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Cliques, Elites, and Other Monsters: Class and Monstrosity in Dark Academia Fiction

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Abstract
This paper explores the intersections between Dark Academia and Horror regarding Class. By examining *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt and *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, the study investigates how monstrosity functions as both a signifier of and a result of the detachment of elites from common morality. Exclusivity and intellectual elitism detach privileged individuals from conventional moral standards. This detachment fosters the creation of new, self-justified moral frameworks within these cliques, leading to a decline in ethical behaviour and the rise of manipulative practices under the guise of intellectualism. Parallels to Horror theory demonstrate how Dark Academia serves as a potent critique of these spaces, exposing their inherent moral decay and the dangers of unchecked privilege.

Dark Academia

Keywords
Monster Theory; Horror; Gothic; Dark Academia; Class.

Introduction

Why do Gothic themes and Horror tropes fit so seamlessly into the world of academia? Novels such as *Ninth House* (2019) by Leigh Bardugo, *A Lesson in Vengeance* (2021) by Victoria Lee, and *The Divines* (2022) by Ellie Eaton exemplify the intersection. The newly emerging genre of Dark Academia often immerses readers in towns and schools imbued with Gothic themes or introduces characters with fantastical abilities and backgrounds. Yet, these novels frequently centre around classist structures and social groups – and those who strive to belong to the top of the social elite. In an article titled "Tweed Jackets and Class Consciousness" (2022), Gunner Taylor teases out the intersections between Dark Academia and class. While his primary focus lies on the appeal of the aesthetic and genre to outsiders, this study focuses instead on their links to Horror. Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992), considered a foundational text of Dark Academia, and the more recent *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, are significant examples of the genre regarding these

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observations. Both texts follow a social outsider and their relationship to an elitist friend group, engaging heavily with themes of monstrosity and the Gothic despite not being classified as Horror. This article explores how Horror and Dark Academia interface, examining how monstrosity serves as a signifier for class and vice versa. By analysing both novels, we can understand how the characteristics and detachment of the elite lead to their monstrosity, adversely infecting and impeding those who strive for upward social mobility.

Privilege, intellectual Elitism, and the Rejection of Morality

Both *The Secret History* and *Bunny* address class by engaging with typical themes and conventions of the Gothic. Gothic narratives are frequently set in places imbued with status and power, such as castles or mansions of aristocratic origin (Botting 2; Jones 7). Similarly, characters are frequently depicted as either aligning with this status or challenging it, thus opening discussions of class conflict in hierarchical societies (Botting 2). The Gothic protagonist is often portrayed as isolated due to their social status, whether marginalised by society or their entrapment in their own privilege. Examples can, for instance, be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Other common themes linking the Gothic to class include an engagement with power. Gothic novels often uncover power dynamics between unequally privileged characters while showcasing corruption and social injustice within institutions, particularly those related to the aristocracy. This is prominently the case in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe, among others. Awad's *Bunny* and Tartt's *The Secret History* showcase these connections between the Gothic and class.

Bunny is set at the fictional Warren University, a New England college reminiscent of exclusive institutions such as MIT, Yale, or Harvard. Surrounded by picturesque greenery (Awad 23), the university offers a special arts program to which only a selected few are admitted (14), making it particularly attractive to aspiring artists from an elitist background (23). While the school entices with its exclusivity and reputation, the town is described as "actual hell" (231), a place full of violent (231) and mentally unstable (62) inhabitants who frequently spread terror by way of "rape, clubbings, stabbings, and shootings" (62). The surrounding Victorian-era buildings, spiked gates and fireplaces

