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## **Interpretations of Sublime Terror: Death, Loss of Self and Reality in Donna Tart's *The Secret History* 1992, through Gothic-Postmodern Lens.**

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## **Dedications**

Thanks to Allah who gave me all the guidance, light and strength throughout my life.

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### **Abstract**

This Thesis reveals the features of Gothic literature in the postmodern fiction, under the interpretations of sublime terror and providing the forms that shape the notion of sublime terror: symbolic death, loss of self, and loss of reality. Reading Donna Tartt's first novel *The Secret History* 1992 through the Gothic-postmodern lens in order to explore Tartt's participations to Gothic-postmodern literary genre. The analysis includes such events as the Dionysian rituals which lead to the farmer's and the Bunny's death and its reflection on the main characters who are the narrator and his colleagues, besides the psychological impacts that confront the students as consequences of their decisions. For this study, an eclectic approach based on Jean Baudrillard's notion of sublime terror and hyperreality, Sigmund Freud's death drive theory with Lacanian's theory "the real, the second death, and *Jouissance*", and Frederic Nietzsche's Dionysian philosophy. In the end, this analysis affirms that Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* 1992 transcends the traditional Gothic literature under the meanings of sublime terror in the Gothic-postmodern literature.

### **Key Terms:**

Death drive theory, Dionysus madness, Dionysian and Apollonian philosophy, Gothic-postmodernism, loss of reality, loss of self, sublime terror, symbolic death, , *The Secret History*.

## ملخص

تكشف هذه الأطروحة عن ملامح الأدب القوطي في الخيال ما بعد الحداثة، تحت تفسيرات الإرهاب السامي وتوفير الأشكال التي تشكل مفهوم الإرهاب السامي: الموت الرمزي، وفقدان الذات، وفقدان الواقع. قراءة أول رواية لدونا تارت التاريخ السري لعام 1992 من خلال عدسة ما بعد الحداثة القوطية من أجل أستكشاف مشاركات تارت في النوع الأدبي القوطي ما بعد الحداثة. يتضمن التحليل أحداثاً مثل الطقوس الديونيزية التي تؤدي إلى وفاة المزارع وباني وانعكاسها على الشخصيات الرئيسية التي هي الراوي وزملائه، إلى جانب الآثار النفسية التي تواجه الطلاب كتبعت لقراراتهم. بالنسبة لهذه الدراسة، هناك نهج انتقائي يستند إلى مفهوم جان بودريلارد عن الإرهاب السامي والحقيقة المفرطة، ونظرية سيغموند فرويد عن دافع الموت مع نظرية لاكانيان "الحقيقي، والموت الثاني، ومجلة"، والفلسفة الديونيزية لفريدريك نيتشه. في النهاية، يؤكد هذا التحليل أن رواية دونا تارت "التاريخ السري 1992" تتجاوز الأدب القوطي التقليدي تحت معنى الإرهاب السامي في الأدب القوطي ما بعد الحداثة.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

نظرية دافع الموت، الطقوس الديونيزية، فلسفة ديونيزية لفريدريك نيتشه، القوطية ما بعد الحداثة، فقدان الذات، فقدان الواقع، الإرهاب السامي، الموت الرمزي، التاريخ السري.

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## General Introduction

Gothic literature emerged in the late of 18<sup>th</sup> Century, with the publication of Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* 1764 Original Gothic novel. This work by Horace Walpole establishes the Gothic genre's conventions, including mysterious settings, supernatural occurrences, and intricate plots. Gothic literature gains popularity in England during the late of 18<sup>th</sup> Century. After that it continues to be only a trend; Gothic as a literary genre marks its end with the end of TV serials that used to inundate media and popular culture and crosses the disciplinary boundaries beyond literary genre into varieties of popular entertainment; such as music, film, fashion, and even webs (Boutting 14). In her book *Gothic-postmodernism Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* Maria Beville acclaims that Gothic literature lacks the interest of the writers in this contemporary era, she says: "Gothic term spent most of the nineties as a buzz-word in literature and culture. Its haunting presence appears to have faded somewhat" (Beville 9).

Gothic-postmodern literary genre emerged in the late of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as a way to recreate, and deconstruct the gothic elements within the postmodern fiction. Gothic-postmodern literature tends to focus more on the psychological and philosophical aspects of horror. Moreover, it challenges the notion of absolute truth and fixed meanings; which is a key feature of postmodernism, using certain theories and concepts to identify the fusion of Gothic literature within the postmodern literary context, relying on the notion of sublime terror, because it is considered as a main aspect that binds between the Gothic literature and postmodern (Beville 17).

Sublime terror reflects on how far the contemporary society is dreadful and evokes the sense of fear, anxiety, and terror into the human psyche. This thesis uncovers the concept of



sublime terror in Gothic-postmodern fiction through Donna Tartt's 1992 *The Secret History* novel. The novel exemplifies the dark academia genre, characterized by themes of detachment and a sense of anomie that follows a group of six students at Hampden College in Vermont, New England. Who are obsessed with ancient Greek aesthetics in a way that leads them to delve into a savagery rituals which followed with two murders, in order to create the sense of suspense Donna Tartt gives all the details about the victim and the crime in the first page in the novel. In addition, Tartt writes a provocative and paradoxical statement which is "beauty is terror". The phrase and the murders play a significant role in creating horror in the novel and show the consequences of the ritual and the students' deeds. In other words, Tartt in her novel did not focus on who commit the murders or when they commit it (Manufacturing Intellect 2016), Tartt emphasizes the reflections of the crimes on the characters specially the students' minds, behaviors, and their relationships.

The thesis aims to emphasize the fusion of Gothic and postmodern literature, and how the Gothic literature transcends the traditional principles in postmodern fiction, The study examines key element that links between Gothic and postmodern literature; which is the notion of sublime terror, and involves a close reading of *The Secret History* novel to identify and analyze the Gothic-postmodern's sublime terror. The objectives of this study include an examination on how DonnaTartt transcends the traditional principles of gothic literature in *The Secret History* novel, the study locates the notion of sublime terror, as it has been the main aspect of Gothic-postmodern literary genre, and this research analyzes the Dionysian rituals from Gothic-postmodern lenses. The study resembles how the Donna Tartt subverts traditional gothic elements through a postmodern lens. The study will delve into the ways in which the novel challenges and recreate the gothic genre, while also examines the implications of this fusion for understanding the anxieties and fears of the modern world. Under the main question: How far does the Gothic literature transcend the traditional in

postmodern context, what is the main element that combines both of Gothic and postmodern literature, and how it appears in *The Secret History* novel?

The primary question shall be answered through the following sub-question:

- How far does Donna Tartt contribute in her novel *The Secret History* to the Gothic-postmodern literary genre?
- How does the portrayal of Dionysian madness participate in Gothic-postmodern context?
- What are the implications of the novel's complex narrative structure and multiple perspectives for understanding the nature of truth and the role of storytelling in Gothic-postmodern literature?

The literature review relies on analytic studies of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* 1992 from various perspectives, locating the Gothic-postmodern features in the text, and the contributions of the author to the Gothic-postmodern literary genre. Donna Tartt in one of the interviews she acclaims explicitly that she Deliberately creates the sense of suspense through evoking the main characters emotions in order to leave its impression to the readers. As well she intends to transcends and blurs the boundaries of the traditional Gothic form and move it to the postmodern context.

This analysis decodes the statements that Tartt writes in her novel "beauty is terror" which resembles the Gothic atmosphere that covers the novel mode due to the the students' pursuit for the beauty, as it analyses the students' obsession and impression towards the Dionysian rituals in the novel's story , besides the murders. Moreover, it deeply analyzes the main characters' experience that influences their decision-making process.

This thesis includes two chapters starting with General introduction and ending with General conclusion the first chapter introduces the theoretical framework for the emergence of Gothic-postmodern literature, emphasizes the main aspect of the genre which is the concept of sublime terror as a distinct element that parallel to the genre, and the three forms that helps

to shape the notion of sublime terror, using Freudian death drive theory “Thanatos” and Jacques Lacan’s the principle of *Jouissance*, the real, and the second death, in order to cover the Gothic-postmodern symbolic death. After that the research denotes on the loss of self idea from Beville’s belief that is drawn from both of Freudian and Jean Baudrillard assumptions. Finally, the study tackles Jean Baudrillard’s concepts of hyperreality, simulacra, and simulation that is associated with the loss of self principle. The second chapter delves deeply into an analysis of the novel context from Gothic-postmodern assumption, and locating the notion of sublime terror and its three forms, in addition to the Dionysian philosophy in order to investigate around the author inspiration of that mythological figure, besides to its contribution to the Gothic-postmodern genre.

