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## "The Secret History" of Hamden Campus : A Study in Elitism and Murder

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Evangelia Kyriakidou

***The Secret  
History of  
Hamden Campus:  
A Study in Elitism  
and Murder***

When people hear of violent crimes, murder, rape, mugging, their mind immediately wanders off to some urban dystopia. We instinctively—and perhaps statistically too-expect to encounter such forms of deviant behavior and violence in urban centers. The peaceful, idyllic setting of a University Campus can hardly fit the description of a scene of a violent crime, as the University has long been associated with humanistic values and belief in man's capacity for improvement. However, University Campuses are not angelic topoi set aside for study, reflection and high culture but a microcosm of society with all its negative connotations. Violent crimes have very often shaken the Ivory Tower of Academia in the USA and have inspired authors to give life to this idiosyncratic subgenre: the campus murder novel. In February 1992 a 20 year old Berkeley student was found stabbed to death in the campus office of a student organization. In April of the same year a male body was found in Vermont near a University Campus. The first event was reported in the *Los Angeles Times* while the second comes from Donna Tartt's acclaimed and commercially successful novel *The Secret History*. In the words of Alexander Star, Tartt's novel "is an elaborately conceived and artistically ambitious thriller that turns not on the quest for tenure or pills, but on such matters as "sin unpunished, innocence destroyed, and evil passing itself as good" (47). The aim of this essay is to examine how the academic landscape serves as an ideal place for the plot, how it interacts with characters and in fact becomes a character itself, taking as a vantage point Tartt's best-selling novel *The Secret History*.

In Tartt's *The Secret History* Hampden College, a thinly veiled Bennington College-Tartt's Alma Mater, is depicted as the quintessential Vermont College: small, elite, picturesque, and in New England. The narrator of *The Secret History*, Richard Papen had been in love with Hampden Campus even before laying eyes on it; through the college's brochure. Richard, a nineteen year old boy from Plano, California is inundated with escape fantasies from his rather bleak surroundings. Richard admits to have spent dozens of hours during his senior year in high school studying Hamden College catalogue; "studying the photographs as though if (he) stared at them long enough (he) would by some kind of osmosis, be transported into the clear, pure silence (10). Richard lived his whole life in Plano California, a hot, dusty place, full of harsh, transparent light that exposed reality for what it was. Richard opts for the foggy, autumnal, mysterious twilight of Vermont that leaves space for dreaming and imagination. Full of faith in the historical importance of the place and motivated by his love for the picturesque, Richard applies for the position despite his poor financial situation and his parents' disapproval. He is not deterred by such obstacles as for him becoming part of Hampden means more than simply escaping the dull existence of his parents; it means fashioning a new identity for himself, creating his own home, just like Jay Gatsby with whom he feels he shares "certain tragic similarities"(79). Richard's dreams of fashioning a new identity for himself are inextricably linked to attending University. One would surmise that his expectations are in tandem with the expectations of an entire nation since in the American imagination university matriculation has been linked with the democratizing potential of society. However, Richard longs for the enclosed, elitist, old-fashioned campus. My assertion is that the democratic vision of the University is perceived differently for Richard and his elite classmates: this becomes evident through their diverse negotiation of space as well as through their act of ultimate deviance planned within University premises. Their murderous plotting further underlines their

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privileged social position within the campus which is supposed to be imbued with egalitarian and democratic values.

Richard's hatred of his birthplace and desire for change of home explain his lengthy descriptions of the picturesque, historical buildings of Hampden College. These detailed depictions of the built space reveal his need to create space for daydreaming, fantasizing different layers of shades and light that would permit the creation of nuances and echoes of past ages. This should not come as a surprise as this lack had been already identified by Henry James. Speaking in the context of the correlation between artistic creation and one's surroundings Henry James in his book about Hawthorne attributed the inability to produce great art in America during its founding decades to the lack of certain things that he deemed necessary to inspire an artist.

No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! (Griffith 10)

Similarly, Richard feels that Plano cannot help him fulfill his potential and that he can be a new man only by leaving “dusty Plano” behind him. In an interesting passage from the novel Richard admits that: “For a long time I looked at a picture of a building called the Commons. It was suffused with a weak academic light—different from Plano, different from anything I had even known—a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books and silence” (10). Richard becomes a kind of artist himself thanks to Hamden's idyllic spaces: first because by assuming the role of the narrator in this secret history he “writes” the story we are reading but more importantly because he re-writes himself in his new home, Hampden.

