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Classical Echoes and Fragmented Realities in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992): A Postmodern Analysis of Morality

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree in Literature and Civilization

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Abstract

The present dissertation examines Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) through a postmodern lens, analyzing the characteristics of intertextuality and fragmentation. The dissertation focuses on the use of these postmodern features in the novel and how they contribute to the development of its major themes, such as morality, intellectualism, elitism, and beauty. The study specifically explores the novel's use of intertextuality, making allusions to classical works by Euripides, Homer, and Plato. This sheds light on the manner in which Tartt reimagined these texts with the purpose of shaping the psychological and moral dilemmas faced by the characters. In addition, the fragmented structure, nonlinear timeline, and the unreliable narration are analyzed as tools that reject objective truth. Through these tools, the thesis argues that *The Secret History* depicts the instable nature of morality. Ultimately, the novel's allusions and narrative complexity mirror the disintegration of the characters' identity and moral values.

Key Words: Donna Tartt, Fragmentation, Intertextuality, Intellectualism, Morality, Postmodernism.

الملخص

تتناول هذه الأطروحة رواية *التاريخ السري* (1992) لدونا تارت من منظور ما بعد حداثي، من خلال تحليل خصائص التناص والتفكك. تركز الأطروحة على كيفية توظيف هذه السمات في الرواية، ومدى إسهامها في تطوير أبرز مواضيعها، مثل القيم الأخلاقية، والنخبوية، والجمال، والفكر الأكاديمي. وتستكشف بشكل خاص استخدام الرواية للتناص عبر الإشارة إلى أعمال كلاسيكية لأوريبيدوس، وهوميروس، وأفلاطون، مما يسلط الضوء على الطريقة التي أعادت بها تارت تخيل هذه النصوص بهدف تشكيل الأزمات النفسية والأخلاقية التي تواجهها الشخصيات. كما تحلل الأطروحة البنية المتفككة، والتسلسل غير الزمني، والسرد غير الموثوق به كأدوات ترفض الحقيقة الموضوعية. ومن خلال هذه الأدوات، تناقش الأطروحة بأن رواية *التاريخ السري* تجسد الطبيعة غير المستقرة للقيم الأخلاقية، وأن الإشارات الأدبية وتعقيد السرد في الرواية تعكس تفكك هوية الشخصيات وانهيار قيمها الأخلاقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دونا تارت، التفكك، التناص، الفكر الأكاديمي، القيم الأخلاقية، ما بعد الحداثة.

Dedication

To all the people dear to my heart and each and every person who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, the panel of examiners, and each and every professor who has lended me some of their knowledge in the past five years of my higher education. This humble thesis would not have come to existence if it weren't for their valuable aid and guidance.

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General Introduction

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is a contemporary novel with postmodern elements that explores themes of beauty, moral corruption, and the consequences of intellectual elitism by portraying a group of elite students whose intellectual pursuits and aesthetic ideals spiral into moral disintegration. The characters' obsession with beauty and the pursuit of intellectualism led them down a dark path. These elements are essential to both the plot and to the novel's postmodern narrative style.

The novel's literary techniques and narrative structure play a crucial role in the exploration of these themes. Tartt's uses intertextuality which refers to refers to how all kinds of texts include references to other texts that have influenced their meaning or creation (Childs and Fowler 121), and narrative fragmentation which involves storytelling that doesn't follow a clear chronological order and instead connects or shifts between different storylines (Genette 29), in order to challenge traditional literary conventions and encourage the reader's active engagement with the text. By employing classical references, unreliable narration, and foreshadowing, *The Secret History* creates a layered meaning that demands deeper interpretation.

This thesis argues that Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* employs postmodern techniques of intertextuality and fragmentation to challenge traditional notions of meaning, morality, and truth, destabilize the reader's perception of reality, and highlight the complexities of beauty and moral corruption.

Since its publication in 1992, *The Secret History* has garnered substantial critical attention. Scholars have examined the novel through the lenses of elitism, aesthetics, violence, and its place in contemporary American literature. This review provides an overview of key scholarly work on the novel in order to situate this analysis within the broader critical conversation.

In her thesis *Initiation With Violence: Donna Tartt's The Secret History*, Clara Cartry draws on Colin Watson's concept of "Snobbery with Violence" (1971) to explore the aestheticization of murder in *The Secret History*. Cartry argues that Richard, as both narrator and accomplice, distances himself from his own role in the murder of Bunny through a detached narration that paints him as an "innocent spectator" (10). Cartry describes this narrative distance as a deliberate aestheticization of violence, contributing to the novel's atmosphere of ritualistic appreciation of crime. This distanciation obscures the moral gravity of the crime and undermines the narrator's involvement with it.

Cartry further argues that the novel encapsulates what might be called "the snow globe effect". This effect refers to the way violence in the novel is enclosed within a controlled and aestheticized narrative space. This detachment is reinforced through repeated references to media such as movies, newspapers, and television when the characters are confronted with the murder (12). Cartry argues that these references fictionalize the event even further, creating a sense of fiction within fiction. This allows the murder to become a distant act which could be admired from afar without an emotional connection or remorse.

Cartry also describes the students as a "renewed society of connoisseurs in murder," arguing that their fascination with violence gradually develops into "an artistic taste" and later a direct practice and engagement in the crime (21-22). This tendency reflects the group's attempt to aestheticize violence and murder by grounding it in a classical framework, elevating crime to the status of art.

Following Clara Cartry's analysis of aestheticized violence, Charles Perseus D'Aniello also focuses on beauty in *The Secret History*, particularly in its connection to destruction. In his thesis "*A Morbid Longing for the Picturesque,"* D'Aniello examines how the pursuit of beauty in *The Secret History* is tied to destruction and loss of control. He argues that the

classics students' idea of beauty is shaped by Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian concepts, as well as by the influence of their professor, Julian Morrow. This illustrates how the students are not just interested in beauty, but in a kind of beauty that is intense and dangerous, and similar to the one they read about in the Ancient Greek texts they romanticize. According to D'Aniello, Julian's admiration for the Greeks and his idealization of self loss guide the students toward linking beauty with terror (6–7). This shows how the students use what they are taught in class to justify their fascination and engagement with violence and death both to themselves and those around them.

D'Aniello then explores how Richard Papen's desire for beauty is tied to destruction. He focuses on Richard's early confession in the novel, where he calls his longing for the picturesque his "fatal flaw" (Tartt 5). D'Aniello explains that this longing is specifically for an idealized kind of beauty, connected to the Apollonian. According to D'Aniello, every time Richard gives in to his longing for the picturesque, he also risks slipping into the chaos and violence associated with Dionysus (14). This highlights the connection between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, showing how the pursuit of one, even innocently, can lead to the other.

While D'Aniello emphasizes Richard's pursuit of beauty, Martin Lind shifts the focus toward the novel's portrayal of elitism and the outsider figure. In his *essay Unlocking The Secret History: A New Perspective in College Fiction,* Lind argues that *The Secret History* redefines the academic novel by addressing overlooked aspects of college life. Lind emphasizes the use of the outsider perspective, noting how Richard's role as an outsider allows Tartt to critique the elitism and aesthetic values of the Greek class. According to Lind, Richard's fascination with beauty and manners blinds him to the group's violence, which reveals the dangers of idealizing elite academic culture (6). This reading fits in among earlier

analyses by showing how Richard's detachment is not only aesthetic but also social. By positioning him as an admirer and an outsider, Tartt critiques the world that Richard gives up his morals to belong to.

