Charting American *Habitus:* An Analysis of 'Middlebrow' Fiction and its Readership through the Prism of Donna Tartt's Published Novels

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis aims to address the paucity of research on contemporary middlebrow fiction and the ongoing tensions in the American literary hierarchy by focussing on the published novels of author Donna Tartt. By examining Tartt's fiction both through a close reading analysis and an examination of paratextual elements of her work, this thesis argues that Tartt's novels fall somewhere in the liminal space between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Each chapter looks at one of her novels in detail, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital and taste as a prism through which Tartt's books might be examined. The introduction explores the history of literary tensions in America. The first chapter examines the role of protagonist Richard Papen in *The Secret History* and his position as an unreliable narrator. Chapter two looks at the merging of literary genres in *The Little Friend,* with a particular focus on the fusing of Southern Gothic and Sentimental fiction. Lastly, chapter three analyses the importance of art in *The Goldfinch,* concentrating on the Carel Fabritius painting for which Tartt's novel is named. It is the intention of this thesis to show through each chapter that Tartt balances the cerebral with the emotional, and offers highbrow critics who dismiss her work as 'popular' a riposte by opening discussions about what constitutes taste in literature.

Introduction: "A Tepid Ooze of Midcult": Tartt's Place in the Pervasive Middlebrow of American Literature

"Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future."[1]

Reviews for Donna Tartt's most recent novel, 2013's *The Goldfinch,* proved mixed. Some critics, such as *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani, claimed the book showcased Tartt's "remarkable storytelling talents into a rapturous, symphonic whole."[2] Stephen King (himself a bestselling author) called the novel "a rarity that comes along perhaps half a dozen times per decade."[3] Yet others such as James Wood, reviewing for *The New Yorker,* have denounced *The Goldfinch,* labelling it "further proof of the infantilization of our literary culture" and "a turkey."[4] It is difficult to overlook the fact that many of the negative reviews come from literary institutions like *The New*

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[1] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1955) trans. Justin O'Brien p. 198.
[2] Michiko Kakutani, "A Painting as Talisman, as Enduring as Loved Ones Are Not" *New York Times,* http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/08/books/the-goldfinch-a-dickensian-novel-by-donna-tartt.html (accessed 03/12/2017) created: October 7th 2013.
[3] Stephen King, "Flights of Fancy" *New York Times,* http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/books/review/donna-tartts-goldfinch.html (accessed 03/12/2017) created: October 10th 2013.
[4] Evgenia Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair,* http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/07/goldfinch-donna-tartt-literary-criticism (accessed: 07/11/2017) created: July 2014.

Yorker and *The Paris Review* which are considered highbrow tastemakers, interested in focusing on the contents of a book rather than its sales figures.[5]

These dismissive reviews attempt to stress the ephemeral nature of the marketplace for popular fiction, emphasising their belief that novels such as *The Goldfinch* would not stand the test of time in the same way that canonical texts have, and suggesting they will quickly be forgotten by the annals of time.[6] Furthermore, as demonstrated by Wood's review, much of the criticism Tartt's Pulitzer Prize winning novel has received from these "bastions of true discernment" hone in on what they consider to be simplistic language choices, tone, and plot, suggesting they "belong in children's literature" rather than a novel intended for adults.[7] By implying the book lacks complexity and cerebral stimulus for adult readers, highbrow critics such as Wood infer that *The Goldfinch* is not suitable for readers searching for an intellectual novel, and infantilises those who enjoy it.

As Nicola Humble notes, this paints a stereotype of the popular fiction reader, portraying them as "undiscriminating, without judgement, a passive consumer gulping down rubbish by the gallon," regardless of the literary merits of a piece.[8] As a result, this use of reductive terminology employs highbrow vocabulary to enforce and underscore ongoing tensions in the current panorama of American literature. Initially, the debate surrounding the value of literature appeared to have ended with changes to the publication and

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[5] Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair.*
[6] James Wood, "The New Curiosity Shop" *The New Yorker* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/21/the-new-curiosity-shop (accessed: 29/11/2017) created: 21st October 2013.
[7] Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair.*
[8] Nicola Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* Ed. David Glover and Scott McCracken (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 86.

marketing of novels in the 1960s. However, it is clear from the treatment of contemporary authors like Tartt that these tensions over taste still exist today.

For the most part, Tartt's work has been well-received by the public. According to *Publishers Weekly*, sales of *The Goldfinch* neared 1.5 million in April 2014 following the announcement of the Pulitzer Prize award, with another 150,000 copies printed for a second run.[9] Similarly, the hype surrounding the release of Tartt's debut novel *The Secret History* in 1992 earned the author a six-figure sum advance and began what Hannah Rosefield refers to as "the cult of Donna Tartt."[10] Much of the excitement surrounding each new Tartt release is generated by her mysterious persona as a reclusive author. She is by no means prolific, writing only one book every ten years or so. As such, the publishing marketplace has learned to adapt to her needs, presenting her almost like one of her own characters: quiet, intelligent, stylish, but removed from society. By building on this romanticised image of Tartt as the reclusive writer, the marketplace has perpetuated the myth, ensuring more sales and intrigue due to a lack of information on Tartt. In the digital age, she possesses no website, no social media accounts, and has given few interviews in recent years, leaving readers hungry for more details about her next novel and personal life.

While Tartt's popular success has been cemented by high sales figures, her mysterious persona, and acclaim from bestselling authors such as Stephen

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[9] Publishers Weekly, "Tartt's 'Goldfinch' Doubles Sales Following Pulitzer Win" *Publishers Weekly,* https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/awards-and-prizes/article/61988-tartt-s-goldfinch-doubles-sales-following-pulitzer-win.html (accessed 03/01/2018) created: April 24th 2014.

[10] Hannah Rosefield, "The Cult of Donna Tartt" *Prospect Magazine,* https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/donna-tartt-secret-history-20-year-anniversary (accessed 01/01/2018) created: February 12th 2013.

King, the reception of her novels by literary institutions like *The New Yorker* suggest she has yet to earn the critical and institutional success afforded to novelists like Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace. However, in the eyes of many middle-class publications such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times,* Tartt's novels are not only commercially successful, but warrant critical praise too, implying that these publications find something of worth in her writing that highbrow publications have overlooked, neglected, or simply disagreed upon. This opens up a schism between those who consider Tartt's work to be of literary merit and those who do not. Based on the highbrow terminology employed in these negative reviews, much of the dismissal of Tartt's novels by these elite literary institutions is founded on prejudices and anxieties over who dictates taste—intellectual publications or the public?

With this issue in mind, it is possible to see Tartt and her work as representing an emerging faction of contemporary American authors who occupy the liminal space between the high and low, a space once considered middlebrow by critics like Dwight Macdonald and Q.D. Leavis. Although the term middlebrow has largely fallen out of fashion since the 1960s, Tartt's novels possess many of the traits associated with middlebrow fiction, including "incorporating highbrow experimentation, language and attitudes [...] with a mass accessibility and pleasurable appeal" and by demanding an active, thoughtful audience, while at the same time eschewing the literary hierarchy through her characters and themes.[11] Yet by analysing the reception of Tartt's books by readers and critics we can see that she also weaves the debate over cultural capital and tastes into her writing. While each of Tartt's

[11] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 91.

published novels has a different genre and tone, all three focus on the tensions between highbrow and lowbrow tastes, offering a glimpse of the society Tartt is attempting to critique: the hedonistic, aristocratic students in *The Secret History*; the conflict between the rich Cleve family and the white-trash Ratliffs in *The Little Friend*: and the debate surrounding art and cultural capital in *The Goldfinch*. Despite Tartt's unwillingness to talk about this topic in interviews, it is possible to see her novels as textual rebuttals to those who continue to frown upon the middlebrow and popular novel. Thus, through both her stylistic and thematic choices, Tartt examines the position of her own work in the context of the middlebrow. She uses outsider narrators such as Richard Papen and Theo Decker (both of whom try to enter groups with highbrow tastes and behaviours, despite having little financial or cultural capital themselves) to ease readers into a complex debate on contemporary U.S. culture and reading preferences.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore twofold. Firstly, to situate Tartt and her fiction within the framework of American literature and culture it analyses how her books have been marketed and received in the U.S. This includes analysis of the paratextual elements of the novels as well as sales figures, author appearances and responses from critics from both mainstream and highbrow publications. Paratextual components such as the author's name, title and preface may appear insignificant at first glance, but as Phillipe Lejeune notes in *Le Pacte Autobiographique,* it is the "fringe of the printed text which, in reality, controls the whole reading."[12] As a result, it is almost impossible to disentangle paratextual components from the messages of

[12] Phillipe Lejeune quoted in Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," in *New Literary History,* 22.2 (1991) p. 261.

Tartt's books, intentional or otherwise. These components are significant evidence for deciding whether Tartt is indeed a writer who represents an emerging wave of neo-middlebrow authors or if she is merely an ephemeral success, as Wood has suggested.[13] Furthermore, by using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to examine the current literary hierarchy, this thesis argues that the middlebrow still represents a significant portion of book sales in the U.S. with readers keen to pick up a novel which is not only enjoyable but also intellectual, furthering their own education through "self-culture."[14] Tartt's novels, with their "Dickensian" prose and popular success, ultimately fold themselves into this category of contemporary middlebrow, appealing to traditionally middlebrow institutions such as book groups which "require books with enough 'meat' for discussion" during meetings.[15]

Secondly, through close-readings, this thesis will analyse Tartt's published novels, examining how she uses outsider narrators and themes concerned with aesthetics, taste and narcissism as a way to open up conversations about class-based privilege and cultural capital, offering a riposte to elitist critics who revile fiction for appealing to mass audiences. Like many middlebrow texts, Tartt's novels pose as a somewhat self-mocking glimpse of themselves. For although each of her books acknowledges the class-based hierarchy that is integral to their plot, they also show 'outsider' characters who represents the middlebrow as stereotypical social-climbers, desperate to gain acceptance in the elite highbrow social-circles by faking

[13] Wood, "The New Curiosity Shop," *The New Yorker.*
[14] Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) p. 9.
[15] Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair* and Humble and "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 90.

knowledge and prestige. By doing so, Tartt's characters stand in for larger social anxieties over cultural authority and what constitutes good taste.

Despite a wealth of academic work focused on the transformation of middlebrow culture between 1920 and 1960, little research has covered what happened to the middlebrow in the aftermath of the Battle of the Brows. The 1960s completely altered the landscape of literature, from the production and consumption of novels to the endorsement of them. As a result, the liminal space between the brows has become much more arbitrary for some critics and scholars. However, a recent article in the *New Yorker,* in which Macy Halford calls Zadie Smith's writing "middlebrow" was met by a backlash of readers who found the term offensive, leading to an article printed the following day to clarify the term and defend its use.[16] As Humble notes, "the term 'middlebrow' continues to be one that embarrasses, because it still has ideological power—notably the power to dismiss."[17] Examples like this therefore suggest that literature is moving towards a more implicit hierarchy, which many consumers may be oblivious to, and which scholars have been slow to address.

Furthermore, there is a significant paucity of research on Tartt and her novels for a number of reasons: her reclusiveness, her status as a middlebrow author, her non-prolific speed of production, and her shifts from genre to genre. While some scholars such as James Annesley and Tracey Hargreaves have chosen to focus on Tartt, much of the existing research concerns itself

[16] Macy Halford, "Reviewers on Reviewing," *The New Yorker,* https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/reviewers-on-reviewing (accessed 09/01/2018) created: February 8th 2011. After complaints by readers, a defence of the term 'middlebrow' was posted two days later by Halford. For more information, see "On Middlebrow" https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-middlebrow.

[17] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 94.

with the literary Brat Pack instead, a movement which emerged in the 1980s and included authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jill Eisenstadt and Jay McInerney. Tartt attended the same university as Ellis and Eisenstadt but Tartt is portrayed as being on the edge of the movement, since she was published only in the 1990s. While it is true that Tartt shares similar themes to those of the Brat Pack authors, such as characters obsessed with surface appearances, materialism and consumerism, Tartt's loquacious writing style does not fit with the blank laconic technique favoured by writers like Ellis. Instead, her work must be examined separately, with a close analysis of both the novels themselves and the context in which they were written and received. Only once this is achieved can we start to understand the position of Tartt in the current panorama of American literature and how her work functions as a riposte and critique of elitist tastes. Through this, we can begin to comprehend the continuing success and difficulties middlebrow texts experience in the U.S. marketplace.

"It's Tartt—But is it Art?" Evgenia Perez demands in her article on *The Goldfinch*.[18] Motivated by the apparent schism between highbrow and lowbrow forms of art, Perez questions "what makes a work literature, and who gets to decide?"[19] Published shortly after the decision to award Tartt's third novel a Pulitzer Prize, Perez's piece explores the complexity of literary hierarchy, ultimately pointing to critics such as Harold Bloom and Q.D. Leavis for shaping and maintaining prejudices in the industry, and attempting to segregate literature into rigid classes or 'brows.'[20] This question of what

[18] Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

constitutes as prestigious literature is nothing new: rather it repeats issues raised by the emergence of the idea of middlebrow culture in the 1920s.

The term middlebrow, popularised by the British satirical magazine *Punch* in 1925, is based on the pseudo-scientific phrenological theory that people with greater intelligence have high foreheads. Middlebrow, then, denotes a person of middling intellect (often from a lower middle-class environment), and is the consequence of anxieties based on cultural authority and the circulation of ideas in Western society between different social strata, which came to the foreground between 1920 and 1960. It serves as the intermediate bridge between highbrow culture and lowbrow, or popular culture, which has been mass produced, often with a working-class audience in mind. Other variations of the term appeared during this period of high tension (referred to by scholars as the Battle of the Brows) in an attempt to either better define the label or as a way to turn it into a pejorative term.[21]These included Leavis's scornful "*faux-bon,*" while Dwight Macdonald preferred to refer to the middlebrow by renaming it "midcult."[22] This was meant to imply, as he had done previously with the term "masscult," that it "isn't really culture at all," but rather a poor mimicry of original highbrow culture.[23]

A large proportion of this dismissive criticism comes from the intangible nature of middlebrow culture between 1920 and 1960. Highbrow and lowbrow are, to some extent, absolutes—if a piece of art does not fit with

[21] Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Garden City Press Limited, 1942) p. 113.
[22].Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Pimlico, 2000) 2nd ed. p. 39 and Dwight MacDonald, "Masscult and Midcult" in *Against the American Grain* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983) p. 37.
[23] MacDonald, "Masscult and Midcult" p. 3.

the values of highbrow culture then it is easily confined to the category of lowbrow and vice-versa. An additional middle subset corrupts the simplified and binary pattern of thinking. This has led to confusion and frustration over what constitutes as middlebrow writing. Tartt's prose is weighty, with all three novels over five-hundred pages, and yet there is something to be said for their readability, with plot points such as murders and betrayals to accelerate their pace. This, according to Humble, is a key trait of middlebrow texts, which "skilfully manipulate the apparently contrasting narrative pleasures, walking a tightrope between the overly emotional (lowbrow) and the entirely cerebral (highbrow)."[24] Thus, Tartt's writing echoes the literature labelled middlebrow prior to 1960.

However, historically it is a label that authors have sought to avoid. This is perhaps best demonstrated in an unsent letter from Virginia Woolf to the then editor of the *New Statesman and Nation* (published posthumously in the collection *The Death of the Moth* in 1942). In the correspondence, Woolf sets out definitions of highbrow and lowbrow culture. When she comes to examine the middlebrow, however, she argues that the best way to describe it is that it is "neither one thing nor the other. [Middlebrow people] are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between."[25] She goes on to suggest that "the middlebrow is a man or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather

[24] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 95.
[25] Woolf, "Middlebrow," p. 115.

nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige."[26] Both these statements rely on describing middlebrow culture and its consumers through what they are *not,* rather than what they are. The sentiment of the difficult "betwixt and between" is acknowledged and expanded upon by Erica Brown and Mary Glover. In their introductory chapter, they note that the middlebrow "is difficult to define [...] because as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it is itself unstable."[27]

Woolf's condescending tone towards those she considers lowbrow, and her dismissal of that "bloodless and pernicious pest who comes between" clearly indicate that she believes herself to be part of the highbrow subset.[28] However, by establishing herself in this way, she highlights the main problem in firmly pinning a definition on the term middlebrow; those who consider themselves a part of the highbrow category of this era were, by and large, the bourgeois class who could afford university education, who did not require full-time jobs, and thus were free to pursue the arts at their leisure. As a consequence, highbrow culture is predominantly made up of those who have been taught, at an academic level, that the ability to analyse and interpret a book is preferable to reading for pleasure. Therefore, as a result of their economic status, which facilitates this education, these scholars become the literary 'vanguard,' creating a pedagogy in academia which forms a vicious circle in which some students eventually become teachers, passing on their knowledge and prejudices to future students.[29] "There is," Douglass Hewitt

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[26] *Ibid* p. 115.
[27] Erica Brown, Mary Glover Eds. *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 2.
[28] Woolf, "Middlebrow," p. 116.
[29] For further reading, see Steven Cranfied, *F.R Leavis: The Creative University* (London: Springer, 2016).

opines, "a natural tendency for academic critics to concentrate attention on what they themselves can do and what the general reader cannot."[30] Put simply, the problematic belief of the time was that books read for pleasure did not have to be difficult to comprehend, and therefore authors whose books are 'readable' are often confined to the realm of the lowbrow. If they have sold enough copies and they are easy to read, it is, according to critics such as Woolf and Macdonald, because there is nothing of value beneath the surface to examine. With the unprecedented sales of *The Secret History* and *The Goldfinch,* Tartt falls neatly into this definition of a popular author who might have been considered middlebrow pre-1960, since her work falls somewhere "betwixt and between" the highbrow and lowbrow.

In this context, it is possible to view Tartt as representative of a new generation of contemporary writers who exemplify the blurring of high and low culture to create something that echoes traditional middlebrow fiction. Her texts are allegorical; they open up a debate about culture and taste and highlight both the dangers of class separatism and the appeal the defence of the brows might have on those trying to protect the 'ivory tower' of highbrow culture. Characters such as Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch* and Bunny Corcoran in *The Secret History* attempt to hoard their knowledge of highbrow culture, guarding it jealously against those trying to gain access to their upper-class worlds. By broaching the topic in this way, Tartt's writing explores the cultural tensions engendered by this anxiety. Furthermore, she acknowledges that in American culture it is those self-same 'highbrows' who, while perfectly willing to accept the existence of lowbrow so long as they can distance

[30] Douglass Hewitt, *English Fiction and the Early Modern Period 1890-1940* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1988) p. 170.

themselves from it, are much more defensive when it comes to those trying to gain access to the highbrow, because it is too close for comfort. The fear underpinning this dismissal of middlebrow is that it might somehow contaminate and infect the highbrow echelons. The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu evaluates this anxiety, suggesting that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences."[31]

Bourdieu argues that those who are not at the top of society have very little control over their aspirations, since human nature and ambition demand that individuals attempt to climb the social ladder, even if they are ultimately unsuccessful. He maintains that this is a deliberate way of using culture to keep the classes segregated, noting that historically, the masses did not have access to art; "music, painting, and even books were pleasures reserved for the rich."[32] This may begin to explain why distinctions between the brows have become more entrenched as the 'cultured' highbrows have to go to greater lengths to ensure the continued separation of low and high culture and hold on to their privilege. By choosing to recognize some modes of art as legitimate or 'highbrow' while criticising others for their lack of originality or popularity, those at the top, who have the most cultural capital, are allowed to distinguish what qualifies as taste in order to enforce the distinction. As Bourdieu argues, this is often achieved by reaffirming a person's cultural capital, which has been received either by their upbringing, or education.[33] As such, works of art are often described by those with a high level of cultural capital by the form

[31] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984) p. 7.
[32] Bourdieu, *Distinction* p. 31.
[33] *Ibid* p. 1.

and mode of representation, rather than the ethos the piece evokes, which is considered obvious and easy to discuss. In a paragraph devoted to explaining how cultural capital is used the art world, Bourdieu posits that because of this obsession with knowing the mode and form and a piece's place in the context of the art world:

> A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of the period, a school or an author, and more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason.[34]

Although Bourdieu later acknowledges that implicit learning can occur on a practical, analogous level (by coming into repeated contact with a particular piece for instance), the majority of the knowledge needed to decode a work of art is part of the cultural capital that is safeguarded by those who are considered highbrow in order to protect their tastes from the masses. It is not enough to simply have a feeling for a piece of art, or *Einfühlung* (the art lover's pleasure); one must also possess the tools to be able to talk about a work of art in detail, using the language of the art world, or risk being exposed for a lack of authority in the field.

[34] *Ibid* p. 2.

