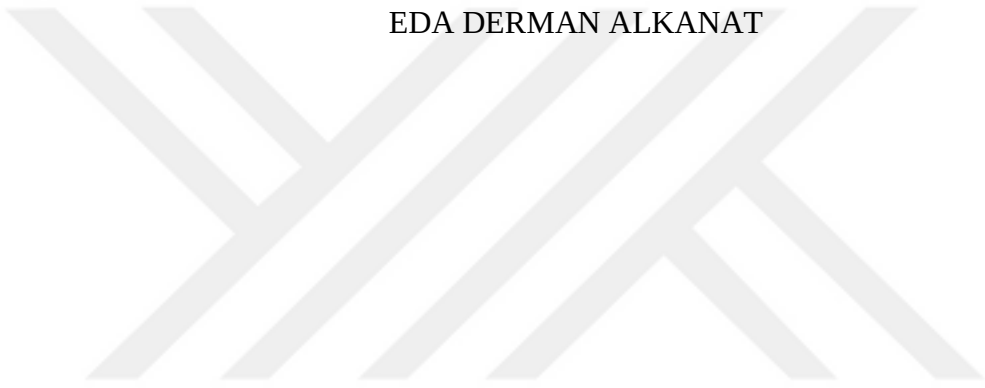


ONCE AND ALWAYS:
FRIENDSHIP, HAUNTOLOGY AND MADNESS
IN “*THE SECRET HISTORY*” AND “*IF WE WERE VILLAINS*”

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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Eda DERMAN ALKANAT

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. *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* provide the reader with a window to observe how a close-knit group of friends reaches the level of murdering one of their own. 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: academia novels, campus novels, contemporary fiction, dark academia, friendship, hauntology, madness

ÖZET

Bu tez, Dark Academia türünün iki önemli örneği olan Donna Tartt'ın *The Secret History* ve M.L Rio'nun *If We Were Villains* romanlarındaki dostluk, Hauntoloji ve delilik kavramlarını araştırmayı ve karşılaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Seçilen romanların incelenmesinde, bu tez, cinayet gibi trajik bir olay karşısında arkadaşlığın dağılışını gösterilmektedir. Arkadaş grubunun kolektif eylemi olan cinayet, karakterlerin hayatlarının her alanına musallat olacak ve ölümcül sonuçlara yol açan çılgınlık içindeki davranışları için bir tetikleyiciye dönüşecektir.

Üniversite yıllarında dostluğun önemi göz önünde bulundurulursa, her iki romandaki dostluk kavramının analizi, üniversite kampüsünde gerçekleşen olayların karakterlerin gelecekteki yaşamını şekillendirmesinde oynadığı rol açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. *The Secret History* ve *If We Were Villains*, okuyuculara sıkısıkıya bağlı arkadaş grubunun aralarından bir kişiyi öldürme aşamasına nasıl geldiğini gözlemlemek için bir pencere sunmaktadır. İki roman arasında dostluğun doğasını açıklamak için bu tez, teorik çerçevesini öncelikle Derrida ve Arendt'in fikirlerine dayalı olarak oluşturmaktadır. Mark Fisher ve Katy Shaw gibi edebiyat eleştirmenlerinin yanı sıra Derrida'nın "Hauntoloji" kavramı, arkadaşlığın değişimini ve cinayetin kahramanlara yansımalarını açıklamak için kullanılmıştır, çünkü işledikleri eylem kahramanlara musallat oldukça olaylar da o derece karanlık hale gelecektir. Kahramanların delilik kavramıyla örtüşen davranışları yalnızca olay serisinde bir tetikleyici olmakla kalmamakta, aynı zamanda dünya üzerindeki algılarını da yansıtmaktadır. Bu tez, delilik kavramına yaklaşımının merkezinde, Foucault ve Nietzsche'nin teorilerine odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: akademika romanları, çağdaş kurgu, dark akademika, delilik, dostluk, hauntoloji, kampüs romanları



In libris, libertas.

For my beloved father and mother

For my beloved husband and son

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INTRODUCTION

“In libras, libertas”¹

“Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul.
The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who
read it and lived and dreamed with it.”
(C.R. Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind*, p.6)

“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 fraternities². 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.

Skull and Bone (Yale University), Porcellian Club (Harvard University), and The Apostles (Cambridge University) are the names of some secret societies that keep their affairs, inaugurations, associates and membership rolls out of the public eye. The privacy behind closed doors only serves to increase the public's fascination and willingness to unfold the mystery. Some collegiate secret societies stand out due to a reason different from the motto of Phi Beta Kappa which supposedly is about elevating learning; the real point of interest for the public is the excessive behaviour

¹ Latin Idiom meaning “In books, there is freedom”.

² <https://www.pbk.org/About>
<https://www.pbk.org/History>

of their members. Alleged excessiveness reaches as far as the claims of the involvement in the assassination of J. F. Kennedy. Among the most problematic aspects of secret societies are their notorious reputation for debauchery and wanton destruction alongside an ostentatious display of wealth and rowdiness. In Britain, the Oxford Bullingdon Club included famous public figures such as David Cameron and Boris Johnson; infamously³, the said dissoluteness brought harm to the places where their dining gatherings were held, and even harm to some of their own members. The Bullingdon's trashing of the restaurants escalated into such mayhem that the University of Oxford refuses to recognise the club officially and many local restaurants do not accept to host their events anymore⁴.

The corruption, misconduct and cronyism in the club are the subjects of the novel *Decline and Fall* by Evelyn Waugh who was once a member. In his novel, Evelyn Waugh recounts the tale of Paul Pennyfeather who ends up losing his scholarship and leaving the university after outrageous events that led to his downfall; this black series of happenings started with his encounter with the fictional Bollinger Club. Pennyfeather is made the innocent victim of a drunken orgy by the Club, and as a result, is expelled from Oxford University due to indecent behaviour. Waugh pens his protagonist's experiences in a satirical way; however, the effect of the customs and notorious behaviour can be persistent for life.

The two novels that are being discussed in this thesis are *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *If We Were Villains* by M. L. Rio: they 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

³ <https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/campus-life-more/sinister-secret-societies/>

⁴ <https://www.crimsoneducation.org/us/blog/campus-life-more/sinister-secret-societies/>

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. Being one of the earliest and the latest works of Dark Academia, *The Secret History* (1992) and *If We Were Villains* (2017) bear the most fundamental and significant features of their category. While Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* is acknowledged as creating the genre, *If We Were Villains* by ML Rio is cited as one of the most popular among the enthusiasts of the genre. Both novels are centred on a group of close friends who end up by murdering/covering the murder of one of their own. Through laying the focus on the aforesaid concepts, this thesis attempts to contribute to the field of studies centred on the Dark Academia, a recent, trending genre with an increasing appeal for the readers.

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. Before the analysis of the novels in terms of the aforementioned concepts, it would be essential to lay certain insights concerning Dark Academia and the novels written in that genre. 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 concept for the characters of the novels in this study. The friends in the novels in question are together at all times and forever distant from the rest of the students on the campus; they eat, drink, party, study and occasionally sleep together. This last aspect adds further depth to their friendship and helps build even stronger attachments for one another. Looking back years later to the tragic event in university years, one of the group members, Richard Papen in *The Secret History* and Oliver Marks in *If We Were Villains*, act as vessels to the reader and recount the events which lead to a tragic end for them and their friendship. From the onset of the two novels, the reader is informed that one of the group members has been killed by his own friends. The element of murder provides the element of suspense in the novels. The murder mystery in the novels, however, is provided not by *whodunit*, rather, the reader of these dark academia novels tries to find out *whydunit* and *howdunit*. Therefore, we come to ask the questions "What makes these close friends murder one of their own? What makes their friendship turn into enmity? Does murdering one of the friends provide what they desire? How does the nature of their friendship change after the murder?" 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.

