

Secret Histories: The Rise of Dark Academia

Amanda Taylor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Bennington College, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing and Literature

January 2022

Amanda Taylor
Secret Histories: The Rise of Dark Academia
Fiction - January 2022

A subgenre of the campus novel, the Gothic-inspired Dark Academia novel popularized by Donna Tartt has enjoyed a resurgence in the twenty-first century. Criticism of the genre comes from an over-simplifying of the storytelling into an “aesthetic” that is maligned for being too elite. Using *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio, and *Bunny* by Mona Awad as examples, this paper argues that the stories and the aesthetic are both criticisms of elitism.

Secret Histories: The Rise of Dark Academia

Since its arrival in the spotlight of the culture, the literary and social portrayal of “Dark Academia” has been criticized for its elitism and so-called celebration of unhealthy behaviors. These assessments generally come from a fundamental misunderstanding of the literature that inspired the look, the movement, and the genre.

Most of the criticism analyzes only the surface level “aesthetic” of the genre, rather than the metaphor-based commentary in the books, movies, and TV shows that portray it. Being an offshoot of the campus novel (but with elements of gothic mystery), the genre is not meant to be inspirational or aspirational, though its trappings can hold a certain romanticism particularly for a young audience.

In an article in *The Guardian*, Dr. Sarah Burton accuses Dark Academia of revolving around symbols of whiteness, economic and cultural privilege, conservatism and nationalism. She says “If there isn’t a clear level of critique in this sort of aesthetic it ends up just as a reiteration of the status quo and ruling class power.” (Burton 2021)

Burton is correct in suggesting there needs to be an examination of what Dark Academia really is, and what it represents. To understand its rise and the implications of its current

popularity, one needs to explore the specific texts, and how they represent the genre. And, I'll argue that the result is a message far different than reiteration or affirmation of the ruling class power and the status quo.

Introduction to Dark Academia

Dark Academia is a term that didn't come from literature (or even from movies or television). The designation started on Tumblr around 2014, by internet users who had interest in the gothic, campus-based "aesthetic." Since then, it has become a catchall term to describe a visual style inspired by certain works of fiction in which the characters subscribe to these main tenets: relentless pursuit of knowledge, violence and often murder, and a dedication to a specific kind of lifestyle that is cut off from the rest of the modern world.

The resurgence of interest in this type of storytelling has largely come from TikTok, as Generation Z (those born between 1996 and 2006) learns about the style and embraces its visually appealing "requirements." This usually includes vintage clothes like tweed blazers, plaid skirts, sweaters, ties — anything inspired by a 1940s American Ivy or English Elite campus. Fans of Dark Academia use candles, drink a lot of coffee or tea, value solitude, and write with ink pens. The pandemic and subsequent lockdown in 2020 increased a dedication to a solitary, studious, old-fashioned lifestyle as many students were forced into one, thanks to online school and remote work. In a New York Times article, Kristen Bateman writes: "for many of its denizens it has taken on new importance during a time when school is canceled IRL." (Bateman 2020)

Undoubtedly, the genre takes its cues from gothic and romantic literature through the ages. Romanticism was a movement that bucked modernity, the Industrial Revolution, and scientific rationalization that came about in the late 1800s. The writing style focused on emotions

rather than facts, and effectively glorified the past. Writers, intellectuals and poets like Mary Shelley characterize this movement. Directly following the romantic period came a rise in gothic fiction (often classified as horror) that explored the darker side of that same emotional storytelling, dipping into the sublime. From Oscar Wilde to Daphne DuMaurier, these novels smack of wealth and mystery, and veer slightly into fantasy territory with their otherworldly settings. Dark Academia has similar traits, owing a lot to a single literary predecessor.

The community unfailingly credits Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) as the center of the Dark Academia universe, for embodying everything crucial to the genre. If *The Secret History* is the definitive guide, a particular passage summarizes the aesthetic:

“It was a beautiful room, not an office at all, and much bigger than it looked from the outside—airy and white, with a high ceiling and a breeze fluttering in the starched curtains. In the corner, near a low bookshelf, was a big round table littered with teapots and Greek books, and there were flowers everywhere, roses and carnations and anemones, on his desk, on the table, in the windowsills. The roses were especially fragrant; their smell hung rich and heavy in the air, mingled with the smell of bergamot, and black China tea, and a faint inky scent of camphor. Breathing deep, I felt intoxicated. Everywhere I looked was something beautiful—Oriental rugs, porcelains, tiny paintings like jewels—a dazzle of fractured color that struck me...” (Tartt 27)