Tartt frequently engages with this argument by referencing culture in her work. For those with high cultural capital, *The Goldfinch* offers reaffirmation of their place within society, since her writing covers familiar ground—artists people have already heard of, like Corot and Frans Hals, as well as paintings those with cultural capital are likely already able to name, such as *The Anatomy Lesson*. By using terminology such as "trompe l'oeil," Tartt makes portions of her description accessible only to those with the cultural competence to decode their meaning, with particular emphasis placed on the school of painting and the mode.[35] Alone, this would be considered a highbrow technique, intended to prevent the average everyday reader from truly engaging with her work. However, she also recognizes the ethos of the artworks she describes, and frequently explains how art (and culture in general) is not something to be dissected and deliberated using facts, but rather something that evokes emotions, a sentiment which can be grasped by anyone who has ever seen a work of art, regardless of their cultural capital. Thus, Tartt uses *ekphrasis,* a term which refers to "works of poetry and prose that talk about or incorporate visual works of art."[36] According to Laura M. Sager Eidt, the use of *ekphrasis* in a text creates an insight into an artwork, "in which the resultant sender/receiver relationships reshape the reader or viewer perceptions of the artwork depicted."[37] In *The Goldfinch,* this works when Tartt's protagonist forges an emotional and psychological attachment to the Carel Fabritius painting, allowing readers to see beyond the paint and technique to the ethos of the work. In this way, Tartt's novel manages to tread

[35] Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (London: Little Brown, 2013) p. 25.
[36] Laura M. Sager Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) p. 9.
[37] Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting* p. 10.

the line between highbrow and lowbrow, drawing her own conclusion about what constitutes cultural knowledge in society. Furthermore, Tartt offers a sliver of knowledge about the art world to readers who might not be familiar with the terminology or artworks in the field, transferring her own understanding to her readers.

According to Bourdieu, the distinctions between high and low culture go further than simply knowing about culture; people must also be able to provide proof that they can identify the difference between 'good' taste and 'bad' taste.[38] The elite (highbrow) wishes to distinguish itself from both the working and middle-classes, while the middle-class seek to separate themselves from the working class and their practices. Bourdieu suggests that judgements of taste are therefore entangled in a symbolic hierarchy controlled by 'legitimate' culture, practiced by the highbrow elite and legitimised by the admiration of the other classes. This assertion of tastes is often done by decorating one's home, or by choosing what to eat, what to wear, or what to admire. This depends on the financial capital an individual is able to spend on such things. Therefore, while the middle-class reveres highbrow culture and aspires towards it, as individuals they do not always possess the cultural knowledge nor the economic freedom to purchase items which will elevate their cultural status. Middlebrow culture then, according to Bourdieu, relies on the aspirations of middle-class people who wish to emulate those above them in a way that is achievable within their levels of cultural and economic capital. Again, Tartt seems aware of these distinctions—she frequently chooses to write from the perspective of 'outsider,' characters who aspire towards

[38] Bourdieu, *Distinction* p. 321.

joining the upper-class, but who ultimately lack the cultural capital required to be accepted into their ranks. The protagonist of Tartt's *The Secret History,* Richard Papen, with his barely proficient Greek, is a good example of this—since Tartt often shows him being ridiculed by other members of his class for his reading choices and clothing, despite it often being nearly identical to their own.

This treatment of Papen serves as a neat reflection of Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital. Unlike critics like Woolf and Macdonald, Bourdieu suggests that sociological and hereditary determinism are responsible for creating this "habitus."[39] Those seeking to redefine their identities and reposition themselves by moving up the social ladder are forced to acquire a cultural knowledge in keeping with their desired social position, thus forcing them to avoid or belittle culture within their own social class. Papen does this by looking down on others, particularly the "hippie" art clique at his college.[40] Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch* also does this by belittling clients at his guardian's antiques store, suggesting they are easily duped by frauds because they are only interested in antiques as possessions which showcase their social standing, rather than knowing enough to spot real pieces (p. 508). By showing us these outsider characters who try and gain access to the social elite by displaying their highbrow tastes, Tartt questions the issues at the heart of middlebrow culture, such as how does one distinguish oneself from the lowbrow without appearing as a poor imitation of the highbrow.

[39] The term is used by Bourdieu to mean an inherited predisposition to specific tastes, and by people seeking to ascend class boundaries by procuring a cultural identity compatible with their desired class position.

[40] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin, 1993) p. 163.

Historically and in the recent past, most critics of middlebrow culture have not approached it in the same way as Bourdieu, arguing instead that middlebrow literature is simply a poor imitation of highbrow writings, produced by authors who wish to have their cake and eat it, since they seek both acceptance from academic critics and from the masses, through sales of books and profits. One of the most outspoken critics of middlebrow, Dwight Macdonald suggests that texts which strive for both academic and commercial success offer little but a distinct lack of originality. "Midcult [...] pretends to respect the standards of High Culture," he laments, "while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them."[41] Art, according to Macdonald, is defined not by its difficulty to read or sales figures, but by the kernel of originality that exists at its core. Conversely, masscult and midcult are less desirable to Macdonald because there is no thought or idea behind them, they are merely there to be produced and consumed, turning art into commodity. He attacks authors he regards as middlebrow, including Ernest Hemingway, insisting that "a hack will turn out hack stuff even when he tries to be serious."[42] Any legitimate member of highbrow culture, Macdonald implies, will recognize the lack of originality and dismiss it, rather than embrace it. Those who belong to the middlebrow, however, will accept "hack writing" because it is a watered-down and commodified version of highbrow.

In particular, Macdonald rails against the growing popularity of middlebrow book groups in America. He criticises the 'Book of the Month Club' (BOTMC), lamenting that it takes away the responsibility of individuals to make choices, leaving them to be dominated by those picking the books,

[41] Macdonald, "Mass and Midcult," p. 37
[42] *Ibid* p. 30.

who might care more about monetary gains and easy sales than they do about the value of the books they pass along to consumers. On a practical level, middle-class book groups such as BOTMC, created in 1926, and Oprah's Book Club, created in 1996, rely to some extent on readability, which includes the length of a book, the pace of the plot, and the writing style. This has led to several controversial issues, such as Oprah Winfrey's decision to rescind her choice of the novel *The Corrections* for her book group after its author Johnathan Franzen called her book picks "schmaltzy" and "one dimensional," suggesting each novel selected for the group were uninteresting and too similar.[43] Yet as Humble notes, book groups rely on novels with enough depth to be debated, meaning that books of certain genres such as romances or crime fiction are often dismissed as being too "lightweight."[44] Yet, as previously noted, book picks must also be enjoyable and readable. If subscribers were expected to toil through difficult and demanding books each month, they would likely cancel their membership. This meant that successful book groups managed to balance pleasure and education with their reading choices. Through the creation of BOTMC, Harry Scherman recognized that a book is, at the most basic level, a consumable. In order to successfully market books to a mass audience using minimal advertising, he stopped looking at potential consumers as individuals, instead treating them as a homogenised group. Once again, financial capital comes into play. Those most likely to buy BOTMC memberships were middle-class Americans, who had both the disposable income and motive to buy. Scherman demonstrates this targeting

[43] Juli Weiner, "The Corrections: Oprah and Johnathan Franzen Revisit Feud," *Vanity Fair,* https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/12/the-corrections-oprah-and-jonathan-franzen-revisit-feud (accessed: 02/04/2018) created: December 7th 2010.
[44] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 90.

of the middle-class through his choice of books. The selected books had to be enlightening (since readers recognized the links between books and education) and enjoyable. As Janice Radway notes in her seminal text, *A Feeling for Books:* "no matter how hard [champions of books] tried to privilege enjoyment and pleasure, [they] returned again and again to its association with education and edification."[45] While *Reader's Digest* never used the term 'middlebrow,' their publication of abridged classics allowed readers to consume and understand classics by making their length and contents more appealing to readers.[46] This was clearly intended to target a largely middle-class audience who wanted the benefit of reading classics but who might not have the time or focus to read the unabridged version. Furthermore, scholars like Joan Shelley Rubin have suggested that one link between contemporary middlebrow and the traditional middlebrow is the allure of and emphasis on self-culture, the ability to improve the self through reading something intellectually stimulating.[47] Since choosing a book that managed to provide both education and pleasure would broaden the audience and the sales, it is clear there were strong motivations for Scherman's and other book groups to focus on this type of material, which in turn aided the popularity of middlebrow novels in America and perpetuated the concept of reading groups as middlebrow platforms. Tartt's novels have frequently been

[45] Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) p. 167.
[46] Clare Swanson, "Reader's Digest Condensed Book Series to Get Wider Distribution," *Publisher's Weekly,* https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/65843-reader-s-digest-condensed-book-series-to-get-wider-distribution.html (accessed: 13/04/2018) created: March 12th 2015.
[47] Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* p. 9.

chosen by book groups in the US and UK, including BBC Radio 4 and Waterstones.[48]

These tensions between the reader's ability to make decisions and the removal of choice through the very nature of a book group, and between the consumer's interests and the marketplace, are at the heart of the discussion of BOTMC in Radway's work. In addition to acknowledging the need for the marketplace (and companies like BOTMC) to consider their target audience as a group, rather than individuals, Radway also notes that from the buyer's perspective, the permanence of the book itself, and the knowledge it provides, are among the main reasons for the subscription services' success.[49] Thus, ownership of a book is considered a sign of good taste and intellect, and since it is a commodity which can be picked up and consumed again and again, it remains a desirable good in the marketplace, particularly amongst middle-class consumers who have the economic freedom to purchase such books. However, while book groups like BOTMC have remained popular in the U.S. the term middlebrow is now less common.

Where, then, has the middlebrow gone? Although the term has largely died out since the 1960s, contemporary authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Michael Chabon, Haruki Murakami and Donna Tartt continue to exemplify traits of middlebrow literature, drawing on allusions to both high and low culture while continuing to aid readers in self-educating themselves through their work. Each of these authors are commercially successful, while their books contain the "meat[y]" plots and themes Humble claims are vital for

[48] For more information see, "Donna Tartt—The Secret History." *BBC Radio 4 Bookclub.* BBC Radio 4: 2014.http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03nrrbm (accessed: 09/01/2018).
[49] Radway, *A Feeling for Books* p. 166.

middlebrow books' success.[50] Furthermore, there is a paucity of scholarship concerning contemporary middlebrow literature, suggesting that the debate surrounding the battle of the brows ended in the 1960s, despite magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* continuing to use the term.[51] As such, it is important to examine the way in which middlebrow literature transforms during and after this period, moving away from the traditional middlebrow of books like *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith (1948), to explore new concepts such as postmodern themes and writing styles.

First and foremost amongst the catalysts for the decline of traditional middlebrow is the swell of popular culture to unprecedented heights in the 1960's. The emergence of the Pop Art Movement and musicians like Bob Dylan and The Beatles attracted the attention of people from all social classes, turning them into omnivorous consumers. Thus, the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow had all but collapsed by the end of the decade, as artists like Andy Warhol came to the foreground of American culture, rejecting the highbrow/lowbrow distinctions and leaving no space for the middlebrow. By ignoring the outdated rules set out before them, Warhol and his quixotic collection of creative allies changed the landscape of culture, challenging the traditions of highbrow art by depicting imagery of mass culture.

This led to music critic Simon Warner declaring: "the Warholian 1960s […] proved to be a kinetic crucible in which the boundaries were pushed and many rules re-written. At the heart of this process was the establishment of an

[50] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 90.
[51] For more information, see Evgenia Perez, "It's Tartt—But is it Art?" *Vanity Fair.*

aesthetic credo which disrespected, disrupted, and dismissed, dismantled even, earlier conceptions of what art should comprise."[52] By breaking the rules established by the 'vanguards' of taste, Warhol and his movement not only forced American audiences to re-evaluate what constitutes as art, but to begin moving away from an obsession with objective merit, pairing the ubiquitous, the mundane, and the celebrity (all parts of mass culture) with the traditionally highbrow form of art—painting. Once the objective merit had been devalued, people were more interested in going against the cultural grain, forming pockets of counter-cultural creative production, opposing the conformist demands of the highbrow, as demonstrated by musicians such as The Velvet Underground.

Furthermore, the social landscape of the U.S. underwent dramatic changes in the 1960s due to the rise of the 'baby boomers.'[53] Lyndon B. Johnson, in his pursuit of the Great Society, passed numerous programmes during the decade to increase federal support for education, including the 1965 Higher Education Act, which helped provide financial assistance and scholarships for those wishing to attend university. This, coupled with other factors during the decade, meant a rapid increase in the number of young Americans who entered into colleges and universities in America.[54] Those who gained admittance into colleges during this period were more socially and culturally aware than the generations before them, with students joining counter-cultural protests such as anti-Vietnam demonstrations and the SDS

[52] Simon Warner, "The Banality of Degradation: Andy Warhol, Underground and the Trash Aesthetic," *Volume!* 9.1 (2012) p. 53.
[53] The term generally refers to those born in the USA after World War 2. Since there are no precise dates associated with this term, for the purposes of this essay, I am particularly looking at those who were becoming adults in the 1960s.
[54] During the Vietnam War, it was possible for American men to dodge the draft by going to university.

(Students for a Democratic Society). As a result, middle-class students were more inclined to embrace middlebrow and popular culture as a way of reflecting on their own identities, and less concerned with trying to climb up the social ladder by claiming a preference for the highbrow, particularly since the era became dominated by anti-bourgeois sentiments. University literature courses appear to fuel this theory, with more contemporaneous authors such as J.D. Salinger and Arthur Miller included on course reading lists at American universities during the decade than before.[55] The inclusion of popular and middlebrow authors suggests a significant shift from the canon dominated teachings of academics such as Lionel Trilling who was originally a member of the New York Intellectuals but shifted away from his liberal traditions in favour of a Neoconservative stance during the rise of the New Left in the 1960s.

However, it is clear that although the term 'middlebrow' is seldom used with regards to contemporary literature, the essence of middlebrow culture survives post-60s, albeit in a different form. Jim Collins suggests that, alongside the continuation of middlebrow texts in America, the new subset of 'high-pop' has further ratified the schism in literature.[56] However, it should be noted that this new term, meaning high culture that has been turned into a popular form of entertainment, should not be considered as a replacement word for middlebrow culture. Middlebrow cannot be discarded even in the milieu of high-pop, since it remains a persistent force in contemporary cultural discourse. Despite some critics attempting to lay the term to rest,

[55] Lionel Trilling, 'The Two Environments: Reflections on the Study of English' in *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966) p. 217.
[56] Jim Collins Ed. *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 2002) p. 1.

others, such as Slate Magazine, have suggested that the 2000s and 2010s could be construed as the "golden age of the Middlebrow art."[57] Additionally, Macy Halford's 2011 article on the author Zadie Smith in *The New Yorker* attempted (somewhat unsuccessfully) to embrace the term middlebrow in a positive light.[58] Clearly, the word still exists, and continues to be used to describe particular elements of literature. The main problem, then, continues to be the term's fluidity. While it persists as a useful, cultural label, the lack of any real definition means that it is ultimately left up to critics to decide what constitutes middlebrow. Sullivan and Blanch (2011) grapple with this issue, and offer a tripartite scheme to explain that it can be recognized as an aesthetic mode, as well as the way a text has been disseminated and transmitted, and finally by the way in which it has been consumed.[59] This seems the most logical way of approaching such a flexible term, particularly as contemporary literature becomes more and more entangled with consumer culture.

Arguments calling for a purge of the literary canon are still being voiced by conservative critics such as Harold Bloom, who see anything less than highbrow a "Dumbing Down of American Readers."[60] Yet, since the turn of the century, inclusiveness of all brows has become much more pervasive in academia, with books by Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Donna Tartt and J.K.

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[57] David Haglund, "Is 'Middlebrow' Still an Insult?" *Slate Magazine,* http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2011/10/12/middlebrow_origins_and_insults.html (accessed 18/01/18) created: October 12th 2011.
[58] Halford, "Reviewers on Reviewing," *The New Yorker.*
[59] Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, "The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism," *Modernist Cultures* 6.1 (April, 2011) p. 2.
[60] Harold Bloom, "Dumbing Down American Readers," *The Boston Globe Archive,* http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/ (accessed 08/11/2017) created: September 24th 2003.

Rowling sitting alongside F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce.[61] This popularity of books which may have been considered middlebrow is in part due to changes to the publishing industry throughout the 1980s, the consequences of which are still clear in the modern marketplace, including a definitive shift from family-run companies to multi-media conglomerates. Recent examples include the £2.4 billion merging of Penguin and Random House in 2013 to create the biggest book publishing company in the marketplace.[62] A similar merger took place in 1976 when Gulf and Western (which later changed its name to Paramount) acquired the publishing company Simon and Schuster. Simon and Schuster went on to purchase Macmillan USA in 1994.[63] This swallowing up of smaller publishing houses by larger companies has changed the marketing landscape, leading to more pressure for commercial triumph and a concentrated attempt to plan the marketing and advertisement of the books represented by these companies. Since many of the parent companies also own various magazines and newspapers, it stands to reason that these are often the mode of choice for advertising authors and their works, using a mixture of book reviews and interviews with the writers to generate interest, since these are cheap and efficient promotional tools. As such, emphasis has often been placed on the appearance and character of the author behind the texts in order to appeal to a

[61] For more information, see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 2nd ed.
[62] Telegraph Staff, "Penguin and Random House Complete Merger," *The Telegraph,* http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/10152247/Penguin-and-Random-House-complete-merger.html (accessed 08/01/2018) created: July 1st 2013.
[63] Figures taken from Simon and Schuster "Corporate History," http://about.simonandschuster.biz/corporate-history/ (accessed 09/01/2018).

target audience, an emphasis which has only grown in the wake of online reviews and the rise of social media.[64]

It is interesting then, to examine the way that Donna Tartt's books have been marketed. Her appearance is often commented on in articles, with newspaper *The Guardian* referencing her often quoted line that she's "exactly the same height as Lolita."[65] *The Telegraph* also describes her appearance: "she has pale, flawless skin and pointed features, and her voice is high and breathy with the faintest hint of a Southern twang."[66] Similarly, *Vanity Fair* even awarded Tartt a place on their 2014 'Best Dressed' list, commenting and showcasing various outfits worn by Tartt.[67] Another element of her personality is also often highlighted during interviews and articles—her knowledge of the classics. Tartt is, according to numerous sources, incredibly well-read, and in interviews she regularly alludes to literary texts or quotes long passages of poetry.[68] This plays into the concept of Tartt as a literary genius, capable of astounding and mysterious feats of intellect and recollection. James Kaplan, then a journalist for *Vanity Fair,* did note that Tartt had a habit of "self-mythologis[ing]"but ultimately only added to the mystique surrounding the

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[64] For more information, see David Carter's essay "The Mystery of the Missing Middlebrow or the C[o]urse of Good Taste" in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World* Ed. Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) pp. 173-201 which argues that the influences of writer's festivals, book store coffee shops and online forums for readers have given a contemporary resurgence to the middlebrow.

[65] Donna Tartt quoted in Katherine Viner, "A Talent to Tantalise" *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/19/fiction.features (accessed 08/12/2017) created: October 19th 2002.

[66] Mick Brown, "Donna Tartt: If I'm Not Working, I'm Not Happy" *The Telegraph,* http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10505597/Donna-Tartt-If-Im-not-working-Im-not-happy.html (accessed 02/01/2018) created: December 9th 2013.

[67] Patrick McMulan "The 2014 International Best Dressed List" *Vanity Fair,* https://www.vanityfair.com/style/photos/2014/07/the-2014-international-best-dressed-list#43 (accessed 02/01/2018) created: 2014.

[68] James Kaplan, "Smart Tartt" *Vanity Fair,* https://www.vanityfair.com/news/1992/09/donna-tartt-the-secret-history (accessed 07/12/2017) created: September 1999.

author.[69] All of these components, while seemingly insignificant, imply to the reader that Tartt is incredibly intelligent and capricious, that her unique style of dress reflects her unwillingness to follow trends, and that her long bouts of inactivity between books is the result of creative genius brewing, rather than a struggle to write. However, what is perhaps most striking about the way Tartt's mystique is manufactured is that it attempts to entice the reader by showing them what they *could* be. The scholar John Aldridge, writing about Tartt's contemporaries, proposed that an ideal writer is one who "becomes a witness and an incurable isolate, doing his work alone and in secret."[70]

Tartt, who scarcely provides interviews, appears to follow this mysterious writer persona, and yet it is important for readers and critics to understand the difference between Tartt as a person, and the mediated version of herself as presented by those trying to sell her books. After all, Tartt is shown as well dressed, intellectually brilliant, well-read, and successful, traits most people with highbrow aspirations wish to possess. Lena Dunham once captioned an Instagram picture with the line: "when in doubt, look like Donna Tartt."[71] The caption led to an article on *The Evening Standard* with the title "What Would Donna Tartt Do?" with a range of scenarios and how readers should handle it, based on the author.[72] This attempt to emulate the author is a perfect marketing strategy for her books, which contain a multitude of characters not dissimilar to Tartt herself. By showing Tartt in this light, the market attempts to sell her work to people hoping that, by reading

[69] James Kaplan quoted in Rosefield "The Cult of Donna Tartt" *Prospect Magazine.*
[70] John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1992) p. 29.
[71] Lena Dunham quoted in Susannah Butter "What Would Donna Tartt Do?" *London Evening Standard,* https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/what-would-donna-tartt-do-8883817.html (accessed 10/01/2018) created: October 16th 2013.
[72] Butter, "What Would Donna Tartt Do?" *London Evening Standard.*

about Greek students who peruse *Paradise Lost* and *Upanishads* while floating around manors in their Ralph Lauren suits in their spare time, they too can become the kind of person they aspire to be.

