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"The Version of The World They Rendered for Us": Suburban Heterotopias in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

After the Second World War, the United States saw a rapid development in mass suburbanization. This drastic change in American topography was accompanied by the idealisation of suburban life, which was virtually presented as a utopia. In parallel, the subgenre of the suburban Gothic emerged by drawing on the anxieties and fear of the newly-produced suburbia.

This research aims at analysing Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* through the lens of the suburban Gothic. More particularly, it seeks to survey the suburbs through Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias. While the entirety of suburbia will be considered a heterotopia, this paper will also examine the emergence of the Lisbon household as a heterotopia within the same, arguing for a nest of heterotopic spaces. In addition, the consequences of the Lisbon heterotopia will be discussed through the understanding of the house as a mirror of the self.

Keywords: *The Virgin Suicides*, heterotopia, suburban gothic, suburban heterotopia, domesticity.

0. Introduction

In the post-World War II United States, the suburbs emerged as a suspended entity from society where to escape from the recent historical catastrophe. In this space, individuals remained confined within a mould of idealised domesticity, which ultimately led to an atemporal and alienated space wherein the values of home life could easily be subverted. In this context, the literary subgenre of the suburban Gothic surfaced. Drawing from the wider Gothic tradition, this particular subgenre focuses on the apprehensions raised by the mass expansion of suburbia, especially paying attention to the disruption of its idealised peace.

With regards to literary production, writers such as Richard Matheson, Shirley Jackson and Stephen King are commonly associated with discussions concerning the suburban Gothic, especially in relation to establishing the suburbs as a gothic site. Jeffrey Eugenides, too, is widely debated within the genre. Particularly, his 1993 debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* has sparked attention in the field as has been read through the lens of the suburban Gothic by academics. Previous studies have primarily focused on issues of identity, involving the geopolitics of the suburbs (Dines 2012, Wilhite 2015). Attention has also been paid to the unreliable narrator(s) of the novel, discussing their impossible narrative voices (Shostak 2009). Nonetheless, the notion of suburban heterotopias in *The Virgin Suicides* has not been surveyed, which is the key motivation of this research. In addition, the notion of nested heterotopias has not been proposed either. Heterotopias, a concept introduced by Michel Foucault (1986), allude to spaces that other reality, usually upsetting what is expected by subverting societal norms. Further, they tend to appear in response to either crisis or deviation.

With this in mind, the present dissertation suggests suburbia as nests of

heterotopias in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*. This research will first aim at observing the entirety of the suburbs in *The Virgin Suicides* as a heterotopia, inspecting the false idyllic mould to reveal a corrupted society that operates in disaccordance with reality. Furthermore, the Lisbon household will be proposed as a nested heterotopia that functions differently from its surroundings as a consequence of Cecilia's disrupting suicide. Finally, the outcome of the Lisbon heterotopia will be discussed, putting forward an analysis in line with the conception of the house as a mirror of the self.

1. The Suburbs as a Heterotopia
1.1 Emergence of Suburbia

In his 2004 book *SuburbiaNation*, Robert Beuka introduces the suburbs by describing them as "A massive development of the suburban landscape, a new type of terrain that dissolved the urban/rural place distinctions that had, until that point, largely characterized American topography" (Beuka 1). In order to account for such a "massive development" in the topography of the United States, it is important to bear in mind the sociocultural context that preceded it. Participating as a mere provider in the Second World War, after the war mainland United States was left virtually untouched, at the same time witnessing a recovery in the economy. As American soldiers returning from the war were promised homes of their own, soon a series of extensive housing developments began to take place and, ultimately, the government catered such developments to all citizens by providing loan guarantees to builders and cheap mortgages to potential owners. In addition, marriage rates rapidly increased after the war, inevitably resulting in a notorious baby boom which caused a population growth of 29 million in 10 years alone. Murphy (2009) explains, "between 1948 and 1958, 11 million new suburban homes were established. An astonishing 83 per cent of all

population growth during the 1950s took place in the suburbs. By 1970, they would house more people than either cities or farms" (*The Suburban…* 6). In brief, the housing development of the suburbs denoted an enormous transformation of not only the American landscape but also society, as an attempt to adapt the growing country after World War II.

