Not Your Average Bildungsroman:
An Examination of Maturation in the Works of Jeffrey Eugenides

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No one ever said that growing up would be easy. Jeffrey Eugenides not only details the maturation of his characters in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*, but dabbles in what would be considered bizarre by many in order to comment on the breadth of what it means to mature. His atypical characters are forced onto the fringe of societal acceptance and grow up in a world that views them as outsiders. Eugenides has taken a common theme in literature, “growing up is a challenging process,” and has applied it to different types of characters, from the well developed Cal, formerly Calliope, Stephanides, to the more symbolic Lisbon sisters. He artfully manipulates a familiar topic to offer more unorthodox perspectives on what the process of growth truly is; to show how “coming of age” cannot be limited to a well-defined set of parameters. He illustrates to us that maturation is universal while the unique circumstances for each individual’s journey are not; that this distinctiveness is part of what makes the human condition, in all its various forms, so necessary to thoroughly account for.

Differing Perspectives

“And it was then Cecilia gave orally what was to be her only form of suicide note…: ‘Obviously, Doctor,’ she said, ‘you’ve never been a thirteen-year-old girl.’”

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An examination of the maturation of the strange characters is accomplished through the use of both self-examination of the main characters and how minor characters see Cal and the Lisbon girls. Cal’s story depends almost entirely on self-reflection, as *Middlesex* is written in first-person narrative. Along with the extensive length of the story, the narrative mode lends a memoir-like quality to Cal’s accounts. The Lisbon sisters’ story depends more on the perspectives of others. *The Virgin Suicides* is a measured account, narrated by the neighborhood boys who silently stand by and watch as, over the course of one year, each Lisbon sister draws further into dark, impenetrable recesses and eventually kills herself.

An important aspect in determining how Calliope (the girl who Cal identified as until age fourteen) views herself is the perceived normalcy of her childhood. Eugenides inserts several moments into *Middlesex* that show Calliope engaging in typical rites of passage that the average American adolescent experiences. Her responses and thoughts, however, indicate to the reader that her unique take on her growth process is the product of unlikely circumstances—it is not so unbelievable that a pseudohermaphrodite should feel like she is out of place, despite the normalcy of her behaviors.

Puberty and sexuality are important factors that Eugenides uses to juxtapose Calliope from the rest of her peers; after all, hermaphroditism is a discrepancy between sexual organs, an inherent question of sex and sexuality. When twelve-year-old Calliope is in middle school and is required to participate in physical education, she is confronted with the realization that the girls around her are developing and she is not:
I look back now (as Dr. Luce urged me to do) to see exactly what twelve-year-old Calliope was feeling, watching the [girls] undress in steamy light. Was there a shiver of arousal in her? Did flesh respond beneath goalie pads? I try to remember, but what comes back is only a bundle of emotions: envy, certainly, but also disdain. Inferiority and superiority all at once. Above all, there was panic. In front of me girls were entering and exiting the showers. ... Moving through the humid air, I felt like a snorkeler. On I came, kicking my heavy, padded legs and gaping through the goalie mask at the fantastic underwater life all around me. Sea anemones sprouted from between my classmates’ legs. They came in all colors, black, brown, electric yellow, vivid red. Higher up, their breasts bobbed like jellyfish, softly pulsing, tipped with stinging pink. Everything was waving in the current, feeding on microscopic plankton, growing bigger by the minute.²

While the other girls unabashedly show their bodies, Calliope herself “[waits] until they [leave] before [she undresses]” and, in the process of doing so, “...[isn’t] naked for a second.”³ The goalie’s uniform serves as a literal and symbolic barrier to separate her from the other, naked girls. Her locker-room experiences are typical for children her age; having to change in front of peers is perhaps one of the most memorable, and embarrassing, parts of any American physical education class. However, Eugenides shows how Calliope’s circumstances render her an outsider within this average situation. Though she does not yet know why, Calliope knows she is different: “No breasts. No period, either. All through sixth grade I’d waited... Now I was in seventh grade and I was still waiting. There were hopeful signs. ... But time after time [they] went away, and nothing came of it.”⁴ She knows that the way that she is growing up is not typical. As a result, her maturity is not an easy, nor typical, experience.

³ Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex, 299.  
⁴ Ibid., 295.
Eugenides utilizes these rites of passage, however, to show how other characters think that Calliope is just another normal kid going through the motions. In juxtaposition through the use of sexuality, Calliope and her secret (female) love interest, the Obscure Object, lose their virginity in the same room at the same time; Calliope has sex with the Obscure Object’s brother, Jerome. Of course, the reader knows that Calliope’s hermaphroditism will not make this an easy situation for her, and that her first time won’t be like that of her normal female friend’s:

Now he was inside my underpants and now he was…inside me! And then: pain. … It ripped into me. … I gasped; I opened my eyes; I looked up and saw Jerome looking down at me. We gaped at each other and I knew he knew. Jerome knew what I was, as suddenly I did, too, for the first time clearly understood that I wasn’t a girl but something in between. 5

…but Eugenides has different plans for Calliope: “Reader, believe this if you can: he hadn’t noticed a thing.” 6

As Calliope anguishes over the idea of being discovered, Jerome “[has] the smile of a boy who, on a summer night, [has] gone all the way.” 7 Eugenides carefully uses other characters’ perspectives of Calliope to emphasize disconnect between how she is perceived and how she feels about herself. While those around her do not see anything particularly wrong with her, she knows that something is definitely wrong. Calliope’s feelings are a nod to the very personal aspect of growth: she is normal in that although everyone else feels that she is maturing right along with the rest, she often times feels very out of place. Eugenides is commenting on how maturation is not always cookie-cutter; that individuals who are genuinely

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6 Ibid., 376.
7 Ibid.
societal outsiders mature just as the rest of society’s average youth does. They just do so with an outsider’s perspective. Cal Stephanides is Eugenides’ way of showing that growth is not rigidly defined. Cal is a pseudohermaphrodite, but has he not had to make difficult choices in order to grow and become self-aware?

_The Virgin Suicides_ is a coming-of-age story, just as _Middlesex_ is. Alexis Skopos, a contributor to _The Tampa Bay Times_, claims that “what sets [_The Virgin Suicides_] apart is how it pinpoints the difficulties of growing up, of moving from young, tender age to maturity.” In actuality the thematic approach in _The Virgin Suicides_ almost exactly mirrors that of _Middlesex_: Eugenides again applies his understanding of difficult maturation to the story of atypical characters. This time, however, five young girls become the vehicle for Eugenides’ comment on the theme. His repeated examinations of what it truly means to grow up offer to the reader a suggestion: the quest to mature has the potential to take on an infinite number of different faces, to be examined from every different perspective. This is how Eugenides subtly asserts the necessity of taking even the odd stories into account, to avoid pigeonholing the experience of growing up and therefore excluding all perceived outsiders. Their stories, too, represent individually valuable portions of the collective human circumstance.

The Lisbon sisters are unlike Cal Stephanides in that they are more symbolic and less well-developed than he. Ultimately their maturity is seen through the eyes of others—the boys of the neighborhood, specifically. The perceptions people have of the girls versus the reality of their lonely existences offer to the reader another angle for examining maturation. Sometimes,

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Eugenides suggests, the growth process is not only difficult to define, but is sometimes, consequently, difficult to understand.

True, the Lisbon sisters are not well developed as individual characters. Scott remarks that “Lux and her sisters exist only insofar as they are objects of masculine desire, which upon their deaths converts into regretful longing…”9 accurately describing the girls as symbolic projections of what the boys collectively perceive of the Lisbon sisters’ shaded world. They are mysterious, with “sunflower eyes fixed on the predicament of [their lives that the boys] would never understand”10; in reading the diary of Cecilia, the youngest and first sister to kill herself, the boys remark that “…Cecelia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity. It’s often difficult to identify which sister she’s talking about…”11 However, in reading Cecilia’s diary and trying to make sense of that fateful year, the boys manage to develop a perspective on the mystery of their collective girlhood:

We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colors went together. …We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them.12

The neighborhood boys acknowledge the inexplicable maturity of the five esoteric teenagers, how Cecilia’s “small body [gave] off the odor of a mature woman”13 as she lay in the bath tub, her slit wrists bleeding out into the water. And as Eugenides’ Calliope did in

