

**“We Are for the Dark”:  
The History and Evolution of Dark Academia**

by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Dark academia is a stranger to no one, though its name may be unfamiliar to many. Most are more familiar with similar terms – academic novel, academic fiction, campus novel, campus fiction, etc. Yet the latter fail to include the scope and the range of content that dark academia provides for. “Campus novel” and “campus fiction” restrict these works to locations with a campus to speak of, usually “Ivy League schools and large state institutions as well as private universities and community colleges” (Scott 86), and thus quietly ignoring the narratives that have not resided there, including those which emerge from laboratories, private studies, and online classes. “Academic fiction,” obviously, restricts all content to fiction, at the expense of nonfictional works including memoirs and autobiographies, journalism and exposés, documentaries and testimonies to the very real events and people that populate the academic world. Even the broader term “academic novel” struggles to hold its own, as it limits an entire genre to a single literary form with no regard for short stories, film, or theater.

All of these imperfect distinctions have culminated into a rather chaotic debate over proper terminology; in one argument, Jeffrey J. Williams posits that narratives which “revolve around campus life and present young adult comedies or dramas, most frequently coming-of-age narratives” fall under “campus novels”, while stories centered on “those who work as academics... [and] portray adult predicaments...most familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots” belong to “academic novels” (561-562). In his own essay, Robert F. Scott uses these terms interchangeably; when including references mentioned by his contemporaries and/or scholarly sources, the terms “college novel,” “academic fiction,” and “academic satire” each appear once,

“campus fiction” appears twice, “academic novel” appears 20 times, and “campus novel” is written in 25 places. These inconsistencies do not contribute to the elasticity of the genre, but rather detract from its validity as an authentic field.

Without a set of established traits, these works have become a vague intimation of what they might aspire to be. According to Williams, for example, the academic novel’s centralization of the professorial figure’s personal life has “grafted with the mid-life crisis novel, the marriage novel, and the professional-work novel to become a prime theater of middle class experience” (562). The conflicts contained in the academic novel expanded further by the end of the twentieth century to include “culture wars as well as marital wars...middle class angst and professional job concerns” (Williams 565) as “the university was assumed to be a main battlefield of American culture” (Williams 570). In any case, academic novels tend to “depict academe in terms of social entanglements rather than intellectual conversation” (Williams 574). On this note, Scott agrees that academia itself is rarely given a central role in an “academic novel,” almost as if “teaching is not an essential component of higher education” (Scott 84). Instead these works find their subject matter elsewhere, including the general “absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities” (Scott 82). Evidently, an umbrella term is sorely needed.

The term “dark academia” may be new for most, and most of its use seems to come from individuals who not only already share a general understanding of its contents but actively seek out this genre in literature, film, and other forms of media. Fortunately for those unaccustomed to the term, its very definition as well as the genre’s standards are both indicated by its name. For a subject to be considered “dark academia” it must simply fulfill the dual requirement of this title.

Firstly, academia must be an integral component of the work in question – a predictable standard, to be sure, but one that is surprisingly overlooked. “Academia” is meant by an explicit association with an environment of study, scholarship, and education. By my own standards, if (for example) a student-mentor relationship at a university can be easily rewritten as an assistant-employer relationship at a private law firm, the standing of the work in question is weak to qualify as dark academia. Student narratives must include the usual classwork, homework and/or independent study that so strongly dictates academic life; likewise, a story concerning a professor must demonstrate how this career affects not only the character but the events of the story as well. Secondly, there must be “darkness,” which in this case refers to corruptions or immoralities within an academic context. Whether these ethical shortcomings stem from situational conflict or character flaws (or both) is up to the creators of these works.

Indeed, dark academia is fertile ground for just about every available genre. The bildungsroman and romances flourish in an academic setting just as they do anywhere else. Science fiction may prosper here as well, at the breeding grounds for scientific pursuits, research, and discovery. Also common is the mystery, so much so that Richard C. Boys claims “we have been flooded with them” (385), including Christopher’s Swann’s *Shadow of the Lions* (2017) and Nayana Currimbhoy’s *Miss Timmins’ School for Girls* (2011). For fantasy, one must look no further than Leigh Bardugo’s newly released *Ninth House* (2019), in which she writes of an extensive occult community centered around the secret societies of Yale. Crime novels and thrillers may be easily imagined in the twisted themes of dark academia, such as Teddy Wayne’s *Loner* (2016), whose deplorable narrator finds that the student he obsessively stalks is using him as a subject for one of her own classes. Even children’s books find their way into this genre,

from Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1905 children's novel *A Little Princess*, to Lemony Snicket's *The Austere Academy* (2000), the fifth installment of his *Series of Unfortunate Events*.

Outside of the novel structure, dark academia is present in various other forms. Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "*Rappaccini's Daughter*" (1884) concerns the dire consequences of botanical and biological experimentation. Theatrical productions include Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004) and Patrick Hamilton's *Rope* (1929), the latter of which was also adapted by Alfred Hitchcock for his 1948 film of the same name. Other films that belong to dark academia include *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) (both of which will be discussed more thoroughly later in this project). Television shows of this genre also include ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–) and Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–); the former revolves around a law professor and her students' whose proficiency with their legal skills come in handy as they navigate their own personal entanglements in numerous crimes. The latter is based on John E. Douglas and Mark Oleshaker's true crime novel of the same name, following the birth of the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit at their Quantico academy.

Despite the range of content and platforms where dark academia has been found, the genre shares a significant trait with the academe itself – both are sticklers for tradition, despite its displays of enthusiasm for progress and expansion into unexplored intellectual terrain, as well as creatures of habit. Its older figures tend to express an unwavering devotion to the classic works of the literary canon, and make sure to instill a deep appreciation of such into younger students and newcomers. Both also tend to follow a demographic tradition of focusing narratives around white cisgendered heterosexual males, usually belonging to the upper classes or else surrounded by those who do – in short, the only demographic whose presence in academia precedes that of any other group.

Another unfortunate pitfall of dark academia is its stark disunity, for plentiful reasons. For one, as discussed, no proper title has been given for this genre. My own preference for the term “dark academia” is due to both the term’s clear and simple explanation of its intent, as well as its ability to condense what other aforementioned terms may leave behind into a concise category. An additional reason for dark academia’s current state of relative disorganization is because it has never quite been seen as a genre in its own right. Instead, it has been chopped into other, more widely-established categories (romance, science fiction, thriller, etc.) and subsequently separated and sent to those respective bookshelves. To add to the chaos, whenever a new book or film emerges, there is no “dark academia” label available to assign it, and the content is immediately placed into whatever category is deemed most appropriate. Because there is no readily established genre for dark academia, its works are displaced elsewhere.

To understand how the circumstances of this genre have come to be as they currently stand, I first present what I believe is the most ideal work dark academia to date, Donna Tartt’s fictional novel *The Secret History* (1992), as well as its real-life inspirations and correlations. I then trace the history of the academe through one of its essential figures, the professor, and track the latter’s tumultuous reputation and notoriety throughout the centuries. Following the professor is a similar analysis of the student as depicted in dark academia, and how they may be seen to embody the best and worst qualities of the genre. Then I discuss several examples of nonfiction in dark academia, and why these examples are so often exceptions to the norm. Finally, I conclude by elaborating how I feel the genre should expand its content to include narratives that have arrived more recently to academic world.

For purposes of focus, I have limited the role of academia in this project to its presence and function in specifically Western history, and my sources and examples have been chosen

accordingly from this limited sphere of influence. The content both discussed and referenced in this project stem largely from Great Britain and the U.S. with a particular focus on late twentieth and twenty first century works. Certainly there is more to be said about the world of academia as an institution as those who inhabit it, and I sincerely hope that scholarship of dark academia continues and expands so that all other aspects which I have neglected to include in this project may receive the attention they deserve.



## Chapter 2: *The Secret History*

Viewed among its fans as perhaps the quintessence of dark academia is Donna Tartt's 1992 bestselling novel *The Secret History*. Tartt, a Pulitzer Prize winner for her later book *The Goldfinch*, wrote her first novel as a satire while drawing heavily on her own experiences and contemporaries at Vermont's Bennington College. Students and faculty alike were surprised (and sometimes offended) when they recognized parodies of themselves – the unknowable sage, the boorish victim, the accomplished scholar – in the novel. Details from Montblanc pens to classroom locations to individual hobbies, distinct behaviors, and even direct quotations proved as such. To be sure, Bennington then was like nothing that current campuses would allow; Nicholas Delbanco, then a member of the Language and Literature faculty, called it “a badge of dishonor not to have slept with your professor”; then-student Bret Easton Ellis and his roommate violated basic safety guidelines when they divided their room with broken bottles on which “someone would shed blood on the glass, but not often”; and Tartt herself has claimed that, “Nobody I know would have been there if they had required SAT scores” (Anolik). The utter melodrama of it all was the perfect inspiration for any aspiring novelist; student Todd O'Neal said he “knew a girl there whose father...gave her an allowance to collect Picasso's etchings” (Anolik). In a later interview with Tartt, her former classmate and Bennington alumnus Jill Eisenstadt admired “how you took things that I recognize from Bennington and gave them a very ominous spin. The sculpture some student built on the lawn, for instance, you had your narrator mistake for gallows” (Eisenstadt 59). It comes as no great surprise, then that in this chaotic nest of aspiring scholars and artists hatched the beginnings of what would be hailed as “a smart,

craftsman-like, viscerally compelling novel” (*Time*), “a thinking person’s thriller” (*Glamour*), “a glorious achievement” (*The Virginian-Pilot*), and “one of the best American college novels” (*Houston Chronicle*).

At first glance, the events within *The Secret History* appear much too unlikely and far-fetched to be inspired by real people and places. The novel follows a group of Classics scholars at the fictional Hampden College in Vermont – the impressive and impenetrable Henry Winter, the rude jokester Bunny Corcoran, the nervous and eccentric Francis Abernathy, and the charming but private twins Charles and Camilla Macaulay – all of them too smart, ambitious, and wealthy for their own good. The narrator, Richard Papen, is their newest addition and an outsider in almost every way; he lies about his working-class background in California, his Greek studies are the result of “an entirely random decision” (9), and he adopts an entirely false persona to fit into the others’ lifestyles of privilege and autonomy. The group also collectively looks to their benevolent, distinguished, and mysterious professor Julian Morrow for guidance. In search of a way “to escape the cognitive mode of experience” (164), inspired by Julian’s lessons on Dionysian madness, the group (excluding Richard and Bunny) organizes a bacchanal during which they murder a local farmer. The secret is later revealed to Richard and discovered by an increasingly suspicious and hostile Bunny, whose threats to expose their crime lead the group to murder him as well. The second half of the novel deals with the consequences of having sunk into this state of moral decrepitude; the Greek class descends into a state of anxiety and paranoia as they struggle to effectively convince others of their innocence. Francis dissolves into a series of panic attacks. Henry’s severe illnesses return to haunt him. Charles spirals quickly into alcoholism and becomes increasingly abusive to Camilla. By the end of the novel, multiple characters have attempted suicide (with varying degrees of success), and all have become

estranged from each other. In one sense, they have gotten away with their crimes. On the other hand, the attempt to recreate their lessons by reviving an ancient practice has utterly devastated their lives.

The tragic finale is a far cry from the original idea of attendance at an institution of higher learning. Academia is meant to better oneself by furthering one's education. The more educated one is (or so we are taught) the more opportunities one has to live their life to the fullest. The concept of knowledge itself is impartial to virtuousness and evil, and so institutions have had to adopt a code of morals to keep the pursuit of knowledge legal, such as restricting the use of human beings in scientific experiments (as Professors Milgram and Zimbardo needed reminding). Students and faculty alike are made well aware of this, and every certified school has specific policies and ethics codes to follow. And yet, there must be a small query – some whisper at the back of our minds that, when met with a roadblock, asks of us, *why stop there?* – that is continuously smothered in the name of morality, or time, syllabus schedules, and/or standardized testing. Many university students, it is safe to say, would dismiss the idea of a bacchanal out of common sense – and it is exactly this idea of *common sense* that their fictional counterparts want to overcome.

Tartt's students are given plenty of freedom to pursue their interests; they are exceedingly smart, exorbitantly wealthy, and just moral enough that (for the most part) they do not deliberately strive to cause harm. They perfectly exemplify the original goal of academia to better oneself, but with a dark twist; they are self-serving to the degree of murdering one of their own just to evade consequences for their unlawful intellectual/emotional pursuits. However, the Greek class learns the hard way what comes of allowing oneself too much freedom. A detail from the novel, mentioned in passing but later quite important, serves as a perfect allegory; the

students live in a mansion for a period of time, where they find a gun that eventually reappears to cause one of their deaths. Their privilege – as (mostly) wealthy students who can easily access potentially dangerous materials and ideas, with the support of a respected figure at an institution of higher education – ultimately hastens and becomes their downfall. It is due to high stakes like these that first-time readers interpret the work as a drama, becoming so drawn into the euphoria and despair of the plot and its tragically flawed characters that that story resembles something of a modern Greek tragedy.

In truth, the novel is a satire that pokes fun of the lofty pretensions and misguided attitudes pervading the halls of academe, and Tartt slips in hints of her satirical intent that provide some much-needed comic relief, but can easily go unrecognized. For all of his dangerous intent, Bunny Corcoran is a ridiculous character – rambling about “Metahemeralism” (109), avoiding the girlfriend he brags about (56, 87-89), – as is Francis Abernathy, who eats cherries he doesn’t like before wordlessly tossing them out the window (335), has numerous parking violations he hasn’t paid (327), and is unhappy with the group’s alibi because he is “embarrassed that people will think we went to see such bad movies” (297). Even Henry Winter, the genius who speaks in dead languages and whose physical strength is matched only by his own intellectual prowess, “was quite startled to learn from me that men had walked on the moon.” (85)

“No,” he said, putting down his fork.

“It’s true,” chorused the rest, who had somehow managed to pick this up along the way.

“I don’t believe it.”

“I saw it,” said Bunny. “It was on television.”

“How did they get there? When did this happen?” (85)

While excerpts such as these break through the otherwise stifling pressure of the narrative, their truer purpose is only more easily found afterwards when the reader goes back to examine the text more closely. Readers often search for deeper meanings and clues, as is often the case in books with this amount of foreshadowing, and it is during these excavations that the shovels hit upon the truth of the book: that *The Secret History* is downright absurd. A classic example of this subversion of expectations comes through in a scene when the group joins a search party to hunt for the missing student they have killed, and a security guard zeroes in on Francis. There is a moment of panic – “Francis started, a wild look in his eye” (327) – and then we learn that Francis hasn’t paid his parking tickets. (“You know how many unpaid violations you’re carrying? *Nine*.” [327]) For all their knowledge and achievements, Tartt reminds us not to take academics too seriously.

