

# Academic Exceptionalism, Liminality and Space as Patterns of Abuse in Dark Academia

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## Abstract

With Dark Academia's focus on student-teacher relationships, it provides an ideal setting for stories about abuse in the classroom. The analysis of *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russel and *Miller's Girl* by Jade Bartlett helps understand how space, crossing of boundaries, and favouritism can be catalysts for abuse in these stories. Teachers manipulate students by offering them academic support, utilising liminal space to breach boundaries and luring students outside of the classroom to further their relationship. To explain the fringe spaces and identities at play, liminality is utilised and a new concept, academic exceptionalism, is created to show the strategic isolation within the grooming process. This understanding helps to identify similar patterns of victim and abuser in fiction and reality.

## Dark Academia

### Keywords

Dark Academia;  
Teacher-Student  
Relationships; Abuse;  
Liminality

## Introduction

Dark Academia features a plethora of sinister themes, and among them are sexual and mental abuse in teacher-student relationships. The aesthetic usually “centers around a thematic focus on life in boarding schools, prep schools, and colleges from the last decades of the nineteenth century up until the 1940s” (Adriaansen 105). Yet the burgeoning popularity of the internet genre invites one to take a closer look behind the aesthetic façades of its gothic universities and consider the stories that transpire behind them. At the centre of these Dark Academia novels, we often find an elite, gifted group of students gathered around an enigmatic, esoteric teacher. With this structure, the genre brings “a sense of thrill to their students’ academic lives through the creations of select groups who isolate themselves from others owing to a sense of academic, intellectual, or general collective superiority” (Mari 18). Yet exactly this framework can create a toxic dynamic ripe for abuse.

There is an observable duality in how Dark Academia approaches teacher-student relationships. In the “Dark Academia ‘Bible’” (Adriaansen 109) *The Secret History* (1992)

by Donna Tartt, Professor Julian Morrow, a retired socialite, accepts only a select few students into his private class. The equally impactful Dark Academia film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) directed by Peter Weir, showcases an unconventional English teacher who fundamentally changes his students' perspectives on poetry, art, and life. Through close mentorship and familiarity, these relationships garner open and creative environments and an alternate space within the rigid world of the Academy. Yet other stories depict a darker reality. Between mentor and student, closeness grows with familiarity, spatial isolation from other authority figures, and extreme favouritism; boundaries become blurry. So, besides the classic stories of gifted students who murder one of their peers or secret societies in ancient universities, some Dark Academic stories feature sexual and romantic relationships between teacher and student. These can be seen in the texts analysed within this paper, *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russel and *Miller's Girl* (2024) directed by Jade Bartlett, or in other examples of the genre such as *Pretty Little Liars* (2006-2017), the short stories "The Unknowable Pleasures" (2023) by Susie Yang and "1000 Ships" (2023) by Kate Wineberg, as well as *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad and *The Truants* (2019) also by Kate Wineberg. While some of these texts share romanticized tropes within the genre, such as a focus on the study of liberal arts and an appointed brilliant student, it is important to correctly label abuse as such and separate it from the aesthetic notions of the genre. The tropes that can construct a creatively charged academic environment for some gifted students may also be breeding grounds for abuse, sexual assault, and inappropriate relationships, for others.

In this essay, I will analyse abuse in Dark Academia literature and film with a focus on academic exceptionalism, liminality, and space. I argue that the student-teacher relationships in Dark Academia activate spatial dynamics that thrive on academic exceptionalism and force liminality to stage the abuse of subordinated subjects. In doing so, these catalysts demonstrate a dynamic ensemble of how abuse is portrayed within the genre and might occur in real life. As stated above, I will primarily focus on *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russel, a harrowing picture of sexual abuse and *Miller's Girl* (2024), a highly aestheticized film that focuses on power relations between teachers and students. While previously mentioned media centring around teacher-student relationships would allow for analysis with similar themes, the two chosen examples show two ends of a drastic spectrum; the grooming of a young teenager in *My Dark Vanessa* and of an 18-year-old, deemed adult, girl in *Miller's Girl*.

