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The End of the Good Life: Literary Representations of Suburbia and the American Nightmare

Joanna Wilson

University of Edinburgh

Conventional literary and filmic representations of the American suburbs depict a space that is either middle-class idyll or claustrophobic vacuum. By engaging with suburban gothic literature, this article interrogates such portrayals and deconstructs the utopian conception of suburbia. I argue that, rather than representing the “good life”, the suburbs in these texts are sites of deeply-rooted cultural anxieties.

The American suburbs have long held currency in Western imagination as the pinnacle of the good life, the attainment of the American Dream. Postwar television series such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* solidified the cultural status of the suburbs as familial idyll and progressive utopia for the middle-classes. Bernice Murphy summarises the promise of suburbia as a “paradise for the American everyman and his ever-expanding brood, a means of providing cheap, well-appointed housing and a stepping stone to the middle-classes for millions of ... young families” (5). However, psychological case studies from the 1960s suggest that this utopian concept of the suburbs is overly facile. Richard Gordon’s 1962 sociological study *The Split Level Trap* examines the impact these new domestic locales had upon residents, relaying case histories characterised by suffocating anxiety and overwhelming alienation. In one, a “young mother is crying. She is crouching in a dark closet. Voices in the wall are telling her she is worthless”, whilst in another, “in the darkness ... a young man creeps up to a window and looks in. He is disappointed, for the housewife he sees is fully clothed” (12). Gordon’s tableaux represent an alternate reading of the suburban locale; one radically separated from the semi-pastoral depiction of family life in the television shows noted above. The sinister, almost gothic, depiction of the suburban neighbourhood in Gordon’s work is representative of a more subversive interpretation of these spaces, one characterised by a quotidian, ever-present middle-class anxiety. These dichotomous cultural representations have led to suburbia becoming arguably one of the most fiercely contested environments within the social landscape of America: no other locale, urban or rural, produces such vibrant disparities in its representations in novels, television shows, cinema and other art forms. This article seeks to investigate the darker side of suburbia through the consideration of two contemporary suburban novels, *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Lovely Bones*,

which destabilise the connection between the American good life and the suburban locale. I argue that these novels build upon an existent uneasiness within middle-class suburbia to explore an anxious and unsettled undercurrent. I will also demonstrate how both texts appropriate the Anglo-American gothic tradition to elucidate these concerns.

Before directly engaging with Eugenides and Sebald's texts it would seem pertinent to investigate the development of the American suburbs more closely, in order to fully understand their cultural importance. The end of the Second World War led to an unprecedented growth in national house building. Funded largely by the American government following the ratification of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act in 1944 (commonly referred to as the GI Bill of Rights), returning white military personnel and their families were able to take advantage of a highly attractive package of benefits. These included government sponsored education, unemployment pay and, crucially, substantial loans against the purchase of property. According to the US Department of Veteran Affairs, from 1944 to 1952, nearly 2.4 million home loans were dispensed to ex-military personnel. This legislation served to drastically increase the number of privately owned homes within the US, and many of these were constructed in the newly developed suburbs (Murphy 6). At the same time, real estate development companies such as Levitt and Sons were revolutionising the housing industry, producing homes factory-line style to increase productivity and reduce cost. Their contribution to the development of suburban communities was such that a newly constructed town near New York was named Levittown to reflect this sea-change in the house building sector. These government-sponsored changes allowed access to a world of education and private ownership that had not previously been accessible to working class Americans. These hallmarks of the good life were suddenly attainable and were enthusiastically utilised. For Bernice Murphy, the benefits of suburbia were manifold, including: "[t]he chance to at last have a home of one's own," a "utopian setting for a better life" and "[a]n opportunity to live amongst like-minded people" in a "place insulated from the dangers of the world" (3). Suburbia's aura of prosperity continues to permeate the American consciousness, with more people today residing in suburban communities than in any other setting. As Robert Beuka points out, "at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States is primarily a suburban nation, with far more Americans living in the suburbs than in either urban or rural areas" (2). Culturally, then, suburban space has become synonymous with American domestic identity: a landscape of materialist possibility.

