PONTIFICAL CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL – PUCRS
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FIRST-PERSON PLURAL NARRATION IN JEFFREY EUGENIDES' THE VIRGIN SUICIDES: AN ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW AND UNRELIABILITY

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Monograph presented to the Letras – English Course at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), as a partial requirement to obtain the title of Graduate in Letras – English.

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ABSTRACT

The present monograph aims to analyze the presence of a potential unreliable narrator in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*. Following Booth's (1983) typology and Olson's (2003) model for detecting narrative unreliability, as well as Nünning's (1997), Chatman's (1978), and Phelan and Martin's (1999) considerations on the topic, an analysis of the novel, including excerpts to corroborate hypotheses, was conducted to assess if the first-person plural narrator of the story can be considered unreliable. As such, this monograph also aims to categorize the potentially unreliable narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* as either untrustworthy or fallible, according to the model proposed by Greta Olson (2003). The method selected for the appreciation of the novel is a literature review regarding the field of narratology and the concept of narrator, narrative perspective, unreliability, fallibility, and untrustworthiness, as well as a subsequent reading and discussion of the novel. It is expected that this monograph might contribute to research on the field of narratology, particularly regarding the concepts of narrative unreliability, fallibility, and untrustworthiness.

Keywords: American literature; narratology; narrative perspective; unreliability.

RESUMO

A presente monografia tem por objetivo principal analisar a presença de um potencial narrador não confiável no romance de Jeffrey Eugenides, *As virgens suicidas*. Seguindo a tipologia elaborada por Booth (1983) e o modelo de Olson (2003) referente à identificação de não confiabilidade em uma narrativa, bem como as considerações de Nünning (1997), Chatman (1978) e Phelan e Martin (1999) sobre o tópico, conduziu-se uma análise minuciosa do romance, com a inclusão de trechos retirados da obra para corroborar as hipóteses levantadas durante a leitura, com o intuito de verificar a possibilidade de categorizar o narrador em primeira pessoa do plural do romance como não confiável. Assim, esta monografia objetiva, também, categorizar o potencial narrador não confiável de *As virgens suicidas* enquanto inconfiável ou falível, conforme o modelo proposto por Greta Olson (2003). O método eleito para a apreciação do romance é uma revisão da literatura no que concerne ao domínio da narratologia e o conceito de narrador, perspectiva em narrativa, não confiabilidade, inconfiabilidade e falibilidade, bem como uma subsequente leitura e discussão da narração do romance. Antecipamos que essa monografia possa contribuir aos estudos no domínio da narratologia, particularmente no que diz respeito aos conceitos de não confiabilidade, inconfiabilidade e falibilidade.

Palavras-chave: Literatura norte-americana; narratologia; perspectiva em narrativa; não confiabilidade.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since its debut, Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides* has called readers' and literary critics' attention due to its plot and inner controversies. Reviewers of Eugenides' novel considered its first-person plural narrative voice as one of its most distinctive and unusual features. It is still regarded as one of the most famous examples of first-person plural narration.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the story of the protagonists, a group of five sisters, is told in retrospect by a collective of nameless, numberless narrators. Puzzled by the suicides of the five girls and frustrated owing to their incapability to fathom the feelings and motives of the sisters, the anonymous narrators decide to retrocede and analyze every single minutia and souvenir they gathered throughout the 20 years since the tragedy that has scarred their lives from adolescence to adulthood. In their desperate attempt to decipher the motives that led the protagonists to suicide, the narrators examine documents, such as a diary and a psychiatrist's report, and interview the sisters' parents, neighbors, and school classmates.

The collective voice in *The Virgin Suicides* narration has been hitherto the object of research in various articles and monographs. Notwithstanding, much of the research available on this topic focuses solely on aspects such as reader reception and problems of representation in literature. One crucial facet regarding the narration of the novel has not been thus far exhaustively researched by scholars – namely the reliability of a narrative whose storytellers are a collective of nameless men and whose objects of focalization are five young, teenage girls. The fact that the narrators have to resort to interviews and documents to provide a solid, reliable account of the protagonists' lives, given they have little to no access to their real motives, thoughts, and feelings, indicates problems of reliability regarding the information presented to the reader and the characterization of the protagonists, frequently romanticized and mystified in the eyes of the tellers of the story. The controversial accounts conveyed by the storytellers in their narrative indicates a potential for unreliability due to fallibility.

In this perspective, the main objective of the present monograph is to analyze the narration of Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* and evaluate its reliability. To achieve this objective and reach conclusions on the topic, we assess the strategies provided by scholars such as Ansgar Nünning and Greta Olson, as well as the many characteristics that might suggest an unreliable narration, with the aim of appraising the degree to which the narrator of the novel can be considered unreliable. Moreover, by following Greta Olson's differentiation between fallibility and untrustworthiness, the present monograph intends to categorize the narrators as either fallible or untrustworthy. In order to achieve the main objective of this monograph, we aim (1)

to define the study of narratology; (2) to outline possible classifications of a narrator and apply them to the object of research; (3) to define point of view or perspective in fictional narratives; (4) to outline strategies for recognizing unreliability in narration; (5) to differ between a fallible and an untrustworthy narrator; (6) to identify the characteristics that might lead a reader to deem a narrator unreliable, fallible or untrustworthy; and (7) to apply the strategies and classifications provided by scholars and discussed in the literature review section of this paper to analyze Eugenides' novel.

Conceptualizing narratology, narrator and point of view is essential to the understanding of the concepts of narration and narrative unreliability, fallibility, and untrustworthiness. In general terms, narratology can be defined as the study of narrative structure, whereas narrative voice is the perspective the story is told from. Eugenides' novel has raised innumerable discussions on representation — considering that the story of the five girls is told by men, which was thoroughly deemed misogynistic — but mainly on narrative perspective and reader interpretation. It is well noted that understanding the point of view in literature is crucial for reader interpretation. A narrator presents the story to its audience from his own specific point of view and thus influences the work's reception. Given the narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* is a group of men, and the "we" is composed of different "I"s (SHOSTAK, 2009), the reader cannot distinguish one single individual from this collective of narrators. This particularity makes it difficult for both readers and researchers to grasp the cultural and psychological aspects that influence the narration and the interpretation of fictional events within the novel.

The present monograph consists of a literature review and analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*. The methodology chosen for this research is bibliographical in nature, encompassing an assessment of previous research on the topics that will be developed further on the analysis of the novel. With the aim of defining key concepts for further investigation, the first sections of the literature review comprise a brief review of the definition and history of the field of narratological studies, a definition and some possible classifications of the fictional narrator in literature, and an explication of what is narrative unreliability, untrustworthiness and fallibility and how these three fictional phenomena occur in literature. The subsequent chapter consists of a thorough analysis of Eugenides' novel in light of the concepts and strategies outlined in the literature review. It is presumed that the conclusions achieved through the present analysis will lead to an assertion of the reliability of the storytellers of the novel. Moreover, we expect that the review of the available literature on unreliability, as well as the assessment of the object of study in the present monograph, may contribute to further research on this specific topic, with the aim of shedding a light on the relevance of unreliability

on reader interpretation of a given literary text and elucidating the need for clearer, more well-defined strategies on ways to recognize an unreliable narrator.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The present chapter of this monograph consists of a literature review of literary concepts and phenomena that will further serve as theoretical basis for the arguments demonstrated in the analysis of the main object of study. This chapter is divided into four sections: (I) a brief review of the history and instances of study of the field of narratology; (II) an explication of the term "narrator" and possible formulas for its classification; (III) a definition of the concept of point of view or perspective in light of its implication in literary narratives; and (IV) a thorough review of the concept of the "unreliable narrator" in fiction, as well as a delineation of available strategies for the recognition of narrative unreliability in literary texts.

