

Once and Always: Friendship, Hauntology and Madness in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*

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Abstract

The present thesis aims to explore and compare the concepts of friendship, hauntology and madness in two significant novels of the Dark Academia genre: *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *If We Were Villains* by M.L Rio. In the examination of the selected novels, this thesis displays the disintegration of friendship in the face of a tragic event like murder. Murder, as the collective doing of the friends, starts to haunt every aspect of their lives and becomes the trigger for frenzy of behaviour with lethal consequences. Considering the significance of friendship in college years, analyzing the concept of friendship in both novels is crucial in that the events which take place on the college campus have a role in shaping the characters' future life. In order to explain the nature of friendship in the two novels, this thesis builds its theoretical framework mainly on the ideas of Derrida and Arendt. Along with the literary critics such as Mark Fisher and Katy Shaw, Derrida's concept of "hauntology" is employed to explain the alteration of friendship and the repercussions of murder on the protagonists because the more they become haunted by the act they have committed, the darker the events become for them. The protagonists' behaviours in madness not only constitute a trigger in the series of events but also reflect their perception of the world. The conceptual approach utilizing madness in the present thesis centres predominantly on the literary theories of Foucault and Nietzsche.

Keywords: Campus novels; Contemporary fiction; Dark academia; Friendship; Hauntology; Madness

INTRODUCTION

“Love of learning is the guide of life.” The quote refers to the motto of Phi Beta Kappa which is one of the oldest academic honour societies in the United States, dating back to the year 1776. The society's objective is to support and promote excellence in the liberal arts and sciences affiliating students only at select American colleges and universities. Despite a transition from a secret society into an academic honour society, Phi Beta Kappa is generally considered the forerunner of modern college fraternities¹. While Phi Beta Kappa is known to recognise academic excellence in about three hundred universities, the elite universities have embodied collegiate secret societies ranging in their levels of secrecy and independence since their establishment. Some collegiate secret societies such as Skull and Bone (Yale University), Porcellian Club (Harvard University), and The Apostles (Cambridge University) stand out due to a reason different from the motto of Phi Beta Kappa which is about elevating learning; the real point of interest for the public is the excessive behaviour of their members. Alleged excessiveness reaches as far as the claims of the involvement in the assassination of J. F. Kennedy².

The two novels that are being discussed in this thesis *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *If We Were Villains* by M. L. Rio both recount the tragic stories of two groups of friends which resemble in many ways the university secret societies that were briefly mentioned above. The study focuses on three significant concepts – Friendship, Hauntology and Madness- in the two novels which belong to a relatively new genre, ‘Dark Academia’. The three concepts that constitute the theoretical framework, given their relevance over centuries also are concordant with the nature of Dark Academia novels.

Dark Academia is the name of a literary group of works with an intense emphasis on reading, writing and learning to combine the traditional and academic with gothic aspects. The characters in dark academia novels are members of a subculture which is centred around higher education and share a high interest, more like an admiration, for classical art, philosophy and literature. Chapter 1 of this thesis aims to provide such information on the genre and the novels as the subject of this thesis. In the following chapter, the concept of friendship is observed in the two novels. The main events in the novels of Dark Academia - and the two novels of this study in particular- usually take place in college campuses where students reside in dormitories away from their families. It is this feature of Dark Academia that makes friendship so pivotal a

¹ <https://www.pbk.org/About>
<https://www.pbk.org/History>

² <https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/campus-life-more/sinister-secret-societies/>

concept for the characters of the novels in this study. In order to examine the concept of friendship in the second chapter, the theoretical framework is mainly based on Derrida's approach to the concept, alongside the contributions of such literary critics as Mark Vernon and Elizabeth Terfel. A friendship that involves such a tragedy is bound to alter. Friends who act as a group lose their dynamic and the interpersonal relations in the group come to the fore. The murder they commit to fix their life, as they think it would, starts to haunt them. Hauntology describes how the act of murder and the guilt felt afterwards affect the future events, and cause the dissolution of friendship in both novels while trying to cover it up. The third chapter of this study aims to explore the two novels through Derrida's Hauntology as a multifunctional concept. The fourth and final chapter employs the concept of madness through the theoretical framework of Foucault accompanied by the critical approaches of Nietzsche and Jennifer Radden. For the characters in the two novels, madness, which to them is perceived as creative, has its certain appeal at the beginning of the events.

RESULTS

This thesis observes Dark Academia and two important novels - *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* - in the said genre. Through the study of these two novels, the thesis contributes Dark Academia genre as a recent genre which bears relatively less focus among literary studies. As observed through this thesis, the two novels under perusal bear the characteristics of Dark Academia considering their form and content. When two novels are viewed in terms of their form, *The Secret History* consists of "books" as chapters and ends in an epilogue similar to the form of a Classical Literature work. The characters in *If We Were Villains* perform Shakespeare's plays; therefore, the chapters in the novel are "acts" including a prologue in each and ending in an epilogue. In terms of their contents, the two novels that are the subject of the present thesis are centred on particular areas of literary studies that is essential for Dark Academia, not only in that the characters elaborate on them, but also in that they become frameworks for living (and dying). The two novels deal with subjects concordant with Dark Academia which occasionally concentrates on the gloomy, gory, and generally arcane themes and motifs present in mythology and the classical gothic writings. The plot, most of the time, reminds the readers of Plato's warnings and concerns in his famous *The Republic*; thus, it revolves around the humanities and liberal arts that are revealed as having the ability to elevate to alarming levels the workings of the affect and the characters' passions. Ancient Classical Greek Literature in *The Secret History* and Shakespeare's plays in *If We Were Villains* constitute cases in point.

The observation of the concepts of friendship, hauntology and madness demonstrate that these concepts are requisite and concordant with the nature of Dark Academia and the two novels in particular. The concept of friendship is on the focus of this thesis in that friendship constitutes the sole relation that the characters can establish. Considering the significance of friendship in college years, the nature of friendship in two novels comes to fore. As observed through the present thesis, the nature of friendship in both novels does not match the ideal view of the concept as we know. We observe a friendship mingled with the concept of enmity which becomes a blurry relation for the characters. Thus, the nature of the friendship is observed as fit Derrida's ideas on the concept. This elusive aspect of friendship leads the characters to murder. Derrida's Hauntology is observed as another crucial concept in the novels in that the college years – with their best and worst – leave indelible marks on the characters. Hauntology presents itself in a reciprocal journey. The protagonists cannot overcome the effects of the events in the past, similarly the past is always there to haunt them preventing them to establish proper lives and proper relationships. Another crucial concept is madness because madness is observed as a trigger and a strong motive for the characters. In the beginning, we observe that the characters delight in the madness which they think harmless. However, when they murder their own friends, the sanity and reason the characters possess gain a blurry aspect. The characters falters in between. Therefore, the three concepts as the focus of this thesis are portrayed as ideal, pleasant and irreplaceable at the beginning. As the events progress, they transgress from their ideal form into a dark area.

