

We All Have the Same Fate at the End: *The Virgin Suicides*'s portrayal of Suicide through Cecilia

Growing up as the youngest in a family with four sisters may seem like the perfect environment to find a shoulder to cry on during tough times. In Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), that is not the case for thirteen-year-old Cecilia Lisbon. By the end of the film all five Lisbon sisters have committed suicide, but Cecilia was the first to end her life. Her feelings of solitude and lack of emotional connections is clearly shown in the first scenes of the film throughout various stylistic elements of mise-en-scene. Although she doesn't receive a lot of screen time, Cecilia's suicide attempt at the beginning of the film plays a critical role in establishing how the family's hometown of Grosse Pointe, Michigan views mental health. Cecilia's suicide attempt is strategically the first sequence because it places her in the center of the viewer's attention and causes them to remain focused on her character. Throughout the first act, this opening scene helps the viewer recognize how Cecilia's suicide is approached without haste and how she is physically isolated on screen to display her ongoing struggle of "fitting in". Upon first watch, it is difficult to recognize how *The Virgin Suicides* uses the camera to distinctly isolate and reflect Cecilia's internal emotions on screen. Noticing these elements proves to the viewer that Cecilia was not helpless after all.

The first sequences of the film introduce a lot of characters that may seem to have little importance throughout the rest of the story, but those characters set up the town's mindset about suicide. Using the opening sequences for this purpose provides the viewer with critical information. It is hard to understand why the town uses Cecilia's suicide attempt as a chance to gossip about the Lisbon family. At first, it may seem like they are looking for an interesting escape from the everyday routine, but this attitude serves a bigger purpose in the film of framing

the town as a non-rehabilitating community that negatively influences the Lisbons. From the very beginning when Cecilia is first admitted into the hospital, the clinician says, "What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets," immediately disregarding the severity of Cecilia's suicide attempt instead of having her open up about her struggles (1:55-2:00). It is significant to know how medical officials deal with suicide in this movie since they are supposed to be the experts about mental health, but this introduction shows how even at the specialist level, the doctors have a sarcastic and non serious mindset. Similarly, the boys use the girls' suicide story as a mystery, coping with their deaths by trying to get to the bottom of the cause of their suicides. The boys have a more personal connection to the girls compared to the neighbors because of their direct interactions and involvement in the girls' lives, but "[e]veryone had an opinion as to why Cecilia tried to kill herself," many of which followed the same dismissive tone that the clinician had (4:44). One woman said on the phone, "[i]t was no accident, Joan. Of course the parents are to blame," (4:37) while two other neighbors told a cameraman that "[t]hat girl didn't want to die. She just wanted out of that house. She wanted out of that decorating scheme" (4:48). The neighborhood comments about Cecilia demonstrate how the town uses her suicide as a topic of gossip instead of being concerned and recognizing that there is an inherent problem with a 13-year-old girl attempting to kill herself. These opening sequences demonstrate how there is limited empathy for the Lisbon family and foreshadow the reasons for the Lisbons' continuing struggle with their own varying symptoms of depression since the community won't be there to recognize there is a serious problem.

The beginning of the film shows moments where Cecilia felt isolated and unheard. The film uses quick edits and moments where Lux steals the attention from Cecilia in order to show how her healing process was disrupted. *The Virgin Suicides* opens with Cecilia's first suicide

attempt. After meeting with a psychologist that assesses Cecilia, her parents are told “I know you’re very strict, but I think that Cecilia would benefit by having a social outlet outside of the codification of school, where she could interact with males her own age” (7:16-7:31). This prompts the Lisbons to bend their overprotective rules, inviting Peter Sisten—a local boy who helped Mr. Lisbon install a model of the solar system in his classroom—for dinner and hosting a small neighborhood party. During the dinner, Cecilia is clearly uninterested by the boy’s presence, showing little emotional engagement with the conversations at the dinner table by her blank and disinterested expressions when she is isolated in the frame (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Still from Coppola, *The Virgin Suicides* (8:50)

From this still, it is easy to recognize how her eyes are staring off somewhere off screen instead of trying to make eye contact with those at the table. She doesn’t show any engagement either as her face is resting on her arm in an effort to hold her head up. Her slouched posture expressed that the dinner is not the best way for her to be introduced to boys her age.

In addition to displaying the ineffectiveness of the dinner party as a course of treatment, the film uses the same scene to demonstrate how the focus is taken off of Cecilia. Removing her from the center of attention demonstrates how the community (specifically her family) is easily

distracted and loses focus of assisting Cecilia with her mental health. Although it is a small moment this is done by the camera shifting to display that Lux was teasing Peter under the table by playing footsies, but it sets up the following significant cuts that take attention away from Cecilia. For example, Cecilia attempts to make conversation with her mother in the kitchen, talking about the Brazilian Turbot Frog being added to the endangered animals list. Her mom is turned away and busy washing the dishes, so she responds quickly with, “Oh dear! The turbot frog, darling, I don’t think I’ve ever heard—” before the camera swiftly pans to Peter who interrupts the conversation and asks to use the bathroom. Before Cecilia can even elaborate on the endangered frog, we see Peter in Lux’s bathroom, exploring all her personal belongings and shifting the attention back to her (8:57-9:02). This cut from Cecilia to Peter and his obsession with Lux, makes the viewer forget about the fact that boys are being invited to the Lisbons’ because they are supposed to help with Cecilia’s recovery, further preventing her from following the doctor’s orders of having a social outlet outside of school. These swift camera cuts act as a distracted viewer that cannot keep their attention on Cecilia, and it acts as a tool that restricts Cecilia from getting the benefits of talking to boys her age that the psychologist suggests.

