

# **“Nature vs. Nurture: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Violence in —*The Secret History*”**

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**By**

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## **Declaration**

I **Imran Qadeer** declare that all material in this thesis is my own work, and that any material which is not my own has been duly acknowledged. Furthermore, I affirm that no portion of this work has previously been submitted or approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

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It is certified that the work presented in this thesis has been carried out and completed under my supervision.

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## **Declaration**

I, **Imran Qadeer**, student of **BS English (8th Semester)** at **Bahria University, Islamabad**, hereby declare that the research work titled “Nature vs. Nurture: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Violence in —*The Secret History*” is my original work. This thesis has been carried out by me under the supervision of **Miss Nadia Rehman** and has not been submitted, wholly or partially, for any other degree or diploma at any university or institution.

All sources of information and data used in this study have been duly acknowledged in the text and references. I take full responsibility for the authenticity and accuracy of the content presented in this thesis.

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## **Abstract**

This study performs a psychoanalytic examination of violence in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* through the paradigm of Nature vs Nurture that remedies a critical gap in scholarship that heavily centres on structural or Gothic elements. Utilising the Freudian, post-Freudian and Object relations theories, the study documented how inherited psychological pathologies of Thanatos subject of Henry Winter's Narcissism, trauma-based dissociation of Richard Papeen, and failure of individuation of Macaulay twins predisposed the characters to moral collapse.

The analysis showed that these intrinsic drives (Nature) were systematically licenced (by the external environment - Nurture) by the external environment (mostly Julian Morrow's amoral elitist pedagogy and the isolating Gothic environment). This environment served as a moral suspension mechanism that supplied intellectual justification for latent aggression. The major finding is that the two murders were just the inevitable result of this deterministic collision where the philosophical licence(Nurture) was wedded to the psychological drive(Nature). Richard's unreliable narration was translated into a clinical defence mechanism against trauma. The thesis comes to the conclusion that the novel is a profound commentary on the psychological fragility of humanity when allowed intellectual permission to manifest itself in collective violence and psychological ruin.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Overview and Context

The *Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt is not exactly the kind of murder mystery in an elite private college but a brilliant and unsettling exploration of the fatal collision of intellectual arrogance and the psychological impetus to achieve it. It is recounted in the novel as a retrospective confession by the storyteller, Richard Pape, the manner of his involvement in a secret charismatic organization, the students of Classics in the fictional Hampden College in Vermont under the tutelage of the mysterious professor Julian Morrow. Unified through the intellectual reverence of ancient Greek thought and artificial abstinence from traditional morality, this club members later participate in a Dionysian orgy that ends in the accidental murder, and then the premeditated, second murder of their friend Bunny Corcoran to keep their secret. This study's key argument is the violence plaguing the novel, leading to moral and emotional death, lacks not just misjudgment or misgivance of philosophical influences, but rather an intricate (often subconscious) way in which biologically ingrained psychological instincts (nature) intersect with an extremely toxic social environment (nurture) (Ullah, Khan, and Zai).

The problem with *The Secret History* is not so much who or how the murders were accomplished (information given by Richard just on the first page), but the far more sinister and important why. How does the prodigious growth of Henry Winter, the group's intellectual and psychological centre, occur from detachment to premeditated murder? Why does Richard Pape, the outsider, become a traumatised accomplice and narrator (as participant and detached observer?) When? (Sorace 237–59) The answers to these questions demand a critical eye who can reach beneath the gothic and intertextual surface of the novel into the deepest psychological recesses of its characters. In this research, we suggest a systematic psychoanalytic analysis of the novel which

utilises nature versus nurture paradigm as the base interpretative axis to decode the subliminal reasons behind devastating actions of the characters (Broderick). The study is based on the rigorous application of Freudian and post-Freudian theory in order to shed light on the roots of violence as a dialectic between the compelling forces of the psyche and poisonous ideological indoctrination.

### **1.2.Context of the Narrative and Thematic Landscape**

The plot of *The Secret History* can easily be seen as a degenerate booster shot of moral blindness, caused by the psychological obsession the group has with an ideal of beauty and amorality skewed by information imparted by Julian Morrow. Richard Papen, being initially drawn to Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy and Charles and Camilla Macaulay, lies in their aura of superior thinking and well-heeled unapproachability. The reason for their destruction is the choice to pursue ecstatic transcendence with a Dionysian bacchanal, the effort "to leave behind the life of ordinary mortals" that in tragic fashion leads the farmer to his death. Their bond is then cemented in secret mutual pledges, but the secret is finally jeopardised by the erratic behaviour and hidden threats of "Bunny" Corcoran who drives the group to plot and carry out his murder just because of his behaviour.

The aftermath of this deliberate violence is a long-term psychological and emotional breakdown. Henry Winter, his intoxicated ego inflated to godlike proportions by the fruit of his orchestration, eventually commits suicide, Charles Macaulay is driven to abusive alcoholism, as a result Richard is driven into severe dissociativity(Sorace 237–59) rendering him unable to discern right from wrong. Thus, it sets in motion a multifaceted clinical analysis of characters experiencing drastic psychological pressure: Henry's hyper-controlled violence is a symptom of deontological

narcissism and an inability to be vulnerable (Miller 2024); Richard's broken narrative is a form of trauma denial (KhalidounTalrfadi); Bunny's eventual destruction is an insufficient childhood and emotional abandonment (Muszkat and McCann 10–33). In this respect, Tartt's prose works as a narrative backboard on which the powerful, and often, tragic relationship between genetic predisposition and environmental failure is arrayed with great vividness, and often, with sad consequences (Cartry).

### **1.3. Research Problem and Research Gap in Literature**

While there is already ample scholarship on *The Secret History*, it predominantly centres on certain critical axes that are truly important but which, in their individual, examined foci, are failures in a systematic interrogation of the text from a psychological perspective. The novel has been largely critiqued through structuralist discourse, in terms of the management of control and suspense (Grip); Gothic-postmodernism, by teasing out the play with haunted landscapes and morbid aesthetics as a critique of the modern disorientation and anxiety ((Berry); (Litzler); (Cheima)). Furthermore, social class materialism has been applied to this novel in which it expresses the alienation of working class in the elite setting (Trikarinaputri, Sachmadi, and Krishnapatria 17–25).

While these analyses recognise the psychological aspects of the novel - discussing Richard's trauma, Henry's coldness, and the isolation of the group - they do not utilise a sufficiently thorough and specific psychoanalytic model that is well equipped to decipher the subconscious forces that both cause and perpetuate the violence. This is a critical oversight, especially since the novel engages explicitly with psychological themes: the post-traumatic stress dissociation of Richard, the descent of the group into a mentality of a "primal horde" (Piven e70000), and Henry's death-drive and related behaviour.

## **1.4.Rationale**

As critics focus on the novel's Gothic aesthetics ((Berry); (Litzler)) or classical allusions, the psychoanalytic intervention becomes clear on the matter: while the foundational human drama of psychological trauma and inner conflict is rarely in focus, a psychoanalytic intervention should make this an explicit focus. By employing narrative techniques, from Richard's unreliable narration to the symbolism of rural Vermont's Gothic countryside, the thesis contends that Tartt's narratives are purposeful devices meant to draw out psychological tensions. The seclusion of Hampden and the ritualistic aspects are interpreted as metaphors for repressed guilt and the subconscious tensions bubbling just below the surface of civilization. Using this framework analysis shows the roots of violence as a negotiated phenomenon between the unstoppable compulsion of our biological urges and the learned, and often disastrous, behaviours of our sociocultural influences, adding to the larger understanding of the intersection of narrative and psychological studies(Woollett, Eyal, and O'Brien e0002209)).

## **1.5.Research Questions**

- How do The Secret History's violent characters act as a metaphor for the way a person's inner impulse (nature) and outside force (nurture) shape him or her?
- In what ways is psychoanalytic theory (and specifically repression, the uncanny and attachment trauma) useful in understanding the origin of violence in the novel?
- How do the classical intertextuality and environmental symbolism used by Tartt intersect with the subconscious motivations of the characters?
- How does Donna Tartt's The Secret History utilise techniques of narrative construction and symbolic representation that serve to question the sources of violence, spanning the gap between the inescapable psychological impulses and the sociocultural programming?