To summarise, the "tepid ooze" of middlebrow literature is still pervasive in contemporary American culture, and continues to be useful to critics, owing to its flexibility. Some, like Bloom, attempt to use the term in a negative context to reinforce conservative notions of literary hierarchy and delegate a spot for writers they consider falling short of the lofty heights of the highbrow. Others, such as Halford attempt to modernise the term and frame it in a more positive light to suggest it is something that allows easier access to culture. In this post Battle of the Brows era, it is clear that authors like Tartt represent a new wave of writers who experiment by drawing together components from both highbrow and lowbrow sources, fusing them together to create something that balances between the two cultures, creating a contemporary middlebrow which occupies the liminal space once inhabited by the traditional middlebrow. Tartt and her contemporaries adopt themes and techniques from the traditional middlebrow, such as the concept of self-education through reading, while fusing their work with themes such as a focus on notions of human nature, morality and objective reality, in order to create something markedly different from the traditional middlebrow of 1920 to 1960.

Chapter 1: "Any Number of Stories": The Unreliable Narrator in *The Secret History*

"It's a very Greek idea, and a very profound one. Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely?"[1]

The design for the first edition jacket of *The Secret History* is unorthodox. The cover features a close-up of a classical statue and is covered in a clear sheet of acetate with the title, synopsis and author photograph printed on the sheet. In an interview for *Financial Times,* one of the jacket's designers Christopher Kidd explains the unusual concept. He states: "the idea came from antiquarian booksellers, who wrap their volumes in acetate to protect them. Because so much of the content of the book relies on the study of Ancient Greece, this made sense to us."[2] Although the cover was changed for later editions (transitioning to a simple, minimalist black design for the mass market paperback) it has always maintained a somewhat classical aesthetic in fitting with the novel's themes of Greek studies and academia. Interestingly, this classical jacket design sets Tartt's novel apart from her Brat Pack contemporaries like Bret Easton Ellis whose book covers often featured neon colours and items symbolic of popular culture, such as 3D glasses and

[1] Tartt, *The Secret History* p. 45 All further reference to this text appear in parentheses.
[2] Carl Wilkinson, "Book Cover: The Secret History," *Financial Times,* https://www.ft.com/content/f26dc6fc-2fe3-11e0-a7c6-00144feabdc0?ftcamp=rss#axzz1DI8nxqYR (accessed: 02/09/2018) created February 7th 2011.

headphones. Tartt's novel deals with similar Brat Pack themes of surface appearances and narcissism, and the exploration of tensions between highbrow and lowbrow culture. However, the use of a more sombre palate and the classical statue immediately set her apart from a group whose work often focussed on popular youth culture in the 1980s.

Further hints at these themes can be found in the acknowledgements at the start of the novel. In them, Tartt thanks her editor for being "*il miglior fabbo*" (the better scholar), a phrase T.S. Eliot borrowed from Dante Alighieri in his dedication of *The Waste Land* to fellow poet, Ezra Pound (p. i). This borrowing of a quote from a canonical text serves to immediately suggest to readers that the novel will allude to highbrow literature throughout the narrative. Thus, through the paratextual components of *The Secret History,* the novel seeks to appeal to middlebrow readers who may wish to increase their own cultural capital through reading books as a form of "self-culture." Significantly too, these paratextual elements of *The Secret History* serve as a bridge between Tartt's readership and her middlebrow narrator, Richard Papen. It is possible to see the desire for self-culture reflected in Richard's character, as he aims to be accepted into a group of students he considers highbrow.

In *Distinction,* Bourdieu discusses the anxieties surrounding cultural capital, and the desire of those who consider themselves highbrow to keep cultural knowledge to themselves to prevent others from climbing the social ladder.[3] This theory is reflected by the way the elite Greek students are grudgingly willing to accept Richard as a member of the group, but continue

[3] Bourdieu, *Distinction* p. 3

to keep him to the edges of their social circle. Often, they keep secrets from him, make jokes he is not privy to, and eventually only involve him in their world to prevent him from revealing their involvement in two murders. Therefore, this chapter posits that by writing from Richard's outsider perspective as he attempts to insinuate himself in the group, Tartt is able to use his character as a metaphor for her middlebrow readership and uses his position as an exploration of the tensions between the brows. As a result of this critique of brow-based anxieties, Tartt's *The Secret History* attempts to explicate the author's own standing in the arena of American culture, at a time when critics struggled to decide where to place Tartt and her work on the literary spectrum.

According to Anthony Oliver Scott, Donna Tartt's debut novel is a "murder mystery in reverse."[4] Told from the perspective of protagonist, Richard Papen, *The Secret History* subverts the traditional murder mystery by opening with Papen's recollection of Edmund 'Bunny' Corcoran's death and the subsequent search for his body. In presenting these events in the prologue, the text adopts a confessional tone, similar to that of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and Nobokov's *Lolita* (1955). Since readers learn from the first few pages who killed Bunny and how, the emphasis instead shifts to learning *why,* with Tartt posing the question—what drives a group of affluent intellectuals to commit murder? Thus, *The Secret History* illustrates the effectiveness of the confessional mode, with the Richard Papen of the present seemingly attempting to retrospectively comprehend and come to terms with

[4] A.O Scott, "Harriet the Spy," *The New York Times,* http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/03/books/harriet-the-spy.html (accessed: 05/02/2018) created: November 3rd 2002.

the psychological fallout of events from his past. Although the main character and narrator are essentially the same person, the narrative method separates them, allowing for what critic John Mullan describes as a "gap between the 'I' who tells the story and the 'I' who is the past self."[5] This distinction is vital when debating the reliability of Papen as a narrator. Traditionally, confession in literature is a means of healing, providing relief to a guilty conscience through acceptance of transgression and a desire to repent.[6]

In *Crime and Punishment*, the double murderer Raskolnikov is driven by his almost obsessive need to confess; he finds himself revisiting the crime scene and making the police investigating his crime suspicious until he turns himself in and admits his guilt. By behaving in such a nihilistic, self-destructive way, Raskolnikov exhibits the psychological distress of committing such an atrocious crime and only through confession does he feel as though he is somewhat absolved of the murder. Though critics have remained dubious about the motives behind Dostoyevsky's protagonist's crimes (citing questions of agency and a Hegelian notion that, as a 'great man' attempting to do good, he is able to bypass conventional morality and laws) it is clear that the majority accept that his confession is, at least, genuine.[7]

The same cannot be said of Papen in *The Secret History*. Kakutani proclaims Tartt's work similar to "the plot of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* crossed with the story of Euripedes' *Bacchae*" and thus draws

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[5] John Mullan, "I Want to Tell You a Story…" *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/25/featuresreviews.guardianreview25 (accessed: 03/02/2018) created: January 25th 2003.

[6] Amy D. Ronner, "Dostoyevsky and the Therapeutic Jurisprudence Confession," *John Marshall Law Review* 40.1 (Fall 2006) p. 44.

[7] For more information see David Matual, "Fate in *Crime and Punishment*" *International Fiction Review* 3.2 (1976).

attention to the parallels between the two texts. Chiefly, the review points out that Papen cannot always be considered a reliable narrator, just as Raskolnikov was not.[8] Unlike Raskolnikov however, Papen's guilt is questionable. Papen sees the events in *The Secret History* through a warped lens, often presenting himself in a favourable light, and as a consequence Tartt forces her readers to question the validity and motives of his confession, casting doubt on his version of events. On the one hand, he appears haunted by his part in Bunny's murder. The prologue draws attention to this, with the present-day Richard noting that: "I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine, rising all green and black through the saplings, a picture that will never leave me," inferring that, while he has physically moved away from the events of that day, his mind is still fixated on it, reliving the murder over and over again (p. 2). Later, he also suggests that: "at one time in my life, I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the one story I will ever be able to tell" (p. 2). Like Raskolnikov, Papen implies he is unable to move on with his life. He feels attached to the moment of the murder, and the consequences of his participation have woven themselves into his life. However, since it is not made clear to the reader what he intends to do with his confession beyond writing it down, questions begin to surface regarding the legitimacy of his admission, and through that, his claim to feel remorse.

These suspicions are further exacerbated by the tone Richard's narration takes. In the opening line of book one, Papen asks the reader: "does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle

[8] Kakutani, "Book of the Times: Students Indulging in Course of Destruction," *The New York Times.*

of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (p. 5). On a surface lever, Papen attempts to gain the readers' sympathies by pointing out what he believes to be his own fatal flaw. However, in literature the concept of fatal flaws (or *hamartia*) are usually applied to explain the downfall of a hero. First used by Aristotle and derived from the Greek word αμαπταωειν meaning 'to err,' the term has often been paired with this passage from *Poetics:*

> The best tragedy is so composed as to arouse pity and terror. Firstly, it is clear that morally good men must not be shown passing from good fortune to bad; this does not arouse pity or fear but is repulsive. Nor must a morally vicious man be shown passing from bad fortune to good, for this does not satisfy our human feeling […] For pity is concerned with unmerited misfortune, fear with a character like ourselves. There remains an intermediate kind of character [entering into misfortune] through some *hamartia*.[9]

According to Aristotle, tragedies such as *The Secret History* are successful so long as it is possible for readers to see themselves in the tragic character. In order for a tragedy to function across a wide audience, and to evoke pathos from them, the character must be neither entirely morally good nor entirely morally bad. Therefore Richard, as a Classics student, is no doubt aware of the implications of the term 'fatal flaw' and yet he chooses to use it irrespective, drawing attention to his morally ambiguous character and thus suggesting

[9] Translation taken from T.C.W. Stinton's essay, "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy," *The Classical Quarterly* 25.2 (December 1975) pp. 221-222.

that while he is not entirely good, he is nevertheless the victim of circumstance and fate, since a "fatal flaw" is something one has little agency over, and often results in the downfall of heroes in Greek tragedies such as *The Bacchae* and *Agamemnon*. Indeed, François Pauw has argued it is possible to read *The Secret History* as "a Greek tragedy in novel form."[10] To some extent then, Papen is correct when he suggests that his flaw is an obsession with the picturesque, which is true insofar that he longs for the imagined idyllic lifestyle of his peers. He sees them as knowledgeable of highbrow culture and he maintains this illusion of the group for much of the novel, despite evidence to the contrary.

It is this theme of appearance and illusion which cements a link between Tartt and the Brat Pack authors. Critics and scholars concerned with Tartt's oeuvre have often positioned her on the edge of the popular literary Brat Pack movement which emerged on the East Coast of the USA in the 1980s. Known for their young age, authors of the movement included Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney and Jill Eisenstadt, who combined a minimalist style similar to that of Raymond Carver with themes of dispassionate youth culture and a blend of high and lowbrow influences. According to journalists like Jason Diamond who affiliate Tartt with the movement, her connection to the group is largely based on her education, since she transferred to Bennington College in 1982 on the guidance of the author, Willie Morris.[11] While at Bennington, Tartt attended class alongside

[10] François Pauw, "If on a Winter's Night a Reveller: The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* part one" *Akroterion* Vol 39 No 3-4 (1994) p. 149.
[11] Jason Diamond, "Sex, Drugs, and Bestsellers: The Legend of the Literary Brat Pack," *Harper's Bazaar,* https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a18422/literary-brat-pack-donna-tartt-jay-mcinerney/ (accessed: 07/02/2018) created: November 2nd 2016.

Ellis and Eisenstadt, often sharing notes on works in progress, including Tartt's draft of *The Secret History* and Ellis' debut *Less Than Zero*. However, two key issues have often stopped many scholars from positioning Tartt within the Brat Pack group. Firstly, Tartt's prose does not follow the minimalist, curt style often deployed by the Brat Pack. Secondly, Tartt released her debut when the group was declining in popularity, almost a decade after Ellis' 1985 novel *Less Than Zero* signalled the start of the group's rise to fame. However, Tartt's books (and in particular *The Secret History*) are effused with themes entrenched in the middlebrow Brat Pack texts, including a critical examination of youth culture in the 1980s and their obsession with surface appearances. In her book on Bret Easton Ellis' fiction, Sonia Baelo-Allue quotes contemporary celebrity critic Joshua Gamson, noting the binary oppositions visible in Ellis' work, such as: "surface versus substance; image versus reality; irrelevance versus truth; lifestyle and consumption versus work and production."[12] These same tensions and parallels which form a foundation of the Brat Pack can be found in Tartt's debut, as she grapples with the idea that Richard, while ambitious enough to want to part of the elite circle of Greek students, is more prone to taking shortcuts and feigning having cultural capital in order to avoid having to work for what he wants.

As such, surface appearances play a central role in Tartt's *The Secret History,* as Richard struggles to gain acceptance into a group he admires for their high cultural capital and tastes, and resolves to maintain an illusion of grandeur at any cost. Richard lies about his childhood, and in the opening chapter of the novel he describes the "very great gift" of his childhood being

[12] Sonia Baelo-Allue, *Bret Easton Ellis' Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011) p. 12.

"an expendable past, as disposable as a plastic cup" (p. 5). Rather than his mundane life in Plano, he crafts for himself a romanticised tale of California, one which involves swimming pools, orange groves and Hollywood starlets. Notably, only Julian, Richard's professor, ever appears to accept this story as the truth, and even then Tartt hints throughout the text that this is because Julian is more interested in how a person presents themselves, and who they wish to be, rather than what they actually *are*. Conversely, the others are not at all surprised when Bunny picks holes in Richard's fabricated story, suggesting they have already guessed the truth.

Richard, however, seems to believe he has maintained his illusion throughout the narrative. He frequently refers to his favourite book, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1922), implying that he himself if a Gastby-like figure, owing to his self-made success and air of mystery. However, in reality, Tartt paints Richard as the outsider, likening him more to Nick Carraway's character, who is both "within and without" of society in Fitzgerald's novel, due to his lack of money and social connections.[13] In this light, it is possible to see Richard as a metaphor for the middlebrow reader of Tartt's novels, since he attempts to reinvent his own history in order to meet his aspirational goals, trading his own working class, lowbrow childhood for a story intended to gain admittance into a group he considers to be highbrow and superior in taste. This is reasonable, argues Tartt, because "everyone lies" in some form or another.[14]However, one of the significant criticisms of middlebrow culture, as we have seen in Macdonald's essays, is that it reveres the highbrow, but produces nothing but a pale imitation of it. By fabricating a story that he

[13] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2013) p. 35.
[14] Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 27.

believes will gain him access to the group, as well as altering his habits and tastes to reflect those held by the others in what he calls "adolescent emulation," Richard becomes a poor copy of them (p. 92). In the end, he is not quite a part of the group, but no longer able to easily fit in with the likes of Judy Poovey, who acts as a counterbalance for the Greek group—a symbol of lowbrow youth culture more in fitting with Ellis' fiction than Tartt's, who spends most of her time drinking, partying and taking drugs. By ostracising himself from characters like Poovey, Richard places himself in the space between highbrow culture (represented by the Greek students) and the lowbrow (represented by characters such as Judy Poovey and Cloke Rayburn).

This idea of reinvention, of fabrication becoming truth, also plays a significant role in how Richard paints his own participation in Bunny's murder. After all, by implying his 'fatal flaw' is an obsession with the picturesque, Richard presents his *hamartia* as something almost unavoidable, suggesting he has little to no agency over his role in the events. This is then expounded by the recurring motif of fate in *The Secret History*. Tartt notes that all the Greek students are superstitious, and points to Henry, the group's leader, as particularly affected by events and coincidences he believes are omens. In one scene, Richard recalls a pregnant dog walking across their path, which Henry calls "a bad omen" and Camilla also reveals that Henry made the group ritually kill a piglet to cleanse themselves of pollution following the farmer's death (p. 387 and p. 404). Fate, portents, rituals and omens therefore provide a backdrop for any number of moments throughout the novel. For instance, Richard notes Henry's penchant for smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes, stating: "whenever I think of him I think of that little red bull's-eye right over

his breast" (p. 175). Those astute enough to pick up on this will no doubt see Henry having a target over his heart as Tartt foreshadowing his suicide at the end of the novel. Additionally, Charles' quip about three ravens being "an augury" infers that he too, puts stock in the concept of fate (p.69).

It is no surprise that Richard is likewise always looking for explanations and connections in his own life, particularly as the book is told retrospectively. This is most predominately found in book one, when Richard states that his decision to take Greek class in college was "an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful," and calls his decision to apply to Hampden "a trick of fate" (p. 7 and p. 9). Tartt, through Richard, also heavily foreshadows the tragedy of *The Secret History* (despite readers knowing from the start what will happen) with flowery descriptive passages drawing attention to nature turning rotten or with imagery relating to death. When Richard first arrives at Hampden, for example, he is overcome by the greenery, noting the: "fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy, sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground and the steady thrum of wasps around them" (p. 12). While Tartt is, as the author of the novel, ultimately behind these hints, it is important to consider that we are viewing everything through the eyes of Papen. As a result, it is possible to see Richard's obsession with fate in two ways; either as present-day Richard adding melodramatic flourishes to his confession, much in the way observers of a disaster will sometimes later claim to have foreseen it in a dream or sign, or as an attempt to assuage himself of his responsibility for the part he plays in Bunny's murder, since he implies he has little agency over events unfurling around him, and therefore cannot be blamed for something that was 'meant to happen' or something that

he had no control over, since he implies he is a victim of causal determinism, rather than having any real agency over his life and actions.[15]

However, Tartt urges readers to be sceptical of Richard's clearly unreliably narration. While Richard claims to have very little involvement in Bunny's death, since Henry is the one who pushes him off the cliff, he still plays a significant role in alerting the others to Bunny's whereabouts on the day, and he, like the others, watches the murder take place without trying to prevent it. An argument can be made that since Richard did not join in the Bacchanal ritual and therefore plays no role in the farmer's death, he is not as culpable as the rest of the group. However, it is also possible to view this in a negative light. For the others, they are "painfully aware of that metaphoric vial of nitroglycerine which Bunny carried around with him, day and night [...] and he had the power to dash it to the floor whenever he pleased" (p. 245). Of the group, only Richard can walk away from the situation. Unlike the others, has no real motive for killing Bunny. He could walk away from the situation, but chooses not to, deciding to protect the group and to avenge himself for all the petty insults Bunny has thrown his way. Richard notes that his motive for the murder was not so much self-preservation as: "little things. Insults, innuendos, petty cruelties. The hundreds of small, unavenged humiliations which had been rising in me for months" (pp. 254-255). Through this, we can begin to see Richard in a much more unforgiving light, as Tartt ultimately intends. Richard is portrayed not as a victim of fate, but reveals himself as a willing participant in the murder of his friend.

[15] Causal determinism is the idea that every event is the inevitable consequence of antecedent affairs prior to the event, act, or decision made by a person.

If this is the impression of Richard we are left with at the end of the novel, what can be said of the others in the group? On a surface level, Richard paints them in a positive light. While he initially calls the group "chilling" from a distance, he admits to finding them fascinating, and asks the students around him for information about them (p. 43). Later, when he gets to know them, he describes them favourably. Charles is "impulsive and generous," and Richard often uses words such as "sympathetic" while describing Francis, who is perceived as being rather effete by Richard (p. 94 and p. 86). Henry, despite seeming remote, is admired by Richard for his intellect and leadership of the group, and for his competitiveness, while Bunny is considered "the sort of son every father secretly wants: big and good-natured and not awfully bright, fond of sports, gifted at backslapping and corny jokes" (p. 55). Camilla, whom Richard believes he is in love with, is described as "bright [and] unattainable" and as "bewitching […] a wisp of silk in a forest of black wool" (p. 252).

However, Hargreaves notes that these qualities Richard initially finds charming quickly turn into something more sinister, arguing that:

> [Henry's] competitiveness becomes manipulative control, [Bunny's] teasing […] becomes extortion, [Francis'] camp[ness] becomes peevishness, and the twins Richard remembers as kind and sweet become, in the case of Charles, violent and resentful and, in the case of Camilla, passive and acquiescent.[16]

It is interesting to note then, that each of these qualities which Richard finds attractive have the potential to become negative right from the beginning. Thus, Tartt allows astute readers to see beyond the veil of Richard's

[16] Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 29.

gilded descriptions. Charles, considered the most friendly of the group, becomes argumentative and eventually sinks into dipsomania as he grapples with his guilt. Camilla is manipulative, flirting with Richard while dating Henry and carrying out an incestuous relationship with Charles. Very early in the novel, readers are able to see a darker side to Bunny's bonhomie, as he regularly insults others using racist and homophobic language, including the waiter at the restaurant he takes Richard to, whom he loudly refers to as an "officious fag" and announces he "think[s] they ought to round them [homosexuals] all up and burn them at the stake" (p. 59). Later in the novel, he rails against Henry's supposed cheapness, despite Henry spending a small fortune on Bunny, and calls him both a "Nazi" and "a cheapskate Jew" (p. 238). He also harbours misogynistic views, even when he is not intentionally trying to offend, getting Camilla to do his ironing while he watches and later suggesting that all women are "categorically inferior" to himself (p. 226).

Often, Bunny insults people when he cannot get his own way, or in order to place himself in a position of power. Henry reveals this potential motive behind these outbursts to Richard shortly before confessing to the farmer's murder, claiming that Bunny's parents have taught him how to live off people with money despite Bunny himself not having "a cent" to his name (p. 142). Bunny would rather live off Henry's money than get a job and shatter the illusion of his family wealth. Later, when the group considers killing Bunny to keep him quiet, it is this realization that Bunny is poor that ultimately drives Richard to become an accomplice. Since Richard himself has no money, he grows to loathe Bunny's hypocritical jibes about his charity-store clothing and lack of taste. As a result, Bunny becomes a kind of

caricature of people who deem themselves to be highbrow, since he hoards his superior tastes and cultural capital, using them as a weapon against Richard, whom he correctly perceives as having a working-class background. With Richard so close to gaining admittance into the group, Bunny has no choice but to lash out at him in order to protect what he deems to be his own spot in the clique in a pique of jealous *schadenfreude*, attempting to pick out gaps and holes in Richard's romanticised narrative of his life and wrench them apart for the others to see, thus revealing Richard to be an outsider based on his tastes and finances.

