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# Et in Arcadia Ego

A class and gender analysis of *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Secret History*

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## Abstract

Even though Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* were written almost fifty years apart, they share many similarities. They are both forms of academic novels and they both depict the University and College as places excluded from the surrounding world where the characters can act out their desires in their adolescent years before they enter adulthood. In both novels, the protagonists come from lower or middle class backgrounds and are invited into the upper class. They both become infatuated and fall in love with the people in that world and the world itself. By comparing these two novels and analysing them using a class and gender perspective, this essay studies how factors like the academic world, class, gender and sexuality affect the protagonists in their admiration for the surrounding characters, but also how these factors affect each other. This essay argues that during the time the characters are within the closed environment of the school they defy norms of gender and sexuality but as they step out of that environment they begin to act according to the social structures of the rest of society.

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# 1. Introduction

In literature, the closed environment of the university with its own rules and structures, cut off from society but familiar to many readers, forms a congenial setting in a novel with its own rules and norms. The college campus, the university grounds and the student dorm rooms can all be seen as romantic and symbolic settings of an individual's last years of young adulthood. The academic sphere is a place where social norms can be questioned and where one's inner most desires can be released. But the academic setting is also a form of a closed sphere, a microcosm with familiar structures, temporal cycles and hierarchies. Although familiar but intriguing, this setting forms a romanticized image of the college life which can be found in many novels after the 1950s when the academic novel became popular (Showalter, *Faculty Towers* 1).

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)<sup>1</sup> and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) adopt the university setting for their narratives, or parts of the narrative. Both novels create a closed world, a society with its own structures and norms, where the characters are experiencing their final stages of late adolescence. Both novels share similar themes when regarding student life and university as an environment despite being set in different times and countries. *Brideshead Revisited* portrays Charles Ryder's life from the early 1920's to the beginning of the 1940s in Britain, and though never specified in the novel, *The Secret History* seems to be set sometime in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century around the time it was written. Both novels challenge and examine questions of sexuality, gender and class and it seem as if the settings of the novels affect the characters in a way that lets them defy and challenge social norms and boundaries.

*The Secret History* portrays the year Richard Papeen spends at a college in Vermont, an isolated place and a small town situated on the New England country side in the USA, where he befriends a group of characters who predominantly belong to a different social class than himself, who is described as lower middle-class. This group of people, the classical Greek students, are members of the upper class and Richard's infatuation with these characters can be discussed and analysed as either expressions of romantic love or as admiration for their status. This theme of a lower middle-class youth befriendng and becoming infatuated with the upper

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<sup>1</sup> Though *Brideshead Revisited* was written in three parts where only one of these focuses on Charles Ryder's years at Oxford University, I believe this part is the most important when discussing and studying his relationship with Sebastian Flyte.

class can also be found in Waugh's novel, in which the protagonist Charles Ryder meets the aristocrat Sebastian Flyte. In this novel it can be argued that Charles and Sebastian form a romantic relationship during their time at Oxford University.

Both these characters, Richard and Charles, never quite belong to the class they try to become a part of. They stand on the outside, completely involved but never quite included. They have both fallen in love with the world of the upper classes and find this world beautiful, and it is this fascination, that in some ways challenges the notions of gender and heterosexuality, that I will discuss in my essay.

Smith-Rosenberg argues that "we view sexual and emotional impulses as a part of a continuum or spectrum of affect gradations strongly affected by cultural norms and arrangements. [...] At one end of the continuum lies committed heterosexuality, at the other uncompromising homosexuality; between, a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings" (qtd. in Rotundo 9). It is this spectrum of sexuality that I will apply on and analyse in the primary texts. But I will also argue that gender as well as sexuality, can be seen as a spectrum and that one can argue for and see gender in these novels not as a binary system but as a continuum. I will study how the year(s) the characters spend at college affect them in terms of how sexuality and class is portrayed and how the two concepts interact or affect each other. Do class and status blur the lines between gender and sexuality in the eyes of the protagonist or is the fascination with the beauty of the upper classes in some way used as a façade to hide or deny the characters' sexuality? In addition, does the fact that the characters are on the edge of adulthood and spending their last time as young adults in a college/university environment where adults are barely present influence their perceptions of class and sexuality?

The essay will be divided into three parts. I will firstly discuss how class is portrayed in both novels. I will do this through character analysis, but also through the setting and environment. Secondly I will study the depiction and representation of gender and sexuality and finally discuss how these themes interact with each other throughout the novels.

## 2. Background – Sexuality

Throughout history, sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, has been regarded considerably different from what it is seen as today. It is possible to say that before the word *homosexual* came into the English language, homosexuality was not seen as something one was but rather an (inappropriate) act one could perform. In other words: homosexuality was not a sexual identity as it can be seen as today, but rather a sexual act which was often criminalized.

