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Academia as a Cult: Knowledge, Power, and Abuse in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

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Abstract

Amongst the themes that literary works in the genre of *dark academia* foreground are power and abuse. In *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt, a book that is considered to be foundational for the dark academia genre, power dynamics plays a central role. Set in a small liberal arts college in rural Vermont, the book follows an exclusive, closed group of six classics students alongside their charismatic professor as they deal with the aftermath of the murder of one of their friends and the events leading up to it. This research aims to explore how the relationships amongst the characters and knowledge, power, and abuse affect their dynamics in Donna Tartt's novel. Through textual analysis that applies Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and Robert Jay Lifton's thought reform theory, this study reveals how knowledge can become a tool of power to control students into blind submission, like cult members, even in an academic environment where critical thinking is encouraged. This research offers an insight on how Tartt's portrayal serves as a commentary on the danger of unchecked power and conformity within academic institutions.

Keywords: dark academia, power/knowledge, thought reform theory, *The Secret History*

Dunia Akademik Sebagai Sekte: Pengetahuan, Kekuasaan, dan Kekerasan dalam *The Secret History* oleh Donna Tartt

Abstrak

Kekuasaan dan kekerasan adalah dua dari berbagai tema yang sering muncul dalam buku-buku dark academia. Dinamika kekuasaan memiliki peran besar dalam The Secret History *(1992) oleh Donna Tartt, sebuah buku yang dianggap sebagai cikal bakal genre dark academia. Berlatar di sebuah perguruan tinggi kecil beraliran* liberal arts *di pedesaan Vermont, buku ini menceritakan enam mahasiswa jurusan klasik, yang eksklusif dan tertutup, bersama profesor mereka yang karismatik, ketika mereka menghadapi konsekuensi dari pembunuhan salah satu teman mereka dan peristiwa-peristiwa yang mengarah ke tragedi tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendalami bagaimana hubungan antara karakter-karakter di* The Secret History *karya Donna Tartt dengan pengetahuan, kekuasaan, dan kekerasan memengaruhi dinamika mereka. Melalui analisis tekstual dan mengaplikasikan teori* power/knowledge *milik Michel Foucault serta teori* thought reform *milik Robert Jay Lifton, penelitian*

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ini mengungkap bagaimana pengetahuan dapat menjadi instrumen kekuasaan yang digunakan untuk mengendalikan mahasiswa agar tunduk sepenuhnya, selayaknya anggota sekte, bahkan ketika mereka berada dalam lingkungan yang seharusnya mendorong mereka untuk berpikir kritis. Penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman tentang bagaimana penggambaran yang diberikan oleh Tartt berfungsi sebagai kritik terhadap bahaya kekuasaan yang tak terkendali dan konformitas dalam institusi akademik.

Kata kunci*:* dark academia*,* power/knowledge*, teori* thought reform*,* The Secret History

Introduction

Dark academia is a subgenre of literature known for its dark and haunting aesthetics, with stories typically set in prestigious academic institutions and involve muder mystery.[1] Power is a recurring theme in dark academia books. According to Foucault, the root of power is knowledge and, to exercise power, one would need to utilize knowledge.[2] This relationship between power and knowledge is prominent in the dark academia literary subgenre. In pursuit of knowledge, typically an esoteric one within an academic setting, characters in dark academia are shown to abuse power, which leads them to moral compromise, isolation, and even violence. Such dynamics reveal systemic structures that perpetuate hierarchies and exclusion, mirroring the broader criticism of elitism and ethics in academia.

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) is often seen as the "foundational novel" of dark academia genre,[3] portraying themes of intellectual elitism and moral decay within an academic setting. The novel is narrated by Richard Papen while he is reflecting on his experience as a Greek student in Hampden College, an elite liberal arts college in rural Vermont. During his time at Hampden, Richard befriended an elite group of five Greek major students, Henry Winter, Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran, Charles Macaulay, Camilla Ma-

[1] Jessica L. Golden, "The Power of Dark Academia: Exposing the Violent Relationship Students Have With the Academy" (Thesis, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2023), https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Golden_uncg_0154M_13843.pdf.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

[3] Simone Murray, "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-Fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's the Secret History," *English Studies* 104, no. 2 (2023): 347–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838x.2023.2170596.

caulay, and Francis Abernathy, and their charismatic professor, Julian Morrow. The story then follows the students' downward spiral after their attempt at exercising a Bacchanal ritual which resulted in several murders.

