munity, trying to stop it being ‘infiltrated’ or ‘corrupted’ by others. Conversely, anyone seen to upset the suburb’s pastoral peace becomes the target of the narrator’s othering – a strategy that is most readily apparent in the case of Trip Fontaine, who is associated with all kinds of others, and whom the narrator subtly frames as the villain of his story. Tellingly, however, the narrator not only admits that he had to “cobble together” the story of Trip and Lux’s love affair; he also observes that it “began on a day when Trip Fontaine attended the wrong history class” (75), as if obliquely to admit that Trip has simply stumbled into a lesson about the past that happens not to be the right one for him. Trip, in short, ends up playing the role of a discursive scapegoat for the narrator.22

The Function of Sacrificial Violence

In order to understand more fully Trip’s role as a discursive scapegoat, as well as its relation to the narrator’s sacralization of the Lisbon girls, we need to examine in some detail René Girard’s thesis that sacrifice is a means of deflecting intra-communal violence. In Violence and the Sacred (1972), Girard argues that all communities are threatened by the possibility of internal rivalry and conflict, and that sacrificial rites are one means of re-directing this type of violence in order to preserve the unity of the group in question (4–8). John Pahl has usefully summarized Girard’s complex argument as a sequence of six basic steps:

1. **Mimetic Desire / Acquisitive Mimesis:** A subject (individual or group) imitates a rival’s desire for an object
2. **Crisis of Differentiation / Rivalry:** Conflict for the object is threatened, or occurs
3. **The Scapegoat / Legitimation of Violence:** A scapegoat is identified whose elimination can resolve rivalry without fear of reprisal or escalating vengeance
4. **Sacrifice / Enactment of Violence:** The scapegoat is expelled or killed; the object’s possession is clarified
5. **Restoration of Order:** Unanimity (temporarily) prevails
6. **Repetition, Masking, and Prevention through Religion:** Myth, ritual, prohibition, and (eventually) apotheosis of the victim (“the Sacred”)

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22 The idea of discursive sacrifice is inspired by a comment by Alex Woloch, who observes in a study of minor characters in fiction that narrative competition is often played out not only on the level of plot, but also on the level of discourse, with characters being “wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed” in the sense of being marginalized or excluded from the text and its telling (25).
create a cycle of desire, enactment, and restoration that sanctions “legitimate” violence, but rules out unchecked rivalry (29)

According to Girard’s model, an internal conflict arises from rivaling desires that are centered on the same object (steps 1 and 2). This conflict can be resolved if the group manages to agree on a surrogate victim or scapegoat (step 3) who is “expelled or killed” in an act that restores the unity of the group (steps 4 and 5; see Girard 84–86). Myth, ritual, and prohibition subsequently serve as means of stabilizing the outcome in order to prevent future outbursts of “unchecked rivalry” (step 6). In assuming a “mythico-ritual character,” sacrificial violence is not only directed outward, but also “conceals the site of the original violence” (Girard 261). In the process, the original violence is masked or disguised, and the group must to some extent misunderstand the nature of the sacrificial act for it to be effective (7). Ultimately, Girard contends, by “channeling its energies into ritual forms and activities sanctioned by ritual, the cultural order prevents multiple desires from converging on the same object” (158), and thus ensures its continuing existence.

The best way to apply Girard’s model to The Virgin Suicides is to begin with the notion of internal rivalry and focus on those internal conflicts that could potentially tear the group of boys apart. The first of two sources of rivalry has to do with the role of the Lisbon girls as the objects of desire for the group of boys. As mentioned earlier, in Eugenides’s novel we never learn precisely how many boys form part of the group. We do know, however, that their number exceeds that of the Lisbon sisters because, when Trip goes to the homecoming ball with Lux, it is only “some of us” who are chosen to accompany Mary, Therese, and Bonnie (115). The boys, in other words, are rivals in their desire for the Lisbon girls – and it is precisely this kind of internal rivalry that, according to Girard, can undermine the unity of a group and, thereby, threaten its very existence. Perversely, then, from the narrator’s point of view the fact that the Lisbon sisters kill themselves constitutes a solution to the problem of internal rivalry, and it is thus no coincidence that he presents the scene of Cecilia’s first suicide attempt in terms of a sacrificial rite:

Mrs. Lisbon burst onto the porch, trailing Cecilia’s flannel nightgown, and let out a long wail that stopped time. Under the molting trees and above the blazing, overexposed grass those four figures paused in tableau: the two slaves [i.e. the paramedics] offering the victim to the altar (lifting the stretcher into the truck), the priestess bran-
dishing the torch (waving the flannel nightgown), and the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips. (6)

As part of his mythical reconstruction of the past (Shostak 818), the narrator describes this scene as a sacrificial act that is, of course, traumatizing for the boys as individuals. At the same time, from the point of view of the group the Lisbon girls’ suicides constitute an act of terminal violence that, as Girard suggests, “can only be labeled sacrificial retrospectively, because it brought all hostilities to an end” (132). Put in the bluntest terms: had the girls lived, then the boys’ friendship might not have survived.

