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Aspects of Control in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

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Abstract

In literature there is a great variety of detective novels and *The Secret History* is one that presents the whydunnit-plot pattern, as the murderers are exposed early on. Another extensive part of *The Secret History* is its connection to Greek tragedies and Dionysian influences. Therefore these are considered and part of the formulation of this paper. I aim to establish 'control' as a unifying theme in the novel and to present it as an answer to the whydunnit by contending that it is a struggle for control that ends up with the murder of Bunny. I search for different aspects of control in relation to the text with inspiration from New Criticism. By presenting the New Critical theory, examining plot patterns and the structure of the novel, together with symbols, images, and character engagement with control, I cover different aspects of the theme in *The Secret History*. This interpretation proposes that the struggle with the idea of control, rather than the complete lack of it, is the answer to the why of the plot pattern. However, much emphasis is put on the psychological aspect of the characters, something that works in favor both when discussing the why, but also the aftermath of the murders in the novel.

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1. Introduction

It is hard to pinpoint what exactly *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt is about. It is a college novel, no doubt. It is a story of friendship and love, but the novel is also about destructive relationships and the intriguing Greek culture. Above all that it is, perhaps most prominently, a murder mystery. However, *The Secret History* is a murder mystery of a different kind. Ignoring the unwritten rules of detective stories, Tartt chooses to present the reader with the guilty murderer(s) already in the prologue. This eliminates the mystery of the question *who?* and instead leads to the question *why?* In this essay I will contend that it is a struggle for control, and the fear of losing it, that eventually spirals out of hand and ends up with the murder of Bunny Corcoran.

The object of this essay is to map out the theme of control in *The Secret History*, as a recurring and subtle theme throughout the novel and to argue for that theme being one answer to the question *why*. This interpretation will be supported by a New Critical approach, thus excluding outward influences and maintaining a focus on the text, by letting the text speak for itself and following patterns and symbols throughout the novel. As well as discussing symbols and patterns in the text, I will look closely at how the novel is constructed through plot and narrative. Together these two focus areas will provide an overview of the novel whilst covering different aspects of control in it. Drawing from New Criticism will deepen my analysis and enable me to focus on the theme of control as something reoccurring and systematic in the text. As much as the theory enables a depth of analysis, however, it does also exclude certain interesting aspects. Therefore I have decided to include a few key-points even though they do not follow an unmitigated New Critical approach. For example, I have chosen to include some theories about the Nietzschean influences in *The Secret History* as I find them closely connected to the idea of control in the text.

Nietzsche claimed that a great tragedy is to be defined by the element of contradiction between Apollonian and Dionysian influences (14). *The Secret History* is undoubtedly a tribute to the classic Greek culture, with the text full of citations and references to it, and therefore Nietzsche's ideas are to some extent a part of the formulation of this paper. By drawing on the idea of Apollonian control and Dionysian chaos being a formula for tragedy, the theme of control in this novel is strengthened. However, it might not be as simple as saying that control versus chaos is presented in *The Secret History*. I would instead argue that it is rather the idea of having control that ultimately is the creator of the chaos. From this point of view, chaos is

born out of different aspects of control rather than working as an antithesis to it. This can be seen in the novel in the destructive relationships and power struggles between the characters. For instance, as Hanna Mäkelä points out in her analysis “Horizontal Rivalry, Vertical Transcendence”, “[Henry and Richard] are, like Nietzsche, clinging on to a sacrificial existence, even though the very fact of their mutual rivalry signals the end of the sacrificial status quo that has always sought to contain violence, not unleash it” (182). The point is that as Henry and Richard are under the illusion of control with the intention of maintaining it, they are in fact losing it and instead admitting an opening for uncontrolled chaos and violence to erupt.

2. Theoretical Background

New Criticism has been developed by a range of influential critics, including I.A. Richards, T.S. Elliot, John Crowe Ransom, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. However, in this essay, I have deliberately chosen to focus on New Criticism as a whole instead of drawing from a particular critic or a specific branch of the theory. One reason for this is the format of my chosen text: New Critical theorists tended to focus on poems rather than novels, which would have altered the approach to *The Secret History*. Another reason is the limitations the theory presents in respect of not being able to draw from, for example, Nietzsche’s ideas, since they are present in *The Secret History* only by indirect references rather than openly engaged with. So by doing an analysis based generally on ideas from New Criticism, the frame for the analysis becomes less strict and more flexible.

New Criticism is a literary theory with a clear focus: the text itself. The existing literature on New Criticism is extensive and focuses particularly on the independent value of the text. Doing a close reading of a text to better grasp it is not an idea for which the New Critics can take complete credit, but they did refine the method and developed it further with an emphasis on regarding text as something self-contained and autonomous, without the need to consider for instance biographical or historical contexts. (Castle 122). In her introduction to literary theory, Lois Tyson identifies today’s New Criticism as different from many other literary theories, as it is “no longer practiced by literary critics” (129). However, so many of the ideas sprung from New Criticism have been incorporated in the way that critics and scholars read today that it can still be called contemporary: “some of the most important concepts concerning the nature and importance of textual evidence – the use of concrete, specific

examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations – have been incorporated into the way most literary critics today [...] support their readings of literature.” (Tyson 129).

