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The Cult of Donna Tartt: Themes and Strategies in *The Secret History*

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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos orientada pelo Professor Doutor Carlos Azevedo

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

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Porto, 23 de Setembro

Ana Rita Catalão Guedes

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on Donna Tartt's much beloved 1992 novel, *The Secret History,* exploring its ambiguous portrayal of the university and the manner in which it uses its ill-defined female characters to bring themes like class and death to its campus setting.

We begin by establishing *The Secret History* both as a campus novel and as a work of American Gothic. Scholars such as Leslie Fiedler and Charles L. Crow feature heavily in these pages, allowing us to understand the American Gothic tradition from which the book draws. Authors like John O. Lyons and Elaine Showalter, on the other hand, provide crucial aid to contextualizing *The Secret History* as a late addition to the minor Anglo-American genre of the campus novel.

The second chapter draws on this revision to focus on the way the novel both critiques an idealized and elitist idea of education and exposes the hollowness of the American promise of social mobility in itself. If the American Gothic shows the underbelly of the promise of an enlightened nation, Tartt exposes those fractures by bringing its violence and decay to the American campus.

Finally, we discuss three major themes at the novel's core through an analysis of its three most notable female characters: Camilla, Judy and Sophie. Camilla, an object of desire, is irrevocability tied to the issues of class that plague Richard throughout the entire narrative. Judy provides comic relief, but also an ambivalent and peculiar example of the American tendency towards anti-intellectualism. Sophie, at last, becomes the definitive symbol of Richard's total failure to either transcend his origins or settle into an 'ordinary' life. Notoriously thinly sketched as they might be, we argue that *The Secret History*'s female character prove crucial to understanding the conflicts at heart of Tartt's book.

More than two decades after its publication, Tartt's novel remains a subject of fierce critical and popular discussion. By analyzing it in the very realm of academia in which it is set in, we are hopefully contributing to the understanding of its enduring appeal.

Keywords: American Gothic, Campus novel, Donna Tartt, The Secret History

Resumo

Esta dissertação discute *The Secret History*, o popular romance de Donna Tartt publicado em 1992, explorando o seu retrato ambíguo da universidade e a forma como as suas indefinidas personagens femininas trazem os temas da classe e da morte ao cenário do campus.

Começamos por estabelecer *The Secret History* como romance académico e como obra de *American Gothic*. O trabalho de Leslie Fiedler e Charles L. Crow ajuda-nos a compreender a tradição americana na qual o livro se insere. Já as obras de John O.Lyons e Elaine Showalter fornecem um contributo crucial para contextualizar *The Secret History* enquanto adição ao género menor do romance académico.

O segundo capítulo parte desta revisão e incide sobre a forma como o romance critica uma ideia idealizada e elitista da educação, expondo a natureza ilusória da própria ideia americana de mobilidade social. Se o *American Gothic* mostra a sombra da promessa de uma nação iluminada, Tartt expõe essa escuridão ao trazer a sua violência e podridão ao campus americano.

Finalmente, discutimos três dos maiores temas presentes no romance através da análise das suas principais personagens femininas: Camilla, Judy e Sophie. Camilla, objeto de desejo, está inerentemente ligada ao tema da classe que assombra Richard ao longo da narrativa. Judy fornece o alívio cómico, mas também um exemplo peculiar e ambivalente da tendência Americana para o anti-intelectualismo. Por último, Sophie torna-se num símbolo definitivo do total falhanço de Richard, que nem transcende as suas origens nem se consegue conformar com uma vida ‘comum’. Embora notoriamente inacessíveis, as personagens femininas de *The Secret History* fornecem um contributo crucial para compreender os conflitos no centro da obra de Tartt.

Mais de duas décadas depois da sua publicação, o romance de Tartt permanece objeto de acesa discussão crítica e popular. Ao analisá-lo no domínio da academia em que a ação se passa, esperamos contribuir para a compreensão do seu contínuo apelo para os leitores.

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À minha mãe, de quem tanto me lembrei ao ler Tartt descrever a pequena boneca sulista que é a dela.

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List of Abbreviations

When citing Donna Tartt’s novels, we have chosen to use the following abbreviations:

TSH – *The Secret History (*1992)

TLF – *The Little Friend* (2002)

TG – *The Goldfinch* (2013)

The full references to the editions cited can be found in the main bibliography.

Introduction

But who am I to give lessons? There are no real messages in my fiction. The first duty of the novelist is to entertain. It is a moral duty. People who read your books are sick, sad, traveling, in the hospital waiting room while someone is dying. Books are written by the alone for the alone.

Donna Tartt, interview by USA Today (Moore, 2002)

Who is Donna Tartt? We must resist the urge to begin this section with one of the many anecdotes attached to the writer of *The Secret History,* whose peculiarities and carefully curated appearance so often turn her into a character of her own making. For one must first emphasize the truly remarkable fact about Tartt: with no more than three published books to date[1], she has earned the distinction of being one of the few current 'highbrow' writers whose work is also massively popular. Yet, occupying this peculiar place between low and high culture brings its backlash. To some, Tartt has yet to prove whether she is a serious novelist or simply a peddler of what her detractors dismiss as 'children's literature'.

The Secret History was her first novel, originally published in 1992. Told through the eyes of Richard Pappen, an underprivileged Californian studying in a New England university, it chronicles his involvement in the murderous exploits of a group of Classic students. Book I focuses on how Richard becomes enamored with the students of a genial and mysterious Classics professor, Julian Morrow. They are Henry, their cold and brilliant leader, Francis, stylish and rich, Charles and Camilla, lovely and ethereal twins and, finally, Bunny, the inconvenient wild card who we know is in for a tragic fate from the very first page. Unbeknown to Richard and Bunny, the other students take part in a Bacchanal in which they slaughter a farmer in a frenzy. When Bunny finds out, the other students plot to silence him, and involve Richard in their machinations. Book II focuses on the after-effects of Bunny's murder, as the characters' carefully curated personas unravel and the pressure builds up to a breaking point.

In a way, Tartt's book defies characterization. From the start, reviewers disagreed about whether the it was a "'whodunnit', a college coming-of-age story, a campus novel, a thriller, a novel about the nature of evil" and whether it was in the tradition of "Southern

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[1] *The Secret History* (1992), *The Little Friend* (2002), *The Goldfinch* (2013)

Gothic, American Gothic or just American *Brideshead [Revisited]"* (Hargreaves 66). They also disagreed about whether it was any good.

It does it no disservice to admit that part of the book's success might have been down to good salesmanship. Tartt began to write it while she was still a student at Bennington College, in which she shared a class with writer Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis introduced her to his literary agent, Amanda Urban, who started competitive bidding for the novel and sold the rights to the publishing house Knopf for an impressive sum. They subsequently sold the foreign rights to eleven countries and printed well above the amount of copies expected for a first novel. Knopf marketed the book relentlessly and used the 1992 Annual Booksellers Association convention to promote it (Hargreaves 78). *Vanity Fair,* which shares its owner, Random House, with Tartt's American publisher Knopf, ran a flattering and enraptured profile of the young writer (67). And so a phenomenon was born. *The Secret History* became a New York Times bestseller and remained in the list for thirteen weeks. But not all critics took kindly to the sycophancy with which it was received. Some saw the book as an emperor with no clothes, "every inch a first novel" at best (Newsweek Staff 1992), a pretentious "designer melodrama" made for fifteen minutes of fame at worst (Bell 1993).

In *Anatomy of a Hype*, an article on the sensation caused by Tartt's novel, a New York editor warned that that the landscape was "littered with the corpses of overpraised young writers" (Newsweek Staff 1992). And yet, even her fiercest critics would be forced to concede that what both journalists and critics call the 'cult of Donna Tartt' (Peretz 2004) is alive and well. Almost thirty years after its publication, *The Secret History* still captivates. While it once spawned a series of "cultish websites" (Adams 2013), readers have now migrated to social networks like tumblr and pinterest, where enthusiasts (many born after the novel's publication) devote their time to creating digital collages and in-depth reflections on the book. Tartt's novel may not have been perfect, but it is, nonetheless, a gripping book with a variety of interesting themes. The characters, far from the weakest element that some critics claimed them to be (Hargreaves 68), are both vivid and mysterious. Its themes of aestheticism, evil, appearance and reality create a fascination far more enduring than that of any average novel of the week. Whether Tartt has delivered on the promise of her first novel, however, remains a subject of considerable debate.

Tartt would not write another book until 2002. In *The Little Friend,* she fully embraced the Southern Gothic tradition many critics had seen as an influence even in her previous work. The novel is set in 1970s Mississippi, and opens on the afternoon nine-year old Robin is found hanging from a tree. Years later, his sister Harriet, now twelve, attempts to discover and punish the culprit. The novel is fundamentally about childhood, more *bildungsroman* than murder mystery, but it cannot be separated from its Southern Gothic elements. There are rednecks, snake-preachers, dotty relatives, race issues, decaying colonial houses. So much so that some considered the book derivative, and it enjoyed a rather lukewarm reception. One critic pointed out that, while rejecting the label of 'Southern' writer, Tartt was liberally borrowing "from its more worthy bearers" (Galvan 2003). It was Harriet herself who was almost universally praised as the novel's greatest achievement, a well-rounded child heroine of the same breed as *True Grit*'s Mattie Ross.

Her third novel, *The Goldfinch*, released in 2013, won 2014's Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and successfully "re-ignited the cult of Donna Tartt" (Peretz 2004). Yet, though a massive commercial success, the critical reception to the book was far from consensual. Just as Tartt's first novel had "straddled the perceived divisions between commercial and critical success" (Hargreaves 75), *The Goldfinch's* publication bred a familiar controversy. Critics either enthusiastically defended the novel's brilliance and heart or denounced it as a simplistic, overly long bore, its commercial success an omen of dark times for literature.

For a writer whose critics so often accuse her of hollow pretension, she seems prone to being on the receiving end of it. Indeed, for all the erudite references in her fiction, Tartt clearly exhibits a view of literature as something that must essentially stimulate its reader. She has often insisted that, regardless of aesthetic merit, one must primarily read for pleasure, and sees storytelling as something that is not wholly cerebral. When Tartt spoke about her Mississippi childhood reading Twain and Dickens on Charlie Rose (Tartt 1992), the interviewer immediately asked her whether a number southern writers had also been influences on her fiction. Yet, while Tartt was quick to assert that she 'loved' one of them, she was rather more ambiguous about the other writer, which she claimed she would not read "sick in bed at the hospital".

Born in Mississippi in 1963, Tartt claims to have been a sickly and precocious child who did spend a lot of time reading in such a state. Amongst the influences of those years, she counts Victorian books on murders which began a lifetime fascination with "all things gothic" (Hargreaves 11). This fascination is, one could argue, written all over her vaguely whimsical arguments about the nature of storytelling. In a way, Tartt's echo Horace

Walpole's first attempt to blend more naturalistic stories with older, more improbable forms of storytelling.

Indeed, we can only hope that there were, as we typed these words, readers across the world enraptured by Tartt's stories for the very first time. For all the polarity with which it was received, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* has become a cult phenomenon, that precious rarity of a novel passed from whisper to whisper onto new, equally devoted readers. Online, Tartt's book still inspires impassioned defenses and critiques. Its classical references and superficial pretension did not stop it from becoming the strange favorite of many younger readers. Some, like this dissertation's writer, are now studying literature or otherwise involved in academia.

The passion the book still elicits leads one to speculate that it might be an object of renewed interest in the coming years. A re-evaluation of Tartt's novel that cements it, not as the overhyped piece of "glitz" (Bell 65) it has long proved itself not to be, but as a work that deserves its modest spot in the history of American literature. In this dissertation, we engage in an analysis of Tartt's work that we hope might stand as its defense.

In an initial section, we focus on the common dismissal of *The Secret History* as a work of American Gothic (Hargreaves 66) and on its role as an adition to the genre of the campus novel. We make case for Tartt as an American Gothic writer, not in a derogatory way, but in an attempt to decode just what lies at the heart of the appeal of her fiction. The ideas of scholars of the mode like Leslie Fiedler and Charles L. Crow feature heavily in our discussion of the mode. We then focus on *The Secret History* as a campus novel, tracing the history of the genre with the aid of authors like Lyons, Showalter and Rossen.

The second section focuses on how Tartt uses the conventions of both the American Gothic and the campus novel to deconstruct the idea of the university and, indeed, America itself, as an innocent place. Richard's parallels with Gatsby reveal the novel's commentary on class and its cynical take on the American Dream.

The third and final chapter analyses three of the the book's elusive female characters: Camilla Macaulay, Judy Poovey and Sophie Dearbold. Although forced to see them through Richard's admittedly limited perspective, we approach them, not as "paper-doll characters" (Bell 65), but as symbols of three different themes. Through Camilla we engage in a discussion of the portrayal of women in American literature, drawing on the ideas of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* to analyze the particular edge between the Apollonian/Chthonian that the character walks. We then briefly approach the way

Camilla is seen as an object of triangular desire through René Girard’s theory. We establish Judy as Camilla’s foil, equaling repeating patterns of American and campus-based literature and intertwined with the American tendency for anti-intellectualism. Sophie, we argue, emerges as a symbol of Richard’s inability to return to ‘ordinary’ life after the events of the novel. Moreover, we argue that because she stands for conventional heterosexual coupling, she is irrevocably associated with death.

The thesis, then, aims to explore three central aspects: In what way does the novel emerge within the tradition of the American Gothic? In what way does it explore its campus setting? What can we decode from its minor and ambiguously sketched female characters?

By answering these questions, we hope to contribute to future academic incursions into Tartt’s work.

I – American Gothic & The campus novel

1 - American Gothic

> *There is, we are frequently reminded, no such place as "America." America is a dream. It is a dream of history, a fantasy of pure origin that is simultaneously the site of some of the most complicated, most confused of genealogies and miscegenations. […] America morphs into the United States; other Americas are all around, proliferating, it sometimes seems, along frontiers incapable of effective defense against this spreading plague of wealth, opulence, enlightenment, corruption.* (Punter 16)

Upon *The Secret History's* publication, critics were quick to place Tartt within an established tradition. She was, not always flatteringly, labeled an American Gothic writer. It is difficult to argue against this classification. Even the criticisms of Tartt's work echo the way the Gothic blurs perceived divisions between high and low culture. Indeed, American Gothic literature did not gather serious academic interest until the 1960s, when mounting interest in psychoanalysis and Marxism rescued the Gothic from the inferior place to which New Criticism had relegated it (Hogle 2014: 3).

The origins of Gothic fiction can be traced back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. First published in England in 1764, it originally contained a preface that passed the text as an Italian manuscript written around the time of the crusades. The second edition added a new one admitting to the deception, as well as a subtitle: "A Gothic Story"[2].