(23) evoke the Gothic genre, along with the protagonist Samantha's workshop leader, whom she has named Fosco, after the character in Wilkie Collins' Gothic novel *The Woman in White* (1860) (Awad 64). Awad creates an atmosphere of elitism and snobbery on campus (see 23) contrasting sharply with the madness and violence off campus (see 62), reminiscent of Gothic themes of madness and aristocracy (Jones 6-8). Samantha describes this dichotomy to the reader: she is a student at Warren but an outsider to its student body, as one of the few from a lower socio-economic background (Awad 15). Without family to support her (233), she relies on stipend checks for sustenance (11). Samantha is one of few participating in the Creative Writing MFA, alongside a clique of privileged girls who Samantha calls 'The Bunnies'. The class difference between Samantha and the Bunnies is almost palpable; the Bunnies possess substantial monetary resources and property (Awad 31, 233-34) as well as connections to university staff (218, 222), which Samantha lacks (7). This allows the Bunnies to focus solely on producing art without the financial worries that burden Samantha.

The Secret History is set at the fictional Hampden College, a small, highly selective liberal arts college in Vermont, New England, reminiscent of Tartt's alma mater, Bennington College (Tartt 10). Established in 1895 (10), the college features several ivied brick buildings with white spires and a clock tower (12). The campus and surrounding greenery are depicted with Gothic tinges, including a "heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground", birch trees rising up like ghosts in the night as well as "black and gusty" and "disordered" nights "wild with stars" (12). These excessive descriptions, evoking themes of decay, Gothic or upper-class architecture, mystery, and the supernatural, strongly recall the Gothic tradition and create an ominous yet almost Romantic atmosphere. At the same time, Vermont is portrayed as a rough and temperamental environment with unpredictable weather conditions (315), which can quickly become dangerous for unprepared hikers. This external threat of nature, particularly during the colder seasons, evokes notions of the Sublime (Jones 8; Botting 2), also common in Gothic literature. The poetic descriptions of the environment are provided by Tartt's protagonist Richard, who, like Samantha at Warren, is an outsider at his elitist college. Richard grew up in Plano, a small, insignificant town in California (Tartt 5). His family relies on the low-income jobs of both his parents (5), leading to constant quarrels about money (7). Despite his parents' opposition, Richard attends college, first in California to pursue medicine (7), then later in Vermont to follow his interest in literature (10). It is at Hampden College

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that he first encounters the exclusive Greek class, a small group of students from privileged backgrounds who are taught Greek and classical literature privately within the college (33). While Richard must work during the semester to earn money (16), the students in the Greek class have wealthy relatives who provided them with a childhood of "English nannies and private schools, summers in Switzerland, winters in France" (7).

Despite their tangible class differences, both Samantha and Richard are eventually drawn to the mysterious cliques they encounter. Samantha, for example, is overcome with the desire to belong to the Bunnies and feels touched to be welcomed into and emotionally supported by their group (Awad 44, 66). Similarly, Richard is fascinated by the Greek class's higher-class lifestyle, desiring to be like them (Tartt 7), and wishing to be part of this exclusive elitist clique and their intellectual pursuits: "All of them, to me, seemed highly unapproachable. But I watched them with interest whenever I happened to see them […]" (18; see 33). Here, the motif of isolation becomes relevant both in terms of class and Horror. Not only are the environments in which the colleges are located isolated, but the privileged cliques themselves are heavily insular. Both in *Bunny* and *The Secret History*, the cliques willingly distance themselves from their peers. This occurs partly through their choice of program, with the Creative Writing MFA and Classics programs both physically and socially detached from the rest of the student body (Awad 12; Tartt 13). While this motif of isolation is common to Horror narratives, especially in terms of setting (See Botting 2; Jones 7, 92), it also serves to code the respective cliques as the 'Other': To the protagonists, the Bunnies and the Greek students come from an unfamiliar class and have vastly different lived realities. Instead of scaring Samantha and Richard off, this unfamiliarity makes the cliques even more alluring; belonging to these exclusive groups seems desirable. This attraction to the unknown recalls Jeffrey Cohen's "7 Theses" about monsters, specifically how the monster and its Otherness are "really a kind of desire", an "alluring projection of (an Other) self" for the beholder (52).