Despite being considered a cult classic,[4] research on Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is surprisingly scarce. More research is done on other books within the dark academia sub-genre than *The Secret History*, while the book itself is simply just cited as the benchmark of what a dark academia book is. Due to its complicated and obscure nature, papers that did analyze *The Secret History* mainly focused on decoding the intended message of the book. Grip analyzed different aspects of control in the book using a New Critical approach and concluded that the events that unfold in the book are the result of the characters' struggle to gain control, which ironically ends with their total loss of control itself.[5] Niklasson also suggested the main characters' struggle with "the duality of Western thought" which is analyzed through the lens of ecofeminism.[6] Meanwhile, Biarnés argued that *The Secret History* illustrates how education becomes corrupted when students fail to present "a balance between intimacy and critical distance from the object of study."[7] In other words, the characters' obsession with their field of study is what leads them to their corruption. In regards to corruption, Gresty also argued that the desire to belong is what leads the characters in this book to destruction, as seen in how characters, such as Richard Papen and Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran, struggle with this desires due to their social class, while Camilla Macaulay, being the only female main character in the book, struggles with how to truly belong in the Greek class because of her gender.[8] On the other hand, other research-

[4] Nick Burns, "Donna Tartt's the Secret History at 30," *New Statesman*, October 12, 2023, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2022/09/the-secret-history-donna-tartt-review-30-anniversary.

[5] Maria Grip and Birgitta Berglund, *Aspects of Control in Donna Tartt's the Secret History* (Lund University, 2019), https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lup/publication/8973170.

[6] Malin Niklasson, *Natural Violence and Escaping Reason: Reading Gender and Nature in Donna Tartt's the Secret History* (Uppsala University, 2014).

[7] Anna Puigpelat Biarnés, "A Deadly Attachment to Academia: How Donna Tartt Depicts the Corruption of Education in the Secret History," Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024, https://ddd.uab.cat/record/299095.

[8] Tabitha Gresty, "Ambition, Fantasy and Belonging Within the Secret History," *Literary Cultures* 4, no. 1 (January 2021), https://journals.ntu.ac.uk/index.php/litc/article/view/326.

ers have also tried to determine which genre this book should be classified. Muntian and Shpak stated that "it is impossible to place any postmodern literary work in the frame of one genre" and concluded that *The Secret History*, as a postmodern book, is a combination of different characteristics of different genres, including inverted detective story, campus novel, and philosophical novel.[9]

Tartt's *The Secret History* is subject to many interpretations. This paper will analyze how Tartt portrays power abuse and relationship dynamics within academia through an inverted murder mystery story. The author argues that power dynamics are performed based on the characters' possessed knowledge, which creates a form of institutional and systemic power and shapes a mindset that justifies abuse, violence, and manipulation. The manipulation in the book also pressured individuals to conform and internalize these newly created moralities without questioning them, like cult members, which is ironic given the academic setting of the book.

Foucault suggested that "power and knowledge directly imply one another."[10] Julian's control over the Greek class is a direct example of how knowledge can be used to shape and restrict power. This knowledge, however, becomes a tool for manipulation as seen in Henry's orchestration of the Bacchanal and the murder of Bunny. Lifton described how "milieu control"[11] and the "dispensing of existence"[12] are used by groups to maintain power and eliminate those who refuse to conform. This is evident in how Henry isolates Bunny and eventually plans his murder to preserve the group's power structure. This suggests that academic institutions could foster environments in which intellectual elitism justifies moral compromise and abuse of power. Furthermore, the insular, hierarchical world of the Greek class and what becomes of it functions as a speculative criticism of an epistemic and moral "apocalypse", offering a reflection of a modern academic institution's breaking point.

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[9] A. Muntian and I. Shpak, "The Purity of Genre and «a Secret History» by Donna Tartt," *Вісник Маріупольського Державного Університету / Bulletin of Mariupol State University*, ФІЛОЛОГІЯ/Philology, no. 19 (2018), https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/the-purity-of-genre-and-a-secret-history-by-donna-tartt/viewer.

[10] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 52.

[11] Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 420.

[12] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 422.

In focusing on how power is exercised through knowledge, this study addresses the following questions:

1. In what ways does the acquisition and use of knowledge relate to power and abuse in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*?
2. How is this portrayal used to criticize academia and academic institutions in real life?