If this interpretation seems disturbing and even callous, then this is in fact part of the point, for as Moshe Halbertal has noted in his study On Sacrifice (2012), feelings of guilt almost inevitably arise from the practice of sacrificial violence. According to Halbertal, sacrifice in the biblical sense “is a substitute for the violence that the offerer might himself deserve” (i.e. an act of atonement in the face of God; 32). Halbertal also contends that this view of sacrifice is incompatible with Girard’s model, as the offerer is not motivated by a desire for violence, but instead by fear and anxiety. However, perhaps it is possible to reconcile Girard’s and Halbertal’s positions, for if communal conflict were to escalate, then everyone who is part of that community might become the victim of violence – which in turn would explain widespread feelings of fear and anxiety. A second disagreement between Halbertal and Girard relates to the question of the victim’s innocence, for while Halbertal regards innocence as necessary because this renders the victim “capable of becoming a vehicle for ultimate projection” (33), Girard holds that the victim’s innocence or guilt are simply irrelevant because it is the victim’s status as “relatively indifferent” to – i.e. as not truly important for – the community that make him or her appear “sacrificeable” (4). Despite these differences, however, both Halbertal (34) and Girard (1) observe that the act of sacrifice itself always threatens to look like a crime because the sacrifice does not constitute a just punishment of the victim (for Halbertal because the victim is innocent, and for Girard because sacrifice has nothing to do with punishment in the first place). Without glossing over their fundamental disagreement, we can thus say that both Halbertal and Girard view acts of sacrifice as ‘borderline crimes’ that are, for that very reason, likely to lead to a sense of guilt on the part of those who commit – and benefit from – the sacrificial act.

This last point is crucial for a reading of The Virgin Suicides because guilt and mutual reproach are another factor that could lead to conflict within the group of boys. We have seen that, from the perspective of the group as a whole (i.e. from the narrator’s point of view), the Lisbon suicides constitute a ‘sacrifice’
that solves the problem of internal rivalry. However, precisely because the boys as a group benefit from the suicides, their collective identity is haunted by a sense of guilt. In addition, there is the much more concrete sense of guilt that each of the boys is likely to feel because, as John R. Jordan and John L. McIntosh put it, in the aftermath of suicide “[g]uilt can be felt regarding what one did, did not do, imagined one might have done, and so forth” (31). Jordan and McIntosh also observe that one way of reacting to such feelings of guilt is to blame others and thereby cast the focus “away from oneself” (30). In the case of the group of boys in The Virgin Suicides, this could quickly lead to a vicious circle of mutual reproach and so undermine the boys’ sense of communal belonging. There is thus a need for yet another surrogate victim, and this is – as we have seen – Trip Fontaine: the discursive scapegoat on whom the boys can shift the full weight of communal blame.

In the case of The Virgin Suicides at least, Halbertal’s idea of the victim’s necessary innocence thus works less well than Girard’s model; after all, Trip’s extremely insensitive treatment of Lux may well have contributed to the suicides, but this is not the true reason why the group of boys choses him as their primary scapegoat. Rather, what makes Trip ‘sacrificeable’ is that he is close to but not truly part of the community; because of his good looks and success with women (including Lux Lisbon), Trip has long been the object of envy and resentment for the boys, and his discursive destruction thus combines the sweet taste of revenge with the relief that comes when one is, finally, absolved from guilt. Tellingly, the final reference to Trip reports his dismissal in a letter clearly written by Lux Lisbon, one of the ‘sacred’ and adored girls:

Dear whoever,
Tell Trip I’m over him.
He’s a creep.
Guess Who (192; original emphasis)

Trip’s eradication on the level of discourse is thus sanctioned on the level of the story by an act of ‘divine’ rejection which simultaneously eliminates Trip as a rival for the group of boys.

And yet, Girard’s model suggests that the sacrificial solution can only become permanent if its true function is masked or disguised, for instance through myth, ritual, or what Pohl calls the “apotheosis of the victim” (29). We have already seen that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides constitute the primary act of ‘sacrificial’ violence in the sense that they solve the problem of intra-communal rivalry for the boys, and we have also examined the extent to which the narrator portrays them as semi-divine, mythical creatures. The discursive destruction of Trip, by