Death is a devastating event; losing a dear person affects his or her friends deeply but how does the murder of a friend affect people? We can ask a further question regarding murder in both novels: "How does murdering one's own friend affect a person and his/her friendship with the others in college years and his/her future life?" 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. In addition, this chapter utilizes the contributions of Mark Fisher and Katy Shaw on the 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. In *The Secret History*, under the influence of Professor Marrow, Richard and his friends are fascinated, even obsessed with the literature and reasoning of Ancient Greece. This frenzy of thought initially bearing harmless intentions becomes the trigger for the following tragic events when the characters get to commit murder. In *If We Were Villains*, the drama students - Oliver and his friends- are gradually drawn into a maelstrom of feelings once they decide to murder one of their own. Through this extreme behaviour, the characters come to share the tragic fates of many Shakespeare's characters that they perform on stage. Thus, in the novels under the perusal of hereby, madness becomes an instrument which reveals that the things that the characters cherish most, such as friendship, their own private world and even their own sense of being in the world are in fact an illusion and destined to dissolve.

CHAPTER I: DARK ACADEMIA IN LITERATURE

“In the end, we’ll all become stories.”

Margaret Atwood (*Moral Disorder and Other Stories*, p.188)

“What an astonishing thing a book is. It's a flat object made from a tree with flexible parts on which are imprinted lots of funny dark squiggles. But one glance at it and you're inside the mind of another person, maybe somebody dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, an author is speaking clearly and silently inside your head, directly to you.”

Carl Sagan (*Cosmos, The Persistence of Memory*, p.280)

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 such "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. These novels are mostly about academics and their satirical, entertaining, or parodic lives in the privacy of the academia. Flourishing since the 1950s, novels such as David Lodge's *Small World*, CP Snow's *The Masters*, Philip Roth's *Human Stain* (2001) and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) have portrayed the academic world in various ways.

When it comes to the twenty-first century, the nature of academic novels has started to change. According to Elaine Showalter “the earlier academic novels had been idyllic, satiric and ironic, even embittered, but these [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 academia⁵.

In *Dead Poets Society*, the unconventional English teacher Mr Keating once lectures his students about the role of literature in a person's life as follows:

One reads poetry because he is a member of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion! Medicine, law, banking- these are necessary to sustain life. But poetry, romance, love, beauty? These are what we stay alive for! (Kleinbaum & Schulman, 1989, p.49)

Such passionate statements constitute an invitation to assess the role of the quest for knowledge and love of literature in Dark Academia. The genre is informed by an interest in classical literature and languages, such as Latin, Greek, but also French, as well as architecture, art and poetry. For 'dark academics', whether they are students or instructors, education is perceived as excellent, and exciting, not necessarily directed

⁵ <https://screenrant.com/dead-poets-society-best-movies-dark-academia/>
<https://www.lofficiel.at/en/pop-culture/dark-academia-aesthetic>

towards utilitarian goals, but mostly as something related to pleasure, an escape from the tediousness of everyday life. The knowledge provided by such education is understood as esoteric, and forbidden, with a seductive allure; the very adjective “dark” which defines the genre suggests the fascination with the unusual, the unconventional, and the illicit.

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 death⁶. 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). Both works make multiple references to the literary subject they deal with. *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.

⁶ <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/dark-academia/>

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 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. The demands of such a self-imposed lifestyle are responsible for unhealthy habits, such as lack of sleep or addiction to caffeine or alcohol.

In the *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and its Discontents*, Elaine Showalter establishes an interesting point of similarity between the marriage institution and the university. Thus, she points out that the story of the wife and the story of the husband – both part and parcel of the marriage institution – resemble the different stories of the faculty and of the students in the academia (2005, p.120). Students are the main point of interest in academic novels, as their comedies and their dramas come to weave various coming of age narratives. In both *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*, the focus is on the students and on the acts of their tumultuous experience, all- ending tragically.

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. The interest is therefore on the depiction of student lifestyle, with typical experiences, such as frequent visits to museums and libraries and study sessions until late hours. 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 fantasy⁷. 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 Secret History (1992) is Donna Tartt's first novel, which won the Pulitzer Prize and Andrew Carnegie Medal. The novel is named after the work with the same title by the court historian Procopius in the sixth century Byzantium Empire. Resembling the chronicles of Emperor Justinian, Tartt's novel "describes the filthy reality behind a beautiful façade" (Steinz, 1992). In the novel, Richard Papen, one of the six students that formed a quite distinctive group in the academic community, years later, describes the events at the college that lead to the death of their friend, Bunny (Edmund Corcoran). His story reflects not only the circumstances of the murder but also its lasting consequences. Richard enrolls in Hampden College in the

⁷ <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/dark-academia/>

hope of studying Ancient Greek, leaving his family and hometown in Plano, California. As it turns out, the professor of the Ancient Greek Department is rather meticulous about selecting his students – a group of five charming and mysterious young people: Henry, Francis, Bunny (Edmund), the twins Camilla and Charles. In his first attempt to join the classes, Professor Julian Marrow declines Richard's request. Charmed by the group's charismatic appearance, Richard ignores his counsellor's warnings against Julian Marrow; consequently, he is accepted into the classes after he proves his unusual excellence by helping them with a Greek translation. All the students, especially Henry, are deeply involved in and devoted to the culture and history of Ancient Greece with its myths, literary works and language. Through his acceptance into the group of friends, he starts to get to know them closely and become a part of their lives. In the beginning, the mysterious and secretive behaviour of the group drive Richard suspicious and gradually, he discovers the truth about them. Henry, Camilla, Charles and Francis have had a Bacchanal ritual and murdered a farmer by accident. The reason behind Bunny's (Edmund) unstable and offensive behaviour becomes clear when Richard finds out that he has been, in a way, blackmailing them about the murder. During the winter break, Henry and Bunny spend the holiday in Rome while Richard takes a low-paid job in Hampden. He barely escapes death when Henry finds him suffering from hypothermia and pneumonia. When they all unite back after the winter break, the tension in the group seems to worsen. The group is no longer capable of bearing Bunny's demands and threats, and they decide to follow Henry's plan to kill him. The plan succeeds but the unexpected search for Bunny has an adverse effect on the group. While struggling to cover their deed, the close friendship they have always held on to starts to disintegrate and the sheer burden of keeping the secrecy has disastrous consequences for all of them.

Francis starts to have panic attacks; Charles dives deep into alcoholism and starts to treat his sister, Camilla, badly. She moves in with Henry, which only worsens the situation for them. On learning about his students' crime, their instructor, Julian leaves his job at the college and disappears without giving any notice to his former proteges. This reads as a tremendous disappointment, especially for Henry. Furthermore, Charles gets detained for drunk driving; this rapid dissolution into alcoholism worries the mastermind, Henry, who fears that Charles he will reveal their secret; conversely, Charles fears that Henry will kill him. Tensions spiral out of control when Charles confronts Camilla and Henry with Francis' gun in the hotel room where the couple live. In the struggle, Charles accidentally shoots Richard. To protect the group and keep their secret hidden, Henry commits suicide. After that incident, the group falls apart and so do their lives.

