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**“BEAUTY IS HARSH”: AESTHETIC GOTHIC AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL RUIN IN DONNA TARTT’S *THE SECRET*
*HISTORY***

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The following paper investigates Donna Tartt's first novel, *The Secret History* (1992), from an aesthetic Gothic viewpoint. The thesis aims to showcase aestheticism as a destructive force that produces Gothic dangers that lead the novel's characters to psychological ruin. The introduction contains a brief overview of the novel and author, as well as the aim of the thesis. The literature review provides a theoretical background of aestheticism and Gothic tropes, which will be the basis for the analysis. Additionally, previous research about the novel will be discussed in the literature review in order to highlight the research gap. The empirical section contains an analysis of aesthetic principles in correlation to the Gothic consequences it produces (such as murder, loss of ethics, and mental destruction). Therefore, aestheticism and Gothicism will be analysed together. The conclusion will contain the main findings of the work.

Keywords: Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*, aestheticism, Gothic literature

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INTRODUCTION

Donna Tartt is a Mississippi-born American novelist, who is known for her novels *The Secret History* (1992), *The Little Friend* (2002), and *The Goldfinch* (2013), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Originally from Greenwood, Mississippi, Tartt is considered a “Southern Gothic writer” (Encyclopedia). During her years at Bennington College, Vermont, Tartt became interested and deepened her knowledge of Greek and English literature (Encyclopedia). Kaplan (1992) describes Tartt’s novel as “gorgeously written, relentlessly erudite, and persistently high-minded.” Her first novel, *The Secret History*, follows the lives of six classical students at Hampden College, Vermont. The group consists of Richard Papen, the narrator, twins Charles and Camilla Macaulay, Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, and Edmund Corcoran (Bunny), with their Greek teacher Julian Morrow. Richard, who initially came to college to study English literature, becomes fascinated by the group studying classics and desires to join them. After multiple attempts, Richard switches majors and joins the “cult”. From early on, it is evident that their teacher, Julian, as well as the rest of the clique, are not ordinary in their ancient manners. Many classes pass with discussions of mortality, Gods, readings in Latin, etc. Inspired by a class discussion, Henry, Camilla, Charles, and Francis decide to orchestrate a Bacchanal, a Dionysian ritual that involves the consumption of drugs, alcohol, and other rituals, which culminates in the murder of an innocent farmer. When Bunny finds out about the crime, he starts manipulating them. This leads the group to the idea of murdering Bunny, which they eventually do, even Richard, who initially did not want to take part in the killing. Later on, when Bunny’s body is discovered, far later than the group had expected, the Federal Investigation starts to investigate the case. This leads the group to the start of their downfall and to question their own sanity. The story continues with many turning events, such as Bunny’s funeral, interrogations with the police, winter break, and Julian finding out. Although the police never discover who was behind the

killing, the group remains psychologically haunted. The story culminates in the unexpected suicide of Henry, who shoots himself in front of the group during a misunderstanding, with Charles being the one initially wanting to kill Henry. Therefore, the novel finds a morbid ending, with none of the characters finding happiness or will in life. Tarrt herself describes the novel as “psychological mystery, a fictional confession, a coming of age tragedy” (Eisenstadt 1992: 56).

Although it has been discussed that aesthetics and its moral implications should stay separate, the thesis argues that, in terms of analysing a novel like *The Secret History*, they should be treated together. This is primarily because aestheticism and Gothic are interrelated to one another, with aesthetic beliefs being the cause of Gothic outcomes. Because of this, the following thesis will approach *The Secret History* from an aesthetic Gothic viewpoint. To be exact, the thesis aims to analyse how, in *The Secret History*, Donna Tarrt demonstrates aestheticism as a dangerous force that places beauty above ethics, resulting in Gothic consequences (such as violence, death, and psychological ruin).

The first part of the thesis contains a literature review of the theoretical background of aestheticism and (psychological) Gothic, with an additional investigation of previous research on *The Secret History*. The empirical part of the thesis contains literary analysis of the novel in terms of aesthetic Gothic, with textual examples from the novel. For this, I will rely on Gothic and aesthetic theories, which will be provided in the literature review below.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON *THE SECRET HISTORY*

The following literature review is divided into three sections. The first section includes a theoretical overview of aestheticism, with a discussion of aesthetic values and Wilde’s aesthetic principles in order to draw parallels in the empirical part. The following section will

then include treatment of (mainly) psychological Gothic tropes. Lastly, the literature review will focus on previous research done on *The Secret History* in order to emphasise the research gap that the thesis aims to fill. This is due to most research treating Gothic and aesthetic literature separately, rather than together. The topic is particularly of interest because the novel itself combines the themes of Gothic terrors with aesthetic beliefs, which should be investigated in more depth.

1.1. Aestheticism

Aestheticism has been a widely researched and studied phenomenon throughout the centuries. As a literary movement, aestheticism has encouraged various discussions about beauty's place in life and its relation to morality and social values. In his book, Johnson (1969: 1) defines aestheticism as “devotion to beauty, and to beauty primarily as found in the arts and in whatever is attractive in the world around us.” He further states that the term “aestheticism” first appeared in the nineteenth century, yet then it was defined as a principle that saw beauty as equal to, or even opposed to, other values (Johnson 1969: 1). Johnson (1969: 3) associates different definitions of beauty through various scholars, such as John Keats, who defines beauty as truth, whereas Walter Pater defines beauty as something that is experienced instantly, and the enjoyment received from literature and the arts. Johnson (1969: 4) also describes aestheticism not only as a study of beauty, but also different beliefs about art and beauty's place in life. Although Johnson (1969: 12) distinguishes three variations of aestheticism, connecting those to either view of art, literature, or life, the focus will be on the latter. Aestheticism as a view of life can be described as appreciating life for its beautiful and dramatic aspects (Johnson 1969: 19). In order to do so “we must cultivate our whole area of awareness, sharpening intelligence, sense of perception” (Johnson 1969: 19). Based on this, Johnson (1969: 20) further mentions the term aesthetic viewpoint, which he describes

through detachment and avoidance of wholehearted involvement in everyday life, which was seen as the only way to appreciate life. The detachment ultimately leads to one's own consciousness and thoughts being perceived as fleeting, resulting in distrust towards one's sense of self and identity (Johnson 1969: 20). This demonstrates that aestheticism relates not only to art and literature but also extends to lifestyle.

