

Between Intimacy and Violence: Portrayals of Transgression in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

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Introduction

Dark academia has become a buzz word on social media platforms in recent years thanks to texts such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Its significant rise in popularity was the result of many young readers discovering Tartt's text and building an aesthetic around it that does not only include literary interest but extends to fashion as well. Dark academia primarily arose as a trendy literary subculture characterized by its fascination with a specific kind of intellectual elitism, one that is related to prestigious academic institutions. As readers are drawn to secluded campuses and dark gloomy libraries, the genre continues to sustain the allure surrounding mystery as transgressive acts unfold in these institutions' halls. Historically, transgression in literature has been explored and discussed predominantly by male authors, with varying narratives centered around the violation of social and moral codes and, therefore, reveling in the aesthetics of aberration. Within academic settings, such as those depicted in *The Secret History*, the insular nature of elite educational institutions allows for the flourishing of stories about decaying morals because established systems of secrecy and exclusion provide a fertile ground for transgression to take place. That is why dark academia affords an apt framework for Donna Tartt to examine how transgressive acts can lure in readers enamored with enigmatic narratives situated in institutions that, on the surface, are said to uphold the highest standard of morality. This paper claims that *The Secret History* and *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, the most well-known American transgressive author with connections to Tartt, engage modes of transgression through distinct narrative approaches. By arguing that Tartt's novel is a dark academia psychological thriller and Ellis's as a horror-infused social satire, the article exposes how these authors investigated violence, intimacy, and moral boundaries in their own midst.

Keywords: transgression, contemporary fiction, Dark Academia, elitism, education

Dark Academia and *The Secret History* Definition and Origins

Tracing the origins of Dark Academia as a literary subculture is not a simple task because it rose in popularity online in strong relation to texts that strongly

sentimentalize classical education and the aesthetics of academic exclusivity. It is also essential to consider nostalgia as a prominent sentiment at the center of readers' ever-growing captivation with these works. The mood inferred from this term recalls a setting where moral boundaries become blurred amid the pursuit of intellectual achievement and social status. Furthermore, its evolution in contemporary literature reflects a mounting fixation on academic life and its pressures as well as social media platforms and their immeasurable impact on students' lives. Platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram, and TikTok have brought dark academia into the cultural and literary mainstream, resulting in significant exposure which drew younger audiences to its hyper-specific aesthetics and literary motifs. The blend of nostalgia for classical education mixed with the numerous anxieties of everyday student life has paved the way for new literary trends that are concerned not only with topics of moral decay within celebrated institutions but also with present-day crises in higher education. This fusion is intensely sympathetic to young readers, who might encounter challenging scenarios of moral uncertainty while circumnavigating their own evolving academic careers. Additionally, university campuses, lecture halls, and exclusive clubs as depicted in *The Secret History* serve as atmospheric backgrounds where hierarchies and a penetrating sense of cultural decay become more and more pronounced, therefore reinforcing the subculture's focus on exclusivity as a feature. These settings were utilized by Tartt to depict academia as both nurturing and cruel; a space where the intellectual quests regularly co-occur with moments of ethical ambiguity. Fictional portrayals of academic life often highlight scholarly dedication in addition to pronounced social stratification, competition, and the clandestine excesses of elite circles. It is important to mention that as a novelistic genre, the dark academia novel evokes Gothic architecture to reinvent a nostalgic mood where characters are often entangled in social hierarchies which assert privilege and exclusion. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shares noticeable features of dark academia because of its portrayal of art and classical education as a noble objective and its obsession with hedonism, debauchery, and consequential moral decay. It also interrogates the social and ethical boundaries of the time which closely resonates with contemporary transgressive literature. Therefore, it is safe to assume that transgressive acts could occur and propagate in such environments, given the tone and engagement with vulgar and lewd themes.

