

ON THE CREATIVE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES' *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

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Abstract: Imagination is one of the most important gifts that man possesses, but also a vast domain characterized by ambiguity. It goes without saying that in literature, the "mind's eye" can be the leading force behind the author's intentions. But more seldom does one come across literary characters whose identities are altered by imagination. The aim of the present paper is to underline the creative role of imagination in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel "The Virgin Suicides"; the way in which imagination not only foreshadows the characters' reality, but creates it and offers various angles of analysis.

Keywords: imagination, imaginary, female characters, creative force, fiction

"A narrative voice allows you to say things you couldn't otherwise. It frees you from the prison of the ego and the limitations of habitual thinking. One of the great mysteries of writing fiction, and one of the greatest pleasures, is the discovery of a voice that opens up a channel to impersonal, but specific, knowledge." These are the words of Jeffrey Eugenides while interviewed by James Gibbons for *The Paris Review*; an utterance as rich in its meaning as its implications. Novels are the epitome of literature: a genre for the most part loaded with imagination, rich in creative force, a type of literature where the author, at his best, releases all strings and surpasses every single limit of real life; a place where the "all persons fictitious" disclaimer is a piece of evidence of how real life is much more than the muse of a literary work. In a world where voicing your opinions is as hazardous as not speaking your mind, creating a narrative voice is the safest way to put forth truths that you might otherwise not utter. A literary universe can be everything that the actual world is, but it does not know fear, nor limits or imposed rules. What Eugenides points out in his statement is precisely the fact that writing fiction and creating a character who can voice out nearly anything, is not only a liberating act of creating fiction but an almost, I dare say, cathartic action of putting forth knowledge about the humanity.

In fact, it is precisely to knowledge - knowledge of the self- and its relationship with the imagination and the imaginary that I would like to refer to in this first part of my paper. To what extent does the imagination have an impact upon the self? How much can the imagination influence mental processes? How deep is the relation between imagination and consciousness and in how far can it affect or define the human being? And it is needless to say that imagination plays a huge creative role. I will try to answer all of these questions by referring to Sigmund Freud's theories about the working of the mind, with regard to the female characters in Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*.

In his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Sigmund Freud states the following: "If such a dominance existed (i.e. the dominance of the pleasure principle over the course of mental processes), the immense majority of our mental processes would have to be

accompanied by pleasure, whereas universal experience completely contradicts any such conclusion” (Freud, 90). In other words, the complex progressions of the psyche seldom produce pleasure, at least when referring to the association of the mind with the factual world. The psyche is a particularly significant aspect in Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *The Virgin Suicides*. The story is focused on the suicides of five sisters who live in Michigan during the 1970’s. The point in time, the historical context, might be one of the reasons why the girls’ suicides have had such a deep, almost captivating impact upon their neighbourhood. The experimental feature of the novel is its first person plural narration. The story is told through the eyes of a group of boys, who recall the events of the girls’ short lives. Enclosed by their parents within the protective shelter of their home, away from the unmoral, unethical and inappropriate outer world, secluded from society and even taken away from school, the Lisbon sisters find themselves having to create a universe of their own, but at the same time struggling to lead a normal life, trying to artificially sustain a linkage to the outer environment.

The only escape for these five prisoners is their imagination – the single source of pleasure of the mind. But Freud states that the pleasure principle is appropriate only at a primary level of the mental apparatus, while “from the point of view of self-preservation of the organism among the difficulties of the external world, it is from the very outset inefficient and even highly dangerous” (Freud, 10). Ironically enough, imagination, or the pleasure of the mind, is lethal to the five female characters of Eugenides’ novel. The Lisbon girls are kept far away from any potential difficulty of the external world, but not far enough from their own mental imagery. Can one’s imagination truly be harmful or even destructive? Imagination means creating, fancying, visualizing and ultimately: bringing into being. The five young female characters decided to put an end to their still fragile and tender lives.

Nonetheless, the saying “mens agitat molem”, the mind moves the matter, fits like a glove in these circumstances. The creative force of imagination is what kept the young Lisbon girls trying to live, but it has also brought them the end. The Lisbon girls-case is a typical instance of what Freud labelled as “neurotic unpleasure”, or pleasure that cannot be experienced as such. Devoid of an external life, they had to channel their energies into thinking, by creating mental images and circumstances that could not actually come true. Some might say that too much imagination and too little freedom was what brought the end upon these five girls. But might it just be that imagination as a creative force actually freed them from their constraints? *The Virgin Suicides* is such a flamboyant, yet bizarre novel, that it has been categorized, more often than once, as a kind of prose-poem. Also, the Updike-fashion of setting the novel in a suburban environment is what transforms Eugenides into a literary dare-devil, to say the least. When the novel was first published, writing about the suburbia was “undignified”, as the author himself states in his interview for the Paris Review.