When Richard finally makes it and goes to study at Hampden he realizes that the actual campus does not fall short of his expectations, at least at first sight. In a very telling excerpt Richard explains how he could not sleep his first night at Hamden dormitories:

I sat on the bed during the twilight while the walls went slowly from gray to gold to black, listening to a soprano's voice climbing dizzily up and down somewhere at the other end of the hall until the last light of day was completely gone [...] and I can't remember the air ever seeming as high and cold and rarefied as it was that night, or ever feeling farther away from the low-slung lines of dusty Plano. (12)

Richard is intoxicated by the beauty of his surroundings; he describes himself as “roaming like a sleepwalker, stunned and drunk by beauty” (12). Richard's behavior displays a certain aesthetic pleasure which implies some sophistication and culture, all associated with the Campus, all the exact opposite from his birth place. His extensive descriptions of the campus buildings, the

dormitories, the Commons clock tower “ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance” (12) echo a sense of enthrallment with his gothic surroundings. Gothic architecture is a landmark collegiate architecture as it evokes America’s obsession with the old, with history. The first American colleges tried hard to emulate Oxford and Cambridge in an effort to look as if they continue a long line of learning in the Anglophone world. Woodrow Wilson famously said about the gothic revival of Princeton:

By the very simple device of building our new buildings in the Tudor Gothic style we seem to have added a thousand years to the history of Princeton, by merely putting those lines in our buildings which point every man’s imagination to the historical traditions of learning in the English-speaking race (qtd. in Meyer 12)

Richard who bitterly admits that “nothing I knew of in Plano had been established much before 1962” (10) is attracted to the romantic, gothic, historical buildings of Hamden. Undoubtedly, Richard Papan, a man who, in the very first lines of his narration, admits that his “fatal flaw” is “a morbid longing for the picturesque” (5) is the definition of a topophilic personality, if I could take the liberty to coin such a word inspired by Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard talked about topoanalysis and topophilia in his 1958 work *The Poetics of Space*. Topophilia—from Greek *topos*/ place and *-philia*/ love is a strong sense of place, which is often mixed with the sense of cultural identity among certain people and a love of certain aspects of such a place.

So far we have witnessed Richard’s positive attitude towards one domesticated place: Hamden Campus. Another built space that offers a representation of predominantly positive responses, topophilia, is Francis cottage in Hamden County. Francis Abernathy is one of Richard’s new classmates in Hamden. Francis comes from a very wealthy family; in fact his mother had him when she was only seventeen and his affluent grandparents raised both his mother and him as siblings sparing no expense. The first time Richard visits Francis’s aunt’s house in the country he is taken aback by the grandeur of the place. It was tremendous with turrets and pikes, a widow’s walk (Tartt 84). However, it is not only the size and architecture of the house that has an impact on Richard, but also the sense of history and ancestry it evokes. The walls of the rooms that Richard is ushered through are lined with portraits and photographs of Francis’s family (84). In one of the pictures, as Francis explains, poses his grandmother’s brother who “went down with the Titanic, poor thing. They found his tennis racket floating in the North Atlantic three weeks afterward” (84).

The reference to the Titanic is not a random one. Francis family is not only so old and so wealthy to have been able to travel with the Titanic, which was admittedly a luxury for the few, but more than that Francis’s family in this way becomes part of the American lineage. The privilege shared by Francis’s family is further accentuated by the description of the cottage’s library. The sight of the latter causes Richard to stare in amazement:

(G)lass-fronted bookcases and Gothic panels, stretching fifteen feet to a frescoed and plaster-medallioned ceiling. In the back of the room was a marble fireplace, big as a sepulcher, and a globed gasolier-dripping with prisms and strings of crystal beading-sparkled in the dim” (85)

Not only is the library luxurious and impressive, invoking the past, inhabited by many generations of noble men and echoes of past presences, that in the flat and one-dimensional light of California do not exist, but also full to the brim with rare collections of books bound in red leather or pale calfskin (85). The detailed description of the rare and expensive looking books in the library represents the objectified state of Bourdieu's cultural capital which will be analyzed further in the essay.