1.2 The Suburban Utopia

As Murphy points out, the migration from the cities to the new world of the suburbs mirrored the previous American belief of 'Manifest Destiny'[1], but now modified to "a home for every family, a car in every driveway" (*The Suburban…* 10). The promised land of suburbia was meant to accommodate utopian ideals of living, as well as providing a safe place for families and children to peacefully live among white picket fences and neatly mown lawns. Laura Miller, in her 1995 article "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal", agrees that "The suburban ideal is about finding a homogenous community of like-minded people, about living in a home that provides comfort and diversion" (395). In *The Poetics of the American Suburbs*, Jo Gill (2013) even compares the idealised suburbs to a "vision of bucolic bliss", stating how they are perceived "as the site of purity, security, and American values of self-determination and prosperity re-emerged and flourished" (31). Further, there was the perception that the suburbs—having recently been constructed—had no attachment to history, that is to say, the latest World War, and would therefore continue to be unspoiled by similar events. All in all, the suburbs represented a place isolated from overcrowded and polluted cities,

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[1] Fueled by fierce national pride and desire to acquire western land, the ideal of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century sought to justify westward expansion by extending so-called American freedom and democracy to less fortunate individuals. Nonetheless, ultimately it was an imperialistic enterprise at the cost of Native Americans' land.

as well as the dangerous outside world, creating an opportunity to live amongst people alike and focus on the values of the family and home.

1.3 The Suburban Reality

Nonetheless, the reality of the suburbs came to be much different. As Dines puts it in his 2012 article "Suburban Gothic and the Ethnic Uncanny in Jeffrey Eugenides's 'The Virgin Suicides'", "the calm exterior conformity of the suburbs is just a facade which hides nests of depravity" (965). The manufactured spaces that represented a blank canvas to start anew were ultimately revealed to encourage conformity, sameness, blandness and materialism that led to a sense of unhappiness. Consequently, the homogenous suburban landscape promoted the death of individualism and spread misery to all its residents. In addition, suburbia also posed a threat to one of the pillars it swore to protect, the family. Murphy (2009) elucidates how "the long hours and endless commuting of the typical suburban father meant that such neighbourhoods were full of lonely, depressed housewives left in charge of a houseful of unruly children: such a recipe, it was sweepingly stated, was resulting in a massive increase in psychological and emotional problems" (*The Suburban…* 7), thus becoming a "claustrophobic breeding ground for dysfunctionality and abuse" (Murphy, *The Suburban…* 3). Further, the suburban hopes for a history-less place become impossible, as "there is still so much history in a place which is supposed to have broken free from the clutches of the past . . . this moment of supposed historical evacuation has itself become a historical moment, with all the problems that recollection and narration entail" (Dines 965). In the end, the suburbs rather became a place of entrapment and haunting wherein torment and anguish are indeed a reality.

Thus, hiding behind a facade, suburbia actually presents a grim, upsetting and different reality to the rest of society, emerging as a heterotopic space. The concept of

heterotopias (hétérotopie in its original French) was coined and elaborated by Michel Foucault, initially introducing it in his book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (*Les mots et les choses: Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines*) in 1966, describing heterotopias in opposition to utopias:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to hold together. (Foucault xix)

In this manner, heterotopias emerged as spaces that other reality, that are upsetting and antithetical and subvert what is outside of them. If we are to analyse the etymology of the word, Goode (2018) explains that it is a conjunction of the Greek words "hetero", which means "another" or "different" and "topos", meaning "place"; therefore, the word heterotopia literally translates to "other place".

It is important to note that heterotopias exist as an alternative—but not complete opposition, which would be dystopias—to utopias. As Foucault (1966) writes, utopias have no real location, they afford consolation in an untroubled region wherein to model a perfected version of society. In a posterior 1986 article, "Of Other Spaces", Foucault compares the relationship between utopias and heterotopias to a mirror. A mirror, by its nature, is a placeless place that shows an unreal image of the self; it allows us to see where we are absent, constituting a utopia. Nonetheless, as the mirror does exist in reality, the image reflected in the glass is also real:

> it makes the place I occupy the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 24)

In such a way, heterotopias would represent the reflection in the mirror. They are other-places—unlike the no-place utopias—and despite upsetting they are

fundamentally real, as suburban life in *The Virgin Suicides* will demonstrate by presenting a distressing rendering of reality.

