Introduction: Dark Academia

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A Few Cutting Words

For academics and the readership that literary journals reach out to, there is nothing that has more potential for darkness and emotional devastation than academia itself. For those continuing education, there are countless systemic issues and other forms of frankly dehumanizing aspects of the job, the least of which is administrative work. Likewise, students are marred with their own darkness, the dead-lines and killing time in a lecture hall with a particularly monotone tenured instructor. Our special issue concerns the body of literature that rises from vacuous university halls and the sinister desires that come with higher education, i.e., the relatively new genre of Dark Academia.

Dark Academia has caught the literary world by storm. Although its Ur-text, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, first surfaced in 1992, it certainly exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, first as an internet aesthetic (see Adriaansen), and then later on as a full-blown literary genre (see Stowell & Therieau n.p.; Murray 353). As Susan Hopkins and colleagues write, the "dark academia aesthetic assign[s] a particular elitist glamour to traditional teaching and learning" (1), one which bundles "tweed blazers, Gothic architecture and vintage books" (1), but also intertwines them with existing fictions as it transgresses aesthetic boundaries into generic ones. Our interest in this special issue is on the literary but also the filmic genre which it borders.

The contributors and editors understand Dark Academia as a literary genre at the crossroads between the New England Gothic, Detective narratives, and Campus novels. Dark Academia blends conventions from these genres, dabbling heavily in the Gothic mode, with a Neo-Romantic bent as it does so. Thematically engaging with questions of class, education, sexuality, secret knowledge, and substance abuse, Dark Academia literary works have a tradition that has blossomed into a mass of popular works. While most Dark Academia texts emerged in response to the coronavirus pandemic (see Adriaansen), we understand genres along the lines of Lauren Berlant's definition, i.e., as an expression for a need for articulation itself or for making possible new kinds of affective ground (85), but also along the lines of Caroline Levine, i.e., as "[a]n ensemble of

characteristics, including styles, themes and marketing conventions" that are changeable and require a "historically specific and interpretive act" (13) in their very recognition. It is necessarily the case, then, that we recognize the mutability, fluidity, and porosity of Dark Academia as a genre.

Since the first bloom of Dark Academia, countless novels of the genre have emerged on the literary stage. Most notably, these include *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M.L. Rio, The *Alex Stern* series (2019-) by Leigh Bardugo, *The Atlas Six* (2020) by Olivie Blake, *Babel* (2022) by R.F. Kuang, *A Deadly Education* (2020) by Naomi Novik, and *The Maidens* (2021) by Alex Michaelides. The literary genre's sibling-medial-genres in film and television have also spawned a range of Dark Academia texts, such as *Saltburn* (2023), the fourth season of *You* (2023), *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-2020), and *The Queen's Gambit* (2020). Taken together, these texts represent two major strains of Dark Academia – the fantastic and the (more) realist. The more fantastic Dark Academia novels operate, at times, in secondary worlds, making use of fantastic conventions to address broader societal concerns of racism, colonialism, or safety seriously while harnessing speculative power to imagine novel forms of education and the academy. Realist Dark Academia novels, on the other hand, engage more heavily and intricately with our primary world's 'real' educational repertoire, featuring dense historical and intertextual references to support their claim to esotericism (see Sell). Such novels romanticize academic drive, successes, and life at a time when such facets of real-world academia might seem distant for students and staff alike.

This special issue's collection of articles is the first of two issues that select from among the best produced by a course of bachelor students from my course "Murder and Mystery at the University: Dark Academia". Their quality is above and beyond what is expected of their relative experience, and I am proud to present these articles as a result. As a practical module, I wanted to provide the students with an opportunity to begin their own descent into the dark academe, and I believe their work has sincerely earned the right to serve as the debut for *TALE: Translational Approaches, Literary Encounters*. The selected articles in this issue resonate with each other deeply in their commitment toward unveiling the structures and relations present in Dark Academia works. Tellingly, they each broach issues of elitism, of exclusion, and of the darkness that fills the corridors of the genre.

The issue begins with a foray into film, followed by Dark Academia in its literary form. The first article, written by Madita Mertens, centers on the academic pressures of Dark Academia and the need to conform, using Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) as an example. She argues that the film is a precursor to Dark Academia and that, perhaps in opposition to texts of Dark Academia proper, it proffers a positive image of growth and freedom that may occur even within the confines of the academy. Theodora Charalambous's article connects Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism to Dark Academia through a reading of Damien Chazelle's film *Whiplash* (2014). Turning to the relationships between conductor Terrence Fletcher and student Andrew Neiman, Charalambous conducts a thorough examination of the way cruel optimistic attachments structure the film. In doing so, she reveals how Dark Academia orchestrates and instrumentalizes cruel optimism in relation to the pursuit of passion within academic and creative environments. The following article, written by Emma Schwesig, also turns to the relations between students and academics, investigating the toxic patterns of abuse on display in Dark Academia. In a comparative approach to Kate Elizabeth's novel *My Dark Vanessa* and Jade Bartlett's 2024 film *Miller's Girl*, Schwesig intertwines concepts of liminality and space alongside the concept of Academic Exceptionalism, which she outlines. Academic Exceptionalism, we learn, is a form of expression in attachment between teachers and students that elevates and isolates students from their colleagues. In her article, Schwesig calls attention to and cautions us of the relations of attachment that can persist in academic structures today.

Turning more fully to literature, Julia Weiser explores the intersection between Dark Academia and Horror in relation to questions of class, using a comparative approach to Mona Awad's *Bunny* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Weiser argues that monstrosity is mobilized to produce the academic elitism and exclusion that the genre's conventions demand. In doing so, Weiser exposes some of the classist cracks in two of Dark Academia's core texts. She also reveals how the exclusivity of groups in Dark Academia might lead to self-justifying moral frameworks that result in a decline of moral practices. Similarly taking up questions of morality, the next article, written by Nadja Marek, is concerned with M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* and unearths the connections between morality and cultism in the text. Drawing on the relationship between the novel, personality cults, and theatrical roles, Marek argues that Dark Academia texts allow for an inquiry into cult structures and behaviors. In allowing us to identify cultish patterns,

the novel extends a warning to readers about the flip side of the elitist clique, and the concomitant loss of autonomy that comes along with them. Lastly, the issue closes with Olivia Sophie Schäfer's article which dives into the anti-intellectual tendencies of Dark Academia. Drawing on the digital space of BookTok, highly relevant to the maintenance of the genre, she reads Richard Hofstadter's understanding of anti-intellectualism alongside *The Secret History* to criticize how Dark Academia romanticizes academic life, elitism, and exclusivity.

Our first issue is especially indebted to the work of Post45's cluster on Dark Academia, which provided necessary critical material for our contributors, and which inspired me to head up the course and issue to begin with. Without the editors, Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau, and their thoughtful engagement with Dark Academia, there would have been little to get started. It is my hope that these articles will offer still more in the way of material for scholars of Dark Academia to draw upon.

That said, I hope this special issue will knock you dead, or at least the contributors will be killing it in their outstanding works.

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The Pressure of Conformity and the Need to Break Free in Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's *Dead Poets Society*

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Abstract

The film *Dead Poets Society* by Peter Weir and Tom Schulman explores the intense conflict between conformity and the pursuit of autonomy within the oppressive environment of Welton Academy. Pressured to adhere to strict traditions and societal expectations, the students face major challenges. Mr. Keating, a charismatic and unconventional teacher, inspires his students to embrace their passions and individuality, challenging Welton's norms. This article analyses the dynamics of authority at Welton and the revival of the Dead Poets Society as a symbol of rebellion. By focusing on the individual journeys of Richard, Knox, Neil, and Todd, varying degrees of success and failure in resisting conformity are revealed. The article also examines the tragic consequences of oppressive control and the transformative power of autonomy.

Introduction

"Sucking all the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone" (*Dead Poets Society*[1] 01:20:28). While this may be feasible for some—provided they can identify what *the marrow of life* means to them—it proves challenging for students at the prestigious all-boys Welton Academy. The phrase symbolises living authentically and to the fullest, free from the restraints of oppression and conformity. This struggle is central to Dark Academia, where the pursuit of knowledge, individuality, and passion often conflicts with rigorously enforced societal structures. Originally from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and inscribed in Keating's old poetry book, the phrase captures Dark Academia's fascination with classical literature and intellectual freedom. It emphasises simplicity and living with only the essentials, stripping life down to its core. Raised to obey rules and

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[1] From this point onward, I will refer to the film *Dead Poets Society* as *DPS*.

authority, several students struggle to attain this ideal while navigating between newfound freedom and the pressure to conform.

Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's 1989 film and coming-of-age drama *Dead Poets Society* is a precursor to the Dark Academia genre and thus informs it. The film features romanticised learning, rebellion against authority, secret societies, and the tragic consequences of pursuing passions. Set in 1959's autumnal Vermont, the film centres on the friend group surrounding Todd Anderson, who is the primary focaliser. Against the backdrop of Gothic architecture, a dimly lit cave, and gloomy landscapes, the group begins their quest to seize the day and assume agency as they follow their passions for the first time. Through unconventional teaching methods and zest, former student and newly employed Professor John Keating encourages his students to embrace critical thought and pursue their interests to gain autonomy. His methods and philosophies clash with the school's conservative motto, "Tradition, Honor, Discipline, and Excellence" (*DPS* 00:03:02). Nonetheless, Keating's advocacy for freedom through poetry and its implementation into everyday life inspires the group of students. They revive the Dead Poets Society, a club that Keating also was a member of, which reflects Dark Academia's themes of secret societies, rebellion, and the pursuit of beauty in literature.