It’s not entirely surprising that Tartt chooses to portray these lofty scholars as less than the airs they put on. Despite their worldliness and intelligence and impressive ambitions, they are still meant to be flawed, imperfect people – people such as Matt Jacobson, Paul McGloin, and Todd O’Neal, who made up the Greek class at Bennington while Tartt was a student there from 1982-1986. O’Neal later revealed in an interview with *Esquire* that “Donna was not a part of our Greek tutorials... She did, however, know Paul McGloin, because they were lovers” (Anolik). Nevertheless, she later worked with the Classics professor, Claude Fredericks, when she began working on her novel during her sophomore year, and it was these connections that would later reemerge as figures in *The Secret History* – with Jacobson recast as Bunny, O’Neal as Henry, and Fredericks as Julian. Classmate Jonathan Lethem later noted that, apart from himself, “Every person I recalled from our time at Bennington seemed reworked in [Donna’s] pages” (Anolik).

The connections were not subtle, as O’Neal recalls, “Everybody was saying, ‘Oh, did you know Donna just wrote a book about Claude and you all? And Claude is Julian and Matt is Bunny and you’re Henry’” (Anolik). He confirmed: “Henry’s apartment was like my apartment. His eye problems, the chip in his tooth. I smoked Lucky Strikes. I wore suspenders and glasses... I learned Latin, and I taught myself Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, Sanskrit. I was very deep into the study of Plato and Plotinus...I did go on a trip with Matt, and I did end up having to pay for it... And what Henry said about Julian...was true of how I felt about Claude” (Anolik). Jacobson had a similar revelation: “I wore wire-rimmed glasses...had dyslexia...was an extremely affected young man. I’d make broad, questionable statements...that line found its way into Donna’s book. And I’d invite people to lunch and then realize I didn’t have any money” (Anolik). Even his mother recognized her son in the unflattering caricature of Bunny Corcoran. Tartt had even called Jacobson; “and immediately she starts asking me questions. I realized later it was her wanting to know” (Anolik). It was just as well, since “Matt didn’t like Donna,” as O’Neal attested. “I found her evasive, a bit impenetrable” (Anolik). Tartt’s relationship with McGloin wove its way into the story as well, though in a slightly more roundabout way. O’Neal remarked, “The incestuous twins, though, I don’t know where Donna got them” (Anolik). The inspiration can be found in a letter written to Lethem, dated February 25, 1983, while Tartt and McGloin were living together:

Paul & I were almost kicked out of our lodgings last Tuesday. The charges? Incest.

That’s really rather impressive, isn’t it? Fortunately we are not brother and sister, or else we would have been quite guilty. (Anolik)

### **“A divinity in our midst”**

The likeness that would cause the most trouble, however, was the character of Greek professor Julian Morrow. His real-life counterpart, Claude Fredericks, was described by colleague Delbanco as “a strange fellow”; “He dropped out of Harvard because he refused to take the swim test or something like that, but he was a genuinely learned person, an autodidact. Knew Latin, Greek, Japanese. Punctilious in his self-presentation” (Anolik). The parallels were just as obvious; both men’s offices and classrooms were rather isolated from the rest of campus life, in a removed building at the top of “this sort of secret staircase” where both men habitually produced “this incredible food, and you didn’t know how he’d prepared it” (Anolik). This testimony from Professor Maura Spiegel, another colleague on the Language and Literature Faculty, echoes in Richard’s own amazement how “Julian, upon occasion, was miraculously able to convey four-course meals” (36) from a small back room; “no classroom could have approached it in terms of comfort, or privacy” (32). Spiegel additionally recalled overhearing a bit of dialogue from Fredericks while she herself had been his student advisee; “Not, do *only* is necessary. Only *do* what is necessary” (Anolik). Again, this very sentence reappears in Tartt’s novel; Henry asks, “Should I do what is necessary?” to which Julian replies, “You should only, ever, do what is necessary” (71). The most miniscule details sparked conversation, and controversy, when they later resurfaced; for example, Henry makes a point to purchase a Montblanc pen, just like Julian who has “at least a dozen of them” (30). Real-life student Jacobsen denied any connection to Fredericks in this vein, saying “The idea of Claude having a big nouveau-riche pile of Montblancs was really too much,” while O’Neal countered, “No, the Montblancs were true. But it was a piece of accidentalia that Donna seized on and used in a pointed way” (Anolik). Regardless, the self-important airs of academia which Tartt wove into

her novel were likely born from the elements of dark academia that Tartt recognized in her own school life and recorded in her writing. Dark academia, then, is not restricted to the pages of fiction, but can (and have been) found in nonfictional capacities as well. (See Chapter 5 for a wider examination of nonfiction in dark academia.)

Tartt's satirical distortion of a widely-respected intellectual figure might not be so unexpected, given her initial exclusion from his all-male Greek class of Jacobsen, McGloin, and O'Neal. Fredericks, according to the latter, had a "classical aesthetic or hierarchy, which prizes maleness and male beauty. So Donna only knew him in a limited way" (Anolik). Julian expresses a similar misogynistic streak, having only admitted Camilla as the single female student in his class, and even she is described as dressing and acting rather masculine. Tartt, it seems, persisted in her attempts to study with Fredericks; McGloin first mentioned her as "that charming southern girl in the Homer class," and Tartt explained her temporary leave from school during her sophomore year due to "Fredericks, the faculty member who I do most of my work in Literature with, [being] away on Sabbatical... Don't imagine that I'm becoming a scholar, though... I'm spending most of my time writing. I have begun a novel" (Anolik).

Julian, for what it is worth, is a far more complex character than most fictional college professors. One theory posits that Julian resembles the god Dionysus. The evidence is reasonable; he creates a cult-like following of the students in his Greek class, and ensures that they are isolated from their peers by restricting their interactions with other teachers and cutting off any opportunities to sit in any classroom that is not his own. Richard is warned of all this when he chooses to take Greek, as his initial advisor cautions that Julian "conducts the selection [of his students] on a personal rather than academic basis" and "to read with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views", and that "he and his students have virtually no contact



with the rest of the division” (14). Julian repeatedly promotes this quarantined mindset, such as when Charles and Camilla recount a harrowing and complicated story of their troubles over the winter break. When Julian asks why they did not reach out to him, they have no answer, to which he quotes “an aphorism from Xenophon...which carried the implication that in troubled times it was best to go to one’s own people for help” (155). His background in the Classics is the single undisputed fact about his personal life; everything else is speculation, rumor, or so fantastical that it might as well be such (among his friends were Harold Acton, Vivien Leigh, T. S. Eliot, the Sitwell’s, and Marilyn Monroe; his past students included a deposed Middle Eastern princess; and he is said to have been personally disliked by George Orwell). In a manner reminiscent of the god’s penchant for revelry, Julian is loathe to refer to his class as “work”; “*I should call it the most glorious kind of play*” (32-33). He also encapsulates the two extremes of divine figures: their equal capacities for warm benevolence and cold absolutism. It is his impression of “the indulgent and protective good-parent” (508) who just wants what’s best for his students that encourages Richard and his peers to flock toward Julian. When he finally learns just how low his students have sunk, his condemnation and fear of them almost seems to revoke his former status as their “patron god” and institutionalize him as yet another member of a restrictive and rigid administration which disapproves of extremism in academic study. He becomes an “ambiguous, moral neutral, whose beguiling trappings concealed a being watchful, capricious, and heartless” (508). The most significant indicators of the Dionysus theory are his encouragement to his students to have a bacchanal, the novel’s working title being *God of Illusions* (Anolik), and a line from Henry while filling out teacher evaluation forms: “‘How,’ he said, ‘can I possibly make the Dean of Studies understand that there is a divinity in our midst?’” (317) (See Chapter 4 for additional references to god and divinity in dark academia.)

It is also worth recognizing that Julian's qualities, and flaws, mark him as a classic prototype of dark academia itself. Another professor tells Richard that "Julian...will never be a scholar of the very first rate, and that is because he is only capable of seeing things in a selective basis... There is nothing wrong with the love of Beauty. But Beauty – unless she is wed to something more meaningful – is always superficial. It is not that your Julian chooses solely to concentrate on certain, exalted things; it is that he chooses to ignore others equally as important" (511).

Similar to Julian's rather superficial focus, fans of dark academia are drawn to the aesthetics and/or themes (e.g., Oxbridge, inspiring prose, elitism, secret societies, wealth/privilege, intellectual lifestyle, etc.) of a genre that is abundant in its great potential for, and "love[,] of Beauty." Celebrated works such as John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959), Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), Meg Wolitzer's *Sleepwalking* (1982), and Peter Weir's classic film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) have certainly celebrated this tradition, bringing a sense of thrill to their students' academic lives through the creations of select groups who isolate themselves from others owing to a sense of academic, intellectual, or general collective superiority. At Welton Academy, a handful of Mr. Keating's students revive the Dead Poets Society, despite its notoriety, the need to break school rules to attend meetings, and ultimately the threat of expulsion from the academy. At the Devon School, Gene and Finny create a Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session in which the sole "membership requirement is one jump out of this tree" (Knowles 31), and soon create their own sport called "blitzball." At the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, the eccentric and rebellious school mistress Jean Brodie collects a handful of students to create her exclusive "Brodie set." In the case of Wolitzer's trio of "death girls" there is a much more prevalent condescension toward outsiders,

but they share the same desire for elitism through the isolation of their peers as they dress in black and sequester themselves in a candlelit room to read gloomy poetry. In the same vein, Julian uses his faculty status and distinguished reputation as a renowned scholar to ensure that he becomes the academic counselor for his Greek students and requires that they take all of their classes and tutorials with him, under the logic that “it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially” (31). Even the shelves of readers of dark academia might reflect this elitism; because the genre is not widely established in its own right, the bookshelf of any devoted reader may lack the multitudes of other traditional genres, resulting in a separate, small, but prized, grouping.

But across the dark academia genre, this beauty, unfortunately, is not often “wed to something more meaningful.” While many academic novels and campus novels strive for both the signature aesthetic and a compelling story, these books far too frequently abandon almost all aspects of academia, which is certainly “equally as important” as the mere academic setting. They keep secondary traces – such as a campus setting or a character’s title of Professor/Doctor, these “certain, exalted things” – but (as several critics have pointed out) rarely do these books discuss anything more interesting than, as a common example, a middle-aged male professor’s crumbling marriage. There’s not much grandiosity to these “superficial” stories, which is a real shame for a genre that tries to live up to its pretentiousness.

Another Greek student, Bunny, provides another simile: “Julian is like one of those people that’ll pick all his favorite chocolates out of the box and leave the rest” (511). In a similar gesture, because of the disunity of the genre (it does not even have a recognized name!) every individual must make their own decision as to which particular works belong in this category. As an example, my own opinion follows that the midlife-crisis works centered on professorial

characters do not meet the standards for the genre, since much too little attention is paid to the “academia” in “dark academia.” (See Chapter 5 for further discussion regarding dark academic works that fulfill or lack this requirement.)

Certainly, there are stories that deliver on their promises of achieving something momentous (just as many figures in academic settings strive to do). In most cases, these books tend to be written from the perspective of students, who have not yet become so bogged down from life and its disappointments. They step onto campus for the first time, aware of their capacity for growth or decline, instead of unremarkable professors who simply collect dust as they wait to retire. Through the lenses of their students, these teachers are instead placed upon a sort of pedestal – as wise mentors, cunning guides, and even accidental dictators and possible gods – and, as is to be expected with well-written works, the readers understand the appeal of these figureheads and lean into the atmosphere these characters cultivate, pulled along by the promise that they will be witness to something truly extraordinary from students with untapped potential under such great leadership. (See Chapter 4 for an in-depth analysis of the student figure in dark academia.)

Richard also confesses that “it has always been hard for me to talk about Julian without romanticizing him,” just as Julian has a way of “conferring kindness, or wisdom, or bravery, or charm, on actions which contained nothing of the sort” (510). The first example in which this can be found is in the character’s second interaction. Richard’s surname is Papin, but Julian mistakes it for Pepin and connects it to “kings of France named Pepin”; he has been swiftly dismissive of Richard until now, when he says:

“I am never too busy for an heir to the French throne if that is in fact what you are.”

“I’m afraid not.”

He laughed and quoted a little Greek epigram about honesty being a dangerous virtue. (27)

Later on, Richard gets a black eye from a student whose girlfriend he accidentally slept with, and Julian asks excitedly if the injury is from a “barroom brawl.” Richard tells him the truth.

“So it *was* a brawl,” he said, with childish delight. “How *thrilling*. Are you in love with her?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know her too well.”

He laughed. “Dear me, you *are* being truthful today,” he said, with remarkable perspicuity. (350)

In a more sobering instance, another of Julian’s students, Charles, has been abusing his twin sister Camilla and is now in the hospital. Not knowing this, Julian tells Richard of a phone call he recently had with Charles.

“Poor Charles. I asked him where Camilla was...he said, in the most melancholy voice, ‘She’s hiding from me.’ He was dreaming, of course. I thought it was rather sweet. So, to humor him, I said, ‘Well, then. You must hide your eyes and count to ten and she’ll come back.’”

He laughed. “But he got angry at me. it was really rather charming of him. ‘No,’ he said, ‘no she won’t.’ ‘But you’re dreaming,’ I said to him. ‘No,’ he said, ‘no I’m not. It’s not a dream. It’s real.’” (489)

In a similar vein, dark academia is glorified by its fans in spite of (or perhaps even for) its darkness. Tragic endings are common – spite, competition, jealousy, revenge, murder, and death are common elements throughout its most celebrated works. Morton Rhue’s *The Wave* (1981) tracks the course of a high school history class’s transformation into a group of fascists whose influence spreads to encompass the entire school and even drives some to violence. Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* (2004) concludes with a motorcycle accident involving a pair of rival instructors, in which one is killed and the other is left physically disabled. In *Dead Poets Society*, a student torn between following the advice of his kindly encouraging English teacher to pursue his interests, and the harsh restrictions imposed upon his academic and extracurricular life by his coldly unsympathetic father, is eventually driven to suicide. Knowles’s *A Separate Peace* follows the collapse of two students’ friendship through jealous competition and violence; its successor *Peace Breaks Out* (1981) witnesses the clash of another pair of students, this time as enemies with harshly opposing values, both inside and outside the confines of the classroom. Both novels culminate in the death of a student, directly or indirectly caused by their peers. Often the bright young students are reduced to hollow shells of their former selves, forced to live in the wreckage of the devastation that they themselves (along with their peers) have caused; examples include Tartt’s Greek students in *The Secret History*, Benjamin Wood’s “flock” in *The Bellwether Revivals* (2012), and M. L. Rio’s fourth-year class at a Shakespeare conservatory in *If We Were Villains* (2017). Few characters acknowledge or even recognize the dangers of pushing limits (of their environment and/or themselves) and they refuse to curb their ambitions. This blindness, willing or otherwise, is certainly prevalent in Julian’s character. He fails to recognize the dire situation and how far it has gone until it is too late, and he immediately disappears.