2.1 *NARRATOLOGIE*: THE SCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

In his book *Grammaire du Décameron*, the Bulgarian-French linguist Tzvetan Todorov (1969) provides an analysis of the meaning and objects of study of *narratologie* (in English, narratology) and defines it as the theory of narrative, which examines its form, functioning, and nature. Thus, narratology is, according to Todorov (1969), *la science du récit* (the science of storytelling, in English), a science that, as such, did not yet exist. In the introduction of his book, the literary theorist compares the study of botany to the study of literature and argues that if botany is a science, its object is not precisely the botanic world but rather the so-called "laws" that govern this very world. The same applies to literature: a literary text is not in and of itself an object of scientific study — its elements, including narrative point of view and sequence, are the target of scientific analysis (TODOROV, 1969). The author states that trying to define the concept of what he calls, in French, *narration*, would be more of an outcome than a point of departure (TODOROV, 1969). Narration is not a phenomenon unique to literature, for it exists in various other disciplines and genres, such as myths, movies, dreams, and others. In arguing that his main aim is not to describe the actions but instead to analyze the discourse that originates those very actions, Todorov further defines narratology as how it is commonly conceived nowadays: the study of narrative elements and structures. Many authors affirm that the study of narratology is prior to the coining of the term by Todorov. In this perspective, Maurie-Laure and Van Alphen (1993) divide the route of narratological studies into three different historical periods: (a) pre-structuralist approach; (b) structuralist approach, of which Todorov is adept; and (c) poststructuralist approach.

In its dawn, narratology was studied by Greek philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle. In his distinction of two possible forms of representation of an object, namely diegesis – in which the story is told by a narrator and by characters – and mimesis – in which the story is shown, such as in drama –, Aristotle paved the way for further ponding on the subject (MARIE-LAURE AND VAN ALPHEN, 1993). According to the authors, mimesis became, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the standard for reliability in narration. Some authors and critics believed that to be reliable, a narrator should be "invisible" or "objective" (MARIE-LAURE AND VAN ALPHEN, 1993). The authors cite Wayne C. Booth as one of the most crucial modern literary theorists due to his contributions to the definition of the concept of narrator, and to the investigation and identification of two instances of narration that had not yet been researched or studied: unreliability and irony.

The structuralist approach to narratology was rooted in Russian formalism and Saussurean linguistics. Some of its main contributors include Tzvetan Todorov and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Maurie-Laure and Van Alphen (1993) also cite the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, whose terminology became the standard for narratological analysis. Genette's notions of narration, focalization, narrator, and narratee were crucial for the study and analysis of different modes of narration and a major contribution to the field of narratology.

Contemporary or poststructuralist narratology involves other fields of study such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and deconstructivism. Lanser (1986) argues that feminism has often been overlooked when it comes to the field of narratology, particularly due to the rigidity and inflexibility of structuralist and formalist approaches. The feminist ideology had, until then, remained "untouched", with very little effort to orchestrate correlations between both fields, frequently deemed incompatible. The author postulates that "virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account" (p. 343), and goes on to cite many theorists, such as Todorov with Boccaccio's *Decameron*, who have focused on literary works written by men – and that most of those theorists are, in turn, men. Further, Lanser (1986) predicts that the intersection between feminist theory and narratology will serve more as a genesis of new questions than an assemblage of definite answers. She argues that structuralist narratology conceives of narratives as linguistic systems and characters as "patterns of recurrence", whereas feminist criticism treats characters as extremely "referential – and influential – in their representations of gender relations" (LANSER, 1986, p. 344). Lanser (1986) postulates that there is a particular aim when it comes to narratologists – i.e., to analyze discourse in a scientific, definite manner; therefore, this structuralist tendency frequently isolates texts from their respective reception.

2.2 *QUI PARLE?* THE DEFINITION OF NARRATOR

Gerald Prince (1987) provides a straightforward definition of the term "narrator", qualifying it as the one who narrates (PRINCE, 1987). According to Prince (1987), in all types of narrative there is at least one narrator, and a given narrative might have multiple narrators. A narrator may be more or less reliable, self-conscious, or knowledgeable, and may be more or less distanced from the events he narrates, the characters, and the narratee; this distance can be either temporal, discursive, intellectual, or moral (PRINCE, 1987).

Mangolin (2014) provides a more sophisticated definition: a narrator is the "inner-textual [...], highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates and from which references to the entities, actions, and events that this discourse is about are being made" (p. 1179). Hence, a narrator is the one responsible for the narration of the events in a given narrative; he is, as such, a storyteller, whereas the narratee — i.e. the addressee of the narrator, the entity to which the narrator directs his narration – is the listener or reader of the story being told. In other words, the narrator is the answer to Gérard Genette's question *qui parle*? – "who speaks?" in English (MANGOLIN, 2014).

In *Figures III*, Genette (1972) introduces a meticulous typology of narrators, classifying those fictional entities as homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, intradiegetic, extradiegetic, or autodiegetic. The autodiegetic narrator narrates his own story — e.g., as in a biography. An extradiegetic narrator tells the story from a perspective that is located outside the fictional universe, whereas the heterodiegetic narrator does not participate in the story and is commonly classified as an omniscient narrator. When a character becomes a narrator, we classify him as an intradiegetic narrator. However, if the narrator is also a character in the story he is narrating, we are, according to Genette (1972), in the presence of a homodiegetic narrator.

2.3 POINT OF VIEW AND REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE

The terms perspective and point of view are often treated as equivalent and used interchangeably in literary theory, the latter being more commonly used in Anglo-American criticism (NIEDERHOFF, 2014). Niederhoff (2014) defines the concept of point of view in narratology as "the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator, the characters and [...] other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld" (p. 1260). As previously asserted, narratives must have at least one narrator and

generally a multitude of characters; thus, multiple perspectives may be inserted into and conveyed through the storytelling. A narrator may tell the story through his own lens but may also do so through a character's point of view (NIEDERHOFF, 2014). Additionally, the narrator might include excerpts, as in a dialogue or a diary entry, that might provide a glimpse of another character's perspective. Niederhoff (2014) indicates that the distinction between "external" and "internal" perspectives has been the source of confusion. In narratology, these two concepts do not refer to spaces, such as inside or outside a box, but to minds — i.e., inside or outside a character's consciousness. In the case of omniscient narration, the reader commonly has access to the characters' feelings and thoughts; in other types of narration, such fictional material may not be accessible. According to Niederhoff (2014), it is crucial, when analyzing perspective in a narrative, to not only identify the position from which a reader visualizes the events but also to assess the type of mind associated with this position and its "privilege" or "access" — or lack of such — in a given fictional world (p. 1263).

In *Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept*, Friedman (1955) cites a multitude of authors and literary critics who tried to define the concept of point of view in a narrative, such as Henry James, Edith Wharton, and E. M. Forster. Tracing the development of the term, Friedman (1955) provides his own definition of point of view in fiction, distinguishing between two modes of narration: "telling" (summary narrative) and "showing" (immediate scene). According to Friedman (1955), a summarized narrative would constitute a generalized account of events, as can be inferred from the term "summary" itself, whereas an immediate scene involves a detailed and continuous account of events, including time, place, action, character, and dialogue. Following Friedman's (1955) considerations on the topic, to be "shown" something, a reader would have to access the setting, the action, and the character of the fictional narrative. Nonetheless, in literary fiction, those two modes of representation are often used interchangeably — i.e., a minute account of the events might be followed by a more generalized, indirect description, and vice-versa (FRIEDMAN, 1955).