## **1.6. Research Objectives**

The research will focus on interactions between the inner psychological forces (i.e., repressed desires, narcissism) and the external forces of the sociocultural forces (i.e., classical indoctrination, elite pedagogy) in defining the violent behavior of the characters.

To interpret the subconscious drivers for the characters' self-destructive behaviour using psychoanalytic theories of Freudian repression, the uncanny, and trauma disrupted attachment and bonding.

The extent to which Tartt uses classical intertextuality (Dionysian rituals, Greek tragedy, etc.) and ecotextuality (the remote location of Vermont, Gothic landscapes, etc.) to externalize the characters' repressed conflicts.

To produce the novel's narrative techniques (e.g. unreliable narration, disjointed chronology) and symbolic structures (e.g. cold imagery, ritualistic motifs) to question the question of how violence arises from the conflict between natural impulses and social pressure.

## **1.7. Significance of Study**

In an important way, it addresses a lacuna in the field by shifting the dominant critical focus of *The Secret History* away from an aesthetic, or structural, analysis and toward a more crucial and needed psychological investigation. In essence, it is interesting in using psychoanalytic concepts such as Freudian repression, Lacanian jouissance, and narcissism to provide an interesting addition to the existing discourse, blending literary criticism, psychology, and cultural studies in a comprehensive interdisciplinary study (Broderick).

The research is innovative and replicable in methodology. It integrates psychoanalytic theory

with narratological and symbolic analysis and, for such reason, represents a solid framework for the interpretation of complex literary texts (Lima 121–43). The interpretation of Dionysian rites as the symbolic expression of primitive instincts degenerating under the influence of intellectual arrogance, and of Richard's unreliable narration as a form of dissociation, offers a different perspective for approaching the aesthetic form of the novel as a mediator of its thematic preoccupations.

On a societal level, the study adds to current debates about crime, ethics and moral responsibility (Muszkat and McCann 10–33). It represents a rift between nature and nurture: while violence can be viewed as the result of basic character traits (nature) and structural stresses (nurture) that complement each other to form an overall disorder, it also justifies the environmentalist reduction in morality (Odinye, and Mbonu). Finally, the thesis places Tartt's novel within a critical intersection for exploring the persistent inquiry regarding the subject of human agency at the threshold of the possible.

## **2. Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1.Introduction**

Since its publication in 1992, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt has spawned a large academic literature review, which includes examinations of genre, philosophy, narrative, and intertextual relations. Such depth of learning has, however, been unified around a small number of axes, with most interpretations concerned with the aesthetic qualities of the novel and minor outer systems of the novel. It is rather likely that the critical consensus will qualify the novel as a Gothic-postmodern text, an intertextual tragedy, or commentary on the corrupting influence of class and elite education. Although these readings are imperative to the form of the novel, they often push off an often intense, systematic questioning of the unconscious or inner processes which drive the characters to premeditated acts of violence and moral dissolution that follow.

This literature review is dualistic since, on the one hand, it aims to create a synthesis of the existing critical discourses, namely, the Gothic-Postmodern, Intertextual-Classical, and Structural-Sociological and establish a comprehensive map of the scholarly reception of the novel; on the other hand, it wishes to critically critique these discourses in order to identify the critical gap (Lima 121–43) that this thesis is designed to drug. The key thesis of this review is that the current literature has continued to give precedence to external forces (nurture) over predisposed driven forces of psychology (instinct) to not exhaustively apply psychoanalytic models in understanding the basis of violence as the direct negotiation of these two forces ((Broderick). As shown in this chapter, the critical field does not exhibit a theory-driven study that incorporates the Freudian repression, the death drive and the attachment trauma with the sociocultural context of the novel.

## **2.2.The Gothic and Postmodern Turn: Isolation, Aesthetics, and Terror**

Much of *The Secret History* thematics considers the novel as the overlap between Gothic and Postmodernism with the settings of Hampden College and the solitary Vermont setting as extraneous metaphors of interior corruption. Critics also claim that Tartt relies on the traditional Gothic themes of isolation, a haunted environment, thoughts of the spectral, and ritualistic violence to criticize modern philosophical and moral apathy ((Litzler)).

### **2.2.1. Dark Academia and Genre Studies**

The novel is generally considered an early assertion of the Dark Academia subgenre, a series of ideas that combines fetishism of high-brow intellectualism with ideas of moral decadence and alienation. Litzler provides an interpretation of the novel in Gothic-Postmodernist terms, the fantastic tropes (labyrinthine settings, morbid aesthetic, etc.) are used by the author to parody the desensitization and lack of sincerity in the late-capitalist society. Likewise, Berry uses the theory of Gothic-postmodernism established by Maria Beville to discuss the novel in terms of fears about the corrupt power of intellectual elite and the degradation of young generation morals. The ungrateful weary walls of Hampden and the grating symbolism of the Vermont landscape (Garcia 315–30) are perceived as the tools to project the state of psychological disintegration onto the outside. Cheima (2024) adds to this point of view by suggesting the sublime terror viewpoint, where it is claimed that, due to the aesthetic excesses of the novel, an existential empty space lies, in which rituals such as the Bacchanal are read as hyperreal simulations of the ancient violence in it they substitute an empty signifier which represents a Baudrillardian landscape (Cain).

### **2.2.2. Critiquing the Aesthetic Focus**

Although these readings effectively help create the aesthetic and generic complexity of the novel, they tend to emphasize the exterior feel and the form of the literary style, which is at the expense of these characters. Terror is rooted in the setting or the style and not in the confrontation of the suppressed id of a character and the rotting superego of a group. Namely, Gothic approach recognizes that the characters are alienated and afraid yet falls short of implementing such a theory as Freudian repression or attachment trauma to describe why Richard is dissociated and how Henry was subjected to narcissism inflation by the surroundings. This criticism shows that there is need to conduct a combination between the readings of the atmosphere with psychoanalytic structure to appreciate the psychological origin of the moral breakdown.

### **2.3. Intertextuality and the Corrosion of Classical Ideology**

A different school of scholarship is the intricate nature of Tarrt in utilizing classical allusions, making the novel a morality narrative against the misuse of the culture of high art and the philosophical perils of radical aestheticism. In this method, the Classics department is not a locality, but the main instrument of moral pollution--the Deity of Nurture.

#### **2.3.1. Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Dangerous Mentor**

The professor of the classics named Julian Morrow is always portrayed as the threatening figure of the mentor who indoctrinates the students into the amoral pseudo-Nietzschean ideology according to which transcendent beauty justifies any kind of a gesture. It revolves around the obsession of the group with the Dionysian-Apollonian duality (Hayes) and, in this case, students strive to attain the ecstatic and anti-rational feeling of liberation.

### **2.3.2. Limitations in Explaining Individual Violence**

The intertextual criticism is successful in creating the nurture part that includes the philosophy which permits the students to kill, the ideology. Nonetheless, it finds it hard to justify why there is a variation in reactions to this ideology. When it was simply a case of the Classics, all students should respond alike, but instead, Henry Winter goes ahead to murder coldly and Francis into anxiety and Charles into alcoholism. What the classical critique does not include is the one-way sexual physical weakness the nature part--that pre-exists in Henry and Richard that renders them successful murderers and dissociated followers respectively. The analysis of *The Secret History* cannot exclude the psychological fact that the classical values just exploit the already existing, suppressed drives, like the extreme narcissism of Henry (Miller); (Zaki) or the need to belong in Richard that lies in the bonds issue ((Bowlby); (Irwin)).

### **2.4. Structural and Sociological Critiques: Control, Class, and Narrative Artifice**

The third branch of study is concerned with the form of the novel, the narratological unreliability and the social satire within the novel about privilege. The studies are significant in interpreting the outcome and control of violence.

#### **2.4.1. Whydunnit and the Illusion of Control**

According to Grip, the main thematic line of the novel can be that of control as the novel can be understood as a psychological whydunnit with the mystery turning on the function of motive but leaving who out. What is ironic here is that the need of the characters to uphold intellectual order and self-discipline is what drives the murderers in to complete chaos. The given analysis throws light on the way Tartt aestheticized the fantasy of mastery (O'Connell) and then, destroyed it by means of emotional and moral degradation. The cold images and pattern symbolism Grip

examines are perceived as outside expressions of the group struggling to suppress their emotional instability which can be taken to be a failing of the ego to subjugate the mighty id.

