

**Unlocking *The Secret History*:
A New Perspective in College Fiction**

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1. Introduction

College and universities have always enjoyed a special position in society and therefore also in literature. Some critics trace the academic novel as far back as Aristophanes while others claim that the academic novel in its proper form did not exist before the 1950s (Showalter, 2005). The reason why we read novels about academe is because of its place in the public imagination. We imagine the academic world to be a place of meaning and progress, both for the individual and for society. The pleasure of reading these novels is, for the most part, identification. Academics and students enjoy reading about their own world and identify with the high status and prestige colleges and universities have in fiction. To the larger public, people outside the academic world, the pleasure lies in experiencing this prestigious world by living vicariously through its fictitious inhabitants.

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* from 1992 has become somewhat of a cult classic but never received much critical acclaim or attention. In this essay, I will argue that Tartt addresses aspects of college and the college experience that previous academic novels have neglected to discuss. Furthermore, I will claim that the formula she uses to accomplish this has been so successful that more recent authors of academic novels have replicated it in some form or another.

Tartt's formula consists of taking another perspective towards college than the traditional one. By applying an outsider's perspective to the academic world Tartt exposes what she feels is wrong with it. This perspective creates a tension between the outside view of college and the inside knowledge of the same. Instead of, as previous academic novels, relying on identification for the pleasure of the reading experience, Tartt distances herself from academe. Much of the appeal of *The Secret History* lies in how Tartt manages to maintain this distance throughout the novel while she, at the same time, convinces the reader of the beauty of the academic world and thereby justifies her interest in and fascination for it.

In the first three sections of this essay, I discuss how Tartt uses the outsider perspective to different ends; how she uses this specific view in order to address certain issues within academe. The first of these sections provides an overview of issues that are particular to academic fiction and discusses what effect Tartt's outsider perspective has on these issues. In section 3, I discuss the problems of portraying a good student and how Tartt accomplishes this in *The Secret History*, while I in section 4 concentrate on what it is within the academic world that Tartt criticizes. In the last section, I incorporate more recent academic novels in the

discussion in order to show the success of Tartt's formula and how the representation of college in literature has changed after *The Secret History*.

2. Why the outsider is important in college fiction

For an academic novel to work, the author must address certain themes and overcome certain formal challenges. In this section, I will present these issues and argue that the role of the outsider is a possible solution to or at least an effective way of addressing these problems and themes. Throughout this discussion, I will look at how Donna Tartt handles these problems in *The Secret History* and relate that to the roles of the outsiders in that book.

The most obvious problem in the creation of the college novel is that of access to the space in which academic novels take place: college. Novels, especially those set in more prestigious colleges must deal with the issue of admittance. However, it is not only an issue of getting admitted to or excluded from college, it is also about group dynamics within the college. In dealing with this problem another, primarily formal, issue arises. For the desire to be admitted into college, or into a group once you are there, to be credible the place must be appealing. Another issue that an academic novel must deal with, at least if the ambition is to give the reader a realistic representation of college, is that of the good student or academic.

Janice Rossen writes in her book *The University in Modern Fiction*:

In fiction, [...] there is a tacit acknowledgement that academe as a whole consists of an elite community, which defines itself in part by excluding others. [...] Like their counterparts in any other profession, academics delight in reinforcing this view of themselves as comprising circles which are closed to the uninitiated. They also tend to compete with each other within that realm for positions of power

(4)

The most natural and effective way for an author who wishes to describe the "elite community" in a realistic and objective way is to have an outsider who wishes to be initiated into the "closed" society; especially if one, like Tartt, wishes to criticize it. In *The Secret History* the "elite community" is represented by the small group of students who study Greek and ancient Greek culture. Tartt separates this group from the rest of the college in different ways. They are geographically isolated from the rest of the college; the building where they have their classes is situated on the edge of campus where no other students go. Their teacher, Julian Morrow, insists that he is the only teacher they should have, explaining that he finds it

“better to know one book intimately than hundred superficially” (Tartt, 32). When Richard, the narrator of *The Secret History*, decides to join the Greek class and give up the rest of his subjects, another teacher, professor Laforgue, tells him: “Forgive me, but I should think the elitist values of such a man would be repugnant to you [...] Frankly, this is the first time I have ever heard of his accepting a pupil who is on such considerably financial aid. Being a democratic institution, Hampden College is not founded on such principles” (Tartt, 33). The same teacher says of Julian that: “he has what I think are some very odd ideas about teaching. He and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division [...] I am told that to study with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views.” (Tartt, 13) The elitist views of Julian and their isolation from the rest of the campus make the Greek students a very clear representation of an elitist community. The dynamics of this community and how they include and exclude people will be discussed in section 4 below.

