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“And lo! Apollo could not live without Dionysus”

A Nietzschean Study of the Apollonian and Dionysian in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

Jessica Kafa

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Supervisor: Kiki Lindell Tersmeden

Abstract

Previous research on Donna Tartt's debut novel *The Secret History* in regards to its intertextual relevance has helped in understanding the traditional campus novel, as well as redefined the classical murder mystery. However, little research has been made on its characters and its portrayal of the human experience. Additionally, plenty of research has been made into Nietzsche's philosophical work *The Birth of Tragedy*, and its importance to the field of philosophy as a whole. Despite this, not much work has been put into applying these theories on modern literature. In this essay, I have used Nietzsche's theories of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in an exploration into two of the characters' psychological tendencies as a way to examine how the theories can be applied onto literary characters. I argue that each character jumps from displaying one principle, to the other, without ever achieving a balance between them. It is this lack of balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, within the two characters, that ultimately lead to their psychological undoing. To explore this topic, I have conducted a close character study, looking primarily at the actions of the characters, and their attitudes towards each other and the situations that they find themselves in. Ultimately, this essay has found that an application of Nietzsche's theories is indeed relevant for Tartt's novel, and that there seems to be a dissonance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the characters.

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Introduction

Donna Tartt's debut novel *The Secret History* is a coming of age story with a sinister background. Taking place at fictional Hampden College in rural Vermont, it depicts a group of young Classics students who find themselves involved in the murder of one of their classmates and friends. In the novel, a dichotomy between rationality and irrationality can be seen. In his very first lesson with his newfound Classics group, narrator Richard Pape is faced with a thought-provoking question: "what is beauty"? In this class, Classics professor Julian Morrow proposes that "beauty is terror" (p 38). He claims that the Greeks and the Romans had a passion for order and an aversion to that which could not be structured or reasoned around. However, unlike the Romans, the Greeks did not reject emotion and darkness. Morrow claims that to embrace terror is an inherently Greek idea, stating that "whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it" (p 42). This idea is represented in the balance and interplay between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles that Friedrich Nietzsche puts forth in his literary work *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian versus the Dionysian can be applied to Tartt's novel. The theory proposes that artistic and cultural expression can be understood in terms of two opposing forces: the Apollonian, which represents order, rationality, structure, and individuality, and the Dionysian, which represents chaos, irrationality, madness, instinct, and the collective experience. This essay aims to examine if and how the Apollonian and the Dionysian principles can be seen throughout Tartt's novel and how they are manifested in the characters of Richard Pape and Henry Winter. I intend to use Nietzsche's theory, applied to Tartt's novel, to explore the characters' relationship to the two principles. By doing this, my essay will explore how the novel presents a nuanced and complex study of the tension between rationality and irrationality, reason and emotion, structure and spontaneity. While both characters exhibit tendencies of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle, this essay argues that the two characters jump from their Apollonian to their Dionysian sides and vice versa, without ever achieving a harmony between the two principles within themselves, which is what leads to their undoing.

Previous research has been made on Tartt's *The Secret History*. Much of the existing research focuses on the whydunnit aspect, as opposed to the classic whodunit. That is how the novel works as a detective story. The whydunnit novel, also known as an inverted detective story, reveals the killer immediately; the mystery lies in figuring out why the killer committed the crime. Within the first two paragraphs of the prologue of Tartt's novel, the reader learns

that someone has been killed and by whom, and so begins the detective story. Another aspect of the novel that has been researched previously is the influence and impact of the female characters in the novel. Furthermore, some research has been done on *The Secret History* as it relates to the Classic Greek tragedy, because of its Classical Greek themes and topics. While prior research has been done on *The Secret History*, there is a dearth of research on how the characters navigate the world based on their own personalities and psychologies. This essay aims to fill this gap by conducting a close character study while exploring the Apollonian and Dionysian principles presented by Nietzsche.

First, this essay will explore Nietzsche's theory. This section aims to establish the outline of the theories that will be used to execute the character study that follows. Then, an exploration of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as it exists in the novel as a whole, will be conducted. Lastly, this essay will examine two characters, Richard Pape and Henry Winter, in a close character study, to see how the interplay between the Apollonian and Dionysian is represented in the characters, their actions, and their behaviour.

For the analysis, I have chosen to look mainly at the ways in which the Apollonian and the Dionysian are represented in the characters' actions. Since the novel is narrated by the character Richard, his thoughts and feelings are disclosed to the reader. Apart from the details which Richard discloses to us, this luxury is not extended to the thoughts and feelings of Henry. Moreover, since the novel is narrated by Richard, all of the events and interactions are coloured by his own personal thoughts and beliefs, something which should not be overlooked in this analysis. For this reason, I have chosen to mainly look at the actions of the characters. However, I will also look at the descriptions which Richard uses to recount the events that happen, both as a means to analyse his own tendencies, and that of Henry's.

This essay examines three parts of the novel, namely 1) the readers first impressions of the two characters 2) the confession about the Bacchanal, the planning of the murder and the actual murder of Bunny Corcoran, and 3) the confrontation at Henry's hotel room. The reason for this circumscription is in part a means of limiting the scope of this essay.