The characters this article focuses on are the previously mentioned shy and quiet Todd Anderson, passionate Neil Perry, romance-seeking Knox Overstreet, and rule-abiding Richard Cameron. While Todd and Knox gain courage throughout the film, Neil's spirit is crushed by his father's unyielding control, leading to his suicide. Richard, succumbing to pressure and conformity, falsely blames Mr. Keating's teachings for Neil's death, resulting in the teacher's dismissal. Caught between conformity and the desire for freedom, the students face conflict and resistance, uncovering to which lengths they will go to maintain autonomy. The intense pressure imposed by Welton Academy's rigorous adherence to tradition and discipline stands in stark contrast to Mr. Keating's unorthodox teachings of life philosophy and freedom. He serves as a catalyst for the students' seizing of autonomy, emphasising the ongoing struggle between oppressive social expectations and the desire for freedom and individuality.

This article explores conformity and authority at Welton, examining Richard's motivation to embrace conformity and its consequences. It then delves into Keating's teaching methods, particularly his emphasis on 'carpe diem' and how this philosophy inspires Knox's pursuit of his dream. Next, the revival of the Dead Poets Society is

discussed as a means of escaping conformity and expression of creativity. Finally, Neil's tragic struggle for autonomy, Todd's growth and loyalty, and the students' unified defiance of Mr. Nolan are examined. The analysis also identifies elements in *Dead Poets Society* that align with Dark Academia, illustrating how the film serves as a precursor to the aesthetic and genre.

Conformity and Authority at Welton Academy

The pressure to conform cannot be pinpointed to one singular factor, as it is a multifaceted issue. Institutional and parental pressure, along with their expectations for the students, prevent the students from creating their own sense of self. An institution that is built on tradition, honour, discipline, and excellence does not leave room for the free development of individuality. This kind of academic environment is characteristic of the Dark Academia genre, highlighting darker aspects of the pursuit of knowledge, like "the pressure to excel" (Włodarczyk 49). As Marta Włodarczyk points out in her Master's Thesis on Dark Academia, "[*Dead Poets Society*] reflects some of the modern anxieties that lie at the heart of [the genre]" (49). Welton's tradition-bound setting embodies some of Dark Academia's core elements, presenting a prestigious yet oppressive institution where intellectual curiosity collides with the relentless enforcement of conformity.

In the film, authority and conformity manifest through conservative teachers and demanding parents. Combined with the peer pressure of the Dead Poets Society, they create forms of group pressure on the individual student. The American Psychology Association's *Dictionary of Psychology* defines *group pressure* as follows:

> [D]irect or indirect social pressure exerted by a group on its individual members to influence their choices. Such pressure may take the form of rational argument and persuasion (informational influence), calls for conformity to group norms (normative influence), or more direct forms of influence, such as demands, threats, personal attacks, and promises of rewards or social approval (interpersonal influence).

Bearing this definition in mind throughout the remainder of this article aids in developing a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and behaviours. Persuasion, conformity to group norms, and more direct forms of coercion are employed not only by parents and teachers but also by the Dead Poets Society.

Solomon Asch's studies on conformity and group dynamics illuminate how factors like group size, unanimity, and confidence influence the level of an individual's conformity. In group experiments, unsuspecting participants were tested against initiated participants. The latter were in the majority and would give unanimous false answers to a test. The result was that approximately 75% of the test subjects yielded at least once (Asch 18). Their reasoning for adapting or re-examining their answers was, among other things, the fear of causing anger within the group due to disagreement with the majority. Hence, feelings of intense pressure and stress emerged as well as a lack of confidence once they adapted their own answer for the first time (39, 44, 69, 70). This change of opinion proves that in uncomfortable or high-pressure situations, a person is more likely to conform. They betray their beliefs for the sake of de-escalating a potential dispute with the majority or to simply fit in.

Considering Asch's studies, it is easy to recognise similar displays of behaviour in some, if not most, of the students at Welton. In this case, however, the common notion of 'majority' does not apply. The teachers inhabit authoritative positions at the boarding school. Thus, they have direct influence and sovereignty over the students during class and in their daily lives at Welton. The parents hold the ultimate decisive power over their children's futures, regarding both their academic careers and personal lives. Together, they build a stern and unwavering front against the inferior body of students. In the film, resistance means immediate conflict since teachers and parents are in correspondence with each other. Possible consequences include corporal punishment (*DPS* 01:17:07), expulsion (01:57:02), or involuntary removal from the familiar environment and social sphere (01:40:25). It is important to note that dire consequences like these exceed those that are mentioned in Asch's studies, therefore evolving into a new category called authoritative pressure. As the film continues, the viewer learns of the fatal aftermath that this harsh attitude of teachers and parents can escalate into, like the ultimate death of Neil.

In *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Perry and Mr. Nolan are the epitomes of forced conformity, exerting the most pressure within the authoritative structure. Mr. Nolan, in particular, embodies Welton's four pillars, ensuring adherence to these conservative values. Neil and the rest of the students have little to no choice but to obey. Their lack of autonomy, confidence, and courage hinders them from properly rebelling and standing up for themselves.

The school's foundational pillars manifest in its prison-like design. Featuring barred windows, spartanly equipped bedrooms, a fixed daily routine, mandatory uniforms, and encouraged competition, only minimal space for personal freedom remains. The school's architecture highlights the strict focus on academic achievement. Moreover, it reflects the authoritarian and isolated settings typical of Dark Academia, where the institution's architecture and traditions are symbolic for emotional confinement (Włodarczyk 68, 76, 103-4). Additionally, the students are unaccustomed to being heard or respected as individuals by their elders, further contributing to their conformity and lack of public self-expression. The oppressive environment crushes their creativity and sense of individuality. In turn, it reinforces the rigid structures imposed by the authorities.

The Dead Poets Society fosters a different form of group pressure driven by the desire to conform to its ideals and values. This dynamic is common in Dark Academia. In Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,* often considered the blueprint for the genre, outsider and protagonist Richard Papen is drawn to the seclusive, elitist group of Greek students. Feeling pressured to assimilate and conform to the group's values to belong, Richard compromises his morals as he becomes an accomplice to murder and swears secrecy to protect the group. Similarly, in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*, underlying peer pressure encourages the friends' adherence to group ideals and expectations. Their need to maintain the group's integrity leads to the members being complicit in hiding the truth about a member's murder. Breaking away from the group poses the risk of academic and social ruin. Although initially not connected to tragedy or crime, the peer pressure within the Dead Poets Society is existent nonetheless. In this case, however, the exclusive society primarily promotes intellectual liberation. Inspired by Keating's teachings, the members motivate each other to step outside their comfort zones. Neil, for instance, encourages Todd to break free of his self-doubt and overcome his shyness, believing in his potential (*DPS* 00:31:20, 01:04:42). Here, the pressure is supportive rather than coercive, promoting taking risks to embrace life. Additionally, the group encourages Knox to pursue Chris Noel, the girlfriend of Welton-castoff Chet Danburry, despite his initial hesitance (00:59:51). This form of group pressure or influence illustrates how the Society's ideals drive individual actions. Richard, another member who experiences forms of group pressure, will be analysed in detail in the following part.

These dynamics mirror Asch's, demonstrating that individuals often adapt their beliefs or behaviours to match group expectations, even if they conflict with personal beliefs (69, 70). While the Dead Poets Society provides a sense of belonging and purpose, it also sets expectations of courage, creativity, and rebellion against conformity. This illustrates how even groups dedicated to nonconformity can exert their own forms of pressure or influence on individual members.

Richard Cameron: Navigating Authority and Peer Influence

A prime example of a conformist student within the revived Dead Poets Society is Richard Cameron, who has a multilayered character regarding the pressure of conformity. Although attending the Society's secret poetry readings past curfew (*DPS* 00:36:26), his participation seems driven more by peer pressure than personal desire, given his fear of getting in trouble. This tension between individual identity and societal expectations is a core theme in Dark Academia since characters often navigate "social, moral, and psychological struggles and inequities of youth in academic settings" (Włodarczyk 24).

Asch's studies on conformity help explain Richard's behaviour, as he finds himself in the minority among friends in favour of re-establishing the Dead Poets Society. Weighing the risks of breaking the rules against his desire for approval, Richard succumbs to *social conformity* (Chakraborty 18-9). Abhinandita Chakraborty, following Asch, defines social conformity as "the behaviour of adjusting one's conduct or conviction to conform with those of a faction or populace" (18). She argues that subjection to social conformity can affect a person's speech, style of clothing, social norms, or thoughts and values, particularly in peer groups (18-9). An individual tends to conform to "authority figures or opinion leaders" since they are attributed with knowledge and credibility, wishing to be perceived in a similar manner (19). This concept is witnessed in both academic environments and fictional Dark Academia settings, where characters, like those in Tartt's *The Secret History* and Rio's *If We Were Villains*, adopt group norms under social pressure. In these examples, conformity leads to morally questionable decisions and significant personal consequences, illustrating the powerful impact social conformity can have on an individual's behaviour.

Moreover, Chakraborty introduces the factors "social acceptance and belongingness" and "the desire to be perceived as competent or knowledgeable" (19), which are crucial for Richard's choice. He adapts his beliefs to align with the norms set by

and expectations of his friends. Richard's conformity to the group's activities is less about genuine enthusiasm and more about fitting in with his peers, fearing isolation. Near the end of the film, Richard's desire to belong and fear of consequences and authority collide. To avoid punishment from his parents and Mr. Nolan, he fully embraces conformity to school rules and expectations. While saving himself, Richard betrays the Dead Poets and wrongfully accuses Mr. Keating of being responsible for Neil's suicide (*DPS* 01:54:09). This suggests that under authoritative pressure, an individual's original beliefs might also be reinforced and cause them to turn on their peers.