Although the word ‘homosexual’ did not exist in the English vocabulary until it was used in the translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopatia Sexualis* in 1890s (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 171), homosexuality as an act and phenomenon had existed for the greater part of human history. The study of Greek love, or pederasty, is something that have interested scholars and academics for centuries, and homosexual relationships between men have had great influence in literature and the academic world. In Ancient Greece, and especially in the city of Athens, homosexuality between men were in many ways practiced. Daniel Ogden describes the ideal model of Greek and Athenian male homosexuality as a relationship that “took place between an *erastēs* (lover), a young man, ideally a bachelor, and an *erōmenos* (beloved), a beardless, adolescent boy between the ages of twelve and eighteen” (38). These both males would belong to the elite part of society and the young lover would be courted by the older man who would present him with gifts. If the younger male accepted his proposal, then they would engage in a sexual relationship (Ogden 38). A major part of the relationship was, for example, for the *erōmenos* to receive moral and ethical guidance in order to become a fully recognized and developed adult male and part of the community. When the young male later turned into an adult, or reached the age of twenty he would become the dominant male, or an *erastēs*, and search for an *erōmenos* of his own before he would later refrain from any homosexual activity and commit to a heterosexual marriage (Ogden 38).

It is possible to say that even though homosexuality was an important part of the culture in classical Athens, it was more closely related to the development of the adolescent male and his education than perhaps as a form of sexual identity as one would see homosexuality today. As for the other Greek cities and communities, apart from Athens, homosexual activities seem to be more closely connected to the military organizations and institutions than the civil life. For example, there is evidence that men in the army or military service were living together, separated from the rest of the society and an *erōmenos* was paired up with their *erastēs* in the front line during battles as “the bond between the two was the strongest of all human bonds and, thus encouraging bravery in defending a partner” (Ogden 41).

Many of the arguments in favour of the Greek pederasty or same sex relations were, and continued to be long after the Ancient Greek Hellenistic period, based on Plato’s idea of the ‘Socratic Eros’, an idea based on Socrates writings: “men who love youths procreate not bodies but ideas, as the love of beauty and virtue in an individual leads to the love of all beautiful and virtuous people and things, and to an appreciation of the philosophical idea of the beautiful and the good” (Quinn and Brooke 686). This shows how the relationships between men were often

based on education and personal development rather than a relationship based on romantic love and attraction to the other partner.

As previously mentioned, the word for homosexuality did not exist in the English language until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the consequence of this was that there could not be another sexuality than heterosexuality because homosexuality did not exist as a concept. Instead the act of having sexual relations with someone of the same sex was often categorized and punishable on the same level as bestiality, prostitution and other forms of sexual perversions that did not conform to the normative heterosexual relationship (Rotundo 9). When regarding sexuality and sexual activity between men in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain in particular was, according to Sean Brady, “one of the most hostile and intolerant cultures in the Western world. Sexually radical ideas, such as free love, were deemed by the authorities to be subversive to society and in need of eradication.” (218) The act of sodomy was criminalized and there was a refusal by the authorities, scholars and media to acknowledge and openly speak or even do research about the fact that there existed a culture of homosexuality in Britain at the time. (Brady 213).

In contrast to the continental states such as France and Germany, Britain did not allow for medical or scientific research on the matter of male homosexuality. Brady means that “[d]iscourse of this nature was ignored or suppressed in order to preserve and present masculinity in [Britain] as free from unnatural practices between men.” (26) On the continent, scientific and scholarly publications were made on the subject which resulted in a wider tolerance towards male homosexuality and many British men sought to Europe for answers and explanations to their feelings (Brady 83).

Elaine Showalter describes the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *fin de siècle*, as a time of “sexual anarchy”, when sexuality and gender seemed to be deconstructed. The last decades of the century contained many sexual scandals and trials convicting homosexual men which created a public awareness of the existence of differing sexualities and tendencies (*Sexual Anarchy* 3). It was during this time homosexuality as a concept and sexual identity began to take form, despite the attempts made by the legal and medical institutions to control and create boundaries around it. Michel Foucault states that “[h]omosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” (43) He also argues that the attempts made by authorities to criminalize and marginalise homosexuality in fact created an inevitable “reverse discourse” around which homosexuals could argue for their legitimacy and recognition by speaking with

“the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault 101). Paradoxically, the approach Britain and its authorities had to homosexuality only gave that culture a voice to speak with instead of actually eradicating it.

In addition to this perception of homosexuality in Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rotundo argues that in North America there was another approach to the issue, or rather, a different attitude towards sexuality. He argues that sexuality was seen as a spectrum on which a person could move freely between hetero and homosexuality, that there was not a complete divide between the two. Instead, intimacy and close relationships between two males were not always categorized as homosexual, mostly because no concept of homosexuality existed but also because “[t]his set of attitudes threw a blanket of ambiguity over the private acts of physical affection between men and left them, in some ways, freer to express their feelings than they would have been in the twentieth century.” (Rotundo 10)

It is then possible to argue that the attitude in North America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century regarding sexuality as a spectrum is very similar to modern days’ attitude, as sexuality has become something of a sexual identity and is much more fluid and free flowing between the binary oppositions of hetero and homosexuality than it was once seen as. When the terms for homosexuality entered the English language and when studies and research were being made on the subject, people not conforming to the traditional heterosexuality received a voice and an understanding of their identity which continued to develop throughout the twentieth century.