Though the term 'Gothic fiction' would not become widespread until much later and the book was considered something of an "eccentric product" (Fiedler 107) at the time, Walpole's work would inspired a barrage of similar stories in the 1790's, namely those of the massively popular Ann Radcliffe. As this fashion coincided with a Gothic Revival in architecture, studies on the literature of terror written after the beginning of the 20th century tended towards identifying Walpole as "the progenitor of a genre" (Hogle 2014: 21). Castles, dungeons, ghosts and exotic medieval settings were unifying elements in many of these stories. Yet, the term Gothic eventually came to be extended to a type of fiction that did not necessarily contain these elements, but focused rather on the macabre and uncanny, with a brooding atmosphere of terror, and which often dealt with violence, taboo subjects and altered psychological states (Abrams & Harpham 137).

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[2] It is important to note that Walpole's contemporaries saw the Gothic age in which the story was set, lasting from "fifth century AD, when Visigoth invaders precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire, to the Renaissance and the revival of classical learning" as "a long period of barbarism, superstition, and anarchy" (Clery 21).

Across the Atlantic, the Gothic would come to play a central role in the literature of the nascent American nation. Charles L. Crow calls the American gothic a "dark twin of the national narrative" (Crow 2015). It creeps as an ever-present critique of the story America tries to tell about itself. From a national narrative of exceptionalism, about a country founded on Enlightenment principles and determined to break ties with the irrational old world stems a sort of literature that is "haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow" (Savoy 167). Yet, to see the role of the American gothic as an opposing force in constant conflict with the national narrative might be overly reductive. For, in their way, fear and anxiety were always intertwined with the optimism that defined the American character and go back to the nation's colonial roots.

The Puritan hope of a "New Jerusalem" was always tainted by the concern that the settlers may have found, not utopia, but "Satan's Kingdom". In the nation's gothic, American Adam has always been just a step away from American Faust (Ringel 141). In Fiedler's words:

> *How could one tell where the American dream ended and the Faustian nightmare began; they held in common the hope of breaking through all limits and restraints, of reaching a place of total freedom where one could with impunity deny the Fall, live as if innocence rather than guilt were the birthright of all men* (127)

Indeed, in the untamed nature of the new continent, the puritans saw neither a forgiving place nor the self-enlightenment Transcendentalism[3] would later find. The territory was a "wilderness filled with wild animals, savages, and devils" in which their faith would be tested (Crow 2015). Moreover, the nature of their doctrine instilled them with a "fear of the malevolent powers of the dead" and of the Native American tribes whose practices they deemed satanic (Ringel 140). Accounts of hardship and capture by the natives written at this time already contained proto-gothic elements, such as graphic descriptions of suffering and violence.

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[3] "There is, however, a counter-tradition, Rousseauistic perhaps in its origins, for which forest, cave and savage, Nature itself, and the instinctive aspects of the psyche they represent are read as beneficent, taken to symbolize a principle of salvation. The dialogue between these two views has continued, basically unresolved, in American life and art until out time." (Fiedler 148)

Yet, it was Charles Brockden Brown, often considered the first professional author in the United States, who first seized the conventions of the British Gothic to tell American stories. With 1798's *Wieland,* Brown drew inspiration from a real murder case, in which a farmer slaughtered his wife and four children at the command of 'voices'. In it, he explores the conflicts inherent to American existence through the horrors that befall the fictional Wieland family. The individual's capacity for logic and self-restraint battle with the unstable social order and the constant threat of the irrational. Though "by no means a popular success" (Fiedler 129) at the time of its publication, the novel casts its shadow on the future of American literature. Rather than a fresh start in an innocent nation, there is an "intergenerational compulsion to repeat the past" (Savoy 173), a theme that writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner would also return to.

Yet, early American Gothic does more than replace the medieval castles and aristocratic settings for which there was no national equivalent[4]. It questions the very belief in human perfectibility on which the American nation is founded. Its literature depicts the failure of an enlightened, egalitarian nation intent on leaving the horrors of the past behind, but which that carries that old human evil into the slaughter of the Native-Americans and the barbarity of the slave trade.

The American Gothic further reinvents itself in the post-bellum South. While always associated with the region, having been the birthplace of Edgar Allan Poe, arguably one of the most central writers in the American Gothic tradition, it gains a new urgency after the civil war. The Southern Gothic emerges as a mode with which to debunk the sentimental myths created around old plantation life (Crow 2015, 4). Romantic portrayals of the slave-owning aristocracy crumble away to reveal a literature of family secrets, decaying manors and bloodlines and racial guilt. In the 20th century, the region produces a number of notable writers in this tradition. Charles L. Crow (2013, 5) includes Tartt in a list that starts with Faulkner and includes Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

For the purpose of this dissertation, we will focus on Tartt's first novel as a piece of American rather than specifically Southern Gothic. Yet, while *The Secret History* is not the bouquet of Southern Gothic tropes that its successor, *The Little Friend*, is, this New England story nonetheless contains traces of the Southern Gothic tradition. Tartt explores not only typically early American Gothic anxieties such as the conflict between the rational and the irrational, but also issues of class and family. She arguably even delights in the "interior decoration, unnecessary repetition, artificial staging of scenes" and "vague delight in freakishness" which Malin points out as common faults amongst the gothic writers of the Southern tradition (Malin 161). Many of the novel's characters, including Henry and the McCauley twins, are displaced southerners, adding an extra implication to their inability to blend into the modern world.

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[4] It is interesting to note that American Gothic came to use seventeenth-century Puritan colonies as a sort of substitute for the Middle Ages favored as a setting by its British counterpart. (Ringel, 2014, p. 140).

Yet, the book's underlying pessimism cuts to the heart of what the American Gothic is. Unlike its European counterpart, which often traces the origin of evil to debased aristocracy or superstition, the American Gothic often leans into the direction of becoming an "exposé of natural human corruption" (Fiedler 148). Richard may not always understand what sort of story he is involved in, but when the epilogue sees him turned to the study of Jacobean theater, drawn to the way it cuts "right to the heart of the matter, to the essential rottenness of the world" (TSH 615), one can only be certain that Tartt does.

The American Gothic implies a microcosm, something like "an army camp in peacetime, Skulley's Landing, a crazy house in 63rd street, and Central Park", where "there is enough room for irrational (and universal) forces to explode" (Malin 5). In *The Secret History*, Tartt brings those forces to the university campus.

The secluded and liberal 'Hampden' College is a thinly disguised version of Tartt's own *alma mater*, Bennington. Hampden is a strange place, half-pastoral and half a deconstruction of it, Waugh's *Arcadia* as well as a terrifying labyrinth in which cold-blooded murderers lurk about under façades of erudition.

Indeed, it is Hampden that renders *The Secret History* a "noteworthy entry" (Williams 2) in the tradition of the campus novel. As Hargreaves notes, "Tartt borrows from something immediately recognizable but develops the campus novel in a different direction" (79).

This recent genre is otherwise referred to as the 'university novel', the 'college novel' or the 'academic novel'. In its broadest definition, we can classify the campus novel as one that takes place within a college or university campus and concerns itself with the lives of its faculty or students (Reis).

The academic novel emerges with works told through the perspective of students and evolves, in a latter phase, to mostly encompass stories told through the eyes of professors or scholars (Reis). Indeed, some define the "modern campus novel" and "academic novel" as distinct post-second world war "satirical genre that focuses on professors rather than students and highlights the flaws of the rapidly expanding academia" (Anténe).

David Lodge , a British writer of academic fiction, emphasizes that the late 20th century campus novel focuses on the professors rather than undergraduates as subjects. He stresses that "university education is often an important episode in novels of the kind named by German criticism the *Bildungsroman*" (3) but does not seem to include them in his definition. Many other writers, however, include the novels of undergraduate life within the 'academic novel' and 'college novel' definitions.

Williams, too, makes a distinction between novels of undergraduate life and those centered on the professors. But rather than outright ignoring the former, he simply uses a different terminology. He defines novels of undergraduate life as 'campus novels' partially because they tend to revolve around actual campus life while preseting coming-of-age narratives. The 'academic novels', on the other hand, feature those who work as academics, but the action is rarely confined to the campus, involving adult predicaments and "familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots" (2).

Yet, the separation between novels about faculty and novels of undergraduate life remains far from consensual. And novels of undergraduate life did not simply disappear after the 1940s. As Williams states, although the portrayls of undergraduate life in literature transferred some of their momentum towards the screen in the mid twentieth century, books about students have continued to be published (9). Indeed, Williams himself highlights "noteworthy entries like Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*" (2), the very book we propose to discuss, into the genre he defines as the "campus novel".

Elaine Showalter makes this distinction by separating the "Bildungsromane" from what she calls the "Professorromane", but considers them all academic novels nonetheless. Her definition is, however, rather unique, as she doesn't believe that the academic novel properly begins as a subgenre until the 1950s (5).

Evidently, the terms 'college novel', 'academic fiction', 'academic novel' and 'campus novel' are thrown around with a distinct lack of clarity. Paradigmatic studies in the field such as Rossen's were using the terms interchangeably as late as the 1990s, and later distinctions don't line up with each other either.

As a result, there is really no point in insisting upon a clear distinction between terms that has no real correspondence in critical discourse. Campus novel and academic novel are still used interchangeably, and while novels centered on professors and novels of undergraduate life certainly tend to differ in many aspects, any discussion of the genre has to include both.

The Secret History chronicles the exploits of a group of undergraduates and is, in some ways, a throwback to early 20th century college novels. But any discussion of the genre has to consider both undergraduate-centered and professor-centered novels in order to understand it as a whole, and it's much more useful to make distinctions between them on a case by case basis.

2 - The American Campus Novel

Much more consensual is the idea that the college novel is a distinctively Anglo-American genre. As Lodge points out, continental European incursions into the college novel have always been slightly marginal, and while it remains a source of fascination for readers and academics outside of the UK and the US, it never took hold elsewhere.

Some of the reasons for singularity of the genre in the anglo-american context are downright geographical in nature. As Lodge states, the "enclosed, often isolated, residential university or college on the Anglo-American model" provides a unique environment, distinct from the academic environment in other countries. "The academic world offers a certain insulation which gives the novelist the chance to enclose the action in time and place" (Lyons xv), as Aristotelic rule dictates that effective dramatic action should.

In England, its unequivocal birthplace, these novels are tied to Oxford and Cambridge, and have tended to reflect the shifting environments within the two universities. Oftentimes, they contain criticisms about academic life and its conditions (Reis). But Womack argues that the now overwhelmingly satirical tone of academic fiction didn't become a norm until the latter half of 20th century. The first english novels with portrayals of university life appeared in the 19th century tended towards the sentimental and even melodramatic.

In America, the case upon which we will be focusing on, the origins of the campus novel can arguably be traced back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1828 novel *Fanshawe*, which contains the fictional setting of Harley college (Womack). A book that, incidentally, its author thought so little of that he later tried to have its copies suppressed (Lyons 5).

From the beginning, the American novel of academic life is shaped by a general suspicion of the scholar. In his pivotal study of *The College Novel in America*, John

O.Lyons argues that this general suspicion towards the academic man also has a tradition elsewhere. “Since the Renaissance the literary portrait of the scholar […] shows him as a buffoon to be laughed at or as a Faust to be hissed”, and either portrayal ultimately “congratulates the common man on his common sense and holy innocence” (3).

But this portrayal was particularly relevant in the nascent American nation. On one hand, there was the issue of democracy. Championed as it was by the forefathers as a system that would only work if the populace was literate, most people at the time held the romantic belief that democratic action rested on common sense and on the ‘demands of the stomach’, rather than on any subtlety of political philosophy.

Then there was the advance of industrial capitalism, in which the academic man had little place. In Lyons’ words, it was engineering which “built the bridges and designed the mills, not philosophy” (4).

In his 1964 book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American life*, Richard Hofstader calls this resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind “older than national identity” (64). Though Hofstader mainly concerns himself with political tendency and popular sentiment, admittedly neglecting philosophical or otherwise structured forms of anti-intelectualism, the book nonetheless shines a light on a tendency that also pervaded American literature.

Even Transcendentalism is somewhat tied to this anti-intellectualist tendency. Though its representatives were, without a doubt, intellectuals themselves, its “general distrust of the mind’s power to order the universe intellectually” (Lyons 5) does not look kindly upon institutions of higher learning.

Fanshawe, as novel, certainly reflects these conventions. The meek, intellectual protagonist begins the novel wandering through the woods at the advice of his eccentric mentor so that he may recover his sanity and health. Fanshawe knows that he will die young due to his reclusive, scholarly lifestyle and ultimately rejects his beloved’s affections so that she might live a long life with his livelier rival.

In a strange parallel with *The Secret History*, the novel is actually more notable for its proto-gothic elements than its campus ones. The academic setting, the fictional Harley college, isn’t explored to its full potential. But Lyons believes that there is enough groundwork to “predict the attitudes of later college novels”. Tropes such as the ‘absent-minded professor’ and the ‘grind’, as in the student who takes his coursework too seriously and lacks natural intelligence, already make an appearance.

Yet, Hawthorne's book is considered almost accidental by Lyons, who locates the true birth of the genre in America in the later half of the 19th century. The early academic novel in America pertains mostly to Harvard. At this point, Harvard has gained a sense of itself as an institution. Its undergraduates, enchanted by overseas tales of Oxbridge rowdiness, begin trying to compete by writing novels of academic life pertaining to their own institution. Lyons considers most of these early novels as plagued by the disease of "cultural inferiority", attempting to outdo their English equivalents where tales of undergraduate mischief are concerned. Most are semi-autobiographical works which include accounts of pranks, athletic events and fraternizing with women. And though these instances of rebellion are told through a golden filter of nostalgia, there is an underlying suspicion of the values of closeted education itself.

The 1920s bring a shift to the American Campus Novel. The collective idealization of youth that follows the First World War brings a 'college craze'. Fashion, popular fiction, film and music are temporarily dominated by the image of the young college student who lives "a life of leisure, wealth and youthful exuberance, a source of either resentment or adulation for those too poor, or too ordinary, to set foot on the campus's hallowed turf themselves" (Bilton 93).

These novels are, therefore, evidently not more discreet about the misdeeds of undergraduates than their ancestors. If anything, they make early tales of undergraduate rebellion seem relatively tame.

Yet, Lyons (45) points out that there is a sense of true desperation to them, one that distinguished them from the pre-war ones. These books are paradoxically "upset by collegiate weekend debaucheries, but they also revel in them".

Such is the case in Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, the inescapable work if we are to refer to 1920s novels of undergraduate life and the one that started what Lyons calls the "documentation of sin on campus". But the book also reflects a more subtle shift in the genre.