It is important to note that Richard's fear-driven choice to conform is not without consequences. He is isolated from his only friends, paralleling the Dark Academia trope of characters facing alienation when deviating from peer-imposed values and norms. For instance, in *The Secret History*, Bunny Corcoran's refusal to conform leads to his exclusion from the group and eventually his murder. In *If We Were Villains*, protagonist Oliver Marks becomes increasingly alienated from his peers after admitting to a crime he did not commit, resulting in a ten-year prison sentence. According to Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (521), the "exclusion to punish" is a common pattern within our modern society. It means to strengthen and clarify the steadfastness of a group's values. This suggests that separation and isolation from the familiar social sphere is a common practice or reaction to severe violations of set norms within a civilised group. In *Dead Poets Society*, Richard has violated the values of his peer group by conforming to the rules of the highest authority, the teachers and parents. As a result of his cowardice and lack of integrity, the aforementioned isolated prison-like experience is only furthered.

Teaching 'Carpe Diem': John Keating's Call to Break Conformity

Some of the other students discover alternatives to the controlling atmosphere at Welton thanks to Professor Keating. As a former student of the Academy, Keating is familiar with its crushing philosophy of fostering academic success and acts as a counterpart to the oppressive system of teachers and parents. Immediately upon his arrival, he challenges the students' conformity by implementing unconventional teaching methods and introducing them to a different, more free-spirited way of life. His most significant impact lies in triggering the need to break free of conformity in his students. It inspires their continuous claim of autonomy and their individual journeys to pursue their happiness and passions. This central topic in the film takes shape in a multitude of ways. Once set in

motion, it reveals its impact, most notably through the revival of the Dead Poets Society. The film's Dark Academia elements are evident as Keating encourages self-discovery and intellectual rebellion against authoritative, oppressive norms.

Keating's teachings start with and centre on the philosophy of 'carpe diem', or 'seize the day'. Throughout the film, the iconic Latin phrase is mentioned frequently, which supports the internalisation of its significance in the students' minds. The phrase gradually gives them the courage to do what they used to deem impossible—breaking free of the pressure of living according to external standards and expectations to instead pursue happiness and individual expression. Keating first introduces 'carpe diem' to his students' vocabulary and mindset by showing them a photograph of deceased former Welton alumni, stressing the inevitability of death (*DPS* 00:14:55). He urges them to "make [their] lives extraordinary" (00:16:26), meaning he wants them to expand their horizons and not let their fears hold them back. Keating familiarises his students with these two concepts by taking them outside of the traditional classroom (00:12:10, 00:50:27, 00:58:01, 01:03:38), highlighting the innovative and unconventional nature of his teaching methods in contrast to Welton's strict standards. Tellingly, this seemingly simple gesture leaves a lasting impression on the students' minds.

The understanding of his philosophy is deepened through unconventional activities on school grounds: having his students kick a ball while reciting poetry (*DPS* 00:51:01), ripping out the introduction pages to poetry of a school-issued book (00:22:55), and yelling a "barbaric yawp" during class time (00:56:14). He even asks his students to stand on his desk to view the classroom—and life—from different perspectives (00:43:26) and to be addressed with "O Captain! My Captain!" (00:12:57). This is an allusion to a poem of the same name by Walt Whitman, which is an expression of grief due to a tragic loss and a reminder that even peace comes at a cost: "From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won; / Exult O shores, and ring O bells! / But I with mournful tread, / Walk the deck my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead" (lines 20-24). It foreshadows the bittersweet ending of the film, hinting at both a successful journey and some form of loss. Nevertheless, by defying convention with his unconventional methods, Keating continuously aims to deepen the students' courage to explore different perspectives on life. He urges them to take control and to escape conformity even if it bears risks.

To further demonstrate the conformity the students are consciously and subconsciously trapped in, Keating has three students walk in the courtyard (*DPS* 01:03:38). Although initially moving at their own pace, they quickly fall into a unison march, with the remaining classmates rhythmically clapping along. This exercise illustrates how easily subconscious conformity occurs. To live extraordinary lives, the students must refrain from unquestioningly adapting to the majority. Instead, they are encouraged to go through life consciously and according to their own speed and manner. Moreover, by engaging his students in physical action against conformity, they internalise a notion of freedom and grow more comfortable embracing it. Thereby, a deeper sense of self-awareness is fostered. Keating's progressive teaching methods reflect Dark Academia's notion of knowledge and wisdom as something that exists beyond structured, conventional learning, embracing more unconventional ways of thinking and living.

Embracing 'Carpe Diem': Knox Overstreet's Seizing of Courage

In Abigail Anundson's article "Carpe Diem and Coming-of-Age in Dead Poets Society'', she notes that Keating acts not only as a teacher but as a mentor (93). This mentorship highlights his nonconformity since he does not adopt the position of a controlling force like most of his colleagues. It also reflects Dark Academia's fascination with unorthodox teachers who challenge the norms of academic institutions, offering students an alternative path. Through poetry and literature, Keating inspires and empowers his students, making them aware of a life outside of Welton's conformity and status quo. He challenges them, which in turn motivates them to challenge authoritative structures. By forming personal connections with the students and showing interest in their lives and growth, Keating surpasses the role of a teacher. As a result, the students are more open and willing to follow his philosophy and act upon it.

The willingness to take agency is especially present in Knox. As the story unfolds, the recurring repetition of the phrase 'carpe diem' encourages him. Despite the risk of rejection, Knox is unrelenting in the pursuit of his romantic interest, Chris Noel. In fact, just before taking the first step, he matter-of-factly states "carpe diem" (*DPS* 01:01:52). This moment captures another important element of Dark Academia, which is the intensity of passion and the unyielding pursuit of desires, even against societal expectations. The conscious decision to take action suggests that, although only half of

the film has passed, the teacher's thunderous conviction of his philosophies has already resonated deeply with his students and has begun to take root.

At another point, Knox remarks that success does not matter in his pursuit of Chris—what counts is his courage to try (*DPS* 01:01:56). He takes agency over his own future for the first time and is not afraid of the consequences. Although his rebellion is not academic, it is still of great importance for his further development of the self. Encouraged by Keating's lessons, Knox gains the confidence to take risks, eluding the confining environment he was unwillingly kept in. His bold steadfastness is ultimately rewarded when his romantic relationship blossoms despite the obstacles the couple has to overcome. The personal growth and development in the face of adversity that is characteristic of Knox is true for most members of the Dead Poets Society. As they begin to challenge authority and societal expectations, they move toward self-discovery and fulfilment.

Breaking Free of Conformity

The revival of Keating's old club, Dead Poets Society, is a direct manifestation of the students' need to break free. It resonates strongly with the core themes of Dark Academia like hidden knowledge, rituals, and the pursuit of artistic freedom. The club offers a safe space to explore interests and creative processes while providing a glimpse of life beyond Welton's strict order. Meeting regularly in a cave, the young students recite poetry by famous poets (*DPS* 00:39:50, 00:39:01), improvise music (00:59:58), smoke and drink (00:59:02), and bring girls to party (01:08:14), engaging in typical teenage rebellion.

Each meeting begins with reading the opening message the original founders had taken from a passage in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, which is: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. [...] To put to rout all that was not life, and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived" (*DPS* 00:36:50).[2] This is a declaration of freedom for

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[2] In *Dead Poets Society*, Thoreau's text was shortened. This deliberate change likely reflects the screenwriter's aim to emphasise the core idea of embracing life without distractions, making it more memorable for both the students and the audience. The original passage reads: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness

the Dead Poets and a guideline for the way of life they wish to pursue. It speaks to the longing for a deeper, more meaningful existence. Since Keating was part of the original Dead Poets Society, these ideas of freedom strongly resonate with his teachings in and out of class.

The regular meetings as a united group allow the students to seize autonomy since, in this context, they hold the power. By contributing with readings chosen by themselves, poetry written and performed by themselves, and having full authority over the meetings, they claim autonomy over parts of their lives. Although Neil initiates and organises the revival, he does not impose authority. Each member's voice is valued and they have equal opportunities to participate, making the structure relatively democratic. What is most important is that the meetings bring forth some of the students' hidden and suppressed character traits, which at their core are creative, witty, passionate, and clever. By participating, they refuse to comply with and thus break free of Welton's strict regulations since the meetings are secret and off-campus during curfew. This marks the start of their rebellion against authority. The Dead Poets translate the concept of seizing the day into reality by following their passions and interests until the very end of the film.

Neil applies this newfound freedom to his daily life by following his acting passion. Cast as Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he is able to express his creative nature (*DPS* 00:52:05). That way, he escapes academic and parental pressure, finding a world where conformity is completely absent. This pushes him out of his comfort zone and fosters personal growth, satisfying his need to break free. By pursuing acting and leading a life outside the academic sphere, Neil rebels against his main oppressor, his father. Mr. Perry only learns of his son's play the night before the performance (01:22:29), which is an important step for Neil toward claiming autonomy. His performance becomes a symbolic act of defiance, representing the yearning for freedom and a life outside the predetermined path laid out for him.

Failed Attempts and Unified Resistance

As already indicated, defiance against the pressure of conformity does not always end well. Neil's struggle for a more autonomous life ends tragically when his demanding

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to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever." (Thoreau 93-4).

father learns of his son's rebellion. After Neil's performance, Mr. Perry announces his son's withdrawal from Welton and the enrolment at a military academy as a punishment for Neil's defiance (*DPS* 01:40:25). Being threatened with losing his newly gained sense of self-determination and forced into an even more discipline-conforming environment, Neil commits suicide. This is his final act of autonomy and his last resort to retain a sense of power. The pressure to conform and the inability to act outside of his father's control become too much for him to bear. Therefore, after having had a taste of freedom, continuing a life under previous conditions seems impossible. Neil's suicide serves as a wake-up call to the destructive power of an authoritative instance that enforces oppression and the obedience of the individual. It also resonates with Dark Academia's themes of intellectual freedom, tragedy, and self-destruction.