New Criticism arose in part as a reaction to the experimental, Modernist literature that developed after the Great War, which could not be judged in relation to traditional forms (Castle 122). The theory reached its peak in teachings during the 1940s and the two decades after (Tyson 129). Connected to the way the theory developed, New Criticism has been subject to some critique on a few points, mainly on the point of a clash between theory and practice. Akman Beazit and Akman Filiz Barin bring this up and observes that this seemingly achievable form of criticism is not as available for all as it is perceived to be, because it requires a certain amount of necessary educational background (707). New Critical theory has been called “elitist, hyperformalist, and escapist” (Timberman Newcomb 530), based on this educational exclusiveness, and on the way the critics were selective even amongst literature, by strongly favoring poetry (Akman & Akman 716). This critique goes against the availability and autonomous idea New Criticism wished to represent in the world of literary criticism. When practice proved that you did in fact require more education and information than provided by the text alone, it opposes the idea of the theory. Despite that critique, I decided to apply New Criticism to *The Secret History* because I found the idea to ‘unravel’ and ‘solve’ the novel by maintaining focus on the novel itself intriguing, and it gave me both a different and a deeper understanding of the story. By tracing symbols and themes in the novel with the specific goal of looking for engagements with control, my reading became closer in that I paid more attention to details that I had missed before.

The take on New Criticism varies and it developed into various approaches. However Gregory Castle sums up the different factions by saying: “It is less a coherent literary theory than a congeries of critical and theoretical approaches all of which agree that the literary work is autonomous” (122) and “that it is free from any burden of reflection on the social world in which it is produced or from any connection to the author who produced it.” (122). Furthermore, Steven Lynn presents the most unifying elements of analyzing a text in a New Critical way as tracing and using irony, ambiguity, paradox and tension by saying that the terms have different meanings, but the point is that, together they form a complexity and a unity of the text (46). For New Critics, irony in a text is not limited to the definition where something is said only to imply the opposite, but can include different perceptions and perspectives of a character. For instance, in *The Secret History*, one such irony is found in the character Bunny. Throughout the novel one may judge and dislike him, but also forgive him and sympathize with him. It is all depending on the description of his character, as an annoying, obnoxious freeloader, but also

due to the reasons of his behavior, such as his financial problems or how he is slowly excluded from his group of friends. It is a matter of viewpoint and portrayal in the text and “[s]uch a variety of possible viewpoints is considered a form of irony because the credibility of each viewpoint undermines to some extent the credibility of others.” (Tyson 133). In literary texts, ambiguity offers a complexity and a depth by generating more than one meaning (Tyson 133). Richard’s and Henry’s relationship in *The Secret History* is ambiguous in the sense that they are both friends and rivals at the same time. Paradoxes, on the other hand, are self-contradictory statements that still present the actual truth (Tyson 132). In *The Secret History*, control is such a self-contradicting idea, because the characters act as if they are striving for control, but the paradox is that when doing so, they act with total loss of control instead. Finally, the creation of tension is much based on the interaction between the irony, ambiguities and paradoxes and it is a mesh between the tangible and intangible, and between a symbolical- and physical reality (Tyson 134).

While the text itself is the main focus for New Critics “the author’s intention or the reader’s response is sometimes mentioned in New Critical readings of literary texts” (Tyson 131) as well. This is most often done when speaking of the two concepts of the intentional- and the affective fallacy. Wimsatt and Beardsley introduces these concepts as “two fundamental errors in contemporary theory” (qtd. in Castle 127). The intentional fallacy “refers to the common assumption that the meaning of a work corresponds with the authors intentions” (127). By presenting this, they emphasize how authors’ intentions with their writing are irrelevant in order to judge a work’s value. The affective fallacy points to a confusion between the reader’s result and the work itself, meaning that a text is isolated from any kind of reaction from the reader and exists only as itself, not as something to instigate a result from the reader (127). In other words, it is a confusion between outward influences and the text itself, something which Lynn notes when he speaks of the fallacies and further explains their separate meanings. The intentional fallacy points to confusing a text with its origin, while the other, the affective fallacy, is a confusion between the text and the result of that text (Lynn 43). Both of these misconceptions are easily made and can alter the analysis of a text completely. These fallacies are not entirely useless however, if they can be connected to any of the formal elements in the text they make for interesting objects for comparison. The point is not to be tainted by either outward nor inward influences and to maintain the focus on the text itself (Tyson 131).

