

“You can justify anything if you do it poetically enough.” – Morality and Cultism in M.L. Rio’s *If We Were Villains*

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Abstract

Dark Academia concerns itself with themes such as morality and manipulation. Typical for the genre is the presence of an elite group that performs immoral actions. This paper explores the connection between the elitist theater group in *If We Were Villains* and its cultist tendencies. The main focus lies on the charismatic cult leader, Richard, whose influence leads to a shift of moral boundaries. Through analyzing the group's internal hierarchy, supported by the influence of the assigned roles in Shakespeare's plays, it is highlighted that internal and external structures create a space that legitimizes murder, abuse, and delusion. Moreover, the novel's integration of Shakespearean plays undermines the obsession with theatrical performance and connects it to the integrity of a cult.

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Introduction

In Dark Academia, the elite group is a prominent feature that shapes the narrative with a focus on intellectual superiority. Novels like *The Secret History* or *Bunny* showcase obsession in secretive circles, but *If We Were Villains* highlights the destructive dimensions of those groups and connects it to cultism. The Dark Academia novel *If We Were Villains* (2017), written by M.L. Rio, gives us an insight of what awaits when the pursuit of knowledge turns into madness. When performing in theater, lines can easily be blurred when reality and play become one. The story of *If We Were Villains* features elements of elitism and the worship of the classics. However, the issue at hand is whether involvement in a cult-like circle causes one to change into someone unethical.

In *If We Were Villains*, cultish behavior manifests in the college theater group in the form of elitism and the worship of Shakespearean plays. Their cultish behavior ultimately leads to the murder of the leader of the group, which results in a reimagination

of the cults' morals. The group's desire for deeper meaning raises questions about morality and explores how cult members become subsumed by the leader's values and beliefs.

Drawing a connection between cultism and literature, my paper argues that the novel offers a new perspective on how elite groups perceive classic literature. Taking advantage of the force of the classics, elite groups can exploit them to legitimize their own interests and to shift others' moral perspectives. This results in a connection to a form of nostalgia for elitism, leading to a neglect of morality in the present. By delving into the characters and their relationships to one another, I will demonstrate how the worship of Shakespeare is utilized to legitimize their moral sphere. Moreover, it relates to the act of persuasion inherent in the cult and seeks to validate actions through their faith. A key component for this structure is Richard, the cult leader.

In *If We Were Villains*, the power dynamics give form to an elite group, which can be derived from an internal hierarchy, determined by the characters assigned to the individuals in the plays they reenact. This hierarchy is an important factor in maintaining the stability and sanity of the cult, while also foreshadowing the fate of each member. Yet, a twist unravels when Richard is cast as Caesar, as his looming death is highlighted from the beginning in an allusion to the eponymously named Julius Caesar.

My paper will also explore how the integration of Shakespearean plays is used to reflect the mindset of Oliver and the entire group. First, I will define and discuss the role that cultism plays in relation to Dark Academia and morality. After that, I will investigate how cultism intersects with *If We Were Villains*. The use of *Julius Caesar* highlights themes of betrayal and power dynamics, which undermine the structures of the cult itself. Over time, more violence, lies, and death comes into play, attributable to the cult's dependency on one another. If one person falls apart, everyone does.

Cultism

The term 'Cultism' centers around the aspects that a practicing cult concerns itself with. Themes such as power and worship lead to behavioral changes in members who take part in cultish activities. To properly identify how this change takes place, it is important to first get an overview of how a cult is formed and how it emerges.

Cults are described as "any group whose appearance and philosophy seem strange" (Hughes 352), but they are far more than merely any 'strange' group. They can