Following Neil's death, Mr. Perry demands an investigation into the matter (*DPS* 01:52:52). The students are individually questioned by Mr. Nolan in the presence of their parents, facing immense pressure from the authoritative figures. Rule-embracing Richard is unable to withstand the pressure and falsely inculpates Mr. Keating. More specifically, he blames the unconventional teaching methods and Keating's encouragement to revive the Society as the sole reasons for Neil's suicide. Richard urges his peers to follow suit to protect themselves rather than doing what is just (01:54:32). Enraged by his friend's cowardice and betrayal, Dead Poets member Charlie Dalton attacks him and faces expulsion as a result (01:55:21). Yet, Charlie's outburst is a sign of his increasing courage to stand up for his beliefs. He breaks free of Welton's oppressive environment and instead takes agency over his own life.

Through "direct forms of influence, such as demands [and] threats" ("group pressure"), Mr. Nolan pressures the remaining members into signing a form that imputes all blame on Mr. Keating, leading to his dismissal. It is noteworthy that in the film, it is left open whether Todd conforms to the pressure (*DPS* 01:59:30). When consulting Schulman's original screenplay, his conviction of Keating's innocence becomes evident. Todd is unwilling to give his signature, declaring "I won't sign it" several times during his meeting with the headmaster (Schulman 128-9). Although, in the script, Todd is faced with disciplinary probation as punishment, he never conforms to the demands of the authority (129).

The question remains whether Mr. Keating's teachings will have a lasting impact on the oppressed students, or if by signing their name, they sign away their autonomy

once again. While the narrative makes no explicit argument, the film's final moments suggest that Keating's efforts were not entirely fruitless. Todd displays his newly gained confidence to (literally) stand up for his values when he copies one of Keating's teaching approaches. Climbing onto his desk, Todd exclaims, "O Captain! My Captain!" (*DPS* 02:03:23), paying the teacher his respect and expressing loyalty and thankfulness. Acting as an initiator and leader for the first time, Todd's meaningful gesture inspires the members of the Dead Poets Society (except Richard) to mimic his actions. Gradually, more classmates follow suit. They finally stand united against their oppressor, Mr. Nolan, who desperately tries to restore order to the classroom (02:03:57). These final moments suggest that in the previous scene of the film in Mr. Nolan's office, Todd remains steadfast and does not sign his name. His new strength and beliefs empower him to finally withstand the pressure of authority.

Conclusion

In *Dead Poets Society*, Peter Weir and Tom Schulman strikingly depict the intense struggle between the pressure of conformity and the desperate need for freedom and autonomy. The film incorporates key elements of the Dark Academia genre, showcasing an elite academic setting, the pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery, and the consequences of resisting or succumbing to societal expectations and authority. Embodied by Mr. Nolan and Mr. Perry, Welton Academy stifles the students' freedom and expression of individuality through rigorous adherence to tradition, discipline, and rules. The opposing force is Mr. Keating. He continuously challenges his students to break free of conscious and subconscious conformity with progressive, unconventional teaching methods and life philosophies centred around the liberating phrase 'carpe diem'. Keating acts as a catalyst for the students' journeys toward self-discovery and self-expression.

The film highlights various responses to Keating's teachings. Knox's unrelenting pursuit of Chris is a prime example of the power of embracing 'carpe diem'. Gaining confidence, he exceeds social expectations for his abilities and breaks free of conformity. Todd also undergoes a transformation, evolving from a shy and quiet boy into an outspoken young man who is no longer afraid to stand up to authority. His newfound confidence underscores the impact of Keating's mentorship. What is more, Neil's endless struggle for a self-determined life and his subsequent suicide highlight the destructive consequences of oppressive (parental) control. It emphasises the powerlessness a person

can feel in the face of imposed conformity. The revival of the Dead Poets Society symbolises the students' inherent wish for a space to safely express their creativity and seize autonomy. This act of rebellion is an important step toward independence and self-expression. The exclamation, "O Captain! My Captain" (*DPS* 02:03:23) in the film's final scene functions as a last appreciation of Keating's impactful philosophies. This meaningful gesture highlights the students' enduring transformation and marks their final act of defiance against Welton's oppression. In contrast to his peers, Richard yields to the pressure of conformity during the investigation into Neil's suicide. He betrays his friends and falsely accuses Mr. Keating, which emphasises the power of fear and the need to self-preserve under authoritative pressure. Richard's exclusion from his peer group illustrates the personal cost of submitting to authority. Additionally, it points out the ease with which an individual can betray their values under pressure and stress.

The constant struggle between oppressive conformity and the desperate need to break free is draining. Nevertheless, the Dead Poets exemplify how to achieve a sense of autonomy in various ways, although some have to compromise. After experiencing internal and external battles as well as personal growth, the students learn the importance of staying true to their values and of living a more extraordinary life. Watching the film may inspire the viewer to reflect on their own level of conformity to societal norms and consider how it might be limiting their autonomy and self-expression. Mr. Keating's impact and legacy, however, serve as constant reminders of the liberating and impactful power of standing up for one's beliefs. It highlights the importance of pursuing dreams and overcoming struggles to experience growth and freedom.

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Drumming to the Beat of Sacrifice: The Cruel Optimism of *Whiplash*

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Abstract

Damien Chazelle's Dark Academia film Whiplash (2014) illustrates the concept of cruel optimism through the toxic relationship between the aspiring drummer Andrew Neiman and his university conductor Terence Fletcher, whose methods blur the line between mentorship and abuse. Drawing from Lauren Berlant's theory, cruel optimism is the attachment to the pursuit of one's desires that ultimately becomes a self-destructive force. In Whiplash, Andrew's ambition to become a famous drummer and Fletcher's obsession with creating a jazz legend form a cruel optimistic cycle of expectation and suffering. This article explores how cruel optimism manifests in the pursuit of passion within contemporary academic and creative environments.

Introduction

The Dark Academia aesthetic usually brings to mind dusty libraries, ancient statues, and ivy-covered brick walls. Amongst the leather-bound books and old-fashioned stationery, a pair of drumsticks might seem somewhat out of place. Yet, in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2014)*,* the world of Dark Academia is brought to life not through quills and parchment, but through the relentless rhythm of jazz drumming. While Dark Academia is mostly linked to the humanities, the genre's essence lies in the romanticization of academic life, achieving (academic) success, and indulging in education as a passion (see Mattila 1-2). The exclusivity of the cult-like classrooms and the pretentious yet much respected professors, cultivate an environment that may inevitably lead to violence. The award-winning film *Whiplash* visualizes the world of academia through gothic shots of the dimly lit rooms of the prestigious Shaffer Conservatory in New York City, modeled after Julliard. The movie focuses on the intense and antagonistic relationship between an ambitious young drummer, Andrew Neiman, and his ruthless jazz instructor, Terence

Fletcher. Upon discovering the young prodigy, Fletcher transfers Andrew into his still-more elite jazz ensemble, the best at their school. However, Fletcher's extreme teaching tactics soon drive Andrew into an obsessive pursuit of perfection. *Whiplash* explores the lengths one is willing to go to for the sake of success and the high personal costs associated with it.

Dark Academia is described to be "riddled by a decidedly contemporary 'cruel optimism'" (Klepper and Glaubitz 2). The concept of cruel optimism, as explained by Lauren Berlant in her book of the same title, is the pursuit of one's desires that ultimately proves to be harmful to their well-being (see Berlant 2). Cruel optimism is built on the emotional attachment to the "good life" that is going extinct (3). In a similar manner, the Dark Academia literary genre romanticizes the search for a prestigious academic life, reflecting a pre-COVID-19 ideal. At the same time, the genre faces the inherent impossibility and inaccessibility of these ideals in contemporary "liberal capitalist society" (3). Dark Academia portrays a nostalgic longing for a scholarly 'good life' that is becoming increasingly unattainable. The genre, therefore, finds itself at an impasse, a temporal cruel optimism, in which it is unable to move beyond the nostalgia and longing for a past that cannot be (re)created.

In my article, I will discuss how cruel optimism is represented in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*. First, following Berlant, I will provide a detailed explanation of cruel optimism and explore its connection to the notion of the so-called 'good life'. In the next step, I will briefly discuss how cruel optimism affects scholars and individuals in other creative fields, relevant to the portrayal in *Whiplash*. The following section will detail how cruel optimism manifests in the lives of the two protagonists in *Whiplash* and their complex relationship, highlighting the detrimental effects of the relentless pursuits of their respective desires. This article aims to illustrate how cruel optimism can be mobilized to read Dark Academic narratives, using *Whiplash* as a prime example. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate how cruel optimism can explain the often-destructive nature of striving for idealized goals within the context of academic and artistic ambition.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Cruel Optimism

Conceptualized by Berlant in her much-discussed book of the same name, cruel optimism refers to a relation that exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 1). The object of desire as described by Berlant is a "cluster of

promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (23). In other words, the object of desire encompasses not just the person, thing, or goal itself but also the various promises and potentialities it signifies. This notion implies that our desire is fundamentally connected to the expected benefits and fulfillments the object could provide. For instance, the desire for a new job extends beyond the job itself toward the broader promises of success, economic security, and personal fulfillment. Berlant clarifies:

> To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much. (23)

Viewing these desires as a collection enables us to better comprehend the nature of our attachments. Rather than misinterpreting our attachments as a sign of irrational thinking, we can use them to gain insights into why we continue to pursue the object of our desires (Berlant 23). This is because being close to the object means being close to the various promises or benefits it represents (23). Notably, all attachments are fundamentally based on a sense of optimism. Optimism, in this context, is characterized as the driving force that compels us to seek fulfillment in the external world, pursuing what we cannot achieve independently (1). However, optimism does not exclusively elicit positive emotions. Due to its ambitious nature, optimism can manifest as a range of feelings, including dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, or even neutrality (1). Consequently, not all attachments inherently feel optimistic. Nonetheless, the inclination to return to situations where the desired object, with all its potential benefits, is present, is motivated by an affective form of optimism (24). People generally tend to gravitate back to situations where the object of their desire, along with its potential benefits, is present. Even if the emotions associated with this attachment are not always positive, the hope or expectation of any positive outcomes, which motivates them to return, is a form of optimism (24).