DISCUSSION

CHAPTER 1: DARK ACADEMIA AND ITS NOVELS

Across the globe and for a growing number of people, especially for Generation Z, an increasing obsession with the style and perception of prestigious (and very frequently gothic in style) universities has been a staple of recent times; during the previous century, a college or a university campus became the setting for various novels. Such novels are categorized as "the campus novels", "the college novels" or "the academic novels" (Williams, 2012, p.1). They constitute an ever-growing and distinguishable subgenre in contemporary literature. According to Elaine Showalter "the earlier academic novels had been idyllic, satiric and ironic, even embittered, but these [contemporary novels are] cosmic, mythic and vengeful" (Showalter, 2005, p.100). Some academic novels seem to merge with other genres such as murder mystery and gothic, depicting a world isolated from everyday life of an academic (Williams, 2012, p.3). The novels with these particular features seem to match the nature of dark academia novels.

Dark Academia takes its place as a subculture in various fields such as fashion, film industry and literature. It often refers to an aesthetics that centres on classical literature, the pursuit of self-discovery and a general passion for knowledge and learning. It is one of the rising trends of the twenty-first century, especially in social media. The term is also the unofficial name for novels written in the same manner with moody and mysterious narration although they are the sub-branch of the campus novels or academic novels in literature. It is not a recent movement but rather a continuation of pre-existing aesthetics with roots in previous periods, especially Romanticism. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and E.M Forster's *Maurice* are considered inspirational for dark academia novels. *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir in 1989 and *Kill Your Darlings* directed by John Krokidas in 2013 are examples of the films influential for dark academia³.

Significantly, Dark Academia is distinct from its counterpart -Light Academia- as it involves mysteries, murder, danger, cults, and secret groups. Therefore, if Light Academia is a celebration of life, Dark Academia is a lamentation for death⁴. Furthermore, it occasionally concentrates on the gloomy, gory, and generally arcane themes and motifs present in mythology and the classical gothic writings. The plot, most of the time, reminds the readers of Plato's warnings and concerns in his famous *The Republic*; thus, it revolves around the humanities and liberal arts that are revealed as having the ability to elevate to alarming levels the workings of the affect and the characters' passions. Ancient Classical Greek Literature in *The Secret History* and Shakespeare's plays in *If We Were Villains* constitute cases in point. The two novels that are the subject of the present thesis are thus centred on those particular areas of literary studies, not only in that the characters elaborate on them, but also in that they become frameworks for living (and dying).

Due to the emphasis on learning and knowledge, the novels unfold in an academic environment with an Ivy League, overtly elitist setting. The college campus is often a remote boarding school with gothic characteristics; timewise, the novels are mostly situated in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The latter half of the twentieth century is denounced for its overemphasis on technology, popular culture, and general elements associated with the modern life; hence, the characters tend to avoid being swept by contemporaneity. Instead, they are dedicated to their studies to the point where in order to enact the conventions of their objects of study they tend to self-destruct or harm others. Often members of secret societies or tight-knit groups, they

³ <https://screenrant.com/dead-poets-society-best-movies-dark-academia/>
<https://www.lofficiel.at/en/pop-culture/dark-academia-aesthetic>

⁴ <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/dark-academia/>

come together to explore their area of interest, in isolation; significantly, they build their micro-universe in the already distinct macrocosm of such elitist academic environments.

All the above-mentioned features of Dark Academia serve to focus the interest of the contemporary reading audience in that they inspire different interpretations for different people. For some, Dark Academia is significant in terms of the noun that defines the genre, clearly as a nostalgic view to either personal pasts or (wished for) such pasts. For the people who completed their education life, dark academia novels offer a view to the past, a melancholic one towards the school days, and their unadulterated freedom from responsibilities, the pure delight in intellectual exploration, for its own sake. Other readers of the genre tend to focus on the adjective; for them, the interest lies in the depiction of the pursuit of knowledge, mysteriously related to what is sublime, mystic and ultimately lethal. Dark Academia is claimed to be the ultimate student fantasy⁵. It presents a form of escapism from our present world. It can be claimed that the reason for that escapism is the yearning and nostalgia for a vanishing era. As previously stated, *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* are the works that are the most significant and popular frontrunners of the genre. The two novels share the common characteristics of the genre, juxtaposed with the elements of suspense and murder.

The two works under perusal in the present thesis focus on the students in academia. Their field of study is highly influential in their lives. As a group of close friends, the nature of the friendship they establish, and its limits will be closely interrogated. The fact that the tragic event of murder is their own doing haunts them and lead to further tragedy in their lives. Hence, the subject of this study in the following chapters centres on friendship, hauntology and madness which are common themes in the two novels.

CHAPTER II: FRIENDSHIP: “THE ENEMIES I LOVE ARE MY FRIENDS”⁶

The concept of friendship occupies a crucial role in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*. The protagonists Richard Papan (*The Secret History*) and Oliver Marks (*If We Were Villains*), in retrospect, recount the events that have profoundly marked their lives; this journey back in time provides them with the opportunity to reassess their friendships during their college years, in both their positive and negative aspects. While arguably providing a benign environment of belonging for initially alienated characters, the said friendships also become responsible for the extremely tragic turns in their lives. Hence, this chapter aims to discuss the nature of friendship

⁵ <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/dark-academia/>

⁶ Derrida, J. (2005). *Politics of Friendship* (George Collins, Trans.) London/New York: Verso, p.33.

among the protagonists, mainly from the perspective of Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt theoretical writings.

Starting from the Ancient Greeks, philosophers have pondered on the scope and structure of friendship. According to Aristotle who was one of the first thinkers to elaborate a systematic perspective of the concept, friendship “is a virtue or implies virtue”. He even elevates the concept to a bond that holds a state together (Aristotle, 2009, p.142). In Book VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he declares friendship as an ethical ideal and claims that only good men resembling one another in virtue can share the perfect friendship in the truest sense (Aristotle, 2009, p.145).