The research intends to explore the portrayal of power and abuse within *The Secret History*, relating it to the abuse of knowledge which the characters have and how such dynamics reflects the behavior commonly associated with that of cults. By analyzing the dynamics between the six Greek class students with each other and with their professor, Julian Morrow, this study aims to reveal Tartt's critique of elitism and hierarchy, which often lead to eventual power abuse in academic institutions. Previous studies of the novel have tried to dissect the intended message of the book, as well as figuring out where to categorize it based on its content, but discussions on power dynamics, specifically with regard to institutional power, are only briefly mentioned. This paper aims to contribute to critical conversations about transformations and limits of the knowledge system in academic spaces, as well as the connection between the themes portrayed in the book and Tartt's own criticism regarding academic elitism and the ethical issues that arise within them.

Method

Textual analysis will be used to gain understandings on how the relationships among knowledge, power, and abuse within the Greek class students in *The Secret History* are portrayed and how this dynamic resembles that of a cult, alongside how this portrayal reflects Tartt's criticism in real life academia. Foucault's theory of Power and Knowledge will be used as the theoretical framework of this research. This theory explains the relationship between power and knowledge, stating that exercising power requires making use of knowledge, and knowledge is shaped and reproduced by power. In addition to this, Robert Jay Lifton's Eight Criteria of Thought Reform, specifically the concept of milieu control, mystical manipulation, and the dispensing of existence, will also be used to explain the psychological manipulation done by the characters in the book when exerting knowledge-based power. Lifton's theory is based on his study of Chinese brainwashing techniques used on prisoners

of war. This theory outlines the tactics used by authoritarian groups to control and manipulate individuals to lose their sense of self and agency.

Analysis

Knowledge as The Root of Institutional and Systemic Power

Julian Morrow

Julian Morrow is one of the main characters in *The Secret History*. He is a Classic professor at Hampden College, who is known for his eccentric teaching method, one of which is his choice to only teach a small, selective group of students. Julian is described to be a "marvelous talker, a magical talker"[13] and has the tendency to view the world in a romanticized, almost detached way. His understanding of ancient Greek culture and ideals seems to transcend beyond his classroom as he also pushes them to his students' lives as seen in how he enables his students to perform the Bacchanal,[14] which is a ritual associated with the Roman god Bacchus, often characterized as drunken, rowdy, and even grotesque. Although Julian does not actively participate in this ritual, the author argues that Julian's role is significant because his teachings are the trigger of what eventually becomes the start of the characters' moral decline. Julian is more than just a teacher, for he is also a representation of institutional academic power.

According to Foucault, "power and knowledge directly imply one another."[15] This statement refers to the cyclical relationship of power and knowledge. It suggests that exercising power requires one to make use of specific knowledge and, by doing so, one would be able to reproduce even more knowledge, which in turn will produce more power. In *The Secret History*, Julian's expertise in Classical Studies allows him to gain power within the academic institution as a respected professor. This gives him the ability to create an environment in which he can establish power over his class. He then exercises even more power by creating limits as to who can and cannot become part of his class. In Chapter 1, Richard's attempt to join the Greek class is halted by his counselor, Professor Lafourge, who told him that he cannot join Julian's class due to these limitations, noting that Julian was "very particular about his students" and that his students needed to acquire certain knowledge

[13] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (Random House Digital, Inc, 1992), 38.

[14] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 78.

[15] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

and even "hold similar views."[16] It is not stated directly what kind of views would qualify someone to be Julian's student, but Lafourge confirmed that Julian selects his students based on personality rather than their academic ability. These statements show that Julian's action is driven by his elitist ideals as he thinks that only certain people deserve the privilege of his teachings.

This also means that his expertise in Classics presents him the ability to control the criteria to be his students and decide which views are important. Robert Jay Lifton refers to this behavior as "milieu control", which is the regulation of human communication through peer pressure and specialized jargon.[17] Julian deliberately constructs an environment that oversees not only what students learn, but how, and even when, they learn it. In his class, Julian has the ability to control the discourse and view that matters, forcing his students to conform to his ideals. Julian's classroom mirrors Foucault's explanation on how institutions are not only a place for knowledge to be shared, but also operate as control mechanisms that shape the "truth" through "appropriation, control, and 'policing.'"[18]

In regard to this, Poorghorban elaborates that institutions such as hospitals, schools, and universities discipline individuals and normalize behaviors to create conformity.[19] Julian's teachings are not merely academic but rather ideological. He shapes his students' identities, behaviors, and moral views by creating discourse that promotes detachment from modern ethical frameworks and romanticizes classical ideals. He alluded to Richard that, unlike the regressive nature of the modern way of thinking, classical thoughts are "narrow, unhesitating, relentless."[20] He also urged his students to "leave the phenomenal world and enter into the sublime"[21] before the class starts, positioning classical studies as a superior, almost sacred discipline. Through these framings, Julian constructs an ideological world where ancient morality overrides modern sensibilities, allowing students to justify morally ambiguous, if not outright dangerous, actions. This worldview aligns with what Foucault described as discourses producing "programmes for the formation of a so-

[16] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 13.

