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THE ANALYSIS OF THE ELEMENTS OF GREEK TRAGEDY IN DONNA TARTT'S NOVEL *THE SECRET HISTORY*

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Greek tragedies have consistently inspired writers across generations and epochs. Contemporary writers also look to Greek tragedies as a guide for crafting narratives that both captivate and horrify readers. This thesis examines how the incorporation of elements from Greek tragedy contributes to the development of the plotline and characters in Donna Tartt's novel, The Secret History. The introduction identifies the research gap based on existing studies on Tartt's novel by examining what aspects have not been adequately addressed or explored in previous research.

The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework that will be employed for analyzing the elements of Greek tragedy in the novel. Specifically, it focuses on Aristotle's Poetics, which outlines six categories essential to a tragedy: plot, character, reasoning, diction, song, and spectacle. The emphasis is also placed on exploring the depiction of the tragic hero, with particular attention given to the investigation of a specific tragic flaw: hubris.

In the second chapter, an analysis is conducted on the characters within the novel to determine whether their actions and resulting qualities correspond to Aristotle's description of tragic characters. The analysis focuses on the character of Henry Winter, who is presented as the tragic hero of the novel. Additionally, the character of Richard is analyzed as embodying the role of the chorus within the novel.

The conclusion of the thesis summarizes the main findings of the study and explores how these findings contribute to the existing research on both the novel and the use of Classical narratives in contemporary literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Donna Tartt, an American author, gained widespread popularity with her three novels: *The Secret History* (1992), *The Little Friend* (2002), and *The Goldfinch* (2013). Her third novel, *The Goldfinch*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014. Donna Tartt attended Bennington College in Vermont, often described as ‘‘the 1980s’ most decadent college’’ (Anolik 2019). During her time there, she studied alongside another notable American author, Bret Easton Ellis, known for works such as *American Psycho* (1991) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). Tartt dedicated her debut novel *The Secret History* to Ellis. She began writing *The Secret History* during her first year of college and continued working on it after her graduation.

According to Lili Anolik’s (2019) extensive article about Bennington College, *The Secret History* can be viewed as a roman à clef. Anolik explores the idea that characters like Bunny, Henry, and even their teacher Julian may have been inspired by actual students and professors at Bennington. The prestigious Hampden College in *The Secret History* bears a striking resemblance to Bennington College, with numerous places and landscapes described in the novel corresponding to the real locations at Bennington.

The Secret History experienced a true renaissance during the recent COVID-19 global pandemic with the emergence of a new internet aesthetic known as Dark Academia. Tartt’s novel became the pivotal literary text that inspired and guided the followers of this aesthetic. It is even referred to as the Bible of the dark academia aesthetic (Adriaansen 2022)

Although Tartt’s *The Secret History* has not been thoroughly studied in the academia, several articles examine the novel from diverse perspectives. Truffin (2014) explores the Gothic approach to education within American educational institutions. She argues that schools, instead of embodying democratic principles, often replicate elitist class structures.

She identifies examples of what she terms Schoolhouse Gothic in Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson* (1839) and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, where the main characters leave school traumatized as a consequence of their educational experiences.

Kurowicka (2020) conducts research on the representation of nonsexual friendships in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and Tana French's *The Likeness* (2008). According to Kurowicka, the two novels concentrate on tight-knit circles of friends who embody a sort of idyllic society. Nevertheless, their intention to maintain this dynamic and defy societal norms is disrupted when certain members betray their friends or choose to depart.

Murray (2022) examines the subculture known as Dark Academia, which finds inspiration in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, recognized as the foundational text of this aesthetic. Murray focuses particularly on the subculture's romanticized depiction of Anglo-American university life.

There are a few articles that analyze the classical aspects present in the novel. Pauw (1994) focuses on the issues of classical intertextuality in Tartt's novel. The article analyzes the ways in which Tartt uses ancient Greek and Roman literature to shape her own narrative, specifically in terms of tragedy and the portrayal of the tragic hero. Mills (2005) explores the representation of classicists in *The Secret History* and analyzes the image and stereotypes associated with this academic field. Turner (2010) investigates how novelists lacking a classical education have engaged with the tragic form, drawing on various literary influences and employing them effectively. In her research, Turner briefly references certain elements from Aristotle's Poetics that she believes were utilized by Tartt in shaping the narrative and characters of *The Secret History*. Among these concepts are peripeteia and anagnorisis, although Turner does not delve into detailed discussions about them. Similarly, Turner mentions qualities that should be present in tragic characters, such as goodness,

appropriateness, and consistency, without providing examples to support her assertions. She also suggests that a form of Greek chorus exists within the novel. However, she contends that instead of being embodied by Richard himself, it is represented by a few minor characters who act as symbols of the broader college community.

In my research, I will analyze the function of the application of the elements of Greek tragedy in the construction of the plotline and characters in Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*. In the first part of my thesis, I will outline and discuss six categories that, according to Aristotle, constitute a tragedy: plot, character, reasoning, diction, song, and spectacle. I will analyze the plot, paying close attention to such elements as *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Furthermore, I will analyze the representation of tragic characters, emphasizing the essential traits they must exhibit. My main emphasis will be on the depiction of the tragic hero, where I will investigate his defining flaw, commonly referred to as *hamartia*. I will examine a specific tragic flaw, namely *hubris*. In my analysis, I will incorporate the works of 20th and 21st-century classics scholars to demonstrate how Aristotle's concepts are interpreted within modern academic discourse.

In the second part of my thesis, I will concentrate on analyzing the characters within the novel, evaluating whether they exhibit the essential qualities outlined by Aristotle. I intend to center my analysis on the character of Henry Winter, whom I will examine as the tragic hero of the novel. I will argue that his tragic flaw is *hubris*, which ultimately leads Henry and the remaining members of the group to their downfall as the narrative progresses through a series of recognitions and revelations. I will also direct my attention to the character of Richard, asserting that he fulfills the role of the chorus in the novel by narrating the events to the readers, akin to how the Ancient Greek chorus communicated with the viewers of the tragedy. I will also explore the language employed in the novel, as Aristotle's guidance to

tragic poets emphasizes constructing their tragedies in a manner that captivates readers and effectively conveys the message of the tragedy.

I will conduct a close reading of the text to identify relevant excerpts that correspond to the Aristotelian theory of the construction of the tragedy, particularly concerning the plot and the main characters. I will concentrate on excerpts that either apply the plot elements discussed by Aristotle in *Poetics* or highlight the qualities of the characters as demonstrated through their actions. These excerpts will be instrumental in assessing the extent to which the novel aligns with the Aristotelian principles of tragedy. In the longer quotation, I will highlight keywords that reinforce the claim regarding the presence of Ancient Greek tragedy elements in the novel. I will utilize the descriptive qualitative method to analyze how the selected excerpts function as elements of Greek tragedy within the text. By examining their role in shaping the plot and characters, I will explore how their application contributes to the narrative's construction.

My research aims to enrich the analysis of *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, as this novel has yet to be thoroughly examined through the lens of Aristotle's theory of Greek tragedy as outlined in his *Poetics*. Additionally, my study will enhance comprehension of the utilization and significance of Classical narratives in contemporary literature.

CHAPTER ONE. Theoretical Framework

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay,
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.
To an Athlete Dying Young
A. E. Housman

1. 1. The outline of Aristotle's *Poetics* and its main ideas

Aristotle's *Poetics* is acknowledged as the earliest existing piece of Greek dramatic theory and the initial philosophical work that specifically explores literary theory. The central emphasis of the discourse lies in the analysis of tragedy (Battin 1974). This text is recognized within the Western critical tradition as a valuable work of literary theory; however, diverse viewpoints have emerged concerning nearly every aspect of this work (Carlson 1993).

Halliwell (1986) assumes that Aristotle wrote Poetics with a narrow audience in mind, specifically educated Athenians such as Sophocles, who engaged in playwriting. *Poetics* remains a commonly cited reference for offering guidance on crafting screenplays. McNeill (2000) claims that Aristotle's *Poetics* is a vital source, as tragedy offers insights into the complexities of human nature.

The origin of Greek tragedy remains unclear to this day. Scodel (2010) emphasizes that the limited evidence and the questionable reliability of sources result in a lack of substantial knowledge regarding the origin of tragedy. Scodel argues that the emergence of the form of tragedy as we understand it can be attributed to three innovations. The primary innovation entailed the development of a distinctive performance featuring a speaker and a chorus, portraying characters from mythical or historical narratives. The speaker transitions from

recounting stories about others, a common practice in traditional oral cultures, to embodying the role of a character within the narrative (Rozik 2002: 143-144).

Murray (1916) states that a majority of the stories depicted by Greek tragic poets were derived from mythical narratives. He acknowledges that the tradition of choosing characters and themes from legends posed significant constraints on Greek tragic poets, particularly in terms of plot and character portrayal. Burian (1997) emphasizes the intertextual nature of tragedy, arguing that Greek tragedy represents a comparatively restricted collection of ‘‘legendary and formal themes’’. Regarding the plot, the evolution of Greek tragedy involves a constant reinterpretation of stories already known to the audience, constituting a ‘‘system of tragic discourse’’.

The second innovation involved incorporating this performance into the City Dionysia festival in Athens. The City Dionysia was an ancient Greek festival devoted to the worship of Dionysus, the god associated with wine, fertility, and theater. The festival usually included dramatic performances, featuring both tragedies and comedies. In the 5th century B.C., the City Dionysia experienced notable changes. One of these changes involved the incorporation of dramatic competitions, transforming the festival into a significant event for theatrical performances (Easterling 1997: 37).

The third innovation encompassed the establishment of regulations that outlined how the performance was to be organized and financed. According to Cartledge (1997), theater, as perceived in Western society, originated in ancient Greece. In classical Athens, the theater was regarded largely as a ‘‘social phenomenon’’. Tragedy was viewed as a significant element of the political landscape and held a prominent place in the awareness of the Athenian citizens.

In *Poetics,* Aristotle (1996: 84) provides the following definition of tragedy:

> Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete, and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.

Aristotle does not use the word *action* to denote any kind of human activity but rather a particular kind of action chosen by the poet that by fulfilling itself accomplishes a certain objective. The poet himself must determine what action is worthy of depicting (Sachs 1995). In *Dramatic Criticism*, Walkley (1903: 99) declares that ‘‘the differentia of drama, what makes it itself and not something else is action’’.

According to Aristotle (1996: 85), an excellent tragedy should consist of six essential elements: plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and song. Aristotle goes on to say that the poet should try to include each, or at least the most important of components in his tragedy. In addition to that, each tragedy should have a complication and a resolution. Aristotle explains complication as the set of events that happen at the beginning of the tragedy and continue until the moment when the fortune of the characters changes for better or worse. Consequently, the resolution is the series of episodes that happen after the changing of the fortune and until the end of the tragedy. Aristotle (1996: 29) further lists four kinds of tragedy: the complex tragedy based exclusively on reversal and recognition; the pathetic tragedy with the motives of passion; the ethical tragedy with the motives of ethics; and simple tragedy.

From the perspective of Aristotle (1996: 86) tragedy without action cannot possibly exist. Since he explains both the tragedy and its plot as ‘‘the imitation of the action’’ it is reasonable to assert that the plot is a pivotal component of a tragedy, its most vital part. Aristotle extends this significance by designating the plot as ‘‘the soul of tragedy’’. For Aristotle, the plot has the meaning of ‘‘the organization of events’’. As to the actions that could be imitated in the tragedy, Aristotle (1996: 116) states that the subject of the poet’s imitation should belong to one of the following categories: the category of the situation ‘‘that

was or is the case’’; the category of the situation that is believed to be the case, or the category of the situation ‘that ought to be the case’. In the following, I will explore the elements that Aristotle deems crucial in the construction of Greek tragedy, which include plot, characters, diction, the role of the chorus, reasoning, and spectacle.

