall us, so that she and her sisters could die in peace" (Eugenides 216). Here, it seems that the narrators have some looming awareness that their attention toward the girls, and thus their gaze, was unwanted and damaging. In forcing the boys to leave the car so she can kill herself "in peace," there is a tragic, elevated meaning to be made here. It is only in death that Lux and her sisters can escape a claustrophobic gaze that is so insistent that it itself is not the problem. Indeed, the novel ultimately criticizes the very way in which the Lisbons' story is being told. As Therese Lisbon

confesses candidly at the one school dance she is permitted to attend “We just want to live. If anyone would let us” (Eugenides 122). This at first seems ironic, considering the narrative ends in the sisters’ suicide. Yet when we truly consider if anyone allowed the girls to live as human beings, it seems to make perfect sense.

Conclusion

In the world subconsciously projected by the boys in *The Virgin Suicides*, female suffering is a fearful, mysterious concept of the uncanny, and one that must be repressed within the male gaze. However, in a fashion that is almost parable-like, the novel’s final tragedy points to the danger of accepting this kind of dynamic, in which women are left voiceless to speak toward their own experiences. In such a way, Eugenides opens a fascinating discourse regarding the entitlement with which men and boys view the predicaments of women, and the internally motivated pressure to maintain binaries between “maleness” and “femaleness” in our society. Through a psychoanalytic reading of this text, readers can continually grapple with these gender dynamics and dissect their own complex gaze over them.

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