Lind also argues that both Richard and Bunny function as outsiders in different ways. Richard is excluded from the bacchanal due to his newcomer status, while Bunny is left out because of his lack of discipline and seriousness. Lind suggests that Bunny plays a crucial role in the group, not despite being a poor student but because of it. His academic failure highlights their success, and his eventual death becomes the central event that drives the plot forward (9). For Lind, both Bunny and Richard serve key roles as outsiders. On one hand, Bunny's exclusion from the group's ritual activities makes him a destabilizing figure, making his eventual death the climax of the story. On the other hand, Richard represents a different kind of outsider who is eager to belong but always slightly excluded. His position allows readers to witness the group's elitism from a certain distance while still keeping him involved with the major parts of the narrative for reasons that serve the rest of the closely-knit group.

Stacey A. Litzler offers a different approach by reading *The Secret History* as part of the gothic-postmodern genre. In her thesis, *Interpretations of Fear and Anxiety in Gothic-Postmodern Fiction: An Analysis of The Secret History by Donna Tartt*, she argues that the novel uses a gothic atmosphere to exaggerate the emotional detachment and isolation found in postmodern life. Rather than interpreting the bacchic ritual as a moment of spiritual connection, Litzler interprets it as a moment of complete disconnection and loss of self. (31-32). For her, this represents the emptiness that can come with postmodern experiences, where meaning is unclear and identity becomes unstable.

Litzler also focuses on the theme of hyperreality in the novel. She notes how, after Bunny's murder, false stories such as people believing that they saw him alive long after he

had died begin to circulate. This shows how fiction begins to replace fact. Litzler links this to Richard's own sense of unreality observed in his dreams, drug use, and moments where he feels like he's watching events unfold on a screen (34). According to her analysis, the novel portrays a world where reality itself becomes uncertain for both the characters of the novel and the readers who attempt to piece the incomplete information together to reach a full interpretation of the story.

In her article, "*The Secret History of Hamden Campus: A Study in Elitism and Murder* ," Evangelia Kyriakidou also explores the elitism present in the Hampden campus. She highlights the tension between the democratic ideals of the university and the hierarchical, exclusionary reality embodied by Julian's Greek class. She argues that "the democratic vision of the University is perceived differently for Richard and his elite classmates," a difference reflected in their carefully orchestrated murder, which is "planned within University premises" (67-68). This exposes a major postmodern concern seen in the way the university values break down as people from different social classes experience the institution differently. The campus, theoretically an egalitarian space of shared knowledge, becomes instead a stage for privilege, secrecy, and violence. Kyriakidou's reading is essential for understanding how *The Secret History* shows how elitism distorts morality in academic spaces.

Additionally, Kyriakidou explains how the group treats the university as something that needs to be protected from the violence of their actions. She writes that "the Greek students understand that a murder on campus would possibly contaminate it, desecrate it so they design to do it outside the campus," even though all the planning happens within university grounds (72). This creates a paradox. The group sees the campus as a sacred space, and yet they bring violence into it anyway by planning their crimes there. This contrast in the

deceitful appearance of the campus makes the atmosphere even more unsettling, and shows how elite academic spaces can hide dark intentions.

The works reviewed here explore different aspects of *The Secret History*, such as beauty, elitism, outsider identity, postmodern fear, and the role of the university campus. Together, they show how the novel challenges ideas about morality, knowledge, and power in academic settings. However, few of these studies focus on how Tartt uses postmodern techniques like intertextuality, fragmentation, and moral ambiguity to build these themes. This dissertation builds on their work by analyzing how *The Secret History* uses these techniques to question morality and truth.

This study is significant for the light it sheds on the complex relationship between beauty and moral corruption in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, particularly through its use of postmodern narrative techniques. By focusing on intertextuality and fragmentation, the research sheds light on how the novel challenges traditional notions of authorship, narrative coherence, and objective truth and addresses a noticeable gap in existing academic literature.

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

-How does *The Secret History* utilize intertextual references and fragmentation to explore themes of morality, beauty, and corruption?

-How does the novel employ postmodern techniques to destabilize fixed meanings and challenge the reader's perception of truth and reality?

The research examines the role of intertextuality and fragmentation in *The Secret History* through the lens of postmodernism. It focuses on showing how these techniques are used to disrupt fixed meanings, blur the boundaries between truth and fiction, and complicate the reader's understanding of morality, beauty, and corruption.

The thesis is divided into two main chapters. The first chapter presents a theoretical, literary, and socio-historical context of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. The second chapter analyzes Tartt's use of the postmodern techniques of intertextuality and fragmentation and their impact on the reader's perception of meaning in the novel. The analysis draws on a range of sources, including literary theory, scholarly criticism of the novel, and classical texts referenced within it, in order to support and deepen the discussion.

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Chapter I

Socio-historical, Literary, and Theoretical Background of *The Secret History*

Introduction

This chapter aims at providing a background of the socio-historical events preceding the publication of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, a brief overview of the plot, the author's life and circumstances leading up to the publication of the novel, and the theoretical foundation on which this research lies as an initiation to the upcoming analysis in the second chapter. This chapter explores the socio-political climate of 1980s America, focusing specifically on the emergence of a new form of conservatism under Ronald Reagan. While conservatism traditionally emphasized limited government and traditional values, Reagan's version introduced aggressive economic deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy, and a reinforcement of harmful social hierarchies.

Although the novel was published in 1992, its writing and conceptualization took place primarily during the 1980s. As such, this chapter focuses on the 1980s as the period that most significantly influenced Tartt's worldview, thematic choices, and narrative style.

1. Socio-historical Background of the Novel

1.1. Reagan's Conservatism: Consumerism, Inequality, and Control

According to Kenneth R. Hoover, the 1980s in the United States was an era marked by conservative capitalism under Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-1989) which moved away from traditionally socialist notions of equality and justice (247). One of the defining features of the decade was the end of the Cold War, with significant protests like the 1982 anti-arms race demonstration highlighting public dissatisfaction with the increase in the military budget. Despite these efforts, Reagan's policies were increasingly focused on massive military spending, often at the expense of social welfare. His anti-communism fueled a push for capitalism, solidifying the rise of consumer culture as a dominant force in American life.

Ann Smart Martin reports that by the end of the 1980s, “the lines between consumption and entertainment increasingly blurred,” and “ the wish for material power was the new world power” (141). Consumerism became more than a way of life. It was a measure of identity and social status as Americans were encouraged to embrace slogans like “Shop ’Til You Drop,” as popular brands capitalized on the glamorization of overconsumption. This culture of excess benefited the ruling class while deepening social divisions, with wealth and privilege dictating access to opportunities and defining personal worth.