Moving from aestheticism in a broader sense to a particular literary example, which is Oscar Wilde's aesthetic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2010), which O'Brien (2011: para. 1) suggests is the most notable example of aesthetic literature of the nineteenth century. Based on aesthetic values, the novel's main character, Dorian Gray, is encouraged to live a life full of pleasure, yet free from morals and focus solely on what is beautiful (O'Brien 2011: para. 3). What is more, O'Brien examines aesthetics through pleasure and experience, separating it from thought:

Wilde, inspired by Kant's first movement, is encouraging the idea that beauty is not something which can be experienced logically, through thought. It must be experienced aesthetically, and to do so one must simply experience beauty through its pleasures. There is a "mystery" in what is beautiful, because it is just experienced as something which pleases; It is not something which can be understood through reasoning. (O'Brien: para. 5)

Besides Dorian's character, aestheticism has also been analysed through Lord Henry Wotton, who serves as Dorian's guiding mentor. Wotton's attitude (towards suicide and death) in the novel has proven to be emotionally detached and disinterested in the reason or outcome (O'Brien 2011: para. 9). Furthermore, his language has been described as "linguistic narcissism" and "word-painting", as through his words, he moulds Dorian into "a verbal image or echo of himself" (Manganiello 1983: 28). Through these characters, Guan (2018: 27) suggests that Wilde wished to investigate how to find beauty in evil, as Dorian's motive for committing crimes was the belief that through crimes, he would achieve beauty. Therefore, Wilde created characters that demonstrate beliefs of aestheticism.

Values of aestheticism can also be linked to principles of dandyism:

The dandy, who despised the vulgarity and false morality /.../ placed particular importance on nonchalant appearance, refined language, banter and cynicism, which manifested the contradiction between spirit and material, aristocracy and vulgarity, art and nature. Because the dandy regarded himself as artwork, aestheticism is essential to understanding the phenomenon of the dandy. (Guan 2018: 24)

Guan (2018: 24) demonstrates dandyism to be focused on external beauty, as the dandies are charmed by outer appearance and style, therefore seeking to display a perfect representation of themselves. Therefore, in dandyism, one's only purpose in life is to present a perfect and elegant self-image (Guan 2018: 25), which aligns with the aesthetic emphasis of beauty as the highest value.

The aestheticised view of life, as was described through Johnson, can be seen in Wilde's aesthetic philosophy, which applies not only to art but also to life (Duggan 2008: 61). Duggan (2008: 61) defines this aesthetic lifestyle as shallow and egoistic: "To the aesthete, the ideal life mimics art; it is beautiful, but quite useless beyond its beauty, concerned only with the individual living it." Connecting this to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Duggan (2008: 61) argues that the novel provides a critique of this said lifestyle, rather than endorsing it. To be precise, he argues that Wilde's novel presents aestheticism as dangerous: "Rather than an advocate for pure aestheticism, then, Dorian Gray is a cautionary tale in which Wilde illustrates the dangers of the aesthetic philosophy when not practiced with prudence" (Duggan 2008: 62). Furthermore, Duggan (2008: 62) demonstrates the moral implications and consequences of this kind of aestheticism, suggesting that Dorian Gray, rather than read as an advertisement for aestheticism, serves as a warning about the moral consequences of uncontrolled aestheticism. This further indicates that aestheticism is not only perceived as appealing but also threatening. What is more, Riquelme (2000: 611) discusses Dorian's painting, which, seeming new and beautiful at first, also turns out to be at odds with the values of society, which praises its attractive appearance. Furthermore, Riquelme (2000: 611) interprets that the act of this process also mirrors the reader's own experience, therefore ending at the same time as the novel finds closure (once Dorian's picture is complete).

Wilde's aestheticism is further developed by Riquelme (2000: 610), who connects it with the Gothic, illustrating Wilde's tendency to aestheticise the Gothic and gothicize the aesthetic. He suggests that:

The merger is possible, and inevitable, because of the tendency of the Gothic writing to present a fantastic world full of indulgence and boundary-crossing and the tendency of the aesthetic, to press beyond conventional boundaries, and to recognize terror within beauty. (Riquelme 2000: 610)

The connection of terror and beauty can be in reference to Myskja (2002: 1), who associates it with the sublime, defining it as something that evokes combined feelings of repulsion and attraction, thereby becoming ungraspable for the mind. What is more, Myskja (2002: 8) discusses the sublime as an aesthetic judgement with moral significance. To be exact, Myskja (2002: 1), relying on Kant's definition, argues that the experience of the sublime is only accessible through feeling, with the most crucial element being the fact that it is both positive and negative. Therefore, the sublime brings together contradictory feelings.

The analysis part of the thesis will discuss aestheticism as morally questionable, as the beliefs of aestheticism bring out the question of "How can art, which is imbued with good and evil, be both aesthetically beautiful and morally destructive?" (Manganiello 1983: 25). The same question remains in connection to the characters in *The Secret History*. Additionally, the thesis will also rely on Wilde's aesthetic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as a guide to understanding the principles of aestheticism, where parallels can be drawn between characters.

1.2. (Psychological) Gothic

In the past, Gothic literature has been studied not only through external aspects but also through characters' inner conflicts. In his book, Botting (1996: 2) defines Gothic fiction as a writing of excess, with threats associated with the supernatural, human evil, and transgression. Similarly, Smith (2013: 4) brings out Gothic tropes such as images of excess, transgression and the supernatural. Botting emphasises the Gothic tendency to promote

criminal behaviour, as well as executions of violent acts to fulfil selfish desires (Botting 1996: 6). He further highlights that these terrors were also a source of pleasure and excitement, therefore, blurring the lines between reason and morality. This can be demonstrated through Hogle (2002: 14), who associates extreme Gothic images being distanced because of their representation to be pleasant in their terror. He further explains, based on Burke, that “life-threatening descriptions prompt an aesthetically worthwhile reaction” (Hogle 2002: 14). Similarly, Morris (1985: 306) further concludes how terror was seen as a dangerous yet freeing force, similarly to Botting (1996) and Hogle (2002). This way, Gothic novels frequently serve as a warning of the dangers of moral transgression by showing them in their most threatening form, therefore showing the consequences of ignoring the rules of social behaviour (Botting 1996: 7).