#### **2.4.2. Unreliable Narration and Dissociation**

The role of Richard Papen should be criticized. Such a genius as Sorace has observed the unreliable narration of Richard and made it an instance of his detached psychology, including or omitting details about the trauma selectively. Xu thinks of this as a performance of sanity, a calculated narrative artifice that aims at putting Richard in the position of an observer. This work is a critique of use of unreliability in literature that lacks clinical clarification. Fragmentation of narration among Richard is not only style, but a medical symptom of dissociation, a typical reaction to a traumatic experience that is too complex and requires the individual to avoid the unacceptable memories. Khaldoun Talrafadi and Nagham and Smith support the significance of the analysis of narrative as a role of defensive psychological processes such as repressions and guilt. Thus, the psychoanalysis of Richard should be the response of the trauma, which should mutually relate the narrative style and inner pathology.

#### **2.4.3. Class and Privilege**

Trikamarin Putri et al. discussed the novel based on the concept of discrimination by social classes, which is that Richard can fit in the group because of turning his back on his working-class past. The privilege of the group is not a mere background, but a poisonous element. Sociological criticism offers the context of structural nurture: a setting where the superego is essentially suspended through the infrastructure of social position of status, allowing the murderous desires of the id to run free. Such contextualization becomes essential to this thesis since it demonstrates how the forces of the system interact with the pathology of individuals in a manner to trigger violence.

## **2.5.The Limited Psychoanalytic Turn: Establishing the Core Research Space**

Even though the psychological richness of the novel is quite evident, the only kind of psychoanalytic interaction provided to it in literature has been tangential or model-based, which proves the existence of the critical gap this thesis is meant to fill.

### **2.5.1. The Death Drive and Narcissism in TSH**

The fundamental ideas of interpreting the genesis of violence, e.g., the death drive (Thanatos) ((Freud 67–102); (Ullah, Khan, and Zai)) of Freud or narcissism are briefly referenced in the discourse on *Secret History*. Cheima points to calculated violence that Henry Winter develops as an expression of the death drive that becomes stronger through the pedagogy of Julian. There is, though, no specific, protracted implementation of these ideas. The psychology of Henry, including his indifference, absence of sympathy and his eventual death by suicide, is a case study on how to be pathologically narcissistic ((Miller); (Zaki)). His requirement of total power and ultimate self-destruction are the rational, tragic conclusions of such a deep narcissistic trauma that makes him play his role of viciousness outside (Bunny) and inside (himself). According to Baker, the theoretical recurrence of the death drive in contemporary fiction is thematic, and this thesis will specifically implement such an analysis to the case of how Henry went through the process of intellectual alienation and existential despair.

### **2.5.2. Repression, Trauma, and Attachment Theory**

Psychological dealings of Richard are also underdeveloped. Although his dissociation is mentioned (Berry), the cause of this phenomenon in his childhood- the trauma of attachment and emotional deprivation suggested by the unstable childhood he experienced is not examined very often. According to the attachment theory (Bowlby); (Irwin); (Sato 500–15)), the early life

experiences (nurture) define the internal working models of the adult, which causes relationship patterns of destruction or lack of attachment (nature). In this thesis, it is suggested that Richard has an immediate desire to fit into the Classics group; a desire it adds to be a pathology, is sturdy classical trauma, the seeking of a safe foundation that was not available in childhood. The next dissociation is the psychic process that he employs to push the unacceptable guilt of his deeds away (Peterson 701–25); (Norris)).

The concept of the fusion of social and psychoanalytic thinking to explain violence in relationships presented by Muszkat and McCann is quite applicable to the dynamics of the group. In the same way, the application of the Object Relations Theory by Klein can be used to critically analyze the intense, co-dependence, between the Macaulay twins, Charles and Camilla, whose dysfunctional adult relationship is a replica of early, fractured, internalization of parental objects. This literature gives the methodological precedent of the type of multidimensional, trauma-informed analysis that *Secret History* requires.

## **2.6.Conclusion: Synthesizing Nature, Nurture, and the Psychoanalytic Imperative**

The prevailing criticism has managed to clarify the extrinsic attributes of *The Secret History*: its genre (Gothic-Postmodern), its philosophical underbelly (corrupt Classics), and its mode of narration (unreliable Richard). These disciplines set the strong scene of cultivating the poisonous environment where the chance and authority to perpetrate violence is available.

Nonetheless, the literature review confirms that none of the studies has up to now had any systematic, character-by-character psychoanalytic analysis that would explain the nature aspect, the already existent, pre-determined psychological drives that defined who was to be the murderer (Henry), who was to be the dissociated accomplice (Richard) and who was to be the

sacrificial victim (Bunny). The crime scene and philosophical lectures are examined in the critical field, yet not the most repressed regions of the minds of the characters.

This argument will proceed to advance the discussion by integrating the strengths of the discussed fields with psychoanalytic rigor that is required. It will approach the Gothic setting as the objectification of suppressed guilt (Garcia 315–30), the classical intertextuality as the ideological conveyer of the death drive, the narration by Richard, as the verbal confirmation of trauma and suppressiveness. As it would entail the use of nature versus nurture paradigm as it explores the Freudian structural model and the theory of narcissism and attachment, the underlying causes of violence in the subconscious shall be systematically elucidated in this research and hence offer a comprehensive and unprecedented explanation of *The Secret History* as a deep study of psychological disintegration. The approach described in the following chapter is specifically made to implement this essential synthesis.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design/ Paradigm**

As such in this study Qualitative Textual Analysis was used under the umbrella of Critical Literary Theory, using Psychoanalytic Criticism more specifically as a primary tool to interpret the text of the piece. The research has been designed to go beyond the descriptive and structural analyses of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* to the systematic decoding of the psychological grounds for violence within the text. This design was necessitated by the observation that despite existing scholarship covering the novel's Gothic aesthetics and classical intertextuality, there was no full explanation, based on theory, with regard to why the characters fell victim to moral oblivion (Lima). The central organising principle for this methodology was the Nature vsNurture

paradigm which did not work as a choice, but as an integrative axis for analysis (Broderick). This way the study could organise innate psychological drives (Nature) in addition to socio-cultural and environmental conditioning (Nurture), and this could lead to a fine reading of moral deterioration.

The process of research was divided into three stages that were interrelated:

- Establishing the Psychoanalytic Framework In addition, the study stated the specific Freudian and post-Freudian concepts (e.g., Repression, Death Drive, Attachment Trauma) that made up the "Nature" component.
- Mapping the Nurture Context: The analysis "mapped" elements-structural and thematic (e.g. elite pedagogy, class privilege, environmental symbolism)-that played the part of the "Nurture" component.
- Textual Triangulation and Synthesis: The combined framework was used to analyse critical scenes to illustrate negotiation between Nature and Nurture that precipitated violence.

### **3.2 Theoretical Framework Psychoanalytic Criticism**

Psychoanalytic criticism was chosen as the ultimate method because the origins of violence in the novel was precisely placed in the subconscious and repressed past of the characters that was transcended over mere conscious motivation (Ullah, Khan, and Zai). As KhaldounTalrfadi and Nagham recommended the need for a psychoanalytical approach to uncovering the "subliminal reasons" and underlying psychological stresses, which served as the driving force behind destructive behaviour.

### **3.2.1 Repression, Guilt, and Uncanny**

The concept of repression was one that was methodologically critical especially in the analysis of the narrator, Richard Papen. Richard's interrupted and unreliable narration was not approached like a stylistic flourish, it was approached like a clinical expression of an unconscious defence mechanism aimed at repressing traumatic memories and minimising his own role in the violence (Smith and Hung).

Furthermore, the repetition of the Uncanny ((Norris); (Peterson 701–25)) Freud's theory of the uncanny was applied to the repetition of the motif of doubles, (Charles and Camilla), as well as the return of the repressed (Bunny Corcoran's body returns from the ravine and the group is forced to confront the consequences they attempted to bury. The Uncanny offered the theoretical connecting link between the internal psychological anxiety (repression) and the Gothic atmosphere of the novel (externalisation of fear).

### **3.3 The Analysis Tools for the "Nature" Component**

In order to tear apart the inborn psychological drives of the key individuals, two special post-Freudian tools were used: Narcissism/Death Drive and the Attachment Theory/Object Relations Theory.