1. 2. The plot of the tragedy

Another aspect that highlights the utmost importance of the plot is its crucial role in the development of tragic characters. Aristotle (1996: 85) argues that people in tragedies might exhibit certain character traits, yet the source of their welfare or misfortune is fundamentally rooted in their actions rather than solely in their qualities or predispositions. Thus, the tragedy does not intend to imitate the character, since the character is dependent on and attributed to the actions undertaken by agents in the tragedy.

Aristotle (1996: 87) declares that in the construction of the plot, the following principles must be taken into consideration: completeness, magnitude, unity, and universality. He insists that the imitated action should be complete and consist of three logical units: a beginning, a middle, and an end. He stresses that the tragic poet should unquestionably adhere to these structural forms and refrain from omitting them by commencing or concluding at a random point in the narrative.

Having discussed the order in which tragic events are to be organized, Aristotle (1996: 14) continues by defining the second important concept of the plot – magnitude. He regards that the appropriate magnitude is constrained within specific boundaries, ensuring that the succession of events, in accordance with what is probable or necessary, permits a shift from unfavorable circumstances to favorable ones, or vice versa. Aristotle emphasizes that magnitude is of the same importance to the construction of the plot as completeness.

Aristotle (1996: 89) was deeply concerned with the question of unity in the construction of a tragedy. He declares that the plot should be the imitation of ‘‘a single, unified action’’ akin to how other art forms are the imitations of a singular object. Aristotle has previously discussed that the plot should under no circumstances be regarded as the imitation of a character because agents in the tragedy fulfill their destiny through actions and not qualities alone. Aristotle warns readers that a plot lacks unity when its focus revolves around an individual because among the many events that take place in the person’s life only a limited number of them are unified. Aristotle concludes that if a particular element of the plot can be omitted without causing a noticeable impact on the tragedy, it should not be regarded as a component of the whole. Therefore, the poet engaged in the construction of the tragic plot should only incorporate events that, if removed or displaced, would disturb the unity of the narrative.

The last essential component of the plot is universality. As maintained by Aristotle (1996: 90), the plots of tragedies possess a universal nature. Aristotle points out that universality is achieved through actions or verbal expressions that align with the characteristics of a specific individual guided by ‘‘probability or necessity’’. In reference to mythological tales traditionally serving as the source of tragic plots, Aristotle rejects the notion that poets should strive to adhere to such stories simply because they are recognizable to a specific group of people. He argues that even what is considered familiar is known to only a limited audience. Hence, Aristotle encourages poets to employ universal narratives in their tragedies, even as they incorporate unconventional names and settings. I will further explore the diverse types of plots present in tragedy and examine how events within the tragic narrative are structured.

1. 3. *Peripetea* and *Anagnorisis*

Aristotle (1996: 92) suggests examining the plot of a tragedy by considering the presence of *peripeteia* (reversal) or *anagnorisis* (recognition) or both of these elements. Consequently, he categorizes tragic plots into two types: simple and complex (ibid). A simple action, as stated in *Poetics*, embodies the principles of unity, completeness, universality, and magnitude. It depicts ‘‘the change of fortune’’ without the elements of *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis*. A complex action, on the other hand, produces ‘‘the change of fortune’’ through ‘‘reversal or recognition or both’’. These elements emerge as a consequence of preceding events, driven by necessity or probability, and should logically follow the structure of the plot.

Peripeteia and *anagnorisis* are designed to elicit powerful emotions, such as fear and pity, within the audience. Aristotle (1996: 91) states that aside from the act of imitating actions, tragedy should also narrate events that produce feelings of pity and fear. According to Reeves (1952: 185), the objective of tragedy is ‘the catharsis of pity and fear and similar emotions’ ultimately resulting in the experience of tragic pleasure. The tragic pleasure serves as the climax where these emotions are ultimately released.

The Ancient Greek word *catharsis* originally carries the meaning of ‘‘purification’ or ‘purgation’’. However, in the context of tragedy, Aristotle uses *catharsis* as a metaphorical expression to describe the distinctive pleasure derived from tragedy — a sensation akin to ‘‘being washed or cleansed’’ (Sachs). He advises poets to construct the tragic plot in such a way that ‘‘anyone who hears the events which occur’’ should immediately ‘‘feel pity at what happens’’. Aristotle provides the example of the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (Aristotle 1996: 96). Given the essential requirement for a tragedy to cause feelings of fear or pity, the

primary objective of the tragic poet should be the creation of situations designed to provoke these emotional responses (Reeves 1952: 186).

Recognition and reversal play a crucial role in evoking intense emotions in the audience. While these events should ideally be spontaneous, Aristotle emphasizes that it is advantageous for plot construction if these revelations can be logically deduced from the unfolding events and ‘‘appear to have happened as if for a purpose’’ (Aristotle 1996: 91).

Peripeteia or reversal involves a shift to the opposite in the actions being carried out. This transformation aligns with the principles of probability or necessity. Aristotle (1996: 92) agrees that incorporating *peripeteia* in the plot is both ‘‘tragic and agreeable’’.

Regarding *anagnorisis* (recognition), it signifies a shift from ignorance to understanding, revealing either a strong connection or hostility among individuals destined for either a favorable or unfavorable destiny. Aristotle (1996: 93) mentions that it is preferable for recognition to happen in conjunction with a reversal. He further notes that, more often than not, *anagnorisis* entails the recognition of specific individuals.

Aristotle (1996: 100) differentiates between four types of recognition. The initial one relies on ‘‘tokens’’. He considers this kind to be ‘‘the least artistic’’ and complains that it is often misused due to people’s lack of imagination. Aristotle claims that certain recognitions are based on physical characteristics, such as scars, while others depend on external attributes like necklaces. The second type involves recognitions that are fabricated by the poet, and Aristotle deems them as inartistic for this very reason. The third kind involves recognition through memory when an individual comprehends the importance of what they observe. The fourth one emerges through deduction. Aristotle (1996: 101) claims that the result of the proper use of peripeteia and anagnorisis is ‘‘bad fortune or good fortune’’. He believes that the most profound recognition arises from the unfolding of actual events, where

emotional impact is achieved through probable occurrences. The second most notable recognitions are those that arise from inference. Aristotle observes that *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* of these two types are likely to evoke feelings of pity and fear. Pity is linked to witnessing ‘‘the undeserving sufferer’’, while fear is tied to observing someone similar to us. Dyer (1965: 663) suggests that the audience is prone to sympathize with the tragic characters and experience fear and pity for them. This is because, in the tragic hero, they recognize aspects of their own selves, realizing that they too might undergo a reversal of fate due to some previously unknown tragic flaw.

1. 4. Tragic characters and their qualities

Aristotle proceeds by providing an analysis of the characters within the tragedy. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistency in characters throughout a narrative to enhance the audience’s comprehension of a character’s choices and actions. Additionally, effective characterization serves to cultivate suspense, allowing the audience to anticipate a character's decisions in crucial moments (DeGuzman 2023).

Aristotle (1996: 98) proceeds by explaining key character elements that ought to be present in a tragedy. Above all, Aristotle emphasizes goodness. As mentioned earlier, whether in speech or action, character is revealed through the nature of a choice. The character is considered good when his choices and actions are virtuous. Aristotle contends that individuals from every social class have the potential to possess virtue. He maintains that virtue is present in both women and slaves, acknowledging that one of these groups may have certain limitations, and the other is typically regarded as less superior. As the second aspect, Aristotle underscores appropriateness. He claims that certain actions may be deemed inappropriate for specific characters. For instance, while Aristotle acknowledges that it is fitting for a character to possess courage, he maintains that there are situations in which it

may be inappropriate for a woman to display courage or cleverness in a particular manner. Hall (1997: 93) portrays Athenian democratic society as marked by xenophobia, patriarchy, and imperialism. The community's reliance on both slavery and imperial tribute for its economic sustenance is apparent. Moreover, the examination of tragedy reveals its role in communicating ideas vital to the continuation of the system—ideas that suggest the inferiority of foreigners, women, and slaves.

Thirdly, Aristotle highlights likeness and ‘‘fourthly, consistency’’. Even if the subject of the imitation is inherently inconsistent, the character being portrayed should maintain a consistent inconsistency. Aristotle emphasizes that it should be likely that a certain person speaks or acts in a certain way, as well as the fact that the subsequent events should unfold in a manner that is either ‘‘necessary or probable’’. Aristotle defines tragedy as ‘‘an imitation of people better than we are’’ and claims that tragic poets depict people as they truly are but enhance their appearance, making them more admirable. For instance, the poet depicting individuals with traits such as laziness or irritability should portray them with these characteristics, while also presenting them as virtuous people.

Aristotle (1996: 97) claims that tragic events typically revolve around interactions between closely connected individuals, enemies, or neutrals. Sackey (2010: 86) highlights Aristotle's observation that a compelling tragedy typically revolves around family members or individuals who share a mutual affection for each other.

Aristotle outlines four specific scenarios in the tragedy: the action carried out by individuals who possess knowledge and understanding, the action left undone because the perpetrator has awareness and comprehension, the action conducted ‘in ignorance’ followed by subsequent understanding, and the action not accomplished due to ‘‘sudden recognition and knowledge’’ (Sackey 2010: 86).

Aristotle (1996: 97) delves into this matter by explaining that the action can unfold in a manner where individuals act with full knowledge and awareness. The action can also unfold with the characters committing a dreadful deed in ignorance, only to later recognize the close connection. A third potential scenario involves an individual who stands on the verge of committing an irreversible crime out of ignorance but manages to recognize the danger and prevent the action. Aristotle adds that among these possibilities, being on the brink of acting knowingly and refraining is the most unfavorable since it lacks the essence of tragedy as ‘‘there is no suffering’’. Executing the action unknowingly is a preferable option, but the best choice is the action carried out in ignorance and followed by recognition because the subsequent recognition produces a significant emotional effect.

French scholar Stapfer (1888) points out that the characters in the tragedy are filled with a single passion that motivates them to act in one of the previously discussed ways. Stapfer emphasizes that this passion is not personal; instead, it is fueled by a sense of duty or some other commitment, such as allegiance to the state, family, or religion. This is the reason why the individual, as such, often fades into the background beneath the grandeur of the sacred interests they are determined to protect. Murray (1916: 56) strengthens Stapfer’s statement that characters in tragedy frequently proceed with strong determination toward an unavoidable conclusion, whether that conclusion involves their own demise or the execution of a dreadful act mandated by the circumstances they find themselves in.

In his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Arthur Miller (1949) asserts that the tragic feeling is stirred in the audience when we witness a character who is willing to sacrifice their life, if necessary, to defend their ‘‘sense of personal dignity’’. He supports his argument with examples from both Ancient Greek dramas like *Orestes* and *Medea* and Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Miller believes that in these works, the central conflicts revolve around individuals striving to attain their ‘‘rightful position in society’’.

1. 5. The image of the tragic hero

Murray (1916: 60) suggests that characters in tragedy who leave a lasting impression on us, despite different narratives, are inherently typical. This can be explained by the fact that we find it difficult to be emotionally affected by the fate of an individual whose nature we do not perceive to be connected to our own. Hence, Aristotle (1996: 95) introduces the concept of the ideal tragic hero. He begins by stating that it is inappropriate for virtuous individuals to experience a shift 'from good fortune to bad fortune', as this fails to evoke the necessary tragic emotions of fear or pity. Instead, it results in a feeling of disgust after witnessing such an unjust occurrence. Similarly, Aristotle argues that wicked characters should not undergo a transformation of their fortune from unfavorable circumstances to favorable ones. He explains that this change is by no means tragic because it lacks the capacity to cause pity or fear. Aristotle points out that pity arises from witnessing someone suffering undeservedly, and an immoral individual suffering for their crimes does not evoke pity. Additionally, fear is experienced when we observe someone similar to ourselves. Therefore, it is unlikely for us to feel fear for a wicked person because we would not want to associate ourselves with such corrupt characters.

The tragic hero is an individual of elevated social standing, blessed with a life of prosperity. He embodies qualities intermediate between all these various types. The tragic hero is characterized as an individual who, on the one hand, is not exceptionally virtuous or just, but whose descent into misfortune is not a result of moral defects in his character. Instead, it occurs due to some kind of error or mistake (Aristotle 1996: 96).

