THINGS LEFT UNSAID

An Examination of Memory, Representation and Death in a Work of Fiction

VOLUME TWO

WAYS TO REMEMBER A MYTHOLOGICAL DEATH: The Effects of Memory and Repetition Technique in Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides

An exegesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

The exegesis asks: what effect does memory (or ‘the concept of memory’) and repetition technique have on the representation of women and their death in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*. Throughout the exegesis I use Gereard Genette’s theory of narratology, specifically *Mood* and *Repetition Order*, explore the literary basis of narrative representations of women and death as suggested by Debra Shostak, Marina Warner, and Elisabeth Bronfen, and discuss the paradoxical nature of memory and its associated problems within narrative as theorised by Steven Rose, D L Schacter, and Ann Rigney.

I suggest that mood, repetition order, and memory represent the Lisbon sisters as mythological beings who (particularly Cecelia) are cast as saviours and virgin martyrs, placing the sisters out of the ‘normal’ realm of female adolescence. Furthermore they are objectified by the male narrators, seen as the ideal female adolescent, who are at once mystical and unknowable yet desirable. The narrative achieves this representation because the female’s point of view is primarily absent from the text.

The novel, *Second Street*, is a fictional account of the 1892 Borden axe murders. Using three narrators, Lizzie (the accused), Benjamin (a fictional character obsessed with Lizzie), and 92 Second Street (the house were the murders took place), the narrative uses the ‘concept of memory’ and elements of repetition technique to explore the reasons for the murder and the ways in which Lizzie and Benjamin create mythologised realities for themselves.
INTRODUCTION
How long could we remain true to the girls? How long could we keep their memory pure? As it was, we didn’t know them any longer, and their new habits—of opening windows, for instance, to throw out a wadded paper towel—made us wonder if we had ever really known them, or if our vigilance had only been the fingerprinting of phantoms.¹

Jeffrey Eugenides

During the Renaissance ‘memory theatres’, places used to store symbols of memory (such as statues and artwork), were constructed as gifts to kings. These buildings were designed simply for memorising—a place to create your own heaven and hell² (eliciting your desires or reliving nightmarish events) based on the strengths and weaknesses of your memories and their symbols. The theatre also encouraged memories to be committed to the page. The long tradition of memory use in both oral and written narratives has allowed the storyteller to explore the ways in which our experiences (past, present, and future) not only shape our lives, but also the way memory affects the interpretations of our lives.

Used within literature, the representation of memory or the ‘concept of memory’,³ can unlock an intimate and revealing narrative, demonstrating character growth and development. It can be argued that many narrative devices and techniques (together with narrative itself) can create sexist narrative representation, particularly when a male narrator is used (as is the case of The Virgin Suicides). Yet the use and representation of memory can reveal how unrealistic and

objectified representations are created by the male narrator toward the female protagonist(s).\(^4\)

However, the flawed nature of memory does not ‘act alone’ when revealing the views of the narrator and his perception of the female protagonists. Repetition technique\(^5\) also reiterates such representations.

This is not to suggest that male authors and their male narrators shouldn’t attempt to represent female characters or write from a female perspective. Rather, a combination of literary memory devices and repetition technique, along with Western literary aesthetics, can create mythologised and objectified representations of female characters.

**The Relationship Between*The Virgin Suicides* and* Second Street***

Mythologised and objectified narrative representations are often heightened by the death of the female protagonist. This is the case for Jeffrey Eugenides’ remarkable debut *The Virgin Suicides*, a novel narrated by a group of men\(^6\) (herein referred to as the collective\(^7\)) determined to uncover

\(^4\) Especially when used by a male narrator who may hold sexist attitudes towards the female characters.

\(^5\) I use this terminology throughout the exegesis to mean the use of the ‘narrative technique of repetition’.

\(^6\) Although *The Virgin Suicides* is retrospectively narrated by adult men, much of the narrating instance takes place while those adults were teenage boys. This creates two narrative perspectives: that of teenage boys and of course, of adult men. This narrative perspective and its effects on the representation of the sisters will be discussed throughout the exegesis, particularly in Chapter Two.

\(^7\) The ‘collective’ is my terminology to describe the group of men who narrate *The Virgin Suicides*. Although membership remains unclear (who they are, their age, and how many there are), I believe there are five members, who are aged approximately fifteen at the time of the suicides and late 40s/early 50s when narration takes place. The collective refers to the sisters as their twins and given Eugenides’ motifs of duality (which is out of the scope of this exegesis) and reflections on adolescence and experience, it is logical to make this conclusion. Given this, my choice to describe the first-person plural narrators as ‘the collective’ mimics the view they hold toward the Lisbons—a giant, singular, mythical creature. The collective refer to
the reasons behind the mysterious suicides of five teenage sisters, the Lisbons. The* Virgin Suicides uses ‘the concept of memory’ and repetition technique and is narrated from the point of view of the collective—the sisters’ voices and their point of view remain largely absent.

themselves as ‘we’ and do not consider themselves as individuals. If an individual experienced an encounter with the Lisbons, the encounter happened to all of the members. This differs from Jonathan Safran Foer’s terminology of a ‘plural narrator’ in his interview with Jeffrey Eugenides. [http://bombsite.com/issues/81/articles/2519](http://bombsite.com/issues/81/articles/2519), Viewed 1 March 2007.

8 The ‘Lisbons’ is my term for the Lisbon sisters and reflects their collective-like quality. The term ‘Lisbons’ does not include the parents, who I refer to as Mr. Lisbon and Mrs. Lisbon. The Lisbons are: Therese, who is seventeen; Mary, who is sixteen; Bonnie, who is fifteen; Lux, who is fourteen, and Cecelia, who is thirteen.

9 It is tempting to fall into the practice of calling the representation of memory or ‘the concept of memory’, memory technique. Memory isn’t a technique on its own, rather it is a method of reflection and is often used within narrative techniques such as repetition. The use of memory in The Virgin Suicides ranges from retrospective reporting of the suicides (i.e. from the perspective of the adult-age collective) to the notion of ‘original plentitude and subsequent loss’, as described by Ann Rigney throughout her essay “Plentitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory”, (in this case, the ‘plentitude’ of memory is from the perspective of the adolescent-age collective), which fills the narrative with rich details of how the collective not only remember the Lisbons, but how they perceive the sisters. The narrative also uses ‘flash forwards’ and ‘flash backs’ of memory which re-informs and refines known and unknown details of the events leading up to the suicides. However, the representation of memory in literature does more than merely advance the narrative. Memory is a necessary social function for reflection and understanding. Yet memory also has a ‘suspect’ quality — we can’t always trust that what is remembered is accurate. Therefore, The Virgin Suicides’ use of memory (the collective’s often contradictory memories and so on) suggests that Eugenides is aware of the ‘suspect’ nature of memory and the way in which it affects narrative point of view. Memory allows us to reach into a type of ‘mental history’— the memories of experience that help shape our definitions of self. By creating a complex use of memory throughout the narrative, Eugenides captures a ‘collective expression of experience’. Memories also allow us to cohere socially. The social memories of the collective aim to cohere their understanding of the reasons why a group of young women would choose to end their lives. Furthermore, socially cohered memories unify the ‘memory participants’ (i.e. the collective). Together the collective can reflect on their lives, their shared history, while simultaneously reliving their fantasies of the Lisbons. The memories shared by the collective help define who the collective are and what they feel their purpose is (which is to uncover the mysteries of the suicides, become ‘mentally/spiritually’ closer to the Lisbons, and most importantly create a sense of closure). The narrative representation of memory, as used in The Virgin Suicides, is held together by the collective’s singular view—there are no deviations, no alternate opinions—and this helps create mythologised and subjectified representations of the sisters (that is, it is the collective’s subjective point of view which represents the Lisbons as objects).
My novel, *Second Street*, similarly uses the narrative technique of repetition and the representation of memory\(^{11}\) to uncover the reasons behind the 1892 Borden axe murders in which Lizzie Borden was accused then acquitted. As the principal narrator and protagonist, Lizzie uses ‘the concept of memory’ to create alternate realities for herself, ultimately mythologising her own life, knowledge, and role in the murders. Similarly Benjamin, the secondary narrator, uses the representation of memory to create alternate realities. It is during these alternate realities that Benjamin not only mythologises Lizzie but objectifies her—considering her little more than a desire or someone to cultivate and own. Unlike the Lisbons, Lizzie’s point of view and voice are active agents throughout the narrative, opposing Benjamin’s objectified perception.

\(^{10}\) This partial absence of the female voice and female perspective is a constant source of debate when discussing Eugenides’ debut novel. Often, the argument arises that male authors, no matter how good their intentions may be, fail to write from the female perspective because of the way in which men/male narrators and writers situate themselves, that is, always from the outside looking in. In her review of *The Virgin Suicides*, Laura Miller states that ‘for male writers, the collective narrator is most often on the outside trying to peep in—usually at a woman or women—but female writers speak from the center of the mystery [...] the communal inclinations of women [...] are riddled with ambivalence, and that makes the first-person plural a particularly fraught choice for women writers.’ “The Last Word: We the Characters”, in *The New York Times*, April 18, 2004, [http://www.dlackey.org/weblog/docs/firstpersonplural.pdf](http://www.dlackey.org/weblog/docs/firstpersonplural.pdf), p. 2. Viewed 2 December 2010.

While this is definitely an apt description of narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*, I think Miller overstates that women writers (seemingly always and always exclusively) speak from the centre of the mystery. I would also argue that men (and therefore male narrators), particularly the collective, are also capable of having a sense of narrative ‘communal inclination’, which helps foster a sense of belonging and purpose for the narrator. While my point here isn’t to enter into a deep discussion about the ways in which men and women writers *write*, it is clear that Miller has picked up on the overall narrative trope found in Eugenides’ novel: that of a group of men in search for clues to a mystery they will never understand.

\(^{11}\) I will simultaneously use the terms ‘the representation of memory’ and ‘the concept of memory’ to mean the narrative use of memory both within *The Virgin Suicides* and *Second Street*. 
Main Research Question

One difference between the two novels is mood\textsuperscript{12} who tells the story and how they tell the story. Therefore my main research questions are:

1) What effect does memory (or ‘the concept of memory’) have on the representation of women and their deaths in \textit{The Virgin Suicides}?

2) What effect does repetition technique have on the representation of women and their death in \textit{The Virgin Suicides}?

Subsidiary Research Questions

If narratives simply represent or interpret the narrator’s and protagonists’ experiences\textsuperscript{13} or points of view, how does ‘the concept of memory’ guide those narrative representations? Does the representation of memory reflect ‘actuality’ or does it capture a ‘desired reality’, creating mythology? What is, if at all, the problematic nature of memory? How does memory shape itself and our experiences? Do the effects of memory change when used with narrative techniques such as repetition or mood (commonly known as point of view)?

\textsuperscript{12} This is Gérard Genette’s terminology and it will be explored in detail throughout the exegesis. \textit{Mood} is Genette’s term to describe the narrator’s point of view, perception, way of seeing and so on.

\textsuperscript{13} And therefore by default ‘our’ experiences, meaning the experiences of those outside of the narrative: society, the author and so on. Narratives often capture human experience. Eugenides himself says that ‘in hindsight, [I] realis[ed] that “the suicides were emblematic of growing up in Detroit, a city in perpetual crisis with a deteriorating automobile industry. There was an elegiac atmosphere when I was there as a child.”’ Nadine Rubin, “The Virgin Suicides’ Sweet 16”, from \textit{The Daily Beast}, Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides, 22 July 2009. \url{http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-07-22/the-virgin-suicides-sweet-16/}, Viewed 15 November 2010.
When used in conjunction with narrative devices such as mood, the role of ‘the concept of memory’ and repetition in *The Virgin Suicides* creates a mythological representation of the Lisbon sisters, ultimately objectifying and rendering them as male adolescent fantasies, not only because the sisters’ voices are primarily absent from the narrative, but because the collective relies on its aging memories which are tinged with nostalgia, regret, and longing for the girls.

In Chapter One, I will approach the role of repetition technique and the ‘concept of memory’ by closely examining French structuralist Gérard Genette’s theories of narratology, primarily that of *order*, an expression of repetition technique. Genette defines order as being the succession of events and stories in the narrative that are being told, and the order that they appear throughout the narrative.14 *The Virgin Suicides* begins with Mary’s death, the last sister to commit suicide, and highlights the way anticipation (or *prolepsis*)15 of an event (the suicides) is used to suggest the Lisbons were fated to die young; it seems unlikely that different actions taken by the girls or the collective will prevent the suicides taking place.

Throughout Genette’s analysis of repetition he identifies two crucial elements—*prolepsis* and *analepsis*16 (retrospection)—and their role in shaping narratives which use literary representations of memory. I will also explore prolepsis and analepsis and the way they influence narrative representation of the sisters.

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15 Prolepsis is a literary device and enables a memory to appear as a ‘flash-forward’. I will discuss the role of Prolepsis within *The Virgin Suicides* in Chapter One.
16 Analepsis is a literary device and enables a memory to appear as a ‘flash-back’. I will discuss the role of Analepsis within *The Virgin Suicides* in Chapter One.
I will then focus on the function of memory. Memory is generally distilled with inherent problems. To explore these problems and their effects on narrative representation, I will reference the work of Steven Rose and D L Schacter. I will touch upon the role nostalgia (as described by Ann C Colley) plays in narratives, and its contribution overall to the sisters’ representation.

