

“The Sisters Strike Back”: Rock Music and Modes of Resistance in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*

Abstract

“The Sisters Strike Back”: Rock Music and Modes of Resistance in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* explores the gendered intersection between rock music and literature through Jeffrey Eugenides's critically acclaimed debut novel. The paper offers a reading of the boy-girl conflict at the center of the novel's plot by taking the reader through the musically and sexually charged episodes of the tale. Rock music's erotic appeal, its teenage quality, its sense of crossing borders and violating decorum – all these aspects are enclosed in a discussion of the narrative violence and the performativity that control the novel's action. By drawing on the girl groups of the 1960s and the Laurel Canyon crew (Joni Mitchell, Carole King and Linda Ronstadt) on the one hand, and gender theory from Judith Butler to contemporary works on queer theory and popular culture on the other, the article attempts to provide a historical reading of the novel's gender conflict as a form of a broader, cultural melancholia. Circling in on a close analysis of the harmonic structures that underlie the pop songs which the boys and girls “exchange” over the telephone, I argue that *The Virgin Suicides* cannot be sufficiently appreciated without precisely this musical illumination. Accordingly, I propose that rock music ultimately provides Eugenides with means and strategies to subvert the traditional gender binary and mobilize the previously unheard voices of the novel's female protagonists. The article's encompassing engagement with rock music in Eugenides's novel thus makes for a captivating exploration of the ways popular music has inspired, impacted and transformed both gender relations and American literary production.