Tabe Bergman puts the television at the foreground when it comes to the tools used by capitalists in order to manufacture consumerism in American society:

> “Setting up a television station requires a large amount of capital, which severely limits who can do so. The freedom to influence American culture by broadcasting television thus belongs to the happy few who own and run the handful of corporations that dominate the American market, and, thus, the public mind” (160).

The exclusivity of ownership when it comes to television stations reflects the domination of the capitalists and the inescapable influence that they exert on the working class by controlling the narratives and choosing what ideologies and agendas to push forward through means of advertisement and propaganda. These corporations reinforce the idea that consumption is directly tied to identity and personal happiness in order to keep poor people poor while increasing their own net worth.

Moreover, Bergman highlights the use of television in politics: “Congressional hearings on supposed communist subversion in Hollywood right after World War II sent a chill through the entertainment industry by making suspect anything that smacked of progressivism. All through the Cold War, state agencies influenced television and movies,

often with the active cooperation of the networks" (163). Congressional hearings used their power and authority to investigate alleged communist infiltration in Hollywood, reflecting widespread fears of communist influence in American society. The hearings created a climate of fear and self-censorship within Hollywood, as even progressive or liberal ideas could be interpreted as communist sympathies. This led to blacklisting, where writers, directors, and actors suspected of leftist affiliations were barred from working in the industry. This suppression persisted throughout the Cold War, as state agencies directly influenced the content of television and movies. Networks and studios often cooperated with the government to produce content aligned with anti-communist propaganda such as the glorification of the military in television shows.

Hoover attributes much of the country's income-security issues to the conservative policies implemented during Reagan's presidency such as his 1981 New Federalism proposal. This began before his presidency with the California Welfare Reform act of 1971 which he signed into law as the California governor (249). Both policies aims at reducing government spending while promoting individual responsibility and giving more power to state and local governments. This made welfare programs harder to qualify for. This showcases Reagan's policies' prioritization of decreased government spending at the expense of low-income families.

The economic policies of Reagan's presidency collectively known as Reaganomics were comprised of tax cuts for the wealthy, under the premise that this would create job opportunities and the benefits would "trickle down" to the masses (Komlos 4). In reality, these benefits failed to materialize, as the policies primarily further enriched the wealthy while deepening economic disparities. This demonstrates the failure of Reagan-era conservatism in achieving economic equity and benefiting the working-class majority.

1.2. The American Higher Education System

To fully grasp the novel's critique of academic elitism, it is important to situate *The Secret History* within the context of the American higher education system. The novel reflects to real structural inequalities in American education, making an understanding of this context essential to fully grasping the social dynamics presented in the narrative of the novel.

The term "system" is loosely applied to American higher education, which comprises a diverse range of institutions, including two-year colleges, four-year universities, and private institutions such as the Ivy League (Karen 191). In order to describe this system, Nicholas W. Hillman explains that the United States "has no national university, no national agency overseeing all of higher education, no national policy on what professors can or cannot teach. There are no national price controls establishing how much tuition institutions can charge. And there is no national admissions policy sorting students into institutions" (5). This decentralized structure grants a significant amount of power and autonomy to state governments and institutions. As a result, policies on admissions, tuition, and curriculum vary widely between institutions, often leading to disparities in access and affordability. The lack of federal regulation results in a diverse range of educational experiences but also leads to disparities in quality and accessibility, reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities.

Furthermore, higher education in the United States has long been a marker of social and economic status, with elite institutions restricting access, reserving it primarily for the rich and powerful. In the late 20th century, universities became increasingly tied to both intellectual prestige and financial privilege. In the 1980s, American higher education underwent significant transformations including rising tuition costs, increased privatization, and a growing emphasis on consumer culture. David H. Feldman reports that "tuition at U.S. colleges and universities has risen by roughly 7% per year since the early 1980s." These

rising costs have not only affected accessibility but also reinforced existing social hierarchies as financial constraints are not the only factor influencing students' choices in higher education. David Karen highlights how social origin influences educational and socioeconomic outcomes, emphasizing that class, race, and gender shape high school students' aspirations and their perceptions of available opportunities (194). This suggests that systemic injustices are deeply ingrained in the educational system, shaping students' trajectories before they even enter college.

2. Literary Background of the Novel

2.1. Postmodern American Literature

It is equally important to consider the literary tradition the novel belongs to. Despite not necessarily being a postmodern book itself, *The Secret History* emerges from a distinctly postmodern American literary landscape, which helps frame its themes, narrative style, and cultural concerns.

Following the end of World War II, there was a shift in the collective mindset of American society. After witnessing the violence of the war and the havoc it wreaked in the world, American authors began to reflect its complexities and consequences as a response to the major cultural and social changes. These literary works often involved discussions of identity, including the national identity, the Black identity, and the female identity. They were also experimental and unconventional in both themes and style.

One of the first American postmodern books was Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, published in 1961. It is a satirical war novel that exposes the horrors and brutality of war in a non-linear narrative with no traditional hero. This novel criticizes the exploitation and corruption in bureaucratic systems, and how the war reduces people into statistics and tools used as a means to an end, effectively erasing their humanity.

Not long after, in 1966, another classic of postmodern American fiction emerged. *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon is a fragmented, intertextual, and parodic novella which explores meaning and paranoia and critiques consumer culture. It subverts traditional storytelling with its ambiguity, leaving space for different interpretations, and its open ending and lack of a narrative closure.

A classic example of American metafictional literature is John Barth's 1968 collection of short stories *Lost in the Funhouse*. The stories' metafictionality lies in their self-reflexive nature. The title story "Lost in the Funhouse," and the story "Title" have narrators who directly comment on the stories and their forms. "Life-Story" is about an author who believes he is a fictional character writing about an author who believes he is a fictional character writing about an author who believes he is a fictional character in an endless metafictional loop. This collection of stories perfectly embodies the playfulness and experimentation of postmodern literature in its blunt self-referentiality and subversion.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a 1969 semi-autobiography that is –like many other postmodern works– strongly anti-war. This novel was highly experimentational with its elements of science fiction and temporal distortion. It critiques not only war but also Christian faith through the use of the science fiction present in the Tralfamadorians, who are aliens with a philosophy very similar to Christianity in its rigid determinism. The story is told in a fragmented fashion. The protagonist is described as being "unstuck in time," and he travels in time back and forth reflecting the chaos of the war and the lingering trauma that it causes the survivors.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989 is generally considered as the beginning of the end of postmodernism. However, many American novels published in the nineties are still considered part of postmodern fiction. An example of this is

another one of Thomas Pynchon's novels, *Vineland*, which was published in 1990. The novel contains elements of postmodernism such as the non-chronological structure and the satire. Despite this, this novel's themes contradict those of his previous novels and the philosophy that he was known for in his writing. Where he would usually foreground isolation and estrangement, *Vineland* depicts forgiveness and reconciliation. This contrast is perfectly exemplary of why many critics believed that there was a shift in American literature into an era that could no longer be confidently described as postmodern. Postmodern elements continued to be used in American literature, as seen in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