In "Of Other Spaces" (1986), Foucault further discusses the traits of heterotopias by outlining a set of principles, five of which—first, second, fourth, fifth and sixth—can be used to analyse suburbia. The first principle asserts that the constitution of heterotopias is a constant in every single culture, and even though there is no homogenic universal form, they can be classified into two main categories. On the one hand there are crisis heterotopias; these are the "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 24). Examples of individuals that are considered to be in a state of crisis, by Foucault's standard, are adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women or the elderly. The military service or honeymoon trips represent crisis heterotopias; they are spaces wherein certain acts—such as sexual virility or "loss" of virginity, respectively—were supposed to take place. On the other hand, there are heterotopias of deviation, which Foucault argues are replacing the former. Individuals whose behaviour deviates from the required or expected societal norms are placed in such; examples are retirement homes, psychiatric hospitals or prisons.

Since each heterotopia has a determined function in society, the second principle notes how societies can alter such function as time passes by. Foucault takes the case of cemeteries, a space that is connected to all individuals as each family has relatives in it. In the eighteenth century, western culture had it customary to place cemeteries next to the church, at the very heart of the city. Distributed according to a hierarchy, some tombs were even placed inside the sacred space of the church, establishing "the cult of the dead" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). By the nineteenth century, however,

cemeteries began to be situated toward the outskirts of the city, following "the individualisation of death and the bourgeois appropriation of the cemetery, there aris[ed] an obsession with death as an illness" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 25). Accordingly, in order to avoid the 'illness of the dead' to be propagated to those still living, cemeteries were removed from proximity. Ultimately, the sacred place of the cemetery became the 'other' dark city.

The fourth principle surveys the relationship between heterotopias and time. Foucault argues that heterotopias "function at full capacity" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26) when they break from traditional time, opening to what he terms heterochronies. Two types of heterochronies are then presented: those that accumulate time—such as museums, libraries and as later discussed, the Lisbon house—and those that seek time in its most fleeting form—festivals and fairgrounds—.

The fifth principle explains how heterotopias are not as easily accessible as public spaces, rather they have "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). Generally, there are two types of entries, either compulsory in the case of prisons or those that appear as simple openings but ultimately create exclusions. Foucault exemplifies this by means of the stereotypical American motel, wherein activities that are not allowed in the open—such as adultery—are sheltered and hidden in its rooms.

The sixth and last trait concerns the role of heterotopias. According to Foucault, there are two extreme roles they can fulfil: the first one is to create an illusory space that exposes real spaces inside human life, the second one is to create perfectly arranged, meticulous spaces that compensate for the ill-construction of ours.

1.4 The Suburban Gothic

With this context in mind, from the fifties and sixties onwards a new subgenre of Gothic fiction arose: the suburban Gothic. The suburban Gothic draws on the anxieties originating from mass suburbanisation—typically featuring suburban characters, settings and preoccupations—, and "it reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyles and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreparable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with the old patterns of existence" (Murphy, *The Suburban…* 2). In order to do so, in an analysis of the movie adaptation of Eugenides' novel, Bree Hoskin (2005) explains how the suburban Gothic reconfigures "Gothic tropes such as the supernatural, violence, death and entrapment . . . in order to represent the dark side of . . . suburban . . . life" (217). Further, she elaborates how the suburban Gothic applies these tropes to familiar spaces "in order to enhance their disruptive effects" (Hoskin 217).

It should be noted, however, that the subgenre is more focused on how suburbia was chosen to be perceived than the actual reality of such neighbourhoods. More specifically, it builds on and explores the suspicion that calm, ordinary-looking neighbourhoods or families must have an abominable secret to hide. In this way, the suburban Gothic illustrates gilded scenarios where utopian ideals are confronted with an opposite reality, actively targeting and upsetting the myth of the suburbs by pitting its dreams and nightmares against each other. Consequently, fear in suburban Gothic works comes from the inside of the community—fellow suburbanites or one's own family—rather than external threats: every white picket fence corresponds to a grim basement.

Suburban Gothic works, therefore, tend to be framed around a peril that threatens the community of the suburb. Some of the most common examples are anxieties about class and money, as portrayed in *The Amityville Horror* (1977) and *Poltergeist* (1982); the community's children being harmed, as in *The Virgin Suicides* (1992) and *A Crime in the Neighborhood* (1997); and deceitful husbands and paranoid women, as in *The Stepford Wives* (1972).

Ultimately, the suburban Gothic alludes to elements of the Gothic tradition to discuss the terrors and anxieties of middle-class Americans from the end of the second World War until the present day (Murphy, "Defining…" 326). Furthermore, it explores and deconstructs the utopian idealism of the suburbs, fantasising about an idyllic community that turns on itself.