The Ancient philosophy on friendship had a huge influence on Western thinking. In the Middle Ages, Christian thinkers combined their religious philosophy on friendship with pre-Christian philosophy and based their works on their heritage. The concept of friendship was justified by “agape”- the unconditional love for God (McEvoy, 1999, p.3). With the advent of humanism in the Renaissance, the concept of friendship turned from a contemplation of the spiritual to the earthly with a more secular view. (Marlow, 2003, p.1) During the Victorian era, the concept expanded to provide solutions for various social issues, such as difficult marriages and families. It became a substitute for family and a base for social action.

In our contemporary times, the concept has somehow departed from the generally idealistic approach of the Ancients and gained realism. Georg Simmel claims that the friendship characterized by the Ancients does not exist today. He adds that such complete intimacy becomes more and more difficult among a large number of people and the modern man seems to lose the traditional meaning of the term (Simmel, 1950, p.325).

One of the significant philosophers who deals with the concept of friendship in contemporary sense is Derrida. His main argument regarding friendship coincides with Deconstruction which destabilizes the concepts such as good and evil, presence and absence or soul and body. In his work *Politics of Friendship*, he argues, “The oppositions we are thus recalling seem to dominate the interpretation and experience of friendship (Derrida, 2005, p.278). He adds that philosophical and canonical discourses on friendship from Aristotle to Kant and Cicero manifestly tied the concept to virtue and justice (Derrida, 2005, p.276). For Derrida, the notion of fraternity is prevalent within the traditional discourse of friendship injecting a public and political aspect. He further states:

The singularity/universality divide has always divided the experience, the concept and the interpretation of friendship. It has determined other oppositions within friendship schematically: on the one hand, the secret-private-invisible-illegible-

apolitical ultimately without concept; on the other, the manifest - public, testimonial - political - homogeneous to the concept. (Derrida, 2005, p.276)

The onset of Tartt's and Rio's novels portrays for the reader the kind of ideal friendship with a strong, unconditional attachment. Richard Papen in *The Secret History* starts Hampden College with the intention of dedicating his time to his overpowering passion, Ancient Greek. However, at first this dream appears thwarted by the meticulous habits of the instructor, Professor Julian Marrow who is unlikely to include outsiders in his selected group. Richard's counsellor Professor George Lafourge warns him about Marrow's selection of students, which is "on a personal rather than academic basis." (Tartt, 2002: p.24). The mystery surrounding Julian Marrow and his eccentric and charismatic students makes Richard more inquisitive about them and gradually builds a desire to belong with this select group. He feels fascination towards Marrow's students, a feeling combined with admiration: "Four boys and a girl. They were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party – at least to me who had never seen anything like them to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities" (Tartt, 2002, p.28). Cut out of the rest of the department, even of the college, this small group provides the affection that Richard cannot find in his family and fills the emotional emptiness that he yearns for. He desperately wants to believe that Henry, Bunny (Edmund), Francis, Camilla and Charles would be his first truly affectionate friends. In *If We Were Villains*, at Dellecher Classical Conservatory, over the course of four-years, the seven friends -Oliver, Richard, Filippa, Meredith, James, Alexander, Wren and James - have grown attached to one another. Oliver describes their friendship with harmless altercations as that of "seven siblings, spent so much time together that we had seen the best and the worst of one another and were unimpressed by either" (Rio, 2017, p.28).

The common intellectual interests of the groups furthermore enhance the profound attachment for one another. As Terfel argues, friendship enriches a great many of our activities escalating the absorption and performance in them (Terfel, 1971, p.240). There exists a specific type of activity in which all friends are involved, the "shared activity" where reciprocity and joint engagement take front stage. (Terfel, 1971, p.223). In the novels, the shared activity of the friendship groups separates them from the other students at the college and thus undoes the intended institutional bonding effect. Arendt states that friendship provides a protected space in which friends can share and discuss their ideas. In the novels, the shared activity among friends seems to create the protected space that Arendt points out:

Friendship to a large extent, indeed, consists of this kind of talking about something that the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it

becomes ever more common to them. It gains not only its specific articulateness but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its own which is shared in friendship. (Arendt, 1990, p.82)

In the novels here analysed, literature, specifically Classical Greek Literature and Shakespeare, constitute the world that Arendt refers to as something to be shared among friends. Hampden College in *The Secret History* is a highly selective school specializing in liberal arts. For Richard and his classmates, Ancient Greek and Literature shape a passion and a way of life. They know the works of Classic Literature by heart and can discuss the philosophy informing them. This select universe of knowledge extends well beyond the classes and assignments, constituting a huge part of their lives. Rio's novel *If We Were Villains* portrays a similar passion of the characters which is acting and Shakespeare. The main characters in the novel study Shakespeare's plays to become drama performers and we see the same immersion into Literature as in *The Secret History*. After training for backstage work, romances and comedies, the final year's education is reserved for Shakespeare's tragedies. In contrast to *The Secret History*, the seven characters are remarkably favoured at school. As promising future performers, they are constantly among the crowd of people with considerable praise and admiration and their shared ambition towards a future of success and prosperity is inspiring to the other students as well.

Alongside the passion for acting and Shakespeare in *If We Were Villains* and Ancient Greek and Literature in *The Secret History*, the tie which connects the friends to one another is reinforced by the adverse attitudes of their families. They thoroughly enjoy the economic support their families provide. They are at liberty to study a field of their liking, and they have their own houses to live in. This aspect of the friend groups in Tartt's and Rio's novels keeps them apart from other students. It also provides a sort of freedom from the rules of society and enables them even to force the limits of their freedom. Moreover, the apex of the friendship for the groups is the time when they think they are unburdened from the responsibilities that derive from living in society.