In the end, data collection contains readings and analyzing *The Secret History* novel to define the Gothic-postmodern sublime terror in Donna Tartt’s novel. The study takes an eclectic approach, integrating Freudian and Jacques Lacan psychoanalysis, Jean Baudrillard’s hyperreality, and Frederic Nietzsche’s Dionysian philosophy. Freudian death drive theory provides insights into the death instincts which motivates the individuals to the violence, aggression, and self-harm. Meanwhile, Jacques Lacan’s the death drive and the second death provides an understanding to the motives that determines the students’ actions, while Jean Baudrillard’s hyperreality identifies the meanings and realities in the novel. Dionysian philosophy attempts to decodes the Dionysus madness symbolic at the plotline. This approach aims to place and manage the Gothic-postmodern sublime terror in the novel.

## **Chapter One: The Sublime Terror in Gothic-Postmodern Literature.**

### **Introduction**

The Gothic-Postmodern fiction emerged in the late of 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a distinct genre, combining the elements from both Gothic and postmodernist literature. Due to the realization of multiple impacts of Gothic and postmodern literature during the last twenty years, critics have develop a subgenre of Gothic in order to address the contemporary works.

In *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Maria Beville acclaims that Gothic-postmodernism is a distinct genre, and she provides a definition for it, stating:

Gothic-postmodernism can be understood as a distinct genre by its own self-consciousness Within the genre, multiple levels of self-irony tender a unique set of meta-discourses which run subversively against mainstream society and the literature that claims to represent it. Its meta-narratives operate to disrupt the dominating narrow accounts of history, religion, culture and identity by referring to inverted versions of the same, often implied by fantastic devices (Beville 16).

Moreover, Maria Beville's in Gothic-postmodern literature emphasizes depictions of: Spectral characters, doppelgängers, hellish waste lands, and the demonized or possessed, as a main Gothic writings in postmodernists' context (Beville 10). Nonetheless, the main intersection of both genres, it focuses on the notion of "sublime terror". Beville considers it a "common dominator between Gothic and postmodernism" (15). Which bosts the definition of each work under the tenets laid out here as Gothic-postmodernism (15).

According to Beville Gothic-postmodern literary genre is concerned with the sublime effects of terror in postmodern context. Therefore, she acclaims in the Gothic-postmodern context symbolic death, loss of self ,and distortion of reality are other forms of sublime terror.

Overall, Gothic postmodern literary genre emerges as a combination of Gothic in postmodern contexts, and it is characterized by the sublime terror element. Which can be interpreted through death, the loss of self, and the loss of reality. This research focuses on how did the postmodern philosophers and theorists adapt the notion of sublime terror and its forms.

## **1. Gothic-postmodernism and Sublime Terror.**

Within the Gothic-postmodern literary landscape, sublime terror arises from destabilization of language, identity, and representation itself. It challenges the foundations of reality perception, self, and the limits of human comprehension, inviting the reader to confront the terrifying unknown that lies beyond conventional boundaries. While traditional Gothic terror often relied on external sources of horror and fear.

### **1.1. Terror and the Sublime Terror.**

Gothic-postmodern literary genre is not only a hybrid of gothic elements and postmodern characteristics, it blends the gothic elements with the postmodern characteristics; a significant example of it is how the gothic-postmodern fiction shows the gothic terror in the real postmodern contexts (Beville 8), which it has multifaceted role in the context, shedding light on the complexities of contemporary society and the human psyche. Terror according to Maria Beville terror is an essential element in the postmodern political discourse that will directly influence the individuals' perception on their surroundings (25).

Beville explores the concept of terror as a personal experience that instills hesitation and suspension on the individuals, her perspective on the experience of terror is characterized by the anticipation of the unimaginable horror (Beville 24), leaving the mind wander in state of uncertainty. "In this late eighteenth century context, Gothic terror and anxiety related to a rapidly changing world defined by violence, disorientation and loss of meaning and faith"

(25); in this quote Maria Beville affirms that the sensation of terror leaves much to the imagination. When the individuals experience terror, one's mind is not presented with explicit details or concrete threats, but rather with vague hints or suggestions of impending horrors. This lack of clarity allows the imagination to run wild, conjuring up scenarios that are potentially far worse than anything explicitly described. Meanwhile, one's mind is not presented with explicit details or concrete threats, but rather with vague hints or suggestions of impending horrors (Litzler 41). This lack of clarity allows the imagination to control over the human's mind, force it to create scenarios that are potentially far worse than anything explicitly described. Shedding light on the psychological power of terror over the mind, highlighting on how the mind is able to evoke fear and anticipation stems from the mind's ability to fill in the gaps and create scenarios that are potentially more terrifying than anything already presented.

Besides, Beville's definition of terror is inspired from a definition written by Ann Radcliffe in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry", she writes "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them"(Ann qtd. In Litzler 42). Radcliffe distinguishes the differences between the experience of terror and horror, while she focuses on the impacts of both on human psyche; she suggests that while terror influences and energizes the individual's cognitions. People may feel more awake and aware of their surroundings during a terror attack, prepared to react to any perceived threat. Horror, on the other hand, has the opposite impact, making people feel lifeless and immobilized. This suggests that the terror overwhelms and immobilizes the individual, preventing them from reacting appropriately (Litzler 41\_42). A person experiencing horror may feel powerless, repulsed, or dreadful, which might cause them to become paralyzed with terror.

Furthermore, philosophers coined the notion of sublime terror, which differs from the term terror. Philosophers ranging from Kant, Burk, and Schopenhauer to Lyotard and Baudrillard believe that sublime horror is more profound and powerful than conventional dread. It is characterized as awe-inspiring in its depiction of the unfathomable. Moreover, it is believed to induce not just fear, but also a heightened and inexplicable sense of pleasure, or a kind of ecstasy. According to Baudrillard discourse of postmodern terror is inextricably tied to the gothic terror, since both address themes of uncertainty, fear, and the collapse of traditional meaning “Significantly, he draws on the gothic idea of the spectre and sublimity in terror in claiming that terrorism is a specter that plagues us all as part of our desire for symbolic death and the realization of the impossible real”(Beville 20); The strength of sublime terror lies in its implication of the unimaginable, the unfamiliar, the repulsive, and the forbidden (Litzler 43).

Overall, terror and sublime terror are significant themes in gothic-postmodern literature. While sublime terror transcends the ordinary fear. It conveys a sense of awe and fascination, notably invoking the unknown and the indescribable. In Gothic-postmodernist literature, terror and sublime terror themes are explored in complicated ways, it delves into the darker aspects of human psyche and society while also challenging conventional narrative structures and perceptions of reality. Through the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary, these works create a sense of unease and disorientation, prompting readers to confront their deepest fears and existential uncertainties.

## **2. Gothic-Postmodernism and Symbolic Death**

Death has long been associated with Gothic literature, whether as a physical or as a metaphorical that conveys the darkest aspects of the human psyche. However, in the postmodernism context, this concept is given a new meaning, which is the unpredictability of

a culture characterized by increased technology advancement, cultural transformation, as well as destruction of traditional values. In its core sense, the concept of the symbolic death in Gothic-postmodern literature is also reminiscent of the dread experience as put forward by existentialism. It has become associated with postmodernist context as a distinct form of counterculture to conventional deathliness (Beville 30).

## **2.1. Symbolic Death in Psychoanalytic Approach**

The psychoanalysis approach discusses the symbolic death concept, especially in Sigmund Freud works and Jacques Lacan. They both refer in their works to psychological state where the individuals face a symbolic transformation of their beliefs, identities.

### **2.1.1. Freudian Death Drive Theory.**

Sigmund Freud is the founding father of psychoanalysis. He delves into the death instinct or “Thanatos” in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 1920, in order to explore the fundamental drive to the death and destruction of human being in his theory “Death Drive Theory”.

In Freudian theory, “Death Drive Theory”, also known as “Thanatos”. The opposite of “Eros” or life instincts, which are responsible of survival, reproduction, and social cooperation. idea of a death drive first expressed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 1920. He proposed that alongside the Life Instinct, there exists an opposing force within the psyche, compelling individuals toward death and destruction; “the life process of the individual leads for internal reasons to an abolition of the chemical tension, that is to say, to death”(Freud 55). Sigmund Freud suggests that the death desires urge towards death operates away from the conscious desires and can emerge in different forms of self-destructive behaviors, such as aggression, and risky behaviors (Boothby 7).