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10 Jeffrey Eugenides, The Virgin Suicides, 27.
11 Ibid., 39.
12 Ibid., 40.
13 Ibid., 1.
Middlesex, the Lisbon sisters participate in seemingly normal behaviors. However, the minor characters in The Virgin Suicides are not as unaware of the major characters’ strange circumstances as those in Middlesex are: the neighborhood boys know that there is something different about the Lisbon girls. Again, puberty is a topic that Eugenides uses to indicate the normal, physical maturation of the girls. Peter Sissen is luckily invited to eat dinner with the Lisbons, and while sneaking around in an upstairs bathroom, he notices…

In the trash can was one Tampax, spotted, still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls. Sissen said that he wanted to bring it to us, that it wasn’t gross but a beautiful thing, like a modern painting or something.14

The mysteries of the Lisbon girls fascinate the boys, causing them to interpret normal indicators of maturity, such as the girls’ menstrual cycles, as beautiful, and driving them to learn all that they can about the sisters. But the esotericism of maturity persists, as Eugenides intends. They understand that the girls are mature beyond their years, lonely and “too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind,” but simultaneously “[the girls] are certain only of the insufficiency of explanations.”15 The boys are forever destined to be haunted by the staid presence of the Lisbon girls, who succumbed to, as Scott reminds us, “both the triviality and the grandeur of youth”16 that are not always readily understood:

We couldn’t imagine the emptiness of a creature who put a razor to her wrists and opened her veins, the emptiness and the calm. And…we had to breathe forever the air of the rooms in which they killed themselves. It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only…that they hadn’t heard us calling, still do not hear us…calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time…and where we will never find the

14Jeffrey Eugenides, The Virgin Suicides, 8.
15Ibid., 242.
16A.O. Scott, ”Evanescent Trees.”
pieces to put them back together.  

Eugenides intends for the boys to be haunted by their lack of understanding; it is a powerful comment on the incapability of the Lisbon girls’ maturation to be dissected and examined as easily as they had hoped. “The Lisbon girls’ pain” does not “[spring] from the same source as other teenage suicides,” despite that “For a while [the boys] tried to accept the general explanations” 18. The suicides add another layer of mystery to the question of growth—they suggest the power of the sometimes harsh awareness that arises from discrepant interactions between the growing mind and a disappointing reality.

The Environmental Aspect of Maturing

“Behold my parents’ bedroom: furnished entirely in Early American reproductions, it offers them connection (at discount prices) with the country’s founding myths.” 19

Both novels take place in Detroit, Michigan—there is even an overlap in that The Virgin Suicides and parts of Middlesex take place in the Grosse Pointe suburbs—but the differing environments exercise unique influences on each set of characters. The actions and reactions of the main characters within their environments provide further opportunities to examine how their atypical maturation unfolds.

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17Jeffrey Eugenides, The Virgin Suicides, 243.
18Ibid., 232-233.
19Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex, 235.
Calliope, or Callie as she is affectionately called, spends the first fourteen years of her life in 1960’s and 1970’s Detroit believing, for the most part, that she is female—as indicated by most of the minor characters that she interacts with, the young Callie is not particularly remarkable in any way. The seemingly average life comes crashing to the ground when a trip to the emergency room reveals that the young girl is actually a pseudohermaphrodite whose disorder had long gone unnoticed. Calliope’s radical choice to begin living as a boy after discovering her condition finally brings an end to the quietly strange upbringing and asserts his new identity as a definite outsider. An environment develops around the female Calliope that includes two integral aspects that influence her growth: her family raising her as girl (when, in fact, Cal points out that “[he’s] got a male brain”\textsuperscript{20}) and her experience within a Greek-American family in 1960’s and 1970’s Detroit.