Another way in which isolation relates to classism is through the intellectual elitism of the cliques, which eventually leads them down a path of moral detachment. The Bunnies view themselves as superior in terms of their craft, comparing themselves favourably to other art departments at Warren (Awad 150-51), to other writers in general (128-29), as well as to their peer Samantha (71). This self-perception even extends to describing themselves as godlike in their creative approaches (151). In both novels, the privileged and sheltered upbringings of the clique members, combined with

the social and spatial isolations, lead to a detachment from common morals and shared lived reality. Consequently, the cliques develop an echo chamber of delusion and justification. In *Bunny*, this manifests in the rituals the Bunnies call 'workshop'. In these workshops, the girls kill wild bunnies as part of what they consider their creative process, or even part of their education (138-144). Upon joining their group, Samantha transitions from initial shock and disgust towards the ritual (116) to feeling inspired and empowered by it (151). The Bunnies do not view their ritualistic killings as morally unacceptable and cruel but as essential to their future success as writers. By reinforcing this belief amongst themselves, they create an echo chamber of moral misdirection.

Like the Bunnies, the Greek students usually keep to themselves, avoiding typical student activities and campus life (Tartt 368). Through their reclusiveness and lack of confrontation with contrasting perspectives, the group becomes detached from common (post)modern morals, instead clinging to older fantasies of glory, battle, and honour (224). Supported by their like-minded teacher, they create an environment where ethical boundaries are disregarded or shifted to their own benefit (269, 339). This becomes especially prominent when their teacher finds out about the murder and, instead of reporting it or reprimanding the students, he leaves school without further notice (574-75). The group's detachment from others leads them, excluding Richard and another group member, Bunny, to attempt to recreate the Greek bacchanals, resulting in the accidental murder of a local farmer. The participants later relativise the incident:

> 'It's a terrible thing, what we did', said Francis […] 'I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it.' – 'Well, of course, I do too', said Henry matter-of-factly. 'But not bad enough to want to go to jail for it.' (Tartt 220)

Notably, the victim comes from a lower class that the group typically never encounters. As they cover up their crime, they argue that the local pastoral community would have punished them even more harshly for their crimes due to their social status if their involvement were discovered (Tartt 196). This deduction demonstrates the calculating and cold manner in which the clique handles what should be a traumatizing and haunting accident. This same coldness later leads the group to plan and execute the murder of their friend Bunny, who discovers their involvement in the farmer's death.

The moral decay and rejection of ethical boundaries lead to a distortion of the characters' perceptions of reality and morality, culminating in ritual killings, explicit

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violence, and the relativisation of murder. While this is reminiscent of the Horror genre, the rituals and their supernatural nature also present a twisting of the natural order, a common element in Gothic literature (Botting 2-3, 4). Additionally, the concept of monstrous cuteness by Leina Hsu is relevant to the representation of the Bunnies. In her essay, Hsu explains how the Bunnies exude 'monstrous cuteness' as a strategy of gender resistance (Hsu 1). By "simultaneously tak[ing] advantage of women's gender stereotypes and brutally reject[ing] them" (1), they create what Cohen calls a category crisis (Cohen 45). What initially seems contradictory, Hsu argues, is naturally linked. Referring to Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska's "Monstrous/Cute. Notes on the Ambivalent Nature of Cuteness", Hsu cites that cuteness not only evokes positive feelings in the beholder (Hsu 1) but can also be instrumentalised to manipulate others (see Hsu 4). Moreover, it can become uncanny, much like the innocence and cuteness of children in Horror movies can also "capture an unexpected terror" (1-2). Monstrous cuteness, however, has a gendered and class dimension. While cuteness is often stereotypically attributed to conventionally beautiful women (2), it is more importantly a privilege. This means that cuteness is strongly tied to and often reserved for 'positive' attributes for women, primarily youthfulness, innocence, and whiteness (see 2, 6).