[17] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 420.

[18] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 245.

[19] Younes Poorghorban, "On Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge, Discourse, and Subjectivity," *OKARA Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra* 17, no. 2 (November 2023): 318–28, https://doi.org/10.19105/ojbs.v17i2.9749.

[20] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 30.

[21] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 38.

cial reality,"[22] meaning that discourse does not simply describe the world but actively constructs the norms, truths, and identities within it. Julian's presentation of classical ideals and his emphasis on transcendence through intellectualism create a reality in which his students are encouraged to adopt a detached, almost otherworldly perspective, enabling them to view themselves as above modern social norms.

This manipulation of thought perception is an example of mystical manipulation. According to Lifton, mystical manipulation refers to the process by which a leader fosters a sense of transcendent, almost divine purpose, among their followers.[23] Julian's specific wordings to open his class are done to immerse his students into a space where knowledge itself becomes a transformative, or even sacred, experience. His students, in turn, internalize these ideals. His framing of classical ideals as invincible truths creates the necessary psychological environment for his students to detach themselves from the modern world and even to the point of justifying actions that would otherwise be deemed morally unacceptable, such as performing a wild and rowdy ritual that leads to murder.

Interestingly, although Julian's literal presence in the book gradually decreases as the narrative goes on, his ideals and teachings remain central in the characters' decisions. This exemplifies Foucault's theory of institutional power/knowledge in which Julian is not a coercive authority but a figure whose charm and intellect shape behavior and belief system. Through his selective pedagogy and classical discourse, Julian creates a closed ideological system in which his students are transformed into subjects of a specific regime of truth. He does not explicitly tell his students what to do, but his teachings make certain actions, such as murder, intelligible and even justifiable. His character serves as a critique of institutional power: how education, when intertwined with elitism and aestheticism, can enable manipulation and ethical detachment under the guise of enlightenment.

Henry Winter

If Julian Morrow embodies the structural power of institutional knowledge, Henry Winter represents its radical, and ultimately destructive, application. He is a Classic student at Hampden College and is described as "always up in the clouds with Plato or something."[24] He stands out not only because

[22] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 245.

[23] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 423.

[24] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 56.

he is a genius and Julian's favorite student, but also because of his enigmatic, seemingly detached from the modern world, demeanor. Henry is obsessed with ancient philosophies and seems to see himself living in a Greek drama, which leads him to persuade his friends to perform the Bacchanal after learning it in Julian's class. While Julian introduces the intellectual framework, it is Henry who weaponizes it. His mastery of knowledge allows him to translate Julian's abstract teachings into a lived, radical practice. Even when the ritual goes south and the group ends up killing a farmer, Henry's influence continues to shape the group's perceptions and justify their action.

Foucault pointed out that "it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge" and that gaining knowledge will naturally evolve into gaining some form of power.[25] Although not directly stated, it is clear that Henry is the *de facto* leader of the Greek class. His deep understanding of Julian's teachings of classical texts, languages, and philosophies places him in a position of epistemological dominance, which enables him to lead the group into transgressive acts, beginning with the Bacchanal. Through his persuasive framing of the ritual as a pursuit of scientific interest, Henry convinces his friends to reenact the Bacchanal, even to the extreme of taking drugs and poison.[26] Even when the Bacchanal results in murder, Henry's influence does not cease to exist as the rest of his classmates continue to follow his orders and become his willing accomplice, including Richard, who does not even participate in the actual ritual itself. His success in persuading the others and maintaining his authority demonstrates how knowledge, when coupled with charisma and manipulation, can bypass conventional ethical restraints.

Henry's control is not merely intellectual, but also systemic. He achieves this through strategic management of information and tasks. His deliberate decision to leave a key where Richard would find it and uncover the truth of the Bacchanal[27] allows him to not only tell Richard about the ritual, but also frame the farmer's murder as "a minor thing" and "an accident"[28] and that Bunny's exclusion from the ritual was necessary for the ritual to work.[29] This is not the only time that Henry limits and regulates information within the group. In the aftermath of Bunny's murder, Henry continuously withheld information from the group. He regularly made his friends promise to not tell

[25] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 52.