Another aspect of *The Secret History* that has been emulated over and over is the way its main characters are isolated — from their peers socially, but also from the larger world, as they live and move through the very small world of a college campus. This, again, could be a reason why Dark Academia resonates with students who control only their own spaces in lockdown and quarantines. The campus novel originated in the 1950s (with Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*) and has spawned a plethora of novels that explore and discuss the academic experience specific to an American-style college campus. With the added layer of Dark Academia, it becomes not just a story but a lifestyle. For me, as a student right now, discovering

this romanticised version of learning and living in isolation and away from the endless doom-scrolling of technology as a distraction, the appeal of Dark Academia is very potent.

The influence of Donna Tartt on two other novels, *Bunny* by Mona Awad (2019) and *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio (2017) is clear. They, too, explore characters who are almost all white, straight, and wealthy, and who dedicate themselves to the humanities but also commit unspeakable acts of violence.

All three novels draw on satire, tragedy, and gothic tendencies woven in with the characters' creative or artistic temperaments, a combination that can lead to substance abuse and dramatic shows of emotion. The stories also rely on old money, high society and family legacies to provide them with a backdrop that allows for some genuinely bad behavior, without real consequences. As a result, these books about beautiful rich people doing horrible things often endear readers to their characters who are objectively bad. The genre brilliantly explores the circumstances required to create an antihero who can actually connect with an audience.

The Narrators

One of the circumstances is that there is, in all three books, a first-person narrator who is an outsider existing on the edges of a privileged clique. Privilege and class conflict are on display right away in each of these three novels. Through the wistful ways the narrator characters discuss their classmates' wealth and the ease of their lives in comparison to their own, the reader can surmise that they don't enjoy the same privilege. They're engaged in work-study programs, they're on scholarship, or constantly worried about a precarious financial situation. And that situation is always a secret from the group.

In *The Secret History*, Richard Papen is a transfer student from California, which his old-money East Coast friends find a delightful novelty. He tells them his life revolves around

Hollywood, when he in fact comes from a small town nobody's ever heard of. The lies pile on, till winter comes. He has no money, despite his job on campus, and although he sneaks a few naps in the lab where he works, the "free housing" someone tells him about turns out to be a run-down place owned by a crazy man. The campus shuts down for the freezing months between semesters, and Richard tells himself he would rather live in a house with no roof than admit to his friends that he needs a place to stay. He nearly freezes to death before Henry Winter, the group's ringleader, finds him.

Richard's shame and embarrassment is compounded by his position as a newcomer in the group who is able to observe the way the rest of them view their friend Bunny. Bunny Corcoran has a terrible relationship with money that aligns precisely with Richard's: he pretends to have loads, when he has almost nothing. The difference is that Bunny constantly talks about money, offers to pay for things, demands luxury from his friends, and behaves like an obnoxious child king. Richard will do anything for the acceptance of the group and cannot fathom asking Henry for a handout, which Bunny does, and often, demanding exotic vacations and enormous meals.

In *Bunny* (the novel), Samantha Heather Mackey attends an elite graduate workshop for creative writers, but unlike Richard Papen, approaches it all with a sarcastic, annoyed attitude. Her class consciousness is obviously not coming from a place of envy, but contempt. When we meet her, she is staying at her best friend Ava's house and spending all her time with the girl. Her classmates are "the Bunnies," a nickname they all use interchangeably for each other, and they all clearly have money. One girl writes poems on glass with a sharply cut diamond. Samantha views these classmates as vapid, ridiculous people she'd prefer never to be. Her friend Ava voices her disdain for the entire institution and everyone in it like this:

"I told you it's crushing your soul."

But how was I to know that was going to happen? I couldn't turn down this opportunity. To go to Warren? I mean, it's *Warren*. The high experimentalism, the parlance, is annoying, sure, but it's worth it. *Is it? Ava always says.*" (Awad 57)

Despite wanting to take advantage of the program, she doesn't fit in — the apartment she can afford is dangerously dirty, sandwiched between two suspicious neighbors, and in a rough part of a town that has been home to some truly grisly murders. Even after the magical and violent events of the novel, Samantha is embarrassed when the Bunnies find out about her living situation and taunt her about it. Because who loves to be poor?