The Apollonian and The Dionysian

The Birth of Tragedy is a cultural, and more importantly a philosophical, critique written by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1872. His work argues that the Greek tragedy originates from what he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian artistic impulses (Nietzsche 409). Additionally, Nietzsche claims that there must exist a balance between these impulses and that it is a lack of harmony between them, and a favour of the Apollonian impulse, that led to the decline of the Classical tragedy, which he argues is the epitome of storytelling (409). Despite Nietzsche's later expression of disagreement with many of the ideas presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* (7), this essay draws upon the book to offer an insightful portrayal of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. As will be shown further, there are certain points of Nietzsche's that have received criticism. Although I have used Nietzsche's theories for this essay, not everything he writes on this topic is relevant or applicable. There is a notable contradiction in what he writes regarding what should be considered Apollonian and what should be considered Dionysian. This lends itself to possible confusion within the analysis section of this essay.

Nietzsche uses the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus as a metaphorical framework to explain his theory by assigning attributes to each of the gods, and having them represent different artistic and psychological tendencies. It is important to note that there is a heavy favour towards the Dionysian in Nietzsche's work. Nietzsche writes that the Dionysian is "primitive joy" (167), and that a reconnection with ones Dionysian side leads to a "feeling of oneness" and a return to the "heart of nature" (37), while also claiming that a reconnection with ones Apollonian side is merely a fantasy and a false interpretation of the world (65).

As mentioned, these opposing forces represent order, rationality, truth, and individuality in the Apollonian, and irrationality, chaos, and the collective experience in the Dionysian. Rationality is defined as "the quality of being", or making decisions, "based on clear thought and reason" (Cambridge Dictionary, "Rationality"). Nietzsche argues that it is from the tension and interplay between these two forces that the Greek tragedy stems (68). Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that the decline of the tragedy is a result of the increasing dominance of a rational and scientific worldview (81). This, at the time, new worldview is what led to the suppression of the Dionysian impulse, according to Nietzsche (81). He also argues that all humans are composed of the two opposing forces (Stephenson 6). Similarly, Nietzsche believed that the tension and interplay aforementioned is the driving force behind humanity, arguing that there must exist a balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in order for humans to achieve a healthy and fulfilling existence (300).

Both Dionysus and Apollo originate from the Ancient Greek and Roman traditions under different names. Dionysus is one of the Olympian deities of the Classical Greek and Roman religions. However, in the Roman tradition he was known as Bacchus. He was the god of, among many things, wine, and fertility, as well as fruit and vegetation, and is deeply associated with nature. Moreover, Dionysus is also the god of insanity, ritual madness, and ecstatic dance. He was likewise the god of the Bacchanalia festivals within the Roman tradition, which were unofficial festivals in honour of the god Bacchus. The Ancient Greeks celebrated a similar festival known as Dionysia. The Bacchanalia and Dionysia festivals were associated with drunken rituals and ecstatic dance, as well as being known for having a sexual nature. In their text “The Child-Murdering Mother: Dionysian or Apollonian? A Study of Nietzsche’s View on Euripidean Tragedy”, Hadaegh and Shams state that the ritual reconciles man with himself, the people around him, and nature (329).

Apollo, or Phoebus in Roman tradition, was also one of the Olympian deities. He, on the other hand, was known as the god of sun, light, and truth. He was seen as the most beautiful god and the ideal man (Baeumer 167-8). Moreover, he was also a god who wards off evil. According to Nietzsche, Apollo represents illusion and Dionysus represents the dream-world and drunkenness (20). Nietzsche argues that the Apollonian principle, which is associated with reason, creates an illusion of the world for the individual (20). In contrast, Dionysus and his connection to the dream-world and drunkenness, shatters the illusion that the Apollonian tendency creates by disrupting the Apollonian order through ecstatic rites and drunkenness, revealing the underlying chaos and terror of life (20-22). This drunkenness refers not only to intoxication by use of substances, but also drunkenness stemming from “spring penetrating all nature with joy” (20), further connecting Dionysus to nature. In Nietzsche’s work, Apollo is the god who rules over “the fair appearance of the inner world fantasies” (20), meaning the illusion previously mentioned. Dionysus, on the other hand, aims to destroy the illusion that the Apollonian forces create, in an attempt to dissolve individuality and achieve a oneness with nature and the collective (25). It is important to note here, that while Nietzsche and his theories in *The Birth of Tragedy* are useful in the context of this essay, much of what he says has been criticised. For example, the idea of illusion and rationality versus irrationality, as well as the dichotomy between them. This will be further discussed shortly.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche speaks of “illusion” (11) as a fundamental aspect of the human experience. As opposed to Apollo being the god of the inner world, Dionysus rules over emotions and “self-forgetfulness” (22). Nietzsche uses the term “dream-experience” to describe the experience of being fully absorbed in art, of which life is a part (23). Nietzsche

argues that this illusion plays an important role in the shaping of every person's perception of the world around them (Stephenson 7), it helps man accept the inherent contradictions of life and the uncertainties of a human existence. In conjunction to this, Kendall Stephenson notes, in her work *“God Is Dead... Now There Danceth A God In Me”: Bringing Modernist Darkness To Light Through The Apollonian And Dionysian Dichotomy* that the Apollonian also represents “the illusion of perfection” (7). Luyster supports this by stating that the Apollonian is the “sponsor of the ‘beautiful illusion’ that makes life worth living” (4). These descriptions could lead to the interpretation of Nietzsche’s illusion to mean the creation of a reality separate from the actual reality in which any man exists. The dream-experience, previously mentioned, that Nietzsche relates to the Apollonian characteristics, is described as “the world of day [...] veiled” (65) and refers to the illusion which helps man interpret and create the world around him: a new, clear, and more intelligible world (65). Bissell criticises many interpretations of Apollo as representing the rational by claiming that dreams and illusions, which are “signature attributes of Apollo” (351), are inherently not rational activities (351). He questions whether this, then, truly is an Apollonian quality, or if it in fact is Dionysian.