However, although in earlier Gothic works, more emphasis was on external dangers, over time, it has increasingly shifted to being associated with inner hauntings and psychological threats. For instance, Smith (2013: 6), based on Freud, brings out Gothic anxiety related to the return of the dead. Based on this, he further discusses repressed feelings, which ultimately threaten to affect and disturb everyday life and reality (Smith 2013: 6). In his work, Morris (1985: 306) brings in a Gothic trope of suppression, emphasising that: “/.../ desires long suppressed, deeply hidden, forced into silence - greatly intensifies the dangers of an uncontrollable release from restraint” (1985: 306). Additionally, Botting (1996: 12) examines the psychological motives of Gothic fiction, which resulted in a world where individuals could no longer trust others or themselves. Botting (1996: 12) further examines how these individuals were ultimately the outcome of desire and subjects of obsession. Therefore, Gothic became part of the internal world of guilt, anxiety and despair (Botting 1996: 10). This can be in relevance to Postlethwaite (1998: 447), who describes the Gothic through “aberrant psychological states” with “figures that signify inner demons”.

These psychological motives can also be further associated with Hogle (2002: 2), who defines Gothic space as a place where secrets from the past rise and haunt the characters either psychologically or physically, mostly emerging as ghosts or monsters. It is also interpreted that these hauntings: “/.../ sometimes invade from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view” (Hogle 2002: 2). This way, the mind itself becomes a kind of prison, ending in madness and breakdown (Spooner 2006: 18). Therefore, psychological Gothic illustrates a world of anxiety, obsession, and hauntings, while ultimately leading its characters into despair.

1.3. Previous research on *The Secret History*

The following section will analyse previous research done about *The Secret History*, bringing in the research gap that the thesis aims to fill. In previous investigations, the novel has been interpreted mostly as a Gothic, classical, and even postmodern text. In her study, Litzler (2013: 2) argues that Tarrt deliberately mixes genres and analyses the novel from a postmodern Gothic viewpoint. Furthermore, Litzler (2013: 21-26) discusses Tarrt’s use of postmodern traits, such as intertextuality, metafiction, and unreliable narrator. She brings out Tarrt’s deliberate use of excessive Gothic tropes from atmosphere to theme of incest (Litzler 2013: 6). Throughout the study, she concludes that *The Secret History* functions as a (Gothic) postmodern warning to the reader of what may happen in society (Litzler 2013: 53). Similarly, Weiser (2024: 49) agrees that Tarrt uses excessive descriptions of setting and nature to evoke a Gothic atmosphere. Both authors suggest that this Gothic excess plays a crucial role in the narrative, making the reader experience the tension and unease throughout the novel. What the researchers disagree on is what this very same Gothic excess is doing in the novel. Litzler (2013: 5) emphasises that these Gothic traits, intertwined with postmodernist traits, are possibly a response to fear and, in the end, actually result in the

characters' numbness. In comparison, Weiser (2024: 48) suggests that these Gothic tropes may be read as "detachment of the elite" that "lead to their monstrosity, adversely infecting and impeding those who strive for upward social mobility."

Besides Gothic tropes, the novel has also been analysed from a classical viewpoint. In her study, Mills (2005) describes the negative portrayal of the classicist students in Tarrt's work. In comparison, D'Aniello (2021: 1) aims to analyse the pursuit of beauty in the novel, relying on Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian theories. The idea aligns with Mills (2005: 15), who also draws on Dionysian patterns. Mills (2005: 15) showcases that the Dionysian mindset of escaping ordinary life does not likely bring freedom, but rather unhappiness. In comparison, D'Aniello (2021: 24) agrees, stating that the pursuit of beauty in a Dionysian way eventually leads to destruction, with Henry being the prime example of Apollonian order switching to Dionysian madness, culminating in death. In his work, D'Aniello (2021: 5) also draws on Mills's study to claim that *The Secret History* depicts classical students likely inaccurately as more superior and snobbish compared to non-classicists. They both conclude that the classical students' isolation from the rest of the school results in refined taste, yet a lack of morals.

Additionally to Gothic and classical tropes in the novel, researchers have also analysed the violence showcased in it. Cartry claims that the violence and aestheticised murder "as a craft" (2021: 9) are not mainly evidence of moral failure, but rather a ritual that produces belonging within the group (2021: 29). While Weiser (2013: 54) suggests that (Bunny's) murder is described as poetic: "Instead, he seems to contextualise it as part of a bigger picture about fleeting life and death, the irony and the aesthetic scenery surrounding Bunny's fall". It is also emphasised that the Bacchanal ritual is likely not only seen just as a murder motive, but rather something with a "deeper meaning", something that creates a sense of belonging (Cartry 2021: 29). However, Weiser (2013: 55) concludes that this kind of framing

murder as art distorts the group's sense of morality, while is also connected to class privilege (Weiser 2013: 56). Therefore, the contrast between Weiser's (2013) and Cartry's (2021) interpretations showcases the novel's ability to present violence as both appealing and destructive.

In conclusion, the literature review illustrated how aesthetic theorists highlight the significance of beauty, while also questioning its moral meaning. Aestheticism as a view of life was discussed, involving the term aesthetic viewpoint, which was suggested to show detachment. Aesthetic and Gothic were placed together, as the correlation of beauty and terror is evident in both. Furthermore, the definition of the aesthetic sublime was discussed with additional investigation about Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Definitions of Gothic tropes, such as violence and transgression, were highlighted, which often blurred moral boundaries. Further, anxiety and repressed feelings were suggested to return as haunting or ghost-like figures. As demonstrated in the literature review above, it is evident that there has been some research done about *The Secret History*, although not many that analyse the novel from both Gothic and aesthetic perspectives. Therefore, the thesis aims to fill the gap by analysing *The Secret History* from a Gothic, as well as aesthetic viewpoints, drawing on the theoretical sources mentioned in the literature review. Additionally, there are still possibilities for further research, such as the theme of incest, power and authority. Since *The Secret History* is the former of Tarrt's works, I further suggest researching her other debut novels, *The Little Friend* and *The Goldfinch*.