Oliver, the narrator of *If We Were Villains*, often notes the lineage of his classmates — two are related to already famous and successful actors — or their giant homes in expensive coastal cities. He does it in an informative way for most of the novel, but in the third act his parents are forced to choose between sending his sister to rehab for an eating disorder and continuing to pay for their son's expensive and exclusive acting degree. As a result, Oliver becomes the secret housekeeper for The Castle, where he and his fellow thespians have lived for their tenure in college, in exchange for tuition. This is, interestingly, never done begrudgingly or used as a tactic by author M.L. Rio for any of his peers to jeer or taunt him. Instead it is merely kept a secret, something Oliver doesn't want to have to address with all of the other issues at hand.

When a narrator is an observer of the status of their classmates, the reader can see clearly that the insiders have a rarified lifestyle. Fans of Dark Academia can identify with a narrator who is an outsider looking in, but they also have to remember that the narrator is likely too emotional to be objective about the insiders, whether from a desperation to join them, or to avoid them at all costs.

The Symbolic Fashion

Typically, one would expect students in college to be a little tight with their money. Especially when it comes to clothes, designers and carefully cultivated closets are rarely an option for the average student. But in *Dark Academia*, the main characters are rich, and the groups are sartorially inclined, without fail.

It's a massive source of pride for Richard that he is generally able to dress well, saving and spending on thrifted or vintage pieces, so he can visibly hide his poverty and upbringing. He cares for his clothes meticulously and always notes what others in his group are wearing. It is remarkable how knowledgeable and specific he is in describing the group from afar, before becoming their friends.

“He wore dark English suits and carried an umbrella...” - Richard on Henry (Tartt 18)

“...his fists thrust deep in the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers. He wore the same jacket every day, a shapeless brown tweed that was frayed at the elbows and short in the sleeves...” - Richard on Bunny (Tartt 18)

“...they liked to wear pale clothes, particularly white. In this swarm of cigarettes and dark sophistication they appeared here and there like figures from an allegory, or long-dead celebrants from some long forgotten garden party.” - Richard on Camilla and Charles (Tartt 19)

He is very detailed, understanding cuts and styles quite well. While Tartt could have written the book in third person and described these clothes with a more distant authorial voice, it is clearly her intention to convey their importance to Richard. The best description, with the most evidence for Richard's moonlighting as a fashion expert, is his assessment of Francis:

“I thought (erroneously) that he dressed like Alfred Douglas, or the Comte de Montesquieu: beautiful starched shirts with French cuffs; magnificent neckties; a black greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked and made him look like a cross between a student prince and Jack the Ripper. Once, to my delight, I even saw him wearing pince-nez.” (Tartt 18)

All of the Bunnies are obsessed with dresses. They too all have their own style — Caroline is pastel and cupcakes while Victoria is the punk one. Eleanor has silver hair and Kira is cute but gothic. But always, always dresses. When Samantha finally joins them, Caroline tells her she likes her dress even though Samantha is wearing a pair of jeans. They do eventually get her in some dresses, like one constructed of a fabric sprinkled with tiny heads of Marie Antoinette that certainly seems like a custom number.

Each Bunny shares clothes with Samantha to attempt to create a Bunny-approved style for her as she falls further and further into the group, erasing her sartorial identity and that of her individuality as a whole. There is a passage of the book that is narrated in a dreamlike “we,” when she is fully integrated and wearing dresses and fussy hairdos to match the group.

Since the characters are often onstage in *If We Were Villains*, their clothes are more obviously costumes. Rio (via Oliver’s narration) rarely describes what any of the Fourth Years are wearing unless they’re dressed for a part, when she lushly details the fabrics and trimmings of the costumes they are able to wear only when in character. As a prestigious and successful theater program, it appears that no expense is spared to adorn these talented kids with the finest. With such expectations set, and roles always cast for them, each actor feels entitled to the lovely costumes rather than impressed by them.

While the groups in the other two novels are attempting to live every moment in a practiced, careful, intentional way, the Fourth Year actors know that you have to be able to step offstage and into your actual life. Unfortunately they rarely achieve that balance, often reinforcing the stereotypes they already assume for each other.

“As if I had somehow summoned her, Meredith appeared between the two center columns, barefoot and wearing a short silk bathrobe, arms tightly folded.