1.5 Suburban Heterotopia in *The Virgin Suicides*

As a result of this, it may be asserted that the suburbs function as a heterotopia separated from the rest of society. The underlying reason to be able to substantiate this statement is to observe the reasoning behind the emergence of the suburbs in close relation with Foucault's theory. As noted earlier, the leading cause of suburbia was the return of the exodus of American soldiers that had been fighting in the war and its consequent baby boom. These newly-formed families that had been scarred and separated by the war sought a detached place from perverted society wherein to live safely and peacefully, isolated from any external harm. Hence, the mere description of the dawn of suburbia reveals its heterotopic nature: heterotopias are in its most basic nature spaces that subvert societal norms, which is exactly what the suburbs attempted to do, to fabricate their own regulations and standards of living with complete disregard to any life outside of them. More precisely, the suburbs are a clear depiction of crisis

heterotopias: families traumatised by World War II seeking refuge in suburbia, a place wherein their healing from the war should take place.

Nonetheless, the suburbanites' hopes for a life of tranquillity and bliss were shattered by the psychological impact of mass urbanisation—for the most part, the rapid change in patterns of living—. This, therefore, is when the suspicions formulated by the suburban Gothic come into play: the threat within the allegedly harmless community. Ultimately, this fear of an internal peril destructs any expectations of a fully undisturbed life, colliding with the foundations upon which suburbia was built, leading to the uncomfortable reality of the suburbs—or at least that one portrayed in suburban Gothic works—, a heterotopia. With this in mind, the suburb wherein the five Lisbon sisters live—Grosse Pointe, Michigan—can be analysed through a suburban heterotopic lens. As Hoskin (2017) imagines, "The Lisbon house . . . becomes the haunted castle through which its darkened rooms and basement the neighbourhood boys creep only to stumble upon the lifeless bodies of the Lisbon girls" (217).

Firstly, the presence of the fear within in *The Virgin Suicides'* suburb shall be analysed. Cecilia's—the youngest of the five Lisbon sisters—death by suicide at the very onset of the novel triggers the ever-present anxiety of the internal threat, as explained by Murphy (2015) in relation to the suburban Gothic. Perhaps the manner in which she died is the most revealing aspect that illustrates the juxtaposition of 'a grim basement for every white picket fence'; Cecilia's life came to an end as her body collapsed on the Lisbon's white picket fence: "Halfway up the staircase to the second floor her steps made no more noise, but it was only thirty seconds later that we heard the wet sound of her body falling onto the fence that ran alongside the house" (Eugenides 28). As Wilhite (2015) points out, "Cecilia's dramatic escape from this world leaves her body transfixed on a familiar suburban symbol, the fence that typically

delineates the borders between domestic properties or between private lawns and public sidewalks" (4). The fact that one of the characteristic aspects of the suburbs, picket fences and mown lawns, is Cecilia's death scene serves to demonstrate the grim reality of suburban life, especially as the internal threat and a suburban hallmark are in explicit, direct contact. The response that follows her death simply confirms the suburban worry of their community being tainted and thus not undisturbed, quite literally weaponising young Cecilia's death as an infectious virus:

> Her suicide, from this perspective, was seen as a kind of disease infecting those close at hand. In the bathtub, cooking in the broth of her own blood, Cecilia had released an airborne virus which the other girls, even in coming to save her, had contracted. No one cared how Cecilia had caught the virus in the first place. Transmission became explanation. The other girls, safe in their own rooms, had smelled something strange, sniffed the air, but ignored it. (Eugenides 113)

Nonetheless, the superficial construction of the suburb does not even locate the origin of threat within itself, but rather subjugates their utopian ideals to it: a place as idyllic and trustworthy as the suburb could not be the cause for a disaster, but instead the outside world has infected the refuge. As narrated, "No one cared how Cecilia had caught the virus in the first place" (Eugenides 113), thus refusing accountability and continuing to ignore that *they* might be the actual fear within. Therefore, what the suburban community does is identify which of their sacred values has been attacked and attempt to individualise the root of the problem in hopes of avoiding its spread: "Dini Fleisher told us that parents had begun making complaints shortly after Cecilia killed herself. They maintained that a person who couldn't run his own family had no business teaching their children" (Eugenides 116). In the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, the parents of the society fear that their own families might suffer Cecilia's infection, thus endeavour to remove all that was in close relation with Cecilia as a means to eradicate the disease.