### 3. Class

#### 3.1. *Brideshead Revisited*

The portrayal of the upper classes in *Brideshead Revisited* differs from that in *The Secret History*. There is no form of elite society distinguished by intellect, but instead Charles Ryder seems to be fascinated with the beauty, extravagance and wealth of Sebastian Flyte and his friends and family. Charles’ scholarly ambitions are put aside when he befriends these people and later he completely discards the academic life and pursues a life as a painter.

Charles meets Sebastian by accident and is then invited into the society of the wealthy at Oxford. He admits to himself: “I was in search of love in those days, and I went full of curiosity and the faint, unrecognized apprehension that here, at last, I should find that low door in the wall, which others, I knew, had found before me, which opened on an enclosed and enchanted garden” (Waugh 33). He finds this place in the life of Sebastian and in the class to which

Sebastian belongs. Charles becomes infatuated with the beauty of the surroundings and interior of the world of the upper classes, the abundance of expensive wine and cigars and the exclusive circle of people. He has been chosen by Sebastian to be included and lets himself be guided by Sebastian through the world of the aristocracy, a world he himself has never been a part of but is now invited into. Charles becomes Sebastian's protégé when he is invited to become his friend. Sebastian pays for their vacations, supports him financially when they spend their breaks from school at the Brideshead castle, Sebastian's family home, and lets Charles feel what it is like to be a part of another class.

Sebastian is portrayed as a flamboyant character and together with his friend Anthony Blanche, who Charles describes as being the 'aesthete' of Oxford, they lead a decadent lifestyle and are both part of the aesthetes of the fin de siècle. Showalter argues that the decadents were "challenging the institution of marriage and blurring the borders between the sexes" (*Sexual Anarchy* 169), and that the aesthetes were a part of the sexual anarchy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Showalter describes a movement which occurred a few decades before Sebastian and Anthony's time at Oxford, it is still possible to argue that the decadent lifestyle of the aesthetes of the fin de siècle continued into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that Sebastian and Anthony were a part of it. When first introduced in the novel, Sebastian is described as both beautiful and eccentric as he carries a teddy bear called Aloysius: "he was the most conspicuous man of his year by reason of his beauty, which was arresting, and his eccentricities of behaviour, which seemed to know no bound." (Waugh 30) Anthony Blanche as well is seen as eccentric and dramatic with his striking outfits, stuttering speech and "high peacock tread" (Waugh 35). Their decadence gives the impression that they are able to be eccentric, to defy gender norms and break sexual boundaries because they both belong to the aristocracy. Because of their position in society, their financial wealth, and their beauty, they are so assured of their status that they don't have to prove their masculinity.

The upper class in *Brideshead Revisited* is depicted as a beautiful and extravagant scene, and intellect does not appear to be of as much importance as in *The Secret History*. Instead it seems as if in the novel and in the upper class, masculinity is undermined and not seen as a significant trait as it would in the working class. Sebastian and his friend Anthony are eccentric and almost effeminate which suggests that they are able to counter gender stereotypes and norms because their positions in the class system are so rooted and definite that they do not need to manifest themselves as particularly masculine.

When at Oxford, Sebastian and Charles see themselves as equal, there are no indications that Charles is treated in any way different by Sebastian because of their different backgrounds.

But Oxford is treated differently by them. For Charles, Oxford is a way for him to enter into the upper class of society, while for Sebastian, it is a way for him to escape his normal life. Sebastian lives out his innermost desires at Oxford together with Charles, but when he is interrupted by his family and forced to leave university he deteriorates, he seeks happiness in alcohol and tries to hold on to something which his mother and family have taken away from him in their attempt to control him and make him a respectable member of society. The following extract shows how Charles describes Sebastian's life at Oxford as him travelling the oceans on a ship, free and blissful:

His constant, despairing prayer was to be let alone. By the blue waters and rustling palms of his own mind he was happy and harmless as a Polynesian; only when the big ship dropped anchor beyond the coral reef, and the cutter beached in the lagoon, and, up the slope that had never known the print of a boot, there trod the grim invasion of trader, administrator, missionary, and tourist – only then was it time to disinter the archaic weapons of the tribe and sound the drums in the hills; or, more easily, to turn from the sunlit door and lie alone in the darkness, where the impotent, painted deities paraded the walls in vain, and cough his heart out among the rum bottles. (Waugh 149)

Charles continues to describe Sebastian's emotions when he returns to the port, or the Brideshead castle, that Sebastian loses that happiness and freedom he felt at Oxford, which later results in him fleeing his own family and move to a monastery in Tunis. In contrast with Sebastian's fate, Charles's life outside Oxford is a continuation on what Sebastian had created for him. He becomes a part of Sebastian's family, and it is when Charles feels closer to Brideshead than Sebastian that they break the relationship they once had. Rossen argues that while Sebastian tries to flee from Brideshead, Charles is completely infatuated with it and that "[w]hen their friendship begins to revolve around Brideshead, rather than Oxford, it starts to dissolve because Sebastian can no longer escape into the alternate world of the University" (Rossen 103). When escaping the microcosm of university, the ability to lose oneself in another person was demolished for both Charles and Sebastian. Charles continues to feel the infatuation with the upper class and the world he found at Brideshead Castle and it is Charles who is able to continue that life when, in contrast, Sebastian continues to try and escape that life.