The debut novel of M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017) is at the top of the list of popular and recommended novels of dark academia. Named as one of Bustle's Best Thriller Novels of the Year in 2017⁸, *If We Were Villains* has positive reviews from New York Times to Publisher's Weekly⁹. The events in the novel take place in the year 1997 coinciding with the reopening of New Globe. At the end of the novel, Rio states that she wrote her novel to pay homage to Shakespeare (Rio, 1997, p.361). In the novel, we witness the tragic turn of the lives of seven drama students at Dellecher Conservatory College. On the day of his release from prison, Oliver Marks meets Detective Colborne who was the lead detective on his case. Suspicious of the veracity of the official account, he asks Oliver to tell him the truth about the murder that has been troubling him for ten years. Oliver agrees on the condition that

⁸ <https://www.bustle.com/p/the-10-best-thriller-novels-of-2017-4483338>

⁹ <https://www.amazon.com/If-We-Were-Villains-Novel/dp/125009528X>

Detective Colborne does not take action on his story. The year 1997 is the fourth year of drama students in Dellecher Conservatory studying and performing Shakespeare's tragedies. The seven students have become more than friends with one another. Their desire to be an actor, their admiration in Shakespeare and his plays along with weak family ties have tightened their relationship, drawing them towards one another. On the night before the casting of *Julius Caesar*, Alexander talks about the unnecessary of an audition because they play the same roles: Richard as the tyrant, James as the hero, Alexander as the villain, Meredith as the seductress, Wren as the ingénue. Oliver and Filippa are consigned as the bit parts. The auditions prove Alexander right; however, for the performance of *Macbeth*, the casting changes. After the auditions, the students are instructed to keep their roles secret. The change in the roles soon marks the change in the group dynamics as they transfer the roles into their real lives. After the performance of *Macbeth* on Halloween, during the after party, Richard attacks James and nearly drowns him in the lake. As Richard's behaviour becomes increasingly violent, both verbally and physically towards his friends, both onstage and offstage, the group decides to respond to his actions at the scene of Julius Caesar's assassination. The next morning, Oliver is summoned to the lake where he and the rest of his friends are gathered and, to his surprise, finds Richard floating on the lake with a broken skull but alive. The decision they make is to let nature take its course and not interfere. During the winter break, when Oliver starts to work as a custodian at school due to his parents' financial difficulties, his relationship with Meredith advances towards a sexual involvement. During one of his cleanings, he finds a bloodstained piece of fabric and decides to hide it. In the meantime, Detective Colborne is suspicious about Richard's death which may not be an accident and, goes on with his investigation. As the semester progresses and the group works on *King*

Lear, Richard's death plunges them into desperation: Wren begins to have panic attacks; Alexander develops drug addiction and James starts to act erratically. When Oliver finds a bloodstained boat hook under James's bed, he confronts him. James confesses that he is the one to have injured Richard. While performing *King Lear*, Detective Colborne arrives. Oliver takes the blame on himself despite Colborne's disbelief. Ten years later, while he recounts these events, Oliver accepts that he has been in love with James. When he wants to meet James, Wren shows him the suicide note that James has written for him. Oliver discovers that James drowned himself four years ago, his body never to be found.

Given the very plots of the novels, 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 2: FRIENDSHIP: “THE ENEMIES I LOVE ARE MY FRIENDS”¹⁰

“Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all affections,
because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time.”
(Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Chapter IV)

Thy friendship oft has made my heart ake
Do be my Enemy for Friendships sake
(William Blake, *To H-*)

The concept of friendship occupies a crucial role in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*. The protagonists Richard Papen (*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 among the protagonists, mainly from the perspective of Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt theoretical writings.

The word “friend” is one of the rare words that has maintained its meaning since it first appeared in Old English. Etymologically, the word was “freond” with a Germanic origin, meaning, “to love” in the present tense. The root of the word was “fr-” which means “to like, love or be affectionate to”. In Old English, “friend” was used to describe a deep emotional bond between two people that was not based on familial or sexual love and this definition has remained virtually unchanged over 1500 years.¹¹

¹⁰ Derrida, J. (2005). *Politics of Friendship* (George Collins, Trans.) London/New York: Verso, p.33.

¹¹ <http://www.whitesmoke.com/etymology-friend>

Even though the word “friend” appeared at the time of Old English, the concept itself long precedes the linguistic equivalent. 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). In *Lysis*, Plato discusses friendship through the dialogue Socrates establishes with Lysis and Menexenus. He attempts to answer the questions “when a person is fond of another person, who is whose friend? Is the one who loves the friend of the one who is loved or is it the other way around?” (Plato, 2005, p.80) He claims that those virtuous men resemble one another, and their friendship is based on a mutual wish for the well-being of the other. True friendship can never exist between bad people (Plato, 2005, p.83).

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). In *Laelius de Amicitia*, Cicero privileges friendship over all other issues concerning man. It is not only the most congruous with nature but also the most beneficial to men in good and bad times (Cicero, 2018: p.35). Furthermore, Cicero discusses the division of friendship owing to the demand of the one from the other to do something that is not right. Such rejection may be interpreted as a violation of the law of friendship (Cicero, 2018: p.69). 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.

As briefly presented above, throughout history the interpretation of the concept of friendship has constantly changed. In our contemporary times, it has somehow departed from the generally idealistic approach of the Ancients and gained in 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)

On his first days at school, Richard starts to get closer to some of his fellow students. They eat together and see one another coming and going; nevertheless, for him, "friend" is not the accurate word to describe them since he does not feel attached to them. Instead, he is painfully aware that they are caught in a game of chance, that "[they] were thrown together by the fact that none of [them] knew anybody" (Tartt, 2002: p.28). This is a painful reminder of his loneliness in his native town, Plano where because of either choice or circumstance he was far from others and he lived a life that felt like an "imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home" (Tartt, 2002: p.17). He has a family with a mean father, an indifferent mother, and an ugly house, which made him feel his existence was tainted. Thus, 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)

However, the acceptance into the group, this ‘arresting party’ will not come by easily. He finds an opportunity to meet them in the library except for Henry and he helps them solve a grammatical issue in a translation assignment. Richard eventually achieves his desire to be a member of Marrow's class and his intriguing students, which enables him to familiarize himself with them more closely. 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. Through their friendship, he experiences several “firsts” with them, such as riding in a Mustang and boating on the lake. He even lies about the economic status of his family merely to gain their acceptance which ironically would facilitate his joining his friends in the tragic event of murder. In due course, Richard realizes that his friends keep secrets from him, and one by one, he begins to unravel them.

While Richard struggles to befriend an already established group of friends, Oliver Marks in *If We Were Villains* is a member of a group of intimate friends who are also his classmates studying drama 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)

Among the seven friends, Oliver gets on the best with James, whom he has met as a roommate on the first day of college. He highly cherishes James' modest and unselfish personality as much as he admires his acting skills. James is the hero for everyone both in real life and in the performances, and Oliver is quite pleased with being his sidekick. Being a lesser yet crucial figure in the story, a sidekick functions as the sound of the reason for the hero; thus, he is the modern embodiment of Sancho Panza for Don Quixote or Dr Watson for Sherlock Holmes. Oliver serves as an excellent sidekick for James not only in real life but also on stage. He is cast as Banquo to Macbeth, and as Horatio to Hamlet. The other members in the group are equally conscious of Oliver's traits as a sidekick, such as loyalty, trust and sacrifice. Meredith praises his consistency in real life and on stage (Rio, 2017, p. 227). Filippa thinks that he would forgive and cannot hold grudge against James even after his aggressive behaviour towards him (Rio, 2017, p.284).