As mentioned above, for the desire to join a closed community to be credible the community must be appealing; not only to the outsider of the story but also to the reader. If the community is not appealing, the reader would not understand, or at least not sympathise, with the desire to join it. In *The Secret History*, the attraction that Richard feels towards the Greek students can be divided in two: on one hand he feels an aesthetic attraction to the physical place and what it represents, and on the other hand he feels what could be called a psychological attraction to the subject matter they are studying. Richard explains his motives for joining the Greek class by saying:

I envied them [the Greek students], and found them attractive; moreover this strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated. (It was the same, I would come to find, with Julian; though he gave quite the opposite impression, of freshness and candor, it was not spontaneity but superior art which made it seem unstudied.) Studied or not, I wanted to be like them. It was heady to think that these qualities were acquired ones and that, perhaps, this was the way I might learn them.

(Tartt, 32-33)

The two major settings of *The Secret History*, Hampden College and Francis’s aunt’s house in the country, represent different sides of the closed, elite community Rossen talks about. Hampden College is situated in rural Vermont and it is surrounded by beautiful nature. The physical beauty of the college and its surroundings has a large impact on Richard since it represents the opposite of his hometown Plano, a small town in California. When Richard gets off the bus that has carried him from California to Vermont he says: “it was six o’clock in the

morning, and the sun was rising over mountains, and birches, and impossibly green meadows; and to me, dazed with night and no sleep and three days on the highway, it was like a country from a dream” (Tartt, 11). The first time Richard visits Francis’s aunt’s house in the country he is struck by the grandeur of the place: “It was tremendous. I saw, in sharp, ink-black silhouette against the sky, turrets and pikes, a widow’s walk” (Tartt, 84). However, it is not only the size and architecture of the house that has an impact on Richard, but also the sense of history and ancestry it evokes. The walls of the rooms that Richard is ushered through are lined with portraits and photographs of Francis’s family and the library is filled with old, dusty books like “*The Club History of London*, an equally massive set, bound in pale calfskin.” (Tartt, 85) All of the things represented in these settings are things associated with the privileged and elite circles of society: the access to natural beauty, history and ancestry. It is no wonder that Richard is drawn to these things, especially since we are told very early in the novel that he has an extreme attraction to the picturesque. He says: “Does such a thing as ‘the fatal flaw’, that showy dark crack running down the middle of life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn’t. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs” (Tartt, 5).

Another place within the college that attracts Richard is Julian’s classroom. When he sees it for the first time he says: “Breathing deep, I felt intoxicated. Everywhere I looked was something beautiful – Oriental rugs, porcelains, tiny paintings like jewels – a dazzle of fractured color that struck me as if I had stepped into one of those little Byzantine churches that are so plain on the outside; inside, the most paradisaical painted eggshell of gilt and *tesserae*” (Tartt, 28). This mix of, on the one hand, physical beauty and on the other, the sensation of stepping into another world shows how much physical beauty attracts and enthralls Richard. The image of the plain outside and the beautiful inside is also important since it mirrors Richard’s view of himself in relation to the Greek students. Outside their elitist community, he is plain but if he can be accepted inside, he might become as beautiful as he regards them to be. This attraction to manners and appearances largely contributes to Richard’s inability to see the group for what they really are and allows him to accept that they have murdered a farmer and have plans to murder Bunny; neither of which has the attributes of beauty so attractive to Richard. By showing where such a vain attraction might lead, Tartt criticizes it, but she could not have done this without the character of the outsider who is genuinely drawn to this culture because then it would just have been a portrayal of an elitist community and not how they are formed and what they are based on.

Although the physical setting is important in *The Secret History*, it is through the psychological setting Tartt criticizes the elite community she is portraying. Janice Rossen claims that there are two components in the attraction to academe: an idealistic and a political. The idealistic attraction is the attraction to knowledge; the quest for knowledge is, in itself, a reason to study. The political attraction is the view of education as a means to an end; the reason for studying is not studying in itself but where the knowledge may take you (Rossen, 4). The fact that the group studies Greek and the culture of ancient Greece is a significant part of the psychological setting. The study of a dead language and culture has little practical value in modern society. Throughout the novel the members of the group show their ignorance of modern society. Richard comments:

they were intrigued by even the most mundane of my habits: by my fondness for mystery novels and my chronic movie-going; by the fact that I used disposable razors from the supermarket and cut my own hair instead of going to the barber; even by the fact that I read papers and watched news on television from time to time (a habit which seemed to them an outrageous eccentricity, peculiar to me alone; none of them were the least bit interested in anything that went on in the world, and their ignorance of current events and even recent history was rather astounding. Once, over dinner, Henry was quite startled to learn from me that men had walked on the moon.