Hsu explains that the Bunnies' monstrous actions can only be covered by their cuteness because society does not already see them as monstrous – a privilege not conventionally attributed to women of colour (Hsu 6). The girls from the clique are free to do as they please due to their white, high-status identity within society as well as their conventional beauty, allowing them to use their cuteness as a guise. Hsu's interpretation of monstrous cuteness thus underscores the links between the Bunnies' monstrosity to their privileged class belonging. Elitist structures allow for emotional and moral detachment which foster not only monstrosity but, as will be demonstrated next, also give way to manipulation and the romanticisation of violence.

The Beauty of Violence and Manipulation

Another recurring presence in both novels is the abuse and trivialisation of alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs. In *Bunny*, alcohol and nicotine are consumed regularly, though not excessively (Awad 29). However, drugs are strongly connected to the Bunnies and their group activities: as Samantha joins them, she appears to be constantly drugged and encouraged by the Bunnies to drink alcohol (41-42, 55) or take their unspecified pills

(116, 134, 154-55), which warps her perception and shifts the narration (149-51). Inebriation makes Samantha more compliant, lowering her moral boundaries and inhibitions, which prevent her from reflecting on her state (137). *The Secret History* delves into the students' drug abuse in greater detail, both during as well as outside of parties (see Tartt 265, 281, 289, 318). Alcohol and nicotine are particularly popular, but other drugs are also consumed, for example during the group's re-creation of the Greek bacchanals. This mixed consumption eventually results in the group's loss of consciousness, and in this intoxicated state, they kill the farmer. Throughout both narratives, drug use is thus not only persistent in the narratives, but also informs their respective plots.

Drug abuse also plays an integral part in the participation in rituals, both in *Bunny* and in *The Secret History.* The rituals of the cliques connect the respective members and make them dependent on each other. This is largely due to their esoteric nature, enhanced by the shared consumption of drugs. Both the transforming and killing of the bunnies as well as the attempt to connect to a deity involve immoral, irresponsible and borderline illegal activity, which participants justify in favour of connecting to a 'higher' morality or spirituality. Because of this, the rituals, their practices, and their goals, are highly exclusive. To further demonstrate the immorality of the respective rituals, and how it ties to monstrosity, it is worthwhile to examine them more closely. The Bunnies' ritual consists of indiscernible chanting and the ritual sacrifice of living bunnies by making them explode (Awad 138). Despite the explicit violence and gore, the act is portrayed as beautiful, magical, or even creational. These rituals contribute to the Bunnies' view of themselves as intellectually or creatively superior, as they believe they reshape the process of creative writing (128-29, 150-51). They partly justify their creational approach by claiming that God would approve of what they are doing (151). The ritual that four of the Greek class students recreate stems from Greek mythology and ancient history. The experience, fuelled by their intoxication, brings the group members closer together, especially when their mindless frenzy ends in the violent murder of a nearby farmer. As they cover up their crime, they trivialise it and treat it as part of their higher spiritual experience (see Tartt 220, 403). The issue lies not only in the homicide itself but particularly in how it is dealt with, the monstrous coldness with which it ceases to haunt the perpetrators the moment the last evidence is destroyed. In both texts, the glorification of drug abuse in higher social classes opens up a serious discussion about

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class and the double and moral standards that go along with it. Especially relevant here are the consequences of the drug abuse, namely the acts of killing themselves. As mentioned above, taking another's life is treated as an artistic act, but which lives are taken must also be considered: For the Bunnies, it is 'lesser' beings, namely animals and human-animal-hybrids, and for the Greek students it is first an unknown lower class farmer, and then the friend who they always viewed as lesser – which is why he was excluded from their ritual in the first place. Read this way, the killings become a classist act.