In both novels, the deviation of Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) from their groups creates the first break in their friendship. The rest of the friends join against a common 'enemy' who is their own friend. The duality of friend and enemy is an issue that Derrida elaborates on the concept of friendship. In *Politics of Friendship*, he quotes from Nietzsche who interprets Aristotle's phrase about friends inversely:

'Friends, there are no friends!' thus said the dying sage;

‘Foes, there are no foes!’ say *I, the living fool.*” (Nietzsche, 1996, p.149)

Derrida argues that the concepts of friend and enemy consequently interrelate and switch places continuously. They interconnect as if they love each other, “all along a spiralled hyperbole: the declared enemy, true enemy is a better friend than the friend”. Since the concepts bear the phantom of the other, the friend/enemy binary acts in a like manner. (Derrida, 2005, p.72). After the death of their friends, the circumstances into which the characters drive themselves cause them to see one another in a different role, rather than a friend. They erroneously think that they have eliminated their enemies - Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) - and their friendship will continue as it used to be. Nevertheless, they find themselves struggling with enemy-like friends within the group. Thus, the characters in Tarrt’s and Rio’s novels come and go between friendship and enmity. Nietzsche claims that of all peoples, it is the Greeks who wrote about friendship repeatedly since the concept appeared as a problem worth solving for them (Nietzsche, 1996, p.143). In both novels under focus, friendship attains a problematic nature in which distrust and secrecy begin to dominate. Nietzsche suggests forgiveness if a friend commits an evil deed (Nietzsche, 2006, p.69). Arendt, similarly, proposes forgiveness as a possible redemption from the consequences of an irreversible action. Forgiveness may function as restorative for the inevitable damages of the action (Arendt, 1998, p.237). When trustworthiness, loyalty and intimacy - the constitutive qualities of friendship - are seriously damaged, the dissolution of friendship among the main characters seems inevitable. The case of the protagonists confirms Aristotle’s observation that a friendship that is not stable is not a friendship. As mentioned by Aristotle, it is natural for a man to break off his friendship on the condition that there is not the possibility of reformation. His friend has become another man and he stands aloof from him. This change in the friend changes the basis of friendship (Aristotle, 2009, p.302).

In *the Secret History*, the feelings of betrayal and distrust manifest themselves especially when the police investigation concentrates on Henry and Charles. The relations between Henry, Camilla, Charles and Frances gradually deteriorate. Richard realizes that Henry tries to direct the police’s suspicions away from himself, towards anyone, be it Charles or Cloke who secretly provides drugs at the college and even himself. Richard begins to believe that Henry intentionally involved him in Bunny’s death in order to lay the blame on him if circumstances demand so. Charles is the one who feels deceived by Henry the most since he thinks that he is targeted by the police on purpose to erase the suspicions about Henry. Richard and Charles complain about Henry’s attitude lasting from the beginning and express their annoyance with him telling them what to do. Richard ponders, “I wonder...not why he tells us what to do. But

why we always do what he says” (Tartt, 2002, p.403). In *If We Were Villains*, the alteration in the nature of the friendship arises due to secrets and lies rather than the feeling of deceit and distrust in *the Secret History*. Although the friends spend the whole of their time together, there are secrets they keep from each other especially about their romantic involvements within the group. Oliver appears to be unsuspecting of the presence of these secrets since they are friends. He learns that Meredith attempted to have an affair with James in their junior year. He suspects that James might be involved with Wren. He thinks about what sort of secrets people keep from each other and how little they wonder in their inner lives (Rio, 2017, p.115).

The final confrontation of the friends in the two novels becomes the moment where the concepts of friendship and enmity thoroughly blur. It not only marks the fate of their friendship but also happens to be the ultimate act of friendship when it is at its lowest. Henry’s suicide and Oliver’s misleading confession to the police are ultimate sacrifices in the friendship. Through their sacrifice, they save their friends from the burden of the murders; however, they cannot change the fate of the friendship. The bond that holds them together is ruptured and the friends are apart and fall adrift in *If We Were Villains*. The others do not pursue their passion that was once in the centre of their lives nor have the desire to do so.

The concept of friendship plays a pivotal role in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* because it constitutes the sole connection that the characters have in their isolated and alienated world. However, the strong friendship(s) do(es) not prevent them from murdering one of their own. Following the murder, the dynamics that form the basis of friendship is destroyed, and the very nature of the friendship is changed beyond recognition. The murder of the friend leaves an irredeemable mark on their friendship and their lives. In Derrida’s words, notwithstanding the different context:

We are friends of an entirely different kind, inaccessible friends, friends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore, without a horizon of recognition. Without familial bond, without proximity, without *oikeiotes*⁷ (Derrida, 2005, p.35).

CHAPTER III: HAUNTOLOGY: “ENTER THE GHOST, EXIT THE GHOST, RE-ENTER THE GHOST”⁸

⁷ The term *Oikeiotes* signifies the sense of belonging, the opposite of alienation. The term evokes the sense of being "at home", of belonging to and by extension becoming "familiarized" with something. Similar to *Oikeiōsis*.
<https://www.alkistis.net/blog/the-ancient-greek-concept-of-oikeiosis-can-save-us>

⁸ Stage instructions for Hamlet. Shakespeare, W. (1996) Hamlet. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Act 1, Scene 1,640-641.

The Secret History and *If We Were Villains* are novels dominated by memories that haunt their characters. The main characters – Richard in *The Secret History* and Oliver in *If We Were Villains* - narrate their memories of friendship and murder which have a direct connection to their present and future. Pursued by the memories with pivotal significance, the members in each friend group are both haunted and haunting the others. The concept of Hauntology therefore is present in several aspects in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*. The main framework of this chapter is based on Derrida's concept of Hauntology supported by the contributions of Katy Shaw and Mark Fisher.

Coined by Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx*, Hauntology is a multipurpose concept combining haunting and ontology. It refers to the return or the persistence of elements from social and cultural past, as in the manner of a ghost.⁹ It replaces the precedence of “being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Davis, 2005, p.373). As detailed by Derrida, in the figure of the spectre, Hauntology blurs the binary oppositions such as presence-absence, body-spirit, past-present and life and death. By aligning a term with its opposite or rather with its absence, Derrida weakens the sense of certainty and demonstrates the fragility of the borders between them. In the realm of hauntology, the border between past and present and being and non-being is the most relevant. (Coverly, 2020, p.78).