## Endowing Exceptionalism and Establishing Liminality

Long gone are the days of ancient Greece, and while plenty of relics remain, some concepts are lost to time. One of them is the relationships between instructors and their pupils. In ancient Greece, the professor was seen as equally, if not more, important in the student's life than the parents (Deresiewicz 44). It was the cultural education, or even counter-cultural according to Socrates, that fell to the teacher's duty (44). According to Deresiewicz, such a relationship evokes an "intimacy of the soul" (43) and forms the desire to redirect it to the subject. Yet that desire is often misunderstood. Especially in contemporary fiction, the professor archetype is often villainized (Mari 26) and cross-culturally cast into the "stereotype[...] of lustful professors as sexual leeches" (28). In modernity "the days when teachers fostered intimate relationships with their pupils and sought to encourage their growth on a personal level" (29) are long past, instead "school has become a hostile atmosphere" (29) to pupils and teachers alike.

Dark Academia is a countermovement to this hostility, striving towards a curious and epistemological education (Ranasinghe 84). In education and aesthetics, Dark Academia is moving towards antiquity and nostalgia (Adriaansen 106). Even though, in Deresiewicz's terms, Dark Academia fiction is "diffused" (46) with the genre's dark themes alongside a renewed interest in academia, Dark Academia also allows teachers and professors to "rise up as inspirational leaders" (Mari 50) again. There is thus a return of the concomitant intimacy of the soul in Dark Academia campus novels and films. Classics of the genre such as *Dead Poet's Society*, *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), or *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) show the unconventional, and at times unorthodox teacher surrounded by a small but, once activated, inspired group of students. The professors and the relationships with their students analysed in this essay lie somewhere between "the sexual leeches" and "inspirational leaders". This renaissance of ancient dynamics, of a proximate and stimulating mentor has "thousands of kids go off to college every year hoping" (Deresiewicz 46) to experience something comparable.

Dangerously, this romantic notion is the basis and excuse for the teacher's abuse and sexual lechery. The return to these dynamics in Dark Academia activates something I term "Academic Exceptionalism". Akin to academic validation, which describes praise for a student's talents and academic achievements, it focuses more on how that praise is used as a vehicle for grooming behaviours and the special status it grants the students

within the institution of the academy. It describes a deep and calculated favouritism based on a student's exceptional talents. Academic Exceptionalism, favouritism, and close mentorship certainly do not always lead to abuse, yet in the case of Dark Academia texts, they are often its enablers. In the genre, Academic Exceptionalism is used by teachers to separate extraordinarily gifted students from their peers and grant them special status and treatment. But it may also be targeted at only one, especially a gifted student, who receives special supervision of an academically ambitious teacher as will be illustrated with the following examples. This isolates the chosen students, both spatially and socially, from their peers and thus can push them into states of liminality; of transition to something other, stripped of their normal standing as students and a teenager or young adult in category crisis.

Liminality as it stands now “refers to a state of being in-between, a transitional phase where boundaries blur and norms are challenged” (Zander 2). The anthropological idea of liminality and the *Rites de Passage* were first explored by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his work *The Rites of Passage* and later taken up and expanded by Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols* in 1967. While these Anthropological ideas are quite abstract, they serve as the basis for the concepts that are later adopted into literary theory. Principally, the basis of liminality lies in the observance that society is divided into separate groups and for someone to pass between these groups, they need to fulfil certain categories or go through a ritual of initiation (van Gennep 1). This suggests that “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts” (2-3). Van Gennep separates these stages in life into “birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death” (3) and for each passing from one state into another there is a ceremony or a rite. He lists rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (10) and further differentiates these with examples in his extensive work.