2. AESTHETIC GOTHIC IN *THE SECRET HISTORY*

The following analysis is divided into six subsections, with the aim of showcasing how aesthetic beliefs lead to dangerous Gothic outcomes. Leaning on aesthetic principles and psychological Gothic tropes, I will combine the two.

2.1. Aesthetic depiction and tales of obsession

In Tartt's novel, the characters' aesthetic desires of perfect appearance lead them to obsessive and morally questionable behaviour. As Johnson (1969: 1) has emphasised, aestheticism can be described as an ultimate dedication to beauty and all that is seen as attractive. Johnson's (1969) definition can be drawn as a parallel to the novel, as the main qualities of the characters are narrated through descriptions of their outer appearance, emphasising the group's devotion to it. To bring an example, there is an explicit and detailed description of how they are perceived and the emphasis they place on their looks, as if it were the leading purpose of their lives. This aligns with the ideals of dandyism, which is mesmerized by appearance and refined lifestyle, implying that "the dandy's aestheticism is about the search for the perfection of appearance" (Guan 2018: 24). Henry, for instance, could be described as an epitome of this obsessive aesthetisation of image, as his main concerns do not involve being a dutiful human being, but rather, as Francis states: "Like if he was carrying around the right book, if Homer would make a better impression than Thomas Aquinas. He was like something from another planet" (Tartt 1992: 509). Additionally, what is also notable here is that there is a detailed description of the clothes the characters are wearing, for instance, Richard describes Camilla and Charles as: "/.../ angelic, their blond hair wind-blown, both in white tennis sweaters and tennis shoes" (Tartt 1992: 67). While his first impression of Henry was that "He wore dark English suits and carried an umbrella" (Tartt 1992: 17). The aesthetic depiction of the group as an elite can be drawn to their way of living, which is limited to only reading classical books, and consuming expensive alcohol, which, in their eyes, ultimately makes them people of higher status. Accordingly, perfect appearance becomes the group's ultimate desire, making them detached from ethics, which later leads them to commit a crime.

Furthermore, the emphasis on aesthetic appearance is evident in Richard's narration of the group as pictures and artwork, marking his detachment from the moral decay beneath. This is a significant aspect to draw attention to, since Richard's narration mirrors the way he himself perceives the group, suggesting the omission of other aspects of life, such as morals, ethics and a clean conscience. This can be interpreted in the way he describes his subjects as "imposing" with sharing "certain coolness, a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world" (Tartt 1992: 32). In this sense, for Richard, the group becomes something otherworldly, which later gives in to his moral detachment. Yet the aesthetic and idealized emphasis on looks and beauty is merely a facade, concealing the moral corruption the students harbour beneath. The moral corruption mentioned here means the preceding events, such as the Dionysian ritual involving (apparently accidental) murder and the killing of their friend Bunny. Bringing a parallel to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, just like Dorian's faultless portrait hides his rotten soul, the classical students mask their mental collapse and a lack of ethics behind their looks. This ultimately produces a contradictory aesthetic desire for outward image and perfection above anything else, marking the starting point of their ethical and mental collapse.

Moving from the core of the aesthetic desire of perfect appearance to the Gothic consequences (obsession) it produces. Richard, the narrator, demonstrates a passive form of obsession. This can be linked to Botting (1996: 12), who proposes that Gothic characters are consequently the outcome of desire and subject of obsession. This can be seen in Richard's character who is a standby, thus what he longs for the most is to belong, which he describes as a "morbid longing for the picturesque" (Tartt 1992: 5). To emphasise, the choice of wording is of importance here as it combines the aesthetic with the Gothic, as "morbid" hints at something dangerous and "picturesque" associates with something ideal. It is also notable that Tartt (1992: 18) demonstrates Richard's passion from the time he first laid eyes on the

group, as he says: “All of them seemed highly unapproachable.” The fact that the clique seems unapproachable deepens Richard’s obsession and desire to join them. As a result, the utter fascination with belonging leads him to witness his friend’s murder. The reason being that, for Richard, passive obsession with belonging to the aesthetic group exceeds moral rules. Richard’s form of desire is quite contrary to Henry’s, whose obsession is expressed through an active act of crime. Richard’s presence and inability to act at the moment of the murder of his friend demonstrate how obsession leads to loss of morals and detachment from knowing the difference between evil and virtue. Therefore, Richard’s behaviour illustrates “the consequences of ignoring the rules of social behaviour” (Botting 1996: 7). Hence, the aesthetic desire leads him to join the desired group, later on resulting in Gothic outcomes, such as utter madness, extreme tiredness, insomnia, and paranoia.

2.2. Bunny: “*Cuniculus molestus*” (“Annoying Rabbit”)

The premise of the following section argues that Bunny’s anti-aesthetic behaviour disrupts the group’s aesthetic world, while his obsessive manipulation causes psychological torment for others, ultimately leading him to his demise. The anti-aesthete lifestyle can be connected to Bunny’s character, who differs significantly from the rest of the group. Despite being from a wealthy family (although his family does not support him financially), Bunny is not entirely obsessed with aesthetics and does not even try to pursue beauty, which is central to the rest of the characters, for example, Henry, whose driving force is beauty. According to D’Aniello (2021: 22), “Bunny is portrayed as vulgar because of being more ordinary, and less in line with the clique’s ideals of beauty as Apollonian and Dionysian.” Bunny’s vulgarity is seen in contrast to other characters, who are described as ideal and refined, while Bunny is described as obnoxious, therefore unattractive and even seen as a threat. For instance, at one time, Henry even calls him “*Cuniculus molestus*”, which translates to “Annoying rabbit” in