2.2. The Contemporary Campus Novel

The Secret History is considered a contemporary campus novel due to its academic setting and the time period of its release. The campus novel is a literary genre that emerged internationally in the 1950s, with authors from various countries contributing to its development, from the Russian author Vladimir Nabokov with his novel *Pnin* to the American author Don DeLillo with *White Noise*. It later regained popularity in the 1990s and 2000s. While it is characterized not by its themes but rather by its setting in a university campus, it still generally tackles the same issues and ideas. According to Dale Bailey and Jack Slay Jr., the campus novel is a "microcosm … of the same moral complacency, elitism, political posturing, and bed-hopping we see everywhere else" (25). Novels of this genre generally focus on portraying elements in academia such as the absurdity of college life, hysteria in characters stimulated by academia, and feuds and discords between different characters (Scott 82). By emphasizing these features, campus novels often serve as a satire and a critique of the higher education system, and the elitist beliefs it propagates which often lead to interpersonal conflicts. This amplifies human flaws by illustrating how they manifest in an isolated environment while reflecting broader social issues. David G. Bevan observes

within this genre of fiction a "widespread and increasing disillusionment with intellectuals and universities" (106). People became disillusioned with the idealization of academia, shifting toward an anti-elitist perspective that, for many, fostered outright anti-intellectualism.

2.3. Biography of Donna Tartt

Donna Tartt is an American author born on December 23rd, 1963 in Greenwood, Mississippi. Being an avid reader from childhood, she wrote her first poem at only 5 years old, and published a sonnet at the age of 13 in the "Mississippi Review." She is a University of Mississippi alumnus, where she wrote short stories for its student newspaper "The Daily Mississippian." An editor of the newspaper showed one of her short stories to the American writer Willie Morris, who played a key role in her discovery, famously calling her a "genius" writer. Morris, in turn, showed her work to the author Barry Hannah, and together, they suggested that Tartt transfers to Bennington College in Vermont, which she did. There, Tartt studied classics, and she befriended several people who also later became authors such as Bret Easton Ellis and Jonathan Lethem. She graduated in 1986 with a degree in philosophy.

Tartt began working on her debut novel *The Secret History* when she was still a student. Although Tartt never confirmed it, many readers and critics speculate that the fictional setting of the novel, "Hampden College," is heavily based on Bennington college with both of them being set in rural Vermont. Her author friend Bret Easton Ellis similarly appears to have used Bennington as inspiration for the fictional arts college which he named "Camden College" in several of his novels. *The Secret History* was a New York Times bestseller propelling her into overnight fame with which she did not cope well as she stayed away from the public eye for a decade before she finally published her second novel *The Little Friend* in 2002. In 2003, this book earned her the WH Smith Literary Award.

2.4. Plot Overview

The Secret History is a mystery campus novel set in the 1980s and narrated by the protagonist Richard Papen years after the events being narrated had occurred. He begins by describing his efforts at leaving his small hometown of Plano, California with no support from his parents who were against his choice to switch his major from medicine to classic arts. Richard enrolls in Hampden College and leaves for Vermont. When he attempts to take a class of Greek literature, he is informed that Julian Morrow is the only professor who teaches it, and that Julian's class is an exclusive one currently offered to only five students who are required to exclusively take all their classes related to Greek antiquity with him. Richard is highly intrigued by the exclusivity of the class and the mysterious aura around the tightly knit group of Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, Charles and Camilla Macaulay, and Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran. He approaches them and helps with a translation they were struggling with. In return, they urge him to talk to Julian again and convince him to let him enroll in his classes. Richard manages to do just that while ignoring the warnings he was given by other people.

Richard enjoys being part of the clique, but the closer he gets to them, the stranger their friendship appears. Henry, who is the unspoken leader of the group and the brightest, seems to have a strained relationship with Bunny who is uncharacteristically careless. Despite that, the two spend winter break in Rome together where Bunny reads Henry's journal and discovers that the group had performed a bacchanal without him and accidentally murdered a farmer in the process. Following this discovery, Bunny's already erratic behavior only gets worse and he continuously blackmails them and forces them to give him money. After a while, as his demands grow too large and his demeanor becomes unpredictable, Henry tells Richard about the incident, making him an accomplice, and convinces the group to murder Bunny. The group goes hiking in an isolated forest and Henry pushes Bunny to his death. It is this

scene that is described at the beginning of the novel, revealing the climax of the story before it begins. The coldheartedness with which they committed the crime proves itself ephemeral as the weight of their guilt takes a psychological toll on them, leading them to a cycle of paranoia and self destruction. Charles goes down a path of alcoholism as the remorse eats away at him, and his strange, illicit obsession with his twin sister Camilla leads him to threaten Henry with a gun, when he believes that Henry is trying to take her away from him. Julian receives a posthumous letter from Bunny, in which he tells him about the group's bacchanal and his presentiment that they might kill him. Initially, he thinks that the letter and its contents are fake, but after he realizes that they are not, he makes a quick exit, leaving the campus and the group behind. In a chaotic altercation between Charles and Henry where the former attempts to kill the latter, Richard is accidentally shot, and Henry shoots himself in a last sacrificial action in order to cover for them when the police arrive. Henry's wound is fatal, and with his death, the group falls apart, and Richard is the only one who ends up graduating. Back to the present, Richard remains unrequitedly in love with Camilla, smothered by the guilt of Bunny's murder, and unhealthily in awe of Henry despite everything.

3. Theoretical Background of the Novel

3.1. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a late 20th-century philosophical movement that came as a reaction against Modernism and its principles following the end of World War II. In this regard, in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale states that the features of postmodernism are typically opposites of features of modernism (7). While modernists embraced reason, idealism, and rigid meanings, their postmodernist counterparts reject the modernist utopian conformity and totalizing systems of thought. Postmodernists are skepticists who do not view the world in black and white, meaning that they emphasize the multiplicity of interpretations and the

plurality of meanings, and deny the existence of objective or singular knowledge (McHale 11). This illustrates the opposing perspectives that the two movements have when it comes to knowledge.

3.2. Postmodern Literary Theory

In literature, Postmodernism manifests through several concepts and stylistic techniques. Postmodern literature is characterized by ambiguity in the narrative, making it susceptible to several interpretations. This represents the postmodern rejection of objective meaning, as truth is considered reliant on perspective. Postmodern text is "plural" and "open to other texts in an endless series of intertextual operations" (Nayar 59). The key concepts of postmodern literature include intertextuality, playfulness, self-reflexivity, parody, and metafiction. (Selden, et al 199). To define the features relevant to our research, first intertextuality**,** according to *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, it is "the name often given to the manner in which texts of all sorts (oral, visual, literary,virtual) contain references to other texts that have, in some way, contributed to their production and signification" (Childs and Fowler 121). The use of intertextuality creates layers of meanings instead of a singular truth and it can serve multiple purposes, from challenging metanarratives, to questioning the notion of originality, to reflecting cultural disintegration.

Second, fragmentation and non-linear narrative are defined by the French critic Gérard Genette in his book Narrative Discourse as narrative structures involving "infedilities to the chronological order of events and on relationships of linking, alternation, or em bedding among the different lines of action that make up the story" (29). This deliberate disruption of traditional chronological storytelling presents events out of sequence, creating a disjointed narrative that challenges readers to actively piece different fragments together in order to reach a version of the truth.