Again, this is a way for Tartt to examine the position of middlebrow literature through Richard's role and treatment throughout *The Secret History*. Clearly, the group sees themselves as separate to Richard, and deliberately attempt to distance themselves from him in much the same way that highbrow culture seeks to separate itself from the middlebrow. In the case of Bunny, this protectiveness of his position echoes the cultural anxiety examined in Pierre Bourdieu's theories on taste and class, that given enough opportunity, middlebrow culture and those considered to be middlebrow, will gain access to the highbrow and besmirch it. Bunny therefore uses his superior cultural capital as a weapon against Richard in the hopes of legitimising the social differences between them and, ultimately, to alienate Richard from the rest of the group in order to protect his own position.

Similarly, Tartt's careful use of Henry's manipulation of Richard compounds this notion of Richard's position within the group as precarious. Richard is often on the outside looking in, first by admiring the group from a distance (having been initially refused admittance into the Greek class by

Julian). When he finally gains access to the them, he is treated with contempt by Henry, who interrogates him on his knowledge of the classics and finds him lacking, and is offered a "sweet, unfocused smile, quite impersonal" from Camilla, which makes him feel as though he is a "waiter or a clerk in a store," rather than someone on equal footing (p. 22). Next, Richard is excluded from the Bacchanal ritual which results in the farmer's murder. He notes the flurry of secretive activity that takes place around him prior to the event, recalling hearing the others sneak around Francis' country house at all hours, the group's obsession with the weather, and "asides in Greek and even Latin" that he knows were deliberately intended to go over his head (pp. 100-101).

It is interesting then, to consider how Richard's position within the group appears to change once he finds out about the murder. On a shallow, surface-level, it seems that Richard is incorporated into the group, since he now knows the secret that ties them together. However, it is also possible to see this as Henry's manipulative control over Richard growing more powerful. Richard becomes so determined to keep his new highbrow status, which he believes he has earned, that he neglects to notice Henry is tricking him into keeping their secret. When Richard finds evidence that Henry and the others are planning on escaping to South America, Henry guides him to the truth rather than steering him away, implying that Richard already knows what they've done. When Richard voices his accusation, Henry laughs and exclaims that: "you're [Richard is] just as smart as I thought you were. I knew you'd figure it out, sooner or later, that's what I've told the others all along" (p. 181). By flattering Richard's vanity, he allows Richard to believe he is an equal, that he is as intellectually capable as the others in the group, and is therefore

allowed to join their ranks and know their greatest secret. In actuality, it is easy for readers to see events as they truly are; Henry has little choice but to tell Richard the truth and hope he understands, since he has accidentally stumbled on incriminating evidence he could use against Henry and the others if he had enough of a motive. Henry, with his scholarly devotion and family wealth, is perhaps the person Richard most aspires to be. Therefore, Henry manipulates Richard's desire to be a part of the group for his own ends, ensuring that Richard understands that his silence is beneficiary, as it allows him to play a part in their world. Through Henry's manipulation, it is possible to again link Richard's character back to the position of the middlebrow reader. If Richard represents the middlebrow, then Henry and the others in the group act as a stand-in for highbrow culture, that ivory tower accessible only to those with the correct taste and high cultural capital. They are initially reluctant to allow Richard, with his scholarship, charity-bought clothes, and lack of knowledge of Greek classics, into their folds, treating him as inferior.

In essence, they use Richard's middlebrow aspirations to make sure he maintains his silence, drawing on his arrogance and obsession with the picturesque to pretend to offer him a place within the group, while at the same time preparing to use him as a scapegoat to escape punishment for their crimes. This is shown again by Henry's determination to make Richard feel as though he is part of the group, praising him for his intellect, quick-thinking and his loyalty, particularly during the lead-up to Bunny's murder, during which Henry tells Richard that he'll "never forget this [Richard helping to plot Bunny's death]" and that it means "everything" to him, signifying that Richard now has a permanent place within the group (p. 282). During the

investigation however, Charles confesses to Richard that Henry has tried to shift suspicion to both Cloke Rayburn, a notorious drug-dealer and Bunny's friend, and Richard himself in order to help the group escape notice, proving that Richard is not part of Henry's inner-circle despite his attempts to join them. He remains an outsider, too ambitious to be content with Judy Poovey's companionship, but without the cultural-capital and pedigree to truly join the elitist Greek scholars.

Alongside its interest in surface appearances *The Secret History* has also been linked to the middlebrow work of the Brat Pack because it blends highbrow and lowbrow culture, through Tartt's vast number of allusions throughout the novel. The novel is replete with allusions to Dante, T.S. Eliot, Fitzgerald and Dostoyevsky, as well as interwoven references to the Greek Classics, all of which can be considered a veneer of allusion to the classics but which can also be seen as an attempt to stimulate self-culture in the reader in much the same way that other middlebrow texts do. Pauw debates this in his seminal essay on Tartt's use of Classical intertext throughout the novel, drawing on the Roman concept of *imitatio,* which he describes as an "adaptation of classical originals to a modern idiom."[17] Essentially, Tartt borrows from Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae* and rewrites it for a modern audience, bringing in other influences and twists. Therefore, although *The Secret History* has much in common with a Greek tragedy, including its formal structure and emphasis on *hamartia,* it is still an original work of fiction, rather than a pale imitation as conservative critics such as Dwight Macdonald might suggest if they were to read the novel. Thus, it is also

[17] Pauw, "If on a Winter's Night a Reveller…" (Part 1) p. 146

possible to view Tartt's allusions to highbrow literature as homage rather than as a 'veneer.'

Allusions to other authors deemed highbrow are also seeded, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout *The Secret History,* with Richard referring to both writhing masses of bodies at parties and the landscape of the search for Bunny's body as "Dantesque," thus linking Tartt's novel with the Italian author Dante Alighieri, famous for his *Divine Comedies,* and particularly for *The Inferno* (p. 80 and p. 380). Such an allusion does not appear out of place or context in *The Secret History,* as the reference draws attention to Richard's guilt and psyche. By the end of the novel, he is trapped by his own actions, unable to move forwards or back, as though he is in purgatory himself. Furthermore, Hargreaves has noticed echoes of Canto I repeated in the prologue of *The Secret History*. In Dante's poem, the narrator has lost his way in the dark forest:

> *"Midway this way of life we're bound upon,*
>
> *I woke to find myself in a dark wood,*
>
> *Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.*"[18]

If, like Hargreaves, we consider one of the themes in Tartt's novel to be 'innocence lost,' it is easy to see that Richard likewise wanders off the main path of morality and studiousness and descends into his own hellish nightmare, moving away from the right road he ought to be travelling on.[19] This echoing of Canto I at the start of *The Secret History* also paves the way

[18] Dante Alighieri, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri Cantica I Hell (L'Inferno),* Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin, 1977), Canto I, 1.1-3.
[19] Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 23.

for a more sinister turn, as Richard descends further and further, highlighting the route from the right path to the dark woods of sin at the start of the novel, to the scene at the ravine, which imitates Canto XII, in which Dante (the character) and Virgil encounter a ravine peppered with rocks, which takes them to the Seventh Circle of Hell, a place reserved for punishing violence against others and the self. All of this, to readers familiar with Dante's *magnum opus*, will provide a heavy sense of foreboding which accompanies the reader throughout the narrative.

However, the most referenced text in Tartt's novel is F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby*. Mentions of it sit slightly apart from those of the antiquated Greek classics, owing to its publication in the 20th century.[20] However, since it is Richard's favourite novel, Tartt alludes to it several times throughout *The Secret History,* both overtly and implicitly. In addition, the novel borrows many of the themes explored in *The Great Gatsby,* including self-invention, obsession with wealth which eventually corrupts, and a fascination with consumerism in America. As previously mentioned in this chapter, Richard also compares himself to Gatsby, casting himself in a tragic role: "in my own humorless state I failed to see anything except what I construed as certain tragic similarities between Gatsby and myself" (p. 79). What these similarities are, Richard does not make clear. However it is possible to see how he might link his own feelings of being misunderstood to Fitzgerald's tragic hero. However, Tartt provides readers with a better fit for a Gatsby-like figure in her novel in the guise of Julian

[20] Which is perhaps telling when considering Richard's position within the coterie of Greek students. Richard, more than the others, is comfortable with culture from the 20th century.

Morrow, somewhat contradicting Richard's grandiose perception of himself. Julian, Richard's professor, is a person of intrigue and mystery earlier in the text. Echoes of Fitzgerald can be seen in the initial descriptions of Julian given to Richard by fellow students in this passage:

> Nearly everyone had heard of him, and I was given all sorts of contradictory but fascinating information: that he was a brilliant man; that he was a fraud; that he had no college degree; that he had been a great intellectual in the forties, and a friend to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot; that his family money had come from a partnership in a white-shoe banking firm or, conversely, from the purchase of foreclosed property during the Depression… (pp. 16-17).

Nick Carraway's first encounter with Gatsby is told in a similar narratological style, with partygoers telling stories about the host prior to Carraway meeting him:

> "Somebody told me they thought he [Gatsby] killed a man once."
>
> A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.
>
> "I don't think it's so much *that*," argued Lucille sceptically; "it's more that he was a German spy during the war." […]
>
> "Oh, no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war […] you look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I bet he killed a man."[21]

[21] Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* p. 44.

It is clear that Tartt is following a similar format to that employed by Fitzgerald in his novel, building intrigue about Julian's character before the reader is allowed much of a glimpse of him, and placing him behind a veil of ambiguity that Richard struggles to pierce throughout the rest of the novel. Julian represents old money and intellect, an authority figure that even the Greek students respect, despite his determination to live in the past, tucked away in his Lyceum which is described as "some sort of Platonic microcosm of what he thought a schoolroom should be," rather like Gatsby who is determined to repeat the past and earn Daisy's affection (p. 34). In this, the Greek students reflect the idea that highbrow culture is more concerned with prestige and the canonical, rather than modern, unproven texts. As Pauw opines, "outside Julian's Lyceum, the socio-cultural fiction created by Tartt reflects a reality that is ephemeral rather than esoteric, quotidian rather than classical" and thus creates a schism between the microcosm of the highbrow Greek group and the mundane lowbrow students around them, who listen to bands such as The Grateful Dead and are more apt to play bongos than translate *Paradise Lost* into Latin, as Henry chooses to do in his spare time.[22]

By and large, the Greek students attempt to distance themselves from contemporary lowbrow or popular culture. This is shown through various moments throughout the novel; Henry's disbelief when Richard tells him about the 1969 moon landing, the group's opinion that Richard's habit of reading newspapers is "outrageously eccentric," and by Henry not knowing who Marilyn Monroe was: "I can't remember her name. She's dead now." He thought for a minute. "She was blonde," he said. "I think she was married to a

[22] Pauw, "If on a Winter's Night a Reveller…" (Part 1) p. 152.

baseball player" (p. 93 and p. 141). All of this plays into the idea that the Greek students are cut off from society, with Richard as the outsider able to translate between their world and the world around them. They are ostensibly highbrow, and wish to distance themselves from the contemporary and the lowbrow in order to protect their cultural status and sense of superiority. This is evidenced when Bunny, who often reads lowbrow comic books such as *The Bride of Fu Manchu,* deliberately switches to a volume of Homer's work in order to impress Julian, and thus hide his taste for popular culture, in fear of being criticised (p. 99).

Although Tartt uses allusion to both highbrow and lowbrow in *The Secret History,* it is clear that the book is predominately a text which references highbrow culture such as John Milton, Virgil, Homer, and Dante. While this may dissuade some potential readers from buying the book, and thus reducing its marketability, Pauw has argued that Tartt's extensive allusions to highbrow culture are not necessarily a reflection of her own erudition, but rather they prove to be "thematically functional," pointing out that Richard and the others are Greek scholars who are bibliophiles and polyglots and will therefore be quite well-read.[23] Notably, it is Henry, Richard and Francis who are most likely to reference highbrow literature in the novel. Tartt chooses not to encumber Bunny (whose preference for comic books over classics is very apparent) with literary allusions, making a distinction of hierarchy even amongst the inner-sanctum of the Greek coterie. Since Richard is the outsider, owing to his lack of cultural capital and financial status, this

[23] *Ibid* p. 150.

can again be seen as a reflection of the middlebrow determination to "self-culture" through reading and exposure to the highbrow.

To wit, Tartt's inclusion of quotations and references to both high and lowbrow culture can be seen in a variety of ways; by cynics as an attempt to broaden her literary marketability; by reviewers as an attempt to boast of her own erudition; or by others as a way to educate her readers and increase their own cultural capital through the act of reading in much the same way that all middlebrow authors have done before and after Tartt. Tartt's use of her own, distinctly middlebrow narrator, Papen, and her exploration of the challenges he faces trying to fit in with an elitist, highbrow group, appears to compound this last argument, suggesting that she is attempting to reflect and analyse her own position as a middlebrow author through the themes of her debut novel, *The Secret History* while at the same time acknowledging that her readers have picked up the text with the ambition of self-culturing themselves while also enjoying the narrative.

This straddling of both highbrow and lowbrow culture has led to mixed reviews of *The Secret History*. This is further expounded by the hype in the build up to the novel's release. Tartt was introduced to her agent, Binky Urban, by Bret Easton Ellis. Urban then started competitive bidding for the novel in 1991, with Knopf publishing company winning the rights for a sum of approximately $450,000, which Tartt has claimed was a "piece of cataclysmic luck."[24] The first print run of the novel grew to 75,000 (65,000 more than the average for debuts) and Kaplan, writing for *Vanity Fair,* marvelled that

[24] Figures taken from Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 77. Quotation from Laura Shapiro and Ray Sawhill, "Anatomy of a Hype," *Newsweek,* http://www.newsweek.com/anatomy-hype-198600 (accessed: 11/02/2018) created: June 9th 1992.

"Knopf had to print an unprecedented second run" after the demand for five-hundred page advanced reader editions turned into a frenzy.[25] This initially led to expectations that the novel would successfully balance the cerebral highbrow with the emotional and entertaining lowbrow and result in a book which was successful on both a literary level and a commercial one. However, even prior to the novel's release, journalists such as Rebecca Mead, writing in *The Sunday Times,* queried whether a book could be over-hyped, and suggested that the media's focus on Tartt's persona, rather than on *The Secret History,* had led to Tartt becoming a well-known name even without proof of her talent to support her fame. As Hargreaves has also observed, initially "book and author fell victim to predictions of its—and her—success at reviewers cavilled at the pre-publication hype and noted the tremendous advance."[26]

Thus, for most Tartt's new-found stardom was a success story, with reviewers like Kaplan describing Tartt's appearance ("lunar-pale skin, spooky light-green eyes") her penchant for quoting poetry, and the story of the novel's publication, rather than the text itself.[27] Others, such as Jason Diamond, have commented on Tartt's links to other Bennington authors such as Eisenstadt and Ellis, thus attempting to position Tartt as a celebrity author belonging to the Brat Pack movement. Portraying Tartt as a celebrity author has manifold consequences; firstly, it has resulted in the rise of the "cult of Tartt" in which fans of the author attempt to emulate her through their fashion choices, reading lists, and mannerisms. This is interesting, since it suggests that Tartt

[25] Figure taken from Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 78. Quotation from Kaplan, "Smart Tartt," *Vanity Fair.*
[26] Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 67.
[27] Kaplan, "Smart Tartt," *Vanity Fair.*

is helping to self-culture her readers through their admiration of her. Secondly, as in the case of Ellis, it has a detrimental effect on how reviewers treat *The Secret History* as many struggled to separate the author, with her witticisms and highbrow aspirations, from the characters. As a result, her status as a celebrity author with aspirations of being the next Eliot or Fitzgerald, placed her novel in the awkward liminal space between commercial success and literary success, with critics unsure of where to position *The Secret History* in the American cultural arena.

The novel appears to have been marketed around this semi-mythological perception of Tartt's persona. Unlike Brat Pack authors such as Ellis and Jay McInerney, Tartt did not seek out the limelight at red carpet events or at hedonistic parties. Rather, she retreated, portraying herself in a romantic light as a reclusive literary genius who could quote large passages of poetry and who "wrote all night every night."[28] Consequently, this marketing ploy has cumulated in mixed reviews of the novel, with highbrow literary publications such as *Partisan Review* criticising Tartt's lack of distinct genre and inability to live up to the hype, while some middlebrow publications like *The Washington Post* were kinder to the novel, praising the book's classical references. Still other middlebrow newspapers offer a riposte to this acclaim, with Lee Lescaze of the *Wall Street Journal* dismissing the novel on the same grounds, arguing: "*The Secret History* may prove to be a best seller [...] but it is not literary."[29] Initial sales figures reflect this mixed opinion on the novel, with *The Secret History* peaking at number 10 on the *New York Times*

[28] Tim Adams, "Donna Tartt: The Slow-Burn Literary Giant," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/oct/13/donna-tartt-quiet-american-profile (accessed: 07/02/2018) created: October 13th 2013.
[29] Lee Lescaze, "Groves of Academe Shed Gold and Yawns," *Wall Street Journal,* 09/09/1992, A12.

Bestseller list and remaining there for thirteen weeks in 1993, hardly a position which positively reflects the amount of hype surrounding the novel's release.[30] Suggestions have since been made to explain why Tartt's debut received such mixed reviews, including an essay by Barbara Melvin, published four years after the novel's release. She argues that the inclusion of classics in the text has caused some resentment in critics who believe Tartt lacks sufficient knowledge of them, again raising issues surrounding notions of cultural capital, and who gets to wield it.[31] For though Tartt's novel was evidently aimed towards a general, middle-class American audience who aimed to both enjoy the book and self-culture themselves by reading it, its allusions to highbrow culture have coloured perceptions of the novel in the eyes of publications deemed 'literary tastemakers,' who claim Tartt is simply a popular author torn between the classics and the MTV generation, and that the novel suffers due to this conflict of interest.[32] However, much of the negative criticism of *The Secret History* appears to have been watered down over time, as Tartt has continued to prove her literary merit as an author, and the book has retrospectively achieved a cult-like status, with publications such as *The Guardian* producing articles such as 'Ten Reasons Why We Love Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' and *The Independent* branding it a "book of a lifetime."[33]

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[30] Figure taken from Hargreaves, *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* p. 78.
[31] Barbara Melvin,"Failures in Classical and Modern Morality: Echoes of Euripides in *The Secret History,*" *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 17.1-2 (March 1996) p. 53
[32] James Wood, "The Glamour of Glamour," *London Review of Books,* https://www.lrb.co.uk/v14/n22/james-wood/the-glamour-of-glamour (accessed: 15/02/2018) created: November 19th 1992.
[33] John Mullan, "Ten Reasons Why We Love Love Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,*" *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/18/donna-tartt-secret-history-modern-classic (accessed: 09/02/2018) created: October 18th 2003. Lucie Whitehouse, "Book of a Lifetime: *The Secret History,* by Donna Tartt," *The Independent,* http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-

In conclusion, it is possible to view Tartt's debut novel as a reflection on the position of the middlebrow in the American cultural arena, with her main protagonist, Richard, representing an ambitious, middle-class American intellectual who aims to infiltrate a group of highbrow students by feigning cultural capital. Furthermore, Henry's manipulation and Bunny's jealous guarding of his own knowledge of highbrow tastes exemplify Bourdieu's theory that those who deem themselves highbrow are anxious about the liminal space between the high and middlebrows, and seek to separate themselves from popular culture, thus legitimising social differences. Tartt's use of highbrow allusions further compound this notion of *The Secret History* as a middlebrow text, since the novel tries to self-culture readers through references to texts such as Dante's *Inferno* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* as well as offering a thematically functioning look into the lives of her characters. The inclusion of lowbrow references appears to be a way for Tartt to position the Greek coterie as a removed, archaic part of campus-life, since they are unable and unwilling to keep up with contemporary culture; they are deliberately distancing themselves from it. Finally, the book has also been marketed as a middle-class, middlebrow novel, with emphasis placed on Tartt's persona as a reclusive author, rather than on the novel itself, enticing readers to buy it in the hopes that they, by reading *The Secret History,* can themselves become as cultured as Tartt.

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entertainment/books/reviews/book-of-a-lifetime-the-secret-history-by-donna-tartt-769505.html (accessed: 12/02/2018) created: January 11th 2008.