The romanticisation of death and philosophical framing of violence also play into this dynamic between the characters in which the killing of other living beings is trivialised and justified in the name of art or philosophy. While the Bunnies' ritual killings are depicted as an essential and poetic part of their creative, artistic processes (see Awad 151), the murder of one of the members of the Greek class, incidentally also nicknamed Bunny, is framed as equally poetic (Tartt 309, 473). For example when Richard attends his funeral:

> He hadn't seen it coming at all. […] Teetering back as if on the edge of the swimming pool: comic yodel, windmilling arms. Then the surprised nightmare of falling. Someone who didn't know there was such a thing in the world as Death; who couldn't believe it even when he saw it; had never dreamed it would come to him. Flapping crows. Shiny beetles crawling in the undergrowth. A patch of sky, frozen in a cloudy retina, reflected in a puddle on the ground. Yoo-hoo. Being and nothingness. (473)

While Bunny's death is an objectively cruel and unpleasant one, Richard focuses not on the horror or the violent aspect of his friend's death. Neither does he comment on how he felt in the moment but is fully detached from the event he recalls. Instead, he seems to contextualise it as part of a bigger picture about fleeting life and death, the irony and the aesthetic scenery surrounding Bunny's fall. This seems almost contradictory to the pragmatic premeditation of the act: Bunny, who was excluded from the group's bacchanal, discovers their crime and cannot handle the moral pressure of knowing without acting on his conscience. Before he can report them to the police or inform anyone else, the group, led by Henry, coldly plans his murder to protect themselves: "Henry had become angry when the twins were voicing moral objections at the idea of killing Bunny. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he snapped." (Tartt 339) While the planning and

execution of the murder are carried out in a level-headed and calculating manner, Richard frames it as deeply philosophical and literary (see 473), especially when Bunny's corpse is initially buried by the returning Vermont winter and its snow (1-2).

Richard's framing can be traced back to the Gothic genre: Excessive emotional affect, alongside intrigue, betrayal and murder take on a central position in the Gothic and are often presented as exciting and sensational (Botting 4), subverting common morals and manners (3). The framing of explicit violence and murder or death as art reflects a sense of sensationalism and thereby further distorts the sense of morality within the cliques. The groups not only distance themselves from the outside world but also become estranged from their own sense of self. This is especially true for the protagonists Samantha and Richard, who join the cliques as outsiders. As they become more involved, their moral compass slowly erodes, altering their self-perception (see Jones 10). And it is joining the elite cliques that sets this process in motion. Their self-estrangement is reinforced by the influence of guilt and paranoia, as well as by the characters' own monstrosity, which is enforced by how the protagonists are in a way haunted: Richard by the murder of his friend (Tartt 337, 310), and Samantha by her past (Awad 231, 233), her imagination (235), and her own creation (276). These plot points reflect the Gothic motifs of fear, madness, guilt, paranoia, and hauntings, which are deeply embedded in Gothic narratives, their characters, and their atmosphere (Botting 1-2, 7; Jones 6-7). Here, it becomes clear how the protagonists' belonging to the elite cliques sets in motion a series of events which contribute to their character development, especially in terms of morals and how they reflect on them. To illustrate this, I will draw on an example from each text.

In *Bunny*, Samantha is haunted by her creation, Max. After leading the Bunnies' workshop, her Draft is nowhere to be found. While searching for it, she encounters a young man outside the house, unsure if he is a real person or the vanished bunny (Awad 209-10). From then on, Samantha repeatedly meets him outside (e.g., 238, 259, 277) without ever further investigating him to gain certainty about whether he is her creation. This vanishing and reappearing follow her like a haunting, ultimately leading her down a path of paranoia and uncertainty. When she later discovers that Max is, in fact, her creation, she experiences fear and guilt, since he has been involved with her friend Ava (see 277), and might hurt her, a fear that is confirmed when Max later harms the Bunnies. In contrast, Richard is most prominently haunted by his participation in the murder, which manifests in different ways. First, he goes through a stage of paranoia and fear as

