

“A Morbid Longing for the Picturesque”:
The Pursuit of Beauty in Donna Tartt’s *The
Secret History*

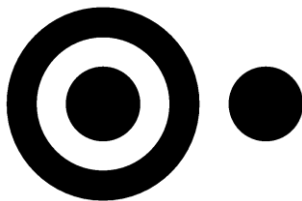
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Abstract

This essay analyzes the theme of the pursuit of beauty in *The Secret History*. It analyzes the main characters' concept of beauty, their manner of seeking beauty, as well as the result of this search. For this analysis, I use Friedrich Nietzsche's theories of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in scholarly texts that analyze *TBT*—which describe the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy as the opposed worlds of order and madness—to define the main characters' concept of beauty.

The narrator of the novel once says that “beauty is terror” (Tartt 45), a statement which paints beauty as harsh and shocking, and potentially destructive. Likewise, in this essay I argue that for these characters beauty is created through the interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and that its pursuit leads to destruction. I analyze this through the characters of Richard Papen, Henry Winter, and Bunny Corcoran. Richard and Henry pursue beauty in that the actions they take are aimed at embodying an aesthetic ideal. In Richard's case, it is his longing for beauty which leads him to imitate and join the classicists—particularly by mimicking their socio-economic class—and which eventually places him in a disordered Dionysian world of madness and murder. Henry, on the other hand, is the embodiment of Apollonian order, and it is his search for beauty through a bacchanal which leads him to commit murder twice and, eventually, to take his own life. Lastly, Bunny is different in that he is neither beautiful nor interested in beauty as his peers define it. It is because of this that he is excluded from the others' pursuit of beauty, that he is murdered, and that his murder is justifiable in the eyes of his murderers. This study finds that, in *The Secret History*, where beauty is defined as the dance between Apollonian order and Dionysian madness, the Dionysian ends up as the victorious half of the dichotomy, causing the loss of reason and the triumph of destruction and disaster. This portrayal of beauty as destruction and vice versa, rather than serving as the vehicle for a moral indictment, is instead the very purpose of the novel.

Keywords: beauty, destruction, Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche

1 Introduction

This essay will explore the influence of the notion of beauty in Donna Tartt's debut novel *The Secret History* (1992). The text, which is both a murder mystery and a campus novel, follows the narrator Richard Pape as he joins a group of classics students in the picturesque Hampden College. In an inversion of the common whodunnit murder mystery structure, the murder and the culprits are revealed at the beginning of the text. The novel takes instead a whydunnit approach to the genre, by narrating the events which led to the group's murder of fellow classicist Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran, as well as the justifications behind it. *The Secret History* has become a cult classic (Mills 14), going as far as being credited for the creation of the aesthetic movement and genre known as "dark academia" (Garrett), which centers around study and the desire for knowledge, as well as around visuals featuring dark, muted colors and tweed — all of which are present in *The Secret History*'s protagonists.

It becomes unsurprising that the themes of beauty, its subjective nature, and the pursuit thereof are particularly relevant to this academic novel. From the way Hampden college is described by the narrator, to the specific and somewhat elitist tastes shared by the classics clique, beauty is a force which influences every aspect of the story and of the characters' lives. However, these students' interest in beauty to the point of obsession is not without consequence. In this essay, I argue that in *The Secret History*, the pursuit of beauty through the interplay between Apollonian order and Dionysian madness leads to destruction. More specifically, this essay will study the theme of beauty as a destructive force as it relates to the characters of Richard Pape, Henry Winter, and Bunny Corcoran, by examining how these characters seek— or refuse to seek— beauty, and how this culminates in destruction. Furthermore, this analysis of destruction at the center of the novel will lead to questions about its purpose, and of what it is that the novel— and, more broadly, tragedy— offers the reader.

In order to reflect the all-encompassing influence which Ancient Greece and classical elements have on every element of the narrative, Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy as described in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), as well as relevant articles related to it, will be used to analyze the novel and its concept of beauty.

1.1 Synopsis of the Novel

The novel begins with an admission of guilt in the form of a prologue. Richard Pape, the narrator, admits to participating in the murder of fellow Hampden student Bunny Corcoran, alongside the rest of the classicists. Richard then begins the tale of the events that ultimately led to that murder, which start with his enrollment at Hampden College in Vermont, far away from his home in California.

Upon arriving at Hampden College, Richard becomes fascinated by the elitist and highly selective classics program, led by professor Julian Morrow. The group is composed of leader Henry Winter, twins Charles and Camilla Macaulay, Francis Abernathy, and Edmund “Bunny” Corcoran. Richard, determined to become part of the group, makes repeated attempts to join, going as far as inventing a new background in order to fit in. He eventually succeeds and is accepted by virtue of his previous knowledge of Greek and his insistence. He gradually gains the classicists’ trust and becomes increasingly enthralled by this new world of indulgence and beauty that he has been absorbed into.

Richard begins noticing escalating tension between Bunny and the rest of the group—particularly Henry. Filled with detective-like curiosity and determination, he investigates and intrudes into the situation, eventually leading to Henry confiding in him about the reason behind the growing tension. Henry explains to him that during a trip to Francis’s country home, the group (excluding Bunny and Richard) had successfully engaged in a bacchanal in which they had accidentally killed a man. Bunny had been upset upon finding out that he was excluded, but the situation had escalated when he had read Henry’s journal detailing the murder during their holiday in Italy. From there on, Bunny had been blackmailing the participating portion of the classics clique, draining their wealth. Richard decides to keep the secret.

The blackmail situation becomes insurmountable when an intoxicated Bunny reveals what he knows about the murder to Richard, who informs the rest of the classicists. Henry believes that the fact that Bunny reveals the secret to Richard indicates that he will eventually reveal it to other people outside their closed circle. In order to avoid this, Henry proposes that they should all murder Bunny. The classicists murder Bunny by pushing him off a ravine. They then pretend to know nothing about the matter, but the consequences of this second murder for their mental states proves impossible to ignore. Charles succumbs to alcoholism and abusing Camilla, Francis develops panic attacks, and— most notably— Henry Winter

completes suicide in front of the rest, initiating the dissolution of the group. In the end, out of the six once devoted students, two perish, three abandon their studies, and only Richard graduates— albeit to a bleak life.

1.2 The Importance of Classical Antiquity and Intertextuality

The important place that classical antiquity holds within *The Secret History* is undeniable and impossible to overlook. The most obvious way in which it manifests is as the field of study which Richard Papien enters at Hampden College, and which connects him to the other culprits in the murder of Bunny Corcoran and to the victim himself. Because the six members of the group are the only classics students in Hampden College, it is reasonable to state that the influence of classical antiquity permeates a large portion of their lives.

One manifestation of this is described by Francois Pauw as “the cross-pollination of intertext” (141). This refers to the extensive classical intertext used among the members of the classics group, who reference scholars such as Plato, as well as other figures of Ancient Greek and Latin scholarship— often in their original languages. Likewise, the group often switches from English to Greek or Latin when conversing amongst themselves. Far from being a merely stylistic feature, however, this communicates the clique’s dedication to classical studies, and also creates the impression that the group is closed to and isolated from the rest of the campus— and, more broadly, their society. This isolation, in a way the formation of a micro-society, allows them to form their own concept of beauty which is shared by them but separate from society.