Rose identifies three types of memory—personal, artificial (such as photos, diaries, newspaper articles), and public (shared experiences such as war). Rose explains that reliance on artificial and public memory offers contradictory outcomes—it has the ability to distort the meaning or outcome of the actual memory/event, creating a new ‘true’ memory. This often manifests through nostalgia.

Rose’s definition of public memory is similar to the concept of ‘cultural memory,’ which ‘highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualisation and acts of communication.’ Indeed, the collective’s narrative is a mediation on the Lisbons’ lives and the collective’s role (or lack thereof) in it. Further to this, Ann Rigney sites Jan Assmann as distinguishing two phases of collective memory:

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17 I understand that ‘memory’ has a literary meaning (i.e. ‘the concept of memory’ or the representation of memory) and a neurological meaning (the scientific study of memory). Having said that, it’s important to understand how the neurological understanding of memory works (the various processes involved, the various forms of memories and so on) and how it can affect the literary representations of memory. Further it’s important to understand the scientific meaning and implications of memory not only in terms of the actual world, but so too the ‘narrative world’—similar in the way the literary term ‘the male gaze’ is used to reflect the general understanding of the structure and presence of sexism in society and its infiltration into a narrative.

18 The Making of Memory.

19 Rigney sites Maurice Halbwachs as the originator of this term.

1) Communicative Memory, that is ‘living memory [which] corresponds to the earliest phase when multiple narratives by participants and eyewitnesses circulate and compete with each other.’

2) Cultural Memory ‘proper’ ‘[which] correspond[s] to the much longer phase when all eyewitnesses and participants have died out, and a society has only relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience.’

The collective therefore seems to exist between these two phases—they use communicative memory, their living memories, and the memories of witnesses which either competes against or complements their views of the Lisbons (for example, the way in which Mr Lisbon’s male friends remember the sisters as being indistinguishable young women). Rigney states that ‘cultural memory is the product of representations and not of direct experience.’

While this may be the case, because memory is used in various forms throughout *The Virgin Suicides*, Rose’s terminology of public, artificial, and personal memory is most helpful in understanding the types of memory the collective use and experience within the narrative.

Rigney’s ‘the concept of memory’ is a useful way to describe the literary representations of Rose’s terminology, and the way in which memory is represented and used in *The Virgin Suicides*. Often the collective’s use of memory appears to take form as ‘oral history

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23 *Plentitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory*, p. 15.
24 And therefore will refer to only these terms in Chapter One.
as written word’,\textsuperscript{26} that is, the mediation phase of their cultural memory (i.e. communicative memory) is understood by the reader as an ongoing dialogue between the collective members in order to uncover the mysteries of the suicides.\textsuperscript{27} Ann Rigney further suggests that oral histories are often seen as simplistic uses of the concept of memory, designed to:

Purportedly [be a] more “authentic” alternative to historiography, because [it]\textsuperscript{28} [is] closer to past experience [offered as “fact” or] “as it really was.”\textsuperscript{29}

Indeed, the collective narrates *The Virgin Suicides* as if emerging from such ‘authentic experiences’ and, while seemingly appearing as if using ‘simplistic forms of memory’, the way in which memory is used within the narrative creates complex representations of both the Lisbons (the way they are remembered and represented) and the collective, particularly ‘their way of seeing’. For example, Rigney argues that ‘memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past.’\textsuperscript{30} While this forms a basis of discussion beyond the scope of this exegesis, it does offer one explanation of why and how the collective remember. I believe that it is the dual perspectives of adolescence and adulthood that are constantly at odds with one another as the collective recollect the sisters’ lives—the collective, as adults, acknowledges that some of its memories have been embellished,

\textsuperscript{26} My terminology to describe the ‘flavour’ of the narrative voice. The collective’s turn of phrase and delivery has an aural/oral quality, and reads as a story that has been passed throughout generations, much like traditional oral storytelling and oral histories.

\textsuperscript{27} Similarly Debra Shostak views the ongoing dialogue between the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* as being ‘[their] efforts [to] highlight the acts of both interpretation and storytelling as communal, transactional, and highly relative. The plotting of the story they tell is determined by both the storytellers’ distance from the object of contemplation and the theoretical presuppositions inevitably brought to any act of reading or telling.’ Debra Shostak, “A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 55; Number 4: Winter: 2009, p. 809.

\textsuperscript{28} Oral Histories.

\textsuperscript{29} *Plentitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory*, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{30} *Plentitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory*, p. 14.
fuelled by one another in order to satisfy adolescent fantasies. This duality of perspective and complex use of memory and nostalgia significantly contribute to the mythologised and objectified representations of the Lisbons.

Both *The Virgin Suicides* and Second Street rely heavily on memory by reporting on remembered events, and both incorporate elements of nostalgia throughout the narrative. D L Schacter points out that there is a distinction between knowing and remembering the past.\(^{31}\) Indeed, many of the ‘facts’ presented throughout *The Virgin Suicides* are not personal memories of the collective at all; rather, they are other people’s memories passed on to the collective after the fact and integrated into the collective’s expanding memories. This is evident during countless recollections of ‘ordinary’ life for the Lisbons,

> Mary would sit before the mirror, watching her face swim through the alterations of counterfeit worlds. She wore dark glasses in sunshine, and bundled up under clouds.\(^{32}\)

Later it is revealed that this information is sourced from Mr Lisbon’s recollections of the lead up to the suicides. Although the collective does not witness many of the sisters’ actions, their meticulous description suggests their presence, bolstering their authority to speak on behalf of the sisters. Knowing the past, in this instance, allows the collective to recreate the world they believe the Lisbons inhabited, reinforcing their own mythology as fact.

The narrators of Second Street rely heavily on personal memories that are often infused with nostalgia for a past that more than likely didn’t exist. It becomes clear throughout Lizzie’s narrative that her memories are exaggerated in order to create her own mythology, offering an escape from reality. The distinction between these two uses of mythology suggests that one is


\(^{32}\) *The Virgin Suicides* p. 177.
more believable than the other: although Lizzie ventures into escapism, we are more likely to believe her because she narrates her own experience.

In Chapter Two, I will explore the importance of *mood* and emphasise the role it plays in representing Cecelia’s suicide. I will focus on Genette’s analysis of *mood*, which he describes as allowing differing perspectives to inform the way in which narrators articulate their points of view of an event.\(^{33}\) Moreover I will examine mood’s role in regulating the amount of information available throughout *The Virgin Suicides* and how it affects the collective’s representation the suicides.

I will then examine the consequence ‘the concept of memory’ and repetition have on the representation of Cecelia and her death. Cecelia is represented as being a ‘Virgin Martyr’ and ‘Saviour’; she is the weird and desired sister and she is the symbol of the collective’s longing and melancholy.

Both order and mood help solidify Cecelia as a mythologised fantasy. However, Cecelia is not merely portrayed as a virginal myth simply because of narrative technique.

To understand the way in which Cecelia and her sisters are able to be represented as virginal myths, I will focus on Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex*\(^ {34}\) and Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over her Dead Body*.\(^ {35}\) Bronfen argues that ‘the aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because […] death occurs at someone else’s body and as an image.’\(^ {36}\) Bronfen’s assertion helps explain the collective’s need to uncover the


\(^{36}\) *Over Her Dead Body*, p. x.
reasons behind the suicides—death is an intimate experience occurring outside of themselves which forces them to confront that which they fear (i.e. their own deaths).

Previous Research

Although little research has been dedicated to the way in which the Lisbons are mythologised and objectified through memory and repetition techniques, recent studies by Debra Shostak explore the relationship between narrative voice and readers’ response to *The Virgin Suicides*. Shostak suggests that ‘the male gaze turned on beautiful, doomed females [creates] the potential for passing judgment against the narrators and the novel they govern’.³⁷ She begins her investigation of the role of narrative voice in *The Virgin Suicides* by focusing on the narrative misogyny³⁸ created by the narrators. This exegesis builds upon Shostak’s exploration of the role of narrative voice by further investigating how narrative voice creates such representations.

Prior research by academics has focused on the correlation between death and the crumbling suburban dream in Sofia Coppola’s film adaptation;³⁹ the traditional roles of the American female in literature;⁴⁰ the representation and treatment of adolescence;⁴¹ the treatment of identity and suicide,⁴² and the motif of ‘coming of age’ in *The Virgin Suicides*.⁴³

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³⁷ A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*.
³⁸ I discuss misogyny in *The Virgin Suicides* in the Conclusion.
⁴¹ Rachael McLennan, “Chasing After the Wind: The Adolescent Aporias of Jeffrey Eugenides”, in Elizabeth Boyle (ed. and intro.) and Anne-Marie Evans (ed. and intro.), *Writing America into
Departing from these studies is Francisco Collado-Rodriguez’s article Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise which explores mythology and representation in *The Virgin Suicides*. Collado-Rodriguez suggests that Mrs Lisbon’s religious belief brings about the girls’ repression and is a catalyst for the suicides. He argues that ‘the castrating role of the mother and the absent role of her husband…is ultimately associated to the girls’ tragic ends’. While the collective hints that repression within the Lisbon home may have contributed to the suicides, Collado-Rodriguez does not focus on the ways in which the collective’s memories and narrative order represent the sisters.

Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise focuses on the connections between Eugenides’ novel and Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Although he asserts that ‘Eugenides’ novel […] explicitly refer[s] to the close link existing between the fate of the characters’ and ‘their condition of virginity [which …] connects them openly to the role played by the Virgin in Catholic iconography’, Collado-Rodriguez’s argument relies heavily on the premise that these ‘troubled’ representations are symptomatic of the novel’s matriarchal motif.

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44 Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, “Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise: Garcia Marquez’s Traces on Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides”, *Atlantis*, Issue 27; Volume 2; December, 2005.

45 *Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise*, p. 32.

46 *Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise*, p. 33.

47 *Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise*, p. 35.
While I explore the different roles the Virgin plays in the novel and how Cecelia comes to embody the icon of the Virgin Mary, I extend beyond Collado-Rodriguez’s reference point by focusing on the effects narrative techniques have on narrative representation, rather than simply relying on the explanation that these representations are the direct cause of the tyrannical Matriarch and the girls’ desires for society to return to Mother Earth.\(^{48}\)

Since the exegesis focuses on the ways in which order and mood create mythologised and complex representations of the sisters (i.e. they exist between the realms of ‘otherness’ and as one-dimensional desired objects, yet traverse the plains of ‘normal’ adolescent girls), I am limiting my scope to the relationships between the Lisbons and the collective and will not venture into a discussion about the role matriarchy and ‘psychic repression’ seem to play in the representation of the sisters.

Instead, I explore how Western literary representations of femininity have created and defined a set of ideals and myths which informs narrative mood. Further, these ideals help explain the means by which the dead female is represented.

Within this framework I demonstrate how female characters, particularly the Lisbons, are more likely to be represented as the ‘fantasised-woman’ without agency (through death) because their voices are predominately absent from the narrative. Narrative uses of memory and repetition technique (including mood), create the ‘perfect conditions’ for female objectification and mythology in *The Virgin Suicides* because of the inherent paradoxical nature of memory and the way narrative repetition reinforces the collective’s point of view.

The narratives of both the collective, engulfed by its adolescent nostalgia and mourning, and of Lizzie, escaping to a world of imagined and possible memories, shares the complexities

\(^{48}\) *Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise*. See throughout the whole essay.
and problems of memory and repetition technique; however, the difference in representing the female characters in these narratives lies within mood and in narrative content.
CHAPTER ONE
Remembering the Memory: Using Memory and Repetition
Narrative Repetition and Memory

In this chapter I will apply Gérard Genette’s model of repetition technique and Steven Rose’s theory of memory to Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, and examine how these narrative devices assist the creation of mythologised and objectified representations of female protagonists, particularly in death (arising when the female protagonist’s point of view is either absent from the narrative or restricted within the narrative).

Set during the 1970s *The Virgin Suicides* centres around five teenaged sisters, the Lisbons, who all commit suicide over a thirteen month period. The novel is narrated by the collective at least twenty years after the suicides. Limited by their memories and knowledge of the sisters (they barely knew the Lisbons) the collective spends years interviewing associates and friends of the family and collecting items belonging to the Lisbons such as photos and a diary, in an attempt to solve and unravel the mysteries of the suicides.

Eugenides’ narrative uses two repetition techniques (as outlined by Genette) which allow the collective to revisit the deaths. They are *repetition order* and *repetition mood* (these will be discussed throughout the exegesis). Paying particular attention to Cecelia’s suicide, I will explore the role the representation of memory, nostalgia, and repetition play in a narrative primarily

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50 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 4.
absent of the female protagonist’s voice (in this case, the Lisbon’s) and the effect this has on
their narrative representation.

In contrast my novel, Second Street, is based on the unsolved 1892 Borden axe murders. It has three narrators and is set over two time periods. The main narrator and protagonist, Lizzie Borden (1892), is accused of committing the crime; Benjamin (1905) is a fictional character obsessed with Lizzie Borden, and 92 Second Street, the house where the murders occurred, remembers and narrates events that have taken place. Second Street also uses repetition techniques to explore the reasons behind the murders. The representation of women in Second Street, while based on memory and repetition, is predominately narrated from the female protagonist’s point of view.