Optimism is not inherently cruel. Berlant defines cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 24). In short, cruel optimism is the act of holding on to a problematic attachment despite its harmful aspects, driven by the hope that the desire will ultimately be fulfilled, regardless of its feasibility (24). Although these attachments can threaten one's well-being, individuals might find it difficult to manage without them. These attachments offer continuity and stability, providing them with a reason to persist and keep on living (24). Cruel optimism involves being stuck in a situation where the very aspirations that inspire hope also hinder genuine fulfillment (51). These aspirations are bound to both unattainable fantasies and the hope they embody, resulting in incapacitating circumstances (51). While the assurances offered by the desired object encourage continued attachment, the fear of losing those assurances inhibits detachment, following the sentiment that one can only win the bets they choose to place.

The affective structure of cruel optimism arises from the "fraying fantasies" of what constitutes the 'good life' (Berlant 3). In the postwar period, particularly in America, the ideal of the 'good life' emerged, centered around meaningful assets and relationships (Crow 14-15; Berlant 3). Alex Lockwood discusses how a 'good life' is realized when a society enables individuals to balance work, family, rest, and leisure activities. This framework ensures a life free from anxiety, insecurity, and excessive worries about the future (1). Berlant similarly interprets the 'good life' as a set of fantasies that form the basis of a meaningful, sustaining, and sustainable existence (3). However, in our contemporary era, marked by ideals of "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy," (3) these fantasies are becoming increasingly unattainable. Cruel Optimism thrives in a neoliberal-capitalist society that promotes meritocracy, enforcing the belief that individuals will be rewarded based on their abilities and efforts (3). Yet, this ideal is increasingly unattainable. In our contemporary world, marked by constant crises and challenges, technological advancements, and economic restructuring, individuals are increasingly required to acquire new abilities to navigate various obstacles in order to sustain their livelihoods (8). During his critique of capitalism's sustainability, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek dismisses optimistic perspectives and their notion of superficial hope amid persistent problems, stating: "I

don't accept any cheap optimism. When somebody tries to convince me, in spite of all these problems, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, my instant reply is, 'Yes, and it's another train coming towards us'." ("Slavoj" 1:11:28 - 1:11:44). Žižek thus argues that optimism about life improvements within a capitalist society is misleading, suggesting that any hopeful signs or solutions are, in reality, further dangers or challenges (1:11:28 - 1:11:44). While the desire for a 'good life' has become a form of cruel optimism, mostly attainable for those born into privilege, even the hope of merely getting by is becoming unrealistic. With constant ecological threats, outbreaks of war, and decreasing job opportunities for positions that barely pay minimum wage, the hope that things will improve seems far from reality. The standard of living has fallen from wishing for the 'good life' to simply trying to survive.

Martin describes survival as a deeply contradictory concept. Though it fails to offer solutions or relief to current problems, it provides context for why the present conditions feel "relentlessly contemporary" (193). Implying that the struggle for survival drags future hopes and possibilities back into the repetitive cycle of the present (193). Similarly, in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant frequently refers to the concept of the "impasse." Typically, an "impasse" is a situation in which a person or a process remains stagnant (4). However, in Berlant's framework, the impasse is used to define a period one navigates in their life "with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic" (4). Amid everything feeling immediate and pressing, a pervasive uncertainty makes it difficult to predict coming events. This necessitates staying alert and engaged in spite of the lack of clear direction or resolution (4). In the context of cruel optimism, given the rapid deterioration of traditional life-supporting structures, the notion of the impasse might seem appealing (4-5). It offers a temporary sense of stability, maintaining the belief that the 'good life' is still attainable. On the other hand, living in an impasse by Berlant's definition, one must constantly adapt, and tread water, to move forward from a period of crisis, ensuring survival (4).

In academia, many scholars persist in their academic careers despite facing significant challenges and limitations, such as unsustainable working conditions (Thouaille 1). Their dedication can be attributed to the high job satisfaction that passion-driven professions offer, often outweighing the difficulties present in the labor market (Steiner & Schneider 226). For such professions, the 'good life' is redefined, focusing not

on professional and personal stability but on inner fulfillment derived from doing what one loves. Thouaille notes that arts and humanities research is driven by cruel optimism, where academics prioritize passion over financial security (2). This attachment to the object of desire, in this case, the passion job, even when achieved, can be detrimental. Individuals in these fields frequently face unemployment, inadequate wages, and job instability, leading to an untenable and anxiety-filled life. Moreover, the relationship between the artist and their art is a cruel optimistic one. Individuals in the arts and cultural sector frequently find it difficult to separate themselves from their creative pursuits, deeply investing emotionally and personally into their projects (Watson 35). This connection, while fulfilling on one level, also contributes significantly to burnout rates, as the pursuit of excellence through their work often takes a toll on their well-being (35). The link between identity and artistic pursuit exemplifies how cruel optimism manifests in the creative professions, where the pursuit of personal fulfillment and producing quality work can lead to both professional and personal strain.

Cruel Optimism in *Whiplash*

In *Whiplash*, cruel optimism is illustrated through its two main characters, Fletcher and Andrew, and their relationship. Andrew aspires to become a famous drummer and gain acknowledgment for his talent, while Fletcher is dedicated to discovering, or rather creating the next great jazz musician. Their relationship embodies both hope and mutual destruction as they pursue their respective ambitions through one another.

The opening scene of *Whiplash* sets the film's tone, foreshadowing the relationship between Fletcher and Andrew. In their initial encounter during one of Andrew's practice sessions, Fletcher begins his psychological games, a pattern that persists throughout the film. Offering Andrew a glimmer of recognition, Fletcher abruptly departs the practice room without a word of praise, effectively crushing Andrew's hope and confidence (*Whiplash* 02:20-04:00). Throughout the movie, Fletcher reveals himself to be a stern professor, regularly berating, humiliating, and verbally assaulting his students for their mistakes. His tough-love approach extends to physical violence, exemplified by his repeated striking of Andrew to emphasize the mistakes of his hurried drumming (25:39-29:40). However, it appears that Fletcher's extreme tactics are not applied equally to all his students; they are particularly intense when directed at Andrew. Recognizing

Andrew's potential, Fletcher is determined to bring him to his limits in order to mold him into a great musician. He manipulates Andrew's confidence, alternatingly boosting and undermining it. One of Fletcher's notable tactics is leveraging other students, particularly the other two drummers, to threaten Andrew's position in the band. His strategy, openly acknowledged later on (01:22:40-01:22:45), is intended to push Andrew to work harder and strive for excellence. Fletcher is willing to go to any lengths to shape Andrew into the next Charlie Parker[1], and Andrew is as equally determined to exceed expectations to meet Fletcher's demands. This further enables Fletcher, proving his manipulation tactics to be effective. Andrew's declaration, "I'd rather die drunk broke at 44 and have people at a dinner table talk about me than leave to be rich and sober at 90 and nobody remembers who I was" (46:11-46:20), illustrates his willingness to sacrifice a comfortable life for his aspirations, regardless of the hardships involved. This dedication manifests in his rigorous practice sessions, often straining himself to the point of making his hands bleed (31:24-32:21). Moreover, Andrew does not hesitate to sever ties that might hinder his productivity, ending his romantic relationship when he deems it will interfere with the realization of his goals (50:33-52:30). This is however only a fraction of the extent to which he is willing to go. Despite sustaining serious injuries from a car accident minutes before a concert, Andrew chooses to perform (01:06:14-01:10:27). His inability to play the drums properly leads to an outburst, during which he kicks his drums, tackles Fletcher, and then threatens to kill him (01:10:00-01:10:13). This incident marks Andrew's breaking point, where the intense pressure to perform combined with Fletcher's abusive methods and criticism result in a violent outcome.

As mentioned above, Fletcher's driving force is an undying determination to create the next great musician, a new Charlie Parker. To achieve this end, Fletcher maintains a tight control over his band, as indicated by his overzealous insistence on his tempo being followed. Fletcher's demand goes beyond typical musical direction. It creates a high-pressure environment where his drummers must constantly strive to meet his unrealistic demands, effectively placing them in a frame of temporal survival. By having them practice his tempo for hours on end (*Whiplash* 56:23-01:01:32) the students are kept in an impasse where nothing truly progresses. This state requires them to

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[1] Charlie Parker, also known by his nickname "Bird", was an American jazz saxophonist and composer. Widely regarded as one of the greatest jazz musicians, Parker's role in the development of bebop in the 1940s, revolutionized jazz. His legacy continues to inspire jazz musicians across the globe.

remain constantly alert and assertive, competing against each other to secure the position of core drummer. One could argue that the conductor will always be in this position of attachment, as he directs the tempo that the musicians undoubtedly must follow. From the beginning of the movie, Fletcher bluntly warns Andrew about the path ahead, stating, "You know Charlie Parker became Bird because Jones threw a cymbal in his head. See what I'm saying?" (23:37-24:15), suggesting that a gentle approach is not on the table. Fletcher is willing to test boundaries, even risking Andrew's well-being, in order to make him an exceptional musician. Suggesting a pattern of abusive behavior, Andrew is not the first student in whom Fletcher had seen potential and drove to their breaking point. Despite Andrew's predecessor finding success through Fletcher's guidance, this success came at a high price. Traumatized by Fletcher and his teaching methods, the student eventually took his own life (01:10:45-01:10:58). This, however, does not raise any concerns for Fletcher. His commitment to creating the next great jazz musician remains intact, despite being fired for mishandling students, in part due to Andrew's confidential testimony. Afterwards, in a chance encounter with Andrew, Fletcher justifies his harsh methods by referencing once again Jones's tough discipline, which Fletcher believes is what drove Charlie Parker to greatness. He explains, "I wasn't there to conduct... I was there to push people beyond what's expected of them" (01:19:00-01:19:11). Fletcher admits he never succeeded in creating his own Charlie Parker but had tried to do so. Consequentially, Andrew once again grabs onto the hope that Fletcher sees him as his potential Charlie Parker (01:17:50-01:22:00). Fletcher then invites Andrew to perform at a critical concert that could significantly impact his career. In spite of his initial hesitation, Andrew agrees, influenced by the hope Fletcher had previously inspired in him. However, moments before the performance begins, Fletcher discloses to Andrew that he knows he is the one responsible for getting him fired (01:28:09-01:28:15). Shortly thereafter, Andrew confronts the harsh reality that Fletcher's invitation was actually a ploy to sabotage his career. Fletcher deliberately gives Andrew the wrong setlist, causing him to embarrass himself on stage (01:28:46-01:30:24). Yet, Fletcher's intentions go beyond mere humiliation. It stands as another test of Andrew's abilities, and Fletcher coldly states, "I guess you don't have it" (01:30:52-01:30:54).