The protagonist, Amory Blaine, fancies himself an intellectual and is introduced to contemporary literature by the campus poet. Though his maturation has little do with what goes on in the classroom (and a significant part of the book, is in fact, set outside of campus), there is a first attempt to portray a sort "intellectual awakening" in these novels.

Although the romantic tradition of anti-intellectualism and distrust of academia that permeates their predecessors continues, these campus novels begin to admit the place of higher education in the nascent nation.

The connection between these novels of undergraduate life and the history of the coming-of-age novel in America is also impossible to ignore. There is an inevitable juxtaposition between narratives of undergraduate life, with young protagonists at the brink of "finding themselves" and novels of youthful development.

Lodge (2008) dismisses novels of undergraduate life from his definition of the academic novel altogether, by referring to them as "novels of the kind named by German criticism the Bildungsroman". Yet, even the use of the word in the context of American literature is a tricky one. The term 'Bildungsroman' was first used by the German critic K.Morgensten around 1820, and referred to a specific genre of German novels which narrated "the early emotional development and moral education" of its protagonists (Millard 2). Yet, it has long surpassed its initial definition. Jerome H. Buckley's 1974 book, *Seasons of Youth,* defines the conventions of the Bildungsroman, and adds several 19th century English novels and 20th century modernist works to its canon. But not all scholars agree with the use that Buckley and his successors make of the concept, namely due to "disagreement over interpretations of the specifically Enlightenment context of 'bildung' and a tendency for critics to use the word ahistorically in ways that change its meaning" (Millard 3).

Boes claims that to use "the word Bildungsroman as an umbrella term erases the national particularity of the genre" (242). He adds that the "term is sometimes […] used so broadly that seemingly any novel" might qualify, and its abuse is particularly prevalent in English departments (230).

In Millard's words, Bildungsroman "has been widely adopted as a term in literary criticism to characterize the generic conventions of any novel of youthful development" (2). Yet, to say that its use is widespread does not mean that it is consensual.

But even the term "coming-of-age novel", seemingly far more encompassing and not plagued by these issues, carries its own problems. The expression 'coming of age' refers to reaching full legal adult status, but such a point in one's life is imprecise and culturally relative (Millard 5). Indeed, many protagonists of "coming-of-age" novels have already reached full legal status.

Perhaps that is why, for all its limitations, Bildungsroman is still such a widely used term. And it is really no wonder that its abuse is as prevalent as it is – particularly in regards to American Literature, in which the idea of the adolescent as has always been massively important. As Millard argues:

> *“This utopian vision often used the figurative language of adolescence to describe the New World’s emergent autonomy as a colony as it struggled to establish its own individual social identity independent of Old World habits and practices. America is the rebellious teenager, impatient with the authority of its European parents and eager to create its own character founded on a different set of values and priorities. So there is a confluence of the genre of the coming of-age novel and a particularly, or even uniquely, American narrative of national identity; the individual new citizen’s drive towards new forms of independence is coterminous with that of the burgeoning nation.”* (5)

The individual novel gains the right to a claim of national significance.

America is also the birthplace of the female version of the genre. In England, the backlash against the admission of women marks both the real Oxbridge and its fictional depictions, with the covert battle for recognition in the university reverberating in female-centric academic novels well into the late 20th century, even if rarely directly addressed (Rossen).

But it is what Lyons calls the “grand experiment and crusade” of the entrance of American women into institutions of higher learning before the 1930s that truly inaugurates the female campus novel. Its writers, mostly female themselves, don’t have the English antecessors to draw inspiration from that their male counterparts did and are much more original. In an early stage, most of these novels focus on teaching young women how to properly conduct themselves. But there are also criticisms on the way American female colleges are run, namely on their inadequate curriculum and stifling of the girls’ freedoms.

Showalter points out that feminism took a long time to seep into the academic novel (49), even on novels written by women. Indeed, according to Rossen many of the academic novels written by women in the early and mid-twentieth centuries do still read like treaties on proper conduct:

> *[The female protagonists] wonder what to do with their lives, and how to integrate their learning and their hard-won education with their pursuits beyond the University - and with their desire to "be" women in sexual, maternal and sensual terms. Many of these novels read like an echo of a Voglle magazine article about how to manage a full life; a number of them offer fantasy solutions to this problem*. (51)

Yet, the 1950s and 1960s had no shortage of campus novels by female writers, and some did escape this model, offering legitimate discussions of the struggles of women in academia. And Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1951) may not be a female-centric work, but it was written by a woman and remains one of the most important American academic novels to date. And from 1980 onwards, authors like Joyce Carol Oates, Rebecca Goldstein, Mary Gordon, Rona Jaffe, Nora Kelly, provided a voice to the women's experience in academia (Johnson).

In America, too, the later half of the 20th century brings a crucial shift to the genre. There is a surge in academic fiction focused on the point of view of the professor, rather than on the traditional one of the undergraduate – it is what Showalter calls the "*Professoromane*" (Showalter 2).

The authors of these later novels are often university professors themselves (Reis). According to the novelist David Lodge, the post Second World War expansion of university education in both Britain and America led to an increase of job opportunities, which attracted aspiring or practicing writers. University teaching became "a favored second occupation for writers, a source of steady income while they wrote their books in their spare time" (Lodge 5) and, as novelists tend to draw from the environments they inhabit, the publication of academic novels increased. Rossen refers to this "professionalization and academicization" (176) of fiction writing as a mixed blessing for the novelist. On one hand, this allows them to earn a living in something closely related to their main work. However, if the novelist choses to write about academics, the result may be a self-reflective and overly specialized book.

Nonetheless, many celebrated American and British writers have tried their hand at academic fiction with successful results. Vladimir Nabokov did so with *Pim*, Philiph Roth wrote several academic novels throughout his long career, Don Delillo has *White Noise* and, on some level, even Jonathan Frazen's *The Corrections* has some of its features.

Different decades also inaugurate different trends in the academic novel. According to Showalter, the academic novels of the 1950s depict "a society with its own rules and traditions, cut off from the outside world" and often suffocating (Showalter 14). It isn't until the 1970s that the political turmoil of the previous decade is explicitly explored on the page. The university is brought to the center of a changing society: the echoes of feminism, sexual liberation and leftism are present, regardless of whether the change is portrayed as positive. The 1980s are marked by increasingly utilitarian concerns about education, and continue to explore the impact of feminism in academia. By the 1990's, the academic novels largely raise discussions about topics such as ‘political correctness’ and the culture wars, with cruel and highly satirical portrayals of the struggle for tenure, status and professional safety.

The Secret History is a break in the overall trend, returning to the point of view of the undergraduate and discussing very different themes. Such an anachronism is, we would argue, part of the novel’s American Gothic nature – a use of seemingly outdated conventions to explore the relevant issues at its core: family, class and the constant conflict between the rational and irrational inherent to the American experiment are never far from sight.

II - A return to Arcadia: The University in *The Secret History*

There is relative consensus when it comes to calling *The Secret History* an academic novel. Even Showalter quotes it as one in her genre-examining book, before moving on to the discussion of more professor-centered ones (11). But there is a noticeable gap when it comes to discussing in *what way* the book fits into the tradition of the academic novel. Perhaps it is because, as some reviewers pointed out, that hardly seems to be the main point. Hargreaves (79) empathizes that although she “satirizes a particular way of life, it’s only an aspect of her novel, not its defining characteristic.”

And yet, we could easily make the case for both the importance of the setting in the book, and the way it borrows on rather emblematic novels of undergraduate life. *The Secret History* may not extinguish itself on the campus setting, but it owes a great deal to it. It certainly does not approach the culture wars and cynicism that most 1990s academic novels face head on, here present only in the form of the typical ‘campus life’ that rolls on in the background of the central groups antics. Yet, the book brings the gothic to the American campus and comments on the idea of the university as a youthful arcadia, both capitalizing on and subverting this notion, with the peculiarities of the setting of a liberal university always lurking.

1 - Fact and Fiction

One of the threads that ties *The Secret History* to other academic novels is the public fascination with the line between fact and fiction in its narrative. But is Hampden truly just a cipher for Bennington?

Reading portrayals of real institutions into academic novels is a long tradition. In Rossen’s words: “these novels engage is the interplay between fiction and fact: we assume University novels to be realistic because they are based on an actual institution, often enough on a real University in a real place” (1). All campus novels are expected to at least allude to a real place, and while in professor-centered ones we might expected thinly veiled criticisms of the universities the writers practiced their trade in, novels of undergraduate life are far from free from this suspicion. Even Lyons already claims that “more than half of the novels of academic life are thinly disguised accounts of the author’s experiences as an undergraduate” (68).

Despite Tartt’s claims to the contrary, Hampden is rumored to be a stand-in for her own *alma matter,* Bennington College (Hargreaves 13). Moreover, she also appears to have been part of clique of “select and well-dressed clique of self-contained students clustered around one tutor” who also taught Greek (Hargreaves 14) – a description any reader will find eerily familiar. Even her characters have drawn comparisons to real-life people. The most notable amongst these are the speculations that concern writer Bret Easton Ellis, who is a former classmate of Tartt’s and to whom the novel is partially dedicated to. Ellis, who flunked all his classes, including the one he took with Claude Fredericks, the aforementioned erudite tutor, is sometimes compared to Bunny Corcoran. The other person to whom the novel is dedicated to, Paul McGloin, is rumored to have been the inspiration behind the character of Henry Winter (Hargreaves 14). Even Tartt’s transfer from the University of Mississippi, in which she was initially a freshman, to Bennington at the advice of writer and literary agent Willie Morris (Kaplan) is held as an inspiration for Richard’s own journey from the drabness of Plano, California to the East-Coast charm of Hampden.

In the 1980s, when Tartt attended it, Bennington was “ a pinnacle of something, a kind of omphalos of refined depravity, money and drugs and hormones and scholarship […] all mingling in a supersophisticated soup” (Kaplan). There are certainly echoes of that in the book, when one considers Judy Poovey’s rabid consumption of narcotics and Cloke Rayburn’s drug dealing.

Tartt herself, however, seems unamused by the constant attempts to find real-life inspirations for her work. In a 2002 interview with *The Guardian* (Viner), she expressed some frustration with it:

> *When The Secret History came out, people did not understand it was fiction, and they went off pretty much trying to track down Francis and Henry [characters in the novel]," she says. "They really didn't understand that - you know... "and here she pauses for dramatic effect, and sounds very southern, "...Ah. Mayed. That. Earp."*

Such a tendency was probably fed by the aggressive marketing campaign conducted for the book, which created the aforementioned ‘cult’ around its writer (Rosefield). Most of the interviews conducted with Tartt treat her as fictional herself, with embellished and literary descriptions that border on mythologizing. They highlight her small stature, her Mississippi twang, her proclivity for tailored suits, her ability to handle her liquor. They capitalize on her reclusiveness and skittishness about being interview (Viner). In short, they turn her into a character of her own. Richard may have a “morbid longingly for the picturesque" (TSH 5) but so does the reading public, who remains interested in the details of the author's eccentricity.

Amusingly enough, this seems to echo one of the strands of the 'cult' around her work: that which prioritizes *The Secret History*'s Book I and its almost idealized and aestheticized view of the characters, rather than the methodical deterioration and inevitable downfall that occurs in Book II.

2 - Death in the Garden

> *Trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground and the steady thrumming of wasps around them. Commons clock tower: ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance*. (TSH 12)

Even before it becomes about Richard's infatuation with his colleagues, *The Secret History* is already about his infatuation with Hampden. In the very first chapter, the narrator tells us about the hours spent memorizing the photographs of the university's brochure, longing to be transported into the midst of the "radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow." (TSH 10). From the start, Hampden is seen as a garden, an Eden, a "country from a dream" (TSH 11).

Indeed, the beauty of its natural landscape suggest something older, colder and lovelier than the barrenness of Richard's native Plano, California. Rather than nature and mystery, the thought of this "plastic cup" (TSH 5) place conjures images of "drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop". His childhood is remembered as a "sad jumble of objects" (TSH 5) sneakers, coloring books and comics, Disney on Sunday nights. But perhaps no description of Richard's 'home' is more revealing than the one in which he speaks of his adolescent pastime:

> *In high school I developed a habit of wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through the bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering*

> *wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.* (TSH 9)

Richard's description of California is a caricature of the very worst of late 20th century America. There is no sign of nature nor promise, only loud noise and bright neon, overstimulation that renders one completely lethargic. The only element of the natural world is the dead, yellow grass.

The contrasting descriptions would have made the hell/paradise duality obvious enough, but it is Richard who outright states it. Plano, he concedes, might not have been the source of his inherent unhappiness, but there is no doubting that it was modeled less on Paradise and more on that other "more dolorous city" (TSH 8). And if Plano is hell, Hampden becomes Arcadia, an earthly Eden[5]. Even Henry compares Vermont, a landlocked place, with the Greek province that originated the Arcadian myth (TSH 233).

In his idealization, Richard ignores the anxieties of the gothic and returns to the American narrative that sees this territory as a place of innocence, the "fresh, green breast of the new world", to borrow from *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 179), that the first settlers once hoped for. But he also already subverts the one that sees the West as a land of American promise.

Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893's frontier theory has long framed the West as the basis of American identity and democracy. Conquering the frontier becomes a disavowal of European influence, the conquest of a true American identity in the new continent (Billigton). Yet, the 1990s California Richard describes to us holds no such promises. The land is conquered, the frontier has closed, and all we are left with are billboards and yellow grass, a Valley of Ashes not unlike the one Fitzgerald once again describes in *The Great Gatsby*.

The modern West, too, has been turned into a "hideous, man-made wilderness" (Marx 358). And just as the Valley of Ashes is associated with the underprivileged, with those who have to live amongst the rubble produced by the 'machine' that sustains New York and the privileged cast of the novel in their false Eden, so is Richard's Californian life associated with poverty and boredom.

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[5] Amusingly enough, this duality is one that Tartt returns to in 2013's *The Goldfinch,* in which there is a marked contrast between the barrenness and hedonism of Las Vegas and the beauty and tradition of New York, associated with the art that the novel so clearly reveres as the only possible path to transcendence.

Indeed, Richard’s idealization of the landscape is somewhat reminiscent of a passage in Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. When discussing Mark Twain’s approach to nature, Marx quotes the series of articles “Old Times in the Mississippi”, in which the author describes a preoccupation with the inability to combine two different ways of contemplating a river. One, the innocent way, renders it as beautiful and sentimental as a landscape painting. The other, the one Twain gained after ‘learning the river’ and the pilot trade, sees past the artifices of beauty into the inner workings of nature. A silver streak in a shadow is no longer simply a beautiful phenomenon, but rather a sign of a break from a new snag that might destroy a boat. He can no longer enjoy the landscape as an admirer, only as a technician. And once the sentiment is gone it becomes possible to see the danger.