Furthermore, Freud argues that the dual conflict exists in a human psyche where the Death Drive is in conflict with the Life Instinct. This conflict manifests as psychological tension and manifests in various forms, such as anxiety, aggression, and neurotic symptoms. “described the life drive as that which seeks to force and hold together, to unite the cells of living substance by an increase of tension, whereas the death drive opposes this tendency”(Sternbach par. 5). Freud emphasizes that this tension is an essential part of human existence, influencing individual actions and adding to the intricacies of mental life. Besides the Death Drive finds expression in a range of behaviors and events, including violence, self-destructive inclinations, dangerous activities, and even some types of creativity and creative expression. According to Freud, people may unconsciously seek for experiences that bring them closer to death in order to cope with the underlying tension between life and death. "Represent an instigation to mental activity" (Freud 200).

Genuinely. According to Freud, insights into the Death Drive provided understandings into other symptomatic processes that take place in society such as war, aggression, suicide, and self-harm. He believed that these behaviors are rooted in the human psyche's innate desire to return to a state of inertia. And the societies seek to organize and guide individuals' instincts in socially acceptable ways (Bluml 11).

All in all, Freud's death drive theory offers clear framework for understanding the individuals' behaviors according to their inner psyche, while this concept creates a debates within psychoanalytic theory and remains as a key element of Freudian psychology.

### **2.1.2. Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory the Notion of *Jouissance* and the Second Death**

Within the death drive, Lacan refers to Freudian epistemology and to the epistemological context in Freud's time. As a comment he indicates that he considered the notion of death

drive suspicious. He introduces a psychoanalytic theory; “*Jouissance*” and “The Second Death”.

In the seminar the Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan develops the concept of *Jouissance*. He approaches that *Jouissance* refers to an enjoyment or pleasure that goes beyond the pleasure principle. He refers to The Oedipal prohibition to define the *jouissance* “the *jouissance* of the Thing as impossible.” In the same seminar, Lacan introduces a definition of the *jouissance* as the satisfaction of the drive—rather than need—a definition that he later never repeats. The aim of the drive is not satisfaction but, to the contrary, the failure of satisfaction, which restarts its circuit. Consequently, if *jouissance* is to be the satisfaction of the drive, it is only insofar as any drive is ultimately the death drive, in other words Insofar as the drive can channel *jouissance* through the chain of signifiers, thus historicizing the subject and, by the same token, bringing *jouissance* out of the exclusive circuit of the living (Dimitriadis Par. 2).

Overall, effectively exploring *jouissance* and the death drive in psychoanalysis, Lacan exposes several layers of human desire and satisfaction. He brings up another principle that goes against Freud called *jouissance* which means a level of satisfaction that is above pleasure. Contrasting *jouissance* with the drive makes it clear that Lacan understood the completion of the drive as the inability to complete the drive. Thus, the infinite Eros and the death drive contribute to the history and the beyond-the-living to solve the problem. Succumbing and indulging spectators to *jouissance* as the cornerstone of the Lacanian vision, it is possible to reflect upon the darker facets of human desire and the constant search for gratification.

### **2.1.3. Sigmund Freud’s Vs Jacques Lacan’s Perspectives on Symbolic Death Principle**

Both of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have distinct perspectives on the concept of symbolic death, they explore the idea of death through their works “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” and the notion of “*Jouissance*”. Sigmund Freud links the idea of symbolic death to the theory that he introduces “death drive theory” or “the death instinct” “Thanatos”. While Lacan transcends the Freudian’s thanatos and pleasure principles in the notion of *Jouissance* (Hsiao 51).

According to Jacques Lacan, each drive is only partially tied to the biological end of reproduction. He rejects the genital drive. Freud links some of these drives to the developmental stages of sexual organization. It realizes a synthesis of the partial drives, and subordinates them to the primacy of genitals as reproductive organs (Freud 130). Surely this “normality” should not be understood in a moral sense, since Freud mentions that the predisposition to perversions is an element of that he calls normal constitution (Freud 88). By rejecting the genital drive and the associated finality of reproduction, Lacan steps aside from the biological portrait of the drive serving the species. For him, drives take place alongside with the Signifier and the constitution of the Subject (Lacan 158). He builds on the resources of the language associated by Freud with the partial drives. For Freud, a partial drive is related to a verb - for example the verb to look for the corresponding drive. The different voices - active, passive and reflexive - organized themselves in a process that lets a new Subject emerge (Lacan 162).

In Lacan's reading of Freud, the structure of Freudian thought can be better explained in terms of *jouissance* in opposition to the pleasure principle rather than the death drive in this opposition. In Lacanian theory, *jouissance* refers to pleasure which is considered superior to that of normal satisfaction and is linked to the satisfaction of drive (Vincent par. 17-18). However, it is also associated with the idea of destruction and the breakdowns of societal orders. Referring to Freud's critique in 'Civilization and Its Discontents,' Lacan underscores

how the pursuit of *jouissance* challenges the feasibility of ethical imperatives, such as the commandment to love one's neighbor, revealing the inherent tension between individual desire and social order.

To sum up, Both of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic ideas concerned with the concept of symbolic death. While Freud focus on the instincts in order to link between symbolic death and the death drive. Freud's idea of the death drive, or Thanatos, is based on his belief that human behavior is governed by two primary instinctive forces: the life drive (Eros), and the death drive (Boulegroune 2023). In the other hand, Lacan places it within the larger context of the symbolic order under the concept of *Jouissance*.

## **2.2. Symbolic Death in Gothic-postmodernism**

In essence, symbolic death in Gothic-postmodern literature is a potent theme that represents the fears and complexity of modern life. As the protagonists confront their own mortality, they confer a risky and uncertain world in which death becomes a gateway to new realms of insight and enlightenment rather than an aim in itself.

According to the Lacanian real, Gary Farnell writes with the sublimation and subsequent rebirth as an encounter with the Lacanian Real and as a second death. “For Lacan, the impossible Real is duly encountered by us within symbolization in the shape of an otherwise nameless and unnamable Thing (or *das Ding* in Freud), the appearance of which, by virtue of its intrinsic transphenomenality, is ever a sort of anamorphic stain in the perception (if not the veiled ideologies) of subjects who otherwise live by signification” (Farnell 594).

Moreover, Farnell classifies the different modalities of death, which is derived from Lacan and Freudian death drive theory; namely the second – or symbolic – death and the first – or physical – death, by using the example of Antigone, “What is the essence of Antigone’s tragic situation, her plight in extremis, her ‘solitude,’ is the fact that, in opposing Creon’s authority

by taking the side of her dead brother Polynices, she has put herself beyond the limits of her given symbolic community, and thus she suffers a symbolic or 'second' death (Farnell 596).

In his article 'Gothic's Death Drive' Gary Farnell acclaims that the significant catastrophe lies on the symbolic death and the notion of the 'second death,' when compared to the two types of death he discusses, he writes because it signifies, "the possibility for the living being of never having been alive in the first place"(Farnell 606); it reflects an existentialist paradox. It delves into the idea, existence, and even the notion of being alive are not fixed. This interpretation suggests that symbolic death challenges the very essence of what it means to be alive. It raises questions about the authenticity of existence and the extent to which individuals are shaped by external forces beyond their control.

To sum up, Farnell's interpretation of Lacanian and Freudian theories of death highlights the significance of symbolic death over physical death. While physical death is the final end of biological life, symbolic death represents a more profound existential crisis. It challenges the very notion of what it means to be alive and the authenticity of one's existence.

### **3. Gothic Postmodernism and Loss of Self**

The combination of gothic and postmodern themes can create a rich and unsettling literary landscape, the theme of loss of self in Gothic-postmodern literature manifests in various ways. It reflects on the complexities of modern existence and the detachment from traditional identities. Emphasizing the characters' quest for authenticity, alienation, and the Buddhism cycle of birth and death.

There is a significant focus on constructing characters' multiple personalities and the split within them that derives from the condition people have in postmodern world. This indicates that Gothic-postmodern texts portray some features that shaped the hollowness of character, including possession episodes and the fragmentation of the self as the doppelganger (Beville

131), Beville argues that loss of self is a central Gothic postmodernist's theme, manifested in dramas of possession and the fragmentation of identity in the form of the doppelgänger (202). Such as, unreliable narrators, multiple narrators or shifting points of view. The story offers a different perspective on it (114). This fragmentation of narrative voice can mirror the fractured nature of identity, as characters struggle to reconcile conflicting aspects of them or drawn with disparate interpretations of reality (118).

Moreover, Gothic-postmodern literature frequently portrays characters who feel alienated from society or estranged from themselves. This alienation stems from feelings of dislocation in a rapidly changing world, the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, or the inability to reconcile conflicting aspects of the self (Beville 200).