Andrew's object of desire is his recognition as a great musician. His attachment to Fletcher represents his pathway to realizing this ambition. Fletcher's occasional affirmations of Andrew's potential reinforce this attachment, as Fletcher is perceived as

the key figure who can guide Andrew to greatness. However, these aspirations become cruel as Andrew's attachment to Fletcher subjects him to both psychological and physical harm. As mentioned in the previous section, regardless of the threat these attachments pose to one's well-being, individuals often struggle to escape them due to the comforting aspects of continuity and stability they offer. In artistic professions, the separation of the artist from their art is particularly challenging, as they often associate their identity with the product of their work. When Andrew fails to perform after his car accident, he loses all aspiration and adopts an all-or-nothing mentality. If he could not be one of the greats, then he would rather be nothing at all. Thus, he decides to quit playing despite his years of practice, opting instead for a mundane, purposeless life, as he had lost all hope in himself. On the other hand, Fletcher is willing to pressure Andrew to extremes to bring out his talent, even if it means driving his student over the edge and risking his own career in the process. Andrew's resilience and ability to bounce back repeatedly fuels Fletcher's hope that his vision for Andrew as a future jazz legend is achievable. Regardless of all the pressure inflicted by his mentor, Andrew's resilience reaffirms Fletcher's belief in his potential to become a truly exceptional musician. In turn, Fletcher's conviction that his tough teaching methods, including the constant mind games, are deemed effective in violently leading Andrew to greatness. Their mutual attachment becomes a binding force and feedback loop that makes it difficult for either of them to break free. In the final scene, fueled by the humiliation inflicted by Fletcher, Andrew defiantly interrupts and takes over leading the next song (*Whiplash* 01:32:21-01:36:48). As Fletcher attempts to regain control by conducting the rest of the band, the song concludes, but Andrew continues to play. His solo, an act of defiance, is his final attempt to prove himself. Surprisingly, Fletcher embraces this outburst, turning the solo into a conversation between the two. Andrew, once again under Fletcher's influence, follows his instructions throughout the solo (01:36:48-01:41:28). Upon the end of the song, Fletcher gives Andrew a smile and a nod of approval, leaving both musicians ecstatic with the outcome. At this moment, they revert to their previous dynamic. For Andrew, this momentary triumph reinforces his devotion to music but also bolsters his dependency on Fletcher's approval. Meanwhile, Fletcher resumes his pursuit of shaping a great musician. Their previously lost hopes re-emerge and become entangled once again, moving from the impossible to the too possible. Both are unable to decouple from their attachments as their object of desire appears to be closer than ever. Fletcher and Andrew's relationship itself is characterized

by cruel optimism. They are interlinked, as they depend on each other to achieve their dreams. Escaping this dynamic appears nearly impossible as it would require them to give up on their desires. Both are willing to ignore any risks they pose each other, remaining trapped in this relationship, until they either both achieve their goals or one of them is forced to forfeit.

Conclusion

In Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*, the concept of cruel optimism manifests through the relationship between Andrew Neiman and Terence Fletcher. Set against the backdrop of an elite music conservatory, the film departs from traditional notions of Dark Academia by focusing on musical performance instead of the literary or classical. Regardless of the substitution of books for music sheets, *Whiplash* follows the traditional notions of the DA genre, utilizing the Gothic as well as romanticizing (elite) campus education. Andrew's aspiration to become a renowned jazz drummer and Fletcher's obsession with creating the next great musician drive them both into a toxic relationship of cruel optimistic attachment.

Cruel optimism reveals the complex dynamics where our desires for fulfillment can paradoxically hinder our well-being. Moreover, it is a state where individuals remain attached to aspirations despite them being ultimately harmful. Pressed further by the promises and possibilities an object represents, one finds themselves in a state of impasse remaining stagnant and simultaneously in a constant fight for survival. Cruel optimistic attachments reflect what has become increasingly unattainable, particularly in professions like academia and the arts where passion often outweighs stability. In *Whiplash*, Andrew and Fletcher's respective pursuits of their desires become entangled in a toxic cycle of expectation and disappointment – one of cruel optimism. Andrew's attachment to Fletcher as a mentor and pathway to success serves as a double-edged sword, providing both cruel suffering and the motivation to sustain his attachment. Fletcher, in turn, pushes Andrew to extremes in the belief that greatness requires sacrifice and suffering, putting in danger his own livelihood. Their dynamic illustrates how optimism, intertwined with unrealistic promises of fulfillment, can result in harmful outcomes that can outweigh any potential benefits. Andrew's relentless pursuit of Fletcher's approval and validation leads him deeper into a state of temporal survival, while Fletcher's uncompromising demands push Andrew to the brink of his physical and

mental limits. The two, bound by their mutually beneficial yet destructive relationship, struggle to depart due to it being the most promising path toward success. Finding themselves back in the same impasse feedback loop, even at times when the attachment appears to be severed for good.

Discussions on cruel optimism within academia, both in the literary and real world, commonly highlight the unfavorable conditions created by neoliberal capitalist systems that prevent any glimpse of the 'good life'. The trope of the 'crazy' artist, driven solely by passion, is well known, nonetheless, this discourse often misses what leads the artist to their inevitable madness. Relating this question to cruel optimism, one can begin to address how the pursuit of perfectionism, unrealistic standards, and empty promises of success for those in creative fields can lead to cycles of dissatisfaction and harm. This discussion however does not need to end in despair. By directly confronting the darkness in Dark Academia, we can brighten the halls of the Academy, or even our own ones, making it a bit less cruel and more optimistic.

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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.

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[1] 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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[1] 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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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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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"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.

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 cautious us of the potential rangers 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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The Paradox of Anti-Intellectualism in Dark Academia

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Abstract

The subculture, aesthetic, and genre 'Dark Academia' romanticizes classical literature and academic life. However, it paradoxically contains elements of anti-intellectualism within its performative celebration of intellectualism. This paper explores how this paradox contributes to the commodification of books and the emergence of a specific readerly identity. By applying Richard Hofstadter's theory of American anti-intellectualism, this paper relates the paradox to a broader cultural trend of prioritizing aesthetic over substance as exemplified by BookTok, a subcommunity on the social media platform TikTok. The discussion centers on Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* as a primary example of the Dark Academia literary genre, revealing how its romanticization of academic life encourages elitism and exclusivity, yet ultimately critiques the superficial intellectualism present in both the subculture and real-life academia.

Introduction

Dark Academia, which can be defined as a subculture that romanticizes classical literature, the pursuit of knowledge, and the university and education systems, has gained significant attention due to the social media platform TikTok and its subcommunity BookTok. While in Dark Academia, intellectualism, higher education, and the arts are seemingly celebrated, it paradoxically contains elements of anti-intellectualism within its own subculture and genre. This article will explore how Dark Academia, due to its performative celebration of intellectualism, promotes superficial engagement with the very works it celebrates and contributes to the commodification of both books and reading practices.

First, a historical overview of anti-intellectualism in American culture,

based on Richard Hofstadter's study *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* will be given.[1] He describes three types of anti-intellectualism: Anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. The historical overview serves as a backdrop for understanding contemporary manifestations of anti-intellectualism, such as certain responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of 'mindless' short video consumption on TikTok. Subsequently, this article examines the origins, themes, and intellectual engagement within the genre of Dark Academia, taking its Ur-text *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt as the primary and representative example of the genre. The article will scrutinize how the romanticization of academic life leads to a superficial engagement with the very material that characterizes it, such as classical literature. This leads to the claim that the embrace of intellectualism seemingly present in Dark Academia is pretentious, which in turn inspires anti-intellectual behavior among representatives of the subculture and those influenced by it.

Acknowledging and analyzing this paradox means identifying a general societal trend of valuing surface aesthetics over deeper intellectual engagement. In Dark Academia, the issue is not simply a focus on aesthetics, as many scholars engage with aesthetic matters, but rather the superficial and performative nature of said engagement. As Dark Academia presents academic life through aesthetics and vibes, its aestheticization ultimately leads to a culture in which intellectualism is associated with appearances more than actual learning. By focusing on the imagery of academia, Dark Academia reinforces elitist structures in real-life universities, where access to knowledge and education is often limited to an exclusive few. This superficial approach to intellectualism often reinforces elitist structures and exclusivity in real-life academia, as intellectualism becomes more about appearance than substance. Hence, understanding this paradox is crucial because it exposes how elitism and exclusivity suppress true intellectual endeavors. This not only marginalizes individuals seeking knowledge for its own sake but also reinforces existing barriers to entry for diverse voices. By addressing said issues, this article seeks to inspire a shift away from pretentious intellectualism and toward a more inclusive and genuine academic environment in which ideas and innovations are valued over aesthetic and image.