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the group waits for the body to be found and is haunted by alleged sightings of their missing friend, who they know is long dead (Tartt 337). Additionally, the grief expressed by their friend's family and their peers haunts Richard, as well as his involvement in Bunny's death, especially when he attends the latter's funeral (428, 473). Finally, the novel is framed as Richard's personal retelling of his time at Hampden College, which suggests that even years later, Richard is still thinking about what he did and allegedly remembers most of it in great detail. Especially the beginning of his narrative suggests that the past events seem to haunt him in a way, as becomes apparent in his closing statement of the prologue: "I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell." (2) His detailed reports as well as the indulgent framing of himself, in which he only passively participated in the murder and regretted it from the start, challenge the reliability of his narration. Thus, Richard's narrative might as well be a retelling and rewriting of the trauma he experienced and an attempt to process it. The incorporation of Gothic themes like the aforementioned haunting of characters along with the romanticisation of death and violence is again strongly connected to class privilege. This is in part due to the feudal themes of the Gothic and to the moral decay set in motion through the cliques, but also the effects of class isolation: Elitist thinking and detachment from reality, together with isolation through intellectual elitism and class distinction, enable the cliques to adapt or reject their moral objections to their benefit.

Not entirely unrelated are the recurring motifs of unbalanced power dynamics, peer pressure, drugging, and manipulation in the primary texts. These motifs serve to achieve communal goals, be it intellectual or other, and maintain the cohesion of the clique while strictly differentiating them from outsiders. Much of this power and manipulation is executed by the cliques' respective leaders: in *Bunny*, it is Eleanor, or 'the Duchess', who seems to control the others, while in *The Secret History*, it is Henry.

Eleanor is portrayed as the cleverest, most determined, and most influential among the Bunnies (Awad 38-39, 183). In her leadership role, she seems to encourage manipulative behaviour and leads by example (see 183), ultimately pushing Samantha to her breaking point by killing an animal with deep meaning to the latter (350). As part of their manipulation, and to make Samantha more compliant and less fearful, the Bunnies continuously give her unspecified pills, as previously mentioned. Samantha suffers physical harm from drug abuse and psychological torment from manipulation, rejection,

and ultimately, abandonment inflicted by the other girls (216). In *The Secret* History, Henry, the leader of the Greek students, is portrayed as the most brilliant, aristocratic, and stoic member of the group which is why he usually makes the decisions for and gives orders to the others (Tartt 36-37, 501). He plays a major role in covering up their first murder and primarily plans and executes their second one. While he manipulates all group members, his power becomes most noticeable when he tricks Richard into assisting them, making him an accessory to their crime without questioning it and making him believe he was involved all along (181, 550): "He had appealed to my vanity, allowing me to think I'd figured it out by myself […]; and I had congratulated myself in the glow of his praise, when in fact […] he'd led me right to it […]." (550)

In regard to manipulation, several aspects of Monster theory and the Gothic mode are activated. First, there is the unreliable narration of Samantha, both in her sober state and especially when she is drugged: Samantha's delusional narration of the surreal events allegedly taking place evokes notions of madness and a split personality (Jones 6f, 8), both common themes in the Gothic. For example, it becomes evident that Samantha experiences and interprets things differently than others, like the swan the Bunnies kill which she perceives as her human friend Ava (Awad 144-45). It is unclear whether Samantha suffers from a mental illness, but her constant lying (55) and the hallucinations that seem to haunt her (see 235, 342-43, 345-46, 347-48) fit neatly into Gothic conventions of the plagued, obsessive and delusional protagonist (See Jones 6f; Botting 8). Second, the monstrous dynamics of manipulation, calculation, and moral boundary-pushing highlight the dark sides of social elitism while reflecting Gothic themes of manipulation and submission. In part, this is represented through Henry's characterisation as a manipulative, mysterious, but alluring intellectual, which projects onto him the image of the vampire, drawing a direct connection to class and Gothic fiction. In his article "Marxferatu: The Vampire Metaphor as a Tool for Teaching Marx's Critique of Capitalism", Morissette explains how the capital owners "step into the role of the vampire", using their lower-class labourers for their own profit while draining them entirely (637). For that, the vampire employs "psychic powers or sheer physical beauty" to lure their victims in, similar to false promises by the well-off capitalist (Morissette 640). While Morissette speaks of an "economic" vampire (639), this image can be adapted to Henry's manipulation in Tartt's novel. As the smartest and richest of the group, he exerts dominance, and the others respect his opinions. Even Richard sometimes wonders