Quest for authenticity is prominent theme in gothic-postmodern literature, characters in Gothic literature often embark on a quest for authenticity or self-discovery. However, this quest is fraught with peril, as they confront their own inner demons, societal expectations, and the dark secrets lurking within themselves.

However, According to The Indian mystical tradition, self is an ever changing process: "Loss of self, instead of being terrifying, was regarded as the supreme relief, or Nirvana" (Akhtar & O'Neil 7). This quote delves into the Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism spiritual traditions that mean, there's an idea that the self, or ego, is the source of suffering. This "self" is often seen as an illusion. So, the loss of this self isn't a physical loss, but rather it is beyond the limitations and constructs of the ego. This loss of self is often portrayed as a state of liberation or enlightenment. In Buddhism, for instance, Nirvana represents the ultimate goal where one transcends suffering and the cycle of birth and death. It's described as a state of peace, freedom, and profound understanding beyond the confines of individual existence (8).

Overall, while both Gothic postmodernism and Buddhism explore themes of loss of self, they do so in different ways and with different implications. Gothic postmodernism emphasizes the disorienting and potentially terrifying aspects of this loss, while Buddhism presents it as a liberating process from the society prison.

#### **4. Gothic-Postmodernism and Loss of Reality**

Gothic postmodernism emerges from the convergence of two influential literary and cultural movements: Gothic literature, known for its exploration of darkness, fear, and the mysterious, and postmodernism, which questions overarching narratives, embraces fragmentation, and blurs boundaries. In this hybrid genre, the theme of the loss of reality becomes prominent, challenges the uncertainties of contemporary society (Beville 124). The blending of Gothic and postmodern elements creates a narration put of the traditional concepts of reality, it become unsettled, and characters often confront surreal, disassembled, and striking circumstances. Within this framework, the loss of reality appears in diverse forms, ranging from psychological breakdowns and existential dilemmas to encounters with the supernatural (Beville 201).

In his work *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1997) Fredric Jameson argues that postmodern culture is characterized by pastiche. As a consequence of pastiche, Jameson argues that contemporary culture becomes "depthless" or "schizophrenic." This means that there is a loss of depth or coherence in cultural products, as they lack a unified historical narrative or framework. Instead, cultural artifacts exist as a collage of disconnected images and references, creating a sense of disorientation and fragmentation in society ("Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"). In his analysis of postmodernism, Jameson suggests that one of its defining features is the loss of a sense of historical reality and a flattening of cultural depth. Moreover, Jameson critiques postmodernism for its emphasis on simulation and hyperreality. He suggests that in a society

dominated by mass media and consumer, reality itself becomes indistinguishable from its representations. The proliferation of images and simulacra leads to a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction, making it increasingly difficult to discern what is authentic and what is constructed (“Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”).

#### **4.1. Simulation, Hyperreality, and Simulacra According to Jean Bauderillard**

The French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard introduces in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* 1981 various concepts that resemble his perception toward the reality in postmodern society: hyperreality, simulation and simulacra, which are interconnected and central to his critique of contemporary society.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Bauderillard suggests that media, capital, and commodification favor the generation of copies over the creation of original things through repeated copying, representation become increasingly distorted, resulting in a world of empty images, or simulacra. This process occurs in four stages: a genuine reflection of reality, a distorted copy which masks aspects of reality, an illusion posing as a faithful reflection, and last “pure simulacrum” a copy for which there is no original. Simulacra constitutes hyperreality an existence in which representations are distinguishable from reality. What is stake in all of this meaning, art, divinity, and authenticity? In a world of pure simulacra Bauderillard believes we experience only the absence of it wrapped in an artifice of resemblance (Bauderillard 49).

For Bauderillard simulacra are imitations that fail to make reference to the original. It is the representations of representations; in other word, it is reproduction of objects or events in a manner in order to look almost real. It has three main parts: representation of nature such as beauty in artistic work, copy of an original, and copy of something that does not exists like



stories. In essence, Baudrillard's theory of simulacra posits that contemporary society has replaced authentic experiences and meanings with simulated representations that have no grounding in reality, creating a hyper-real world of pure simulacra (Baudrillard 49).

Due to Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation. The distinction between what is considered "real" and what is "simulated" or artificially constructed becomes increasingly blurred. According to Baudrillard, simulation does not just replicate reality; it replaces it; the blurring of the distinction between the "true" and the "false" undermines the notion of authenticity. Douglas Kallner defines Baudrillard's simulation as "the cultural modes of representation that simulate reality as in television, computer or cyberspace, and reality" (Killner par. 31). Baudrillard argues that in contemporary society, we have become so saturated with models, representations, and simulations that it has become impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is not. According to Baudrillard, in the final phase, simulations have become the reality itself, and there is no longer any distinction between the real and the simulated. Baudrillard uses examples like Disney land to illustrate his concept of simulation. He argues that Disney land is a simulation of an imaginary world that has become more real and appealing than the actual world outside. He believed that Disney land was created to conceal the fact that the entire surrounding environment, including Los Angeles, is a simulation of reality itself (Baudrillard 48).

In a hyperreal environment where simulations are ubiquitous, authenticity becomes elusive, as everything is mediated and constructed, rather than being grounded in genuine experience or truth (Baudrillard 4). Besides, Simulations become so pervasive that they overshadow or even replace our experiences of reality. As a result, it becomes difficult to discern what is genuinely real from what is simulated or artificially constructed. Consequently, simulacra, or simulations, wield such influence over the cultural landscape that

they mold our perceptions and encounters more deeply than actual reality. Significantly, representations of reality hold greater sway and impact than the reality they claim to depict.

All in all, this convergence between Gothic and postmodern elements highlights the complexities of contemporary existence, where the boundaries between reality and illusion are constantly shifting, and where individuals grapple with the fragmented nature of their own perceptions and experiences. Ultimately, in the Gothic-postmodern framework, the loss of reality serves as a thematic exploration of the intricacies of human consciousness, the ever-evolving nature of cultural and technological landscapes. Jean Baudrillard's conceptual framework *Simulacra and Simulation* highlights on how the contemporary society has become saturated with copies, imitations, and models that no longer refer back to any original or authentic source.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, Gothic-postmodern literature emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a hybrid of Gothic and postmodern elements. It emphasizes how the Gothic features appear in the postmodern context. In her book *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* Maria Beville affirms that the central element between Gothic and postmodern texts is the notion of sublime terror. Jean Baudrillard sees that sublime terror transcends the ordinary fear and evoking the sense of fascination, making the mind in state of imagining the unfamiliar.

According to Beville the sublime terror can be decoded via three forms: death, the loss of self, and the loss of reality. The Gothic-postmodernists develop several theories, concepts, and philosophical principles that help the readers to analyze the contexts and distinguish the sublime terror features in postmodernist fiction. In psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud's interpretations toward death is linked to his death drive theory or "Thanatos", which he

introduces it in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In the other hand, Jacques Lacan transcends Freud's concept of pleasure in the idea of *Jouissance*. Therefore, the sublime terror theme is characterized through the loss of self and reality also, theorists such as Baudrillard develops concepts that represent the Gothic-postmodern loss of reality. In Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra* he delves to the notion of hyper-reality, simulation, and simulacra in order to clarify the idea of loss of reality in Gothic-postmodern framework.

All in all, the sublime terror is a prominent theme that is analyzed through three layers: death, loss of self and reality, and this is what the study focuses on, the next chapter emphasizes how the Gothic-postmodern's sublime terror is seen in Donna Tartt's first novel *The Secret History* 1992, the novel is largely considered as a dark academia novel. However, the study points to the specific aspects whether sublime terror is present or not in the analyzed work of art based on the character behaviors, mental order, as well as certain events.

## **Chapter Two: Gothic-Postmodern Analysis of *The Secret History*: Locating the Features of Sublime Terror.**

### **Introduction**

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* 1992 is regarded as the first major work that established dark academia literary sub-genre. Originating from Tumbler in 2015, the work has been called the "foundational text" of dark academia novels (Drube par. 4). The Term Dark Academia suggests something dark, but that does not mean simply dark color rather it means a dark vibe and aesthetic, since the Dark academia literature focuses on higher education, intellectualism, and a mysterious atmosphere, along with shadowing on a classical Greek and Roman architecture (Drube par. 9-12).