As a narrative device ‘the concept of memory’ can be expressed through techniques such as the use of repetition, which can highlight conflicting narrative perspectives (i.e. the collective challenging the memories of their younger selves) or can suggest an inevitable conclusion for a character or narrator (the sisters were fated to die because the collective begins their narrative with the deaths, cast as prolepsis). Repetition is achieved by exploring a particular narrative event several times or perhaps a constant revisiting of a protagonist’s dream or memory. Memory offers an intimate point of view of an event or desired outcome creating immediacy and ownership of the narrative.

According to Genette the level of repetition in a narrative expresses itself through four major narrative aspects:

1) Order— the succession of events and stories in the narrative that are being told and the order that they appear throughout the narrative.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{51} Essentials of the Theory of Fiction, p. 121.
2) Duration— the relationship between the duration of these events and stories and the duration of the narrative.\textsuperscript{52} The Virgin Suicides and Second Street concern themselves with events taking place at one specific time, yet the narratives are told many years after the fact.

3) Frequency— the relationship of repetitive frequency between the events and the narrative, between history and story.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, how often is an event retold? Does the repetition of the event indicate a significant importance over other events in the narrative?

4) Mood— allows differing perspectives to inform the way in which narrators articulate their points of view of an event.\textsuperscript{54} The Virgin Suicides is narrated from a male narrator perspective, whereas Second Street, while using multiple narrators, is primarily narrated from a female protagonist’s perspective.

The narrative expressions of repetition which demonstrate how memory can inflate mythologised female representations in The Virgin Suicides are order and mood.\textsuperscript{55} The order of repetition throughout The Virgin Suicides highlights the inevitability of suicide, compelling the reader to accept that alternative actions taken by the sisters or the collective will not prevent ‘fate’. Similarly Second Street begins with the murders having taken place, not only suggesting the certainty of murder, but that death is the only possible solution for Lizzie’s sanity and happiness. Narratologist Mieke Bal sees this aspect of repetition order, that is, narrative anticipation, as being:

\textsuperscript{52} Essentials of the Theory of Fiction, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{53} Essentials of the Theory of Fiction, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{54} Narrative Discourse, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{55} Mood will be examined in depth in Chapter Two.
[A] traditional form of anticipation [...] the summary at the beginning [of a novel]. The rest of the story gives the explanation of the outcome presented at the beginning. This type of anticipation can suggest a fatalism, or predestination: nothing can be done, we can only watch the progression toward the final result.\footnote{Meike Bal, \textit{Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative}, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. 95.}

**Order**

We didn't understand why Cecelia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice.\footnote{\textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 32.}

Jeffrey Eugenides

Genette identifies two main elements of repetition order: \textit{prolepsis} (anticipation) and \textit{analepsis} (retrospection):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Prolepsis} occurs in any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in \textit{advance} an event that will take place later on. \textit{Analepsis} is any evocation after the fact of an event that took place.\footnote{\textit{Narrative Discourse}, p. 37.}
\end{quote}

Moreover prolepsis and analepsis also contain temporal relationships that are either subjective or objective retrospections (e.g. objective—the newspaper reports of the suicides) or subjective or objective anticipations (e.g. subjective—the collective’s account of the final suicides at the beginning of the novel). These variations often arise in narrative categories such as mood, affecting the representation of an event or protagonist.

Before I apply these elements generally to \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, it is necessary to consider how these elements work throughout the narrative. Genette explains that narrative devices such as ‘announcements’ or ‘recalls’ are used to demonstrate how memory has the ability to be
changed, or have meaning applied to the memory years after an event has taken place.\textsuperscript{59} Hence the collective revisits its memories in order to uncover the reasons for the suicides that may not have been known or understood at the time.\textsuperscript{60}

These narrating elements have subjective and objective variations. Genette considers analepsis a subjective element as it is more often than not used when ‘a character…with[in] the narrative [does] no more than reporting [their] present thoughts…such as “I remembered.”’\textsuperscript{61}

The collective frequently uses analepsis subjectively when narrating other people’s memories of the Lisbons. In doing so, the collective asserts its authority over the narrative because it is able to collate the available information—stitching evidence and memories together piece by piece—presenting scenes (which may or may not have happened) though a fantasised adolescent gaze. These scenes are filled with romantic imagery of the sisters’ surroundings, reflecting the collective’s nostalgic and sexist ‘way of seeing’\textsuperscript{62} (because they are revisiting memories that have become mythologised). In essence, the Lisbons ‘serve […] as the obscure objects of the narrators’ desire.’\textsuperscript{63} An example of this takes place during their recollection of Father Moody’s visit to the house shortly after Cecelia’s death:

Father Moody passed their bathroom [where] he saw shirts and pants and underthings draped over the shower curtain. “It sounded quite pleasant, actually,” he said. “Like rain.” […] Father Moody stood outside the bathroom, too bashful

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Essentials of the Theory of Fiction}, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{60} I will discuss the way memories can be altered, particularly if those memories are influenced by nostalgia, in Section Two.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Narrative Discourse}, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{62} The collective views the sisters in many forms throughout the novel. Generally speaking, its ‘way of seeing’ is though a nostalgic and fantasised lens, which sees the Lisbons placed on pedestals as desired objects, martyrs, and mythological beings. It is apparent throughout the narrative that the collective holds these views of the sisters all at once but will place different emphasis on each representation depending on what they wish to reveal or articulate about the suicides or their adolescence at any given time.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides}, p. 812.
to enter that moist cave that existed as a common room between the girls’ two shared bedrooms. Inside, if he hadn’t been a priest and had looked, he would have seen the throne-like toilet where the Lisbon girls defecated publicly.  

It is revealed that Father Moody’s recollection is actually a conversation overheard by an altar boy. The collective uses this conversation to fill the gaps left by Father Moody’s memory of his house visit. This establishes its own version of events, transforming the sisters’ ordinariness into something heady and mythical. It also reflects the altar boy’s perception of the Lisbons, and suggests that it was not only the collective who created dream-like feminised worlds filled with the desired loveliness of the teenage sisters. It is likely that both the altar boy’s and the collective’s version of Father Moody’s house visit are embellished to reflect their desires, thus perpetuating a mythological narrative representation.

Conversely, prolepsis affects the narrative when it is used to heighten reader anticipation and establish narrative authority. Prolepsis allows the narrator to bring the narrative back to the present by presenting it as if emerging from the past; as if being told from the point of view of the past,  

The first use of prolepsis in The Virgin Suicides advances the Lisbon’s mythology—the collective offers a tantalising and mysterious glimpse of the sisters’ deaths, while capturing their own perplexed perceptions of the suicides. The opening scene establishes the use of prolepsis and analepsis:

On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—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 […] Thirteen

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64 The Virgin Suicides, p. 50.
65 Narrative Discourse, p. 39.
months earlier [...] the trouble began. Cecelia, the youngest, only thirteen, had gone first, slitting her wrists like a Stoic.66

Prolepsis also establishes the collective’s way of seeing, further reinforcing the way it remembers the sisters first and foremost: dead. In this instance, order illustrates the way memory will be used throughout the narrative, to document the unknown lives of the Lisbons through the prism of the collective’s mood. Order influences how the narrator will unravel the narrative and in this case the sisters’ representation. Likewise, the narrative order of Second Street reveals Lizzie’s preoccupation with viewing her father and step-mother as death’s objects; Lizzie’s mood negotiates the narrative representation of her parents, particularly her step-mother Abby, so that the reader constantly perceives them as dead throughout the novel. Moreover, Abby is presented as a caricature, someone without agency. Lizzie uses caricature to disassociate herself from the murders and to disengage sympathy for Abby.

Additionally, order establishes the time frame of narrative in The Virgin Suicides. The order of time within repetition reveals two important pieces of information:

1) The main narrating instance, the suicides, occurs over a thirteen-month time period.
2) The collective’s narrative takes place twenty years after the suicides.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, time and order not only affect what is remembered but the way in which it is remembered. Narrative order within The Virgin Suicides helps characterise the sisters’ as the ‘inaccessible mysterious woman’: their perspective and voices

66 The Virgin Suicides, p. 3.
aren’t directly represented, and are primarily absent, regardless of the fact they are the protagonists.

Although repetition, as a device, can be used to manipulate the sisters’ representation, it only partially explains how these representations manifest and promote the views of the collective.

Repetition influences the way public memory (or controlled memory such as a written narrative) establishes the narrative as an official document—it commits the memory, making it static, and reiterates the views held within the memories. The Virgin Suicides demonstrates the negative implications of narrative uses of memory and repetition technique and the absence of the female protagonist’s point of view because the collective’s memories cannot be changed and the reader must accept the narrative as the ‘literary fact’. Therefore the collective’s (male) perspective, although an attempt at understanding the Lisbons, instantaneously mythologises the sisters because of its limited perspective.

Furthermore the collective’s memories appear to be rehearsed, reflecting its own group history (it’s likely it has gone over the events amongst itself many times before committing its memories to the narrative), demonstrating the various stages of repetition in the narrative. When the collective states ‘we’ve tried to arrange the photographs chronologically’, it emphasises the static nature of documenting memory and reinforces the notion that its memories have been explored many times. Indeed, these memories become the ‘stubbornly elusive referen[ce]’ which helps the collective construct a perspective on their version of events. The fallout from the

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67 *A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides*, p. 814. The sisters’ voices are filtered by other narrating agents, such as the collective’s retelling of events ‘shared’ with the Lisbons.

68 This notion will be expanded upon throughout this chapter.

69 *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 4–5.

70 *A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides*, p. 812.
collective’s ‘public’ account is a narrative, or ‘official version’, that is a static literary narrative unable to deviate from the recorded memory. Here we enter the realm of controlled memory.

**Unravelling Nostalgic Memories**

*For the first few seconds the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels.*

Jeffrey Eugenides

Although the representation of memory can unlock an intimate narrative point of view, its use in *The Virgin Suicides* and Second Street also creates an unrealistic (and thus mythologised) point of view toward the female protagonists, particularly when nostalgia is substituted for *personal* memory or the narrator relies on other sources of memory such as *artificial* and *public* (three concepts that will be explored later in the chapter). When these devices are used with repetition the narrative reiterates the narrator’s point of view of the narrated event, influencing the way in which protagonists (in this case the female) are represented.

In order to explore how memory (and therefore the representation of memory) propagates unrealistic narrative representations, it is necessary to understand the precarious nature of memory and the problems it can cause within the narrative. For centuries, the art of oral storytelling relied on memory—the teller remembers the story and intent and the listener must remember and learn so that they too can pass on the story. Oral storytelling allowed a sense of

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71 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 25.
72 Internal and individual memories of experience.
73 Artificial memories can consist of such things as photographs, diaries, and newspaper reports. They are also considered public memories and tend to be of a visual nature.
74 According to Steven Rose, public memories, such as of a war, can be seen as shared experiences. These memories tend to be static in nature, that is they do not easily change, and usually represent a collective moment in time. Public memory may also consist of artificial memory.
freedom for the teller—you could add to the story, change the structure of telling, or heighten the sense of shared experience with your audience. From the moment the oral story became written word, these memories and shared experiences became fixed or static. The very notion of written memory has long been debated. Socrates claimed that writing was inhuman because ‘it pretends to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind.’ Literary theorist Walter Ong believes that the very act of writing our memories is to control them, making them a standardised fact so that in essence, what we are doing is creating a sense of closure.

*The Virgin Suicides* can be seen as an attempt by the collective to gain closure to the mysteries of the suicides. The collective’s act of collating ‘evidence’ such as diaries, photographs, and individual memories is an effort to cohere the collective’s perspective and memories of the deaths. Shostak further describes the collective (as adults) as a group who ‘conceive of themselves [...] as objective gatherers of information’. These types of artificial memory are a form of public memory, much like the memory theatres of the Renaissance. Further, what is depicted in a photo, although a true physical representation, may not adequately capture or represent what actually occurred. Interpretations throughout the passage of time, may be influenced by nostalgia.

As the narrator pieces together its memories of an event, it often reveals their desire to return (physically) to the event. Therefore memories have the ability to manifest as nostalgia, a

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75 *The Making of Memory*, p. 72.
76 *The Making of Memory*, p. 108.
78 *A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides*, p. 816.
yearning for times past when perhaps life was seemingly simpler, or more appropriately, merely different to the times in which a narrator or protagonist currently exists.

Nostalgia affects narrative mood because a narrator offers their memory to the reader, placing emphasis on a particular aspect of the memory, changing the way the reader can interpret the narrative. Often when the collective uses nostalgia, such as the ‘random’ recollection of a sun-drenched Lux sitting alone in the school yard (instead of being in class) looking angelic, its narrative imbues a wistful daydream-like quality which casts Lux (and her sisters) as the epitome of adolescence, the golden age of life. Moreover,

There are two kinds of nostalgia: The first creates sites of memory that freeze and attempt to conserve or frame a detached moment; the second evokes places of memory and attaches one’s yearning to a wider orbit and multiple dimensions that continually qualify the experience of longing. [Nostalgia] gathers bits and pieces from the past and assembles fragments arising from the involuntary memory, [and therefore] merely offers vanishing glimpses of what was.  