### 3.2. *The Secret History*

The college depicted in *The Secret History* is described as a closed off and isolated place and the outside worlds feel distant and abstract in comparison to the campus which is completely surrounded by the Vermont countryside. Not only is the outside distant in the physical sense but it is also distant and almost excluded from the novel itself. The characters rarely interact with the world outside the small town and it is not until after the years at college that they step outside the isolated college. This results in the perception that the setting of the novel, and the college itself, is its own universe or microcosm. Elaine Showalter describes the setting of many academic novels as “a society with its own rules and traditions, cut off from the outside world, a snug, womblike, and, for some, suffocating world” (*Faculty Towers* 14). If Hampden College can be seen as a place with its own rules and traditions, would that mean that there are, in this universe, also a specific hierarchy and a class system for that place?

When Richard arrives at Hampden College and befriends the other Greek students he tries to blend in with these people which results in him hiding his background and trying to make them believe that he comes from another social class than he actually does. In the beginning of the novel, he describes his background and life in California as a something he is not proud of, a background which he can shed as a layer of skin when he arrives on the east coast and he says: “My years [in California] created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. [...] On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers.” (Tartt 7). And this fabrication of his past is something he continues to do and it is especially noticeable when he meets the Greek students who predominantly belong to a higher social class than himself. Not only do they belong to the upper classes in terms of money and wealth, but also in terms of their backgrounds, the families they descend from, their beauty which Richard admires and often comments on, and intelligence – Henry is seen as a linguistic genius and the others are admired for their knowledge of classical Greek and scholarly ambitions.

The character Bunny, or Edmund Corcoran, differs from the other of the Greek students in the way that he is not portrayed as either intelligent or beautiful, but instead he is depicted as rather annoying and somewhat a stereotype of the upper classes. He calls his friends “old man”, talks loudly about his family which he is very proud of, invites Richard out for extravagant lunches and talks about the wealth of Henry’s family as something less valuable because it was not inherited: “Family’s got money like you wouldn’t believe. Millions and millions. Course it’s about as new as it comes, but a buck’s a buck, know what I mean?” (Tartt 53). For Bunny,

the family name is worth more than actual money when it comes to class, at least when he compares himself with Henry, a man who does not have the same form of important blood line as Bunny. In reality, Bunny does not have any money at all – but he still acts as if he does. He lives off the people in his circle of friends and especially Henry who tells Richard: “Frankly, [...] no matter what Bunny tells you to the contrary, he hasn’t a cent and neither does his father. [...] They may look wealthy, but they haven’t a dime. I expect Mr. Corcoran is about bankrupt.” (Tartt 128) But it is not to say that money is the single denominator when it comes to determine class or social status. Bunny’s family background and education in a class perspective are equally valuable as having money and he himself argues that Henry’s lack of heritage is something that differentiates him from Bunny. But Bunny refuses to admit that he is not wealthy in terms of money, something that indicates that he still believes that he would lose his social status if that fact would no longer be a secret. It is also possible that Bunny’s refusal to change his way of living is connected to a form of pride, and that his social status is greatly connected to both his heritage and his way of living. By having expensive taste in clothes and food and by being sent to expensive and reputable boarding schools, Bunny assures his position in the upper class and maintains the façade that conveys his social status. Although he still is a member of the upper class when it comes to background and education, losing his wealth, or the illusion of it, would mean losing his pride.

It is not only the money Richard admires when he envies the other Greek students, but rather their self-possession and poise – at least when he observes them from a distance and speaks of them: “they were an interesting party – at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities.” (Tartt 17) Their wealth is rarely mentioned before Richard befriends them and even after that it is more of a casual fact than an important trait that could possibly change Richard’s perception of them. The quality that Richard values more than money is the intellect of the Greek students, and arguably that is the reason why he is so interested in joining this exclusive group of people. If Richard sees them as members of the upper classes but at the same time sees intellect and knowledge of Ancient Greek as qualities which make them upper class, then it is possible for him to acquire these qualities and be a part of that social class.