Friedman (1955) distinguishes between eight modes of representation or point of view in fiction: (I) "editorial omniscience", which involves an intrusive third-person narrator; (II) "neutral omniscience", which is similar to editorial omniscience, but with less intrusion from the narrator; (III) "I" as witness, which designates a character that is also a narrator; (IV) "I" as protagonist; (V) multiple selective omniscience, a third-person narration that involves multiple characters' points of view; (VI) selective omniscience, a third-person narration from the point of view of only one character; (VII) the dramatic mode and (VIII) the camera, both third-person narrations in scenic mode. Although useful, Niederhoff (2014) points out some confusing

aspects of Friedman's typology, such as the distinction between the sixth and the seventh modes of representation – which, according to the author, are practically the same – and the rather unclear boundaries of the difference, when it comes to access to information, between the third and fourth modes.

Nonetheless, Friedman (1955) specifies a compelling aspect regarding the "'I' witness" point of view. The author asserts that what the narrator shows the reader might not be as restricted as one may infer, for, although not omniscient, he might talk to characters and thus render their point of view to the reader or provide other sources of material, such as diaries and letters, which may "offer glimpses of the mental states of others" (p. 1174), an aspect also asserted by Niederhoff. Moreover, the narrator might offer the reader his own inferences as to the feelings and thoughts of other characters, which raises other problematic circumstances. The narrator's inferences are, as one might deduce, a product of his own perspective, of his personal experience, which might render his personal account not trustworthy or reliable.

Niederhoff (2014) argues that a first-person narration might be conveyed in one of two forms: "an authorial one, in which narrators tell the story as they see it at the time of the narration, i.e., with hindsight; and a figural one, in which they render it the way they experienced it as characters in the story" (p. 1269). Among other methods and models to assess and analyze point of view in fiction, Niederhoff (2014) cites Genette's (1972) concept of focalization, which is synonymous with the terms point of view and perspective. Defining the concept of focalization, Niederhoff (2014) explains that it "may be defined as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld" (p. 396). Genette distinguishes between three different degrees of focalization: zero or non-focalization, internal and external. Zero or non-focalization would be the equivalent to the omniscient narration or to Todorov's formula "narrator > character", which means the narrator knows and says more than the characters in the narrative (GENETTE, 1972). Internal focalization is the equivalent to the formula "narrator = character", which means that the narrator knows and says only what a given character knows. The third and last concept, external focalization, refers to the formula "narrator < character", in which the narrator says less than what the character knows.

In *A Poetics of Composition*, Boris Uspensky (1973) discusses the concept of point of view in arts, cinema, theater, and, most importantly, literature. The author designates five planes on which point of view occurs in a given narrative: (I) ideological; (II) phraseological; (III) spatial; (IV) temporal; and (V) psychological. According to Uspensky (1973), the analysis of the ideological plane of point of view in literature relies upon intuitive understanding, for it

designates the evaluation and perception of the author or narrator of a given text. It is part of the "deep compositional structure, as opposed to the surface compositional structure which may be traced on the psychological, spatio-temporal, or phraseological levels" (USPENSKY, 1973, p. 8). One given literary text might have one or several ideological viewpoints, which would form a much more complex structure. However, if various viewpoints are presented as "essentially equal ideological voices, we have a polyphonic narration" (USPENSKY, 1973, p. 10). Following the conceptualization of Mikhail Bakhtin, Uspensky (1973) defines polyphony as "many-voiced", occurring when there are independent viewpoints in a given work. These points of view must belong to characters who take part in the action of the fictional events. In a literary work, a character can be either the object of evaluation or its vehicle, and he might not even participate in the described fictional events, and as such cannot evaluate them as they occur (USPENSKY, 1973). A narrator's ideological point of view may be explicitly acknowledged, as in first person narration, or concealed. In the latter case, it would require a deeper analysis.

Uspensky (1973) associates the ideological with the phraseological level, which can be broadly defined as the linguistic means used while expressing a point of view. In this perspective, the ideological plane might be analyzed by identifying and assessing the features and characteristics of the specific speech produced by a given author or narrator. These speech characteristics may be used to convey an "ideological position or world view" (USPENSKY, 1973, p. 16). The distinction of points of view in a literary text is more discernible when an author uses different speech characteristics to describe different characters – e.g., when the author provides a description of a given character from the point of view of another character and then from his own perspective or the point of view of a third character. This phraseological plane of point of view might also be exemplified by the choice of appellations – i.e., how a character or narrator refers to another character. In a literary text, a character can be called by a variety of different names or titles – e.g., a nickname, the character's full name, or a title such as Mr. or Mrs. –, which designate a specific position or viewpoint of the speaker of a given utterance.

Furthermore, the point of view of a narrator may also be located in a specific space or time. In this perspective, "in a literary work, the positions of the narrator (or the observer) and a specific character may or may not concur" (USPENSKY, 1973, p. 58). When those two positions concur, a narrator is commonly following a given character or seeing the space through the character's point of view. Uspensky (1973) exemplifies this by describing a scene in which a character enters a room and the narrator describes the room as seen by the character.

Nonetheless, in some other cases, a narrator may spatially follow a character but not describe the events from the latter's point of view. Uspensky (1973) points out another possible device when it comes to spatial point of view, which he designates as "the bird's eye view". This specific viewpoint is "an all-embracing description of a particular scene, [...] an encompassing view of the scene from a single, very general point of view" (p. 63). It is as if the narrator assumes a position in which he observes a scene from above, or of a privileged place in which he can visualize all the events that are taking place. Another possible case a "silent scene", in which the narrator describes the events or gestures but not the utterances of the characters. According to Uspensky (1973), in a "silent scene", the observer can visualize the characters but cannot hear them, as if he was watching them from a distance.

2.4 THE COMPLEX PHENOMENON OF NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY AND SOME POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR THE CRITICAL READER

Since the coining of the term "unreliable narrator", introduced by Wayne C. Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the concept, the definition, and the strategies a reader is supposed to use to recognize narrative unreliability have served as the main object of scrutiny in various scholarly articles. In defining the concept, Booth (1983) concludes that a narrator can be considered reliable or trustworthy when "he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work" (i.e., the implied author's norms) and "unreliable when he does not" (p. 159). Therefore, Booth based his definition of the concept of the unreliable narrator on another complex and often deemed ambiguous concept: the implied author. To Booth (1983), what mainly differs unreliable narrators in terms of degree is the distance between theirs and the implied author's norms. In this perspective, to evaluate the unreliability of a given narrator, the reader is expected to be acquainted with the implied author's norms of the work. According to Baldick (2001), the implied author is the source of the meaning and design of a given literary text, which is to be inferred by its readers. It differs from the real author, for it is an imaginary entity, and must be distinguished from the narrator (BALDICK, 2001).