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Here the collective’s recollection captures evidence that Lux, like many teenagers, wagged classes, yet the collective’s nostalgic longing for a return to Lux, to adolescence, and to the past, portrays Lux as being out-of-this-world. By offering this fragmented glimpse into the past, the collective directs the reader to revere this ‘precious’ memory just as much as it has.

Shostak stresses that this ‘desire to return’ is steeped in the collectives’ (self-perceived) alignment with the sisters, whereby they ‘yearn for [their] lost continuity’.  

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In other words, the Lisbon’s deaths have broken a link with the collective and the collective’s adolescence. Their nostalgia can be seen as a longing for continuity, the ‘re-birth’ of a meaningful link between themselves and their beloved Lisbons; they desire to carve a place for themselves within the

80 A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides, p. 817.
sisters’ lives. In one such instance, the collective recalls Peter Sissen’s memory of attending the Lisbon home before the suicides take place. Peter’s memory, much like the altar boys’, is filled with sexual desire for the sisters, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere which in turn fuels the collective’s imagination of the girls as one mythical and mystical entity. Together, the teenage boys create a fantasy of what it must be like to be a young woman, and to be one of the sisters, which evolves into the ‘official’ memory, the official way of viewing the sisters. Perpetually remembering the visit in this way invites the collective (as adults) to come back inside the girls’ world; or rather back into the adolescent fantasy they created.

However, Peter’s memory also demonstrates both the problems of public memory and the way in which the collective reports assumed knowledge\(^{81}\) of the sisters. Public memory allows the collective to insert themselves into Peter Sissen’s memory, exposing them to Peter’s point of view (that of a sexually-obsessed male teenager). The collective tells us that:

>[Peter] came back to us with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, of stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls, […] of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space.\(^{82}\)

The romanticised nostalgic imagery heightens the memory and creates an idealised, dreamy world for the Lisbons to exist within. For the collective, nothing in Peter’s story (and therefore their memory/public account) suggests that the sisters were depressed or suicidal. Rather, the sisters appear as if belonging to a harem, waiting for Peter, the collective, or anyone, to come to them and share the wonderment of their developing womanhood and sexuality. This in itself adds to the tenacity of the collective’s twenty-year-long quest for answers to the

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\(^{81}\) Assumed because the memory is recalled from the point of view of Peter Sissen and isn’t a direct experience from the Lisbon sisters’ point of view.

\(^{82}\) *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 9.
suicides. However, the collective’s memories do not provide any further explanation for the deaths, mainly because the nostalgia associated with the memories derives from the collective’s fantasy-based point of view. These memories are not created from the sisters’ point of view, denying their voices and thus any insight as to why they committed suicide.

The narrative use of nostalgia offers the reader a glimpse of what was, or what was idealised for the narrator. Historically nostalgia was often thought of as a ‘disease’, and it was not uncommon for physicians to prescribe a remedy that involved either distracting the sufferer from their obsession, or offering the patient hope of returning to their homeland. Early literary uses of nostalgia often created a world whereby the narrator and reader could reflect on shared past experiences to try and understand the world they now found themselves in.

In her study into the use of nostalgia and recollection in Victorian culture, Ann C Colley argues that R L Stevenson often used his own art to inform his literary creations. His artwork, begun in childhood, often reflected the outside world viewed from memory. But it appears that often his memories were predominately formed by nostalgia. Colley surmises that Stevenson’s use of art and reflection allowed him to:

Become more aware of [recollections] visual elements—to notice the optical metaphors that help structure the experience of it […] and remind[s] one that recollection is not merely a looking back; it is also a commitment to a particular way of seeing.

_The Virgin Suicides_ can be read as the collective’s commitment to a particular way of seeing—how the collective remembers the Lisbons, regardless of actuality. Once again, this

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83 This enables the collective to cloak the sisters in mystery. The layering of mystery allows the collective to continue their archaeological exploration of lost lives, highlighting the depth of nostalgia associated with their memories.

84 _Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture_, pp. 2–3.


reflects the way in which the collective asserts narrative ownership and authority over the sisters’ story because of the intimacy created by the use of memory and repetition.

The collective uses each other’s memories to understand the suicides and, during the process of repetition, the collective mourns both the loss of the sisters and its own adolescence. Because nostalgia evokes yearning and quantifies the experience of longing, the collective, by maintaining their hold on the past, mythologises their lives with the sisters, inevitably objectifying them. For example, the collective remembers the Lisbons as being:

Short, round buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled that same dorsal softness. Whenever we got a glimpse, their faces looked indecently revealed, as though we were used to seeing women in veils.87

Here the sisters are both the physical embodiment of teenage desire and the ‘catalyst of revelation’ of what that teenage desire is. Retrospectively for the adult-aged collective, it was this moment, when the Lisbons ceased to be the ‘hidden woman’ (the sisters revealing their ‘feminine secrets’ to the collective), that ‘allowed’ the boys to ‘see’ women for the first time; ‘allowed’ them to catch a glimpse of the feminine world that would be awaiting them. The Lisbons propel the collective into the beginnings of manhood.

The collective revels in and holds onto physical descriptions of the sisters because it can’t capture (or understand) the sisters’ interior lives. Once more, memory is used to fortify the collective’s objectified representation of the sisters.

The collective also has the ability to deviate from its own visions of the Lisbons, which further emphasises how nostalgia shades its memories. On the night of Cecelia’s death, a few collective members are invited to a party at the house and state ‘we saw that Peter Sissen’s

87 *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 7–8.
descriptions had been all wrong. Instead of a heady atmosphere of feminine chaos, we found the house to be a tidy, dry looking place.\textsuperscript{88}

Throughout the narrative the collective often realises its memories of the Lisbons do not always reflect the reality, yet it still remembers the sisters unrealistically because it suits the mythology it has built. The narrators at once understand they have constructed and nurtured the Lisbon myth yet cannot let go of the fantasy because it means the loss of their adolescence, of their desire, and of the sisters: the Lisbons will always exist between what was and what could have been.

Much like R L Stevenson’s use of nostalgic memory, the collective’s use of memory and nostalgia reiterates the way it wishes to remember the Lisbons, affecting the sisters’ representation.

The commitment to memory and experience resonates in \textit{The Virgin Suicides}. The collective’s quest to understand, to remember and to explain the deaths compels them to record their memories. In essence, this recording of memory not only records the interlinked relationships between the collective and the Lisbons, but also preserves the narrative DNA\textsuperscript{89} of their own lives and the perceived lives of the Lisbons.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{89} Eugenides’ skill is making this link apparent to the reader, reinforcing the notion that all art is a memorialisation of what has been lost.
Moving from Nostalgia to Memory: Controlling Memory and Establishing Myth Through Narrative Repetition

*From clues later discovered, it appears Cecelia’s ascent to her bedroom was not as quick as we remember it. She took her time.*

Jeffrey Eugenides

Steven Rose suggests that ‘the problem of the freezing and fixation of artificial memory is even greater when we move from the individual to the collective in memory’.  

So far I have concentrated on the uses of memory, the representations of memory and nostalgia as literary devices and their limitations when used as part of repetition technique. Previously, I mentioned the concepts of personal, artificial, and public memories and here I will pay attention to their interaction within the narrative. These three types of memory articulate the way in which the collective use narrative mood to either heighten the ‘first-person plural narrative voice’ of wish fulfilment and longing (in this case, the Lisbons are still alive) or to uncover a mystery (why they committed suicide).

Eugenides’ novel uses artificial memory such as photographs, lipsticks, old perfume bottles, and newspaper articles to inform and reignite the collective’s memories. Artificial memory acts as a substitute for personal memory and gives the illusion that a memory has more depth than it actually does. Moreover, when artificial and public memories are used throughout a narrative it creates a public mythology.

Given the narrative is an account of *remembered* aspects of the Lisbons’ suicides—an account that is recorded as a written document—we can view the narrative as a ‘public memory’

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90 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 47.
91 *The Making of Memory*, p. 111.
92 *A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides*, p. 808. This is Shostak’s terminology to describe the collective’s narrating voice.
not only because the collective will refer to the document in the future, but also because it contains the memories of individual collective members that are combined into a shared, group memory.

Second Street’s narrative is not intended as the representation of a public memory, even when public memory is used. Benjamin’s narrative is an example of this. He uses public memory (newspaper articles and photos) to construct personal memories which then create mythological versions of Lizzie. Similar to the collective, Benjamin builds a fantasy life with Lizzie and is convinced that the imagined is reality. Yet, unlike the collective, Benjamin’s narrative isn’t an official record of events and is clearly a narrative of wish fulfilment—this is backed by the inclusion of Lizzie’s primary narrative which opposes Benjamin’s point of view.

Alternatively, Lizzie’s narrative is based purely on personal memory. Although ambiguous as to whether her memories are fantasies, half truths or legitimate recollections, Lizzie’s narrative clearly defines her emotions and thoughts. This is a stark contrast from The Virgin Suicides whereby the Lisbon’s voices are predominately absent, leaving their point of view out of the public memory, deepening their mystery.

The Virgin Suicides knits public memories together exposing the collective’s insights of how they perceived the sisters and their interpretations of events surrounding the suicides. Many of these public memories are made from artificial memory, such as the laminated picture of The Virgin Mary93 Cecelia held in her hands during her first attempt at suicide. These uses of public memory have two functions. First, they act as a springboard for the collective to recall memory and secondly, they help situate the collective as an authority. They own artifacts of artificial memory that can be used to back up the collective’s personal memories (e.g. they own the

93I have chosen this particular scene as I will explore the theme of the Virgin Mary in more detail in Chapter Two.
records Lux was forced to throw out, the lipsticks that Mary wore which Peter Sissen saw on his visit, and photographs of the sisters at the Homecoming dance—an event which ultimately forced them into isolation and to their eventual suicides. This authority deceptively authenticates the narrative, which is missing the direct voice of the Lisbons—the collective presents their evidence and their memories as possible reasons for the suicides thus substituting their point of view for that of the Lisbons.

In order to exploit its authority, the collective recalls and uses testimony, interviews and first-hand accounts of contact with the Lisbons from outside sources—non-collective members who knew the sisters either in a personal or a professional capacity (such as high school friends, doctors, paramedics, and journalists). These non-collective memories can be considered public memories because they have been recorded as part of the narrative. Moreover, these public memories create a space where verified actions of the Lisbons can co-exist alongside fantasised actions of the Lisbons (for example Actual: the sisters protect Cecelia’s favourite tree that is now dying in the front yard. Fantasised: the sisters and the collective go on holiday together). The discovery of the laminated picture demonstrates how the collective interweaves non-member first-hand accounts (personal memories) and make them their own, enabling them to become similar to an omniscient narrator, furthering their authoritative position:

The paramedics found the laminated picture first, of course, […] the fat one […] at the hospital […] gave] it to Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon[…]
Mr. Lisbon thanked the paramedic for saving his daughter’s life […] looking at the picture…Mr Lisbon[…] said in a defeated voice “We baptized her, we confirmed her, and now she believes this crap.”
It was his only blasphemy during the entire ordeal. Mrs. Lisbon reacted by crumpling the picture in her fist (it survived; we have a photocopy here).94

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The narrative techniques of repetition and ‘the concept of memory’ are at play here, both of which underline how artificial memory weakens public memory. Rather than quote the paramedics, the collective conveys the paramedics’ first-hand account into a personal memory or personal experience. By doing so, they are able to achieve two things with this scene. The collective controls the emotional representation of the parents and Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon’s anguish is treated both as a caricature and a non-event. According to the collective’s adolescent perspective, the parents hardly show emotion, particularly Mrs. Lisbon (she simply crumples the picture, she does nothing else), foreshadowing her perceived emotional coldness. Mr. Lisbon, on the other hand, is paralysed by his anguish and is cast as the weak character (according to the collective, he can’t even manage blasphemy after this experience). The collective fails to decipher the parent’s genuine anguish (both in this scene and throughout the novel) because it is preoccupied with collating and recording only ‘pertinent’ narrative information it believes helps solve the mysterious suicides (regardless of the collective’s absence from the scene). The parent’s emotional depth simply isn’t the collective’s main focus.

Furthermore, this scene is a repetition of memory (the repetition of the paramedic’s memory) which also consists of artificial memory (the laminated picture) which overall cements the scene as an example of a weak memory.

The complex use of memory creates problems within the narrative—the memory that is presented to the reader, regardless of whether this is the actual scenario which occurred at the hospital, cannot be considered a personal memory and is only glued together by the artificial memory (a photocopy laminated card) and a retelling of a first-hand experience. What is most striking about this passage is the collective’s ability to centre itself within the action, enabling them to solidify their narrative authority.
The revelation that the collective possesses a copy of the laminated picture shows the precarious nature of its public memory. Though the collective claim the picture survived, the photocopy, which is used to substantiate its authority, indicates that something has happened to the original, lengthening their distance from the Lisbons—it is one more original object belonging to the sisters that the collective does not have.

Overall, the collective’s memories, while based on the individual members’ experiences with the Lisbons, are reliant on the memories and experiences of those outside of the collective (such as the paramedics) because those memories are used to ‘complete’ unknown events. Therefore these types of memories can be seen as ‘known’ memories, rather than memories that are remembered.