From the beginning of time, ghosts have been alluring and mysterious (non) entities. Their stories date back to the myths and beliefs of ancient cultures. As a consequence of these beliefs, the burial practices and funerals originated to bid farewell to the deceased, furthermore, to prevent their souls from lingering in the world. The existence of the ghosts has been accompanied by the feeling of being haunted, which is a traumatic and disturbing experience. Every period and every culture from the Ancients to our contemporary times own their specific ghosts and hauntings. The literary ghosts have the function to interconnect the past, present and future. The literary ghost signifies the processes of being haunted by the past, by other texts, and by those who have been marginalised or silenced. Thus, the spectral figure functions as an entity for intertextual exchange and transference of memory, trauma, melancholia or loss (Lorek-Jezinska, 2013, p.7). In *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in the Twenty-First Century English Literature*, Katy Shaw argues that a fixation with the recent past has a significant effect on contemporary literature, and spectrality becomes an instrument to display the interconnection of past, present and future (Shaw, 2018, p.3).

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>

One of the most important aspects of Hauntology is time. Haunting looks back to the past and points forward to the future from the moment of the present. The spectral haunting questions history through disordering the traditional chronology of past, present and future. Derrida claims that haunting is historical. He states, “[haunting] is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, instituted order of a calendar (Derrida, 2006, p.3). To illustrate, Derrida demonstrates the significance of time in hauntology in his analysis of Hamlet’s line “Time is out of joint” at the beginning of *Specters of Marx*. Derrida interprets time in this line as “disarticulated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad” (Derrida, 2006, p.20).

Derrida differentiates the two words related to the future: "Future (future)" and "to come (l'avenir)" as can be translated from French. "Future" is expected, planned and foreseeable whereas "to come" points toward what is unexpected and unpredictable. It has a feature that is neither existent nor non-existent, resisting the human desire to control (Acar, 2014, p.2-3). In relation with the issue in Hauntology, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that: “The future can only be for ghosts...At the bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back” (Derrida, 2006, p.63-66).

The Secret History and *If We Were Villains* start with what is “to come”, in the futures for the characters. Richard in *The Secret History* and Oliver in *If We Were Villains* narrate the single most important event in their past. They recount their stories like a spectre in the present hovering over their memories of their college years. Richard in *The Secret History* crosses off his life prior to Hampden College and the only story he could tell is the one that haunts him the most. In *If We Were Villains*, when Oliver finishes his story, the restlessness to know the truth is there to stay; he mistakenly thinks it will become bearable, with some kind of closure.

In relation to Derrida’s idea of hauntology destabilizing time, Mark Fisher states that in our contemporary world, what haunts us is the state of things and better futures that they promised but that never became real. By saying lost futures, Fisher argues that the present is cancelled and is in the grasp of nostalgia. He states, “The threat is not the deadly sweet seduction of nostalgia. The problem is not, anymore, the longing to get to the past but the inability to get out of it” (Fisher, 2014, p.103). The past, according to Fisher, is a series of pantomime gestures which people neither are able to nor desire to perform any longer. In the two novels, the characters eventually seem to lose the capability to grasp and speak of the present. In *The Secret History*, when Francis, Camilla and Richard meet at the end of the novel, the present status of the characters is painful for them to have a conversation about. None of the characters continues their interest in the Ancient Greek which once stood in the centre of their lives. As a person

who pursues a career in academia, Richard now specializes on Jacobean Drama. His studies bear the hauntologic effect of the events in Hampden College – “the candlelit and treacherous universe in which [they] moved – of sin unpunished, of innocence destroyed” (Tartt, 2002, p.471). *If We Were Villains* illustrates the similar refusal or inability for the characters to adjust to the present time. Wren ends up living as a recluse. Even though Alexander and Meredith become actors, they do not perform any play by Shakespeare. The future which onetime seemed wild and full of promise once is lost for them.

Not only the story but also, the friends - the architects of the stories have a hauntological feature, as well. Henry, Francis, Camilla, Charles and Bunny of *The Secret History* have all left their marks on Richard. He states that so many things remained with him, from his preferences in clothes to books and even to food “in adolescent emulation of the rest of the Greek class” (Tartt, 2002, p.88). Similarly, in *If We Were Villains* Oliver remembers his friends looking towards a future in which their friendship continues unchanged. The future in the hopes of the friends is filled with acting and Shakespeare. However, Oliver states that he is terrified of the unknown ending after Richard’s death. Richard’s (*The Secret History*) and Oliver’s (*If We Were Villains*) recollections are what Derrida describes as “the spirit of sublime and the spirit of nostalgia crossing all borders” (Derrida, 2006, p.187). Memories cannot be confined in borders, and they pass through walls constantly, tricking consciousness (Derrida, 2006, p.54) Derrida astutely points out that “Hamlet could never know the peace of a happy ending” (Derrida, 2006 p.52); this is accurate for the characters in the novels under perusal here, as well. Richard’s (*The Secret History*) and Oliver’s (*If We Were Villains*) memories for those days relate to a future that will soon turn into a “future to come” which is unpredictable and unexpected.

As defined in Hauntology, Derrida’s Spectres are not “chain-clanking, hair-raising, bump-in-the-night ghosts” (Buse & Scott, 1999, p.17). Understood conventionally, people that are haunted by ghosts fear the harm they might inflict on themselves, since the ghosts have needs and demands to be realized or responded to. The metaphorical ghosts cause people to "suffer from guilt, remorse and regret as they begin to appreciate the extent of suffering that must have been caused by the injustices of the past" (Hollan, 2020, p.455). Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) become the characters with the most haunting effect on the friends in both novels. The death of the two characters represents the dreams that are destroyed, the betrayals and secrets that are surfaced, and the future that is deprived of alternatives. What Richard thinks describes the situation best as follows: “It is only later, in solitude, in memory, that realization downs: when the ashes are cold; when the mourners have departed; when one

looks around and finds oneself – quite to the one’s surprise – in an entirely different world” (Tartt, 2002, p.254).

Setting relates both to physicality and to spectrality in hauntology. Hauntology disorders space as well as time. Katy Shaw argues that the etymology of the word “haunt” carries spatial connotations with reference to a home, a journey back to an original dwelling. The haunted site can function to read the past and to explain the future through spatial metaphors and representations. (Shaw, 2018, p.18). Mark Fisher states that one of the meanings of the term “haunt a place” signifies both the dwelling place and the domestic scene. According to Fisher, “Haunting happens when a space is invaded or disrupted by a time that is out of joint, a dyschromia” (Fisher, 2014, p.116). As the site of the appearing and disappearing of the phantom, the house or home (the heimlich) turns into the uncanny (the unheimlich) (Buse & Scott, 1999, p.132). In *Signatures of the Visible*, Fredric Jameson also states that it is anachronistic that ghost stories are contingently and constitutively dependent on a physical place, in particular, on a house. The ghost is united harmoniously with a building of antiquity (Jameson, 1992, p.123). Derrida, furthermore, argues that the most familiar turns into the most disturbing. Through what is most strange, distant and threatening, the economic home of “oikos” which is the nearby, the familiar and the domestic or even the national frightens itself (Derrida, 2006, p.181).