(Tartt, 93)

None of the students in the Greek class has any clear ambitions about what to do after college; they do not know to what use they can put their knowledge. To use Rossen's terms, their view of college is clearly idealistic: they study for the sake of studying and learning is a purpose in itself. In the end, every member of the Greek class has either died or is doing something entirely different than what they studied; Camilla takes care of her grandmother fulltime, Charles is an alcoholic and has run off with a married woman who he supports by working in a diner and Francis is marrying a woman he does not like because if he does not, his grandfather will stop supporting him financially and he would be forced to earn his own money (Tartt, 623, 621, 618). Richard is the exception. After the Greek class is split up, he studies English literature and eventually gets a Ph.D (Tartt, 612). English literature is clearly more practical and applicable to modern society than ancient Greek and thus, in Rossen's terms, a more political subject; Richard is only successful after he abandons his idealistic view of college for a more practical one. By making the students end up in positions where they are not able to use their full potential and put their knowledge to good use, Tartt seems to

say that studies without a clear aim, practicality or applicability to modern society can lead to an unfulfilling position in life.

The ordinary, day to day life of a good student or an academic is not that interesting for an audience since it mostly involves sitting by a desk and reading or writing. To be interesting or entertaining the novel must contain a conflict that functions as the foundation of the plot. The activities of a good student or academic rarely involve the kind of conflict that would be interesting for a reader; this is especially true if the intended reader is someone outside the academic world who is less likely to identify with it. In academic novels with a first person narrator who is also a character, like *The Secret History*, the good student or academic is essential. If the narrator were a bad student, it would not be credible or realistic that he or she would be able to write the book we are reading. In the next section, I will discuss the outsider characters of *The Secret History* in relation to the idea of the good student.

3. The representation of the good student

In *The Secret History*, there are two characters that can be said to be outsiders: Richard and Bunny. This is illustrated in two ways. On the plot level, they are left out of the bacchanal that the rest of the group organises. Richard is excluded because he is new to the group; the rest do not know if they can trust him and they are not sure how he would react to the idea of actually performing an ancient ritual. Henry tells Richard: “‘Of course we weren’t going to tell you. We hardly knew you. You would have thought we were crazy.’” (Tartt, 183) Bunny is not allowed to participate because he does not have the discipline or devotion required. Henry explains to Richard that during the attempts where Bunny participated he would tell jokes and start laughing at crucial moments, thus ruining the chances of success. Henry would not let him do that (Tartt, 185-6). On the discourse level, the reader is told within the first five pages how the story will end for Bunny and Richard. Bunny will die during the course of the narrative, and Richard will succeed, in as much as he will be in a position where he is able to write down the story we are reading. By telling the reader this at such an early stage in the novel, Tartt puts the focus on these two characters; separating them from the rest of the group whose fates we know nothing about. In this section, I will discuss how Tartt uses these two very different, almost oppositional, characters and how their roles as outsiders fulfil different needs of the college novel.

Bunny’s presence in the group is quite remarkable. Why would a student without any real interest in the subject, without any discipline, and with dyslexia be welcomed and

embraced by a group devoted to the rather advanced study of an ancient culture? Bunny starts studying ancient Greek to help with his dyslexia; his parents and teachers thought that it might help to read a different alphabet; he is more or less forced to take the subject. Richard explains:

Though Greek gave him so much trouble, he'd actually studied it far longer than any of the rest of us, since he was twelve, a circumstance about which he perpetually boasted. He suggested slyly that this had simply been a childish whim of his, a manifestation of early genius *à la* Alexander Pope; but the truth of the matter (as I learned from Henry) was that he suffered from fairly severe dyslexia and the Greek had been a mandatory course of therapy, his prep school having theorized it was good to force dyslexic student to study languages like Greek, Hebrew, and Russian, which did not utilize the Roman alphabet. At any rate, his talent as a linguist was considerably less than he led one to believe, and he was unable to wade through even the simplest assignments without continual questions, complaints, and infusions of food.

(Tartt, 103)

A couple of years before the novel starts, he was also Henry's roommate. These reasons to include Bunny in the group seem rather weak, especially when we read about Henry's interrogation of Richard before he is considered a part of the group (Tartt, 37). However, the fact that Bunny is a bad student has two important functions in the novel: he serves as a sort of foil character to the others; his poor academic qualities enhances the others' good, and he is the character that the entire plot revolves around; none of the other characters, being good students, could do for the plot what Bunny does.

In the previous section, the difficulties of describing a good student were discussed. By juxtaposing a bad student, Bunny, with the rest, Tartt creates a forum for the rest of the group to show their knowledge without necessarily having to show how they have required this knowledge. The quote above, from page 103, is representative of this effect. The other students have not studied Greek for as long as Bunny has and still they are better than him at it. He is the one who asks them questions when it should be the other way around.