Additionally, we find the subversion of genre conventions. Childs and Fowler define convention as a "generalizing term which isolates frequently occurring similarities in a large number of works" (35). Therefore, the subversion of literary conventions is the deliberate rejection or reversal of them. This includes the combination of different genres usually explored separately, making the antagonist the main character, or avoiding clichés by tackling new themes and creating innovative narratives. This allows postmodern authors to critique established literary conventions and explore original and creative possibilities.

Ultimately, postmodern literary theory came to analyze literary works through a fresh lens that explores the way literature is used in order to challenge the concepts of established truth and reality, emphasize the importance of diversity in perspective, and encourage critical engagement with literature as a reflection of life and society. This allows us to question literary and cultural norms, and engage more deeply and subjectively with the complexities of both literary texts and the world around us which literature reflects.

3.3. Nietzsche's Philosophy

Friedrich Nietzsche is a 19th-century German philosopher considered a precursor for Postmodernism. Nietzsche was an aestheticist with a contempt for reason and Christianity and Western philosophy (Norton 740). He foregrounded the beauty of art above any purpose it may possibly possess, and saw art as the highest form of human expression. Due to his lack of belief and scornful views on religion, his philosophy challenges the dominant narratives of morality and truth at the time. In *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche states that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified" (42). This is evidence of his prioritization of art and aesthetics over rationality. Some notions found in Nietzsche's philosophy can also be found in Postmodernism. The death of God is an idea which Nietzsche first introduces in his book The Gay Science, where he bluntly states, "God is dead; but given

the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow" (108). Another common principle is the rejection of absolute truth which he discusses in *Beyond Good and Evil*, asserting, "I will say this a hundred times: "immediate certainty," like "absolute knowledge" and the "thing in itself" contains a *contradictio in adjecto*" (16). According to this statement, Nietzsche views the concept of "absolute knowledge" as a contradiction.

3.3.1. *The Birth of Tragedy* and the Apollonian-Dionysian Dichotomy

One of the most influential aspects of Nietzsche's thought is his theory of the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, which he explores in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This section delves into this framework to better understand how Nietzsche tackles the duality within art and existence. This lens is particularly relevant to *The Secret History*, where the tension between order and chaos, embodied by the Apollonian and Dionysian, shapes both the narrative structure and the moral ambiguity of its characters.

Friedrich Nietzsche believes in the collapse of reality and the blurring of the line between the real and the apparent. This concept is seen in his book *The Birth of Tragedy* in which he discusses the birth and demise of Greek tragedy. He goes into great detail about the dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, discussing their opposite nature, as well as the way they interact and impact each other.

To define the two concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Nietzsche describes the Greek god Apollo whom the concept of the Apollonian is based on, as a god of cheerfulness, healing, and the higher truth (27), and Dionysus from which the Dionysian comes, as a god of ecstasy, drunkenness, and the loss of self (28). This means that the Apollonian represents reason and clarity in the individual's mind, as well as order and harmony in their spirit. In contrast, the Dionysian embodies the absence of these qualities,

with chaos and frenzy replacing them, painting a dark, infernal image that starkly opposes the dream-like quality of the Apollonian.

Nietzsche believed that the existence of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian was as crucial in art as the existence of the sexes is to procreation (25). This comparison emphasizes the interdependence of these forces. This suggests that for true art to be created not only do they both have to be present, but a perfect balance between the structured beauty of the Apollonian and the frenetic intensity of the Dionysian must also be maintained.

Nietzsche then describes the allure of the Dionysian, explaining why a person might willingly surrender their mind and body to its influence by emphasizing its restorative power. The Dionysian breaks down man-made boundaries not only between individuals but also between humanity and nature (28). By abandoning reason and all sense of self, humans can break free from their petty rivalries with one another, relinquishing their relentless attempts at dominating nature as seen throughout history, and instead be reunited with it in a harmonious relationship.

Nietzsche describes the two notions as "artistic powers, which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist" (29). This emphasizes how a person experiencing one or both is but a victim to nature and human instinct, and cannot take the blame for it.

He compares the Greek Dionysian festivals to what he calls their "Dionysian barbarian" counterparts, emphasizing the superiority and profoundness of the Greek and the barbarism and crudeness of the non-Greek (30). This perspective exemplifies the elitism in classical Greek tradition which can be found in its learners, as can be seen in the characters of Tartt's novel.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a general overview of the socio-historical background of America prior to the publication of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Then it examined the novel's literary background as an American contemporary campus novel which can be arguably referred to as postmodern in some of its aspects, as well as the biography of its author and the influences which impacted her when writing the book. Lastly, it detailed the theoretical framework of postmodern literary theory and Nietzschean philosophy which will be used as a specific lens and a tool through which we will analyze the novel in the following chapter.

Chapter II

The Analysis of Intertextuality and Fragmentation in *The Secret History*

Introduction

This chapter aims at examining the role of intertextuality and fragmentation in *The Secret History* and their impact on the novel's narrative and themes. The first section explores the novel's classical allusions and their significance. The second section is concerned with the way fragmentation is used to shape the readers' perception through unreliable narration, non-linear structure, and foreshadowing.

1. Intertextuality in *The Secret History*

Intertextuality is omnipresent within *The Secret History*, highlighting its engagement with classical literature and the novel's underlying themes inspired by it. Various allusions and references to ancient Greek texts, philosophy, and tragedy are made, shaping the narrative and strongly influencing the construction of the characters' identities. By incorporating literary works such as the *Bacchae*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, Donna Tartt succeeds in creating a complex narrative in which the characters not only refer to these works but also embody them in their thoughts and behaviors.

1.1. Euripides's *Bacchae*

Euripides was one of the three great tragedians of ancient Greece, alongside Aeschylus and Sophocles. One of his most renowned tragedies is the *Bacchae* which tells the story of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy, who returns to his hometown of Thebes in order to avenge his mother and prove his divinity after being rejected by the city's ruler, Pentheus. To punish Thebans for their disbelief, Dionysus drives the women, including Pentheus' own mother, Agave, into a frenzied Bacchic ritual in the mountain. Pentheus refuses to acknowledge Dionysus as a god and attempts to stop his worshippers. In retaliation, Dionysus deceives Pentheus into disguising himself as a woman to spy on the Bacchants. Once the king is among them, the raving women mistake him for a wild animal and violently tear him apart.

Agave, still in her frenzied state, unknowingly murders her son, only realizing the horrifying truth once the Dionysiac madness fades.

Euripides is first mentioned in *The Secret History* during one of Julian's classes, where he describes the maenads and the Dionysian ritual in an idealized manner. This becomes especially evident when he states, "Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it" (Tartt 37). By romanticizing the Dionysian frenzy as something sublime and admirable, Julian influences the group toward letting themselves sink into the terror in pursuit of the beauty. This is proven when Henry later admits that Julian was aware of their attempts at doing Dionysiac rites (165). However, his words also serve as foreshadowing for the repercussions that will inevitably follow. Beauty and terror are linked, and the students' desire to attain transcendence through this ritual ultimately leads them down a violent and destructive path, just as the maenads' worship in the *Bacchae* leads to the brutal murder of Pentheus.