More important for the literary understanding of liminality however was Victor Turner’s elaboration of van Gennep. His main interest was in the transitional rites that “indicate and constitute transitions between states” (Turner 93). Between the transitions from one state into the other, there often are liminal stages (95), the subject is neither fully in one state nor the other but is practically suspended in the air between them; a

state between states. Such “transitional beings” (95) he calls neophytes (98). Liminality since, has departed from its “anthropological baggage” (Zander 18) and shifted towards “an umbrella term for states or experiences of transition and ambiguity” (Banfield 611), as well as, on occasion, a contextualization of space at the threshold (611). Due to its “metaphorical suggestiveness” (Zander 18) the concept lends itself well to the field of literary studies. As Zander puts it: “The concept appeared to be particularly promising for the theorization of literature, since it makes liminal or threshold spaces not only symbolically tangible and metaphorically explicable but virtually presupposes them” (18). Thus, liminality serves as a tool for understanding the theorization of space and characters within such a threshold.

### **Of Boundaries and Liminality – the Enablers of Abuse**

*“The inappropriate teacher-student relationship is a longstanding trope in fiction stories. Commonly, stories of this nature have romanticized and sexualized this trope instead of showing the situations for what they truly are – manipulation and abuse.”* (Brown 1)

While not part of the typical Dark Academia repertoire like *The Secret History*, and *Dead Poets Society*, *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russel offers myriad Dark Academia themes, be they a private old campus, dark subject matter, or an appreciation for literature and writing. Set partly on the campus of a Maine boarding school with “students in sweaters, the lawns a brilliant green, golden hour setting white clapboard aglow” (Russel 29), the novel details the twisted, abusive, and complicated affair of 15-year-old Vanessa Wye with her 42-year-old teacher Jacob Strane. The story alternates between an account of this affair stretching well into her college years and Vanessa seventeen years later. Now in her thirties, she is grappling with the trauma, a sense of victimhood, and the refusal to identify her experiences as abuse, against the backdrop of multiple allegations against Strane during the height of the #MeToo movement. A harrowing story of abuse intended as a dark romance (Brown 4); the novel bends the conventions of the Dark Academia genre all the while giving a portrayal of its dangers.

Marketed as a thriller, the newly emerged *Miller’s Girl* quickly took its spot next to popular Dark Academia films such as *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) and *Maurice* (1987). Featuring stacks of old books (*Miller’s Girl* 1:24), candelabras with burgundy candlesticks (1:28), and a “positively gothic” (2:08) ambience, the film fits right into the aesthetic

collages or videos of Tumblr and TikTok that tie to the aesthetic. The film depicts the affair of newly eighteen Cairo Sweet and a very clearly middle-aged Jonathan Miller. Cairo, uninspired and longing for something greater and more substantial than her lonely Tennessee life (16:00), seeks out the mentorship and intimacy of her teacher; he feels seen by what he deems an extraordinary student brimming with literary possibility (13:02). She is given a head start to the mid-term assignment, a short story written in the voice of the student's favourite author and turns in a story about a teacher and his student that would make "Henry Miller look like Dr. Seuss" (1:02:36). Faced with the eventual rejection of a penitent Mr. Miller, Cairo retaliates and sends the incriminating story to the school's principal (1:00:29). After its release date, *Miller's Girl* has received quite a whirlwind of reception. While reviewers such as Jeannette Catsoulis (Catsoulis) criticized the film for its vapidness, the audience online tore it apart. Jade Bartlett paints Cairo, the preconceived victim of the situation, as a villain (Karim) and allows her agency in the development of their affair. The film is supposed to challenge the conceptions about such relationships with both "nebulous and gray" (Karim) but intendedly real characters, yet for audiences, it seems to have been received as highly shallow.

### **Boundaries Crossed – Academic Exceptionalism and Space**

*"You can't blur the lines and then expect me to see a boundary when I suddenly cross it"*  
(*Miller's Girl* 56:06-56:26)

The spatiality of the school or university campus plays a big role in enabling abuse and how it is portrayed in these works of fiction. A small group of students entails separation from peers and faculty; the prerequisite in the equally longed-for boarding school is a prolonged separation from parents and authority figures besides teachers. Such spatial and mental isolation, the crossing of classroom boundaries as well as a subversion of the power dynamic of teacher and student are purposefully used by the teachers in these stories. In *My Dark Vanessa*, in Vanessa's mind her prestigious boarding school "swallows [her] whole" (Russell 11) and the contact with her parents dwindles to "limited [...] phone calls and school breaks" (11). Similarly in *Miller's Girl*, Cairo, "another run-of-the-mill generationally wealthy gal, living in a haunted ancestral mansion" (*Miller's Girl* 16:52-59), is completely abandoned by her rich and ostensibly uncaring parents.