Richard tries desperately to blend in and to become a part of this other side of the social class spectrum and does so by hiding his background. He dresses in clothes that is not his usual choice and hides the sides of his life that do not match the façade he wants to maintain – the façade that shows the same form of self-possession that the other Greek student convey. Parts of Richard’s attempts to blend are connected to the dream of being able to become someone

else when you move to a place where no one knows who you are. But it is also to be connected to the feeling Richard has that this is a group of people who are completely unapproachable. They are an isolated and exclusive group of people who he wants to be included in and in order to achieve this and to be accepted he believes he *has* to be someone else. It is for this reason that he goes to extreme lengths to hide his background and especially his economic situation. He refuses to tell anyone about his living conditions during the winter break – living conditions that almost kill him after a severe case of pneumonia: “Partly because I did not wish to be burdened with anyone’s pity or contempt, I concealed the true circumstances of my stay [...] I had decided to stay alone in Hampden (at an unspecified location) and work on my Greek, spurning, in my pride, their craven offers of financial help.” (Tartt 106). This alleged self-made decision to stay behind and study is met with impressed comments rather than worry or pity from his friends. To them, choosing this kind of intellectual activity is more admirable than to travel and enjoy oneself.

The Greek students appear to believe that they are superior to the rest of the college and that they are the elite because of their intellect, wealth and beauty. They are not arrogant per se, but they are aware of their status. By believing they are superior they seem to deconstruct their sense of morals and ethics. They seem to be a part of the decadence and aesthetics which Showalter associates with the *fin de siècle*, a movement that refused to live after traditional and conservative norms and defied social structures and boundaries and instead sought to “live in the experience of the moment, to seek the ‘new, the rare, the refined.’” (Pierrot qtd. in Showalter *Sexual Anarchy*, 169-70) There is a search for beauty in art and intellect and this is what the Greek students long for and they seem to find it in the Greek culture. However, during the strive for decadence and the strive for superiority in terms of intellect and aesthetics, they lose the sense of understanding the consequences. The Greek students kill a man during a Dionysian ritual, a ritual which Henry describes as a way “to loose one’s self, lose it utterly. And in losing it be born to the principle of continuous life, outside the prison of mortality and time” (Tartt 164). They have killed a man and their reactions afterwards are not those of grief, guilt and disgust but rather indifference:

‘It’s a terrible thing, what we did,’ said Francis abruptly. ‘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.’

Francis snorted and poured himself another shot of whisky and drank it straight off. 'No,' he said. 'Not that bad.' (Tartt 197)

Their worst fear is that they might be caught and sent to jail. In their minds, the murder is what separates them from the rest of the world. Their successful Dionysian ritual is what makes them exceptional. Its success is a confirmation of their intellect, that they could perform something no one had been able to do for centuries. It seems as if their feelings of exclusivity and superiority but also that they are members of the upper class lead to them believing that there are no consequences to their crimes. In the wake of the first murder, their reaction is to simply flee the country and technically they would be able to do so because of their financial wealth and position in society, but in reality they stay in Vermont which results in the later murder of their friend Bunny.

Richard's choice to help them, to cover for them and to finally be a part of the killing of Bunny, and his realization that he does not care about them killing someone shows how much he admires them: "It doesn't matter.' I said this without thinking, but as soon as I had, I realized, with something of a jolt, that it was true; it really didn't matter that much, at least not in the preconceived way that one would expect." (Tartt 173) – when simultaneously he believes there is nothing he actually has in common with them. He tries to define what he sees in the Greek students and especially Henry: "there is no doubt that Henry was so confident of his own abilities and position in the world, and so comfortable with them, that he had the strange effect of making others (including myself) feel comfortable in their respective, lesser positions, whatever they might happen to be. Poor people for the most part were unimpressed by his manner, except in the most hazy and admiring fashion [...]" (Tartt 210). Richard is constantly aware of his position in relation to the Greek students, being from a different social class and being a form of an outsider, but he also seems comfortable in that position by feeling included in their small, elitist and exclusive part of the world.

## 4. Gender and Sexuality

### 4.1. *Brideshead Revisited*

Unlike *The Secret History*, *Brideshead Revisited* is not a college novel as such. It is divided into three parts and only one of these focuses on Charles' and Sebastian's time at Oxford University. However, it is during this time that Charles meets Sebastian and develops the

relationship which constructs foundation on which the rest of the novel is based upon – a relationship which is constantly present and important in Charles’ development as a character. Janice Rossen describes the university in *Brideshead Revisited* “as a symbol of youthful arcadia, where a unique place and time intersect to provide [its] heroes with a spiritual rebirth of such magnitude that it continues throughout the rest of their lives” (93). Charles Ryder describes his time at Oxford as a form of paradise and his reason for perceiving it as such would be his friendship with Sebastian Flyte – “It was my third term since matriculation, but I date my Oxford life from my first meeting with Sebastian, which had happened, by chance, in the middle of the term before.” (Waugh 25). It seems that in *Brideshead Revisited*, as well as in *The Secret History*, the university acts as a space in time when the characters can indulge in that which is not accepted by society – Charles’ love for Sebastian, conceivably homosocial or sexual, seems to dissolve once they leave that haven which university is described to be.