The Bacchae is directly mentioned a second time during the scene where Henry admits to Richard that the group, excluding Richard and Bunny, had successfully performed a Bacchanal. The violent aftermath of their ritual, particularly their bloodied and disheveled appearances, uncomfortably reminds Richard of the savagery described in the *Bacchae* (167). This moment is significant because it solidifies the parallel between the students and the Bacchants in Euripides's tragedy, highlighting how their pursuit of transcendence has led them to brutality. In their frenzied state, the students tear apart the farmer's body, mirroring Dionysus' followers as they unknowingly behead Pentheus in their divine madness.

In his paper, Simon Perris speaks of the violence of the drama saying, "If *Bacchae* exemplifies Greek tragedy, it does so not only through ritual or metatheatre, but also through the tragic processes of violence and death" (38). When considering its influence on *The Secret*

History, this brings attention to how the group's ritualistic pursuit of transcendence and spiritual enlightenment leads to violence and bloodshed. Much like the Bacchants' frenzied killing of Pentheus, the group of students lose themselves in Dionysian ecstasy, resulting in an irreversible act of violence that changes the trajectory of their lives.

George Maximilian Antony Grube highlights how Dionysus's worshippers emphasize joy and beauty when persuading the Thebans to accept and participate in his rites (39). This mirrors the way the students in Tartt's novel engage in the Bacchanal as a pursuit of transcendence and enlightenment. Just as the Bacchants frame their worship as a path to liberation and divine connection, the students believe that immersing themselves in Dionysian ritual will elevate them beyond ordinary existence. However, in both cases, they are thrown down a path of violence. This parallel highlights how both Euripides and Tartt explore the seductive yet destructive nature of Dionysian ecstasy, where the pursuit of beauty and enlightenment leads to violence and moral corruption.

Bunny serves a similar role in *The Secret History* as Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. Pentheus's refusal to believe in Dionysus's divinity ultimately leads to his death, just as Bunny's lack of full commitment to the Bacchanal results in his exclusion. Because he was absent when the others finally achieved the transcendence they sought, he became an outsider. Like Pentheus, who is torn apart by one of the people closest to him, his mother, Bunny is ultimately murdered by his own friends as an inevitable consequence of his inability to fully integrate into their ritual.

1.2. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

Homer is the most well-known ancient Greek poet who is credited with the authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two foundational epics of Greek literature. Violence is a central theme in these works, often depicted not just as physical brutality but as a force that shapes

fate, power, and human behavior. In her essay *The Iliad or, The Poem of Force* Simone Weil refers to this violence as "force," describing it as an overwhelming power that wields power over both the victim and the perpetrator. She argues that in the *Iliad* "at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to" (3). This highlights the inescapable nature of this force which can result in nothing but destruction. Weil describes the hero in the *Iliad* as a "*thing* dragged behind a chariot in the dust" (3). This reduces the typically glorious warrior to a lifeless object to the whims of force and fate. In depicting the hero in this light, Homer's portrayal of war becomes an image of endless suffering instead of one of heroism and courage.

Homer is repeatedly mentioned throughout *The Secret History*, reinforcing the themes of violence and elitism. The students engage with Homeric texts on an academic level and this exposure influences their morals and perception of the world and themselves. Their professor consistently refers to Homer during his lectures, romanticizing the violence within the epics. Early in the novel, he remarks, "Bloodshed is a terrible thing… but the bloodiest parts of Homer and Aeschylus are often the most magnificent" (33). This statement foreshadows their later pursuit of ancient Greek magnificence and the bloodshed that inevitably follows, reflecting the group's aestheticization of violence and how they use it to justify murder.

Homer is also used as a status symbol among the students, emphasizing their performative classicism. When Julian is expected for dinner, Bunny replaces the book he was reading, *The Bride of Fu Manchu* with a volume of Homer (81). This action reveals the performative nature of their intellectualism. Bunny does not genuinely care about the book, instead he uses it as a tool to maintain an illusion of scholarly superiority. This showcases the group's obsession with appearances. Greek antiquity is not just an area of study for them, but

a lifestyle they immerse themselves in. Bunny fails to truly embody this lifestyle. As a result, he becomes an obstacle that needs to be disposed of.

Homer also emerges near the end of the novel as an exploration of guilt surrounding Bunny's murder. After Bunny's murder, Richard recalls Julian's lecture on the *Iliad,* in which he described the scene where Achilles sees the ghost of Patroclus: "The dead appear to us in dreams… what we see is only a projection, beamed from a great distance, light shining at us from a dead star" (502). The reflection of this is evident when Richard hallucinates the ghost of Detective Sciola after he sees his posthumous video message on television. Sciola was one of the detectives responsible for the investigation of Bunny's death, making both the message and the hallucination a reminder of Richard's complicity in the murder and the inescapable guilt that haunts him even years later as he narrates the story. Richard is haunted by the loss of Bunny much like Achilles is haunted by the bitter loss of Patroclus. The romanticized lens through which Homeric ideals were viewed by the students is shattered in this moment by the weight of reality and their actions. This shows that despite their classical education which granted them a false sense of superiority, the students are not tragic heroes like the ones they read about in their books, but rather deeply flawed individuals who now have to face the consequences of their actions.

1.3. Plato's Phaedrus and Republic

Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher and one of the most influential figures in Western philosophy. He was a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotles. He founded an academy in Athens considered to be one of the first institutions of higher education in the west. Many of his writings explore themes such as beauty, wisdom, and immortality. These themes are subtly interwoven with the plot of *The Secret History*.

Julian mentions Plato during one of his lectures, discussing Plato's four divine madnesses, a concept mentioned in *Phaedrus*, as well as the burden of the self (32). Plato categorized madness into four categories: the prophetic, associated with Apollo; telestic, associated with Dionysus; poetic mania, inspired by the Muses; and erotic frenzy, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros (Gale 72). He suggested that madness is not always destructive in nature. Instead, it can be the path that leads people to transcendence and wisdom. This aligns with the students' pursuit of an altered state of consciousness through a Bacchic ritual. This is later proven in the scene where Henry admits to Richard that they tried to experience Dionysiac frenzy. He names Julian's lecture on Plato's telestic madness as the catalyst for that decision (149). This moment puts the blame on both Julian and the students. Julian's presentation of his various lectures lacks objectivity. His teachings are riddled with moral ambiguity surrounding the concepts he discusses, influencing the students toward an equally morally ambiguous path. Another thing this moment suggests is that the students were deliberately using these lectures to intellectualize and justify their descent into madness and violence.

Additionally, Julian refers to Plato's definition of justice in the *Republic*: "[W]hen each level of a hierarchy works within its place and is content with it" (192). The reference to this definition within the book can be interpreted as a way of reinforcing the rigid hierarchy between the characters. The notion of a person's inherent worth being an inescapable fate dictated by society is an explicit endorsement of elitism. This aligns with the students' self perception as an intellectual elite, separate from *hoi polloi* such as the farmer they murdered. Just as Richard questioned the truth of this definition when he referred to Julian discussing it, the development of the narrative similarly challenges it. The illusion of superiority within this imagined hierarchy imposed by Julian and embraced by the students did not lead to harmony like Plato suggested. Instead, their elitism led them down a dark path that only resulted in

their self destruction. This shows the consequences of exploiting philosophy in order to justify a false sense of moral superiority.