be connected to religion, because they source “[their] inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture” (Richardson, “Oppositional” 31), and revise common themes to attract individuals who seek belonging. Forming from religious context, cults adapt ideologies and shape them to create legitimacy. This includes the worship of a higher order and belief system that a religion follows. The connection to religiosity can furthermore be traced back to the structures of religious sects. Sects are “a particularly intense version of the dominant religion” (Ellwood 22), which connects sects with religious worship. Additionally, extremist sects are the basis of cults, because a cult’s social structure derives from those of sects, therefore one can “assume that the cult existence is not totally different from its sect existence” (“From” 151). Looking at the sociological, western historical context, the relation between a cult and belief is highlighted. The origin of cults can be tied back to religion, especially to “sect[s], [the] church and denomination” (“Definitions” 348). In this case, cults glorify devotion towards the institution of the church. They mobilize religiosity as an instrument to legitimize their authority over people’s lives by establishing a sense of belonging and faith among their members. Nowadays, cults are not necessarily linked to a religion, but rather are connected to the word ‘culture’, “both being from the Latin verb *colere* which means both to cultivate and to worship” (Conway 1). This connection implies that the activities performed in the cult, such as rituals, are offered to a private community that wields devotion towards a higher order. The exclusivity of the cult is inherently intertwined with elitism, as they usually require membership to be a part of the group. It is important to distinguish between “modern personality cults [which] derive their legitimacy from ‘the masses’ [and] monarchical cults [...] aimed at an elite” (Pisch 54). My focus lies on personality cults, which highlight the leader figure, around which glorification revolves and where the leader’s performance symbolizes the groups’ identity.

The hierarchical structure of a cult holds great significance to the cult’s identity and legitimacy. The most influential member of the cult is typically its leader. The cult’s identity is tied to members, which is why they “often possess [...] a somewhat charismatic leader” (Richardson, “Oppositional” 31). Two well-known examples include Charles Manson, who manipulated people to commit murders and Jim Jones, who convinced over 900 members to commit suicide (van de Kerkhof). The leader’s personality seeps into the entirety of the group and their influence is bound to their intelligence and wisdom. Often the cult’s values are intertwined with the identity of the leader. Thereby, the “term ‘cult’

came to be coupled with the term ‘personality’” (Pisch 52). In order to form a personality cult, you need the “elevation and glorification of an individual” (54), which leads to “the use of symbolism and ritual” (54). Cults need the management of the leader figure in order to function properly and build a followership. The worship of the leader serves the purpose of the creation of a hierarchy similar to those of religious cults. The dynamic results in the adaption of the leader’s belief system and moral compass and applying it onto their own lifestyle. Therefore, leadership and authority are two of the most important factors that uphold the structure and cohesion of the cult.

Morality in Cults

After defining how a cult operates and what aspects are important for the preservation of the cult, I will now connect the dynamics within a cult to morality.

Morality is the attitude out of which arises right action or the good intrinsic in certain acts; or morality is the series of acts which make up good conduct and good character. (Burns 226)

Morality is formed by the value and belief system that leads to a certain attitude, which then creates the ability to act and react to situations based on this system. Moral values are based upon norms and ethics that individuals align with and “they accept standards according to which their conduct is judged as either right or wrong, good or evil” (Ayala 9016). Depending on the demands that need to be achieved, morality produces alienation, which distances an individual from their problem and sets the focus on the need to fulfill moral action (Railton 135). Therefore, for a person to act morally correctly, “a moral point of view must exclude considerations that lack universality” (138). These actions can also be ethical, depending on the moral compass that one acts upon. I understand a moral compass to be that which allows moral boundaries to be identified; These moral boundaries provide the context in which moral actions can be taken. I distinguish between morals and ethics because with regard to cult morality, the values and beliefs that are conveyed by the cult leader tend to be morally ambiguous at times. The moral compass in this context can shift, depending on the state of the individual, whether they act upon the influence of the cult and cult leader, or whether they are not influenced by that.

Ethics cover general sets of rules, whereas morals focus more on the personal rules of an individual. According to Joseph L. Lombardi “[t]o be a moral agent is to be an

autonomous or self-directed agent” (Lombardi 102), which suggests that moral acts can only be performed if the person acts out of their own will. In a cult, obedience to the cult leader sets the boundaries for the morals adopted by the group. Whatever morals the leader advocates, the group takes on and uses for their personal duties. “In the case of worship, as in the case of autonomous moral agency, it is important to distinguish between having a role and conforming to it.” (103). If a person does not act within the cult's shared moral standards, they might face the consequence of being cast out. The hierarchical structure and the role a person take on within a cult are therefore directly tied to their moral behavior. To identify what exactly a cult leader needs to be respected and imitated, it is important to look at a specific form of morality.