Nietzsche described Apollo as an “ethical deity” (36), claiming that he demands of his followers self-knowledge and a balance between “know thyself” and “not too much” (36). Nietzsche has taken ‘Know thyself’ and ‘Not too much’ from Ancient Greek culture, where it originates from the Apollo temple at Delphi, and are part of the Delphic Maxims. However, Nietzsche does not correctly quote them. The original inscriptions at the temple read “Know thyself” and “*Nothing* too much” (Wilkins 1, italics added). Wilkins explains in her dissertation that ‘Know thyself’ was an encouragement from Apollo to the worshipper to “be clear about himself and what he wanted” (9). Additionally, ‘Nothing too much’ was an encouragement to “limit the excessive number of requests” made to the Gods (Wilkins 9). However, Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Delphic Maxims could serve as a reminder to man of the importance of virtue, as he quotes Socrates who says that “virtue is knowledge” (Nietzsche 101). It could also be an allusion to the relationship between knowledge and ignorance, wherein knowledge is power and ignorance is bliss. Meaning that to know yourself too much, or to believe that you know all, is indulgence, and therefore ignorance. Nietzsche also leans on the Socratic Maxim, which states that sin stems from ignorance, and knowledge stems from virtue (101).

Apollo was regarded as the Ideal Man in Greek mythology (Baeumer 167-8). To claim that Apollo was the ideal man is a bold statement, considering the fact that he was not a man, but a God. Instead, it can be said that Apollo was the closest thing to a representation of what an ideal man could or should be. In his text “Nietzsche and the Tradition of the Dionysian”,

Baeumer suggests that this representation of the ideal is contrasted in Dionysus being the Ideal Youth (167-8). The idea of the “ideal man” versus “ideal youth” further strengthens Nietzsche’s claim of the Apollonian being represented by rationality and the Dionysian with irrationality, just as a man and a child might be thought to be rational and irrational, respectively. In her text, Stephenson uses Nietzsche’s dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian to examine modernist literature. According to Stephenson’s reading of Nietzsche, apart from being associated with rationality, order and individuality, Apollo also represents the illusion of perfection, restraint and beauty, as well as individuality. The Apollonian force rules humans “in their wish to define a personal selfe [sic] distinct from others” (7). Apollo is the image of the “principle of individuation” (Nietzsche 111), according to Nietzsche. He creates a self that is set apart from the rest, which is important for the Apollonian principle, as it encourages man to understand himself and the world he inhabits (148). In opposition to this, the Dionysian force aims to attune man with his “primitive nature” through intoxication and the collective experience (7). As Nietzsche explains, both are equally important for a full experience of life.

The Dionysian principle is explained by Nietzsche as a type of primal experience that is characterised by a dissolution of the boundaries between the self and others (205). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues that the strength of the Classic Greek tragedy lies in its ability to awaken the Dionysian side of human nature and transport the observer into ecstasy and provide a release from the limitations and constraints of rationality (100-1). In his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E.R. Dodds states that the function of the Dionysiac ritual of madness was catharsis (109). Dodds continues by explaining that Dionysus was “the Liberator” (109) and stating that he “enables you for a short time to *stop being yourself*, and thereby sets you free” (109, italics in original). Baeumer states that the Dionysian is “the affirmation of life even in the face of its most unfamiliar and difficult problems; the will to live, rejoicing in the sacrifice of its highest types to its own inexhaustibleness [...]” (166). Moreover, Dennis Sweet writes in “The Birth of ‘The Birth of Tragedy’” (1999) a detailed exploration of the significance of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. According to Sweet, the Dionysian character embodies an “ecstatic/aesthetic realisation of the terrible, absurd [...] power of nature” (357). An Apollonian character, on the other hand, embodies a rational understanding of the world as a thing of logic (357). Through this character, Apollo represents that which is terrible and absurd only in an aesthetically pleasing and highly stylised manner (Sweet 357).

Camille Paglia writes in her book *Sexual Personae* (1990) about how the primary conflict in Western culture and literature is the binary opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which is in direct reference to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. According to

Paglia, Apollo represents individuality, objectification, obsessiveness, and voyeurism (103), while Dionysus represents the destruction of and liberation from individuality. Paglia continues by explaining that Dionysus “liberates by destroying” (101) the self in order to become one with the collective and with nature. Additionally, she claims that Dionysus is “energy unbound”, stating that he is associated with emotionalism, metamorphosis, and frenzy (103). Although “energy unbound” is never defined by Paglia, I believe it refers to Dionysus being the god of the Bacchanalia rituals, where energy is released in ecstatic rites.

In a lecture held in 1969 at Boston’s Ford Hall Forum, Ayn Rand discusses the issue of a perceived dichotomy between reason and emotion. In her lecture, Rand references Nietzsche, and argues against the necessity of a “reason-emotion dichotomy”. In his article “Will the Real Apollo Please Stand Up? Rand, Nietzsche, and the Reason-Emotion Dichotomy”, Roger Bissell expands on Rand’s argument. Bissell argues that Apollo is neither the god of reason, nor emotion, but rather of intuition (344). Moreover, he claims that an opinion of Apollo as a god of reason is a misreading of Nietzsche and a misunderstanding of Apollo’s original role in Ancient Greek culture (344). Rand explains that reason is “the power to engage in a deliberate and logical process of thinking” (Bissell 344) and that *thinking* is a “purposefully directed process of cognition” (Bissell 344). Rand contends that emotions are “an automatic response proceeding from an evaluation of an existent” in direct contrast to the notion that reason is a consciously initiated cause while emotions are an automatic outcome of one’s thought process.