D L Schacter argues there is a distinction between remembering and knowing the past.95 We may recall an event from our past but we may not know exactly how the event unfolded or what the event actually meant. Furthermore:

Memories must see double […] two images […] converge in our minds into a single heightened reality […] so that] feelings of remembering result from a subtle interplay between past and present.96

The narrative use of the representation of memory in The Virgin Suicides often transitions between public memory and personal memory, both of which can be classified as either the past being remembered or the past being known. For example, known memories are when the collective experiences a moment with the sisters such as a member attending the homecoming dance with them (personal memories that are remembered), or the collective entwines the memories of non-collective members into its own, such as Paul Baldino reporting on how

95 Searching For Memory, p. 23.
96 Searching For Memory, p. 28.
Cecelia looked in the bath tub after her first suicide attempt (personal memories that are known). This interplay of memory places the narrative between reality and ways of seeing through the memories (i.e. nostalgic views). These moments of nostalgia or wish fulfilment render the sisters as objects of desire, and as objects of absence, fetishised through the adult gaze of longing. Although I will explore the representation of women in death in Chapter Two, one particular example of a known memory which becomes a nostalgic public memory takes place as the collective recalls the Lisbons’ autopsy. The collective remembers ‘[the coroner] opened up the girls’ brains and body cavities, peering inside at the mystery of their despair […] he wrote that] the Lisbon girls […] were “like something behind glass like an exhibit.”’\textsuperscript{97}

The collective shows its distaste of an outsider (the coroner) commenting on the sisters as being perfect specimens in death, regardless of the fact that the collective held similar views of the sisters when they were alive ‘no one could understand how Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon had produced such beautiful children […] five glittering daughters in their homemade dresses, all lace and ruffle, bursting with their fructifying flesh.’\textsuperscript{98}

From the collective’s point of view, its beloved Lisbons, who they feel entitled to ‘own’, have been objectified by outsiders, rendered perfect specimens of young women—youthful, beautiful, mysterious and so close to the brink of woman/adulthood that they are wasted in death. By recording the coroner’s report as part of their own narrative, the collective are adding it to the public memory, further emphasising the re-imagined and objectified views of the sisters.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 221.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 8.
However, relying on public memory is problematic. Public memory instantly recalls a specific moment and a specific way of seeing for a ‘collective memory’—public memory provides a means of social coherence for a shared history.\textsuperscript{99} Steven Rose explains that:

\begin{quote}
We can no longer make and remake [public memories] in our own minds, assimilate them fully into our lived experience and consciousness, because they are forever fixed by [a photograph, a written document, or video]. The power of [public memory means that it can] be remade at the behest of a Big Brother with a memory hole.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

The use of public memory is contradictory. On the one hand it keeps the memory static, discouraging new memories or revelations of an event to be added, whereas personal memory has these abilities. Yet public memory allows us to understand a moment in time. The fact that this type of memory can then be reinterpreted to suit a new way of social remembering means that memory can be erased and rewritten publicly.

During the narrative the collective registers the negative impact public memory has had for the Lisbons. Shortly after the suicides, a series of newspaper articles is written which characterises the deaths as a simple suicide pact. The collective explains that ‘[they] treated the girls as automatons, creatures so barely alive that their deaths came as little change […] in […] [the reporters’] accounts […] the girls appear as indistinguishable characters.’\textsuperscript{101}

Here the two forms of public memory create contradictory representations which help create a mythologised version of the Lisbons lives. First the articles reflect the way outsiders (society) may have seen the suicides, projecting a rudimentary understanding of suicide (the suicide pact). In this sense the sisters cannot be understood and cannot be seen as individuals (i.e. the suicides were not acts of individuals but a group action), denying them a voice, denying them

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{99} The Making of Memory, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{100} The Making of Memory, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{101} The Virgin Suicides, p. 176.
\end{flushleft}
agency, and portraying them as urban legends. Outside of the collective’s written record the Lisbons will only be known by these articles that help to create the public memory.

Yet, by not showing the reader the full articles, the collective attempts to rectify the public representation of the sisters by editing the journalist’s point of view. While it is possible to assume that the articles have misrepresented the girls, it is clear that the collective also treats the Lisbons as ‘indistinguishable characters’ due to the repeated references of the sisters being a mythical creature, or the way they all looked the same. While the collective attempts to understand the sisters after their deaths, their limited knowledge and contact with them prior to their deaths accentuates the conflicting attitudes and representations the collective has toward them.

Interweaving two types of public memory throughout the narrative creates a world whereby the collective maintains ownership of the girls and any memory associated with them, demonstrating the collective’s desperation to remember the Lisbons as something other than the ‘official’ version presented to the public. Indeed, when the collective realises they are slowly losing some of their memories they ask themselves:

How long could we remain true to the girls? How long could we keep their memory pure? As it was, we didn’t know them any longer, and their new habits—of opening a window [...] to throw out a wadded paper towel—made us wonder if we had ever really known them, or if our vigilance had been only the fingerprinting of phantoms.\textsuperscript{102}

The collective acknowledges its memories are fading and that it didn’t really know the sisters, yet maintains its authoritative possession of them, constructing the ultimate tome of public memory based on fading personal memory. This establishes a nostalgic and fantasy-based narrative that mythologises the Lisbon sisters’ lives and deaths. As Colley points out:

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 187.
Through […] nostalgia, [authors and their narrators …] sometimes sentimentalize and fictionalize a past that, perhaps, never fully existed. At times they seem to subscribe to what has now become a standard way of thinking about nostalgia—that it corrupts reality by idealizing the past and by eradicating what had been difficult.103

The sisters’ reality has been idealised through a remembered past based on artificial, public, and personal memory. The collective’s public documentation suggests a level of mourning for the Lisbons who represent the collective’s adolescence. The public documentation is not only a love song to the end of youth and naivety, but also a love song, a calling, to the longing of teenage dreaming and a way of seeing. In essence, the collective are searching for clues that they may have missed—what did the Lisbons know about the future that nobody else could see? Why did the girls leave the collective, forcing them to travel through life without them? In the end, the collective’s public record is a mourning for all things that were and never will be again.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, mourning is also a particular way of seeing—one that represents the dead female form as being the ‘most poetic’ (pure, virginal, and sacrificial). However the collective’s mourning also shapes the way in which the reader interprets the Lisbon’s deaths. Not only do the deaths represent the trope of the ‘most poetic’, they symbolise, for the collective, society’s losses, both in a material (the crumbling American Dream) and liminal capacity. Society’s great loss was the sisters’ deaths—everything they embodied, all that was good and full of promise, has been taken away, leaving behind a hostile environment and the residue of unfulfilled dreams.

103 Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture, p. 4.
CHAPTER TWO

Objects of Death and Mythology: Representation Through Memory and Mood
After the funeral, our interest in the Lisbon girls only increased. Added to their loveliness was a new mysterious suffering, perfectly silent.\textsuperscript{104} Jeffrey Eugenides

The Mood of Death

To understand how objectified and mythologised representations of the Lisbons become embedded within a narrative, it is necessary to first explore the elements of mood.\textsuperscript{105}

Gérard Genette defines the function of narrative as being able to tell us

\begin{quote}
More or less […] according to one point of view or another […] this capacity […] is] precisely what \textit{narrative mood} aims at—narrative representation or […] alternatively] narrative information.\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

Furthermore ‘the function of narrative is not to give an order, express a wish [or] state a conclusion, but simply to tell a story and therefore to “report” facts (real or fictive).’\textsuperscript{107} Thus, mood is a means of focusing narrative or the narrator—it is the function that shapes how the narrative is told and who the narrative is told by (or in other words the narrative point of view).

Since narrative can tell us ‘more or less’, mood’s role is to regulate the amount of information available within the narrative which acts either as a deliberate censor (the narrator wants to hide information) or proves the narrator doesn’t have all the information and simply narrates from their perspective based on what they know. The narrative information that is given and how that information is used affects the narrative representation.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 52. \\
\textsuperscript{105} As Chapter One already covered the problems with narrative devices such as \textit{artificial} memory, this section will concentrate solely on \textit{how mood} is used to objectify and mythologise women and death in the novel and how they are represented. \\
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Narrative Discourse}, pp. 161–162. \\
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Narrative Discourse}, p. 161.
\end{flushright}
Moreover, mood allows a particular perspective to inform the order of narrative and reinforces the narrator of past uncertainties or past misunderstandings.\(^{108}\) This is a form of repetition technique. The collective has limited information yet narrates from a perspective that establishes their authority over the unknown (e.g. the reasons behind the Lisbons suicides). The collective begins the narrative through the lens of the past, beginning with Mary, the last Lisbon to commit suicide, and her death. Here the collective do not reveal why Mary died only how she died. The lack of narrative information (therefore narrative representation) affects the representation of how the sequence of events is narrated and the way in which events are narrated—the collective represents the Lisbons through their limited perspective, yet narrate the events as if they know the sisters and their thoughts. This lays the basis of a narrative that departs from the female protagonist point of view and suggests a narrative that demands a continual return to the past in an attempt to uncover new narrative information.

The collective turns their focus to Cecelia and her first suicide attempt, indicating that the narrative is an attempt at unravelling the mysterious deaths (‘thirteen months earlier […] the trouble began […] Cecelia […] had gone first.’\(^{109}\) and that the narrator’s mood is that of both an adult detective and an adolescent boy who fantasises about and yearns for the sisters (‘we had loved them.’).\(^{110}\) Here, mood captures the duality of the collective’s particular way of seeing and the way in which the narrative information will be used to inform the narrative representation.

One example of the collective’s representation of the sisters can be found in the discovery of Cecelia’s diary. The collective perceives and therefore represents Cecelia as an enigma who can’t be readily understood. She is desirable yet strange, akin to a young man’s failure: ‘a few of

\(^{108}\) Narrative Discourse, p. 205.
\(^{109}\) The Virgin Suicides, p. 3.
\(^{110}\) The Virgin Suicides, p. 249.
us had fallen in love with her, but had kept it to ourselves, knowing that she was the weird sister.111 Even Cecelia’s sisters’ register her difference.112 [Therese asked] “Do we seem as crazy as everyone thinks?” [... she] stuck her hand out the door to test for rain. “Cecelia was weird, but we’re not.”113

Although she is a desired Lisbon, she is otherworldly (continually wearing an old wedding dress, her interest in paganism) and expected to die (not only because she attempts suicide twice but because she is so different from her sisters).

The diary emphasises the collective’s narrative scope—on the one hand it gives an intimacy to the narrative suggesting the collective is sharing their information (it is an exhibit they own) yet the contents of Cecelia’s diary remain somewhat elusive (keeping Cecelia at a

111 _The Virgin Suicides_, p. 40.
112 This is one of the rare examples of the sisters outwardly expressing their desire to be seen as individuals, or at least, distance themselves from the ‘oddity’ Cecelia appeared to be. However, in the next breath, Therese adds ‘we just want to live. If anyone would let us.’ _The Virgin Suicides_, p. 132. Here we see another paradoxical perspective of the Lisbons. On the one hand they think of themselves as a ‘collective of sisters’, alluding to the idea that they share the same thoughts and have the same needs. Yet, they struggle to be seen as individuals, and struggle to see themselves outside of their own group. This is another example of how Eugenides uses the motif of duality throughout the narrative, demonstrating the ways in which both the collective and the Lisbons operate as ‘psychic twins’ who are inextricably bound (both within their own groups and to each other).

113 _The Virgin Suicides_, p. 132. Therese’s response to the collective is one of the few occasions the narrative expresses the direct voice of the sisters. Although Therese’s dialogue is filtered through the collective’s perspective, the reader can assume that the exchange occurred in this manner and is unlikely to be ‘misrepresenting’ the sisters—there is nothing ‘phenomenal’ about what Therese said, rather it is akin to what any ‘regular’ teenage girl, worried about other people’s opinions about her, would say. Furthermore, given that the narrative is an attempt at closure, of understanding the mystery of the suicides, it seems logical that the collective would attempt to portray any exchange they had with the sisters as accurately as possible (of course there would be some embellishment, perhaps, in relation to how the sisters looked, or smelled and so on, as the narrative has set up the expectation of the collective to delve into adolescent fantasy and myth). Yet this exchange also deepens the mystery of the suicides—if it is accepted that Cecelia committed suicide because she was ‘weird’ and was expected to do so, what on earth possessed the others to follow her if they ‘aren’t weird’?
distance, as someone who cannot be readily understood), a ‘sacred text’, \(^{114}\) selectively edited by the first-person plural narrators (the collective) who tell us ‘we didn’t understand why Cecelia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice. Her diary […] didn’t confirm the supposition of unrequited love.’\(^{115}\)

Moreover the use of Cecelia’s diary reiterates the collective’s narrative _distance_. Although they reference her diary, a gateway to her narrative voice, the collective very rarely reveal the diary’s contents, keeping Cecelia’s thoughts and feelings as a personal treasure. The reader is left with a two dimensional point of view of Cecelia due to the collective’s control of narrative information.

Narrative mood determines representation. The mood employed in _The Virgin Suicides_ presents Cecelia’s two deaths as paradoxical—they are both inevitable (therefore our protagonist is flawed, defective) yet preventable (the collective believes they could have stopped the suicides taking place if only they had known the sisters; they believe they could have saved them from themselves). The collective decides:

> The essence of the suicides consisted not of sadness or mystery but simple selfishness. The girls took into their own hands decisions best left to God. They became too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind.\(^{116}\)

Here Cecelia and her sisters are represented as both victim and ‘selfish perpetrator’ of the collective’s misery.

