

# Ambition, Fantasy and Belonging Within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

Tabitha Gresty

Within *The Secret History*, the desire to belong - and forcing others to belong - is a destructive force, due to the deception it requires and the dangerous fantasies that create this desire. This essay demonstrates the impact of social class, familial psychology, and gender upon belonging within the novel and resolves that belonging is a fallacy as none of the characters match their fantasy of who they want to be or should be. Thus, *The Secret History* explores the notions of ambition and identity, illustrating the effect of these notions upon belonging. The characters of Richard Papen, Camilla Macauley and Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran respectively represent the difficulties facing them of social class, gender and dysfunctionality of family. Due to the desire of the classics students to embody the classical world with the bacchanal, each of these characters cannot belong and thus, must create a fantasy self to belong. Richard must create a false world of Californian new money, Camilla becomes the object of obsession and desire, while Bunny highlights the horror of this world and thus must be eliminated. This essay concludes that, in trying to belong, these characters are left empty as the fantasies they have created serve them no more. Thus, belonging becomes a destructive and chaotic force.

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# Ambition, Fantasy and Belonging Within *The Secret History*

Tabitha B Gresty

Within *The Secret History*, the desire to belong - and forcing others to belong - is a destructive force. The deception required to fit into the classist society of the novel follows this desire.

This essay demonstrates the impact of social class, familial psychology, and gender upon belonging within the novel. The text resolves that belonging is a fallacy as none of the characters match their fantasy of who they want to be or should be. Thus, *The Secret History* explores the notions of ambition and identity, illustrating the effect of these notions upon belonging. The characters of Richard Papen, Camilla Macauley and Edmund “Bunny” Corcoran respectively represent the difficulties facing them including social class, gender and dysfunctionality of family. Due to the desire of the classics students to embody the classical world with the bacchanal, each of these characters cannot belong and thus, must create a fantasy self to belong. Richard must create a false world of Californian new money, Camilla becomes the object of obsession and desire, while Bunny highlights the horror of this world and thus must be eliminated. This essay concludes that, in trying to belong, these characters are left empty as the fantasies they have created serve them no more. Thus, belonging becomes a destructive and chaotic force.

<sup>1</sup> Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin, 1993), p.8.

Within *The Secret History*, belonging is tied to themes of friendship, patriarchy and elitism. As the only girl and only lower-class figure respectively, Camilla and Richard are love interests and yet, they cannot belong together either. Camilla is posited outside the world of classicists purely because being the token woman reduces her to an object to be desired. Due to his lower-class upbringing, Richard must concoct a fantasy to belong with them but his lower-class upbringing is ultimately what sets him apart.

Throughout the novel, Richard Papen’s desire to belong is a class struggle. His construction of a fantasy childhood allows him to join the elitist circle of classicists and, to an extent, gain their acceptance. However, being lower class sets him apart, even with this fantasy, and ultimately his belonging is demonstrated as a fallacy. His initial taste of classics is through his college Greek class, a class he only takes due to convenient timing allowing him to sleep in on Mondays.<sup>1</sup> The banality of this is a direct contrast to the bacchanal at the climax of the novel and the pinnacle of fulfillment for the classicists. The bacchanal was a Roman festival, celebrating Dionysus, the Greco-Roman god of wine, freedom and ecstasy. The cause of this banality is due to Richard’s secondary reason for taking Greek: to fulfill a humanities requirement to study to be a doctor because ‘doctors make a lot of money.’<sup>2</sup> The desire for financial success taints Richard’s motives in a way it does not taint the other classicists. Taking Greek becomes part of the mundane desire to get a satisfactory job, a need never mentioned by the others, whose future plans revolve around living in Francis’s country house, writing books and studying.<sup>3</sup> The only character who may have to

<sup>2</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.116.

get a job is Bunny but Charles only suggests the bank, which is where Bunny's father works. This indicates that this is less of a financial need and more of a family obligation.