In spite of the clear positives afforded by the development of new suburban housing during the postwar decades and beyond, a negative backlash has simultaneously existed in opposition to these manufactured landscapes. Psychologists such as Gordon warned that the suburban setting engendered feelings of alienation and anxiety, whilst studies such as William Whyte's *The Organization Man* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* focus on the empty, corporate-centric atmosphere of suburbia. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* investigates the pervading unhappiness of suburban housewives seemingly living the American Dream while still fundamentally unsatisfied. This Friedan describes as "the problem with no name," characterised by inadequacy and a desperate search for individual identity (11). In literary contexts, the suburbs are represented as a fundamentally duplicitous space: Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* portrays the banality of suburban life for the Rath family, whilst Richard Yates's 1961 *Revolutionary Road* explored the darker undertones of suburbia, including adultery, deception and abortion. John Updike's Rabbit tetralogy, whose publication dates spanned the years between 1960 and 1990, considers the subversive nature of suburban life in relation to gender politics, whilst more contemporary literary explorations into the American suburbs have continued to engage with this binary conception of suburbia. Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections*, depicts suburban St. Jude as a vapid space characterised by nostalgia and anxiety. It is within this literary context that I intend to situate Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*.

Each of these narratives offer a profound and unsettling textual engagement with the American suburbs. Published in 1993 and 2002 respectively, both texts fundamentally destabilise the connection between an ideological utopia and the suburban locale. The novels have been read as examples of a specifically suburban gothic, defined by Murphy as a "sub-genre of the wider American gothic tradition which dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass urbanisation of the United States" (2). The suburban gothic serves to disrupt the polished façade of suburbia: aiming, for example, to elucidate anxieties over the impact of the landscape upon the family unit, or the pressures of constant neighbourhood scrutiny upon the individual. For Martin Dines, the suburban gothic seeks "to evoke a horror of suburban surveillance and conformity and anxieties about the violence and perversity of family life hidden behind closed doors" (959). It is within the utopian ideology of the suburbs that gothic disruption becomes most effective: horrific or supernatural occurrences are all the more shocking or unsettling within pristine suburban cul-de-sacs, rather than in old manor houses or haunted European castles. As Murphy comments, "In the American gothic, the family home replaced

the castle as the central locus of terror” (105). The family abode within the suburban gothic narrative represents more than just a bricks-and-mortar space. It is, instead, an indicator of the psychological state of its inhabitants and their place within the suburban community (107). The ability of superficial appearances (of the individual or the home) to shield a variety of eccentricities and, in the case of *The Lovely Bones*, criminal activities, draws upon critiques of the suburban obsession with exterior appearances and the breakdown of urban communities from the 1950s onwards, as populations drained out of American cities towards brand new homes on the peripheries (2). The utilisation of gothic tropes in suburban fiction is deeply political: the disruptive tendencies of the genre draw attention to the “outpouring of polemic” that began during the postwar era of mass suburbanisation and continues into the twenty-first century (Dines 595). Sarah Whitney argues that employment of the gothic in *The Lovely Bones* produces a highly politicised critique of the current “post-feminist moment that is invested in minimizing claims of gendered inequity and violence” (351). In what follows, I will demonstrate the ways in which both *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Lovely Bones* draw upon the suburban gothic tradition to destabilise the utopian vision of suburbia as the epitome of the “good life”.

Linden Peach describes the American suburbs as “a testimony to bourgeois anxieties and deeply buried fears” (111). Pressure to conduct oneself in an appropriate manner is paramount within the suburban community. For Murphy, the fear of “[n]eighbours with something to hide” forms one of the central tenets of the suburban gothic (3). Within these communities, neighbours are continually monitored to ensure adherence to strict social codes of behaviour: if one does not conform, one risks arousing the suspicions of one’s fellow suburbanites, or even being ostracised from the community. In Sebald’s *The Lovely Bones* Mr. Harvey (a child murderer and rapist) understands the importance of superficial conformity to his survival, and adheres to a strict domestic timetable following the rhythms of the street in order to protect himself from scrutiny:

When the alarm had gone off to tell him to shut the blinds and then the next alarm, which told him to shut off most of the lights, because the suburbs were asleep after that, Mr. Harvey could go down into the basement, where there were no cracks that light could peek through and people could point to, to say he was strange. (130)

In conforming to the cadence of normality, Mr. Harvey effectively evades suspicion from the suburban community for a significant part of the narrative. Shielded by his unremarkable banal exterior, his subversive interiority remains hidden. In sharp contrast, when he returns to his old neighbourhood

after living as a fugitive “past caring who spotted him” (296) and driving a “patched-together car” (298), he is immediately stopped by police responding to a report of a “suspicious vehicle” (298) and is asked to “move along” (298). In a relatively prosperous neighbourhood, his ramshackle car is instantly recognisable as belonging to an outsider: someone who does not belong. His sinister surveillance of the area is voyeuristic and predatory, moving slowly from one house to another, focusing his attention on women and children home alone. Susan Saegert has characterised the suburban environment as essentially feminine, populated solely by housewives during office hours while their husbands work in the city, and the sinister male voyeur clearly embodies fears of intrusion into the carefully delimited suburban space (97).