Chapter 2: "Mirror Shards of Nightmare": Echoes of Southern Literature Genres in Tartt's *The Little Friend*

"Running might take her forward, it could even take her home; but it couldn't take her back–not ten minutes, ten hours, not ten years or days. And that was tough, as Hely would say. Tough: since back was the way she wanted to go, since the past was the only place she wanted to be"[1]

In the opening pages of her second novel *The Little Friend,* Donna Tartt paints a horrifying picture of a nuclear family shattered by the murder of a nine year-old child, Robin Cleve. The prologue follows Robin's mother, Charlotte, as she becomes alarmed at her son's disappearance, and ends with her finding his body in a tree. Interspersed with lines from evocative gospel music about Jesus calling people home, the scene is haunting and at times melodramatic, harkening back to one traditional middlebrow genre: the nineteenth-century sentimental novel, whose success relied on emotional appeals to readers. This chapter posits that Tartt utilises certain elements of sentimental fiction such as moral instruction and melodrama. Alongside this exploration of sentimental modes and themes, Tartt weaves in other literary genres (such as the Southern Gothic) which focus on the emotional and imaginative rather than the rational and orderly often associated with highbrow fiction. Thus, the sentimental and gothic act as a vessel for Tartt's exploration of literary hierarchy and prejudice in *The Little Friend*. In

[1] Donna Tartt, *The Little Friend* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002). p. 332. All further reference to this text appear in parentheses.

merging these genres, Tartt destabilises both the sentimental and the Southern Gothic. This allows her to highlight several outdated elements in these genres, including prejudices regarding female agency and class-based stereotypes. As a result, what emerges is a merging of these genres which aims to bring them to a more contemporary audience, while recognizing some of the inherent problems in both the Southern Gothic and Sentimental. Furthermore, the fusing of genres also opens debates surrounding literary prejudice. Sentimental fiction has often been considered lowbrow, owing to its links to femininity and the emotional. Conversely, Southern Gothic is established as a masculine genre, linked to social commentary and the cerebral. By fusing them together, Tartt attempts to protest the binary stereotypes of authors who write in these genres.

According to Leo Braudy, nineteenth-century sentimental novels valued feeling over intellect, and depended upon their ability to "embody direct experience," allowing their audiences to position themselves in the story through empathy and compassion.[2] Thus, a sentimental novel's functions were twofold: on the one hand, it had to efficiently "mould the emotions and sentiments of the reader"; on the other it must grapple with politically controversial topics embedded in the text itself.[3] Owing to its depiction of 'feminine' outpourings of emotions, sentimental fiction has always been considered a feminine genre, which perpetuates and exacerbates existing literary prejudices. Markman Ellis states: "the sentimental novel addressed

[2] Leo Braudy, "The Form of the Sentimental Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7.1 (Autumn 1973) p. 5. Similarly, Markman Ellis discusses the concept of 'sensibility,' which he describes as a source of pride for individuals, since it involved knowing right from wrong, and as a pleasure which improved the morals of both individuals and society. Possessing sensibility allowed humans to be moved and swayed by sentimental fiction. Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 2.

[3] Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility* p. 2.

women as much as men, and, increasingly those who belonged to the middle stations in life," leading to the genre often being connected with the middlebrow due to its middle-class readership.[4] In his theory of literary hierarchy, Andreas Huyssen explains that men have historically been linked with elite forms of culture, while women are often associated with commercial forms.[5] As a result, sentimental fiction has often been dismissed as middlebrow or lowbrow.

Due to the connotations of emotion and melodrama being a 'feminine' trait, sentimental fiction, with its ties to emotion over cognisance, has typically been linked to "the damned mob of scribbling women" by influential male authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne.[6] Jane Tompkins argues that such views sow distrust of women writers.[7] This, she notes, has caused scholars to equate "popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness [...] and all these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority."[8] Yet both Tompkins and Jaime Harker acknowledge that the mode of these novels and the success they garnered allowed for women to voice political and social concerns at a time when they were confined to the domestic or 'private' sphere.[9] Nineteenth-

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[4] *Ibid* p. 2.

[5] See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[6] In his letter to his publisher, William D. Ticknor in 1855, Hawthorne criticised the appeal of sentimental fiction and the women behind it, declaring that he "should have no chance of success while the popular taste is occupied with their trash," clearly revealing both the author's frustrations over the success of sentimental fiction, and more tellingly, a fear of his work being obscured by it. Nathaniel Hawthorne quoted in *Selected Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne* Ed, Joel Myerson (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002) p. xiv.

[7] Joan D. Hendrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 349.

[8] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 123.

[9] For more information on this theory, see Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* and Jamie Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). The distinctly patriarchal doctrine of separate spheres created a dichotomy where the public-- the regulated world of production, government and law, was labelled a masculine space, while the unregulated private or domestic sphere of housework

century women attained legal status through male members of the family. But, as historians such as Gerda Lerner have noted, the domestic confinement of middle-class women intensified at the same time as poorer women were drawn out of the home for paid labour during industrialization.[10] Thus, as Lerner argues, the "cult of true womanhood" emerged amongst factions of white, middle-class American women who wished to distinguish themselves from their working-class counterparts by celebrating their domestic roles.[11] Some even began to see their sphere as equally important since it required them to create a "haven in a heartless world." [12] This suggests that the domestic sphere was gentle and docile, while the male world outside was aggressively competitive and ruthless. Others turned to carving out autonomy for themselves in areas such as organizing religious and welfare associations, but this was a pastime exclusive to upper and middle-class American women.

These views of female autonomy in the confined space of the private sphere feed into sentimental fiction of the period. By using a 'feminine' mixture of Christian morality and emotional appeals, middle and upper-class women writers were able to blur the lines between the private and public spheres, enabling the writing of stories to become their platform to raise concerns. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s abolitionist message caused national outcry over the conditions of slaves in the South, leading Abraham Lincoln to joke upon meeting its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, that she was

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and family was considered a feminine space. Ashlyn K. Keursten, *Women and the Law: Leaders, Cases and Documents* (Oxford: ABC Clio, 2003) pp. 16-17.

[10] Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3.1 (Autumn 1975) p. 7.

[11] Lerner, "Placing Women in History," p. 7.

[12] Nancy Bonvilliain, *Women and Men: Cultural Constructions of Gender* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007) 4th ed. p. 184.

"the little woman who wrote the book that made [the civil war]!"[13] Similarly, Maria Susanna Cummins' novel *The Lamplighter* (1854), whose phenomenal sales figures prompted Hawthorne's attack on sentimentalism, raised concerns about the mistreatment of orphans in America through her abused and abandoned protagonist.[14] To be effective, sentimental fiction had to marry the emotional with the political, the melodramatic with a moral message readers could take away from the narrative. As we have seen with Hawthorne's letter, the popularity of such books has led to the genre's dismissal by male authors and critics who felt threatened by middle-class women encroaching on the 'male space' of literature. As a result, with few exceptions such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* literary history has created a schism between women authors and their popular but ephemeral 'emotional' novels, and male authors with their 'serious' canonical texts.

As with traditional sentimental texts and their authors, Tartt's second novel received strong criticism from reviewers. Again, this draws attention to the schism between male and female authors and their success within literary hierarchy. Troy Patterson condemned the book as an "incoherent melodrama."[15] David Hare pointed out that male authors like "Philip Roth and Jonathan Franzen have lately set the bar so exhilaratingly high for the American novel that you feel some sympathy for those of their daunted

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[13] The reliability of this quote is somewhat questionable, since there is no record of Lincoln saying this, or what the precise wording of it might be. Roy Morris Jr and David B. Sachsman, eds. discuss this in *Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2007) p. 8.

[14] *The Lamplighter* sold 20,000 copies in the first week and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold roughly 310,000 copies in the 1850s. Figures taken from Michael Winship, "Hawthorne and the 'Scribbling Women:' Publishing *The Scarlet Letter* in the Nineteenth Century United States," *The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings* Ed. Leland S. Pearson (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2005) p. 419.

[15] Troy Patterson, "The Little Friend," *Entertainment Weekly,* http://ew.com/article/2002/11/01/little-friend/ (accessed: 20/07/2018) created: November 1st 2002.

colleagues who no longer even bother to jump, but who instead just run along under and hope nobody notices."[16] Though Hare credits Tartt with at least "giv[ing] it a go," he labels her novel "frankly frustrating."[17] A.O. Scott echoes some of the sentiments of Hare's argument, suggesting *The Little Friend* is more of a children's novel than an adult's, owing to its child protagonist and likening it to Louise Fitzhugh's children's book, *Harriet the Spy* (1964).[18] Both these reviews are condescending in their own way. One implies that *The Little Friend* is perfectly readable but does not measure up to other novels published by ambitious male authors around the same time. The other draws parallels between Tartt's adult novel and children's literature, infantilizing it and its readers. Furthermore, Natasha Walter attacks Tartt's "uneven prose," claiming that she "stumbles over details" and pointing out Tartt's tendency to describe things in threes.[19] These assessments, connote a sense of weakness and childishness in *The Little Friend* which critics have since attached to Tartt's other novels.[20] Such claims that the book did not live up to the hype surrounding its release often imply that the writing was not adult enough or coherent enough to meet expectations generated by male authors like Roth and Franzen. Although there are no definitive sales figures for *The Little Friend* many reviews and interviews around the time of release nod to the hype surrounding the book and its "long anticipated release," suggesting the

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[16] David Hare, "Great Expectations" *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/27/fiction.features (accessed: 07/04/2018) created: October 27th 2002.
[17] Hare, "Great Expectations," *The Guardian.*
[18] A.O. Scott, "Harriet the Spy," *New York Times* https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/03/books/harriet-the-spy.html (accessed: 22/07/2018) created: November 3rd 2002.
[19] Natasha Walters, "Soaringly, Incredulously, Gloriously Cruel…" *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview1 (accessed: 18/07/2018) created: October 26th 2002.
[20] In particular *The Goldfinch.*

novel was a commercial success.[21] This harkens back to the schism between 'popular' women writers and male authors and their 'serious' texts. Therefore, *The Little Friend*'s commercial success and its female authorship positions the novel as firmly middlebrow in the eyes of critics such as Hare, who dismiss the book in favour of more highbrow male authors like Franzen.

Similar views about other contemporary female writers and their success are expressed by authors and critics. During an interview at the Royal Geographic Society in 2011, Nobel Prize winner V.S. Naipaul dismissed the idea that any female author (including canonical writers such as Jane Austen) could ever be his equal. He suggested that he could tell "within a paragraph or two [if a work] is by a woman or not" because it was "unequal."[22] He later added that this was because of women's "sentimentality, the narrow view of the world," and suggested that because a woman was not a "complete master of a house [...] that comes over in her writing too."[23] Outdated though his views may seem, it is clear that sentimental novels continue to be largely the domain of female authors. This is in part due to their popularity amongst a middle-class female readership. Book groups such as Oprah's Book Club have frequently chosen to promote contemporary novels with morality themes and the acceptance of death through books' resolved endings, which harken back to nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Selected novels include *The Invention of Wings* (2014) by Sue Monk Kidd, a book about the horrors of slavery, and *Drowning Ruth* (2001) by Christina Schwarz, which explores a family dealing

[21] Vanessa Thorpe, "The Secret History of Donna Tartt's New Novel," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview1 (accessed: 20/06/2018) created: July 28th 2002.
[22] Amy Fallon, "V.S. Naipaul Finds No Woman Writer His Literary Match—Not Even Jane Austen." *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/02/vs-naipaul-jane-austen-women-writers (accessed: 15/05/2018) created: June 2nd 2011.
[23] Fallon, "V.S. Naipaul Finds No Woman Writer His Literary Match," *The Guardian.*

with the death of their mother.[24] Evidently, the theme of extreme grief leading to catharsis and discussions of serious societal issues continues into contemporary sentimental fiction published around the same time as Tartt's *The Little Friend*.

One such novel, the hugely popular *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002) confused and angered some critics, who suggested it was "literary comfort food for a post-9/11 public desperate to believe in the happy afterlife for its lost citizens."[25] Here the term "literary comfort food" implies an innate badness; considering how often comfort food is used as another term for 'junk food.'[26] Furthermore, this statement disparages contemporary sentimental fiction fans, and their fondness for something that is saccharine but not healthy for them. Despite using such a critical term, it is possible that Sarah E. Whitney's theory is correct and that contemporary sentimental fiction aims to understand and comprehend the horror of the 9/11 attack and, by extension, the meaning of life and its fragility. Contemporary sentimental books do this by exploring themes of grief and trauma, which are intended to be cathartic for readers, allowing them to work through their own personal trauma. As Anis Shivani reflects, this literary catharsis allows for "a steady build-up of uncontrolled hysteria about barely perceptible fears, and a markdown of the threat bringing you back to earth, so to speak, minus the baggage. Isn't that parallel to the exaggeration, mystification, threat-escalation, pacification, and

[24] Complete list of Oprah Book Selections taken from http://static.oprah.com/images/o2/201608/201608-obc-complete-list-01a.pdf (accessed: 07/05/2018).
[25] Sarah E. Whitney, *Splattered Ink: Postfeminist Gothic Fiction and Gendered Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016) p. 24.
[26] This harkens back to Nicola Humble's argument that middlebrow readers are often seen as passive consumers who gulp down rubbish rather than quality content.

threat- management that we have seen in the war on terror?"[27] While this opinion about post-2001 literature may not be entirely plausible (owing to a lack of evidence) what is clear is that coping with traumatic events proved a popular subject matter in books of the period, and aimed to offer readers a sense of 'comfort' through fiction.

At first glance, the opening of *The Little Friend* lends itself to the traditional sentimental mode made popular by authors such as Stowe, Cummings and Susan Warner. By concentrating primarily on the death of a child and a mother's grief, the novel incorporates one of the most common plot points of traditional sentimental fiction and shows how trauma can shatter the comfortable domesticity of the Cleves. Robin's death leads to marital discord and divorce, as well as mental health struggles for his surviving family members. Thus, Tartt's often uncomfortable outpourings of melodrama and emotions such as Charlotte's "melancholic stupor" force readers to acknowledge the impact of grief and loss on the Cleve family in a way which allows readers to encounter the "direct experience" Braudy discusses in his work.[28] In doing so, Walter claims Tartt creates a "convincing portrayal of fractured domesticity."[29] The success of this portrayal therefore relies on Tartt's own middle-class readership, since this "direct experience" often stems from readers' own knowledge and experience of family domesticity for understanding the tragedy at the heart of *The Little Friend*.

[27] Anis Shivani, "The Shrinking of American Fiction," in *The Antioch Review* 62.4 (2004) p. 687.
[28] Scott, "Harriet the Spy," *New York Times.*
[29] Walters, "Soaringly, Incredulously, Gloriously Cruel…" *The Guardian.*

However, although Tartt uses methods in keeping with the sentimental mode, she also deliberately eschews some of the tropes common in contemporary novels of this genre. In particular Tartt disregards the expected happy or resolved ending outcome found in novels like *The Lovely Bones* which concludes with the death of the protagonist's murderer. Conversely, in *The Little Friend* the tragedy of Robin's unsolved murder creeps into every aspect of the Cleves' lives, and as a result Robin's presence seems to haunt their memories and home. Rather than being neatly resolved at the end of the book, the trauma and grief of the Cleves is ongoing.

This sense of trauma is apparent from the opening pages of the novel. Replicating the same sense of foreboding she uses in *The Secret History*, Tartt draws on one of the most common beliefs many people have after bereavement: a sense that they could have done something to prevent the death. Writing in the third person, Tartt recounts the day of Robin's murder by concentrating on his mother, Charlotte. Although much of the novel follows Harriet's adventures as she tries to solve her brother's murder, the opening scene of the book focusses instead on her mother. The choice for this appears to be twofold: firstly, Harriet is a baby at the start of the novel, meaning that Tartt would not be able to effectively show the audience the horror of the scene through Harriet's point of view. Secondly, as Hare comments, *The Little Friend* "insidiously invokes the horror of the little dangling corpse," a horror we as readers can only begin to fully appreciate through Charlotte, who allows us to "embody the direct experience" of her trauma.[30] She is the individual

[30] David Hare, "Great Expectations" *The Guardian.*

who is most transformed by Robin's death; it is much more poignant for readers to experience it through her.

As previously stated, Tartt achieves this poignancy through her use of foreshadowing. From the very first line of the book—"for the rest of her life, Charlotte Cleve would blame herself for her son's death because she had decided to have Mother's Day dinner at six in the evening instead of noon"—readers get an insight into Charlotte's state of mind following Robin's murder, as she blames herself for making a small, insignificant change to their routine (p. 3). Tartt takes this one step further, noting that the elder Cleves were unhappy with the change and that Charlotte, when she looked back on the events of the day, "felt that she should have paid attention to the undercurrent of grumbling, that it had been a slight but ominous warning of what was to come; a warning which, though obscure even in hindsight, was perhaps as good as any we can ever hope to receive in this life" (p. 2). In laying down the foundations of the prologue in this way, Tartt prepares readers for the mother's grief, expounding the terror of a parent's loss by playing on this idea of the possibility of changing the outcome of the tragedy by doing something differently and thus preventing the death. We, as readers, know what is about to happen, and yet it is impossible not to get trapped in the moment with Charlotte as "she stumbled blind and terrified toward what she knew—for it was all there, everything, in Mrs. Fountain's cry—would be the very worst" (p. 12).

Although we do not get this horror directly from Charlotte in a first-person narrative, it is interesting to note how Tartt's very emotional, sentimental style in the lead up to the discovery of Robin's body changes

dramatically for the remainder of the prologue. By contrast, the description of the body itself is almost too blunt, creating a tension of narrative styles. Although still descriptive, this passage avoids the kind of overwrought emotion we might expect from sentimental writing, forcing the reader to acknowledge the cruel truth of Robin's death through the passage's stark realism:

> He was hanging by his neck from a piece of rope, slung over a low branch of the black-tupelo that stood near the overgrown privet hedge between Charlotte's house and Mrs. Fountain's: and he was dead. The toes of his limp tennis shoes dangled six inches above the grass. The cat, Weenie, was sprawled barrel-legged on his stomach atop a branch, batting, with a deft, feinting paw, at Robin's copper-red hair, which ruffled and glinted in the breeze and which was the only thing about him which was the right color any more (p. 13).

The language in this section is significantly more passive than the rest of the prologue, which, alongside the blunt, sharp bite of lines such as "and he was dead" connotes the sense of numbness felt by Charlotte. Other sections of the prologue likewise explore this numbing, almost dreamlike sense of grief which prepares readers for Charlotte's withdrawal throughout the rest of *The Little Friend* and the fact that she "more or less abdicates from life altogether."[31] Though there are suggestions of the day having a "chaotic, fragmented quality" and of Charlotte being "so distracted that she had no very clear recollection of the last words she'd exchanged with Robin, or even the last time she'd seen him," these are interspersed with Charlotte's agony over her

[31] Hare, "Great Expectations," *The Guardian.*

loss, and the extreme "mirror-shards of nightmare" she experiences in the wake of Robin's death (p. 4).

Here again, Tartt acknowledges a common reaction to trauma: the ability to recall certain small details while forgetting or repressing other, more important or more substantial moments. Psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell discusses this hazy state in her theory of grief, arguing that it creates what she terms a "pseudostate."[32] This is a psychological symptom of trauma, which "makes a breach that empties a person out; probably after the gasp of emptiness, there is rage or hatred—an identification with the violence of shock. This state cannot be lived with, and then a phony or pseudostate will be resorted to."[33] As such, Charlotte is able to remember vivid details about the day, such as conversations with her housemaid, but nothing about the last time she spoke to Robin. Given the scope of her grief and how substantially it affects her over the rest of *The Little Friend,* it is suggestive of Charlotte's decline into depression; from this moment on, she rarely appears as anything other than a distant sleepwalker, incapable of looking after herself, her marriage, her home, or her remaining children.

Reminders of children's mortality and outpourings of grief are common themes in traditional and contemporary sentimental novels. In this regard, Tartt is certainly not a trailblazer, nor is she the most recent author to write about such a difficult and moving subject. Nineteenth-century sentimental fiction frequently turned to the theme of the death of a child in order to emotionally appeal to a predominately female audience. A good example of

[32] Deborah Jensen, *Trauma and its Representations: The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) p. 32.
[33] Jensen, *Trauma and Representations* p. 32.

this occurs in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One scene, in particular, stands out in this regard: the death of Eva St. Clare, the daughter of Tom's master in New Orleans. "Little Eva" as she is often referred to, is the epitome of an angelic Christian child, regularly studying her Bible.[34] Her death in chapter twenty-six is drawn out almost painfully, with Eva frequently referring to her weakening state. Similarly, Susan Warner's 1850 novel *The Wide, Wide World* (often considered America's first bestseller) focuses on the hardships of protagonist, Ellen Montgomery. Ellen's ailing mother, Mrs. Montgomery, teaches her the importance of Christian ideals and imparts on her a belief in God's plan, suggesting that those who are moral will be rewarded because everything in life leads to something good.

This sentiment is reflected by the symbolism of the lamplighter in the opening chapter of the novel, who illuminates the dark and rainy streets and offers light in the darkness.[35] Ellen spies him from the window of her mother's bedroom, where her mother lies bedridden, suggesting that the symbolism of the lamplighter offering light is linked to the hope of Christianity Mrs. Montgomery offers her daughter. She tries to comfort her daughter by saying: "Remember, dear Ellen, God sends no trouble upon his children but in love; and though we cannot see how, he will no doubt make all of this work for our good."[36] Thus, the author imparts on the reader the necessity of believing in God's plan. Writing about the subject, Jane Tompkins argues "the power of the dead or the dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction [...] Mothers and children were thought to

[34] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2002) p. 264.
[35] Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World,* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005) p. 10.
[36] Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* p. 12.

be uniquely capable of this work."[37] Therefore, in traditional sentimental novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World* there is a pervasive cultural myth which paints mothers and children as innocent and angelic, creating a greater sense of catharsis when such characters die or are dying. This ultimately serves to offer comfort in the vein of Christian faith to those encountering similar hardships in their lives.