Transgression through Characters

By situating *The Secret History* within the context of classical education within an elite institution, Donna Tartt creates a narrative in which immorality manifests itself as an extension of academic life and its escapades. Rather than adopting the overtly unsettling and often gory tone associated with earlier male-authored transgressive works, Tartt creates and describes transgression by introducing tensions, desire, murder, friendship and belonging within elite groups. The novel's characters, specifically their proclaimed leader, Henry Winter, is presented as an individual who carries an affinity for academic opulence while maintaining an existence strongly devoted to

intellectual pursuit while unburdened by financial worries. Henry's engagement with arcane knowledge, such as translating *Paradise Lost* into Latin, exemplifies a style of classical scholarship practiced not for academic advancement but for personal fulfillment. In the following exchange with Richard Papen, the narrator, he explains the motivation behind his endeavor: "I am interested to see what I will wind up with. Milton to my way of thinking is our greatest English poet, greater than Shakespeare, but I think in some ways it was unfortunate that he chose to write in English—of course, he wrote a not inconsiderable amount of poetry in Latin, but that was early, in his student days; what I'm referring to is the later work. In *Paradise Lost* he pushes English to its very limits but I think no language without noun cases could possibly support the structural order he attempts to impose" (Tartt 75). As an introduction to his way of thinking, one can surmise that this group of students, Henry in particular, is confident in contributing meaningfully to the field of classical literature, perhaps altering what previous scholars have achieved through years of academic pursuit. This emphasis cements the pursuit of knowledge at the forefront of the dynamics of friendship present in the novel, as the protagonists' intense, nonsexual bonds focus on alternative modes of intimacy.

Moreover, Tartt's character construction critically interrogates and destabilizes traditional gender expectations pervasive in transgressive literature. For instance, Camilla Macaulay, the only female member of the group stands as a highly intelligent and complex figure but remains constrained by the expectations and limited perceptions of her male peers, who fit her, both metaphorically and socially, into a narrowly defined role. Richard's narrative reduces her to an idealized muse or romantic interest, mediating her existence through a male gaze that diminishes her autonomy and frames her transgression ambiguously. He describes her actions and movements in an almost infantile manner as he recounts her excitement about visiting a lake: "Camilla—who was rarely content to sit still but was always itching to do something, anything, play cards, go for a picnic or a drive—was bored and restless, and made no secret of it. She had a book, but she wasn't reading; her legs were thrown over the arm of her chair, one bare heel kicking, with obstinate, lethargic rhythm, at the wicker side. Finally, as much to humor her as anything, Francis suggested a walk to the lake. This cheered her instantly. There was nothing else to do, so Henry and I decided to go along" (Tartt 87). Camilla simultaneously embodies intellectual rebellion within a club that is, in many ways, a male-dominated bastion resistant to change or inclusion. Despite limited direct insight into her thoughts and motives, the narrative and Richard's observations suggest that she is neither weak nor innocent but rather a dangerous and cunning character. Her role as a manipulator and spy within the group is implied early on, particularly when Henry entrusts her with the task of keeping an eye on Bunny, an assignment that demonstrates her ability to navigate social terrains unobtrusively. For example, during a party where she watches Bunny under Henry's orders, Richard encounters Camilla returning home drunk yet exhilarated; she jokes about feeling like a spy. These instances, coupled with this admission: "Camilla he tormented simply because she was a girl. In some ways she was his most vulnerable target—through no fault of her own, but simply because in Geekdom, generally speaking, women are lesser creatures, better seen than heard"

(Tartt 204), prove that Tartt's layered textual portrayal situates female transgression as subtle and ambiguous rather than explicit acts of defiance or violence. These interactions, embedded within a cloistered community, reveal how the protagonists' desires for intimacy and recognition are shaped as much by social privilege as by gendered scripts of behavior. Tartt's depiction resists the inevitability of coupling and instead highlights friendship's capacity to serve as a site of alternative eros and quiet resistance to compulsory norms. In fact, Tartt's precise and measured narrative style significantly shapes how readers interpret the ethical dimensions of her actions. Rather than relying on sensational descriptions or moralistic commentary, Tartt guides the audience through the unfolding events with a sense of detachment, encouraging reflective engagement with both guilt and complicity. This stylistic restraint positions morality as a fluid concept within the novel.