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. Richard has chosen to study in this department against the wishes of his father who wants him to run his filling station. His friends, Edmund, Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles are members of wealthy families who do not have any financial concerns. 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. As an illustration of the point, Julian Marrow and Henry converse in Ancient Greek joking and arguing. Richard reads Plato's *Parmenides*, writes essays in Callimachean epigraph; Henry translates *The Paradise Lost* from English into Latin merely to see what he will be able to accomplish in the end, and writes his diary in the same language. The area of their study is the symbol of their isolation and otherness that is also reflected in their daily life. They lead a life in prosperity with a strong emphasis on sleep depravity, alcohol, a hint of incest and finally murder. However, soon Richard realizes that the group that he sees as "the characters in a favourite painting" is an illusion (Tartt, 2002, p.33): "I do not know, nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a

knowledge of Greek and the year of my life I spent in their company.” (Tartt, 2002, p.18)

Henry who acts as the leader of the group is contemptuous towards Richard at the beginning, even more about Richard’s knowledge of Ancient Greek and Literature. For the rest of the members of the group and even for Professor Marrow, Richard has proven himself in their area of interest. However, for Henry, how much Richard’s knowledge of the Classics seems to determine whether he would be accepted into the protected space they have already formed. He relentlessly questions Richard’s knowledge of the Classic writers and their works as a police officer would, suggesting that this be the most significant criteria for his accepting him as a friend.

Rio’s novel *If We Were Villains* portrays a similar passion of the characters which is acting and Shakespeare. Being a Shakespearean performer means being a traditionally trained actor. In order to become one, the students go through serious and extensive training and are expected to acquire formidable skills. One of the most prominent goals of a Shakespearean actor is to perform a leading role in one of the prestigious theatres. In *If We Were Villains*, Dellecher Classical Conservatory is an elite school that provides the same type of education for its students. A Dellecher certificate means “having one of Willie Wonka’s golden tickets – guaranteed to grant the bearer admission to the elite artistic and philological sodalities that survived outside of academia” (Rio, 2017, p.28). 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*, the tie which connects the seven of the friends to one another is reinforced by the adverse attitudes of their families. The group of friends appears to be “isolated from their siblings and parents so unfamiliar that they might as well have been a different species” (Rio, 2017, p.215). Their families are either indifferent or sardonic towards their desire to act or against their wish to attend an art school to become actors, except the two cousins – Richard and Wren whose parents are actors and directors in London. In the limelight as the senior year drama students, these seven characters call themselves “thespians”, named after Thespis¹² who was the inventor of tragedy. All the characters in the novel are immersed in Shakespeare’s plays, and they are devoted to acting on stage. Their roles both in real life and on stage have already been formed before they start their senior year. Although they are always in front of an audience, Shakespeare and acting are the main features that distinguish them from the rest of the college. Similar conditions are valid the group of friends group in *The Secret History*. 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. For Richard in *The Secret History*, it is the day he spends at Francis’s house with his friends in total isolation from the real world.

¹² <https://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/041gkorig.htm>

Similarly, for Oliver in *If We Were Villains*, it is ironically a moment during a lecture, in which they all discuss the assassination of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play. Each of the two characters feels lucky to be among those friends; ironically, this confidence and impression of safety and hopes for eternal friendship will be irremediably shattered.

As attested by Terfel, friendship relies on the specific actions being performed; nevertheless, the reason behind the performance of such actions is supposed to be friendship rather than duty, pity or self-interest. She exemplifies these duties as "to help the friend when under attack (physical or verbal), or in need or trouble of any kind, to proffer advice and criticism, not only when asked but when not asked for but needed" (Terfel, 1971, p.224).

Considering the shared activity among friends, Terfel emphasizes that some of these duties to friends may be compelling or disagreeable. In *The Secret History*, the Bacchanal ritual that the group decide to hold requires preparation beforehand such as fasting, baths, vigils and libations. First attempts fail and Henry realizes that the full experience of a Bacchanal ritual must also involve faith. However, Bunny fails to carry out the necessary mental and physical preparations. Bunny, in fact, stands apart from the group, personality-wise. He presents a more extroverted and less severe character than the others do. He is not competent enough in his studies. Among the friends, he is the one who is best connected to the outside world. Therefore, it is not surprising that Henry attributes their failure in the ritual to Bunny's general lack of faith and interest; as a result, the group decide to perform the ritual without Bunny. The ritual unites them far closer as friends, yet Bunny is blamed for previous failures. Henry complains that Bunny starts to tell some asinine joke and ruin everything while Charles witnessed him eating the things he should not have for the sake of the ritual

(Tartt, 2002, p.180). However, the decision they make would be the trigger for Bunny's change in attitude towards them.

Thus, Henry, Camilla, Charles and Frances hold the Bacchanal successfully without Bunny and Richard. Later on, when Richard finds out all about the event, he seems not to care about his exclusion. However, Bunny's reaction leads him to behave in an unfriendly way. Frances explains Bunny's attitude not as an act of conscious or moral outrage but as an act of anger since "he thinks he's been somehow wronged and excluded" (Tartt, 2002, p.199).

In a similar vein to *The Secret History*, the change in the casting for the performance of *Macbeth* in Rio's *If We Were Villain* is the first break in the intimacy and trust among the friends. It seems to make the aggression and violence present in Richard solid. Until that time, his persona has been secure in the group: an alpha-male who is accustomed to getting what he wants, including his relationship with Meredith- the most attractive female in the group. On the performances, in the same way, he has always been cast as the tyrant. Combined with heavy drinking, Richard's erratic behaviour accelerates the events that end in his death. The conversation between Wren and Oliver exemplifies the situation; when Wren mentions that Richard's behaviour has deteriorated from little brute towards outright meanness, Oliver retorts by calling his actions sadistic (Rio, 2017, p.130)

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)

According to Derrida, on the condition that there are no friends other than where an enemy can be found, the necessity of enmity converts it into friendship: "The enemies I love are my friends. So are the enemies of my friends" (Derrida, 2005, p.33). Further on, he 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. In *the Secret History*, Henry stands out the most in this respect, displaying the friend/enemy duality. He is the mastermind behind Bunny's death, and he acts in a manipulative way after his death. Through his actions, he becomes the most important figure in the dissolution of the friendship in the group. Richard describes his role in this "drama he wrote" as someone "cold but friendly, hesitant, reticent with details, bright but not as bright as he really was" (Tarrt, 2002, p.308) While Henry is the one to control the group, in *If We Were Villains*, James

avoids his friends. Although he does not have the leader position in the group, he possesses a considerable amount of influence over Oliver. Oliver is perplexed by his sudden disappearances and his behaviour, as well by his romantic interest in Wren.