There is evidently a form of love between Charles and Sebastian. Charles says:

that summer term with Sebastian, it seemed as though I was being given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood, and though its toys were silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars and its naughtiness high in the catalogue of sins, there was something of nursery freshness about us that fell little short of the joy of innocence [...]. [T]hat to know, and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom.” (Waugh 50)

This seems to indicate that there is some form of relationship between the two characters, though not specifically sexual. Tison Pugh argues that “Charles and Sebastian’s relationship can best be understood as a romantic friendship” and that “[r]omantic friendships were common in the sex-segregated societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (65). What Pugh means is that “despite the physical attraction between the two men, they might not identify as even sympathetic to same-sex desire.” (Pugh 65). As a continuation on this argument, David Leon Higdon claims that “the characters’ tie is homosocial, that Charles is homoerotically attracted to Sebastian, and that their relationship is homosexual, though perhaps not sexually active” (83). Although either reading is possible, it seems evident that there is a relationship between Charles and Sebastian that can be viewed as at least homosocial. Charles often describes Sebastian with words one would associate with someone describing their lover: “He was entrancing, with that epicene beauty of which in extreme youth sings aloud for love and withers at the first cold wind” (Waugh 33–4). They both isolate themselves from the rest of the world and only enjoy each others company, they plan on moving in together and Charles “had

no mind then for anything except Sebastian” (Waugh 148). This implies that there is an intimate relationship between the two men.

While the relationship between Charles and Sebastian is never explicitly homosexual and homosexuality in general is throughout the novel rarely overtly spoken about, heterosexual relations are much more explicitly talked about. Especially Charles’ love for Julia, Sebastian’s sister, is often spoken of in sexual terms. He meets her for the first time when she drives him from the train station to Brideshead, Sebastian’s family home, and when he gives her a cigarette he says “I caught a thin bat’s squeak of sexuality, inaudible to any but me.” (Waugh 87). But as he describes Julia during this first encounter, he also calls attention to her similarities with her brother: “She so much resembled Sebastian that, sitting beside her in the gathering dusk, I was confused by the double illusion of familiarity and strangeness. Thus looking through strong lenses, one may watch a man approaching from afar, study every detail of his face and clothes, believe one has only to put a hand out to touch him” (Waugh 86). There is a similarity here to what Richard feels towards the twins in *The Secret History*, as Charles falls for both of the siblings, but during different times of his life. It is possible to say that during his time at Oxford, he is in a relationship with Sebastian because of that closed environment, because the atmosphere at the university gave him that possibility. In the novel, Sebastian’s father’s mistress even says: “I know of these romantic friendships of the English and the Germans. [...] I think they are very good if they do not go on too long.” (Waugh 117) and it seems that there is a general understanding that relationships between young men are common and accepted as long as they only take place in the male’s adolescence and dissolved once he reaches adulthood.

When Charles is removed from university he can no longer indulge in that form of sexuality and reaches out for something similar, but different. When Julia asks Charles, years later, if he was in love with Sebastian he answers “Oh yes. He was the forerunner.” (Waugh 307). This indicates that Sebastian, and the love Charles felt for him, was transformed into the love he later feels for Julia. However, he also states “I had not forgotten Sebastian. He was with me daily in Julia; or rather it was Julia I had known in him, in those distant Arcadian days.” (Waugh 362-3). Pugh argues that to label Charles as either homosexual or heterosexual is to ignore the fact that he himself perceives his subject for his love as interchangeable (70). This argument can be connected to how one can see sexuality as a spectrum and as something fluid. Charles seems to move freely between the binary oppositions of hetero and homosexuality without much effort, although it is possible that it has equally as much to do with how Charles sees Julia and Sebastian as interchangeable and that it is in fact Julia he was infatuated with when he first fell in love with Sebastian.

Charles' and Sebastian's relationship can be heavily connected to the idea of the 'Socratic eros' and that their love is based on personal development and education rather than romantic and sexual love. Charles' education at Oxford is, according to himself, foremost based on his friendship with Sebastian and it is through Sebastian's guidance that Charles evolves. It is by entering into Sebastian's world that Charles finds his passion in the arts and his position in the society. Janice Rossen argues that Charles "locates the source of much of his education in his friendship with Sebastian, claiming that he has learned more about art from Sebastian's intuitive approach than from the intellectual analyses of his first group of friends" (97). She also argues that Sebastian's role in Charles' life at Oxford is to provide sensual guidance. Charles compares the two forms of educations, the academic and the spiritual, and says: "I remember no syllable of [the texts] now, but the other, more ancient lore which I acquired that term will be with me in one shape or another to my last hour." (Waugh 50). This suggests that what Charles values in Sebastian and what remains with him during the time after Oxford is the development of identity which Sebastian was a major part of. Charles' life began when he met Sebastian and although the two men lose contact with each other and their relationship deteriorates after they leave Oxford, Sebastian is still a crucial influence in Charles' life and it is through Sebastian he discovers the arts, the beauty and love in life.

#### 4.2. *The Secret History*

*The Secret History* tells the story of Richard Papen's first year at college, the school in which Richard's life intertwines with the lives of the rich, beautiful and mysterious Classical Greek students – Henry, Francis, Camilla, Charles and Bunny. As mentioned before, Richard is a form of an outsider in the sense that he is not completely a part of the group of people he is fascinated with. From the beginning, and arguably throughout the novel, he stands on the edge, having full sight of what is happening within the social group and constantly admiring them from the outside, but he never quite takes the step off that edge and into the group.