In *The Virgin Suicides* anxieties over regulation and conformity are just as central to the text. Following Cecilia Lisbon’s suicide, the local newspaper avoids covering the story, focusing instead on the “Welcome Neighbour” column that “continued to feature newcomers attracted by [the] town’s greenness and quiet” (Eugenides 93). Death – suicide – is, at first, alien to Eugenides’s suburbia. As the narrator states, “there had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes” (35). A strict binarism is established between the suburban town untouched by tragedy and loss, and the urban centre of Detroit, where “hardly a day passed without some despairing soul sinking beneath the tide of the recession, men found in garages with cars running, or twisted in the shower, still wearing work clothes” (93). In this context, Cecilia’s death is doubly incomprehensible. She is, as resident of a prosperous suburban outcrop, radically separated from the suicidal epidemic of 1970s urban Detroit, both economically and in gender terms. The regularity of deaths amongst working-class men in the urban centre reflects the economic hardships of the decade. As historian William Chafe comments, the:

[a]pparently limitless economic growth of the postwar era had come to a grinding halt by the early 1970s, as the 1973 oil embargo heralded the end of ‘the era of cheap oil and gas which had fuelled the American way of life and leisure’. (qtd. Murphy 112)

This industrial stagnation was particularly felt in Detroit, the American centre of car manufacturing, where rising fuel costs and competition from overseas markets formed a strong challenge to economic survival in the manufacturing industry. The narrative seeks to explain the Lisbon suicides as connected to a wider economic decline: “[s]omething sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls ... Mr Hedlie ... put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying empire” (Eugenides 231). For Kenneth Millard “[t]his empire is the empire of American heavy industry ... the

identification of this industry and American national identity” (71). The connection drawn between the Lisbon girls’ deaths and the decline of American industrial strength inextricably links the Lisbon family to a wider social context, far beyond the limits of their suburban community. This association is precisely challenged in the local newspaper’s initial reluctance to print the story of Cecilia’s suicide: the suburbs seek to remain essentially separate from wider economic anxieties. As the cultural symbol of affluence, these suburban communities must guard against such threats to retain their prosperous appearance.

After Cecilia’s suicide the Lisbon family is treated with a mixture of pity and suspicion. This wariness increases throughout the novel, and when the family becomes more reclusive, this suspicion leads to fear. As in *The Lovely Bones*, when suburban residents conform to expected behaviours, they are harmonised with their environment: homes are tidy and well-maintained and residents remain innocuous. As the Lisbon family’s behaviour becomes more bizarre, however, their home begins to reflect their corrupted interiority. For Murphy, the utilisation of the dilapidated or derelict home in the American gothic tradition has an undeniable lineage, tracing back to Edgar Allan Poe’s nineteenth century short story “The Fall of the House of Usher”. In this tale the family and the house “share a single, indissoluble identity ... The relationship between master and house is such that Roderick Usher’s disintegrating sanity mirrors the destruction of the house itself” (Murphy 107). Just as in Poe’s short story, the Lisbon home in *The Virgin Suicides* is inexorably connected to the psychological state of its residents, both home and family becoming ever more precarious as the narrative progresses. As the first-person plural voice comments: “the growing disrepair of the Lisbon house constantly reminded us of the trouble within” (Eugenides 94). Clearly indicative of this gradual dilapidation is the description of the home following Mr. Lisbon’s failure to take part in the annual leaf-clearance which heralds the beginning of autumn for the community. In the glow of flames from burning piles of collected leaves in neighbouring gardens, “[o]nly the Lisbon home remained dark, a tunnel ... emptiness” (92). Mr. Lisbon’s rejection of community ritual demarcates the Lisbon home as different, and a threat to uniformity. After Mr. Lisbon loses his job as a teacher at the local high school and the girls are removed from the very same school to be ostensibly taught at home, the “creeping desolation” of the family home accelerates dramatically (89). The house is now described as “one big coffin”, in which the adolescent Lisbon daughters are entombed (163). The Lisbon house here dramatises critiques of the suburbs as dangerous spaces of entrapment. Robert Beuka’s interpretation of the 1998 film *The Truman Show* reads the suburbs as “a prison, a (nearly) inescapable grid of pre-