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[1] Due to the nature of this theoretical foundation, the article is mainly concerned with American culture and society, though many of its claims may be relevant in other contexts, particularly in the Global North, as well.

Anti-Intellectualism

Richard Hofstadter defines the phenomenon of anti-intellectualism as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life" (Hofstadter 7). Hofstadter further divides anti-intellectualism into three different and rather specific types: Anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. While anti-rationalism denies the general value of critical thinking, anti-elitism suggests distrust of the elites of society, and unreflective instrumentalism looks down on ideas that do not have any immediate practical value (Rigney 435). Not only do anti-intellectuals often distrust intellectuals, but they are characterized by rejecting factual, scientific evidence. Hofstadter includes the view of intellectuals through the lens of anti-intellectualism, a view that defines intellectuals as "[...] pretentious, conceited [...], and snobbish; [...] immoral, dangerous, and subversive. The plain sense of the common man is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise." (Hofstadter 18f) This perspective on intellectuals—or people with higher education in general—highlights the divide between intellectuals and anti-intellectuals, promoting a preference for simplicity and practical knowledge over scholarly expertise. This attitude contributes to the persistence of anti-intellectual sentiments in society, especially in the US.

Hofstadter mentions the anti-communist movement of the early 1950s in the US, i.e., McCarthyism, named after Senator Joseph McCarthy, as one of the factors that influenced society's view on intellectuals in a negative way (Hofstadter 3). McCarthyism greatly took advantage of people's fears and suspicions after World War II, causing them to be easily influenced and mass-ruining the careers of many scholars who were accused of representing communist values. Since then, there has been a rise in anti-intellectual beliefs, such as anti-vaccination or flat-eartherism. Another factor contributing to the recognition of a prevalence of anti-intellectual behavior is the global skepticism observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is empirical evidence indicating a correlation between anti-intellectualism and a reduction in the frequency of mask usage which demonstrates the real-world consequences of anti-intellectualism (Merkley and Loewen 710). These examples show how deeply rooted anti-intellectualism is in American history

and how it is still impactful, underscoring the importance of addressing this trend to raise awareness and prevent further societal harm.

BookTok and Overconsumption

Besides the mistrust of authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the social media platform TikTok has also played a significant role in popularizing anti-rationalism, as well as unreflective instrumentalism. The growing popularity of TikTok ties in directly with the creation of the Dark Academia subculture, which was born on BookTok, TikTok's "very fast book club" (Roberts 27). Mainly consisting of short videos, the act of scrolling on TikTok's 'ForYou-Page' reduces its users' attention spans and thus encourages overconsumption of short and addictive content (Junco and Cotten 505-14). However, overconsumption itself is not anti-rational. Rather, consuming a large number of short videos and their information without ever questioning their factuality or, in terms of overconsumption, not questioning whether the purchase of new books is truly necessary when one already has a considerable number of unread books waiting on one's shelf, is. The previously given definition of anti-rationalism provided by Hofstadter and analyzed by Rigney contains the devaluation of critical thinking, after all.

As illustrated by Huizinga in the following quote, the BookTok aesthetic encourages readers to become consumers, which has the effect of reducing books to mere short-lived marketable trends:

> BookTok acts as a helpful case study, showcasing how companies will find any way to capitalize on what people love online. Our current stage of capitalism thrives off bottling peoples' passions and interests and selling them back to them in a cheapened, sterilized package. This inevitably leads to the erosion of artistic authenticity and books becoming less of an art and more like products that tick the right boxes. (Huizinga para. 14)

In response to this, companies are marketing special editions and other book-related merchandise, capitalizing on the 'being a reader' identity that is advertised on BookTok.

> [T]he focus of BookTok seemed to shift away from the reading itself and more toward the identity of being a reader. You would think that the act of reading precedes the label of "reader," but social media famously facilitates the development of appearance without substance. [...] Instead, the focus shifts to the aesthetics, which include the [...] consumption of many, many books, all of which

are tagged with copious sticky tabs to ensure viewers that you are in fact reading

the book. (Huizinga para. 6)

TikTok's recommendation algorithm intensifies this issue, as it prioritizes popular, visually appealing books and thus limits the diversity of voices that can be heard on the platform (Barnaby para. 13-14). By emphasizing the consumption of books and the performative aspect of reading, the deeper, more critical engagement with literature is often neglected. Barnaby emphasizes in her article that TikTok's focus on fast consumption has raised concerns about the quality of the literature being promoted (Barnaby para. 4). This is due to the rise of the 'BookTok-genre', a genre containing books that are specifically designed for being marketed on TikTok. They are usually written and produced with an eye to consumption and therefore rely on common tropes and appealing imagery (Barnaby para. 5). It is crucial to acknowledge that this observation does not suggest that the objective of each TikTok video or, more specifically, BookTok is to prompt the average viewer to consume more books. But, as the TikTok algorithm favors already popular videos over others, it is safe to assume that the majority of videos that are suggested to the user are consumption-oriented. The resulting consumption practices and development of a specific readerly identity contribute to anti-intellectual behavior on the platform, as the algorithm favors the consumption of new books over the engagement with existing works. Characterized by large bookshelves filled to the brim with special editions and colorfully annotated notes, BookTok romanticizes the aesthetic of reading and the appearance of engaging with books. While the visual appeal is often prioritized, deeper intellectual interaction with the books in question is not a prominent feature of the platform. This romanticization, together with TikTok's recommendation algorithm, encourages a kind of consumption behavior that can be characterized as unreflective instrumentalism. For example, when constantly being exposed to aesthetically appealing videos that encourage an impulsive spending mentality—such as buying more books than one can realistically read in a given time—viewers are more likely to adopt this behavior themselves. This illustrates how overconsumption can be interpreted through the lens of romanticization, as well as the anti-intellectual subcategory of unreflective instrumentalism. The three concepts romanticization, overconsumption, and unreflective instrumentalism thus serve to explain the shift away from the plot of a book to the status of owning a book. This shift highlights the broader societal trend of valuing appearance and superficial engagement over genuine

intellectual pursuit. Anti-intellectualism is thus ultimately rooted in devaluing intellectualism across American society and among TikTok users.

Dark Academia and (Anti-)Intellectualism

The Dark Academia subculture was born as an internet aesthetic during the COVID-19 pandemic and prominently popularized on TikTok (Adriaansen 108). It centers around a specific vibe, or atmosphere, as Adriaansen calls it, conveyed through moodboards, playlists, outfits, and books, often featuring elements of classical education, literature, philosophy, and fashion, such as tweed blazers, vintage books, and candlelit study sessions.

Books that engage with the conventions of the eponymous literary genre, which was established a little later, often deal with topics such as obsession, murder, mystery, elitism, and addiction. The Ur-text of the Dark Academia literary genre is considered to be Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, even though the term did not exist when it was first published in 1992. However, in retrospect, it is considered to be one of the foundations of both the Dark Academia literary genre and the Dark Academia online subculture (Murray 350). In *The Secret History*, many, if not all of the previously listed examples for Dark Academic items can be found while the book itself functions as a tool to negotiate said examples. The topics of obsession, morality, and addiction are also explored within *The Secret History* (Tartt 29). As the Dark Academic prototype, *The Secret History* serves as the benchmark for evaluating whether a book meets the criteria for Dark Academic standards.

Within the Dark Academia literary genre,[2] but more prominently within the Dark Academia subculture, intellectual life and its academic achievements are romanticized. This romanticization happens through the association of academic achievements with the Dark Academia aesthetic. For example, on BookTok, colorful annotations (see Fig. 1) are shared to inspire others to read and study selected titles, while meticulously organized bookshelves filled with expensive volumes (see Fig. 2) often emphasize financial and intellectual superiority.

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[2] In this article, Dark Academia, not only refers to an aesthetic phenomenon or a subculture, but also references the literary genre more generally, unless otherwise specified.
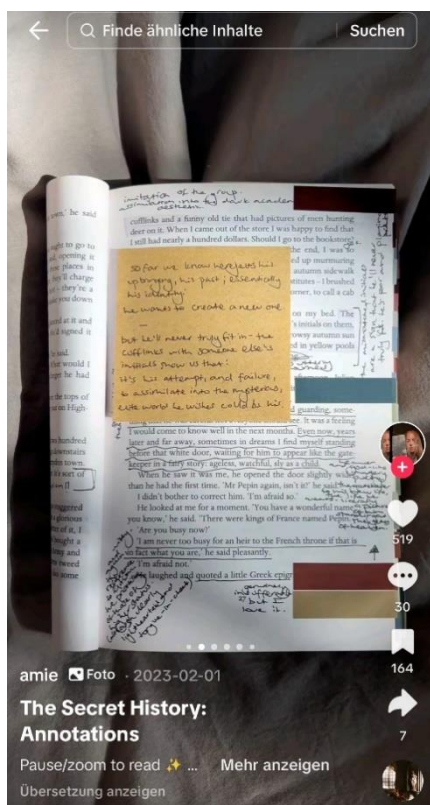
Figure 1: @literamie: The Secret History: Annotations. Aesthetic, Dark Academic book annotations found on BookTok.

Figure 2: @literamie: Bookshelf Tour. Aesthetic book displays featured on BookTok inspired by Dark Academia.

Individuals are encouraged to live a life dedicated to intellectual pursuits, thus implying that a life devoid of such achievements is inherently unfulfilling. Since this growing subculture promotes the desirability and fulfillment of an intellectual life, it seemingly counters the devaluation of intellectualism apparent in the recent history of American society.