The qualities that make Bunny a bad student are exactly the qualities that make him the major carrier of the plot. Had he been devoted to the subject he would have taken the bacchanal just as seriously as the others and had not needed to be excluded. Had he not been excluded he would not be in a position where he could tell on the others, at least not without implicating himself, and the others would not feel the need to get rid of him. Also, Bunny is not as independent or self-reliant as the rest. He likes to keep the same habits and standard of

living as the others but he does not have the money to back it up, so he borrows vast amounts of money from them without any intention of returning them. He takes their generosity for granted which becomes a source of irritation and contributes to the group, in their view, having to resort to extreme measures. The conversation between Henry, Francis and Richard below shows that frustration, concerning Bunny's habit of lending money, is building up:

“Henry shrugged. ‘He’s always been like this,’ he said. ‘Always. He’s amusing; I liked him; I felt a little sorry for him. What was it to me, to lend him money for his schoolbooks and know he wouldn’t pay it back?’

‘Except now,’ said Francis, ‘it’s not just money for schoolbooks. And now we can’t say no.’

‘How long can you keep this up?’

‘Not forever.’

(Tartt, 219)

Another important aspect of Bunny's character is his interaction with the rest of the student body. None of the other characters interact as much as Bunny with people outside the group; most notably, Bunny has a girlfriend, Marion, who is not part of the group. Had Bunny, like the others, had no interaction with persons outside the group he would not be so quick to tell anyone about the group's actions; going to the police would be his only option and since he did not do so immediately he stands to lose almost as much as the others (Tartt, 290).

Having discussed how Bunny is portrayed as a bad student, it is interesting to look at one particular passage where he actually shows a sort of academic success. When he and Henry are in Italy, Henry is bedridden with headaches and during this time, Bunny manages to translate Henry's diary from Latin to English. Henry later comments: “‘I never dreamed he was capable of such a thing. It must have taken him days. I wasn't even angry. I was too stunned’” (Tartt, 213). To understand the meaning of Bunny's accomplishment, the context must be considered. Since Henry is sick, Bunny is left all alone in a foreign country where he does not know anybody. The social distractions of Hampden are absent. By reading Henry's diary he is hoping to have his suspicions about the group's involvement in the murder of the farmer confirmed; he has an interest in the subject. The very things that, at Hampden, make Bunny a bad student are, in Italy, taken away and suddenly he turns into a good student. However, as discussed above, seeing him sitting at a desk for several days is not particularly interesting for an audience.

In comparison to Bunny, Richard is not a particularly good character; he does not contribute much to the plot. In fact, if Richard had not been the narrator of the novel, he

would probably not have been in it at all. Richard's function on the plot level is mainly one: when the group has decided that they have to get rid of Bunny, they know that they are in no hurry until Bunny has told Richard what he knows about the group's involvement in the murder of the farmer, since they are sure that Richard is the first one Bunny will tell. Henry tells Richard that he was only the alarm-bell; he serves no other function (Tartt 291). This comment is telling of Richard's role in the plot. He is the receiver of news; when someone else performs an action, it is Richard's duty to tell others about it. His role on the plot level foreshadows his role on the discourse level; he is a narrator of events.

Throughout the novel Richard, as a character, displays several qualities that are important for a good student and for a writer. The part of the book where Richard spends the winter in a warehouse he rents for free from a hippie displays several of these qualities. He shows that he is capable of spending a large amount of time on his own; both studying and writing are things one do on one's own. Richard refuses to ask the others in the group for help; he avoids it to the point of absurdity. Henry tells him: "But you're so scrupulous about not borrowing money that it's rather silly." [...] "I think you might have died in that warehouse rather than wire one of us for a couple of hundred dollars." (Tartt 219) Richard shows that he values his independence and self-reliance which are also important for a student or writer. Curiously, as discussed above, these are the exact qualities that Bunny lacks. The part that deals with Richard's winter in the warehouse is also telling about how the character of Richard would function if he had been the main character. First of all, roughly two months of time are dealt with in fourteen pages, which is rather short considering the length of the rest of the novel. This is of course because not much happens. Richard essentially lives as a good student would: a rather eventless, solitary life, uninteresting for an audience. Second, Tartt shows, in a way, that she is aware of this, because at the end of Richard's stay in the warehouse, he nearly dies. The character of Richard, the good student, cannot survive without people around him, without characters who perform the action. All the qualities that make Richard a good student and a good narrator are exactly the qualities that make him a bad character.

4. The construction of an elitist society

In section 2 above, I discussed how the group of Greek students could be seen as a representation of an elitist society. In this section, I will discuss how this society is formed and governed. I will argue that there is a tension between the actual values and the perceived

values of the society. Furthermore, I will show where the actual values are derived from and discuss how they contribute to what Tartt wishes to say by portraying the society in the way she does.