Alexander whistled under his breath, “Would you look at her legs? I guess that’s one way to sell tickets.” (Rio 98)

Donna Tartt herself was on Vanity Fair’s International Best Dressed list (Vanity Fair 2014), and has been quoted often in interviews talking about the importance of nice clothes. Though her book is set in the 1980s, it is still inspired by earlier fashion that has clearly caught on. A New York Times article about Dark Academia aesthetics says that the appeal is “more approachable aesthetically than other internet subcultures,” (Bateman, 2020) as the pieces can be found vintage and secondhand. The narrators of these novels, however, might disagree that getting the correct look is so achievable.

The Impractical Pursuit of Knowledge

A major characteristic of both Dark Academia the aesthetic and Dark Academic literature is a relentless thirst in the characters for knowledge, sometimes at all costs. Notably, none of the areas of study featured in the three texts examined here feature a major that is very “practical” or would lead immediately to an obvious career.

In *The Secret History*, the Classics Clique (Henry, et al) are studying a dead language alongside Hellenistic art and philosophy — a very impractical, almost purely academic pursuit. Learning for the sake of it. A very Greek ideal, actually. And although Richard’s parents would prefer he become a doctor, he follows his impulse to study what he is drawn to. The others in his group have little to lose by focusing their higher education experience on such an abstract topic, but without family money to fall back on Richard will someday need a career, an income, a pension, and all those other boring practicalities that a person in America is required to think about unless their family is inordinately wealthy.

However, it is hardly the study of Aristotle that gets the group into trouble. It’s the fact that they decide to attempt a Dionysian ritual, concocting a liquid mixture to get them high

enough to see the god and reach a state of bliss. They're all brilliant, and the effort they put into this somewhat ridiculous endeavor proves to be successful, then deadly.

As a Tartt fan and a Bennington student, I believe that her influence came largely from her surroundings. Bennington college and the surrounding Vermont woods have an air of mystery around them. The region is home to the famous Bennington Triangle, where things and people — often young girls, as immortalized by Shirley Jackson in *Hangsaman* — disappear. Indeed it is worth noting that Jackson and Tartt both wrote extensively about the area, from different but not opposite positions. Their experiences, based on the time periods they lived in Bennington and the demographics of the college at the time, varied. Both, however, note the strange qualities of the area. Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is paranormal, and *The Secret History* includes some inconclusive mentions of meeting Greek gods who transform into animals in the woods. The setting paves the way for the group to study and experiment well outside the bounds of any traditional classroom.

Similarly, although the Bunnies are learning to be better writers in their Workshop, the thing they are primarily seen studying is magic. The book never says the word magic, never really explains the system by which the girls are attempting to transform campus-dwelling rabbits into the men of their dreams, but it is the primary focus of the group's attention.

Samantha finds that the only thing she's good at is storytelling, which leads to her acceptance and enrollment in the program, but she's also naturally gifted at creating the once-animal creatures they dub Darlings (because they eventually have to kill them). She barely works at any of it, being the exception to the particular Dark Academia rule that dictates rigorous studying, because it is innate and even sometimes beyond her control. The rest of the Bunnies, however, are frantically trying to learn from her something that simply cannot be taught. And,

although Samantha has some natural talent, it doesn't seem likely that her future as an adult with a career will be very successful either as a writer or a conjurer.

It's an interesting discussion, in *If We Were Villains*, whether acting can be taught. The approach by the small faculty at the novel's Dellecher Classical Conservatory seems to be to bully it into the students (a common acting class technique). They spend every minute memorizing and reciting Shakespeare, even going so far as to speak in verse to one another in their downtime. They live and breathe only this type of play, spending hours and hours dissecting the scenes and relationships in order to portray them authentically.

The demands of repeating and internalizing and living these verses bleed into their offstage conversation throughout the text, which is a brilliant way for the young students to emote when they aren't sure what language to use. It also makes their everyday interactions seem pretentious and slightly unrelatable to the reader, as they are formatted like a script:

“Alexander turned to us and said, ‘We’ve had a long week. I plan to make a long night of it, and if you two aren’t royally fucked by midnight I will take it upon myself to see that you are fucked, royally or otherwise, by morning. Understand?’

Me: ‘You make it sound a lot like date rape.’

Alexander: ‘Do as I’ve said and it won’t come to that.’

James: ‘You’re both of you going to hell.’

Me: ‘Posthaste.’

Alexander: ‘*Every man put himself into triumph; some to dance, some to make bonfires, each man to what sport and revels his addiction leads him. Go.*’

Obediently, we went.” (Rio 121)

The field of study is an issue for Oliver, as Richard's choice of Classics is for him and Samantha's writing is for her, because he doesn't have a trust fund either. His father, when telling him they can no longer afford to pay for school, makes several jabs at Oliver about his chosen major being useless and ultimately going nowhere as far as a career is concerned. Probably because of this lack of support or safety net, Oliver often feels like a sidekick or lesser character

compared to his talented friends, even though he survived the same rigorous education. The money issue simply separates him from the group no matter what.