As this essay has a Nietzschean perspective, it is important to discuss not only Nietzsche’s own views, but also those of his critics. For example, Nietzsche has been criticised by Roger Bissell for his use of ‘dichotomy’ when discussing the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. For the purpose of this essay, it is important to note that the use of ‘dichotomy’ in the sense of the true meaning of the word is not correctly used here. Bissell explains in his article that a ‘dichotomy’ is “any splitting of a whole into two non-overlapping parts” (345). The outline of a true dichotomy follows the Law of the Excluded Middle, which states that “a thing is either A or non-A” (Bissell 345). In other words, a dichotomy is two separate parts which are inherently mutually exclusive. Bissell continues by explaining that anything that claims to be a dichotomy but does not follow the Law of the Excluded Middle, is therefore a false dichotomy (346). Sweet claims that it is Nietzsche’s argument that the Dionysian impulse and the Apollonian impulse are diametrically opposed (357). With these definitions in mind, the “dichotomy” spoken of in this essay, is in truth a clash or a conflict. This distinction is highly relevant here. As Bissell goes on to explain, reason and emotion are not mutually exclusive (346). Furthermore, Bissell expands on Rand’s true meaning of the dichotomy

between reason and emotion, namely the dichotomy between reason and irrational emotion (347). As mentioned, this essay argues that the two characters exhibit both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities, i.e., both reason and irrationality, but that neither of them can embrace both reason *and* irrationality. Following this logic, there is an overlap between reason and irrationality, making it a false dichotomy (Bissell 346). However, since this essay is based mainly in the writings of Nietzsche, reason and irrationality will be put against each other as two opposing forces. This essay deals with the conflict of reason and irrationality in the characters of Richard Papen and Henry Winter from Tartt's novel, meaning this conflict is not a true dichotomy.

Analysis

Tartt's novel tells the story of five Classics students who attempt, and succeed, with performing the Dionysiac ritual Bacchanal. The ritual results in an accidental, but violent, murder of a farmer in the area. As a result of having been excluded from the Bacchanal, group member Bunny begins torturing the rest of the group, blackmailing them for money and threatening to expose them to the police. With this increasing frustration, group leader Henry involves newcomer Richard in his plan of eliminating Bunny. Despite Henry's hopes of someone finding Bunny's body shortly after the murder, it takes several weeks for the body to be found. Following the investigation into Bunny's death the group becomes increasingly unstable. In fear of group member Charles turning to the police, Henry devises a plan to kill Charles as well. In the resulting confrontation, Henry instead commits suicide in order to, in his eyes, save the rest of the group. After this event, the group disintegrates.

The Apollonian and the Dionysian in *The Secret History*

Tartt's novel is sprinkled with references to Apollonian and Dionysian themes. This is hardly surprising since the novel heavily centres around a group of students who study Classical Greek and Latin texts. The characters' behaviour in the novel can be seen as a manifestation of Nietzsche's principles. The themes of the Apollonian are already visible in the first chapter of the novel. In the first few pages there is mention of the Lyceum, in which their professor, Julian Morrow, has his office. A lyceum refers to a public lecture hall (Merriam Webster, "Lyceum").

However, a lyceum originally referred to the temple in Ancient Greece dedicated to the god Apollo (Merriam Webster, "Lyceum"). Moreover, the mere attempt at a Bacchanal that the group attempts is wholly Dionysian. As mentioned, Bacchanalia were Dionysiac rituals performed in Ancient Rome in honour of the god Dionysus. Paglia explains that Dionysiac rites often ended in "mutilation and dismemberment" (101), which is exactly what happens in the novel. As students of Classical Greek and Latin, the group is consumed by a desire for knowledge and understanding, as well as power and a sense of belonging. Professor Morrow's class is limited to five students (Tartt 16). However, under the influence of his top student, Henry, Professor Morrow allows Richard to join the group. Mills explains that this exclusion from the rest of the university contributes to a sense of elitism within the Classics group (14). She states that all Hampden students are, by definition, an elite, but because they study Classical Greek and Latin, the Classics group become "an elite within this elite" (Mills 14). Simultaneously, the demand that Morrow puts on his students creates a great sense of individuality from others, as it does a sense of the collective with each other. As a result of Morrow's stipulations, the group of now six students are very alienated from the rest of the college. Naturally then, they all have a need for belonging, or a sense of it at the very least. In this pursuit of knowledge and academic excellence there is an undertone of the Apollonian principle, which as previously stated is concerned with rationality and intellectual control.

Greek mythology and literature, being one of the group's main interests, often deals with themes such as excess and irrationality, which, in line with Nietzsche's theory, is very Dionysian in themes. As the novel progresses, the themes as well as the characters become more and more Dionysian by giving in to their base instincts and desires. As the events of the Bacchanal and, eventually the murder of Bunny and Henry's death, the group becomes increasingly disconnected from the outside world, and their actions become more destructive and erratic. In preparation for the Bacchanal, the group, apart from Richard, partakes in frequent drug and substance use and orgies (Tartt 164). As a result of the Bacchanal, and even more so after the murder of Bunny, the group becomes more and more unstable, falling into habits of alcoholism and addiction.