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). Taking the issue further ahead, Paul Vernon asks in *Philosophy of Friendship*, “What happens when the amnesty is not enough? Or, more generally how should one treat a friendship when it breaks up whether by deliberate action or unavoidable accident?” (Vernon, 2005, p.69). 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 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 his work *Philosophy of Friendship*, Vernon claims that the closest friends are not immune from the damage that can be caused by the feelings of envy, distrust, and betrayal. Friendship is under threat when people find themselves skating on thin ice (Vernon, 2005, p.68). To define the end of a friendship, Aristotle claims that when

there is a distinction between what people think their friendship is based on and what it is, quarrels happen more often than they usual do. (Aristotle, 2009, p.167) There is hardly a good ending for those who have taken serious offence. Whenever friends change for the worst, the foundation of the friendship changes, too. Vernon continues his argument by saying that the perception of deceit is as destructive to the friendship as the deceit itself; and it especially is destructive on the intimacy of the closest friends (Vernon, 2005, p.69).

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. Another concealed matter he discovers is the romantic and sexual affairs of his friends with one another. He has always had romantic feelings for Camilla, but Francis tells him that Henry and Camilla have been in a relationship since the beginning, which is another reason for the growing tension between the two and Charlie. Francis mentions that the twins Charles and Camilla may have been involved in an incestuous relationship. Moreover, Francis confesses that he and Charles have had sexual intercourse a couple of times, hinting that it has happened with Camilla, too. Considering all of these secrets, for Richard, their friendship transforms into a disturbing and forced alliance:

At one time, I had liked the idea, that the act, at least, had bound us together; we were not ordinary friends, but friends till-death-do-us-part. This thought

had been my only comfort in the aftermath of Bunny's death. Now it made me sick, knowing there was no way out. I was stuck with them, with all of them for good (Tartt, 2002, p.413).

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*¹³ (Derrida, 2005, p.35).

¹³ 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 *Oikeiôsis*. <https://www.alkistis.net/blog/the-ancient-greek-concept-of-oikeiosis-can-save-us>

CHAPTER III: HAUNTOLOGY: “ENTER THE GHOST, EXIT THE GHOST, RE-ENTER THE GHOST”¹⁴

There is no greater pain than, in times of misery,
to hold at heart the memory of happiness.
(Dante, 2012, Canto V, 24)

Hamlet hardly knows what to make of so many skulls.
But suppose he forgets them! Will he still be himself?
(Paul Valéry, *The Outlook for Intelligence*, 48.)

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.¹⁵ 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). The concept originally stems from Derrida’s discussion of Marx’s famous claim that “a spectre is haunting Europe”, referring to communism (2005, p.2). As detailed by

¹⁴ Stage instructions for Hamlet. Shakespeare, W. (1996) Hamlet. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Act 1, Scene 1, 640-641.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>

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).

Derrida is interested in the spectral side of literature; thus, he argues that literature actually voids itself in its infinitude since “there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature” (Derrida, 1981, p.223). Kronick and Buse & Scott also comment on Derrida’s notion of spectrality of literature. In *Derrida and the Future of Literature*, Kronick states that literature is “not existent nor localizable remains or archive”. Hence, it belongs to the future with a promise to haunt the present time (Kronick, 1999, p.1-2). Buse & Scott claim that writing and ghosts share such common qualities as secondariness and belatedness, while literature has always been an accommodating environment for ghosts (Buse & Scott, 1999, p.8).

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. The stories about ghosts have been passed down first in oral form and then in written form from generation to generation¹⁶. The Ancient Greeks frequently wrote about ghosts. Homer’s Odysseus

¹⁶ <https://medium.com/the-inner-citadel/the-origins-of-ghosts-and-famous-accounts-in-literature-b5f4b6326ade>

comes across his mother in the underworld where the dead are shadows. In *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, the ghost of Clytemnestra seeks justice for her murder. Ghosts continued haunting literature in the Roman Empire, in the medieval times and the Renaissance from Virgil to Shakespeare. From Hamlet's father to the spirits of *The Turn of the Screw* and Dickens' ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, the literary ghosts never ceased to capture the human imagination. The contemporary ghost stories, on the other hand, tend to demonstrate more complicated and distinct features than the ones in the previous ages. In his article on New York Times, Parul Shegar writes concerning those shifts as follows: "The ghost story shape-shifts because ghosts themselves are so protean — they emanate from specific cultural fears and fantasies. They are social critiques camouflaged with cobwebs; the past clamouring for redress" (Shegar, 2018).

Every period and every culture own their specific ghosts and hauntings. Yet, 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 adds that twenty-first century English Literature is in contrast with the literature of the previous two centuries. Shaw lays this contrast by saying "twenty-first century English literature is not only interested in how we have come to live with spectres, but in how we are living with them, and the ways in which popular culture is tracing this

process of 'living with' (Shaw, 2018, p.3). Shaw seems to be in agreement with Shegar's statement in claiming that the critical practice of haunting looks to the past to comprehend how we got here and how we could build a better future.

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). Buse & Scott explain the ghosts and time as follows:

Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past...The idea of a return death fractures all traditions of temporality. The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical (Buse & Scott, 1999, p.11).

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.

The very beginnings of Tartt’s and Rio’s novels evoke the sense of something lingering in the air. Richard’s (*The Secret History*) and Oliver’s (*If We Were Villains*) narrations indicate that they are haunted by their own stories. It suggests that the past has never left and will always be there to haunt them. Even though at the end of their story, they seem to have managed to carry on their lives relatively better than the others, their story still walks along with them years later. It also suggests that this is a never-ending haunting process and that the very future bears its elusive marks. The fixation with their memories evokes the feeling that they are the ghosts from the future earnestly roaming in the past. Thus, Hauntology presents itself in a reciprocal journey from the past to the future and from the future to the past through the address of the present time in the two novels. Richard in *The Secret History* narrates his story as his only past. He crosses off his life prior to Hampden College and the only story he could tell is the one that haunts him the most: “I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell” (Tartt, 2002, p.14). In *If We Were Villains*, the story not only haunts Oliver but also Detective Colbourne who investigated their case ten years ago. “Not knowing who, not knowing how, not knowing why” is the reason that brings him to Oliver on the exact day he is released from prison (Rio, 2017, p.9).

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. However, like Richard in *The Secret History*, there is no such relief, since he tells Colbourne that for the protagonists of those horrible events there was no respite: "For you, it was just one day, then business as usual. For us it was one day, and every single day that came after". (Rio, 2017, p.8)

In relation to Derrida's idea of hauntology destabilizing time, Martin Hagglund claims that the French philosopher aims to formulate hauntology in opposite direction to ontology in its traditional sense. He argues "what is important about the figure of the spectre, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* and *not yet*" (Hagglund, 2008, p.82). Taking the issue step further in his book *Ghosts of My Time: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher distinguishes the *no longer* and the *not yet* as two directions in hauntology. The *no longer* refers to that which is effective, and the *not yet* refers to that which has not yet happened (Fisher, 2014, p.18). 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. Charles has parted his ways with

Camilla living a wayward life with a married woman. Francis, being queer, plans to marry a girl whom his mother has chosen. Camilla lives alone occupied only with taking care of her ill grandmother. 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). Richard describes his friends as characters who do not belong to their time, as souls from ancient times. His habits, which are ordinary for our present-day such as movie-going, using disposable razors or watching the news on television, intrigue the friends in the group. Despite the irregular diet and work habits, Henry and friends live like clockwork. One can see Henry studying all day and night in the study room or library. Bunny dates his girlfriend every Wednesday; the twins’ house is an indispensable place for Sunday dinners. Their routine continues without alteration even on the days after Bunny’s death. Richard resembles this fixity in their lives to the continuity of the

Roman Empire without a ruler. It constitutes precisely the mode of living of this past by which he is haunted. After everything has ended - Henry and Bunny dead and the rest of the group has separated - it is the friendship in his first term at Hampden College that Richard recollects. In his memories, the most delightful times for Richard are the weekends they spend at Francis' house with no future plans for after forty, fifty years. 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. Consequently, he takes the blame for James' crime to prevent that ambiguous end. 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. In this future, none of the characters ends up the way they dream how they would be. Richard (*The Secret History*) and Oliver (*If We Were Villains*) cherish and recollect the friendship in which there are no hauntings. Therefore, the death of Bunny and Richard stands for a future unlived and indicates unfulfilled potential.