3. Narrative and Plot

The Secret History is a novel about a group of friends at a college in Vermont. There they study Greek in a secluded group led by professor Julian Morrow. During an attempted bacchanalian rite, inspired by their Greek studies, Henry, the leader of the group, accidentally kills a man. When Bunny, who was not present, learns this, he takes advantage of the situation by teasing and blackmailing his friends. After a while, the rest of the group gets fed up and decides to kill Bunny, seeing it as their only solution, and they do so by pushing him off a cliff. However, the aftermath of the calculated murder weighs more heavily on them than they had imagined, and the pressure of it makes them lose control entirely. One kills himself, another tries to do the same, the third becomes an alcoholic, and the fourth shuts herself off in grief and sadness. Only Richard finishes school and lives on in an ordinary sense, and he is also the one to retell this story.

Although *The Secret History* is not a regular detective story, it still carries the main ingredients for detective fiction, namely secrecy and suspense. In Bennet and Royle's introduction to literary theory they suggest:

[t]he most obvious example of enigma in the context of literary narratives [to be] the whodunnit detective story: the question 'whodunnit?' forms the central enigma of the text and the hermeneutic code involves 'the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed' (Barthes 1990b, 19 qtd. in Bennet & Royle 241).

By removing this common whodunnit-plot, Tartt replaced it with a similar central enigma which could follow the same terms plot-wise. When, as a reader, you already know who has committed a murder, or in this novel the two murders, the clues to look for will not indicate the who, but rather the why. The whydunnit-plot incorporates another psychological aspect and puts emphasis on motive and reasoning between the revealed perpetrators. The psychological strain on the characters is used by Tartt to create suspense in the novel, and she stretches out the clues and always leaves the reader wanting more:

Tartt handles suspense with care. In one well-paced episode, Richard waits interminably for Morrow to flip over a piece of stationery and discover a vital clue. This scene not only slyly parodies its own page-turning momentum but also adequately summarizes Tartt's method: the brisk pace of dialogue and description clashes with delayed gratification of the reader's desire (Star 48)

This pattern of stretching her plot in order to present a delayed gratification has been criticized by those who did not experience the gratification of postponement, but instead met with disappointment. James Shell criticizes Tartt for the way she “seems to be letting her characters (and herself) off rather easily” (Shell). He refers to the loose strands in the plot, meaning that tension is built up skillfully by Tartt only to be followed by hasty endings, for example “neither of the two homicides that occur during the span of the book's narrative is ever resolved” (Shell). In order to connect his criticism with the text, Shell argues that “[...] nowhere is this better exemplified than in the character of Julian Morrow” (Shell). True, the charismatic and influential professor decides to just pack up and leave his students when they might have needed him the most, and this way of not living up to responsibilities is recurrent in the novel. The notion of irresponsibility is strengthened by the fact that Morrow seems to have known what his students were up to, he even claims this himself at one point: “But’ – he laughed- ‘I’m afraid my students are never very interesting to me because I always know exactly what they are going to do.’” (Tartt 29). He makes this claim, yet “[o]nce he learns the truth of the murders, Julian is disgusted by the lengths Henry has gone to in his pursuit of the Greek ideal supposedly shared by teacher and student alike” (Mäkelä 193-194). As the only prominent adult with a relationship to the students, together with his authoritative position as their teacher, Morrow is the most father-like character in the novel. However, he is not willing to be the responsible adult and acts only the role he finds befitting himself in every circumstance. As the text so clearly lacks a character who lives up to an authoritative position, it creates the sense not only of a lack of responsibility, but also opens up an invitation to see a lack of control in the narrative. With no adult or authoritative figure to take charge, the text presents an uncontrolled atmosphere, almost like a reference to *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954), and it reinforces the sense of a general lack of control for the characters.

Just as Morrow abandons his students after having secluded them from the rest of the college, there are no real consequences of the actions rendered in the novel more than the mere

psychological strain, which is more about the fear of getting caught than feeling guilty. The general lack of responsibility throughout the text is present, not only in a tangible aspect but, in the minds of the perpetrators: “What we did was terrible, but still I don’t think any of us were bad, exactly; chalk it up to weakness on my part, hubris on Henry’s, too much Greek prose composition – whatever you like” (Tartt 275). This tendency to not take responsibility coincide with the idea of not having control and it connects with the theme of Greek tragedies which Morrow praises and teaches. Morrow is not only abandoning the Greek-group and not securing control. He is also responsible for being the instigator who encourages the exploration of a darker side:

And it’s a temptation for any intelligent person, and especially for perfectionists such as the ancients and ourselves, to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self. But that is a mistake [...b]ecause it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he’s worked so hard to subdue. Otherwise those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, the more violent the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely. (Tartt 40-41)

Morrow has no problem leading his students down a dangerous path even though he is not willing to help them with the consequences: “the charismatic teacher is revealed as a false prophet, espousing a decidedly violent and aggressively individualist worldview” (Mäkelä 191). Morrow’s actions adds to the seclusion and independence of the Greek-group, and it works as an excuse for them not to take responsibility or control.