Aside from the behaviour of the characters, Nietzsche's theory can also be applied to the themes, topics, and motifs of Tartt's novel. Hampden College is described as an old, highly selective college (Tartt 11). Richard even describes it as something "from a dream" (13). Often associated with order and reason, and intellect and knowledge, a college institution falls into the category of Apollonian. Hampden, with its student body of merely five hundred students (Tartt 11), is a small and isolated community with an emphasis on discipline and rationality,

both of which are seen as Apollonian, according to Nietzsche (37). Additionally, the settings in which the group find themselves often reflect that which could be interpreted as Dionysian. The group frequently visits the country house of group member Francis. In his first visit to the house, Richard describes it as “tremendous”, its “sharp, ink-black silhouette against the sky, turrets and pikes, a widow’s walk” (Tartt 77). Furthermore, walking into the house, Richard describes the interior of the library: “glass-fronted bookcases and Gothic panels” and a marble fireplace (77-8). The house immediately gives a sense of something darker, perhaps even something Dionysian. Moreover, the characters spend a lot of time outside Francis’ estate, especially when attempting the Bacchanal. The secret rituals are held in remote places in the woods (Tartt 164). This further shows that the themes and motifs in the novel point to the Dionysian principle as Dionysus is closely associated with nature and the return of man to nature. Likewise, the use of chitons and costumes in the Bacchanal (164) further reflects Dionysian tendencies. The coordinating dress during the ritual could be seen as a representation of the idea of hiding one’s true self, one’s individuality, and embracing the sameness of the collective, or a Dionysian persona. The group also consistently and increasingly indulge in alcohol, and sometimes even drug use. As Nietzsche explains, Dionysus is associated with drunkenness and intoxication (20). This theme of alcohol further shows the Dionysian themes of the novel.

Tartt’s novel is split into two books, the first recounting the events leading up to the murder of Bunny, and the second recounting the events that follow. Book I ends with the execution of the murder. The actual murder occurs “off screen”, as it were. Between Book I and Book II of Tartt’s novel, the author has included a quote from E.R. Dodds’ *The Greeks and the Irrational*, which reads as follows: “Dionysus [is] the Master of illusions, who could make a vine grow out of a ship’s plank, and in general enable his votaries to see the world as the world’s not” (Tartt 273). This quote and its placement in Tartt’s novel is important as it reflects the transformation from the Apollonian to the Dionysian, and the contrast between them. It is also interesting as it refers to Dionysus as the “Master of illusions”, which is in direct contrast to what Nietzsche says about Apollo being the god of illusions. After the events of the murder, the rest of the Classics group try to maintain a sense of normalcy. However, the effects of consistent alcohol and drug misuse provide nothing except an “illusionary respite” (Pauw 157). The group’s imagined world of normality becomes fragmented as a result of the murder and the resulting disintegration of their psyches, and they all fall into their own personal hells.

Richard Papen

First Impressions

Richard switches between his Apollonian and Dionysian side but cannot find a harmony between them. Richard, as narrator, recapitulates the events of the novel some eight years after the fact (Tartt 7). As mentioned, the events are coloured by Richard's personal feelings and beliefs and the novel is narrated with a hindsight-based cynicism. It is therefore important to mention that Richard's initial response to the Classics group is one of awe and admiration. In her text "Ambition, Fantasy and Belonging Within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*", Gretsy writes that Richard is struck by "the brilliance" of the Classics group in a similar way to Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (3-4). Richard's Apollonian qualities are shown in his intellectual pursuits and his desire for knowledge. This is something that all students in the Classics group share. Through reason and analysis, Richard spends his time going over and thinking about correct grammatical structures (Tartt 21) and the writings of Euripides (40). However, it is interesting to note that Richard stumbled upon the study of ancient Greek as a result of sheer laziness, saying: "[...] since the Greek classes happened to meet in the afternoon, I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays" (Tartt 9). This goes against the Apollonian quality of reason. Furthermore, Richard himself says that he believes that his personal 'fatal flaw' is "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (Tartt 7), once again steering him more towards Apollonian qualities, since the Apollonian, according to Nietzsche, relates to the "plastic arts" (19), which involve paintings and sculptures. Nietzsche also claims that the Apollonian qualities separates man from the Dionysian. It creates rapture for individuals who long for beautiful forms (Nietzsche 151). Thus, Richard's longing for the picturesque strengthens the claim that he leans more towards Apollonian qualities.

Richard also exhibits Dionysian tendencies and qualities. Since he was young, he has had a desire to escape his hometown of Plano, California (10). While originating in an interest in Greek, Richard's involvement in the Classics group also stems from a need for a sense of belonging. His need for belonging pushes him so far as to lie to his classmates and friends about his familial and financial background (Tartt 50, 53). This need for the collective experience indicates a tendency of the Dionysian in Richard. Nietzsche states that the Apollonian principle makes people wish to "define a personal selfe [sic] distinct from others" (7). Richard's behaviour points to him clearly wishing to be like the rest of the group. In lying about his background and appearing to be just like everyone else in the group, Richard switches to his Dionysian qualities.