Dark academia literature has a prominent connection with Gothic-postmodern literature. Because it is linked to the principles and aspects of the Gothic-postmodern fiction, such as the main feature "sublime terror", both of sublime terror and dark academia contains the classical Greek aesthetics, as well as; they delves deeper within the human emotions, experiences, and knowledge. In order to explore the reflections of the duality between beauty and darkness on the human psyche.

Overall, dark academia literary sub-genre such as *The Secret History* 1992 holds a Gothic-postmodern main aspect "sublime terror". Creating narrative that embodies the depths of the characters emotions, experience, and internal struggle around a setting and through several events in the novel. This is going to be analyzed in this chapter, including the three forms of sublime terror, that are loss of self and reality, symbolic death. To cover the notion of sublime terror in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* 1992.

## **1. *The Secret History* Plot Summary**

*The Secret History*'s first narrative book told by Richard Papan, Richard is 28 years old telling his story when he was 19 years old moves from California to New England in order to study Greek literature at Hampden College in Vermont. However, Richard's demand was not accepted until he convinces the Professor Julian Morrow and he did not refuse Richard's demand.

Richard Papan becomes Julian's pupil with Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, Bunny Corcoran, and Charles & Camilla Macaulay who are fraternal twins. Richard spends the vacations on learning Greek and working. Besides, Richard hides his background as much as possible he could from his new friends. In particular, Henry and Francis who are quite wealthy. While Richard was embarrassed to present his working-class upbringing.

Henry, Francis, Bunny, and the twins spent the semester performing rituals and trying to induce Dionysian madness, which is a sort of pre-civilized euphoric state associated with the Greek god Dionysus. They succeeded in inducing Dionysian madness. However, in doing so, they accidentally killed a local man.

Eventually Bunny discovers their secret about the murder and starts blackmailing them, until they decide to commit the second murder, they kill Bunny; Henry pushes Bunny into a ravine in order to make it look like an accident. The police takes 10 days to find Bunny's dead body because it was covered in snow. The FBI questioned the students but they did not suspect in them, so they got away with the crime.

Not long after Bunny's funeral, Julian tells Richard and Francis that he has received a lost letter from Bunny talks about his students' crime during the rituals, besides Bunny's apparent fear that Henry wants to murder him. Julian forces Henry to explain to him about the content

of the letter, Henry confesses to the professor who gives him the letter and asks him to leave Hampden.

After that the novel explores in its events the consequences of the students' deeds that fracture in their relationships, and a tragic end involving further violence and emotional turmoil among the group members. Richard remains hunted by remorse, the twins Charles and Camilla's relationship becomes abusive, Henry suffers from illness due to his headaches until he suicides. Charles develops a drinking problem, and Francis suffers from panic attacks.

Gradually, when the plot develops, the prospects of characters experiencing the sense of guilt, violence, and addiction as a hopeless illusion. Instead, love transforms into vindictive acts, lack of genuine trust, and miscommunication. It reflects the consequence of their actions, which leads to the students' tragic ends.

## **2. Dionysian Rituals in *The Secret History***

In *The Secret History* the Dionysian rituals play a significant role in the story. The main characters who are the students involves in the rituals that is associated with the Greek God Dionysus.

### **2.1 Dionysus the Greek God**

Greek gods aren't easy to get along with, as their myths show. Time and again they destroy the lives of mortals for reasons that are hard to comprehend, and even harder to accept; their actions and behaviors do not align with our modern understanding. The Greek Gods are vindictive, flagrantly immoral, and highly appear and rationally incomprehensible (Carpenter 13).

Of all the Greek gods, Dionysus who is God of wine, pleasure, fertility, and religious ecstasy. According to the classical myths, Dionysus was illicit son of Zeus. From the princess

Semele daughter of Cadmus the first king and the founder of Thebes. When Hera has discovered that Semele is pregnant from Zeus she convinces her to ask for the true divine form of Zeus to see him, he appeared as the supreme god in all his glory, the energy and light incinerated the mortal Semele, killing her. However, Zeus was able to rescue the unborn child, Dionysus, from Semele's womb. He sewed the fetal Dionysus into his thigh to protect him until he could be born (Wetmore 91).

The circumstances of Dionysus's birth give him the name "the twice born god". Nymphs raised Dionysus in Mount Nysa away from Hera, but soon he has discovered the grapevine and start winemaking Hera curses him, Hera sent various monsters like the terrifying giants Eurynome and Leucothoe to attack and attempt to kill the young Dionysus (Dragatakis par. 5).

Additionally, Hera tries to prevent the worship of Dionysus from taking root in certain regions like Argos and Thebes. Throughout turning the kings against him, spreading the fear and hostility to his followers through sending monsters to drive him away from establishing their cult in order to turn the populace against accepting his rites (Dragatakis par.7).

Despite Hera's efforts to prevent Dionysus cult, it eventually spread across the Greek world and faces Hera's will through the resilience of Dionysus himself and became a prominent theme in art, literature, and philosophy.

## **2.2. Frederic Nietzsche's the Dionysian Philosophy.**

The Dionysian illusion in Donna Tartt's novel *the Secret History* is a central point explored through the tension of rationality and irrationality, reason and emotions, chaos and order. The novel portrayal of Dionysian rites reflects Nietzsche's philosophy "Apollonian and Dionysian".

Frederic Nietzsche the German philosopher derives the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts in his work *The Birth of Tragedy* 1872. The Apollonian represents order, rationality, and structure. While in the other hand, Dionysian resembles chaos, madness, instinct, and irrationality. Nietzsche saw the Greek culture whipsawed between two opposite antagonistic cultural principles, symbolized by the god Apollo and Dionysus. The aspects of Greek's ancient civilization appears at Apollo's side. However, Nietzsche points out that there is another crucial side to Greek culture it is embodied in the cult of Dionysus; the god of destruction as it manifests in Greek tragedies such as Euripides's *Bacchae*. What Nietzsche acclaims is that both sides create the beautiful structure in vague sense and the urge to destroy tear things apart and reduce them to the most fundamental components. Both sides deal with the pain of existence. The Apollonian spirit covers over the pain of existence what Nietzsche calls "a beautiful dream image", in the other hand; the Dionysian spirit in Greek culture revels in the pain losing the individuality of the suffer surrounding to the chaos that nature's power, hence identifying through loss of ego (Chaliakopoulos par. 7-9).

All in all, Nietzsche coins the Apollonian and Dionysian concept in order to emphasize the balance of two principles that successes in making a model of Greek culture

### **3. The Murders in *The Secret History*.**

The murders in the novel start accidentally during the bacchanal ritual. The students Henry, Francis, and the twins holds a Bacchanalia; a Dionysus ritual at night in the countryside outside the college town. It involves drinking and dancing at the cemetery. Henry holds a pole that mimics the ancient ritual weapon and he gets more frenzy by the ritualistic madness when he saw a local farmer named Lessing, Henry though that Lessing is mythical fawn, he strikes him in the head repeatedly until Lessing gets killed. Right after, the group



decide to cover up and remove any evidence, they bury his body and create an excuse for where they were during the hours when the murder occurs.

The group becomes paranoid after Lessing's death and fearing from others who were not present, they work so hard to keep their secret from the other students specially Bunny. But unfortunately Bunny discovers about the murder through their conversations, he starts blackmailing them by dropping hints that he knows about their secret. And that what leads the group to the second death.

Henry convinces the rest of the group that they must kill Bunny to protect themselves from going to prison for the first murder. They hide out in the woods where Bunny liked to walk in, and when he appears, they crowd around him and Henry pushes him into a ravine.

#### **4. The Notion of Sublime Terror in *The Secret History*.**

The sublime terror reflects the experience of fear and anxiety, in order to evoke the sense of fascination, uncertainty, and transcendence. Donna Tartt's novel delves into the complexities of human nature, morality, and consequences of the actions, in order to create atmosphere of psychological tension and moral decay. In the interim of other themes that shapes the notion of sublime terror in the novel; which are: death, loss of self and reality. That appears in the Dionysus madness, and the impacts of the rituals on the students' behaviors and decisions.

##### **4.1. The Loss of Self & *The Secret History*.**

Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* delves into the existential theme of loss of self, manipulation, and blurring the reality. Through two characters are: Bunny and the narrator of Richard Pape. The novel also emphasizes the students' alienation in the novel, with their experience with the Bacchanalia; an ecstatic ritual involving intoxication and frenzy, serve as

a catalyst for their descent into a realm where reality and illusion become indistinguishable. Alongside with the students' impression toward the experience of Bacchanalia.