Theoretical Background

These examples are significant because they extend beyond the text into the realms of academic and professional literary criticism. Narrative distance, as described by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, is the degree of intimacy or distance between the narrator and the story as told, greatly influencing the degree to which readers emotionally and morally connect with both the characters and the general plot. Booth states that "every literary work of any power – whether or not its author composed it with his audience in mind – is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment along various lines of interest. The author is limited only by the range of human interests" (Booth 72). Following this logic, an intimate first-person narrator allows empathy to take place, suggesting that the narrator's point of view becomes the dominant one. Meanwhile, enhanced narrative distance enables readers to consider the narrative from an objective and analytical frame of mind, which often engages them in deeper reflection over the multitude of ethical questions. In the same vein, it is apparent that Tartt's approach to narration holds a stern narrative distance while exploring the characters' interiority, providing a representation to this dialogic notion of literature as an open ethical discussion, rather than a closed moral message. This narrative openness does not aim to stabilize or assume any form of morality because it shifts based on perspective and context. This is supported by the protagonists' language which is precise and controlled; creating a position that could swing between empathy (compassion) and critical distance. Additionally, this flexibility is explored in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which argues that meaning, moral meaning in particular, is not surmised in one static authorial voice, but is compiled to produce a space of differing voices and standpoints within the text:

"Any stylistics capable of dealing with the distinctiveness of the novel as a genre must be a sociological stylistics. The internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse requires the concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as the force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its "form" and

its “content,” determining it not from without, but from within; for indeed, social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse, in those relating to “content” as well as the “formal” aspects themselves” (Bakhtin 300).

Tartt’s narrative strategy aims to fashion a style of writing that allows for the articulation of her character’s internal conversations that are shaped by specific social and intellectual contexts. She does not take an ethical stance; instead, these conflicting social voices and individual subjectivities work dialogically with one another. Therefore, one is left with a moral ambiguity that reinforces Bakhtin’s premise that the style and content of a novel emerge from “social dialogue reverberating in all aspects of discourse.” In the introduction to *Dark Academe Capitalism, Theory, and the Death Drive in Higher Education*, Jeffrey R. Di Leo explains how Tartt’s work paved the way for authors such as Amy Gentry to explore more pressing issues in campus novels. He states that “Gentry checks one more box regarding the fiction of dark academia: it is socially and politically progressive. According to her, all of the novels listed above, including her own “reckon frankly with sexual harassment and abuse, class disparities, homophobia, and systemic racism.” This additional element of dark academic fiction is important because many have characterized it as reactionary: “a genre of fiction that fetishizes assimilation, gender normativity, and whiteness” (Di Leo 11). This approach enables the genre to engage not solely with personal moral collapse but also with systemic issues tied to class, privilege, and the negation of democratic educational ideals. Tartt’s focus on alternative modes of intimacy and the ethical ambiguities inherent in group affiliation complicates inherited narratives that traditionally center on solitary transgression or nihilism.

Subdued Transgression and Elitism

Through her use of classical motifs, Tartt constructs a narrative set within an environment defined by intellectual exclusivity and reverence for ancient tradition. The characters’ fascination with Greek antiquity is evident in both their scholarly pursuits and daily interactions, as illustrated in this exchange: “Death is the mother of beauty,” said Henry. “And what is beauty?” “Terror.” “Well said,” said Julian. “Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory. Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming.” I looked at Camilla, her face bright in the sun, and thought of that line from the *Iliad* I love so much, about Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining” (Tartt 35). This passage encapsulates the allure and danger these motifs represent within the group dynamic. Furthermore, the novel’s sustained engagement with these motifs positions the characters’ admiration for the classical past as both a marker of elite intellectual identity and a force that draws them toward transgressive behavior. More specifically, *The Secret History* draws upon a variety of classical allusions, ranging from direct references to Greek tragedy to invocations of mythological themes.

The group’s academic obsession culminates in their staged bacchanal, an event explicitly evocative of Dionysian rituals, where participants engage in a wild, drunken celebration. This highlights the blurred boundary between scholarly study