The Confession, The Planning and The Murder of Bunny

Having joined the group very recently, Richard was excluded from the Bacchanal, and has no knowledge of the group's plan to attempt one, or of the resulting murder. When Richard is finally clued in on what has happened is when his Apollonian side really shows. As can be expected when being told by someone you consider a friend about a murder that they have committed, no matter how unintentional, a normal response or reaction would be one of disbelief and confusion, even anger. However, while surprised, Richard's reaction shows little to no disbelief (Tartt 162-5). Simultaneously, Richard's Apollonian illusion begins to crack slightly, as he is reminded of the terrors of the world: "With a rush of what was almost motion sickness, I experienced for a moment both the claustrophobic feeling that the walls had rushed in towards us and the vertiginous one that they receded infinitely, leaving both of us suspended in some boundless expanse of dark" (Tartt 163). It is with horror that he shortly thereafter realises that this revelation does not do anything to actually influence his opinion of the rest of the group. When asked what Richard must think of them, for having done such a thing as killing an innocent man, Richard simply reassures them that it does not matter (Tartt 173). With some surprise, he realises that he means it. Despite the Apollonian illusion of beauty, veiled by reason, being questioned in this scene, Richard chooses to attempt to retain the illusion of awe he has created around his friends. Thus, the Apollonian illusion remains.

Some time after this interaction, Henry comes to Richard with a wish to learn how much poison is needed to kill a man (Tartt 230). With this, Richard realises that Henry must mean to kill Bunny. Learning this agitates Richard (230), but still he aids Henry in his search for the right dosage (233). In helping Henry, we see Richard's need for a sense of belonging with the collective of the group. This need for belonging is Dionysian in nature. However, Henry quickly realises that poison is not a viable plan, and so he thinks up a new one (249). Henry fills Richard in on the plan to push Bunny off a cliff on Bunny's habitual afternoon walk (253). During this conversation, Richard recalls feeling "clammy and light-headed" (Tartt 256, 259), having not realised that he had begun sweating. Despite Richard's decision to help Henry, the Apollonian in him causes a physical reaction. When Richard realises that the group had missed Bunny's walk, he hurries into the woods to find them and tell them (Tartt 264). Unfortunately, Bunny does show up, making Richard complicit in his murder. Although he remains calm (266-7), he is clearly anxious, recalling feeling that it was "too much for [him] to take" (268). Although Nietzsche does not assign anxiety as one of the Apollonian qualities, it could be hypothesised that Richard's anxiety is a result of him realising that the act of killing Bunny is

immoral and an illogical reaction to the situation. During this, I would argue that Richard's Apollonian side is still the more prevalent one, since he, in his anxiety, is being reasonable.

The Confrontation

Having lost Charles when they were supposed to be keeping an eye on him, Richard and Francis decide to go to the Albemarle Hotel, where Henry is staying with Camilla in order to keep her from her abusive brother (482, 484). Upon arrival, Charles is not there, and Henry and Camilla are in the middle of dinner. After some time, Charles shows up unexpectedly. After the initial sense of relief that Richard feels after seeing him at the door to Henry and Camilla's hotel room, he realises that Charles, drunk, is holding a gun and that he is there to kill Henry (533). Quickly, Richard begins to panic. In an instant, Charles fires the gun four times, and accidentally shoots Richard in the stomach. Now real panic and anguish begins to fill Richard (534). However, despite this, he recalls feeling "oddly calm" (Tartt 535). Because of the traumatic nature of the situation, Richard's calm response can be viewed as something rational or irrational. Yet, I would argue that while this sense of calm may seem Apollonian, it is, in fact, Dionysian. Nietzsche's work does not necessarily support this theory; however, I think that it is important to remember the context of these instances. Sitting down with a gunshot wound in his abdomen, there is no sense in remaining calm and rational. It is a false rationality, and the calmness is actually quite Dionysian, as it reflects the fact that in the face of total chaos, Richard does not react by panicking, which would be a more rational reaction according to Nietzsche.

The character of Richard begins as someone smart, lonely, and ashamed of his background. He longs for friendship and intellectual stimulation. In this, his Apollonian qualities are evident and clear. As the story progresses, Richard begins to lose touch with the rest of the world as a result of his complicity in his friend's murder and his drug use. This is where his Dionysian side starts to overtake the Apollonian. As the group disintegrates after Henry's death, Richard moves back to California, because he believes that that is the responsible thing to do (Tartt 546). Ultimately, this shows a return to his Apollonian side. With this, it can be seen that Richard moves from the Apollonian, to the Dionysian, and eventually back to the Apollonian again. In moving back and forth between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Richard never manages to find a balance and reconcile both parts of himself.

Henry Winter

First Impressions

Henry also switches between his Apollonian and Dionysian side without finding a harmony between them. Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics are particularly interesting in their manifestation in the character of Henry. Henry is characterised by his intellectualism, intelligence, and his love for the classics. He is highly rational and deeply analytical. These are all qualities represented by the Apollonian principle. Everything Henry does is thoroughly thought through and he leaves no stone left unturned. Francois Pauw summarised the character of Henry Winter well in his text "‘If On A Winter's Night A Reveller’: The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Part 1)", describing him as "tall, rich and chillingly aloof [...], a polymath with [...] a predilection for translating *Paradise Lost* into Latin [...] and keeping a Latin diary" (143).

Henry lives quite a sheltered life. In Richard's impression of him, Henry is a man of honour and reliability. When Richard and Bunny meet for dinner, Richard having no money, and Bunny supposedly forgetting his wallet at home, it is Henry who comes to their rescue, paying the bill without question (Tartt 79-60). This air of aloofness, and superiority that Richard sees in Henry further points to his Apollonian qualities. Henry lives in a bubble. Because of his intelligence, he has deemed certain things beneath him, such as, for example, watching television. Richard even notes that Henry did not know that man had landed on the moon (Tartt 85), which Bunny points out was broadcasted on television.