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\(^{114}\) _A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides_, p. 816.

\(^{115}\) _The Virgin Suicides_, p. 32.

\(^{116}\) _The Virgin Suicides_, p. 248.
To further clarify the intricacies of mood, Genette points out that regulating narrative information is the function of two modalities: distance and perspective.\textsuperscript{117} For the purpose of this exegesis, I will focus on distance within mood as this best illustrates the way mood performs within \textit{The Virgin Suicides} and Second Street.

In Eugenides’ novel, distance demonstrates the collective’s narrative intimacy even with the partial exclusion of the Lisbon sisters’ point of view. It also reveals the contradictions of a narrative which uses artificial memories and nostalgia. The collective states that the diary was ‘an unusual document of adolescence in that […] the] standard insecurities, laments, crushes, and daydreams […] were] nowhere in evidence.’\textsuperscript{118}

The collective forms its varied opinions of Cecelia (she was emotionally unstable)\textsuperscript{119} and her sisters (they were a single entity)\textsuperscript{120} based on Cecelia’s limited expression of personal information. The collective’s own exaggerated adolescent fantasies and point of view (its belief that the Lisbons were really women in disguise and understood love and death)\textsuperscript{121} also contributes to contradictory narrative representations of the sisters.

On the one hand the use of Cecelia’s diary typifies the collective’s limited knowledge of the sisters, yet the diary is also used to demonstrate how close the collective feels it has become to the Lisbons.\textsuperscript{122} Although the collective admits that it didn’t understand Cecelia, it tells us that

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\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Narrative Discourse}, p. 162.  
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 42.  
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 41.  
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 42.  
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 44.  
\textsuperscript{122} This close proximity (brought upon by collected evidence) is verified by Shostak who characterises the narration as being ‘the narrators at once explicitly interpret evidence for themselves and organize it for the consumption of the unknown narrate to whom, […] they wish to confide their perplexity’. \textit{A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides}, p. 809.
‘our own knowledge of Cecelia kept growing after her death […] though she had spoken only rarely and had had no real friends, everybody possessed his own vivid memories of Cecelia.’

This is further exemplified once the collective confirms that Cecelia’s diary allowed them to ‘[feel] 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, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn’t fathom them at all.’

Distance in this case shows the complexity of narrative mood—a narrator can imply intimacy in relation to narrative events without being central to those events (by using narrative devices such as artificial memory i.e. a diary), yet narrative distance highlights how the narrator can be placed outside those same events because the narrative is reliant on artificial memory and is primarily devoid of the protagonist’s voice.

The collective’s narration bridges their distance from the sisters due to the focus of narrative mood. In this instance, mood aides the biased representation of the female protagonists because of the limited narrative focus.

For example, when Cecelia’s two deaths are revealed, they are narrated from the collective’s point of view—her actions and perceived emotions (or interpreted emotions) are seen from the point of view of outsiders. In essence, her emotions and actions are the emotions

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123 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 40.
124 *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 43–44.
125 I will revisit Cecelia’s death in the next section. What is meant by ‘two deaths’? The collective begins the narrative with an image of Cecelia’s suicide (she slits her wrists) and refer to this failed attempt at suicide most often when they discuss her death. After the failed attempt, Cecelia is represented as existing on another plain—even neighbours treat her as if she has died, as if she is a breathing, living ghost. The Lisbon family unit begins to shut down after the first attempt (even though she survived) which further intensifies when Cecelia succeeds the second time. When Cecelia impales herself on the fence, it is generally accepted that she finally ‘finished the job’ she started—as if it was only a matter of time until she died again. Given this, I think it suitable to refer to Cecelia as having died and experienced suicide twice.
of the collective. This is evident during Cecelia’s first attempt at suicide where ‘in the emergency room Cecelia watched the attempt to save her life with an eerie detachment. Her yellow eyes didn’t blink, nor did she flinch when they stuck a needle in her arm.’

Alternatively, Second Street uses distance to deliberately mislead the reader. Although Lizzie narrates her own point of view she is deceitful with her emotions and thoughts because she refrains from exposing herself completely. Lizzie controls her narrative and therefore controls the way she is represented. This in itself exposes Lizzie’s emotional state as the murders take place.

Before I explore the consequences of mood and how it affects the representation of women and death, I will examine Genette’s understanding of narrative distance and the ‘narrative of events’ and how this determines a narrative point of view.

Genette explores two different mimesis that occur in mood—*narrative of events* and *narrative of words*. According to Genette the narrative of events focuses on either the *quantity* of narrative information (how detailed the narrative is) or the *absence* of a narrator (the minimal presence of the narrator). The collective’s narration plays with both of these factors. On the one hand the narrative of events is quite detailed, the narrating voice constantly present. Yet the narrative of events is incomplete because the protagonist’s voices are limited. Throughout the narrative the collective uses a first-person perspective when narrating an event it has witnessed, such as the telephone call to the sisters in order to play the girls records:

> We called again the next day, at the same time, and were answered on the first ring […] we played the song which most thoroughly communicated our feelings

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126 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 7.
127 The exegesis will focus on the narrative of events as narrative of words is a linguistic study of narrative mood and distance, and is not the focus of this exegesis.
128 *Narrative Discourse*, p. 166.
to the Lisbon girls. We can’t remember the songs title now […] however [we] recall the essential sentiments.129

This emphasises the narrative’s *quantity*. Yet the collective often transfers to a third person internal perspective when narrating the actions and emotions of the Lisbons that they may not have necessarily witnessed themselves:

At night, Therese continued to use her ham radio, tapping out messages that took her away from her house, to warm Southern states and even to the tip of South America. Tim Winer searched the radio waves for Therese’s frequency and a few times claimed to have found it […] We think it shows that as late as March, Therese was reaching out toward a freer world.130

This highlights both the absence of the narrator and protagonist, as well as the distance of the narrator to the narrative of events.

This is what Genette meant when he said narrative perspective is considered ‘the second mode of regulating information, arising from the choice (or not) of a restrictive “point of view”—[are...] the questions having to do with narrative technique.’131

It is with this in mind that we must then ask the narrative questions of ‘who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?’132 (who sees?) and the very different question ‘who is the narrator?’133 (who speaks?). These questions regarding narrative mood, when posed in relation to *The Virgin Suicides*, suggests not only how the sisters’ deaths are narrated, but also how they are represented.

129 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 195.
131 *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 185–186.
132 *Narrative Discourse*, p. 186.
133 *Narrative Discourse*, p. 186.
Narrating the Mysterious Deaths of Cecelia Lisbon

*Cecelia gave orally what was to be her only form of suicide note, and a useless one at that, because she was going to live.*

Jeffrey Eugenides

*The Virgin Suicides* presents death as an inevitable conclusion—beginning with Mary’s death the repetitious narrative unravels the suicides as if the Lisbons were fated to die and concludes with the collective lamenting the demise of their childhood loves, acknowledging that there was nothing they could have done to stop the suicides.

The deaths of Cecelia Lisbon are remembered as pagan rituals; Cecelia was the only sister who bled during her deaths (she slit her wrists in the bath and then bleeds on the picket fence after she impales herself) and the only sister who outwardly expressed both her physical difference (she was seen as an obscure sexual object by the collective) and her ‘psychic’ difference (her interest in mythical creatures, the Zodiac, Tarot cards, the Celts, her seemingly morose personality) from her sisters. Cecelia’s suicides are regarded as the most inevitable because of her difference from the other sisters.

Cecelia’s deaths are narrated through the prism of artificial and personal memory. Narrative mood demonstrates how the collective perceives her deaths not only as an inhibitor to womanhood (she is thirteen when she dies—she will never grow up or reproduce) but the catalyst for the deterioration of society and the collective’s adolescence. Because Cecelia’s point of view is largely absent (her diary, extracts of psychological reports, and overheard conversations are all we have) we are left without any explanation as to why she committed suicide, her thoughts and actions remaining a mystery to the collective. At one point during its

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134 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 7.

135 The collective states that ‘everyone we spoke to dated the demise of our neighbourhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls.’ *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 243–244.
adolescence, the collective, upon reading Cecelia’s diary, decides ‘[she] is a dreamer. Somebody out of touch with reality. When she jumped, she probably thought she’d fly.’

In addition Father Moody declares Cecelia’s second and successful death an ‘accident […] how do [we] know she didn’t slip […] suicide, as a mortal sin, is a matter of intent. It’s very hard to know what was [in …] her heart. What [she was] really trying to do.’

Thus mood lays the basis for representing Cecelia’s deaths as a mythological occurrence and one that doesn’t always grant her self determination over her life/death, ultimately infantilising Cecelia. The Virgin Suicides narrative mood is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe’s statement that ‘the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.’ This, suggests Beth Ann Bassein, connects women with the ‘most passive state occurring, that of death.’

Cecelia’s ‘most passive state’ occurs twice. Although she survives her first suicide attempt, the use of narrative repetition and narrative mood keeps Cecelia in a state of death—when she is alive Cecelia is passive and withdrawn from the ‘dreamy bubbly’ quality of life her sisters are depicted as having. Her survival seems almost accidental.

While Cecelia is represented as an oddity, her death brings her a certain amount of power. Although Cecelia didn’t demonstrate her dominance over her life and others at the time of her death, the collective retrospectively grants her power through death because it

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136 The Virgin Suicides, p. 42.
137 The Virgin Suicides, pp. 37–38.
138 Over Her Dead Body, p. 59.
140 By this I mean the way in which the collective perceive the sisters as ‘living’—there’s a hypnotic, dream-like quality to the way in which the collective describe the Lisbons and in the way the collective believes that the sisters live in another realm.
acknowledges the impact her suicide has had on itself and the neighbourhood. In that respect, Cecelia’s actions are on par with the power held by the Virgin Martyr.\textsuperscript{141}

The Virgin Meets her Death: The Martyr, The Purist, The Saviour

\begin{quote}
Poor Cecelia appeared in our consciousness at odd moments, most often as we were just waking up [...] she rose up in her wedding dress, muddy with the afterlife.\textsuperscript{142}

Jeffrey Eugenides
\end{quote}

Traditionally Virgin Martyrs represented the ‘cult of female virginity which emphasised not only the virginity of its heroines, but also the attempts of their persecutors to defile or degrade it.’\textsuperscript{143} Indeed, when Cecelia’s sisters die, the collective depicts the autopsies as akin to bodies being defiled: ‘a single coroner [...] opened up the girls’ brains and body cavities, peering inside the mystery of their despair.’\textsuperscript{144} The collective’s outrage at the ‘contamination’ of the perfectly pure bodies by the coroner reflects not only the collective’s assumed ownership of the Lisbons (only they can truly cherish them, know them) but how it has internalised the role the sisters have played in its own life; they are no longer mere ‘girls’. They have become symbols of what women should be like (a fantasy).\textsuperscript{145}

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\textsuperscript{141} That is to say that the Virgin Martyr is often depicted as someone who has made the ultimate sacrifice, someone who, after death, can only exist on another plain. The Virgin Martyr is unlike us—she is someone without the needs of flesh (therefore cannot be restricted by the earthly body), someone who epitomises the ‘true’ essence of femininity. See throughout Alone of all Her Sex for the various descriptions of the Virgin Martyr and the power she is able to wield.\textsuperscript{142} The Virgin Suicides, pp. 111–112.


\textsuperscript{144} The Virgin Suicides, p. 221.

\textsuperscript{145} Shostak similarly suggests the collective holds this opinion of the Lisbons. She states the narrators ‘common ignorance that the feminine is always wholly sexualized and enduringly mysterious for them [...] likewise convey[s] their inclination to idealize female sexuality,
The reality that could have awaited the Lisbons is reflected in the collective’s experiences with future girlfriends:

The girls were monstrous in their formal dresses, drunk and kissing us, or passing out in chairs []. They were bound for college, husbands, child-rearing, unhappiness only dimly perceived – bound, in other words, for life.146

From the collective’s point of view, death has saved the sisters from impurity and the corruption of adulthood, saved them from ruined adolescent fantasies of the ‘dream’ girl, the lusted girl, because there is no possibility of achieving adulthood.

In the ancient world, pagan mythology elevated virginal goddesses because virginity allowed them to die and rise again each year, proving they possessed powerful magic, strength, and ritual purity.147 Cecelia is both paganistic (or at least otherworldly) and traditionally virginal (reminiscent of the Virgin Mary), which is embodied within her two deaths. Indeed, her first death, in which she survives, sees her rise from death and placed in a type of middle plane—although alive, the narrative, using repetition and memory, emphasises the expectation that she is to die a second time. Narrative distance ensures the reasons for Cecelia’s deaths remain mysterious. The motif of the Virgin Mary demonstrates the complexity of the narrator’s representation of Cecelia, furthering her image as an unknowable figure.

Cecelia’s deaths differ from her sisters’ in that they both consist of physical self harm and blood-letting—they are violent, a declaration that Cecelia intended to end her life. In mythology and ancient practice, self harm (in particular stabbing and the self deprivation of food and water) is part of a broader goal for virgins to acquire strength and purity. This practice was used displacing it into spiritualized terms.’ A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides, p. 815.