and experiential imitation. According to Henry, the purpose of this event is “to lose one’s self, lose it utterly, and in losing it be born to the principle of continuous life, outside the prison of mortality and time” (Tartt 150). Henry also notes that part of the appeal lies in the fact that such an event has not occurred in nearly a thousand years, suggesting that participating in or organizing it would be an exclusive, once-in-a-lifetime experience. These examples not only reinforce the thematic depth of the narrative but also critically interrogate the seductive dangers inherent in appropriating the aesthetics and values of the classical tradition. Furthermore, these classical allusions exert a powerful influence on the characters’ identity formation and the dynamics within the elite classics group. Their shared preoccupation with the Greek ideal of beauty creates an exclusive bond, yet this pursuit also intensifies individual insecurities and rivalries, especially as members seek validation through their connection to the classical past. These dynamics generate a group hierarchy and strengthen feelings of alienation. Consequently, classical references in *The Secret History* function not only as symbols of cultural aspiration but also as rituals that redefine friendship ties, bringing forth competition and eventually dissolving the amicable atmosphere that once existed. Added to that, the reverence of classical antiquity and its questionable employment is displayed through transgressive acts as Tartt reveals that this admiration is not purely theoretical but destructive, most notably the aforementioned bacchanal and the subsequent murder, both rooted in fanatic imitations of myths. The group’s unwise efforts to “live as the Greeks did” reveal how the line between desire and enactment can be erased due to obsessive tendencies. In addition to its classical motifs, *The Secret History* is deeply invested in portraying the elite rituals that underpin its college environment, including intimate seminars, ritualized social gatherings, and a rigid set of internal codes. The novel’s depiction of Julian Morrow’s exclusive Greek class offers a clue to this tendency since it is described by another faculty member as follows:

“He and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division. I don’t know why they continue to list his courses in the general catalogue—it’s misleading, every year there is confusion about it—because, practically speaking, the classes are closed. I am told that to study with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views. It has happened repeatedly that he has turned away students such as yourself who have done prior work in classics” (Tartt 12).

This introduction emphasizes the privileged access these students enjoy, reinforcing their sense of exceptionalism and conveying the message that this group is distinguished in ways beyond academic or intellectual achievements. Private dinners parties at Julian’s house are described as possessing a specifically curated mood in order to subtly cement clear group boundaries. It becomes recognizable that these dinners mirror classical ritualized practices which prove group membership but also seek to foster the students’ loyalty and sense of belonging. Beyond this direct function, these practices tend to expose an elaborate system of exclusion. This signifies that only a select group of students are allowed to gain access to cultural capital and certain circles where valuable information is disseminated. Consequently, those students

on the periphery do not receive the same treatment nor the privileges that a select few enjoy. The preferred few get the opportunity to construct their identity based on classical archetypes, which is problematic because it consciously necessitates the existence of an unprivileged group. It could be said that this aspect is purposefully designed as Tartt's commentary on the activities and interpersonal relationships present in elite institutions such as the one she attended in reality. By integrating this critique, the text demands one to contemplate how elite institutions may contribute to perpetuating cycles of marginalization while asserting their inclusive and politically correct nature. Consequently, this raises questions related to the viability of academic elitism and its practice especially nowadays. Although this narrative exposes these structures through moments of personal and collective moral crisis, it still suggests that partaking in such rituals would result in excellence and a unique educational experience. Eventually, Tartt accomplishes exposing the dark side of tight-knit academic circles while somewhat romanticizing belonging to such atmospheres despite their precedents in maintaining marginalization and exclusion.

Transgression in *American Psycho* Violence as Satire

Simultaneously, Bret Easton Ellis's channels transgression through extreme displays of masculine violence and moral detachment, constructing a narrative landscape dominated by nihilism and performative excess. Within the carefully curated world of 1980s yuppie culture, Ellis positions protagonist Patrick Bateman as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by brutal acts that serve as assertions of power, ego, and control. In Petra Fišerová's article, "From Toxic to Politically Correct: Masculinities in *American Psycho* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*," Bateman is described as a product of his environment: "killing women is very important and very personal for Patrick. His unhealthy desire to dominate and violate women predates his alleged depersonalization at Harvard, since he off-handedly admits that he raped a maid at his house at the age of fourteen. . . . Where participating in a consumerist lifestyle calms him down and makes him feel better, torture-rapeing women to death is where he truly expresses himself" (Fišerová 526). The novel's use of graphic, repetitive violence, paired with a stylistically detached narrative voice, transforms senseless brutality into a mechanism for interrogating the emptiness underlying patriarchal and consumerist values. Bateman's obsessive attention to commodity consumption further exposes how social violence is intertwined with competitive displays of capital and the commodification of both bodies and relationships. Mattius Rischard comments on this particular notion in "Masculine Capital / Yuppie Patriarchy," clarifying that "the languages of consumption and commodification become interchangeable for Bateman, just as the line between subject (i.e., that which cannot be consumed yet) and object (i.e., a consumable thing) ranges from permeable to nonexistent" (Rischard 441). The irony is that Bateman is not unique in his inability to understand how deeply entrenched he is in the late capitalist system of 1980s New York. As a yuppie, his cultural upbringing and core social beliefs revolve around generating income in a specific way, only to then spend money on sought-after cultural artifacts and