Richard Papen is often involved in the creation of suspense in *The Secret History*. In a way, Richard is the guide in the novel presenting the reader with the secrets and clues, and by using him as the voice of the novel Tartt secures a mean for mystery and the story is connected to his pace and discovery. In terms of narrator Richard is a classic first-person narrator who tells his story as though he has been standing on the outside looking in on the events he is retelling. The viewpoint of an outsider is effective when creating suspense and tension, and is common in college fiction (Lyons 73). In *The Secret History*, Richard mentions that his favorite

novel is *The Great Gatsby* and he makes a connection between himself and Gatsby: “I failed to see anything except what I construed as certain tragic similarities between Gatsby and myself” (Tartt 72). However, I would argue that he has more in common with another character in that novel, namely Nick Carraway. This connection was made by Michael Adams as well: “[H]e closely resembles Nick Carraway [...] who romanticizes everything that happens to him” (Adams). Both Richard and Nick are first-person narrators and they share the same viewpoint in respective stories, developing from feeling excluded to gradually taking part of both events and secrets. As the story progresses, so does their insight and understanding. In Richard’s case, he gradually becomes one with the group of people he started off watching from the outside, and this brings on an intimacy that gets him tangled up, not only with their friendship, but their secrets and wishes as well. This narration is effective in creating an atmosphere for the reader: it causes suspense and suggests that Richard is actually not in control, but rather just swept along in the story and getting mixed up with his new group of friends. Richard’s narrative is presented as a sort of confession or exposure of a secret past where he then seemed clueless, and he starts off with a suiting though about this:

Does such a thing as “the fatal flaw,” that showy dark crack running down the middle of a 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 7)

Richard’s new friends, the Greek-group, are indeed very picturesque and fit precisely into his imagined college experience. He even realizes this himself when looking at them “[a]t close range, though, they were an arresting 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). The story Richard tells is colored by his own thoughts and views, how he perceives people and tries “to make it seem something more, in short, than my own fatal tendency to try to make interesting people good” (Tartt 512). This tendency can be the key to Richard’s passiveness and reluctance to judge his friends, however bad the situations he finds them in are. He is portrayed as being controlled by his own romanticized version of reality, creating a dream-like world of his own, where murder and death can be glorified just like in the Greek tragedies.

To better describe the relationship between Apollonian and Dionysian influences, Nietzsche chose to describe them “as the separate art worlds of *dream* and *intoxication*, two psychological states which contrast similarly to the Apolline and Dionysiac“ (14). This

definition does not allow either state to inflict control without the other. A dream world, no matter the intensity, is still no more than an illusion (15) and the state in which one reaches the innermost core of oneself (17) is reached under the influence of intoxication. Control is part of the equation, only in the sense that the total loss of it creates a beautiful terror, a tragedy. “And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or own, than to lose control completely?” (Tartt 42), Julian tells his group of students, not then knowing just how terrifying the result was to become.

Dream and intoxication are two reoccurring themes in *The Secret History*, especially when it comes to Richard and Henry. When Richard describes his arrival at Hampden College he presents those days as having made him happier than ever before, when he was “roaming like a sleepwalker, stunned and drunk with beauty” (Tartt 13). This feeling of being stunned remains with him at times in the novel, being “[d]azed, half dreaming, not quite sure where I was” (Tartt 76), and “[a]fter class, I wandered downstairs in a dream, my head spinning, but acutely, achingly conscious that I was alive and young on a beautiful day” (42). Mäkelä observes how this dreamlike state is connected to Richard’s relation to Henry: “The novel’s ending scene that takes place in Richard’s dream world permeated by the obsessive secret of Henry’s death resembles the Old Testament motif of ‘valley of death’” (189). Richard meets Henry in his dreams, even after the suicide, and their relationship still affects him both in his sleep and when awake. Richard’s relationship with sleep is mentioned more than once, something Litzler points out in her analysis: “In fact, Richard always seems to be sleeping when anyone comes to see him, and just about every main character in the novel walks in on him sleeping at some point” (14). Almost every time he is awoken, something bad follows and Litzler’s interpretation of this is that sleep and the reoccurring awakenings work as a symbol of fear and anxiety with “a significant contribution to reader anxiety, as we come to anticipate what is usually a melodramatic snap into reality” (14). Sleep can also be argued to be the state in which you truly have no control and let go completely, and in that sense Richard would only be under the illusion of having control. That would strengthen his role as a narrating bystander who is drifting along in the story. However, in *The Secret History*, Richard’s sleeping and dreaming is used to create tension in the novel, rather than to present him as a character without control.