2. Fragmentation in *The Secret History*

Fragmentation is a key narrative technique in *The Secret History*, shaping the way the story unfolds and controlling readers' perception of it. Through Richard's unreliable narration, the non-linear plot structure, and the use of foreshadowing, the novel presents a disjointed and subjective version of events. These techniques not only reflect Richard's distorted recollection but also heighten the novel's sense of mystery and inevitability. This emphasizes the endless possibilities intentionally left within the contrast of what is said and what is withheld, and the truth and the lies.

2.1. Richard Papen's Unreliable Narration

The novel's narrator, Richard Papen, is an unreliable narrator whose perspective is highly subjective. Since he recounts the events years after they occurred, he openly admits to forgetting certain details. Additionally, his idealization of his friends and their professor distorts both his memory and his point of view, shaping the narrative in a way that blurs the line between reality and perception.

Early in the novel, Richard reveals that he is a good liar, even describing it as a gift that he has (22). This confession is significant, subtly warning the readers that his lies may extend to his account of the events. He lies several times throughout the novel. Whether it's to Dr. Roland, Professor Julian, or his classmates, Richard seems to struggle with telling the truth. He gives so much value to the clever and the beautiful that he would rather lie about the mundane than admit that any part of his life, especially his past, is less than perfect. Camilla once told him not to believe anything he hears which serves as both a reminder of his gullibility and of the narrowness of his account.

Richard describes his memories prior to his first weekend in the country with the group as distant and blurry, admitting that it took months before he started to see the classicists in a less subjective manner. Even as he admits to his idealization of them in his mind, he continues to describe their "reality" as even more interesting. After discovering everything they did and the chaos it led to, we are inclined to believe that even what he deems objective is likely still riddled with subjectivity that he is simply blind to. Another period of time that Richard openly admits to poorly remembering is the Corcorans' post-funeral get-together. These constant confessions are always there to make the readers doubt the truth of the only point of view they have throughout the narrative.

Occasionally, Richard will bring the readers' attention back to the fact that he is not narrating the events in real time. At one point he admits that he still wears many of the suits that Francis gave him back then. This detail suggests that he remains emotionally attached to that period of his life. This lingering attachment implies that his recollections may be distorted by nostalgia and longing even if he does not realize it. His inability to fully move on raises the question of whether his retelling is an honest reflection of reality or a romanticized reconstruction, shaped by his continued idealization of the past. Furthermore, the combination of his tendency to lie and his attachment to the past further puts the objectivity of his perspective in question.

Near the end of the novel, Charles reveals Francis's perception of Richard to him. He tells him that according to Francis, he is "[d]rinking too much. Wandering around drunk in the middle of the day. Rolling down the road to ruin" (398). Richard is startled at this revelation, which is ironic considering the fact that he had previously mentioned his drinking problems many times. Although it was evident to the readers that an issue was present, he failed to realize that his behavior was anything out of the ordinary. This lack of self awareness and ignorance to the intensity of his actions leads us to question his self perception.

Another significant revelation in Charles and Richard's conversations came when Charles admits, "There was a lot towards the end we didn't tell the rest of you" (407). This confession exposes the limitations of Richard's perspective which forces both Richard and the readers to confront the possibility that much of what he has believed to be true is either incomplete or distorted. His version of events is no longer just a matter of subjective bias but also one of omission and manipulation by the people around him.

Richard's guilt, coupled with his substance abuse leads him to experience vivid hallucinations. He repeatedly envisions gibbets and gallows, structures that symbolize execution and punishment. Moreover, he claims that the hallucination has ended, yet he paradoxically proceeds to say that it has also persisted. This contradiction leads us to question not only his narration but also his mental state both during and after the events he is narrating.

2.2. Non-linear Plot Structure

Tartt's novel is structured non-linearly, frequently shifting between past and present. Richard, as the narrator, recounts events years after they occurred, often interrupting his own story with reflections or revelations that hint at future developments. This fragmented storytelling mirrors his own struggle to make sense of what happened, and it also manipulates the reader's perception by withholding key details until later. This structure forces readers to piece together the story and the events that led up to that moment.

The non-linearity is present starting from the prologue as the novel begins with the scene of Bunny's murder which does not happen until later in the novel. Richard prematurely tells us all about the success of their murder plan and even about the snow covering up their crime for weeks. On one hand, this takes away any potential suspense about the possibility of their plan going wrong. On the other, this breeds a curiosity about the complex events that led

to the making of such a drastic decision. By revealing the outcome from the start, Tartt forces readers to pay closer attention to the motivations, psychological unraveling, and moral dilemmas that led to this moment, making the journey toward the murder more intriguing than the act of murder itself.

Once again, Richard brings the readers back to the present by explicitly stating, "Bunny's dead now" before the scene of the murder takes place (201). This abrupt reminder interrupts the chronological flow of the narrative, reinforcing the novel's non-linear structure. It also serves as a contrast to the ordinary events preceding it, reminding readers of the upcoming act of murder.

As the climax approaches, these abrupt narrative interruptions increase. Richard reveals the thoughts and feelings he had after the murder happens before reaching the point in the story where it happens. "But, if I dare say it, it wasn't until I had helped to kill a man that I realized how elusive and complex an act a murder can actually be," he states before reflecting on the moment of Bunny's death: "An interesting question: what was I thinking, as I watched his eyes widen with startled incredulity ("*come on, fellas, you're joking, right?*") for what would be the very last time?" (207). By reflecting on the murder before recounting it, Richard plunges the readers into his fragmented recollection, making the narrative feel both disorienting and immersive.

Following the climax, Richard interrupts the flow of events once again to comment on them:

> This part, for some reason, is difficult for me to write . . . I don't know why we did it. I'm not entirely sure that, circumstances demanding, we wouldn't do it again. And if I'm sorry, in a way, that probably doesn't make much difference. I am sorry, as well,

to present such a sketchy and disappointing exegesis of what is in fact the central part of my story (251).

This passage serves as a direct acknowledgment of Richard's struggle with narrating the most pivotal moment of the novel and likely with the rest of it as well. By admitting his inability to fully explain their motives, he leaves a gap in the narrative, forcing the readers to engage with the text and try to interpret it on their own. Moreover, his uncertainty about whether they would do it again reveals a moral ambiguity present even after he had years to reflect on his actions.

By repeatedly jumping between the past and the present, the novel's non-linear structure builds a sense of inevitability surrounding what happened. This fragmented storytelling mirrors Richard's memory, reinforcing his role as an unreliable narrator and strengthening the novel's psychological complexity through a layered narrative.