#### **3.3.1 Narcissism and the Death Drive (Thanatos)**

The one singled out for this analysis was Henry Winter. His systematic violence, chilling logic, and eventual suicide was rationalised as the expression of pathological narcissism ((Miller); (Zaki)) overpowered by a potent death drive (Thanatos) (Freud 67–102). The methodology that Henry's transcendental quest for experience through murder be interpreted not as philosophical

curiosity, but as an ultimate act of self-aggrandisement and control fueled by an intense narcissistic injury. His death was analysed as the final, destructive return of the drive, wherein the aggression that has been discharged in the outside was finally turned inwards.

### **3.3.2 Attachment Trauma and Object Relation Theory**

The non-murdering members of the group were analysed in terms of the early relational deficits: Richard Pape: The methodology to be used was Attachment Theory ((Bowlby)) and Attachment Trauma ((Irwin); (Sato 500–15)) to analyse Richard's desperate desire to be accepted and fit in the group of Classics. His rapid assimilation and subsequent dissociation were taken as the classic traumatism response - the pathological search for a secure base, which resulted in compromise and moral injury.

Charles and Camilla Macaulay: This relationship between the twins has been examined using the concepts of Object Relations Theory and especially the work of Melanie Klein with her ideas regarding splitting and co-dependency (Klein, 1946/2005). The research was looking at how their highly intense, destructive co-dependence reflected the early internalisation of "bad" or "fractured" parental objects, which created an adult relational dynamic reflected in Charles's alcoholism and the inability to function independently (Muszkat and McCann 10–33).

### **3.4 Charting the "Nurture" Context: The External Amplifiers**

The analysis of the "Nurture" component was equally critical, for this established the environmental and ideological conditions in which the innate drivers were licenced.

#### **3.4.2 Sociocultural Privilege and Environmental Isolation**

The socio-economic critique (Trikarinaputri, Sachmadi, and Krishnapatria 17–25) was integrated here to demonstrate how the nurture of elite education led to a certain insulated world where the

external Superego (society, law, ethics) had no jurisdiction, giving free licence to the internal Id. Furthermore, the Gothic landscape of Vermont was examined as a metaphor of psycho geographical as the isolation and cold image externalised the emotional detachment and feelings of repressed guilt of the group (Garcia 315–30); (Litzler)).

### **3.5 Analytical Procedure: Data Selection and Coding**

The main "data" for this study was the textual evidence taken from *The Secret History*. The analytical procedure had three thematic phases:

#### **3.5.2 Systematic Thematic Coding**

A variant of thematic analysis was employed for systematic coding of the novel for repeated psychological and symbolic motifs in order to enable quantitative tracking of qualitative concepts ((Woollett, Eyal, and O'Brien e0002209)). Important coding categories were:

**Aesthetic Distance:** Aesthetic Distance was a category we coded for instances where characters were more focused on the aesthetic beauty of an act than the act's morality in which we coded aestheticism (Nurture) in relation to moral corruption.

**Cold/Decay Imagery:** This coded instances of coldness/snow/physical decay as external symbols of emotional repression and the death drive (Thanatos).

**Control/Order Language** This coded phrases that reflected the attempt at order or domination of the characters, linking to Henry's narcissism and Grip's theory of control.

**Relational Markers:** This coded instances of emotional dependency, abandonment and insecurity, which joins Richard and the twins to Attachment and Object Relations Theory.

### **3.6 Rigour, Validity and Limitations**

While this study was interpretive in nature, methodological rigour though textural grounding and

transparency was maintained in the study. All interpretations were traceable directly to specific textual passages, and were screened through the created psychoanalytical structure. This rigour ensured the interpretation didn't stray into making claims too much inherent in highly theoretical criticism ((Peterson 701–25)).

The major methodological drawback was the subjective nature of psychoanalytic interpretation because of its very nature is speculative. In addition, the unreliable narration of Richard Papen was a constant problem. This methodology responded to this problem by not regarding the unreliability as a flaw, but as the main object of analysis the linguistic evidence of the psychological condition itself. By using this critical approach, the goal of this study was not to make definite clinical diagnoses, but the best explanation of violence that is textually backed up by the interaction between Nature (innate drives) and Nurture (sociocultural conditioning).

## **Chapter 4: Discussion and analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins the methodical psychoanalysis of violence in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* by simply concentrating on the "Nature" element: the pre-existing psychological pathologies, innate drives, and traumas of early life that made the Classics students so prone to moral collapse. Moving away from any external aesthetic or philosophical critiques, this analysis sets up the psychological underpinnings of weakness of the group. Specifically, the chapter uses three major frameworks (Freudian, Object Relations, and Attachment Theory) to examine three major subjects of pathology: Henry Winter's Thanatos-based narcissism, Richard Papen's trauma-based dissociation, and the Macaulay twins' lack of individuation. By isolating these innate

predispositions this discussion is helpful in showing that the group's descent into murder was not an aberrant situation, but an inevitable psychological unfolding just waiting for the environmental catalyst of 'Nurture' (Julian Morrow's corrupt elitism) to be activated.

#### **4.2 The Narcissistic Death Drive: Henry Winter's Case**

In addition to being a protagonist, Henry Winter in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt is a bloodthirsty specimen of the awareness of narcissistic psychopathology and the annihilating powers of the death drive. As these formal aspects of the novel, along with the subject matter of the work demand a more thorough analysis of the psyche of Henry, not as a genius (in intellectual terms) but as a tragedy wherein the inner disharmony is played out in bizarre murder and self-murder. Next in this section we have a glimpse of the psychological side of Henry by examining the relationship that exists between narcissism and the destructive trait exhibited by Henry which ultimately results in his downward demise. This analysis shows how pathological narcissism of Henry relates to his narcissist defense mechanism, and how the two phenomena evolve into the emergence of the death drive using psychoanalytic and philosophical explanations of the text. It is in this context that Henry is not an intellectual as he is brought out as a living laboratory of the experiment on human frailty, destructiveness and disintegration of the moral frontiers when intellectual pursuits are made the cover-faces behind the underlying psychological demands.

##### **4.2.1 Pathology of Control: Malignant Narcissism as Personality Armour.**

One of Henry Winter's most important qualities is that of obsessive control, which is at the core of his ability to control both anyone around him and the storey itself. At first glance, his emotional detachment and control question the image of an intellectual superiority of the tragic

hero who progresses to transcendence in the classical world. However, the version of Freud offered by psychoanalytic theory is more unnerving. His sway is not about thought power but rather a complicated defence mechanism to protect a very fragile, insecure psyche. This is consistent with what Otto Kernberg calls Malignant Narcissism (MN), which is characterised by grandiosity, cruelty, absence of empathic capacity and creation of a False Self (Kernberg). Henry's actions reflect the characteristics of malignant narcissism - indifference to other people's feelings, the strategic use of other people, the tendency to see others as disposable - all of which are not a result of intellectual or emotional empathy but the deep-seated desire for power and control.

### **The False Self and the Malignant Narcissistic Structure**

Henry's False Self is impeccably developed with his intellectualism. This False Self is not just a mask but a whole complex which is made up of the amalgamation of intellectual success with a quasi-religious fervour for Classical studies. His inability to let go of the pursuit of knowledge as it relates to occult studies and mastery of ancient languages is the "strong fortress" that protects him against any threat, inner or outer, which would leave him exposed (more vulnerable on the inside). The False Self is a protection mechanism which allows Henry not to experience the potential for being "normal" or unexceptional. This defeat system relates to the narcissistic hypodomains which are at the heart of his personality. Identity for Henry is externally constructed through the validation he gets from his intellectual prowess and his distance from messy, imperfect human life that exists outside of his abilities. Jacobs holds the extreme attachment of Henry to the Classics to be a manifestation of his efforts to create a consistent unassailable identity by identifying himself with non-ephemeral all-encompassing values, thus being isolated from the fear of mediocrity.

In the narcissistic context this False Self is not only a social play but an existential tactic. This is a psychological armour that Henry wears to protect his low self-concept with the interior disarray of emotional helplessness.