programmed behaviour” (13), whilst John Keats highlights the economic constraints of suburbia in his 1956 work, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, stating “[f]or literally nothing down – other than a simple two per cent and a promise to pay, and pay, and pay until the rest of your life – you too ... can find a box of your own” (qtd. in Murphy 7). This preoccupation with physical confines and suffocating spaces is similarly prevalent in *The Lovely Bones*, with Susie being raped and murdered in a small underground lair constructed by her murderer, a man who prefers to spend much of his time at home in his basement.

Fear of losing one’s individuality is connected to these anxieties: living in identical homes, maintaining a strict code of conduct and rampant consumerism have all been read as indicative of a claustrophobic homogenisation. Catherine Jurca argues that living in “the suburb requires eternal and exhausting vigilance to preserve one’s integrity against [the climate of conformity]” (148). The Lisbon sisters’ entrapment within the family home is indicative of broader concerns: the female experience of suburbia has been read as regressive and deeply traumatic. Deborah Chalmers states “it is now acknowledged that the built environment [of suburbia] tends to institutionalise ... patriarchal relations” (87). Abigail Salmon in *The Lovely Bones* exemplifies this position. As a bored, well-educated suburban housewife and mother, the narrator describes her as feeling increasingly trapped within these stereotypically feminine roles. The temporal framing of *The Lovely Bones* is crucial here: for Whitney, Sebald’s decision to set the novel in the 1970s “allows her to connect the story of Abigail’s untapped intellectual potential to larger issues of second-wave feminism” (360). Abigail’s desperate desire to reclaim a subjective identity beyond that of mother or housewife recalls Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which has been repeatedly credited with reinvigorating the feminist movement in America. Friedan’s study exposes the unspoken desire amongst suburban housewives for an identity beyond their caretaker role. One of Friedan’s interviewees, a young mother and college leaver, describes her desperate quest for selfhood by participating in neighbourhood activities and her puzzlement over her continued unhappiness, despite her comfortable situation:

I tried everything women are supposed to do – hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbours, joining committees, running PTA ... teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you ... any feeling of who you are ... I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody to be called on when you want something. But who am I? (10)

Her frightening loss of identity and subsequent quest for selfhood is repeated throughout Freidan's case studies, with even Friedan herself acknowledging her own feelings of frustration in her role as housewife and mother (9). As Whitney argues, the narrative descriptions of Abigail Salmon's experiences could easily have featured in *The Feminine Mystique*, with lengthy passages characterised by repetitious language emphasising the tedium of the housewife's role (360):

She washed out thermoses and lunchboxes, and when Lindsey decided she was too old for a lunchbox, my mother caught herself actually happy when she found wax-lined bags that would keep her daughter's lunch from ... staining her clothes. Which she washed. Which she folded. Which she ironed ... and which she straightened on hangers. (Sebold 158)

Abigail's identity is almost wholly subsumed by her role as suburban housewife and mother. This is especially striking when one considers that she holds both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, which she had "fought tooth and nail with Grandma Lynn" to pursue, and had even "held on to vague ideas of teaching" when her children "were old enough to be left on [their] own" (149). The repetitive nature of Sebold's language underlines the claustrophobic nature of the female experience of suburbia during the postwar years, in an environment which "actually [drove] mad myriads of housewives" (Keats qtd. Murphy 7).

The impact of female centrality within the suburban family home was a grave cause for concern for critics of suburbia: with fathers undertaking long commutes for work and women remaining at home, many feared that this imbalance would have devastating consequences for child-rearing. Arlene Skolnick argues that suburbia "turned families into matriarchies with overbearing wives, emasculated husbands, overinvolved mothers, absent fathers, spoiled and delinquent children" (60). *The Virgin Suicides* represents a clear example of these fears come to fruition: Mrs. Lisbon is portrayed as the family authoritarian, whilst Mr. Lisbon is depicted as emasculated and ineffectual as a father figure. Mrs. Lisbon is formidable, with "plump arms ... brutally cut steel-wool hair, and librarian's glasses [and a] queenly iciness", in contrast to her husband, with his "high voice" and "boyish" appearance (8). As a teacher, one might assume Mr. Lisbon to be the family disciplinarian, but all such duties are undertaken by his overpowering wife. After the girls are essentially imprisoned within their own home by their mother, the narrative voice states "[a] cloud always seemed to hover over the Lisbons' roof. There was no explanation except the psychic one that the house became obscured because Mrs. Lisbon willed it to" (141). Mrs. Lisbon possesses almost supernatural powers, controlling not only her own children but atmospheric conditions as well. Her widespread authority