The composition of Julian's character is not merely a compelling representation of the professorial archetype, but a strikingly accurate representation of dark academia as a genre. He is a highly accomplished Greek scholar, and the Classics (aside from being viewed as a highly pretentious field) have long been considered by many to be the height of intellectual achievement and enlightenment. His origins are murky; he has a background as a highly distinguished and accomplished figure, and yet very little of his personal life is known at all. He is idolized by his students, who predictably see themselves as intellectually inferior. He is also viewed by his contemporaries as a pleasant enough man, but rather pretentious and lofty.

But perhaps his most memorable characteristic is his sheer elusiveness. It is his classes, during which he instructs his students about the mysteries of the ancient Dionysian cults, that inspire the events of the plot – and yet there are only a few classroom scenes when his lessons are described with real length and detail. Far from the unrealistic lack of attention to this integral facet of college or university life, Tartt makes sure to include plenty of references to Julian's assigned homework and office hours, even if they are written as recollections or fleeting contemplations within a longer train of thought. Homework as well is often brought up and discussed among the Greek students, and even leads to significant plot points. Richard misplaces his Lidell and Scott textbook, and it is during his search for it that he discovers the rest of the groups covert activities regarding a plan to flee to Argentina (142). He later delivers an almost dreamlike reflection as to why he has committed himself to studying Greek, which he calls “an alien light, inarticulable in our common tongue” (200), prompted by the reference to a homework assignment from Julian. The man's actual presence is limited to a handful of scenes within the span of over 500 pages – even though he was originally written with the intent of being a more central figure who “really should have been there more than he was”, according to Tartt; “But

the scenes with him were just excruciating to write... The other characters – I would just wind them up and let them go – he was much harder. The whole book would fall on its face if he wasn't credible – he was the whole reason for everything happening" (Eisenstadt 59). Without Julian's consistent and reassuring presence providing an altruistic lens to the pursuit of knowledge, it becomes all too easy for the enlightened ideals he stands for to become distorted beyond recognition by his pupils.

This is a familiar issue in the realm of dark academia, as most works lean too heavily on the "dark" and subsequently lose sight of the "academia." Subsequently, far too many works have sunk to a level that struggles to include itself in the genre, as "not only do campus novels rarely depicts their protagonists in the classrooms, but these figures also seldom discuss their actual teaching experiences" (Scott 84). This leads to a vagueness where fields of actual study are concerned, and there is a profound "failure of the college to hold firmly to its ideal of academic freedom" (Carpenter 456), even to the point where the most pointed threats faced by college faculty and administrators and even "the academic world itself was often [being] attacked not on academic grounds, but on grounds of social injustice as such" (Ong 236). And, of course, the entire concept of dark academia relies on the whole of its name being fulfilled to distinguish itself from other genres.

Tartt manages to sidestep this problem by tying Julian to his Greek class by more than one thread – Julian accepts dinner invitations at the manor where his students temporarily reside (90-91), and Henry later confesses that "I loved him more than my own father... I loved him more than anyone in the world" (519) – so that he becomes linked in a more familial relationship than a mere teacher-student bond. Julian facilitates a bond with his students just like those of the ancient Greeks he so admires, who believed that "the teacher's relationship with the child was



regarded as more valuable and more intimate than the parents’” (Deresiewicz 44). But in this vein *The Secret History* is the exception and not the norm. Julian Morrows have become something of a rarity in dark academic, as that “absent-minded professor, that kindly old figure, is long gone” (Deresiewicz 36).

Fredericks, who passed away in 2013, was described by O’Neal as “a seeker more than anything else...trying to find a way to be a complete person, to live well in order to die well” (Anolik). O’Neal again: “But Donna’s Julian is Claude through a glass darkly. Claude considered it a betrayal – not a personal betrayal so much as a betrayal of his teachings. He wouldn’t talk to Donna for years” (Anolik).

For some readers, *The Secret History* may seem too absurd to be true; for others, evidently, the novel hits too close to home. And as Tartt weaves an enticing fictional narrative through her own experiences and memories of the Bennington community, the truth is that the academic world can perhaps never be as it was during her own student days. The lack of authoritative oversight, personal and professional boundaries, and the perspective of academic study as a hobby rather than work – these attitudes have been “purged” from Bennington along with the faculty who fostered them. Fortunately, Tartt preserves this unusual academic environment where passion and ambition drive take precedence, for better or for worse.

### Chapter 3: The Professor

Despite the Fredericks-Morrow controversy, it may be rash to label Tarrt's fictional stereotype of the professor as a villainous or evil presence. Rather, Julian Morrow stands as one of few exceptions to the standard depiction of the professorial character in dark academia. The college or university professor (and, less often, academic advisor or high school teacher) is far more often depicted in a most unflattering light; to come to this conclusion, one only needs to trace the rise in power – and subsequent declining merit – of the professor, the “emblem of downward mobility” (Williams 576), in academic fiction. From the Western model's origins in the Ancient Greek world, “the professor went from being a rare figure to a common professional, one whom most Americans would encounter” (Williams 576).

Williams offers a theory that this notoriety stems from “an Anglo-American attitude toward intellectuals, finding them to be morally suspect” (565); William Deresiewicz contributes, “The existence of academia, an institution predicated on intellectual hierarchy, irritates our feeling that intellect constitutes a contemptible kind of advantage... It's no wonder that people resent the gatekeepers and enjoy seeing them symbolically humiliated” (41). And humiliation undeniably abounds; there is a plethora of examples in which “academics are portrayed as pompous, lecherous, alcoholic failures,” either “because that's what they are” or because “current writers of screenplays and novels have a special animus against professors, especially English professors” (Deresiewicz 40). But to understand how far the professor has fallen – and how he might still be redeemed, we must step back and assess the need for this figure in the first place.

## **From Intimate Family to Classroom Bully**

The concept of higher education involves a fundamentally human vision; indeed, the human condition has necessitated a consistent mode of shifting growth and transformations in order to adapt, survive and thrive in the world. But physical evolution could only take us so far; to continuously surpass the limits of our ancestors, centers of learning and education were established and encouraged, and continue to stand today as a milestone of achievement, both on a personal level for the individual and as an accomplishment on the part of our species.

The Western model for education stems from the ancient Greek world, where “the teacher’s relationship with the student was regarded as more valuable and more intimate than the parents’” (Deresiewicz 44). The parents could teach their children how to walk and talk, but it was the teacher who instructed them where to go and what to say. Parents simply provided life; teachers showed their pupils how to fulfill that those lives with virtue and intelligence, to the benefit of both the individual and the community. In a society where schooling was largely an exceptional privilege, the circumference of academic circles was small enough to ensure that “the family model was not only appropriate but virtually inevitable” (Kinnison 309). The role of the faculty extended beyond the classroom walls as they took on the role of parent, *in loco parentis*. The college itself is structured in an effort to function “as dear and nourishing mother, *alma mater* personified,” and in institutions where students were (and continue to be) housed, it became the faculty and administration who “enforced rules of conduct and behavior governing the physical, mental, and moral lives of students” (Kinnison 309).

But even beyond the educational experiences in a familial upbringing, the ancient Greeks built “an intimacy of the mind” or “an intimacy of the soul” (43), as Deresiewicz puts it, that shaped the relationship between instructor and pupil. An intense emotional and even spiritual link has proved difficult to harness and implement successfully, as instructors who manage to connect with their students risk creating “a burning desire for his or her approval and attention, his or her voice and presence, that is erotic in its urgency and intensity” (Deresiewicz 43); similarly, an instructor in Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys* claims that “the transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act” (53). Perhaps as a result of this, the unfortunate stereotypes of lustful professors as sexual leeches has surfaced; a misinterpreted desire, a simple but significant mistake that will be addressed later in this study. Luckily, Deresiewicz makes a case for the prevalence of the original emotional model, as “the great majority of professors understand that the art of teaching consists not only of arousing desire but of redirecting it toward its proper object, from the teacher to the thing taught” (43). Though the Greeks of antiquity are long gone, their teachings and teaching styles remain relevant as ever: “what attracts professors to students, then, is not their bodies but their souls. Young people are still curious about ideas, still believe in them – in their importance, their redemptive power” (Deresiewicz 46). Indeed, power was, and remains, an essential facet of education. “Knowledge is power,” so the saying goes – and where there is power, there is sure to be conflict.

We can see the truth of this in the classrooms of the Romans. They first borrowed the Greek model of oral-based teaching, implementing its structure into their own competition-heavy culture with their own distinctive elements, crystallized by the term, “*ludus*, the Latin word for school, means also play, with all the agonistic color this term sports” (Ong 233). Walter J. Ong posits that here the foundations of “the game of schooling” shifted into a much more aggressive

mode. In the Greco-Roman world where prestige and power followed those who performed their civic duty as a public servant, an oral culture was readily established. This sentiment pervaded the walls of academia, which became an increasingly harsh and inflexible field, since the oral culture was only “manageable if formulas are kept relatively rigid and unchanged: otherwise it is distorted and vanishes” (Ong 230). Classical Greek and Latin were continuously taught and extensively discussed, and thought to have “disciplined or toughened the mind” (Ong 232). Ancient Greek subject matter such as “epics and histories full of violence and tales of valor” (Ong 232) were thought to toughen up young students and “to ‘inflamm[e]’ his courage” (Ong 232) exemplified course material. Gone were the days when teachers fostered intimate relationships with their pupils and sought to encourage their growth on a personal level. School became an increasingly hostile atmosphere, and the oratory modes of teaching lent themselves to a more aggressive environment with a surprising ease. Indeed, a student in John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace* tells of how Caesar is “more a tyrant at Devon than he had ever been in Rome” (162); and later in *Peace Breaks Out*, it is the school’s Latin instructor who teaches students “what the words ‘discipline’ and ‘precision’ and ‘ceaseless energy’ and ‘personal authority’ really meant” (6).

Another integral pillar of academia, one that stood long after the fall of the Roman Empire, was the figure of the orator, or public speaker. Students trained specifically for this role as “the ideal product of the overall academic educational effort” (Ong 230) and even “ideally the most learned and accomplished of all human beings” (Ong 231). In the classroom, instructors prepared their pupils for this title as they “learned subjects largely by fighting over them” by “having the student attack or defend a thesis” (Ong 230) and “pitting one speaker against the

other” (Ong 232). Renaissance humanists in particular prized oratory modes of education, as it served their activism-based interests and ideals.

Over time, however, written texts underwent a shift from rare prizes to mass-produced works, and this change brought with it increasingly widespread literacy rates. But the oratory-based model upon which academia leaned so heavily for so long was not easily dismantled. Longstanding educational institutions found themselves faced with a hard adjustment period, and so the subsequent centuries (especially in the 1800s until the early 1900s) promoted the “elocution contest...[aimed] to make oral recitation of a text composed in writing sound like spontaneous oral performance” (Ong 231). Written texts were utilized primarily as tools “to be ultimately read aloud to others and thus injected into the contentious oral world” (Ong 231). According to Ong, medical universities in particular held onto their oral-based teaching methods for longer, remaining “basically oral and deeply agonistic in life-style and intellectual style” (230) as they always had.

These cutthroat ideologies embedded themselves into the perception of academia as a whole, and the professor, as the leader of the academic world, gained a rather notorious reputation; even as far back as the Renaissance, artwork from the period depicts how “a schoolmaster is recognized by his bundle of switches” (Ong 232). Teachers had long been aware of their roles as molders of young minds, but an increasing array of disciplinary tactics were introduced to the schooling system, especially among younger students. In more severe cases, teachers who opted for corporal punishment had the authority to physically punish students who failed to live up to classroom standards and expectations. Put together, Ong concludes that the “combination of physical threat from switching, agonistic methods of teaching and testing, and

highly martial subject matter could often result in an academic setting something like that of a present-day ‘survival course’” (232).

While most of these disciplinary tactics have become outdated or outlawed, the damage has been done. The instructor’s relationship to and with the students had taken a sour turn, and even now “the professor as enemy is a favorite subject in fiction” (Boys 383). As a teacher once remarked to Ong, “Ach! These boys expect you in the classroom to be their friend. When I was a boy, everybody knew that the teacher was the enemy” (Ong 229).

### **From Monastic Origins to Sexual Impropriety**

Deresiewicz points out another unencouraging common theme: “Why is professional futility so often connected with sexual impropriety? [...] Why are these professors all men, and why are all the ones who are married such miserable husbands?” (37) It is a valid question, as Williams also notes that “adultery is a common motif continuing up to the present” (565) and claims this focus stems from “early academic novels [that] had often followed marriage plots” (564), but would later come to “invert the standard marriage plot and turn on a professor’s adultery” (565) by the latter half of the twentieth century.

It is an interesting claim after taking into account the “monastic background of all universities” (Carpenter 44), still prevalent in the bones of academia, its classroom setting, and the architecture of its campuses. Past narratives following the lives of students, like Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), called attention to the disapproval from academic institutions when it came to students’ romantic or sexual lives, as “formal ‘academic’ life, as such, has traditionally ignored and even negated the emotions”

(Carpenter 447). Frederic I. Carpenter notes that “the typical undergraduate is not supposed to let himself become deeply involved in a love affair, and the typical faculty member is usually described as emotionally repressed, and even sexless” (447). Certainly this is the case for Stephen, as his education is provided by strict Catholic schooling and appropriately exemplifies the standard “emotional starvation of the majority of academic novels” (Carpenter 444); another student in John Knowles’ *Peace Breaks Out* notes this trend of “New England guilt” as well, complaining how “everybody is s scared of sex!” (25) Similarly in *Dead Poets Society*, as one student remarks on the humble lodgings of his teacher, Mr. Keating jokes, “No, it’s part of the monastic oath. They don’t want worldly things distracting me from my teaching.” Since most academic novels, as previously noticed, tend to wander further away from any actual academic focus, fictional professors have had to turn their attention toward other characters – such as their colleagues, administrative superiors, or (most commonly) their students – to find a plot or source of conflict.

Works of dark academia from previous generations may have suppressed emotions and sensuality (or at least attempted to do so) according to the standards of intellectual institutions, but this is certainly no longer the case. Even the more restrained novels, argues Scott, have come to “simmer with barely concealed feelings of anger and even despair” (83), and “many academic novels also place great emphasis on sexual adventures of all types, though most show the results of such escapades to be harmful, if not disastrous” (82). Deresiewicz, who always manages to grab onto dark academia’s most frequent (and often most troubling) habits, notes that “one of the things nearly all professors in movies and novels have in common is that they sleep with their students” (42):



In fact, lust is the only emotion that movie professors ever express toward their students. In the rare scenes in which these teachers actually teach, the point is to exhibit the classroom or office hour as a locus of sexual tension. The popular mind can't seem to imagine what other kind of relationship, let alone what other kind of intimacy, a professor and student could share. And it certainly can't imagine what other sort of gratification a person could derive from teaching in a university. (42)

**“Why am I wasting my life in this god-forsaken school?”**

None of this has worked in favor of “the new academic stereotype, with its emphasis on moral failure and the frustrations of petty ambition” (Deresiewicz 41). From the perspective of works that imagine the university as a graveyard for its faculty rather than as the birthplace of knowledge, the academic world becomes an utterly bleak one where, as John Hedeman describes, professors and teachers “who wanted to make a difference in the world beyond their cloistered campus...have given up caring even about their own disciplines” (Scott 83). The lives of the faculty “are commonly depicted as dreary, depressing, and stifling” (Boys 382) and composed of a staff of “established, middle-aged, male professors, with their useful promise behind them” (Williams 572). Instead of fulfilling their potential as inspiring instructors or encouraging guides for their students, dark academia has trapped its idealistic professors in what Frances K. Barasch calls “‘burn-out’ fiction, in which sensitive young professors object to old-guard courses that lack ideas, deplore the absence of humanist interests on campus, and are frustrated by sex regulations” (29). Personal failure abounds, to the point where “so many of these failed professors [are] also failed writers” (Deresiewicz 37), and “as a result he is sour and

jealous” (Boys 382) of those younger intellectuals who flock toward academic institutions because they still see it as a place of learning and growth. Add to that an underwhelming salary, and although his position as an academic allows him “a kind of grudging respect... [he is also] looked down upon for his inability to make money, commonly the test of success in this country” (Boys 379). This can easily lead to a lack of fulfillment in his career, since “a professor’s only excuse for doing something so trivial and accepting such paltry rewards for it is his love for the subject. If that’s gone, what remains? Nothing but baseless vanity and feeble ambition” (Deresiewicz 40).

