

The Rise and Fall of the Lisbon Sisters: The Virgin Suicides

By: Cheyenne Daniels

The first time I saw *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola 1999) I witnessed pieces of my youth right there on the screen in front of me. Pieces of adolescence, numbness, and the eternal pending doom of girlhood are all scattered throughout the film. The film is an adapted screenplay of the 1993 novel of the same name written by Jeffrey Eugenides. In the film we follow the Lisbon sisters, five mysterious girls who have eyes all around them watching their every move. From their strict religious parents to the neighborhood group of adolescent boys who idolize the girls, their existence is viewed like a novelty. The film takes place in suburban Michigan in the 1970s. The girls are seen as elusive and desirable to the group of boys, a mystery to solve one could say. To the girl's parents they need to be protected and kept from the world. Everyone around the girls seem to forget that they are not something to be discovered or protected, they are simply humans. While seeming untouchable they indeed have feelings and can hurt. The film is mainly composed of the viewers seeing the girls through the eyes of the boys. An aged regretful version of the group of boys narrate the scenes and introduce us into the whirlwind lives of the Lisbon sisters. They are haunted by the years in their suburban Michigan neighborhood where the Lisbon sisters served as their main source of entertainment. The film shows just how deeply people can affect you, even if you don't realize it at the moment.

Through the lens of Coppola's camera we witness a hazy dream-like world filled with muted color palettes, excellent wardrobe design and a sense of nostalgia in every scene. Every detail in the film is meticulously planned and conveyed, in a way to test and up-root the standard manic pixie dream girl narrative writers and directors throw at young women. The dreamy but poisonous world of girlhood is captured perfectly by Coppola while allowing the viewer to see the actual private experience the girls went through.

***The Virgin Suicides* shows an inside look at the troubles and tribulations of youth, femininity, and depression. Director Sofia Coppola shifts the view from the male gaze to a deeper understanding of the girls' lives, while showing the viewer behind the scenes of a tragedy.**

Unlike the book the film captures the depth of each of the sisters. Eugenides the author of the book once said "But with a book like this no one should really play the characters, because the girls are seen at such a distance. They're created by the intention of the observer, and there are so many points of view that they don't really exist as an exact entity... I tried to think of the girls as a shape-shifting entity with many different heads. Like a Hydra, but not monstrous. A nice Hydra." The mysterious nature of the girls from the story telling of the novel does not really introduce us to the girls. Coppola takes a different approach with her film making. She allows the viewers to see inside the worlds, and personalities and shifts away from the male gaze. The film could have taken many different shapes as many have before it. While much of the film does revolve around the boy's view of the girls and what they see, Coppola makes sure that we are able to see the girl's view of things as well on their own terms. Providing beautifully captured images of what the boys can not see. What they missed from the girls' lives even if they watched them every day. What happened behind the solitude of their bedrooms and closed doors. She shows what each girl represents, their tastes, personalities, and each of their hardships. Each girl's style is shown in distant representation.

From the beginning of the movie we as the audience have a sense of what we are in for. The title alone gives away any hopes of a happy ending, and the opening sequence shows us that we will be witnessing a different narrative of how young women's stories are told. In the opening scene we are introduced to Lux, one of the five Lisbon sisters. She is shown eating a popsicle on