His association with dream and sleep identify Richard as a representative figure of the Apollonian dream-state in the text. As a contrast, to represent the Dionysiac intoxication, Henry is clearly the most driving factor in carrying out the Bacchanal which is the very manifestation of the intoxicated state. To have Richard and Henry as figures for the relation between

Apollonian and Dionysian influences enhances the idea of how a rivalry between the two is actually a cause for chaos. Mäkelä comments on the rivalry between Richard and Henry as “a kind of metaphysical apprenticeship, where the “master” and the “disciple” begin to mirror each other’s innermost desires” (Mäkelä 190). Between the two, Henry poses as the master and Richard as the disciple, something which does not change even when death separates them, as Henry “has placed his faith in the god of death, the Nietzschean Dionysus, and the deadly logic of mimetic rivalry that he is able to ignite in Richard even beyond the grave” (Mäkelä 189-190). However, the chaos in the novel is not caused by them working as opposite forces. Richard is more of a bystander, not at all involved in the first murder and though present, not an acting force in the second. His influence, his dream-state, is presented instead as both self-induced and only affecting himself, further indicating his role as a bystander without control.

4. Symbols and Imagery of Control

Although symbols and images presenting the dichotomy of good and bad are common in literature, and quite effective in creating tension and suspense, sometimes these symbols are more complicated than two opposite poles. In *The Secret History* there are several symbols and images to find, and the connection between them and control presents itself in different ways. One theme found through these symbols and images is a complicated version of the dichotomy between cold and warmth. Complicated, because one side is so much more prominent than the other. The symbols and images of cold are the most notable ones in the novel and seem to always appear in important scenes. Acting as an indicator of bad things to come, snow, cold, drafts, or rushing winds, are present in all situations connected with hurt, death and betrayal. Warmth, by comparison, tends to serve more as a way to contrast with and enhance the cold. Images of money and clothes also serves to reinforce the complexity of the relationships between the characters. This is especially true of the relationship between Bunny and Richard, victim and narrator, who share similar fortunes and expectations yet end up as opposites rather than likes. Control is a reasonable representation of this division and complexity, as Richard is in control of his situation while Bunny is not, and instead he preys on others to keep afloat.

At the very beginning of *The Secret History*, cold is presented as a symbol of mystery and death. Starting with an image of Bunny’s body buried in the snow: “for the snow that fell that night; it covered him without a trace, and ten days later, when the thaw finally came, [...]”

all saw that they had been walking back and forth over his body until the snow above it was packed down like ice” (Tartt 3). Symbolism of warmth and cold is central to the characterization of Richard as a narrator, as he seems to experience a constant choice between the two, where he always tend to choose cold. He comes from warm California, but is eager to leave and ends up at the much colder Vermont and Hampden College. Richard even decides that it is better for him to stay in Vermont during a freezing winter than going back to California. This choice of cold over warmth indicates the complexity of this particular dichotomy, where cold is symbolizing more appeal than the warmth, even though it is connected with death and suffering as well.

Coldness and snow are present during the first murder in the novel. When Henry retells the scene of what happened with that first murder to Richard he explains how they (the rest of the Greek-students, excluding Bunny) stressed about carrying out their Bacchanalian rite before it got to cold: “We were closer than we’d ever been, and every day counted; already it was terribly cold, and if it snowed, which it might have any day, we’d have had to wait till spring” (Tartt 166). They succeeded however, and when they sobered up a bit from their intoxication they found a dead man: “He was dead. [...] His neck was broken, and, unpleasant to say, his brains were all over his face” (Tartt 169). The imagery of cold weather was creeping up as an indicator or bad things to come, and made a suspenseful reveal in the text.

Snow and cold is definitely present when it comes to the second murder, Bunny’s, as well as the first. Beginning with the rise of tension and the statement: “It was getting darker by the minute and cold, too” (Tartt 267), the cold is there to create tension and suspense. After Bunny has been pushed over the edge and died, the rest of the group (same as before, including Richard) return to their car, and while Henry is trying to determine a shared story that will present them with alibies the others are quite concerned with such a seemingly trivial thing as the weather. “When we got back to the car it had not yet begun to snow, but already the woods shrank beneath the sky, hushed and waiting, as if they could sense the weight of the ice that would be on them by nightfall” (Tartt 278). The snow seems to represent a rising anxiety or a panic over what they have done and they are focusing more on the snow than Henry’s attempts to create a cover story of their whereabouts:

“Henry was silent for a moment, and he was about to speak when Francis suddenly pointed out the window. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘Is that *snow?*’

‘Look, you guys,’ Charles said. ‘It’s really snowing.’

'I've never seen it snow this late in the year.'" (Tartt 279-280).