#### **4.2.2 The Bursting Out of the Death Drive (Thanatos)**

While the frame of reference that narcissism offers gives a practical reason for Henry's craving for control and his violent reaction to hurt, it is not adequate to comprehend the extent of devastation he creates. In an adjustment of this position Freud's notion of the Death Drive (Thanatos) will become essential. The Death Drive is an inherent drive for annihilation, self-annihilation and fall back to the state of the inanimate. Freud says that the human beings have not only life instinct (Eros), but also their counterpart, the death and annihilation instinct. To understand the reasons why Henry involved himself in activities of such violence and self-destruction, it is not possible to see it only in terms of narcissism, but, in terms that are pushed to a deeper and more primitive aspect, the Death Drive.

#### **The Divide: Thanatos and Philosophical Ideal.**

While he is at this point, Henry tries to sublimate his destructive tendencies into knowledge by engaging in a number of intellectual activity, especially obsessed with the Dionysian ecstasy advocated by Nietzsche. His study of ancient tragedy and his involvement in the Bacchanal rites are an expression of his desire to overcome the limitations of the human condition and to embrace the chaos and destruction that are part and parcel of life. However, this philosophical ideal does never end up to be sufficient to contain the powerful forces within him.

The death of the farmer at the Bacchanal constitutes an important milestone in the plot. Freud proposes that the Desire for Death strives to throw the person back into a condition of inertia, to reverse the tension and complexity of Life itself. For Henry, the death of the farmer is not a

moral trauma, but an existential realisation. It is an act of destruction that allows him to experience the ultimate expression of control of life and death. However, this act is not chaos, and is not being performed without disdain; it is carefully orchestrated, supporting the notion that Henry's violence is the result of a deep-seated, unconscious death wish, a death wish that must be externalised. This moment also is the trigger for the violence that takes place that night, leading to the premeditated murder of Bunny.

### **The Calculated Thanatos: Bunny's Murder**

The murder of Bunny is perhaps the most obvious expression of Thanatos in the novel. Bunny's murder is cold, rational and methodical as opposed to the impetuous violence of the Bacchanal. Henry does everything to both Bunny and himself, and his orientation is a direct result of the blend between narcissistic need and death drive. This act can be regarded as the externalisation of the self-destructing urge towards aggression, which is characteristic of Thanatos. With Bunny, Henry is not only ensuring his intellectual superiority over the group but also asserting his control of life and death. The act is not merely protecting himself from exposure because of to the life-enhancing drive being met, he destroys the life-creating drive for the death drive; the death drive being met.

### **Pitting Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Views**

It is at this juncture that the difference between the Nietzschean and Freudian interpretations are apparent. Among different interpretations, Henry's actions from the Nietzschean viewpoint can be interpreted as a fulfilling of the heroic role of Dionysus in his desire for power. However, the psychoanalytic point of view disputes this interpretation. The murder is not some Nietzschean transgression of the self, but the outburst of an intense psychological pathology that he had grown up with.

### **4.2.3 The Final Success of the Death Drive: Suicide and Psychic Retreat**

Henry's suicide is an ultimate and final triumph of the Death Drive. The death instinct, which periodically explodes as a gust of destruction and annihilation throughout the novel, finally finds an outlet in Henry's self-destruction. As Henry is pressed in on all sides by the outside world, his reaction is not to fight back or flee, but to retreat into death, to claim a definitive control over his fate. have provided the storey connecting narcissism and suicidality and also described the factors of malignant narcissistic personality in which suicide was a final source of power. Henry's suicide is not a despairing act, but an assertion of the death drive, a final triumph over his fate.

#### **Suicidality in Narcissism**

Henry's suicide is not caused by depression or existential despair. Instead, it is a final act of positioning, a positioning of authority over his own storey. Gabbard notes that suicide for narcissistic individuals in many ways is a form of control, the last attempt to not be controlled by anything. In Henry's case, the suicide enables him to retain control of his destiny so that he won't end up being humiliated or exposed by the outside forces. Through his own suicidal act, Henry maintains his authority even after defeat.

Moreover, Bauer explains Henry's suicide as a type of Psychic Retreat, a psychological coping mechanism that responds to the unbearable pressures of external reality. On this level, Henry's final action can be seen as a return to the state of inanimate, the ultimate triumph of Thanatos over the forces of life and creation.

Henry Winter in *The Secret History* is the narcissism and death drive in its worst form. The harshness of his psycho-sexual armor, his narcissistic behavior, and finally his descent into violence and self-destruction mean that the damage in his psyche has been catastrophic. Through

psychoanalytic perspective, Henry is not a mere intelligent man with predilection to intellectual matters or a compulsion of inquiry into, into the intellectual aspects but the resultant creation of an unconscious power, the power that seeks to destroy. His unfortunate demise is not a chance but the natural and the rational implementation of the devastating powers in the man. Ultimately, the novel is a ghost story about the dangers of narcissism that go unchecked, how delicate the human psyche is and how pointless the death instinct can be.

### **4.3 Repression & Dissociation: The Trauma of Richard Papen**

The psychological condition of Richard Papen can be not only taken as one of the keys to the explanation of his personal way in *The Secret History*, but it is also possible to see it as the significant point of analysis in the larger thematic study of human nature, amoral character, and devastating consequences of unresolved trauma. As a passive receiver of the immorality of the group Richard demonstrates something of a prototype of the play between Nature and Nurture, the impact of early traumas and exposure to intellectually demeaning conditions collide and ultimately result in a stimulus (breakdown) of moral integrity and psychological health. It is his personality that the tragic fulcrum of the group collective entry into violence reveals the way, when nakedly exposed, the trauma generates a deadly association between a harmed consciousness and the surrounding atmosphere which fosters the degradation of moral sense. This section explores in detail the complexities of Richard's psychological development, focusing upon attachment trauma, dissociation and repression as its central themes, and engages critically with Richard's role within the larger, philosophical and psychoanalytic framework of the novel.

#### **4.3.1 Attachment trauma, Splitting and Need for Inclusion**

Richard Papen's introduction to the Classics group, therefore, isn't characterised by the curiosity

of an intellectual or a desire for self-improvement, it is driven by a deeper, subconscious desire for belonging and psychological integration. This is best explained in the context of Attachment Trauma as a term that means emotional neglect and inadequate responses in one's early childhood. Richard's poverty and emotionally sterile family life have made him suffer from large psychological scars, especially a general sense of alienation and insecurity. These early deficiencies in his environment where he lacked a secure base and emotionally available caregivers-go on to define his emotional responses to world around him and lead to difficulty in forming stable object relations throughout his life. Richard's response to this trauma does not reflect resilience and healing - but rather, a desperate need to be included and to belong, traits which lead him into the dangerous world of the Classics group.

### **The Trauma of Emotional Neglect**

The consequences of Richard's early emotional neglect are manifested in several ways. His internalised techniques of insecure attachment that then result in emotional regulation difficulties are at the root of his deeply ingrained fear of abandonment in both his own person as well as in his interactions with others. Richard's emotional neglect is not simply the lack of emotional nurture but an active sterilisation of his emotions, in which he was taught to repress his own emotional requirements. This background left him with a chronic fear of being alone, which turns out to be a central motivational factor in his willingness to commit morally questionable actions. As a part of the Classics group, for Richard, Richard is provided with a semblance of security that his family never provided him. In this respect, attachment theory (Bowlby) helps to understand Richard's strong desire to replace both lack of nurturing parental figures by idealised versions of these figures in the Classics group. The group's exclusivity and intellectualism, symbolised by such characters as Henry and Julian Morrow, become Richard's

replacements for the secure base he never had.

### **Pathological Idealisation and Connecting Things**

Upon entering Hampden College, Richard does not realise friendships or connexions in the typical way. Instead, his need for inclusion quickly becomes pathological. He idealises the classics group, Henry, and Julian Morrow in an almost fetishistic way, such that he can set up a psychological defence mechanism to avoid facing the inherent void left by his childhood trauma. This idealisation is a fundamental narcissistic defence in which Richard divides the world into "good objects" (the group, an idealised version of a family structure) and "bad objects" (his biological family and past, which he must now reject to emotionally survive). This mechanism of Kernberg is integral to the structure of Borderline and Narcissistic disorders where the person's self-worth and psychological equilibrium is based on idealising others and putting down the sources of earlier trauma. In Richard's case, his splitting guarantees that he is both emotionally reliant on the Classics group and rejecting his past, both essentially fragmenting his identity. Furthermore, the group becomes a set of objects for attachment and distancing, something Richard can use to form temporary attachment emotionally while avoiding the deeper psychological pain of seeing his past.

