

IBDP Extended Essay

Comparison of the novels “The Scarlet Letter” and “The Virgin Suicides”

Research Question: How effectively do the novels “The Scarlet Letter” and “Virgin Suicides” reflect society’s perception on women within their respected setting?

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I Introduction

The scope of my investigation will be throughout analysis of two books themselves, supported by a work of historical fiction *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a fictional novel *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, and the literature underlying philosophy of Puritanism, male and female gaze.

The themes of sin, guilt and finding a way out to live or leave can be seen in both novels. In my writing, I want to pay particular attention to how the female figure is handled in the two books. I will look closely at the social pressures and events that came about because of social events, in which the female figure was depicted at various points in history and from diverse viewpoints. These two works are written from different points of view. Female gaze was used to describe the female figure in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, whereas male gaze was used to describe women, more specifically, young female figures in Jeffrey Eugenides's novel. The way women are depicted and the extent to which their identities are twisted is examined during an assessment of the novels. The two books *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Virgin Suicides* are a great example of the dichotomy as well as the role of male gaze in establishing the judgment system.

II The Gaze

According to the Male Gaze hypothesis, heterosexual males observe women in the media via their eyes and portray them as passive objects of their desire. Audiences are obliged to perceive women through the perspective a guy. The male gaze is frequently shown in medium-closeup pictures of women taken from behind a man's shoulder, in shots that pan and focus on a woman's body, and in scenes when a man is observed gazing intensely at a woman who is acting passively. Mulvey states that "the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses."¹ The male spectator, the intended audience, and the issue is a result of a traditional, male-driven culture.

Male gaze has transformed the five females into passive canvases for narrators, rendering them as identical copies of one another and objects, rather than individuals. This is in favour with Budd Boetticher's statement that "What counts is what the heroine stimulates, or rather what she represents,"² as it is stated in Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. She is the one who influences the hero's actions, or more specifically, the love, fear, or anxiety that she arouses in him. The lady is completely unimportant to herself.³

The narrators' perception of the Lisbon girls is not consistent with or connected to the girls' true identities and is instead the outcome of how the narrators' "desires determine their knowledge" throughout the course of the novel as they attempt to understand the girls and provide evidence in the form of "exhibits" to the reader along the way.⁴ Within the Eudgines's novel, the male gaze may be defined explicitly as a gaze that aims to standardize, objectify, and dominate the object at whom it is aimed within the limitations of a patriarchal society.⁵

According to Debra Shostak, this demonstrates how the narrators are “provoked to” build a myth rather than a history. *The Virgin Suicides* focuses on the male gaze towards the Lisbon girls. The narrators are unable to acknowledge the focus of their gaze as anything but an object of the tale in either of the two-time planes, the present or the past, wherein the story is fundamentally derived.⁶ The novel focuses on a group of young guys trying to understand and make sense of the deaths of the sisters. The sisters' enigmatic existence and the boys' fascination with them have driven them to become fixated with learning the sisters' driving forces and justifications for killing themselves. The sisters' humanity is hidden by the boys' gaze, which reduces them to a series of puzzles to be solved.

The Scarlet Letter is a novel about sin, with a focus on the notion of guilt and punishment and the way the main character, Hester Prynne, has been punished for adultery. It reflects the idea of the masculine gaze acting to dominate and restrict the feminine body and, by extension, the female. Nathaniel Hawthorne's statement that "In the sight of Infinite Purity, we are all sinners alike" raises doubt on the Puritans' authentic life. "In the face of Boundless Purity, we are all sinners alike," wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne. This claim casts significant misgivings on the Puritans' real lives. The key character, Hester Prynne, best exemplifies female gaze and perspective. The narrator immerses the reader in the character's inner self, providing a frightening depiction of a feminist during the Puritan era. Women were not valued for being greater than others, but for being linked to a man in some capacity.⁷ But other than this typical viewpoint on any women throughout the history we see a quiet different viewpoint as well. Other than the significant elements of how these two books are affected by the different points of views Hawthorne's book distinguishes the substantial use of symbolism. *The Scarlet Letter's* use of symbolism demonstrates Hawthorne's ability in producing a novel of the greatest grade.

The letter "A" can be found in a variety of locations other than on Hester Prynne's chest. Hester is made to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her attire as a sign of the public's scrutiny and as a way to identify her as an outcast. Hester's humanity is hidden from view by the community, which reduces her to a representation of guilt and disgrace. The letter A has several different meanings. Originally used to represent the sin of adultery, each character's meaning is distinct. The letter is seen by the Puritan community as a sign of appropriate punishment. The letter, according to Hester, is a symbol of unfair humiliation.