Secondly, the focus will be on the display of abnormal societal behaviours as a result of the heterotopia. As discussed previously, the attempt to live unperturbed in the suburbs was, eventually, impossible and the occurrence of incidents that endangered the suburban dream destabilised the overall functioning of the community. In this manner, when Cecilia dies by suicide, the community fails to act according to customary societal norms, instead adapting a corrupted version of them. On the one hand, right after Cecilia's death, the community does not respond with the usual procedure of addressing condolences to the family but instead, paralysed by the fear instilled in the neighbourhood,

> Flower arrangements arrived at the Lisbon house later than was customary. Because of the nature of the death, most people decided not to send flowers to the Funeral Home, and in general everybody put off placing their orders, unsure whether to let the catastrophe pass in silence or to act as though the death were natural. (Eugenides 41)

As evidenced, suburbanites stash away their moral code in order to avoid the reality of their so-imagined idyllic community. This is further illustrated by the action the neighbourhood—as a group—take on in place of mourning Cecilia's passing. By arguing that

> "Our kids could jump on it, too" . . . a group of fathers began digging the fence out free of charge. It turned out the fence stood on the Bateses' property. Mr. Buck, a lawyer, negotiated with Mr. Bates about the fence's removal and didn't speak to Mr. Lisbon at all. Everyone assumed, of course, that the Lisbons would be grateful. (Eugenides 44)

The narrators recount how the Lisbon family, who was grieving the death of a daughter, was not even taken into consideration when removing their own quintessential picket fence. In this manner, "the fence removal suggests a widespread concern linking the threat posed by the Lisbon house to the security and sanctity of the neighborhood" (Wilhite 10), the debased community ultimately deciding to withdraw them from the community on their own account.

Later on, due to a rise in suicide rates around the country and probably as well as remorse from their actions, the neighbourhood high school organises a 'Day of

Grieving' as a way of addressing the death that has now become a taboo. Nonetheless, the community once again founders and a message of "supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever" (Eugenides 77) is delivered instead.

Thirdly, and lastly, the final resolve of the community will be taken into account. After the five Lisbon sisters have died, their parents divorce and flee the suburb. What continues afterwards is the vicious cycle of the suburban heterotopian space, which promotes a fake utopian mould: "The new young couple turned the house into a sleek empty space for meditation and serenity, covering with Japanese screens the shaggy memories of the Lisbon girls" (Eugenides 169). In this manner, a careless reparation of the malfunctioning space is attempted, making-believe the suburban dream was never broken and simply restarting its engine anew.

2. Matryoshka Heterotopias

2.1 A System of Opening and Closing

Against this background, when the heterotopian suburb of Grosse Pointe is examined closely, one can observe signs of another heterotopia within the same. According to Foucault's sixth principle, heterotopias can create perfectly arranged spaces to compensate for instability outside—that is the role adopted by the entirety of the suburbs, a place to heal from the repercussions of the war—, but what would the result be if such a neatly organised space was unable to redress the outside imbalance? This is how the Lisbon house emerges as a nested heterotopia within the neighbourhood; as explained by Hancock, Faramelli and White (2018) in *Spaces of Crisis and Critique*, "The crisis individual leaves society so as not to infect it and creates a heterotopia by doing so" (4). As a consequence of Cecilia's death, the Lisbon family essays to fabricate a space in which they can recover and not infect society.

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To survey this, the fifth principle proposed by Foucault comes into play. This principle explains how heterotopias are not easily accessible, and their access demands particular requirements due to "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). Following this, the Lisbon household tampers with its accessibility in accordance with their surroundings, presenting various regulations for its opening and closing, or as Mr. Lisbon refers, "it's just our policy" (Eugenides 83).

At the onset of the novel, the Lisbon household is believed to have strict rules that limit their daughters' social interactions and freedom. As a consequence, Cecilia comes close to dying by suicide after slitting her wrists in the bathtub. As she is quickly rushed to the hospital with an ambulance she ultimately survives, and the Lisbon parents receive the following advice:

> I do not think the patient truly meant to end her life. Her act was a cry for help." He met with Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon and recommended that they relax their rules. He thought Cecilia would benefit by "having a social outlet . . ." From that time on, the Lisbon house began to change. (Eugenides 23)

It is, thus, the disrupting occurrence of Cecilia almost dying that allows for the first change in its accessibility. The narrators of the novel qualify the changes in the Lisbon house as "miraculous", even simple events like "Butch, who cut the Lisbon grass, [being] now allowed inside for a glass of water, no longer having to drink from the outside faucet" (Eugenides 23) or "two weeks after Cecilia returned home, Mr. Lisbon persuad[ing] his wife to allow the girls to throw the first and only party of their short lives" (Eugenides 24). Surprisingly, then, the narrators are first allowed inside the Lisbon house for the party, noting how previously "Only one boy had ever been allowed in the house. Peter Sissen had helped Mr. Lisbon install a working model of the solar system in his classroom at school, and in return Mr. Lisbon had invited him for dinner" (Eugenides 14).