dramatises anxieties over the suburban family through the use of gothic tropes. Portrayed as a malevolent force, Mrs. Lisbon asserts her control over her family. In sharp contrast, the men of the suburbs are depicted as weak and effeminate: after Cecilia Lisbon's suicide, the neighbourhood fathers attempt unsuccessfully to remove the fence upon which she had fatally impaled herself. This scene farcically compares the heroics of American masculinity during the Second World War and the corporate men of Eugenides' narrative, emphasising suburban gender concerns:

We had rarely seen our fathers in work boots before, toiling in the earth and wielding brand-new root clippers. They struggled with the fence, bent over like Marines hoisting the flag on Iwo Jima. It was the greatest show of common effort we could remember in our neighborhood, all those lawyers, doctors, and mortgage bankers locked arm in arm in the trench. (53-54)

Critics of the suburbs during the early postwar years decried them as essentially detrimental to both sexes, with housewives confined to "psychologically debilitating ... domestic roles" and men reduced to "alienated, emasculated corporate drones" (Dines 960). Eugenides is deeply conscious of these anxieties, and they are exaggerated in the text by the narrator's comparison between the professional men of the suburbs and the highly trained, hyper-masculine Marines. The reference to Iwo Jima purposefully recalls the much-replicated image taken in 1945 of six Marines raising the American flag on Mount Surubachi, Iwo Jima, which came to represent the American victory over the Japanese during the Second World War. This contrasts a national show of masculine strength with a group of fathers who prove to be weak in comparison. Despite their best efforts the fence cannot be moved and a handy-man with a tow-truck is called to dispatch it, which he does, with surprising ease: "[he] attached a hook to the fence, pressed a button to make his giant winch revolve [and] the murdering fence came loose" (Eugenides 54). The effectiveness of automation over manual labour is important here, considering the temporal frame of the narrative. As William Chafe states, during the 1970s the American "economy seemed stagnant, and ... unemployment was seemingly endemic. Through automation and technology countless positions were permanently lost" (qtd. Murphy, 112). Although none of the suburban men are employed in industrial roles (given the geographical location, more specifically car manufacturing), this reminder of technology's growing ability to supplant manual labour serves to relocate the suburbs within the wider social and economic contexts, forcing the acknowledgment of concerns at both urban and national levels.

Suburban anxieties are not just elucidated through plot, however: each novel explores themes of claustrophobia, stasis and insecurity through a combination of form and voice. Both Eugenides's and Sebald's texts are narrated by highly unusual first-person narrators. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrative voice is comprised of an anonymous male collective, a group of neighbourhood boys obsessed with the lives and deaths of the Lisbon sisters, narrating from a temporal distance of twenty years after the events in question. Through the utilisation of first-person plural narration, one might expect a collective reliability, with security in numbers. However, it becomes clear early on in Eugenides's narrative that this is not the case: facts are continually disputed, and a positive consensus rarely reached. When Cecilia commits suicide (after her first unsuccessful attempt), the narrative voice ("we") states "[w]e didn't understand why Cecilia had killed herself the first time and we understood even less when she did it twice" (Eugenides 32). Debra Shostak argues that Eugenides' narrative style establishes a "perspectival vertigo ... the authority conferred by [the collective] is undermined by the narrators' confession of their common puzzlement" (809). The plot is driven by this continual and ultimately doomed quest for understanding through the examination of memory. This constant re-visiting is replicated in the cyclical structure of Eugenides's text: "the circularity of the novel's structure largely emerges from its frequent return to certain incidents, especially those associated with trauma", writes Shostak (813). From the first paragraph, the novel persistently returns to these traumatic episodes in its attempt to construct what the narrative voice terms "a story we could live with" (241). *The Virgin Suicides* begins with the death of the final sister, hiding nothing of the novel's plot from the reader: "[o]n the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide – it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese" (3). The opening passage effectively summarises the demise of the girls within the first paragraph of the novel. The first-person-plural voice cannot escape the cyclical nature of memory, seeking answers to questions they can never answer with any real sense of authority. The claustrophobic tone of the novel reflects anxieties over the suburban landscape: the circularity of the narrative reflects the cyclical cul-de-sacs that lead nowhere. The suburbs have come to represent "depthlessness ... a sterile zone, devoid of cultural and aesthetic value ... the very absence of signification ... a haunting presence", and Eugenides's narrative structure reflects this: one cannot penetrate beneath its surface but is instead left with an unshakable sense of unease and an unfulfilled desire for closure (Webster 2).

