

Jeffrey Eugenid's novel the virgin suicides: studying the eyewitness effect

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In Psychology, the bystander effect is loosely defined as the inaction of persons who witness a horrific event because each person assumes that another will do something to help the victims. For instance, if a child is being bullied in full view of a group of students and each student expects someone else to go and tell a teacher, the child will continue to be hurt until someone decides to intervene. In this scenario, the bully is considered the 'perpetrator', the child being bullied the 'victim', and the students looking on the 'bystanders'. But what if the roles aren't quite so clear? This is the case in Jeffrey Eugenide's *The Virgin Suicides*; nearly all characters in the novel can be considered perpetrators, victims, and bystanders to the tragic suicides of the Lisbon girls. The investigative, first-person plural narrative of the novel by the boys across the street serves the purpose of bringing the reader into the story but also helps readers to see firsthand how bystanders can also be classified as perpetrators and victims. Although there are many perpetrators in the novel who could be considered responsible for the Lisbon girls' deaths, the boys across the street, who obsessed over the girls from afar during their last months on earth and continued to obsess over them twenty years after, along with the community as a whole, are the most at fault for the death of the Lisbon girls.

Throughout the novel, nearly all information about the Lisbon girls is told by the boys across the street, nearly all of it based off of observations from afar, assumptions based on neighbors' statements, or from the possessions of the girls after their deaths. There is no clarification that the claims about the girls' thoughts, feelings, and actions are even remotely true. The boys do not attempt to talk to or get to know the girls while they were alive, but instead

appear comfortable which the versions of the girls that they know in their minds. The perceived mystery and inaccessibility of the girls is more alluring to the boys than answers and facts would be. In the eyes of the boys, the Lisbon girls are fictional characters in a story of their lives that the boys are writing themselves. This treatment of the girls as storybook characters rather than human beings contributes to their feelings of isolation. It's almost as if the Lisbon girls are trapped in a fishbowl in their home, unable to communicate with anyone because they are of a different species and do not live off of the same air as everyone else. The boys across the street and the members of the neighborhood prefer the girls to be in the metaphorical fishbowl so that the tragic ending of their lives can seem to be an unavoidable part of life. The girls are separate from themselves, perceived to be unreachable and therefore, not their problem- just their daily gossip.

The collective narrator reveals more about the dangerous repressive and conforming aspects of life in the suburbs in the 1970s and consequently the slow deterioration of the Lisbon girls than it does about the girls as actual people. This is most clearly articulated in this quotation from Kostova's article:

Being a reflection of the whole community, the boys seem to be mere bystanders or voyeuristic observers of the events in their neighborhood: they witness the metamorphosis of the childlike girls into alluring women, their subsequent death drive, the deterioration of suburban space (chipping down of elm trees) and of industry (lay -offs in automobile factories. (citation)

In the community where the novel takes place, Gross Pointe, there is an incessant desire for normalcy, which is reflected most clearly in the neighborhood's response to unpleasant or traumatic events. The inhabitants of the suburb also continuously insist on disassociating themselves with things that were unlike themselves, for instance, "Occasionally we heard gunshots coming from the ghetto, but our fathers insisted it was only cars backfiring" (Eugenides 32). By minimizing, normalizing, and explaining things that are unfamiliar, the members of Gross Pointe secure their identities and superiority over those who experience unfortunate events. The parents teach their children to behave this way, thus leading to the tragedy of the Lisbon girls.

The incorrect grouping of the Lisbon girls as a single entity by the boys across the street expedites their demise. Briefly, before Cecilia's death at the only party her parents allow the girls to throw, it is implied that the boys begin to see the girls as individuals. This party is the only instance in the novel that the boys attempt to actually talk to any of the Lisbon girls aside from the night of their suicides, when the decorations from the party had never been taken down. "...informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people. Instead of five replicas with blonde hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions" (Eugenede 23). However, after Cecilia commits suicide the individual identities of the Lisbon girls once again blur together until the girls become irrelevant unless they are being referred to as a unit. This depriving of any sort of individuality by the boys across the street directly influences

how the rest of the neighborhood views the girls and consequently effects how the girls view themselves. This is evidenced when the girls are about to go to the dance, the boys who are taking them do not care to know who they are individually. " Fortunately, their dresses and hairdos homogenized them. Once again the boys weren't even sure which girl was which. Instead of asking, they did the only thing they could think of doing: they presented the corsages" (Eugenide 117). This undesirable view of the Lisbon family as the reason for the neighborhood's problems serves as a death sentence for the girls. Towards the end of their lives, the girls succumb to the assumptions of the rest of the suburb that they are hopelessly bound to end up like Cecilia. With the stifling, prison-like atmosphere of their home and the absence of anyone reaching out to them wanting to get to know them, it becomes the perfect storm for the girls to end their lives in.

Although it would be easy to place all of the blame upon Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon for the suicide of their daughters, they are not entirely at fault. Although the girls' parents practice very religious and traditional styles of parenting, such as enforcing an extremely modest dress code, forcing Lux to destroy her rock records, and taking them out of school, their parenting style alone does not cause their daughters to commit suicide. In fact, as the people of the neighborhood begin to view the Lisbon girls as a disease of sorts, their children followed suit in their interactions (or lack thereof) with the Lisbon girls. Mrs. Lisbon gives her reason for taking the girls out of school when she did: " At that point being in school was just making things worse. None of the other children were speaking to the girls. The girls needed time to themselves. A mother knows. I thought if they stayed at home, they'd feel

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better” (Eugenide 137). The problem is not with the parents, and it is not with the girls themselves either. The problem is with the way that the girls are viewed and treated by the rest of the community. In their last attempt at reaching out to someone outside of their home, on the way home from the dance, Therese states: “ Cecilia was weird, but we’re not. We just want to live. If anyone would let us” (Eugenide 128). Although the Lisbon parents’ strictness and rigidity during the final years of the girls’ lives did not necessarily help them, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon acted with the best of intentions in what they thought was best for their daughters, which cannot be said for the rest of the community. Through their inaction and condemnation of the girls, the community is the driving force behind the girls’ death.

The tragedy of the Lisbon girls is one that wholeheartedly could have been avoided. If the boys across the street had simply walked across the street, knocked on the door and said “ Hello, how are you?”, it could have made a world of difference with the fate of the girls. The boys consider themselves ‘ experts’ on the girls after their deaths, hoarding diaries, medical records, and photos of the girls as evidence nearly 20 years after the suicides, and yet they could not bring themselves to bridge the gap created by the community’s desire to distance themselves from anything unsatisfactory or that does not fit the mold of the Grosse Pointe suburb. This is a prime example of communal culpability, where the entire community is at fault for the tragic event. As bystanders, each and every member of Grosse Pointe, especially the boys across the street, become the prime perpetrators.