The great diversity of the students in the Greek class does not allow a simple statement as to what it is that connects them. Henry and Francis are the only characters that live up to the air of privilege that the group cultivates. They are the ones that are rich and come from families that can claim some kind of ancestry and/or success. Bunny's family likes to give the impression of these things but we know from Henry that they live beyond their means and that the success they convey is only on the surface. He says: "The Corcorans [Bunny's parents] have delusions of grandeur. The problem is, they lack the money to back them up. No doubt they think it very aristocratic and grand, farming their sons off on other people" (Tartt, 218). To which Francis replies: "He's shameless about it, [...] Even with the twins, and they're nearly as poor as he is" (Tartt, 218). This is pretty much all we know about the twins', Charles' and Camilla's, financial status. Richard is certainly not rich; his shame over the plainness of his family and origins runs through the entire novel. Even though the group's preferences in clothing separate them from the rest of the student body, the way they dress differs within the group. The twins dress in white, loose-fitting and light clothes whereas the others prefer their dark suits and ties (Tartt, 18). Even Richard thinks that these things, such as where you are from and how you dress, are important to the group, but, he learns that they are not. Bunny teases him from time to time about how he dressed when he first arrived at Hampden but it never becomes more than teasing; Bunny does not consider the way you dress to be an important enough criteria to exclude someone from the group. Richard says: "[e]ven in the happiest times he'd made fun of my Californian accent, my secondhand overcoat and my room barren of tasteful *bibelots*, but in such an ingenious way I couldn't possibly do anything but laugh" (Tartt, 250). Even Henry comments on the actual origin that Richard has tried so hard to hide and dismisses it as unimportant (Tartt, 92).

What they do have in common is their knowledge of and fascination for Greek and ancient Greek culture. On the surface, it is this knowledge that holds them together and it is this knowledge that is the foundation of their distance from the rest of the college. When Richard gains access to the group, it is through his knowledge of the Greek language. He overhears them debating over which case of a noun to use in a translation of an English text to Greek. The answer he gives is the password to gain entrance into the group (Tartt, 21). He has proven that he is worthy of their attention and interest by his knowledge of the language they all share. Richard later says:

In a certain sense, this was why I felt so close to the others in the Greek class. They, too, knew this beautiful and harrowing landscape, centuries dead; they'd had the same experience of looking up from their books with fifth-century eyes and finding the world disconcertingly sluggish and alien, as if it were not their home.

(Tartt, 224)

Thus it seems that knowledge and knowledge alone is important to the group, at least in Richard's view. However, it is not just any knowledge that is important; you have to have the correct knowledge. Alongside the quote from professor Laforgue about Julian above, this is illustrated by the interrogation Richard is submitted to by Henry before their first class (Tartt, 36-37). This shows how single-minded the members of the group are. What matters is what is important to them and they do not care very much about other people. Henry comments on this to Richard in his garden. He says: "[y]ou don't feel a great deal of emotion for other people, do you? [...] It doesn't matter, [...] I don't either" (Tartt, 556). After noting that the knowledge of these two characters, Henry and Julian, is as esoteric as it is, the fact that they are the leaders of the group based on this knowledge becomes interesting. Seen in this light, the knowledge that the others admire is not real knowledge but the illusion of knowledge. The aforementioned professor Laforgue says to Richard: "Julian [...] will never be a scholar of the very first rate, and that is because he is only capable of seeing things on a selective basis. [...] It is not that your Julian chooses solely to concentrate on certain, exalted things; it is that he chooses to ignore others equally as important" (Tartt, 577). Julian is not only very selective in his knowledge; he also uses that knowledge to justify some of his less attractive qualities. After Bunny's murder, Richard says of Julian:

He'd been almost inexplicably fond of Bunny, but strong emotion was distasteful to him, and a display of feeling normal by modern standards would to him have seemed exhibitionist and slightly shocking: I was fairly sure this death had affected him more than he let show. The again, I suspect that Julian's cheery, Socratic indifference to matters of life and death kept him from feeling too sad about anything for very long.

(Tartt, 485)

Although, the reader does not yet know that Julian feels little or no loyalty towards his students, the irony of Richard's assessment of Julian's state of mind is apparent. As a reader,

one gets the feeling that Richard has missed something essential about Julian's character by confusing his lack of empathy with devotion to his subject.

With only one teacher, the students only get one perspective and, no matter how informed and educated this perspective might be, this lack of diversity in teachers can lead to that the students take their one teacher too seriously and not question what he says. In turn, this unquestioning attitude will lead to that you hold your specific knowledge to be better and more important than that of others. In short, it will lead to elitism.