However, it is that precise night of the party that Cecilia dies by suicide in the house's picket fence. As a result, the Lisbon household experiences the second change in its accessibility: complete entrapping. Wilhite (2015), too, identifies this change as the beginning of a period of tampering with the Lisbons' accessibility: "in the weeks and months following Cecilia's suicide, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon experiment with varying degrees of incarceration to secure their remaining daughters" (6). As the narrators retell, "Other than to school or church the Lisbon girls never went anywhere" (Eugenides 67); the four remaining sisters were completely confined except for the two activities their parents deemed essential enough for them to open the valve to the house. Nonetheless, it was not a comfortable confinement in an attempt to fluff them out of external peril, but rather the entire family removed itself from any activities other than school or church. "The year of the suicides the Lisbons' leaves went un-raked" (Eugenides 70) and the delivery of weekly groceries was also halted, meaning the Lisbons fully imprisoned themselves to the walls of their home, not even stepping outside in their yard.

During the lockdown, there was a small opening in the heterotopic house: "I want to ask Lux to Homecoming" (Eugenides 83). After Trip Fontaine presented Mr. Lisbon with this petition, the Lisbon dad announced the requirements for the Lisbon home to open:

> The girls could go under the following conditions: (1) they would go in a group; (2) they would go to the dance and nowhere else; (3) they would be home by eleven. Mr. Lisbon told Trip it would be impossible to get around these conditions. "I'm going to be one of the chaperons," he said. (Eugenides 85)

However, Lux failed to comply with the third requirement—"(3) they would be home by eleven"—which called for "Mrs. Lisbon shut[ting] the house in maximum-security isolation" (Eugenides 102). In this manner, the heterotopia of the Lisbon house altered itself to become even more upsetting—this is in accordance with

Foucault's second principle, which argues that the function and form of heterotopias can be altered over time—. This time, "Without explanation, the girls were taken out of school. They merely failed to show up one morning, and then again the next" (Eugenides 102), only leaving the house when the last remaining valve opened: attending church on Sundays. Though such measures might come across as a castigation, Mrs. Lisbon explains that the function adopted by the Lisbon heterotopia is to provide a space for protection and healing:

> When we spoke to her years later, however, Mrs. Lisbon maintained that her decision was never intended to be punitive. "At that point being in school was just making things worse," she said. "None of the other children were speaking to the girls. Except boys, and you knew what they were after. The girls needed time to themselves. A mother knows. I thought if they stayed at home, they'd heal better." (Eugenides 103)

Mrs. Lisbon, thus, asserts the Lisbon house as a heterotopia of crisis, removing her family from the rest of society as a means to not contaminate it and, instead, heal first before returning.

2.2 Ambulances

Regardless, the Lisbon sisters find another valve that allows them to open their isolated house to the exterior: ambulances. First exemplified by Cecilia, the Lisbon house initially relaxes when she has to be rushed to the hospital after her near death. When she dies, she is also rushed outwards by an ambulance. Following this example, Lux is able to leave the "maximum-security isolation" house after she pretends to have appendicitis, "despite her convulsions (she was clutching her stomach), Lux had dared to put on a coat of the forbidden pink lipstick" (Eugenides 108). Even when the doctor inquires "Why all the commotion? Why the ambulance?", Lux explains how it was the "Only way I could get out of the house" (Eugenides 110). In such a way, the one other and final time the sisters leave the house is once again by ambulance, after they die by suicide. Mary, the only survivor, stays at the hospital for two weeks and upon her return

to the house, she will finally leave by ambulance after her death. Ambulances, thus, create a valve the Lisbon sisters are able to manipulate without needing Mrs. Lisbon's accordance, emerging as the second aperture of the heterotopia alongside the Lisbon parents' commands.