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why he repeatedly follows Henry's wishes with little to no questions asked (Tartt 550, 501). While Henry does not act for financial profit, he usually gets his way and gains the freedom to do as he pleases, dictating to others how they should act. He even convinces them, despite initial objections (339), to murder their friend. This habit of manipulation which poses Henry as an elitist vampire emphasizes the monstrosity of elitist characters, especially those who have a certain level of control over others. Yet, they are looked up to by their clique members for exactly that and are portrayed as superior in one way or another.

Through the manipulation of the lower-class protagonists, the parallelism between elites preventing social mobility and the monster preventing mobility becomes tangible: while Richard and Samantha desire to belong to their respective clique and emulate their lifestyles, potentially rising to their social and even their financial status, it is the cliques themselves who hinder this aspiration. Primarily, this occurs by their refusal to accept Samantha and Richard as equals intellectually and in terms of lifestyle. In Monster theory, the monster "polices the borders of the possible" (Cohen 49), thereby restricting mobility within social spaces, including intellectual advancement (50). This way, it tells a "double narrative" in which it demonstrates how it became a monster to begin with, and at the same time, one in which it warns us to follow after it (50). In consideration of the characteristics attributed to monsters – whether their freedom to transgress taboos or their propensity to violate boundaries (52) – the monster serves as a potent metaphor for the elites. This attraction to the morally ambiguous spaces of the elites, however, is enabled through the assumed benefits that come with belonging. In both *Bunny* and *The Secret History*, the desire to belong is not primarily of a financial nature. Instead, it is a desire to be part of something greater, something beautiful, and in this case, the beauty lies in the violence.

Transformation and Destabilisation of Identity

"*The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming*" (Cohen 54)

Throughout the texts, the once-appealing cliques reveal their faults and unattractive sides. The Bunnies initially appear as an excessively cute friend group but evolve into monstrously cute women, revealed to be cold-blooded and disenchanted, culminating in their abandonment of Samantha. Similarly, the Greek class members' weaknesses and

moral taboo breaks become increasingly evident, from alcohol-related hospitalisations (Tartt 538, 541) to the rejection of societal norms such as incest (511-12, 513-14). Henry in particular exhibits coldness and a disturbed worldview, viewing killing as a natural solution to personal discomfort (261).

As the groups unravel, a destabilisation of personality and a loss of self are observed in the protagonists as well. Samantha loses her sense of individuality (Awad 149) and her initial relationships (165, 170) upon joining the Bunnies. Initially critical of the Bunnies' aesthetic and expression of femininity (4), Samantha eventually fully adopts their style, influenced by the drugging she undergoes (166). During detox, she experiences additional hallucinations and fevers, isolating herself from others for an unspecified amount of time. Isolation ultimately helps her regain some sense of self (237).

Richard assimilates into the clique's habits, lifestyle, and particular sense of morality, despite the psychological turmoil it causes him, especially in terms of guilt and haunting. His desire is to shed his old identity completely, striving to seamlessly integrate into the world of the Greek students. This loss of self mirrors themes found in the Horror genre, particularly the "divided self" or destabilised identity, a prominent trope in psychological Horror according to Jones (6, 84). This destabilisation can manifest through Horror archetypes such as doppelgängers or through moral hypocrisy (87). The ambiguity and dual nature of the two characters is also a common trait among Gothic antagonists, notable examples among Gothic characters including Dorian Gray or Jekyll and Hyde. While Samantha navigates an ambiguous and unstable perception of her surroundings, Henry from *The Secret History* starkly exposes his underlying coldness to Richard before Bunny's death. Specifically, Henry openly confesses his lack of common morals and empathy, expressing that he feels more alive through taking another's life (Tartt 556-57). This revelation starkly contrasts with Henry's typically composed and civilised demeanour, evoking notions of madness instead, thus creating dissonance and highlighting double standards of virtue (see Jones 87).