Ansgar Nünning (1997) argues that few have tried to reformulate Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator, which is based on a concept he considers ill-defined. Nünning (1997) affirms that Booth has acknowledged that this terminology is inadequate to comprehend the complex phenomenon of narrative unreliability. There is an internal issue when it comes to theories regarding unreliability, for theorists do not clarify whether the narrator's flaws or deficiencies are of moral or epistemological nature (NÜNNING, 1997). In light of this, Nünning

(1997) has attempted to decentralize the implied author, a concept he considers unnecessary and even disposable, in the process of recognition of narrative unreliability, asserting that detecting unreliability is more dependent upon the reader's personal experiences and perceptions. The German researcher considers that the reader's attention has to be redirected from the level of the story to its speaker and the "foregrounding peculiarities" of his psychology (NÜNNING, 1997, p. 88). An unreliable account would be thus more easily recognizable when its vehicles are first-person narrators, who are concomitantly characters or protagonists of the stories they narrate. Nünning (1997) argues that signals such as "textual inconsistencies, the verbal habits of the narrator, and discrepancies between the fictional world presented by a text and the reader's world-knowledge and standards of normality" (p. 85) would constitute the basis for the assessment of a narrator's reliability. Moreover, the author suggests a differentiation between unreliable narrators – "one whose rendering of the story the reader has reasons to suspect" – and untrustworthy narrators – "those whose commentary does not accord with conventional notions of sound judgment" (NÜNNING, 1997, p. 89).

In ascertaining that the assessment of narrative unreliability depends on the reader's standpoint, Nünning establishes another conundrum for the evaluation of a narrator's unreliability or untrustworthiness: its recognition would rely on particularly subjective conditions. A given reader, with his own set of moral values and world perception, might deem a given narrator unreliable, whereas another who reads the same text but has a different worldview will judge the same narrator as a reliable source of information. Nünning's contributions seem to highlight the impossibility of a narrator being universally perceived as unreliable or untrustworthy, given that this assessment supposedly depends on personal standpoints.

In consideration of some particularities that potentially indicate narrative unreliability in a fictional narrative, authors such as Nünning (1997), Mangolin (2014), Chatman (1978), Olson (2003), and Phelan and Martin (1999) argue that there are a few indications that might lead a reader to suspect and revise a narrator's account of a story. Analyzing Nelly Dean's narration in *Wuthering Heights*, Nünning (1997) postulates that the narrator of Emily Brontë's novel's strong bias due to emotional involvement is one aspect that needs to be accounted for when analyzing her unreliability. Further, the author cites modernist fiction works and affirms that often the focus of a novel is the narrator's interpretation of what has happened and his misapprehension of facts, the latter being an aspect that also indicates a potential unreliable narrator (NÜNNING, 1997, p. 93).

Mangolin (2014) claims that only personalized narrators can be deemed unreliable by the reader, and unreliability is only applicable if the narrator is a "reporter of facts" and not an "inventor of tales", e.g., as in a fable (p. 880). Furthermore, "a narrator may himself alter the reliability of any of his claims by citing lack of information or inability on his part to fathom things" (MANGOLIN, 2014, p. 881). A reader or critic of a given text may also seek psychological explanations to investigate the reliability of a narrator's account. Some of the aspects involved in this investigation are the narrator's lack of knowledge or experience, his psychological deficiencies, such as limited intelligence, insanity or drug use, self-deception, a given mental disposition, and an intentional deceptive strategy (MANGOLIN, 2014).

According to Chatman (1978), "the narrator's vested interests may be so marked that we come to think of him as unreliable" (p. 158). This is mostly the case with narrators that are emotionally involved in the story or with the characters – e.g., a narrator might want to convince the reader that they are reliable, or their narration might simply be emotionally charged.

Booth (1983) associates narrative unreliability to the use of irony, which would be, in this context, a means of communion with the reader, an attempt to communicate a gap between the narrator's and the implied author's perspective. However, Booth (1983) acknowledges that, by following this formula for detecting unreliability, a reader who finds himself unable to grasp the entirety of the ironic device might not recognize that a narrator is unreliable. Conversely, Olson (2003) considers that there are textual indicators that may lead a reader to revise his interpretation of a given text, such as the incongruities between the narrator's values and the author's and the potential inconsistencies within a narrative — e.g., regarding fictional facts or events. Analyzing Booth's and Nünning's models for detecting unreliability, Olson (2003) concludes that the two formulas are almost identical, and that both assume that the reader will judge the narrator as he would a real, personified individual. The author suggests an amplification of Booth's model of unreliability with the aim of reshaping the nature of unreliability and establishing some reasons for the many ways readers interpret this phenomenon. To develop this amplified model of unreliability, which distinguishes fallible from untrustworthy narrators, Olson (2003) approaches Phelan and Martin's (1999) classification of six types of unreliable renderings of a fictional story, dividing them into two categories. Olson (2003) affirms that narrators may (1) misreport, when they falsely disclose fictional events; (2) misread, an indicator that the narrator's perception is mistaken; or (3) misregard, when a narrator falsely evaluates the fictional events. The second group encompasses the narrator's (1) underreporting, which means not disclosing the entirety of the fictional events; (2) underreading, when the narrator simply cannot grasp the entirety of the

events; and (3) underregarding, an indicator that the narrator does not make a complete value judgment of an event.

Furthermore, Olson (2003) considers the limitations of homodiegetic narrators, who, as inhabitants of the fictional world, are subject to a biased perception. However, this circumstance does not necessarily point to irrefutable unreliability. Olson (2003) claims that fallible homodiegetic narrators can be categorized as such due to their limited education, experience or access to the events of a given story. The author cites examples of narrators who depend on documents, such as letters and diaries, or interviews with characters who might themselves be prejudiced, and identifies those narrators as fallible due to the controversiality of the information they have access to. Conversely, untrustworthy narrators can be regarded as such due to mental instability or insanity. Olson (2003) postulates that the reader has to evaluate whether the narrator exposes his untrustworthiness sufficiently to fall in this category. Moreover, there is always a possibility that a narrator shifts from fallibility to untrustworthiness during the course of a narration (OLSON, 2003).

The way a reader reacts to an untrustworthy narrator differs from how he would perceive a fallible one: untrustworthiness is associated with a doubtful character, whereas fallibility is more likely to present itself in a manner that might lead a reader to excuse a narrators' failures in terms of delivery (OLSON, 2003, p. 104-105). Another important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is that untrustworthiness and fallibility can vary in degree, and that one narrator can be more fallible than another – and vice-versa.

In light of the theoretical basis hitherto discussed, the subsequent chapter aims to apply the strategies, as defined by scholars, for recognizing narrative unreliability in fiction, as well as to identify the narratorial characteristics that might lead a reader to distrust the narrators of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel renderings of the story. In this perspective, Nünning's (1997), Mangolin's (2014), Chatman's (1978), Olson's (2003), and Phelan and Martin's (1999) considerations regarding the aforementioned literary phenomenon will serve as basis for the arguments presented in the analysis of excerpts taken from the object of scrutiny of the present monograph.

3 CHARACTERIZATION, OBJECTIFICATION, FAULTY MEMORY, AND IMPOSSIBLE SCENES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATION IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

The aim of the present chapter of this monograph is to discuss the events narrated in Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides*, as well as to describe its narrators and main characters. It is anticipated that the narrators of the novel may be deemed unreliable, untrustworthy, or fallible due to their emotional bias, faulty memory, explicit incapability of analyzing the fictional events, and hyper-romanticization of the five protagonists of the literary text. Thus, we will conduct an analysis of the narrators' account of the story, point of view, and potential unreliability by applying concepts and strategies cited in the first four sections of the literature review.