Richard, however, is no technician. Detached from nature in his barren version of California, he has the aesthetic response to nature once associated, not with the West, but with the “effete, cultivated, urban, privileged East” (Marx 324) he longs to be a part of. It is the practical and technical approach of the pilot that is associated with the West in the original text. But Richard does not understand nature this way, seeing it only for the idyllic façade. He, like the passengers, is unable to detect the “menacing ‘reality’ masked by the beautiful river” (Marx 324).

Let us, then, return to the description of Hampden that opens this chapter. The trees, the white spire, clock tower. The fallen, rotting apples. The wasps. Death and corruption lurk in Hampden from the start. “*Et in Arcadia Ego*” – the inscription found in the sarcophagus of Poussin’s *memento mori* painting depicting a group of Arcadian shepherds standing around a tomb (Ariès 422), need not be written by Tartt to be seeped into her portrayal of Hampden. Death, too, is here. This Hampden already contains the seeds of malevolence that lead the plot to, like one early reviewer claim, march “with cool, classical inevitability toward its terrible conclusion” (Katutani). It is only that Richard, blind and idealistic, is unable to see them.

Yet, perhaps Richard’s, and consequently the reader’s, blindness comes from a deliberate play on genre conventions. For the idea of the university as a sort of Arcadia is not a new nor, indeed, exclusively American one. *Et in Arcadia Ego* is also the title of Book I of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, which focuses on the protagonist’s infatuation with his friend Sebastian Flyte during his Oxford days, and sets the stage for his attachment to the titular estate and spiritual journey later in life. As in *The Secret History*, the seeds of what will ultimately destroy both the friendship and Sebastian Flyte himself are already present, but its portrayal of academic life is highly idealized. Rossen identifies this idyllic view of the university as common amongst campus novels on undergraduate life:

> *This view of the University as nurturing - as a place in which to grow and dream - is echoed in novels such as E. M. Forster's The Longest Journey and Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited. Both of these writers use the University as a symbol of youthful arcadia, where a unique place and time intersect to provide their heroes with a spiritual rebirth of such magnitude that it continues to resonate throughout the rest of their lives.* (93)

For these characters, the university becomes the setting of a sort of second childhood. Pertaining to the Oxbridge experience as these two novels do, they use the university as something with which to contrast the loneliness and oppressiveness of public school life. Despite their privilege, both Charles Ryder and Rickie Elliot had stark, neglectful childhoods and did not get to fully experience them. And, like many protagonists in undergraduate tales, the defining experience of growth for them turns out to be love, if not necessarily romantic or erotic one.

Richard's first glimpse of the classic's groups draws precisely on our expectations about this sort of formula, by presenting characters we immediately cast in the role of the "special friend who is unique, larger than life, and scintillatingly attractive", introducing us to a troupe of "dazzling, seemingly unattainable" people (Rossen 94).

> *Four boys and a girl, they were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities* (TSH 17)

Although the reader knows the inevitability of the murder from the very first page, Tartt uses these conventions to lure us into thinking that we are reading another sort of story. The narration reproduces Richard's fascination and nearly leers at the characters, meticulously describing their appearances and quirks. Henry's dark suits and amusingly misplaced formality suggest an old soul. Bunny's rosy cheeks and loud, cheery demeanor a good-natured rake. Francis's appearance brands him as a dandy, some sort of American Anthony Blanche. While the twins are, of course, white and luminous and ethereal, literally compared to Flemish angels and reminiscent of "long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party" (TSH 18).

Yet, just as the wasps and rotting fruit highlight that Hampden's is not the "soft or consolatory" (TSH 41) type of beauty that one would expect from a campus setting, but rather a terrible one, so do the details snuck into the descriptions of the characters. Henry's "blank eyes" are a sign of his emotional vacancy and murderous tendencies. Bunny, with his "fists thrust deep into the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers", is mean-spirited and antagonistic behind his jovial persona, and even the poor state of his tweed jacket already alludes to his financial leeching. Francis, with his "shrewd albino face", later exhibits cowardly and narcissistic traits. And the twins, who have an incestuous relationship, look like "boyfriend and girlfriend" at first glance (TSH 17-18).

Though it doesn't directly allude to it, we must once again stress the way *The Secret History* draws heavily upon Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* to establish Richard's youthful Arcadian dreams and their subsequent deterioration. Both books share "a dreamy university location, infatuation with a glamorous group of undergraduates, a country house which offers a retreat from the outside world in which friendships are cemented and unmade, a brother and a sister who closely resemble each other" (Hargreaves 19)

Indeed, Francis' country house, a major element of Book I, takes the role of a somewhat twisted version of Brideshead:[6]

> *The very colors of the place had seeped into my blood: Just as Hampden, in subsequent years, would always present itself immediately to my imagination in a confused whirl of white and green and red, so the country house first appeared as a glorious blur of watercolors, of ivory and lapis blue, chestnut and burnt orange and gold, separating only gradually into the boundaries of remembered objects: the house, the sky, the maple trees.* (TSH 113)

Some of the descriptions of Francis's estate are just as detailed and awe-filled as Hampden's. Richard's claim that he "couldn't have loved" (TSH 112) the house more if he had grown up in it certainly evokes the idea that this, too, is the setting of a second childhood, an idyllic enclosed space like the university's. And yet, this particular vision of it is already unreal, a watercolor painting, a blur.

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[6] Charles Ryder's connection with the family estate of his friend Sebastian Flyte is, of course, deeper, fostering his artistic growth and accompanying him far into his middle years. But there is an utterly familiar tone to the way Richard describes the house.

In this light, we would argue that the house serves as an extension of Hampden, just as in *Brideshead Revisited*, "the 'enchanted garden' of Oxford leads to the 'enchanted palace' of the great country house" (Rossen 102). In it, Charles Ryder both cements his relationship with Sebastian and begins to develop the connection to his family that will ultimately destroy it. In *The Secret History*, it is also in the house that Richard is seemingly admitted to the "the inner circle of the very aristocratic and refined group inside" (Rossen, 103), but it is while under its roof that the other students decide to partake in the Bacchanal that will ultimately lead to the two murders that drive the plot.

Truthfully, the country house is even more visibly tainted than Hampden itself. The first impression Richard has of it is fittingly ominous. The place is "tremendous", with a "sharp, ink-black silhouette against the sky, turrets and pies, a window's walk" (TSH 84). The entrance is "dim", the walls "spidery with the shadows of potted palms" and the high ceilings hold "distorted traces" of shadows. There are gilt mirrors and chandeliers, a fireplace as "big as a sepulcher", a piano and "moth-eaten velvet curtains" (TSH 85).

By Book II, once the murder has been committed and everything has begun to unravel, the house is openly described as "Gothic and monstrous" (TSH 365). The country house is neither Eden nor Brideshead. It is the House of Usher. The enchanted palace, seemingly isolated from the nefarious influence of the society that surrounds it, is a decayed fright. If Gothic fiction often portrays schools as "haunted or cursed by persistent power inequities" (Truffin 164), then Francis's country house is its own specter, a symbol of the monstrous privilege of Richard's colleagues even in a seemingly egalitarian setting.

Just as the American Gothic subverts the doctrine that asserts the country's exceptionalism and holy innocence, Tartt uses these elements to subvert the conventions of the portrayal of the university as an idyllic place, a garden apart from life. "Innocence and experience are mapped through Richard's belief that he has found his Arcadia, followed by his recognition that his belief was illusionary" (Hargreaves 19). Tartt brings death to the garden of Hampden, just as all American Gothic brings to the garden of America.

Moreover, the fractures that Richard's tale exposes are American flaws. His sophisticated friends are classist and numb, and though the idealized past that they cling to is not that of an American Utopia, it is equally illusory and destructive. And Richard's dreams of being assimilated by the elite, mimicking the idea that one can be 'anyone' in

America, fail spectacularly. For, unlike the character in the typical novel of undergraduate life, this is not only the beginning of Richard's life, but also the end of it. The epilogue sees him miserable and drained, old before his time. And the story of his years at Hampden is, after all, the only story he will "ever be able to tell" (TSH 2).

The university is exposed, not as an idyllic garden apart from life, but as a microcosm where both the flaws of American society and the nastiest of human tendencies play out and lead to the novel's inevitable ending.

3 - On class

But what is Richard's fatal flaw? The answer is offered to the reader on the very first page. "A morbid longing for the picturesque" (TSH 5), he calls it. Even the idealization of the landscape that we have discussed in the previous section, the transformation of Hampden into a garden, can be read as a consequence of it. But it is not, as we have previously suggested, simply the beauty of nature that Richard longs and destroys himself for. It is also the beauty of wealth.

Richard's disgust with Plano's barren and unnatural ugliness cannot be detached from his disgust with his own miserable, impoverish childhood. The character's background sets him apart from his Hampden friends. His father ran a gas station, his mother answered phones in a chip factory outside San Jose (TSH 5). He didn't have what he idealizes as an "American childhood" (TSH 7) like even the least privileged amongst the other Classics students did.

In a way, Richard's background alludes to interesting aspects of the old American myth of the self-made man, namely in the way he describes his childhood as "expandable" and "disposable" (TSH 5), something to be discarded in favor of something better. It is now widely accepted that the classic American "rags-to-riches" story is more of a symbol than a statistical actuality (Hofstader 253). But the narrative of the business man who transcends the boundaries of his humble origins to become someone of wealth and importance has persisted.

While the original myth of the self-made man spoke of someone whose success did not depend on formal education and "for whom personal culture, other than his business character [was] unimportant" (Hofstader 254), aspects of this idea have grown to pervade the way modern education is perceived. As Giroux & Aronowitz state:

> *Formal education simultaneously represented a departure from, and continuity with, the figure of the self-made man for the working class. [...] The notion persisted that it was up to the individual to perform well in the classroom in order to achieve liberation from manual labor. In failing to acquire school knowledge, which by the turn of the century was the universal signifier of the promising student, kids condemned themselves to follow their parents into the mines and mills unless they could acquire economic capital.* (ix)

For a boy like Richard, a college education is sold as a way out. It is under this assumption, we are told, that he first decides to major in pre-med at a small college in his hometown, seeing it as his only hope of escaping his hell-reminiscent city and not having to be a gas station manager like his father. As he tells us "doctors make a lot of money" and that struck him as the only way of improving "his fortunes" (TSH 7). But this idea of academic education as tool of social mobility is squashed when discussing less 'practical' fields such as the liberal arts.

When he switches his major to English, his father, echoing anti-intellectualist arguments, paints a dire portrayal of his future. He assures him that he will spend the rest of his life unemployed and begging him for money. Although the narration is quick to assert that this statement comes from a man who knows nothing "of either finance or academia" (TSH 8), it is clear that this a large gamble for a boy like Richard.

If a business or trade oriented education is a way out, then a liberal arts one is seen as a privilege, as something for rich kids to waste their money on. Hofstader sums up this particularly American sentiment rather well. He elaborates on the the country's touching faith on mass education as a tool that leads to political and economic benefit, but also highlights its suspicion of an education based on developing the mind for intellectual or even imaginative achievement. Already in the 19th century;

> *Many Americans were troubled by the suspicion that an education of this kind was suitable only to the leisured classes, to aristocracies, to the European Past; that it usefulness was less evident than its possible dangers; than an undue concern with the devolpement of mind was a form of arrogance and narcissism which one would expect to find mainly in the morally corrupt.* (Hofstader 309)

But Richard wants imagination, he wants intellect. Here, too, he is a victim of his obsession with beauty. He cannot stomach the cow hearts and formaldehyde stench that come with studying medicine, longing for the lovelier things he associates with an education in the arts and humanities. For this practical, trade-oriented education is likely not the college experience Richard has dreamt of. We would argue that he, too, expects the self-discovery and romantic conventions that so many of the novels of undergraduate life prepare the reader for. And yet, he already describes the feeling of switching majors as that of making a horrible mistake, something like “cutting [his] own throat” (TSH 8) – because this fantasy, this idea of college as the garden and expensive country club that it once was is barred to him.

For all his abusive inclinations and blunt anti-intellectualism, Richard’s father may have a point. Richard’s fixation with beauty is a peril and it nearly does become a fatal one. There is at least one point in the novel in which Richard’s inability to financially support himself while at Hampden, as well his stubborn attempt to sustain the illusion that he is wealthy, nearly kill him.

He comes rather close to dying during his Christmas break in Vermont (TSH 122-138). Since he would rather stay in a dilapidated warehouse with a morose hippie than go back to Plano and its “flat land, and filling stations, and dust” (TSH 114), Richard spends his winter break sleeping in a room with no heater and a hole on the roof.

When he finally does receive help, the diagnosis is “chronic hypothermia, with a bad diet and mild case of pneumonia on top of it”, but Richard’s winter also includes “hallucinations” and “mental confusion” (TSH 134). His “mental darkness” is so severe that it makes him delirious and leads him to contemplate death (TSH 131).

It is Henry who finds him in a pitiful state and it is Henry who, according to the doctors, ‘saves’ his life (TSH 139). But Richard is not saved. Indeed, he concedes that although he recovers his health quickly enough in a short-term sense, he “never really quite got over” (TSH 139) that winter and develops a tendency for colds, as well as lung and bone problems as a result. In a way, Richard’s Christmas break experience forebodes the way the entire plot of the novel leaves him – cold, disillusioned and worse for wear.

His ‘rescue’ also stresses another important point: the extent to which Richard idolizes Henry, with whom he is arguably even more enamored than with the rest of his colleagues. He never questions Henry’s motives for asking around the offices to find out where he lives, nor for showing up at the warehouse (TSH 138). And even after some of his illusions about Henry have been shattered, he admits to Camilla that he had “loved him, too” (TSH 624).

And yet, one of the first descriptions we get from Henry establishes that not all of Hampden sees Henry nor the classics group in the flattering light that Richard, he of self-recognized “clumsy hands and suburban ways” (TSH 40), does.

According to Judy Poovey, Henry is “an asshole” and “a bastard” (TSH 50) who nearly became violent with her during a campus party for throwing a beer at Camilla. She describes Charles’s over-emotional state and Henry’s even more menacing coldness (TSH 51), echoing the attitudes that they adopt towards the end of the plot. Richard’s academic counselor Georges Laforge also disapproves of Julian’s “elitist values” (TSH 33) from the very start.

Yet, the most amusing reminders of the dissonance between Richard’s idealized view of the other Greek students and the way they are perceived by the rest of the world are certainly those in Book II.

It is Charles, the most likeable to outsiders, by then driven to a breakdown due to having to take the brunt of the interrogations, who has to point out that Henry is not that conspicuous of a figure. When Richard picks up from the courthouse after he is arrested for drunk driving (TSH 504), he reveals that the authorities are far more suspicious about the circumstances of Bunny’s murder than Richard first anticipated.