experiences, such as fine dining at select NYC restaurants. Furthermore, his violent tendencies are portrayed not merely as individual pathology but as symptoms of a broader societal condition in which hegemonic masculinity is inextricably linked to power, ego, and an unrelenting quest for control. Ellis' portrayal of a world obsessed with materiality slowly uncovers how violence became more and more normalized within elite circles who prioritize rivalry above all else. By situating Bateman's actions within these yuppie social boundaries, Ellis manages to critique the emptiness of identities fashioned through the everlasting hunt for wealth and status through means of performative success, eventually claiming that ethical decay occupies a substantial position within a culture that is largely dominated by artificial ideals.

Comparative Intersections: Transgression within Elite Worlds

Ellis's depiction of male characters mirrors the mentioned fascination with explicit, albeit shallow, displays of power that distinctly diverge from Tartt's focus on the intricacies of group dynamics ruled by intentional narrative ambiguity and restraint. While *American Psycho* builds the notion of power as a byproduct upheld through violence, social status, and consumption, Tartt's characters navigate it through complex relationships and intellectual competition. It is evident that Bateman's drive for dominance is almost uniquely performative because it aims at disregarding his incessant inner void shaped by continuous cultural and economic pressures and a competitive relationship with his peers. Clearly, Ellis's central figure is isolated and resorts to measures of extreme aggression in order to establish a false and fleeting sense of agency within a context that ultimately renders such gestures utterly insignificant. In contrast, Tartt's protagonists face a number of ethical dilemmas which they navigate as a group and even though their opinions differ, they share the same goal of hiding a murder from the public. This contrast further illustrates how gendered interpretations of authority and transgression shape plots of moral breakdown, exposing the bounds of seeking control in environments ruled by fear and exclusion.

Critical Reception

Critical responses to *The Secret History* often focused on Tartt's presumed closeness to her subject matter or questioned the legitimacy of a female author engaging deeply with themes traditionally dominated by men, thereby reinforcing the gatekeeping prevalent in academic and literary criticism. The following is a commentary on the novel from The Hudson Review which criticizes Tartt's narrative assertiveness in her debut novel:

“A book that exceeded even *Sin* and *Damage* on the hype-meter was another Knopf novel—*The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. This property, too, elbowed its way onto the bestseller lists, and generated very much the same kind of buzz as Hart's books did. The difference however, is that *The Secret History* is actually

good. Granted, it's not flawless, and it too descends ultimately into melodrama and pathos, but for most of its 524 pages it does what good books must do—signify as much in small moments as in big ones. To be honest, I wished for fewer big moments in the book, because it was only when she was trying for a grand flourish that Ms. Tarrt's hand seemed less than sure" (Krist 241).

In contrast, Ellis's hypermasculine portrayal of academic and social decay was sometimes received as an unfiltered exploration of deeper cultural truths, reflecting entrenched assumptions about male authority within elite scholarly spaces. Based on a study conducted by Emily F. Henderson and Pauline J. Reynolds on fictional conferences and what they reveal about academic life, the authors argue that, according to their analysis of several fictional works, "conferences signify privileged, mobile work, where absence from campus is equated with a successful research career and a deprioritization of campus-based work. Recent research aligns this with gender, noting this privilege to be more significant with men academics, and women academics laboring to meet the needs of the institution" (Henderson and Reynolds 1213). This observation should not be taken lightly, as it starkly highlights how various academic fields and, by extension, creative literary endeavors are affected by gender biases, even when presenting a progressive, feminist, or politically correct image to the wider public. *American Psycho*'s relentless portrayal of brutality not only pushed genre boundaries but also raised questions about the influence of such representation on perceptions of academic elitism. Critics frequently questioned whether Ellis's approach intentionally challenged or merely reinforced damaging stereotypes associated with masculine authority, violence, and dominance. A small article simply entitled "Boycott" explains how the novel is extremely misogynistic by exposing the boycott of Ellis' novel because it "portrays women being tortured, skinned alive, dismembered, and includes a chapter in which the protagonist attempts to make meat loaf out of one of his victims. Simon & Schuster dropped the book just before it was due for release. But the following publicity prompted Alfred A. Knopf and Vintage books to publish. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) is organizing a boycott of all but the feminist works published by Knopf/Vintage. Critics charge that NOW's boycott and Simon & Schuster's refusal to publish the book may backfire, pushing up sales when *American Psycho* might have languished in obscurity" (Alh 12). Due to its visceral nature, the novel has been dismissed by feminists especially, however, Rischard presents another viewpoint by claiming that "critical dismissal of the novel or film as misogynist obscenity is complicit with the more general cultural work of minimizing systemic inequalities caused by the social violence required in expanding the finance industry and creating yuppie masculinity. Criticism should acknowledge yet avoid the significantly narrower conception of Bateman as a singular, transgressive serial killer" (Rischard 457). Thus, the reception history of *American Psycho* serves as a lens for interrogating how transgressive narratives intersect with cultural anxieties, particularly those concerning gender and power. Nevertheless, the authorial relationship between Donna Tarrt and Bret Easton Ellis provides a compelling context for understanding the differing receptions and institutional frameworks surrounding their work. Both writers were contemporaries at Bennington