### **4.3.2 Dissociation and Repression in the Structure of the Narrative**

One of the most imperative manifestations of traumas on Richard is his position as a narrator of *The Secret History*. His first-person narration, which is remote and sometimes unemotional reflects his highly dissociative condition, which is a direct result of his unresolved trauma. Dissociation and repression enable Richard to establish a psychological defence system and he can narrate how he was involved in the group of perpetrations of violence without having to face

the mighty emotional and ethical consequences of his actions.

### **Dissociation The Retreat of the Self.**

Dissociation is a mental process by which an individual becomes detached as an emotional state of a traumatic event and forms a significant component of the story of Richard. Dissociation enables Richard to narrate the two murders, the murder of the farmer and the murder of Bunny in an aesthetic manner; that is, he narrates the murders in the style that makes the events appear as abstract events and not as ethical crises. Richard describes these events with lyrical detail, paying more attention to the mood and atmosphere, rather than the moral horror they stand for. This aestheticization of violence is not merely a literary tactic, but a psychological defence mechanism, representing his psychic retreat. This withdrawal from the self can be regarded as a type of psychological numbing in which the consciousness of Richard moves away from the reality of what is happening to the self, to avoid the psychological pain that is unbearable to the self. In his turn, Richard's narration becomes a psychic retreat, a splitting of the self into an experiencing self - which is part of the events - and a narrating self - which recounts the events with cool detachment, to avoid the emotional consequences of his involvement.

### **Freudian Repression and Storey Holes**

Richard's dissociative tendencies are reinforced by Freudian repression, which is another defence mechanism used by the mind to keep traumatic or unacceptable material from entering the conscious mind. Freud's idea of repression can account for Richard's contradictory memory and gaps in his storey as he either knowingly or unknowingly refuses to confront the true consequences of his actions. Richard's emotional coldness, his refusal to express any genuine remorse or guilt for his part in Bunny's murder can be explained by this process. Repression is not the passive forgetting but the active psychological defence against the traumatic truths that

threaten the coherence of the self. Richard's repeated narrative gaps are suggestive of this process: the more he attempts to process his involvement in the violence through a detached intellectual lens, the more he represses the emotional reality of his actions. In this manner, Richard attempts to bring control of the events in retrospect, but this control only serves to further his dissociation, ensuring that the trauma will remain un-integrated and his guilt will remain unconscious.

### **4.3.3 Richard as Postmodern Gothic Subject**

The literary style of Richard's narration, with aesthetic detachment and emotional repression, situates him squarely in the family of Gothic-Postmodernism, as promoted by writers such as Maria Beville. Gothic-Postmodernism combines the dark atmosphere of the Gothic genre with the ethical and philosophical uncertainties of post modernity and creates a narrative space in which moral ambiguity and psychic dislocations can thrive.

#### **Gothic-Postmodernism and Moral Paralysis**

Beville's idea of Gothic-Postmodernism is how the classical elements of the Gothic genre (isolated settings, sinister aesthetics, morally ambiguous characters) work to illustrate the terrors of postmodernity, namely, moral and philosophical disorientation. Richard's involvement with the group is not driven by a rational ethical process of decision making, but an aestheticized desire for something transcendent, something he believes can help fill his emotional void after being neglected as a child. His attraction to the Gothic aesthetic of the Classics groups their intellectualism, their exclusivity, their disengagement from the mundane with postmodern subjectivity, which often has an aesthetics over ethics. This is realised in the example of Richard's lack of connexion to the moral ramifications of the violence he is involved in, which he

does not view the murders as moral failures but aestheticised events.

In this sense, Richard's psychological splitting resembles the philosophical splitting in Gothic-Postmodern novels. His dissociation enables him to view the murders as not a failure of morality, but morbid, almost artistic occurrences. This thematic dislocation underlies a general cultural crisis of the time when the collapse of stable ethical values in the face of intellectual and philosophical fragmentation. What the character of Richard does, however, become then, is not only the psychological exploration of the trauma as well as dissociation but it also serves to represent the moral paralysis within a postmodern world where the moral lines are always in a state of flux.

The Secret History is a personal tragedy of moral corruption, psychological disintegration and existential breakdown in the hands of the early attachment trauma forces, i.e. dissociation and repression that Richard Papen gives himself. The effects of childhood trauma that are horrifying and left this character the passive means in which he is the most passionately vulnerable to this core ideological influence by the Classics group. Dissociation, repression and desperate belonging of Richard make him participate in the downward spiral of violence of the group, and simultaneously he is also left alone with the after-effect of his actions, psychologically and emotionally. After all, Richard exemplifies Nature of trauma that in the fusion with nurture of moral corruption, but intellectual idolisation leads to the destruction of both the personal image and the ethical uprightness. Through Richard's narrative, Tartt provides a poignant exploration of the human psyche, in which trauma and dissociation interact to create a profound crisis of moral and psychological proportions.

#### **4.4 Object Relations and Codependency: The Macaulay Twins**

The psychological exploration of Charles and Camilla Macaulay is a profound change to the

discussion of the "Nature" component in Secret History. Moving from individual drives and acquired trauma, as in Henry Winter and Richard Papen, the twins are the case for developmental failure and relational pathology. Their common psychological structure comes from a total inability to distinguish each other from each other, which is what makes them deeply unstable persons, psychologically united to each other. This pathological relationship, based on their inability to individuate, is what makes them so vulnerable to manipulation and eventually complicit in the destructive behaviours of the group. By utilising Object Relations Theory, in this section, the problem use of the failure of twins to achieve psychological separation in the emotional states of the twins that cause their volatility problems and plays an integral aspect in the group's eventual moral collapse and violent actions.

#### **4.4.1 The Failure to Individualise: Symbiotic Existence**

The fundamental pathology of Charles and Camilla is that they have not been able to reach the peak development called individuation, during which a child separates from a primary caregiver so that she or he has achieved a separate and independent self. Their relationship works as a symbiotic unit, a sign of arrested development, which sees both twins work as if they were a singular, undifferentiated entity. This lack of being able to differentiate psychologically from one another leads to extreme codependency, which, according to Object Relations Theory, is a result of early attachment failures. The Macaulay twins, however, are incapable of functioning as their separate persons, and this relationship becomes a basic part of their psychological structure, and thus a defining aspect of their inside world.

#### **The Symbiotic Unit and Lack of Differentiation**

Object Relations Theory focuses on the inability to individuate as causing a symbiotic existence where two people psychologically fuse and avoid the pain of separation. To Charles and Camilla,

this intensity of codependence is their failure to develop an independent identity apart from the bond. As suggested by Klein, splitting is frequently a defence mechanism applied in relationships where one struggles to integrate both positive and negative feelings towards others. In this case, the twins use each other as an idealised object, uniting their emotional worlds and dealing with the psychic chaos brought about by inchoate early trauma. This splitting of the self in which they cannot then see each other as separate entities with separate identities continues to prevent them from maturing and leads to a sort of tenuous unity that when threatened causes psychic disintegration.

The severe attachment between the twins is probably the outcome of a family life situation characterised by emotional neglect or distance (Bowlby). Such an environment cannot give proper emotional support to the twins to distinguish from their main attachment figures, usually the mother. This distance of emotions produces an internalised representation of the parental objects which is in some way inherently fractured, and unable to provide the individual development of each twin. Their symbiotic existence becomes a defensive measure in which their psychological survival is tied in their shared sense of self, which is in constant threat of being threatened from the outside forces.

### **Contrast: Relational Pathology and Trauma (Richard)**

The pathological relation between Charles and Camilla is in grave contrast with the psychological problems of Richard Papen. Richard's pathology is related to Attachment Trauma; he has no secure base and therefore seeks new things to attach to reclaim a stability and self-worth. In contrast, the problem with twins is one of Relational Pathology, the inability to separate from one another and become independent as an individual. Richard's emotional need for reputation and self-justification is straightforward in relation to his need to belong to the world

anew, while the existential fear of the twins stems from their inability to separate and which makes them emotionally paralysed so that they are unable to escape from each other's influence. This difference in nature is used to explain their differing reactions to external threats: Richard dissociates and represses his feelings to stay within the group, whereas the twins respond with volatility and psychic collapse when their shared reality is threatened by the group's actions.