In both instances, not only the campus but also the classroom is vital to this isolation. Both Mr. Miller's and Mr. Strane's classrooms are arranged unconventionally. They have transformed their classrooms into spaces that diffuse strict teacher-student separation. Mr. Strane's "classroom feels lived-in and comfortable. There's a rug with a worn path down its centre, a big oak desk lit by a green banker's lamp, a coffeemaker, and a mug with the Harvard seal sitting atop a filing cabinet" (Russell 21). This classroom serves as the stage for the first transgressions that occur within Vanessa's and Mr. Strane's relationship and the place where Strane first utters academic interest in her. The novel actively shows the break between the romantic boarding school and the regular public school once Vanessa changes schools. Her new school, with "carpeted classrooms, pep rallies, kids in T-shirts and jeans, voc classes, cafeteria trays of chicken nuggets and slab pizza, classrooms so crowded they can't fit another desk" (203) presents a break within her academic career. Prior, under the regained control of her parents, she lives a normal high school experience, with no special treatment and no breaching of boundaries between teacher and student. Mr. Miller's classroom offers a similarly comfortable feel as Mr. Strane's. He is set up in the old theatre of the sacked drama club and decorated the room with bookcases, plenty of lamps for intimate, indirect light, and isolated reading nooks. The reading nooks themselves are separate from the typical classroom structure even at the school (*Miller's Girl* 3:20). Both classrooms are important distinguishing markers from the rest of their respective faculties. Firstly, they serve a visual purpose to fulfil the aesthetic demands of the genre and further paint both teachers in an unconventional light. Secondly, these spaces are set up differently from strictly divided classrooms, in a way that eventually blurs the traditional clean-cut boundaries between teacher and student.

Academic Exceptionalism is observable in the spatial isolation of the 'most talented' student. In *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt for example, it is Henry, the ingenious group leader, who is invited privately to Julian Morrow's<sup>1</sup> office (Tartt 77) time and time again. For the exceptionally gifted, there are academic exceptions made. This is something explicitly shown in *Miller's Girl* when, after reading her essay, Mr. Miller asks to see Cairo after school (*Miller's Girl* 21:30-34). They sit in a reading nook, complete with brocade armchairs, stacks of dusty books, and a record playing in the background

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<sup>1</sup> It might be interesting to note that Claude Fredericks, the Bennington College teacher that Julian Morrow is very closely based on, had multiple affairs with male students while Donna was a student there (Anolik).

(22:50); a liminal space at the fringes of the classroom where the roles of teacher and student can be subverted and challenged (28:30-36). “The asymmetrical power dynamic which structure teacher-student relations are sometimes disrupted by such liminal spaces” (Todd 60) and, here, lead to something new and unfamiliar. While the term liminal education, which is being described here, is regarded as a learning opportunity that teachers and students both benefit from, it ought to be approached more critically considering the potential for abuse. This is because the “ontological possibilities [...] created outside the structural intentionalities of teaching” (Todd 60) exhibit attributes of Academic Exceptionalism that can be witnessed here. “You’re exceptionally talented” (26:08), Mr. Miller notes, offering Cairo an early start on the mid-term project. The secluded space and the distance from others allow them to become vulnerable, both reciting the work of the other from memory (24:30-25:30/26:50-27:35). “Are you offering me special treatment, Mr. Miller?”, (26:30) Cairo inquires. And that is exactly what he does. When asked if he exhibited favouritism towards her or gave her special mentorship he answers with a simple “Of course” (1:14:43-1:17:00). He has built a romanticized image of her in his mind, sheds her of her student status, and creates the blossoming writer, “who reads *Finnegan’s Wake* in her own volition” (8:49). In a notoriously hard industry and an economy that encourages only the success of a select few, Mr. Miller fulfils the “new academic stereotype” (Deresiewicz 37) that Deresiewicz observes, a failed professor and perhaps even worse, a failed writer, whose failure leads to sexual impropriety (Deresiewicz 37). To him, Cairo is his salvation, someone who appreciates his work (*Miller’s Girl* 26:50). He imagines her as his intellectual equal and only seems to recognize what he has been projecting onto her after reading her mid-term assignment (55:39). In *My Dark Vanessa*, Mr. Strane follows a similar pattern of isolation. In Vanessa’s own words “he singled [me] out and fell in love” (Russell 268). The first transgression happens when he asks her to his desk while the other students are working. Referencing one of her poems he asks, “Nessa, did you mean to sound sexy here?” (44) and touches his knee to her legs. For him, it’s a test, away from prying eyes but just close enough to be dangerous. To see if she speaks up, a gauging of her reaction. After that, he singles her out more frequently. She begins to stay late after class, and he seeks her out on campus. Under the ruse of Academic Exceptionalism, the boundaries between teacher and student are eroded.