Significantly, prior to their death, Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) behave in a manner of a spectre. Through his agitating actions, Bunny becomes a character evocative of the restless ghost of the farmer, the previous

victim of the group. The murder of the farmer is a blurry memory for Henry and his friends; they do not feel remorse or guilt about the person they savagely killed and left unburied. However, Bunny is a constant, annoying reminder of his death. He makes jokes about death, the death penalty or jailhouses, and talks about calling the tip line of the police. He even keeps the newspaper article about the death of the farmer. Such behaviour poses a tremendous burden and torment for the rest of the group. Relatedly, in *If We Were Villains*, Richard's actions become tyrannical and physically vulgar. He spoils their entertainment, insults their acting. At some point, he hurts his friends on rehearsals and provokes them to fight among other students. The friend groups in the novels find the solution in murdering Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) to liberate themselves from the spectre.

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. Their spectrality is a reminder of a future that could be different. 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).

In *The Secret History*, Bunny's funeral serves as an unveiling event for the regret and guilt over his death. For Richard, the entire process of Bunny's funeral is improper and unfair. From the moment they arrive at Bunny's house, Richard observes that the Corcorans, Bunny's family, do not seem to give the impression of being devastated by grief over the loss of a son and brother. While the father is subjected to emotional upheavals, and alternates between the highs and lows of coming to terms with the trauma of his son, Bunny's mother is more concerned about the show-off at the funeral. Seeing the pretentious coffin and the uncordial behaviour of Bunny's family members, Richard realizes that murdering Bunny was injustice to him. In his heart, he sincerely apologizes to him. While Richard and his friends struggle to deal with the absence of Bunny, the letter he wrote to Professor Marrow serves as the reminder of their crime. The letter is also the first denunciation of the farmer's murder which they kill to conceal. In the letter Bunny wrote, he openly discloses that his classmates were involved in the murder of a man. The letter plays a crucial role in the rupture of the relationship between Marrow and his students. In the eyes of Professor Marrow, his students are not interesting to him because he mentions to Richard that he always knows what they are going to do. The friend group, especially Henry, adores and idolizes Professor Marrow as a wise, charismatic, and eccentric academic. He represents the ideal to take as a model. Alongside his academic influence over his students, he also represents the father figure that each character lacks in their families. However, while Richard describes him in adoration, he also mentions another layer in Marrow's character. On one hand, he encourages people around him conferring kindness, wisdom, and charm; on the other hand, he has

a gift for twisting the feelings of inferiority into superiority and arrogance. It is this side of his character that encourages his students to disregard others and to consider themselves as a select group for whom morality is redundant. For Richard, underneath his charisma, there lies a mask for great coldness, an illusion of warmth and depth. When Richard and his friends are exposed to Julian through Bunny's letter, they encounter what lies under the mask and illusion. Julian displays no sign of emotion, neither anger nor sadness or remorse. His reaction or rather his unresponsive attitude is the worst punishment for the group and Henry in particular.

A second death that haunts Richard is Henry's suicide. Richard states that Henry had the ability to make himself 'invisible' anywhere he wanted when he was alive. After his death, he is the one that haunts Richard in his dreams. When Camilla, Francis and Richard meet later, they share the feeling that Henry is not dead and will show up in a short time. They remember the saying of Professor Marrow on ghosts: "There *are* such things as ghosts. People everywhere have always known that. And we believe in every bit as much as Homer did. Only now, we call them by different names. Memory. The unconscious." (Tartt, 2002, p.476).

In *If We Were Villains*, in Richard's commemoration ceremony, the Dean of the college describes him as a person who will not fade away from memories. Oliver and his friends feel haunted by Richard like the ghostly appearances of his roles. On stage, Richard has performed as Julius Cesar and Banquo as ghosts to haunt the guilty consciousness of their murderers. Richard's portrait hanging in the lobby evokes the sense that he is still alive and wants to wreak havoc on them. While the friends try to act as if everything was normal, it is Richard's empty chair that stands there to remind everyone of his death. For Oliver, death will not stop Richard from tormenting them. In Oliver's dreams, he is a recurring character, and, in the daytime, Oliver feels that

he accompanies Oliver in his chores like a dark and sinister entity. Oliver contemplates Richard's absence as follows: "He was more than a vacant bedroom, an unoccupied seat in the library, a chair in our refectory table. Where he sat like Banquo's ghost, invisible to everyone but us" (Rio, 2017, p.266). After Oliver is released from prison, he also realizes that in his college years, he loved James but pretended otherwise. In a similar way to Bunny's letter in *The Secret History*, James reminds himself to Oliver through a letter in which are lines from *Pericles*:

"A man throng'd up with cold: my veins are chill,
And have no more of life than may suffice
To give my tongue that heat to ask your help;
Which if you shall refuse, when I am dead,
For that I am a man, pray see me buried" (Shakespeare, 1996, Act 2, Scene 1, p.1041).

Oliver learns that James has disappeared due to the unbearable guilt he felt. In the letter, through Pericles' lines, James expresses that he can no longer ask for Oliver's help and all he thinks about is death. However, there is uncertainty over his death since his body has never been found. Rio's novel ends leaving Oliver with the ambiguous ending with which he is most terrified.

The memories that haunt Richard (*The Secret History*) and Oliver (*If We Were Villains*) mostly take place at colleges they attend. Hampden College in *The Secret History* and Dellecher Classical Conservatory in *If We Were Villains* resemble other Ivy League colleges such as Oxford and Cambridge Universities. These colleges described in the two novels provide an enthralling and idyllic environment. They are far remote from the city with their own cultures and distinctive students. This

characteristic of the setting plays a crucial role in contributing to the hauntological aspect of the novels.