The campus, in other words, has become in the popular imagination a last stop for those academics who “are ambitious, but in a weak, pathetic way” (40), writes Deresiewicz, calling to mind the themes of “‘those who can’t do, teach’; the critic as eunuch or parasite; the ineffective intellectual; tenure as a system for enshrining mediocrity” (40). As Deresiewicz observes:

The alcoholic, embittered, writer-manqué English professor who neglects his family and seduces his students is a figure of creative sterility, and he is creatively sterile because he loves only himself. Hence his vanity, pomposity, and selfishness; his self-pity, passivity, and resentment. Hence his ambition and failure. And thence his lechery, for sleeping with his students is not a sign of virility but of impotence: he can only hit the easy targets; he feeds on his students’ vitality; he can’t succeed in growing up. (38)

In a cruel, but uncoincidental, twist, the majority of these deplorable professors tend to belong to the same department – the Humanities. “In the popular imagination, ‘professor’ means ‘humanities professor’,” notices Deresiewicz (39). He is not wrong – these figures stand in a field that makes them easy targets for creative manipulation by writers, filmmakers, and the general public outside of the walls of their classrooms.

If the modern archetypal professor is a washed-out failure, then humanities scholars are ideal characters for this role because “no one really knows what they do,” explains Deresiewicz, “and to the extent that people do know, they don’t think it’s worth doing.” (39) (Deresiewicz, for his part, is a writer, literary critic, and former professor of literature and writing at Yale University.) This essentially speaks to the ignorance of the public mind, as humanities studies cover a broad range of intellectual pursuits – including literature, politics, law, history, philosophy, and more – all of which can lead to hundreds of lucrative and fulfilling careers. But in a culture which takes pride in making headway in more scientific and technological fields, these longstanding (and continuously relevant) fields of study tend to be sidelined or dismissed as unusable skills, their classes viewed as a waste of time and money, its students and scholars as living in a fantasy world in which the humanities are at all important. The fictional humanities scholars, then, are often imagined as having realized this (entirely incorrect) viewpoint, as they are condemned to lives of mediocrity and disappointment. Boys summarizes, “the only good people are the simple and untutored ones, those unpolluted by learning and brains” (383), and, “Anyone teaching in college who is content with his lot...is too much of a fool to know any better” (382).

This begs the question, then, as to why the humanities, and its specialists, continue to exist both on and off the page. If these people have no real rewards for their work – no lasting success or fame or compensation for the focus of their lives – they must

represent an altruistic interest in knowledge, culture, and liberal learning rather than their own gain... [They] have the freedom to pursue their intellectual interests, the fantasy of most people with a desk job. It is probably their own fantasy too, which generates their ambivalence when their jobs don’t live up to that image. (Williams 582)

The throngs of fictional college professors – the burnouts, the alcoholics, the depressives – are therefore assigned an automatic virtue if they belong to the Humanities department; they are idealistic. And when that idealism has faded away and become dull with the passage of time, or been crushed by the typical disappointments of life, these characters garner sympathy from their audiences as well.

But the benefit of being a blank slate, however, may be the sole virtue of the fictional college (humanities) professor, otherwise viewed as “buffoons or intellectual charlatans...the absent-minded instructor, the wise simpleton, the lucky bumbler, the old goat, and the fuddy-duddy” (Scott 83). Barasch’s model includes the following traits: “white, male neurotics, oversexed, underappreciated and probably Jewish” (28), while Scott notices the trend of professorial protagonists written with a more victimizing lens as they are despondently caught “between administrative indifference on one side and student hostility on the other” (Scott 83). Boys refers to “the professor as dry scholar” who is “often vain and highly contemptible” (382), among the other “inhabitants of the academic community [who] are exposed as cruel, shallow, treacherous, and generally undesirable” (383). Williams also contributes his own prototype of this sorry individual, drawing from a similar template of the professor “at midcareer, usually in his or her forties or fifties and dealing with the loss of youthful promise...[such as] struggles with career disappointments, marital slump, and indecision, which precipitate a crisis, thus generating the plot” (571). It is precisely at this conclusion that we may recognize a major drawback to not only the unfortunate archetype, but the entire genre of dark academia. The stories that revolve around these wretched characters are at their core “anxiety narratives,” to borrow Williams’s term;

“They show the tension not of entry but of established position in adult life... The permutations of the academic novel hit various anxiety buttons, portraying the embattled position of the professional white male, the marriage or job troubles of mid-life, the dizzying change of technology, the abasement of deprofessionalization and social subordination, and simply the failure of underemployment. Their signature feeling is depression rather than optimism.” (581)

Zadie Smith’s 2005 novel *On Beauty* provides a typical example in Professor Howard Belsey; his professional rivalry with Monty Kipps quickly becomes personal, as his own career dwindles at a standstill due to his failure to publish a book, and he joins the ranks of predatory college professors when he has an extramarital affair with an eighteen-year-old student. Even his career as an art historian fails to credit him with any real academic renown, as he uses his theoretical philosophies of art to demean others’ ideas of beauty.

The few scenes set in Belsey’s classroom are brief and unnecessary for the story as a whole. Instead of inspiring his art history students, he disparages Rembrandt by “replace[ing]the familiar rebel master of historical fame with Howard’s own vision of a merely competent artisan who painted whatever his wealthy patrons requested” (155). When asked what Belsey does like, his wife replies, “Therein lies the mystery” (54) – a discouraging answer for any academic. Instead of utilizing his position as a respected campus figure, Belsey falls into the most defective prototype of the professor.

His relationship with his students is enormously objectionable – in addition to inappropriate sexual conduct with his student (and daughter of his professional rival), her contribution during class is enough to merely display her sharp intellect, which is more fully-fleshed outside of the classroom walls. Other students find themselves utterly intimidated by

Howard, to the point where one particularly idealistic freshman is driven to tears following the third class, where “she cursed her stupidity and her youth” (250). Most are silent during the lessons, a response which Belsey “positively relished” (155), echoing the agonistic sentiments of previous generations of teachers and pupils; “The fear was respect, the respect, fear. If you didn’t have the fear you had nothing” (155).

Belsey rejects the entirety of the academe’s history of building positive student-teacher relationships; in his classroom there is no inspiration, no encouragement, and no reassurance – instead Belsey focuses the little concentration he can muster into hardening his ideas as facts in the eyes of his pupils. His classroom is no center of learning; instead, Belsey’s “anxiety narrative” revolves around his failure to publish his book, and thus reflects a stark shift of values for the academic world. Scholarship, it seems, trumps the student in terms of academic importance. The classroom as foremost setting is substituted by the home office, the private study, the chaotic headspace of an academic crippled by his own frustrations. There is certainly no requirement for a student-professor relationship (regardless of context) for a text to be called dark academia. There is, however, a necessity that dark academic works include and/or utilize actual academia, a necessity which *On Beauty* predominantly lacks. Belsey’s large absence from the classroom might be permissible if there were at the very least signs of activity from there, such as assigning homework, grading papers, critiquing essays, planning lessons, etc. He not only abandons his class, but in his inability to produce anything of substance, he also betrays himself.

*On Beauty*, then, holds fast to a handful of ideas that have perpetuated the walls of the academe, such as the stark division between the professor and the student, and occasionally does include minute details of academic life that strengthen the authenticity of the story, such as a

detailed (if pessimistic) description of the shopping period of classes (142), and Belsey's eventual, reluctant transition from a bulky projector to PowerPoint. These minutiae, though, are too sparse and minor to allow the reader to view *On Beauty* as something other than a midlife crisis novel centered on "the overwhelmed white, professional male...as his power recedes" (Williams 572). However much their mere presence and inclusion may try to bring academia into the foreground of the novel, the effort ultimately proves too weak to lift the book onto the shelves of dark academic works.

At the same time, the novel upholds the worst perversions of the academic world. Belsey himself identifies as one of the washed-out relics of his profession, "beyond the point of learning new tricks" (142) and so disillusioned with his life's work that he has "seen it so many times he could no longer see it at all. He spoke with his back to it, pointing to what he needed to with the pencil in his left hand" (144). When she learns of her father's affair with a student, Belsey's daughter shouts, "IT'S SO BORING, DAD. IT'S SO FUCKING *OBVIOUS*" (433). The novel's final scene sees Belsey give a presentation, but the event is oversaturated with cynicism: "In Wellington terms, he was already a dead man walking, with no book coming anytime soon, surely heading for a messy divorce and on a sabbatical that looked suspiciously like the first step towards retirement" (441). His character stands for moral collapse and academic failure; and with his position as the novel's central protagonist, the book reads more like a midlife-crisis story than any type of academic fiction or campus novel. Belsey's downward spiral reflects the depressing fall of the position and reputation of the fictional college professor, for whom "the feeling has gone from privilege...to insecurity and pressure" (Williams 581).

## “A teacher is human”

But the wars within the academic community – both in fiction and the reality it represented – gradually faded halfway through the twentieth century. By the 1960s, the hostilities of the classroom faced the post-war era of social justice and student activism, especially across American campuses, and Ong claims that “by 1967 the old kind of ceremonial enmity between teacher and (male) student was largely outmoded or even outlawed” (229). If teachers faced hostility from their pupils, he continues, the cause “tended to be because of a faculty member’s personal beliefs, not because of his behavior as a teacher or disciplinarian” (Ong 236). Suddenly the administrative figures of the world of education replaced their faculty as the focus of student antagonism. Their role in fiction did not drastically shift; administrative presence had been moderate to minimal, and from the point of view of the professorial protagonists these characters were “vain, arrogant figures who alienate students, faculty and staff and thereby isolate themselves from their coworkers. Often ruthlessly ambitious, these shallowly characters generally treat faculty members callously and seek to call attention to themselves through showy displays of leadership” (Scott 83). As for the professors themselves, they had been pushed aside into a gray area where they “were either students’ friends, or nothings” (Ong 229). To get back into the spotlight, these characters would have to work harder to grab readers’ attention.

The titular instructor of Muriel Spark’s 1961 novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* stands as a compelling example, albeit an extreme one. She uses, and abuses, her position of power over her students to defy school rules and social decorum alike, first by selecting six of her pupils to form a “Brodie set” to be the “*crème de la crème*” of their peers at Marcia Blaine School for Girls. Instead of staying on her own side of the invisible line drawn between teacher and student,



Miss Brodie instead shares deeply personal details about her private life during class times. When she does care to pass some instruction on to her pupils, they are infused with her own opinions and values. She tells her students that “safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first” (17). When asked to identify the greatest Italian painter, a student offers da Vinci, to which Miss Brodie dismissively replies, “That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favorite” (18). The cultural knowledge she infuses them with – such as an equal admiration for Anna Pavlova and Mussolini – is deemed “irrelevant to the authorized curriculum” and is therefore “useless to the school as a school” (10); the Brodie set is groomed to perhaps lag just a little behind their peers in “ordinary humble subjects” (97) even as they are warned by the headmistress that “culture cannot compensate for lack of hard knowledge” (97). Although the girls are instructed that their “loyalty is due to the school rather than to any one individual” (Brodie 97), they are no match for the commanding authority of Miss Brodie, who declares outright, “Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life” (16, 164). She carefully selects the members of her group to ensure their loyalty and trust, and she reciprocates both of those attitudes by declaring herself “devoted to you in my prime” (35). The single teacher who poses a threat to Miss Brodie’s totalitarian classroom – the “thrilling” (36) science teacher to whom Miss Brodie’s students visit as their “most secret joy” (38) – is entirely condemned by Miss Brodie’s edict of “Art and religion first; then philosophy; lastly science. That is the order of the great subjects of life, that’s their order of importance” (39). In addition to her admiration for the current (1930s) state of affairs in fascist Italy, Miss Brodie’s teaching style is distinctly infused with Ancient Roman influence as her “fine dark Roman head” (69) and her “dark Roman profile” (16); her “principles of education” stem from the etymology of the very word, “from the root *e* from *ex*, out and *duco*, I lead... To me education is a leading out of what

is already there in the pupil's soul" (54). Her instructive policies, then, borrow from both the Ancient Roman traditions and the Ancient Greek attitudes of forging close personal relationships with one's students, sometimes in lieu of the parents, whom Miss Brodie ensures "she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy" (39). But Miss Brodie's personal relationships with her students ultimately culminate in betrayal; she goes too far, and suffers the consequences of the destruction of her teaching career.

In later years, a fresh perspective has risen to defend what Scott calls "the much-maligned figure of the college professor" (83); though this figure's notoriety runs deep within the reputation of the academe, Boys claims that "not all the professors are looked down on by their creators" (384). From the second half of the twentieth century, educators were recast in the popular imagination as role models, and dark academic works began to reflect, and perhaps take advantage of, this shift as well. In these works, teachers, professors, mentors, advisors, and counselors deliver a stream of support, advice, and additional help to their fictitious pupils. Their encouragement further assists students to climb higher in their ambitions and achievements, and (often) ultimately proves a useful tool in the latter's frequent Icarian arc.

If the paradigm called Howard Belsey exemplifies the "bad" educator, his counterpart is a young, happily (and loyally) married, innovative educator called Ben Ross – even though Ross is "a high school teacher who had accidentally slipped into the role of a dictator" (Rhue 103). His nonfictional inspiration is Ron Jones, a History teacher whose classroom experiment called *The Third Wave* brought calamity upon a Palo Alto high school in 1969. The event was later adapted as a teleplay, which was then novelized in 1981 by Todd Strasser (under the pen name Morton Rhue). In chronicling Ross's corruption and his students' degeneration under the influence of

The Wave, the story meets, and even exceeds, the standards of dark academia, since here both the teacher and the students follow the trajectory of the Icarian arc to its devastating end.