Latin (Tartt 1992: 213). Such a nickname highlights how the group does not perceive Bunny as an equal in terms of aesthetic pursuit, and may be the very reason he found his tragic ending in the form of betrayal from his friends. Because of the difference in beliefs, Bunny is not only perceived as ugly but also as a dangerous force of anti-aesthetics that has to be stopped:

Religious slurs, temper tantrums, insults, coercion, debt: all petty things, really, irritants - too minor, it would seem, to move five reasonable people to murder. /.../ The danger which he presented was, after all, not immediate but slow and simmering /.../. Fear for our own lives might have induced us to lead him to the gallows and slip the noose around his neck, but a more urgent impetus was necessary to make us actually go ahead and kick out the chair. Bunny, unawares, had himself supplied us with such an impetus. (Tartt 1992: 254)

Richard's statement illustrates that for the group, what is seen as unattractive (Bunny) is considered intolerable. This proves the argument of Bunny himself giving the group a motive for murder with his vulgar, therefore unattractive behaviour, as he "supplied us with such an impetus".

What is more, Bunny's danger is not only seen in his anti-aesthetic demeanour but also in his behaviour as a reminder of the group's corruption. Bunny's behaviour could be described through a Gothic trope of "suppressed desires that culminate in an uncontrollable release from restraint" (Morris 1985: 306). Morris's claim supports Bunny's suppressed desire to reveal the hidden secret and break the aesthetic illusion, which eventually results in his death. Meaning that after finding out that Henry, Charles, Camilla and Francis had killed a farmer during the Bacchanal, he becomes obsessed with the idea of manipulating them.

If what Bunny really wanted was revenge, he could have had it easily enough and without putting himself at risk. What did he imagine was to be gained from this slow and potentially explosive kind of torture, had it, in his mind, some purpose, some goal? Or were his own actions as inexplicable to him as they were to us? Or perhaps they weren't so inexplicable as that. Because the worst thing about this, /.../, was not that Bunny had suffered some total change of personality, /.../ but rather that various unpleasant elements of his personality /.../ magnified themselves to a startling level of potency. Distasteful as his behaviour was, we had all seen it before /.../. (Tartt 1992: 249)

What Richard calls "slow torture" can be related to Bunny's "suppressed desire", as he does not act or seek revenge immediately, but gradually over time, yet the "uncontrollable release" mentioned can be related to Bunny's real, intensified personality coming out. Bunny's

characteristics can furthermore be demonstrated in Richard's description of him: "Once he gets something like that on the brain he won't give it up" (Tartt 1992: 207), which further emphasises Bunny's tendency towards obsessive behaviour. Thus, he tries to inflict conflict at every opportunity, making jokes and intensifying unease in the group, as without him: "Everyone seemed unusually calm and at ease and I thought I knew why. It was because Bunny wasn't with us" (Tartt 1992: 232). This proves that Bunny's behaviour serves as a reminder of a suppressed crime for the group, causing psychological torment. The manipulation comes to extremes when Henry decides to take Bunny to Rome. While Henry is paying for everything, instead of being grateful, Bunny turns the vacation into a "living Hell" by complaining and keeping an eye on Henry at all times (Tartt 1992: 210). Consequently, Bunny functions as an intolerable and disruptive figure, whose vulgarity and manipulation break the group's "perfect" illusion, causing them to commit a murder to eliminate a threat, which could be defined as an aesthetic sacrifice to maintain the group's beauty.

2.3. Sublime as terror and aesthetic detachment: "Death is the mother of beauty"

The following chapter delves into the theme of the sublime, which becomes a justification and aesthetic detachment. Relying on Myskja's definition (2002: 1), who defines the sublime as an experience that produces both feelings of pleasure and displeasure, that is, both repulsion and attraction. This aligns with the sublime seen as terror in the novel. For instance, the clearest example of the mentioned sublime (as terror) in the novel would be the Bacchanal. The Bacchanal here refers to a ritual associated with Dionysus, the God of wine, where consumption of alcohol, drugs, and other ritualistic acts, such as fasting, water poured over the head, and baths, are arranged to receive cultic purity and see the God himself (Tartt 1992: 184). For instance, Henry describes the ritual as: "Heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing" (Tartt 1992: 186). The choice of words, especially "glorious" and

“heart-shaking,” demonstrates the ritual as an ecstatic and pleasurable experience. Yet as the group continues their ritual, supposedly accidentally, they kill a man in the woods, which can be seen as the displeasurable part of the ritual. Although Henry does not recollect much of it, he describes it in quite detail: “/.../ his neck was broken, and, unpleasant to say, his brains were all over his face” (Tartt 1992: 189). These two contrary descriptions depict the Bacchanal as a sublime event, bringing with it both negative and positive emotions. When Francis, one of the participants from the group, explains the situation to Richard, he refers to their physical state during the ritual as “bloody” and “like something from Edgar Allan Poe” (Tartt 1992: 200). The description further shows the character’s perception of the murder not as a crime, but rather a sublime incident, which is compared to living in fiction. The very reason behind doing the ritual is actually the influence of the group’s Greek teacher, Julian, who emphasises that “beauty is terror” (Tartt 1992: 44). Although Julian connects the idea with Greek ideals, it also aligns with the aesthetic and Gothic tendency to “recognize terror within beauty” (Riquelme 2000: 610). Another instance of the interrelation of beauty and terror can be brought when Richard describes Bunny’s murder:

That surge of power and delight, of confidence, of control. /.../ And although this new lucidity of vision was frequently nerve-wracking, there was no denying that it was not an altogether unpleasant sensation. (Tartt 1992: 557)

Ultimately, the depiction of the sublime and terrifying together intertwines feelings of ecstasy with the terrifying, making the cruel events seem aesthetic and justified.