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”¹⁷

“Some madness doesn’t act mad to begin
with, sometimes it will knock politely at the door, and when you let it in,
it’ll simply sit in the corner without a fuss – and grow.”
(Nathan Filer, *The Shock and The Fall*, p.25)

“Madness borrowed its face from the mask of the beast.”
(Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p.85)

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.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/TheLewisBlack/status/1237120817214955520>

Madness refers to a variety of mental disorders, with the term also including psychological ailments. It denotes actions that appear rash, impetuous and self-destructive. The Ancient Greeks and Romans associated madness with the characteristics of a sacred disease. The Ancient Greek equivalent of “madness” is “mania” or “lussa (raging madness)” and the Ancient Roman expression parallel with madness is “insania” or “furor”. In ancient times, madness not only indicated a disease but was also used to explain extreme and abnormal behaviours, as well¹⁸. Plato reveals this distinction of the Greek understanding of madness in his work *Phaedrus*. According to Plato, the first type of madness is caused by human diseases and the second type is caused by divine intervention. Madness in the latter type relates to prophetic, poetic, Dionysiac and amorous madness. Divine madness can be considered a good thing since divine possession brings gifts from the gods. The reasons for madness can be explained as a punishment from the gods with supernatural or superstitious beliefs (Plato, 2002, p.25-26). In Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was the most influential, the decisive factor that dictated the discourse on madness and mad people. Thus, madness was an incurable disease with a stand between god-like punishment and divine possession. What distinguished the ancient and medieval times from other periods was that mad people were allowed to wander in society without restriction although they were not exactly welcome. In Renaissance, the perception of madness remained the same as in the Middle Ages; however, it was also a period in which madness was distinguished from melancholy, hysteria, bewitchment or fury (Dzaja, 2016, p.210). In his work *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault states that during the aforementioned periods, man’s conflict

¹⁸ <https://oxfordre.com/classics/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-7044>

with madness was a dramatic debate that challenged man with the world's secret powers. The images of the Fall, the will of God, of the Beast, of the Metamorphoses and other secrets of knowledge blurred the experience of madness (Foucault, 1988, p.xii) The conception of madness in the modern sense originated in the seventeenth century. With the rise of secular thought, it was a time when man was divided into body and soul philosophically. It was also a time when mad people were confined in institutions and repressed to the margins of society. The purpose of the confinement was both for medical treatment and for the evasion of shame and dishonour in public. From this period on to our present day, madness has been considered a mental illness with negative connotations.

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 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). Conversely, in *Madness and Unreason*, Jennifer Radden argues that unreason differs from madness which suggests a wider range of the spectrum. Unreason is not a permanent madness but a temporary one. It is fostered by the environment and the character's perception of the world (Radden, 1985, p.2).

Since it is man himself who constitutes madness, it is in every man and it involves every man (Foucault, 1988, p.26). Foucault's perspective on the ubiquitousness of madness, therefore can be read as a continuation of Erasmus' thought. In *The Praise of Folly*, the famous humanist maintained that Folly, present in almost all relationships from marriage to master-servant or teacher-student, is also the paradoxical element that makes people tolerate the other party with its sweetness. No society or no union life could be pleasant and lasting without folly (Erasmus, 2015, p.28).

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. To illustrate, in *The Secret History*, even before attending Hampden College, Richard's life was one that he wanted to escape from; the cure to its dull, monotonous rhythm was the inventing of a fictive childhood with no connection to reality. That was more colourful and striking than his real uninteresting life. This alternative existence proved its usefulness when he encountered his new friends in college, whose life-stories and backgrounds were colourful, exciting and lively. The twins, Camilla and Charles, are orphans, hence strangely independent; Francis's mother gave birth to him at a very young age, while Bunny's childhood was a perfect example of a typically well-off American childhood. Thus, 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. According to Tracy Hargreaves, the characters in *The Secret*

History have been so acculturated in their studies that they replicate its structures and behaviours albeit the invidious characteristics they possess (Hargreaves, 2001, p.26). Her ideas seem to be in accordance with the characters in *If We Were Villains*, as well. 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 who 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*. The students find Gwendolyn's teaching methods merciless and brutal in the emotional sense; however, a series of lessons with Gwendolyn are of utmost significance in making them display their true selves. Gwendolyn emphasizes the irresistibility of passion in Shakespeare’s plays and forces them to disclose the strong

and weak features in their characters. For Oliver and his friends, to reveal what is not on the surface is an experience that shakes them profoundly. Oliver states that he thinks of himself as the least talented person in the group while he is claimed to be the most generous person on stage. James' immersion into the roles he plays is both his strong and weak side. In another lesson, Camillo, the stage choreographer and movement coach, talks about how the violence in theatre and Shakespeare, in particular, can numb people. He lectures on the effect of violence in Shakespeare as follows:

When Macbeth has his head chopped off, or Lavinia has her tongue cut out, or the conspirators bathe their hands in Caesar's blood, it should affect you, whether you're the victim, the aggressor or only a bystander (Rio, 2017, p.49).

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). Described as a magical talker by Richard, he undoubtedly pervades his students' minds, when he relates sublime to terror and violence. Henry and his friends are fascinated by the idea of loss of self when Professor Marrow praises the unchaining of the irrational inside of a man. He is the one to motivate them knowingly or unknowingly to have a Bacchanal ritual in its true sense. 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 behaviour.

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; thus, he resembles the Ancient Greeks to the contemporary man in that man in the two periods is cultivated and civilized. He argues as follows:

It's a temptation for any intelligent person... to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self. But that's a mistake...Because it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated the person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses (Tartt, 2002, p.56).

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). Subjectivity disappears to the point of self-forgetting as the Dionysian stirrings intensify (2001, p.17). 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). Henry additionally recalls that following the ritual and

their state in self-forgetting and intoxication, they were covered in blood and ended up at a place they did not know. He confesses that together with Francis, Camilla and Charles, they killed a farmer and each of them has a vague and different memory related to the murder.

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). When drunkenness merges with the ecstasy of the performance and the party, the night ends with a fierce fight. Similar to the bacchanal ritual in *The Secret History*, Halloween night is significant for the characters in that they face the primitive side in themselves and in one another.

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. Although these two drives are in opposition, Nietzsche mentions their coexistence as follows:

These two very different drives exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them (2007, 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. For him, the death of the farmer is an unintentional incident committed under the influence of intoxication and his best friend Bunny's murder is "a redistribution of matter" (Tartt, 2002, p.269). Since his is the most profound influence in the group, the others unconditionally adopt his deeply morally flawed perspective: "Murder is pollution. The murderer defiles everyone he comes into contact with. And the only way to purify blood is through blood. We let the pig bleed on us. Then we went inside and washed it off. After that, we were okay" (Tartt, 2002, p.317). 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).

Shakespeare’s plays that Oliver and his friends have been training for in their final year pose considerable influence over their reasoning. Considering Shakespeare as another friend in the group triggers the inevitability of the characters being affected by his plays. As their interpersonal relationships become more and more complicated, the line dividing reality and acting start to fade. In this regard, the performance of *Macbeth* is significant in that it unleashes the inhuman side inside them. James as Macbeth and Oliver as Banquo are out of their usual roles. During the performance, Oliver sees James not as “angelic but handsome the way you think of the devil as handsome” (Rio, 2017, p.66). Another instance in which the lines between reality and acting are blurred is the performance of *Julius Caesar*. For Oliver, it is a play that is personal and more about the people rather than politics. However, the murder of Julius Caesar on stage turns into an enactment of a personal fight with Richard on stage.

The characters’ falling into madness can be best assessed through Foucault’s views on partial madness:

There are kinds of madness that affect intelligence but not the rest of the behaviour or kinds that affect the rest of the behaviour but not the intelligence. It is only within the latter category that we find madness that does not affect behaviour in general but only a particular kind of behaviour: murderous behaviour, for example (Foucault, 2003, p.139).

Radden also discusses the effects of irrational thoughts and beliefs on behaviour in this regard. She states that no matter how well-grounded it is, 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.