“We’re so used to Henry”, Charles points out, “We don’t realize sometimes how he looks to other people” (TSH 505). It is then that the reader is reminded of the improbability that Henry Winter, with his dark suits, stiff politeness and total lack of knowledge about anything that pertains to modern life, would come off as anything but a Hannibal Lecter knockoff to anyone in a remotely realistic setting or, indeed, in the sort of detective fiction Hargreaves claims we might regard the book as. According to Charles, Henry just “*looks* suspicious”, like one of the “guys with horn-rimmed glasses and armbands in a gangster movie, […] the one who cooks the books for Al Capone.” (TSH 507). And the FBI agents, characters that abide by these detective-novel conventions rather than by Richard’s picturesque delusions, immediately suspect him:

> *Those people had never seen anything like Henry in their lives. I’ll tell you the sort of thing he worried about. Like if he was carrying around the right book, if Homer would make a better impression than Thomas Aquinas. He was like something from another planet. If he was the only one they’d had to deal with he would have landed us all in the gas chamber.* (TSH 509)

To most of the ‘*hoi polloi’*, a category in which Henry personally includes people from a variety of social standings that he considers lesser in culture and character (TSH 236), he is evidently a profoundly off-putting and unlikeable person. Why, then, is Richard so drawn to him? The explanation is not hard to guess at, but the narrator offers it himself. He points out that, though genuinely disliked by most people outside of his highly elitist circle, Henry is popular with particularly destitute people who accept their status:

> “*(...) Henry was so confident of his own abilities and position in the world, and so comfortable with them, that he had the strange effect of making others (including myself) feel comfortable in their respective, lesser positions, whatever they might happen to be*.” (TSH 236)

Henry’s classism, firm and unapologetic, paradoxically allows him to get through to poor people without having to resort to the “condescending friendliness of the wealthy” (TSH 235). And Richard, too, responds to that. Yet, it is easy to argue that he only craves this comfort with his ‘inferior’ position because he isn’t used to feeling comfortable with his background in the first place. He is constantly seeking upward mobility.

4 – Becoming Gatsby

We would argue that there is at least one other hero in American Literature who also draws on the idea of the self-made man, and whose *hamartia* could also be fittingly described as a “morbid longing for the picturesque” (TSH 5). Early in the book, Richard rereads *The Great Gatsby*, one of his favorite novels. In his “humorless state” he fails to see anything but what he construes “as certain similarities between Gatsby” and himself (TSH 79).

Upon first reading, this might land as something of a joke. Richard does not strike one as Gatsby type, but rather as a sort of Nick Carraway, a narrator to a more superficially compelling character’s story. But he is something of both. As Robert Hahn argues:

> *The two narrators have much in common. The point of departure for both is a prototypical American journey from west to east—Carraway coming from the Midwest, Papen from California, although his California is not a glamorous la-la-land but a lower-class family in a dusty inland town, a dull reality he replaces with*

> *a Tinseltown fable. For Tartt's purposes this deception is an inspired invention, since it enables her to connect Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby, and to graft both onto Richard Papen.* (Hahn 5)

Like Gatsby, Richard is clinging to a dream that will be forever out of his reach, trying out the role of a character he never quite masters. While Richard Pappen makes Hampden into the center of his self-reinvention, Gatsby absorbs the claim of having been "educated at Oxford" (Fitzgerald 1925/ 2017 65) into the façade of respectability with which he hopes to 'conquer' Daisy.

Which is, in turn, reminiscent of Richard's attachment to Camilla. Though she will be the subject of a more detailed analysis in a coming chapter, we must point out the obvious similarities she bears with Daisy – like Gatsby's lover, she is inherently connected to a male character's desire for status. Daisy's appeal is largely that her voice is "full of money", that she is "the king's daughter, the golden girl" (Fitzgerald 1925/ 2017 119). Camilla, in turn, is the cold and white, equally unreachable, nebulous status symbol Richard pines for. She, too, is "the girl who lures her lovers on, like America itself, with a 'voice…full of money.'" (Fiedler 300).

But this sentiment isn't necessarily restricted to Camilla. From the beginning, Richard "envied [his friends], and found them attractive", responding to the impression that this "strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated". Because he wants "to be like them", and believes that by belonging in their group he "might learn" to emulate whatever appeal they have (TSH 33).

Immediately after first interacting with them in the library, Richard feels "sick of being poor" (TSH 26) and swindles money from Dr.Roland by inventing a car problem. He then spends it all buying shirts in an expensive men's shop[7] and proceeds to gather whatever he can from the local Salvation Army. A tweed overcoat, a pair of brown wingtips, cufflinks, but most importantly, a tie with "pictures of men hunting deer on it" (TSH 27). This picture invokes the way the first murder is carried out as, in their Dionysian haze, the male revelers believe themselves to be "chasing a deer through the woods" while Camilla remembers thinking that she was a deer herself (TSH 188). We might see this as further evidence, then, that his attempt to emulate the wealth of the

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[7] This passage can also be read as another allusion to Fitzgerald's book: Gatsby's vast collection of fine shirts, which Daisy admires and sobs into (Fitzgerald 1925/ 2017 92).

Classics students is a part of Richard's *hamartia*. And, in due time, even Richard understands it. Julian's abandonment after knowing about the murders damages them all, but the stakes are more than emotional for Richard:

> *To them, I knew, this didn't make the slightest bit of difference. What was it to them if they had to go an extra term? What did it matter, if they failed to graduate, if they had to go back home? At least they had homes to go to. They had trust funds, allowances, dividend checks, doting grandmas, well-connected uncles, loving families. College for them was only a way station, a sort of youthful diversion. But this was my chance, the only one. And I had blown it.* (TSH 583)

By setting a story of murder and deceit in the idealized setting of the campus, Tartt underlines the inherent classism in the idealized setting of the university as a place in which to grow and dream.

These contradictions have been highlighted before. Although her study of power in the university novel focuses on the British tradition, Rossen quotes the book *Tom Brown at Oxford* as a novel who portrays a poor marginalized character in an environment of "sport and indulgence". He complains to the hero that he feels "excluded from the mainstream of college life because he cannot afford to entertain his fellow students" (Rossen 65). He is, instead, relegated to a reclusive and monastic life, which in turn only leaves him more depressed.

The portrayal of the university as an "idyllic place, apart from life" (Rossen 103) is an impossibility for a man like Richard, because he cannot escape the constraints of his poverty. Mimicking the lifestyle of his colleagues requires constant effort, and trying to assimilate into the archetype of what one might describe as the "ancient university and its towers of privilege" (Showalter 52) becomes not only futile, but dangerous. Even his involvement in Bunny's death may be seen as an attempt at assimilating into the elite "by murdering a peer whose family has made an incomplete class leap and who incessantly polices class and other social boundaries" (Truffin 171).

While his friends are allowed to explore knowledge for knowledge's sake, Richard can never escape his origins. When, at the end of the novel, he turns out to the only one who even finishes his degree (TSH 614), the others still remark upon it with somewhat insulting amusement.

5 - The Disenchanted 1990s

We have remarked upon how Richard's vision of the Greek students seems to bear little resemblance to the way they are perceived by outsiders. And yet, his delusions run deeper than that. For Richard's romantic dreams of academia bear little resemblance even to the Hampden the other students and faculty seem to exist in.

As one of Julian's students, Richard is virtually isolated from the rest of the campus. Julian is a bastion of everything modern and 'progressive' education is against. He is an elitist who believes that a great amount of teachers is "harmful to a yound mind" (TSH 32) and holds a clear contempt towards any sort of 20th century cultural product. He prefers to teach in a non-scholastic environment full of fresh flowers, a Platonic microcosm of what he feels a schoolroom should be (TSH 34). In a way, his classroom is the isolated ivory tower anti-intellectualist arguments accuse universities of being. And yet, the rest of the Hampden faculty does not gain from the contrast.

In *Faculty Towers*, Elaine Showalter highlights that most professor-centered academic novels of the 1990s contain little idealization of the university, focusing instead on the "the lottery of hiring, political correctness, the culture wars, and the tragedies of tenure" (Showalter 87). And while we have argued that *The Secret History* both follows and subverts traditions of the novel of undergraduate life, its depictions of the Hampden faculty seem perfectly suited to a 1990s professor-centered academic novel.

Perhaps the most relevant example Georges Laforgue, a professor of French literature who is assigned as Richard's academic advisor at the beginning of the novel. Laforgue staunchly opposes Julian's ideas of education, criticizing his elitism. He warns Richard against the gamble of quitting all his classes to learn with a single professor, which does, indeed, backfire when Julian leaves at the end of the novel and leaves him in a rather difficult academic situation (TSH 583) and, in a way, by tangling Richard with the murderous pagan antics of the Greek students in the first place. Laforgue is also vain, incompetent and self-obsessed.

By highlighting that Julian's elitist values should be "repugnant" to someone like Richard, a working class student on financial aid, he shows a staggering amount of condescendence and suggests his democratic inclinations to be of a somewhat performative and hypocritical nature (TSH 33). And his resentment of the Greek class is suggested to be connected to the fact that Henry Winter, who despises him, once intellectually humiliated him in a question-and-answer period in front of entire Literature faculty (TSH 19).

Most importantly, for all his criticism of Julian's values, we would argue that there is something comparatively mercenary about Laforgue's attitude towards teaching. Whereas Julian, a wealthy man, donates his salary to the college and teaches out of sheer love for it, Laforgue admits that the money "comes in handy" and seems more concerned with gossiping and protecting himself from his "formidable enemies in the Literature Division" (TSH 14) than with anything that actually pertains to education. Indeed, we suspect that part of Julian's appeal to Richard may reside precisely in how this fairytale of the wealthy, knowledge-oriented sage contrasts with the tales "financial hardship, of limited endowment, corners cut" (TSH 14) that characterize the late 20th century university, and which Richard has already heard in his few weeks at Hampden.

Dr. Roland, the psychology professor for whom Richard works as a research assistant, also falls into the tradition pointed out by Lyons of presenting the academic man as "a buffoon to be laughed at" (Lyons 3). Roland is an "old, dazed, disorderly looking fellow" (TSH 16) whose senile manner is punctuated by flashes of lucidity that make some suspect it to be a façade. He lets Richard swindle him into giving him his paycheck in advance with a vague excuse of car trouble and does not realize that his assistant is practically dying and occasionally sleeping in the office during Winter break. In the last few pages, Richard reveals that Dr Roland, now retired and having gained some local acclaim by publishing a book of photographs of the college over the years, almost caused him to not get accepted into graduate school by writing a glowing recommendation letter that referred to him as 'Jerry' (TSH 625).

Neither Georges Laforgue nor Dr. Roland are portrayed as entirely despicable. They are almost comic relief, a glimpse of one type of novel intruding into another one, and a part of the mashup of genres with which *The Secret History* arguably plays.

Actual undergraduate life, the world in which "pseudo-intellects and teenage decadents" abound (TSH 18) is described with a sort of detachment. Despite Judy Poovey's interest and Sophie Dearbold's appeal as a romantic prospect, it's easy to claim that Richard never truly connects nor, indeed, cares to connect with anyone who isn't a part of the Greek class. Despite participating in the substance abuse that explicitly characterizes Hampden student life with reckless abandon, particularly after Bunny's death, Richard remains entirely detached from it.

Hours after Bunny’s murder, Richard tries to calm his nerves by calling Henry for company. As he only receives advice about thinking in another language, he decides to go to Judy Poovey instead (TSH 317). There, he speaks to her friends about “pinball, motorcycle and female kickboxing” (TSH 320) and is temporarily heart-warmed by their attempts to include him, questioning whether he misjudged these “common people”. Yet, it is short-lived. Richard ends the night in his room with a pretty girl whose name he does not know, someone he had seen “without paying much attention” (TSH 321).

When her boyfriend returns to threaten and assault him a while later, Richard is “too stunned to reply” (TSH 392) and can only look at the stars from the spot on the ground that he has been kicked into. The next morning, the entire incident floats to him “like a dream” and he can only stare in detachment at the black-eyed and dazed figure in the mirror. College life, with its soap-opera plotlines and banal conversations, does not interest him in the slightest. He is entirely detached from it.

Deprived of its idealism and mystery, it is no wonder that Richard could not care less about Hampden as “democratic institution” (TSH 33), as Laforgue calls it. He wants to be a part of an elite – he wants to mimic the Greek students precisely because he craves the same intensely cultivated quality that draws him to them. He romanticizes the idea of a classic, elitist education, a secluded garden of arcane knowledge that provides an intellectual and spiritual awakening.

Academic squabbles, senile superiors and jealous boyfriends might not quite hold the same appeal as the old lyceum, but the garden that Julian promises is a lie. Richard’s idealized dream is inherently connected to wealth, his friends are two-faced murderers and the ‘rot’ he craved to escape by leaving California is all around him.

In the article *Teenage Wasteland*, Curtnutt’s brutal indictment of 1980s and 1990s coming-of-age novels, *The Secret History* is quoted as an example of a portrayal of teen disaffection. Yet it is not ‘trashy’ hollowness nor the ubiquitous drug use of the majority of the Hampden students that the author mentions. The harshest depiction of a disengagement that leads to the search of pure sensation is precisely that of the Classics students themselves.

These are characters who “speak of murder with the same dispassionate pedantry that they bring into their literary pursuits” (Curtnutt 99). Towards the end of the novel, Henry confesses that the world has always been an empty place to him, that he used to feel “dead in everything [he] did” (TSH 556) and that it only ever changed after the group accidentally killed the farmer during the bacchanal.

Most importantly, the author includes *The Secret History* in a list of novels whose bleak detachment actually contains a yearning for paternal authority. The manner in which Julian abandons the Classics group after the murder echoes the way these young people's parents have similarly abandoned them. The argument is:

> *(...) The Secret History is most adamant in crediting teen amorality to adult ineptitude, for Tartt's characters are impishly condescending towards the sorts of mass-culture amusements (rock music, recreational drugs) ordinarily blamed for corrupting youth. Regardless of their high-culture pretensions, their criminal instincts arise from their elders' failure to empathize with them rather than inculcate them in 'high cold principles'* (Curtnutt 102)

Although the case mounted against what the author identifies as the quasi-reactionary nature of late 20th century coming-of-age novels is rather compelling, we cannot rush to entirely agree with Curnutt's argument. Indeed, it's just as easy to argue that the issue lies precisely with the futility of these 'cold, high, principles' themselves. It is the attempt to return to the past, to emulate the Dionysian rituals of old, that causes the farmer's death and starts the chain that ends with Henry dead, Charles a lost alcoholic, Francis a suicidal neurotic and Camilla and Richard empty and miserable people.