The Lovely Bones utilises a similar cyclical structure, opening with the rape and murder of the first-person narrator, Susie. The murderer is identified within the first few pages, leaving the

remainder of the narrative to explore the impact Susie's death has upon those left behind. With the revelation of the killer's identity, Sebald is redirecting her narrative, moving away from a classic "whodunit" towards an exploration of the emotional impact tragedy or trauma has upon the family unit. Her employment of analepsis allows the narrative to revisit the past in a quest for closure. Susie's narrative voice occupies a distinctive first-person omnipotent position: from her celestial location, she accesses the innermost thoughts of her friends, relatives, and even her killer. Her involvement in the text allows her to develop and mature via the experiences of those she follows so closely on earth. One can characterise the novel as a posthumous subversion of the American Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age narrative. This intriguing narrative style also allows for a continual relationship between the living and the dead, as Susie remains emotionally close to her family. The comforting appeal of this unbroken connection between the living and the dead cannot be denied, and this, together with the publication date of Sebald's novel in 2002, one year after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York City, explains for some the phenomenal popularity of *The Lovely Bones*. As Whitney comments, "*The Lovely Bones* is ... literary comfort food for a post-9/11 public desperate to believe in the happy afterlife of its lost citizens" (351). Following the national trauma of 9/11, critics including Richard Gray argue that art forms (including literature) witness a nostalgic return to "the seductive pieties of home, hearth and family" as a way to overcome the legacy of the terrorist attacks (16). In many ways, Sebald's narrative does this: her focus is primarily domestic, and by the end, the family have been reunited by Abigail's return, and the restorative nature of heteronormative relationships is confirmed through Lindsey's happy marriage. However, Whitney reads the gothic elements of Sebald's narrative as a critique of the domestic in what she terms the "post-feminist moment" (351). She defines post-feminism as "a cultural mood deriving from two dubious premises: that gender equity has been achieved and that feminism is now both obsolete and undesirable" (352). In her reading of *The Lovely Bones*, the novel does not provide a domestic utopia in which both genders flourish; instead, the suburban environment is one in which "violence against women ... is not anomalous but alarmingly frequent". Whitney is referring specifically to Mr. Harvey as "*serial rapist and killer*" (354, emphasis added), and also more broadly to the mental violence and "self-abnegation" of female subjectivity within the suburban context (353). As discussed above, Abigail Salmon is required to forgo her ambitions and education in favour of marriage and motherhood after she becomes pregnant a third time, and Susie, rather than condemning her killer from her position in heaven, must learn to accept the violence inflicted on her physical being and move on; she comes to

view her own death as a necessary “sacrifice” that served to “bind her family together” (Whitney 360). Female characters are required to adjust to their situations in a way that does not prioritise their desires: instead, they must compromise their selfhood to survive within the suburban context.

Within literary contexts, it is clear that the American suburbs represent something much darker, sinister and more subversive than depicted during the postwar years of their proliferation. Television series of the midcentury in particular helped to cement the suburbs as a middle-class idyll: a safe place to raise a family and to live amongst a community of like-minded (predominantly white) professionals. Writers like Sebold and Eugenides have sought to deconstruct this idealised portrayal of suburbia, utilising a specifically located gothic ideology to disrupt the polished façade of affluence and reveal deep-rooted anxieties over conformity and gendered roles amongst other issues. *The Lovely Bones* and *The Virgin Suicides* reject an overly simplified portrayal of the suburbs through their narrative form and voice, ultimately problematising utopian depictions of the suburbs as the location of the American good life.

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Author Biography

Joann Wilson is a first-year PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her current research interests include literary representations of anxious masculinities and the suburbs in contemporary American fiction.