III Pure & Evil

The *Virgin Suicides* begins with Cecilia, the youngest of the five Lisbon girls, attempting suicide. She is seen as the purest sister and is aware of the stigma of being the youngest, despite being the youngest. She says to the doctor that “Obviously, Doctor,” she said, “you’ve never been a thirteen-year-old girl”.⁸ The vivid and tragic scenario is entwined with religious imagery, creating a relationship in the narrators' complex idea between feminine sexuality, or sensuality more widely, and death. This incident foreshadows how the Lisbon girls will use violence against themselves to sabotage the narrators' and society's attempts to sexualize, objectify, control, or rather deconstruct them.

Many of the information and imagery Eugenides uses in *The Virgin Suicides* appear out of place and unneeded when one reads the book with the sole intent of learning why the girls kill themselves. The Lisbon girls stand out from the other characters in the book due to their distinct aura and are often referred to by Eugenides as "pinkers" to represent purity. They are so important that boys collect mementos to preserve their existence and create a stronger remembrance of them. These details are important in the context of the fading purity of the world. The narrator of Eugenides' novel states, “The girls took into their own hands decisions better left to God. They became too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind”.⁹ This quotation is particularly persuasive since it implies that the girls' immense power and altruistic attitude gave them a bigger purpose in the world. Taking their sense of power to a whole different level and reassociating a sense of sanctity around them, Eugenides explicitly states in this paragraph that they are powerful and even links them to God. By stating that they couldn't live with selfish individuals, he further conveys the virtue of their deeds. The sisters' additional associations with purity are strengthened by these passage-related emotions. The Lisbon sisters remain in the boys' memories even after they have passed away.

The Lisbon girls serve as a metaphor of purity in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*, and via their suicides, they demonstrate that Earth's purity cannot be preserved in the face of reckless environmental activities taken by humanity.

The sisters do this by taking the image of the Virgin Mary, turning it into a symbol of their suicides, and asserting control over their bodies—authority that the Virgin Mary never claimed. According to Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, the attempt to mythologize the girls as Virgin Mary figures created "a prolonged conflict primarily caused by this narrative voice, between its depiction of the girls as potential representations of a primal matriarchal spirit and the contrastive perception of the Lisbon sisters as hazardous objects of male desire."¹⁰

As the narrator depicts the "scene" of the paramedics bringing Cecilia out of the home and into their ambulance following her attempt, he portrays "the two slaves offering the victim to the altar, and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an unearthly grin on her pale lips."¹¹ As a result, the narrator focuses on Cecilia as a "virgin" of a "ethereal" nature, which is a degrading perspective.¹² Cecilia had "an old bridal gown that she constantly donned" to emphasize her connection to the Virgin Mary figure. Western culture often portrays a white wedding dress as a symbol of how men and young men perceive a female, such as a red "A" embedded on a woman's breast for adultery. In Hawthorne's novel we also see many figures such as the red "A" embedded on her breast for adultery, the character of Pearl, the Rose Bush, Hester, and Dimmesdale.

Hawthorne serves as an indicator that all individuals are at least partially responsible for evil, and thus, we all wear a birthmark of some form of evil, such as scarlet letter or a black veil, or we bear the scars of some sort of evil. The most wicked characters in Hawthorne's reality are those who either disregard their own moral failings or fixate on the transgressions

of others without acknowledging that all people are fallible. The moral condition of our souls is ultimately determined by how we react to the evil in ourselves and in others.

The Puritanistic times in which the novel is set, however, is the most crucial component. In the 16th century, Puritans were the most radical Protestants in the Church of England. These Protestants believed that the English Reformation had not gone far enough to change the church's teachings and organizational structure. They claimed that success and lofty positions were indications of "eternal grace," or God's favour.

Hawthorne explores how the Puritans' rigid moral code affects the lives and experiences of the individuals featured across the book and contends that their conviction of the perfect goodness of God and the absolute evil of sin is a type of self-delusion. The rigorous Puritan moral code influences the ideals of the men in "The Scarlet Letter." The novel is religious and follows the Puritans' belief in both the ultimate goodness of God. They oversee the neighbourhood, enforce the moral code, and judge and condemn Hester Prynne for her wrongdoing. The men's rigid moral code is seen as harmful and tyrannical, with the devil being responsible for all wrongdoing. To avoid falling into his hands, constant watch was also required.¹³ Unlike the Puritans, who believed that evil was a by-product of human nature's flaws and didn't require much study, Hawthorne contends that evil is a decision we make to behave in ways we know are bad. Understanding the causes and consequences of some people's failures might foster empathy and a feeling of community and possibly stop others from committing the same mistakes. However, Hawthorne departed from his psychological notion of evil in his portrayal of Pearl, the child of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale since she always comes off as an impish being wholly attributable to her adultery beginnings.