By the narrator’s own admission at the very beginning of the novel, it is beauty which leads to fatality. Richard states that his “fatal flaw” (Tartt 5) is “a morbid longing for the picturesque” (5). The “fatal flaw”, or *hamartia*, is a concept distinctly associated with Greek tragedy. Therefore, this quote directly links beauty and aesthetics to classical Greek influences and elements of Greek tragedy. This connection renders Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy an ideal lens through which to approach this research, as it acknowledges and fits within the ancient Greek influences which permeate the text.

2 Previous Research

Since its publication in 1992, *The Secret History* has risen in popularity, to the point of arguably reaching cult status. Despite this, there is no wealth of research being conducted on

the novel, although there appears to be an increase in interest surrounding it in recent years. This section aims to present research papers and articles which have been written about *The Secret History*, and which might be particularly relevant to this essay. The texts chosen for this section relate to themes such as the importance of the Classics field to the novel, elitism, belonging, class, and the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy— all of which appear to be linked to each other in the text.

2.1 Elitism

As previously mentioned, the influence of Classics on the novel and its characters is a theme that holds an important place when discussing *The Secret History*. In her article, Sophie Mills approaches the question of how the classicist is portrayed in Tartt's text. Mills describes Tartt's portrayal of Classics students as "distinctly unrealistic" (14), criticizing the elitist attitudes and the highbrow elements Tartt associates to the classicist, and going as far as saying that Tartt "fetishize[s]" (14) the field. This might be connected to the idea that what Tartt does in *The Secret History* is convey an aesthetically pleasing picture of classicists rather than an accurate one— that is, that the experience of being a Classics student is romanticized in order to make it picturesque, but that this sacrifices realism in the process.

Regarding elitism, Mills proposes that it is directly linked to the characters' identities as Classics students. She writes that Greek is a symbol for "the Otherness of these students" (14). Though perhaps "otherness" tends to carry connotations of marginalization, this is not the way the term is used in connection with the classics students. Instead, it refers to otherness born from elitism and the feeling of superiority over non-classicists. This quote supports the idea that classicism and Greek Antiquity have a role and a significance other than simply being a field— that is, that having them be classicists is crucial, and that replacing this with another discipline would have fundamentally altered the narrative. This is especially true in that studying Classics makes these students "an elite within [the Hampden College] elite" (Mills 14). The classics clique is remarkably isolated from the rest of the Hampden students, as well as from the world outside of their elitist bubble. This isolation from the world may account for a certain dichotomous nature in the Classics students. As Mills puts it, they are both "worldly in [their] tastes of wine and other luxuries" (14) and "curiously unworldly" (14).

Mills also addresses the idea that being a classicist is for “rare souls who do not need to worry about the banalities of supporting themselves” (15), therefore bringing up the issue of class and how it plays a part in the elitism of the group. Bunny and Richard are linked in this respect. Richard is from a working-class background and cannot afford the same lifestyle as the rest of the clique. Bunny, despite being from a more financially rich background, “is accustomed to the good life but has insufficient means to support his tastes” (Mills 15). Both of them end up being othered in one way or another: Richard due to his background, Bunny due to his “ordinariness” (Mills 15), which according to Mills is routinely portrayed as “vulgar” (14) within the classicists’ micro-universe. Interestingly, it is precisely these two othered characters who are excluded from the clique’s ill-fated bacchanal. One possible explanation for this is that the four within the clique who did participate in the bacchanal are a further elite within the Classics group (Mills 14) and that, as the furthest group from the ordinary, they “can more easily believe that conventional moral principles need not apply to them” (Mills 15), therefore rendering something as otherworldly as arranging a bacchanal a logical choice to make. The theme of elitism will become relevant to this essay in that it informs the classics clique’s concept of the beautiful, as well links issues of class to the pursuit of beauty as it relates to Bunny Corcoran and Richard Papen.

2.2 Belonging

Tabitha Gresty’s article focuses on the theme of belonging within *The Secret History*, particularly as it applies to the characters of Richard and Camilla. Gresty approaches this theme by relating it to class and gender (1) for each character respectively. There appears to be a link between Gresty’s argument and Mills’s, in that social class affects both the characters’ ability to belong as well as defines the elitism within the classicists. While Mills’s text can be interpreted as arguing that the classicists belong in their group due to the elitism thereof, Gresty argues that it is precisely due to the classics students’ “desire... to embody the classical world” (1) that none of them can truly belong.

With regard to social class, Gresty points out that Richard, because of coming from a working-class background, has to invent a “fantasy self” (1) with a background of new money vastly different from the truth in order to have any chance of belonging with the rest of the classicists. This results in Richard gaining some level of trust and inclusion from the truly wealthy classicists (Gresty 1). However, at the same time, Richard is “split firmly between the elitist world of the classicists and his own lower-class childhood” (Gresty 2).

That is, that the very pretense which allows for a sliver of belonging also creates a further separation between Richard and the rest, as he is struggling to maintain a false image of himself rather than being his genuine self. This idea is particularly relevant, as it will be further explored in the analysis section of this essay. I will argue that Richard's search for a sense of belonging in the elitist world of the classics students is also a pursuit of the beautiful as it is understood within the clique and, much like Gresty writes regarding belonging, it becomes "a destructive and chaotic force" (1). This, incidentally, has implications of Dionysiac influences which will be described later on.

Although Gresty focuses on Camilla and Richard, she does mention Bunny Corcoran's own struggle with belonging. Gresty states that Bunny "highlights the horror of this world and thus must be eliminated" (1), thereby providing a hint of a justification for Bunny's murder, an answer to the "whydunnit" aspect of the novel. The "horrors" which Bunny highlights may have a connection to the "vulgar" (Mills 14) mundanity mentioned in Mills's article. In short, the suggestion is that Bunny's demise came about because of his inability (or perhaps even his unwillingness) to belong.

2.3 Ecofeminism, and the Apollonian/Dionysian Dichotomy

Malin Niklasson's essay offers an ecofeminist reading of *The Secret History*, focusing specifically on the role of hierarchy as it relates to gender and to nature/reason dualism (2). As a framework for the research, the author uses Val Plumwood's theory of dualism in Western thought, as well as Camille Paglia's approach to the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy as outlined in *Sexual Personae* (Niklasson 4). The latter is different from Nietzsche's approach to those concepts, but is linked to it nonetheless.

Although the Apollonian and the Dionysian are often mentioned in research on Tartt's *The Secret History*, it does not seem like sufficient research has been done, which places this dichotomy at the center of an analysis of the novel. Niklasson's essay, however, is one which does take this approach, although with an ecofeminist focus in place of the aesthetic focus which this research paper aims towards. In Niklasson's text — through Paglia's framework — the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy becomes linked to the reason/nature dualism (8). Furthermore, both of these are linked to gender (Niklasson 9): the Apollonian is the embodiment of reason, and is associated with the masculine and positioned hierarchically as superior to the Dionysian, which is in turn related to nature and the feminine. Apollo is a

symbol of the Greek gods, who are “authoritarian and repressive” (Niklasson 9). In that way, Apollo is the god of order and rigidity. By contrast, Dionysus is portrayed as the “god of liquidity” (Niklasson 9), which in this case symbolizes nature and flexibility. In the case of *The Secret History*, I would argue that the classicists value the Dionysian as the more important force when it comes to beauty. That said, perhaps Niklasson meant that the Apollonian is hierarchically superior in the sense that it is *overtly* seen as superior and more desirable.