In *Miller's Girl* as well as *My Dark Vanessa*, much of the physical intimacy of the relationships happens outside of the classroom: The respective meetings in the classroom act as a rite of initiation. Outside of the classroom, the power dynamics between teacher and student shift. In *Miller's Girl*, at a poetry reading Mr. Miller has implicitly invited her to, Cairo describes their blossoming bond, after sitting closely together and sharing a cigarette, not as falling in love but "more deliberate than that. It's recognition of what we really are" (*Miller's Girl* 33:50-36:00). With this invitation, Mr. Miller further closes the gap between mentor and student and troubles their relationship. Similar to Mr. Miller's invitation, Mr. Strane also invites Vanessa to meet off campus. At his house, Mr. Strane, and Vanessa only realizes this after years of therapy, sexually abuses her (Russell 103). He actively takes her outside of her intended seemingly secure environment, to commit these sexual transgressions. Away from any possible control from other teachers or parents, both teachers make advances against their pupils. Both the unconventional classroom and the unobserved outside are manipulated and used to foster an opportunistic and abusive space.

While sexual transgressions are clear boundary breaches, other smaller acts like discussing politics or personal preferences can challenge them as well (Plaut 216). "Boundary violations compromise the integrity and effectiveness of the student-teacher relationship" (216) and a dual relationship emerges; one personal, one academic (216). These isolations and bonding moments with students and the resulting confusion of boundaries, whether calculated or not, create the basis for abuse in the classroom and put the student in a liminal position. To prolong the initial professorial approval, the students must shed the category of student and become something new.

### **"More like a woman than not" – Suspended in Liminality**

United, the student, the teenager, and the victim are ascribed maturity to legitimize abuse by an adult authority figure and thus inhabit a liminal position as a result of grooming and strategic targeting. The student is already in a liminal position, in a state about to enter academia but not quite there yet (Potgieter 115). The teenager, perhaps the most troubling state among the great life states, is in such a position as well (Lipska 11), as they are wedged between childhood and adulthood. The victim, both student and teenager, is again deliberately reinforced in their liminality by the abuser because neophytes are invisible and hidden (Turner 98). Under the ruse of Academic Exceptionalism, the teacher

binds the gifted student to them, employing an apparent likeness as if the student's talent sets them apart in maturity from their peers. In *My Dark Vanessa*, this apparent maturity is highlighted often as Vanessa is told: "I mean you're fairly developed. More like a woman than not" (Russell 139) or "'I'll bet for as long as you can remember, you were called mature for your age. Weren't you?'" (114). The repeated ascription of maturity in teenage years leads to a rift in developmental stages. As a teenager already unsure of her identity, Mr. Strane's grooming and later abuse mercilessly enhance her category crisis. Already unsure of her place in the world, he throws her personal development into chaos, she begins to see herself only through lenses that he creates of her (40). While Vanessa still feels like a child, her teacher seems to perceive her as an adult. She cannot unite her conceptual self with the mature and sophisticated version that Mr. Strane has created of her: "I stand in front of my bedroom mirror, study my face and hair and try to see myself as Mr. Strane sees me, a girl with maple-red hair who wears nice dresses and has good style, but I can't get past the sight of myself as a pale, freckled child." (33-34). Too early, she is pressed into adulthood while sporadically torn back into childhood; "You're a baby, a little girl" (133), Strane says during a phone call while asking her to call him "Daddy". In her new identity, she occupies the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood, and the disassociation between the two further enhances that position. This liminality manifests itself through disassociation. She repeatedly reports a splitting of herself during traumatic situations. During scenes of abuse, she is "airborne, freewheeling" (133), "nothing, no one, nowhere" (103), "torn in two" (253). Liminality not only enables her abuse but is also her coping mechanism once that abuse occurs.