Not even Henry's suicide, his last attempt to redeem them all by embodying the 'cold, high, principles' that Julian does not live by after all, truly saves them. They remain tainted by the murder, haunted by Henry in a way that, given that the book ends with Richard dreaming of his friend, might be almost literal. They are not the ruins of their youth, but "the ruins of those ruins" (TSH 610) as the quote that precedes the epilogue announces.

According to Hargreaves (23), it is "the search for an authentic self and an alternative culture which proves, in the end, to be the classicist' undoing". Julian's failure to stand by them is only another proof of its futility.

In this manner, Tartt once again exposes the falsehood behind the idealized undergraduate life that Richard seems to want to immerse himself in. We do not mean to argue that *The Secret History* is an anti-academia novel, nor that there is some profound Marxist criticism intentionally coded in its plot.

And yet, we would argue that the novel is much more satirical and critical of the values and entitlement of its characters than it first appears. It provides a comment on its own unrealistic, idealized portrayal of an education, on the lie of the university as a place apart from class and evil. For all the caricaturing of the ‘hoi polloi’ that Henry Winter so seems to despise, the cold high creatures that the Greek students first appear to be come off not only as bloodless monsters but, indeed, as a little ridiculous and entirely unfit for the modern world.

Perhaps such a contrast is one of the reasons why, upon its publication, one critic called the book an investigation “of the chasm between academe’s supposed ideals and the vagarities of its actual behavior” (Hargreaves 75). As Richard must become disillusioned with the rottenness of the garden, of an idealized America and of an idealized college life, so must the reader.

III - On Women in *The Secret History*

But the schizophrenia is really […] in the American mind itself. There are not, in fact, two orders of women, good and bad, nor is there even one which seems for a little while bad, only to prove in the end utterly unravished and pure. There are only two sets of expectations and a single imperfect kind of woman caught between them: only actual incomplete females, looking in vain for a satisfactory definition of their role in a land of artists who insist on treating them as goddesses or bitches. (Fiedler 302)

It requires no great leap to go from discussing ambiguity and illusion in *The Secret History* to discussing its depiction of women. Despite being set in the 1990s in a firmly co-ed setting, female characters are still very much an ‘other’ in the novel, seen by the narrator through even more diffuse lenses than their male counterparts.

Camilla, the only female member of the central group of students, is an obscure object of desire for Richard. If Hampden is Eden, then Camilla evokes Christian myth by initially appearing as a ‘Madonna’, a Mary figure, an untouchable woman of pure light. The other female undergraduates introduced throughout the novel are little more than one-night stands or vaguely ridiculous party girls, as is Judy Poovey’s case.

We can partially attribute this portrayal of women to the conventions the novel is trying to evoke. By drawing inspiration from early 20th century tales of undergraduate life, Tartt inevitably casts her female characters in the roles they were constricted to in these early academic novels with male protagonists: dream girl Camilla and fast girl Judy, domestic nag Marion and horrid mother Corcoran.

The novels Lyons (35) evokes in his discussion of the american college novel already seem to contain similar characters. *Stover at Yale* has Jean Story, the proper daughter of a distinguished jurist, and Fanny LeRoy, the shopgirl who aspires to the same refinement. *This Side of Paradise*’s Amory Blaine has Isabelle, the flirt, Rosalind, the woman of the world, and Clara, the saint.

And yet, the approach the novel follows is far from exclusive to the American campus novel. It is, rather, also a product of a national literature that has always capitalized on a Fair Maiden/Dark Lady duality in its depictions of women (Fiedler 279). In many ways, The Secret History reflects these conventions with the Camilla/Judy opposition. The novel encourages it by having Judy mention a clash with Camilla on her very first scene (TSH 49) and maintains it by often having her appear just after Camilla.

Richard’s narration itself invites us to compare them in a way that invokes the Freudian madonna-whore complex.

Despite popular tendency to use the dichotomy to classify women, the term actually refers to a male sexual disorder. Men suffering from the madonna-whore complex are unable to reconcile sexual and romantic desire in a single female object. They divide women between pure, asexual madonnas and dirty, promiscuous whores (Boryszewski 216) and are unable to sexually function with the former.

Yet, while Freud attributed this issue to the inability to deal with unresolved sexual feelings towards a mother figure, it is now widely argued that “viewing these attitudes as a psychopathology ignores how culture and social structure shape men’s beliefs about women” (Bareket, Kahalon, Shnabel, & Glick 2). While evolutionary psychologists see this phenomenon as way to address paternal uncertainty by framing long-term mates as chaste and therefore incapable of infidelity, feminist theories see it as an ideology designed to enforce the patriarchy by splitting women into two mutually exclusive roles, limiting their sexual freedom and reinforcing gender roles.

At first glance, *The Secret History* would seem to echo the dichotomy at the heart of this complex for the way it creates a contrast between Camilla and Judy. Indeed, it is pertinent to point out that much of the novel is somewhat structured around binary oppositions: barbarity vs. civilization, repression vs. hedonism, the noble old world vs. the vapid modern world (Hargreaves 63).

On one hand, we have Camilla, “beautiful in an unsettling, almost medieval way” (TSH 24), at one point described as a “hazy and ineffably tender apparition” (TSH 230). In contrast, and often appearing just after her unattainable counterpart, we have promiscuous, “senseless cokehead” Judy Poovey (TSH 255).

While not physically impotent, Richard is, indeed, unable to consummate his relationship with the Madonna Camilla. She rejects him time and time again, and his love for her remains. When they part ways at the end of the novel, he compares himself to Orpheus glancing at the ghost of his only love (TSH 624). She is forever lost, out of reach.

Loud, physical Judy, however, elicits no sort of erotic desire either. Despite her alleged claim that she is going to sleep with him (TSH 49), Richard and Judy never do become sexually involved with each other. And although she seems rather jealous of his encounter with the committed, “kind of a slut” (TSH 331) Mona Beale, Richard and Judy remain friends throughout the novel.

Like the men afflicted by the Madonna-whore complex, consummating relationships appears to be somewhat of a problem for Richard – who also rejects the advances of his friend Francis.

Tartt herself asserts that the novel is essentially about repressed sexuality. However, the claim that the novel's characters "possibly uniquely among students the world over - seem almost totally devoid of a sexual life" (Brown) is blatantly false. Charles has a sexual relationship with his sister Camilla, who in turn has one with Henry. Charles is also involved with Francis, who tries to become involved with Richard, who does manage to have at least one dalliance with a minor female character. The lack of graphic depravity, she argues, is only superficial, as there is "sex all in the book, but it's really pressed down. And that's basically the plot—it's like a water pipe with weak spots, and it'll kind of explode in different places. But it's very controlled." (Kaplan).

Since both of *The Secret History's* most prevalent female characters are a sexual interest for and someone who is sexually interested in Richard, any analysis of the way *The Secret History* portrays women has to take this repression into account. Do the female characters in *The Secret History* subvert the roles in which Richard casts them? Why do they remain out of reach?

The answer lies not only in portrayals of Judy and Camilla, but also in that of Sophie Dearbold, the girl Richard has an unsuccessful relationship with at the end of the novel.

1 - On Camilla and the fear of woman

"She was a living reverie for me: the mere sight of her sparked an almost infinite range of fantasy, from Greek to Gothic, from vulgar to divine." (TSH 107)

But who is Camilla? The only woman amongst Julian's pupils remains the most ill-defined of the group: she is myth, abstraction, a nebulous projection of a woman. Presented through the "soft-focus lens of Richard's desire" (Hargreaves 29) Camilla's character is ambiguous in everything. Even gender.

She is initially introduced as one of two, the female counterpart to a male twin brother with which she supposedly shares an uncanny physical resemblance. Charles and Camilla Maccaulay are described together before they are separately named. They are androgynous, with "epicene faces" that lead them to resemble a pair of sexless "Flemish Angels" (TSH 18).

As a duo, Camilla and Charles invoke a number of mythical and literary comparisons. On one hand, we might claim that they are the Artemis and Apollo of Greek myth. At first glance, Charles's superficial resemblance to Apollo lies in his beauty and initial luminous charisma, while Camilla's is easily compared to Artemis, virgin goddess of hunt, wilderness and childbirth.

Early in the novel, Bunny compares Camilla to a statue of Artemis's roman counterpart, Diana, at his father's club (TSH 61). Camilla even believes herself to be a deer during the Bacchanal (TSH 188), an animal with which the deity is often pictured. Moreover, Artemis's status as a virgin goddess further highlights the 'Madonna' conventions under which she is perceived, and her nature as "goddess of transitions" (Budin 2), namely that from girl to woman, mimics the character's own ambiguous identity.

But the gothic nature of the twins does not reside solely in their ambiguity. The Macaulay siblings also initially invite comparisons to Edgar Allan Poe's Madeleine and Roderick from *The Fall of The House of Usher*. Truffin points out that they "seem like modernized versions of Poe characters" (167). There is already an element of the gloom even in the way they are initially described as "long-dead celebrants of some forgotten Garden party" (TSH 18).

On a certain level, these two references are connected. According to some, Apollo and Artemis are not divergent but mirror images, "a motif not recurring until the incestuous brother-sister pairs of Romanticism" (Paglia 74). Yet, this portrayal of Charles and Camilla as a dual character begins to falter the minute Richard finds himself sexually attracted to the sister, with the narration constantly remarking upon her beauty from the first class onwards (TSH 40), and it deteriorates throughout the novel, as their contrasting personalities emerge. Towards the end, one of the FBI agents in charge of investigating Bunny's murder, Detective Sciola, remarks that they don't look much alike at all – there's a familiar resemblance but their "hair's not even quite the same color" (TSH 422).

For, despite Richard's first impressions, Camilla and Charles are not entirely alike. Whereas her brother is mercurial and emotive, she is cold and self-possessed, the one who least unravels as the investigation of the murder evolves. Indeed, despite her parallels with Artemis, Camilla is the more Apollonian of the twins if we read them through an Apollonian/Dionysian binary.

As Hargreaves reminds us, Apollo is the Greek God of healing, music, prophecy and light. Dionysius is the God of Wine and ecstasy, promising transcendence of identity at the cost violence.

In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia[8] recovers the Nietzschean dichotomy of the Apollonian and Dionysian by framing them as two antagonistic forces at the heart of western culture. She mostly rejects the term Dionysian due to its contamination with "vulgar pleasantries" and choses chthonian, "of the earth", the "earth's bowels", the strength, squalor and rot (5) of brutal nature, but its opposition to the civilized surface of the Apollonian remains.

The male, Paglia suggests, is Apollonian, whereas the chthonian nature is female – "nature's cycles are woman's cycles" (9). Nonetheless, *The Secret History*'s most predominant female character remains the most adept at taming her chthonian nature.

Camilla's Apollonian nature is reflected even in her appearance. With her boyish haircut (TSH 234) and proclivity for wearing her brother's clothes (TSH 61)[9], bramble rose rather than hybrid tea as Bunny calls her, Camilla's beauty is reminiscent of Paglia's description of the "beautiful boy".

Her golden halo of a head recalls the youth's "flowing or richly textured hyacinthine hair" (Paglia 118), with whom she shares an "unconscious and slightly masculine grace of posture" (TSH 495). She is the subject of as much aesthetic distance as the muses of Dante and Petrarch that Paglia compares to the beautiful boy: "dreamy, remote, autistic, lost in a world of androgynous self-completion" (Paglia 121).

Throughout the novel, she is often described through light-related metaphors. Her eyes are 'radiant'. She is 'clear', she 'sparks', she is 'illuminated' (TSH 40).

Yet, rather than transparent, we would argue that the light renders her impossible to look directly at, impossible to perceive. Richard may find her charming and kind, akin to her equally “impulsive and generous” but moodier brother (TSH 94), but Camilla is also calculating and cold, in control of herself in a way most of the other characters are not.

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[8] Paglia's credentials as a polemicist are irrelevant to this dissertation. One must agree with the claim that she gathers "most of her publicity by loudly and nastily proclaiming everyone wrong on the sensitive issues of gender, sexuality, and rape", but the fact that *Sexual Personae* is an "endless recycling of the same sexual dynamics, a constant recasting of new faces in the same old roles" is precisely the point (Loffreda 121). Although her calls to a disputed biological dogma are dubious at best, and at odds with the core of modern gender and queer studies, Paglia nonetheless offers interesting insight into the way Western culture portrays womanhood. Glorified stereotypes as they may be, her ideas allows us to trace the sources of the current portrayals of women – we do not have to take these as givens of mother nature as she proposes.

[9] An early suggestion of the nature of their incestuous relationship.

She shows evidence of this self-possession early on. When she cuts her foot in Francis’s house, she reacts to the bloodshed of a ruptured artery with surprising calm, brushing off compliments about her bravery with the guarantee that “it didn’t hurt that much” (TSH 110). Henry and Francis suggest that, when they returned home after the Bacchanal, it was Camilla who threw an ashtray at Bunny to keep him from screaming and who had sense to flick off the light before he could notice that they were wearing bloody sheets (TSH 201).

Despite his “uncanny ability to ferret out topics of conversation that made the listener uneasy” (TSH 207), Bunny is unable to hurt Camilla with his misogyny. Even Richard, enchanted as he is, occasionally sees traces of her true nature:

> *Being the only female in what was basically a boy’s club must have been difficult for her. Miraculously, she didn’t compensate by becoming hard or quarrelsome. She was still a girl, a slight, lovely girl who lay in bed and ate chocolates, a girl whose hair smelled like hyacinth and whose scarves fluttered jauntily in the breeze. But strange and marvelous as she was, a wisp of silk in a forest of black wool, she was not the fragile creature one would have her seem.* (TSH 252)

Camilla, slight and lovely as may appear, is all Apollonian impenetrability. Yet, instances of admirable self-possession are far from the only evidence of Camilla’s coldness. She progressively emerges a far darker, shrewder character than the strange and marvelous creature Richard insists in making her out to be.

Bunny may be unable to hurt Camilla by belittling her gender, but he does strike a nerve by (accurately) suggesting that she is sleeping with her brother. When she looks at him with “absolutely no expression in her pale eyes” (TSH 254) we see a Camilla deprived of the golden halo Richard has crafted for her.

Tasked with taking Cloke Rayburn on a double date with Bunny and Marion, she finds the entire situation amusing, letting out a low, sweet chortle at the idea that Cloke now likes her. And even intoxicated, she still has the “vacant, drunken composure” to reject Richard’s request to go home with him (TSH 292).

Book II is marked by the chthonian and Dionysian, by a loss of control. Henry loses the ability to manipulate the investigation. Charles descends into alcoholism (TSH 531). Francis becomes increasingly neurotic and hypochondriac (TSH 519). Even Richard spins further into substance abuse. But Camilla's displays of frailty are almost predatory in themselves – a part of the delicate beauty that conceals her true nature.