Of particular interest to this essay is the following quote by Niklasson: “Apollo is what constitutes civilization, but also convention and repression, while Dionysus is energy unbound in all its madness and destructiveness” (9). This short description of Apollo as the god of order and Dionysus as the embodiment of madness is similar to the Nietzschean theories which will be used as the theoretical framework for this essay. Also relevant is Niklasson’s characterization of Henry Winter as the image of the Apollonian, turning towards the Dionysian through the act of murder and the desire to lose himself (18, 22).

3 Theoretical Framework

In this section, the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, along with the interaction between them, will be described according to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and other texts surrounding it. According to Dennis Sweet, before the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Winckelmann argued that the elements which characterized ancient Greek art were “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” (qtd 348). However, although this did seem to describe some portion of the art produced in ancient Greece, others argued that these characteristics were by no means all-encompassing, as for instance Greek tragedy is, despite portraying horrors and pain (Sweet 348), undeniably a form of art.

Instead, Friedrich Nietzsche proposed that there is a “dark and sinister side” (Sweet 353) which accounts for the terror found in Greek tragedies and which is also an origin of art and aesthetic experience. He portrayed this other side of art not as an afterthought to Winckelmann’s, but rather as a fundamental element of the art and world-view of ancient Greece (Sweet 353). This was the Dionysian, which was initially regarded by Nietzsche as the sole origin of tragedy. However, by around 1870, Nietzsche posits that the essence of tragedy consists in “the fusing together ... of both the Dionysian and the Apollonian

impulses” (Sweet 357). This is how the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy is born, linking the two opposed forces to each other, and from it *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Nietzsche describes the dichotomous forces of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as “separate art-worlds of dreams and drunkenness” (1). The Apollonian, presiding over the dream-world, is linked to beautiful appearances and fantasies (Nietzsche 3), but only those fantasies which remain within the introspective world of dreams and of the self. As such, it also carries with it the necessity for restraint as well as individuation (Nietzsche 3) — in a sense, the separation of individuals from the collective unity of unrestrained nature (Sweet 354) as well as from each other. These “boundary lines” (Nietzsche 33) between individuals are, for the Apollonian world-view, laws which are necessary to preserve order, and which protect the individual from the primitive call of nature. The latter will soon be explained to mean the Dionysian. In summary, then, the Apollonian side of this dichotomy is characterized by order, individuation, restraint, pleasant appearance, and self-knowledge—all traits needed for humankind to resist its more primitive nature.

Entirely opposite to Apollonian order is the world of the Dionysian—the “intoxication” (Sweet 3) side of the dichotomy. Nietzsche goes into much more detail regarding the influence of the Dionysian on ancient Greek art (and indeed, on the essence of art in general) than he does regarding the Apollonian. In fact, three versions of the Dionysian can be found in Nietzsche’s work (Luyster 2), although for the purpose of this essay, the concept of the Dionysian used is based on *The Birth of Tragedy*. The metaphor of intoxication is one which implies loss of control, and the impairment of logic in favor of emotion and instinct. This is similar to what Sweet describes as the goal of Athenian Dionysia: “to bring the spectator to a peculiar psychological state whereby the ordinary sense of individuality is lost and an aesthetic experience of the wholeness and unity of nature is achieved” (354). The effect of the Dionysian, then, is achieving the destruction or abandonment of the self, such that the Apollonian boundaries that exist between individuals and nature are dissolved. This dissolution of the line between human and nature brings with it a feeling of joy, described by Nietzsche as “blissful ecstasy” (3), which is brought about by the perceived liberation from the burden of individuality and order that the Apollonian imposes, as well as by the return to the world of natural, primitive impulses embodied by the Dionysian. In short, the Dionysian is characterized by self-forgetfulness, by a unity with nature, and a return to the primitive.

In order to fully comprehend how the Apollonian and the Dionysian, being complete opposites, come together to create tragedy (and within it, beauty), it is important to first understand the interconnectedness of the two. While it is evident that the two art-worlds are very much opposite, Nietzsche proposes that the Apollonian exists only so long as the Dionysian is there as well. This is because the Apollonian, as it presides over dreamlike beauty and appearance, has the primary purpose of restraining the Dionysian impulses which characterize nature and life (Nietzsche 8) as well as of masking the terror and suffering that comes with the Dionysian return to nature and self-forgetfulness. Nietzsche writes that “it was only [humankind’s] Apollonian consciousness which, like a veil, hid this Dionysian world from his vision” (7). This quote supports that Apollonian concern for beauty and aesthetics is a method for hiding Dionysian loss of control and primitiveness. Thus, the Apollonian is plastic in that it is an artifice which lends an appearance of beauty and control to the true Dionysian nature of humankind. If there were no underlying Dionysian nature, the Apollonian would have no purpose, as the “substratum of suffering” (Nietzsche 12) upon which it depends would not be there to justify its existence. The role of the Apollonian as the jailer (so to speak) of the Dionysian, paints the former as a hero, or a warrior, who “overcomes the horrors of existence through the process of aesthetic creation” (Luyster 5). However, although the Apollonian, through its creation of beauty, does often succeed in hiding the Dionysian away, it cannot be said that it erases it from existence.

The Dionysian, aside from being about ecstasy and drunkenness, is ultimately driven by nature (Niklasson 9). Because of this, it must constantly exist regardless of whether the Apollonian is there to counteract it. The Dionysian is the embodiment of a frenzy which feels akin to being godlike — uncontrollable and unrestrained but powerful at the same time (Nietzsche 4)— and both comes from and culminates in the destruction of the self. Because of its characteristic self-forgetfulness, the aesthetic experience of the Dionysian is intensified by the existence of Apollonian individuation directly opposing it. Additionally, Nietzsche proposes that the presence of Apollonian order and restraint— especially to the extent of becoming repression— can be withstood “only by incessant opposition to the titanic-barbaric nature of the Dionysian” (12). This further cements the idea that the Apollonian needs the Dionysian in order both to have a purpose as well as to be enduring, and that the Dionysian needs the Apollonian in order to be, in a sense, survivable.

The culminating product of the interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is tragedy. Nietzsche describes Greek tragedy as “the Dionysian chorus, disburdening itself

again and again in an Apollonian image-world” (27). According to this description, tragedy involves the release of Dionysian impulses, but communicated through the picturesque, dream-like quality of the Apollonian. This occurs when “the Apollonian impulse to beauty overwhelmed by the influx of the Dionysian” (Nietzsche 12), and is, as a result, unable to perform as a veil as it usually does. Instead, in Greek tragedy, the Apollonian becomes a vessel through which the natural truth that is the Dionysian is conveyed. In other words, the beauty of the Apollonian becomes the language of Dionysian revelry (Nietzsche 59), thus blurring the lines between the dream-beauty of the former and the natural terror of the latter.