Cold and chilliness indicate more than just murder and death, and are presented in more than one way in the text. Not just as cold weather, snow, frost and chilly winds, but cold is present also as a symbol of a more abstract manner, in terms of how people are perceived. Every part of the book where coldness is present is somehow connected to the Greek-group and the friendship between them. It either describes how they are perceived or is encoded in the surroundings of their actions. The group of friends who are so appealing to Richard are by other students and teachers at the college considered secluded and weird. They perceive the Greek-group as reserved and with an elitist attitude towards the rest of the school. Not even to Richard, who admires them even before knowing them, does the group give any warm impression, but are rather standoffish and cold. It becomes clear later on, when Richard has become part of the group, that they actually do differentiate themselves with their views from others:

'We don't like to admit it,' said Julian, 'but the idea of losing control is one that fascinates controlled people such as ourselves more than almost anything. All truly civilized people – the ancients no less than us – have civilized themselves through the willful repression of the old, animal self. Are we, in this room, really different from the Greeks or the Romans? Obsessed with duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice? All those things which are to modern tastes so chilling?' (Tartt 40)

Richard takes in what Julian just said and agrees, "I looked around the table at the six faces. To modern tastes they were somewhat chilling" (Tartt 40), and for all that he still admires and idolizes the group around the table. So whether it concerns their views, their beings or their actions, the group of friends is central to the symbol of the cold. Not only does this passage bring up how the group differentiates themselves from the 'modern tastes', and in that way exclude themselves from their peers, but it also points to their obsession with control. It is interesting how they at this point can discuss this and seem so aware of it: this could indicate that they actually position themselves in uncontrolled situations on purpose.

Besides warmth and especially cold, another reoccurring symbol is that of clothing, which symbolizes status and money, and the lack thereof. It is present in many ways throughout the novel and is a way of presenting the characters with certain traits. As when Richard first

describes his new friends in the Greek group: Henry “wore dark English suits and carried an umbrella” (Tartt 18); Francis was always wearing “beautiful starched shirts with French cuffs; magnificent neckties; a black greatcoat” (18); and the twins Charles and Camilla “liked to wear pale clothes, particularly white” (18). Perhaps most distinguished is the note on how Bunny “wore the same jacket every day, a shapeless brown tweed that was frayed at the elbows and short in the sleeves” (18). The descriptions are not only detailed, but they are significant in presenting a difference in class and money, something that carries a lot of meaning when the story progresses and an issue with money arises. The distinction between Bunny and the others is emphasized on several occasions and Richard is always reminding the reader how Bunny’s clothes are worn and torn in some way: “Charles was wearing a white tennis sweater, and Camilla a sun dress with a sailor collar, and a straw hat. Bunny’s tweed jacket was slung across the back of his chair, exposing several large rips in the lining” (Tartt 20).

This emphasis on clothing is very distinct concerning how Richard perceives himself as well, or on how he wants to be perceived. This is very apparent when he has just been shot in his stomach and is mainly occupied with the condition of his shirt: “There was a small hole, slightly charred, in my white shirt; *my Paul Smith shirt*, I thought, with a pang of anguish. I’d paid a week’s salary for it in San Francisco” (Tartt 534). It is also displayed in his earlier interactions with the Greek-group, as, for example, when he is invited to his first social gathering with someone from the group, a lunch with Bunny, his concern with his outfit is striking. He decides on his best jacket even though it is not suitable in the weather: “The jacket was beautiful – Irish wool, gray with flecks of mossy green [...] but it was much too heavy for a warm sunny day” (Tartt 46). He is unexpectedly given a jacket by his friend who notices the warm and uncomfortable one he would have been forced to wear, and Richard is delighted to discover that “[t]he jacket, unexpectedly, was wonderful – old Brooks Brothers, unlined silk, ivory with stripes of peacock green – a little loose, but it fit alright.” (Tartt 49).

When they meet for lunch, Bunny compliments Richard on the new jacket by saying: “By the way, love that jacket, old man” (49) only to bring it down a moment later “Bunny pinched a piece of the rich, yellowy cloth near the cuff and rubbed it back and forth between his fingers. ‘Lovely piece,’ he said importantly. ‘Not quite the thing for this time of year, though.’” (49). The way in which Bunny feels the need to correct Richard about appropriate clothing is distinct as he even added a note on it on his invitation: “p.s. wear a tie, I am Sure you would have anyway but they will drag some godawful one out of the back and meke (s.p.) you Wear it if you Dont” (43). It becomes especially striking in contrast to the description of his own torn clothing and presents the idea of him trying to establish dominance over Richard.

Furthermore, it plays well with the outsider-perspective in the novel. When the Greek group is portrayed as constantly well-dressed, then the two characters who are not stand out. It creates a rivalry between Bunny and Richard, concerning who is to be the outsider in the group, the one to not entirely fit in. Bunny clearly thinks himself superior and seems delusional about his own role in the group. He sees himself as just as good as the others, while Richard constantly struggles with not feeling good enough. It can therefore be argued that they both experience loss of control because of their clothing. It is different for the others in the group. They never seem to give it much thought until Charles is interrogated because of Bunny's disappearance and he states that: "I never realized, you know, how much we rely on appearances," he said. "It's not that we're so smart, it's just that we don't *look* like we did it" (Tartt 343).