3.1 *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*: TEENAGE SUICIDE AND AMERICAN SUBURBAN LIFE

"Dark", "deadly", "dreamy", "eerie": those are only a few of the adjectives used to describe Pulitzer-prize winner and American writer Jeffrey Eugenides' debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (SIMS, 2018; TEMPLE, 2018; JANSEN, 2019). Published in 1993 and adapted for the screen in 2000 by director and screenwriter Sofia Coppola, the novel and its cinematic adaptation almost instantly achieved the status of cult classics. Its story centers around the lives and suicides of five teenage sisters who lived in a suburb of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, in the 1970s. Restrained by their inflexible Catholic parents, Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary and Therese Lisbon, aged from thirteen to seventeen years old, commit suicide in the summit of their youth, putting an end to their short-lived adolescence and to the neighborhood's peaceful environment. Cecilia, the youngest sister, is the first one to take her own life. What follows her suicide is the self-inflicted seclusion of the Lisbon family, which is reinforced and intensified after Lux Lisbon's failure to make curfew when Mrs. Lisbon, their rigid mother, allows them, in an unusual display of flexibility, to attend the school's homecoming dance. The family stops leaving the house altogether: the girls are taken out of school and Mr. Lisbon resigns his post as a math teacher. After months of isolation, the four remaining sisters, unable to leave the house, take their lives collectively and simultaneously. The novel follows the impact of their suicides on the narrators, their neighborhood and, ultimately, on American society.

The girls' story is told in retrospect in the form of flashbacks by an anonymous, nameless, and numberless group of middle-aged men whose families used to live in the same

neighborhood as the Lisbons. Finding themselves unable to fathom the girls' existence and their death, the narrators assume the role of tellers of a story "which [has] scarred [them] forever, making [them] happier with dreams than wives" (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 164). In their attempt to make sense of the suicides, this group of men reports and analyzes every single detail and souvenir – which they refer to as "exhibits" – they were able to collect during the last 20 years since the five sisters' suicides. Going through photographs, documents and objects and conducting interviews with more than fifty secondary and minor characters, such as the girls' parents, neighbors and school classmates, the narrators scrutinize the motives and circumstances that led the five girls to suicide and try to understand what their lives were like, although they do not manage to deliver a solid account of their story.

The Virgin Suicides approaches delicate subjects, namely teenage suicide and isolation, and has more than once scandalized its readers and reviewers. Given that suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers between 10-14 years old and the third cause of death among people aged 15-24 in the U.S. (CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, 2020), the reaction for Eugenides' delving into such a sensitive theme does not come as a surprise. Other themes, such as extreme religiousness and adolescence, merge to outline the American suburban atmosphere of the novel. It explores the female universe of teenage girls as perceived and visualized by young boys, now middle-aged men who, after two decades, try to fill the gaps of an intricate puzzle of events, gathering as much information as they possibly could to revisit and retell the story of the five Lisbon sisters, who are just as strangers to them as they become to their narratees. Throughout the novel, the focus of the story gradually shifts from its five female protagonists to its narrators, who, by telling the story of the objects of their desire and obsession, reveal more about themselves than about the Lisbon girls, who they still found impossible to decipher.

Jeffrey Eugenides's novel has received the most attention due to its "impossible voice" — i.e., the "we" narrators that chronicle the events that took place during the last two years of the five sisters' lives and the outcomes of their suicide on their acquaintances and ultimately on the neighborhood. According to Shostak (2009), the atypical use of the first-person plural narrative voice has been singled out by critics as one of the most singular features of the novel. Nonetheless, in the current of feminism, gender and female representation studies, another significant facet, mainly concerning the novel's narration, has been discussed and pointed out by both reviewers and common readers: its misogynistic portrayal and hyper-sexualization of teenage girls.

3.2 "THEY MADE US PARTICIPATE IN THEIR OWN MADNESS": THE "US" AND "THEM" IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

Since the five female protagonists of the novel are evoked and represented by male narrators, the reader seldom has access to the girls' thoughts and feelings through their own fictional voice. Given they are frequently referred to as "them", and that the narrators refer to themselves as "we", there is little characterization when it comes to the protagonists, as well as to the tellers of the story. The narrators do not share any information about themselves – or even regarding how many "I"'s are comprehended within the "we" –, arguably as an attempt to guarantee their moral irreproachability and distance the reader from themselves. Shostak (2009) and Temple (2018) contend that *The Virgin Suicides* is a feminist work, for it supposedly uncovers, in a critical manner, how men perceive women and, more specifically, teenage girls.

The narrators' incapability of perceiving the sisters as regular human beings accounts for the fact that they romanticize their existence and, ultimately, their death. The focus on their physical appearance — what the narrators can recall through memory and their precious mementos — overshadows their personalities, still indecipherable to the tellers of their tragic tale.

The Lisbons' mysticality in the eyes of the narrators is what appears to set them apart from other supposedly regular girls. However, as simply put by Temple (2018), they are indeed just teenage girls – something the narrators cannot conceive. The narrators find themselves unable to accept that the Lisbon girls and the memories they had of them were slipping away from them – as if they were ever within their grasp – and their storytelling seems to amount to a masturbatory attempt to keep those memories fresh.

In the first few pages of the novel, the narrators are mesmerized to find out the Lisbon sisters knew about their existence, and even more puzzled to learn that they knew their names. Having been invited for "the first and only party of their short lives" (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 21), the boys convey their bewilderment to the reader in a rather romantic passage:

> Our amazement at being formally invited to a house we had only visited in our bathroom fantasies was so great that we had to compare one another's invitations before we believed it. It was thrilling to know that the Lisbon girls knew our names, that their delicate vocal cords had pronounced their syllables, and that they meant something in their lives (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 21).

Only after arriving at the party and seeing the girls from a closer point of view, the narrators realize that "the Lisbon girls were all different people" (p. 23), although they continue

to refer to the sisters as "them", "the girls" or "the Lisbon sisters" throughout the entirety of the novel. Even though they knew them for years, the narrators could not discern one sister from another, which elucidates their generalization of their physical appearance: "Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings" (p. 23). What follows this conclusion is an oversimplified rendering of the girls' features: Bonaventure, or Bonnie, "had the sallow complexion and sharp nose of a nun" (p. 23); Therese "had a heavier face, the cheeks and eyes of a cow" (p. 23); Mary's "hair was darker; she had a widow's peak and fuzz above her upper lip" (p. 23); Lux "radiated health and mischief" (p. 24); and Cecilia was "the weird sister" (p. 37). These descriptions raise problems of characterization and individualization: the girls are seen as an entity rather than individuals. This aspect is once again reasserted when the narrators see the four sisters arriving at the school's homecoming dance, concluding that "in the dresses the Lisbon girls looked identical again" (p. 127).

3.3 "A CARNAL ANGEL": REASSESSING LUX LISBON'S OBJECTIFICATION AND HYPER-SEXUALIZATION

Albeit the fact that the sisters are, as aforementioned, mostly perceived and characterized as a group, one of the protagonists is given special attention on the part of the narrators due to her alleged "promiscuity" (p. 84) and "derangement" (p. 145). Lux Lisbon is the boldest, most audacious sister in comparison to Cecilia, Bonnie, Mary and Therese, and is the narrators' utmost object of focalization. Her characterization illustrates how they hyper-sexualize and objectify her, given she is referred to as an "angel" (p. 140, 143) – and to its opposite, a "succubus" (p. 142) — a female demon —, and described as a "force of nature", an "ice goddess" (p. 144). Those descriptions may be met with skepticism largely because she is a fourteen-year-old girl. The frequent comparisons with mystical and mythological beings forges an over-romanticized account of Lux's personality and physicality, and, given that she has no say in that matter, the reader either must accept and comply with the narrators' version of Lux or develop a new, more reasonable image of her.