In *The Wave*, Ross is presented as a teacher whose success as an educator stems from his understanding and kinship with his students; among them, he is known for “his intensity – the way he got so interested and involved in a topic that they couldn’t help but be interested also” (4-5), as well as his “contagious” enthusiasm, “meaning that he was charismatic. He could get through to them.” (5). The rest of the faculty are more divided in their perceptions of him: in one flattering lens, he possesses “energy and dedication and creativity” (5); those who view him more unfavorably think of him as

“young, naïve, and overzealous, and that after a few years he would calm down and start conducting classes the ‘right’ way – lots of reading, weekly quizzes, classroom lectures. Others simply said they didn’t like the way he never wore a suit and tie in class. One or two might even admit they were just plain jealous.” (5)

The latter group’s misgivings are not entirely unfounded, as it is Ross’s fresh, unconventional teaching methods that inspire him to create the Wave in an attempt to demonstrate to his students the collective mindset in of Nazi Germany by entrenching them in his own small-scale, pseudo-fascist movement. Clearly, an analysis of Ben Ross as a character warrants a degree of wary caution. His wife points out his tendency to become obsessive when particularly excited; “Not just involved, but utterly absorbed in them to the point where he tended to forget that the rest of the world existed” (27). He forgets that the Wave concerns, in the words of the concerned principal, “young, impressionable kids...[who] can take things too far if they’re not watched” (79). Ross mirrors his students, both in his unflaggingly eager acceptance

of The Wave and his stubborn persistence that the experiment is a good idea, as “he had enjoyed his students’ accomplishment” (40).

As the Wave, and its corruption, progresses, so too does Ross’s teaching styles. His casual, friendly relationship with his class eventually comes to echo that of the old Roman *ludus*, with all its agonistic attitudes and fervor, even culminating in small acts of violence. When first forms the Wave, he says to “create power through discipline” (31), thus embedding a centuries-old sentiment into his otherwise progressive classroom. The oral tradition reemerges in a “fierce exchange of questions and answers, the quest for perfect discipline” – all of which Ross comes to find “infectious and, in a way, mesmerizing” (40). His classroom becomes a training base where the students behave “like a regiment, Ben thought, just like a regiment” (44). The few students who resist joining the Wave notice this shift as well, as one says the movement “is just a game. It’s like little boys playing soldier” (73), and later asking a lone Wave member, “Where are your troops?” (112). Ross even dresses more formally in a suit and tie – the former rejection of which had distinguished him from the other stiff, conventional faculty – in a customary display of decorum and authority. He also indulges in a rare moment of personal ambition, specifically “about a story in the education section of *Time* magazine: *Discipline Returns to the Classroom: Teacher Makes Startling Discovery*” (67). But where the Romans intended their educative methods to be uplifting and challenging, Ross easily manipulates these tactics so that “his students could glibly spit back answers as if by rote, but there was no analysis, no questioning on their part” (66). As Wave members under Ross’s newfound instruction, the once-thoughtful and spirited history class regresses to a state of constrained, unquestioning obedience.

The Wave also represents the elitism that shadows academia, and persists in dark academia especially. The experiment is advertised and developed through a rousing motto –

“Strength Through Discipline, Strength Through Community, Strength Through Action!” (62) – and later promoted with a symbol and membership card. Ross tells his students they “are not competing against each other”, but neglects to say they are not competing with non-Wave members either. Instead he instructs them to “actively recruit new members” (60), and in doing so designates all non-members as rivals. Few students are able to remember that “the outside world doesn’t know or care about The Wave” (72), and some become so caught up in the excitement and novelty of the movement that it drastically affects their self-awareness and perceived identity, even to the extent that they “won’t be able to function outside of school where The Wave doesn’t exist” (Wave 72).

Ross eventually comes to realize the destructive power and potency of the Wave and that “you can’t experiment with human beings” (122). The final scene of the novel shows the return of his empathetic connection to his students, as he reaches out to help a troubled student who had been drastically affected by the experiment. Despite the rocky journey, the kind and supportive teacher emerges with a kind of Pyrrhic victory.

Ross is not the only well-intentioned (history) teacher to lose control of his class. In John Knowles’ 1981 novel *Peace Breaks Out* (the companion to his better known *A Separate Peace*) Devon School alum and recent World War II veteran Pete Hallam returns to his alma mater “as an instructor in American History and a member of the Physical Education department” (1). Before he even begins teaching, Hallam resolves not to become one of the “droning pedantic bores who failed completely to reach their isolated and helpless students” (13), and he meets this goal with marginal success. He invites his class to call him by his first name (14), but ensures a modicum of respect for his position by telling them otherwise to “call me ‘sir’ because that’s still the custom around here” (14). He wants his classroom to be a locus of debate and encourages all

contributions to group discussions, even reluctantly permitting xenophobic opinions to be said, though they are not met with approval from his or the rest of the class. Instead of immediately shutting down, Hallam allows a student's hateful rhetoric because he "found this enmity rather entertaining; he thought it made meetings of the class more stimulating; the atmosphere sometimes fairly crackled with animosity and masked insults" (57). For all his intentions to be a stimulating and effective educator, like Ross, Hallam unwittingly reverts to *ludus*-style tactics; but, unlike Ross, because he does so inadvertently, Hallam finds himself quickly losing control over his students. He is unprepared for the brutality and steel they exhibit in the academic arena of the classroom, and "could not stem the swelling animus between these two bright, articulate, and somehow precociously bitter students" (57), and although he "decided he himself had better intervene and diffuse the situation if he could" (58), Hallam's "total failure" (60) to curb tensions between his pupils leads to unforeseen (though perhaps not unanticipated) violence and tragedy.

In another sense, Hallam intentionally overlooks the warlike discord invoked by *ludus*, as he is reluctant to view his students in an unfavorable light. When discussing a crime that has occurred, Hallam is reluctant to direct suspicion at any of his students, even though several of them had access and/or motive. One student deliberately, and repeatedly, disconcerts Hallam, but the latter squashes his private concerns and discomforts by telling himself that he is "too suspicious" (91). Later recalling another student who was a Nazi sympathizer, Hallam concedes that he "had a very high intelligence quota" (162). Hallam is certain that he understands his students, "so eaten up with frustration [at missing their chance to participate in the war], so eaten up that they don't know which way to look" (157) and therefore need his experienced guidance. He acts like their older, more responsible friend, chaperoning their ski trips and assisting their athletic endeavors, and most of the boys respond positively, thinking of him "as one of those

leaders who did more than the least of his men. He might be expected to carry one or two of their packs, but surrender his own? Never” (113). An initial reaction to Hallam is restricted to “I think he’s okay,” a comment which “constituted high praise” (21). For all his failures and insufficiencies, Hallam remains a “good guy” to the end.

In his personal life, however, Hallam initially reflect more of the poorly-depicted stereotypical professor than he realizes. As a war veteran who lost friends and family and collected shrapnel in his leg, he is viewed as Devon’s “very own Wounded Athlete Veteran Prisoner of War Who Had Escaped” (130). His leftover trauma is none helped by his abused ex-wife’s decision to leave him while he had been fighting abroad, leaving him worried that “his fate was to be ultimately alone” (65). And so, Hallam arrives at Devon “trying to catch my breath” (35) and struggling to keep from sinking into painful memories of the past. He attempts to look toward the future, which he sees as “a blank, featureless wall. He had not, on some profound level, expected to have one” (36).

But, also like Ross, Hallam manages to make a partial recovery. He makes amends with his ex-wife, with possible plans for a new future together, and reacts the death of a student with a newfound appreciation for his life; “a boy had just died here, violence had been loosed here, and he, Pete Hallam, was alive, on the whole well... He probably had forty more years or so to live” (174). Hallam, then, takes the opposite route of the clichéd professor, instead of watching his enthusiasm for teaching wither and fade, his story is one of growth through experiences in both classroom and campus settings; and by the end of the novel, he is readier than he has ever been to guide the next generation of Devon students to the heights of their potential for good.

It may be interesting to point out, however, the stark different representations of the professorial model in alternative modes of academic narratives from more contemporary years.

In film, audiences were introduced to Robin Williams as John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and Julia Roberts as Katherine Watson in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003); while both figures come to the same end, their final scenes are filled to the brim with not only the promising futures of their students, but the pride and fulfillment shared by their teachers as well.

The former film's main professorial figure is a far cry from the lecherous, dismal failures of his fictional predecessors. Keating is away from his spouse/romantic partner but waxes about how he misses her. His career is (until the culmination of the film) a largely successful one, having taught at another prestigious academy before the current Welton Academy. But the main difference that sets Keating apart is his dedication and commitment to his students. As yet another Humanities professor (this time in charge of the school's English department, with a concentration in poetry) Keating refuses to uphold the academy's – and the academic world's – regurgitative teaching tendencies. Instead he uses his position as educator to redirect the focus of his classroom to his students' personal, as well as intellectual, growth. The boys are encouraged to think for themselves and create their own works – in another words, “seize the day” – while thinking about their assigned texts; it is due to Keating's gentle and resolute teaching style that they choose to revive the titular Dead Poets Society to apply their academic lessons to their own lives.

Welton Academy, however, hosts a fair number of antagonists; among them are the Headmaster Nolan representing the strictly traditional and formal teaching methods of academia, as well as the students' own parents who have been educated, and thus promote the education of their children, in the customary, long-established teaching mode which Keating so defiantly rejects. While most of the film is centered around the personal lives of the students, enriched by their intellectual growth through poetry, Keating emerges at the forefront as the main hero of the



story – an uncommonly successful feat when one considers the discouraging depictions of educators before him. Perhaps this accomplishment makes more sense when one considers that Keating is, in many ways, one of his own students. As a Welton alumnus, he knows firsthand how stifling literature (among other subjects) can be when taught poorly; and he uses this drawback to his advantage by not only forming the Dead Poets Society, but creating a lasting legacy for forthcoming generations of Welton pupils. In this way, the student-based narrative prevails.

*Mona Lisa Smile*'s Professor Katherine Anne Watson is written in a similar vein as Keating. She too puts (what she believes to be) her students' best interests first, even when it means defying the traditions of the academic institution that employs her; but here, most of the similarities end. The film swaps the all-male Welton Academy for the equally private, elitist, and homogenous Wellesley College in 1953. But in an era where higher education is a rare privilege for women, Watson arrives to find her art history students are already well-versed in the subject. With the foundation of her job already completed, Watson focuses her aim on a much loftier goal: inspiring her students to become free-thinkers independent of their patriarchal environment. The film becomes less academic and more of a social criticism – certainly a valid one, since the students are (for the most part) either so entrenched in matrimonial concerns to give their academic life proper attention, or caught between professional aims and societal expectations, or else concerned with the burgeoning sexual revolution (a particular locus of debate and controversy on a conservative campus).

Watson has much more of a clear agenda than Keating, and (initially) challenges the pull that she and her students feel to settle into the roles of wives and mothers. But, like Keating, Watson is also partially a pupil herself, as a graduate student coming from the West coast with a

firm mindset and teaching style in mind. Keating aims to unlock the boys' potential; Watson pushes her students to direct that same potential into the direction she believes is best for them. Keating demands that his students utilize their education to enrich their lives; Watson presses hers to decide if they want to continue their academic educations at all. Both instructors ultimately leave their respective institutions (Keating is fired, while Watson rejects a set of stifling teaching conditions), but what earns Watson a touching sendoff from her students is her respect of their own goals as much as they have accepted hers. While *Mona Lisa Smile* is certainly less academic (and more artistic) than *Dead Poets Society*, the film centers on students and teachers having the choice to decide if, and how, they choose to pursue a career in an academic field.

The "dark" elements of *Dead Poets Society* (including censorship, emotional abuse, anxiety, and suicide) are alternatively made manifest in *Mona Lisa Smile* as female oppression, sexual repression, and enormous societal pressure. Parents and administration reprise their roles as subjugators and authoritarians, allowing teachers like Keating and Watson to rise up as inspirational leaders whose "the mission is to save the world and not the job" (Barasch 36). The task to save the world falls to the students.

## Chapter 4: The Student

The students of dark academia find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable and simultaneously empowering position. While some critics, including Carpenter and Scott, would minimize their presence by arguing that “more of these novels concern the faculty than the students” (Carpenter 446) or that the latter “do not often figure prominently in academic novels” (Scott 84), these claims are highly contestable. The student is always, to an extent, the focus of any work concerning academia. If the goal of an individual or institution is to impart knowledge and/or influence, the presence of a student to receive them is not only helpful but utterly necessary. Without the student, there is no faculty, or even an academe. Simply because a work focuses on the instructors does not mean that the student’s role is in any way diminished, especially such a role that gives meaning to the instructor’s identity as we know it. As one student poses to his instructor in *The History Boys*, “What they want to know, sir, is, ‘Do you have a life?’ Or are we it? Are we your life?” (34) To be able to tell any story about a teacher, the answer has to be *yes*.

However, as in the case of the professor, being the subject of a dark academic narrative is a double-edged sword. Student depictions in this genre generally lean toward the unfavorable, and “rarely is student life presented sympathetically” (Boys 384). While Boys generously concedes that “not all students are depicted as worthless, immoral, or frauds,” these characters mostly tend to be as loathsome and detestable as their professors, ruled by “superficiality and stupidity” and depicted as “immoral...and evidence of their wickedness is portrayed vividly” (384). Even other fictional characters regard the dark academic student with this unforgiving

lens; in the case of Miss Brodie's "set," across the rest of their school the Brodie girls are "held in suspicion and not much liking. They had no team spirit" (Spark 11).

If the figure of the student is viewed with distrust and dislike by both characters and critics, the attitude in response is not one of mutual animosity, but of indifference to their disrepute. The Brodie set, for instance, ignores the judgement of their peers because "they were not allowed to care. Their disregard had now become an institution, to be respected like the house system itself" (Spark 163). Tartt echoes this mindset in her characters as well:

"You don't feel a great deal of emotion for other people, do you?"

I was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" I said. "Of course I do."

"Do you?" He raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so. It doesn't matter," he said, after a long, tense pause. "I don't, either." (Tartt 493)

Even after murdering one of their own, these students retain an emotionally stunted perspective as they take some comfort in that fact that "I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed" (Tartt 197). Given this perspective, Boys' antipathy towards these figures becomes reasonable.

### **"We're all enemies"**

Among the student's more common traits that might account for their notoriety is their lofty aspiration sharpened by an almost grim determination. More than the usual feelings like "how juniors always want to be like the seniors" (Rhue 81), these figures do not possess so much of an ambitious streak as an all-consuming infatuation with the heights of their own potential for greatness. In *A Separate Peace* (1959), one student athlete "used to be aiming for the Olympics"

(117), a reminder of the Roman agonistic attitudes that have clearly maintained a stronghold in the student mentality. Some years later, in *Peace Breaks Out*, a student named Wexford who is certain that “I’m going to be famous” (56) ponders whether or not he is “an addictive type of person” (26); he is. This trait is also seen in the narrator of *The Secret History*’s narrator Richard, who confesses, “I am nothing in my soul if not obsessive.” (29). Ben Ross asks his students in *The Wave*, “Is there anyone here who isn’t interested in power and success?” (Rhue 30). In dark academia, the reply is a resounding *no*. Indeed, students appear to be groomed for success, either by their upbringing or their own doing. As if to hint at the great heights to which this group will one day ascend, Ivo Stourton assigns one of the more boorish characters in his 2007 novel *The Night Climbers* the nickname “Falstaff” due to, among other associations, “a shrewd proximity to powerful figures” (48).