With its themes of grief and loss, Tartt's *The Little Friend* bears a strong resemblance to both traditional sentimental fiction and more contemporary novels such as *The Lovely Bones*. Given the nature of the death in *The Little Friend,* Tartt's novel also has parallels to fiction by author Jodi Picoult and the sentimental resurgence of the 1990s, which saw a rise in the number of books focused on missing or dead children which has continued into the present day.[38] In an interview with *The New York Times,* Picoult noted the trend, suggesting the raised awareness of child protection laws in the U.S. during the decade paved the way for scrutiny and interest in the publishing world.[39] Furthermore, as a parent herself, she notes that her books come from an awareness that "the more we seek to protect our children, the more we fear the consequences of an inability to do so," highlighting how anxieties over child kidnappings and murders at the end of the century became significant fears for parents.[40] Thus, unlike traditional sentimental

[37] Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* p. 130.
[38] TV shows such as Netflix's *Dark* (2017), *Stranger Things* (2016) and season one of *Broadchurch* (2013) all have the trope of missing or murdered children, suggesting the popularity of the emotional trend has not diminished.
[39] Ginia Bellafonte, "Jodi Picoult and the Anxious Parent" *The New York Times,* https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/magazine/21picoult-t.html (accessed: 02/05/2018) created: June 17th 2009.
[40] Bellafonte, "Jodi Picoult and the Anxious Parent," *The New York Times.*

fiction the purpose of contemporary novels of the genre concentrate primarily on catharsis, rather than attempting to communicate messages of change to their readership. Books such as *The Lovely Bones* aim to soothe their predominately female and middle-class audience by allowing them to experience their worst fears by embodying direct experience. In *The Little Friend* the 'worst nightmare' scenario is realized and experienced by the audience, allowing them to process it and accept it, working through their own fears and traumas. Tartt uses this grief to address the metaphorical issue of the meaning of human existence which may be questioned by individuals in the wake of tragedy such as the loss of a child. Therefore, in some ways, Tartt's *The Little Friend* is immersed in the contemporary re-emergence of sentimental fiction, using similar themes and modes to reflect parental anxieties at the time of publication and in the aftermath of a huge cultural trauma.

However, *The Little Friend* does not fit neatly into the contemporary sentimental genre. While novels like *The Lovely Bones* and *Drowning Ruth* do end on a somewhat positive note, Tartt's novel is distinctive in its lack of resolution. At the end of the book, Robin's murder is still unsolved and Harriet's attempts to rectify this have resulted in more death and chaos. Through Tartt's languorous prose and the Cleves' ongoing grief, readers are left with a sense that the family is haunted by the memory of Robin and his murder. Harriet, wandering the house one night, "felt her dead brother draw close to her side" (p. 65). Similarly, her dark obsession with playing under the tree where Robin was hung is due to wanting to play in "the darkest place in the yard" (p. 34). Harriet wishes to play in a place stained in gruesome history,

since the tree now has 'dark' connotations in the wake of the murder. Charlotte's depression is also a sign that Robin is constantly on her mind. Thus, although the novel is not a typical ghost story, since Robin does not physically haunt his family, *The Little Friend* explores Robin's death in a variety of ways that pull together strands from different literary genres. On the one hand, his death is explored in the sentimental mode previously discussed, with melodrama playing a central role in the way Tartt opens the novel and deals with trauma. On the other hand, Robin's murder and the sense of haunting grief echoes elements of another literary genre familiar to Tartt: the Southern Gothic.

The effects of this shift may seem jarring. On the surface, sentimental fiction bears little resemblance to Southern Gothic fiction. Sentimental fiction relies on the "comfort food" of emotionalism, clear moral oppositions and a reassuring resolution to the difficulties depicted in the narrative. Some characters learn to accept and embrace their trauma. Others, such as Sarah Grimke in *The Invention of Wings*, strive to bring positive social change to mitigate the effects of trauma and injustice. Conversely, Southern Gothic literature aims to horrify and terrify readers and focusses primarily on the internal rather than the external.[41] Much of all gothic literature takes place in the mind, while sentimental fiction examines society. Despite this, both genres represent a shift from the reason of canonical texts, towards a novel grounded in imagination and emotions. As we have seen, this shift from the rational and orderly resulted in widespread criticism of the "scribbling mobs of women"

[41] Robert D. Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," in *PMLA* 84.2 (1969) p. 282.

who wrote sentimental fiction. Similarly, the overarching genre of gothic fiction, with its overwrought emotion, has been associated with the "sub-literary depths of romanticism."[42] As such, traditional gothic literature is widely considered a popular, lowbrow form of fiction. Helene Meyers contests that the traditional gothic has "privilege[d] emotion and the domestic sphere, and middle-class women have obsessively written and read it."[43] Southern Gothic shares some themes of the traditional gothic, including the use of overwrought emotion. Critics have struggled to differentiate between Southern Gothic and traditional gothic literature, owing to their similarities. However, Charles Crow suggests that Southern Gothic is unique in its harsh depiction of the South, uncovering the repressions and historical realities beneath the veneer of the idyllic picture of the pastoral South.[44] Like sentimental fiction with its ties to the feminine emotional, Southern Gothic texts faced literary criticism due to their dark and controversial subject matters and their commercial popularity. Ellen Glasgow, who coined the term 'Southern Gothic' in 1935 criticised the subgenre as an "inflamed rabble of impulses" full of "aimless violence."[45] However, unlike the majority of sentimental fiction, Southern Gothic literature came to be considered highbrow, apparently owing to its complex analysis of class struggles, racism and repression which are unique to the subgenre.[46] Additionally, Southern Gothic fiction was a male dominated genre, and authors such as Edgar Allan

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[42] Samuel Chew, *The Nineteenth Century and After;* Book IV of *A Literary History of England* Ed. A.C. Baugh (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967) 2nd edition p. 1196.
[43] Helene Meyers, *Femicidal Fears: Narratives of the Female Gothic Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) p. 25
[44] Charles L. Crow, *History of the Gothic: American Gothic.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009) p. 124.
[45] Ellen Glasgow, "Heroes and Monsters," *The Saturday Review.* (May 4th 1953) p. 3.
[46] Crow, *History of the Gothic* p. 134.

Poe and William Faulkner have become canonical in the arena of U.S. literature. This is perhaps due to the continuing schism between 'serious' male authors and 'popular' female writers.

The similarities between sentimental and Southern Gothic (both the reliance on emotion and the criticisms of the genres) are explored in *The Little Friend* through Robin's unsolved murder. By using the Southern Gothic as a vessel for the sentimental mode, Tartt is able to use melodrama and emotion to draw attention to key social issues in her home state of Mississippi, including the problem of downward mobility and social-class prejudices which are raised in the aftermath of Robin's murder. Robin's death plays a pivotal role in this fusing of literary genres. According to Michelle J. Smith, in gothic literature "children occupy the transitional state between infancy and adulthood," while ghosts "occupy a liminal space between the living and the dead."[47] A dead or ghostly child, then, represents a break from the rational order where children become adults, leaving behind a more significant sense of unease or confusion as people attempt to grapple with the unexpected. Thus in both sentimental and gothic fiction, the dead child is revered as a sign of permanent and untainted innocence. The rational is simple: since the child does not grow up, it does not have the same sins attached to its soul as an adult would, and can ascend to heaven. This is demonstrated early on in the novel. Tartt weaves sections of Ida Rhew's gospel hymns with the search for Robin, creating a sense of foreboding. The lines she picks out suggest "Jesus is calling" people home to heaven (p. 12). The stained glass window in the

[47] Michelle J. Smith, "Dead and Ghostly Children in Contemporary Literature for Young Adults," *The Gothic and Death* Ed. Carol Margaret Davison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) p. 192.

church features "a red-haired boy in a baseball cap who bore an unmistakable resemblance to Robin" sitting next to Jesus with the phrase "SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME UNTO ME" inscribed below (p. 45). Since stained glass windows are often decorated with saints and images of God and Jesus, Robin's inclusion suggests that he is not only in heaven but is also pure enough to be considered saint-like.

Later on however, the trauma in the wake of Robin's death becomes less about the child himself and more about the hole in the family which can never be filled. The narrative moves away from the emotions of sentimental fiction to anxieties over cultural hereditary and inheritance within the strata of the upper and middle-classes in America. This sense of aristocracy in decline is a common theme of Southern Gothic literature. The genre often romanticises certain aspects of American history including the Civil War. This is expressed through derelict settings and troubling events stemming from violence, poverty and racism. Gothic elements such as the haunted house and the importance of crossroads and boundaries serve as a reminder that the genre has arisen from the South's "often violent and traumatic history."[48] According to Teresa Goddu: "the American Gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming a repository for everything from which the nation wishes to disassociate itself."[49] Rather than ignoring these issues, the genre embraces and explores them. Novels of the genre, including Carson

[48] Ed. Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p. 2.
[49] Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 3.

McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) often do so through allegory, which Jan Whitt describes as the "often chosen mode of expression for the Southern writer, dealing with one's own place in the indecipherable world."[50] Robert E. Long also highlights the importance of allegory in Southern Gothic literature, noting that the Gothic writer sees the physical world as a "symbolic chart containing concealed meanings."[51] This being the case, it is possible to see the fall of the Cleve family, which begins with the loss of their upper-class status prior to the start of *The Little Friend* and ends with Robin's death as a moralistic message that pride and class-based snobbery result in ruin. This message is endemic of both the gothic and sentimental fiction modes that Tartt has interwoven in her novel since it marries the emotional with the horrifying and the realities of life in the South with moralistic warnings.

The Cleves, once vastly wealthy, are first reduced in status by bad investments and confidence men. They lose the symbols of their status, including the grand gothic mansion known as Tribulation, as well as many of their financial assets. The name of the lost mansion is no coincidence, since the term *tribulation* has connotations of great suffering and trouble. Chosen by Edie's great grandfather, the name represents the toil of building the home for his family; it suggests a self-made fortune and family heritage prevalent in Southern states such as Mississippi, where the novel takes place (p. 38). The home is also crumbling, falling apart around its occupants. Tartt describes it concisely: "the floors were rotten, the foundations were soft with termites, the

[50] Jan Whitt, *Allegory and the Southern Gothic Novel* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1994) p. 2.
[51] Robert E Long, *The Great Succession: Henry James and the Legacy of Hawthorne* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979) p. 4.

entire structure was on the verge of collapse" (p. 38). By selecting the name Tribulation and describing the home's decrepit grandeur in such detail, Tartt turns the aristocratic home into an omen of things to come, using it as a symbol to represent the Cleve family themselves. While *The Little Friend* does not employ many of the Gothic tropes of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) it is possible to see a correlation between Poe's short story and Tartt's narrative as the Cleve's beloved Tribulation is razed to the ground, just as the House of Usher fractures in two and sinks into the tarn at the end of Poe's story. The only remaining evidence of Tribulation's existence, outside of memories and photos, is "twin chimneys and a mossy brick wall […] where five cracked tiles on the riser, in faded Delft blue, spelled the letters CLEVE"(p. 38). Here Tartt neatly employs symbolism to suggest that, by removing the family's fortunes and estate, the only remaining item of value is the powerful family legacy, cracked and chipped but intact.

This idea of upper-class family destruction is completed by Robin's death. Though never officially attributed to Robin's murder, the trauma causes the estrangement of Charlotte and her husband, Dix. Psychologists Christine Littlefield and Irwin Silverman note that in the marital discord that follows bereavement, there is often an irrational belief that genetic factors in the spouse caused the death, and couples are afraid of replicating these reproductive failures in the future.[52] Most often, such factors are attributed to the mother. This anxiety over genetics causes a psychological and often physical distancing, eventually causing irreparable damage to the marriage. In

[52] For more information read Christine H. Littlefield and Irwin Silverman, "Marital Dissatisfaction Following the Death of a Child: The Influence of Genetic Factors at Cause in the Death," in *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 53.3 (1991) pp. 799-804.

the case of Charlotte and Dix, this only serves to reinforce this idea of the family collapsing in on itself; with the last remaining male gone, there is no hope for repair to the family's future. Considering the once upper-class status of the Cleves, the damage this loss causes to the family is detrimental. Biljana Oklopcic points out the utopian landscapes and sentiment towards aristocracy in Southern literature, noting how the South epitomizes a way of life where family is at the heart of everything, and where the ideal is a "white column mansion set on a hill [...] and on the mansion's porch sits a gentleman, behind him an angelic wife, both observing children playing."[53]

Gothic literature often attempts to show the falsity of this image of a way of life based on family and land by depicting the reality of it; the dilapidated buildings, ongoing class prejudices and deep-rooted racism are all shifted to the foreground of the texts to be explored. In order to make this possible, white aristocratic families are often portrayed as sinful bastions of the old South in Gothic literature, benefitting from ancestors who once owned plantations worked on by slaves, and with ideas and opinions often still rooted in this concept of the Southern utopia. This sparks unmistakable parallels between Tartt's *The Little Friend* and the class driven works of Faulkner. In Faulkner's fiction, the aristocratic Southerners "invoked classical ideas of order to legitimize their feudal system and argued that only the leisure class could attain the esthetical and ethical excellence to forward the course of civilization."[54] Others, such as Hector St. John de Crévecœur, writing in 1782,

[53] Biljana Oklopcic, *Faulkner and the Native Keystone: Reading (Beyond) the American South,* (New York: Springer, 2017) p. 1.
[54] Myra Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 21.

lambasted plantation families in the South, arguing that "the salubrious effluvia of the earth animate our spirits and serve to inspire us."[55] In his mind, the plantation families and their land oligopoly were sinful because they failed to partake in the sanctity of labour. As such, the Cleves serve as a metaphor for the fall of the corrupt old families who profited from slavery and passed down their wealth from father to son, leaving generations with no need to work or be productive. Though it is not clear that the Cleves themselves harken back to plantation owners, their presence in Mississippi during the 1800's suggests as much: "the Cleves, like most old families in Mississippi, had once been richer than they were" (p. 37). The family owned the house since 1805, again hinting at the likelihood of owning slaves and profiting from them. Robin's death severs this long history of corruption and inheritance, leaving the family tree with nowhere to expand through a male heir, and the Cleves' financial ruin prior to the start of the novel seeks to reaffirm this; the family is also dying, the old slowly removed to make way for a new South.

Given the context of Robin's death and her own upbringing, it is possible to see why Harriet embarks upon a mission to exact revenge on Robin's 'murderer.' However, her privileged upbringing and the prejudices of those around her lead her to automatically suspect an old friend of Robin's, Danny Ratliff, with only one piece of circumstantial evidence to fuel her goal—the mention of Ida Rhew chasing Danny away from the house on the day of the murder (p. 133). Here, as in *The Secret History,* Tartt turns the eyes of the readers towards debates about class privilege and prejudice. Tartt's debut is,

[55] Hector St. John de Crévecœur, *Letters From an American Farmer*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 19.

at its heart, a novel about attempted upward mobility and Richard Papen's aspirations of fitting in with his upper-class friends with his feigned cultural capital. Conversely, *The Little Friend* focusses on notions of social anxiety and downward mobility. Harriet's perception of Danny is already tainted by her impression of the Ratliffs and the other poor white families in her neighbourhood—an impression imposed on her by the adults around her. Whenever someone describes one of the 'white trash' families to Harriet, it is always with an air of superiority and scorn, or with a sense of pity for their 'misfortune.' Pemberton Hull is the first to mention Danny to Harriet, and warns that she doesn't "want to mess with [him]. He just got out of prison" (p. 96). He then goes on to say that "every single one of the Ratliffs has been in the penitentiary for armed robbery or killing somebody except the baby, the little retarded guy. And Hely told me *he* beat the shit out of Mr. Dial the other day" (p. 96. Italics in original).

Interestingly, Harriet is appalled at this, since she knows that Curtis (who has Downs Syndrome) did not attack Mr. Dial as Hely claimed. She is aware that this is a fabrication, or at least a bending of the truth, and yet she does not think to apply it to the rest of what Pemberton tells her. This suggests she dismisses the part of the story she knows is not true, but accepts the rest based on no evidence, purely because of the way the Ratliffs have been portrayed to her by others. Similarly, Charlotte and Ida Rhew treat the Odums (another poor white family) with a mixture of snobbery and pity, with Charlotte happy to supply the younger children with lemonade or with donated toys, while also believing that when they become teenagers, these same children "shot BB guns at dogs, stole things from people's porches, used

bad language, and ran the streets till all hours of the night" (p. 11). When they reach this age, she is content to let Ida chase them away. Despite her own class status as a maid, Ida is the one most critical of the poor white children, stating to Harriet that "not a one of em knows right from wrong" and that the children don't know anything but robbery and theft because their parents "never do a lick of work" (p. 128). This prejudice becomes visible through Harriet's actions too, when she throws some pound cake at Lasharon Odum for looking "cringing," and who has snuck into the Cleves' yard to retrieve her lost library book, and again when Harriet begrudges her mother's pleas to donate her old toys to impoverished children (p. 101). Her lack of empathy in both of these situations suggests that she doesn't believe the other children have earned these things, because they haven't worked for them, as Ida has claimed. Thus the later allegory of Harriet throwing the snake, a symbol of biblical sin, at Gum only serves to compound the message of Tartt's book: how easy it is for the privileged to pass their sins, and the consequences of such actions, off onto the lower classes (p. 330). Again, this use of a moralistic message is Tartt's way of using the gothic as a vessel for the sentimental mode of bringing about social change through emotions.

With this in mind, it is important to address how Tartt uses the fall of the Cleve family to reflect the ill-fortunes of the Ratliffs. In one sense, they have much in common. As Daniel Mendelsohn notes: "Tartt has constructed her narrative so that the Ratliffs and the Cleves are mirror images of each other: the former a family of orphaned boys being reared by their backwoods grandmother, Gum; the latter a family of neglected girls being reared by their

formidably crisp grandmother, Edie."[56] Additionally, neither family work, at least not in the traditional sense. Finally too, there is the connection of hardship and loss. The Cleves have lost Robin and been reduced in financial status from upper-class Southern aristocracy to middle-class Americans. Similarly, the Ratliffs, owing to their criminal activities, have lost several of their own to jails and murders, and their own financial ruin is evident in their disillusionment with the American Dream. Rather than continue with jobs such as mailmen, they instead turn to crime and gambling to fund their family. This, Tartt stresses in an interview, is due to "a horrible ethos in rural southern poverty that it's dumb to do well, it's stupid to succeed, and that people will laugh at you."[57] Yet the Cleves, despite their reduction in status and their own lack of work, continue to behave much in the way an upper-class family would, using their cultural capital of manners and tastes to separate themselves from others in the neighbourhood.

However, this downward social trajectory heightens anxieties about social class, since it places the Cleves closer in their minds to those such as the middle-class black family and poor white families like the Ratliffs. In their theories on whiteness in Southern literature, Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray argue that unlike hegemonic forms of whiteness, white trash is marked as distinct from the start. It is not just racially marked, it is also marked as trash, something to be disposed of in order for whiteness to maintain social

[56] Daniel Mendelsohn, "Murder and Manners," *The New Yorker,* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/10/28/murder-and-manners (accessed: 12/06/2018) created: October 28th 2002.
[57] Katharine Viner, "A Talent to Tantalise," *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/19/fiction.features (accessed: 23/07/18) created: October 19th 2002.

dominance.[58] White middle-class Americans like the Cleves feel threatened by the existence of poor white families because they believe they reflect poorly on their skin colour, and thus raise unwanted questions about the validity of white superiority. The answer to this is for the white middle-classes to separate themselves from the 'white trash,' to label them as something to discard, something with no value to society, as Ida Rhew suggests when she claims the Odums can't tell right from wrong and don't work for anything. Even their names imply as much: Ratliff includes the word 'rat,' an omnivorous pest which is considered invasive and damaging to urban areas. Likewise, Odum is not so dissimilar from the word 'odium' meaning a general disgust incurred by someone as a consequence of their actions. Thus, just as Bourdieu notes that those calling themselves highbrow wish to distinguish and segregate themselves from middlebrow and lowbrow cultures, Tartt implies through *The Little Friend* that this extends far beyond cultural capital to more deep-rooted issues of prejudice and discrimination.