With cries of hellfire and damnation from the lips of hell, persuasive pastors forewarned of the devil's potency. The strict Puritan rule imposed heavy penalties on both men and women

for a variety of offenses. Criminals who committed acts of treason were also sinners, and they received harsh punishment. But women were under more harsh circumstances. Women were not allowed to vote or participate in town meetings or church councils.

III *Ambush of the narrators*

Suicide is like Russian roulette. Only one chamber has a bullet. With the Lisbon girls, the gun was loaded ...The [last] two bullets are impossible to name, but that doesn't mean the chambers were empty" says Eugenides.

Suicide frequently signifies resistance in literature. Nevertheless, it is sometimes seen as a sign of helplessness since it is more prevalent in lower socioeconomic strata and women are far more prone than males to disclose mental illness and suicide attempts. Although Rachel Giora contends that there was a minor rise in which women punish their oppressors by murdering them during the feminist revolution in the 1970s, the suppression of female aggressiveness leads the fictitious protagonists to bring the fury out on themselves. Female authors frequently discussed suicide as a kind of "repressed revolt" and emancipation from a controlling environment. In Victorian literature, women killed suicide most frequently by drowning and by hurling themselves into the air.¹⁴ It's possible to perceive women drowning in water as a return to the womb, feminine secretions, or tears. On the other hand, women born in the air represent greater tenacity and grit; flying represents "rising oneself, in status and morality." The *Virgin Suicides*' core topic is the idea of suicide as repressed revolt and emancipation.¹⁵

The decision, suicide, to employ the instrument of one's own demise rests entirely with the person who created it is a tough thing to determine. The suicide victim chooses whether to live or die, and no one else has the authority to make that decision for them. Bystanders may only offer encouragement to the sufferer to avoid self-destruction. Yes, the suicide was a decision, but it wasn't selfless.

The novel "Adolescent males" examines the influence of 1970s social and cultural expectations on women's lives. The Lisbon sisters are privileged and complex personalities that defy social standards and were expected to conform to social ideals of virginity and femininity. Despite this, they ultimately killed themselves due to restrictions placed on them. The Narrators go beyond the text by describing them as perfect, enigmatic angels, and how the suicides of these seemingly flawless girls had tormented them. Eugenides demonstrated how everyone in the novel loved, broke and ultimately, no matter what, they could only rescue themselves. The young boys' narration gave the narrative character, allowing readers to deduce the theme that was buried deep in the novel.

The Puritan neighbourhood where the narrative is set serves as the narrator's point of view in "The Scarlet Letter." The third-person omniscient narrator's perspective gives the reader access to the community's ideas and values. To portray Hester Prynne, the main character, as having committed sins, the narrator also takes the viewpoint of the neighbourhood. From this vantage point, the reader can see how the community's rigid moral code affects the people's lives and experiences, as well as how it makes Hester feel lonely and alienated.

V *Boys Will Remain Men*

In *The Virgin Suicides*, male narrators seize control of what they see to be a historically female-centred history. This is a reaction to the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, the narrators manipulate the Lisbon sisters' history by retelling the 1970s incidents in their own narrative. They are now middle-aged guys who are still attempting to understand why the Lisbon sisters committed themselves. The Lisbon sisters, Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese, died between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Both in the past and the present, the narrators are smitten with the girls, and they frequently concentrate on their memories of the girls' physical characteristics. The males describe the ladies as being "short, round-buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled the same dorsal softness" at the opening of the book. Women are seen as infantile, childish characteristics and are treated more as bodies than real persons, raising the question of whether they care about them or are attracted to them because of their attractiveness. The men's adult sexualization of the Lisbon girls further exacerbates the problem of why they are presenting the narrative in the first place. Susan J. Douglas argues how "women are identified by our bodies, our identities anchored in our bodies, and those must be sexually appealing" in her book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. This implies that the males have a sexualized discourse about the bodies of the girls, which explains why the girls are depicted in the novel's text in such a sexualized manner. When the sisters are represented as sexualized creatures, the males automatically gender the dead girls and only remember them as the young teens they were at the time of their deaths. With Douglas' thoughts in mind, they characterize the females by their outward looks, and that is how their legacy is recalled in the male narrators' imaginations. The Lisbon sisters were probably quite conscious of their bodies because women and young girls are frequently defined and evaluated by their attractiveness. You've never been a thirteen-year-old girl, Cecilia tells her doctor as she is about to pass away. Year after year, the males start to forget the ladies, yet their alleged love for them

remains unwavering. This is a typical habit that many people engage in when a loved one passes away; they maintain tangible mementos of those who have departed to keep their memories alive. They have saved the girls' clothes to help them recall the past and to hold onto the memory of the kids forever. Even though the guys weren't close to the daughters, they nonetheless held onto a lot of memorabilia from the girls' formative years. They have aged like the males after hanging onto these "exhibits" for twenty years. For instance:

...(Eugenides 18) Mary's old cosmetics drying out and turning to beige dust; (Eugenides 32) Cecilia's canvas high-tops yellowing beyond remedy of toothbrush and dish soap; (Eugenides 57) Bonnie votive candles nibbled nightly by mice; (Eugenides 62) Therese's specimen slides showing new invading bacteria; (Eugenides 81) Lux's brassiere...becoming as stiff and prosthetic as something a grandmother might wear (Eugenides 241).