In *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*, the college means home itself for the characters, especially Richard and Oliver. The friend groups spend most of their lives within the borders of the college. The events that leave their marks on their memories take place in the college or places close to the college. For Richard (*The Secret History*), Hampden College is different from any place he knows, with a distressing and disappointing atmosphere at first glance. The college possesses all the features of a gothic but alluring environment with a tinge of antiquity. Still, he feels elated to be there. The same atmosphere is shared in the Dellecher Conservatory in *If We Were Villains*. The college is housed on an old country estate with a dormitory called the Castle and a building for classrooms called The Tower. Oliver and his friends are so attached to their studies that they feel sad when they have to leave college for holidays. However, the college they call home turns into a place of tragic events that will haunt them. It becomes the tangible reminder of their failed friendship and broken lives. Thus, in *The Secret History*, none of Richard’s friends returns to Hampden College after Henry’s suicide. Richard is the only one of them to graduate. In *If We Were Villains*, the visit Oliver pays at Dellecher Conservatory after ten years makes him experience various emotions. He feels panic, nostalgia and longing yet he cannot avoid the feeling that he is no longer welcome there.

CHAPTER IV: MADNESS: “THE ROAD TO MADNESS IS MADNESS”¹⁰

Madness, in its numerous disguises, such as insanity, folly, frenzy and delusion has been a recurrent theme in literature since ancient times. Sophocles’ Ajax, Euripides’ Orestes and Hercules constituted some of the earliest representations of madness. The spiritual wandering of Margery Kempe in *the Book of Margery Kempe* and Don Quixote’s chivalric perception of reality also displayed the understanding of madness in their own periods and employed the theme to handle the issues of their society; yet another famous literary character, Bertha Rochester inspired numerous writers to tackle the theme. Alex Delarge in *A Clockwork Orange* by Stanley Kubrick and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath are more recent characters with distinctive approaches to life through their madness.

Madness in the novels discussed in the present thesis constitutes a major drive for the characters, when both their view of life and their actions are taken into account. The protagonists are not mad people in the literal sense of the word; however, they come to act under its gradually accumulated influence. To illustrate this, the theoretical structure of the present chapter will be mainly centred on Foucault's approach to madness in his *Madness and Civilization*, along with Jennifer Radden’s more recent critical contributions.

In his work *Civilization and Madness*, Foucault explains sanity and insanity by giving the example of daylight. The mad man sees the same daylight as the sane man; however, for him, the shadows are the way to perceive the daylight. The mad man believes that what he sees is reality; therefore, delirium and dazzlement constitute the essence of madness (1988, p.108). Foucault argues that in the period named "Great Confinement" in the seventeenth century, mad people were considered as “unreasonable” alongside the poor, the vagabond and the criminal. By the end of the period, the madness started to be seen as distinct and more dangerous than even poverty and criminality. This change in attitude paved the way towards what Foucault named the silencing of the mad and the disappearance of the unreason. Foucault sees the said change as a radical development from the liberated condition of the mad in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As a consequence, in the preface of the same work, he demands that we must try to return to the period in history in which madness is seen not as a separate experience, but as a concept without the division of reason and madness (1988, p.ix). According to Foucault, madness can be described and understood through *unreason*. He argues that “we must understand unreason not as reason diseased or as reason lost or alienated, but quite simply as

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/TheLewisBlack/status/1237120817214955520>

reason dazzled” (1988, p.108). Through the concept of unreason, Foucault links madness not to the world and its forms under the surface but to man and his weaknesses, dreams and illusions. Madness does not deal with the world and the truth but with man and his perception of the truth (1988, p.40).

The groups of friends in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* are subjected to the manifestations of such omniscient madness, as well as to the dire consequences of their deeds. Its traces might be seen in their perception and interpretation of life and their own selves. While the characters transgress the boundaries of sanity, they are obliged to face the real world and their real selves. Furthermore, there are other aspects of their problematic being in the world, which explain why they frequently act unreasonably. Their unconventional family structures and upbringings provide the grounds for the various links that they forge with one another. In addition, their excessive internalization of their very fields of study -- Ancient Literature and Shakespeare’s plays – creates a separate realm, a world that while enriching to them, inexorably destroys the potential of meaningful interactions with all the outsiders.

The outset of the novels initially depicts this deviation into unreason as a dimension of their life that is both enjoyable and harmless, a mere eccentricity without any serious circumstances. Hampden College and his friends in particular provide Richard with a different and attractive setting, completely separated from his own humble origins. Significantly, when Richard enters into the friend group, he also enters into the world of the Ancient Classics. The same departure from reality is portrayed in *If We Were Villains* where the group of friends seem to completely dissolve in the world of Shakespeare’s characters. James is always the noble character, Alexander is the evil one, whereas Oliver and Filippa are always cast in the supporting roles. This character-allegiance is the mark of their real life interactions, as well; thus, their friendship and their images co-exist side by side. However special they assume they are, the characters in the two novels cannot avoid falling onto the margins of society when they commit murder. Thus appearance, reality and perception become dislocated. In *The Secret History*, Francis tells Richard that the police will not presume them as murderers, not because they are smart but because they do not look like they killed Bunny (Tartt, 2002, p.297). In the same vein, in *If We Were Villains*, Detective Colborne expresses his distrust in Oliver and his friends because being actors, “they could all be lying through their teeth and how will we know?” (Rio, 2017, p. 210). Foucault argues that madness begins at the point where man’s relation to truth is disturbed and darkened. In this relation and in the destruction of this relation, madness assumes its meaning and form (Foucault, 1988, p.104). In the novels studied in the present thesis, the characters get more and more unbalanced when they face the traces of the real selves and the real world and,

their reasoning is tested. In this context, the instructors of the groups of friends, as people with whom they interact most, play a significant part in shaping their reasoning. Frederick, Gwendolyn and Camilo in *If We Were Villains* are portrayed as teachers who train the students as drama performers. They compel them to submit to the passion(s) essential to play Shakespeare's characters, especially in affectively charged plays, such as *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. While the instructors in *If We Were Villains* are portrayed as more fitting to the concept of a typical instructor, Professor Julian Marrow in *The Secret History* stands out as a truly eccentric instructor. As the only instructor of the department of the Literature of Ancient Greek, he is idolized and admired by Richard and his friends. The students are under his influence in every aspect, from his ideas to his lifestyle. His lectures, as Richard states, bear the experience of "leaving the phenomenal world into entering into sublime" (Tartt, 2002, p.51). Thus, while the characters in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* tend towards irrational behaviour, it is their instructors who intermediate their transgression(s). While provoking and even encouraging their students' unreason, they tragically fail to consider the consequences of their behaviours.

