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Dark Times In Dark Academia

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Thesis Presentation Speech

The growing aesthetic known as Dark Academia, is an internet subculture that has gained attention during the recent pandemic, that is obsessed with the idealization of higher education. Drawing from the gothic tones of literature, art, architecture, and fashion qualities associated with higher education creates the general consensus of the aesthetic. Dark Academia is considered by the online community of literary readers as a canonized sub-genre of the Campus Novel genre starting from the publication of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* in 1992. Where the Campus Novel is a genre that consists of its story taking place on a university campus, the Dark Academia genre requires a bit more qualifications. Where the Dark Academia genre diverges from its predecessor, it must contain heavy gothic tones and a tragic death usually from the result of murder. The genre has spread from this generality that even boarding schools are included in this campus setting requirement. This has caused the genre to spread to a wider range of audience by infiltrating the Young Adult genre, catering to an audience of a younger age than the prior intended audience.

The Dark Academic genre, though being a newer genre, has requirements that distinguishes it from other genres. Looking at both Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017) the canonized qualities of Dark Academia can be identified, as well as the correlation between Dark Academia and queer identity. Both novels explore the key aspects that distinguishes the aesthetic through the character observation of the setting, the relationship between the genre and the humanities being the chosen course of study, the relationship of queer identity in the genre and the queerness of the genre itself.

The Dark Academia genre itself is fully enveloped with key aspects that make up its aesthetic. This aesthetic is comprised of gothic tones drawn from the Anglo-Saxon style of higher education. The aesthetic has been incorporated into fashion, decor, and lifestyle. The fashion is heavily saturated with turtlenecks, tweed coats with elbow patches, chunky sweaters, collared shirts, pleated trousers or skirts, paired with Doc Martins or Oxford shoes, and all in monochromatic color scheme usually of browns, greys, blues, and blacks. Key pieces of wardrobe of this aesthetic tend to be historically accurate found within an institute of higher education swayed by Anglican influence during the 1970s-1990s.

The Dark Academia aesthetic romanticizes the focus on liberal arts education. The study of languages with a special interest in ancient Greek and Latin, classical literature, poetry, art, theater, music, history, etc. Those associated with this aesthetic has reclaimed the joy in pursuing their education, replacing the typical boredom associated with higher education with something that causes them to have a deeper love for it. A reoccurring trope in the Dark Academic genre is the focus on the study of the humanities. Almost classified as an obsession, the area of study tends to be focused on that of literature, philosophy, and art. It can almost be guaranteed that in any Dark Academia novel that there will be many references to major works of classical literature, such as Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, and other similar authors, as well as the works of classic literature, such as the likes of Mary Shelley, the Bronte sisters, Dostoevsky, and Jane Austen. M. L. Rio reinforces this academic scenery image in her novel, *If We Were Villains*, by describing one of the most common sets for the characters as, "The Castle library was an airy octagonal room, walled with bookshelves, crowded with sumptuous old

furniture, and kept drowsily warm by a monumental fireplace that burned almost constantly, regardless of the temperature outside,” (6).

Other than aesthetic purposes, the Dark Academic genre focuses on the humanities for a second reason. This is partially due to the audience of the genre are humanities students themselves, and due to the dramatic flare and overall fascination in the tragedy that literature students are drawn to through their studies. Beata Garrett, reporter for Mount Holyoke News, summarizes this non-aesthetical reason in that “They also often focus on the humanities and liberal arts, which motivate the passions of the main characters, who resort to violence,” (Garrett). One cannot study the classics and not have a complete admiration of tragic emotionally charged pieces of literature and art. M. L. Rio seems to agree to this concept by having Oliver, the main character, mention “We were always surrounded by books and words and poetry, all the fierce passions of the world bound in leather and vellum. (I blame this in part for what happened),” in reference to the tragic plot of the novel to be explored later on (6).

There seems to be a tight correlation between Dark Academia and the queerness associated with the genre. This queering is usually done through either homosexual relationship between characters, or homosocial relationships. Regardless of if every character is canonically heterosexual, the genre itself is queered. This queerness is due to the relationship of the specific definition of the term *queer* being that of anything that is different of the heteronormative societal norm that is established in a society.

Eve Sedgwick explores the relationship between *queerness* and shame. Stating about how she nominates James’s novel as a prototype for, “...not ‘homosexuality’ – but *queerness*, or

queer performativity. In this usage, 'queer performativity' is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma," (11 Sedgwick). Here, Sedgwick is claiming that there is a difference between homosexuality and *queerness* – that homosexuality has a strict definition, yet *queerness* is a term that encompasses many definitions or labels.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royale further describes the concept of "queer reading". Bennett and Royale explain that the hypnotic pull that literature continues to lure us with is due to this. In reference to the concept that the reader has control of the interpretation once the literary work is out of the author's hands, Bennett and Royale identify that part of the fun of literature is being able to interpret texts any way to an extent that the text itself allows. One method of this freedom of interpretation for readers is that of the queer theory and how literary texts, "offer for thinking (differently) about gender and sexuality," (189 Bennett Royale). This "different" method of thinking being that the readers are able to conclude from context clues and subtle bits of information the author deliberately chose to include within a text that isn't canonized to be queer, yet holds a queerness about it.