Precisely due to this curious mix, tragedy produces joy in the spectator through the aesthetic experience of beauty. As tragedy emerges, the Dionysian triumphs over the Apollonian, but the latter’s beauty blends with the horror of the former. This manifests itself in a feeling of ecstasy. Nietzsche writes that “pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us” (6), a statement which defines ecstasy as the blending of suffering and pleasure— of horror and beauty. This ecstasy in tragedy places the Dionysian into a dominating position over the Apollonian (Nietzsche 80)— that is, that nature and terror become the objects that inspire joy, and the Apollonian mask serves to portray this reality in an aesthetically pleasing light. In this way, as Nietzsche puts it, “the highest goal of tragedy and of art in general is attained” (81): beauty is born from tragedy and, more broadly, from the interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian influences.

To summarize, these are the points regarding the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy which will be used in this essay’s analysis of the pursuit of beauty in *The Secret History*. Firstly, that the Apollonian according to Nietzsche embodies the qualities of restraint, self-control, self-knowledge, and individuality. Additionally, Apollo presides over the world of dreams and dream-pictures, as well as ordered beauty. The Dionysian, on the other hand, is disordered. It signifies nature, the abandonment and destruction of the individual self, primitiveness, terror, and lack of restraint. In a sense, the Apollonian and the Dionysian dichotomy can be said to be the division between order and madness. The two forces both feed and oppose each other in a shifting balance and imbalance. Furthermore, an important point is that the blending of these two forces creates tragedy. Finally, the interaction between Apollonian dream-beauty and Dionysian terror and nature produces beauty, particularly through ecstasy.

Also relevant to the coming analysis is the question of what it is that tragedy offers to the spectator, and what its purpose is, since *The Secret History* shares common elements with tragedy. In this case, Nietzsche's view on the subject is of particular interest, in that I suspect Tartt's novel might follow Nietzsche's idea of the purpose of tragedy. According to Saul Tobias, in *The Birth of Tragedy* "tragedy is conceived in aesthetic, rather than moral ... terms" (305). This suggests that the art and beauty in tragedy, for Nietzsche, takes priority over moral indictments or suggestions. Likewise, Joshua Dienstag argues that Nietzsche's idea of tragedy "simply serves to lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence" (87) — that is, that the revealing of this horror is the point of the tragedy, and that what Kirkland refers to as "the absence of clear solutions" (qtd in Tobias 305) is in fact a part of the point of tragedy. This idea is further confirmed by Tobias's statement that "For Nietzsche, suffering is the ultimate teacher, not because it brings certainty, but because it brings doubt" (306). The "doubt" present in tragedy, in which there is no clear-cut moral or answer emerging from the suffering, is part of what tragedy offers to the spectator: an example of how the world is "fundamentally disordered, untamable, unfair, and destructive" (Dienstag 90). This brings up the question of the inevitability of destruction. Dienstag argues that according to Nietzsche, the "pattern of destruction and creation is unalterable and must be borne" (93). This is a reference to the cycle between birth and death that mankind must follow. However, the word "destruction" seems to have connotations of chaos, horror, or pain. This then implies that the horror present in tragedy, or at least its instability, is one that is inescapable. Following these arguments, Nietzsche would agree that tragedy "recommends no cure for the pains of existence, only a public recognition of their depth and power" (Dienstag 87), meaning that the portrayal of this inevitable pattern of destruction as an aesthetic experience is the very thing that tragedy offers.

4 Analysis

4.1 The Concept of Beauty: "Beauty is terror."

In order to analyze the influence of the pursuit of beauty in the novel and its connection to destruction, it is important first to establish what the characters' concept of beauty is, and what it depends on. In this case, the concept of beauty shared by the classics students is related to the interaction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. This claim becomes most evident through two instances in the novel: firstly, due to a conversation between the

classicists' and their professor Julian Morrow, and secondly through the way the clique's Bacchanal is described.

The way the classics clique understands the concept of true beauty is colored by their mentor's views and words. The students, especially Henry, idolize Julian, to the point of referring to him as a "divinity" (Tartt 317). It is unsurprising that Julian's words would influence what his students view as beautiful. He does exactly this during a conversation with his class early on in the novel, in which he says "Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely?" (Tartt 44). By placing the "souls" of the classicists next to those of the Greeks, which are the object of their studies as well as of their admiration already, Julian is also connecting his students to the Apollonian. He also refers to them (and himself) as "controlled people such as ourselves" (Tartt 43), further linking the Apollonian trait of restraint and self-control to his pupils.

Through these words, Julian also portrays loss of self as an ideal state of mind. He calls losing control "desirable" (Tartt 43) and refers to it as a way to let go of "the burden of the self" (Tartt 38). This is similar to how Nietzsche writes about the Dionysian being needed by the ancient Greeks in order to withstand the rigor of the individuation characteristic of the Apollonian. Further, Julian states: "If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn." (Tartt 45). Here, the veil that Julian refers to is the Apollonian, which according to Nietzsche exists as a mask over the true Dionysian nature which Julian seems to claim lies at the core of the classicists (through their comparison to the ancient Greeks). The violent and graphic way in which he describes the act of being consumed and devoured by God is here pronounced beautiful despite being essentially a description of pain and death, precisely because it implies the death of the self and the reemergence as something entirely other. In this way, the Dionysian self-forgetfulness which lies behind the Apollonian appearance of calm is painted as the end that justifies the violence of the means, and also as the epitome of true beauty: terror. Additionally, in this way Julian equates destruction with beauty in the eyes of the clique.

That the classics group adopts this ideal of beauty as proposed by their mentor is made clear through Henry's description of the bacchanal which resulted in their first murder. When describing the bacchanal to Richard, Henry says "You have no idea how pallid the

workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem, after such ecstasy” (Tartt 187). However, the everyday life which Henry calls “pallid” is not the life an ordinary person outside the clique lives. Instead, the ordinary life Henry refers to is the classicists’ ordinary lives, which have previously been defined as Apollonian lives by Julian. The bacchanal was the closest the clique could get to Athenian Dionysia, and so the ecstasy they experience during it causes the necessary order and restraint of their everyday Apollonian lives to seem especially severe. This ecstasy, incidentally, is brought about by the self-forgetfulness that Julian referred to, which is proven when Henry says that during the bacchanal “Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no ‘I’” (Tartt 186). This all shows that the bacchanal was the epitome of beauty to the classicists, and therefore that their concept of beauty in general is inextricably tied to the dance between order and madness, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, in which the latter emerges victorious through the destruction of the self.

4.2 Richard Papen: Mimicking beauty

The idea of the pursuit of beauty as the cause of destruction is one that Richard communicates in the very first chapter. He says:

Does such a thing as ‘the fatal flaw’, that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside of 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 5)

In this quote, Richard characterizes his yearning for beauty as “morbid”. In this case, the word has implications of obsession, but also, as evidenced by the fact that the novel is a murder mystery, of a connection with death and darkness. The specific word that Richard uses, “picturesque”, calls forth associations to the plastic arts and the ideal quality of a painting or picture, which are within the realm of the god Apollo. This suggests that the beauty Richard longed for was that of the Apollonian. Furthermore, Richard calls this longing for beauty his “fatal flaw”. This term, which originates from Aristotle's *Poetics*, about Greek tragedy, describes a flaw which ultimately leads to the destruction of the character. In confessing that the desire for beauty is his fatal flaw, Richard inextricably links beauty and destruction within his life and within the story he is embarking on. Therefore, for Richard, wherever he succumbs to his “longing for the picturesque”, there is also the danger that Dionysus’s destruction is lurking around the corner.