A cult might seek to change a member's individual morality through mind control i.e., brainwashing. This is legitimized through the figure of the leader. “The unethical mind control that cults use are systems that seek to undermine an individual's integrity in making [their] own decisions” (Hughes 354). With that, they point out that morality is consequently not bound to intuition but connects autonomy with value sets and rules (Burns 226). In other words, unconscious actions can neither be moral nor immoral as they lack an autonomous decision. Therefore, a shift in personal moral boundaries also comes with a change of autonomy. By using value sets that are provided by the leader followers align their morality with that of the cult, because adhering to the set boundaries creates belonging. But with belonging, they neglect their own independence and intuition.

Moral behavior is described as the “actions of a person who takes into account in a sympathetic way the impact the actions have on others” (Ayala 9015). Unethical morality is thus not accounted for in moral behavior, unless the ethics and moral standards controlled by the leader are unethical to begin with. This raises the question of whether cult members know that the role they perform results in what is perceived as immoral behavior from the outside. I argue that the exclusivity of the cult forms a morality in which unethical and immoral actions are depicted as ‘for the greater good’ and thus justified in an appeal to existing ethical frameworks. The cult shifts the focus on the outcome of their immoral actions, legitimizing wrongness with beneficial effects for the cult, namely an increase in its ability to act outside of normative morality.

Cultism in *If We Were Villains*

If We Were Villains deals primarily with obsession, manipulation, and acting. The reader follows a seven-member group of fourth year university students who study theater together. From the beginning, the group dynamic unfolds when the new play of the term, *Julius Caesar*, is announced and casting begins. Not long after, Richard earns the role of Caesar, James Brutus, and Oliver Octavius. Each role is given to the characters at the beginning of the novel and foreshadows their respective fates in the novel. The casting classification also sets a framework for the hierarchy within the group.

Richard is an example of a charismatic leader in an elitist cult that blurs performance and reality to form an isolation of societal ethics. As the cult leader, Richard's manipulation of moral standards is foregrounded. By inducing fear, he manipulates the cult members' minds and subjugates them. The intensity of his actions forces the others to stand back and show respect. When performing *Macbeth* for Halloween, Richard is not the one who gets cast as Macbeth, but James. This causes trouble in the power dynamics and results in Richard interrupting the performance. "He was nowhere to be seen, but his voice pressed in on [them] from all sides, so loud it rattled in [their] bones" (Rio 69). Richard's exclusion from the group challenges his desire to stay the cult leader and shows that he wants to reclaim authority. It sets an emphasis on his influence, because his physical absence does not change the negative emotion he evokes in the cult members. In this case, his voice induces fear and reminds the others of existing hierarchical structures. With that, the morals of the cult are reconstituted and set by Richard.

Richard is "hated and loved with equal ferocity" (Rio 20), he "terrorized the fairies, tormented the other players, scared the hell out of the audience, and—as always—stole the show" (20). His intimidating aura makes Richard charismatic and powerful, which is why he is seen as the leader of the cult-like group. The interplay between fear and affection reinforces authority over the group, which he maintains through manipulation, brain-washing and corruption. Richard's abuse of the cult members also affects their perception of morals. During rehearsal, Richard gets carried away in his performance and pushes one of the girls, who stumbles and nearly falls down a flight of stairs. Pulling her close, Richard tells her not to cause a scene, inducing additional anxiety on an already terrified subject. This abusive behavior exemplifies the power dynamics of the cult, and the influence Richard has over other members. The group responds with anger, but ultimately, he faces no consequences, because he induces fear onto the other members

and is seen as a figure of authority. Because of that hierarchy, the cult members subordinate their emotions and therefore their morals regarding abuse to the morals of Richard. Doing so, creates a space where personal morals are shifted to strengthen the cults integrity, ultimately leading to dependency on one another.

Another dependency that maintains the structure of the cult is the constant engagement with theatrical performances. That focus demonstrates their obsession with performing to the extent that it clashes with their identity and moral compass. Oliver states that “[f]or [them], everything was a performance. [...] Everything poetic” (Rio 151). Reenforcing an environment, where the ability to perform shapes their live, leads to maintaining cult like structures, as well as a neglect of authenticity. It further supports the idea that acting is a necessity to be integrated into the group and to continue staying in the group. Therefore, the cult’s power is bound to the dependency on the act of acting, which is connected to loyalty to the cult, causing glorification of cult-like activities as well as unethical decisions.