### **Charles's Alcoholism, Chemicals Dissolving Self**

Charles's descent into alcoholism can be interpreted as a chemical way to dissolve unbearable anxiety caused by the threat to his symbiotic bond with Camilla. His alcoholism is not so much moral degradation as a self-destructive method of coping considering his inability to differentiate from Camilla and his intense lack of self-definition.

The fracturing of the twin's shared reality is made even more extreme by the violent actions of the group, and particularly the murder of Bunny. Charles, unable to deal with the psychological crisis this act causes, turns towards alcohol as a means of helping to chemically solve his emotional distress. This is in accordance with Sandler's theory that when people have unresolved relational deficits, they will often use substance abuse and psychic fragmentation to try to obliterate their sense of self as a response to emotional pain. The alcohol therefore acts in this sense as a temporary escape but does not address the deeper problem of their pathological attachment and adds to the emotional instability of the twins.

### **Camilla's Emotional Complicity: Maintaining the Common Reality**

Although she is regarded as the most stable among the two twins, Camilla helps a lot in keeping the symbiosis unit alive between her and Charles. Her compliance with the group (and emotional commitment in the relationship with her Henry, in particular) indicates that psychologically she had the need to maintain stability of the common reality between them. Whereas Charles

employs alcohol to cope with the pressure, Camilla employs emotional availability to Henry as a tool of ensuring that the psychological connexion between her and Charles continues to survive. Her fashionable affair with Henry is not an affair between them or any form of desire is not a significant variable; it is a strategic maneuver to guarantee mentality bonding in the twins.

In associating herself with Henry and letting him assume power over the group, Camilla secures that the symbiotic relationship with Charles will not be ruined despite the fact that this will affect her moral independent. This is an indicator of codependence in which the identity of a pair of partners is more deeply connected to those of the other that individual moral decision making becomes second to the preservation of a common reality. This emotional complicity trend, as Berghout and Zevalkink say, occurs due to the necessity to preserve psychic solidarity that, in many cases, comes at the expense of their personal moral values. The emotional complicity of Camilla in the transgressions of the group is a desperate way of trying to prevent the dreadful psychic dissociation that would occur when the twins would have been detached.

#### **4.4.2 The Dangerous Psychological Constellation**

One of the most striking features in the character design of Tartt is that the Nature elements of the psychological structure of each of the characters are not present as solitary entities but they constitute a rather dangerous complex of psychology. It is a complicated play of Thanatos-driven narcissism of Henry, dissociation of trauma and impossibility of individuation of the twins in Richard. These two individual pathologies play a fluctuating game that the malfunctioning of each of the characters contributes to the others and makes them more effective before culminating in the tragic direction of the group.

The ideal vehicles to bring out the narcissism of Henry are his Death Drive (Thanatos), Richard with his dissociative state and the codependent relationship between the twins. Henry takes

advantage of the psychological silence experienced by Richard and the emotional regarding each other codependence of the twins, and their controlling narcissism. This constellation of pathologies makes for a group dynamic highly susceptible to manipulation and moral collapse.

Richard's trauma-based dissociation is the very complicity and silence that enables Henry to exert his will on the group (Berry).

#### **4.5. Challenging Nature vs. Nurture: The Concurrence of Findings**

The previous pages have considered the Nature part - Henry Winter's psychological charge, Richard Papen's attachment trauma, and the Macaulay twins' relational pathology - and proved that violence is not just an outburst of individual moral weakness, but a negotiated condition. Triangulation of these results within the broad context offered by the method used for this one chapter alone has given the author a greater understanding of how these psychological conditions intersect with Nurture, the ideological, environmental, and socio-cultural dynamics. This blend of Nature and Nurture provides a more complete picture of the forces that move the characters toward violence and moral decay. While Nature is psychological compulsion, Nurture is ideological and social framework that give and ensure sanctity to the compulsions, allowing it to follow a course that is rampant with menace to destruction.

##### **4.5.1 The Classics Indoctrination: Superego Suspension**

The first and most significant Nurture component in *The Secret History* is the nature of the Classics department and Julian Morrow's teaching philosophy as an ideological conditioning norm. Diagnostic Mode: the philosophical dichotomy of beauty vs. amorality between Julian and the students acts as a corruptive influence on his students. His fascination with the Greek tragedy and Dionysian rites is not only an intellectual tool, but a psychological excuse for their amoral acts. Julian's philosophy is explored as an attempt to break down conventional morality and

replace it with an aestheticized form of amorality, in which violence is justified as an act of transcendent beauty. This ideological order is the mythic template for the violence that will ensue.

Though the Superego (moral conscience, which has been traditionally used as an inhibiting factor in the destructive instincts of human beings) is put on abeyance, this is a direct result of the philosophical ideals Julian inculcates in his students. Julian's doctrines serve as a corrupt external Superego, which assures the students that not only are their violent impulses acceptable, but essential in the quest for intellectual and existential transcendence (Beville). And this is where the Nurture aspect comes in: It does not produce Henry's Thanatos, nor does it produce his desire for destruction, buried at the centre of his soul; it, however, allows these desires a licence, providing them with a cognitive framework which gives them an intellectual and historical legitimacy and exempts them from the moral frame.

More specifically the classics themselves-how they all focus on the Dionysian ritual and sparagmos (ritual dismemberment)-give the students a narrative frame into which violence becomes an act of divine release. This association with ancient myth serves to rationalise the use of violence as a philosophical imperative, as it is also a natural attribute of the Id, of the primitive, omnipotent, destructive part of the psyche, unchecked by the moral controls normally imposed by the Superego. Adler nonchalantly suggests that this intellectualisation of violence is one of the main reasons for the moral decadence that is widespread in the group in order to see their destructive acts in an aesthetic rather than a moral perspective.

#### **4.5.2 Sociocultural Privilege: No Consequence**

The sociocultural privilege of the group is one of the most important Nurture factors that contributes to the violence in *The Secret History* and provides an essential structural environment

in which the lack of consequence is normalised. The students, especially the core group of Henry, Richard, the Macaulay twins, and others, are trapped in a socio-economic bubble that is totally disconnected from the social, legal, and moral norms, norms that are applied to mainstream society. This isolation is important to their psychological and moral destruction, because that outside Superego society's rules, laws, and moral requirement-provokes the same levity on them as it would on the lower classes of people. The elite education system creates this mindset that these students are not subject to the same laws as everyone else. The lack of accountability for their actions is a potent anaesthetic to their morality and violence.

Such an environment moulded Henry into his narcissistic view that he is "above human law". This is added to his intellectual superiority and social superiority since he does not need to abide by the restrictions of society as compared to the ordinary people. This belief is not merely the expression of his mental makeup but is instilled in him on a higher socialisation plane where his pathological behaviour is practiced. The fact that this power and the absence of social disapproval of it allow the group to internalise their philosophy that they are somehow above the sort of moral considerations that is expected to hold normal people back. The Nurture context of privilege thus offers external legitimization for their violent fantasies which further cements their collective fantasy of exceptionalism.

Since the group operates in an environment in which morals are weakened by regalia and by isolation, they are exhorted to do whatever they like without having to worry about the retribution of society. This becomes a positive feedback loop, the more they can act with impunity, the more emboldened they become. The violence perpetrated by them is not merely the result of individual psychological failure but a manifestation of the cultural and social forces that create a normalised ideology within their midst. Having been validated structurally in their

desires, they inevitably decades later enter the realm of murder.

#### **4.5.3 The First Murder: Suspension of Disbelief and Superego Suspension**

Killing the farmer is the moment when the Id (the instinctual, primitive element of the psyche) losing control for a time through the killing of the farmer, the Superego is put aside. Though one of the primary focuses of this drive is intellectualising and achieving beauty and control, this killing is an explosive manifestation of Henry's Thanatos, his represented drive towards destruction. For the group, murder is an uncontainable sublimation of violent energy. At first, the killing appears spontaneous and chaotic, and the group becomes caught up in the ecstasy of the ritual of the Bacchanal-a collective psychosis that temporarily breaks their ego boundaries down. Finally, from the standpoint of Nurture, Dionysian ritual, which is one of the main rituals emphasised in the Classics department, is employed as an ideological solace for violence. The students regard the murder not as a moral failure but as a rite of passage - a philosophical transcendence. It is Julian's own philosophical teachings celebrating Dionysian ecstasy and the renunciation of moral boundaries that provide the intellectual paradigm of their actions. The ideological suspension of the Superego that has been bestowed upon them by the Nurture context of their education makes it possible for the group to suspend their moral preoccupations and to justify their violent drives in the name of a transcendent, existential mission.