The pursuit of beauty is what initially brings Richard to Hampden College. Richard refers to his life before Hampden as “little of interest, less of beauty” (Tartt 6), an attitude which led him to venture away from California and towards Vermont in the first place. This implies that the ordinariness of his upbringing, which verged into banality, came with a loss of beauty, and therefore needed to be escaped. The way Richard came to apply to study at Hampden College was through an old brochure. He states “I don’t know why it was in my closet. I suppose I’d saved it because it was so pretty” (Tartt 10). In this quote, beauty once again makes an appearance as the reason and cause behind Richard’s actions, as he wants to move ever closer to that which he considers picturesque, and away from a past he considers unworthy by virtue of being ordinary and worldly.

Once Richard arrives at Hampden College, his longing for beauty causes an attraction to the classics clique based on their embodiment of the Apollonian. Whereas before experiencing the presence of the classics students he wants to join the Greek class for practical purposes (due to having studied it for two years before), his motivations for joining the class become linked to his desire to pursue the beautiful once he lays eyes on the clique. Richard states that the appearance of the clique “suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities” (Tartt 17). These fictive qualities can be linked to the Apollonian dream-world of beauty or, as Nietzsche puts it “the occasional ability to view men as mere phantoms or dream-pictures” (Nietzsche 2). Richard does indeed continue to describe the clique in terms of dream images, for instance by saying: “In this swarm of cigarettes and dark sophistication they appeared here and there like figures from an allegory, or long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party” (Tartt 18). This description, aside from being picturesque, calls forth associations with something otherworldly and ethereal. Richard sees the classics students as figures out of place in the ordinary world, so much so that they could have been from the world of the dead. This description mixes the Apollonian dream-world with the Dionysian inclination towards darkness and death, thereby rendering the group beautiful, and irresistible for someone like Richard, whose self-admitted flaw is a longing for beauty.

After being initially denied access to the Greek class by Julian, Richard states that “[his] interest in Julian Morrow and his Greek pupils, though still keen, was starting to wane” (Tartt 19). However, this attitude changes completely upon coming into contact with the objects of his longing— that is, upon interacting with the classicists themselves. Richard describes it as follows: “It was as if the characters in a favorite painting, absorbed in their

own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me” (Tartt 21). Again there is the implication that the classicists, by virtue of their beauty, were an elite within Hampden College and belonged not in the world of the ordinary, but in a different world ruled by beauty. Richard’s admiration for them, along with this interaction in which he was seen by what he considers to be the pinnacles of beauty, lead to a reinvigorated motivation to join this elite picturesque world. His pursuit of beauty, once waning, becomes again the center of his life, and the means through which he will leave the banality of the world behind.

One key characteristic about Richard is that he is an outsider, both within the classics clique and within Hampden College. He is an outsider from the general Hampden population because he desires to escape banality and be part of the Apollonian elite— that is, of the classics group— but he is an outsider as well from the elite, once he is allowed to join it, due to class. Richard’s working-class background makes him disadvantaged compared to the rest of the clique. Even Bunny, who is not particularly affluent, comes from a wealthier background than Richard. On one occasion, Richard’s French teacher comments, regarding Julian’s inclusion of Richard in the Greek class: “this is the first time I have ever heard of his accepting a pupil who is on such considerable financial aid” (Tartt 33). This sets Richard apart from the rest of the classicists, and ensures that he has more ground to cover in his pursuit of beauty than those who already have the means to live a life of Apollonian beauty and Dionysian indulgence.

Because of this gap in social class, and in order to further belong in the beautiful, ordered yet self-indulgent world of the elite, Richard attempts to simulate wealth. Prior to his second time trying to convince Julian to accept him as a pupil, Richard says the following:

I was sick of being poor, so, before I thought better of it, I went into an expensive men’s shop on the square and bought a couple of shirts. Then I went down to the Salvation Army and poked around in bins for a while and found a Harris tweed overcoat and a pair of brown wingtips that fit me, also some cufflinks and a funny old tie that had pictures of men hunting deer on it. (Tartt 26)

In this passage, Richard firstly gives in to the Dionysian impulse towards self-indulgence by buying expensive clothing that he cannot afford. This is done in order to escape his working-class background, and better fit into the world of beauty. Even the images of deer in his secondhand tie allude to the god Dionysus. Furthermore, Richard simulates wealth and imitates the beauty he seeks by purchasing clothing which resembles that which the classics

clique wears: tweed coats, cufflinks, ties. Much like the Apollonian masks the Dionysian, Richard uses Apollonian appearances to mask his “vulgar” (Mills 14), non-dreamlike upbringing and background. However, it is important to note that he goes to the Salvation Army for these items. That is, that the items are secondhand and worn, compared to the elite’s new or inherited ones. In this way, Richard remains both an outsider and a step away from genuine beauty (as he understands it), and therefore his search for beauty continues.

Richard’s attempts to simulate wealth also mark his introduction to the Dionysian. When examining the items he purchased to appear more like he belonged with the classicists, he says “The cufflinks were beaten up and had someone else’s initials on them, but they looked like real gold, glinting in the drowsy autumn sun which poured through the window and soaked in yellow pools on the oak floor— voluptuous, rich, intoxicating” (Tartt 27). Firstly, this passage once again highlights the gap between Richard and the rest of the clique: whereas the others’ cufflinks would be personalized with their own initials, Richard has no choice but to accept items that were not meant to be his. However, this worry is quickly erased by his observation that the cufflinks may be real gold, and his subsequent dreamlike description of how they look in the sun. The last three words, “voluptuous, rich, intoxicating”, mark the arrival of Dionysian influences into Richard’s thinking and concept of beauty. They hint not only at indulgence, but also at self-forgetfulness through the term “intoxicating”, which alludes to drunkenness and therefore to loss of control. Through his attempts to mimic wealth (and through this inch closer to true beauty), Richard also erases his working-class background and upbringing, and creates a new self more in line with the classicists’ aesthetic.

In trying to create a new self to fit into the Apollonian-appearing world of the classicists, Richard finds himself tied into the Dionysian reality that lies beyond the mask his classmates wear. This is the world of over-indulgence, bacchanalia, and madness. One relatively harmless way in which this happens is when Bunny takes him out to an excessive, over-indulgent lunch (Tartt 57), after which neither of them can pay the bill (63). However, while this incident is a minor one in which the Dionysian impulse towards intoxication and self-forgetfulness manifests itself, it is only the beginning. By the time Richard gains the other classicists’ trust, he is faced with a much harsher reality: that of the bacchanal and the murder that came from it. Despite not having participated in the bacchanal himself, Richard has the choice of whether to notify the authorities about the murder, or keep the other classicists’ secret. This is hardly a difficult choice for Richard, who states that he “didn’t see

this crucial moment then for what it was” (Tartt 223). This is because, in being trusted by his classmates with the truth of what happened that night, he is implicitly accepted into their elite, and is therefore closer to true beauty than he has ever been before.