[26] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 183.

[27] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 176.

[28] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 181.

[29] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 186.

each other critical information about the investigation of Bunny's murder. Richard described Henry as a "propagandist" who reveals information only when it "serves his purpose."[30] This selective revelation and framing reflect what Lifton identifies as "milieu control," in which not only external communication but also internal perception is shaped by the group's leadership.[31] By managing the flow of information in this way, Henry subtly binds Richard into complicity, limiting his ability to critically question the group's action and deepening his dependence on the group's shared worldview.

Likewise, Henry distances himself from the more dangerous consequences of their actions by pushing others, such as Charles, to take the risks. Charles noted that, when the city-wide search attempt of Bunny began, he was the one dealing with the police while Henry remained uninvolved.[32] This manipulation exemplifies Foucault's theory that power operates through networks where individuals are both subjects and agents of power.[33] By distributing responsibility while retaining control, Henry ensures that his dominance circulates within the group without directly exposing himself, reinforcing how knowledge and power become inseparable mechanisms of manipulation.

Henry's manipulation extends to the rationalization of violence. He intellectualized Bunny's murder with chilling detachment, describing it as a "redistribution of matter."[34] This reduction of violence into a philosophical idea reflects Foucault's argument that knowledge systems produce norms that justify otherwise condemnable acts.[35] By framing murder as a noble extension of classical ideals, Henry removes moral hesitation, not just from himself but from the group. When planning Bunny's murder, Richard noted how the rest of the group seemed to be at ease,[36] suggesting how thoroughly Henry's worldview has reshaped their ethical boundaries. As Charles later noted, the Greek students had a completely out-of-touch view of Henry because they were "so used to Henry,"[37] illustrating the extent to which Henry's rationalizations normalize violence within the group.

This tension between knowledge, power, and resistance becomes the

[30] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 501.

[31] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 420.

[32] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 508–9.

[33] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98.

[34] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 339.

[35] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 94.

[36] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 285–87.

[37] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 505.

clearest in Bunny's role. Less intellectually absorbed and more socially tied to the outside world, Bunny disrupts Henry's power. Bunny is the only one out of the six Greek students who not only has good relationships with his family but also with the rest of Hampden College. He is friends with other students and even has a girlfriend. Henry explained to Richard that, during the Bacchanal, Bunny "didn't grasp … that things had changed significantly" and decided to break his fast in the morning of the scheduled ritual.[38] His failure to fully internalize the group's ideals is what leads him to be excluded.

After uncovering the murder, Bunny briefly gained power through blackmail and veiled threats,[39] but his nonconformity made him expendable. Lifton came up with the term "dispensing of existence," which is when groups determine that those who threaten internal cohesion are no longer entitled to belong or even survive.[40] Because Bunny failed to fully assimilate the group's ideological worldview and jeopardized their secrecy, he was increasingly regarded as expendable, which makes his murder a violent reassertion of the group's moral and intellectual order. Foucault also asserted that discourses not only define what is true but also protect and police themselves against anything that threatens their stability.[41] In Henry's world, Bunny's failure to conform was not just a personal betrayal, but rather a disruption to the truth they had constructed, and thus needed to be eliminated.

Henry's dominance is not entirely self-made, but it emerges from the structure Julian first established. Where Julian provided the discourse, Henry radicalized it into action, turning knowledge of classical philosophies into justification for manipulation and violence. Through Henry, Tartt critiques how the pursuit of specialized knowledge, when isolated from ethical responsibility, can evolve into a destructive system of exclusion and control.

Richard Papen

As the narrator, Richard Papen serves as the reader's entry point into the events that happen in the book. Coming from a working-class background in California, Richard's longing for access to elite knowledge and culture frames his initial pursuit of the classics. For Richard, knowledge becomes not just a field of study but a means of transformation, a way to deviate from his origins and fulfill his desire to belong in an institution which he deeply romanticizes.

[38] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 185–86.

[39] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 240–41.

[40] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 422.

[41] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 245.