The side of BookTok that is less consumption-oriented rarely provides book recommendations and pretty color-coded collections of expensive volumes, but instead offers insight into a more regular lifestyle with which users tend to identify (Dezuanni et al. 368). In addition, readers share genuine analytical approaches to certain works. In this segment of BookTok, individuals with similar interests are encouraged to interact and engage in philosophical conversations centered on their shared passion for analyzing their favorite books (Boffone and Jerasa 10-12). By celebrating diligence and dedication, Dark Academia encourages academic pursuits and a genuine love for learning. This

provides a positive and supportive environment for intellectual growth. In this way, Dark Academia effectively challenges anti-intellectual sentiments and advocates for the significance and fulfillment found in intellectual life.

Just as a segment of BookTok promotes a romanticized and aestheticized view of intellectualism, *The Secret History* idealizes the portrayal of an exclusive academic setting and reveals deeper tensions around intellectual elitism and moral complexity. *The Secret History* is set in the fictional elite college Hampden in Vermont where the main characters take an exclusive Greek class (Tartt 12-17). This setting is ultimately idealized within the Dark Academia aesthetic and contributes to the overall romanticization of academia. Said exclusivity also isolates the students from their colleagues and friends, creating an environment of intellectual elitism and superiority, with the latter often reflected on by the characters: "it is impossible for a mediocre intellect to render the speech of a superior one" (Tartt 36). Featuring a plotline which revolves around a murder committed by the group, Tartt uses dark imagery (examples: "shadowy figure" and "snowy twilight" (Tartt 123, 138)) which evokes a mysterious atmosphere. Henry's use of the word "[g]lorious" (Tartt 167) to describe the first murder stands out precisely because it contrasts sharply with its conventional, positive connotation. This juxtaposition gives the word a dark and unsettling meaning in the context of the novel's narrative and subtly hints at the morally grey behavior of the students, especially of Henry.

Dark Academia's promotion of intellectualism is, however, fundamentally superficial. While Dark Academia glorifies the visual appeal of academia, it tends to prioritize the aesthetic over the intellectual engagement that is essential to genuine scholarship. When aesthetic becomes the sole focus, it can distract from the actual practice of studying and engaging with literary works. This focus on aesthetic alone becomes anti-intellectual when it serves as the sole reason for engaging with academia without any other effort beyond that.

The Secret History provides an illustrative example of the superficial engagement with intellectualism that is also evident on BookTok. While the novel does include one example of an intellectually stimulating conversation set during the Greek class (Tartt 36-39), it primarily serves to create an ambiance of intellectualism rather than to demonstrate a deep immersion in specific material. Furthermore, it serves as the only detailed philosophical conversation between teacher and students in the book, while another conversation between them is mentioned by Henry (Tartt 164) but is never

rendered in direct speech. This conversation is about the Dionysian ritual, which is a key point of the plot and the catalyst for the first and second murders, respectively. Nevertheless, these two instances are insufficient for the narrative to be regarded as intellectual as giving details on main plot assets is necessary for a smooth narration. Henry, the student who proposes the performance of a Dionysian ritual, provides only fragmented information regarding the ritual itself. He and the other members of the group refrain from offering any precise details about what actually happened during the ritual and if they do, their statements are unclear and contradict each other: "We are not too clear on what happened after that," "Charles tells a different story," and "Every time you talk to him, he remembers something different" (Tartt 169). Readers of *The Secret History* are thus forced to mistrust the 'elites,' the group of students, as the exact circumstances of the ritual remain uncertain and are only known to those who experienced it.

Furthermore, instances of intellectual gatekeeping can be observed when students make remarks in Greek, Latin, or even French, and readers are required to translate them on their own. In the absence of a provided translation within the novel, it is possible to inadvertently miss the intended meaning of jokes or lines with significant connotations. One example of this is the Latin nickname "*[c]uniculus molestus*" (Tartt 190), which Henry gives to Bunny in his diary. This nickname undoubtedly highlights Henry's growing dislike towards Bunny, foreshadowing the murder of his friend and fellow student. The decision of Richard, the novel's narrator, to not translate words and phrases in non-English languages contributes to his (own) characterization as an unreliable narrator (Tartt 7) who seemingly takes pleasure in alienating himself. Nevertheless, when lines in non-English languages are not integral to the plot, as in Henry's "*Consummatum est*" (Tartt 99) after having removed a piece of glass from Camilla's foot, they may appear pretentious and excessive. However, when this biblical quote reappears in the book after Bunny's death (Tartt 276), it enforces the idea that Bunny—just like Christ—died for their sins, i.e., the killing of the farmer during the Dionysian ritual and, unlike the first use of said Latin words, it has a much deeper, integral, and apparent meaning for the plot.

A third example of superficial intellectualism within *The Secret History* can be found when Richard lies to Henry about having read works by Plotinus. Richard even blatantly states: "'Yes,' I lied. I have never, to this day, read a word by Plotinus" (Tartt 35).

Subsequently, this prompts the reader to question Richard's expertise and sincerity in his intellectual pursuits and thus build a relationship of mistrust towards him as well as the other characters. The above examples show how readers are pressed to reconsider whether the 'intellectuals' of the novel are intellectual at all.

The Paradox and Its Consequences

Thus far, this article has demonstrated that BookTok romanticizes the act of reading by encouraging individuals to engage with literary works of the BookTok genre, while the majority of videos favored by the algorithm often only promote a surface-level engagement. As the Dark Academia subculture emerged and continues to thrive on BookTok, it mirrors this pattern, where it is more concerned with aesthetic characteristics than with actual academic pursuit. Therefore, the observation that it seems to celebrate intellectualism is transferable. There are many aspects in *The Secret History*, such as discussions of classical literature, reverence for ancient languages, and the intellectual atmosphere created by those two aspects together, which lead the reader to conclude that the characters actually value intellectual pursuit. Nevertheless, this form of intellectualism is a façade and devoid of substantial depth, as my earlier examples show. Enjoying and engaging with Dark Academic media, its aesthetic, and vibes is not anti-intellectual in itself; however, engaging with academia for mere aesthetic reasons is. The previously mentioned romanticization of academia fuels a cycle of superficial engagement, prioritizing visual appeal and trendiness over genuine intellectual depth, ultimately leading to overconsumption as seen on BookTok, which is heavily influenced by behavior that comes close to what Hofstadter and Rigney call unreflective instrumentalism. The short video format on TikTok has led to a situation in which BookTok readers must race to keep up with the fast pace of recommendations.

Most of the time, books of the BookTok genre do not lend themselves for an in-depth analysis. This is largely due to the fact that they are primarily designed for immediate consumption. This consumption pattern, which fosters a new readerly identity, encourages anti-intellectual behavior on the platform, where the algorithm prioritizes the acquisition of new books over the serious engagement with those already read. Ultimately, the Dark Academia subculture was born through the anti-intellectual behavior of BookTokers. It is necessarily anti-intellectual, as its fundament, TikTok, is anti-intellectual and discourages users from thinking critically by shifting the focus from

reading to consuming. Thus, Dark Academia and BookTok are both a product of mindless consumption and therefore invite anti-rational and unreflective instrumentalist behavior.

The paradox of Dark Academia is that it claims to celebrate intellectualism, yet this very act of celebration is a performative one and even contains anti-intellectual elements, such as superficial engagement with literary works and the commodification of reading. It imitates the elitist structures of real-life universities by focusing on aesthetic and performativity, as evidenced by the organized shelves of BookTokers, meticulous aesthetic note-taking, and the Dark Academia literary genre's obsession with classical education. However, it also critiques these structures by romanticizing them to the point of appearing satirical, considering how intellectual appearances are valued over actual intellect and equated to academia. The commodification of academic interests observed on BookTok serves as another critique of how real-life academia turns education into a commercial product, further alienating those who are not part of this elite institution. It is crucial to acknowledge the existence of this paradox within the context of Dark Academia because it functions as a means to both mirror and criticize the elitist structure and exclusivity of real-life universities.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has unearthed the critical tension present within Dark Academia: its outward celebration of intellectualism on the one hand, and its involvement with superficiality and commodification on the other. The analysis has shown that this very act of celebration is a performative one by containing anti-intellectual tendencies, as introduced by Hofstadter, as well as inspiring anti-intellectual behavior in people interacting with the subculture and aesthetic. The Dark Academia subculture sheds light on a complex relationship between pretentious intellectualism and actual intellectual celebration. While it does present a romanticized version of academia, it simultaneously reduces academic engagement to superficial aesthetics and symbols rather than encouraging deeper intellectual engagement. Once those two things become indistinguishable, Dark Academia proves to be a misleading and deceptive approach that diverts attention away from the real labor of the university. By analyzing anti-

intellectualism in Dark Academia, we can make ourselves aware of elitist structures and dynamics present in *The Secret History*, which may well apply to real-life academia.

The commodification of reading, as exemplified by BookTok, is a prominent feature of contemporary culture. However, the emphasis on aesthetic of Dark Academia also allows it to critique the very structures of academia, which it simultaneously mirrors. By recognizing the absurdity of reducing real-world academia to its aesthetic, Dark Academia satirically dismantles said elitist structures that promote exclusivity and intellectual superiority.

If students and the general public read and study in a performative and superficial manner, it might have dire consequences for reading as a significant cultural practice. As our reading processes shift from a focus on deep intellectual engagement to a search of vibes and emotional resonance, there is a risk of succumbing to anti-intellectual sentiments. In doing so, readers may support anti-science and anti-rational positions, ultimately endangering societal and cultural well-being.

As this article has been primarily concerned with anti-intellectualism in American culture, and society, it has introduced the possibility of a field of future research that includes examining global perspectives on anti-intellectualism. With TikTok being a relatively new global phenomenon, it presents researchers with the opportunity to explore how anti-intellectual tendencies manifest themselves across different cultures. It would be immensely valuable to better understand how different cultures interact with and are influenced by anti-intellectual behavior.

While the paradox of (anti-)intellectualism in Dark Academia highlights the overall need for a more genuine approach to intellectualism—one that values substance over superficiality in both academic and public discourse—understanding and addressing the paradox is crucial for inspiring action towards a more genuinely intellectual academic environment.

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