This similarity in circumstance but difference in attitude between Bunny and Richard is equally striking when it comes to money. Both Richard and Bunny lack a fortune and rich parents and they are actually rather poor. Richard is at college due to scholarships, and he is just as uncomfortable with his shortage of money as he is with his clothing, and these go quite hand in hand. He goes to lengths to hide this, but Henry figures it out: "'Look at you,' he said to me. 'Your parents aren't particularly generous with you, are they? But you're so scrupulous about not borrowing money that it's rather silly.'" (Tartt 195). This is a trait his friends admire about Richard, and it is a stark contrast to how they feel about Bunny and his relation to money: "'Heavens. I think you might have died in that warehouse rather than wire one of us for a couple of hundred dollars.' [...] 'That's an infinitesimal sum. I'm sure we shall have spent two or three times on that on Bunny by the end of next week.'" (Tartt 195). Even though all of the Greek-group have been subjected to Bunny's blackmail and his taking advantage of them, they also excuse him because of his circumstances and defend him, which is part of the irony of Bunny's character and present different perspectives on it. They complain about him, but they also excuse his actions by explaining to Richard how "[Bunny's] parents don't give him a cent. Apparently they never have" (Tartt 194), and that he struggles because of this. "'It's a horrible thing to tell your kids that money's the only thing in the world, but it's a disgrace to work for it.'" (Tartt 348). The complicated relation Bunny has with money is a part of what creates the irony about him. He is not a very likeable character, but when he is killed he evokes sympathy rather than annoyance.

5. Control and Restraint – Cost and Reward

In *The Secret History* control and chaos present a complicated contradiction as they both favor and oppose each other. The striving for control stems from not having it and a feeling of chaos, but in *The Secret History*, chaos is also the result of actions intended to ensure control, so it is like the two poles steadily contradict and push one another. The otherwise general idea of control sums up to being a good thing to have, and a bad thing to lose. However, there are aspects where too much control becomes alarmingly bad, and where showing less restraint can be very helpful. So I would like to conclude that control is an act of balance, where the most dangerous and undesirable dimension is a total lack of control – something equivalent to chaos and disorder. In *The Secret History* several aspects of control are shown in different ways. Control figured as a bad thing is displayed both with the total lack of it, as when Henry murders a man during an intoxicated frenzy, but also with the display of showing too much restraint, to the point where Richard nearly dies because he is persistent about controlling his own circumstances. Again, Richard's and Henry's different and complicated relations to control present them as rivals, just as the idea of dream and intoxication did. However, the complication lies in them not being constant opposites but that they both shift between relinquishing and gaining control.

Henry is in a way the character who is the most striking figure of control as he is granted the role of leader and is always prone to action. He is the driving force in the novel, the decision-maker and the one the others look to for guidance, even when it comes to the murder of their friend: “‘So what’s the plan?’ said Francis. Henry tossed the match into the ashtray. ‘This weekend,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow.’ ‘Oh my God,’ said Charles, disconcerted. ‘So soon?’ [Henry:] ‘It can’t wait any longer.’” (Tartt 253). After the murder of Bunny, Henry seems to relish having control in the situation, feeling untouchable by the police, and it is as if “[h]e, in some senses, was the author of this drama and he had waited in the wings a long time for this moment, when he could step onto the stage and assume the role he’d written for himself” (Tartt 353). More so than being the one to call the shots, Henry is also a representation of violence and is willing to drag his friends down with him in order to explore the Dionysian culture:

The characters’ initial flirtation with extreme violence is brought about by their theoretical interest in the Dionysian cult of ancient Greece. Henry’s purely academic Dionysianism turns all too real

and his insistence on having seen the Greek god face to face during the successful and murderous bacchanal, inspires awe and envy in Richard and makes him a willing accomplice in the second murder. (Mäkelä 188)

Although the entire Greek-group share this interest and are excited to try and perform the ritual, it is Henry who is the leading force and the one to kill a man in a total frenzy.

So despite being the authoritative and controlling figure, Henry is also the one driving to perform the Bacchanalian rite where they experience the uttermost loss of control. He is drawn to this Greek divine rite because “[a]fter all, the appeal to stop being yourself, even for a little while, is very great,” he said. [...] But one mustn’t underestimate the primal appeal – to lose 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). The idea of control extends not just to being in control of others, but also to having control over oneself. Therefore, to lose one’s self, is by definition a total loss of control, and so Henry’s wish to lose himself in connection with his dominating character makes up a very paradoxical relation to control. Even his suicide indicate this relation and it is his final act of control:

Through his suicide, Henry achieves what appears to Richard to be the crowning feat of his life’s story: Henry has defined his existence through the very act of ending it. This kind of taking control of one’s actual life story or its textual equivalent is characterized by an attempt to die the “right” or the “beautiful” death (cf. Brooks 1992: 107; Black 1991: 2) (Mäkelä 188)