While the affair leaves Vanessa in the precarious position of not quite child, not quite adult, Cairo's experiences conclude her transition into adulthood; a dark coming-of-age story. She begins her narration, which carries on throughout the film, with the question: "What is an adult? Becoming one didn't transform me into anything outstanding or significant" (*Miller's Girl* 1:25-1:36). Concerning affairs with older men Vanessa says: "All interesting women had older lovers when they were young. It's a rite of passage. You go in a girl and come out not quite a woman but closer, girl more conscious of herself and her own power." (Russell 192). Vanessa's stance, a result of grooming and manipulation, is reflected in Cairo's attitude towards the transformative aspects of an affair with an older man as well. She seeks out this affair with hopes of a grand transformation as a writer and an adult (*Miller's Girl* 17:07- 17:26). In the aftermath, she is thrown into

confusion about her initial intentions and her newly gained status as an adult. The film closes with a dramatic soliloquy, and ends her experience with:

“Is this what it is to be an adult? The same exquisite longing of adolescence but with the burden of constant accountability, no excuses to be made for your choices? For they are yours alone. I cannot say whether or not I'm grateful for the experience, for the knowledge, the felicity of youth has been ripped from me like skin and exposed, as I am sore and open as I am. I can feel it shape me into something new; hero, villain, writer. Grown from the human ruins of a madman's love.” (*Miller's Girl* 1:26:48-1:28:1)

The “fantasy, not on the page but in real life” (55:53) that Mr. Miller built of Cairo as an intellectual equal has transformed her into something new and no longer liminal; something she has even longed for. Whether it is beneficial or as traumatic as what Vanessa deals with, in the aftermath remains ambivalent. Yet clearly, this want for mentorship and guidance has turned into something all-encompassing that has irrevocably changed her.

## Conclusion

The allure of Dark Academia's haunting themes can be witnessed in tales of forbidden and inappropriate relationships between teachers and their students. While close relations can be regarded as special and nurturing in some works such as *Dead Poet's Society* or *Mona Lisa Smile*, the trope can provide insight into damaging and inappropriate relationships as well. This essay has explored the patterns of abuse in the abuser and the manifestations of abuse in the victim shown within the Dark Academia genre. The classroom and isolation at the centre of Dark Academic settings, yet also in real boarding schools and campuses, allow teachers to abuse their power by making an exception for one especially gifted student. Here, space is purposefully utilized by the abuser to isolate the student and blur the boundaries of the roles within the classroom. Anthropological liminality and Academic Exceptionalism help in understanding how these relationships develop and become problematic. Isolated spaces within academic settings, where traditional roles and boundaries are blurred, allow for the exploitation of power dynamics and weaponization of Academic Exceptionalism. Finding these patterns of abuse and their ramifications in fiction, especially in such a popular genre, can aid in recognizing them in real-life academia. Deresiewicz's hated stereotype of the failed writer

as a lecherous professor (Deresiewicz 37) certainly appears frequently and does a disservice to all teachers who pride themselves in their work. Yet his statement that the only “kind of sex professors are having with their students behind closed doors: brain sex” (45) is regrettably not the case (Plaut 212). While certainly, not all Dark Academia stories deal with such abuse, the genre provides the ideal backdrop to explore these stories, considering its focus on academia and dark themes.

There lies a great appeal in Dark Academia, with its exploration of the tension between intellectual pursuit and the darker aspects of human relationships. Hence, it is important to acknowledge and address the ethical concerns they raise as the genre’s popularity grows.

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