Martha Nussbaum (1992) asserts that through their observation of tragic characters, viewers engage in critical intellectual analysis of the situations portrayed in tragic narratives. Nussbaum (1992) suggests that to experience pity and fear in response to tragedy, spectators

must to some extent identify with characters who act and suffer. This emotional connection, in turn, offers viewers an opportunity for emotional and intellectual growth, leading to a deeper comprehension of personal identity and values. Brecht (2001: 167), however, challenges the Aristotelian theory of pity and fear by arguing that empathizing with characters impedes viewers' ability to reflect on the societal roots of human suffering. Brecht's critiques imply that Aristotelian drama relies on ''sympathetic role models'' to guide viewers. He argues that these response patterns hinder critical examination of the social aspects of tragedy because observing the events of the play solely through the lens of the central character may restrict viewers from gaining a broader perspective on the social themes depicted in the play.

Sackey (2010: 92) believes that Aristotle situates the tragic hero within a specific context. For instance, it is considered inappropriate for the tragic hero to express such negative traits as faintheartedness, rage, and brutality. However, according to Segal (1986: 35), the tragic hero grapples with internal contradictions. On one hand, he partakes in barbarous acts (such as incestuous affairs, homicide, etc.), or on the other, he aspires to attain a unique level of divinity, seeking might and freedom.

Murray (1916: 61) observes that Ancient Greek tragedy did not primarily aim for the development of human character; instead, it was preoccupied with the theme of human fate. While the very essence of character resides in the will, it ''was obliterated, thwarted, cancelled by the dark fatalism''. Burian (1997: 182) contends that fate is a frequently emphasized element in discussions of tragic conflict. He argues that in Greek tragedies, the audience usually possesses prior knowledge of the story's outcome, creating an impression of all-pervading fate within the tragedy. Therefore, concerning the plot's structure, the tragic poet is essentially liberated from the necessity to instill suspense within the tragedy. Rather,

their responsibility shifts to using fate in a manner that cultivates and intensifies dramatic tension.

Vinje (2021) agrees with Aristotle's statement that the finest tragedies center around an individual who is neither extraordinarily righteous nor overtly wicked. Hence, a tragedy should depict a character situated between these two opposites. This character meets his downfall through a certain form of ''failure'', referred to as *hamartia* in Greek.

1. 6. The notion of *hamartia*

According to Aristotle (1996: 95), the concept of *hamartia* or a fatal flaw is distinguished not by a transition from misfortune to good fortune but rather by a shift from prosperity to adversity. This transformation should occur not because of wickedness but as a result of a significant mistake made by an individual of a particular nature. Examples of such characters, whose downfall is brought about by a fatal flaw, include figures like Alcmeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, and numerous other individuals who have undergone or committed grievous deeds.

Classical scholars continue to engage in ongoing discussions about the interpretation of Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*. Dyer (1965: 658) acknowledges that the interpretation of *hamartia* in *Poetics* has been a subject of more debate than any other literary concept. Bywater (1909), translates it as a shift ''from happiness to misery'' caused by an ''error''. In Butcher's translation (1923), *hamartia* is rendered as a transition 'from prosperity to adversity' resulting from ''error or frailty''. Fyfe (1940) defines *hamartia* as an ''error of judgment''. Meanwhile, Else (1957), employs the term 'mistake', indicating a transformation ''from good fortune to bad''. Considering that various translations may convey different ideas, it becomes crucial to analyze and discern the possible interpretations derived from these translations.

According to Dyer (1965: 658), the notion of fault closely aligns with the *flaw*, indicating a shortcoming in an object or character that may hinder the fulfillment of its intended purpose. Dyer maintains that, from Aristotle's perspective, tragedies narrate the tales of characters who initially experience success but are subsequently revealed to possess a significant flaw, ultimately resulting in their downfall. Given that tragedy is an imitation of an action, the manifestation of this flaw should likewise be evident in the characters' actions and decisions, as these elements play a crucial role in determining the outcome of success or failure. Dyer concurs that failure can stem from various factors, including ''error, ignorance, mistakes, and wrongdoing''. Dyer highlights that Aristotle does not explicitly state whether faults stem from errors in judgment, deficiencies in moral or religious perspectives, or simply a lack of information. Thus, the responsibility of the tragic poet is to illustrate that the shift from success to failure occurs not by chance, as that is not considered ''tragic'', but rather through a flaw (*hamartia*) present in the hero's character.

Henn (1956) offers an example of a definition of a ''tragic flaw'' as an imperfection that, in its essence, is not malicious but becomes harmful due to the unlucky developments within the context of the tragedy. Hyde (1963) puts forth a perspective that diverges from the conventional pursuit of identifying ''tragic flaws'' in tragic heroes. Instead, Hyde advocates for a more effective approach, suggesting the translation of *hamartia* as 'error'. This interpretation entails perceiving *hamartia* as the misguided step, stemming from ignorance, that culminates in the calamity.

Brody (2014: 23) argues that Aristotle's application of *hamartia* in *Poetics* is best understood in its literal context, signifying ''missing the mark'', rather than embracing the broader and more commonly adopted concept of a ''tragic flaw''. He interprets the term *hamartia* as a form of mistake, separate from moral shortcomings. Instead, he emphasizes a nonjudgmental perspective, highlighting the idea of misinterpreting one thing for another.

In alignment with this statement, Glassberg (2017: 201) affirms that *hamartia* signifies an action, involving the commission of an error or the misinterpretation of a situation.

Vinje (2021) argues that Aristotle dismisses exemplary individuals as unfit for tragedy because they cannot experience downfall through *hamartia*. According to Vinje, Aristotle excludes ‘‘morally outstanding’’ individuals as tragic heroes because they lack the ability to make questionable choices. She argues that such heroes refrain from actions that could cast a negative light on their moral character. Vinje agrees that the tragic hero should not be excessively vicious either, to avoid appearing worse than necessary. However, by definition, they must possess at least one flaw. The absence of a flaw in the tragic hero renders them ill-suited to the development of the tragic plot. Contrastingly, the Aristotelian tragic character, precisely due to his imperfection, would harbor the essential tragic flaw that elicits both pity and fear in the audience.

Brecht (2001: 172) criticizes the Aristotelian concept of *hamartia* and its depiction in tragedies, suggesting that it fails to provide genuine insight into the origins of human suffering. He argues that plots that highlight the protagonist’s error as the sole cause of their misfortune evade examining the shortcomings within the social and political structure. Brecht’s criticisms underscore the significance of dramatic techniques that enable viewers to contextualize the protagonist’s actions within a broader social framework, rather than solely attributing tragic misfortune to individual error. Brecht claims that Aristotle’s focus on the tragic hero’s *hamartia* as the connection between his actions and resulting misfortune disregards the systemic failures in ‘‘social arrangements’’ which leads the viewer to perceive human suffering as ‘‘inescapable’’. As a result, this perspective lacks the capacity to stimulate the ‘‘critical social reflection’’ necessary for instigating meaningful social change.

According to Vinje (2021), Aristotle excludes ‘‘morally outstanding’’ individuals as tragic heroes because they lack the ability to make questionable choices. She argues that such heroes refrain from actions that could cast a negative light on their moral character. Vinje agrees that the tragic hero should not be excessively vicious either, to avoid appearing worse than necessary. However, by definition, they must possess at least one flaw. The absence of a flaw in the tragic hero renders them ill-suited to the development of the tragic plot. Contrastingly, the Aristotelian tragic character, precisely due to his imperfection, would harbor the essential tragic flaw that elicits both pity and fear in the audience.

1. 7. The notion of *hubris* and its manifestations

Frequently, the tragic flaw takes the form of *hubris*, an overbearing pride that leads the hero to disregard a divine warning or transgress a moral law. The term *hubris* signifies ‘‘wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength or from passion, insolence’’ (Liddell & Scott 1968). *Hubris* is characterized by overweening arrogance and is often referred to as ‘‘the pride that precedes a downfall’’. In Greek tragedy and law, *hubris* was considered a grave violation, and it carried significant consequences (Gill 2020). The common usage of *hubris* in English implies pride or over-confidence, often with a negative connotation. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), *hubris* is defined as ‘‘an extreme and unreasonable feeling of pride and confidence in yourself’’, while the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) describes it as ‘‘exaggerated pride or self-confidence’’.

The significance of the concept of *hubris* was notably established through Aristotle’s work *Rhetoric* (2015), where he defines *hubris* as:

> doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it. For those who act in return for something do not commit *hubris*, they avenge themselves. The cause of the pleasure for those committing *hubris* is that by harming people, they think themselves superior; that is why the young and the rich are hubristic, as they think themselves superior when they commit *hubris*.

Aristotle goes on to recognize that *hubris* seems to be even more ingrained in the behavior of the wealthy than in that of the young. According to Aristotle, *hubris* is regarded as behavior that is both insulting and harmful. This kind of approach is typical of the selfish youth, of the rich, who are captivated by the influence of their wealth, and of those who have achieved excessive success and confidence, and wish to be perceived as ‘‘superior to others’’.

MacDowell (1976) mentions that an individual exhibits *hubris* by intentionally engaging in behavior that is negative, unethical, or unproductive simply because it aligns with their desires, without concern for the feelings or rights of others. According to Fisher (1976), *hubris* is a ‘‘gratuitous insult’’, propelled not by a desire to attain any concealed objective but by the inherent satisfaction derived from showcasing one's supremacy in a manner that brings shame to another person. Fisher identifies the core of *hubris* in the deliberate commission of abusive acts that are specifically intended to dishonor others. MacDowell (1976: 18), in contrast, posits that *hubris* does not necessarily require a victim, and therefore, it does not have to involve dishonor. Instead, its nature is characterized by the ‘‘self-indulgent enjoyment of excess energy’’. MacDowell defines *hubris* as possessing ‘‘energy or power and misusing it in self-indulgently’’. This definition is reinforced by five additional supporting points:

1) *hubris* is invariably negative.

2) *hubris* is always a voluntary act.

3) *hubris* is often, though not consistently, triggered by factors such as youth, wealth, and an abundance of food and drink.

4) *hubris* is typically not of a religious nature.

5) *hubris* frequently includes a victim and becomes more severe when such a victim is involved.

The primary emphasis in his explanation is placed on the existence within the individual committing *hubris* a predisposition to prioritize personal desires and succumb to temptation. Fisher (1976) contradicts MacDowell's claim that behaviors such as excessive eating, drinking, indulging in too much sexual activity, and engaging in playful activities can be considered displays of *hubris*. Fisher questions whether, in such instances, *hubris* might merely denote enjoying oneself, even when there is no negative impact on others.

Fisher (1976) claims that *hubris* is often associated with actions such as insult or derision. The individuals engaging in such actions are typically affluent and well-educated youths. Thus, unjust actions tend to be characterized more by *hubris* than by trivial misdeeds because of their wit, which can be viewed as a form of ‘‘educated *hubris*’’. The possession of wealth can also cultivate *hubris* and arrogance. This dynamic leads the wealthy to develop a distorted perception of their value and an unwarranted trust in their luck. Likewise, Dickie (1984) contends that *hubris* is fundamentally a character trait marked by presumptuousness or arrogance. Hence, an individual fails to recognize the natural vulnerability and inherent restrictions that apply to every human being. *Hubris*, when manifested in actions, is perhaps most frequently characterized by physical abuse such as hitting, wounding, or even killing others.

1. 8. The role of the chorus

Weiner (1980) asserts that there is much that remains unknown about how the Greek chorus functioned. It is confirmed that in the early 5th century B.C., the Greek chorus comprised fifty members. Aeschylus probably reduced this number to twelve, and there is a likelihood that Sophocles subsequently raised it to fifteen (Aristotle 1996: 30). This

arrangement endured throughout the remainder of the century. Tragic poets have considered the chorus to be of great significance. This claim is drawn from the observation that every surviving tragedy includes choruses, and these choruses are assigned a substantial number of lines. Additionally, we comprehend the function of the chorus, which encompasses both dancing and singing (Weiner 1980: 205-206).