This ambition aligns with Michel Foucault's idea that power and knowledge are inseparable and that individuals internalize norms and seek to conform to structures of power, believing they are pursuing "truth" while they are, in fact, shaped by it.[42]

Richard's need for assimilation drives him to internalize the group's values. He constantly monitored his behavior and language, mirroring Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which explains that institutions instill self-surveillance on individuals, causing them to regulate themselves without external coercion.[43] He eventually becomes both the object and agent of surveillance, always aware of his position in the group. For instance, he started lying about his background, claiming that his family owns an oil well, which was the source of their wealth,[44] while his father was actually a gas station owner. He also started to dress and act like the rest of the Greek class, such as wearing a tweed jacket despite the scorching hot weather,[45] simply to assert his position within the group. He also admitted early on that he was "met with a kind of willful blindness" as he wanted to believe that the friendship between him and the Greek class was genuine, despite knowing that they were hiding secrets from him.[46] His willingness to conform at any cost is even more evident when he decided to cover up the murder of the farmer.[47] Despite knowing the severity of their actions, Richard remained silent, prioritizing his sense of belonging to the group over moral integrity. This complicity continued as he rationalizes Bunny's eventual murder alongside the others,[48] further proving how normalization and internalized power can push individuals toward unethical actions.

However, Richard's illusion of belonging inevitably collapsed. After Bunny's death and Julian's sudden disappearance, Richard's usefulness to the group diminishes. In the novel's final act, Richard was shot during a drunken altercation between Charles and Henry, but he was met with an unpleasant surprise by his friends' indifference to his injury.[49] This moment of disillusionment reflects Lifton's concept of dispensing of existence, in which individu-

[42] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98.

[43] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 155.

[44] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 57.

[45] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 49.

[46] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 100.

[47] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 181.

[48] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 277.

[49] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 604.

als who no longer serve the group's agenda are rendered expendable.[50] This betrayal forces Richard to recognize the transactional nature of the group's power structure in which he was never truly valued but merely tolerated as long as he served a purpose.

Moreover, Richard's inability to recover from the collapse of the group further emphasizes the socioeconomic inequalities embedded within elite academic spaces. When Julian decided to flee after finding out about Bunny's murder, unlike his friends, who were wealthy and had trust funds, Richard faced the harsh reality that he could not simply change majors or drop out without consequence.[51] His financial insecurity, contrasted with the others' privilege, reveals another layer of exclusion masked by the group's superficial intellectual unity. In the end, Richard's narration serves as a critique of the structures that shaped him: institutions that claim to pursue pure knowledge while fostering hierarchy, exclusion, and moral decay.

Richard's character development embodies Foucault's view that power disciplines individuals internally, leading them to become complicit in systems that ultimately exploit them.[52] Through Richard's gradual awakening, Tartt highlights the dangerous allure of academic elitism: the promise of belonging that blinds individuals to the systems of control operating beneath the surface. While Richard begins his journey seeking transformation through knowledge, he ends it disillusioned, physically and emotionally wounded, and painfully aware of the cost of conformity. His character reinforces the broader critique in *The Secret History*, which is that academic elitism can lead not to enlightenment but to destruction.

Academic Elitism as an Apocalypse of Moral Order

The portrayal of knowledge, power, and psychological control within the Greek class in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* ultimately serves as a broader criticism of academic institutions. In the book, Tartt dismantles the illusion of academia as a pure site of enlightenment. Instead, the novel exposes how educational spaces can foster intellectual elitism, moral detachment, and violence. Consequently, the Greek class' eventual downfall becomes a metaphor for epistemic and ethical rupture in which a closed academic world loses its moral and intellectual grounding.

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[50] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 422.

[51] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 583.

[52] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98.

The character dynamic in *The Secret History* reflects cult-like totalism as seen in the characters' deep immersion to Julian's ideas and blind submission to Henry. This is also emphasized by the group's "obsession with ancient Greek rituals."[53] While the Greek class is not a cult in the formal sense, the influence that Julian and Henry have over their peers does reflect several of Lifton's mechanisms stated in his thought reform theory. Lifton's eight criteria[54], though originally developed in the context of religious cults, are not confined to those settings. It is applicable to any institution where authority becomes closed, self-informing, and intolerant of dissent, such as political movements or re-education programs. This broader scope suggests that institutions outside of religious cults can reproduce patterns of thought reform in subtle but significant ways.

Ironically, the book is set in a university, an institution which, in theory, is meant to foster independent thought and critical thinking which are opposite of the closed and coercive dynamics of cults. Yet Tartt shows that even intelligent, highly educated students fail to question Julian's teachings and Henry's authority. This breakdown exposes how modern institutions produce docile and self-regulating subjects.[55] Julian's class functions as a heterotopic space in which intellectual conformity is enforced through subtle control of knowledge flows[56] which resulted in the students' internalization and normalization of violence. It is only after Bunny's death, Julian's departure, and Henry's suicide that Richard and his friends begin to detach from these influences and recover critical self-awareness that academia is supposed to nurture.