These lengthy descriptions help to emphasize the elitist nature of this group of students who are privileged enough to move freely in and out of these equally privileged domesticated spaces: the campus and the cottage, both burdened with history and shadows of the past. However, the very title warns us that appearances can be deceptive. As literary critic Pieter Steinz has observed, Tartt borrows the title *The Secret History* from the sixth century court historian Procopius' chronicles of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, because both books give accounts of "a horrible reality underlying a façade of normality" (25).

This façade of normality is soon to be broken by an intruder to the academic world of Hamden. Richard, an outsider in all respects and purposes, notices the coterie of the five select Greek students and wants to be one of them. These students are described as "intensely cultivated" (32) and distinct from the rest of the college in various ways: they are wearing pale clothes, as opposed to the black-clad student body at Hamden, they walk together around campus, they take classes with Julian Morrow, a very eccentric teacher who insists that students need only one teacher, and, most importantly, they are geographically separated from the rest of the college since their class is situated in the far end of the campus, in a building which is abandoned. This place is called the Lyceum. This is a reference to Ancient Greek Academics, most commonly associated with Aristotle. The Lyceum at Hamden is located near a grove of trees exactly like the original Lyceum in Classical Athens. The Ancient Lyceum was connected to one of the manifestations of Apollo (Apollo Lykeios)<sup>1</sup> so Hamden's Lyceum is the haven of the Apollonian spirit where only Julian and his students are allowed and only they are privileged enough to experience the sublime during their classes there. As a place the Lyceum is very powerful in an academic, Apollonian sense; it is the realm of reason. In the Lyceum it is not only the world of non-academics which is excluded but also the world of chaos and disorder. It is not coincidental that after Bunny's murder the grove outside the Lyceum "was trampled and littered like a fairgrounds" (395). The crowds of people helping in the search for Bunny had trespassed this selective place and in a sense desecrated it. This desecration could be interpreted as a violation of the world of reason by the spirit of chaos (Dionysus). It is reminiscent of the war between these binary opposites: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Hamden Lyceum, a primarily Apollonian place, is not for the uninitiated. Its material construction heightens this inaccessibility. Richard himself admits that finding the Lyceum "wasn't easy at all" (15). He describes it as "a small building on the edge of campus, old and covered with ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from its landscape. Downstairs were lecture halls and classrooms, all of them empty, with clean blackboards and freshly waxed floors" (15). Julian's Greek class congregates in a room that can be found only by following a "staircase-small and badly

1 Encyclopedia Britannica, "Lyceum", <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/352514/Lyceum> (9/9/2015)

lit-in the far corner of the building” (15). The classroom’s privileged status is conveyed by the difficulty of accessing it, both metaphorically and literally/physically. Richard expresses his wish to join the Greek class as he feels that only by grouping with them will he ever belong somewhere:

I envied them [the Greek students], and found them attractive; moreover this strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated. [...] I wanted to be like them. It was heady to think that these qualities were acquired ones and that, perhaps, that was the way I might learn them (32–33)

In this indicative ‘window’ to Richard’s thoughts, we recognize the traces of Bourdieu’s cultural capital; Bourdieu talks about the cultural capital as that which will infallibly identify you to others as a person of a certain culture with a similar trajectory in life (Bourdieu 471). He divides it in three sub-categories: the embodied state (pronunciation, dialect), the objectified state (cultural goods, such as books, records) and the institutionalized state (the educational qualifications one acquires). Richard who comes from a working class environment and whose cultural background is very low struggles to go to Hampden in order to acquire the institutionalized cultural capital that will enable him to become one of the others; the bourgeois students he so much admires. At the same time, Bourdieu’s reference to the objectified state of cultural capital is highlighted by his predilection for libraries and books. The embodied state he hopes to acquire is reflected in his realization that “it was heady to think that these qualities were acquired ones and, perhaps, that was the way I might learn them” (32–33). With these words Richard reverberates the Greek jurists who made a distinction between the inherited qualities one has (*ta patroa*) and the acquired ones (*epikteta*). Richard lies about his roots and tries to emulate bourgeois tastes and behavior throughout the novel in his effort to be included in the group of Greek students. Bunny, who is the least affluent of them all but is extremely sensitive to commodities that define class hierarchies, incessantly afflicts Richard with comments that always verge on exposing his modest origins. Richard admits that Bunny “Even in the happiest times, ....made fun of my Californian accent, my secondhand overcoat and my room barren of tasteful bibelots” (250) and that he would play tricks on him just to embarrass him in front of their friends. Richard knows that there is no way he can really infiltrate this tight group of elite students other than knowledge.