The knowledge that his friends are capable of murder— and, what’s more, murder during the ecstasy of a bacchanal— in no way deters Richard from his pursuit of beauty. This is precisely because that is the beauty that he was searching for when he first joined them: this dance between order and madness that they live in, which is oppressive and also out of control, and thus inevitably appealing. Eventually, Richard’s existence in the beautiful world of the Apollonian and the Dionysian leads to his participation in Bunny’s murder. Regarding his experience watching Bunny’s last moments, Richard says that he thought:

Not of the fact that I was helping to save my friends... but... the hundreds of small, unavenged humiliations which had been rising in me for months. It was of them I thought, and nothing more. It was because of them that I was able to watch him at all, without the slightest tinge of pity and regret, as he teetered on the cliff’s edge for one long moment... (Tartt 255)

In this passage, Richard expresses that his justifications for going along with Bunny’s murder were neither righteous nor caring. Instead, his desire for murdering Bunny came from a need for petty revenge. Furthermore, Richard’s lack of regret at his actions show the prevalence of self-forgetfulness and loss of control in him at that time. As such, his participation in Bunny’s murder has distinctly Dionysian qualities. Similarly to how Gresty argues that Richard’s desire to belong within the classics clique becomes “a destructive and chaotic force” (1), this shows that Richard’s pursuit of beauty through inclusion in the classics clique leads him to teeter over the edge and towards destruction, like he watched Bunny do moments before his death.

4.3 Henry Winter: The Epitome of Beauty

Henry Winter embodies the quintessence of the Apollonian. While it is true that all the classicists live existences in which Apollonian order is prevalent— that is, before the bacchanal— Henry is identified as the one most affected by these influences. Richard first describes him as walking “stiffly through the throngs of hippies and beatniks and preppies and punks with the self-conscious formality of an old ballerina” (Tartt 17). This description separates him from the regular crowd at Hampden— that is, awards him uniqueness and

individuality— as well as characterizes him as having enough restraint and self-awareness to be remarked upon, all of which are Apollonian traits. Bunny Corcoran later tells Richard: “See, his mind doesn’t work the same way yours and mine do. He’s always up in the clouds with Plato or something. Works too hard, takes himself too seriously, studying Sanskrit and Coptic and those other nutty languages.” (Tartt 56). In this quote, Henry is explicitly said to be different even from the elite over which he presides. Rather than being grounded in the real, human world, he is positioned in a dream-world alongside Plato, whom he studies as well as admires. Henry’s devotion is to study, and it is one that requires order and severity, thereby allowing the Apollonian to rule his life.

Despite being the epitome of the Apollonian, Henry pursues the Dionysian with equal force and earnestness. This search is most evident through his interest in having a bacchanal with the rest of the classics clique. Henry, who was self-admittedly “obsessed with the idea” (Tartt 182) explains his desire to experience a bacchanal as follows: “After all, the appeal to stop being yourself, even for a little while, is very great ... To escape the cognitive mode of experience, to transcend the accident of one’s moment of being.” (Tartt 182). In this passage, it is evident that what Henry seeks is Dionysian self-forgetfulness and unity with nature. These traits, importantly, are the antithesis to his everyday Apollonian existence of order, restraint, and individuation. Because the Apollonian and the Dionysian oppose and interact with each other, Henry is simultaneously affected by both with increasing intensity. This collision between order and madness— between the repression of his everyday life and the primitiveness of the bacchanal— is precisely the beauty that he seeks. Henry succeeds in his endeavor, and achieves the beauty he sought during the bacchanal. He describes it as being “something changeless and joyous and absolutely indestructible” (Tartt 186), which shows that he experiences ecstasy and loss of self during the ritual, thereby renouncing the Apollonian and succumbing to Dionysian influences, if only temporarily.

Because the bacchanal achieved the beauty that Henry sought, the murder that resulted from it is secondary to him. He even refers to the murder of the farmer as “a minor thing, really. An accident” (Tartt 181). This is because the act of murdering a human being during a bacchanal truly was minor in Henry’s mind, when compared to experiencing the horror of beauty (and the beauty of horror) and seeing Dionysus himself. He does not feel any significant remorse for the murder, because it was all in the interest of beauty. Notably, Apollo is described by Nietzsche as the “ethical deity” (11). Dionysus is the god to free humankind from the repression imposed by Apollo, and thus from the confinement brought

about by adherence to conventional moral and ethical beliefs. In this way, the desire for beauty displaces reason, and as Mills writes “moral principles need not apply” (15) to someone like Henry, who exists so far from the ordinary world that he is a curiosity even to his own elite circle.

Similarly, Henry also seeks beauty in order to mask the horrors of Dionysian reality. For instance, when he first makes the decision to murder Bunny in order to stop the blackmail as well as to prevent him from revealing what he knows about the bacchanal and first murder, Henry devises an incredibly impractical plan. The plan involves mixing harmless mushrooms with identical, yet highly poisonous ones, and poisoning Bunny lethally, and himself to a less lethal degree. When questioned by Richard, Henry states “The Romans liked them a great deal” (Tartt 259) about the mushrooms and “My own life must be plausibly in danger” (Tartt 260) about the plan in general. In these statements, it becomes evident that Henry’s insistence on using this complicated plan is due to it being in line with his aesthetic ideals. To him, it is relevant that the Romans liked those mushrooms because it links his plan to the objects of his study. Similarly, it is crucial to him that his life, too, be in danger, because it makes the prospect of murdering a friend a tragedy rather than merely a calculated crime— that is, it includes Dionysian horror within Apollonian control. He himself states that “the whole idea is like something from Sir Walter Scott” (Tartt 280), proving that it was the aesthetics of the plan that he desired. For Henry, anything that can be made beautiful is justifiable, even the murder of a friend.

Henry’s pursuit of beauty ends in his death— that is, in destruction. Not only that, but the unresolvable conflict between Henry’s relentlessly Apollonian nature and his pursuit of beauty through Dionysian influences could *only* end in death. Importantly, Henry dies by suicide, meaning that it was ultimately his personal choice to perish. Regarding Henry’s suicide, Richard says “I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use” (Tartt 612). This confirms that self-destruction through death— and specifically a tragic, untimely death— is the only end which would be consistent with Henry’s views on life and his pursuit of beauty. Dying by suicide can be interpreted, in Henry’s particular case, as a blending between Apollonian control and Dionysian madness. His death stems from the Dionysian in that it is carried out in a psychologically altered state, but it is also Apollonian in that it is controlled and decided in line with his individual ideology. He is the hero of the tragedy, the object of admiration, the essence of the

Apollonian, who succumbs to Dionysian madness and meets a fateful— and, above all, beautiful— death.