When they are having tea together in her apartment, Camilla shivering and preoccupied, Richard is fantasizing about physical contact and waxing lyrical about her pessimistic mouth right until he decides to ask her about the murder:

> *'It was a cold night. I'll never forget the smell of it, either. Like when my uncle used to cut up deer. Ask Francis. He remembers, too.'*
>
> *I was too horrified to say anything. She reached for the teapot and poured a bit more into her cup. 'Do you know,' she said, 'why I think we're having such bad luck this time around?'*
>
> *'What?'*
>
> *'Because it's terrible luck to leave a body unburied. That farmer they found straightaway, you know. But remember poor Palinarus in the Aeneid? He lingered around and haunted them for the longest time. I'm afraid that none of us are going to have a good night's sleep until Bunny's in the ground.'*
>
> *She laughed.*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *She was silent for a moment. Then she said 'Do you know what Henry made us do, a couple of days after that thing in the woods?'*
>
> *'What?'*
>
> *'He made us kill a piglet'*
>
> *I was not shocked so much by this statement as by the eerie calm with which she delivered it 'Oh, my God', I said.* (TSH 403-404)

While she claims to have felt sick after the ceremony with the piglet's blood, Camilla seems remarkably indifferent to the violence she has witnessed. She laughs as she recalls it. She pours herself some tea. This is the woman which, as Richards admits, "had been party to the killing of two men; had stood calm as a Madonna and watched Bunny die" (TSH 402).

By the end of their conversation, a drunk Charles appears and calls her "honey" and his "girl". Yet, Richard sees nothing, still. He fails to perceive the incestuous nature of

Camilla's relationship with her brother until he drunkenly plants a voluptuous kiss on her mouth, to which she responds by not flinching or moving, acting as if nothing has happened (TSH 512).

Clear-eyed, bitter Francis sees Camilla and her brother through different lenses. He claims that that they care about no one, not even each other, and that they take a perverse pleasure in leading people (including Richard) on. Their relationship is no idealistic fantasy of incest, but something darker, violent and twisted. Even Bunny, he claims, knew that she was "bad medicine" (TSH 517).

These last portrayals of Camilla would seem to sway her to the other side of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. It is arguably Charles's jealously over her relationship with Henry that leads to the climax of the novel, that places the pistol with which he commits suicide in the room (TSH 606).

The *femme fatale,* Paglia reminds us, may appear as a "frigid nymph, masquing in the brilliant luminosity of Apollonian high glamour" (Paglia 15). In Greek mythology, the Artemis to whom Camilla is so compared is herself a ruthless figure who, along with Apollo and Athena[10], wages war against chthonian nature.

Amusingly enough, early Artemis was a mistress of beasts, "swarming hive of mother nature" – her Ephesian statue is covered in breasts and bull testicles. Mary died in Ephesus, where Artemis's temple was considered one of the seven wonder of the ancient world: the Madonna, too, "is a spiritual correction of Ephesian Artemis, symbol of animal nature" (Paglia 75). Artemis the huntress and the Madonna, Paglia claims, are Apollonian corrections of the same Great Mother. So is Camilla, we suggest.

She emerges from the book as something remarkable and terrifying. But Richard cannot reconcile it with his idyllic picture of her. Enamored with her as he remains even throughout the epilogue, loving a "wan but still beautiful" Camilla (TSH 619) reminiscent of the pale, dead leaf of a nymph of the later pages of Nabokov's *Lolita* – he cannot accept the darker shades of her character, the sharp Apollonian edge of her beauty and the chthonian darkness of her sexuality.

Richard's resent of Camilla is exemplified towards the end of Book II, once the impact of the violence has spun him out of control. When she shows up in his room to tell him that Charles has been hurting her, he feels an urge to seize her bruised wrist and "strangle her, rape her" (TSH 546).

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[10] With whose "terrible eyes shining" (TSH, p. 41) Camilla's are also compared.

In the single character of Camilla, Tartt projects a variety of roles: Fair Lady, Dark Lady, victim.

1.1 - Camilla, the object

One of the aspects we must inevitably address about Camilla is her role as an object of desire. Throughout the novel, she is the object of too many erotic triangles to keep track of: with Charles and Henry, Richard and Henry, Richard and Charles.

Girard identifies three key figures in the erotic triangle in the novel: the subject, the object and the mediator. Desire is of an imitative nature, and the subject's "impulse towards the object is ultimately an impulse towards the mediator" (Girard, 10), which they seek to emulate by coveting the same object that they show an inclination towards. In this manner, "a *vaniteux* will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires" (7). The bond between subject and rival is, at times, stronger than the one with the object.

In *Between Men*, Sedgwick takes these thoughts further. While Girard's model is unconcerned with asymmetries of gender, she points out that his examples are most often those in which two male characters are rivals "over" a female one – as is the norm in the European high-culture tradition the book analyses. Girard's bond is essentially a bond between males. This form of male heterosexual desire thus becomes a desire to "consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females." (Sedgwick 38).[11]

We have previously discussed Richard's attempts to emulate the other students in the Greek class – he clearly longs to absorb whatever wealth-related quality he believes makes them superior. Indeed, his first signs of interest in Camilla come with an acknowledgement of this perceived inferiority. He does not believe he stands much of a chance with her, surrounded as she is by "clever rich boys in dark suits", while he has only his "clumsy hands and suburban ways" (TSH 40).

Just as in the sort of desire Girard identifies, Richard's desire to possess the object and absorb the mediator comes in the guise of a desire to be initiated into an "unfamiliar way of life" (Girard 53). But what he wants is to become the mediator, to become someone else.

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[11] One must note that, unlike Paglia, Sedgwick distinguishes these bonds from homosexual ones, rejecting the idea that homosexual desire arises from misogyny or rejection of the maternal flesh (Loffreda 123).

This notion brings us to another, if not perfect, intersection between Richard and Fitzgerald's Gatsby: Camilla becomes Richard's very own Daisy Buchanan.

We have previously pointed out the obvious similarities between Camilla and *The Great Gastby'*s Daisy. The most glaring one is the shared color motif. Daisy is, in skin and clothes "even more conspicuously white than her husband" (Elmore 428) Like Camilla, she is surrounded by whiteness and light.

Yet, Daisy also represents "Southern Gentility" as an enduring face of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant America (Elmore 430). Camilla, although an orphan and far more financially humble that this literary counterpart, has an equally southern background, a past the narrator idealizes as "reared by grandmothers and great-aunts in a house in Virginia: a childhood […] with horses and rivers and sweet-gum trees" (TSH 6).

Even their descriptions are eerily similar. Nick describes a face that is "sad and lovely with bright things in it" (Fitzgerald 1925/ 2017: 11), Richard talks of losing himself in Camilla's "singular little face, in the pessimism of her beautiful mouth" (TSH 402).

The portrayal of Camilla as a complicated figure under Richard's idealization of her equally echoes Harold Bloom's interpretation of Daisy as a "snow queen, ice cold" (Bloom 6) whose character flaws cannot affect Gatsby's attitude, for whom she is ultimately a vision of an ideal. To both Gatsby and Richard, the object's ultimate traits do not matter, for what they long for is to become the mediator.

It would be hard to see violent, decadent Tom Buchanan as a mediator for Gatsby. But Gatsby was, we need remember, already infatuated with Daisy before she met Tom. Much like Flaubert's Bovary's mediators are the heroines of her treasured romance novels, Gatsby's mediator is arguably an idealized version of himself, the wealthy fiction of a Gatsby he turns himself into to court Daisy. If she is "the king's daughter, the golden girl" (Fitzgerald 1925/ 2017: 119), then Gatsby wants to be *the* king by claiming her.

Richard, on the other hand, admires his unknown 'rivals' Charles and, especially, Henry from the very start. We have previously stressed the extent to which Richard idolizes Henry, who 'saves' him (TSH 139) from dying of hypothermia. Richard is easily manipulated by his friend, flattered by Henry's claim that he is "just as smart" as he believed him to be for catching on about his plan of leaving the country (TSH 181), seeking his approval to the point of involving himself in a murder he has no reason to aid.

The ending is, we would argue, an admission of the triangular nature of his desire for Camilla. When she rejects him for the last time, arguing that she is incapable of choosing anyone but the memory of her dead lover, Richard replies that he had “loved him, too” (TSH 624). Henry emerges, at this point, as the true source of Richard’s desire. He longs to emulate him, to absorb him, and succeeds only in the sense of forever having the pale ghost of Henry Winter haunting his dreams, evading all his questions before finally “receding down the long, gleaming hall” (TSH 629).

It is not simply that Richard fails to perceive Camilla as she is – he is hardly even interested in it. He is blind to the complexities of the object, longing only to absorb the mediator and become someone different. Her rejection dooms him to the impossibility of ever really surpassing himself.

2 - On Judy and the fear of the intellect

I found her lying on her bed, watching a Mel Gibson movie on a VCR she’d borrowed from the video department. She was managing somehow to polish her fingernails, smoke a cigarette, and drink a Diet Coke all at the same time. (TSH 536)

The foil to Camilla, the false Whore to her false Madonna, is Judy Poovey. A hard-drinking, diet-coke jugging, exercise obsessed California girl who owns a Red Corvette, Judy seems like a fitting representation of the modern world Richard cares to reject by spending his time with the Greek students. She, in turn, seems considerably infatuated with him, to the point of remaining bizarrely helpful and devoted to him throughout the novel.[12]

Yet, Richard is initially repulsed by Judy. In the scene in which she is first introduced, he is displeased to run into her brushing her teeth in the sink, and describes her in less than flattering terms. Everything about the character, from her frosted hair to her cut-off jeans, to the ‘screech’ to which her voice rises (TSH 49) is immediately outlined with arguably misogynistic contempt.

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[12] Judy’s character is somewhat reminiscent of the ‘sluts’ of Donna Tartt’s autobiographical *Team spirit: Memories of Being a Freshman Cheerleader for the Basketball Team*. Echoing *The Secret History’s* Judy, the ‘sluts’ are portrayed as sympathetic figures, if obscene and ditzy, much kinder to young Donna than their richer and snootier counterparts. Judy’s parallels with them are further proof that, though not financially unprivileged herself, the character is inevitably meant to be a foil to an ‘elite’.

Whereas Camilla is ethereal, Judy is garish, loud, bizarre. Camilla is mystery, Apollonian beauty concealing the chthonian darkness of violence and incest. Judy bares her “intensely aerobicized midriff” (TSH 49) and spits out a mouthful of toothpaste in public. She is no abstraction of a woman. She conceals nothing for Richard to romanticize.

The status related implications of this duality are clear. Though bearing more resemblance to the imaginary glamorous California Richard has crafted for his past than to the one of his actual childhood, much about Judy still suggests the drunkenness of noise, light and consumer goods with which Richard associates an adolescence of poverty. It does not matter that Judy is not truly poor: she is cheap.

She is also not truly ‘white’. For the Fair Maiden/Dark Lady duality alludes, not only to a moral polarity but to an ethnic one. The Dark Lady becomes an embodiment of the sexuality denied to her fairer counterpart, a surrogate “for all the Otherness against which an Anglo-Saxon world attempts to define itself” (Fiedler 286). And while Judy, with her earnestness and limited sexual appeal for the protagonist, is no traditional Dark Lady, she is but an imitation of the Fair Maiden. Her “frosted” hair echoes the idea of the bleached blonde, whose “fair hair is the product of the peroxide bottle rather than of race or culture, a disguise rather than an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace” (Fiedler 315). Her blondness does not hold the promise that Camilla’s does. Yet, perhaps the partial nature of her blondness, with frosted rather than dyed hair, suggests that the character is not truly interested in deceiving. For whereas the traditional bleach blonde is vampy and destructive, Judy is notoriously defanged.

Judy can be Dionysian, but mostly only for the reasons for which Paglia rejects the word. She is not chthonian darkness but a much more mundane, socially acceptable sort of excess: a substance abusing ‘party girl’. Judy is never in control, but there is no threat to her frenzy. Richard himself hypocritically dismisses her as a “senseless cokehead” (TSH 255), a distinction that elevates itself to ironic considering the amount of times he himself engages in drug use throughout the novel.

Judy also provides a comical and, sometimes, narratively necessary reprieve from the bloody exploits of the central group. She is a part of the campus setting in its most modern sense, becoming a part of what is arguably the “realistic base which stabilizes this occasionally fantastical narrative” (Hargreaves 39).

Interestingly, Judy is strongly reminiscent on a sort of archetypal female character O’Lyons already identifies in his 1962 book on the American college novel. There is the

‘Cynthia’, a reference to the novel that inspired the homonymous 1925 movie *The Plastic Age*, in which a freshman undergraduate falls for Clara Bow’s popular, fun-seeking party girl Cynthia Day (Lyons 35).

The Secret History amusingly reverses what happens in the 1920s story. Unlike Hugh Carver, Richard feels no pull towards the ‘fast’ girl. It is not the rowdy excess of youth that tempts him, but a group that wears a veneer of culture and sophistication. Richard desires the object he does because he thinks possessing it will transform him into someone better. Judy holds no such promise.

Yet, there is an interesting parallel between the original character and Judy, with whom she unequivocabily shares some traits. By the end of the *The Plastic Age*, Cynthia ‘selflessly’ chooses to abandon Hugh, as she is “a woman of experience and not good enough for him” (Lyons 34) – an act early 20th century morality would frame as noble. Judy, too, proves somewhat kind and self-sacrificing towards Richard in her own 21st century way, maintaining a friendship with him despite his lack of interest in her, advising and aiding him in several occasions.

Early in the novel, she plays benevolent fairy godmother to Richard’s Cinderella by offering him a blazer to take on his brunch with Bunny (TSH 52). She tries to invite him to parties (TSH 294) and shows some gossip-tinted concern with a minor character’s eating disorder (TSH 319). Even her resentment upon learning that Richard slept with another girl doesn’t last (TSH 331). But perhaps the most compelling evidence of Judy’s decency is the way she deals with Richard when the news of Bunny’s ‘disappearance’ spreads:

> *She looked up at me, her eyes large with compassion, with understanding of the solitude and invincibility of grief. ‘It’ll be okay,’ she said, giving my arm a squeeze, and then she left, pausing the door for a sorrowful backwards glance.* (TSH 359)

Vapid and hedonistic as she may be, Judy is arguably the kindest character in the entire novel. Even Richard warms up to her, going from mean-spirited to benevolent contempt. When Judy and her ‘girlfriends’ take it upon themselves to distract him after Bunny’s funeral, Richard complains about their proclivity for Mexican Food, tequila-based drinks and “long boring stories”, but he also admits that Judy is a “a kindly soul”, so “bossy and talkative” that he feels oddly safe with her (TSH 429)

Hargreaves (30) compares Judy to “the Good Angel in a morality play”, sounding off warnings about the nature of the Greek students that contrast with Richard’s idealized perception of them.