Henry feels the need to connect with the Dionysian within himself. Since the Dionysian qualities involve a connection to one's emotions, Henry's aloofness further directs him to the Apollonian. However, while they may not be as evident, Henry's Dionysian qualities are also present throughout the novel. Henry is prone to outbursts of anger and, sometimes even violence (48). These outbursts showcase Henry's true nature. They showcase energy without a means of natural release, which results in explosive anger. As Paglia claims, Dionysus is unbound energy (103). Thus, Henry's outbursts of anger indicate the Dionysian qualities that he possesses.

Furthermore, because of his need to connect with the Dionysian aspect of himself, Henry is very influenced by his professor. The idea of attempting a Bacchanal does not entirely come from Henry alone. Henry's relationship to Morrow is filled with admiration and respect and Henry is highly influenced by everything that Morrow says. The importance of Morrow in Henry's life is not limited to their teacher-student relationship, and Henry even states that he

loves Morrow more than his own father, actually “more than anyone in the world” (Tartt 519). Richard recalls, in one of their early lessons with Professor Morrow, discussing Dionysiac frenzy and madness, as well as Euripides’ *Bacchae* (Tartt 39-42). While talking about embracing Dionysian tendencies, Morrow inflicts a sense of romance and aspiration in the Classics group. Morrow argues that people “such as [them]selves” are fascinated with the idea of losing control (Tartt 40). Further claiming that “it’s a temptation for any intelligent person, and especially perfectionists such as the ancients and ourselves, to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self” (41). However, after proclaiming this as a mistake, and being questioned, Morrow states that “it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational” (Tartt 41). In so many words, Morrow is saying that it is important to also embrace irrationality, terror, insanity, and instinct, which is directly in line with Nietzsche’s own belief of the importance of embracing one’s Dionysian side (36-7). Additionally, Morrow also points out that the more intelligent a person is, and the more “cultivated” and “repressed” someone is (Tartt 41), the more that person needs a “method of channelling the primitive impulses” that he is used to repressing (41). In the introduction to this essay, I quoted Morrow’s first class, in which he asks the group what beauty is. After establishing that beauty is terror, Morrow, in reference to the Bacchanalia festival, says:

What could be more terrifying and beautiful [...] than to lose control completely? To be absolutely free. [...] To sing, to scream, to dance barefoot in the woods in the dead of night, with no more awareness of mortality than an animal! [...] If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn (Tartt 42).

Ultimately, Morrow concludes the class by stating that this desire is the seduction of the Bacchanal, and of the Dionysiac ritual. Morrow’s opinion of the Dionysiac ritual as something freeing is in line with E.R. Dodds’ own opinions: Dionysus enables you to “stop being yourself, and [...] sets you free” (109). This desire is what motivates Henry, as he claims that his deepest desire is to “live without thinking” (Tartt 493). Mills notes that just like the illusion of liberation that Dionysus brings Agave in *Bacchae* (1168-1215), Henry’s ability to reach his goal is ephemeral (Mills 15). In this class discussion with Morrow, a seed is planted in Henry’s mind.

The Confession, the Planning and The Murder of Bunny

When telling Richard about the Bacchanal, Henry is described as calm and smiling (Tartt 162-3). This calmness may be an indication of Apollonian qualities. However, as with Richard, this is not the case. In reality, it is highly irrational to be smiling in an instance where one is being accused of murder by a close friend. As previously mentioned, being rational means to be clear headed and reasonable. In having a calm reaction to this confrontation, Henry is not being reasonable. Instead, he is being irrational. Henry's tendency to keep up an Apollonian front is actually a show of his irrational, Dionysian, side. Additionally, when Richard figures out that the group has unintentionally killed a man, Henry smiles, once again, and applauds Richard for his intelligence, telling Richard: "You're just as smart as I thought you were" (Tartt 163). Henry then admits to having been obsessed with the idea of the ritual (Tartt 164). Obsession itself could also be seen as Dionysian, as Dionysus rules emotions. In his explanation, Henry says that the reason for attempting the ritual came from a desire to "escape the cognitive more of experience, to transcend the accident of one's moment of being" (Tartt 164). This, too, points to a desire within Henry to let go, so to speak, of his Apollonian tendencies. This progression from the Apollonian into the Dionysian, for Henry, happens with the Bacchanal, but the qualities of the Dionysian have always been present in him. Henry claims that the one thing he has wanted most in all his life is to "live without thinking" (Tartt 493). This wish further showcases Henry's Dionysian tendencies. According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian requires a separation from one's self, a self-destruction of sorts (100-1), which is exactly what Henry attempts when performing the Bacchanal. In his separation from self, Henry believes that he achieves his one wish, to live without having to think; in that, he realises that he can do anything he wishes (Tartt 493). Nietzsche explains that with modern society and the development of science, people began suppressing their Dionysian impulses (81). Something that is clearly seen in Henry.

Some time after Henry's confession to Richard, Richard starts figuring out that Henry must be planning to do something about Bunny (Tartt 227). Henry approaches Richard, asking his advice about dosages for poison (230). In this interaction, Richard describes Henry as patient (231) and serene (232). Once again, this patience and serenity could be read as either Apollonian or Dionysian, depending on the interpretation of his actions. Because of this, there exists a potential contradiction. There seems to be no anxiety or worry in Henry, even when talking about something as serious as planning the murder of one of his closest friends. Richard notes that the plan is "genius" (231), saying that: "if anything could be relied upon [...], it was that Bunny, at any given meal, would somehow manage to eat almost twice as much as anyone

else” (Tartt 231). This comment alone points to Henry’s successful attempt at seeming Apollonian to those around him.