According to Weiner (1980: 206), there is a theory suggesting that the chorus serves as a ‘‘buffer between the actor and the audience’’. This indicates that there will consistently be a certain gap between the two, and it is the responsibility of the chorus to bridge that gap. The chorus is also occasionally perceived as an ‘‘Ideal Audience’’, serving as a standard against which the actual audience may gauge its response. However, Weiner disagrees with this statement, considering it to be incorrect. He argues that choruses often misinterpret the events in the tragedy, while the audience understands what actually happens. Moreover, choruses often provide foolish or unfitting comments on actions in the tragedy. The theory of the Ideal Audience contradicts Aristotle’s notion that the chorus should be considered as one of the actors in the tragedy.

In *Poetics* (1996: 104), Aristotle conveys the idea that ‘‘one should handle the chorus as one of the actors’’, emphasizing that it ought to be an essential component of the production, contributing to the overall performance. A chorus typically comprises a homogeneous group. This composition not only improves the clarity of their collective role as actors but also allows them to seamlessly integrate into the plot (Kitto 1956).

When the chorus is intricately woven into the structure of the play, it takes on the qualities of a collective character more distinctly, enhancing the overall complexity of the play. Weiner (1980) claims that, although Aristotle encourages the audience to perceive the chorus as a collective character, it should still be regarded as a character to the same extent as

Oedipus, Heracles, or Medea. Burian (1997) believes that the chorus functions not only as ‘‘a collective character’’ with a specific connection to other characters in the tragedy but also as a mediator between the tragic characters and the audience, contributing to the shaping of the audience’s perspective.

According to Aristotle (1996: 93), the tragedy is divided into the following components: prologue, episode, finale, and choral parts, which include entry-song and ode. Aristotle adds that these elements are found in all tragedies. Burian (1997) remarks that from the entry song to the conclusion of the play, the chorus remains consistently in the orchestra, with occasional and notable exceptions. Through its leader, the chorus actively engages in both dramatic dialogue and lyric exchanges with other characters.

According to Weiner (1980), the integration into the plot makes the chorus a more essential aspect of the narrative. Weiner (1980) provides the example of Sophocles’ play Ajax. The chorus in this tragedy is seen as a representation of the sailors under Ajax’s command, emphasizing their dependence on him. Contrastingly, Euripides’ choruses typically do not have a direct interest in the outcomes of the protagonists, be it success or failure. In most cases, they serve as mere observers, and the hero’s misfortune does not significantly impact the chorus other than causing a sense of unhappiness. Aristotle (1996: 104) views Sophocles’ approach as superior, as it contributes to the overall enjoyment and comprehension of the audience.

1. 9. Reasoning

Segal (1986: 29) argues that an essential focus of Greek tragedy revolves around the language. Burian (1997: 100) notes that in the realm of tragedy, words serve as instruments of power, and the language itself inherently carries an ominous quality. In Aristotle’s view (1996: 86), reasoning involves the methods through which individuals argue for or against

the validity of a statement and present ‘‘universal propositions’’. In essence, it includes ways in which an individual, within the context of a tragedy, can utilize language to influence or affect another person. Using language for reasoning should result in providing evidence and countering arguments, eliciting emotions (e.g., pity, fear, anger, etc.), as well as determining the significance or insignificance of a subject. Aristotle contends that reasoning is the skill of articulating what is implicit and fitting for a given situation. Furthermore, I will explore the appropriate type of language that should be employed in the tragedy.

1. 10. The distinctive features of diction

Aristotle (1996: 110) asserts that diction is a form of ‘‘verbal expression’’, emphasizing the use of language as a means to communicate a message. Diction encompasses various components, including phonemes, syllables, connectives, nouns, verbs, conjunctions, inflections, and utterances. He maintains that incorporating various literary devices can elevate the overall quality of the tragedy. Aristotle argues that diction stands out when it incorporates unconventional expressions, including non-standard words, metaphors, lengthening, and anything that differs from prevailing linguistic norms. However, in Aristotle’s view, an overly dazzling diction has the potential to obscure both character and reasoning. He warns against the exclusive reliance on metaphors by a tragic poet, as it would puzzle the reader, and emphasizes that using only non-standard words would lead to incomprehensible nonsense.

Aristotle emphasizes that clarity is the primary quality of diction. The deviation from the usual usage makes the diction extraordinary, as it is unfamiliar to us. However, there is a connection with what we are accustomed to, ensuring that it remains clear. Aristotle argues that an effective strategy entails combining two elements: one, incorporating non-standard

words or metaphors to make the diction unusual and avoid a loss of dignity, and the other, utilizing current usage to ensure clarity.

1. 11. Spectacle

Spectacle is characterized as the utilization of visual or auditory elements to communicate a narrative or concept. These elements encompass scenes, costumes, and settings, all of which contribute to the narrative (DeGuzman 2023). Due to the inherently performable nature of tragedy, the poet is tasked with ensuring that the text can be staged without resulting in visual absurdities. However, the poet is not responsible for the direct execution of his text in visible stage action. Instead, Aristotle (1996: 36) deems spectacle to be the least significant element among the components of tragedy, as the responsibility for its execution falls on the stage manager and director.

CHAPTER TWO. The analysis of the elements of Greek tragedy in the novel *The Secret History*

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.
To an Athlete Dying Young
A. E. Housman

The Secret History (1992) follows Richard, a California student who transfers to Hampden College in Vermont. He becomes captivated by an exclusive classics group, consisting of four boys and a girl. The group's attempt to recreate a bacchanal leads to tragedy when they unintentionally cause the death of a farmer. To silence suspicions, they manipulate Bunny, the excluded member, but he discovers their secret. The group eliminates Bunny, triggering a chain of tragic events that culminate in the tragic suicide of Henry, the group's leader.

2.1. The four tragic characters in the novel: Henry Winter, Camilla and Charles Macauley, Francis Abernathy

Aristotle's (1996: 98) definition of tragedy highlights that tragedy imitates individuals who are ''better than we are''. This idea establishes a distinct aura around the tragic characters, rendering them more admirable and noble. Characters in Greek tragedy, despite being ordinary people like us, demonstrate heightened physical and mental qualities that present them as more refined and elevated in the eyes of the audience.

In *The Secret History*, the main characters are introduced to us through the perspective of the narrator, Richard, who is a new transfer student from California. Shortly after settling at Hampden, he begins to observe a group of Classics students who, as he initially asserts,

‘‘were nothing so unusual at a distance’’ (p. 17). However, upon closer inspection, he describes them as an ‘‘arresting party’’, that ‘‘suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities’’ (p. 17). By calling the group picturesque, he conveys the idea that they appeared exceptionally beautiful and elegant. The use of the word fictive suggests that they did not seem natural in the college surroundings, almost as if they belonged to a realm separate from the everyday world inhabited by ordinary people. This becomes evident from the subsequent descriptions that Richard provides for each member of the group. When Richard writes about the leader of the group, Henry Winter, he emphasizes that Henry ‘‘walked stiffly through the throngs of hippies and beatniks and preppies and punks with **the self-conscious formality of an old ballerina**’’ (p. 17).

He then proceeds to provide us with a description of another member, Francis, whom he labels as ‘‘the most exotic of the set’’ (p. 18). Francis caught Richard’s attention not only with his appearance but also with his style. Francis is described as wearing ‘‘**beautiful** starchy shirts with French cuffs; **magnificent** neckties; a black greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked and made him look like a cross between **a student prince** and Jack the Ripper’’ (p. 18).

But perhaps the most complimentary description is reserved for the twins, Charles and Camilla, who are said to have ‘‘faces as clear, as cheerful, and grave, as a couple of Flemish angels’’ (p. 18). Richard also provides an account of their clothes and states that ‘‘perhaps most **unusual** in the context of Hampden – where **pseudo-intellects** and **teenage decadents** abounded, and where black clothing was de rigueur – they liked to wear pale clothes, particularly white’’ (p. 18).

These characteristics are overwhelmingly positive and flattering. Henry is described as possessing the grace of a ballerina, Francis is depicted as resembling a prince in his refined

attire, and the twins are quite literally described as angels. The recurring theme in his description of the group is their elegant looks, setting them apart from other students. The extent to which Richard is captivated by the four main characters becomes apparent when he starts describing Bunny, the fifth member of this highly exclusive group. In Richard's perspective, Bunny is

> […]**sloppy gum-chewing**, with a relentlessly cheery demeanor and his fists thrust deep in the pockets of his **knee-sprung** trousers. [He wears] the same jacket every day, a **shapeless** brown tweed that was **frayed** at the elbows and short in the sleeves (p. 17).

As evident from this description, Bunny is the exception within the group, lacking the elegance or style of Henry and Francis. Bunny also lacks the enchanting physical appeal of the twins. Later in the novel, when Richard suspects that Henry might harbor feelings for Bunny, the notion is hard to accept. When attempting to view Bunny in a romantic context, all Richard can conjure is ‘‘a **repugnant** miasma of **sour-smelling** shirts and muscles gone to fat and **dirty** socks’’ (p. 151).

In the end, Richard arrives at the conclusion that, to him, Bunny is’ ‘about as erotic as an old football coach’’ (p. 151). Bunny's unfavorable description aligns with the one Richard provides for his neighbor Judy Poovey, the only person outside the Classics group with whom he converses the most in the novel. Richard characterizes her clothes as ‘‘wild’’ (p. 48) and when he asserts her voice, he contends that it ‘‘was loud and rose frequently to a screech’’ (p. 48), resembling, in his perception, ‘‘the cries of some terrifying tropical bird’’ (p. 48). These comparisons illustrate that Richard, and consequently, the reader, from the very beginning, forms the perception of the four main characters as individuals undoubtedly superior to the typical crowd found in American elite colleges, which may consist of ‘‘pseudo-intellects and teenage decadents’’, ‘‘hippies and beatniks and preppies and punks’’ (p. 18).

Richard characterizes the group as ‘‘highly unapproachable’’ (p. 18) due to their sense of superiority and an air of foreignness. Nevertheless, he is so captivated by these students that he trails them around campus, hoping to catch at least one glimpse of them. One day, he observes the twins and Bunny grappling with their Greek homework and gathers the courage to speak up, offering his solution to the linguistic challenge. Following this initial encounter, he writes that ‘‘it was as if **the characters in a favorite painting**, absorbed in their own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me’’ (p. 22).

In this excerpt, Richard compares the group members to a work of art, specifically his favorite painting. This suggests that, for Richard, these individuals do not belong to the same category as other students; they are clearly above him and others. He admires them and looks up to them, akin to how one would appreciate a beautiful painting in a museum.

Captivated by the group, Richard is driven to alter his academic path, shifting from English literature to Classical studies. He enrolls in classes under the instruction of Julian Morrow, the sole professor offering courses in this field. Teachers describe Julian as ‘‘a distinguished scholar’’ (p. 14), and there is a rumor that he has been acquainted with some of the most prominent thinkers of the 20th century, including figures like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Richard is convinced that, guided by the influence of a charismatic and influential teacher like Julian, he can transform himself into someone akin to Julian's students. Richard expresses that ‘‘his students – if they were any mark of **his tutelage** – were **imposing** enough’’ (p. 32). Upon agreeing to mentor Richard, Julian lays out a set of conditions, requiring that Richard abandon all other classes except for French and appoint Julian as his advisor. Essentially, this implies that Richard would have to transfer ‘‘entirely out of Hampden College into [Julian’s] **own little academy** of ancient Greek, student body five,

six including [Richard]'' (p. 32). Richard's ultimate motivation for making such a crucial decision is the desire to emulate Julian's students and ''be like them'' (p. 32). He asserts that should the qualities exhibited by the four group members be attainable, he might adopt them by spending time with Julian and his students in the classroom together.