The narrators' gradual sexualization of Lux reaches its summit "a few weeks after Mrs. Lisbon shut the house in maximum-security isolation", when "the sightings of Lux making love on the roof began" (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 136). The boys begin watching her from across the street, using binoculars to get a glimpse of Lux "copulating on the roof with faceless boys and men" (p. 140). The narrators admit that, even 25 years later, now middle-aged men, they still fantasize about an underage girl:

> [...] even now, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that it is always that pale wraith we make love to, always her feet snagged in the gutter, always her single blooming hand steadying itself against the chimney, no matter what our present lovers' feet and hands are doing. [...] in our most intimate moments, alone at night with our beating hearts, asking God to save us, what comes most often is Lux, succubus of those binocular nights. (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 141-142)

Apart from the many emotionally charged passages in which the narrators delve into their platonic passion for Lux, they also cite, as a source for the information they were able to gather about her, the only interviewee they deem reliable: Trip Fontaine, a young boy who dated her right after Cecilia's suicide. According to the storytellers, most of the boys who had got to know Lux were unreliable sources of information — apart from Trip. However, the narrators were only able to interview him years after the suicides due to his "sense of honor" (p. 65). Now a patient in a detoxification center, Trip reminisces about the time he spent with Lux, describing her as "the most naked person with clothes on he had ever seen" (p. 75). In his interview, Trip reports a scene in which Lux went to his car, after he had come to her house to watch television with her parents and sisters in order to get their permission to date her. However, the scene is described by the narrators without the use of quotation marks, which leads to the conclusion that the words they used were not exactly his:

> He felt himself grasped by his long lapels, pulled forward and pushed back, as a creature with a hundred mouths started sucking the marrow from his bones. She said nothing as she came on like a starved animal [...]. She was no longer wearing pants but a flannel nightgown. [...] He felt her clammy shins, her hot knees, her bristly thighs, and then with terror he put his finger in the ravenous mouth of the animal leashed below her waist. [...] Two beasts lived in the car, one above, snuffling and biting him, and one below, struggling to get out of its damp cage. Valiantly he did what he could to feed them, placate them [...]. (EUGENIDES, p. 81-82)

Comparing this excerpt to other passages in which Trip Fontaine is cited directly evinces that the tone of the speech, as well as the use of particularly poetic and romantic words, is more likely to convey the narrators' interpretation of Fontaine's interview. Constructions such as "creature with a hundred mouths", "starved animal", and "beast" are more characteristic of the narrators' speech, since they often use metaphors related to animals and mythical creatures to refer to Lux. Trip Fontaine's utterances seem more simplistic and down-to-earth: "I've never gotten over that girl, man. Never" (p. 71).

3.4 "WE WILL NEVER BE SURE ABOUT THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS": FAULTY MEMORY AND IMPOSSIBLE SCENES IN *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES*

As aforementioned, the narration of *The Virgin Suicides* focuses on the telling of a story that happened two decades prior, a circumstance that leads to problems related to faulty memory. We can argue that the narrators would hardly be able to remember every word uttered by each character in each scene unless they had recorded them — something that is not specified in the novel, but seems unlikely nonetheless. Some of the examples of their attempt to avert their faulty memory include descriptions of time, temperature, clothing accessories, and other similar, seemingly unimportant minutiae.

In one of the first pages of the novel, the narrators introduce the first of their many exhibits to the reader: a photograph of the Lisbon's house shortly before Cecilia's first suicide attempt. Discussing this specific memento, the narrators state that "it was June 13, eighty-three degrees out, under sunny skies" (p. 3). We can infer that such details, such as the day of the month and the temperature, are improbable to be remembered twenty years later. To all intents and purposes, the narrators try to fill in important gaps in their storytelling with random, irrelevant information, such as in their description of the immediate scene after Cecilia's second suicide attempt, in which they mention that "it was nearly nine o'clock" (p. 31) when the paramedics carried the youngest sister to the hospital.

To account for their lack of information regarding the girls' feelings, thoughts and, in a more general sense, their story, the narrators conduct interviews with more than 50 characters, ranging from family members and neighbors to classmates, teachers, dentists, psychiatrists and cemetery staff. Although they acknowledge that some of these characters are not reliable, the narrators proceed to cite all the information they were able to gather through their interviews as if it could replace the facts. Some of the characters provide conflicting accounts for the same event, and the reader has to choose whose version of the story he should trust — the narrators do not provide any elucidation on this matter. One example of this inconsistency is Mrs. Buell's and Mrs. Scheer's renderings regarding the reaction of Mrs. Lisbon when they brought a cake in sympathy a few days after Cecilia's suicide attempt:

> On the day Cecilia returned from the hospital, those two women brought over a Bundt cake in sympathy [...] "As soon as Lily and I took over that Bundt cake, that woman told the girls to go upstairs. We said, 'It's still warm, let's all have a piece', but she took the cake and put it in the refrigerator." [...] Mrs. Scheer remembered it differently. "I hate to say, but Joan's been potted for years. The truth is, Mrs. Lisbon thanked us quite graciously. Nothing seemed wrong at all." (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 15)

In another excerpt, the narrators, who were inside the Lisbons' house at the time of Cecilia's second suicide attempt, endeavor to understand the sequence of the events right before the youngest sister managed to take her own life. In consideration of the fact that they could not be at two places at the same time, the narrators did not see Cecilia's exact steps the very moments before she died. Resorting to another interview to account for this important gap, they cite Mrs. Pitzenberger's, a neighbor, report. Mrs. Pitzenberger tells them she thought Cecilia's parents were sending her on a trip, for she saw her carrying a suitcase, although, as indicated by the narrators, "no suitcase was ever found" (p. 43). As an explanation for this incongruity, the narrators mention that Mrs. Pitzenberger is a bifocal wearer. Although they disbelieved her account, they still move on to tell the story as if it were the truth.

Mr. Lisbon's interview seems to be one of the most relevant for the narrators' minutious analysis of the fictional events, given that he is the protagonists' father. Analogous to the narrators' accounts of the unfolding of events, his interviews bear specific details of scenes that happened many years before, which might lead the reader to wonder if he filled the gaps of his own memory with these minutiae or if the narrators colored the scene to make it seem more detailed and, consequently, reliable. As evidenced in the first sentence of the excerpt below, the narrators interviewed Mr. Lisbon years after the suicides, which also leads to a problem regarding his own potentially faulty memory:

> We went with him only later, invisibly, with the ghosts of our questions. Apparently, as he stepped back inside, he saw Therese come out of the dining room. She was stuffing her mouth with candy – M&M's, by the colors – but stopped immediately on seeing him. She swallowed an unchewed chunk. Her high forehead glowed in the light from the street and her cupid's lips were redder, smaller, and more shapely than he remembered, especially in contrast to her cheeks and chin, which had gained weight. Her eyelashes were crusted, as though recently glued shut. [...] Therese brushed the hair out of her face, smiled, and began walking slowly up the stairs." (EUGENIDES, 2018 p. 56)

Another critical interviewee to the narration of the novel is Lux's high school crush Trip Fontaine. Through Fontaine's lenses, the reader gets a glimpse of how Lux Lisbon really was; notwithstanding, the narrators not only paraphrase much of his utterances, but make it their own by inferring information and adding a range of adjectives, as exemplified in the excerpt included in the previous section.