In contrast to what a straightforward Madonna/whore dichotomy would suggest, Judy ends up being a subversion of the idea of the party girl as morally corrupt. The narrative does not punish her with an undignified ending either. She does not descend into alcoholism like *The Plastic Age*’s Cynthia. Indeed, the epilogue reveals Judy to be doing far better than any of the main characters – she is “something of a minor celebrity” (TSH 625), a certified Aerobics instructor that regularly appears on cable television.

And yet, there is also something infinitely familiar to placing Judy, lively and unintellectual, as fundamentally ‘good’ - in opposition to the more sophisticated and intelligent, whose refinement and intellect renders them cold and ‘evil’[13]. Judy ultimately emerges as an example of what Fiedler calls the ‘Good Bad Girl’ who, with her “heart of truest gold beneath the rougher of exteriors”, also borrows something from the idea of the Fair Maiden. Despite the brutal reconstruction of the innocent american girl that Camilla represents, Tartt still feels the need to introduce a character that contains something of America at its most innocent, with its “faith that evil is in appearance only” (Fiedler 300).

3 - On Sophie and the fear of death

Much like, in the *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* fairytale, it takes the titular character something scalding and something freezing to find a perfect one, Richard is given a chance at finding a balance between two opposing forces with Sophie Dearbold. She is a girl he vaguely knows from his French class and with whom he and Francis share a ride to Bunny’s funeral. Camilla is too cold, Judy is too hot, Camilla is brutally ancient, Judy is repulsively modern. Sophie, however, is *just right*. Francis immediately remarks upon her resemblance to Audrey Hepburn, halfway between myth and past and pop culture present (TSH 434). Bunny had harbored a crush on Sophie, and Richard soon expresses an interest in her too, describing her as “one of the prettiest girls at Hampden” and unrepentant of the possibility of having slept with her during one of his drunken blackouts (TSH 526). Richard and Sophie could have fallen in love, we suppose. But they never truly do.

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[13] It’s arguably an odd echo of the same anti-intellectualist sentiment according to which stimulating the intellect and the imagination for their own sake would lead to moral corruption.

Although in the epilogue, Richard reveals that he began a relationship with Sophie in his senior year, they are apart by the time he tells the story. They ‘thought’ they were in love, he claims – and the word implies that they never do forge a genuine connection, that the potential link between them is also a missed opportunity. And yet, it was always bound to be. For heterosexual romance and its consummation call back to a circle of life, to the “hideous mechanics of birth and copulation” (TSH 9) that Richard and, we might argue, all of Tartt’s protagonists fear and reject.

It is his committed relationship with Sophie that ‘drags’ Richard back to the California he always associated with rot. She is hired by a dance company in Los Angeles and he, against his “better judgment”, applies to graduate schools in the same state. And yet, the thought of living in California with Sophie leads to dreams of “car crashes, freeway snipers, the glowing eyes of feral dogs in suburban parking lots” (TSH 615). The fact that it is Sophie who returns Richard to a place he considers tainted by decay is not incidental.

It echoes Henry’s warning to Bunny early in the novel, when he points out that his friend’s dreams of marrying Marion and having children with her will inevitably lead to decay, for “the fulfilment of the reproductive cycle” is “an invariable harbinger of swift decline and death” (TSH 112). Moving in with a partner, a socially orthodox way of ‘growing up’ always echoes this cycle and its inevitable end. This physical, non-platonic relationship would always result in the “defilement” that he identifies with life in his native Plano:

> *'There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death […] been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death death death*.' (TSH 9)

This sentiment is clearly echoed in one of the most striking passages of the *The Goldfinch.* In it, protagonist Theo explains the sense of doom that taints his existence through a repetition of the futile and mundane things that constitute ‘ordinary’ human life. Stripped of specifics, the passage could easily belong in *The Secret History*:

> *But depression wasn't the word. This was a plunge encompassing sorrow and revulsion far beyond the personal: a sick, drenching nausea at all humanity and human endeavor from the dawn of time. The writhing loathsomeness of the*

> *biological order. Old age, sickness, death. No escape for anyone. Even the beautiful ones were like soft fruit about to spoil. […] Most people seemed satisfied with the thin decorative glaze and the artful stage lighting that sometimes, made the bedrock atrocity of the human predicament look somewhat more mysterious or less abhorrent. […] But in a strong light there was no good spin you could put on it. It was rotten from top to bottom.* (TG 534-535)

Richard's paranoia echoes *The Goldfinch*'s Theo Decker's claim that "life is catastrophe" (TG 324). Yet, this sentiment does not exhaust itself in Tartt's male protagonists. Even *The Little Friend's* Harriet succumbs to the same dread. Amusingly enough, while both Richard and Theo fear the advance of death through the union of heterosexual marriage, Harriet's fear, too, is characterized by a revulsion of femaleness.

At camp, Harriet is repulsed by the way the "stupid Tupelo girls" discuss menses and dating, finding many of them obscene, coarse and frightening. She is horrified by the looming "indignity" of growing into a "Teen Girl", a creature "wholly protuberance and excretion" (TLF 366). She would rather "starve" herself than develop the fleshiness associated with female puberty (TLF 364). Harriet fears these mechanics of defilement more than she fears death itself: "*Knowing that it was inevitable was in no way better than knowing that some day she would die […] Death, at least, was dignified: an end to dishonor and sorrow"* (TLF 366). To Theo and Richard, defilement is linked with a union to a woman - to Harriet it is linked with becoming one.

Yet, while we cannot deny the link binding Tartt's three protagonists together, it is still Theo and Richard that share the most. Harriet fears the taint of adulthood, but she still spends most of the novel in the cocoon of childhood, protected from the true uncertainty and rottenness that lie ahead. [14] Richard and Theodore fear it all throughout their respective stories.

The difference we can detect between them is that, while the former is permanently haunted by the futility of his attempts to escape the catastrophe of life, Richard temporarily buys into the illusion of escaping it through becoming one of the Greek Students[15].

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[14] "Later, when Harriet remembered that day, it would seem the exact, crystalline, scientific point where her life had swerved into misery. Never had she been happy or content, exactly, but she was quite unprepared for the strange darks that lay ahead of her" (TLF 340).

[15] The difference between Richard and Theo is, one could argue, precisely that Theo succeeds where Richard fails. Though their thirst for beauty causes them both suffering throughout the narrative, Theo is ultimately able to find some solace in the redemptive power of art, and atones by returning the titular

Yet, this illusion is, as we have previously discussed, doomed to failure. For we would argue that Richard, as all of Tartt's protagonists, does fear death – if, like Harriet, he can stomach it as a clean, distant end to dishonor, then he certainly cannot stomach it as a long process of pestilence and defilement. Such as a rejection is inherently connected with the 20th century American and Western avoidance of death – a phenomenon that is no longer framed as simply tragic, but downright shameful. Historian Philippe Ariès portrays a culture with a staunch belief in progress, that cannot reconcile itself with its inability to beat death. The increased medicalization hides it, confining it to the realm of hospitals, and the physical processes associated with it become all the more unpalatable:

> *It is indecent to let someone die in public. It is no longer acceptable for strangers to come into a room that smells of urine, sweat, and gangrene, and where the sheets are soiled. Access to this room must be forbidden, except to a few intimates capable of overcoming their disgust, or to those indispensable persons who provide certain services. A new image of death is forming: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty.* (Ariès para 7).

Birth, copulation and such mundane phenomena are feared by Richard and the rest of the Greek students because they bring about this sort of decay. Actual violence and murder, however, are callously rationalized and even seen with a perverse sort of fascination – but is this truly the contradiction that it appears to be?

The rationalization is arguably a natural consequence of an approach to death that is characterized by a forced indifference. Many times "the disappearance of an individual no longer affects" society's continuity as it once did (Death Denied, para. 5) and sentimentalized mourning is relegated to the very specific and beautified ritual of the funeral[16]. In this context, it becomes easy to dismiss a murder with the claim that its victim "was not Voltaire" (TSH 220) or that "people die violent natural deaths all the time" (TSH 190). Just as it becomes easier to see Bunny's murder as a twisted kind of necessity.

As for the fascination, we must quote Ariès' claim that when "shown the door by society", death will come back in through the window (Ariès, Death Denied, para. 7). It is a sentiment one can easily tie with the American Gothic's frequent exploration of the

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painting. Richard's fascination with the beauty of the Greek students proves misleading, and he can never truly atone for his involvement in Bunny's murder.

[16] We must stress that is precisely just before the funeral, confronted with the true impact of his actions, that the protagonist's indifference is pierced at last. "My baby", cries Mr. Corcoran, and it is the helplessness of it that leads Richard to finally register the evil of Bunny's murder (TSH, p. 437).

futility of repressing the irrational and its inevitable return. Tartt echoes this idea not only in the way the novel places Apollonian/Chthonian as one of the binary oppositions at its core (Hargreaves 63), but also in the way the central group's superficial indifference towards death is constantly challenged. Part of the reason why it is unfair to claim that the *The Secret History* is simply a tale of murderous teenage detachment is that the murders do have an impact in most of the characters – Henry and Richard experience periods of heightened sensation after killing Bunny (TSH 556), Charles unravels (TSH 531) and, ultimately, all of their fates are irrevocably tainted by what they did[17]. Death is not, we are reminded, easy to tame.

Lovely Sophie, then, remains a symbol of a death that is "improper, like the biological acts of man, the secretions of the human body" (Dirty Death para. 7), of a natural world that is ultimately repulsive.

Furthermore, Richard's inability to love her is definitive proof of his utter failure at the end of the narrative. Not only has he been unable to fully transcend his origins, ending up back in California as an academic on financial aid, he is rendered incapable of 'moving on' with his life in more mundane ways. It is not simply that the contact with the Greek students fails to transform him into someone better, like he once craved it to. Their shared crime actually transforms him into someone *worse*, someone marred by the evil of what they did to Bunny. Sophie could have represented a change, a life, however ordinary. But Sophie leaves him. "The way I looked at her sometimes, when I woke up in the morning, frightened her" (TSH 615), he admits. Ultimately, both the dreams of social mobility in the New Republic and the power of education prove illusory. Richard will never share whatever "cultivated quality" (TSH 33) he once associated with his friends. The only thing he can share is the murder, and the hollowness with which it endows them all.

Abandoned by their mentor and unable to find a personal culture or a set of principles in the modern world, the surviving Greek students cling to the protection of older, ghoulish figures, as if trapped in some perpetual childhood. By the end of the novel Francis is a useless heir forced to marry a woman for the benefit of a homophobic grandfather, Camilla is a lonely caretaker for her grandmother, Charles is a born-again Christian living in a "dump" with an older married woman (TSH 621). Their dreams of living "forever" (TSH 100), as they at one point toast to, are gone.

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[17] Even those of Francis and Camilla, possibly the most nonchalant amongst the murderers. Henry at least feels some compulsion towards the murder itself instead of being indifferent to it.

Conclusion

We should begin this conclusion by admitting to the present dissertation's constant attempt to escape from its initial premise, veering off into unexpected corners at many points of its development. In a way, this ought to have been expected. *The Secret History* is a strange patchwork of a novel, blurring high and low culture, genre and tone. Yet, we believe ourselves to be closer to establishing what makes the book as compelling as it is.

Tartt may be a product of media 'hype' (Newsweek Staff), and she is, as the commercial success of *The Secret History* and *The Goldfinch* against the lukewarm reception of *The Little Friend* prove, at her most popular when she writes about wealthy white people. However, her novels are neither uncritical nor nostalgic depictions of picturesque, pretentious people.

The Secret History is, instead, a noteworthy entry into the tradition of the American Gothic. It stands in contrast with the idea of the country's essential innocence, becoming a part of the "alternative vision, recording fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness" (Crow 2014: xviii). By deconstructing the idea of the university as the setting of an innocent second childhood, Tartt takes on issues of class and questions the viability of the egalitarian values on which America itself is built. The American Gothic and the campus novel meet, and her characters emerge, not as the dazzling friends that initiate the main character into an elevating bond, but as monstrous caricatures of privilege.

And yet, critics that dismiss Tartt's characters as "synthetic" (Bell 65) or lacking in personality (Hargreaves 68) dramatically miss the point. For all its occasional realistic elements, mainly present in its ridiculous secondary characters, *The Secret History* has one foot in the fanciful. The main characters may not always strike the reader as fully credible human beings because not much in the plot is wholly credible, but they serve their purpose in the larger narrative and incorporate the themes that the book cares to approach.

Nowhere is this more obvious that in the novel's overlooked female characters. While feminist readings of the novel may find little to work with[18], Camilla, Judy and Sophie are arguably representative of the conflicts at the heart of the book.

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[18] One might wonder about the lack of mention of Tartt's own gender within these pages, particularly when women-authored Gothic is a field of study in itself. Yet, while that is certainly a possible path of analysis, the reading we present here does not seek to place the book within an écriture feminine tradition. Indeed, it seems a stretch to ascribe to the book to it. *The Secret History* has none of the central Female Gothic motifs of wilful heroines and domestic incarcerations, and it seems limiting and possibly

Camilla is Richard's very own Daisy Buchanan. Like her counterpart, "her fairy glamour is illusory, and once approached the White Maiden is revealed as a White Witch, the golden girl as golden idol" (Fiedler 301). Camilla represents Richard's dreams of upward mobility. She is never person, but an object in his failed quest to become the mediator and absorb the cultivated charm of his wealthy peers. Judy, her foil, stands in contrast as the unintellectual but essentially kind-hearted wild-child, proving Fiedler's suggestion that in America, the anti-aristocratic principle has often translated into forms of anti-intellectualism (129). Sophie, the least notable and most thinly traced of these characters, enters the latter half of the novel to assert the impossibility of a fulfilling resolution. By being a feasible and 'healthy' romantic interest for Richard, Sophie becomes a symbol of the decay that inevitably accompanies an ordinary life. Obsessed with the 'rot' at the heart of the world and unable to redeem himself from the crime in which he has partaken, Richard can never truly love her.

It is, we would argue, its true bleak nature that renders the novel as appealing as it is. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick foreshadows its success when she asserts that the Gothic's "allure to the middle-class adolescent lies in its promise of initiatory shortcuts to the secret truths of adulthood" (90). *The Secret History* furthers immerses its readers in the underside of the American experiment, using the innocuous and seemingly idyllic campus setting to tell a story of murder, evil and inequality.

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misogynistic to discuss it in relation to that tradition based exclusively on the perceived gender of the novelist.

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