Part of the reason why the Greek class in *The Secret History* is so cult-like is the sense of exclusivism this group of "dazzling, seemingly unattainable" people have.[57] Through this elite group, Tartt addresses the myth that intellectual brilliance naturally correlates with moral or ethical superiority. Julian Morrow handpicks his students not for their character, but for their ability to reflect his aesthetic and intellectual ideals. In doing so, he creates an exclusive micro-society, reinforcing the idea that certain individuals, by virtue of their

[53] Jessie Berry, "Death, Doubles and Dissociation: Reading Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* Through the Lens of Gothic-Postmodernism" (Master's Thesis, University of Oslo, 2021).

[54] Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, 404–5.

[55] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

[56] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 24.

[57] Janice Rossen, *The University in Modern Fiction: When Power Is Academic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).

knowledge and class, are inherently more valuable. This mirrors Foucault's observation that "truth" is not discovered neutrally but is manufactured and protected by systems of power.[58]

The creation of Julian's own elitist institution eventually leads to the corruption of his students. All six of the Greek class manage to internalize Julian's teachings that they experience moral regression. This is specifically apparent in the case of Henry Winter, whose intelligence allows him to internalize Julian's ideals the most and ultimately embodies the danger of such elitism. His ability to rationalize murder, including the murder of his own friend under the guise of intellectual pursuit, reveals how knowledge can be weaponized to excuse horrific acts. Tartt shows that the pursuit of intellectual elitism erodes empathy, detaching individuals from broader ethical responsibilities. In this sense, the novel criticizes the real-world academic belief that intellectual merit alone can, or should, justify elevated social status.

The unchecked authority granted to intellectual figures is another central criticism. Julian Morrow, complicit in teaching and enabling the Bacchanal,[59] disappeared when confronted with the consequences, avoiding any accountability for the environment he fostered. His retreat highlights how academic institutions can protect revered figures while leaving vulnerable students to bear the cost of their influence.

Similarly, Henry's control over the Greek class thrives in the absence of institutional surveillance. His dominance is unquestioned that it culminates in violence, revealing the danger of celebrating intellectual brilliance without safeguarding against its misuse. As Foucault noted, institutions produce subjects that internalize their own subjugation.[60] The closed and isolated environment of the Greek class from the rest of the college ensures that the students do not just accept Henry's authority, but also internalize it, seeing it as natural and even necessary. This is what makes the group easily believe that they can get away with both the farmer's and Bunny's murder.

Henry's maintenance of control extends beyond intellectual influence into psychological domination. Drawing from Lifton's framework of thought reform, he employs techniques such as milieu control and the dispensing of existence to maintain loyalty and suppress resistance from his friends. By managing what information is shared, controlling the group's understanding of their actions, and rationalizing violence as necessity, Henry ensures his nar-

[58] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 94.

[59] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 78.

[60] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98.

rative remains unchallenged. Bunny's exclusion from the Bacchanal and his subsequent murder highlight the violent reassertion of conformity. This shows that those who do not align with the group's intellectual and moral code are dispensable. This parallels Foucault's notion that discourse regulates what is accepted as true, governing both inclusion and exclusion within a system.[61]

Tartt's criticism extends beyond the dynamics of knowledge and power in an elitist academic institution. The main character of the book sharply contrasts with his wealthier peers, revealing the economic inequalities embedded within elite academic institutions. Unlike his classmates, Richard lacks a trust fund or safety net. His desperation to assimilate is not purely intellectual, but it is a survival strategy shaped by his financial insecurity and desire to belong. After Julian's disappearance, Richard realized he cannot simply switch majors or leave Hampden like the others. This moment is central to Tartt's criticism of academic elitism, which is that it does not offer safety for students who are not financially privileged, regardless of its facade of equal education access. This scene exposes the deep structural inequalities in higher education institutions where knowledge becomes a luxury commodity and thus, "independent wealth is necessary to enjoy its rewards."[62]

This broader economic criticism complements the novel's deconstruction of intellectualism as a moral shield. In *The Secret History*, learning is not shown as noble goals but a tool for control. Henry's obsessive study of classical ideals leads not to wisdom but to murder. His control over the group is maintained not only through knowledge but also through psychological manipulation and the normalization of violence. Academic discourse, in Tartt's depiction, functions as a moral camouflage, allowing harm to be justified under the guise of higher ideals. In the book, murder does not become an anomaly, but rather, an extension of the group's scholarly identity.