As seen above, sublime terror makes violence and death seem thrilling. This produces aesthetic perception that leads to Gothic detachment, as seen in Richard’s narration style. The detachment is especially evident in Richard’s narration during Bunny’s murder, which he describes quite insensitively, given the fact that he is witnessing the deliberate killing of his friend. Detached perception of murder aligns with Hogle (2002: 14), who associates the tendency of life-threatening descriptions to evoke an aesthetic reaction, which can be seen in Richard’s description of Bunny’s killing:

A month or two before, I would have been appalled at the idea of any murder at all. But that Sunday afternoon, as I actually stood watching one, it seemed the easiest thing in the world. How quickly he fell; how soon it was over. (Tartt 1992: 311)

The calm and composed attitude towards death suggests Richard's indifference, as well as disconnection. It is a recurring pattern in Richard's narration style to depict gruesome scenes only through visuals, while lessening the feelings brought up with them. As a result, distancing himself "so much so that it becomes difficult to recognize the "real" events that should affect our emotions" (Litzler 2013: 13). This can be compared to Johnson's (1969: 20) definition of aesthetic viewpoint, which involves detachment and an avoidance of wholehearted engagement. Johnson's aesthetic viewpoint can be seen as Richard further states:

I marvel at how detached it is in viewpoint, eccentric in detail, largely devoid of emotional power. [...] I watched it all happen quite calmly - without fear, without pity, without anything but a kind of stunned curiosity - so that the impression of the event is burned indelibly upon my optic nerves, but oddly absent from my heart. (Tartt 1992: 310)

Although it may seem that Richard has some sort of judgment or comprehension over the situation described, there are several key factors that contribute to aesthetic experience producing Gothic emotions. For instance, "optic nerves" indicates him visually perceiving the fall, yet "oddly absent from my heart" suggests the absence of sympathy related to it. Moreover, his "stunned curiosity" enables a sense of (Gothic) disturbance, since curiosity would likely not be the first emotion arising from witnessing a murder. Overall, the description provided further emphasises how Richard tends to acknowledge experiences through images and vision (related to aesthetic thinking), but lacks emotions and sympathy (related to Gothic). Another instance of aesthetically distanced perception of death can be drawn from Henry's original plan of Bunny's murder, which was to poison him with mushrooms. Part of the plan was that, together with Bunny, Henry also consumed the poisonous mushrooms. Meaning, also put his own life in danger, like he himself dramatically stated: "My own life must be plausibly in danger" (Tartt 1992: 260). Therefore, Henry

demonstrates a possibility of aesthetic beliefs becoming life-threatening, while Richard's attitude shows an aesthetic perception leading to indifference and detachment.

2.4. Julian as an aesthetic mentor

Julian, the group's mentor, serves as an aesthetic leader who perceives beauty and intelligence as the highest values, which further carries on to his students. Johnson (1969: 1) examines the importance of beauty, which can outweigh or even be opposed to other values. An example of Julian's aesthetic values can be seen when one of the teachers at Hampden College, Georges Laforgue, states:

There is nothing wrong with the love of Beauty. But Beauty - unless she is wed to something more meaningful - is always superficial. It is not that your Julian chooses solely to concentrate on certain, exalted things; it is that he chooses to ignore others equally as important. (Tartt 1992: 577)

The moral blindness and sole emphasis on aesthetic qualities can be interpreted in Julian's depiction of his students, as Richard confesses:

Though on a psychological level his manner was almost painfully intimate, superficially it was businesslike and cold. He refused to see anything about any of us except our most engaging qualities, which he cultivated and magnified to the exclusion of all our tedious and less desirable ones. While I felt a delicious pleasure in adjusting myself to fit this attractive if inaccurate image - and eventually in finding that I had more or less become the character which for a long time I had so skillfully played - there was never any doubt that he did not wish to see us in our entirety, or see us, in fact, in anything other than the magnificent roles he had invented for us: *genis gratus*, *corpore glabellus*, *arte multiscius*, *et fortuna opulentus* - smooth-cheeked, soft-skinned, well-educated, and rich. It was his odd blindness, I think, to all problems of a personal nature which made him able at the end to transmute even Bunny's highly substantive troubles into spiritual ones. (Tartt 1992: 365)

Julian's idealization of the group reveals his detachment from reality and ignorance, as he focuses solely on the students' appearance and engaging qualities. This is evident in his tendency to "cultivate" and "magnify" the most desirable, yet ignore the more unappealing traits. The description can be in parallel to Henry Wotton from Wilde's novel, who recreates Dorian in his own images and likeness, therefore, turning him into his own "creation" (Manganiello 1983: 25, 30). Additionally, Richard's tendency to feel "a delicious pleasure in adjusting myself to fit this attractive if inaccurate image" highlights his attempt to fit into an aesthetic world, where one can not be sure of themselves nor "have any stable identity"

(Johnson 1969: 20). Moreover, Julian's "odd blindness" may refer to his tendency to fit his students into the roles that fit his aesthetic worldview, and somehow ignore the immoral side of the students. This becomes evident when he finds out the group's secret, the murder of his dear student Bunny, Julian's silence spoke louder than words could. Instead of confronting the group after learning the horrible truth, Julian disappears. To be accurate, he leaves school and is never seen again, which further demonstrates his choice to ignore the corruption hiding beneath the beauty. Another instance of Julian's moral blindness is also evident during Bunny's search. This occurs when Henry describes the chaotic and mysterious scene as "something from Tolstoy" (Tartt 1992: 383). Reference to Tolstoy suggests something deep, dramatic and mysterious, which reframes the morbid scene as something literary. Because of this, instead of feeling worried about Bunny's disappearance, Julian's face lights up as he understands the aesthetisation of the crime scene.