In a scene laden with symbolic meaning, Richard gains access to the close-knit group by showing off his knowledge of Greek. The students are in the College Library—the realm of knowledge—where Richard overhears them troubling themselves over which case of a noun to use in a translation of an English text to Greek. He provides them with the correct answer as if giving them a secret password through which he proves he is worthy of their attention (Tartt 21). Knowledge for him as well as for the rest of the Greek students’ group is the vehicle through which they gain power in the context of college life. At the same time, their desire to acquire the knowledge of Greek and Latin is what brought them together in the first place. It is important to note that what brings these students together and makes them equals, not in class but in that they all belong to Morrow’s select cohort, is their shared desire to explore the ancient languages of Greek and Latin, erroneously believing that

this kind of knowledge would distinguish them from the rest of the students and that it would include them in a secret, obscure and mysterious ancient world (rites) accessible only to the initiated. This knowledge does more than simply set them apart from the rest of the student body; it also differentiates from 'hoi polloi' and empowers them. Power and knowledge—as Foucault underlines—are not seen as independent discourses but are inextricably related—knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge. In the case of the students of Greek, knowledge endows them with such a sense of superiority that they feel on top of the social ladder when everyone else is placed beneath them and is—to their eyes—insignificant.

This idea of social hierarchy comes from Plato's *Republic* which they –not coincidentally– have studied in Julian Morrow's class. Julian Morrow, the highbrow Classics Professor at Hampden, during one of his enthralling lectures, reminds them of Plato's definition of Justice in the *Republic*: "Justice, in a society, is when each level of a hierarchy works within its place and is content with it. A poor man who wishes to rise above his station is only making himself needlessly miserable" (235). With this line of reasoning in mind, people's worth is directly relevant to the status attributed to him by society; the use of male pronoun is deliberate at this point because the group is exclusionary in terms of class and gender. In this way, the Greek students feel that their specific knowledge of the ancient Greek language gives them the right to treat other people as inconsequential in so far as the latter do not possess the cultural capital / power to rise above their designated status. Like their professor they employ their knowledge to justify and belittle the consequences of their actions. After they accidentally kill a farmer during a bacchanal the group experiences no remorse, only the fear of being caught. In a quite telling dialogue between them Francis says: "It is a terrible thing, what we did. I mean this man was not *Voltaire* we killed. But still. It is a shame. I feel bad about it" (220). Francis's words reflect the whole group's ideology: since the person they killed is not of the intellectual status of a *Voltaire*, he is therefore insignificant in the order of existence. They, on the other hand, are above morality, above right and wrong on account of their academic status. In a sense, they derive power from the fact that they are part of the university while they disregard the farmer who is an uneducated 'townie'. We see here the spatial distinction between the campus as a privileged setting and what lies outside its limits. It is not a coincidence that both the farmer's and the second murder they commit, that of their friend Bunny, take place outside the campus; the Greek students understand that a murder on campus would possibly contaminate it, desecrate it so they design to do it outside the campus. Nevertheless, all the planning for Bunny's murder takes place on campus thus rendering the academic spaces strangely unfamiliar; *Unheimlich*. Using the Freudian term rather loosely here, I contend that the once homely (*Heimlich*) campus spaces take on a sinister, unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*) quality when the murderous plot is deployed on site (cf. Freud 1955).

Plotting to kill their second victim, Bunny, in the academic space of the campus the students render the campus an *unheimlich*, uncanny terrain. Bunny, who is the 'bad student' and functions as their foil in *The Secret History*, is nothing but a hindrance to them. He is not their intellectual equal and on top of that he dares to blackmail them relentlessly. They see no other solution but to get rid of him. In this respect, it is particularly ironic when they discuss killing him in the college's dining room which is called the Commons; the dining room is named the Commons to denote the democratic spirit of the



University, a place commonly shared by people who are intellectually equal. However, even in the university there are certain hierarchies defined by the acquired cultural capital. In this sense the knowledge of the classics is above all other disciplines since it is considered an esoteric field of knowledge. In fact, it is a subject only for the few, only for an oligarchy. Especially, taking into account the impracticality of studying ancient Greek and Latin we are led to understand that people who study this branch of knowledge are not pressed to enter the workplace hence they are probably scions of a wealthy family that have all the time in the world to pursue intellectual pleasure. This is knowledge for knowledge's sake. And the ability to partake in the use of this specific discourse is what makes them even more aloof and powerful on campus.