College, an environment that fostered their explorations of intellectual elitism and moral boundaries, although their professional trajectories diverged significantly after graduation. While Ellis's *American Psycho* faced immediate controversy and polarized criticism for its violent, hypermasculine imagery, prompting debate on the cultural consequences of such academic narratives, Tartt's *The Secret History* achieved critical acclaim, accompanied by nuanced discussions regarding her reinterpretation of gendered academic archetypes, such as the charming male professor.

Gendered Modes of Transgression

The differences in public and critical reception partly reflect enduring stereotypes within literary and academic circles, where female-authored works are often judged by standards shaped by prevailing discourses of male authority, privilege, and acceptability. Joanna Richards expertly details the academic stereotypes associated with female scholars, arguing that they “damage gender equality and the contribution that women make to academia and undermine the years of hard work and study necessary to access this profession. The blue stocking is a woman lost to her books. The eccentric academic is out of touch with reality and is overly emotional. The school ma’am is a shrill disciplinarian or a bossy, grown-up schoolgirl. In many of the descriptions of female academics, there is a discourse of emotional excitability or of being odd, which are linked to their academic learning” (Richards 114). In the same article, Richards observes that the stereotypes associated with male academics correspond to R.W. Connell's analysis of different expressions of masculinity, indicating that professional academic dynamics are influenced by the personal construction of identity and gender expression. This insight is significant because it highlights how institutional structures and the gendered dynamics of publishing further shape the broader impact of these narratives, revealing persistent inequalities that affect how transgressive literature by male and female authors is evaluated and understood. Ultimately, whether *The Secret History* mirrors male-established traditions of transgressive literature remains a subject of debate. Tartt's appropriation of classical motifs and elite institutional rituals enables her work to engage critically with the foundations of dark academia, while simultaneously risking the reinforcement of the very structures it questions. There is a certain ambiguity in Tartt's positioning, as it signals both the potential for subversion and a recurring alignment with established modes of transgression, reflecting broader tensions within the evolution of dark academia.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, *The Secret History* undoubtedly proposes a subtle and layered examination of classical myths and their reinterpretations in academic culture since it locates them as central narrative tools that became largely associated with dark academia as a literary subculture. At face value, these deliberate narrative choices maintain the appeal of classical studies by examining the passionate relationship that

the students have with the subjects and professors. However, this miniscule group of students does not represent the vast majority of the students who may never be included in such a distinctive educational experience. The novel urges a necessary interrogation of the boundaries between academic aspiration and behaviors related to exclusion, complicating the aesthetic that defines dark academia's enduring appeal. While *The Secret History* draws the aforementioned classical motifs, its primary engagement with transgression is marked by a play between subtlety and romanticizing privilege which challenges long-standing motifs established by male-authored transgressive fiction to a degree. This is why Tartt's work contrasts sharply with Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, which depicts transgressive acts through scenes of graphic violence and hypermasculine excess, reflecting a nihilistic reckoning with capitalist consumerism within patriarchal systems of thought. The differing depictions of transgressive acts do not only depend on gender and authorial experience but also on stylistic choices and genre; Tartt's work is an exploration of elite groups in prestigious settings while Ellis' is a critique of consumerism through the lens of extreme body horror propagated by its protagonist.

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