Here again, the similarities between Tartt's writing and Faulkner's are hard to ignore, particularly given that Tartt has been called "the heiress to the legacy of Faulkner."[59] Faulkner's fiction often used literature as a prism for exploring social and class distinctions in the South and deconstructed the "American myth of classlessness."[60] According to Myra Jehlen, Faulkner "drew characters whose inner lives are essentially linings for selves tailored to

[58] Eds. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, "What is White Trash?" *White Trash: Race and Class in America,* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 1.
[59] Mick Brown, "Worth Waiting For," *The Telegraph,* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4729011/Worth-waiting-for.html (accessed: 22/06/2018) created: October 19th 2002.
[60] Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South* p. 11.

impossible social patterns."[61] In stories such as "The Bear," the planters and the 'rednecks' are two different and distinct groups who cannot coexist peacefully, owing to the characters' "motivations and the plots of their stories [which] most often have to do with maintaining, representing, or refurbishing a social situation which is first of all class defined."[62] For some critics like Ryuichi Yamaguchi, this attempt to show the social divide often devolves into caricatures—the 'redneck' and the scheming plantation owner amongst many others. Yamaguchi notes that this is due to the hyperbolic world Faulkner creates which requires characters who are "grand enough not to get lost in it."[63] Similarly then, Tartt's inclusion of characters such as the Ratliffs, who are the epitome of 'white trash' stereotypes (living in a trailer, dealing drugs in run-down pool halls) can be seen as a grandiose attempt to separate them from the fortunes of the Cleves, creating two distinct groups which act as constant social opposites for one another. Danny, described by David Hare as the "amphetamine-popping runt of a redneck litter" is the most stereotypical of all the Ratliffs, and Tartt repeatedly shows him trying to behave in a way that breaks from his family (for example by playing with Robin) but ultimately he is unable to do so and is trapped in the vicious cycle of crime and poverty created by this social prejudice.[64]

Despite their mirroring in misfortune, the Cleves seek to maintain their high status over other white families such as the Ratliffs whom they deem beneath them, just as highbrow readers seek to distinguish themselves from

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[61] *Ibid* p. 1.
[62] *Ibid* p. 10.
[63] Ryuichi Yamaguchi, *Faulkner's Artistic Vision: The Bizarre and the Terrible* (New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing, 2004) p. 220
[64] Hare, "Great Expectations," *The Guardian.*

the threat of middlebrow and mass-culture fiction. Additionally, Doug Henwood states in the opening of his essay "Trash-O-Nomics" that, problematically, "in the American mind, *poor* and *black* are virtually synonymous."[65] Yet in *The Little Friend* the majority of black characters are employed and behave in a responsible manner, caring for their families and attending church. This being the case, families such as the Ratliffs and Odums, who are white, poor and unemployed (except for producing and distributing methamphetamine) are seen by the Cleves as almost worse than black—in their experiences, black people are workers such as housemaids and gardeners while whites are criminals and unemployed. The 'white trash' families of Tartt's novel are ridiculed and chased away even when attempting to help themselves—Lasharon is not allowed to return for her library book, and Harriet dismisses her for reading simple children's books over more complex matter (p. 102 and p. 88). Through this, Tartt demonstrates Harriet's and the other Cleves' privilege. Having never struggled financially, because of inherited wealth, the Cleves do not understand the struggles of families such as the Odums and Ratliffs and assume that children cannot help but grow up to reflect their parents, suggesting there is no hope for characters such as Lasharon or Danny because they are inherently predetermined to fail due to their upbringing.

Tartt shows the futility of this type of thinking by leading Harriet on a wild goose chase which only highlights how needless vilification of poor whites by middle-class Americans causes dangerous ruptures in society, rather than mending them. Like Faulkner's fiction, Tartt's writing showcases "dilemmas

[65] Doug Henwood, "Trash-O-Nomics," *White Trash: Race and Class in America* p. 177.

[which] are rooted in problems of history and society."[66] Harriet believes Danny is her brother's murderer because of preconceived prejudices, and chases him single-mindedly; yet it never truly crosses her mind that Danny might be innocent. Thus in blaming him, Harriet removes any chance of finding her brother's real killer, instead creating an enmity between herself and Danny which results in his growing paranoia to the extent that he attempts to murder her. Considering how the concept of 'white trash' has been fabricated to create distinctions between both black working-class society and between poor whites and middle-class whites, creating a schism which benefits only the elite in society, it is possible to see Harriet's goal as a symptom of class-based prejudices and as distinctly problematic, leading to the eventual death of Farish and Danny and still no closure to Robin's murder.

By addressing complex issues of class distinction in *The Little Friend,* Tartt adapts the traditions of melodrama and moralistic messages in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction and views them through the prism of Southern Gothic settings and horror. This fusion of styles and themes acts as an effective criticism of aristocratic white families in the South and the prejudices they perpetuate. Through the death of Robin, Tartt explores the impact of grief and loss on the nuclear family, particularly on his mother, using elements of sentimental fiction. However, his murder also paves the way for an analysis of social class distinctions in American culture which is more in fitting with the image of Tartt as Faulkner's heir. At the heart of *The Little Friend* lies an exploration of downward mobility which juxtaposes the Cleves against the misfortunes of the 'white trash' Ratliff family to show how the

[66] Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South* p. 5.

Cleves, despite their ill-luck continue to believe themselves above others due to their ancestry and previous social status. This fusing of genres and important issues represents Tartt's middlebrow status; she uses some strands of each genre, using the melodramatic Southern Gothic, with its eerie atmospheres and haunted houses, as a vessel for the sentimental mode and message. As a result, Tartt and her writing walk a tightrope between two genres which have both been criticised for their popularity and lack of cerebral reasoning. In using two popular, middlebrow genres in *The Little Friend,* Tartt creates a novel which is distinct in the themes and messages it tries to convey to the reader about class distinctions and prejudice in both literature and in the American South.

Chapter 3: "The Light of Long Ago:" Art and Human Connections in *The Goldfinch*

"Caring too much for objects can destroy you. Only—if you care about a thing enough, it takes on a life of its own, doesn't it? And isn't the whole point of things—beautiful things—that they can connect you to some larger beauty?"[1]

In an interview with Tim Murphy, designer Keith Hayes explains his choices for *The Goldfinch*'s jacket. He discusses how the image of Carel Fabritius' painting "stuck with [him]" and notes that although Tartt originally requested that the cover did not feature the painting, she "ended up loving it."[2] The cover design is vastly different from those of Tartt's other published works. The UK editions of *The Secret History* (published by Penguin) and *The Little Friend* (published by Bloomsbury) are both black and minimal. Both feature silver-grey serif text with a small symbol between the title of the book and Tartt's own name. Their designs are almost classical in their lack of detail. By contrast, *The Goldfinch*'s cover is off-white. The font is different; it looks handwritten in charcoal. Later editions proclaim the book's status as a Pulitzer Prize winner. However, it is the image on the cover that draws the eye. Readers are offered a glimpse of the goldfinch in the painting through a tear in the paper covering the canvas. The goldfinch stares back through the gap and although most of the painting is covered (including the bird's chain) it gives

[1] Tartt, *The Goldfinch* p.848. All further reference to this text appear in parentheses.
[2] Tim Murphy, "14 Confessions of a Book Cover Designer," *Mental Floss,* http://mentalfloss.com/article/70820/14-confessions-book-cover-designer (accessed: 09/08/2018) created: November 9th 2015.

the impression that the bird is trapped by the layer of paper covering it. Most importantly, the tear and the glimpse of the painting turns the reader into a voyeur; through this peephole readers are allowed a furtive view of the masterpiece. The tear gives the impression of sharing a secret since the painting is otherwise covered up and hidden.

The cover of Tartt's most recent novel to date serves to connect the reader to the artwork. Since the release of *The Goldfinch* in 2013, museums exhibiting Fabritius' masterpiece have noted the rise in crowds visiting the painting. Margaret Iacono, assistant curator of New York's Frick museum (where the painting was briefly exhibited in 2013) called the artwork a "new star. Maybe a co-star" and suggested that "the bird has now blown up in people's minds because of the book."[3] A reported 200,000 people queued to see the painting at the Frick.[4] Journalist Jonathan Jones recalled seeing the painting at its home in the Maritshaus in The Hague, where it was "roped off, almost like the Mona Lisa."[5] In the wake of *The Goldfinch*'s release, exhibitions of the artwork have become "a very rare opportunity for art and literature lovers alike to come face to face with one of the most compelling paintings in western art."[6] The rise in the painting's popularity suggests the influence of Tartt's novel and its ability to explore art through the written word. Just as the characters in *The Goldfinch* are connected through time and

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[3] Anthony Mason, "The Goldfinch Painting Drawing Big Crowds Since Donna Tartt's Book Release," *CBS News,* https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-goldfinch-painting-drawing-crowds-since-donna-tartt-book-release/ (accessed: 19/07/2018) created: December 30th 2013.
[4] Brian Ferguson, "Dutch Masterpiece The Goldfinch To Go On Show in Scotland for the First Time," *Scotsman,* https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/dutch-masterpiece-the-goldfinch-to-go-on-show-in-scotland-for-the-first-time-1-4218608 (accessed: 22/07/2018) created: September 1st 2016.
[5] Jonathan Jones, "Clipped Wings: the Tragic True Story of The Goldfinch," *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/oct/21/the-goldfinch-carel-fabritius-scottish-national-gallery (accessed: 17/07/2018) created: October 26th 2016.
[6] Jones, "Clipped Wings."

space by their attachment to the painting, readers are connected to the artwork by the novel and its cover.

According to Pierre Bourdieu however, emotional connections to art are often dismissed as lowbrow. In *Distinction,* Bourdieu argues that, in order to maintain a cultural hierarchy, "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences."[7] In particular, consumers of art are divided into two categories—those with the cultural capital to connect to art through their knowledge of styles, modes, techniques and schools (highbrow), and those who do not have this knowledge and who instead appreciate art with *Einfühlung,* the art lover's pleasure. Bourdieu notes that those who lack the cultural competence to decode encoded messages in art are left feeling "lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason."[8] As we have seen already in literature, highbrow culture, perched at the top of the hierarchy chain, often attempts to dictate that the cerebral should be celebrated and valued over the emotional.

In *The Goldfinch,* Tartt addresses and challenges the cultural tensions surrounding experiences of art. On one hand she acknowledges highbrow approaches to art through descriptions of paintings and other forms of art such as antiques as well as by examining the world of private art collections. On the other, however, Tartt uses *ekphrasis* and its "sister term" *enargeia* throughout the novel to imply that human connections and emotions towards art should be valued more highly than cultural capital. Stemming from the

[7] Bourdieu, *Distinction* p. 7.
[8] *Ibid* p. 2.

Greek words 'ἐκ' (meaning 'out') and 'φρἀσις' (meaning 'to speak') *ekphrasis* is often used as a rhetorical device in "works of poetry and prose that talk about or incorporate visual works of art."[9] These descriptions of the visual become "verbal discourses that directly verbalize one or more visual images."[10] Similarly, *enargeia* is an attempt to appeal to the senses of the reader to create a stronger image of the visual. Thus in *The Goldfinch* Tartt uses *ekphrasis* and *enargeia* to create bridges between her readers and the characters as well as the paintings they encounter throughout the novel. This chapter will therefore examine the central role of art in *The Goldfinch* and will concentrate primarily on the importance of human connections to culture and how this can be seen as Tartt's riposte to notions of cultural hierarchy in America.

As with *The Secret History* and *The Little Friend* frequent references to culture are interwoven into the narrative of *The Goldfinch*. Paintings, in particular, form a significant portion of the allusions Tartt makes throughout the novel. Several websites and blogs have attempted to list all of the artworks Tartt alludes to throughout the novel. These allusions include works by Frans Hals, Egbert van der Poel and Wybrand Hendriks alongside more noticeable examples such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh.[11] Although artists like Van Gogh have become recognizable household names, others Tartt mentions are less likely to be known by her general readership unless they have a prior interest in art. Here then, Tartt uses her own knowledge of art and the cultural capital

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[9] Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting* p. 9.
[10] *Ibid* p. 9.
[11] Laura Oosterbeek, "Beyond the Bird: A Definitive List of Artworks in 'The Goldfinch,'" *The Millions,* https://themillions.com/2015/08/beyond-the-bird-art-in-the-goldfinch.html (accessed: 20/07/2018) created: August 6th 2015.

she received through her research to educate others on paintings. If, as Joan Shelley Rubin contends, middlebrow literature is created to lead readers to new knowledge through "self-culture" then we can consider Tartt's extensive list of references to art as an attempt to feed this desire for cultural capital in her middlebrow readers.[12] Initially, descriptions of these paintings are delivered by Tartt in a highbrow fashion, with an emphasis on the mode, school, and style at the forefront rather than emotion.

One such example is Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Strolling around the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tartt's protagonist Theo is introduced to the painting by his mother, Audrey who describes it as "very naturalistic" and notes the deliberate reversing of the thumb in the painting as a stylistic choice to draw attention to the subliminal wrongness of the anatomy performed on the canvas (p. 27). Similarly, Audrey discusses in detail the painting style of Frans Hals:

> Now, Hals. He's so corny sometimes with all these tipplers and wenches but when he's on, he's *on*. None of this fussiness and precision, he's working wet-on-wet, slash, slash, it's all so *fast*. The face and hands—rendered really finely, he knows that's what the eye is drawn to but look at the clothes—so loose—almost sketched. Look at how open and modern the brushwork is [...] Van Gogh loved Hals too. Somewhere he's writing about Hals and he says: *Frans Hals has no less than twenty-nine shades of black!* (p. 27. Italics in original).

Bourdieu points to knowledge of "styles, modes, techniques and schools" as a sign of elevated cultural capital. In this description then, Tartt draws attention

[12] Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* p. 9.

to several key elements of the painting which are highbrow in their essence. These include the style of painting ("wet-on-wet" with the "modern" brushwork) and the technique of the "almost sketched" clothes and the finely rendered hands and face (p. 27). Although it is not overtly mentioned, Tartt also hints at the school of art when she suggests that Rembrandt and Van Gogh were inspired by Hals (p. 28). Thus, readers are initially introduced to art in *The Goldfinch* through the prism of highbrow observations. This serves a two-fold purpose. On one level it allows readers with enough cultural competence to decode the encoded messages of the painting through Tartt's writing, giving them a sense of being involved in the text because they understand something others perhaps do not. On another level, such descriptions usher middlebrow readers into the fold, giving them the opportunity to learn something new and educate themselves through Tartt's writing. Tartt's research around art history attests to this desire to educate through her work. In interviews with Waterstones, Tartt admits that she often reads texts which are "being ploughed back into the book" and that "a book that was never very far away from [her] while [she] was writing was Seymour Slive's *Dutch Painting*."[13] In acknowledging her own desire to learn more about the subjects she is writing about, Tartt points towards middlebrow readers' thirst for cultural capital, which is attained through reading.

Yet Tartt also recognises the tensions that Bourdieu explores in *Distinction*. Much of *The Goldfinch* hinges around human connections to art, rather than a highbrow litany of form and school. When Tartt uses highbrow techniques to discuss paintings, she is merely describing art by generating

[13] Waterstones, "Donna Tartt Discusses *The Goldfinch*," YouTube video, 31:04, January 15, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPgPixshbXo&t=758s.

words which, if the reader is able to decode them, connote an image in the reader's mind. While this description does fit Sager Eidt's definition of *ekphrasis* as a "verbal discourse that directly verbalize[s] one or more visual images" it lacks the ability to truly move beyond the written word and capture the essence of the painting. This lack of emotional appeal highlights ongoing friction between scholars who believe that "painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture" and those who follow Plato's argument that the written word is "inferior" to images "with regard to their mimetic faithfulness of representation."[14] To alleviate these tensions between the visual and verbal, and thus acknowledge the complexity of the written word, Dionysius of Halicarnassus developed a "sister term" for *ekphrasis* called *enargeia*.[15] According to G. Zanker (who translated Dionsyius' text), *enargeia* is the stylistic effect "in which an appeal is made to the senses" of the reader in the hopes of turning them into a "witness" of events or culture, rather than someone who only sees an image through the verbal.[16] Rather than relying only on the ability to translate words into images, the rhetorical device *enargeia* seeks to incorporate other senses, including the ability to *feel* art through emotional. As Eidt notes, the term *enargeia* also "encompass[es] *ekphrasis* as a form of vivid evocation."[17] Therefore when Tartt moves away from describing art through highbrow terminology and begins to forge human, emotional connections between her characters (and by extension her

[14] Henryk Markiewicz and Uliana Gabara, "Ut Pictura Poesis: A History of the Topos," *New Literary History* 18.3 (1987) p. 535 and Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting* p. 11.
[15] G. Zanker, "Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 124 no. 3/4 (1981) p. 297.
[16] Zanker, "Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry," p. 297.
[17] Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting* p. 11.

readers) and paintings in the novel, she is able to create a more significant sense of bonding and familiarity through the sense of feeling.

As suggested by the title and cover jacket, the most notable example of *enargeia* occurs when characters in *The Goldfinch* connect to Fabritius' 1654 masterpiece. Again, Theo Decker is introduced to the painting by his mother. However, unlike with *The Anatomy Lesson,* Audrey immediately establishes a personal connection to the bird on the canvas. She recalls: "it was in a book I used to take out of the library when I was a kid. I used to sit on the floor by my bed and stare at it for hours, completely fascinated" as well as pointing out that it is possible to "love" even a bad reproduction of a painting (p. 29). Audrey concludes by saying that she "started off loving the bird" almost like a pet, but "ended up loving the way it was painted" (p. 29). It is worth drawing attention to a word which reoccurs several times during this passage—*love*. Love is a human emotion; it implies a deep and meaningful connection. Later in *The Goldfinch,* Hobie also suggests that the aesthetic beauty of the painting evokes such a strong feeling of love within Theo that Theo is willing to "destroy" himself to maintain his connection to it (p. 848). Audrey does exhibit some highbrow knowledge of art techniques used in the painting, noting the bravura technique Fabritius adopted to scratch the goldfinch's yellow stripe with the butt of his brush to create a lifelike texture to the paint. However, the majority of her discussion of *The Goldfinch* painting is reserved for her emotions towards it, effectively positioning the lowbrow above the highbrow in regards to importance.

For Audrey, *The Goldfinch* is her favourite piece of art because it inspired her to pursue art history. Theo's connection to the painting is much

more complex. Shortly after he sees the painting for the first time, the art gallery explodes in a terrorist attack, killing his mother in the process. While escaping from the destroyed museum, Theo takes the painting, believing that his mother would want him to rescue her favourite piece of art from the fire and rubble. This is perhaps spurred by Audrey's earlier mention of the destruction of The Parthenon, which was used as a munitions storehouse, a decision which Audrey calls "heart-breaking and unnecessary" (p. 31). She tells Theo (moments before the explosion) that anything humans manage to "save from history is a miracle" (p. 31). Therefore Theo begins to tie his saving of his mother's favourite painting to the possibility of his mother's survival. Despite the diminishing chances of her returning home, he leaves takeout food for her because it would be too late for her to order, cleans the apartment so she could return to somewhere pleasant, and most importantly, he sets the painting on her bureau so it would be "the first thing she'd see when she came home" (p.209). Although Theo's growing panic suggests he is aware it is increasingly unlikely his mother is alive, the painting begins to act as a kind of talisman for him, since it proves that miracles can occur and things (and people) can be saved from history. Once it is clear this Audrey is dead, the painting continues to serve as a connection between Theo and his mother. Tartt has noted in interviews that *The Goldfinch* becomes a "talisman," suggesting that: "when he carries it around, he himself compares it to a holy article of protection [...] it gives him an invisible sense of rightness and it reminds him of his mother."[18] This is somewhat unsurprising, since the last moments Theo shares with Audrey are when they see the painting together

[18] BBC Arts, "Donna Tartt on *The Goldfinch*," video, 2:07, November 04, 2016. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04f5zf8.

and she talks about her love of the artwork. As long as he carries around the canvas, he carries around a memory of his mother.

The tragedy of the explosion which kills Theo's mother at the start of *The Goldfinch* forces Theo to grow up too fast, effectively ending his childhood at the point of the explosion. Theo himself refers to his life as Before and After his mother's death and states that he believes "things would have turned out better if she had lived" (p. 7). Although Theo lives with the Barbours for some time, and then with his father, the stability of the home he shared with his mother is gone, and he is consequently forced into an adult world of drugs, alcoholism, gambling and physical abuse. Without his mother or a reliable father to steer him through these challenges, Theo instead relies upon his connection to the painting. He views it as a refuge, as something he can hold on to regardless of where he lives and who is his guardian. He views it as his own possession, despite understanding that he has, in effect, stolen it from the museum where his mother died.

With this in mind, it is interesting to consider the symbolism of the painting and its subject. In a lecture conducted at The Frick museum in New York, Edwin Buijsen, the Head of Collections at the Maritshaus, discussed the painting techniques used in Fabritius' masterpiece. Buijsen noted one of the key characteristics of Dutch genre painting in the seventeenth century was the emphasis on the everyday.[19] At first glance, this fits with Fabritius' painting, since goldfinches were considered pets in antiquity, making them an everyday occurrence. Emilie Gordenker, director of the Mauritshuis, explained that

[19] The Frick Collection, "Behind the Scenes of Everyday Life: Dutch Genre Painting," Vimeo, 1:01:59, November 06, 2013. https://www.frick.org/interact/edwin_buijsen

"they are intelligent birds and they sing beautifully [...] so they were very popular pets."[20] The Dutch word for goldfinch, *het putterje* translates roughly as 'drawing water from a well' since the birds were often taught to draw drinking water using a small bucket.[21] In his lecture, Buijsen also drew attention to the broad, fluid brushstrokes and how "from a distance it looks like the bird is alive and could move any moment."[22] Buijsen suggests that this gives the painting the quality of an illusion, since the bird appears lifelike from a distance but not up close. In essence, Fabritius is able to use his brushstroke technique to turn the everyday image of the bird into something unique and extraordinary. Thus the painting can be directly compared to Theo Decker's experiences in Tartt's *The Goldfinch*. If the painting transforms something ordinary into something extraordinary using an illusionary technique, then Tartt's novel too seeks to turn Theo's coming-of-age narrative (something we can consider ordinary, since everyone grows up) into something unique through the tragedies and experiences he encounters as he matures into adulthood.