Some may say that the Lisbons and the community could not find ways to help Cecilia because of her shy nature, but the film includes a moment of connection between her and Joe that demonstrates what the girl needed in order for her mood to improve. Cecilia has limited screen time, and she is usually shown in the background of her sisters having fun and socializing. Here, it is easy to see her swallowed by the other characters and events at her own “prescribed” party (Fig. 2). Cecilia is cornered, alone in the frame and in the dark whereas in contrast, her sisters are placed together in the light. Her dancing sisters seem to be the focus of this shot although it is Cecilia’s party that she spends buried away behind other characters. By playing her alone in the

dark part of the fame, the director portrays Cecilia's internal feelings of isolation and darkness on screen.



Fig. 2. Still from Coppola, *The Virgin Suicides* (13:11)

Though, there is a moment where Cecilia smiles and for a split second she interacts with a male her age (Fig. 3). When Joe, her developmentally delayed classmate, is led in by one of her sisters and brought directly to Cecilia, she smiles and finally looks like she is excited to have time to talk with someone alone at her party. It may be because society sees Joe as an outsider because of his disability that Cecilia feels a stronger connection to him and lights up when they greet each other, but due to his disability, Joe is treated differently at the party as the other boys quickly surround him and use him to entertain the other kids at the party. This interruption clearly makes Cecilia very upset. Her facial expressions quickly return to those of Fig. 2 and she even decides to leave the party (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3 & Fig. 4. Stills from Coppola, *The Virgin Suicides* (15:29 & 16:07)

The first still shows Cecilia's reaction to a personal and intimate exchange between her and Joe whereas the second still shows how her excitement is ruined by the arrival of all the other boys at the conversation. Joe is clearly an outsider and is soon exploited for comedic value, being told to sing for the entertainment of the others. Although the psychiatrist recommended for Cecilia to talk to boys her age, it may have been beneficial to specify she would benefit from talking to other outsiders. She clearly lights up at the opportunity to talk with Joe and connect with him, but seeing the way he is treated afterward for being an outsider makes her return to her depressed state. There could be a number of reasons her expression changes. One possibility could be that she is jealous of Joe since all the attention shifted to him, but this is unlikely since there have been no instances where Cecilia has visually expressed jealousy when others were receiving attention. I think the more reasonable explanations are that she becomes upset that her alone time with Joe was interrupted and the fact that the boys exploited someone who was an outsider just like her. This mistreatment of Joe could have been a moment that showed Cecilia how society treats outsiders prompted her to lose hope of recovery and leave the event. Soon after leaving the party, Cecilia commits suicide. In succession, these events show how there was hope for Cecilia's recovery and the moment where she connects with Joe served as a way to show the audience that she could be helped.

To clarify, I'm not saying that the only reason Cecilia relapses is because she feels neglected by her family and friends. She is not being picked on by her family or explicitly bullied by the boys at school, and they are not intentionally excluding her from conversations. If anything, the problem can stem from Cecilia being more closed off and seeming unapproachable to the guests. They simply didn't know the best way to aid Cecilia with recovery and may not have wanted to put her on the spot in a party setting. Some viewers may argue that Mrs. Lisbon was doing her best to help Cecilia in her recovery. After all, it's not like she has any experience with this situation; it's the first time she has to deal with a suicidal child. Although this is a valid point, Mrs. Lisbon clearly loses focus of Cecilia in multiple instances and the film intentionally leaves Cecilia out of frame, focus, and dialogue to show us the neglect Cecilia is facing. Furthermore Mrs. Lisbon could have easily spent more time talking directly to Cecilia and the therapist in order to prevent her from relapsing. It can be assumed that the psychologist's advice is effective since Cecilia smiles and her mood changes when she has a moment to talk with Joe on her own earlier in the film. What the psychologist could have specified or needed to dig out of Cecilia was that she would benefit from talking to other outsiders or people that shared her struggles of feeling isolated or belittled by those around her.

Opening with Cecilia's suicide and showing how she feels incomplete around others, gives the viewer one example how someone struggles with suicidal thoughts. Her disengagement with society can clearly be seen in the film's beginning sequences when she is isolated crammed into the corners of frames and her inability to receive attention is evident as the camera quickly cuts from her dialogue to progress other story lines. But Joe acts as a glimmer of hope that arguably could have saved Cecilia's life and even the lives of her sisters thus showing the viewer she was not helpless after all. Leading with Cecilia struggling to integrate herself amongst her

peers but simultaneously displaying how her sisters have normal social experiences may have left the viewer to wonder why all the Lisbon sisters die at the end. In my opinion, *The Virgin Suicides* serves as a great example of how each individual struggles with mental health in their unique ways. We may not have seen the rest of the girls' stories, but it is fair to assume that since the approach to Cecilia's recovery was not taken seriously, all the girls would face the same fate.