Transformation of both the identity and the body becomes particularly significant in the form of the Bunnies' 'Drafts,' humanoid hybrids born from the girls' blood rituals. These hybrids defy natural and conceivable boundaries, exemplifying what Cohen terms as a "category crisis" (Cohen 45). The Bunnies' monstrous identity emerges not only from their monstrous cuteness (see Hsu) but also parallels Gothic villains (see Botting 2). In "LIMINANIMAL. The Monster in Late Victorian Gothic Fiction", Ortiz-Robles writes that

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famous monsters of the Gothic like Hyde from *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s (1891) eponymous main character "cannot be reductively inscribed within a mythic or supernatural order of representation", but that their transformative processes throughout the narration are part of what makes them monstrous (11). For instance, Dr. Jekyll transforms into the animalistic Mr. Hyde, succumbing to primal urges, while Dorian Gray discards all moral constraints in his pursuit of perpetual youth and beauty. These portrayals of humanity's animality and monstrosity, driven by unrestrained desires, find resonance in the elitist groups at Warren University and Hampden College.

Moreover, Ortiz-Robles cites that such animality also takes shape in the "outsized ambitions" of the mad scientist archetype, creating their perverse abomination while transforming into something "at times even 'monstrous' themselves" (11). This is certainly evident with the Bunnies: not only their animal nicknames, but also their irrational endeavours to create the ideal and therefore impossible man reflect their perceived animality and monstrosity. Like in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, monstrous characteristics can therefore not only be found in the scientist's creation, but also in their creator. The members of the Greek class also fit into this archetype to some extent: their efforts to resurrect ancient rituals and commune with gods, imbue them with an aura of esoteric mania and madness. In this case it is not a monstrous creation but a supernatural practice that allows conclusions about the practitioners. This obsessive pursuit, intertwined with its esotericism and ties to academic disciplines like Classics and History, further underscores the characters' class affiliation and intellectual elitism.

Conclusion

The exploration of moral decay, the romanticisation of unhealthy behaviours, and manipulative practices in Dark Academia literature vividly portray how elites misuse their privilege to construct environments devoid of common morality and ethical boundaries under the guise of intellectualism. This study reveals a recurring theme where privileged individuals dictate social hierarchies, similarly to how Cohen describes the monster to dictate the possible within its realm. Simultaneously, both elites and monsters transcend these boundaries themselves, illustrating their unchecked freedom to transgress societal norms.

In novels such as *The Secret History* and *Bunny*, the consequences of breaching these boundaries are starkly illustrated for outsiders attempting to navigate the elite realm. Entering this exclusive world resembles stepping into a Horror narrative, where one either succumbs to the manipulative forces at play or endures long enough to adopt the monstrous traits themselves. Samantha's departure from both her privileged peers and the prestigious academy signifies a rejection of this world's toxic allure, whereas Richard's complete immersion into the academic elite underscores the allure of and possibilities that come with embracing its monstrous aspects.

While Dark Academia fiction often romanticises the intellectual and elitist realms, it simultaneously serves as a potent critique of their excesses and ethical lapses. By juxtaposing the allure of knowledge and cultural elitism with its dark undercurrents of manipulation and moral dissolution, these narratives compel readers to scrutinise the societal structures and power dynamics inherent within academic and elite circles. Thus, Dark Academia emerges not only as a genre that romanticises these settings but also as a critical lens through which to interrogate their complexities and implications.

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