The males have a firm grip on the women from the past thanks to their more than eighty-one pieces of "proof." The artifacts they have gathered from this quotation are extremely private and intimate items from the life of the sisters, such as Lux's brassiere and Mary's previous cosmetics. They are things that the girls formerly physically interacted with and utilized, and they serve as substitutes for the girls' actual bodies that the males use. The girls will never change, even as the males and their vast collection of the girls' possessions age. The men's memories of them will always be youthful, and they exploit the girls' possessions to maintain these youthful perceptions of them.

Society has long held women to different standards than men and this story is no different. The story of Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester is a prime example of how women can grow from tough judgement. Hester refused to name him to the townspeople and Dimmesdale did nothing to own up to the act himself. He wore his shame in secret and it eventually began to eat away at him. When Dimmesdale questions Hester, "happy are you Hester that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret," his mortification over the matter

is expressed. His expressions show how a man cannot handle defying society's standards and how he allowed the shame to consume him instead of learning from the experience.

VI Conclusion

In two very different historical settings, "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne and "The Virgin Suicides" by Jeffrey Eugenides, two books investigate the lifestyles and experiences of women. The views of the characters and the issues of the novels are both influenced by gender, despite the contrasts between the two books. The themes and views of the two novels' characters are both shown to be influenced by gender in different ways. Both examine how the social and cultural demands placed on women impact their experiences and lives. Both books, nevertheless, also show how the female characters reject these expectations and stand up for their own agency and autonomy.

The way the two books employ narrating perspective to communicate their thoughts and ideas is another resemblance between them. While "The Virgin Suicides" is told from the viewpoint of a group of teenage males who were infatuated with the Lisbon sisters, "The Scarlet Letter" is from the point of view of the Puritan town in which the narrative is set. Both books examine the morality of society and the veracity of the narrator's viewpoint by using their narrating points of view. In terms of style, both books have a melancholy, introspective tone that evokes feelings of desire and nostalgia. The novels' descriptive and metaphorical writing style contribute to the melancholic mood.

Finally, although being set in wildly dissimilar historical periods, "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Virgin Suicides" are two books that have several features in common. In these books, women's lives and experiences are explored, and it is made clear how society and cultural expectations may oppress and harm women. The ethics of society and the veracity of the narrator's viewpoint are two further themes that both works explore through their narrating perspectives. Additionally, the melancholy and contemplative tone of their writing and shared style contribute to the ambiance and themes of the works.

The gaze is a major element in both novels. Both books demonstrate how the gaze influences the characters' views and the books' themes. The protagonists in both novels maintain their personal power and autonomy, rejecting to be labelled by the gaze of others, even though the gaze is employed in each novel in a particular way and helps to hide the humanity of the characters.

The themes of good and bad are connected to cultural and societal expectations in both stories. In "The Scarlet Letter," the Puritan community imposes the requirement for complete moral purity, while in "The Virgin Suicides," society imposes the requirement for femininity and virginity. These expectations are onerous and may be harmful, according to both novels. Both novels feature a significant amount of the themes of good and evil. They investigate how society and cultural expectations affect the characters' experiences and way of life. These expectations are said to be oppressive and to have negative effects in both works. They also question the morality of imposing strict moral codes and societal expectations on individuals, suggesting that individuals have their own morality and personal beliefs.

The effects of narration in literature may significantly affect how readers experience and comprehend a tale. The narrating viewpoint significantly influences the themes and characters of two novels. Both books communicate various themes and concepts using various narrating angles. In "The Scarlet Letter," the narrator's point of view enables the reader to comprehend the community's rigid moral code and how it affects the characters' lives and experiences. The reader of "The Virgin Suicides" may comprehend the boys' infatuation also with sisters and how that affects how they perceive the sisters' life and deaths thanks to the narrator's point of view. Both novels use the narrating perspective to question the morality of the society and the reliability of the narrator's perspective.

The topics and characters in the books are significantly influenced by how men and their ideals are portrayed. The impact of men's ideals on the lives and experiences of the female

protagonists are explored in both books, along with their repercussions. While the males in "The Virgin Suicides" are shown as rigorous and constrained in their knowledge and empathy, the men in "The Scarlet Letter" are seen as tyrannical and destructive. Both books highlight the unfavourable effects of rigid moral standards imposed on women by males and cultural norms.

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