Despite Henry’s hope of someone finding Bunny’s body shortly after the murder, it takes several weeks for the body to be found. This derailment of Henry’s plan opens up a police investigation into Bunny’s death (Tartt 321-2). While an open investigation might cause distress in Henry, he remains certain that he will be able to solve the issue, and escape conviction. This certainty stems partly from his intelligence, and partly because of the illusion that he has about how the world around him works. In this calmness, Henry has switched over to his Apollonian side. During this time the Classics group are all interviewed and questioned and, naturally, they are all affected differently. The group becomes more and more unstable. Charles descends into alcoholism and abuses Camilla, Richard becomes addicted to pills and Francis’ hypochondria worsens (Tartt 281-2, 291, 311). The investigation finally closes, and the case is ruled as a hiking accident, which, it is worth mentioning, was Henry’s original plan. Henry fears that Charles may confess to everything that has happened and Charles fears Henry is planning to murder him, as he did with Bunny. In an attempt to kill Henry before Henry can kill him, Charles barges into a hotel room that Henry and Camilla share in order to confront Henry.

The Confrontation

Just as Richard, Henry also switched between his Apollonian and Dionysian sides, without finding harmony between the two. When Richard and Francis arrive at Henry and Camilla’s hotel room, looking for Charles and interrupting their dinner, Henry is not happy to see them (Tartt 532). Charles soon arrives. At the realisation of Charles carrying a gun, Henry quickly puts together Charles’ plan, which Richard recalls Henry doing in an “remarkably composed” manner (Tartt 533). As previously mentioned, Henry’s calm disposition, in the face of Charles’ erratic behaviour, could be interpreted as either Apollonian or Dionysian. On the one hand, calmness and aloofness is associated with Apollo. However, I would argue that, considering the circumstances, Henry’s ability to remain composed points to an irrationality within him. As Charles begins explaining why he has come to kill Henry, Henry’s patience begins to wane (533) and he even begins antagonising Charles, calling him an idiot (533). Any other man would perhaps attempt to de-escalate the situation, maybe even bargain with the perpetrator. Instead, Henry calls Charles an idiot (Tartt 535). This points to Henry not actually being rational, although he might believe that he is. Calling Charles an idiot might also be an act of dominance and a way to regain control of the situation. This irrational and illogical behaviour

further demonstrates Henry's Dionysian qualities. In quick succession, Charles begins firing the gun and in an instant, Henry acts, trying to constrain Charles (534).

Throughout the confrontation, Henry also shows his Apollonian qualities, remaining calm. Once again, while Henry's composition may seem Apollonian, they are not. Immediately, he takes charge of the situation, closing blinds and taking the gun (Tartt 353). At the commotion, staff began frantically knocking on the door of the hotel room. In an instant, he formulated a plan. Henry, wanting to save the rest of the group, silently decides to take the gun and shoot himself, making it look as if he was responsible for it all (536-7). This decision to provide a solution by suicide is an interesting addition to Henry's character. Is this a Dionysian response? An irrational reaction to a seemingly impossible situation. Or is it one final attempt from Henry to reconcile with his Apollonian side? Baeumer claims that one of Nietzsche's definitions of the Dionysian is "the affirmation of life even in the face of its most unfamiliar and difficult problems; the will to live" (166). With his suicide, Henry rescinds his will to live. He does this for, what he believes are, noble reasons as he believes it will save his friends. Ultimately, smiling, Henry whispers something into Camilla's ear and raises the gun to his temple (536). Another interesting question that this scene poses is this: Why is it the representation of the Dionysian, Henry, that must die? Why does the rational representation in Richard prevail?

As has been shown, Henry exhibits both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities. It is important to note that both can be seen in him. In his actions, he is either fully Apollonian or fully Dionysian, which is why I argue that he never achieves a balance between them. As readers, getting to know Henry, his structured, rational, and intelligent side - his Apollonian side - is visible. Slowly learning about the Bacchanal and the resulting murder, the reader realises that Henry is dishonest and irrational towards Richard and the others, lying to them and displaying outbursts of anger. In this, Henry has switched completely to displaying Dionysian qualities. Henry claims that his wish is to live, which is in accordance with his Dionysian side and supported by Baeumer. However, Henry relinquishes this wish in order to, in his own eyes, save his friends by committing suicide and taking the blame for Bunny's murder. In this scene, Henry believes he is being smart and doing the rational thing. When Richard reflects on the events, he remarks that he believes Henry decided to commit suicide to "prove to [them]" (Tartt 544) that he was dutiful and loyal. Here, Henry once more jumps from his Dionysian side and his will to live, to his Apollonian side. Thus, never achieving a balance between the two.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to explore the novel *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt through the lens of Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. By way of a character study, this essay has examined three essential instances of the novel, namely the introduction to the characters of Richard Papen and Henry Winter, the confession of the Bacchanal and the plan to murder their friend, as well as the execution of the murder and the confrontation that follows. By first looking at the themes of the Apollonian and Dionysian as a whole in the novel, and then at the two characters themselves, this essay has concluded that the two principles are visible in both characters. It has been shown that Richard leans more towards the Apollonian principle, and Henry the Dionysian. Although both can be seen to inhabit both principles. While both of them try to find a balance between the two, Richard by letting go and embracing the habits of the Classics group, and Henry by trying to remain collected and rational, neither of them can achieve true harmony between their Apollonian and Dionysian sides. Instead, both characters jump between exhibiting one principle fully to exhibiting the other, without finding a balance. This inevitably leads them to where they end up, one dead and the other back where he started, alone and without direction.

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