2.2.1. Foreshadowing as a Narrative Tool

Early in the novel, Charles casually mentions to Richard that there is a graveyard on a nearby hill remarking, "It's pretty. Especially in the snow" (57). This seemingly random observation is significant in hindsight, foreshadowing the moment when Richard will stand alongside his friends as they push Bunny to his death from a hill, turning the area into a graveyard. Additionally, Charles's comment about the snow serves as another layer of foreshadowing, After the murder, snow falls covering Bunny's body and making it difficult to find. This remark serves as a subtle hint to the murder while transforming the landscape from beautiful to ominous.

Another example of foreshadowing lies in the small details Richard notices about the group's behavior before learning the truth. He speaks of how they would sometimes disappear mysteriously, exchange private jokes in Greek and Latin, and react with visible discomfort

whenever Bunny sang “The Farmer in the Dell.” At the time, Richard found these habits irritating but harmless. However, in hindsight, he realizes that these moments carried a much darker significance: “Naturally, I disliked this, but there seemed nothing alarming or unusual about it; though some of those casual remarks and private jokes assumed a horrific significance much later” (83). Richard speaks directly to the readers when he reflects on these moments, but he does not reveal the truth about the crime until later. At this point in the narrative, his mention of a “horrific significance” remains vague, leaving readers to speculate about its meaning. Just like Richard himself at the time, they are unaware of the full implications of Bunny’s remarks and the group’s reactions.

Moreover, Bunny makes a few taunting comments toward Henry after he finds out about the Bacchanal and the murder of the farmer. However, since Richard is unaware of these events at the time, their true meaning is lost on him. When Bunny says, “‘I hear you’ve been taking in the sick,’’ followed by, ‘‘Conscience been hurting you? Thought you’d better rack up a couple good deeds?” His words indirectly reference Henry’s guilt over the murder of the farmer (119). Yet, Richard, lacking the necessary context to understand, fails to interpret it for what it is. He continues his taunts when Henry says that he has an appointment in town, sarcastically asking if it’s “[w]ith a lawyer’’ (120). The readers are only provided with Richard’s limited perspective, they are equally ignorant to the crime in question. Only in hindsight do these remarks take on a more sinister meaning, serving as foreshadowing for the eventual reveal of the group’s past actions.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of intertextuality, delving into the way that several classical allusions are used to draw parallels between them and the novel’s characters. Then, it

investigated the use of fragmentation and its various techniques such as unreliable narration, non-linear plot structure, and foreshadowing and their impact on the novel.

General Conclusion

This research has explored the interplay of beauty and moral corruption within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. It investigated how superficial aesthetic ideals and the pursuit of intellectual superiority lead to the moral decline of the characters. By projecting a facade of intellectual superiority and ignoring ethical guidelines in their day to day actions, the characters become increasingly detached from reality, allowing the fantasy world they inadvertently created to justify their criminal and immoral actions.

In the first chapter, we provided a comprehensive overview of the socio-historical, literary, and theoretical contexts of the novel. The socio-historical section examined the conservatism of the Reagan era and its impact on the American higher education system. This frames the context of the novel's exploration of elitism and intellectualism. The literary background clarified the novel's place within postmodern American literature and the contemporary campus novel, while the author's biography presented Donna Tartt's college experience and its influence on *The Secret History*. Lastly, the theoretical framework introduced the key postmodernist concepts which were used in order to analyze the novel as well as Nietzsche's philosophy, particularly the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, which is an essential element in understanding the developement of the characters and their moral and psychological conflicts. These frameworks collectively contribute to our understanding of *The Secret History* and how it critiques the dangerous allure of beauty and intellectualism through the characters' downfall and tragic fates.

The second chapter examined the elaborate relationship between intertextuality and fragmentation within the novel. By analyzing the works of Euripides, Homer, and Plato, as well as the unreliable narration and foreshadowing in *The Secret History*, we provided evidence that the characters' skewed intellectual pursuits were ultimately the reason for their moral deterioration and downfall.

Through the analysis of intertextual references and the narrative fragmentation, we found that *The Secret History* employs these literary techniques to reflect the moral corruption of its characters and the path that led to it. The characters' obsession with classical ideals, beauty, and intellectual superiority leads them down a trajectory of destruction where their superiority complex and complete detachment from reality results in their abandonment of all moral boundaries. This reveals how Tartt critiques the dangers of the prioritization of beauty and intellectualism above everything, showing that they are not inherently positive forces, but rather tools that can be used for corruption and destruction when they are in the wrong hands as much as they can be used for good under different circumstances.

In addition, the use of each classical work is emphasized as more than a superficial intertextual reference. Tartt draws on their central themes like divine madness, violence, guilt, moral disintegration, and philosophical transcendence to shape the behaviors and choices of her characters. This shows that *The Secret History* does not merely refer to classical texts but it also embodies their themes within its plot, making the characters active participants in a postmodern tragedy.

Moreover, while the ancient texts exude the illusion of functioning as a tool to elevate the students morally, in reality, they are used to justify their descent into madness and immorality. During Julian’s lectures, the presentation of these texts is morally ambiguous, encouraging aesthetic and philosophical admiration without clear ethical guidance. This leads the classical ideals the students view in high regard to collapse under the weight of their own misinterpretation.

Conversely, the fragmented structure of *The Secret History* reflects postmodern notions of instability of meaning and the rejection of a cohesive and linear narrative. By adopting an unreliable narrator, non-linear plot, and foreshadowing, Tartt rejects traditional

storytelling conventions, forcing readers to actively engage with the text and interpret the several fragments of the story. This mirrors the fragmentation of the characters' identities and moral compasses.

Both fragmentation and intertextuality emphasize the instability of identity and memory in *The Secret History*. The characters' personalities and histories are constructed through fragmented and not always entirely accurate recollections. The novel thus challenges the stability of the self, a key principle of postmodern philosophy, where memory and experience are seen as unreliable, and identity is fluid and constantly fluctuating.

The combination of fragmentation and intertextuality serves the postmodern rejection of objective knowledge and fixed truth. The novel's non-linear timeline and unreliable narration reflect the uncertainty of the characters' understanding of their own lives as well as the academic notions they regularly engage with. The uncertainty is deeply embedded within the plot, making the readers' interpretation also susceptible to ambiguity.

This thesis contributes to existing scholarship on *The Secret History* by offering a focused exploration of the way beauty and moral corruption are connected through postmodern techniques. While previous studies have addressed the novel's engagement with elitism and moral decay, none have examined how intertextuality and fragmentation are specifically utilized to reflect the characters' descent into immorality. By connecting Tartt's aesthetic concerns with postmodern elements of intertextual allusions, unreliable narration, and narrative fragmentation, this study provides a new angle through which we can understand *The Secret History* as a complex postmodern text that critiques the ideals it appears to admire.

Ultimately, *The Secret History* shows that the pursuit of beauty and intellectual superiority, when placed above morals, leads not to enlightenment but to destruction, making

it a reflection of the postmodern experience. Future research could further explore *The Secret History* through psychoanalytic theory, examining the unconscious motivations and psychological conflicts that shape the characters' actions and their moral decline. Additionally, a Marxist approach could be used to examine the class divide among the main characters, particularly focusing on the narrator's economic struggles, and how economic privilege and social status influenced the character's behaviors and contributed to the plot.

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