Burton, in her paper titled “Dark Academia, Gender, and Aesthetic Practices of the Intellectual” asks the reader to consider how academic spaces operate, saying: “What are the intellectuals? What does an intellectual life look like? How do you know if you’re an intellectual?” (Burton, 2021) These questions, when posed against the genre, seem to support her claim that the aesthetic and the literary tenets that inspire it do not make space for women, the working class, people of color, and any other marginalized group. But this is, intrinsically, the point. Placing the academic and intellectual part of campus novels that contain gothic inspiration under a microscope, it is difficult to argue that any of these three (Tartt, Awad, Rio) are making a strong argument *for* the behavior. Dark Academia as a genre is a deconstruction of academic lifestyles and pursuits, and meant to examine whether they are morally “good” or provide real opportunities with those who didn’t already have them.

The Fall and The Consequences

All three novels feature some truly unhealthy behavior, with loads of alcohol, drugs and sex as coping mechanisms, and incredible amounts of pressure being mitigated in ways that serve none of the characters in the end.

The romanticising of “study behavior” — late nights, bingeing, a sense of urgency and panic — is a hallmark of the campus novel as a whole, but Dark Academia adds a twist: violence.

Whether the inclusion of murder became necessary thanks to Tartt, or just works well to heighten the gothic influence of any Dark Academia novel, murder is certainly present in almost every one. The novels don’t quite fit the “murder mystery” format, though. In the case of *The*

Secret History, Bunny's death is in the prologue. Many have called it a "why-dunnit" rather than a "who-dunnit." In *Bunny*, because the Darlings are not strictly human, the mystery doesn't really revolve around the deaths at all, but the immense power that Samantha has. *If We Were Villains* is the most traditional murder mystery, the killer revealed at the end and the consequence being jail time. But that may be the novel's biggest mistake.

The first murder in *The Secret History* is treated in the retelling (by Francis Abernathy and Henry) as if they had accidentally hit a squirrel with their car. Killing a random Vermont farmer who was wearing a yellow plaid shirt seemed to feel, to these children of superior intellect and position, like a similar experience. The farmer was lowly, unremarkable, and an accident during their crowning achievement of performing the ritual they'd been attempting for weeks. It is *understood* that they will get away with it, and they would've moved on from it completely had Bunny not figured it out and started to taunt them with it. These threats are what lead directly to Bunny's murder, also treated extremely casually and like a necessary step in the game of life.

"It's a terrible thing, what we did," said Francis abruptly. "I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it." (Tartt 197)

Even when the police get involved, and the group starts to spin out of control due to their own guilt and unresolved feelings about each other, the ultimate consequence (Henry's death, the third and final death of the novel) does not lead to any lasting legal ramifications for anyone in the group.

The most interesting part of the killings in *Bunny* is not that the girls have to dispose of their Darlings after they create them, it's that sometimes they choose not to. In the background of

the entire novel are references to extreme violence being perpetrated by unknown sources, contributing to the danger in a particular part of town.

The reveal that the Bunnies are driving their Darlings to the seedy edge of town, and they're slowly stumbling back to the center where their wealthy creators are, serves as a subtle explanation. Nobody in the novel exclaims "ah hah!" about this information, but the clever reader will put it together. The Bunnies feel absolved of any guilt because they are hardly the ones assaulting people. And the people being assaulted are not them, but people who live in poorer sections of town.

"She thought maybe I'd been the victim of the Random Decapitators, a supposed band of roving homicidal maniacs ... maybe they did exist, that they cut off my head and put it in a locker or something and it was stinking up some marble hallway. That happened here once. It actually did." (Awad 140)

The death of Richard Stirling in *If We Were Villains* is framed at first as a decision by the Fourth Years to let him die when they find him injured and floating in the campus lake. Because he has been bullying and abusing most of the group, many of whom are healing from wounds he has inflicted, it feels like a tough but fair decision.

When it is revealed that James Farrow, Oliver's roommate, best friend, and the man he loves, actually killed Richard, Oliver immediately takes the fall and ends up serving ten years in prison. He feels he is responsible for protecting and covering for his friends, always feeling separate from them and quite literally cleaning up their messes. This choice by Rio seems to inflate the traditional role of outsider by making him their champion, though it does serve to illustrate just how lucky and well-off his rich counterparts are.