After the murder of the farmer during the bacchanal, the group feels no remorse, only fear of being caught. They find their justification by turning to the ancients. For instance, they believe that everyone has a place on the social ladder and that those below you on that ladder are worth less than you. This idea of a social hierarchy comes from Plato's *Republic* which they have studied in Julian's class (Tartt, 235). Francis reminds Richard of another thing Julian used to say: "[a]bout a Hindu saint being able to slay a thousand on the battlefield and it not being a sin unless he felt remorse" (Tartt, 571). Like Julian, they use their knowledge and their elitist belief that their specific knowledge is better than others to justify and belittle the consequences of their actions.

As seen above, it is the shared knowledge of Greek and the ancient Greece that, at least on the surface, keeps the group together. It is also this knowledge that, according to them, entitles them to a higher social standing. In this sense it is their perceived elitism that connects them. The foundation of the elitist society is nothing more than a shared belief that they are the elite. Although, as discussed above, appearances are not important enough to the group for them to exclude people, appearances are important for them in order to cultivate and reassure their elitism. For instance, when Richard is shot, his first thought goes to his ruined Paul Smith shirt (Tartt, 603) and when the group, without Richard, returns to Henry's apartment after killing the farmer and finds Bunny there, Henry seems more concerned with his ruined possessions than with the dead farmer. He later tells Richard:

'Really, this was the last straw,' Henry said crossly. 'He took a quart of ice cream out of my freezer to eat while he waited – he couldn't bother to get a bowl of it, you understand, he had to have the whole quart – and when he fell asleep it melted all over him *and* on my chair and that nice little Oriental rug I used to have. Well. It was quite a good antique, that rug, but the dry cleaners said there was nothing they could do. It came back in shreds. And my *chair*'

(Tartt, 200)

This shows where the members of the group's priorities lie. In what should be moments of great existential anxiety and fears they are more concerned with the objects that confirm their belief that they are the elite; once again proving that the thing that really matters to them is elitism.

By placing the narrator outside the elitist society and portraying his desire to be included, Tartt effectively reveals the discrepancy between how the society is perceived and how she feels it actually is. What Richard perceives as something beautiful, and what Tartt portrays as something beautiful, is in actuality just a facade. In a rather complex way, Tartt explains and shows compassion for the attraction at the same time as she condemns what the attraction leads to.

5. A comparison to other college novels

Above, I discussed how Tartt handles different aspects of the academic novel. In this section, I will discuss how her attitude towards these aspects reverberates in more recent college fiction. The novels that I will discuss are *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith from 2005, *Ravelstein* by Saul Bellow and *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth, both from 2000. Academic novels, as novels in general, have always been a tool for surveying the environment in which they are set. Although the college novel did not originate with *The Secret History*, there are several trends that seem to follow the course Tartt sets in the more recent novels I have looked at. The first trend is an idea of the need for looking at college in a more objective way and that this can only be done by some form of incarnation of the outsider character. The second is that the authors distance themselves from college instead of, as before, identifying with it. I will argue that this is largely due to the fact that the recent academic novels are set in America, and that the change in attitude towards college reflects the view that college has failed to adapt to a more modern and diverse society. I will also argue that the success of these novels lies in the tension that is created between the attraction towards and distancing from the academic world.

In *The Secret History*, Richard is the outsider who wishes to be admitted into the elitist group of Greek students. Through his experiences, Tartt lays bare what she thinks is wrong with certain aspects of college. That she uses an outsider suggests that she thinks that an insider would not have the perspective needed to reveal the things she wishes to reveal. For instance, if Richard had come from a rich family, she could not have portrayed the attraction that the less privileged feel towards the privileged. Without the outsider, *The Secret History* would just have been a novel about the privileged. The same idea is addressed in *The Human Stain*. As a professor and dean of a New England college, the main character, Coleman Silk,

is very much an insider of the college. However, when he is accused of being a racist for uttering the word *spooks* about two absent students, who happen to be black, he resigns and leaves the college. He then starts writing a book about the wrongdoings within the college, but after a couple of years he realises that he is unable to write it because he is too close to his own story. He turns to his neighbour, the isolated author, Nathan Zuckerman, and asks him to write his story for him. Zuckerman writes: "Of course you [Coleman] could not write the book. You'd written the book – the book was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you it could only be concealment and so it would never work" (Roth, 344-5). What Zuckerman discusses here is not just a question of a perspective towards a college but also a question of one's perspective on one's own life. It is just as much an issue about autobiographies as it is about academic novels' though it also suggests why autobiographies set in college need this perspective. This is also true for *Ravelstein*. The novel starts, much like *The Human Stain*, with an aging college professor, Abe Ravelstein, asking a friend, Chick, an author, to write his biography. The novel does not offer any greater insight into the world of college, but the idea of an outsider to that world describing an insider is there nonetheless. By using the outsider as a biographer, these two novels attempt to dislodge their subject from the academic world; to show how Coleman Silk and Abe Ravelstein differ from their academic counterparts and thereby give a more complete account of their subjects. This suggests that the authors are distancing themselves from the idea of the academic world being something grander than other professions; the authors are resisting the traditional view of college as a place of great fulfilment and grandeur.