In *The Secret History*, Professor Marrow's lecture about the Dionysian rituals and loss of control in those rituals displays a clear fascination for madness and cruelty, which he illustrates by claiming that the bloodiest parts of the Greek plays are also the most magnificent at the same. His thoughts recall Foucault's claims according to which madness fascinates man on all sides. The fantastic images that madness produces are not momentary; moreover, when man confronts his madness, he also engages in the animal in his own nature (1988, p.105). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, also Nietzsche refers to the Dionysiac experience as such. According to Nietzsche, the barriers and limits of existence are destroyed and it becomes the cause of the ecstasy during the Dionysiac experience (2001, p.40). In *The Secret History*, the description that Henry makes about their Dionysian ritual coheres with Nietzsche's claims. Furthermore, he states that the practice of the Bacchanal ritual was an experience far more than the ancient sources or commentators revealed. For him, it was heart-shaking "to escape the cognitive mode of experience, to transcend the accident of one's moment of being" (Tartt, 2002, p.177). Although not directly as Henry and his friends do, the characters in *If We Were Villains* undergo an experience of loss of control during the night of Halloween. Oliver and his friends present scenes from *Macbeth* to the students at college. The performance corresponds to the spirit of the night in its striking presentation, such as Oliver's appearance covered in blood as Banquo's ghost and the girls' entrance onto the stage through the lake as the three witches. The party

following the emotionally intense performance is endowed with “bacchanal proportions” and “sybaritic hysteria” in Oliver’s expression (Rio, 2017, p.73).

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche reflects on the Apollonian drive alongside with its opposite, the Dionysiac experience that the characters in the novels under perusal go through. On one hand, the Dionysian comprises the drive concerning the excess and the transgression of limits and boundaries, on the other hand, the Apollonian drive represents reason and self-control (2001, p.14). Foucault’s views about madness seem to stand parallel with Nietzsche’s ideas. He states that the man of madness and the man of reason are not separate despite moving apart. He argues as follows: “Madness and non-madness, reason and unreason are inextricably involved: inseparable at the moment when they do not exist and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them” (1988, p.11).

In *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*, the characters oscillate between madness and non-madness, reason and unreason. The murders of the farmer and Bunny display an unreasonable approach to death with regards to the characters in *The Secret History*. For Henry and his friends, the murder of the farmer is the first serious transgression whose consequences they managed to escape. Henry relates two previous instances in which he accidentally killed a duck and a deer. He states that during both incidents he felt deeply shaken; yet, he can coldheartedly calculate the best scenario about how to act before and after the farmer’s and Bunny’s murders for which he appears not to experience any serious remorse. In *If We Were Villains*, when Oliver returns to college after ten years, he resembles his college years to a time of being in a part of cult that offered ritual madness, ecstasy, and human sacrifice. For him, it was confusing to distinguish whether art was imitating life or the other way around. According to Foucault, in Shakespeare, madness relates to death and murder. It occupies an enormous place since it is beyond appeal. He refers to madness in Shakespeare as follows: “Nothing ever restores it either to truth or to reason. It leads only to laceration and hence to death” (1988, p.31).

Radden discusses the effects of irrational thoughts and beliefs on behaviour in this regard. She states that no matter how well-grounded it is, an action which is based on unusual belief or desire is irrational (Radden, 1985, p.59). She further argues that given a set of beliefs and desires, every behaviour can be rationalized and that as a result, the substance of any belief can be explained given a specific narrative of how it came to be. Even the most improbable beliefs may be reasonably justified. However, irrational ideas and desires are those that are socially, ethically and conceptually improper, and an irrational or unreasonable person exhibits weakness of reasoning (Radden, 1985, p.71). Judging the way the characters think, the murder

of Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) appears as the only way to escape from their menacing behaviour. In *The Secret History*, the friends get weary by Bunny's erratic behaviour which - they claim- drives them half-mad. His implied meanings about the farmer's murder exasperate and terrify his friends. Thus, when he starts alluding to the murder in public, he clearly poses a serious threat for them. Similarly, exasperation leads Oliver and his friends in *If We Were Villains* to let Richard die. The night before they find him afloat on the lake, they were all under the influence of alcohol; thus, passivity turns into violence when they actually decide not to save him.

Although the characters in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* display the effects of unreasonable thinking, the murders they commit are intentional and calculated. In *The Secret History*, Henry's plan on killing Bunny and create a story about their whereabouts for a possible police investigation is an example of calculatedness. In *If We Were Villains*, on the other hand, the characters do not plan to murder Richard, but they take the advantage of the situation when they find him seriously injured. Like Henry and his friends (*The Secret History*), they immediately decide on a story to tell the police. The main concern for both groups of friends is to avoid imprisonment; therefore, they naturally presume that a shared story will be sufficient to evade the legal consequences of the murder. They think that their lives would turn their normal course without Bunny's implications or Richard's threats.

However, in both novels, Richard and Oliver respectively begin to question the necessity of the murders after a while and thus unleash the sense of guilt. The feeling of guilt is related to a total evasion of moral standards, and it also includes a state without redemption. Therefore, the sense of guilt seems another reason for their irrational behaviour. According to Freud, we may reject the existence of an original capacity to distinguish good from bad; moreover, what is bad may be sometimes that which is desirable (Freud, 1962, p.70). Thus, a great number of people allow themselves to commit bad deeds as long as they are sure that the authority will not know about it and will not hold them accountable for it (1962, p.72). For Richard in *The Secret History*, Bunny's murder is a terrible act; yet, none of his friends is particularly villainous. Therefore, he rationalizes the farmer's death as a dropped stone on the lakebed which scarcely makes a ripple and concludes that Bunny's murder would be equally unproblematic. In *If We Were Villains*, Oliver and his friends feel relieved when they get through the initial police investigation. However, they begin to feel the absence of Richard immediately afterwards and they imagine Richard's replacements on stage as acting in bad taste; therefore, the very continuation of their students' life, as actors in Shakespeare's plays seems meaningless.