However, apart from being an unconventional setting, the suburb plays a huge role in the tragic development of Eugenides’ female characters. The five girls are experiencing adolescence, with its innate boisterousness and outburst of impulses and desires, in a small industrial home town, soon to be stricken by riots; which could not be any further apart from an ideal location where to experience the tumultuousness of the teenage years. The author’s choice of setting the plot in Detroit was far from accidental: “*That* was what I was really writing about. I had imagined a family of suicidal sisters, five brief lives, and I’d put them in

an atmosphere of ruin and decay—the dying automobile plants, the dying elm trees—but the source of all this, psychologically and emotionally, had to do with the impermanence of everything I knew as a child”, says Eugenides in his interview with James Gibbons. Needless to say that the surroundings of and individual influence him or her tremendously, and this is all the more so true in the case of young people. The Lisbon sisters, born into a conservatively religious family and far from being born with a silver spoon in their mouths, struggle to find an identity that is impossible to achieve given the context, a fact which arouses neurotic displeasure and ultimately leads to disappointment. And here is where the creative force of imagination plays its part.

In his poem entitled *Two Part Prelude*, William Wordsworth pleads that during childhood, creative imagination is in its commencement; that childhood is an important milestone in the future development of creative thinking. Furthermore he points out that a child is the uncontaminated type of adult, who lacks prejudice and is thus able to achieve pure imaginative and creative thinking – two fundamentals that ultimately lead to inner growth; which means that adolescence is the transitional stage where creative imagination transcends from origination to maturity. Thus, the five female characters in *The Virgin Suicides* are experiencing a moulding stage of creative thinking, which they are forced to perfect too soon as they find themselves trapped within the borders set by their family, society, surroundings and eventually by themselves. Lacking a social existence, they live a life lead by the force of their own elegiac imaginations. Even though the five young women are silenced by their parents and depersonalized, they manage to conserve their individualities, which are rendered by the author in such an impeccable manner, that the novel has frequently come across as a feminist narrative. Suicide in literature is often a expression of liberation or resistance. If historically or psychologically speaking, suicide was considered a form of female hysteria or madness, in literature suicide is often a means of concealed revolt. Naturally, this is a possible interpretation for Eugenides’ suicidal saga as well, but the characters are so serene, self-confident and schematic in their apparently desperate process of ending their lives, that the entire phenomenon does not seem frantic at all, but a perfectly planned procedure, engineered by their imaginations and conducted flawlessly.

Coming back to the creative force of imagination, Einstein, the greatest physicist of all time, has also been interested in the working of imagination and said: “I come close to the conclusion that the gift of imagination has meant more to me than any talent for absorbing absolute knowledge” (Calaprice, 22). “The *gift* of imagination” is the engine that keeps the girls alive. The example is, of course, broadened; the girls are far from absorbing absolute knowledge, but as far as the knowledge of the self is concerned, imagination is the only vigour in their artificially sustained lives – imaginary lives. Imagination plays an important role throughout the entire length of the novel, which substantiates its existence as a Leitmotiv. The first person plural narration is highly subjective, despite the multi-perspectives, the narrative authority overwhelms all the other character’s voices to such an extent that the Lisbon sisters are silenced once more and portrayed as illustrations of the female enigma. The creative force of imagination is just as significant a mechanism for the male characters, the narrators, who create mental images of the girls; who become obsessed with them, and despite their almost scientific research methods of observing the sisters, gathering material about them - the so called exhibits - despite any of the girls’ trials to seem normal, filter the sisters’

images through their imaginations and search for obscurity and mystery in the simplest of the girls' behaviours. The narrators' infatuation with the girls transforms into a dream-like neighbourhood adventure of chasing after mythical creatures that they themselves have created. When given the chance, at the prom or at their party, the girls behave like typical adolescents, dancing, trying to have a good time and socializing. But this is not the image that the narrators are looking for. They are ignoring this conduct, lest their daydream would end.