Academia can be an environment of crippling competition, and the students seem to both perpetuate this “heady atmosphere” (Bennett xii) and bear the brunt of it. In *A Separate Peace*, for example, the protagonist and his best friend compete with each other for both academic achievements and athletic goals. The more intellectual of the two, Gene, constantly reminds himself that “somebody’s got to be the head of the class” (51); and when he suggests the possibility of his earning that position, his friend Phineas replies, “I’d kill myself out of jealous envy” (52). This competition also spills outside of the classroom, as Phineas creates a game called “blitzball” in which “there aren’t any teams...we’re all enemies” (38). Later on, Gene imagines that Phineas “had deliberately set out to wreck my studies” (53) with his distractions, convincing himself that “it was all cold trickery, it was all calculated, it was all enmity” (53). In *The Wave*, another friendship, this time between high schoolers Laurie and Amy, is tested by “a constant competition for boys, grades, popularity, almost everything one could compete for.

Even though they were best friends, that constant competition somehow prevented them from being really close” (23). Naomi Alderman illustrates this over the course of *The Lessons* (2010), after an Oxford physics student is told by his alumnus sister that “Oxford is a race”;

“We all knew it, each of the physics men. We did not discuss our first assignment, did not sit together in the library. Later, when times became more desperate, we pulled each other by the collar over fences and hurdles, copying one another’s work in a manner we would have scorned at school.” (11)

Knowles’ later students in *Peace Breaks Out* posit a need for conflict, having only just missed the chance to be drafted at the conclusion of World War II. Having seen their older peers leave for military service, this class is left with no purpose to fight for and no enemy to fight against. Without them, the boys are left to wonder, “what do we do?” (23) In his novel *Black Chalk* (2013), Christopher Yates has his narrator voice what is usually a more underlying sentiment in other works; the idea that competition is unextractable from the composition of these students, since “we call ourselves the human race” (14).

For these characters, academia is a challenge to be conquered, a ship in the throes of a stormy sea, even at the cost of throwing their own peers overboard. Very few can battle their way to the helm, giving way to the fiercely competitive environment previously discussed. Boys notes that much of “this restlessness is seen in the attitude of many of the more intelligent students, who feel vaguely dissatisfied with the education they receive” (386). One such model from Benjamin Wood’s *The Bellwether Revivals* (2012) is a Cambridge prodigy obsessed with Johann Mattheson, described by his sister and fellow pupil as lacking “a humble bone in my brother’s body...But he has every right to feel superior, given what he’s capable of. He’s a remarkable person, really” (190), having “always been the golden boy” (189). The brightest

individuals, who tend to possess a certainty of their own greatness and capacity for such, sometimes forego the ship entirely for an even higher aspiration. For them, the stakes are elevated to the extent that metaphors of divinity are invoked. One of Alderman's students comments, "I have a friend who says that Oxford is hell. Perfect hell without redemption. But the people make it heaven" (Alderman 26). The sentiment is echoed in *Peace Breaks Out*, where "the sky's the limit and so is hell" (9), and a student's call to abolish mandatory prayer is interpreted as an attempt to "cancel God" (61-63). Bennett's titular History boys are more candid in their own opinions, as one states that "God should get real. We don't owe him anything." (Bennett 45). And, of course, Tartt touches upon the subject of an unearthly presence within the walls of the academe, including a Greek class's encounter with Dionysus – "We're talking about God here. God is serious business" (Tartt 168) – and the theory of "a divinity in our midst" (Tartt 317) among the members of a college faculty.

Perhaps it comes as no great surprise to hear these characters aspiring to such lofty heights; after all, to achieve a status akin to divinity is no small feat, if not impossible. Luckily, the dark academic student counts themselves as one of the select few people who stands a chance of attaining such exalted accomplishments. In this way, they promote an attitude as longstanding as the academe itself. Elitism has never strayed too far from the walls of academic institutions, from restricting involvement from women, people of color, or lower socioeconomic classes, to participating in national fraternities, sororities, and secret societies, among plenty of other examples of exclusionary practices. Indeed, one of the dark academic student's most idealized and disparaged sentiments is their embrace of elitism in dark academia, so long as they get a seat at the figurative table. Among dark academic works about students is a trend of rejecting a larger campus community in favor of a small selection of worthier students. *The Wave* demonstrates

this as a controlled, and then uncontrolled, classroom experiment. In *If We Were Villains* (2017), M. L. Rio's Shakespeare students have made it to their fourth year at their prestigious conservatory after all other underperforming students have been dismissed; they also share a dormitory literally called the Castle.

And almost as numerous as these tight-knit groups are the places where they gather, in structures designated to keep outsiders out. (Sometimes these locations manifest when students are assigned residences together in dormitories, but this is less often the case, as restricting these characters to curfews and other communal rules dictated by a larger authority disagrees with the lifestyles of these singularly remarkable freedom-seekers. When the opportunity arises for a private and/or off-campus residence, they take it.) Tartt's Greek class retreats to a family member's grand country house; Wood's "flock" stays at the Bellwether mansion, especially the organ house in the back; and in her novel *An Uncommon Education* (2012), Elizabeth Percer's all-female Shakespeare Society ("the Shakes") at Wellesley College congregate to perform and socialize in a "replica of Anne Hathaway's Tudor cottage" (146) on campus.

The members of these groups are sheltered from the *hoi polloi* and "untouched" (Knowles 31) by the hardships of the real world. Ross's high school students, for example, are "the products of stable, middle-class families, and despite the violence-saturated media that permeated society around them, they were surprisingly naïve and sheltered" (Rhue 11). Interestingly, in a subversion of common perceptions, a privileged Cambridge student in *The Bellwether Revivals* offers an alternative perspective to her small group's elitism:

"And socially? Well, we've always sort of existed in our own little bubble. Boarding school can do that to you. We don't live the same way as your average Cambridge students. I suppose we're kind of on the fringes of things, but deliberately so. We like to



be on the outside looking in. That's how we've always been. But we still have a close-knit group of friends..." (Wood 190)

Despite this argument that her isolated upbringing (as well as the small numbers of her group) have made them the "outside[rs] looking in," the speaker's identity as an outsider as opposed to an insider is dubious. Although isolated from her peers, the fact that she and her compatriots have chosen to limit their social lives hints at her privilege; they have both the opportunity and the means to restrict their contact to a select few friends. And owning a mansion to retreat to at a moment's notice certainly helps.

### **"Who, academically speaking, get away with murder"**

With regards to wealth, the dark academic student tends to fall into one of two unlucky categories. They may be the inheritors of extravagant fortunes, treated with suspicion and dislike by critics such as Boys who use this model to slander the student's reputation; or else they consist of students from lower-middle class backgrounds, who are either edged out of the frame or made to abandon the values and practices of their origins. The former is largely indulgent and careless, usually with little concern as to how to support their opulent lifestyles. At the very least they are generous, inviting their less fortunate companions to join in their activities and their homes. One working class student in *The Night Climbers* describes his absurdly wealthy friend as follows:

"He lived so easily, and with such freedom from the grinding little concerns that informed my day-to-day existence – such as worrying about whether I could pay my rent that term, or peering into my wallet the night after a binge and wincing at the empty

leather – that it made his soul beautiful. His family’s extraordinary fortune...served to elevate him above the world in the same way a monk seeks to free himself through a vow of poverty. When I say we loved Francis for his money, I do not mean for one moment to diminish our friendship, for it was part of the bedrock of his nature.” (Stourton 78)

While a scorn for the wealthy class and their money (indeed, a well-established motivator of corruption) may aid in arguments that criticize the superficiality and decadent attitudes of these students, their affluence is still idealized and even celebrated in most novels, as the narrator continues, “Far from feeling embarrassed, he encouraged me to congratulate myself on my own good fortune at having made friends with him, just as he was fortunate to be his father’s son” (80). On the other hand, students from more humble origins share three common traits. Firstly, those from lower class backgrounds – such as Richard in *The Secret History*, James in *The Night Climbers*, James in *The Lessons*, and Oscar in *The Bellwether Revivals* – tend to serve as narrators through whom the whims of their wealthy companions are “exposed by the author through the medium of an outsider” (Boys 384). They constantly nurse a private shame about their lacking backgrounds, and view themselves as, to borrow a phrase from Yates, “a farm boy on a scholarship and financial aid” (26). Secondly, there is a sentiment (hinted with varied subtlety) that there is no room for a working-class student in dark academia; in one instance at Cambridge, the narrator is “technically not allowed to have jobs during term time” (Stourton 80), and those characters that do manage to find work then, as in real life, must juggle their responsibilities and their schoolwork, risking isolation and alienation from their wealthy nonworking peers. This leads to the third trait regarding working-class students: in most cases (including all four previous examples) their friendship with their affluent counterparts ushers these characters to participate in a life of ease and comfort, free from the mundane worries of

collegiate campus life. Perhaps the understanding is that when they are free from financial burdens and monetary concerns, students may devote their time to more academic pursuits and interests.

That might be the case if another one of the dark academic student's traditional character flaws wasn't a weakness for pleasure-driven distraction. In its tamest form, this shortcoming may be merely a disinterest or distraction from their studies; in a manner rather reminiscent of Julian Morrow's distinction of schoolwork versus "play," one student maintains that "the key was to divorce study from its associations with labor, to treat it as pure pleasure, with no pressure to remember or even to understand what we heard" (Stourton 81). More often than not, however, the pleasures sought are vices, primarily drinking and drugs; in the student's mind, it appears that there are "no rules...until they were broken" (Knowles 36). One of Knowles' most academically driven students in *Peace Breaks Out*, Wexford, is referred to as "a lounge lizard, bookworm, pianist, smoker, palaverer, debater, away-from-school drinker, and rumor had it secret drinker at the school as well" (50). There is no lack of alcohol and drugs at a great number of academic institutions, especially the high-pressured environments of the university; but the abuse of such substances in dark academia can be excessive. The students in *The Secret History*, *Black Chalk*, *The Lessons*, *The Bellwether Revivals*, and more indulge in plenty of drinking, and in *Peace Breaks Out* even high school-aged Wexford "was not afraid to venture alone and a little drunk into the world" (77). A few students in *The Night Climbers* habitually use cocaine, and after his first intake the narrator professes, "Now I am experiencing things" (Stourton 104). Perhaps it is the students' ambition to distinguish themselves from their inferior peers, or their extraordinary arrogance, or some combination of the two, that compels them to seek recreation through immoral and/or illegal channels. Perhaps these misdeeds come from an interpretation that

students who pursue academia “come for adventure” (Yates 3), and here they may find it. In the case of *The Night Climbers*, Stourton’s group find their thrills in scaling the old Cambridge buildings at Tudor College, invoking the divinity-defying sentiments discussed earlier – or so it seems in the case of the narrator James, for whom this activity carries an exhilarating “rush, being brought into proximity with my own mortality and retaining control over my own salvation” (125). For the group’s leader, Francis, this forbidden pastime appeals to “his preference for drama over safety” (84). Regardless, the night climbing is an opportunity for this group to set themselves apart from other students by (literally) reaching new heights in both physical and mental achievements:

“Where the rest of the passing pedestrians saw only a door or a window, Francis saw a finger grip, a foothold. He thought in different dimensions, and he applied to the buildings a new set of rules in opposition to the strict proportions that dictated the classical facades or the judicious physics that maintained the Gothic fan vaults. His imagination swarmed over them...” (126-7)

Fortunately for Stourton, the novel’s distraction from an actual school-related plotline only just manages to remain academic by describing the night climbers as continuing a longstanding tradition “stretching back into history as far as the buildings themselves” (132) and having them studiously hunt down new climbing paths through dedicated research.

If Keating in *Dead Poets Society* described the academic ideal as *carpe diem*, the night climbers and their dark academic contemporaries stray from this sentiment with an almost-mocking arrogance in favor of “carpe p.m. and all that” (Stourton 73).

## Romanticism and Victimhood

But despite the plethora of shortcomings and flaws, the student preserves a respect and sort of reverence for the academic world they inhabit, if not for its educative qualities then its aesthetic ones. One student in Alexander Maksik's *You Deserve Nothing* (2011) voices his hopes "that the International School of France would be a collection of beautiful buildings, ivy, lawns, and a Gothic bell tower maybe. Something academic, regal, scholarly. I imagined something traditional, something elegant," and his disappointment findings afterward; I'd been so sure that this school would be something beautiful" (78). At Knowles' Devon School in *A Separate Peace*, narrator Gene tries to reassure himself that an unauthorized assembly is instead "some kind of schoolboy masquerade...with masks and candles" (165-166), intentionally glamorizing his own experiences even as they happen to him. This romanticism floods dark academic literature and entices its students. For the narrator of *The Lessons*, the idea alone of Oxford is enough to sustain his difficult adjustment to the school:

"Oxford is beautiful; its beauty is its plumage, its method of procreation. The beauty of the dream of Oxford, of spires and quiet learning, of the life of the mind, of effortless superiority, all these had beguiled me. Oxford was a tree decked with presents; all I had to do was reach out my hand and pluck them. I would achieve a first, I would gain a blue, I would make rich, influential, powerful friends. Oxford would paint me with a thin layer of gold." (10)

In *The Secret History*, narrator Richard also admits to possessing "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (7) – to the extent that he calls it his own "fatal flaw" (7) – and romanticizes his peers, professor, and general experiences at college. This impression is felt so greatly that instructor Pete Hallam senses it in *Peace Breaks Out*, and ponders how "destruction

can be beautiful” (115) as his students struggle to contain their need for a conflict and an enemy to feel that they have any purpose; “and if they can’t find anything else to destroy, then they just destroy themselves” (115). He later wonders of a student: “Is he using terror to keep away boredom? Does he have to try to destroy something? Even as a last resort, himself?” (119)

Self-destruction, though, may not be necessary, as “those students who are featured in academic novels tend to fare quite poorly” (Scott 84), enduring addiction, blackmail, betrayal, violence, murder, and suicide, among other injustices. By the conclusion of multiple novels – including *The Secret History*, *The Lessons*, *The Night Climbers*, *Black Chalk*, *If We Were Villains*, and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, to name a few – the groups of students have been utterly destroyed, having lost touch due to separation with time and distance. Some are no longer living at all. And all are scarred by the events of their shared school days of the past, with emotional trauma having substituted each other’s company. Angela Hague notes a similar trend of students “frequently depicted as victims, willing or otherwise, of the sexual and political machinations of professors” (Scott 84). In the case of *The History Boys*, the students suffer both; when discussing an instructor who gropes and indoctrinates them, one student asks, “Are we scarred for life, do you think?” to which his classmate responds, “We must hope so. Perhaps it will turn me into Proust” (77). In *The Lessons* as well, this theme prevails as one theology student ruminates:

“Mark talks a great deal about sacrifice. It’s one of his themes, although at times he places himself in the martyr’s role and at times in the place of the one for whom sacrifices are being made, depending on his mood. After debating the matter with himself – my own ideas do not figure in his theology – he comes to the conclusion that both partners in a sacrifice are one.” (85)

Perhaps, then, it is no great surprise that *The Lessons* “began with a fall” (9).