The thoughts and feelings of guilt continue to unhinge the characters' furthermore when they dream. Their haunting dreams conform to Freud's ideas on their origin, as experience which has been regenerated or remembered (Freud, 1999, p.12). Foucault also argues in *Dream and Existence* that the dream experience cannot be separated from its ethical content, and it is the heart shown naked (1994, p.52). In *If We Were Villains*, Oliver's dream in which the friend group stand in the swamp reciting the line from *As You Like It* is the voice of the sense of guilt: "Look but in, and you shall see him" (Rio, 2017, p.196). In his chaotic dreams, violence and intimacy are united, with Richard covered in blood and accompanied by James and Meredith. The chaotic dreams in which people and places blur affect Richard in *The Secret History* in the same vein; they all centre around Bunny's death. In his nightmares, a vague figure accompanies him down to a bottomless stair or chases him until he falls incessantly. These disturbing dreams correspond to Foucault's idea of the murderous dreamer who meets the death he deals out, the death which stalks him, and thus discovers the horror of existence (1994, p.53-54).

Hargreaves states that there exists a continuous reverberation of order and chaos, control and its loss in *The Secret History* (Hargreaves, 2001, p.45). This applies to the transgressions and the blurred boundaries between reason and unreason in the novels analysed here. The characters first enjoy the 'madness' of freedom and belonging to their own imagined world. However, as the events progress in a domino effect, madness becomes dangerous. Regardless of how they try to act, they cannot avoid the disintegration of their lives. Thus, madness in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* becomes an aspect of the characters' acts, a marker of irreversibility and catastrophe.

CONCLUSION

In *Faculty Towers: Academic Novel and Its Discontents*, Elaine Showalter states that reading academic novels is not to depreciate the activity of the quiet corridors and quadrangles of academia. She adds that we would be astonished by the roar on the other side of the quiet if we could comprehend even a portion of what has been thought and felt within them (2005, p.124). *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* as the subjects of this thesis present the stunning stories of a group of people dedicated and devoted to literature, culture, and scholarship from the point of view of students. The moody narration of the novels which involves dark and mysterious elements conforms to the characteristics of Dark Academia genre which is a recent popular trend in the fashion and film industry alongside literature.

The pursuit of knowledge and love of literature is indispensable in Dark Academia for students as well as instructors of the academy. In *The Secret History*, Richard and his friends live in their own world in which Ancient Greek and Literature designate their view of life. For Oliver and his friends in *If We Were Villains*, reaching the standards of a Shakespearean actor coincides with a fascination with Shakespeare and his plays. Intertextuality in the novels serves to reflect how they view the world and how they feel. The characters in the two novels value everything – even death – in relation to aesthetics and art so that in the end this perception involves murder in real life. They mistakenly attempt to apply this perception of life to their actions, especially the murders they commit. In *If We Were Villains*, the characters claim that doing something poetically is sufficient to justify everything (Rio, 2017, p.252) and in *The Secret History*, the characters are at one with the idea that death is the mother of beauty (Tartt, 2002, p.54). In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida asks whether we are sure we can distinguish death (so-called natural death) and killing, then between murder tout court (any crime against life) and homicide (2005, p.x). The main confusion of the characters in both novels derives from their inability to distinguish fiction and reality.

In this context, a novel written through the point of view of students in an academic novel naturally leads to the questioning of the relationships between the characters. The theme of friendship in the two novels is observed in the second chapter of the thesis. The theme of friendship stands out in that the said relationship presents a problematic nature. The characters in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* belong to a closed group of friends with tight ties. Their shared interests and family structures strengthen the connections among them. While that intense and close-knit friendship lasts lifelong is a general belief, in both novels, it leads to tragedy. The supposedly strong friendship starts to disintegrate and display its true nature when the characters murder one of their own. Friendship among them turns into an alliance in which they try to cover their crime and diverges from the classical perception of the concept which Aristotle discusses as virtuous and supportive in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The theoretical framework of Derrida is utilized to observe the concept of friendship which transforms into a blurry area for the characters.

In his famous work *On Murder*, De Quincey states that the best person to murder [is] a friend (2006, p.102). Derrida refers to “phantom friends” in Nietzsche’s *Human All Too Human*. These friends return as the phantom of our past- to sum, our memory, the silhouette of the ghost, who not only appears to us but an invisible past (Derrida, 2006, p.288). The characters’ murder one of their own seems to evade the legal consequences at first. What they do not take into consideration is the damage it causes both to their lives and to their friendship. The murder of

their friend starts to haunt them. In the following chapter, Derrida's multi-purpose concept of Hauntology is discussed. The hauntological impact of murder is apparent even at the onset of the novels in that the narrative starts with the disclosure of the crime they commit. These events – which constitute a huge part of their past now - haunt their present and they will mostly likely haunt their future, as well. Everything the characters value such as their friendship, their passion for literature and acting and even their love affairs become “a series of pantomime gestures which they are no longer capable of performing and which they no longer wish to perform” to put it in Fisher's words (2014, p.60).

De Quincey, in his same work *On Murder*, states that once a man engages in murder and causes his downfall, you never know where he will end up. Many people meet his ruin due to the murder of another, which he may have overlooked at the time (2006, p.84). He also mentions that murder erases all distinctions and reduces man to the level of a vermin; it displays human nature at its most abject and despicable (2006, p.44). The characters, already engaged in benign madness in their enclosed worlds, gradually deteriorate. The friend groups fall in and out of reason and unreason, and they witness themselves and their friends fall from the privilege and exclusivity they assume they had. They realize that they are not just classicists or actors, but they are people who are capable of murdering a person – a friend. They are both the villains and the victims of their story.

Friendship, Hauntology and Madness have been discussed in the present thesis as relevant and interdependent concepts to human nature. *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* as prominent examples of the genre, stand out in displaying the human nature and value of aesthetics and art, while combining murder with academic life. This thesis provides a glance at the world of Dark Academia - “genre as narrative and genre as lifestyle”¹¹ which will hopefully inspire further studies.

¹¹ <https://post45.org/sections/contemporaries-essays/dark-academia/>

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