3. The House as the Self

Despite the Lisbons' efforts to remain unperceived and inscrutable, their house eventually reveals their true nature. Instead of presenting a concealed version of reality—in accordance with the protective function proclaimed by Mrs. Lisbon—, the Lisbon house becomes a symbol of the exact truth inside its walls. What enables homes to mirror the self is the function attributed to the space; as Dupuis and Thorns (1998) argue, "home is where people feel in control of their environment, free from surveillance, free to be themselves and at ease, in the deepest psychological sense, in a world that might at times be experienced as threatening and uncontrollable" (25), allowing the true psych of its residents to unfold. In the 2015 book *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home,* Cooper states how "The house therefore nicely reflects how man sees himself, with both an intimate interior, or self as viewed from within and only revealed to those intimates who are invited inside, and a public exterior . . . or the self that we choose to display to others" (131). With relation to *The Virgin Suicides*, Wilhite (2015) agrees that "The narrators' layered description of the "comfortable suburban home" mimics the belief that the exterior of the house should reflect the family it contains" (6). Nonetheless, such difference between the interior and exterior becomes blurred with the Lisbon house, as their great imbalance launches all their surroundings out of their control, even their own selves. In all, "The [Lisbon] house might be viewed as both an avowal of the self . . . and as a revelation of the nature of the self" (Cooper 131), breaking through their initial masking effort.

Prior to the death of Cecilia, the narrators retell how the bedrooms of the Lisbon sisters used to be in a state of arguable balance:

> He 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 a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and of the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space. (Eugenides 15)

This description clearly evidences an average space governed by teenagers, not showing any signs that would alarm fellow neighbours, but rather it instils curiosity and fuels the narrators' dreams about the girls. The bathroom, too, illustrates a canonical image of teenage girls: a "secret cache of cosmetics tied up in a sock under the sink: tubes of red lipstick and the second skin of blush and base, and the depilatory wax . . . He inventoried deodorants and perfumes and scouring pads . . . twelve boxes of Tampax in the cupboard" (Eugenides 15). In this fashion, the Lisbon house preceding the first death symbolised a stereotypical suburban home inhabited by teenagers, perfectly fitting in the mould of the suburbs.

All the same, after Cecilia's passing the Lisbon house begins to change. Wilhite (2015) argues that "The Lisbon house makes visible the infelicities of violence, death, and decay that the private realms of suburbia have been built to keep out or, at the very least, to repress as a matter of decorum" (11). On the one hand, the exterior shows "signs of creeping desolation": "The illuminated doorbell went out. The bird feeder fell in the backyard and was left on the ground" (Eugenides 67). The Lisbons also give up on raking the leaves in their backyard, a tradition that occurred yearly but "On the appropriate Saturday Mr. Lisbon didn't stir from his house" (Eugenides 70), leaving them to flood the outside of the house. The residence later began to visually fall apart, as a tile slid off the roof water and was let in the house, but Mr. Lisbon stuck to positioning cans under each leak, a roofer never showing up to properly repair it. What is more, the decadence of the Lisbon house did not restrict itself to vision, but it spread

to the sense of smell too, almost like a rotten corpse:

> For even as the house began to fall apart, casting out whiffs of rotten wood and soggy carpet, this other smell began wafting from the Lisbons', invading our dreams and making us wash our hands over and over again. The smell was so thick it seemed liquid, and stepping into its current felt like being sprayed . . . The smell was partly bad breath, cheese, milk, tongue film, but also the singed smell of drilled teeth. (Eugenides 118)

Undoubtedly, then, the exterior of the Lisbon house displays the infelicity within the house, at the same time clashing with the expected formalities of decorum in the suburbs.

On the other hand, the interior remains rather frozen. Right after Cecilia's death, the narrators explain how the inside "was a mix between a funeral parlor and broom closet. All those flowers. All that dust" (Eugenides 43). Though this could simply be a temporal image in cause of the recent loss of a daughter,

> the house showed signs of uncleanliness, though they were nothing compared to what was to come later. Dust balls lined the steps. A half-eaten sandwich sat atop the landing where someone had felt too sad to finish it. Because Mrs. Lisbon had stopped doing laundry or even buying detergent, the girls had taken to washing clothes by hand in the bathtub, and when Father Moody passed their bathroom, he saw shirts and pants and underthings draped over the shower curtain. (Eugenides 42)

The Lisbon house rather remained stuck in time after the night of the passing, as if unmovable. The half-eaten sandwich sitting on the stairs is still found there five months later, alongside empty cans of food; as Cooper states, "the presence or absence of certain objects are good if not perfect clues to status and attitudes" (136). Nonetheless, there is another death inside the house—a metaphorical one. Gill (2013) refers to the suburbs as "the matriarchal suburbs" (42), including William J. Newman's assertion that the suburbs are "Above all else a place for women and children. It is to these women and children that the 'Masters'" (Newman cited in Gill 42). In this fashion, Mrs. Lisbon—the 'Master'—resigning to do laundry alludes to the death of the matriarchal suburb within the Lisbon household, eliminating the centrepiece of the house. Because of this, the metaphorical death of the Lisbon house accounts for its

stillness following Cecilia's death, refusing any further action other than the unavoidable passing of time.