The Campus Experience

The Dark Academia rule of setting these murder mysteries on a campus, and using the traditional bildungsroman focus on the bridge between (child and adult) is essential to these

novels' success. In an article in *The Guardian*, "Who's afraid of the campus novel," writer Aida Edemarian points out that not only is the physical location finite, but the semesters begin and end too. Having these parameters is helpful when telling a story about a fixed point, and how it affects the future. She also writes, "...it's all set against the life of the mind." (Edemarian 2004)

By honing in on a campus experience, the authors create rich, small universes where, although the characters end up feeling like lords of their castles, the reality is that they are still children in very controlled environments. A lot of these characters behave in ways that adults might — with access to a lot of drugs and alcohol that they might otherwise not have if they weren't so unworried about consequences. Perhaps this is because they are young and lack perspective, perhaps the privilege the characters enjoy make them less likely to consider ramifications.

Dark Academia novels emphasize cultures within cultures. The culture of Hampden College, the (Bennington-inspired) fictional college in *The Secret History*, is depicted accurately but with much disdain by Richard and the Clique. Sure, his classmates are going to dress-up parties and experiencing drunken hookups like the average American college student, but he and his friends rarely attend. Their parties are sophisticated, adult, with home-cooked dinners and highbrow topics of conversation or —alternatively — ancient and mysterious Dionysian rituals. Their approach to college is extremely focused and more adult in its execution.

The Bunnies of Warren University are also somewhat isolated from their peers, choosing to create men rather than date the existing ones at their school. They are slightly older, being graduate students, and the appeal of debauchery and experimentation has clearly turned into something else for them: a game of control, of creation, of magic. But they're still students, occupied only by their studies and not distracted by the more practical parts of an adult life.

There are factions in all three novels, with each group certain that its academic efforts are superior to those of the others. This is especially so in *Bunny*, where the women of The Narrative Arts Department are all in creative fiction, and all of the men are poets. The perceived divide is enhanced by the sloppy, if not abjectly poor, appearance of the poets and their friends.

“The poets AKA the reptile people pass us huddle-hugging on the green. They are getting out of their own Workshop with their professor, Silky, KareKare’s husband, who wants to have sex with us so badly, and has made this known in so many silky, nonverbal ways. The poets are on their way to get beers in the basement bar across the street, which smells of stale kegs and fake cheese. They stare at us with judgy eyes as they pass, frunting nobly in their fake poor clothes. They think we are such stupid girls... The way we do not wish to pretend to be poor, sorry (well, most of us).” (Awad 124)

All of the Dellecher Fourth Years in *If We Were Villains* are so far removed from reality, it is practically laughable. They live inside Shakespeare’s verses, whether in character and costume or simply sitting around in their shared house. Although they know other actors from years behind them, they barely know or have relationships with any of the other people at their school, even the ones who creatively collaborate with them on their elaborate stage productions. They take their roles extremely seriously and work like they are already well-paid and famous adult actors in their prime.

It’s also essential that the characters be in a period of their lives when they can afford to dedicate endless time to the pursuit of their chosen field of knowledge — indeed it is the job of many of them, who have no other obligations to speak of. Furthermore: they must have curious, intimate relationships with adults who are not parents, but faculty members who find them fascinating and essential to their teaching endeavors.

The Esteemed Faculty

With almost no mention of families in any of these books (except to establish their quirky, wealthy history), the major adult figures are always professors. Although the student

characters are haughty about their peers being young and idiotic, they crave approval from authority figures in a way that shows how insecure they really are.

Julian Morrow is the charismatic, famous professor who chooses the Classics students he'd like to work with for a very exclusive type of study in which none of his students ever work with another teacher during their time at Hampden. By creating and cultivating this sense of superiority and extreme otherness, he unwittingly herds the brilliant sixsome toward madness. Henry's desperate attempts to recreate the ritual that leads to the farmer's death is completely inspired by his need for acceptance and approval by Julian. He has a bad relationship with his father and is clearly replacing one with the other.

Julian invites them to what is essentially his lair, an office far away from the rest of campus, to discuss and philosophize while drinking tea. He sometimes hosts dinner parties that the students are allowed to attend, with illustrious guests and more of the same kind of intellectual conversations. They're all interested in his approval, as he is the richest, smartest, and most well-known of them all.