#### **4.1.1. The Students' Impression toward Bacchanalia Experience in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.**

The loss of self theme manifests through the characters and their experiences the Bacchanalia that practiced by Henry, Francis, and the twins. It starts when the professor Julian teaches the six students about Dionysus rituals, they got excited when he tells them "something to all appearances not mortal. Inhuman" (Tartt 47). So they work hard to reach it as Julian has explained to them in the class as it is "the fire of pure being" (49), until they finally achieved it (Litzler 30). But they do it without Richard and Bunny, Henry leads the rest to exercise the ritual at the cemetery in the countryside without any supervision of the professor Julian. Henry goes deeply into a frenzy state from getting drunk until he accidentally committed a murder. The crime goes unpunished besides Henry says about it "I do not know to say" and describe it saying: "it was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches" (175). The experience fascinates Henry which makes him describes the existence in the word "pallid" through saying to Richard: you have no idea how pallid the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem" (175). It drives him to reject his existence in the world throughout the phenomenal change as being.

#### **4.1.2. Manipulation and Fake Representation in the Novel.**

Among the characters there are other students who resemble loss of self theme. Richard Pape who is the narrator of the novel, in order to get the sense of belonging Richard represents himself that he is coming from more privileged family to his colleagues; fabricating stories about his background, he was ashamed from being from working class students specially in front of Francis and Henry; it appear when he always thinks about

leaving Hampden which is result of sense of belonging is far from his original own  
(D'Aniello 16)

Not only Richard who has such secret but also Bunny was lying about his state. Bunny faces a financial crisis, Bunny's parents have stopped supporting him financially because he was drug addicted, sooner they discover about him they abandoned him financially. For the sake of maintaining his lifestyle and status he manipulates the other characters; in the second chapter from the novel Bunny takes Richard to a restaurant and acts that he forgot his wallet, when it did not work on Richard because they were both broke Bunny calls Henry to rescue him. As soon as Bunny discovers the students' murder he tends to use unethical means which is blackmailing them. Bunny desires for transforms so that he can fulfill his constant need for money besides the feeling of belonging and acceptance.

#### **4.1.3. The Students Alienation from the Social World**

Beville believes that the self alienation is the essence of the Gothic-postmodernist writings, where the characters discover themselves by themselves, she says "the self as alienated from community" (Beville 46). Tartt transmits the alienation in the novel *The Secret History* 1992, it manifests in the students' relationships at the collage and the other students' viewpoints on the Greek class students'. However, Bunny is the only student who has friends out of the Greek group, but unfortunately he ends up to be dead. Another example of alienation in the novel is when the performance art girl said to Richard about his colleagues: "they worship the Devil" (Tartt 77). Besides Judy's fights with Camilla at one of the parties.

In *The Gothic* essay 2004 David Punter and Glennis Byron acclaim that the distortion of perspective offers a landscape for Gothic-postmodern literature (Punter & Byron 51). The distortion of perspective idea appears in the novel; Richard Pape's narration in the novel is holding his own memory and perceptions toward the events. Richard remembers the events

and he interprets them in a way that aligns with his own biases and subjectivity, which distorts the reader's understanding of the novel context, which resembles the "the division of the self" according to David Punter and Glennis Byron.

In Gothic-postmodern literature, Beville focuses on the spectacle of terror, the Dark and the Negative, Irrational, and its animosity to conventional norms of rationality, in order to reveal the disconnection from reality, where the characters struggle to distinguish between reality and fantasy. *The Secret History* 1992 reflects the characters disconnection from reality through the students' detachment sense from the society, where they become isolated from the world. They also face challenges to distinguish between reality and fancy; Henry, Francis, and the twins consider the Dionysus madness as an escape process from their responsibilities (Miller par. 4).

To sum up, the novel embodies the loss of self features through the students' alienation from the society and their behaviors toward the experience of the Dionysus madness, alongside Bunny's manipulation with his colleagues and Richard lies about his state to the other students in order to show how the theme is represented from the students' social class.

#### **4.2. *The Secret History* and Loss of Reality**

Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* is a compelling examination of the postmodern idea of hyperreality. Tartt creates a universe in which the lines between truth and delusion grow more blurred using complicated storytelling methods and rich characters. The novel is a sad meditation on the disintegration of truth and purpose in contemporary life. Tartt masterfully illustrates the characters' alienation from the society. The narrator's untrustworthy viewpoint, along with the depiction of addiction and loss of reason, adds to the impression of instability and doubt, undermining the reader's concept of objective reality. This research dives into the numerous components of *The Secret History* that demonstrate the ideas of

hyperreality, the students' addition problems, the scenes that retold by the narrator that happens in one the students funeral, and even the narrator's credibility.

#### **4.2.1. The Representation of the Hyper-reality Principle in the Novel.**

According to Jean Baudrillard the idea of 'hyper-reality' lies on the way how television, photography, Disney World represent the original image (Nayar 48), while the individuals cannot distinguish between the real and the copy any more (49). The novel portrays the postmodern concept of hyper-reality through several depictions from the narrator. For instance when Richard describes Bunny's disappearance and death to the readers, despite the fact that he was one of the murders. Besides, Baudrillard mentions that we are not consuming the objects but the sign of that objects (49), the reader in *The Secret History* has Richard's version only of telling the events.

However, Donna Tartt excludes Richard from the novel when Richard talks about his feeling of presence as if he is watching the actions around him on a screen that most explicitly convey the sense that he is removed from reality (Litzler 37). Besides when he talks about series of dreams along with being drunk and high, he describes it in strange way of surreal sensations and experiences. It aligns with what does Baudrillard believe that the copy becomes the original and we are not allude to see the original (Nayar 48).

Badrillard, in his work on postmodernity, describes a hyperreal existence where simulated reality surpasses authentic reality within a given system of production or reproductive representation (Beville 30). It appears when Richard starts discovering about the five students' murder during the bacchanalia, he admits by saying: "nothing seemed real, and I felt as though this were some complicated film I'd started watching in the middle and couldn't quite get the drift of"(Tartt.162). Additionally Richard uses the director vocabulary as he cuts

from scene to scene in describing the murder from his mind to the reader as an “objectionable little documentary” (288).

#### **4.2.2. Representation of Loss of Reality in the Novel through Addiction.**

The excessive use of drugs and alcohol contributes to the characters loss of reality in distortion of their perception which makes them unable to distinguish between reality and illusion, this will effect on both of their decision-making and their moral sense. The characters addiction is considered as a mean of skepticism; they use drugs to escape from their responsibilities, the problems, and the pressure they face. Well this escape consequently creates a detachment from the students reality; they start to deny their essential existence, it appear when Henry said to Richard “ to stop being yourself, even for a little while, is very great”(Tartt 171) and he says after: “to transcend the accident of one’s moment of being”(171) in this quote Henry prefers to be high than being sober, he also calls his social life as a prison by saying “outside the prison of morality and time”(171).

#### **4.2.3. Analyzing Bunny’s Death in the Novel.**

In *The Secret History* 1992 the signifiers of death and absence lose meaning, for instance when the four friends discuss and describe the Corcoran family’s attitude toward Bunny’s death saying “Mr. Corcoran would act all sad and worried for a while, then the next thing you knew he’d be playing with the baby, giving everybody a beer” (Tartt 248\_249); but they have not forgotten themselves how did they kill him (Litzler 35). Along with the narrator imagery of the funeral was alike the wedding imagery emptied out from the ceremonies meanings; Richard describes Bunny’s mother at the funeral using terms that is quite linked to the weddings ceremonies such as “she was carrying a small bouquet of rosebuds, Patrick offered her an arm, calm as bride” to show that all she cares about her appearance (35).

Not only Bunny's absence and death is meaningless but also he is replaceable. Bunny's girlfriend Marion marries Bunny's brother whom she meets in Bunny's funeral, which indicates that Bunny is able to be simulated in his brother. In another instance, Tartt names two of Bunny's sister-in-law Lisa, besides Richard narration about Bunny's three brothers, he says "more Bunnys, Bunnys coming" and according to Richard it all aims to make confusion (Litzler 36).

Tartt suggests the rejuvenation of Bunny and renewability for Lisa in order to show the characters emptiness. However, Bunny is main character and one of Julian's six students but he can be replaced along with he is not unique, which means he could be found in another characters by his friend and girlfriend (Litzler 36). Whereas, this perspective starts with the idea that things are fundamentally similar or identical according to Gilles Deleuze, in his 1969 work *The Logic of Sense*. Gilles offers a binary interpretation of the words; one is given to us to solve and the other invites the reader to think which side deviates from a previous similarity or identification. Otherwise, he challenges us to consider that uniformity, and even identity as a performative effect of prominent difference (Deleuze qtd.in Litzler 36)

#### **4.2.4. The Absence of Reason in the Novel.**

The individuals in the novel seem lost and separated from the world and consider it fake. In which shown when Bunny disappear the individuals start to talk about his disappearance and claim that the drug dealer kidnapped him, they accuse the Arabs also (Lirzler 34). In other example, when Henry tells his colleagues after pushing Bunny off the ravine that no one will notice them coming out the wood and says: "people don't pay much attention to ninety percent of what they see"(Tartt 270). As they do not pay attention to the authentic source or are not able to distinguish the original source to rely they knowledge on.