Once he is dead, Henry again embodies the Apollonian, as he did before the bacchanal and the disaster that followed. This is evidenced through Richard's actual dreams of Henry, but also through Henry's appearance to Richard while he is sedated in the hospital after being shot by Charles. Richard says "Henry padded about in the shadows behind [his mother]; preoccupied, unnoticed by the nurses; rearranging, with meticulous care, a disordered vase of flowers" (Tartt 613). In this passage, Henry is meant to be a figment of Richard's imagination. He appears as a figure of order through his rearrangement of the flowers. He is one of the "phantoms or dream-pictures" (Nietzsche 2) which are associated with the Apollonian dream-world. Furthermore, it is only through his complete destruction, that Henry is, as Julian describes it in the beginning of the novel, "reborn" (Tartt 45). This shows that it was only his death which could rid him from the pull he felt in life towards the Dionysian, and towards the beauty born from its triumph over and destruction of his Apollonian self.

4.4 Bunny Corcoran: *Cuniculus Molestus*

Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran is different from Richard and Henry in that he does not see beauty as his purpose, and makes no attempt at seeking it through the balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Instead, Bunny shows a lack of restraint and a tilt towards the Dionysian. This section will analyze how beauty— or, in this case, the refusal to pursue it above all else — culminates in Bunny's destruction.

Bunny is referred to in Henry's journal as "*cuniculus molestus*" (Tartt 213), which means "bothersome rabbit" in Latin. This is perhaps the most succinct way to describe how Bunny's character is portrayed during the entirety of the novel— that is, as bothersome and oblivious to beauty and, ultimately, as ugly. Upon first seeing Bunny, Richard describes him as "a sloppy blond boy, rosy-cheeked and gum-chewing, with a relentlessly cheery demeanor and his fists thrust deep in the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers" and his voice as "loud and honking" (Tartt 17). This description already reveals that Bunny is not like his fellow classicists, in that he is unconcerned with the beauty that the rest hold as their *raison d'être*. Describing him as "sloppy" and "relentlessly cheery" and "loud and honking" separates him from the Apollonian traits of order and restraint. Furthermore, this description comes right

after Richard's description of Henry as "expressionless and blank" and "self-conscious" (Tartt 17), which serves to exacerbate how out of place Bunny is among the beauty-seeking elite. In fact, part of how Bunny is characterized as ugly or unworthy of beauty is through comparisons with Henry. Whereas Henry is portrayed as an Apollonian life seeking Dionysian release, Bunny is portrayed as vulgar because of being more ordinary, and less in line with the clique's ideals of beauty as Apollonian and Dionysian. Camilla once says "Henry's so serious and Bun's so sort of— well, not serious" (Tartt 68), thereby placing Bunny in direct opposition to Henry. Due to Henry being the epitome of Apollonian appearance, placing Bunny in comparison to him makes Bunny himself seem like the farthest from Apollonian dream likeness, and the closest to Dionysian revel.

Class (or its appearance) also plays a part in Bunny's ugliness. Whereas Richard comes from a working-class background and must struggle to mimic wealth in order to be as beautiful as the others, Bunny comes from a hardly more well-off family, but fails to make any attempt to conform to the beauty standards set by the classics clique in the way that Richard does. In his first description of Bunny, Richard comments that "He wore the same jacket every day, a shapeless brown tweed that was frayed at the elbows and short in the sleeves" (Tartt 17) and that his jacket has "several large rips and stains in the lining" (19). This quote points towards Bunny's inability — and also disinterest— to embody Apollonian order or to appear, like the rest do, like an Apollonian dream-picture.

When explaining Bunny's attitude towards money, Henry tells Richard "the Corcorans have delusions of grandeur. The problem is, they lack the money to back them up" (Tartt 218). In addition to confirming that Bunny's economic situation differs from that of the wealthier clique members (such as Francis or Henry himself), this passage suggests that although Bunny has no interest in the Apollonian, he still comes from a family that values money as the means through which to indulge in worldly pleasures and, as such, he is susceptible to Dionysian impulses towards indulgence and excess. One instance of this comes when Bunny invites Richard for dinner, only to pretend he has forgotten his wallet when it is time to pay. About this, Henry says Bunny "takes it on faith that whoever he's with can produce tremendous sums at a moment's notice" (Tartt 66). In this way, Bunny differs from Richard in that the latter attempts to disguise his working-class background, whereas the former uses the wealth of those around him to overindulge. Bunny also does not possess the Apollonian restraint self-consciousness of the ethical god that makes Henry remarkable. Bunny is, even before the bacchanal and the blackmail, a Dionysian being. Incidentally, I

would argue that perhaps he is excluded from the bacchanal precisely because he lacks the Apollonian qualities that make the bacchanal the release of repression and emergence of madness that it is meant to be.

Once Bunny finds out about the bacchanal and the farmer's murder, his tendency towards the Dionysian worsens, and he begins spiraling downwards. He is described as having "eruptions of hysteria" (Tartt 240) and being "happy as a mental patient" (241). Both of these descriptions carry connotations of madness which, as has been explored before, is entirely within the realm of the Dionysian. At one point, Richard says:

The worst thing about all this, as Camilla once remarked, was not that Bunny had suffered some total change of personality, some schizophrenic break, but rather that various unpleasant elements of his personality which heretofore we had only glimpsed had orchestrated and magnified themselves to a startling level of potency. (Tartt 249)

Without an ounce of Apollo in him and, more importantly, without any intention of counteracting his Dionysian nature and pursuing the beauty that is at the core of his classmates' lives, Bunny has nothing to keep him from sinking further into the world of madness and self-forgetfulness.

It is these very destructive, unrestrained Dionysian influences which eventually seal Bunny's fate. The night that Bunny confesses to Richard about the rest of the clique's murder, he does so while intoxicated, after going to a bar with Charles and Camilla as well as to a party. Regarding his confession, Richard states that "it was three in the morning when he stopped talking. The story he told was drunken and garbled, out of sequence and full of vituperative, self-righteous digressions" (Tartt 275). Through this quote, it is made clear that Bunny's confiding in Richard happened because of the former's drunkenness, and the increased lack of self-control that it comes with for someone like Bunny, who had no Apollonian bones in his body. Bunny's drunken confession to Richard was, in Henry's words, "the alarm bell" (Tartt 291) which directly led to his murder. That is, that it was the very Dionysian world of intoxication and loss of control which Bunny failed to veil with Apollonian appearances that caused his destruction.

Moreover, it is this same refusal to pursue beauty through the balance between order and madness that justifies Bunny Corcoran's murder. Beauty is everything to the classics clique, specifically beauty born from a repressed existence freed through bacchanalia and

terror. Gresty argues that Bunny “highlights the horror of this world and thus must be eliminated” (1). Bunny Corcoran lived an unrestrained, unserious life (Tartt 68) by his own choice, and made no attempts to follow the same Apollonian ideals of his peers. That is, that he remained aesthetically outside of the world of the classics clique in his refusal to pursue the beauty. As such, he was even more out of place than Richard ever was, and had to be destroyed. Bunny’s demise is an example of how the pursuit of beauty is a destructive force in *The Secret History*, even to those who refuse to engage with it. In a sense, Bunny’s murder was not unlike that of the anonymous farmer killed during the bacchanal: an unfortunate event, but ultimately justifiable by virtue of being done in the name of beauty.