146 The Virgin Suicides, p. 235.
147 Alone of all Her Sex. See throughout the book.
primarily to achieve the *magical* state of power rather than to reflect a personal statement of ‘immorality’, such as having sex.\textsuperscript{148} For Cecelia, power comes in the form of post-life reputation.

Given this, I am suggesting that this power might have been the goal of Cecelia’s death—to have power over her own life and achieve a magical state of being by freeing the physical body. The high stakes of self harm is the key to achieving power. After her first death, Cecelia attains an unassuming power over her strict mother—the girls host their first and only party in the house, with boys as guests (an event that would not have been possible before her first death). However, the collective remembers Cecelia’s actions as more than a rebellion against her mother—its narrative mood implies that Cecelia’s deaths were closely connected to the symbolism of the Virgin Mary and pagan rituals.

An early example of this symbolism is seen during her first death as Cecelia is rushed out of the house on the paramedic’s stretcher. The collective observes that she ‘looked like a tiny Cleopatra on an imperial litter’\textsuperscript{149} and although this seems inoffensive, it immediately places Cecelia outside the ‘normal’ realms of a thirteen-year-old girl. She is unattainable. She holds the grand power of Cleopatra (a queen). However, it isn’t merely her unattainability that is displayed here—Cecelia is remembered as a sacrifice as the collective recalls that:

> The two slaves [paramedics] offer[ed] the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess brandishing the torch ([Mrs. Lisbon] waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips.\textsuperscript{150}

Cecelia’s second death is similarly symbolic and ‘pure’ in that she didn’t look dead at all. Impaled on the picket fence ‘the spike had gone through so fast there was no blood on it. It was

\textsuperscript{148} *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{149} *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{150} *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 6.
perfectly clean and Cecelia merely seemed balanced on the pole like a gymnast.'

Having died in her favourite white wedding dress, Cecelia attains the pure life/death of the female subject; her virginity intact, unspoiled by corruption.

The chaste representation that is formed not only from Cecelia’s deaths but so too her sisters’, creates an image of the Lisbons as idealised young women—beautiful, pure, and mythical, capturing the innocence of childhood which characterises their ‘Virgin[al] youth [...] and [...] visible sign of [...] purity.’ Furthermore, unlike her sisters, Cecelia outwardly ‘wears’ her virginity: her wedding dress and bare feet are reminiscent of sightings of the Virgin Mary (white silk dress, bare feet and a white veil) and reflect the usual outfits worn by girls during the feast of purification.

However Cecelia, like the Virgin Mary, is not merely represented as a virginal vessel which articulates purity. Cecelia represents the border between female adolescence and womanhood, the two worlds of the female body. Marina Warner states that ‘the Virgin Mary, a polyvalent figure who appears under many guises, is [...] the ideal of the feminine personified,’ someone who not only represents chastity, humility and gentleness, but the ideal of womanhood: she ‘has been formed and animated by different people for different reasons and is truly a popular creation.’ Cecelia and her sisters, like the Virgin Mary, has multiple representations.

Casting the sisters in the role of the Virgin demonstrates the way in which virginity is used to reinforce the mythology of the dead female. The Virgin’s mortal life intersects with

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151 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 31.
152 *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. 302.
153 *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. xxiv.
154 *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. xxii.
death, as her ‘timeless, undifferentiated, immortal beauty and bliss […] and […] the promise of the Virgin’s ungrudging, ever flowing clemency sustains [the sinner].’\textsuperscript{155}

This is reminiscent of Cecelia’s first death. Having been found in the bath tub clutching a picture of the Virgin Mary and having slit her wrists (both a pagan and Catholic symbol of self-harm and blood-letting), Cecelia is presented as a Virginal Martyr ‘should’ be: ‘beautiful, graceful, irresistible […] and virtuous.’\textsuperscript{156} These are the traits with which the collective constantly imbues the sisters.

The iconographic images of the Virgin Mary are used throughout the narrative, most notably during the repetitious memories of death. Cecelia’s suicide is linked with the neighbourhood’s decline and deterioration, first with the fly-fish season: plague-like insects ‘attacking’ the middle-classes manicured lawns and homes, then with the threat of an Elm tree infection—as the trees die so too does the suburban utopia. Indeed Cecelia, along with her sisters, is viewed as someone who has saved herself from the diabolical nature of adulthood and the demise of the suburban dream. The collective explains that ‘people saw [her] clairvoyance in the wiped-out Elms, the harsh sunlight […] They] put the deaths down to [her] foresight in predicting decadence.’\textsuperscript{157}

The death of nature in the neighbourhood is reflected within the Lisbon household, particularly after Cecelia’s second death. The house deteriorates, normal life becomes non-existent, the girls’ appearances become slightly dishevelled until they are eventually locked inside the house and forbidden to leave. For the collective, Cecelia’s deaths are seen as a

\textsuperscript{155} Alone of all Her Sex, p. 331.
\textsuperscript{156} Alone of all Her Sex, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{157} The Virgin Suicides, p. 244.
warning—a premonition as to what the future holds in 1970s America.\textsuperscript{158} Clutching her Virgin Mary card, her purity seeping from her wounds, Cecelia not only echoes but clings to the promise of the Virgin Mary’s ‘salvation [who] reprieves the sufferings of sinners after death […] she is […] the “life sweetness and hope” […] the advocate who pleads humanities’ cause before the judgment.’\textsuperscript{159}

Judgment and salvation are promises of the Virgin Mary and are echoed in the sisters’ actions before they commit suicide. Moreover, the Virgin Mary acts as a lantern for the girls, used to bring attention to their situation; a plea to the outside world not to be forgotten.

After Lux misses her curfew, the sisters are impounded inside the house. They then release multiple pictures of the Virgin Mary (the same picture Cecelia had) into the neighbourhood with notes such as ‘in this dark, there will be light. Will you help us?’\textsuperscript{160} written on the back. Although the collective doesn’t understand the significance of the pictures, which therefore ‘closes’ the Lisbons’ point of view and intent as to why they have chosen to use them, the relation to Cecelia’s death and the literary representation of the Virgin Mary would suggest the pictures signify two things: one, that the girls are potential saviours who, knowing that societal deterioration is approaching, offer an opportunity to the collective (and to the neighbourhood) to be saved; and two, purity is being disseminated by the sisters, both figuratively and literally (not only are they viewed as pure, but they give purity to the neighbourhood by spreading the Virgin Mary card) which ties them to the cult of the Virgin Mary.

\textsuperscript{158} For example \textit{The Virgin Suicides} makes reference to the Vietnam war, industrial disputes and strikes, the death of the so-called ‘ideal 1950s America’, the beginnings of neo-liberalism, and general societal upheaval.  
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Alone of all Her Sex}, p. 316.  
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, p. 193.
If the message of Cecelia’s Virgin Mary card is to be correlated with her sisters’ use of the same Virgin Mary card, it reiterates the collective’s views that the sisters are here to bring the Virgin Mary’s message of ‘peace to a crumbling world’.  

Linking the Virgin Mary to Cecelia, the sisters use the cards as a precursor to their own suicides, warning the collective that it too will soon disappear. If we put aside Western religious notions that suicide is a ‘mortal sin’, the deaths, particularly Cecelia’s ‘perfect’ suicides, attain the purpose of the Virgin’s death common in many Eastern accounts of the Apocalypse: ‘the Virgin Mary descends into the underworld. She does not enter the underworld to wrestle with death, but to see the fate of the wicked.’ This particular representation of the Virgin Mary sees Cecelia’s (and eventually her sisters’) deaths as the creation of a Saviour.

The image of the Virgin Mary in modern society functions as ‘intercession: she is prayed to for redress against private and public wrongs.’ Indeed, by continually returning to their memories of the Lisbons, the narrators subconsciously acknowledge the role the deaths have had on its life by invoking the ‘sinners’ wishes; to be saved from their own deaths and to be redeemed for succumbing to the wrong-doings of the adult world.

The death of The Virgin binds the female protagonist to the role of the ‘most poetic topic’ and Humanity’s Saviour, or in this case, the collective’s Saviour. Narrative mood, with the partial absence of the Lisbon sisters’ voices, turns the sisters into ‘death’s objects’ to be used by the male narrators for their needs (i.e. longing, mourning the loss of adolescence etc). The Virgin Suicides’ mood and narrative content removes the sisters’ agency and makes them symbolic characters amongst the collective’s crises.

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162 *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. 321.
163 *Alone of all Her Sex*, p. xxiii.
Death, Mood, Mourning and Mythologising

Most people remember the Day of Grieving as an obscure holiday...the result was that the tragedy was diffused and universalized. As Kevin Tiggs put it, ‘It seemed like we were supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever.’

Jeffrey Eugenides

Narrative mood has enabled the collective to gain authority over the Lisbon sisters’ story and point of view: the sisters are passive in death and therefore passive in their represented lives because their point of view is absent. Moreover, the narrative allows the collective to assume the ‘feminine’ voice by creating the illusion that it knew the sisters intimately, therefore enabling them to speak on their behalf.

While it isn’t necessarily ‘inappropriate’ or problematic for a male author, in this case Eugenides, to write from the point of view of a female protagonist, the problem of representation within The Virgin Suicides’ narrative lies within mood—how an event is narrated and who narrates it. Moreover mood controls the amount of information that is being revealed, affecting representation.

The Virgin Suicides’ mood has also exposed the role the Lisbons’ deaths have had on the collective’s lives, revealing the effect mourning and nostalgia have on ‘the concept of memory’.

The collective’s narrative exists because it mourns the sisters and its own adolescence; the collective’s melancholic memories often give way to fantasies of shared lives with the

164 The Virgin Suicides, p. 104.
Lisbons. When the collective discovers the sisters have been subscribing to travel brochures, it subscribes to the same ones so that it can see for itself:

Where the girls wanted to go [... we] hiked through dusty passes with the girls, stopping every now and then to help take off their backpacks, placing our hands on their warm, moist shoulders [...] we did whatever we wanted to, and Cecelia hadn’t killed herself.  

According to Freud, melancholy is ‘failed mourning, an inability to accept the death of a desired object.’ Julia Kristeva similarly argues that ‘so as not to die of the other’s death, the mourner imagines for himself an artifact, an ideal, a beyond, in order to take up a place outside himself. The immutable beautiful body replaces perishable psychic value.’

The collective crafts the Lisbons’ deaths into artifacts of memory. Not only are the memories objects (artificial memories the reader knows are beginning to fade away) kept as proof of life, the sisters develop into objects (they are objectified) and cease to exist as individuals. They become idealised versions/visions of what women should be like, according to the collective’s adolescent fantasies and desires. Because the Lisbons are objects to be treasured, this inevitably prevents the collective from moving on with their lives because ‘objects’ cannot provide closure the way a ‘living person’ might be able to provide closure. In essence, the collective mourns nostalgic artifacts because it does not always view the sisters as ‘real’ people.

The narrators’ inability or unwillingness to let go of the feminine mystery they have created for the Lisbons ensures that they maintain a relationship to both the sisters and to the past. By returning to this past, to a nostalgic way of seeing, objects are no longer ‘dead’,

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165 *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 169.
166 *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 64.
167 *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 64.
168 A person would have the ability to tell you what you needed to know, or needed to hear about an event or situation in order for you to move on. To obtain closure, there often needs to be that final dialogue between the parties. There needs to be the chance to heal.
allowing the mourners (the collective) to prolong their own lives. If we apply Kristeva’s beautiful body to *The Virgin Suicides* we see the entwining of the ‘physical’ young female body (the sisters) and the ‘metaphorical’ body (artificial memories as the ‘body’ of memory). These bodies ensure that the sisters are not forgotten and preserve the collective’s adolescence, preventing it from facing its own death.

In Western literary representations, the young female body, indeed femininity, attracts and defines its own set of ideals and myths which inform narrative mood and, in the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, helps characterise the way in which the collective views and therefore represents the Lisbons. These feminine representations also inform the means by which the dead female is represented. Cultural myths of femininity which feature women and death usually emerge in the form of a closed space, symbolic of the tomb, signifying impending death of the female character or narrator. The most common form of the closed space in which women are associated is the home, traditionally correlating to the womb or the tomb; places that represent warmth, life, darkness, and death.\(^{169}\)

In literary traditions the house is almost always linked to ‘woman’ or ‘mother’ and therefore the life/death cycle in which women give birth to life (the birth of new life, the birth of a new society), highlighting the links between death and birth, death and conception, and birth and resurrection. Indeed *The Virgin Suicides*’ narrative is heightened by the relationship between the Lisbon family home and the sister’s death, and the slow decay of the collective’s neighbourhood and adolescence. As the Lisbon home settles into disarray, particularly after Cecelia’s second death, the house is viewed as a self-imploding object. It is shrouded in constant darkness, covered in fly-fish larvae, and the delivered newspapers piled up outside the front

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\(^{169}\) *Over Her Dead Body*, pp. 59–75. See throughout Chapter 4.
lawn; the odour inside of the house signifies the domain of the crowded, unwashed young women. The house doesn’t preserve life, rather it prepares for the oncoming suicides—the house is the outward expression of personal conflict and suburban decay. The home becomes a tomb.

Similarly in Second Street, the family home ceases to be a place of safety, warmth, or life and instead becomes a cell of death, distrust, and oppression. The women (whether victim or violent perpetrator) in the home in part symbolise the end of life.