#### **4.2.5. Unreliable Narrator in *The Secret History*.**

In this novel Tartt gives the description of Bunny's death to the narrator perspective, who happens to be one of the killers. Richard description of Bunny's murder, disappearance, and funeral is considered to be out of the normal, which stands for distortion of the reality in the novel and deconstruction of the death meaning (Litzler 38). Besides he describes his emotions and experience as a pleasure by saying: "looking pleasantly into the pleasant beefy face of the policeman" (Tartt 342).

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is one that engages the readers and forces them to think about the practicalities of life, the difference between honesty and lies, and what truth really stands for. Hyperreality of the actual world, which is why Tartt deconstructs the motif of an objective reality to navigate readers through the logical outcomes of the world where virtuality is indiscernible from reality. Mingling alcoholism, the absence of reason, and the ambiguous perspective of the protagonist, the novel poses one more sad paradox of their reality twist.

### **4.3. Symbolic Death in *The Secret History*.**

Symbolic death in *The Secret History* novel highlights the characters' transformations, the consequences of their intellectual arrogance, and shows the state of their moralities. This theme underscores the novel's exploration of the dark side of human nature and the destructive potential of unchecked ambition and desire for transcendence.

#### **4.3.1. The Representation of Symbolic death Through the Spiritual Rituals.**

In her novel Donna Tartt draws on the Greek mythology, focusing on the god Dionysus. The characters obsession with achieving the rituals leads to the death of their innocence and their morality. In other words, this event signifies their crossing of boundaries into a world governed by Dionysian chaos, in the novel this ritualistic event leads to accidental murder, the



way they behave after this murder symbolizes their moral death and foreshadows the violence and moral decay that occurs (Grip 10).

#### **4.3.2. The Absence of Logical Justifications in The novel.**

The central point that emphasizes the symbolic death in the novel is how the novel challenges the typical view of life and death, via the representation of harsh (D'Aniello 10), unvarnished reality of the characters' actions and their consequences. The characters' actions is separate from the idealistic or logical justifications, for instance Bunny's murder that is considered as brutal act of the students driven by fear from exposing their secret; the students' fear from Bunny and his threats leads to Henry plan to kill him.

#### **4.3.3. The Representation of Symbolic Death in the Novel through Death Drive: Freud and Lacan.**

The concept of "Death Drive" is a prominent aspect of psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud coins the concept in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 1920, and it developed and elaborated upon by thinkers and psychologists such as Jacques Lacan in the notion of *Jouissance* and Slavoj Žižek. It has a potential role in Donna Tartt work *The Secret History* 1992. The notion of death drive manifest in the novel through the students behaviors, self-destruction, and the excessive use of drugs.

##### **4.3.3.1. Manifestation of Freudian Death Drive Theory in *The Secret History*.**

Unlike the life drive theory "Eros", Freud conceptualized the death drive "Thanatos" as unconscious and self-destruction that appears in aggression and risky behaviors, as well as the death drive pushes subjects to self-annihilation to return to be inanimate, non-life they once were (Akhtar & O'Neil 2). Several actions and behaviors of the students can be interpreted from this lens; such as the relationship of the twins Charles and Camilla which turns from

genial relationship into a violent relationship, where Charles abuses his sister Camilla until it leads her to cut off contact with him. Moreover, Sigmund Freud develops “the reality principle” from the “the pleasure principle”, which is associated with how the mature mind who is obsessed with pleasure seeking in a way that makes him sacrifice in order to avoid or just minimizing the pain (10). The students’ behaviors in *The Secret History* are driven by pleasure principle until they confront the reality that will not tolerate their actions. The aftermath of the Bacchanalia in the novel considered to be an example of reality principle, while the Bacchanalia itself is the source of pleasure or the pleasure principle; during the Bacchanalia the students delve in the pleasure principle, their experience led to a series of psychological and social disintegration, it reflects on their mental state; what happens to the narrator from nightmare and sense of guilt reflects on the consequences of his decisions, otherwise the relationship between the students starts to fracture due to the pressure of the secret they share and Bunny’s blackmailing. However, even after Henry’s suicide the students still facing the consequences of their deeds, despite the fact that Henry suicide is a reality principle in itself but his death does not rescue the other it just ends him after he realizes that his situation is unescapable.

#### **4.3.3.2. Interpretations of Lacanian’s the Second Death in the Novel.**

Žižek interprets the Lacanian concept of the second death or symbolic death as it is the of how life moves toward death. Unlike Sigmund Freud who acclaims that life is the opposite of death, Lacan considers that the life is a process of death. Life is a movement towards the absolute death or the first death as Lacan calls it, it is also how the death is already movement within life. The first death for Lacan is the physical death, while the second is symbolic and happens during the living period, in which considers that every drive is a death drive. Žižek introduces examples of the symbolic death occurs when the idea of our existence disappear from the others mind. As well as Donna Tartt establishes her first novel *The Secret History*

1992 with examples of symbolic death. Tartt addresses the Lacanian the second death through Mrs. Corcoran attitudes at the television interview when she uses such an expressions that does not hold the sense of grieve for her sun, she was trying to get the attention when she talks about the people and gets out of the topic, it also appear when Henry says right after he watches the interview “she photographs rather well” (Tartt 363). What tart attempts to depict is how far Bunny becomes forgotten even though he was extrovert unlike his colleagues Henry, Francis, and the twins.

#### **4.4. The Notion of Sublime Terror in *The Secret History*.**

In Gothic-Postmodern context the concept of sublime terror is central theme which links the gothic elements with the postmodern texts; postmodernists adapt the gothic aesthetics in their postmodern context. In order to revive the gothic genre in the novels they tie both of postmodern literature and gothic literature with sublime terror through different forms such as: loss of self, loss of reality, and the symbolic death. This research sheds light on the notion of the sublime terror and the themes that help in shaping it alongside with its manifestation in Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* 1992. Through:

##### **4.4.1. The Interpretations of Sublime Terror Through Mass Media Influence in *The Secret History*.**

Symbolizing the effect that media has on perceived public opinion through depicting different forms of media like television, newspaper, and magazines the novel also shows how these media channels influence the individuals’ perception of events in their environment. Scandals and tragedies are among notable ways that the media affects public opinion to a significant extent (Birkenstein et al. 11).

The manner in which the public receives Bunny’s disappearance is a classic instance of this phenomenon. This idea, according to the novel, when no concrete information or

rationality is available to explain a phenomenon then media along with public begins to jump to wrong conclusions. When it comes to Bunny's abduction, the people described in the novel are presented close to change to the Arabs and a drug dealer; it transmits the specificity of the event when the media plays an essential role in shaping the public opinion, making people develop prejudices and false conclusions (Letzler 35).

This phenomenon highlights the significant power that media outlets wield in shaping public opinion, particularly in the context of highly charged or emotionally resonant events (Birkenstein 26). The media's ability to selectively report on and frame information, as well as their propensity to prioritize sensationalism over factual accuracy, can have a profound impact on how individuals interpret and respond to the world around them.

Overall, the novel's examination of the media's impact goes beyond the portrayal of specific events or people. The extensive presence of media in the characters' everyday lives, as seen by their regular intake of television, newspapers, and magazines, implies a greater level of impact on their worldviews, values, and decision-making processes.

#### **4.4.2. Donna Tartt's Adaptation of the Dionysian Philosophy in *the Secret History* Novel.**

Inspired by the Greek god Dionysus, contrasts to the Apollonian philosophy it portrays the worldview of chaos, irrationality, and the primal instincts of humanity. Frederic Nietzsche coins the term Dionysian in his book *The Birth of Tragedy* 1872.

The Dionysian is characterized by self-forgetfulness, by a unity with nature, and a return to the primitive (D'Aniello 9). It embraces the man with the nature to achieve the Dionysus madness state as the students in the novel they were always drunk and high. Besides Dionysian philosophy according to Nietzsche encourages the individuals to release their primal instincts and experience it not just a conceptual thought about the frenzy state and

getting lost in the emotions. Tartt addresses this through the parties and the rituals that the students have practiced.