When Oliver finds out that James is the one who killed Richard (328, 336), the casting in *Julius Caesar*, where James played Brutus, comes full circle, as Brutus is also one of the characters who kills Julius Caesar in the play itself. The hierarchy in the play is adapted to the characters’ real-life situations. James’s inevitable destiny of killing the leader comes to light, the conventions of the assigned role expand to their real lives. The performance as the roles they have on stage is merged with their real-life identity, making it impossible for them to interact with one another apart from their roles. James's act of murder achieves a scripted fate and points out the impact of their roles on their personal actions, as the tragedy of *Julius Caesar* plays out in their lives.

The retrospective: “Which of us could say we were more sinned against than sinning? We were so easily manipulated - confusion made a masterpiece of us” (Rio 357), shows the control Richard had over the change in moral perspective. The members of the cult were captivated by the combination of psychological control through fear and admiration through worship. Richard caused them to rethink their perception of moral rights and wrongs. If “a worshipper [is] commanded to do something objectively wrong, his compliance would ipso facto involve him in a violation of his role as an autonomous moral agent” (Lombardi 110). Agency is taken away by the cult leader and therefore also the responsibility to act ethically as an individual. With the change of morality, the cult turns to more obsession and the justification of murder.

Oliver expresses that “[y]ou can justify anything if you do it poetically enough” (Rio 254). The act of doing is one of the key factors to determine immorality in the cult, because “there is a difference between the attitude and the practice of worship” (Smuts 222). Performance as a form of devotion towards Richard and his morals as well as the inhabitation of the content of the play *Julius Caesar* blurs the line between acting and behavior outside of the play, e.g., the use of Shakespearian language in dialogue. Cult members internalize behaviors that are morally questionable under the guise of artistic expression as well as loyalty.

We’re only ever playing fifty percent of a character. The rest is us, and we’re afraid to show people who we really are. We’re afraid of looking foolish if we reveal the full force of our emotions. But in Shakespeare’s world, passion is irresistible, not embarrassing. (Rio 32)

The stage is transformed into a dimension where ethical limits are crossed, and morality is secondary. In every situation, the cult members adjust between role expectations and societal ones. They suppress parts of themselves normally and only within the boundaries of Shakespearean plays do they feel emotionally secure and safe to express their identities. Richard’s influence preys upon this security by helping to emphasize and link the character performances to the actual persons behind them. This results in a mismatch of moral boundaries and a connection towards the higher pursuit of being and living like an individual in a Shakespearean tragedy.

The group questions whether “[w]hat is more important, [is] that Caesar is assassinated or that he is assassinated by his intimate friends” (39), which is undermined by Richard’s death, since it marks the point where the cult transforms and changes meaning. The hierarchical structure within the cult initially served the purpose of establishing order, but later yields a controlling environment that leads to immoral actions. It creates an emotional imbalance that is shaped by guilt. This dynamic is further highlighted, when Alexander almost dies from an overdose (294). The scene marks one of the key points that initiates the collapse of the cult, as the structure, once held together by Richards leader figure, seems to crumble and the cult members are confronted with a sudden emotional and moral change. It shows the fragile nature of a personality cult without their leader and highlights the illusion of integrity within the group.

Even though they initially want to get rid of their oppressive leader figure, they are left with nothing to honor and idolize in the aftermath. Without worship, there is no

one “to feel respect, gratitude, and love” (Smuts 222) towards: The absence of Richard signifies a shift in the group's moral compass and regaining of autonomy over their morality. Richard was the catalyst for their unethical actions, and his influence helped the group to form moral ambiguity. With his death, the realization of what has been done fractures the group's integrity, causing the cult to fall apart. I could still see it. Richard suspended on the surface of life, bloodied, gasping—and the rest of us simply watching, waiting for the curtain to drop. *Revenge tragedy*, I wanted to say. Shakespeare himself couldn't have done it better. (Rio 168) In *Julius Caesar*, Caesar is killed out of revenge, which connects the character's death to Richard's death. It is a signifier for Richard's glorification of Shakespearean plays that the cult also took over to justify their immoral actions. Ironically, it is the leader's admiration for Shakespeare, which is the instrument to manipulate the group's mind, that becomes the tool that gets him killed. The space within the plays is no longer existent and the cult's structure crumbles. Moreover, the structure of the cult needs to be reinvented. Murder forces them to alter their moral boundaries and recognize the harm their involvement caused. The loss of the cult leader evokes “a transitional period, short or long, of uncertainty, even confusion, before the movement begins to settle in one direction or another” (Barrett 180). The drastic change of dynamics after the death ends the dependency of the cult towards Richard. It also shows that their relationships are not stable without him as the group loses its structure and integrity.