Before he has met them, when he has only seen them walking around the campus he says, "I envied them, and found them attractive; moreover this strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated. [...] 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 31). But what are these qualities that Richard envies but also admires in the Greek students and how do they relate to the question of gender? What are the gender stereotypes in this novel and how do the character conform to these?

There seems to be within the group of Greek students, a resistance towards gender norms, although not in a sense that it is a conscious choice or a theatrical performance. Instead this occurs in the sense that these characters do not seem to conform to what the surrounding society would argue are stereotypically male, female or heterosexual. The characters' actions seem heavily dependent on their views on morality, ethics and sexuality which can be connected to their studies in Ancient Greek. Richard meets the Greek students while studying Classical Greek with them and their shared classes are also in some way what allow him to become friends with them – “I do not now nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except for a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life spent in their company.” (Tartt 9). It is also through their common interest in Greek and how that language, or the study of that language, affects them, that he gets to know these people:

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. It was why I admired Julian, and Henry in particular. Their reason, their very eyes and ears were fixed irrevocably in the confines of those stern and ancient rhythms– the world, in fact, was not their home, at least not the world as I knew it– and far from being occasional visitors to this land which I myself knew only as an admiring tourist, they were pretty much its permanent residents, as permanent as I suppose it was possible for them to be. Ancient Greek is a difficult language, a very difficult language indeed, and it is eminently possible to study in all one's life and never be able to speak a word. (Tartt 200–1)

As the characters are studying ancient Greek they seem to become a part of that world and the language itself seems to affect their perception of the world around them. It is possible to argue that gender stereotypes and sexuality in *The Secret History*, and especially within the group of Greek students, would heavily be affected by the culture of the language they study. Judith Butler claims that “what gender ‘is’, is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.” (Butler 10). This would mean that gender and how gender is constructed is always in relation to culture, history and context and that the culture of ancient Greece is so present in the language that the students conforms to the norms of that culture in contrast to the norms of the world in which they in reality are. The fluidity of sexuality and same sex relations which

can be found in ancient Greece is something they all adopt in their own perception of norms and social structures.

The turning point of the story is when Richard finds out about the murder committed during a Greek Dionysian ritual, an act which strongly suggests how influenced the Greek students are by the subject which they study. It shows how it separates them from the rest of the college, how it affects them in their beliefs that they are a part of that culture and ancient world. Their feelings of belonging to the ancient Greek culture also shows through their sexual relations, the most explicit one being the relationship between the twins Camilla and Charles Macaulay. It is an incestuous relationship which is at first only hinted at through almost too intimate touches between the siblings, comments dropped by people around them and then slowly uncovered through drunken kisses and caresses in public situations and then almost completely confirmed by Francis when Richard asks him. Richard was fascinated with the twins “because there was something a tiny bit inexplicable about them, something I was often on the verge of grasping but never quite did” (Tartt 224). The twins’ sexual relations are later affirmed by Francis and that relation is then not talked of in disgust or seen as perverse by either Francis or Richard, but rather as a casual fact and as something erotic – “the thought of them together brought, along with the predictable twinges of envy, scruple, surprise, another very much sharper one of excitement” (Tartt 455). In their essay on incest in literature, Lydia Kokkola and Elina Valovirta argue that the incest in *The Secret History* “alludes to Greek myths which underlie the plot” (129), that it contributes to the atmosphere of moral degeneration which is constant through the novel, but also that it separates them, the twins along with the Greek students, from the community surrounding them, and contributes to the perception of the campus being its own universe.

Richard falls in love with Camilla but he never takes the step of confessing this love. There seems to be something that restrains him from doing so. Instead he admires her from a distance and at the same time compares her to her brother Charles: “she looked so much like her brother, yet his straightforward, uncompromising good looks were almost magical when repeated, with only slight variations, in her. She was a living reverie for me: the mere sight of her sparked an almost infinite range of fantasy, from Greek to Gothic, from vulgar to divine.” (Tartt 97). He describes both of them as a form of enigma, which can be connected to their intimate and close relationship as twins, but it can also be connected to Richard’s feelings that there is a mystery surrounding them and his constant feeling that there is something happening which is impossible for him to actually determine what it is. The twins are often seen as the same person or a collective. Richard portrays them as a united entity, calls them ‘the twins’

when he mentions them and often sees the other in one of them. As he falls for Camilla and feels unable to express it, he lets himself get close to her brother as a form of substitute as he says:

Camilla I was the fondest of, but as much as I enjoyed her company I was slightly uneasy in her presence; not because of any lack of charm or kindness on her part, but because of a too-strong wish to impress her on mine. Though I looked forward to seeing her, and thought of her anxiously and often, I was more comfortable with Charles. He was a lot like his sister, impulsive and generous, but more moody; and though he sometimes had long gloomy spells, he was very talkative when not suffering from these. (Tartt 86)