However, *The Virgin Suicides* also uses the motif of home/house as a place where death resurrects life. The collective stores artifacts and evidence of the lives of the Lisbons in a tree house, a place where the narrators feel safe to unravel and understand the suicides, ultimately bringing the sisters back to life, if only as memories. According to Elisabeth Bronfen ‘death is […] conceptualized as the return […] to the peace before the difference and tension of life’.\(^\text{170}\)

The representation of Cecelia as the Virgin acting as saviour to the collective (returning to death, the home, and artifact) emphasises the sisters as saviours (or a distraction from the collective’s adult life).

Repetition technique allows this return to death as a way to resurrect the collective’s own life *before* adulthood, *before* the neighbourhood disintegrated and changed beyond recognition—nostalgia, a yearning for the past, returns the collective to this time.

Yet narrative distance also demonstrates how the sisters’ deaths are viewed. Losing their sense of agency the Lisbons, in death, will never seem to act on their own volition when they are alive (in the narrative) and instead are used as instruments of ‘healing’ for the collective because the female protagonist’s voice is partially absent and unknown. Cecelia becomes the

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\(^{170}\) *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 65.
mythological and unknowable female figure because her relationship to mood is passive, her femininity tied to the representation of the home.

However representations of death and women do not merely end with the home. Bronfen argues that ‘the aesthetic representation of death lets us repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because [...] death occurs at someone else’s body and as an image.’

The idea that the dead female body can repress our knowledge of death’s reality suggests there are elements of fantasy within *The Virgin Suicides* narrative mood. Because death doesn’t happen to the collective, it can only ever view death from the outside as an image which it can invest with its own ideals or fantasies regarding femininity. The collective often reveals its fantasies of the Lisbons’ lives when reading Cecelia’s diary, the only ‘real’ link they have with her thoughts (and in some cases her sisters’ thoughts). These fantasies expose the collective’s limited knowledge of the Lisbons, yet reveal the collective’s desire to understand them. Moreover, the collective’s fantasies often repress the realities of the suicides and the dismantling of the suburban dream by constructing alternate versions of the collective’s images (and therefore representation) of the girls. In one such fantasy, the collective reveals that:

> After one of us had read a long portion of the diary out loud [...] we felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy [...] We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn’t fathom them at all.

Desiring the Lisbons as their twins and as their lovers shows the attachment and dependence of the collective on the sisters. Bronfen, referring to Poe once more, suggests that:

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171 *Over Her Dead Body*, p. x.
172 *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 43–44.
It is then only logical that for Poe beauty should find its supreme manifestation in the melancholic tone, and that the speaker best suited for the “most poetical topic” should be “a lover mourning his deceased mistress.”

If the collective is the unofficial ‘lover’ (their twins, their saviours) of the sisters, it is logical that the girls’ deaths inspire melancholy, and that memories of the sisters are tinged with the ‘most poetic topic’ and therefore affect the manner in which the girls are represented throughout the narrative. The mythology built around the sisters is solidified with the admission that the Lisbons ‘allowed’ the collective ‘for the first time ever [... to feel] like men.’

Similarly in Second Street Benjamin revels in his obsessive, unrealistic images and fantasies of Lizzie: he projects the desires he may wish himself to possess onto Lizzie. Benjamin’s mourning derives from his absence from Lizzie (regardless of the fact they have never met) and further adds to the way he mythologises Lizzie. Benjamin’s fantasies stem from a single newspaper photograph. Much like The Virgin Suicides, Second Street’s mood demonstrates how the male narrator mythologises and objectifies the female protagonist. One difference between the two novels is that Second Street isn’t completely devoid of the female protagonist’s voice and therefore is capable of expressing alternative views.

\textsuperscript{173} Over Her Dead Body, p. 64. \textsuperscript{174} The Virgin Suicides, p. 205.
CONCLUSION
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 [...] and [...] we will never find the pieces to put them back together.  
Jeffrey Eugenides

After Mary Lisbon takes her life and her parents abandon the family home, a young couple buys the house and renovates its façade. The house’s new exterior removes any trace of the troubles that plagued the Lisbons. Everything the collective knew has gone: ‘It wasn’t only the Lisbon house that changed but the street itself [...] we got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was.’

The Virgin Suicides’ suggests that the sisters committed suicide because they knew what awaited them if they stayed alive. This reiterates the collective’s paradoxical conclusions of its investigation—on the one hand the suicides were ‘selfish acts’ which took beauty and youth out of their (the collective’s) lives, yet on the other, the sisters were visionaries with the foresight to avoid the doom that awaited the neighbourhood. That the sisters tried to warn the neighbourhood, only to be ignored, further highlights their mythical status in the eyes of the collective.

Jeffrey Eugenides himself concludes that ‘I gave myself very strict rules about the narrative voice… [I] really constrained the point of view.’ This constrained point of view, or mood, is the narrative technique which displays the differing narrative representations of women and death in The Virgin Suicides and Second Street.

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175 The Virgin Suicides, pp. 248–249.
176 The Virgin Suicides, pp. 242–243.
177 Jeffrey Eugenides Has it Both Ways. Unpaginated.
Throughout the exegesis I have explored how narrative techniques such as repetition and mood, and narrative devices such as ‘the concept of memory’ and nostalgia assist in the perpetuation of unrealistic representations of the female protagonists in *The Virgin Suicides*. This is possible because repetition reinforces the narrator’s point of view while mood (point of view and voice) obscures or eliminates the female protagonist’s voice.

As reviewer Michael Griffith noted, ‘the sisters are thoroughly ordinary…their magic has less to do with their own attributes than with the enlivening lust of their pursuers’. Indeed, throughout the narrative we see how the collective’s reliance on adolescent memory and nostalgia create the Lisbon mythology. Due to the precarious nature of memory and the collective’s limited knowledge of the girls, the narrative creates a static version of events (a public memory), which is layered with the collective’s assumptions and feelings about the suicides, inevitably substituting their point of view for the Lisbon sisters’ point of view.

It is in this capacity that mood highlights the collective’s distance from the events leading up to the suicides and their distance from the sisters, creating objectified representations. The sisters are very rarely seen as ‘real girls’ but rather unattainable fantasies that have had a permanent hold over the collective.

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179 By this I mean the Lisbons are rarely seen as people who lived ordinary, possibly quite boring lives. They are very rarely viewed as being ‘typical teenagers’ who have the same hang-ups and worries as most teenage girls, and are therefore immune to carrying out daily tedious tasks. In short, the sisters are cast in a light that sees them living ‘above’ the normal constraints of life, sees them thinking and speaking with ‘amazing and profound clarity’ that perhaps ‘regular’ teenage girls wouldn’t have.

180 By contrast, *Second Street*, using narrative techniques of memory and repetition, creates a mythology surrounding the Borden murders, while Benjamin’s narrative simultaneously objectifies Lizzie. The difference between the narratives is mood—who tells it and how it is told. *Second Street*, although tinged with the paradoxes of memory, nostalgia, and repetition, remains
This exegesis asked the following questions:

1) What effect does memory (or ‘the concept of memory’) have on the representation of women and death in *The Virgin Suicides*?

2) What effect does repetition technique have on the representation of women and death in *The Virgin Suicides*?

The exegesis also explored how mythologised and objectified representations of the Lisbons occurred through narrative uses of repetition and memory.

In summary, repetition order allows the collective to revisit the narrative events several times in order to unlock the mysteries of the sisters’ suicides. In doing so, the collective portray the Lisbons as ‘death’s objects’ (in other words, they are remembered and viewed as dead first) suggesting the suicides were inevitable, and characterises the sisters as being fated to die. Repetition order also creates a subjective narrative—the collective reveals events and evidence in a way that benefits its interpretations of the sisters, therefore affecting not only what is remembered, but how it is remembered, manipulating the narrative representation. Lastly, this allows the collective to cast themselves as the authoritative voice.

Bolstering the authoritative voice, the narrative use of the ‘concept of memory’ is paradoxical. Through the lens of nostalgia, artificial, public, and personal memory, the Lisbons are represented as lustful objects of desire, Virgin Martyrs, Saviours, or selfish teenagers. In adulthood, the collective balances its memories between two ways of seeing: that of the adolescent perspective and that of the reflective adult perspective (who can understand how the firmly grounded in the female protagonist’s voice, enabling an alternate view from the male narrator’s representation.
Lisbon mythology was created and why it exists). This demonstrates the problematic nature of the representation of memory—it can be both static (thus making it an ‘official’ memory) and malleable, dependent upon what is known or what is truly remembered.

It is important, therefore, to consider the role that the collective’s ‘shared histories’ (its personal, public and artificial memories) has played in the sisters’ representation. The collective seems to have a shared agreement that concerns not only how it will remember the Lisbons, but how it will also remember the past.\textsuperscript{181} We see this as the adult-age collective, ‘mature men who [...] possess a fallen consciousness’\textsuperscript{182} and who are aware of its role in creating the Lisbon myth, continues to hold onto past visions and ideals regarding the sisters. Maintaining their perspective of the past gives the collective a reason to exist, gives a reason to bring each other together (i.e. the Lisbons unites the collective) as they continue their rehearsal of memory. As Shostak explains:

\begin{quote}
They resist the present, living most intensely within the stopped time of the past and [provoke] to construct a myth rather than a history. The girls remain impenetrable, but that is what fascinates the boys, making the sisters a suitable subject for the mythic imagination.\textsuperscript{183}
\end{quote}

While both ‘the concept of memory’ and repetition order affects the narrative representations of the female protagonists, it is the primary absence of the sisters’ voice from \textit{The Virgin Suicides’} narrative which intensifies their mystique, rendering them unattainable or otherworldly. Alternatively, while Benjamin’s narrative in Second Street achieves the same level

\textsuperscript{181} Again, there is almost no room for the collective to deviate from their perspective of the Lisbons and their own adolescence. They are cohered to the confines of the past.
\textsuperscript{182} \textit{A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides}, p. 818.
\textsuperscript{183} \textit{A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides}, p. 816.
of mythologising Lizzie, her voice is the primary narrative and is able to counteract Benjamin’s perspective.

These mythologised and objectified representations are the consequence of mood and the content of narration. The function of mood is to simply tell a story and ‘report’ facts (actual or fictive) and to focus the narrative of events through the narrator. Given that *The Virgin Suicides* is narrated from the collective’s perspective, which relies on fading and incomplete memories in order to uncover the reasons for the suicides, narrative mood in *The Virgin Suicides* is not only subjective but unreliable because of the limitations of narrative information available to the collective. The restriction of the sisters’ narrative voice alters the way in which they are represented.\(^{184}\)

This led to my examination of the way in which the sisters are represented. Generally, the narrative representation of the Lisbon sisters are captured in the depictions that manifested through Cecelia’s two deaths, which marked her as both Pagan and Virgin—the embodiment of the collective’s mourning and grief, Saviour, and Virgin Martyr. It is within this context that the representations of the Lisbons, as a whole, can be seen as unrealistic and therefore mythological.

**Further Research**

Finally, I would like to point out that although this exegesis has expanded the current research dedicated to *The Virgin Suicides* there is room for an extended study.\(^{185}\) Further academic

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\(^{184}\) In short, narrative mood is an important aspect of representation and contains two aspects: *who* narrates and *how* they narrate and secondly, *what* is narrated (the content). The content is coloured by *who* and *how* it is narrated.

\(^{185}\) The limited scope of this exegesis made it impossible for me to explore the motif of sexuality in *The Virgin Suicides* and subsequently in *Second Street.*
research opportunities exist to explore *The Virgin Suicides’* representation of sexuality through the representation of memory and repetition—the way in which the collective remembers and relates to the sisters’ burgeoning sexuality bolsters the mythological and objectified views they hold of the Lisbons. Sexuality and death are very much interrelated within Western literary narratives and the field of academic research for *The Virgin Suicides* would benefit from such a discussion.¹⁸⁶

It is important to reiterate that mythological and objectified representations of the female protagonist will not always occur when a male author attempts to tell a ‘female story’ and vice versa, but rather it is an aspect of narrative mood—who regulates the narrative information and how the narrative information is revealed. In *The Virgin Suicides* (and in *Second Street*) mythological and objectified representations of the female protagonists were also made possible through the use of memory and the representation of memory and repetition technique.

Over the years Eugenides has been accused of writing a misogynistic novel.¹⁸⁷ He himself states:

Some […] read the book and [think] that it accuses the girls in the end. The boys do make accusations about the girls leaving them but those are meant to be seen as selfish on the boys’ part, and it says as much pretty obviously at the end of the book.¹⁸⁸

Regardless of the implicit problems of narrative technique explored throughout the exegesis, I agree with Eugenides’ conclusion: *The Virgin Suicides* isn’t a misogynous novel, rather the collective holds misogynous views. The fact that some readers picked up on the

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¹⁸⁶ For example, Shostak has begun to discuss the conflict of narrative perspective and its convergence to explore ‘the erotic and its relationship to death.’ *A Story We Can Live With: Narrative Voice, The Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides*, p. 810.


¹⁸⁸ *Jeffrey Eugenides Has it Both Ways*. Unpaginated.
collective’s misogyny only reiterates the effect narrative mood plays in representations, and its relationship to memory and repetition technique.
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