Seemingly oblivious to this distinct class difference, Richard joins Julian's class in Ancient Greek, despite the evident elitism of his teacher. Richard's construction of his fantastical, wealthy childhood begins when he buys a formal outfit of a tweed overcoat, 'real' gold cufflinks and brown wingtips. When Julian sees him in this outfit, he 'opened the door slightly wider than he had the first time', indicating that Richard becomes more acceptable to him because of the way he dresses.<sup>4</sup> However, once again, this supplies a contrast due to his buying it at the Salvation Army. Even in the early chapters of the novel, Richard is split firmly between the elitist world of the classicists and his own lower-class childhood. Upon telling his counsellor of his plans to join Julian's class, Georges Laforgue clearly explains Julian's elitist attitudes and the distinct difference between Richard and the classicists, questioning the point of paying tuition to study under one tutor.<sup>5</sup> Julian never raises the issue of tuition and Laforgue emphasises the self-destructive nature of Richard's decision by indicating that Julian is unaware that he is on financial aid. Laforgue is aware of a risk that Richard ignores, due to his being caught up in the fantasy of belonging with the classicists.

However, this does not allow Richard to seamlessly fit into the classicists, but Julian's ignorant elitism causes much panic at the end of the novel. The risk of Richard paying for a degree he can never finish becomes very apparent when Julian leaves Hampden college. This coincides with a strong disillusionment with the classicists who do not seem to care because they have 'trust funds, allowances,

dividend checks.'<sup>6</sup> His desire to belong with them results in his ignorance that this venture may prove a very expensive and pointless venture. He fulfills his own fantasy too dearly and is brought to a crushing reality when it becomes clear that it is just a fantasy.

It should not come as a surprise to learn that one of Richard's favourite books is *The Great Gatsby* as Richard aspires to be a Gatsby but assumes the role of Nick Carraway.<sup>7</sup> He constructs the same glamour and projects the same false wealth as Gatsby but in the end, he can only observe the other classicists. He is not the centre of the story and, unlike Gatsby, he survives to tell the tale. Once he renounces his classics degree in favour of English, he manages to succeed and lead a healthy life. As Sophie Mills explores in her article on the classicists within *The Secret History*, he succeeds in a way that the classicists do not.<sup>8</sup> The twins are left romantically and geographically desolate, Henry and Bunny are dead and Francis sets upon the path of suicide attempts and a heteronormative marriage. It becomes clear that none of the classicists were able to cope with a life outside of Hampden College and the morbidity of their post-Hampden lives illustrates that their seemingly elite status was nothing more than a fantasy. Each of them strove to belong to a group where the ideal was non-existent. In the same way as Nick Carraway, when Richard emerges from Hampden, he is aware that 'all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'<sup>9</sup> However, while Nick Carraway's advantage is the wealth he was born with, Richard's is the opposite; his lower-class nature set him apart from the classicists and thus, he did not share in their fates. As Robert Hahn explores, Richard arrives in the story struck by the brilliance of the classicists in the same way Nick Carraway is struck by the glamour of Gatsby, but by the end, he emerges

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<sup>4</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, pp.28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.34.

<sup>6</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.612.

<sup>7</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.82.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Mills, 'What "Does" She Think Of Us? Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*, and the Image of Classicists', *The Classical Outlook*, 83.1 (2005), 14-16 (p.15).

<sup>9</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 2006) p.1.

from the world of the classicists and describes it as akin to Orpheus leaving the underworld.<sup>10</sup> For Richard, belonging is a fantasy and pursuing it takes him into a metaphorical hell.

The theme of belonging is also crucial to the storyline of Richard's love interest Camilla Macauley. Camilla does not belong because she is simply an object to be desired, with no intellectual force. Those who desire her do so destructively. Henry, Charles, and Richard become her protector, abuser and voyeur respectively. She is dependent on Henry's money for her protection, as he puts her up in the Albemarle which she simply can't afford. Camilla does not demonstrate any reluctance in relying on Henry for this and, when Francis and Richard discuss it, they place all the blame on Henry, absolving her.<sup>11</sup> When Richard challenges her decision to rely on Henry, rather than asking Francis for the money and moving independently, she further demonstrates that she lacks agency. In the same way the classicists within *The Secret History* rely on their families for their lifestyles, Camilla relies on Henry, even for cigarettes. Her decision to rely on Henry stems from the fact that her abuser is afraid of Henry.<sup>12</sup> She does not question whether she should be afraid of him, nor does she state that love drives her to rely on Henry.