I have discussed that the main characters in *The Secret History* are meant to be perceived by readers as superior in behavior and looks compared to the ordinary students at Hampden College. I will now explore whether the four characters exhibit goodness, a trait Aristotle considers essential for tragic characters. Aristotle argues that the goodness of tragic characters becomes apparent through the nature of their choices. Aristotle suggests that a character is considered good when his choices and actions reflect virtuous qualities.

Throughout the novel, the main characters predominantly interact with each other and there are few depictions of their engagement with individuals outside their Classics group. Given that the narrative is confined to Richard's perspective, it is difficult to predict how the characters interact with each other when Richard is not present. Additionally, there is limited information provided about the dynamics within the group before Richard becomes a part of it. Due to this restriction, my assessment of the characters' goodness will be primarily based on how they treat Richard.

In the first part of the novel, Richard is only embraced by the twins Charles and Camilla, who make deliberate efforts to ensure his sense of acceptance in this unfamiliar environment. He reminisces about

> […]how **sweet** Camilla was in those first awkward weeks and how Charles had always had a way of showing up in [Richard's] room, or turning to [him] in a crowd with a tranquil assumption – **heartwarming** to [Richard] that he and [Richard] were particular friends (p. 219).

When Richard is unable to secure housing for the winter, he resorts to living in a partially abandoned house with no heating. His stubbornness prevents him from seeking help from his new friends, causing him to endure the extreme cold. He acknowledges that among his

few sources of joy during that period were ‘‘boxes of cookies’ made by the twins’’ (p. 124) grandmother and ‘‘letters written in alternating inks – black for Charles, red for Camilla’’ (p. 124). Richard felt immensely grateful for ‘‘their letters –frequently unacknowledged on [his] part – which had come so **faithfully** over the long winter months’’ (p. 219).

While the emotional support from the twins was significant for Richard, it was Henry who saved him from death in that house. The narrative does not provide clarity on how Henry discovered Richard’s location, as Richard had not disclosed his address to any of his friends. Nevertheless, on one particularly freezing evening, when Richard succumbed to exhaustion and hypothermia, Henry appeared at the house and drove Richard to the hospital. Richard claims that ‘‘Henry **stayed** with [him] **almost the whole time**, bringing [Richard] sodas when [he] asked for them, and a razor and a toothbrush, and a pair of his own pajamas’’ (p. 133).

Richard expressed particular gratitude for Henry’s support during the nights, when he struggled to breathe and experienced pain in his lungs, preventing him from sleeping. The emergency room doctor went so far as to inform Richard that Henry had, in fact, saved his life. Touched by these words, Richard reflects that ‘‘if there is a place where lists are kept, and **credit given**, [Richard is] sure there is **a gold star** by [Henry’s] name’’ (p. 134).

After Richard leaves the hospital, with no place to go, Henry extends the offer for Richard to stay at his place, even suggesting that Richard should sleep in his bed while Henry takes the fold-out bed from the wall. When Richard protests, Henry argues that ‘‘it's good to change the place where one sleeps from time to time’’ (p. 136).

In the case of Francis, his affluent background and meticulous attention to his style, result in a consistent display of extraordinary generosity, as he regularly gifts Charles and Richard with armloads of his old suits.

Nevertheless, Aristotle does not suggest that tragic characters need to be virtually flawless in every aspect. He emphasizes that tragic characters can indeed possess negative traits such as laziness or irritability. However, these aspects of their character should not diminish their overall admiration and goodness. In *The Secret History*, the four main characters are portrayed with weaknesses such as excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, and drug use. When Bunny first describes Francis to Richard, he mentions that Francis ‘‘won't do a thing after school but drink like a fish and go to parties’’ (p. 57).

Commenting on Charles’ drinking habit, Richard states that,

> […] as a matter of fact, **Charles** did **drink a lot**. [They] all did: but still, though he didn't indulge in any very conspicuous excess, [Richard] had frequently had the experience of **smelling liquor** on his breath **at odd hours** or dropping by unexpectedly **in the early afternoon** to find him with **a glass in his hand** (p. 233).

While the main characters in the novel do exhibit certain negative traits, these characteristics rarely have drastic negative effects on their lives and do not render them repulsive or unappealing. For example, after Richard is invited to one of their parties for the first time, he returns home very late. Having slept in, he rushes to class, forgetting to brush his hair or shave. He is amazed to find that, despite a night of heavy drinking, his group mates ‘‘all looked fresh, well rested’’ (p. 74). Subsequently, the reader is amazed by the members’ ability to live in such a reckless way yet still consistently manage to submit their assignments on time and maintain a presentable appearance during their classes with Julian.

2.2. Henry Winter as the tragic hero of the novel

I will now shift my attention to a character who prominently stands out in the novel - Henry Winter. He is the initiator of the bacchanal that resulted in the first murder and the mastermind behind the plot to kill Bunny, the fifth member of the group. I will examine Henry as the tragic hero of the story because his *hamartia* sets the entire narrative in motion, ultimately guiding Henry and the other characters toward their tragic end.

Henry aligns closely with Aristotle's description of a tragic hero. Aristotle emphasizes that a tragic hero holds a prominent position in society and enjoys a life of privilege. Henry's affluent upbringing, where he is the sole heir of a wealthy family, results in an abundance of financial resources bestowed upon him by his parents. This excessive wealth prompts Charles to remark that ''Henry has more money than he knows what to do with''. It is also mentioned that Henry had attended exclusive American schools before deciding to withdraw from education entirely during the eleventh grade. Henry's decision to drop out stemmed from his refusal to take the SATs since ''he's got some kind of aesthetic objection to them'' (p. 70). This choice led him to Hampden College, described by Camilla as ''the last place on earth for the worst people in the world'' (p. 70). At Hampden, Henry quickly gains the reputation of being ''a linguistic genius'' because ''he [speaks] **a number of languages**, ancient and modern, and **had published a translation** of Anacreon, with commentary, when **he was only eighteen**'' (p. 19). Julian claims that

> […] it's **remarkable how good** [Henry] is **at anything** he tries. He can grow flowers, repair clocks like a jeweler, add tremendous sums in his head. Even if it's something as simple as bandaging a cut finger he manages **to do a better job** of it (p. 259).

Julian concludes that had Henry not chosen to dedicate his life to Classical studies, he could have excelled as a doctor, soldier, or scientist. Fortunately, the wealth of his family grants Henry the luxury of not having to work for a living, allowing him to fully engage in the pursuit of knowledge. According to Charles, ''**all Henry wants** to do when he finishes school, if he finishes, is to find some place where he can **write** his books and **study** the Twelve Great Cultures'' (p. 107).

The others perceive Henry as a prosperous and intelligent young scholar, ''a sort of Mycroft Holmes of classical philology'' (p. 241). Similar to the Holmes brothers, Henry exhibits little patience for individuals whose intellectual capacities do not match up to his

levels of intelligence. Hence, everyone acquainted with Henry regards him ‘‘with a kind of fearful respect’’ (p. 92).

A tragic hero in a Greek tragedy is often notable for both exceptional height and physique, setting him apart from the ordinary crowd. In Richard’s initial portrayal of the group, he starts by depicting Henry, and the first observation he makes about Henry is his considerable height ‘‘well over six feet’’ (p. 17). Bunny reveals to Richard that despite the car accident that left Henry immobilized for an extended period during his childhood, he ultimately managed to regain the ability to walk. Bunny admires Henry’s commitment to self-improvement and compares him to ‘‘a regular Teddy Roosevelt, overcoming obstacles and all’’ (p. 57). Bunny also notes that Henry is now ‘‘strong as an ox’’ (p. 57).

Aristotle suggests that the tragic hero should avoid displaying undesirable qualities such as timidity, and indeed, Henry does not display this particular trait. When Bunny starts harboring suspicions about the group’s role in the murder of the farmer and intimidates them with inappropriate and suggestive jokes, Henry remains ‘‘as serene as the Buddha’’ (p. 163), in stark contrast to Francis, who is described as being so pale that he is ‘‘almost green’’ (p. 163). Even in the face of danger, such as Charles barging into the hotel room with a gun and threatening Henry’s life, he is ‘‘remarkably composed’’ (p. 571).

In his role as the group leader, Henry bears the responsibility of making crucial decisions. When the group ultimately decides to devise a plan to eliminate Bunny, Henry takes charge by designing the plan and meticulously calculating all associated risks. At one point, Henry considers the possibility of poisoning Bunny with mushrooms. The plan involves both Bunny and Henry consuming the toxic mushrooms, resulting in Bunny’s death while Henry only experiences food poisoning. In response to Richard’s observation about the challenge of measuring a safe dosage, Henry emphasizes that for the group to establish a convincing

scenario where Bunny's death appears as a tragic coincidence, ''[Henry's] own life must be plausibly in danger'' (p. 249). Henry demonstrates his readiness to jeopardize his own life as a means of protecting both himself and the group from potential exposure.

Examining Henry from the viewpoint of Segal (1986: 35), who argues that the tragic hero contends with internal contradictions, provides insight into the complex dynamics within Henry's character. The tragic hero, according to Segal, is characterized by engaging in brutal acts like homicide while simultaneously striving to achieve a distinctive form of divinity.

When Henry explains to Richard the profound effect of the bacchanal on his life, he openly admits that, until then, his existence had been dull: ''the world has always been **an empty place** to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I **felt dead** in everything I did'' (p. 527).

Henry acknowledges that he ''thought too much, lived too much in the mind'' (p. 528), a tendency that often left him feeling ''immobilized'' (p. 528). When Julian delivers his lecture on Dionysian religious ecstasy and the necessity of breaking free from self-imposed boundaries, Henry comprehends that many of the arguments in favor of this endeavor apply to him as well. This realization dawns on Henry as he recognizes his attempt to construct his entire personality around the ideals of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Charles once refers to Henry as ''an old Roman'' (p. 67), and Richard observes that

> **[Henry's] reason**, [his] very **eyes and ears** were **fixed** irrevocably in the confines of those stern and **ancient rhythms**…and far from being occasional visitors to this land which [Richard himself] knew only as an admiring tourist, [Henry was] pretty much **its permanent resident**, as permanent as I suppose it was possible for [him] to be (p. 215).

Julian observes that the Greeks shared similarities with modern people, characterized by their formality, exceptional civility, and a tendency to suppress their emotions. Julian underscores that the Greeks were consumed by concepts of ''duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice'' (p. 42). When Henry takes his own life, one of the explanations provided by Richard is that

> [Henry] 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 [them] to use. **Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice** (p. 577).

In his lecture, Julian asserts that the Roman flaw is rooted in their preoccupation with order and a ‘‘fierce denial of darkness, unreason, chaos’’ (p. 43). Julian goes on to claim that the concept of losing control is particularly fascinating to people who are typically restrained and controlled because ‘‘all truly civilized people – the ancients no less than us – have civilized themselves through **the willful repression** of the old, **animal self**’’ (p. 42).

Julian cautions his students about the dangers of ignoring the existence of the irrational. He contends that it becomes a temptation for intelligent individuals to try to repress or eradicate ‘‘the primitive, emotive, and appetitive’’ (p. 42) aspects of themselves. Julian emphasizes that this approach is misguided, as highly intelligent individuals often exhibit heightened suppression of their inner desires. Ultimately, they must find a way to unleash those primal impulses; otherwise, those forces will intensify until they become ‘‘**violent** enough to break free… [and] **sweep the will** away entirely’’ (p. 43).

In the novel, the manifestation of Henry’s repressed personality is witnessed when he and the rest of the group attend one of the college parties, and Judy Poovey spills beer on Camilla. Camilla and Judy become entangled in a conflict, prompting Henry to quickly come to Camilla’s defense. This intervention, in turn, results in Henry getting into a fight with one of the students named Spike. Henry, unable to restrain himself, attacks Spike, breaking his collarbone and two of his ribs. Judy claims that ‘‘six guys couldn't pull [Henry] off’’ (p. 50). When Judy recounts this incident to Richard, given that it occurred before he transferred to Hampden, she concludes that ‘‘when uptight people like that get mad, they get really mad’’ (p. 50).