The Greek students are not only divided from the rest of the college through the knowledge of Greek and the incestuous relationship between the twins, but also through other sexual relations within the circle of friends. There is an underlying sexual tension within the members of the group which is enhanced when Richard comments that the Dionysian ritual is in reality a sexual ritual – a comment only answered with an “Of course, [you] know that as well as I do” by Henry (Tartt 168). It seems that if gender is fluid and socially constructed, then sexuality can be fluid as well. Smith-Rosenberg claims that “we view sexual and emotional impulses as a part of a continuum or spectrum of affect gradations strongly affected by cultural norms and arrangements” (qtd. in Rotundo 9) and within the group of Greek students, there is not a question of either or, but instead sexuality is unstable and accepted as a spectrum instead of a binary system.

The only character who acts according to the male stereotype and follows a patriarchal structure is Bunny who according to Richard dislikes women, objectifies them and treats them as if they were below him on a social scale. Bunny also seems to have difficulties accepting homosexuality. He rarely socializes with Francis, the only character being openly homosexual. Bunny loudly proclaims to Richard during their first lunch that “there’s nothing I hate like I hate an officious fag, [...] [y]ou ask me, I think they ought to round them all up and burn them at the stakes” (Tartt 54). It is also Bunny who is murdered by those who were supposed to be his closest friends. It is Bunny who is pushed off the edge of a cliff because of his friends’ paranoia that he might tell someone that they killed an innocent farmer. It is almost as if he, with his conservative views and misogynistic behaviours, personifies the abnormality and is to be punished for it in the same way differing sexualities were criminalized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Richard claims that the reason Bunny was killed, in addition to the feeling of paranoia he

produced in his friends' minds, was because of the constant "[i]nsults, innuendos, petty cruelties. The hundreds of small, unavenged humiliations which had been rising in me for months. [...] It was because of them that I was able to watch him at all, without the slightest tinge of pity or regret, as he teetered on the cliff's edge [...] before he toppled backwards, and fell to his death." (Tartt 227). It suggests that Bunny was slowly being excluded from the Greek students' group not only because he was being a threat to their freedom but, in addition, because of his differing views on social structures and his constant sexist comments towards Camilla and his homophobia towards Francis.

## 5. Conclusion

In these two novels, the upper classes of both England and USA are depicted as an elite society and an exclusive group to be a part of. Both Richard and Charles feel as if they have been personally chosen to be included and discover they've become infatuated with the upper class world. They both fall in love with people around them and the world they are invited into.

The upper classes are presented in different ways. In *The Secret History*, high class can be associated with intellect and to be separated from the rest of society through not only wealth but through knowledge, culture and education – the Greek students see themselves as superior to the rest of the college because of the exclusivity and decadence of the Greek language. This also results in a form of moral degeneration and their inability to feel concrete remorse and guilt even after they have committed brutal crimes. They include Richard in their social group primarily because he is a part of the Greek class, but also because he seems to be admiring them in such way that he is even willing to be a part of the murder of Bunny to save them from going to jail.

In both novels the university and college act as safe havens and isolated places where the characters can go against the norms of society. Within in the upper class, gender norms are somewhat defied which leads to incestuous relationships, interchangeable love and homoerotic friendships which are not questioned but instead accepted or seen as normality. But when the characters leave the microcosm of the academic world, they begin to conform to the norms of society. Charles Ryder's friendship with Sebastian falls apart when they leave Oxford, primarily due to the fact that the family at Brideshead disapprove of their decadent lifestyle at university, but also because the two are unable to continue something that only seems acceptable during their adolescence and youth. However, Charles continues to be a part of the

aristocracy even after he loses Sebastian and this indicates that even though he loved Sebastian, he was more in love with the world Sebastian belonged to than the man he met at Oxford.

Similarly, in *The Secret History*, when the group leaves college, the enchantment which had lingered over the campus grounds breaks and Richard no longer feels the infatuation with the Greek students that he had once felt. It is as if once he returns to the outside world he can look back on what had happened, how he had acted and what he had been a part of and though parts of it lives with him, most of it can be discarded and left behind. He leaves the enchantment of youth and by doing so, those values and norms. Richard seems to have become infatuated with the persons rather than the class they belong to. Though much of this admiration is based on the mystery and beauty surrounding the Greek students which is connected to them being upper class, and this is what draws him in, ultimately it is the people he feels affection towards and not so much the upper class. Though he himself is ashamed of his own background, he still sees flaws in how the Greek students carry themselves in relation to the world surrounding them.

In both of these novels the characters deconstruct norms and act against stereotypes of gender and sexuality and it appears to be a result of the fact that they belong or are invited into to the upper classes. Richard and Charles fall in love with that world and the people belonging to it, but at the same time that love seems effortless to reject as they both renounce the love they felt at university or college after they leave the enclosed environment. While Richard leaves the Greek students completely and shed the life he led at Hampden college as a layer of skin, Charles loses Sebastian but continues to live the same life Sebastian had once lived, a life in the upper class of British society.

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