

# Comparative Woman

---

Volume 1  
Issue 1 *Spirituality*

Article 3

---

12-30-2018

## MEN WHO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN

Grace Pulliam  
*Louisiana State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/comparativewoman>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pulliam, Grace (2018) "MEN WHO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN," *Comparative Woman*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: [10.31390/comparativewoman.1.1.02](https://doi.org/10.31390/comparativewoman.1.1.02)

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/comparativewoman/vol1/iss1/3>

## MEN WHO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN Grace Pulliam

One of the many purposes of literature is to represent the respective culture it belongs to. Likewise, one of the most important facets of literary study is to piece together a clear impression of the cultural institutions, social functions, and normative sanctions of a given society using the literary artifacts it leaves behind. This explains why we know so little about the thoughts, motivations, and interactions of our prehistoric ancestors, and why the invention of written language was so imperative for the continuity of knowledge and understanding through generations. By reflecting on the literature of the past, we can gain a greater wisdom of the human condition as something that transcends vast oceans of culture and time.

Written over two thousand years apart from each other, *Antigone* and *The Virgin Suicides* are similar but unrelated stories which both ask the reader to contemplate the philosophical motivations of young women who, finding themselves at odds with their presiding sovereignties, end their own lives.

*Antigone* is one of many literary artifacts from a very well-documented time in ancient history: the empire of ancient Greece. It was a champion of its genre, written by esteemed philosopher and playwright Sophocles in 441 BCE. The work entails the plight of its title character, Antigone; a young woman who defies the will of the tyrant king Creon in order to bury the body of her brother Polynices, a known war criminal. Eventually, Antigone is jailed for civil disobedience and hangs herself to die on her own terms. Though it was written two thousand and four hundred years ago, particularly as a reflection and criticism of ancient Grecian society, the themes dealt with in *Antigone* are still familiar today, and present in contemporary literature.

Jefferey Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, set in the 1970s America, focuses on the five teenage Lisbon sisters, individually eccentric and collectively mysterious. Told in retrospect, through the prying-eyed perspective of their male acquaintances in the neighborhood, the novel portrays the sisters as living in an especially conservative and religious household, oppressive to their burgeoning curiosities about the outside world. There are five of them: Cecilia, thirteen; Lux, fourteen; Bonnie, fifteen; Mary, sixteen; and Therese, seventeen. Together they suffer from isolation, interdependence, and inability to connect truly with their peers, fostering a shared fatalistic outlook. Cecilia is the first to kill herself.

Cecilia's death is the event that alienates the Lisbon sisters from the fabric of their world. Like Polynices, Cecilia is a traitor: to the unspoken covenant of her birthright, to the facade of order and peace which fortifies the suburban globule she belongs to. In *Antigone*, Polynices' body is left where it lays, visible to whoever wishes to see it but, by King Creon's decree, purely untouchable. In *The Virgin Suicides*, not only is Cecilia's suicide a highly public act, it's a topic of discussion about which seemingly every member of the community has a differing opinion, tailored to fit their own interests and levels of experience. Despite this, very little actually changes in the Lisbon household as a result of Cecilia's death.

Mrs. Lisbon, a specimen of the kind of authoritative, loveless praxis that sent the Lisbon girls in search of an exit, feels betrayed by Cecilia's suicide much in the same way that Creon feels betrayed by Polynices: in Cecilia's death she has lost a former subject. Like Creon, Mrs Lisbon goes mad with power in an attempt to repress the freedoms of her subjects. And in Mrs Lisbon's case, the age-old notions hold true: the repressed meet their end in an act of bittersweet

retribution; and the repressor, wiser now, is humbled by the infinite sadness of loss. “Lead me away. I have been rash and foolish. / I have killed my son and my wife. / I look for comfort; my comfort lies here dead. / Whatever my hands have touched has come to nothing. / Fate has brought all my pride to a thought of dust.” (Sophocles 1034-38)

The Lisbon sisters exist almost as components of a singular entity; the composite of which forms a complete protagonist, comparable to Antigone. The older sisters are more reformed to their mother’s rule, generally quiet and inconsequential to the story for some time. The younger sisters’ actions are driven by a desire to distinguish themselves from their mother, a prudish housewife. It’s no coincidence that the first to go, Cecilia, is the youngest of the sisters: in her young age, Cecilia is the least reformed to the kind of societal norms criticized in *The Virgin Suicides*. Following Cecilia’s death the girls undergo a relatively unseen change which is only fully realized when they kill themselves almost exactly a year later.

The question that remains is this: why did the Lisbon girls resolve to kill themselves? Had they simply been driven mad by circumstance? Like with any case of suicide, all is speculation except that which comes straight from the mouth of the victim themselves. Luckily, the Lisbon sisters and their deaths exist strictly in the literary sense, meaning it’s possible to apply literary methods to demystify their motivations as characters within a story.