When considering both their admirable and detrimental qualities, perhaps the students embody dark academia more than their professors. Pete Hallam asks about Wexford in *Peace Breaks Out*, “What happened to you when at age eighteen you were moneyed, bright, articulate, charming, meretricious, domineering, hypocritical, underhanded, and an egomaniac?” (110) Like many dark academic students, Wexford’s upstanding and corrupt natures blend so that they often present themselves as one and the same. Boys and his contemporaries may disparage these characters for their demerits – of which there are certainly plenty – and even fictional adults express reasonable doubts regarding students’ readiness for all they want to achieve, protesting that it is “hard to know when these boys are ready to make their own decisions. They’re just on that dividing edge” (Knowles 138). Another argues that because of their youth they lack the “judgement we hope they’ll someday have. Sometimes they can take things too far if they’re not watched” (Rhue 79). But these students demand to be taken seriously, and I believe they deserve that recognition. Unlike the professorial archetype, the students have the advantage of their mobility; there are more rungs on the intellectual ladder for them to climb, and they possess the sharp ruthlessness and steel-edged ambition to ascend it. They have the willpower and the nerve to set (sometimes impossibly) high goals for themselves, and often their biggest obstacle to achieving them are their own hamartias and lapses in judgement or focus. Most importantly, students are still somewhat newcomers to the academic world; they are not yet privy to its secrets and not yet embedded in its legacies. They have much to prove, and they want to prove it. The stakes in dark academia are high, as a genre whose stories so often end in tragedy and misfortune; but its students either don’t know that or simply don’t care. Either they’ll succeed

beyond their peers' wildest dreams, or their fall will be that much more crushing; and both outcomes are welcome in dark academia.



## Chapter 5: Nonfiction

At its best (or worst), academia is stimulating and uplifting, channeling the high stakes and exhilaration that come with the upwards climb of one's intellectual growth. The promise of personal fulfillment and increased potential that comes with an extensive education has driven students of all backgrounds, cultures, and centuries to the doors and/or walls of the academe for about as long as the institution has been standing. In an environment that professes to welcome progress and advancement while keeping a firm grasp on tradition and convention, the academic campus has long maintained fertile ground for a genre devoted to its community – and its missteps.

Dark academia, then, is certainly not a category reserved for fiction (plentiful and worthwhile as those works may be); but when “dark” so often means a corruption of ideals and virtues, it is understandable as to why nonfictional stories may occur less frequently. Indeed, true stories of moral lapses which would stain the academe's proud reputation are either censored or dramatically reshaped. They are then marketed as fictional stories, as troubling *what ifs* and deterrent examples of education gone wrong, so that institutions and individuals may uphold their honor and integrity.

*The Secret History* is one such instance when real people and locations were drawn upon for dark academic inspiration, either from Tartt's own admission or her contemporaries' recognition of themselves in her work. However, her novel is plainly fictional; while clear parallels can be drawn to real people, their characteristics and relationships are changed drastically enough that, when coupled with the entirely imagined plot, it would ultimately be

more accurate to say that *The Secret History* is inspired by real people rather than an account of them.

Patrick Hamilton steps closer to real events in his 1929 play *Rope*, which was based on Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb's murder of a young boy in 1924 after studying Nietzsche's theories of *übermenschen*. Unlike Tartt, Hamilton takes a real event and adapts it for the stage; thus, the play lacks Tartt's authenticity and detail that comes from personal experience with the content of one's work. Hamilton also takes liberties with the characters of Leopold and Loeb, renamed Charles Granillo and Wyndham Brandon and reshaped to fit a more dramatic mold. The characters' motive for murder is to demonstrate, and later display to their professor, their crime as an intellectual accomplishment. It's certainly a dark academic story, but the play is too disloyal to the Leopold-Loeb case to qualify as nonfiction.

Of the limited content of nonfictional dark academia, three examples stand out to me; first is Alan Bennett's account of his preparation for and admittance to Oxford, as he grapples with heavy competition, harsh examination procedures, and a choice to "cheat." The second case is Todd Strasser's well-known novelization of *The Wave* (1981), when a high school classroom experiment escalated until it got dangerously out of hand. The third example, and a particularly troubling addition, is *You Deserve Nothing* (2011) by Alexander Maksik, which tracks the moral descent of a beloved high school teacher (including his sexual relationship with an underage student) and disconcertingly mirrors the author's own teaching experiences, so say his former students.

Dark academic nonfiction is not a collection of precautionary tales, but a wake-up call to the injustices and ethical dilemmas facing the academic world. These narratives are not written merely for entertainment but for awareness, calling our attention to a number of issues afflicting

higher education – such as the sacrifice of ethics in the pursuit of knowledge and the mistreatment of its most vulnerable members – and exposing the shortcomings of the academe that so often prefers to hide its failings.

Nonetheless, dark academia is as true to reality as other genres such as biography and history; Alan Bennett draws from both in his 2004 play *The History Boys*, which focuses on a class bright students all preparing for Oxford and Cambridge entrance examinations as they are caught between the conflicting instructions of two fundamentally different instructors. In his introduction, Bennett recalls how he “turned up in a suit” for his pre-university examinations, much to the ridicule of his peers; almost a decade later he and the rest of his Oxford graduating class “were all dressed up in the suit” to take their Finals (vii). Clearly, the prestige and repute that comes with formal schooling is no literary invention. Bennett admits to seeking his Oxford scholarship “out of sheer vanity” and for the sake of a romantic crush, in the hopes that “if I did manage to get a scholarship he would think more of me in consequence” (xiii). The romanticism of academia, and especially the high culture and status of Oxbridge, made its impression; by contrast, the *hoi polloi* of Britain were “louts” (x) who belonged somewhere far less esteemed and respectable; in Bennett’s eyes, “the nastier a college looked the lower seemed to be its social and academic status” (ix). The harsh elitism of Oxford had seeped in even before he was a member of its student body. Much like a majority of protagonists in dark academic works, he placed all of his hopes in the transformative power of his education to shape him and his life into something great – and, as is often the case, he was disappointed by the discovery that acceptance at Oxford ultimately meant admission to school: “I thought life was never going to be the same again, though it quite soon was, of course” (xiv), with the additional hurdle of financial struggles to overcome. He also recalls the “a sad and shabby lot” of schoolmasters in his pre-Oxford years,

including a History teacher “rumoured to have had some Housman-like breakdown” in his own university days, as well as a French teacher who once “put his head down on the desk and wailed, ‘Why am I wasting my time in this god-forsaken school?’” (xi) In both fiction and reality, it seems, the professorial figure is one of abject suffering.

But perhaps the most obvious way Bennett’s higher education could be classified as dark academia is his confession that on his Finals at Oxford “I cheated, just as I had cheated a few years before to get the scholarship that took me to Oxford in the first place” (vii). To be fair, this confession is exaggerated; what Bennett did was simply “reducing everything I knew to fit on cards which I carried everywhere” (xv), having had to come up with his own technique to answer examination questions which “somebody ought to have taught me but never had” (xv). This technique was nothing more than “going for the wrong end of the stick” when answering questions, which he figured was “more attention-grabbing than a less unconventional approach” but would probably “be put down to sheer snobbery or the notion [of indecency]” (xv). He admits that “nobody else would have called it cheating” but attributes his guilt for having “cheated” to what he calls “false pretences” (vii). Now that scholarship examinations are practically obsolete, as Bennett learned only in the middle of writing his play, he almost mourns the harsher school policies of the past: “The test, the examination, the ordeal, unfair though they may be, are at least dramatic... Fairer, more decent and catering to the individual the new system may be, but memorable and even ceremonial, no, and that is a loss” (xx). Regarding his own university experience, Bennett declares, “I have no nostalgia for my Oxford days” (xvii).

One of the more notorious – or popular – instances of dark academia in real life is the account of the Third Wave, a classroom experiment in 1967 at Cubberly High School in Northern California and the brainchild of History teacher Ron Jones. Jones later recalled, “It was

not a planned classroom activity; it came about as an improvisation” (Johnston); and yet the Wave was a remarkably meticulous and complex organism that soon took on a life of its own.

With the intention of showing his students how German citizens under Hitler could willingly follow a dictator, Jones began to mirror the Nazi Party’s strict disciplinarian tactics as he first “began teaching his 10th-grade class the power of discipline, drilling them to sit properly and breathe correctly. He made them address him as Mr. Jones, stand by their desks when answering questions, and chant slogans” (Lipsett). As the Wave progressed, additional steps to isolate – and in their minds, elevate – its members, Jones implemented “a uniform, insignia, salute and banners” (Johnston), as well as “a salute (a raised, cupped hand), a slogan...and a secret police force” (Lipsett). To further stress the seriousness of the Wave, students were told that the movement was a national one, “involving 1,000 other high schools around the US” as well as a “national leader” (Lipsett).

It is worth wondering if the Wave would have been as effective if directed by a different teacher. Ron Jones, by all accounts, was the perfect authority figure to collect his students’ trust before manipulating them to become mini-fascists. He was young, having “arrived there straight from training college” (Johnston); former student Philip Neel remembers him as “boyish and appealing” (Johnston), while his peer Mark Hancock calls him “the most popular teacher in school. He was only 10 years older than us, so we trusted and liked him a lot. We were 15, the age when you start to get an attitude and think independently. We were idealistic and passionate, but young and impressionable” (Lipsett). Jones also had a history of implementing unconventionally creative teaching methods, such as “making students at the almost all-white school use different toilets to demonstrate apartheid, for instance” (Johnston). Thus, his popularity soared, as Hancock recalls, “Kids would cut classes to go to his, he was that much

fun... He got you involved in the community, not just class” (Lipsett). Neel agrees, “Everyone wanted to be in his class. So at first we thought the Wave was him doing something funny” (Johnston).

The fun eventually came to a screeching halt. By the time the Wave had “swell[ed] to more than 200 members” (Johnston), parents and teachers alike complained about the Wave having gotten out of control. Finally, Jones called for a Wave rally, where he then confronted the students with “footage of Hitler and Nazi rallies on the wall to emphasise how easily the students had been misled into behaving like fascists” (Lipsett).

Years later, Jones does not fully regret his role in the Wave, saying that it fulfilled its goal and his students’ “need for answers in a fearful situation. And I became intrigued by it myself. I discovered I liked the order and the control” (Johnston). While he is “very glad I did it for discussional purposes, yes” (Lipsett), Jones also acknowledges that the experiment was “definitely” a mistake (Johnston): “It’s a framework to learn and discuss fascism... But it’s like the atomic bomb. Is it valuable? Yes, but it’s dangerous too” (Lipsett).

Thus, the Wave and all of its (many) subsequent portrayals in literature, film, media, and the arts has come to join the ranks of dark academia. The darkness is inherent in the corruption of an originally noble ideal; and the goal of education drives the narrative, allowing the Wave to continue its regime despite the numerous red flags. Elitism, another favorite trait of the genre, prospers and thrives in the movement’s hierarchical structure, as students within the Wave isolated and intimidated those who resisted its pull. Thirdly, Ron Jones (and his fictional counterpart Ben Ross; see Prof chapter for an analysis of fictionalized account of this character and the Wave) fits the model of the “good” teacher/professor, whose main goal is to do his job and to do it well. Based on the testimonies from his former students, their education and

understanding – and, therefore, their academic and intellectual growth – took precedence over other important matters in education, such as boundaries and ethical soundness. In doing so, Jones also followed the downward trajectory of the standard dark academic protagonist, whose enthusiasm and skills in an academic setting is undermined only by his personal ambition, regardless of noble or corrupt intentions. Unfortunately (or otherwise, if only for the sake of more dark academic content) this pattern recurs in nonfiction more often than is discussed. Other morally gray experiments, such as those conducted by Milgram and Zimbardo, come readily to mind, each with plenty of their own adaptations and films; the former has been depicted in *Atrocity* (2005) and *Experimenter* (2015), while the latter has been the subject of *Das Experiment* (2001) and *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015).

In true dark academic fashion, Alexander Maksik’s 2011 novel *You Deserve Nothing* collects the best and worst parts of academia and combines them intrinsically to produce “a novel so rivetingly plotted and beautifully written that you forget its shopworn premise” (Langer), according to a *NY Times Book Review*. The main protagonist Will Silver follows seems to check off all boxes as to the type of instructor he is; in the more close-knit manner of the Ancient Greeks, Silver claims that he and his students “become a family. It is a kind of love affair” (20). Unfortunately, that is exactly what happens when he embarks on a sexual relationship with a high school student at the International School of France where he teaches literature. He also adopts a Romanesque classroom policy of learning through debate and rhetoric, and only rarely asks students to leave when they arrive unprepared or, in the case of one girl who repeatedly replies, “Whatever”, unwilling to properly engage in classroom discussions. As long as they actively contribute to the group, he is even comfortable playing the role of

classroom adversary, though his character inclines him to be more understanding and sympathetic than otherwise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Silver's "charismatic and engaging, even life-changing [lessons]...draw comparisons to Robin Williams' character in 'Dead Poet's Society'" (Strauss), in book reviews and even by other characters. One student particularly infatuated with Silver, Gilad, comments on the his teacher's singular ability to connect to his students by explaining, "Teachers in movies are always leaping onto tables and sacrificing their lives for their students and their love of literature but the truth is that you rarely, rarely take a class from a teacher who cares. It's just unrealistic" (169). The largely philosophical classroom debates about free will, ethical choices, personal responsibility, and existentialism leave room for unfiltered thought and deeply personal bonds to grow and flourish (and eventually crumble); Silver relishes the freedom he has been given to build the course "from scratch without the influence of an English department" (89), and the vast majority of students respond in kind, as Gilad praises, "You know, I think maybe I've learned more in a month than I've ever learned anywhere" (119). Silver's personal values too are traditionally noble; "You speak seriously, earnestly, and you believe in what you're saying... You show them that you love the books, the ideas, learning, philosophy, something" (87). But upon closer inspection, Silver's ideas of teaching hint at a more performative, egocentric hue;

"You wonder if the pleasure you feel upon returning to school lies exclusively in the performing, in being adored...

You're standing on stage, presenting yourself, happy to be back. Which is not to say that you don't believe in teaching, because you do. There are few things you believe in more



and you want to do something good. But along with that comes the wonder of standing before a group of people who love you, who imagine that you are strong and wise.