5 Conclusion

This essay has aimed to explore the influence of beauty in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*. By using Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy as expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it was argued that beauty, for the classics students, is embodied by the interaction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Furthermore, it was argued that the pursuit of beauty inevitably results in destruction through the triumph of Dionysian chaos over Apollonian order. This point was argued through analyzing the characters of Richard Papan, Henry Winter, and Edmund “Bunny” Corcoran.

Richard, an outsider from the beginning of the novel, seeks beauty through inclusion in the classics clique. The concept of beauty that he carried, as an outsider, was more Apollonian than it was Dionysian, in that he longed for the plastic, controlled elite. Richard’s desire to embody that Apollonian beauty leads him to mimic a wealthy background and create a separate self in hopes of being accepted. This inclusion into the elite introduces him into a world of Dionysian excess and chaos, blended with Apollonian restraint and order, that he had not anticipated, but which he then remains in for the sake of continuing to belong in the beautiful elite. When the classics clique decide to murder Bunny to stop the blackmail, Richard goes along with this, succumbing to Dionysian self-forgetfulness and madness temporarily. In this way, it is Richard’s longing for beauty in the Apollonian which leads him to the Dionysian, and to destruction through the murder of his friend and classmate. Importantly, Richard is the only one out of the three characters studied in this paper to remain alive, and the only one out of the six classics students to eventually graduate. This might be because of his being an outsider to the group: Richard sought Apollonian beauty and became

wrapped up in Dionysian chaos, but he did so while remaining an outside party. He veiled his ordinary, working-class background with an Apollonian appearance of new money, and as such never truly belonged with the elite. This distance may have been what allowed him to experience destruction without being destroyed himself in the way Henry and Bunny were.

As the epitome of Apollonian restraint and order, Henry pursues the beauty found in Dionysian revelry and self-forgetfulness. Because beauty is the interaction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, it makes sense for Henry, who is the polar opposite of the Dionysian, to seek it through chaos and revelry. This search is what leads him to organize the bacchanal with the other classicists—excluding Richard because he is an outsider, and Bunny because he is unconcerned with beauty. Besides being Henry's introduction to Dionysian chaos, the bacchanal leads directly to an innocent bystander's murder, and is the first instance of the pursuit of beauty leading to destruction in Henry's life. Notably, this murder does not weigh on Henry's mind precisely because it was the result of what he deems truly beautiful. Once Bunny finds out about the bacchanal and the resulting murder, Henry's life sinks further into Dionysian chaos through Bunny's threats. Henry's decision to murder Bunny is a disproportionate response and a chaotic (Dionysian) decision, which he masks through the veil of Apollonian beauty and order. Henry's pursuit of beauty ends in his suicide, which is a controlled Apollonian manner to achieve Dionysian destruction. Ultimately, the inclination towards beauty through the Dionysian and the desire to achieve it by any means possible is to blame for Henry's demise.

Beauty was also the culprit behind Bunny Corcoran's destruction. Bunny was the only one out of the classicists who did not aim to embody beauty through the interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Bunny fails to be beautiful because he indulges too much in the Dionysian, while possessing none of the Apollonian to balance it out. He is portrayed as the beast to Henry's beauty, the Dionysian indulgence to Henry's Apollonian order. Additionally, Bunny was never concerned with appearances in the way that Richard was, which is what sets them apart from each other. While Richard does everything possible to hide his socio-economic status, Bunny highlights his own vulgarity through his dismissal of Apollonian restraint and self-control. All of this is why Bunny needs to die—and die in a way out of his control, through the Dionysian influences that he indulged in life.

It does appear that the novel endorses Henry's path to destruction through his pursuit of beauty over Bunny's destruction through the refusal to seek beauty through the balance

between Apollonian and Dionysian influences. Henry's death is painted as beautiful and consistent with his search for beauty, as well as tragic in that it meant the loss of an exceptional individual. In that sense, Henry is the hero of the tragedy, destined to perish. His life fulfills its highest purpose (beauty) through his destruction— or, if viewed in a slightly different way, his search for beauty is the flaw which leads to his demise. Bunny's death, on the other hand, is offered both as the solution to the problem that was the blackmail, and as the creator of further conflicts (due to the psychological impact it had on the rest of the clique). However, while Henry is portrayed as ideal, and Bunny as ugly, both cases culminate in destruction through death. Therefore, rather than endorsing the pursuit of beauty, the novel seems to warn that beauty is the edge between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, such that a misstep in either direction inevitably leads to destruction. On the other hand, this leaves the reader with seemingly no recourse nor alternative route to follow.

One possibility is that the novel warns against pursuing beauty through ancient forces such as the Dionysian without understanding the risks. However, if destruction cannot be separated from the Dionysian (and from beauty), then the subjects' awareness of the risks would do nothing to prevent it. Another option is that the novel warns against the pursuit of beauty through the ancient religion of the classical Greeks at all. This would suggest that the classicists' modern minds should not have been playing with these forces, and that this is what leads to their destruction. Another option is that the novel condemns the pursuit of beauty at all costs in general, and that the solution is not to pursue beauty. However, these last two options would constitute a recommendation of the very existence the classics clique viewed as unworthy and vulgar: ordinariness. As such, they would fundamentally contradict the aesthetic ideals that the novel upholds. Besides, Bunny's disinterest in beauty also ended in his destruction, which means that not pursuing beauty is also dangerous.

I propose instead that the novel does not constitute a warning against the pursuit of beauty, nor presents a solution at all, but instead follows Nietzsche's ideas of what tragedy offers. As Dienstag argues, Nietzsche rejects the idea that tragedy's value lies in either catharsis or a moral, but that instead it "simply serves to lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence" (87). That is, that the absence of any recourse or solution alongside the presence of destruction is what gives value to tragedy. In that sense, Tartt's novel acts like a tragedy in the way Nietzsche conceptualizes it, in that it "recommends no cure for the pains of existence, only a public recognition of their depth and power" (Dienstag 87). *The Secret History* presents the clique's path towards Dionysian destruction in detail, but does not

present a way to avoid destruction, nor to alleviate its effects. Instead, the destruction is portrayed as tragic and fated. Based on this, I would conclude that *The Secret History* has the portrayal of this inevitable, beautiful destruction as its true purpose, rather than as a means to offer any sort of moral indictment or recourse.

It would be ideal to explore in further detail how *The Secret History* behaves like a tragedy, both through Nietzsche's theories about tragedy, and through possible intertext between Tartt's novel and Euripides's *Bacchae*. It would also be interesting to explore the idea of the tragic hero, and to attempt to determine who within the classics clique acts as the hero of the tragedy— whether it is, as I suspect, the beautiful Henry, or whether it may be the outsider Richard, or perhaps even the ill-fated Bunny. Due to the length and scope of this essay, these topics could not be properly addressed in this paper with the depth that they deserve, but are identified as options for further research into Tartt's novel. This essay has instead focused on how the pursuit of beauty through the Apollonian and the Dionysian leads to destruction. It finds that where beauty is pursued through these forces, the Dionysian triumphs, inevitably bringing about destruction and disaster on those who sought the beauty of terror.

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