The bacchanal and the subsequent murder act as a catalyst for the release of Henry’s pent-up emotions, allowing him to break free from self-imposed constraints. He describes the

night of the bacchanal as ‘‘the most important night of [his] life’’ (p. 528) because it fundamentally altered his existence, allowing Henry to fulfill his deepest desire –‘ ‘to live without thinking’’ (p. 528).

2.3. The characters’ tragic flaws

A defining feature that renders a hero truly tragic is the presence of *hamartia*, commonly referred to as the tragic flaw. According to Aristotle (1996: 95), the concept of a fatal flaw is marked by a transition from prosperity to adversity. Aristotle emphasizes that the tragic hero faces his downfall not because he is inherently malevolent but due to a crucial moment when his tragic flaw prompts him to make a misguided decision. This, in turn, triggers a sequence of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, ultimately culminating in the shift from fortune to misfortune. Hence, the tragic hero should not be excessively wicked or virtuous; however, it is essential for him to undeniably possess at least one flaw.

I explored the portrayal of the four main characters in the novel as individuals with a combination of positive and negative qualities in their characters. As the narrative progresses, readers become progressively appalled by the choices the characters make. Nonetheless, they extend their sympathy to them, understanding the motivations driving these decisions.

Upon discovering that the first murder was an unintentional accident, the emotional response of the readers mirrors that of Richard when he conveys to Henry that ‘‘it really **didn't matter that much**, at least not in the preconceived way that one would expect’’ (p. 185).

However, the situation takes a darker turn when Bunny begins to blackmail the group, threatening to expose their secret. We observe the group’s attempt to secure Bunny’s silence as Henry takes Bunny on an extravagant trip to Italy, indulging him with everything he

desires. Francis discloses that he spent thousands of dollars on Bunny, ‘‘taking [him] out for hundred-dollar dinners every night’’ (p. 210). Bunny’s irrational spending has reached a point where Francis’ mother begins to suspect that he might be involved with drugs. Consequently, she informs her parents not to provide Francis with any more money. The group’s initial intention is to appease Bunny and find a peaceful resolution to the issue. However, due to their financial dependence on their parents and Bunny’s unrelenting behavior, they begin contemplating the idea of murdering him, viewing it as the only way out of the predicament.

Moreover, the reader is confronted with scenes where Bunny offends every member of the group based on their gender, sexuality, social class, religion, and other factors. Richard states that ‘‘with some preternatural craftiness [Bunny] always knew the **right nerve to touch**, at exactly the right moment, to **wound** and **outrage** most’’ (p. 233).

For instance, Bunny is notorious for engaging in ‘‘ill-informed and frequent tirades against the Catholic Church’’ (p. 233) as he is aware that Henry, Francis, and the twins were raised in this faith. He also makes numerous sexist comments about Camilla, treating her ‘‘with the condescension of an old papa toward a dimwit child’’ (p. 241). Concerning Francis being a homosexual, Richard admits that he

> […] [does not] really have the heart to recount all the **vile things** he said and did to Francis, the practical jokes, the remarks about **faggots** and **queers**, the public, **humiliating stream of questions** about his preference and practices: clinical and incredibly detailed ones, having to do with such things as enemas, and gerbils, and incandescent light bulbs (p. 235).

Bunny’s offensive behavior evokes feelings of hate and disgust from readers, as he appears to offend every social group imaginable. Consequently, readers come to perceive him as an antagonist of the story. When the group finally carries out his murder, we side with Richard when he says that ‘‘what [they] did was terrible, but still [Richard does not] think any of [them] were bad, exactly’’ (p. 292).

This discourse perfectly aligns with the Aristotelean idea that the main characters in *The Secret History* are certainly not flawless. However, their tragic end is not the result of inherent evil character traits, but, as Henry puts it, it is ‘‘just a horrible string of coincidences’’ (p. 190) that leads them to become murderers despite their best efforts to prevent it. Eventually, the reader gets the idea that with the first murder being a tragic accident, the characters committed the second murder more out of necessity to protect themselves than deriving actual pleasure from murdering their friend, albeit a nasty one.

I shall proceed by analyzing how the notion of *hamartia* is manifested in the novel. I will begin by examining the tragic flaw shared by Richard, Francis, and the twins because it forms the foundation for Henry to activate his own tragic flaw. The planning and execution of the murder become viable through the weakness of character demonstrated by the four group members, Richard included, thereby intensifying Henry’s excessive pride.

When Richard endeavors to clarify the group's reasons for committing a cruel act against their friend Bunny, he maintains that readers can ‘‘chalk it up to **weakness** on [Richard’s] part, **hubris** on Henry’s, too much Greek prose composition – whatever [they] like’’ (p. 292).

These two tragic flaws are interdependent. Without the support of the group, Henry would not have had the opportunity to orchestrate the bacchanal, and consequently, it would not have culminated in the murder of the farmer. Furthermore, the murder of Bunny would have been exceedingly challenging without the cooperation of the group members, a collaboration instigated by their initial involvement in the first murder.

As the group collectively decides to carry out the murder of Bunny, Richard notes that they all placed unwavering trust in Henry. Richard, in particular, ‘‘had **a childlike faith** in

him and, as confidently as Dr Watson observing the actions of his **more illustrious friend**, [Richard] waited for the design to manifest itself'' (p. 246)

The other group members constantly adhere to Henry's instructions, even when they may disagree or are not inclined to follow through with the given tasks. In the aftermath of Bunny's disappearance, his family invites Francis, Henry, and the twins to spend time together at the hotel. The meeting quickly transforms into a party that continues until dawn. After Francis returns home in the morning, exhausted and in need of rest, Henry calls and instructs him to join the search party organized for Bunny. Francis, in a fit of rage, exclaims that he has not had ''a wink of sleep'' and has not ''eaten anything in about three days'' (p. 357), but despite his frustration, he still goes along with the search, as do the other members.

After the FBI launches an investigation into Bunny's murder and Henry begins to exercise continuous control over the group, Richard finds himself wondering ''not why [Henry] tells [them] what to do. But why [they] always do what he says'' (p. 478).

Charles, who had to deal with the FBI entirely by himself, informs Richard that ''not much good'' (p. 478) has resulted from their obedience to Henry's orders. When Richard disagrees, Charles asks: ''The idea of that fucking bacchanal in the first place – who thought of that? Whose idea was it to take Bunny to Italy? Who the hell wrote that diary and left it lying around?'' (p. 478). Charles admits that he holds Henry responsible for the misfortune that befell the group. During their final confrontation, Charles passionately confronts Henry, exclaiming: ''The stupidest thing I ever did in my life was listening to you'' (p. 572). This excerpt emphasizes the idea that almost every significant turn of events, ultimately leading to the group's exposure by Julian and potential exposure by the police, originates from Henry's decisions. The group members, through their passive behavior and lack of strong will, delegate full control over the bacchanal and murder plan to Henry. Their tragic flaw

appears to be rooted in their weakness of character and inability to resist Henry's influence. The members' willingness to obey contributes to Henry's *hubris*, reassuring him of his dominance and authority within the group.

2.4. Henry's tragic flaw: *hubris*

Henry's tragic flaw reveals itself in the form of *hubris*, an excessive pride that ultimately drives him to commit two murders. According to Aristotle (2015), *hubris* is a characteristic often associated with the wealthy and the young, as they tend to believe they are superior to others. Those who are wealthy and engage in *hubris* often possess a sense of security derived from their financial affluence. Their incapacity to experience pity stems from an inability to imagine anything similar happening to them, given their sense of privilege. *Hubris* often involves a victim and is characterized by acts of physical abuse, such as murder.

Henry's *hubris* might have been influenced, at least partially, by the education he received from Julian. Julian's students, including Francis and Henry who have complicated relationships with their families, as well as the orphaned twins, lack emotional support from their parents. The lack of strong family connections makes them more vulnerable to being swayed by Julian's captivating personality. Julian is fully aware of the influence he wields over his students, as he mentions to Richard that ''[his] students are **never** very **interesting** to [him] because [he] always **know**[s] **exactly** what they're **going to do**'' (p. 30).

Julian is known for selectively accepting students exclusively from affluent families, who ''read the right things, hold similar views'' (p. 14). Richard notes 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** (p. 546).

Julian aspires to shape his students into the ideal image of young, clever, sophisticated scholars who believe they are capable of anything, including the organization of a bacchanal.

Henry, who considers Julian to be the most significant person in his life and his primary influence, strives earnestly to meet the image that Julian has of him.

When Henry accidentally kills the farmer, he does not experience remorse or a sense of guilt. Instead, he associates the act with the intense emotions he felt in the forest, considering the murder to be part of the ritual. In the conversation with Richard, Henry initially refers to the murder as ‘‘a minor thing, really’’ (p. 174), emphasizing how insignificantly it occupies space in his mind. When Henry describes the murder, his use of terms like ‘‘unpleasant’’, ‘‘unfortunate’’, and ‘‘mess’’ (p. 181) underscores Henry’s detached and nonchalant attitude towards the act, as if he is discussing a mere inconvenience rather than acknowledging the gravity of the situation. He continues by sharing an incident where he once hit a deer with a car and had to witness the animal’s suffering. He concludes that the cruel murder of the farmer was ‘‘even more distressing’’ and acknowledges that he ‘‘never dreamed [they]’d hear anything else about it’’ (p. 182). This implies a certain level of surprise or disbelief at the prospect of the incident coming to light or having consequences.

When Henry is confronted with the possibility of being arrested and charged with murder, he asserts that the group stands no chance against ‘‘a jury box of poverty-level Vermonters’’ (p. 186). He believes that, in the eyes of the local community, the group members, being ‘‘all young, well-educated, reasonably well-off’’ (p. 186), might be perceived as a bunch of spoiled rich kids who, having exhausted the list of activities at a prestigious college, have resorted to terrorizing local residents. According to Henry, the group’s wealth may create the perception that they plan to use their financial resources to buy their way out of legal consequences. Nevertheless, Henry raises the topic of his family’s wealth while questioning ‘‘how well either the **taxpayers' interests** or [his] own would be served by [his] spending sixty or seventy years in a **Vermont jail**’’ (p. 186).

The group's discussions make it clear that none of them is willing to assume responsibility for the murder. When Francis expresses feeling ''bad'' about the death of the farmer, Henry asserts that it is ''**not bad enough** to want **to go to jail** for it'' (p. 211).

In the case of Bunny's murder, Henry once again demonstrates a lack of emotional connection to the deed. When Charles questions Henry about how he can justify cold-blooded murder, Henry's response that it is a ''redistribution of matter'' (p. 321) reflects a perspective that reduces the act of murder to a purely physical transformation, without acknowledging the moral implications or emotional weight typically associated with murder.

Because of Henry's higher intellectual capabilities and his wealth, he develops a trust in his ability to escape persecution. When Richard asks Henry if he is at all worried about the possibility of getting caught by the FBI, Henry responds that he is not, stating, ''I can get us out of it, I think'' (p. 212). After the rest of the group expresses concern about the uncertain plan for Bunny's murder, Henry reassures them, saying: ''Really, there's **nothing to worry about**... It seems risky, but if you look at it logically it couldn't be safer. It **won't look like a murder** at all'' (p. 277).

Henry's *hubris*, shaped by both Julian's teachings and his own distorted sense of morality, leads him to believe that he is free from any responsibility or consequences for his actions during the bacchanal. Confronted with the possibility of facing justice, Henry decides to commit an even greater crime—murdering his friend in cold blood. This drastic choice reflects the depths of his desperation and the lengths to which he is willing to go to escape accountability for his actions. Throughout the novel, Henry consistently maintains a belief in his superiority over common people, including the police and the FBI. This superiority complex, coupled with his manipulative influence over his friends, proves to be a crucial factor in allowing Henry to escape punishment for the murders he commits. However,

Henry's decisions, as revealed through a series of recognitions and reversals, ultimately result in his tragic downfall and eventual suicide.

