

Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Tam Yan Kiu

Name of School: Heep Yunn School

Book Title: The Virgin Suicides

Author: Farrar, Straus & Giroux (FSG)

Publisher: Jeffrey Eugenides

The Virgin Suicides is a hauntingly exquisite novel, which has stood the test of time, remaining a classic even two decades after its publication. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to resonate with modern teenage girls who empathise with the Lisbon sisters. Set in an American suburb in the 1970s, the novel focuses on the cloistered lives of the Lisbon sisters. The story is told from the perspective of a group of mysterious

teenage boys who are captivated by the sisters and eventually by their deaths.

The book begins with the youngest Lisbon sister, Cecilia, slitting her wrist and attempting suicide in the bathtub. Despite being rescued, she tragically passes away two weeks later after jumping from her bedroom window. This event leaves the Lisbon parents feeling unsettled and fearful, causing them to isolate and incarcerate their remaining daughters, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese, in an attempt to prevent another tragedy. However, in a puzzling turn of events, all four sisters end up taking their own lives without any discernible motive.

Jeffrey Eugenides, the author, masterfully utilises the term 'virgins' when referring to the Lisbon sisters. It is not to indicate their literal virginity but rather to evoke a sense of innocence and purity that they possess, as they have never formed

emotional connections with the outside world. Eugenides's choice of first-person narration by the boys also provides a unique perspective, leaving the readers with doubts about the exact reasons for the sisters' deaths. This highlights a crucial theme of the book: outsiders do not necessarily have the right to know how others feel and they can never fully understand or relate to the intimate details of others' lives.

As quoted from the novel, 'In the end we had the pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name.' However fascinated and curious the neighbourhood boys are when they try to unravel the shocking mystery of Cecilia's death by breaking into Lisbon's house and reading her diary, there are always 'gaps' remaining and it is impossible for them to find a clue. Likewise, people in reality often like to draw conclusions from all kinds

of sources. Yet, it would still remain impossible for people to truly figure out a definite answer, just like how the boys are left with more questions than answers.

A deeper analysis of the book reveals the strained relationship between the Lisbon sisters and their family, as well as the outside world. In fact, the dysfunctional and slowly decaying nature of the Lisbon family is evident and apparent throughout the entire story. Mrs Lisbon, in particular, comes across as an extremely manipulative and overbearing mother. Her religious beliefs heavily influence her parenting style, leading her to prohibit her children from socializing outside of school. Her oppressive behaviour is further exemplified when her 14-year-old daughter, Lux fails to return home for the night. Instead of addressing the issue through communication, Mrs Lisbon simply punishes her and forces her to burn all her beloved rock records.

Similarly, Mr Lisbon is to blame as well. As a busy father, his absenteeism in the family contributes to the sisters' alienation and disconnection from their mundane lives. Mr Lisbon fails to provide necessary emotional support and is often distant from his daughters, as shown in his refusal to allow them to attend a prom. He simply suggests that their mother would not allow it instead of engaging in a genuine discussion on the matter with the sisters. Although Mr Lisbon may not have acted intentionally, his passivity towards his daughters ultimately exacerbates their depression following Cecilia's death.

The lack of understanding and emotional support for the Lisbon sisters is also seen in the neighbourhood. It is devastating to see that neither the neighbours nor the boys express their concern about the Lisbon sisters after Cecilia has taken her life. People witness the despair and the deterioration of their well-being, but

nobody seems to care enough to ask if they are in a good mental and emotional state. Worse still, the grief goes unspoken in the family, and the sisters remain confined behind closed doors, feeling empty. The silence of the bystanders and the family takes a toll on the sisters and results in their inexplicable behaviour.

One particularly disturbing scene in the book is when Lux claims that she and her sisters are secretly suffocating. Yet, Mrs Lisbon quickly dismisses their feelings and concerns, saying ‘No, you’re safe.’ This is a prime example of the parental toxicity exhibited by Mr and Mrs Lisbon, with them failing to empathise with their children and only regarding parenting as providing shelter, food, and warmth. What they have never understood is that the Lisbon sisters just want to be free, to live normal lives, to have fun, to love, and to be loved. As readers, we may never fully understand the true reasons for the sisters

taking their own lives, the ending might have been completely different if the Lisbon parents had been less domineering and had fostered better communication.

This novel's significance extends beyond the fictional portrayal of dysfunctional families. Indeed, the importance of positive parent-child relationships is well-illustrated throughout the book, highlighting the need for effective communication and affection. In reality, it is increasingly common to hear adolescents express feelings of being constrained and misunderstood by their parents. Although most parents have good intentions, parents should avoid being overprotective, while simultaneously setting clear boundaries for their children. By giving children the space they require while also valuing genuine communication, parents can demonstrate their love and care for their children.

In summary, *The Virgin Suicides* is a poignant, thought-provoking novel that avoids romanticizing or glorifying teen suicide. Instead, it is sophisticated and powerful as it enlightens readers about important issues such as adolescence and family relationships. By revealing the Lisbon sisters' demise as a result of teenage struggles, parental misunderstanding, and social isolation, the book provides valuable insight. Overall, this book is a captivating read that is well worth the investment of our time.

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