Apart from the Commons, another place rendered uncanny by the group of students who plan to murder Bunny is the dormitory. Richard's initial description of the dormitories, which weren't "even dorms [...] but white clapboard houses with green shutters, set back from the Commons in groves of maple and ash" (11), and of his room in the dorms which was "a white room, with big north-facing windows, monkish and bare, with scarred Oak floors and a ceiling slanted like a garret's" (12) come into stark contrast with what actually takes place in these romanticized topoi of the intellect: it is in this room in the dorms that Henry and Richard talk about the right dosage of poisonous mushrooms to do away with Bunny during a dinner between friends (257–263). In the same dorm room Bunny proceeds to a drunken confession of what he knows about the farmer's murder to a stunned Richard (273–276). Immediately after this confession, Richard describes a nightmarish milieu in the place of his once perfect haven of a room: "the objects in the room seemed to swell and recede with each thump of my heart" (276) and instead of the voice of a soprano, what he had heard on his first night on campus, Richard hears "diabolical rap music" floating "from the Opposite building" (276). The room and its objects acquire human agency, they become living creatures whose dimensions and weight grow. Once again, Tartt shows how the setting with its distinctive traits becomes a protagonist; the platform on which Tartt stages the plot.

We know from the start that this close knit group of students murdered two people so every description of a glorious campus lit with an Apollonian light immediately assumes a double meaning: what seems familiar, safe and sophisticated, becomes at once unfamiliar, precarious and primitive (233). Tartt chillingly depicts this group of handsome, educated, young people discussing how to kill their friend Bunny after class, walking around campus, in the Commons Room after dinner, in their dorm rooms. If someone looked at them from afar, this group of bespectacled boys, well dressed, well behaved, accompanying a beautiful girl, carrying heavy books, they would believe they were discussing philosophy or trying to translate something in Greek. In fact, this group was "painfully aware of that metaphoric vial of nitroglycerin which Bunny carried around with him, day and night, and which, from time to time, he allowed (them) a glimpse of, unless anyone forget it was always with him, and he had the power to dash it to the floor whenever he pleased" (245). This "vial of nitroglycerin" changes their well-ordered and austere surroundings to some nightmarish landscape. Bunny's annoying singing "The Farmer in the Dell" before Julian's class starts unsettles everyone even though at face value it is just an innocent children's song (101). There are several instances when Bunny justifies his secret nickname *Cuniculus Molestus*, annoying rabbit in Latin, (213) and manages to unnerve his peers no matter their surroundings:

Bunny reading excerpts of the article “Mysterious Death in Battenkill County” in the Commons Room during lunch time (206); Bunny greeting his friends in class with a very snide “Khairei deerslayers” (204). Bunny’s choice of blackmailing his friends in the democratic place of the college dining room and the classroom is especially important and renders his blackmail all the more powerful as his ominous utterances manage to subvert the spirit of equality and sharing that these campus spaces promote. The constant references to Bakchoi, maenads, omophagia, and Dionysus which are the backbone of *The Secret History* come to stark contrast with the Apollonian element that is supposed to be running through an educational institution.

The Greek students’ choice of conspiring to kill their friend in the democratic place of the college is especially important and renders their plans even more terrible as their cold, ominous utterances manage to subvert the spirit of equality and moral uplifting that the campus landscape promotes. Despite the fact that a campus remains deeply rooted in popular American imagination as the space where the lower class can find a way out of its ills and up the social ladder, Tartt’s narrative comes to shatter dreams of education being an ideological apparatus that democratizes and preserves the myth of equal opportunities for all. Thus, spatial modalities both in the text and landscape are subverted and a foundational crisis of meaning in the campus is created.

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2 Khairei is Ancient Greek for Hello, and the ominous sounding word deerslayers has a double meaning here, first it refers to the novels plot: after accidentally killing the farmer during one of their Bacchanals the group of friends return to Francis’s cottage where they see Bunny and in order to justify their bloody appearance they fabricate a story involving them running over a deer. The second connotation the word has is related to the God Dionysus since his votaries, in a drunken frenzy, would commit all kinds of atrocities including killing animals and wearing their hides.