#### **4.4.3. The Students' Obsession with the Ancient Greek Aesthetics.**

Donna Tartt adapts the Greek mythological symbols and themes in her work *The Secret History* 1992. Tartt inspires the Greek god Dionysus which is associated with madness, violence, and chaos. The novel represents the Dionysus madness through each character.

At the first chapter Richard Papen decided to study Greek literature at Hampden College in Vermont due to his love for Greek aesthetics, but unfortunately he could not join the Greek class at first, his obsession with Greek literature makes him mock at the sociology class, besides he tries desperately to join the Greek literature class even after Julian refuses him. Despite the fact that Richard comes from working class unlike his colleagues, he enjoys the other students company specially the twins Camilla and Charles. Also he could not get the sense of belonging with the group and when he faces a problem the first decision comes across his mind is leaving but he could not; Tartt emphasizes it when Richard says: "my decision to drop everything for Greek had been a rash and foolish one" (Tartt 73).

Therefore, in this novel the students come from rich families (except the narrator) they lack the parental guiding. They are herded by their professor Julian, who doles out ideas about aesthetics and Greek and philosophy in their class, his students like a tiny cult and him like a benevolent, and Henry Winter is the leader of that cult. Julian explains to his students the idea of bacchae and the activities through achieving it in order to transcend the existence. After the class the students became obsessed with achieving the rites (Fysuden par. 2).

The students' obsession drives them into their fatal flaws before they know. The beauty of Dionysus madness leads them to blur the lines between the beauty and good; they appeal to their sense of pleasure. However, they faces the consequences of the terror beauty; they fail to

recognize the conflict between the beauty they seek for and the morality limits, which eventually lead them to commit the murders (Era par. 7).

#### **4.4.4. Emphasizing the Sublime Terror through the Impacts of the Dionysus Madness on the Characters in *The Secret History*.**

In her novel *The Secret History* 1992 Donna Tartt the concept of madness is linked to the Greek god Dionysus as a reference. The consequences of the Dionysus madness manifest through the students in several forms. Henry, Francis, and the twins mental state they experience. Even the narrator challenges inner struggle and suffer from nightmares.

Soon as the characters get out of the murders they commit they face psychological punishment. The police did not suspect in the students in both of crimes because the novel highlights on the psychological torment that happens to the murderers. Tartt uses the symptoms of mental disorder on the five students after experiencing the Dionysus madness, the experience of Dionysus rituals drives the leader (Henry) to kill a farmer. In order to maintain their secret they plan to kill their friend Bunny, due to how anxious they were when Bunny starts blackmailing them. The students obsession for maintaining their secret and protecting their privileged lives drives them to commit a cold blood murder, alongside with the sense of isolation and detachment from reality. The characters' fear and anxiety of being caught they live with it is the reason of the state of hallucination and paranoia that have impacts on the behaviors and decision-making process of the five students (Litzler 27).

The students' friendship deteriorates and reveals its aftermath following Bunny's death. The students obsession with their own desires and the pursuit of their idealized lives leads to betrayal and the deterioration of their once-close relationships. They prioritize their personal obsessions over loyalty to one another (Anon par. 6).

#### **4.4.5. The Reflection of Suspense from the Characters to the Reader in the Novel.**

Usually the murder mystery novels reveal the murders in the end, in a way that is drawing to the reader a space to think and imagine and build expectations around the murders. However, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* 1992 first page exposes the second murder and all the facts around it, even before introducing the characters, the narrator describes the crime scene "THE SNOW in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation" (Tartt 3), and admits his role in the murder "It is difficult to believe that Henry's modest plan could have worked" (3). In an interview Donna Tartt explains why does she purposely reveal on the name of the victim and the murders in the first page of the novel. She aims to create suspense from what is already known from the characters dialogues and sense of hesitation to the readers' perception, which is associate with the Gothic-postmodern principles Beville believes that the sublime terror in Gothic-postmodern writings reveals for those readers still in suspense (Beville 112). She also considers that the Gothic suspense parallels with Gothic-postmodernist works which approach terror through defamiliarisation (169).

To summarize, Donna Tartt addresses in her work *The Secret History* 1992 the sublime terror features in both of implicit and explicit ways, which can be analyzed first when the writer create sense of suspense to the reader out of the usual, and through the main characters, what urges the characters' behaviors, the mass media and the ancient Greek aesthetics for instance. In addition to how it end up with the characters when they cross the boundaries of the order.

### **Conclusion**

The Secret History is considered the work that outlined the dark academia genre and is to this day considered the pioneer work of this genre. Dark academia books are set at traditional

universities or represent classical art or architecture and feature anti-hero main characters that are amoral at best.

The plot of the novel concerns group of students at exclusive Vermont College, who get addicted to emulating Dionysian rituals of Antiquity and accidentally perform human sacrifice. Some ideas raised through this television show include identification loss, manipulation, hermeneutic death, and a tragic conclusion for the both. The characters try to incite the kind of madness that Nietzsche portrayed in his gods Dionysus, the symbol of the anti-Apollo and irrationality. But what is more evident in this novel is how Tom and the other characters achieve their immortality through these rituals only to end up as violent characters and tragedy.

Furthermore, it raises issues regarding postmodern concerns with regards to absolute reality due to an unreliable narrator, portrayal of addiction, the inability to think and the portrayal of the media as swaying the people.

All in all, *The Secret History* sets the foundations for dark academia for its aesthetic amalgamation of both Classical studies and philosophies along with a gothic, emotionally ambivalent plot detailing the melancholic nature of academic desperation.



## General Conclusion

This thesis is a profound analysis of the Gothic-postmodern fiction, fundamentally relies on the concept of sublime terror in which is shaped by: symbolic death, loss of self, and loss of reality. Using Donna Tartt's first novel *The Secret History* 1992 to analyze the Bacchanalia and the murders through Dionysian philosophy, Freudian and Lacanian death drive theory in addition to Jean's Baudrillard idea of hyperreality. The study transmits the interpretations of fear, suspense, and anxiety and their impacts of the main characters within the novel context. In a way to emphasize the Gothic literature in postmodern fiction.

The first chapter includes a general background on the Gothic-postmodern literature, it affirms that the notion of sublime terror links between Gothic and postmodern literature. It also distinguishes the essential patterns of the sublime terror which are: symbolic death, loss of self and reality. The study collects several theories in order to provide a framework that helps for understanding the notion of sublime terror in Gothic-postmodern literature; it goes deeply in psychoanalytic theories, Freudian death drive theory and Lacanian death instincts upon Freudian death drive theory theory and the perception of Jouissance which affirms that death serves as a vehicle for exploring existential, philosophical, and socio-cultural themes in ways that challenge and subvert traditional literary and Gothic conventions. It invites readers to question and reevaluate their understanding of life, death, identity, and narrative structures in a contemporary, fragmented world. As a part from the sublime terror principles Beville stimulates the loss of self in her work, she collects the alienation, quest for authenticity that associates with the characters' existence and identities in the postmodern contexts, and Buddhism cycle of Birth and death "Nirvana". Other than the existential beliefs such as Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, simulacra, and simulation to underline on the loss of reality principle as he acclaims that the individuals lose the ability for distinguishing the reality and fantasy. The chapter deduces that the Gothic-postmodern's sublime terror is

widely liked to the psychological and existential prospects in the contemporary fiction context.

The second chapter, evolves a Gothic-postmodern analysis on Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* 1992, it tackles a main event in the novel which is the Dionysus rituals and analyzes its reflections on the characters and the plot line. Tartt's novel inspired from Greek figure who is Dionysus the God of winemaking, madness, and chaos reflecting on the students' obsession with ancient Greek aesthetics and experiencing the Dionysian rituals in which accidentally leads them to commit a murder. Moreover, the study discovers that the sublime terror features was not on the characters and plotline only, it has an impact on the reader also. As it demonstrates an interpretation for the phrase "beauty is terror" that appears in the novel which coexists with the capacity for savagery, it reflects on the idea that beauty possesses a dual nature—it captivates and enthralls, but it also has the power to disturb and unsettle. In the novel, the characters' encounters with beauty evoke both awe and fear, as they confront the consequences of their actions and the darker aspects of their desires.

All in all, this analysis affirms that Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* 1992 represents to the readers the hostility of postmodern society through echoing on the fear and terror experience over rationalizing the crimes to the readers and creating the suspense within the characters' decisions, actions, and behaviors in the novel, as it also decodes the principle of "beauty is terror" and linking it to the notion of sublime terror in order to examine the relationship between the art and the depths of human nature, which resembles the darkness, violence, and terror.

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