Bunny's approach to faculty is something akin to a mother pushing cousins together and insisting they become friends because they're the "same age." Ursula (who Samantha, a narrator with a knack for nicknames, calls "Fosco"), the advisor for Samantha and the Bunnies, seems to wish that the girls were better friends and more respectful of each others' work. She clucks a lot about Samantha being different, and in so doing drives a wedge even deeper between them. It's a disturbing violation of boundaries between teacher and student, which is certainly characteristic of all three novels.

When it comes to Fredrick and Gwendolyn, the two acting teachers who have coached and bullied the Fourth Year actors to their senior year, they are perhaps more in control than they

even understand. By casting certain students in certain roles, they encourage those students to replicate the roles in their real lives. It is never clear how intentional they are about this, but the implication is that they would suggest that a real actor was able to leave it on the stage.

“‘This isn’t working,’ Meredith snapped.
 ‘And why not?’ Gwendolyn said. ‘You two don’t like each other right now? That’s too damn bad.’ She stopped, sighed. ‘Here’s the thing, kids—and I know this because I’ve lived a long and scandalous life—here’s the thing about lust: you don’t have to like each other. Ever heard of hate sex?’
 Fiippa made a small gagging noise, and I swallowed a nervous laugh.” (Rio 291)

It would seem that all of these adults have forgotten that their bright, well-off students are still so young. Often, with gifted and intelligent students, emotional growth is stunted by a simple fact: they are expected to act like adults. Used to pleasing teachers, some smart kids do whatever it takes to continue to garner that praise. Especially at the higher education level, the personal lives and intricacies of the relationships between students can become secondary to their pursuit of knowledge.

Gender and Sexuality Politics

Notably, all three novels are written by women. Although two have male narrators, it is still important to consider the perspective of the author. While Tartt implies that young rich men with bright futures can — and do — get away with literal murder, Rio suggests the the best versions of these privileged men do not want to commit violence, and will even take blame to protect their friends. Tartt’s novel does not glorify the violent, addictive behavior of her characters but does create sympathetic, even endearing pictures of these people that have made decades of readers feel for them. Rio lays out the roles of her players very clearly — the hero, the villain, the sidekick, the antagonistic fool. In doing so, she is able to explore some of the macho behavior that comes from the male ego while countering it with some gentler, more nuanced behavior on their part.

Both use the trope of making every man fall in love with one of the female characters. In *The Secret History*, there is only really one to choose from, and Camilla is the object of affection for three of the four straight male characters. The possessiveness, the intensity of treating women like property, is embodied best in the incestual sexual assault by Charles on his sister.

The Secret History is also set in the late 1980s, when excess and wealth were even more common across a broad swath of the American public than they are now. Tartt used real-life experience to convey the “eat, drink, and be merry” spirit of the time, especially for young people on a campus. In the same way that the era characterizes wealth, it also speaks to the ill-kept secret that Francis Abernathy is gay. He sleeps with and loves Charles, and kisses Richard, but is largely quiet about his sexual encounters because it’s the eighties, and coming out carried a lot more risk.

If We Were Villains takes place in the late nineties, when little had changed economically for the already rich. But it does feature an openly gay character, Alexander Vass, even if he’s played as overly sexual and proud to flirt young men who don’t know they like boys yet. Oliver and James, too, share a connection that goes beyond friendship and have to contend with the fact that they might not be as straight as they thought. When Richard refers to James as “queer for” Oliver, it is the moment James snaps and hits Richard so hard with a boat hook that he cracks his skull, which eventually leads to his death.

The novel does follow the Camilla path — Richard and Oliver both sleep with Meredith Dardenne, and she and James share a couple of steamy makeout sessions. But James also sleeps with Wren, making it a slightly more liberal bunch.

Bunny is all-out female, from its language, to its fashion, to the way the characters treat each other, and Awad seems especially gleeful about depicting women in bloody, violent

scenarios that would usually be reserved for male characters. But she also knows that this only works because of the fantasy element, that the deaths of the Darlings aren't as horrific because they were once lowly animals.

All of the Bunnies are straight, and rabid for a hot man they can have sex with, but they never even attempt to date real people, probably because they are fairly self-absorbed, and imagine that they're never going to find anyone as great as they are. Samantha is intrigued by the Darlings but who she really loves is the Darling she created without knowing it: Ava.