For Richard, his relation to control is less ambiguous but instead progresses throughout the novel. He starts off as a representative figure for lack of control and for someone not taking care to steer his own life. He describes this himself, regarding how he started his Greek studies: “I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays. It was an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful” (Tartt 9). Even so, the choice becomes more and more important and prominent in the narrative. Even though he “lit on Hampden by a trick of fate” (Tartt 11) he became excessively determined to go there and to study Greek. This determination when it comes to the Greek studies presents a beginning where Richard starts

taking control over his own life. Later on in the novel, the aspect of instead having too much control, or showing too much restraint, is also shown by Richard when he decides to spend the winter break in Hampden instead of leaving for home in California. Not only can this choice symbolize choosing between warm and cold, but also the choice to take control of one's life. Without money or contacts, Richard's options are limited when staying in Hampden. He manages to rent a room in Hampden town not far from the school where he has a job, only it turns out that the room is entirely without heating and with a huge hole in the roof. As it is in the middle of a cold winter, Richard suffers chronic hypothermia as well as pneumonia and nearly freezes to death. Still, it does not occur to him to ask his friends for help, and instead he acts on self-discipline to the point where it could, and almost did, kill him (Tartt 195).

The Secret History is built up by minimizing the murders and emphasizing the consequences and feelings that surround them, something which inflates the psychological aspect of the novel and coincides with the whodunnit-plot. This is noted by Sarah Anne Johnson as well in her article, and she claims that “[In her fiction], Donna Tartt examines the complex layers of human emotion that are stirred up in the aftermath of murder” (Johnson), and that is where the emphasis on the novel lies: “While murder is the backdrop of these narratives, it is the effect of murder on the lives of her characters--the psychological fallout--that interests Tartt” (Johnson). This presumed intentional fallacy of how Tartt is putting emphasis on the effect on the characters after the murders does coincide with what is found in the text. The two murders in *The Secret History* and their aftermath also present two different versions of control. The first murder, of an unknown farmer, was made in a state of total loss of control. It is fundamentally different from the second one, where the group of friends planned and schemed to kill Bunny. One is the representation of an intoxicated and uncontrolled action whilst the other is a calculated move in order to regain and reestablish control.

The murder of Bunny was committed to maintain control, with nothing and no one else to blame afterwards. Therefore, the impact the two murders had on the perpetrators is much contrasting. The regret and remorse the group feel after the murders seems to be connected to how much in control they were. When discussing the first accidental murder the perpetrators are not very remorseful about it, nor willing to suffer any consequences:

‘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.’ (197)

Even though they express remorse to some degree, as by saying “‘Really, it was more upsetting than you can imagine’” (Tartt 171), it appears that the upsetting part is how the murder affected themselves rather than remorse for the person who lost his life and those who might miss him. This merely personal affect is strengthened by how they can calmly retell the story as a chapter they have put behind them, except for the fact that Bunny is being a nuisance and refuses to let this go. The aftermath of the second murder, where the group kills Bunny, is what really takes a toll on them and puts them in a position where they are again forced to ensure control by avoiding the truth coming out on how Bunny died.

6. Conclusion

In *The Secret History* there are a number of images and symbols which create ambiguities and contradictions, and based on these I have formulated a thesis where control is the unifying factor to resolve these issues and tie the novel together. My interpretation is that the symbols and images in the novel can all be connected to the struggle for control with the characters. The three most prominent symbols in connection to control are cold, clothing and money, where the latter two are often used in our society to present control and power. It is interesting how Bunny is described as short of these symbols of power, and he is still the one behind the big issues for the characters, which in a sense presents him with power. However, the real chaos does not erupt until Henry takes control, and Henry is well versed with both money and clothing. This difference between the characters when it comes to money and clothing seem directly linked to the amount of control they have. Richard is the outsider-narrator, controlling only himself and no one else. Bunny is disillusioned about how much control he is in, acting as if he is on top of everything and making demands, when he is actually struggling hard not to break down. The rest of the Greek-group relies heavily on regaining control and put their trust in Henry, who is actually the main reason why they grapple for it.

In this essay, I have made a point of connecting the clues of control in the text in order to present a reasonable motive for the whydunnit-mystery. I conclude that I was not wrong to contend for it being a struggle for control that ended up with Bunny's death. It was an act done by the characters in order to secure control when they fought for it and feared losing it. Bunny was a threat to the control they had already reestablished after the first murder, and so they decided to eliminate the threat in order to situate themselves in control once more. The text implies that the Greek-group find that it is a reasonable and necessary solution to kill Bunny, as he poses a threat to the other characters because of his inability to keep their secret. However, the act of killing him puts them in a position of more instability and uncertainty and it seems that in their strive for control, they end up losing it instead.

No one in the Greek-group fancies the idea of killing Bunny. They are not presented as coldblooded murderers, but as pressured people and out of sorts with what to do. Bunny is singled out as not only the weakest link in the novel, but as a reliability and a burden. The fear of losing control construes Bunny as such a threat that the group decides to kill him. Even though they get away with his murder, the psychological strain it has on them makes them lose control entirely, and I would argue that the focus in this novel is not as much on the murders as on the aftermath and the effects on the perpetrators. Therefore the question *why*, although it can be answered to be because of a struggle for control, should perhaps be followed up with another question: *...and then what?*

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