A description of Calliope’s medicine cabinet is particularly significant:

Two pink Daisy razors stood…in a small drinking cup… My Breck Creme Rinse with Body promised to make me ‘the girl with the hair’… my Epi*Clear Acne Kit; my Crazy Curl hair iron… Q-tips and cotton balls, lip liners, Max Factor eye makeup, mascara, blush… Finally, hidden in the back of the cabinet, was the box of Kotex pads, which my mother had given me one day. ‘We better just keep these on hand,’ she’d said…\textsuperscript{21}

After an extensive list of beauty products, Cal ends his description of his childhood medicine cabinet with a box of Kotex pads significantly hidden in the very back. Everything that can make Calliope appear to be the perfect girl on the outside cannot make up for the ovaries and uterus missing from the inside. Calliope knows that she has yet to need the pads,

\textsuperscript{20} Jeffrey Eugenides, \textit{Middlesex}, 19.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 312.
and although she enjoys experimenting with cosmetics, a divide is established between her actions and her thoughts. This indicates why Calliope is so scared while having sex with Jerome—she convinces herself that she is a girl until it is not possible to do so. "'Middlesex’ is…a coming-of-age story, albeit an exceptionally fraught one…” states Laura Miller, a writer for *The New York Times*, nodding to the conflict between the way Calliope was raised and the persistent knowledge that “there’s something seriously odd about her body…” Miller asserts the difficulty of Calliope’s maturity that is outside the realm of standard childhood woes, which is absolutely true. It cannot be argued that hermaphroditism is something the average child must deal with. And yet, Eugenides is skillfully indicating that maturity is difficult no matter what. Some just have a strange set of challenges to face.

The Stephanides are a Greek family who trace their roots back to Bithynios, a Greek territory in Asia Minor. Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides, Calliope’s grandparents, are actually brother and sister who married and gave life to Calliope’s father, Milton—it is suggested that this genetic foray ultimately resulted in Calliope’s condition, 5-alpha-reductase deficiency. After having escaped the burning of Smyrna in 1922, the refugees Lefty and Desdemona finally make it to Ellis Island and initiate a “saga that traces three generations’ efforts to grapple with America and with their own versions of the American dream,” as Michiko Kakutani, a contributor to *The New York Times*, very importantly points out. Perhaps the elaborate story contained within *Middlesex* would not have had the same poignancy if

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Calliope had not been the granddaughter of Greek immigrants and the daughter of conservative first-generation Greek-American parents. Calliope’s struggles cannot be simply limited to her personal circumstances, as Kakutani suggests; it is her entire family’s collective efforts to wrestle with what it means to be Americans that further distance her from what society perceives as a commonplace existence. Just as Calliope eventually must grapple with her condition and the necessary decisions she must make, her Greek-American family strives continuously to assimilate into “normal” American society. Miller also highlights the difficulties that add to Calliope’s struggle, such as the rifts that exist between “Greek and WASP, black and white…,”24 alluding to the minority status of Greeks within Detroit and the race riots of 1967. These are just two of the many events that pull the Stephanides family into seemingly perpetual conflict.

As Calliope’s father’s “politics grow increasingly reactionary…[and] Chapter Eleven…worries about being drafted and sent to Vietnam,”25 complicating engagements that Kakutani importantly indicates Calliope herself takes no direct part in, Calliope manages to become stuck in the middle. Her hermaphroditism is a clash between the mammalian sex organs; her Greek heritage is a clash between Old World mysticism and new-fangled American values. Her “family’s tumultuous engagement with the American twentieth century,”26 works both to establish a time period and distance Calliope from the commonplace. The final house Calliope lives in as a female, Middlesex, according to Miller is “[a] modern house the Stephanides manage to purchase in the exclusive suburb of Grosse Pointe (it’s too peculiar and

24 Laura Miller, “My Big Fat Greek Identity Crisis.”
25 Michiko Kakutani, “The American Dream.”
26 Ibid., 2.
unfashionable to sell to WASPs) is ‘like communism, better in theory than reality.’” The attempts of Calliope and her family to assimilate as best as they can into normalcy, such as living in their prized Middlesex home that Miller described as “peculiar and unfashionable,” are at once humorous and significant. The difficulty and peculiarity of Calliope’s journey to adulthood are mirrored in her family’s experiences.

*The Virgin Suicides* also takes place in Detroit, Eugenides’ hometown. The gradual descent of the Lisbon girls into darkness is catalyzed by a literal restricting of the perimeter of their environment; Mrs. Lisbon eventually pulls all four remaining girls out of school and forbids them to leave the house. The conflict between their unusualness and their suburban location comes to blows when the entirety of burdensome suburbia (as the girls see it) is condensed to approximately 2000 square feet. Scott denotes that there is “pain, frustration and grief that simmer beneath the tranquil affluence of [the] enchanted suburb,” nodding to the buildup of anguish and instability within an environment whose façade betrays its eventual tragic purpose, which the sisters eventually succumb to. He significantly indicates that the grief and the pain do indeed simmer rather than overflow, allowing the tragedy ample time to fully develop within the Lisbons’ solemn home. Cutting the sisters off from the outside world exacerbates the unusual loneliness that was already present when the world was theirs to explore.