2.5. The recognitions and reversals in the novel

In his examination of tragedy, Aristotle (1996: 92) underscores the importance of incorporating *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagnorisis* (recognition) into the structure of the tragic plot. He stresses that these elements should be logically inferred from the unfolding events, creating a sense that they occur purposefully and with meaning. Reversal denotes a significant shift to the opposite in the actions unfolding in a narrative, leading to a change in fortune. Recognition refers to a moment when a character undergoes a crucial shift from ignorance to a state of understanding. Aristotle suggests that it is more favorable for recognition to occur simultaneously with a reversal, highlighting the interconnectedness of these elements in the construction of a tragic storyline.

In the novel, the reversal of fate occurs through a series of recognitions, gradually leading Bunny to discover that the group is collectively responsible for the death of the farmer during the bacchanal. Bunny, being absent from the actual bacchanal, chose to go to Henry's place with the intention of surprising the group members when they returned. Having a key to Henry's apartment, he entered without permission and concealed himself in the darkness. Upon the group's return after the bacchanal, ''all white robes and bloody like something from Edgar Allan Poe'' (p. 191), it is Bunny who is terrified by their eerie appearance. Henry confesses that it was a tragic coincidence that Bunny stumbled upon them in the first place: ''**If we'd** stopped in the country to get rid of our clothes, **if we'd** come here or to the twins, **if Bunny only** hadn't fallen asleep…**If only** he'd left the lamp on, anything to tip us off'' (p. 191).

However, the group did not perceive Bunny as an immediate threat. Henry asserts that ‘‘at the moment he was the least of [their] troubles’’ (p. 193). Bunny, having been with the group on their previous attempts at a bacchanal, was aware of what was about to happen that night. When Henry tells him a story about a deer they hit on their way home, Bunny appears satisfied with this explanation.

The story of the dead farmer was initially published in the local paper, and then, ‘‘by some rotten stroke of luck’’ (p. 197), two weeks after the murder, the paper published a follow-up story. Bunny, who ‘‘never reads the newspaper’’ (p. 197), met with his girlfriend Marion, who brought the newspaper along. As Marion conversed with her friends, Bunny, feeling bored, started to read her paper. As Bunny reads the newspaper, he realizes that the details of the murder story coincide with the time and place of the bacchanal: ‘‘November tenth? That’s **the night** you guys were **out at Francis's**. **The night** you **ran over** that **deer**’’ (p. 197). Bunny quickly starts pretending to be suspicious, loudly suggesting that he could call the police and report that on the night of the murder, the group members returned home ‘‘from Battenkill County... with blood from head to toe’’ (p. 197). It was difficult to determine whether Bunny genuinely suspected anything or if he merely considered it a curious coincidence.

Bunny eventually uncovers the truth due to another turn of events when he and Henry travel to Italy. During their trip, Bunny bothers Henry with constant complaints, never leaving him alone even for a brief moment. Shortly afterward, Henry experiences one of the severe headaches he occasionally suffers from. The intensity of the pain leaves him bedridden for several days, completely unaware of his surroundings. While Henry is ill, Bunny successfully steals his diary, which contains details about the bacchanal and the murder of the farmer. Given that the diary was written in Latin, Bunny purchased a

dictionary and ‘‘managed to eke out a pretty **competent** little **English translation** of the more **recent entries**’’ (p. 204).

Bunny, armed with evidence of the group’s complicity in the murder, resorts to blackmailing the group members, threatening to expose their involvement. Initially, as discussed earlier, the group does not contemplate murdering Bunny. However, they reconsider their initial decision after Bunny reveals details about the murder to Richard. When Richard questions Henry why he is ‘‘in such a goddamned rush to kill [Bunny]’’ (p. 279), Henry confesses that Bunny’s disclosure to Richard about the murder makes it ‘‘twice as easy to tell a second person’’ (p. 280) who may potentially report the information to the police.

The occurrence of multiple recognitions, one revealing Bunny’s awareness of the group’s involvement in the farmer’s murder and the other acknowledging the group’s mistrust in Bunny’s ability to keep the secret, together contribute to a reversal of fate. This reversal leads the group, initially without ill intentions toward Bunny, to decide on silencing him permanently through the planning and execution of a murder.

At first glance, Bunny’s murder may not appear to have resulted in tragedy for the group. Despite Charles’s increasing alcohol consumption due to the fear of being discovered and the stress of FBI interrogations, resulting in conflicts with both Henry and Camilla, it appeared that the group had successfully avoided consequences for two murders. For Henry, at least, things began to take a positive turn after the murders. After Charles’s violent actions towards Camilla, Henry took the opportunity to move in with her at the hotel. The murders had freed him from internal constraints, enabling him to relish life without the limitations and restrictions that he had previously imposed on himself. However, a subsequent revelation occurring towards the end of the novel signifies the ultimate shift from favorable

circumstances to misfortune for all members of the group, causing Henry to commit suicide and the group to collapse shortly afterward.

This recognition occurs when Julian learns about the murder by reading Bunny's letter. Before his death, Bunny wrote Julian a letter in which he detailed Henry's committed murder and also revealed the incestuous relationship between the twins. However, Bunny accidentally placed the letter in the mailbox of another professor who happened to be on sabbatical. After Bunny had already been buried, the son of the professor stumbled upon the letter and brought it to Julian. When Francis and Richard spontaneously decide to have lunch with Julian on the very day the letter arrives, he shares its contents with them. Julian notes that the letter ''might have been put in at any time'' (p. 532), and he perceives it as a cruel prank. However, Richard and Francis promptly realize that the letter is authentic because

> […]it was badly spelled, with a great many of **Bunny's characteristic errors**, which fortunately couldn't have meant much to Julian, as Bunny was such a poor writer that he usually had someone else go over his work before he handed it in (p. 532).

Even though Julian is unaware of Bunny's poor spelling, the boys are horrified to discover that when Julian turns another sheet over, it reveals hotel stationery from the *Excelsior*—the hotel where Bunny and Henry had stayed in Rome. The boys realize that if Julian studies the sheet more closely, he will undoubtedly notice the letterhead and understand that the letter, along with every detail it contains, is true. While Richard and Francis make attempts to warn Henry over the phone, he goes to see Julian without any knowledge of the letter. Richard rushes into Julian's office and attempts to draw Henry's attention to the letterhead, but

> […]he wasn't fast enough, and in that split-second, Julian looked down – casually, just an afterthought, but a second too soon…**Julian** leaned over and **looked at the letterhead** for a long time. Then he picked up the page and **examined it. Excelsior**. Via Veneto. Blue-inked battlements (p. 543).

Julian comes to the realization that his students were responsible for both the farmer's death and Bunny's murder. Henry attempts to provide explanations, but Julian refuses to listen and instead hands the letter to Henry During the next Greek class, the group discovers

from the dean of studies that Julian ‘‘has taken an indefinite leave of absence and does not know when he might return’’ (p. 550).

The prompt departure stems from Julian’s fear that the murder might somehow be linked to him as well. Every member of the group is perplexed by this decision, but Henry is the one who suffers the most from it. He is profoundly hurt by the realization that Julian, whom he loved more than his own father, ‘‘more than anyone in the world’’ (p. 556), committed such a cowardly act by leaving them.

Once again, we observe two types of recognition. The first one signifies Julian’s realization that the group committed two murders. This revelation prompts Julian to reveal his true nature to Henry, who subsequently experiences a second realization that his supposedly ideal teacher is, in fact, a very selfish and cowardly person.

Julian’s betrayal severely impacts Henry’s mental health. When Charles threatens Henry with a gun, he seizes it and shoots himself in an attempt to make amends for the crimes he has committed and the lives he has ruined. Henry’s tragic death traumatizes the rest of the group because he was a central element around which they all revolved. He served as the binding force that held them together as a group. Following his suicide, the characters are unable to come to terms with the overwhelming grief and claim to still feel his presence in their lives.

Camilla, no longer in contact with her twin brother, lives with her sick grandmother in their country house. When Richard proposes to Camilla after they visit Francis together, she reveals that she still loves Henry. Upon Richard admitting that he also loves Henry, she states that it is ‘‘not enough’’ (p. 588) for them to stay together because the presence of Henry will always haunt their relationship. Francis, attempting suicide after his grandfather discovers his affair with a man and forces him into marrying a woman, confesses that while lying in a

bathtub with slit wrists, he saw the ghost of Henry. According to Francis, Henry ‘‘said to [Francis], in this really **disgusted** voice: ‘Well, Francis, I hope **you're happy** now’.’’ (p. 587). In the goodbye letter Francis writes to Richard before his attempted suicide, he expresses anticipation about seeing Henry again and ‘‘asking him why the hell he **didn't just shoot** [them] **all** and get it over with’’ (p. 581).

Richard admits having seen Henry in a dream. When Richard asks Henry if he is happy in the other world, Henry responds that he is not, just as Richard is not content in his earthly life. Hence, it is evident that Henry’s repentance through suicide did not enable the group members to escape their punishment, as none of them could find peace or happiness after Henry’s death.

2.6. Richard as the representative of the chorus

Aristotle (1996: 104) states that the audience should regard the chorus as a character of equal importance alongside the main tragic characters. According to Burian (1997), the chorus serves not only as a ‘‘collective character’’ but also as a mediator between the tragic characters and the audience. The chorus actively participates in dramatic dialogues with other characters. I will examine how Richard's role in *The Secret History* aligns with the role traditionally performed by the chorus in Greek tragedy.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the narrative will be told solely from Richard’s perspective as he claims that ‘‘this is **the only story** [he] will ever be able to tell’’ (p. 4). As a result, numerous gaps exist in his recounting of the events, primarily because Richard either was not present during their occurrence or they took place before his enrollment at Hampden College. Similarly, in Greek tragedy, the audience receives information primarily through the songs performed by the chorus. Hence, the audience cannot be completely certain about the accuracy of the interpretation of events as narrated

by the Greek chorus. Richard was absent during the most significant event—the bacchanal. Consequently, he recounts the limited information he can gather from other characters. He acknowledges that ‘‘so much of what [he] knew was only **secondhand**, so much of it was only what [the other members] had told [him]; there was **an awful lot**, when you got right down to it, that [he] **didn't even know**’’ (p. 522).

When Richard gains the group’s trust, and they share details about the bacchanal, he observes that each member has their own interpretation of the story. Despite collecting all these versions, Richard admits that ‘‘the picture [is] still wholly obscure’’ (p. 173).

Richard shares a characteristic feature with the Greek chorus in that he is a crucial element of the narrative, yet he does not significantly impact the course of events. Just like the Greek chorus, woven into the tragic plot without driving it forward or making plot-altering decisions, Richard too functions as a participant without fundamentally changing the course of the narrative. Richard admits that he never experienced a genuine sense of belonging within the group: ‘‘I am never able to **blend myself in entirely** and remain in some respects quite **distinct from my surroundings**’’ (p. 199).

As he reflects on his role within the group, he describes himself as ‘‘something of a stranger’’ (p. 84), who observes the unfolding events in a manner ‘‘watchful and grudging, oddly silent’’ (p. 84). After Richard visits Henry’s apartment and discovers that the group departed for Argentina, he chooses to keep this secret to himself and does not share it with anyone. When Henry inquires why Richard did not disclose the information to anyone, Richard finds himself without a clear answer for his inaction. On the day of Henry’s suicide, Richard is unintentionally hit by one of the bullets as Henry struggles to wrest the gun away from Charles. Following Henry’s death, the police and Henry’s family adopted a version of events in which Richard attempted to rescue Henry but ended up getting shot in the process.

Richard, who was merely standing in the room without making any effort to assist either Henry or Charles, confesses that this idea ‘‘made [him] feel better in some obscure way: imagining [himself] a hero, rushing fearlessly for the gun, instead of merely **loitering** in the bullet’s path like the **bystander** which [he] so essentially [is]’’ (p. 577).