Henry's thoughts represent the general attitude of the group. They feel bad about the farmer's death but not bad enough to be imprisoned for it. However, they would rather go to prison than have Bunny blackmailing them for the rest of their lives. Richard, nevertheless, considers the idea of murdering Bunny so repellent, that he disguises it as a chess problem, a game (Tartt, 2002, p. 233). It is thus not the death of a friend that they have planned, but an unreal and fabulous trip (Tartt, 2002, p. 254). 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. They justify Bunny's and Richard's murders through their unreasonable behaviour and loss of control meant to actually preserve control. For a short while, the characters seem to enjoy the order and peace that the absence of Bunny and Richard provide. They continue their usual way of life after the murder, attending their courses and carrying out their daily chores.

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. Regarding the just and unjust behaviours, in Book II of Republic, Plato argues that man is just only because he wants to avoid the consequences of unjust action. In the story of Gyges, it is argued that if released from bonds, the just and the unjust man would go the same way. The cloak of anonymity provides man to

be unjust since injustice is profitable. (Plato, 1991, p.37-38)¹⁹. In addition, 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. Nevertheless, they realize the gravity of the situation weeks later. The search party for Bunny turns into a huge event, with the participation of hundreds of people from factory workers to state troopers. This popular joining in the search party is an illustration in fiction of Freud's claims according to which civilization reinforces the sense of guilt and maintains order and stability. When things go well in a man's life, his conscious is latent and allows his ego to do as it wants but when misfortune strikes, he searches his soul and admits his sinfulness (Freud, 1962, p.73). The search party seems to be the assertion of the real world and the reminder of authority, in that sense. The enormity of the search party is, for the culpable group of friends, the clear proof of the enormity of their deed. Richard likens his state to the effects of anaesthesia wearing off, and his sense of guilt to a feeling with diabolical powers of invention. Bunny's funeral is

¹⁹The Ring of Gyges is the story of Gyges who is a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. One day when he is out with his flock, a storm and earthquake occur opening a crevice into which Gyges descends. There he finds a bronze horse with doors. Opening the doors, he sees a human skeletal wearing a ring. Gyges takes the ring and at the gathering of the king's shepherds, he finds out that the ring has the power to make him invisible. Through his ability, Gyges seduces the king's wife and replaces him. Through the story of the Ring of Gyges, in Book II of Republic, Socrates and Glaucon discuss that the just man and the unjust man act no differently from the other. It is the proof that no one is just willingly but only when compelled to be so (Plato, 1991, p.37-38).

another realization of the magnitude of their misdeed. It is a “bitter, irrevocable truth of it, the evil of what we have done” (Tartt, 2002, p.350).

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. Even more affecting than his absence from performances is his absence as a friend. Oliver often finds himself expecting Richard as if he would come into the room or appear around the corner. He describes his guilt as some huge weight crushing on him like a boulder (Rio, 2017, p.172) or an itchy rash on his skin that flares up whenever he tries to forget him (Rio, 2017, p.195). Past the point of death, that Richard was the enemy seems simply an exaggeration.

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):

Man has known, since antiquity, that in dreams he encounters what he is and what he will be, what he has done and what he is going to do, discovering there the knot that ties his freedom to the necessity of the world (1994, p.47).

According to Foucault, the dream is deceptive and illusory; it creates confusion. Nevertheless, it is not erroneous, and error constantly exists with the dream. Madness occurs when the images close to the dream receive the affirmation or negation that constitutes error (1988, p.104). 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 dreams concerning Richard not only disturb Oliver but also his classmates, as well. Those dreams make Meredith tremble, and cause James to fidget in his sleep most nights.

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). Foucault also suggests that a dream is the fulfilment of a desire; however, if it is a dream rather than a realised desire, it is because the dream also satisfies all the counter desires (1994, p.73). Richard’s dream at the end of the novel seems to fulfil his desire to meet Henry again. His dream is not a nightmare like the dreams he had when Bunny died; yet it is not a dream that provides the closure and relief he seeks. Henry’s replies are vague, and they do not promise happiness for the future when he communicates his unhappiness.

In the same dream, Henry tells Richard he is not dead, but he has trouble with his passport which becomes a symbol for his suicide. Although the Ancient Greeks’ attitudes to suicide were different, honourable suicide –or self-sacrifice in some cases– was acceptable and praiseworthy. Thus, true to his training, Henry embraces and acts on the thoughts of the Ancient Greeks and the teachings of Professor Marrow, especially about the sublimity of death. For Richard, fear or desperation are not the reasons for his suicide but “the high, cold principles which Julian had thought us to use: Duty, piety, loyalty and sacrifice” (Tartt, 2002, p.468). According to Durkheim,

suicide is either disease in itself or a special form of insanity, an event involved in one or several variations of insanity; moreover, it cannot be found in sane persons, therefore it can be connected to partial madness, to a special form of insanity limited to a single act (Durkheim, 2005, p.4-5). In the novel, Richard describes Henry's reflection in the mirror when he raised the pistol on his head, his expression one of "one of rapt concentration, of triumph, almost, a high diver rushing to the end of the board" (Tartt, 2002, p.468). Henry's suicide puts an end to the frenzied situation that started with Bunny's murder. Although not suicide as in *The Secret History*, another act of self-sacrifice ends the emotionally tangled situation in *If We Were Villains*. Oliver takes the blame for Richard's murder instead of James, which results in ten-year imprisonment. While his self-sacrifice saves the others from criminal charges, for James, it intensifies his burden in addition to the guilt of Richard's murder. At the end of the novel, Oliver discovers that James has left a suicide note, although it is one which makes him question what actually happened.

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

Me, poor man, my library
was dukedom large enough
(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene II)

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 *Dead Poet's Society*, when Mr. Keating argues that poetry, romance, love, and beauty are the reasons why we stay alive, he not only refers to the passionate immersion in knowledge and literature but also to their place in Dark Academia as an essence to live for. 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. Bunny (*The Secret History*) and Richard (*If We Were Villains*) need to be excluded from their groups because not only do they pose a threat to the serenity of their friends but also they do not accord with and cannot develop a sense of aesthetics both groups in the novels possess.

In this context, a novel written from the point of view of students in an academic novel naturally leads to the questioning of the relationships between the characters. 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. When two of their friends – Bunny in *The Secret History* and Richard in *If We Were Villains* start to behave out of the group dynamics, the rest of the friends decides to solve the problem within the group and within their shared frame of mind. It is unthinkable for them to seek a counsel and compromise from the outer world without renunciation. Eventually, the supposedly strong friendship starts to disintegrate and display its true nature when the characters murder one of their own. The characters in both novels become uncanny to one another. Friendship among them turns into an alliance in

which they try to cover their crime and diverges from the classical perception of the concept that Aristotle discusses as virtuous and supportive in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. They get out of the security of friendship and leave any effort behind to maintain their bond.

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 of 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 on their lives and to their friendship. The murder of their friend starts to haunt them as an act to have performed to control the situation but proved otherwise. 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. The events – which constitute a huge part of their past now - haunt their present and they will most 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). Fisher also states that nothing is worse than recognizing someone you know, someone dear to you, or family seeing a look that is not theirs (2014, p.59). After everything, the friends cannot form stable relationships and cannot continue their friendship at college with the same intensity.

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 become both the villains and the victims of their stories.

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 a lifestyle"²⁰ which will hopefully inspire further studies.

²⁰ <https://post45.org/sections/contemporaries-essays/dark-academia/>

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