All three narrators fall for a same-sex person in the texts, and indeed all of the cliques are somewhat "incestuous" in the way they all tend to kiss or have sex with multiple people in the group. The choice to make the college experience be compounded, if not characterized, by a journey to discovering one's sexual preferences does not seem, for the tuned-in reader, homophobic or exclusive but true to the era that the novels are depicting. In terms of story, the fluid sexuality and deep connection that these groups share is essential to their entire makeup. It gives voice to the uncertainty of being in your early twenties, and shows that, although the characters are bright and have a lot handed to them, they still have internal struggles that make them sympathetic and relatable.

Conclusion

One of the major criticisms of Dark Academia is that it skews male, straight, white, and rich. But that isn't because those characters' stories are the most valid, or because the authors prefer those types of characters. Without an establishment, there would be nothing shocking about bucking it. In an exploration of intellect and violence and what happens when someone who has everything to lose actually tries to do that, your best bet for a successful antihero is a

character who is a cis straight white man. It isn't a celebration; it is a cynical view of male privilege.

All three of these novels certainly stem from the influence of *The Secret History* — made clear by the inclusion even of specific names and the fact that Frederick always offers his students tea just like Julian. While many other books have tried to hit on the exactly correct formula that Tartt created, *Bunny* and *If We Were Villains* come the closest by taking what exist as the tenets of the Dark Academia genre and making them uniquely their own.

Despite what makes them different, the core of all three novels is that they feature a group of rich and privileged kids who live slightly removed from reality thanks to their status. They're smart, often smarter and definitely more dedicated than their peers. It is because of this distinction that the story is able to maintain its mystery, secrecy and separation from the stereotypical campus experience, of keggers and football games.

Once it is established that the characters are not just aloof but possess a very real otherness from the rest of their classmates, the group dynamic can become more and more heightened and dangerous as it becomes even more insular. This is demonstrated all the time in the real-life actions of the elite, who all protect each other from scandal and ruin through their many connections and influences. Even though these students are young, they're connected, too.

In a time when YA fantasy reigns, it is interesting that a more grounded approach to an escapist lifestyle has taken hold of so many readers and authors alike. Thanks to the success of works like JK Rowling's Harry Potter series and *The Magicians* trilogy by Lev Grossman, publishers have been pushing series with fantasy elements for the better part of two decades, but they have not escaped Dark Academia mania. Harry Potter, thanks to the film's shooting location at Oxford University, is a big influence in the Dark Academia aesthetic. The TV adaptation of

The Magicians also features several sets that are a Dark Academia dream. But if a reader who, especially in 2020 and during a global pandemic, is looking to transport themselves into another type of existence, it's much easier to choose candles and tea cups than magic and monsters.

Today there is a thirty-one page listing on "Aesthetics Wiki" for Dark Academia to guide those interested in living the lifestyle via motifs, colors, values and related media.

"Pretentiousness is celebrated within the dark academia community," the listing says.

"Romanticizing education and moments in life is the core appeal of the aesthetic." This harmless, surface-level return to analogue, simple beauty is fine in itself.

But although the aesthetic has been recently embraced, those on the purely physical side of the conversation have failed to grasp what it represents. Yes, the popularity comes from a nostalgia for a different time, but it can be argued that the stories are meant to inspire a hard look at what privilege can mean, and how the elite treat everyone around them. Plus, and maybe more importantly: how the elite are treated. To suggest that the Dark Academia skews white, rich, and horrible is the point. To be inspired to live like these characters is addressed directly by Donna Tartt, via Richard Papen:

"Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs." (Tartt 7)

Awad, Mona. *Bunny*. Viking, an Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2019.

Bateman, Kristen. "Academia Lives - on Tiktok." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 June 2020,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/style/dark-academia-tiktok.html>.

Burton, Sarah. "Tiktok's Dark Academia Trend Criticised for 'Whiteness'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Feb. 2021,
<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/feb/10/tik-toks-dark-academia-trend-criticised-for-whiteness>.

"Dark Academia." *Aesthetics Wiki*, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia.

Maia. "Dark Academia, Gender, Intellectualism." *NU Women*, 16 Feb. 2021,
<https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/nuwomen/2021/02/16/dark-academia-gender-intellectualism/>.

Nast, Condé. "The 2014 International Best-Dressed List." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 30 July 2014,
<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/photos/2014/07/the-2014-international-best-dressed-list>.

Rio, M. L. *If We Were Villains*. Flatiron Books, 2018.

Tartt, Donna. *The Secret History*. Vintage Books, 1992.