"The only reliable boy who got to know Lux" (p. 65) was, according to the storytellers, an avid marijuana smoker and drug addict during high school: "Trip Fontaine went to his car three times a day, at ten-fifteen, twelve-fifteen, and three-fifteen, as though he wore a

wristwatch like Petrovich's that beeped at dose time" (p. 71). The comparison between Fontaine's drug habit and Peter Petrovich, one of the narrators' classmates, diabetes functions as a hyperbole to convey the intensity and frequency with which he used the hallucinogenic substance. Although the narrators suggest that his mnemonic details might have "been laced with the same THC in his blood" (p. 71) and seem to think that, therefore, they are not reliable, they cite them as if they should be taken as facts:

> Without consulting anyone or confessing his feelings for Lux, Trip Fontaine walked into Mr. Lisbon's classroom and stood at attention before his desk. He found Mr. Lisbon alone, in his swivel chair, staring vacantly at the planets hanging above his head. [...] "It's fourth period, Trip," he said wearily. "I don't have you until fifth." "I'm not here for math today, sir." "You're not?" "I'm here to tell you that my intentions toward your daughter are entirely honorable." Mr. Lisbon's eyebrows rose, but his expression was used up, as though six or seven boys had made the same declaration that very morning. "And what might those intentions be?" Trip brought his boots together. "I want to ask Lux to Homecoming." At that point, Mr. Lisbon told Trip to sit down, and for the next few minutes, in a patient voice, he explained that he and his wife had certain rules, they had been the same rules for the older girls and he couldn't very well change them now for the younger ones, even if he wanted to his wife wouldn't let him, ha ha, and while it was fine if Trip wanted to come over to watch television again, he could not, repeat not, take Lux out, especially in a car. [...] "I'm afraid it's just our policy," he said, finally. (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 108-109)

The details from the conversation with Mr. Lisbon as described by Trip Fontaine — i.e., his exact gestures and overall appearance at the time of their interview — also indicate issues related to faulty memory. The narrators affirm that the interview they conducted with Trip Fontaine happened in a "detoxification ranch where [he] had gone to dry out on the last of his ex-wife's savings" (p. 65), which may further increase the reader's suspicion, taking into consideration that he was under the influence of marijuana when the events the narrators retell happened and, during his interview, was recovering from another, unspecified addiction. The narrators admit to managing to get Trip Fontaine to talk due to "the recovering substance abuser's need to talk nonstop" (p. 71).

In the same vein of the narrators' potential faulty memory, we can point out the impossibility of a few fictional scenes reported in their narration, such as their description of Lux's underwear, in which she supposedly wrote Trip's name in water-soluble ink.

> Lux didn't seem to mind because her thoughts were filled with Trip Fontaine. She had gone back to writing names on her underthings, using water-soluble ink so that she could wash the "Trips" off before her mother saw them. [...] Presumably she confessed her feelings about Trip to her sisters, but no girl at school ever heard her mention his name." (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 113).

The impracticability of this specific account stems from the fact that the storytellers never mention an interview with a character that could have been aware of this specificity – and, as we can infer, they cannot have witnessed it themselves. They presume, notwithstanding, that Lux had told her sisters about her crush on Trip. However, as the term itself entails, the narrators cannot verify this assumption, since they did not interview the Lisbon sisters. Additionally, the water-soluble ink Lux supposedly used to write Trip's name on her underwear, as well as her intention for using this specific material, would only be accessible to the narrators through an interview with a character that could have witnessed it. Still, they state that "no girl at school ever heard [Lux] mention [Trip's] name" (p. 113). This consists of one of the most important gaps left out by the narrators while telling the girls' story, inasmuch as they do not specify the source for this information.

In summary, the description of past events and scenes are so minutely constructed and rich with details the reader may wonder whether the narrators' memories can be precise to this extent even 20 years after the incidents they are narrating or if they purposefully include other information to provide a more vibrant scene. Such remembrances may also be a product of their own imagination, given that they often misread events and account for scenes and conversations they have not witnessed. The interviews with other characters, intertwined with the actual narration of events, apparently befog the narrators even more, for, as previously asserted, they frequently present conflicting accounts for a given scene.

3.5 UNRELIABLE, FALLIBLE, UNTRUSTWORTHY? ASSESSING THE RELIABILITY OF THE NARRATORS OF EUGENIDES' NOVEL

Following Genette's (1972) typology, the narrators of the Lisbon sisters' tale would be categorized as homodiegetic; however, they frequently act as heterodiegetic, omniscient narrators, particularly when they describe an event they have not witnessed and do not provide a source for the information they share with the narratee.

Prince (1987) postulates that the distance between the narrators, the narrated events and the narratee varies according to the narrative. In *The Virgin Suicides*, we contend that the narrators are both close and distant to the narratee and to the events they narrate, for, inasmuch as they do not name themselves and do not provide any characterization regarding their own character, they address the narratee multiple times throughout the novel. As for the events narrated, they seem to be closer due to their proximity and involvement in the Lisbon girls' story; however, there is also a significant distance, considering the narrators have not witnessed

most of the events themselves, having to resort to interviews to assess what happened. We assert that the storytellers distance themselves morally from the narratee when they admit, as middle-aged men, their musings about a fourteen-year-old girl. This moral distance can also be attributed to their emotional bias: in the height of their obsession and passion, they visualize the five sisters as mythical beings, and not real, average teenage girls. The narrators distance the reader from their actual objects of focalization, providing new, self-constructed characters. Going through the entirety of their narration, the reader still does not know who the Lisbon girls were, much like the narrators themselves, and thus has to accept their rendering of the protagonists' personalities.

Following Niederhoff's (2014) concept of point of view, we can contend that the narration of the novel is influenced by the position and the personalities of the narrators; as characters in their own story, the storytellers assume the position of telling a tale they supposedly have witnessed. Moreover, the collective narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* – the "we" that does not identify the "I's" – conveys little to no individualization: the reader cannot discern one narrator from the other. Thus, *The Virgin Suicides* presents an impossible voice, a collective of narrators that produce the same utterances and share the same thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. In this regard, we can argue that the narrators present an equal ideological voice, which would correspond to a "polyphonic narration", a "many-voiced" rendering of a story (USPENSKY, 1973).

The narrators of the novel would correspond to Friedman's (1955) third mode of representation in a narrative — i.e. the "I" as witness mode. As aforementioned, the narrators tell the tale of the Lisbon girls through their own words, but they also include excerpts of dialogues and entries from Cecilia's diary, providing, as pointed out by Niederhoff (2014) and Friedman (1955), glimpses of other people's perspectives. However, as homodiegetic narrators, they cannot enter the minds and access the thoughts of other characters and are subject to personal interpretation of the information they acquire throughout their storytelling — e.g., when one of the narrators "decodes" Cecilia's diary, one of their most valuable exhibits, according to his own viewpoint. In this perspective, the narration of the novel would correspond to Genette's (1972) third degree of focalization, summarized by the formula "narrator < character", which indicates that a given narrator discloses less information than what a character knows.

Vuillaume (2021) argues that the use of the first-person plural "we" is used to indicate that the narrators were close to the sisters, although they were not. This aspect can be attributed to the fact that there is no distinct "I"s in the "we" that tells the story; therefore, a reader might

infer that at least one of these "I"s could have had a closer relationship with the protagonists. However, we can deduce that the non-individualization of the narrators can serve as a narrative strategy, a way to "not take the blame" and concomitantly deliver what could have been a more reliable account of fictional events, particularly because, as a group, an individual might remember something others do not, and, as a collective, they might agree on a given interpretation or rendering of a scene, which supposedly makes it more reliable, for it has been assessed by a group of people. Shostak (2009) also presents a similar perception of the use of the collective voice in the narration of The Virgin Suicides, arguing that "it promises to offer a more reliable point of view than one might expect from a single voice" (p. 809). In choosing not to name themselves, the narrators tend to shift the focus from themselves to the objects of their contemplation: the Lisbon girls.