Seemingly speaking for the group, Alexander asks, “When did we become such terrible people?” - “Maybe we've always been terrible.” (Rio 222). This critical reflection highlights the group's remorse and indicates how destructive the loss of authority and vying for control can be. With the collapse of the cult, self-awareness arises and the means for their immoral actions are no longer justified. Consequentially, the regaining of consciousness over their identity and autonomy creates confusion and guilt.

I told the story as James had told it to me, with only necessary variations. Richard, enraged by my and Meredith's betrayal. Me, swinging the boat hook at his head in a fit of jealous fear. They didn't ask about the morning after. (Rio 347)

To protect his friend, Oliver takes the blame for the Richard's death. When asked why he is lying, he admits “[i]t's like *Romeo and Juliet*” (Rio 348), confessing that he has feelings for James that go beyond friendship. This clearly acts as a reference to *Romeo and Juliet*, a love story that ends in tragedy and a doomed relationship. The intertextual

connection to the play suggests that the romantic feelings for James compel him to act immorally, because he thinks his destiny is also that of the star-crossed lovers. Putting himself beneath James, suppressing his urge for self-preservation, Oliver becomes a victim of his own distorted morals. Oliver sacrifices himself to save James, his identity is dependent on his usefulness for the cult. This undermines the hierarchical order of the cult and its' importance for the individual's status within the cult.

After his release from prison, Oliver learns that James drowned himself (Rio 353-54), leaving him devastated. In a haunting vision, Oliver reflects on Richard's lingering influence:

I look at the chair that had always been Richard's and find it isn't empty. There he sits, in lounging, leonine arrogance. He watches me with a razor-thin smile and I realize that this is it—the *dénouement*, the counterstroke, the end—all he was waiting for. He lingers only long enough for me to see the gleam of triumph in his half-lidded eyes; then he, too, is gone. (Rio 354)

Even after his death, Richard's impact on the lives of the other characters remains. The charismatic leader is able to reshape their entire individuality and force them into unethical behavior that is justified through the performative, theatrical act. His presence remains in the form of consequences of their own immoral action. It is the aftermath of manipulation which forms the individual mindset to one that is based upon "emotion and ego and envy" (Rio 60). The worship and unhealthy obsession of Shakespeare ultimately leads to a transformation of their values, beliefs, and consequently their morals. Moreover, the dependence on prestige and approval from Richard creates a life where personal moral boundaries are sacrificed for validation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *If We Were Villains* effectively uses the theme of obsession and manipulation to connect it to cult-like dynamics within the peer group. The group's actions, especially the act of performance, shape them, altering members' identities and morality. Richard's influence forms a new identity for the individuals and immoral actions are justified and approved. The hierarchical structure of the group centers on the worship of a leader who acts unethically and legitimizes the physical and mental abuse of his peers. Even though he is hated by the members to some extent, he is also respected and has a great influence on their mindset and values. Fear-induced authority helps

Richard to maintain control and to manipulate the members. This reinforces dominance, which leads to a continuation of managing their moral standards.

Immorality is directly tied to the authority figure of the cult leader, Richard, and his death causes a disruption in their moral compasses. His death is a turning point that serves to renew the cult's structure and ultimately results in the failure of the cult. Moral clarity emerges in his absence and causes a struggle over the group's identity. Their acts, which were previously justified by the glorification of Shakespeare's plays, are now laid bare and their society's ethical standards catch up to them. The shift causes them to reinvent their identities apart from their roles, which does not succeed. Their cult falls apart and they are haunted by the thoughts of their leader and his immoral actions.

In summation, an authority figure in a cult holds great impact and can dominate a whole group with their ideals and values through manipulation of the individuals' morals. *If We Were Villains* illustrates how roles imposed on individuals by a charismatic leader can result in tragic consequences. The themes of the manipulation of identity and the impact of authority also hold great importance in real life situations. Charismatic leaders can mobilize fear to gain control over the masses and communicate with scheming tactics. That can also lead to manipulation of groups within society. The disclosure of such power dynamics in fiction cautions us of the potential dangers of cults and cult-like structures. Identifying the patterns of cult-like behavior may be the key in avoiding falling into cult-like moralities.

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