What is perhaps the most grim sight of the Lisbon house and sets the origin of the decadence at the night of Cecilia's death is the basement:

> By the time we reached bottom, we felt we'd literally traveled back in time. For despite the inch of floodwater covering the floor, the room was just as we had left it: Cecilia's party had never been cleaned up. The paper tablecloth, spotted with mice droppings, still covered the card table. A brownish scum of punch lay caked in the cut-glass bowl, sprinkled with flies. The sherbet had melted long ago, but a ladle still protruded from the gummy silt, and cups, gray with dust and cobwebs, remained neatly stacked in front. A profusion of withered balloons hung from the ceiling on thin ribbons. The domino game still called for a three or a seven. (Eugenides 151)

The feeling of travelling back in time the narrators experience can be justified by Foucault's fourth principle. Principle number four surveys how heterotopias may perform as accumulations of time, reformulating the biological term 'heterochronia'. As Foucault (1986) explains, underlyingly heterochronies are "the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place" (26). Correspondingly, triggered by Cecilia's death and Mrs. Lisbon (in)actions, the inside of the Lisbon house transforms into a heterochronia, becoming a museum-like place of the Lisbon distress.

In such a way, the Lisbon residence undoubtedly expresses the psychology of its inhabitants. For one thing, the exterior communicates the passing of time as it accumulates fallen leaves and gradually falls in both visual and olfactory deterioration. Conversely, the interior is an accumulation of the time past, the Lisbon basement party remaining untouched, as well as similar traces around the house such as the half-eaten sandwich. The effort to remove themselves from the rest of the neighbourhood in order to not taint it is, thus, in vain as the home reveals their real selves.

4. Conclusion

In closing, the present analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* has uncovered three different heterotopic layers in relation to the Grosse Pointe neighbourhood and its inhabitants, in particular the Lisbon family.

At first, the analysis has focused on investigating the false utopian ideals of suburbia, revealing how the suburbs are actually a heterotopic space. From the constant fear within—that is, one's neighbour or own family—the suburban community acts in discordance with expected societal behaviours and subverts reality. In Eugenides' novel, this is illustrated by the death of Cecilia, which suburbia treats as an infectious disease that leads its inhabitants to display abnormal behaviours and want to remove what they believe is threatening their utopian ideals.

Secondly, the study shifts its perspective to focus only on the Lisbon household. By surveying Foucault's principles of heterotopias, the Lisbon house can ultimately be deemed a matryoshka heterotopia. As examined, the Lisbons present a system of opening and closing that alters their accessibility and the requirements to it, emerging as a heterotopia within the bigger suburban one. In the novel, this is observed by the modifications in the Lisbon 'policy' after Cecilia's death: the Lisbon parents tamper with the accessibility to the household by confining their daughters within it, in an attempt to create a heterotopian space wherein they isolate themselves from society and heal. In addition, the Lisbon sisters construct another valve that allows them to escape the house without meeting the heterotopia's requirements: ambulances.

Thirdly and lastly, the previous observations are contrasted by noticing how the Lisbons' intentions actually fail on account of the house physically mirroring them. The exterior illustrates the decadence experienced by its inhabitants, depicting the passing of time through both visual and olfactory means. The interior, rather, accumulates time.

The clearest portrayal of this are the decorations of the Lisbon house party, which remain completely untouched after the night of Cecilia's death until the deaths of the remaining sisters months later.

4.1 Further Research

With regards to further research, the concept of heterotopias would greatly benefit from additional investigation. Approaching literature from a heterotopic perspective would open new venues of analysis and investigation, particularly in relation to the suburbs. While researching for this thesis, previous works that concerned both heterotopias and the suburbs were rather scarce but, as presented in this dissertation, there is much to converse about. Likewise, the field of the suburban Gothic would also profit from the introduction of this analysis, expanding its scope of investigation.

Furthermore, special emphasis could be placed on the concept of matryoshka heterotopias proposed in this research, as it has not been surveyed at all in the past. As a result, this study has been limited by the lack of literature to corroborate the suggested findings, and presents itself as a hopeful dissertation that stimulates further research in both the heterotopic and suburban Gothic fields.

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