As discussed above, Tarrt criticizes the single-minded and selective knowledge of the elitist professor, Julian Morrow. Through the outsider character Carl, Zadie Smith addresses the same issue in *On Beauty*. Carl is a young, black, spoken word artist who comes from a poor neighbourhood and does not attend college. When speaking to Zora, who comes from a family where almost every member is in some way involved with the academic world and who goes to college herself, Carl says: "'cos you can't do what *I* do without knowing about other shit outside of your direct, like, your influences and shit – '" (Smith, 136). The italicised *I* suggests that Carl is under the impression that Zora, as a college student, only has one perspective and lacks the diversity that he has. The character of Carl is discussed further below. If Tarrt uses the outsider as someone who wishes to be admitted into a group in order to reveal the false attractions of elitism, then Roth, Bellow and Smith use the outsider to show that there are other important qualities and perspectives than those found within the academic

world. What they have in common is that they all seem to feel that a person who is completely involved in the academic world and experience is not the proper judge of it.

Janice Rossen writes:

In reflecting a high value for Oxbridge, modern fiction writers affirm a fact of social history in holding Oxford and Cambridge Universities to be preeminent in prestige. And this strikes at the root of what fiction is and why we read it. These writers either wish to identify with Oxbridge themselves, and thus to appropriate its *mana* by boasting of their insiders' knowledge, or they assume that their readers will wish to do so vicariously through their novels

(1)

As seen in the discussions above, Tartt does not identify with the college world and experience she portrays, nor does she expect the reader to fully do so. On the contrary, by criticizing the elitist, isolated group of Greek students and the specific part of the college community they represent, she is distancing herself from it. The tension of *The Secret History* is in the relationship between the outside perspective and the inside knowledge. In a way, Tartt is what Rossen calls boasting of her insider knowledge of the academic world at the same time as she is distancing herself from it by adopting the outsider perspective that allows her to criticize it. Much of the appeal of the novel lies in Tartt's ambivalence between attraction and distance towards college.

In the quote above, Rossen is speaking about academic novels set in British universities while the academic novels I have read are set in American universities. This difference is important and much of the success of Tartt's formula can be explained by the particularities of American society. In comparison to British society, American society is much more diverse when it comes to cultural identities and the wide variety of perspectives it brings.

In *On Beauty*, as discussed above, the outsider Carl, as a young black man, is a representation of one of the many cultural identities in contemporary American society. Even though he shares several of their interests, Carl is in many ways the antithesis to the characters within the academic world, most notably members of the Belsey family, at least when it comes to his attitude.

This is illustrated by the fact that he meets the Belseys at an outdoor Mozart concert. Classical music is more closely associated with the academic world than with the world that Carl comes from. What separates Carl from the academic world is not his interests but rather his attitude towards academe. Later on in the novel, when he meets Zora, the daughter of the

Belsey family, he says: “Now, if I ever see that bad-tempered black girl again, I’m gonna lay some of my Mozart thoughts on her head, see how she takes them – that’s all. That’s college right? That’s what you paying all that money for – just so you get to talk to other people about that shit. That’s all you’re paying for” (Smith, 137). This is a very democratic view of what the college experience should be: college is a place where you have a chance to express yourself and get feedback on that expression and, perhaps most importantly, everyone’s opinion matter. Smith juxtaposes this view with that of certain members of the Belsey family’s, most notably Zora’s.

In contrast to Carl, Zora tries hard to conform to the ideals of the college. Before her first day she is very concerned with what to wear to give the right impression (Smith, 129) and she is under the impression that college is where you go to find yourself; it is at college you form an identity. She wonders if she is the only one “who experienced this odd impersonality or it was everybody, and they were all play-acting, as she was. She presumed that this was the revelation college would bring her, at some point” (Smith, 210). For Carl, college is a place for individual thoughts and ideas. For Zora it is a place where you go to change into someone else. Carl’s view is more pragmatic; he is concerned with what the college might do for him once outside its walls. To use Rossen’s terms: he has a more political attraction towards college. Zora is more concerned with college life as such; she has a more idealistic view. In these terms, Smith makes the same claim about these two ambitions as Tartt. Carl, the one with the political attraction, is portrayed as a strong and creative individual whereas Zora, the idealist, is portrayed with a bit more irony and humour. For instance, we learn about Zora that while in Paris she was so intent “upon reading the guide book to Sacré-Cœur that she walked directly into an altar, cutting her forehead open” (Smith, 71). Thus Smith is making the same point about the college experience as Tartt does. Going to college with the impressionable attitude that the experience in itself will change you into a good person may not always be such a good thing.