Furthermore, Julian is the one shaping the students' depiction of reality and values, becoming the driving force leading the group to moral decay, as they also believe in aesthetics overriding ethics. This can be reflected through Tartt's description of Julian: "he was the whole reason for everything happening" (Eisenstadt 1992: 59). Bringing another parallel to Lord Henry Wotton, who serves as an aesthetic guide. He is the one giving Dorian the hedonistic motto of life that centers around pleasures and beauty, as "Dorian has not only been poisoned by a book, but also by Lord Henry's words" (Manganiello 1983: 29). Julian's aesthetic value is especially carried on to Henry, his dearest student, who does not care about the outside world as long as one has Plato in hand, which Henry associates with intellectual superiority and outer appearance. For instance, Henry's fondness for Julian and his ideas is seen in the Bacchanal, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was essentially taken from Julian. This is because Julian foremost proposes the connection between beauty and terror: "Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying

and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely?“ (Tartt 1992: 44). As a result, the group makes it their mission to successfully experience the ritual, which takes them multiple attempts. Although the ritual ends in a bloody and gruesome murder, the group does not perceive it that way. The reason being that their beloved mentor has emphasised how “/.../ bloody, terrible things are sometimes the most beautiful” (Tartt 1992: 44). Therefore, Julian’s aesthetic values that override moral boundaries carry on to his students. Interestingly, only after several years does Richard start to understand the true colours of Julian’s persona:

Now, of course, it would be easy for me to veer to the opposite extreme. I could say that the secret of Julian’s charm was that he latched on to young people who wanted to feel better than everybody else; that he had a strange gift for twisting feelings of inferiority into superiority and arrogance. I could also say that he did this not through altruistic motives but selfish ones, in order to fulfill some egotistic impulse of his own. And I could elaborate on this at some length and with, I believe, a fair degree of accuracy. But still that would not explain the fundamental magic of his personality or why - even in the light of subsequent events - I still have an overwhelming wish to see him the way that I first saw him: as the wise old man who appeared to me out of nowhere on a desolate strip of road, with a bewitching offer to make all my dreams come true. (Tartt 1992: 576)

This way, Julian holds power over the students’ minds for the rest of their lives, as Richard’s reflection still tends to perceive him through his most engaging qualities (“see him the way that I first saw him”), just like Julian perceived them. Therefore, indicating Richard’s inability to escape the aesthetic world and Julian’s influence, even outside Hampden.

2.5. Gothic consequences: paranoia, anxiety and psychological collapse

The novel showcases aesthetic beliefs turning into (Gothic) psychological collapse. This can be linked to Botting (1996: 10), who emphasises Gothic becoming part of the inner world of anxiety and despair. The collapse of the internal world can be seen when, after Bunny’s murder, the group starts to get tormented by their own inner world with feelings of paranoia and anxiety, yet not with guilt. To be exact, their anxiety comes to its starting point when the police discover Bunny’s body later than the group had anticipated. What is more,

the group does not feel remorse for their behaviour but only fear of getting caught. This can be seen in Richard's confession:

Whatever else one may say about guilt, it certainly lends one diabolical powers of invention; and I spent two or three of the worst nights I had, then or ever, lying awake drunk with a horrible taste of tequila in my mouth and worrying about clothing filaments, fingerprints, strands of hair. (Tartt 1992: 430)

Although Richard himself describes his state as guilt, he does not precisely showcase feelings of sorrow, only the fear of getting caught, as he describes "worrying about clothing filaments, fingerprints, strands of hair", which emphasises anxiety. Notably, nearly every character faces their own battles and ways of coping with the consequences of their action. For instance, Charles (in a way they all) starts drinking excessively, leading him to severe alcoholism and withdrawal. Charles's downfall is evident in Richard's description of his state: "He's out of his mind, and Camilla has no idea, and I don't know what we'll do when he gets home. I'm not even sure he'll be able to stay by himself" (Tartt 1992: 555). Then Francis, with horrible panic attacks and a suicide attempt: "I'm having a heart attack. I think I'm going to die" (Tartt 1992: 487). Following Richard himself, suffering nightmares and insomnia, which results in the consumption of pills: "Unmedicated sleep was impossible, a fairy tale, some remote childhood dream" (Tartt 1992: 553). This demonstrates aesthetic thinking turning into a Gothic consequence of mental collapse, yet indicating the absence of regret.

Furthermore, aesthetic beliefs that turn into immorality return as Gothic haunting. Smith (2013: 6) brings out Gothic anxiety related to the return of the dead, where characters are haunted by feelings that disturb everyday life. This can be seen in Bunny's haunting presence even after death, as Richard, Francis and Charles often see him as a disturbing, ghost-like figure:

The hallucination was over in a moment, but in a strange way it had persisted, manifesting itself in different lights like one of those pictures on the cover of horror paperbacks in the supermarket: turned one way, a smiling blond-haired child; turned the other, a skull in flames. (Tartt 1992: 553)

The hallucinations and nightmares demonstrate the character's inability to escape the claustrophobic doom of fear, even in their sleep. Bunny's tormenting presence can be

interpreted through Hogle's (2002: 2) definition of crimes and conflicts failing to remain buried. What is more, Bunny was essentially not the only ghost appearing in the story, as after Henry's suicide, the group also sees visions of him as well. Francis explains seeing Henry while being in a bathtub:

Faucet dripping, blood all over the god damned place. I thought I saw him standing there in his bathrobe-you know, that one with all the pockets that he kept his cigarettes and stuff in - over by the window, with his back half-turned, and he said to me, in this really disgusted voice, "Well, Francis, I hope you're happy now". (Tartt 1992: 622)

The recurring disturbing presence of the dead demonstrates the Gothic inability to escape suppressed feelings (of anxiety). Feelings of paranoia do not only apply to the return of the dead, but also expand to Charles's fear for his life, as he is certain that Henry plans to murder him. Charles's irrational fear may be connected to the fact that both murders were primarily Henry's ideas, and now Henry has a taste for blood. Charles's distrust illustrates Gothic psychological motives, which result in the characters who can not be sure of either others or themselves (Botting 1996: 12). Charles's delusion starts to worsen as his alcohol consumption becomes more excessive, resulting in being hospitalised. Ultimately, functioning as a reminder that crime does not remain hidden and may turn into something haunting.