a hot day on her front lawn. Instead of the scene transcending into a male gaze *Lolita* type situation Lux finishes her popsicle with a few chomps and walks off from view with a secretive grin. This is only the beginning of how Coppola chooses to show the girls. Also how she chooses to combat the constant hyper sexualized nature that women endure from male filmmakers. In another scene we begin to see how important the choice to show the distant difference between each of the girls is. We see each of the girls' names displayed on the scene along with them, in different fonts and scripts. This detail is to let the audience know that each sister is their own person. Allowing the audience to see the sisters behind what the male narrator is describing them as. Each sister has their own personality and it will be shown throughout the film. The way in which Coppola shows the struggle of womanhood and the tribulations of youth express so much real life emotion. Allowing the women in the film to be fully developed characters, instead of them falling short to whatever preconceived notions the boys may have had about really ties the whole film together. She shows us the big and the small parts of being a young woman. From the crushes on boys, school dances, fights with siblings, devouring fashion magazines, to the societal pressures that the world places on young women, we see it all. The girls sweat, swear, menstruate, and cry because the director allows them to. We see the gritty and unnerving parts of girlhood that other works of media do not show. We see the ugly, unhappy, and messy side of being a teenage girl trying to figure this crazy world out one day at a time. A particular scene that empathizes with the reality of being a woman involves Lux, one of the sisters' love interest Trip. Trip is also one of the men we see re-telling his memories about the Lisbon sisters during the film, Throughout the film we saw Trip court Lux. He played by all the rules to try to win her heart. He asked her father for permission to ask her to the dance, ate with them at their family dinner, all just to leave her lying alone on the school's football field after getting what he

wanted. The desire and heartbreak Lux felt for Tripp is conveyed in a way that every female watching can relate to. Trip wanted only the fantasy of Lux not the reality.

Following the novel the story of the film does rely heavily on the narrator's retelling of events. The story is being described as how the narrator witnessed the events, while Coppola makes sure that we the viewer see what is actually happening. She allows the story to be told from the claustrophobic harsh reality that the girls face in their home life. Their overbearing, strict, and highly religious mother and feeble father rule control the girls every move. The imprisonment the sisters felt in their own home from their own parents, played a huge part in each of their unfortunate fates. The film has a lot of symbolism all throughout. The elm tree in front of their home is a large one. The girls found out that the city is removing elm trees in Lisbon's neighborhood due to deadly fungus caused by Dutch beetles killing them. The Spring after the first suicide the youngest sister Cecilia, the tree is set to be removed. The girls protest and run outside to stop the workers from removing it. They get the tree temporarily saved, but as the worker tells them "You're too late, the tree's already dead." The elm tree in their driveway symbolizes the surviving Lisbon sisters and their will to stay alive. Their argument that the tree is "not already dead" is a testament to their own position of being survivors of a sibling suicide. The doctor that had treated their sister Cecilia before her death claimed that her suicide had infected the other girls brains, causing to develop a post traumatic stress condition. That same logic is shared by the city Parks Departments, one sick tree will infect all the others. Both the tree and the Lisbon sisters survive for only a short amount of time, as they are affected by their environmental factors.

Depression is explored a lot in the film. We see the girls try to continue living a semi-normal life after the tragedy they endure by losing their sister, in the beginning of the film.

They go back to school, they attend the school dance with dates, they do whatever they can to try their best to assimilate into the world around them, despite their worlds being turned upside down forever. We see the depression build up in the girls through the movie. The major turning part is after the school dance, when Lux does not come home until the next day. This prompts their mother to take them out of school and begin homeschooling them, essentially trapping the girls completely in their own home. This form of punishment all but pushes the girls to their ill fated futures. While trapped inside their home they have no contact with the outside world, the neighborhood boys watch the girls through their windows. The boys piece together fragments of how the girls spend their days, while they are essentially walking and talking ghosts as any regiment of their former life is slowly fading away. The sadness and sorrow that the girls feel begins to bubble up, and eventually boils over.

We see how each girl has their own unique personality up until the very end of the film. Each of the five girls choose a different way in which they will end their lives. Even in their death they will make it a point to show others that they were different from one another, a fact that was hardly recognized in their waking lives.

Works Cited:

Abbott, Megan. "*The Virgin Suicides*: 'They Hadn't Heard US Calling.'" *The Criterion Collection*,
<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5573-the-virgin-suicides-they-hadnt-heard-us-calling>.

Croteau, D. (2021, June 3). *Media/Society: Technology, industries, content, and users*.

Google Books. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from

https://books.google.com/books/about/Media_Society.html?id=xTwiEAAAQBAJ

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. 4th Estate, 2021.