All that attention, it's hard to resist. And if you're honest you acknowledge that before you ever became a teacher you imagined your students' reverence, your ability to seduce, the stories you'd tell, the wisdom you'd impart. You know that teaching is a combination of theater and love, ego and belief. You know that the subject you teach isn't nearly as important as how you use it." (86-88)

Silver, however, also fits the role of the less upstanding professorial prototype. In accordance with (Deresiewicz argues) the public mind's inability to shake the notion of illicit classroom relationships as being the primary interest of academic life, Silver also embarks on a sexual relationship with a high school student at the International School of France where he teaches literature. Once more, a humanities instructor – though this time almost brimming with what Williams calls “altruistic interest” – falls short of the standards that are expected of him.

Passion and enthusiasm certainly have their place in academia; without them, the world of the academe would be considerably smaller. Silver welcomes and encourages his students to feel strongly in order so that they may think deeply and learn successfully, but – also on-brand for dark academia – unintentionally allows those passions to abound unbridled and unchecked. In school, he allows his students to rifle through his lunch as they eat and gossip with him; off-campus, he accompanies them to both chaperoned parties and nightclubs. Gilad later recalls how “Mr. Silver was the first person I'd fallen in love with. Not that there was sexual desire. Or maybe there was. It's hard to say. Any time you love someone that intensely, anytime you want to *be* loved that badly, sexual desire is always part of it” (169-170). Perhaps Silver's fault is his misplaced trust in his students to be able to differentiate their passion for their classes from their

teacher. He and his students reach out to each other, and he counts the openness of this relationship as an inherently good thing; unfortunately, he fails to curb their affection until it has already ruined his career and Marie's life.

The passage above, then, reads less like a character study of Silver than a confession from Maksik himself – though, when provided with the larger context of the novel, it may certainly serve as both. Following the book's publication and distribution, "several one-star reviews appeared on Amazon.com, from commenters alleging that they were former students at the American School of Paris who were disgusted by the book" (Italie); they claimed that the novel had been based on true events, and their accusations were followed and substantiated by a more detailed article by Elissa Strauss on a *Jezebel* blog. When gathering reports, reviews, and testimonies from multiple sources, a picture of the author's inspiration for the novel comes more clearly into view.

Maksik lost his teaching position at the American School of Paris in 2006, allegedly "for having an affair with a seventeen-year-old student. Their relationship allegedly lasted over a semester, and ended when Maksik was quietly dismissed by the school shortly after the young woman, named Marie in the book, had an abortion" (Strauss). In the novel, Marie's narration tracks her infatuation with Silver as she actively pursues him. By the conclusion, she remains staunchly loyal to him and defensive about their relationship; she "scoffs at the guidance counselor who tells her, after news of the affair gets out, that she was used and that she should be angry. Her last line in the book is: 'I still dream about him.' Real-life 'Marie,' however, felt taken advantage of and violated" (Strauss).

Maksik has protested any direct comparisons drawn between his work and his personal life, allowing that "Clearly there are parallels, clearly there are similarities. But I was never such

a talented teacher. I was never so charismatic. I never had legions of fans” (Italie). He also stated that he and “Marie” “remained in touch while he was working on the novel, and she knew he was writing it...[but] she ceased communication after “You Deserve Nothing” came out” (Italie). Strauss contests that “Maksik never asked her for permission” having apparently emailed “Marie” when writing for *Jezebel*. His publisher Kent Carroll, however, made a point of taking legal precautions after “We identified a whole series of things — names of people, names of streets in Paris, descriptions of buildings — that we thought might be close to real people, real places — and we had all of those changed” (Italie).

But any arguments made by Maksik and Carroll have been largely decried by the former ASP students, who confirm that “nearly everything that happens in the book happened in real life, and almost all the characters are based on real people” (Strauss). With regard to parallels drawn between Maksik and Silver, Strauss writes that

“Former students of Maksik say he was a very popular teacher, and many saw him as a mentor. Some said that he treated them like adults and got them thinking about life's big questions. They say that anyone who reads the novel can get a sense of the way he taught because many of the conversations in the book were lifted directly from ones they had in class. A few I spoke with said they felt that he courted adoration – he flirted with girls and would eat lunch and play sports with boys – but even they concede that he was an inspiring teacher for many, which made the initial betrayal of the student-teacher affair, coupled with the second betrayal of publishing a novel about their lives, all the harder to cope with.”

One testimony from Siobhan Steen, a former ASP student and “close friend” of “Marie,” directly addressed editor Alice Sebold in her one-star Amazon review of the novel:

“Within the author’s retelling of my senior year of high school every plot point of significance was lifted directly from reality. The characters can all be generally identified as real teachers and students, all the major events are true, and the chronology is accurate.

Everyone from ASP has been talking non-stop about this book from the first press-release on. Rumors and speculation have been making the rounds, and now that we all have read it, there is more gossip still. This book stirred up a lot of unnecessary and unwanted memories for everyone, especially for the young woman in question.”

The identity of “Marie” has been kept private, but one can still well imagine her trauma of having to revisit this period of her life. Straus and Steen offer some insight from their own correspondence with her; Strauss reports that the woman is “disgusted that he is getting literary kudos for re-telling her very real story. She said Maksik included a number of very personal things she told him in confidence in the book, and that she has worked for the past five years to move past the shame and guilt she felt as a result of the affair only to re-encounter it all again in a widely praised novel.” Steen also adds that the woman “has received emails from former teachers inquiring how she “feels” about the book.”

On Maksik’s part, an interview with The Associated Press reported him as being “as regretful about his private behavior as he is forceful about his right to use it for his novel, one he thinks should be liked or dismissed based on the quality of the book itself” (Italie). In that case, *You Deserve Nothing* may be counted as a success; even Steen admits that “it’s not a bad book, I read it in one 5 hour sitting,” and the *NY Times Book Review* praises the way in which Maksik “writes about the moral ambiguity of Will’s circumstances with dazzling clarity and impressive philosophical rigor” (Langer).

Despite the controversy both on and off of the page, there remains a clear effort to preserve Silver as a fundamentally good man. Readers argue that he “either succumbs to the flirtations or preys upon the insecurities of Marie” (Langer), even as the latter retains a stubborn loyalty to Silver and her relationship with him until her last words. Conversely, Silver “becomes more and more stoic as he assumes the role of the seduced. The affair is something that happens to Will, rather than something he does” (Strauss). His lessons about free will and choice ultimately do him no good, as he goes through his world “acutely aware of his powerlessness, his inadequacy and his alienation from his emotions” (Langer). In trying to avoid blame for his wrongdoings, Silver inadvertently becomes the washed out, beaten-down stereotype of the professor that his devoted students praised him for avoiding. Does this mean that a teacher who participates in an illicit affair with a high school student is morally superior, just because he retains his autonomy, resolution, and responsibility? Gilad seems to lean toward *yes*, as he ruminates over Silver’s singular appeal which sets him apart from the rest of the faculty:

“That’s why the ones who stay are so often some of the most depressing people you’ve ever met in your life. It has nothing to do with their age. They’ve stayed because of their disposition – bitter, bored, lacking in ambition, lonely, and mildly insane. With few exceptions, these are the people who are capable of staying in a school. This is what it takes to teach for half a life-time. The ones who care, who love the subjects, who love their students, who love, above all, teaching – they rarely hang around.” (169)

Silver’s dilemma becomes a double-edged sword; if he truly is the active and assertive leader who prioritizes his students above all else, then the scandal with Marie is his fault. On the other hand, if this man is ultimately a susceptible target trapped in a state of powerlessness against the

whims of the world, then he may be painted as a victim of his doing – and thus expose himself as a failure in the eyes of his admiring students and colleagues.

In Maksik’s case, there is virtually no trace of the events depicted in his novel. According to Steen, “he wasn’t fired from the school, simply asked to resign, which I will attribute to the cowardice of the school board and their aversion to negative publicity. From what I understand the incident never went on his record” (Steen). In his own way, Maksik was given the option to quietly step away from the mess he’d made at ASP, and it appears that he took it.

Hillel Italie posits that Maksik “wanted to tell a story of moral failure,” and he has. Thus, *You Deserve Nothing* fits neatly among the ranks of dark academia. Far from being merely a midlife crisis novel about a teacher’s grossly indecent conduct, the novel stresses Silver’s passion for his field, his work, and his job, even if the integrity of his motivations are somewhat debatable. Classroom scenes are as frequent and full of detail as the private lives of each of the novel’s three narrators (Silver, Gilad, and Marie), and the ideas discussed therein greatly affect and foreshadow the rest of the story. Simultaneously dark and academic, the inclusion of and praise for *You Deserve Nothing* might warrant some hesitancy, due to the flood of controversy surrounding its origins and author; in response, I call attention to a comment made by Silver about Gilad: “I like him. He makes me want to be good” (159). The desire to “be good” is not a trademark of a villain, but of a fundamentally human person. And I believe that, in the world of the academe formed for the ultimate purpose of bettering ourselves, that sentiment warrants this singularly controversial novel a place on the dark academic shelf. *You Deserve Nothing* seems to have one foot in fiction (the genre in which it was marketed) and the other in nonfiction (or autobiography, as was suggested by Steen), but this vagueness allows for an exceptional distinction among a genre whose capacities are only beginning to show themselves.

That is not to say that this trend of fictionalizing real events should continue; in fact, to do so is a grave disservice informed by extremely poor judgement. It reduces real people to mere characters, dismisses and reduces their genuine experiences to hypotheticals, and, most dangerously of all, compels us to let down our guard so that these injustices may happen again. These stories of moral quandaries and ethical corruption may continue emerge from the very bones of the academic world; surely there are plenty to be found in the institution's long and expansive history. But there is a shameful tendency to deny these histories and auto/biographies the seriousness they should be met with by obscuring reality with fiction, and there is no good reason for it. Dark academia is stocked with plenty of fictional works. The genre could use more nonfictional content; and if there is no lack of these real accounts, the moral – and brave – choice is to tell these stories as they are.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Dark academia's history is long-established, if somewhat unrecognized; Boys argues that "most novels centering about academic life demonstrate strikingly that we have had very little first-rate fiction in this field. Certainly the material is ample enough and rich, but with very few exceptions the writers have failed to capture the spirit" (381), and "few books present such a balanced study" (385) of the highs of academia with the depths of its darkness. He continues with something of a want ad:

"The book we are looking for, then, must have the authenticity of detail, but it must have a certain universality which will lift it above the interest of any particular college or age. It must show us all kinds of students and all kinds of teachers, not just the malcontents, nor, on the other hand, the completely uncritical, satisfied individuals. Most of our college fiction has lacked this sense of proportion. Furthermore, most of this fiction reflects an uncompromising bitterness toward the system, which may explain why most of our fiction about college is satire, often amusing, often needed, but not telling the whole truth." (387)

And the truth is, the world of the academe has undergone tremendous change in the last century or two, and the narratives of this genre can often fail to accurately convey the landscape and climate of the academic world. Regarding its inhabitants, for example, the demographics of both students and professors alike have dramatically changed, though the amount of dark academic content that focuses on these newer arrivals is fewer in number, and "although faculty wives and coeds have been given human dimension...the professional heroine is still a rare



breed” (Barasch 33-34). Some works address the introduction and advancement of women in their fields and/or academic lives include Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), Meg Wolitzer’s *Sleepwalking* (1982), Elizabeth Percer’s *An Uncommon Education* (2012), and Jenny Davidson’s *The Magic Circle* (2013), as well as the films *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) and *The Woods* (2006).

Regarding LGBT+ representation, many established works whose characters attend a unisex institution have become the subjects of largely informal speculation for homosexual or homoerotic undertones, such as Neil Perry and Todd Anderson in *Dead Poets Society*, or Gene and Phineas in John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace* (1959). In later years, readers have been presented with more overt LGBT+ characters (usually gays or lesbians), as seen in Francis Abernathy of *The Secret History* (with room for speculation for other characters), Posner in *The History Boys* (though the play’s depictions of homosexuality are largely predatory, despite the author’s own identity as a gay man), and Oliver, James, and Alexander in M. L. Rio’s *If We Were Villains* (2017).

Even less overt, unfortunately, are people of color. Most dark academic works include one or two characters of color at best, such as Francis in *The Night Climbers*, Yin in *The Bellwether Revivals*, and Jun in *An Uncommon Education*. On screen, representation is marginally better; four of the main characters of ABC’s *How to Get Away with Murder* are people of color, led by black bisexual female law professor Annalise Keating (in an extraordinary and gripping performance by Viola Davis). Aside from Keating (perhaps a reference to another acclaimed fictional teacher), the only other instance of a character who checks all three boxes – a non-heterosexual woman of color – is the protagonist Charulata Apte of Nayana Currimbhoy’s 2011 novel *Miss Timmins’ School for Girls*. All these examples are a

good start for representation of demographics who have been barred from the doors of the academe for the better part of its history; but there should be more narratives focusing on these characters.

Interestingly, the most diverse aspect of dark academic works in recent years has been its fields of study. Once largely restricted to the classics and the literary canon, there is now a wider range of studies. Though the humanities remain as prevalent as they have ever been, additional topics of interest have emerged as well. English, literature, and poetry are the focus of works such as *Dead Poets Society* and *You Deserve Nothing*. The subject of history is a particular focus of *The History Boys*, *The Wave*, and *Peace Breaks Out*. Legal studies dominate *How to Get Away with Murder*, while matters of religion come to the forefront of Kate Henry's 2018 novel *Heretics Anonymous*. Regarding the performing arts, music is an integral part of Eleanor Catton's *The Rehearsal* (2008) and *The Bellwether Revivals*, while theater (specifically Shakespeare) takes center stage in *If We Were Villains* and *An Uncommon Education*. As for the sciences, psychology is as vital to Chloe Benjamin's *The Anatomy of Dreams* (2014) as botany is to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter* (1884). Even game theory is discussed at length in Jenny Davidson's *The Magic Circle* (2013), as is the subject of magic in Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House* (2019).

With all of this in mind, Boys' claim that "perhaps it can never be, but certainly the great college novel remains to be written" (385) sounds more like a challenge than a discouraged response. (Though, to be fair, Donna Tartt was still a sophomore at Bennington College when he wrote this, nine years before *The Secret History* was published.) Instead, I call attention to another statement from Boys, that "our chances of getting a first-rate American college novel are better now than ever before" (385). While dark academia has certainly yielded a satisfactory

number of high-quality works, the genre is still small enough that there is plenty of room for more.

My own hopes for the future of dark academia are high, and they lie with those who have been using this term lovingly (even excessively) to define their collective interests, aesthetics, and even fashions. I was first introduced to “dark academia” online, where the genre’s fans often draw parallels between the individual content they discover or hear about, and I too fell into this kind of game of making connections. Because content has been stretched so thin, fans of dark academia are always eager for more to surface, in literature, film, the arts, television, or any other type of media. Luckily, this enthusiasm has brought with it ideas for more dark academic stories which purposely cast off the dusty clothes of the genre’s ancestry in favor of new styles, themes, and characters. From the sentiment gathered from these individuals, I believe that dark academia is not only facing a transformation, but a revolution. Perhaps, finally, this unrecognized genre will finally be shown the attention and reception it deserves.

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