Donna Tartt sums this up quite comically in her novel by stating, "'You want to know what Classics are?' said a drunk Dean of Admissions to me at a faculty party a couple of years ago. 'I'll tell you what Classics are. Wars and homos,'" (55 Tartt). Dark Academic literature cannot be separated from queerness due to the intense interconnection and historical context it has in influencing cultural society and the tragic aspects it pertains in those that reject it. Andy Mientus reiterates this intertwining of the Dark Academic genre and queerness in an

author note by stating, "...this was an art school after all, and where there is art, there is queerness." (N.P. Mientus).

While literature is filled with "wars and homos," even the characters in the genre have a self-awareness as to how close they are becoming to their studies. The line of separation of reader and character begin to blur. M. L. Rio acknowledges this in her novel, "We felt all the passions of the characters we played as if they were our own. But a character's emotions don't cancel out the actor's – instead you feel both at once. Imagine having all your own thoughts and feelings tangled up with all the thoughts and feelings of a whole other person. It can be hard, sometimes, to sort out which is which," (248-249 Rio). Here, Oliver is addressing this erasure of compartmentalizing the separate personalities of both the character and the student. Thus, due to the emotions the character is experiencing are universal emotions that transcend time, the reader easily gets sucked into a sense of empathy for the character. This personal relation causes the reader to embody some form of the character, thus causing this situation of where, "art was imitating life or if it was the other way around," (9 Rio).

In *The Secret History*, the revelation about one's own identity can be seen when Richard, the narrator and protagonist, contemplates the sexuality of his peers, and then later himself. First Richard tries to imagine the reasoning for the sudden distance between Henry and Bunny, once close friends now separated by a social rift in their relationship after coming back from their trip to Italy together, only to come up with the idea that maybe his friend Henry tried to shoot his shot with Bunny, and Bunny who's a homophobe, took this pass disastrously. Richard remarks this thought of his as, "Incredible, but a possible hypothesis," (141 Tartt). Richard supports his own method of conclusion through his own biased thinking once again. Richard

believes he is qualified at making this assumption due to how “accurate” his own assumptions of people’s sexuality are. This belief of his can be seen in his thinking of Henry’s possible *queerness* as,

Which I, being rather more disinclined that way than not, am quick to pick up on. I had caught a strong breath of it from Francis, a whiff of it at times from Julian; and even Charles, who I knew was interested in women, had a sort of naive, prepubescent shyness of them that a man like my father would have interpreted alarmingly – but with Henry, zero. Geiger counters dead. (141 Rio)

Even though Richard has strong belief that his gaydar is accurate, and explores the possibilities of his peers’ sexualities, he then turns his gaydar onto himself. The ability to stop and think of an individual has the capacity to be attracted to a peer of the same sex is not a heteronormative thought process. A heteronormative thought process would be if a peer of the same sex was brought up, the individual would immediately decline the prospect due to the peer being of the same sex. The heteronormatively inclined individual would never prosper the idea of a potential attraction when the concern of same sex is brought up. Nonetheless, Richard does host this possibility of having an attraction to Bunny, just to even see what he thinks of the matter. Richard explores this thought through stating,

It was possible for me to recognize, in a general sort of way, that Bunny was handsome, but if I brought the lens any closer and tried to focus on him in a sexual light, all I got was a repugnant miasma of sour-smelling shirts and muscles gone to fat and dirty socks.

Girls didn't seem to mind that sort of thing, but to me he was about as erotic as an old football coach. (141-142 Tartt)

While Richard does find disgust instead of a sexual attraction to Bunny, he uses this thought process to allegedly put himself in Henry's shoes. Regardless, this exploration of Richard's identity is his own process of trying to understand his sexuality yet is that of a queer exploration.

In *If We Were Villains*, the exploration about one's own identity can be seen when Oliver, the protagonist and narrator, contemplates his relationship with his gay roommate James and observes as to how their relationship with one another was different than what he originally thought it was. Oliver does this years removed from the situation, able to look back through a discussion with detective Colborne. Oliver first describes his and James' dynamic to be that of close friends, or even that of brothers. Detective Colborne refuses to take that as his answer and instead tries to supply Oliver with an answer of his own. Colbourn attempts to define Oliver and James' relationship as an enamored one – that each was fully enamored with the other. Oliver responds that his relationship with James was much more than a friendship. Oliver knows Colbourn wants to ask Oliver what he means by that but doesn't. Oliver states that if asked he would have told Colbourn everything he meant with his comment yet knowing that Colbourn who is happily married to his wife, could never understand how Oliver's "infatuation with James ... never mind enamored") transcended any notion of gender," and that no man who is not queer himself could never understand this type of relationship between himself and James (301 Rio). Thus, Oliver is unable to truly define his relationship with James due to knowing of the disconnection that Colbourn would have with Oliver's answer.

While happening in hindsight, rather than narrating of the moment Oliver explores his identity, he instead informs the audience of his conclusion through his conversation with Meredith after ten years of being in prison.

She says, “Were you in love with him?” “Yes,” I say, simply. James and I put each other through the kind of reckless passions Gwendolyn once talked about, joy and anger and desire and despair. After all that, was it really so strange? I am no longer baffled or amazed or embarrassed by it. “Yes, I was.” It’s not the whole truth. The whole truth is, I’m in love with him still. (351 Rio)

Through this conversation, Oliver admits to his romantic feelings towards James that he did not realize until years later. Oliver was able to figure out his feelings based upon the sheer amount of emotions and closeness that he and James shared with one another. Although, when Oliver does figure out his feelings based on the exploration of his identity, he seems to have figured out his own *queerness* too late. This prevention of Oliver pursuing a happily ever after with James is an example as to how tragedy prevents these *queered* characters in Dark Academia from fully exploring their identity.