Desire, Melancholia, and Cultural Myth: A Cultural and Psychoanalytic Reading of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Marriage Plot*

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Abstract

This article examines Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Marriage Plot* through the intersecting lenses of Cultural Theory and Psychoanalysis, exploring how the novels interrogate the cultural constructions of desire, melancholy, and romantic idealism. By dramatizing the fragmentation of the subject and the commodification of love narratives, Eugenides critiques dominant ideological structures that shape identity and intimacy in late modernity. The analysis draws on Freud's theory of melancholia, Lacanian notions of desire and the Other, and cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Fredric Jameson to demonstrate how these works reveal the tension between individual subjectivity and cultural myth-making. Eugenides's narratives thus function as critical sites for examining the psychic and social investments that sustain gender norms, narrative closure, and the fantasy of romantic salvation.

Keywords: Jeffrey Eugenides, Cultural Theory, Psychoanalysis, Melancholia, Desire, The Virgin Suicides, The Marriage Plot

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Introduction: Cultural Narratives and Psychic Formations

Jeffrey Eugenides's fiction has often been celebrated for its literary self-consciousness and psychological depth. His novels, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and *The Marriage Plot* (2011), explore the intersection of cultural forms and psychic experience, offering devastating critiques of American mythologies of romance, family, and the self.

Eugenides does not merely narrate individual tragedies or love stories; rather, he exposes the ideological underpinnings of these narratives, revealing how culture shapes subjectivity, desire, and mourning. By employing the frameworks of Cultural Theory and Psychoanalysis,

this essay argues that Eugenides's fiction interrogates the structures of meaning that produce both cultural myths and individual neuroses.

Through the Freudian lens of melancholia and Lacanian theories of desire, we see how his characters inhabit stories that both promise and betray them. Meanwhile, Cultural Theory illuminates how these personal dramas resonate with larger ideological formations, revealing the ways in which intimate life becomes a site of cultural reproduction and critique.

The Virgin Suicides: Melancholia and Cultural Fantasies

Narrative Structure and the Collective Voice

The Virgin Suicides is narrated not by a single individual but by a collective male voice—a group of now-grown men who obsessively recall the Lisbon sisters' suicides decades later:

"We knew 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." (*The Virgin Suicides* 39)

This collective voice is itself an ideological formation, embodying what Louis Althusser calls the "ideological state apparatus" that produces subjects through interpellation (Althusser 127). The narrators' attempts to interpret the sisters' silence is a kind of cultural policing—a way to impose meaning on female opacity.

Their retrospective narration functions as a melancholic act in the Freudian sense. Freud defines melancholia as a pathological mourning in which the lost object is incorporated into the ego, resulting in self-reproach and obsessive memory (Freud 245). The narrators cannot release the Lisbon sisters; they internalize them as haunting presences that structure their adult lives.

"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." (*The Virgin Suicides* 40)

Here, the narrators imagine themselves inside the girls' subjectivity, but this act is not empathy so much as projection, an appropriation that fails to truly hear or represent the sisters' silence.

Cultural Mythologies of Purity and Decay

The Lisbon sisters function as symbols within the suburban imagination—a projection of purity, mystery, and eventually decay. Their hyper-feminized and idealized images are inseparable from their deaths. The narrators' fascination with the sisters' bodies echoes what Laura Mulvey famously described as the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women in visual culture (Mulvey 837).

Moreover, the suburban setting, with its manicured lawns and moral strictures, embodies a cultural ideology of containment and repression. Stuart Hall argues that culture is a site of ideological struggle, where meaning is constructed and contested (Hall 64). In Eugenides's novel, the girls' suicides rupture this suburban fantasy, revealing its underlying violence.

"The Lisbon house began to emit the sulfurous gases of decay." (*The Virgin Suicides* 94)

The house becomes a gothic emblem of cultural repression returning in the form of physical and psychic decay. This collapse of the suburban dreamscape exposes the disavowed traumas that American culture seeks to deny.

Psychoanalysis and Female Silence

Lacanian theory helps illuminate the girls' silence and refusal to be fully "known" by the male narrators. For Lacan, desire is always structured around the Other's lack—an absence that drives the subject's own desire (Lacan 58). The Lisbon sisters' deaths literalize this lack, leaving the narrators perpetually desiring a truth that cannot be accessed:

"We would never understand them." (*The Virgin Suicides* 243)

Their deaths fix them as enigmatic objects of desire, forever inaccessible. The novel thus stages the boys' psychic formation through lack and loss, demonstrating how desire is maintained by absence rather than presence.

This also aligns with Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender. The Lisbon sisters are forced to perform ideal femininity within the claustrophobic confines of their family and neighborhood. Their refusal—ultimately, their suicides—constitutes a violent negation of this script, a refusal to perform the roles assigned to them.