As a dark academia book, romanticization and glorification of beauty and suffering become a haunting narrative in *The Secret History*. Right in the beginning of the book, Richard himself admitted that his fatal flaw was "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs."[63] While retelling the events in the book, Richard often uses high metaphorical words, dramatizing events and their effects on him and other characters. Julian's teaching further emphasizes Richard's tendency to romanticize everything regardless of the actual

[61] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 245.

[62] Peter Fleming, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

[63] Tartt, *The Secret History*, 5.

real-life situation. From the very first class with him, Richard immediately internalized the phrase "beauty is terror" which then turned into romanticization of his sufferings and the justification of the violent acts that he and his friends have done. Even when he was abandoned by Julian and realized his expendability, he continued to struggle to not sentimentalize Julian and his friends.

Richard's romantic and sentimental depiction of violence and suffering is not uncommon throughout the dark academia subgenre. Perhaps taking inspiration from *The Secret History* itself, the main characters in dark academia books tend to lay out the same type of narrative and, ironically, many even end up the same as Richard: morally corrupt and mentally disrupted. The experience of these students in the dark academia genre shows the "brutal reality" in university.[64] This shows that this glorification of suffering, violence, and beauty-for-beauty's sake, is essentially a hollow philosophy which comes from narcissism and elitism, and eventually leads to destruction.

Through the portrayal of Henry Winter, Julian Morrow, and Richard Papen, Donna Tartt offers a complex and damning criticism of higher academic institutions and the dark academia subgenre. Knowledge, rather than liberating the characters, becomes the mechanism of their manipulation, isolation, and eventual destruction. Intellectual elitism breeds exclusion and moral blindness, economic privilege shields the powerful from consequences, and the pursuit of knowledge without ethical responsibility may lead one to violence. Essentially, the Greek class' creation and destruction represent an "apocalypse" of ethics and morals within an academic institution. Tartt's novel ultimately warns against the dangers of viewing knowledge as inherently virtuous. Without accountability, self-awareness, and critical reflection, intellectualism can serve the same oppressive functions as any unchecked system of power.

Conclusion

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* offers more than just a reversed murder mystery story, but it is also a sharp critique of intellectual elitism and how knowledge can become a tool of manipulation, exclusion, and violence. Through the characters of Julian Morrow, Henry Winter, and Richard Papen, Tartt illustrates how specialized knowledge in an elite academic setting does not only enlighten students, but also disciplines, isolates, and controls them. Julian's role as the gatekeeper of classical knowledge symbolizes his posi-

[64] Golden, "The Power of Dark Academia."

tion as the embodiment of institutional power, shaping his students' worldview while subtly isolating and manipulating them. This enables his student, Henry, to transform his knowledge of Julian's teaching into systemic control, using selective information, moral detachment, and subtle forms of coercion to dominate the group. However, Richard's gradual internalization of the group's values, complicity in their crimes, and eventual abandonment is what exposes the group's dynamic as a power structure that disciplines individuals into compliance only to discard them at once when they are no longer useful.

The findings of this research suggest that *The Secret History* dismantles the myth of academic institutions as an inherently ethical space, exposing how even educated individuals can become complicit in violence and authoritarian mechanisms can subtly manifest in prestigious institutions. As a classic dark academia book, *The Secret History* criticizes academic elitism and how academic institutions can reproduce systems of exclusion and abuse. Furthermore, the character dynamics in the book also show how, despite being in an environment which is supposed to foster critical thinking, students can internalize their teacher's ideals to the point of conformity, just like a cult member blindly submitting to its leader. The Greek class, in this sense, embodies a metaphorical apocalypse of academia due to elitism and moral decay.

This research on *The Secret History*, a work foundational to a genre that is enjoying growing popularity, adds to the discussion of power and academic elitism in dark academia literature, specifically about the intersection of power and knowledge and the irony of control and obedience in an academic institution. Future research may investigate the intersection of power and knowledge shown in other characters in the book other than the three mentioned above or in other books, as well as other methods of psychological manipulation used to shape individuals in academic institutions. Furthermore, the findings of this research also open up the possibility to examine even deeper the appeal of dark academia as a genre and subculture despite being a tragic genre centered around violence in an academic setting in an era where higher education is often criticized as being exclusionary and mentally taxing.

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