In his first class with Julian, Richard describes Camilla as akin to *The Iliad's* Athena, the goddess of wisdom and warfare.<sup>13</sup> Yet, her only strategy in her conflict with Charles is to rely on Henry and thus, her intellectuality is diminished. This sets her apart from the classicists, to whom intellect is fundamental. In this, she subverts the theme of classicism and takes on a Gothic role of the damsel, fleeing her degenerate and incestuously motivated brother. While the role

of the damsel is not strictly gothic, this female vulnerability is tied with the erotic and incestuous villain who will ultimately disintegrate the small society of the classic students. This is fundamentally Gothic and is synonymous with anti-Classical.<sup>14</sup> Not only does Camilla lack any intellectual independence, she takes on a role in direct opposition to the world of the classics students. Therefore, her role within the group of classicists is entirely separate from their main purpose, purely because she is female.

While one could argue that Camilla's position as the desired object gives her some sexual power over the boys, her relationship with Charles contradicts this. When Richard witnesses Charles and Camilla kiss for the first time, she does not initiate it; she aims for his cheek but he instigates a 'greedy' kiss.<sup>15</sup> 'Greedy' is synonymous with consumption and within the description of the kiss, it is purely focused on Charles's hand wandering over her chin, neck and throat. Camilla does not stop or encourage him. Later, Francis and Richard speculate that Camilla and Henry are sleeping together and, given the fear Henry provokes, it would not be difficult to imagine that Camilla has limited agency in that relationship as well.<sup>16</sup> She is reduced to her sex alone and is infantilised. Finally, her relationship with Richard is potentially the most objectifying of the three. Richard equates Camilla to Athena, due to her beauty, or specifically, her face and eyes.<sup>17</sup> The earliest instance of this description of Athena is when Athena comes to warn them against battling over the claiming of a beautiful woman.<sup>18</sup> In this intertextual reference, Camilla serves as a warning for lust-driven conflict, yet this goes ignored. In the class, they discuss the

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<sup>10</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.655.

<sup>11</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.554.

<sup>12</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, pp.573-574.

<sup>13</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.43.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), p.5.

<sup>15</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.536.

<sup>16</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.555.

<sup>17</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.43.

<sup>18</sup> Homer, *The Iliad* (London: Penguin, 1950), p.28.

terror of beauty, yet Richard disregards this terror to focus on Camilla's beauty. As Mikaella Clements notes, Camilla becomes unsatisfying because she is simply an 'unsatisfying, insubstantial ghost because Richard has no interest in what lies underneath her physical allure.'<sup>19</sup> Despite being his love interest, Camilla does not belong with him; she is clearly not his intellectual equal and exists only to be physically attractive to him. They are both outcasts within the group, yet this separation does not allow Camilla to belong. Richard demonstrates this when he describes the atmosphere around Camilla as flooded with 'glorious light' and her face 'burst into a glowing bloom.' She's serving her role as physically attractive, yet his response to that is destructive. He wishes to 'strangle her,' amongst other disturbing and violent actions.<sup>20</sup> Within a novel preoccupied with classic intellectualism, Camilla stands out as a purely physical being and this reduces her to an abused child, unable to even belong with her fellow outcast who treats her exactly the same.

In conclusion, *The Secret History*, while being concerned with the notion of friendship, presents belonging as impossible. Despite being part of the patriarchal force, Richard is rejected because his lower-class origins render his friendship with them pointless and self-destructive. He is unable to keep up the fantasy of the other classicists who have the luxury of being ignorant of money and in no need of stability. Camilla is similarly discarded because she is female and cannot pretend otherwise. She becomes the fantasy to Richard; however, this does not enable her to belong and further damages her. The men reduce her to a child and, due to her inability to match their intellectuality, she is forced to accept her position as the Gothic victim. In this, she passively opposes the classicists and thus, cannot exist amongst them.

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<sup>20</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p.573.