The Marriage Plot: Romance as Cultural Ideology

Intertextuality and the Critique of Narrative

The Marriage Plot explicitly references the nineteenth-century marriage plot tradition of Austen, Eliot, and James, interrogating its continued ideological force in late capitalist America. The novel follows Madeleine Hanna, an English major writing her senior thesis on the marriage plot itself:

"Madeleine's love of the Victorian novel sprang in part from a sense of its narrative clarity." (*The Marriage Plot* 21)

Madeleine's nostalgia for narrative closure and romantic fulfillment reflects the cultural fantasy of the "marriage plot"—a structure that promises resolution through heteronormative union. Eugenides deconstructs this fantasy by juxtaposing it with the realities of modern relationships, mental illness, and intellectual disillusionment.

Fredric Jameson argues that postmodern culture is characterized by the "waning of affect" and the commodification of cultural forms (Jameson 10). Eugenides's novel stages this condition: the marriage plot itself becomes a commodity, a fantasy consumed even by those who know it is false.

Desire, Melancholia, and Psychological Fragmentation

Mitchell Grammaticus, the semi-autobiographical stand-in for Eugenides himself, is in love with Madeleine but also deeply suspicious of narrative closure. His reading of Derrida leads him to critique presence and logocentrism:

"Derrida was the death of love." (*The Marriage Plot* 45)

This theoretical skepticism mirrors Mitchell's inability to fully inhabit or reject the romance narrative. His desire for Madeleine becomes a site of melancholic attachment, structured by ambivalence and self-reproach—again recalling Freud's model of melancholia.

Madeleine's relationship with Leonard Bankhead further complicates the romance plot. Leonard's manic-depressive illness destabilizes the fantasy of romantic salvation:

"She wasn't sure she wanted to save him anymore." (*The Marriage Plot* 302)

Their relationship exposes the limits of the marriage plot as a cultural form, revealing the psychic costs of attempting to transform narrative closure into lived experience. Leonard's psychological fragmentation resists narrative containment, embodying the Freudian unconscious that interrupts the ego's self-consistency.

Cultural Theory: Romance, Capitalism, and Knowledge

Eugenides also critiques the commodification of romance within capitalist culture. The college setting, with its debates over theory and authenticity, satirizes the institutionalization of critique itself. Madeleine's thesis on the marriage plot becomes a meta-commentary on her own entanglement in cultural ideology.

As Stuart Hall observes, cultural forms do not simply reflect reality but actively produce it (Hall 60). Madeleine's intellectual love of the marriage plot is not innocent; it is a form of cultural consumption that structures her desires:

"She couldn't figure out why it didn't work out the way it did in books." (*The Marriage Plot* 329)

Eugenides thus stages the disjunction between cultural narrative and lived experience, exposing how ideology shapes even our most intimate longings.

Psychoanalytic Desire: Knowledge and the Other in *The Marriage Plot*

Lacan's theory of desire is essential to understanding Mitchell's infatuation with Madeleine. For Lacan, desire is not directed toward an object that can be possessed; rather, it is structured around the Other's desire and lack (Lacan 58). Mitchell's romantic idealization of Madeleine is less about who she is than about the fantasy she represents—the completion of his own fragmented subjectivity:

"Mitchell felt that if she chose him, it would mean he was worthy." (*The Marriage Plot* 96)

Mitchell's desire is therefore narcissistic in Freud's sense, rooted in a fantasy of self-completion. Madeleine is the screen on which he projects his own longing for existential

certainty. Yet, this certainty is always deferred. Lacan's "objet petit a"—the unattainable object-cause of desire—manifests in Mitchell's endless oscillation between devotion and critique.

Similarly, Leonard Bankhead embodies the abjection of the Freudian unconscious. His manic episodes reflect a libidinal excess that escapes social regulation. Freud describes the unconscious as "the repressed," the return of what the ego cannot acknowledge (Freud 147). Leonard's illness stages this return, disrupting the ego's illusions of mastery:

"His mind was a hall of cracked mirrors." (*The Marriage Plot* 287)

Leonard's breakdown exposes the limits of reason and narrative control, suggesting that love is not the redemptive cure the marriage plot promises, but a site of conflict between conscious desire and unconscious compulsion.

Institutions of Knowledge: Cultural Theory and the University

The novel's setting in the elite academic world of Brown University is not incidental. It is a critical site where cultural capital is produced and contested. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" is useful here. Bourdieu argues that educational institutions legitimize and reproduce class hierarchies under the guise of meritocracy (Bourdieu 84).