These instances indeed support the idea that Richard’s role in *The Secret History* shares similarities with the role of the Greek chorus in a tragedy. Richard maintains constant contact with the group members, yet he never assumes an active role within the group. Instead, he functions as an observer, reporting their actions while remaining detached from the direct involvement in the events. Richard can be characterized as a collective representation of a contemporary individual placed in an unconventional environment, striving to navigate and make sense of it. Richard’s confiding tone, and similarities with contemporary readers, who also view the group as extraordinary, contribute to making him exceptionally relatable. Richard’s position allows readers to connect with the story through his perspective, serving as a bridge between the fictional world and the real-world experiences of the audience. As Richard does not significantly impact the progression of events in the novel, readers can readily envision themselves in his position and contemplate how they might respond in similar situations.

2.7. The language employed in the novel

Aristotle (1996: 110) asserts that diction plays a crucial role in conveying the message of the poet. Aristotle argues that diction should encompass unconventional expressions, including elements like non-standard words.

In the novel, the main characters are depicted as highly educated and sophisticated individuals who employ refined vocabulary, even in their interactions with each other. For instance, Richard observes that when Henry speaks English, his native language, he sounds

like ‘‘a well-educated foreigner’’ because of his ‘‘calculated, formal English’’ (p. 215). Francis, having attended various boarding schools in England and France, speaks English with a ‘‘lazy, snob accent’’, reflecting his prestigious background (p. 99). The remaining members of the group also make an effort to use proper English and refrain from using any slang words in their speech. Considering Richard’s background, he occasionally integrates Californian slang words into his narration. Richard notes that Francis often teases him when he uses phrases that Francis recognizes as distinctly Californian. On one occasion, when Richard used the word ‘totally’, Francis promptly began to mimic Richard’s ‘‘suburban, hollow, flat’’ accent (p. 491).

In the novel, the word ‘totally’ is predominantly used by Richard at various points as he narrates the story. There is a singular instance where Judy Poovey, another Californian from Los Angeles, uses the slang word ‘totally’ to recount a quarrel with Camilla: ‘‘So then she says something rude, like **totally** uncalled for, and first thing I knew I'd thrown my beer in her face’’ (p. 49). The use of a common slang word in the speech of both Richard and Judy Poovey, who share the same regional background, suggests that Richard has not completely assimilated into the group. Despite Richard’s attempts to transform his personality, he cannot entirely detach himself from his origins.

Another aspect that sets the group apart from the rest of the students in Hampden is their use of swear words. The word ‘fuck’ is employed by various characters in the novel. However, there is a notable distinction in the casual and frequent usage of this word by the regular Hampden students compared to the way the main characters use it to express their emotional distress. First, let us examine how the word ‘fuck’ is integrated into the speech of Judy Poovey, a typical Hampden student. Judy uses this word quite frequently. For instance, when Richard asks her what she would do if she had a fever of a hundred and three degrees, she straightforwardly replies that she ‘‘would go to the fucking doctor’’ (p. 508). When she

gifts Richard a vintage jacket, she mentions that she does not have time to do anything with it because she is ‘‘too busy sewing those damned costumes for **fucking** *As You Like It*’’ (p. 51).

On the contrary, the main characters, including Bunny, utilize the word ‘fuck’ exclusively in moments of increased tension and emotional pressure. For instance, after Bunny discovers that his friends are murderers, he progressively loses his sanity. During one of the conflicts he has with Henry, Bunny screams: ‘‘You don't care about a goddamn thing, do you?... Not a thing but your own **fucking** self, you and all the rest of them…’’ (p. 228). In the letter Bunny wrote to Julian in the middle of the night, when he was intoxicated and gripped by fear for his life, Bunny describes Henry as ‘‘a fucking Monster’’ (p. 533).

Charles also undergoes considerable emotional damage due to the persistent questioning by the FBI and the pressure put on him by Henry. Following Julian’s departure, the Dean of Studies assigns a new teacher of Ancient Greek. After the first class with the new teacher, Henry declares that he will no longer attend their classes, and Charles remarks that Henry ‘‘doesn't have to go to school…He can do whatever he **fucking** pleases. He can fail every single **fucking** class and his dad will still send him that fat allowance check every month’’ (p. 557). When Henry asks Charles to refrain from using the word ‘fuck’, Charles exclaims angrily: ‘‘**Fuck**? What's the matter, Henry? You never heard that word before? Isn't that what you do to my sister every night?’’ (p. 557). Charles’ reaction stems from the discovery that Henry had moved to the hotel to live with Camilla and had forbidden her from seeing Charles, triggering intense anger and pain in Charles.

The characters in *The Secret History* employ non-standard vocabulary, incorporating both slang and swear words into their speech. In contrast to the typical students at Hampden College who use swear words casually, the main characters in *The Secret History*

communicate with eloquence. Due to their manner of speech and choice of words, they differ from other students, including Richard, who frequently utilizes the slang word ‘totally’ in his narrative. Since these non-standard words are not typically used by the main characters, they serve as a means to express their emotional distress and agony. Therefore, when the main characters use the swear word ‘fuck’ in their speech, it signifies the irritation, fear, or stress they are experiencing.

CONCLUSION

Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*, which regained immense popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, narrates the tale of classics students from a prestigious New England university. After their initial plan to organize a bacchanal takes an unexpected turn, they find themselves entangled in two murders. This thesis examines the elements from Greek tragedies employed in Donna Tartt's novel and how they contribute to the creation of plot and characters. The analysis of the novel is conducted through the perspective of Aristotle's theory of Greek tragedy as outlined in his *Poetics*.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest Greek dramatic theory, lays out key principles for crafting literature. Aristotle identifies six crucial elements for a great tragedy: plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and song. According to Aristotle, when constructing a plot, a tragic poet must consider four essential principles: completeness, magnitude, unity, and universality. Aristotle (1996: 92) advises analyzing tragic plots by looking for *peripeteia* (reversal) or *anagnorisis* (recognition), or both. *Peripeteia* involves a reversal in actions, while *anagnorisis* signifies a shift from ignorance to understanding, revealing crucial connections among characters destined for either fortune or misfortune.

Aristotle (1996: 98) further elaborates on essential character traits for tragedies, emphasizing the importance of goodness. Aristotle introduces the ideal tragic hero, who is not exceptionally virtuous but falls due to his tragic flaw, known as *hamartia*. A tragic flaw is often manifested as *hubris*, or excessive pride. Hubristic behavior is common among the wealthy or the young.

Aristotle also discusses the chorus, an essential part of any Greek tragedy. Aristotle emphasizes the importance of the chorus in Greek tragedy, suggesting it should be treated as one of the actors. He highlights its role in enhancing the overall performance, noting that

the chorus usually consists of a unified group. Aristotle further discusses reasoning, focusing on how individuals within a tragedy employ language to persuade or influence others by presenting arguments for or against statements and conveying universal truths. Aristotle also places particular emphasis on diction, referring to the language used in tragedies. He stresses the importance of clarity in diction and argues that it becomes noteworthy when it includes unconventional expressions like non-standard words, metaphors, or deviations from common linguistic norms. Aristotle briefly touches on spectacle, describing it as the use of visual or auditory elements to convey a narrative or idea. However, he deems spectacle the least significant element in tragedy, as its execution primarily rests with the stage manager and director.

Tartt employs elements of Greek tragedy within the novel to craft characters that readers admire. Throughout the novel, readers are meant to perceive these characters as inherently good individuals who find themselves entangled in challenging situations, ultimately meeting tragic ends due to specific weaknesses in their characters.

In the construction of the main characters in the novel, Donna Tartt adheres to Aristotle's principles, portraying them as superior and more refined than ordinary individuals. This portrayal plays a crucial role in explaining why Richard decided to join the group initially. When Richard first encounters them—Henry, Francis, Charles, and Camilla—he is captivated by their striking appearance, impeccable sense of style, and enigmatic aura, which set them apart from other students on campus. Through Richard's perspective, readers also become enchanted by the group members, developing admiration and sympathy towards them. Another quality of the tragic characters reflected by the group members is their goodness, as they consistently demonstrate care for Richard and offer assistance in times of need. However, despite their superiority in looks, beauty, and character, they still demonstate

a few negative traits such as heavy drinking, smoking, and drug abuse. Nevertheless, these vices do not diminish their overall positive portrayal.

One character who particularly stands out is Henry Winter. Coming from a privileged background, Henry possesses remarkable strength and intelligence, garnering admiration from both his peers and professors at college. These qualities establish Henry as the leader of the group, entrusted with making crucial decisions. This portrayal of Henry establishes him as the central figure in the novel, clarifying why other group members follow his orders without question. As the narrative unfolds, the reader develops a trust in Henry's ability to navigate through challenging circumstances and find solutions.

Richard, Francis, and the twins exhibit their tragic flaws through their weakness of character and their inability to confront Henry. Henry's tragic flaw, *hubris*, convinces him that he is immune to any repercussions for his actions, ultimately driving him to commit two murders. Henry and the other group members undergo tragic downfall as their fate reverses through a series of recognitions. These elements of the tragic plot evoke emotions such as pity and fear. The reader experiences these emotions as they witness the gradual descent of the group members, whom they initially sympathized with, as their actions are exposed and brought to light.

Since the reader experiences the unfolding events through Richard's perspective, it can be argued that Richard's role in *The Secret History* is similar to the role of the Greek chorus in a tragedy. Richard's position allows readers to engage with the story through his viewpoint, serving as a bridge between the fictional world and the real-world experiences of the audience. As Richard does not significantly alter the progression of events in the novel, readers can easily imagine themselves in his position and contemplate how they might react in similar circumstances.

The language utilized in the novel serves as a reflection of the characters' emotions and internal conflicts. Portrayed as highly educated and sophisticated individuals, the main characters employ refined vocabulary, even in their interactions with each other. However, when these characters deviate from their standard language and use swear words like *fuck*, it signifies the intensity of their emotional distress.

My thesis contributes to the study of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* by exploring its utilization of the elements of Greek tragedy. Through my analysis, it becomes evident that Tartt integrates various elements of Greek tragedy into her novel, with the intention of establishing a connection between the main characters and the reader. This connection cultivates a sense of care and empathy towards the characters, as they experience their tragic demise, evoking feelings of pity and fear in the reader. Ultimately, Tartt's incorporation of Greek tragic elements enriches the narrative, eliciting powerful emotional responses from the audience.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Anna Havrylyshyn

The analysis of the elements of Greek tragedy in Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*

Kreeka tragöödia elementide analüüs Donna Tartt'i *The Secret History* romaanis

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Donna Tartti menuromaan *The Secret History*, mis saavutas veelgi suurema populaarsuse koroonapandeemia ajal, jutustab loo klassikalise filoloogia üliõpilastest prestiižses Uus-Inglismaa ülikoolis. Pärast seda, kui nende algne bakhanaali pidamise plaan võtab ootamatu pöörde, rulluvad lahti sündmused, mille tagajärjel on nad lõpuks seotud kahe mõrvaga. Antud väitekiri keskendub Donna Tartti romaanis kasutatud kreeka tragöödiatest pärit elementidele, uurides seda, kuidas need panustavad süžee- ja tegelasloomesse. Romaani analüüsitakse Aristotelese tragöödiateooria vaatenurgast, võttes aluseks tema teose *Luulekunstist*.

Aristotelese *Luulekunstist* on vanim säilinud draamateooria, milles esitatakse kirjandusteose peamised loomepõhimõtted. Aristoteles eristab kuut elementi, mis on suure tragöödia loomisel võtmetähtsusega: lugu (süžee), iseloomud, sõnastus, mõtted, väline ilme ja meloodialooming.

Tartt kasutab oma romaanis Kreeka tragöödia tegelasloome põhimõtteid, kujundades nii tegelasi, keda lugejad imetlevad. Kogu romaani vältel häälestatakse lugejaid nägema selle tegelasi sisimas heade inimestena, kes leiavad end keerulistest olukordadest ja jõuavad viimaks oma traagilise lõpuni, millesse nende tegelaskujude traagilised vead neid paratamatult juhivad.

Märksõnad: Kreeka tragöödia, hubris, hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia.

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