The unusual awareness of the Lisbon girls—especially Cecilia—is displayed through an inversion of Roman Catholic images. Mrs. Lisbon is an intensely pious Catholic, so the Lisbon

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27Laura Miller, “My Big Fat Greek Identity Crisis.”
28A.O. Scott, “Evanescent Trees.”
household is naturally quite strict. Cecilia, perfectly fine with her "...zodiac mobile... [and] Tarot cards..."\(^{29}\) (items juxtaposed to the pious Catholic atmosphere) is found clutching a "laminated picture of the Virgin Mary...against her budding chest"\(^{30}\) on her first suicide attempt. On the back is printed a phone number, "555-MARY," upon realizing this, Mr. Lisbon "[says], in a defeated voice, 'We baptized her, we confirmed her, and now she believes this crap.'"\(^{31}\) Cecilia knows that her concerns extend beyond what her environment can answer to, that her mature awareness clashes with the simple expectations suburban life places on her as a thirteen-year-old—complacency, silence, conformity. She takes her life when she is unable to reconcile or accept these differences.

When Mrs. Lisbon finally breaks down and locks the girls inside the house for good, the result is devastating. The girls, women in girls’ bodies, strange and yet so wondrous to the boys, are now forced to continue their attempts at growth within a stifling environment. The walls of suburbia eventually close in on the sisters and suffocate any chance they had to continue maturing. The boys begin to lose touch as the girls and their conditions deteriorate, as is evidenced by the increasing entropy of the house:

...the fact that the girls were slowly sinking hadn’t completely penetrated our minds, and on some mornings we awoke to a world still unruptured: ...only after rubbing our eyes at the window did we remember the rotted house across the street, and the moss-blackened windows hiding the girls from our sight. The truth was this: we were beginning to forget the Lisbon girls, and we could remember nothing else.\(^{32}\)

\(^{29}\) Jeffery Eugenides, *Suicides*, 27.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 2.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 180.
The stifling of the Lisbon sisters is one of the most powerful tragedies of The Virgin Suicides. Already well into the process of maturity, Mrs. and Mr. Lisbons’ decision to completely cut off their daughters’ contact with the world ultimately drives them to suicide. No longer are they out of place because of innate womanly and mysterious qualities, they are now completely denied the chance to continue to exist as eminent figures of their own growth. Their unusual maturity fascinated the boys. But ultimately, this maturity, the result of “tortures tearing the girls [that] pointed to a simple reasoned refusal to accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws,”33 gave the Lisbon girls no other options. Quietly facing the loneliness they felt before—a consequence of being socially atypical—and now the imposed loneliness of a completely secluded environment, the girls decide that the struggles to mature in a world whose social realities they refuse to easily assume are no longer worth the effort.

Jeffrey Eugenides acknowledges in his literature that growing up is indeed a difficult process. There is no possible way to anticipate the genetic disorders, unalteringly strict mothers, or the implications of the cultural label. Embarrassment and confusion are hallmarks of growing up; figuring the world out is by no means easy for any individual. No general set of instructions to attain maturity has ever been published because of the inherent distinctions made from individual to individual—it is truly humbling to consider that the lives we live are entirely unique and entirely ours. Too often the intrinsic value in the struggles of the outsider goes unrecognized because the individual didn’t quite fit the mold, however. Their stories of maturation stand to be pushed aside in favor of stories that are more comfortable, less alien. Eugenides has made an effort to bridge the gap between what society deems as valuable in

33 Jeffery Eugenides, Suicides, 239.
understanding the human condition and what the human condition is, in its essence: a confluence of the billions of different perspectives that result from maturity, no matter how strange those perspectives may be. He reminds us in works like *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex* that while everyone may face challenges while discovering the world around them, we all have an equal say in what it means to grow, to learn, and, ultimately, to live.