2.6. Critiquing aestheticism

The following section argues that the extreme obsession and longing for beauty discussed in previous chapters likely lead to a self-centred life, destroying the characters psychologically. This can be seen through Johnson (1969: 7), who believes that "aestheticism, consistently followed as a comprehensive attitude to life and art, must lead to an ingrown selfishness in life". Although Tartt succeeds in making the aesthetic world seem attractive with her unique narration style, she also depicts the Gothic outcomes attached to it, such as suicide, alcoholism, isolation, and madness. This highlights the aesthetic paradox that

the group's devotion to beauty is also the very thing that eventually destroys them. This can be traced to the novel's prologue, when Richard confesses: "I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will be able to tell" (Tartt 1992: 2). The confession highlights how the moral downfall caused by the aesthetic lifestyle will be embedded in the group for the rest of their lives and how the paradox has shaped their identity. Parallels of Gothic and aesthetic consequences can be drawn from Henry and Dorian Gray, who share the same fate in suicide as a consequence of a life lived through aesthetics replacing morality. This can be interpreted in Richard's description of Henry's suicide: "I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use" (Tartt 1992: 612). Therefore, suggesting that by the end, aesthetic principles prove to be unsustainable. Consequently, by the end of both novels, Henry and Dorian realise that they are losing their facade of a beautiful image, and start to reveal the corruption they hide beneath. This can be connected to Riquelme (2000: 611), who describes Dorian's painting as being against society's values that appreciate its beautiful image, which means outer appearance may also hide something immoral. This is due to the fact that the ugliness starts to show, which becomes unbearable (since it breaks their illusion of perfection). This way, while "advocating the principles of aestheticism", the demise of the characters illustrates that "aestheticism needs to be properly controlled" (Duggan 2008: 67). Therefore, Tartt's novel functions as a warning against the self-destruction attached to the aesthetic lifestyle the characters are determined to live.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore how, in her debut novel, *The Secret History*, Donna Tartt showcases aesthetic beliefs as a destructive force that ultimately leads to threatening outcomes. In the introduction, a summary of the novel was discussed with some background information about Tartt herself. The literature review firstly gave an overview of aestheticism as well as (primarily psychological) Gothic tropes in literature, which later gave a basis for the analysis. The second section included previous research done about Tartt's *The Secret History*, which noted the novel being mainly analysed from either classical, postmodern or Gothic viewpoints. This emphasised the research gap in the absence of analysis done on both Gothic and aesthetic tropes in one work.

The empirical part of the thesis demonstrated how the characters' aesthetic beliefs of beauty as the highest value came to replace ethics through emphasis on outer appearance and style. This was connected to ideas of dandyism. The description of appearance emphasised the group's paradox: beauty on the surface, hiding corruption beneath. The illusion of a seemingly "perfect" group produced Richard's desire to belong, which later on turned into a passive obsession. Further analysis included demonstration of Bunny as an anti-aesthetic character, which was argued to be the ultimate reason for his own demise (as he destroyed the group's perception of their flawless illusion). The analysis further examined Myskja's concept of the sublime as both repulsive and attractive, which I argued shaped the group's distanced (and aestheticised) perception of death and violence, with examples brought from the Bacchanal and Bunny's death. The concept of aesthetic viewpoint was connected to Richard's distant perception of his friend's murder. The following section discussed Julian's function as an aesthetic leader, representing aesthetic mentality producing moral ignorance. Furthermore, this led to the analysis of Gothic consequences produced from the aesthetic values, as the moral corruption fails to stay buried beneath and returns as haunting, with the

characters being tormented by feelings of anxiety and paranoia (involving alcoholism, suicide, panic attacks and nightmares). Interestingly, it was argued that paranoia and anxiety were the outcome of fear and mental collapse, rather than feelings of guilt and sorrow. Besides inner feelings, the character's mental collapse was further intensified by ghostly figures, such as Bunny and Henry, reminding the group of their crime and making their corruption seem inescapable. Finally, a critique of aestheticism was provided, which argued that aesthetic thinking likely leads to a selfish and dangerous lifestyle, with consequences of suicide. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrated the aesthetic and Gothic tropes co-existing and being interconnected, thereby filling the research gap mentioned in the literature review.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Katariina Mals

“Beauty is harsh”: Aesthetic Gothic and psychological ruin in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*

“Ilu on karm”: esteetiline Gootika ja psühholoogiline allakäik Donna Tartti romaanis “Salajane ajalugu”.

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 33

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks on analüüsida Donna Tartti romaani “Salajane ajalugu” (1992) Esteetilise Gootika perspektiivist. Täpsemalt uurib töö, kuidas esteetilised uskumused eiravad eetikat ja moraale ning seetõttu viivad raamatu tegelased gootiliste tagajärgedeni, nagu surm, vägivald ja psühholoogiline allakäik.

Töö koosneb peamiselt neljast osast: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, raamatu analüüs ja kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate romaani sisust, ning töö eesmärgist. Kirjanduse ülevaade sisaldab taustainformatsiooni esteetika põhitõdedest, lisaks kasutatakse Oscar Wilde'i raamatut “Dorian Gray portree” esteetika põhimõtete selgitamiseks. Lisaks annab kirjanduse ülevaade selgituse (psühholoogilise) gootika printsiipidest ja varasemast analüüsist, mis Tartti romaanist on tehtud.

Empiiriline osa koosneb kuuest alapeatükist, mis käsitlevad raamatus esinevaid esteetika ja gooti elemente. Täpsemalt tegelaste kalduvust keskenduda välimusele ja kujutada ennast, kui kunstiteost, mis toob endaga kaasa passiivse obsessiivsuse. Lisaks kujutab analüüs Bunny tegelaskuju kui anti-esteeti, kes lõhub grupi illusiooni, mille tagajärjel sooritatakse mõrv. Järgnevalt defineeritakse sublime'i läbi terrori, tuues näite Dyonysose rituaalist, milles tegelased osalevad. Samuti uuritakse esteetilist eemaldumist, mis selle tagajärjel tekib. Juliani tegelaskuju kujutatakse kui esteetilist ja moraale eiravat mentorit, kelle ideed kanduvad edasi ka ta õpilastele. See kõik viib gootiliste tagajärgedeni, nagu paranoia ja ängistus. Viimaseks kritiseeritakse esteetilist elustiili, mis antud romaanis viib Henry tegelaskuju suitsiidini.

Uurimus tuleb järeldusele, et esteetiline elustiil peidab endas enesekeskset ja korruptsioonile kalduvat elustiili.

Märksõnad: Donna Tartt, “Salajane ajalugu”, esteetika, gooti kirjandus

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