"The pressure by unsatisfied instincts" (Freud, 11), due to their incarceration and loss of freedom, is to a great extent the reason for the Lisbon sisters' tragic deaths. Nevertheless, this particular case is one of those instances where the lack of freedom leads to sovereignty of the imagination. Emotionally suppressed by the same burden, the girls encapsulate one another's personalities and through the power of creative thinking, come to function as one single entity. When reading Cecilia's diary the boys say the following: "she writes of her sister and herself as one single entity", making it difficult "to identify which sister she is talking about" (Eugenides, 42). Under the weight of the same repressed feelings, Eugenides' five female characters can be perceived as a mythical creature, with five distinct personalities molten into one single spirit, who ultimately chooses to escape its cage by dying. Nevertheless, the sisters' suicides are a way of expressing themselves in an otherworldly society which they are not allowed to join.

At this point I suggest another approach to the subject of the creative role of imagination in Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, namely the working of the mind in children's play. In his essay on the pleasure principle, Freud analyzes this complex process and comes to the conclusion that playing is an enactment of real life; that "children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and make themselves master of the situation" (Freud, 17). But on the other hand, Freud notices, children's play is "influenced by a wish that dominates them the whole time – the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do" (Freud, 17). It is known for a fact that adolescence is a particularly challenging phase, for the reason that self-identification is rather problematic in this stage: the individual finds himself or herself in a "hermaphroditic" juncture – one where he or she is both characterized by child-like and adult-like features. It is the case of the Lisbon girls as well, who apart from struggling with problems of self-consciousness, typical of adolescence, are entrapped in their home and held back from the one essential characteristic of any adult human being, which is the ardent need to socialize. Their repeated suicidal attempts can be interpreted, from a Freudian point of view, as a childlike play, or in other words as an attempt to act like grown up women who take decisions of their own. Since their entire existence has been dominated by the figure of their mother, who has taken even the most basic of decisions regarding the girls' very subsistence, ending their lives is the single decision that the girls make for themselves, in their attempt to "make themselves masters of the situation". Playing is almost always imaginative; aside from being an acting out of real life conditions, it requires a great deal of creative thinking. Leading a life of imprisonment forces the girls to create an existence of their own via their imagination. Deciding to end their lives in such tumultuous manners is the sole creative, individualistic decision that they allowed themselves to take, the only means for their authoritative creativity to come forth.

From the very beginning of the novel it strikes the reader that the characters will have a tragic ending: “On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide (...)” (Eugenides, 3). The reader is going to find out later that life has been much more dreadful than death in this case. Which brings me to my next point, namely that imagination and creativity alter the status of decease in the novel: rather than being a loss, it is a regaining of status, in the sense that suicide is no longer a cry for help or an act of rebellion, like in most cases, but a passing from the imaginary life that the Lisbon sisters have lived to a transcendental space of freedom. Suicide is no longer regarded as an ending but as a way of coming into one’s own: rather than living a life within the walls of their rooms, they choose to create an escape from captivity into autonomy through death and thus suicide becomes an act of self-government, self-sufficiency and self-rule. Death can be interpreted as an act of creation in *The Virgin Suicides*, which clarifies the choice of words in the title. Defining the girls as “virgins” is not only a way of referring to their biological state of sexual inactivity, but also an evident reference to the Virgin Mary who has given birth to a son destined to die at the blossoming of age. Furthermore, the almost oxymoronic choice of words in “virgin suicides” symbolizes the dichotomy of death and life, of purity and impurity, of wholesomeness and sin. Through the Lisbon girls’ deaths the unconscious becomes the conscious and the suppressed is converted into the exteriorised.

Undoubtedly, the premise of suicide in Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *The Virgin Suicides* is by no means seen as a primitive, unconscious act but a creative expression of the mind’s eye. The five female characters live in a reality which is governed by imagination; a reality which is defined by their own mental imagery, as well as by the mystical aura that the narrators cast upon them. The novel can be interpreted in many ways, be it from a feminist or psychoanalytic point of view, taking gender studies or the historical perspective into account. What remains unaltered is the unmistakable dream-like mood of the novel; which makes me asseverate that imagination in general and its creative force in particular are significant interpretative milestones in this particular novel. Authors are more or less imaginative when creating a character, but what must be underlined here is the fact that through the creative power of imagination, Eugenides’ characters are more than bare receptacles waiting to be filled in by the writer’s voice, but become symbols for freedom of the mind.

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