For that reason, it’s useful to have access to a work of literature like *Antigone*, which is similar both in structure and in function to *The Virgin Suicides*, to provide some clarity. Given that the two works of literature share a common message, it’s possible to make assumptions about one story by directly relating it to the other. Antigone killed herself not because she was mad, but because she saw death as the preferable alternative to a presumed lifetime of imprisonment. The exact same is true for the Lisbon sisters, who each must’ve realized that they, too, were prisoners; prisoners of a different kind, free to move about in the world but forever detained by their mother’s invisible chains.

They were not insane. The decision they made was calculated, whether it was made out of devotion to their sister, or out of execration for their mother, or out of aversion to whatever mundane lives surely awaited them. Just like Antigone, the act of suicide was the final and greatest act of rebellion against a world they knew to be uncaring and voyeuristic and grim.

Somewhat unfortunately, *The Virgin Suicides* is written in a way that deliberately inhibits the reader’s understanding of the characters’ motivations and feelings. It’s structurally reminiscent not only of *Antigone* but of many classical Greek tragedies. The majority of the story is told in third person, recounting only what was said and done, but with no real insight as to the innermost thoughts of the characters in question. “In the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn’t name,” (Eugenides 181).

The main difference between the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* and the chorus of *Antigone* is reliability. The chorus of *Antigone* has the benefit of existing alongside the story, possessing the given trust of the audience, exercising somewhat divine omniscience and infinite wisdom. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrator is - unhappily, madly - human. The reader is given only anecdotes, presented as facts, diluted by time and obsession, smoke and mirrors, but never granted the simple courtesy of an explanation or an ending -- in its place, only a grim reminder that the story has no end.

“It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn’t heard us calling them, still do not hear us...calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in

suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.” (Eugenides).

*Antigone* and *The Virgin Suicides* have nearly identical endings. That is to say, neither story ends with the death of the main character, the perceived heroine. In fact the deaths themselves seem insignificant, and anticlimactic -- such that they could be seen not as the conclusion of some great cycle, not as the climax, but as a prelude to a life unseen; that which takes place outside of the story's boundaries.

I speak of course of the faceless male voices which guide both stories to their ends. Men, who escape with their lives, and claim a final say about the deaths of the women they knew. Men who have, only by proxy, only through female suffering, have learned their cosmic lessons. *Antigone* closes with Creon declaring newfound moral, a new and righteous man in the wake of tragedy. It is because of *Antigone's* living acts of rebellion, and her death, that he has been reborn. In the same way, it's abundantly clear that the male narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* undergoes some sort of metamorphosis as a result of the Lisbon suicides; makes the significant shift between childhood and adulthood. He has lost his innocence. Maybe a small price to pay, considering that five girls lose their lives in the process.

Despite this, the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides* is not unsympathetic. Even wretched Creon, tyrant Creon, who -- unlike the boys of *The Virgin Suicides*, who were little more than bystanders -- was directly to blame for the deaths in *Antigone*, is not completely evil, not completely mad, because he did, indeed, learn his lesson (if he is to be believed).

Both *Antigone* and *The Virgin Suicides* have been lauded as rule-breaking, women-driven stories about tragedy, devotion, and death. While both pieces of literature handle subjects of gender politics poignantly, they are -- at their core -- stories about men, something too rarely addressed by critics, especially considering that in both cases this seems intentional. Both *Antigone* and *The Virgin Suicides* are stories of young women, written by adult men. Jefferey Eugenides was thirty three years old when he published *The Virgin Suicides*, and Sophocles roughly in his fifties when *Antigone* debuted. It seems no coincidence that both are so close in age to their respective literary mouth-pieces. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrator is quick to admit that, even after many years had passed, the Lisbons -- and, by extension, all women -- remained a complete mystery to him. Art is, by definition, autobiographical, and literature especially should be representative not only of the culture it hails from but of its singular creator. So it's only fitting that *Antigone* and *The Virgin Suicides* turned out to be, in the end, only stories about men who watch women. Men who learn from women. Men who write about women.

WORK CITED

“Art as Inherently Autobiographical.” *ENTKUNSTUNG*, 23 Jan. 2018,  
Sophocles. *Antigone*. 442AD.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993.

Coppola, Sofia. *The Virgin Suicides*. 1999.

Kakutani, Michiko. “Books of The Times; Of Death in Adolescence And Innocence Lost.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 19 Mar. 1993,  
[www.nytimes.com/1993/03/19/books/books-of-the-times-of-death-in-adolescence-and-innocence-lost.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/19/books/books-of-the-times-of-death-in-adolescence-and-innocence-lost.html).