The result is a tragedy which confirms them in their beliefs: the group succeeds in accomplishing transcendence, which gives credence to their immoral philosophy and establishes precedence for what is going to be the second more calculating act of violence. The murder is not only the catharsis of Henry's individuality, but also the collective validation of a new intellectual superiority of the group, which has learned to think of violence as a natural and justified part of our aestheticized existence.

#### **4.5.4 The Second Murder: Pathological Ego and Ideological Justification**

The second murder, that of Bunny Corcoran, indicates the shift from uncontrolled but uncontrolled lashing to controlled management. Here, the psychological aspects of Nature and Nurture are even clearer. The rage started from the explosion of Thanatos but by the time Bunny is killed, Henry's Pathological Ego is completely in full control. This time, the murder is premeditated, and it shows just how effective Henry is in channelling his destructive impulses into a rational and controllable process.

From a Nurture perspective, the murdering of Bunny is described as a logical necessity to secure the group's secret and to preserve their structure of power. Murder is no longer the ecstasy of release or transcendence in the philosophical sense; it is about the continuation of the intellectualised system of control which Henry has built. The collective ideological rationale with which the group justifies all its actions, which is based on their classical studies in conjunction with the licence of privilege, is what reduces the violence of murder to a justifiable act of defence of one's intellectual sanctity. Ideological teachings that had once been used to suspend the Superego have now been used to justify deliberate violence.

The second murder therefore certifies the systemic failure which had been developing in the group: the Ego, through the cold supra-conscious consciousness of Henry's calculated pathology, manages to evolve the collective trauma (nature) and ideological licence (nurture) into a cold, conscious violence. This second act becomes the complete merger of Nature and Nurture where the internal psychological self-destructive tendencies are not simply intensified by forces outside of the mind but painful and encouraged by them. The result of this is the group's complete descent into moral blindness, where ideas of intellectualism, privilege, and psychological conditioning coagulate into an epic storey of tragedy.

The negotiations of Nature and Nurture in *The Secret History* will expose the intricate, negotiated operation by which psychological compulsion and sociocultural influence come together to create violence. The Classics indoctrination works as the ideological apparatus that suspends the Superego of the students by creating ideological motivation for violent acts. The existing privilege and nonconsequence only reinforce these inclinations to produce a social climate in which violence exists as a possibility, an invite to do so, or is rationalised as an imperative transcendence. The first murder is the time of the eruption of the Id, facilitated by the ideological construction offered by Nurture, and the second is the absolute de-moralization, the realisation of all the pathological potential within the group that carries out and concretizes its violence through the structural institutionalisation of their violence. Finally, the Nurture context does not generate the violence, but it authorises it, giving the ideology which turns the characters into people capable of acting without remorse, and which is able to affirm the devastating consequences of their inner and outer failure.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Restatement of Thesis and Summary of Findings**

This thesis undertook a psychoanalytic exploration of violence in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* through the integrated lens of the Nature vs. Nurture paradigm. The central argument established that the novel's acts of violence—the spontaneous murder of the farmer and the calculated killing of Bunny Corcoran—were not aberrations of circumstance, but the inevitable consequence of a deterministic collision between the characters' innate psychological pathologies and a corrupting, amoral sociocultural milieu. This research contributed to a critical

gap in the current literature about Tarrt, following which structural, Gothic and intertextual analyses had been predominant to date.

The study was able to fulfill all its four major aims:

- The discussion showed that three distinct inherent pathologies that led to the group to the behaviour of destructiveness exposed Henry Winter to thanatos-driven narcissism, Richard Papen to trauma-induced dissociation, and the Macaulay twins to a lack of individuation ((Miller)). These mental impairments constituted a precarious base to collective psychosis of the group.
- The analysis substantiated the hypothesis that the external environment, which was amoral elitist pedagogue Julian Morrow and the extremist Gothic geography of Vermont as an isolating mechanism served as an intricate form of moral suspension (Piven e70000). The doctrine of Julian gave the requisite intellectual license (Nurture) to the inherent destructive urges (Nature) to get an expression without moral intrusion.
- The fundamental conclusion was that the two killings were meant to be psychologically necessary. The Bacchanal was the place whereby the Dionysian license (Nurture) could merge with Thanatos (Nature), creating the primal killing. The next sacrifice was an informed when it came to Bunny, a narcissistic self-preservation, to shield shared to the collective, weak ego against outside intrusion.
- The thesis itself made Richard an unreliable narrator not only as a rhetoric choice, but a clinical symptom of repression and dissociation, which proves the overall dernity of the text with the aftermath of trauma (Sorace 237–59). The repetitive cold and Gothic imagery proved to be used as an objective correlative to the emotional detachment and the repressed guilt swollen in the group.

## **5.2 Theoretical Implications and Scholarly Contribution**

This study has made some important contributions to the literature and psychology. This paper reformulates *The Secret History* as a genre text (enabling it to be viewed as a foundational text in the Dark Academia sub-genre that serves the purpose of a comprehensive sociological and psychological case study of elite education and moral responsibility) by re-setting the academic discourse of genre analysis to a text (Gothic-Postmodernism) that is grounded in a deep-seated psychoanalysis etiology instead of a generic analysis one.

In terms of methodology, the thesis exhibited the effectiveness of the application of the paradigm of Nature vs. Nurture as an organizing principle to explain character. It goes further than merely demonstrating Freudian ideas and how these instinctual drives are organizationally coerced and rationalized by external pressures. This model can be duplicated and may be used in other literary works, which are interested in elite moral disintegration, like *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis or *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P. D. James (Berry).

Moreover, the critical examination of Henry Winter makes him a concrete literary summation of the narcissistic death drive, which could serve as a valuable archetype in references to the pathological control as well as intellectual justification of violence in contemporary fiction. The findings highlight the vehement importance of the attachment trauma on the development of Richard Papen susceptibility as something that offers a required human-wide response to the GDP malice.

## **5.3 Limitations of the Study**

Although quite thorough, this work was limited by the nature of all psychoanalytic literary criticism. The way clinical frameworks are applied to fictional characters, by definition, is both interpretive and subjective, which does not allow conclusive findings, which are based on

empirical reasoning on psychological state.

In particular, the paper was not as much investigative on other schools of psychoanalysis like Jungian archetypes or even more specific to the lacanian analysis than the mentioned concepts of jouissance and the Symbolic Order. The Nurture analysis itself was limited to the pedagogical and physical environment, whereas a subsequent sociological investigation could elaborate the role of the class and economic anxieties momentarily mentioned through the prism of Richard as an extra systemic force which drove the elitism of the group (Trikarinaputri, Sachmadi, and Krishnapatria 17–25).

#### **5.4 Recommendations for Future Research**

According to the findings and shortcomings of this thesis three main areas are suggested as subject to further scholarly research:

- Future research ought to use a strict Lacanian approach to the novel and analyze the Bacchanal and the murders as both representations of the Real that has subverted the Symbolic Order. That would give more insight into layers of linguistic and narrative techniques used by Richard to conceal the actual and trauma-inflicting Real of the events.
- It needs to be compared to *The Secret History* and some modern-day Dark Academia novels and create a spectrum of immoral pedagogy. In this study, in particular, a comparison of the influence of Julian Morrow with other destructive mentor figures may be made, in order to explore the systems exploitation of narcissistic supply in high institutions.
- Studies ought to be conducted on the socioeconomic aspect of Nurture paradigm. This would entail studying the conflict between the working-class background of Richard and the affluence of his classmates, how affluent position and the ardent desire to rise

becomes more destructive to the psychological vulnerability that results into his moral decay.

To sum up, *The Secret History* is not the story of transgression, but a well thought-out psychological story. By showing that the root of it was the fatal Nature vs. Nurture collision, this thesis makes the novel an impressive and timeless piece of commentary on the moral evils that can transpire when inherited psychological weakness is granted the freedom to think.

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