Perhaps more important than the difference in attitude between Zora and Carl, they have different perspectives depending on their different cultural heritage or upbringing. Zora gets her ideals and sense of cultural identification from her father, Howard. Howard is British and a professor at the college she attends. His idealistic view of college is shown through his relationship with his youngest son, Levi. Levi differs from the rest of the family in that he does not identify with college but with an urban community of black teenagers, much the same as Carl. Levi marks his belonging to a different culture by dressing and talking like them and Howard, instead of showing an interest in the new culture, berates him for it. Like Julian

Morrow in *The Secret History*, Howard is reluctant to accept any other perspective than that of academe.

This reluctance is further explored in the part of the novel which is about one of Howard's lectures. The focalization is on one of the students, Katie Armstrong, who is a stereotypic all-American girl from Indiana. Even though she is as interested in the subject and as devoted to her studies as the rest of the class, she feels inadequate when it comes to giving her opinion in the classroom. This is due to that she finds it difficult to follow the intellectual, academic jargon used by Howard and some of the other students, most notably Zora. Just a little while into the lecture, "the class escapes Katie; it streams through her toes as the sea and sand when she stands at the edge of the ocean and dozily, *stupidly*, allows the tide to draw out and the world to pull away from her so rapidly as to make her dizzy" (Smith, 253). Because of the exclusionist discourse, Katie feels that her opinion does not matter.

That the narrator of *The Human Stain* is an outsider offers an objectivity that an insider would not have. At least this is the case with Delphine Roux, the new dean of the department in which Coleman works, and the leader of the witch hunt against him. Had Coleman himself been the narrator, the picture of Delphine Roux would not be as comprehensive as it is. Even if it is not exactly clear how the narrator, Zuckerman, has learned the things he knows about Delphine's personal life, he offers the reader the motivations behind her actions instead of reducing her to the superficial nemesis that Coleman would have portrayed her to be. However, Roth does not use the outsider as a way to address issues in the way that Tartt does. Roth criticizes the absolute job security that tenure brings and the intellectual sloth that goes with it, and, as discussed briefly above, political correctness when it reaches such an extreme as it is portrayed here. Since Coleman does not know that the students he is referring to are black, he clearly uses the word *spooks* in its literal sense, *spectre*, and not as a pejorative about black people. But, the college administration does not care about what Coleman really meant; they only care about the possible ramifications for the college if one of its teachers gets a reputation as a racist.

The ironic part in the discussion about Coleman's racism is that he is actually a black man, but of such a light hue that, ever since he joined the army, he has been able to pose as a white man. He feels that in order to succeed in the world, and especially the academic world, he has a better chance if he hides his real cultural heritage.

Even though it cannot be said with any certainty that Tartt started a trend with *The Secret History*, it is certainly a part of a new tradition of the college novel. This new tradition does not rely on the pleasure of identifying with college or making the reader identify with it. The

novels discussed in this essay show that this new tradition involves doing the exact opposite, namely distancing themselves from college. How then has American college fiction survived and even flourished into the 21st century? Why do authors continue to set their novels in a space of which they do not seem to approve?

The reason why they still flourish is a measure of Tartt's success in applying the outsider perspective to her insider's knowledge. Perhaps the pleasure in reading and writing these novels lies in this tension between the attraction towards college and the distancing from it. It is as if the authors, by using college as the setting, claim that it is a place worthy and deserving of discussion, only to say that it is a narrow-minded, elitist place where young men and women run the risk of being misguided and corrupted. Tartt shows this in the discrepancies between what Richard is attracted to, his picturesque image of the privileged, and what he actually gets, an elitist, single-minded view of the world.

The ideological view that these authors have in common is a belief in the potential of the American college and the view that this potential is not being realised due to the inability to accept other perspectives than the traditional. In *The Secret History*, this view is represented in several ways. The group of Greek students' fascination with the ancients and their detachment from modern society is a way for Tartt to show how the academic world holds on to an obsolete view of which perspectives that matter and disregard the fact that there might be others just as important. This view has a more obvious representation in the character of Julian. As seen above, Julian is a very clear symbol of the reluctance to accept other perspectives than his own. Both *The Secret History* and *On Beauty* contain characters that are the opposite of Julian and represent college as it should be. Professor Laforgue and Carl have a more democratic vision of what college should be: a place where everyone has a chance to have their specific individual voice heard. However, both of these characters are peripheral and their view does not seem to be shared by the main characters of the novels.

The reason why we read these novels is that we identify with and approve of the image of what college could be, at the same time as we join the authors in mocking the folly of the people who keep this utopia from becoming reality.

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