Forasmuch as the narrators present multiple characteristics that indicate a textbook unreliable narration, other aspects that might influence this assessment need to be taken into consideration, particularly regarding the degree to which the narrators can be considered unreliable. It has been hitherto ratified that homodiegetic, first-person narrators are more prone to be deemed unreliable by a given reader. However, according to Olson (2003), this aspect does not necessarily indicate narrative unreliability. Nünning (1997) postulates that the assessment of a narrator's reliability rests upon the interpretation of the reader, which will, in turn, evaluate the narration according to his own perspective. Pointing out aspects that might indicate a potential unreliable account of fictional events, Nünning (1997) cites textual contradictions, strong emotional bias, and misapprehension of facts on the part of the narrator. In this respect, we can argue that the conflicting accounts the narrators acknowledge as factual is an aspect that amounts to inner inconsistencies. Additionally, the narrators might be emotionally biased due to their trauma and their obsession towards the protagonists, whose story is the focus of their narrative. This claim can be supported by their own account of their reaction when seeing Bonnie Lisbon hanging from the ceiling minutes after the four remaining sisters committed suicide. The narrators state that they were not able to react for one minute but recall specific feelings and emotions related to this event, which is an aspect that also indicates how deeply moved and affected they were by the protagonists' suicides.

In an excerpt of the novel, the narrators admit that, probably due to trauma, they suffered a "mental dislocation" after Cecilia's suicide, "which only grew worse through the course of the remaining deaths", and that "the prevailing symptom of this state was an inability to recall any sound" (p. 147). This "mental dislocation" also suggests a potential incapacity to fathom and interpret things, which is indicative of an unreliable narrator. Notwithstanding, if we consider

Mangolin's (2014) assumption that a narrator might recognize his lack of information or inability to assess fictional events and thus alter the degree of unreliability of his account, the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* cannot be considered altogether unreliable. Unreliability, untrustworthiness and fallibility can vary in terms of degree; therefore, the narrators of Eugenides' novel, in revealing their incapacity to fathom the protagonists' motives and emotions to the reader, would be at the lower end of the spectrum of unreliability. When the narrators admit they "didn't understand why Cecilia had killed herself the first time" and "understood even less when she did it twice" (p. 29), and when they state that "trying to locate the girls' exact pain is like the self-examination doctors urge [them] to make" (p. 165), they recognize their incapability of understanding the Lisbon girls' feelings. Towards the ending of their narration, they also state that

> Many of us continued to have dreams in which the Lisbon girls appeared to us more real than they had been in life, and we awoke certain that their scent of the next world remained on our pillows. Almost daily we met to go over the evidence once again, reciting portions of Cecilia's journal [...]. Nevertheless, we always ended these sessions with the feeling that we were retracing a path that led nowhere, and we grew more and more sullen and frustrated. (EUGENIDES, 2018, p. 233)

Olson's (2003) differentiation between untrustworthy and fallible narrators, as well as the assumption that both categories can be of a variable magnitude, indicates that the narrators scrutinized in the present monograph fall into the category of fallibility rather than untrustworthiness. Olson (2003) proposes three aspects that denote fallibility: a limitation when it comes to (1) education, (2) experience or (3) access to the fictional events. Considering the narrators resort to documents and interviews to tell the Lisbon sisters' story, we can assert that they have limited access to facts and events and try to account for this limitation through other characters' perspectives and renderings of events.

Conversely, there is no evidence within the novel that might point out mental instability or illness on the part of the storytellers, although we can infer their deep trauma and their incapability to elaborate the events that change their lives forever. Thus, we cannot maintain that they are untrustworthy. Another aspect pointed out by Olson (2003) that can indicate potential untrustworthiness is a sense of self-interest on the part of the narrator, who dispositionally conveys an unreliable account of a given story. Even though the narrators seem to try to convince the reader of their own point of view, we can attribute this circumstance more to their limitation as homodiegetic narrators – for, as individuals, they cannot help but narrate the story as they visualize and interpret – than to an attempt to purposefully deceive the reader.

Fallibility can also be associated with a display of controversial information, which, as mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, is also present in the narration of Eugenides' novel.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present chapter of this monograph aims to discuss and draw final conclusions regarding the results observed and demonstrated through the analysis of the narration of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel. As previously discussed, the polyphonic voice in *The Virgin Suicides* has been highlighted as one of its most unique aspects, and the novel has been hitherto considered a trademark of a narrative with a first-person plural narrator. Due to this distinctive feature, researchers and critics have often focused on the analysis of the collective — and sometimes deemed impossible — voice conveyed through the narration of the novel. Consequently, a relevant characteristic regarding the narration in Eugenides' novel has not been thoroughly analyzed — i.e., the reliability of its narrators.

In this perspective, the main aim of this research was to assess the reliability of the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*. As a means of fulfilling this main aim, we conducted a thorough research and bibliographical review of key concepts for the understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon of narrative unreliability.

The discussion and analysis of the scientific literature pertaining to the concept of narrator, point of view and reliability hence provided a solid theoretical background for the assessment of the unreliable narrator in Eugenides' novel. In this respect, the review of these concepts supported the conclusion that the narration analyzed in this monograph can be categorized as unreliable to a certain degree, an outcome anticipated during the preliminaries of this research. Moreover, differing between fallible and untrustworthy narrators proved itself to be a cogent strategy for analyzing the reliability of a given narrator.

Through the analysis of excerpts and some characteristics concerning the narration of Eugenides' novel, we reached the conclusion that its unreliable narrators can be categorized as fallible due to their potential faulty memory and lack of access to fictional information regarding the objects of their focalization. In recognizing and ascertaining their incapability of reaching any sort of conclusion as to the motives that led the five Lisbon sisters to suicide, the male narrators are more likely to be excused by the reader for their failures in the rendering of the fictional events.

Regarding untrustworthiness, there is not substantial evidence to support the argument that the narrators can be considered dispositionally unreliable. Furthermore, we cannot contend that the storytellers are mentally unstable or ill, although the evidently traumatic events they experienced outline the characterization of their main objects of focalization and render their

narration emotionally charged – another aspect that, as aforementioned, indicates a potential unreliable narration.

In addition, some of the interviewees cited in the novel present conflicting accounts for the same event. Thus, the reader has reasons to distrust their renderings. Since much of the information collected through interviews would serve as a fundamental basis for the unraveling of the plot, this significative gap, which the narrators cannot fulfill due to their inaccessibility to fictional data, has to be accounted for in view of the fact that it influences the story altogether. As inhabitants of the fictional world, the homodiegetic, personalized narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* are limited to a biased perception of events, a particularity that, when taken into consideration by the reader, may change his interpretation of the text.

One of the most important limitations of the present research is the lack of scientific material pertaining to the reliability of first-person plural narrators, given that the polyphonic voice is an uncommon occurrence in literature. Another significant impediment for the accomplishment of the main objective of this monograph is the lack of consensus concerning the procedures one is supposed to follow to assess the reliability of a given narrator. Since there is still a considerable hesitation pertaining to the definition of narrative unreliability, and that oftentimes researchers present conflicting views of the nature of this literary phenomenon, we suggest that further research is needed in order to outline its essence.

Notwithstanding, we anticipate that the study conducted in this monograph, as well as the conclusions reached through the analysis of excerpts of Eugenides' novel, may contribute to future studies on narrative unreliability. Although thoroughly researched by different scholars, the strategies for assessing a narrator's reliability remain vague and uncertain largely due to the fact that there is not a consensus regarding the particularities within a literary text that might demonstrate that a narrator is not to be trusted by the reader.

In light of this circumstance, we expect that this research has demonstrated the importance of the assessment of a narrator's reliability in a reader's interpretation of a given text. We hope it may also serve as a theoretical contribution to the vast scientific literature encompassing narratology and the narrative unreliability in literature.

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