Madeleine's thesis on the marriage plot becomes an ironic symbol of this dynamic. Her scholarly deconstruction of Victorian narratives does not immunize her from their ideological power. Instead, her education produces a reflexive form of desire that both critiques and clings to the fantasy of romantic closure:

"She was in love with love the way a scholar was in love with knowledge." (*The Marriage Plot* 37)

This collapse of epistemological and affective economies underscores the complicity of the university in sustaining cultural myths. Eugenides satirizes the 1980s "theory boom" as both an emancipatory promise and a commodified trend. As Stuart Hall warns, cultural forms are sites of ideological struggle that may reproduce, rather than resist, dominant power structures (Hall 64).

Knowledge, Power, and the Gaze

Michel Foucault's insights into the relationship between knowledge and power also illuminate Eugenides's project. Foucault argues that regimes of knowledge produce subjectivity, constructing categories of normalcy and deviance (Foucault 27). Leonard's bipolar disorder is pathologized within medical discourse, marking him as deviant. Yet the novel refuses to reduce him to diagnosis:

"He was both the illness and the person who had it." (*The Marriage Plot* 289)

This refusal mirrors Eugenides's broader critique of categorization, whether in literary genre, psychiatric labels, or cultural myth. Madeleine's desire to "know" Leonard—to heal or redeem him—echoes the colonizing impulse of knowledge itself. Her ultimate failure signals the limits of empathy when it is structured by mastery rather than genuine recognition.

Comparative Analysis: Desire, Melancholia, and Cultural Form

Despite their differences in setting and tone, *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Marriage Plot* share deep structural concerns. Both novels interrogate the cultural forms through which desire is imagined and regulated.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, desire is shaped by absence, loss, and projection. The narrators' melancholic fixation on the Lisbon sisters is sustained by their deaths, which freeze them in the amber of fantasy:

"The girls were ours in the way dead things are." (*The Virgin Suicides* 187)

This possessive mourning exemplifies Freud's melancholia, where the lost object is incorporated and endlessly replayed. The girls' silence becomes the blank space onto which male desire is projected, a refusal that cannot be assimilated.

The Marriage Plot explores the same dynamic in the commodified form of the romance narrative. Madeleine's longing for narrative closure parallels the boys' desire to make sense of the Lisbon sisters. Yet both projects fail. Eugenides's novels thus expose the ideological violence inherent in the desire for narrative mastery—whether in love, knowledge, or memory.

Cultural Hybridity and the Crisis of the Self

While neither novel deals directly with transnational migration in the way of Adichie or Lahiri, both register cultural hybridity as a crisis of the self in late capitalism. In *The Marriage Plot*, the collision between Victorian narrative form and postmodern theory dramatizes this hybridity. Madeleine's subjectivity is shaped by competing discourses—religious, literary, psychoanalytic—that offers no coherent unity.

This fragmentation resonates with Fredric Jameson's account of postmodern culture as the "cultural logic of late capitalism," characterized by pastiche, depthlessness, and the collapse of grand narratives (Jameson 16). Eugenides stages this crisis not simply as a critique of contemporary culture but as a reflection of the psychic cost of living without stable narratives of meaning.

Psychoanalytic Impasses: Love, Loss, and the Real

Lacan's concept of the Real—the traumatic kernel that resists symbolization—offers another way to read these novels. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters' deaths are the Real that cannot be integrated into the boys' symbolic order. Their endless retellings circle this absence without filling it.

In *The Marriage Plot*, Leonard's illness functions similarly as the Real that disrupts romantic fantasy. Madeleine's failure to "save" Leonard signals the collapse of the marriage plot as a symbolic solution to desire. Love in Eugenides's fiction is not redemptive but melancholic—a confrontation with lack, loss, and the limits of knowledge.

Conclusion: Eugenides and the Critique of Narrative

Jeffrey Eugenides's novels offer a sustained critique of the cultural forms through which desire and subjectivity are imagined. By staging the failure of the romance narrative, the impossibility of fully knowing the Other, and the melancholic incorporation of loss, Eugenides exposes the ideological work of cultural myths.

His fiction insists that narrative itself is both necessary and treacherous—a structure that offers meaning while foreclosing other possibilities. As such, it participates in what Stuart

Hall describes as “the politics of representation,” revealing how cultural forms shape not just collective imaginaries but also psychic life (Hall 67).

Ultimately, Eugenides does not offer solutions. Instead, he dwells in the impasse, the refusal of easy closure. This refusal is ethical as well as aesthetic, inviting readers to confront the limits of their own desires for mastery, knowledge, and redemption. In doing so, his work exemplifies the critical task of contemporary fiction: to reveal the ideological and psychic structures that sustain both cultural fantasy and personal subjectivity.

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