Yet the goldfinch in the painting symbolises much more than a once-common pet. According to Hope B Werness, goldfinches have often been linked to the Christian theme of salvation in European art at the time in which Fabritius painted. In part, this can be explained by the variety of paintings depicting the goldfinch perched on the hand of the Christ child.[23] Perhaps more fittingly, depictions of the goldfinch in art often stem from the legend

[20] Alastair Sooke, "The Intriguing Mystery of The Goldfinch," *BBC Culture,* http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20161207-the-intriguing-mystery-of-the-goldfinch (accessed: 07/08/2018) created: December 12th 2016.
[21] Sooke, "The Intriguing Mystery of The Goldfinch."
[22] The Frick Collection, "Behind the Scenes of Everyday Life: Dutch Genre Painting."
[23] Hope B. Werness, *Continuum Encyclopaedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art* (London, Continuum, 2003) p. 198.

that the bird earned the red feathers on the side of its head by drawing a bloody thorn from the crown Jesus wore on the way to his crucifixion.[24] This legend has led to the goldfinch becoming a symbol of salvation in art, including Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) and Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna Litta* (1490-1491). Perhaps more significantly, however, the tragedy of Fabritius the artist offers readers a much clearer parallel between Tartt's protagonist and the painting he attaches himself to; one which does not require any cultural capital to grasp. Having seen Egbert Van der Poel's "smouldering wasteland" pictures in the gallery, Audrey explains their context to Theo (pp. 29-30). She informs him that Van der Poel was Fabritius' neighbour and witnessed the disastrous explosion at Delft which killed Fabritius and destroyed almost all of his life's work. Later, while living with his father in Las Vegas, Theo reads about the Delft explosion in a textbook and connects it to his own experience through the concept of 'time warps':

> You could study the connections for years and never work it out—it was all about things coming together, things falling apart, *time warp,* my mother standing out in front of the museum when time flickered and the light went funny, uncertainties hovering on the edge of a vast brightness. The stray chance that might, or might not, change everything […] *Time warp:* a way of seeing things twice, or more than twice […] so too, the explosion in Delft was part of a complex of events that ricocheted into the present […] when I looked at the painting, I felt the same sense of convergence on a single point: a flickering sun-struck instant that existed now and forever (p. 341).

[24] Werness, *Continuum Encyclopaedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art* p. 198.

Clearly, Theo sees the bizarre parallels between his mother's death in the explosion at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Fabritius' demise in the explosion in Delft several centuries earlier. Tartt herself has expressed surprise at this connection, which she uncovered during research for the book. In interviews with Kirsty Wark for BBC, Tartt contends that, despite knowing she wanted to put *The Goldfinch* painting in the book before she ever saw the original, she did not know about the explosion in Delft until after she started writing the novel.[25] She later states that she felt it was a brilliant coincidence she could not pass up: "when all the cards start falling into place like that, you know that you've got your subject [...] I thought, well God has just given this to me. It was just a gift."[26]

Thus, Tartt supplies her readers with two distinct ways to interpret the painting, one obscure and the other very much overt. Yet both interpretations link back to the theme of hope in *The Goldfinch*. The Christian symbolism of the goldfinch is obscure knowledge, available only to those with enough cultural capital to decode the message in the painting. Yet despite the fact that this symbolism is hidden from the majority of Tartt's readers, the emotional connections between Tartt's protagonist and *The Goldfinch* painting remain visible to every reader, regardless of cultural capital. As she states in interviews, Fabritius' masterpiece is "a very deep little painting."[27] Both the symbolism of the bird itself and the history of the painting supply readers with a rich seam of possible interpretations. Speaking to Wark, Tartt notes that the painting can represent "captivity, escape and bravery and brightness even in

[25] BBC Interview, "Donna Tartt Discusses *The Goldfinch*."
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*

the face of really dark, terrible circumstances."[28] One of the ways she achieves this connection is through Theo's emotional attachment to the painting, and how it gives him hope even in dark and seemingly hopeless situations. Therefore, the chain attaching the goldfinch to the water feeder in the painting begins to represent two things: captivity and survival.

It is possible to see the chain as a sign of captivity. The symbol of a chained goldfinch has previously been used in literature by authors such as Charles Dickens to symbolize slavery.[29] Presumably, the bird in the painting is a pet, and it has been chained to its feeder to prevent it escaping. Theo himself initially views the chain in this context. When he first sees the painting, he silently agrees with Pippa's horror at the sight of the chain: "the shackled foot, the chain was horrible" (p. 30). Later, his views on the bird's captivity begin to cloud with his fondness for the painting: "only occasionally did I notice the chain on the finch's ankle, or think what a cruel life for a living creature—fluttering briefly, always forced to land in the same hopeless place" (p. 342). This comment comes at a pivotal moment for Theo. At the time, he is living in Las Vegas with his alcoholic father who has mounting gambling debts. In a section shortly after Theo's observations on the painting, his dad physically attacks him because Theo questions the need to phone his lawyer in New York to request a large transfer of money. As such, there are clear parallels between Theo being trapped at his father's home, and the bird who is chained and unable to fly.

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[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Dutch News NL, "10 Things You Might Like to Know about The Goldfinch," https://www.dutchnews.nl/features/2015/09/10-things-you-might-like-to-know-about-the-goldfinch/ (accessed: 07/08/2018) created: September 25th 2015.

However, another interpretation of the chain is also worth exploring. If we consider the goldfinch in the painting as a counterpart for Theo Decker, then it is possible to see the chain not as a means of captivity, but as a means of tying Theo to life through survival. Throughout the novel, several events and passages support this interpretation. As mentioned above, Tartt deliberately links the explosion in the gallery in New York with the explosion in the gallery in Delft. In both instances, tragedy occurs. Yet while people and other objects are destroyed in the disasters, the painting of *The Goldfinch* managed to escape damage in both events. In essence, it is an item that has miraculously been "saved from history." As such, the painting is, like Theo himself, a survivor of sorts. Throughout the remainder of his chaotic childhood, Theo is able to look at the painting and remind himself not only of his mother, but of his connection to the "larger beauty" of life. In spite of being forced to live with his alcoholic father in the wake of his mother's death, Theo eventually manages to escape back to his home city of New York, where he is able to craft a new life for himself and take some agency over his choices. This life is made possible because, earlier in the novel, Theo establishes significant human connections to others through both his experience of the explosion and Fabritius' painting.

In the aftermath of the explosion, Theo converses with a dying man named Welty, whom he saw wandering the gallery with his adopted niece, Pippa. In Welty's final, somewhat delirious moments, he demands that Theo save the goldfinch painting. Next, Welty presses his family ring into Theo's hand: "He was mumbling and tugging at his index finger. He'd taken his ring off, a heavy gold ring with a carved stone; he was trying to give it to me" (p.

44). Despite Theo's reluctance, he takes the ring, and listens to Welty's last coherent piece of dialogue before the man dies: "'Hobart and Blackwell,' he said, in a voice like he was drowning from the inside out. 'Ring the green bell'" (p. 44). Though this seems nonsensical at the time, Theo later relies on this piece of advice when he feels the urge to talk to someone about the tragedy and the ring supplies him with the ability to forge a human connection with Hobie. Theo "held out the ring" to Hobie who "looked at the ring and then at me [Theo]" (p. 137). Hobie asks where Theo got the ring, to which Theo replies: "He gave it to me [...] he told me to bring it here" (p. 137). In the end, possession of the ring seems to be enough to get Theo through the door of Hobie's home. Theo is then able to pass along the details of Welty's death to Hobie. This suggests that there is a connection being established between Hobie, who was Welty's business partner and friend, and Theo, who watched Welty die. Theo feels a significant connection to Welty because of this. At one point he talks about a word he learned in class, *consanguinity* (meaning to be joined in blood). This he links this to seeing Welty die, stating: "the old man's face had been so torn up and ruined I couldn't even say what he'd looked like, and yet I remembered all too well the warm slick feel of his blood on my hands [...] and it made me understand why some people talked about blood brothers and how blood bonded people together" (p. 123).

By returning the ring to Hobie and discussing details of Welty's death, Theo is able to form a meaningful connection to Hobie that he returns to again and again throughout *The Goldfinch* when he feels like he needs someone to protect him. While living at the Barbours, this takes the form of a kind of therapy. Hobie is the one adult who treats Theo "as a companion and

conversationalist in [his] own right" (p. 189). Others, such as Theo's teachers, social workers and psychiatrist either patronise Theo by treating him like a child, or draw attention over and over again to the tragedy he experienced and expect him to relive it. Consequently, Hobie's ability to treat Theo as a friend and equal allows Theo to feel comfortable around him. Later in the novel, this develops into what is arguably a father and son relationship. Following the death of his own father in a drunk-driving accident, Theo flees back to New York. He turns up at Hobie's with a raging fever and nowhere else to go, having just been brushed off by Mr. Barbour. Hobie takes Theo under his wing, treating him almost like a son. At one point, Theo describes the joy he feels when someone mistakenly calls Hobie his father whilst in a café: "it thrilled me, deplorably, when people mistook Hobie for my parent […] why, I thought sadly, as he returned with his topcoat over his arm, why hadn't my mother married someone like him--?" (p. 449). Significantly too, Tartt uses an epigram from Friedrich Schiller at the start of part four: "it is not flesh and blood, but hearts which make us fathers and sons" (p. 481).

From this, it is clear that Theo views Hobie as more of a father figure than his own dad. Part of this is because Hobie looks more like a father to Theo. Hobie, Theo notes, could have been like one of "those older European dads you saw on the East Side—polished, portly, self-possessed dads on their second marriages […] in his gallery-going clothes, sipping his espresso and looking out peacefully at the street, he might have been a Swiss industrial magnate or a restauranteur with a Michelin star or two" (p. 449). For Theo, someone like Hobie, who is interested in highbrow culture, is the binary opposite of his own father, who enjoyed the showy city of Las Vegas, with its

"lights and rackets, its trash and daydreams, its projections and hollow facades" (p. 261). It is interesting then, that this connection to Hobie is made possible by Welty giving Theo his family ring. Tartt hints at a strong relationship between Welty and Hobie prior to Welty's death; at one point, Hobie recalls how Welty gave him a job to help him escape his abusive father. With this in consideration, the passing of Welty's family ring from the man to the boy signifies that Welty is giving Theo his place within the family. Furthermore, Hobie also acknowledges that he believed that "someone had pocketed [the ring] at the morgue" (p. 154). Once again then, it seems that Theo has saved an item from history. While not able to save Welty, Theo was able to save the painting Welty cared about and his family ring, and thus forge a connection with a like-minded individual. The ring is representative not of its monetary value, but rather its emotional worth to Hobie. As a consequence, Hobie and his friends view the passing of the ring to be a deliberate decision made by Welty in the last moments of his life, rather than a moment of confusion. Mrs. Dufrees', Hobie's closest friend, tells Theo that "Welty knew *exactly* what he was doing by giving you that ring. Because by giving it to you, he brought you straight here to Hobie." (p. 846). At the end of the novel, Hobie reveals Welty's passion for Fabritius' painting, noting: "well he was a person like us [himself and Theo], he got attached to objects, they had personalities and souls to him" (p. 846). Thus, the handing over of the ring from Welty to Theo seems more like a deliberate act, rather than a chance occurrence. Theo was only there in the final moments of Welty's life because they were both viewing Fabritius' painting in the gallery. Theo's willingness to save the painting appears to be a test in Welty's eyes. Once he has proved

worthy, Welty talks to him about culture briefly before handing over the ring, perhaps recognising a kindred soul through a mutual show of *Einfühlung*.

Tartt sharply contrasts this emotional bond over a mutual love of art with the cold world of private collections in *The Goldfinch*. Upperclass families such as the Barbours collect and store valuable works of art in their homes or in special storage facilities, where only their family have access to the painting. Through her exploration of this issue, Tartt looks at the problem of ownership in the art-world. A distinct parallel is made in the novel: between Theo's mother, who regularly skipped lunch to save money for tickets to visit galleries, and characters like Horst who want to keep art all to themselves. Theo's mother talks at length about her passion for art. At the start of the novel Tartt, writing from Theo's perspective, discusses how studying art history was one of the most important things to happen to his mother. She is capable of loving art, even before she has seen the originals, through reproductions and images in books (p. 29). This marks Audrey Decker as distinctly different to characters such as Mrs Barbour and Horst. Later in the novel, when Theo visits Mrs. Barbour following the deaths of Andy and Mr. Barbour, he is allowed into Mrs. Barbour's bedroom, which was shut to him as a child. Inside, he learns of the treasures she has locked away: "nine or ten Old Master drawings: the flight into Egypt, Jacob and the Angel, circle of Rembrandt mostly though there was a tiny pen-and-brown-ink of Christ washing the feet of Saint Peter that was so deftly done [...] it might have been from Rembrandt's own hand" (p. 496). When Theo questions Mrs. Barbour, she reveals that it is in fact an original Rembrandt. Naturally, this creates a distinct dichotomy between characters like Audrey who are passionate about

art and have an emotional connection to it, or *Einfühlung,* and those like Mrs. Barbour who seek to keep art for themselves, shut off from the rest of the world. Additionally, it is worth noting that Audrey does possess cultural capital in regards to art, as showcased at the start of the novel when she visits the gallery with Theo. Audrey's knowledge has been hard won. She has earned it through self-sacrifice and study, saving up money to afford to visit the paintings, and attending classes and doing coursework in order to learn about the subject she loves. Mrs. Barbour also possesses cultural capital. However, unlike Audrey, she also possesses the financial means to purchase art. In addition to this, her knowledge of art, as far as the book hints, comes from inheriting art from her family, and from having the time to attend auctions and other functions which give her the ability to learn about such things.

Similarly, when Theo encounters Horst, he notices the van Goyen painting, which he initially mistakes for a Corot (p. 651). This, Theo is informed, is "not for sale," suggesting that Horst views the painting as a possession rather than a piece of culture that should be shared with the world (p. 651). Though Horst reveals his own emotional connection to *The Goldfinch* painting, having seen it at the Maritshaus on the only occasion his father took him to a gallery, this sense of connection is rather undone when he refers to the painting as "your finch," to Theo, again suggesting ownership (p. 650). Horst's goal is eventually revealed in Amsterdam; he plans to steal the painting from Theo and keep it for himself, even if it entails murdering Theo and his friend Boris. Thus, through Horst, Tartt is able to imply that there is a certain subsect of people who care more about personal possession of art and the sense of power it gives a person to be able to hide valuable works of culture

from the rest of the world. Later, other distinctions are also made between Hobie, who repairs furniture like a "doctor," and Mrs. Barbour who arranges her antique furniture like "taxidermy" (p. 468 and p. 184). Hobie's passion for furniture and antiques is made apparent the first time Theo meets him. Theo sees Hobie's wooden Noah's Ark and believes it to be Pippa's: "the animals were so lovingly arranged (the big cats ignoring each other; the male peacock turned away from his hen to admire his reflection in the toaster) I could imagine her spending hours arranging them and trying to get them exactly right" (p. 155). To Theo, this shows a level of dedication to the pleasure of art. Interestingly too, Hobie mentions in passing that he is a "cabinet-maker, not a businessman" immediately positioning himself as a maker and repairer of art, rather than a person who profits from it (p. 153).

This is again different from Mrs. Barbour's approach. She is someone who, according to Hobie, has a "good eye" for antiques (p. 151). However, while it is immediately clear to readers that Hobie is passionate about art, Mrs. Barbour is portrayed as little more than a private collector who picks work for the financial value and importance of the piece. Theo compounds this when he tells Hobie that he can almost see the furniture in Hobie's shop like animals with "different personalities" (p. 184). When he comes to describing the Barbour's home however, he likens their arrangement of antique furniture to stuffed, dead animals: "at the Barbour's [...] it's more like those scenes with the taxidermy animals at the Natural History museum" (p. 184). He adds to this, stating: "the way she [Mrs. Barbour] has it set up, a table on its own with a light on it, and all the stuff arranged so you're not supposed to touch it—it's like those dioramas they place around the yak or whatever, to show its

habitat" (p. 185). Here, Theo seems to be pointing at the coldness of Mrs. Barbour's arrangement of the furniture. It is not chaotic and pleasant like in Hobie's workshop but is instead positioned with an eye for the viewer. Considering Mrs. Barbour's social standing, it seems likely that this careful arrangement of antiques is to show off her wealthy status and importance to guests at charity functions at her home. Tartt stresses here that there is a significant difference between people like Hobie and Audrey, who enjoy art because it is beautiful and worth admiring, and highbrow people like Mrs. Barbour who view art as a financial asset and one which should be kept private and away from others. Although Tartt does not overtly weigh in on this debate between public and private ownership of art, it is worth pointing out that *The Goldfinch* ends with Theo anonymously handing over the painting to the authorities so that it can be returned to the Maritshaus and displayed for the public once more. This suggests that, to some extent, Tartt recognises the importance of maintaining art galleries for public use, so that others can gain cultural capital and their own understanding of art through their own experiences of it.

As a result, Tartt's most recent novel emerges as a distinctly middlebrow book since the novel uses some highbrow art history terminology alongside Tartt's own research into art and antiques to enable her readers to "self-educate" themselves through picking up and reading her work. Furthermore, while Tartt's novel is a work of fiction and does not directly invoke Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, it is possible to examine *The Goldfinch* through this prism of cultural hierarchy and contained knowledge. Throughout *The Goldfinch,* Tartt addresses the tensions between highbrow

versus lowbrow attitudes towards art. By concentrating largely on the significance of Carel Fabritius' painting through the use of both *ekphrasis* and *enargeia,* Tartt is able to identify the debate between highbrow knowledge of form and school, and lowbrow passion and emotion towards art. Thus, Tartt and *The Goldfinch* appear to fall somewhere in the liminal space between the two, suggesting that both, to a greater or lesser extent, are important. Although Tartt does acknowledge the importance of art history and knowledge of culture in her most recent novel, the majority of the book is a coming-of-age narrative, in which a boy who loses his mother uses her favourite paining as a kind of talisman to guide him into adulthood. In raising and addressing these frictions in American culture, Tartt is able to argue that human connections and emotions towards art are essential to the human experience of culture, even more so than having significant cultural capital. In one of the most moving scenes of the novel, Hobie states passionately his own opinions on art:

> If a painting really works down in your heart and changes the way you see, and think, and feel, you don't think 'oh I love this picture because it's universal.' 'I love this painting because it speaks to all mankind.' That's not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It's a secret whisper in an alleyway. *Psst, you. Hey kid. Yes, you* (p. 849).

Hobie's monologue eloquently captures the entire ethos of *The Goldfinch*. More than knowledge, more than experience, the human ability to *feel* towards art is one of the most important driving forces behind the continuation of its creation. The beauty of art then, as Tartt frequently claims in *The Goldfinch* is the way it speaks to the individual, regardless of their knowledge or prior experience of art. By creating a novel which explores and

examines art from this perspective, Tartt is allowing readers with some, little or even no cultural knowledge of art to learn and engage through her fiction in a way which is inherently middlebrow.

Conclusion: Middlebrow Matters

"To talk nonsense in one's own way is almost better than to talk a truth in someone else's."[1]

At first glance, Donna Tartt's three published novels do not appear to have much in common. Written over a span of three decades, each book deals with a distinctly different casts of characters and settings. These range from the aristocratic, hedonistic scholars of *The Secret History* to the white trash Ratliffs of Mississippi in *The Little Friend* and the myriad of art aficionados in *The Goldfinch*. However, despite surface level differences, all Tartt's published books to date have common threads. In each text, Tartt explores the tensions between highbrow and lowbrow culture, addressing the issue of literary and cultural hierarchy both in her fiction and in the market which publishes her work.

These tensions between highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow culture existed long before *The Secret History*'s publication. Several scholars, including Jaime Harker and Joan Shelley Rubin, have traced the importance of the period between 1920 and 1960 and the "Battle of the Brows" as a sign of the growing chasm between the brows in culture. Additionally, Nicola Humble contends that problems emerge in literature when individual reading tastes are critiqued and stereotyped, noting that portraying popular fiction readers as "undiscriminating, without judgement, a passive consumer gulping down

[1] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. David McDuff. (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 242.

rubbish by the gallon," is both prejudiced and reductive.[2] Furthermore, the concept of middlebrow culture has often been contested by critics such as Dwight Macdonald, owing to the belief that the middlebrow attempts to copy, corrupt and water-down elements of 'superior' highbrow taste and offer it to the masses.[3] This in turn opens up debates surrounding both the legitimacy of middlebrow culture and the anxieties concerning its potential usurpation of highbrow culture in the chain of literary hierarchy.

Scholarship on the brows wanes after 1960, suggesting to some extent that the problem of taste and hierarchy is no longer considered an issue in American culture. Yet it is apparent from the treatment of contemporary middlebrow authors like Tartt and Zadie Smith that the tensions between the brows still exist, albeit in a less discernible form. However, Tartt's novels repeatedly attempt to engage with this debate and draw consciously or unconsciously on Pierre Bourdieu's theories concerning cultural capital and tastes in society. This engagement is primarily achieved through the common themes of the books themselves. Significantly, in each Tartt novel, tensions occur between characters who are arguably highbrow (the Greek class in *The Secret History,* the Cleves in *The Little Friend* and the Barbours in *The Goldfinch*) and those who are considered lowbrow or middlebrow. This occurs in *The Secret History* when an outsider wishes to gain access and acceptance into a group of higher social standing. This is also done through a character self-educating themselves into gaining a higher level of cultural capital, such as with Audrey Decker in *The Goldfinch*. In *The Little Friend,* this distinction

[2] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 86.
[3] Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult" p. 3.

is even more defined as the once-aristocratic Cleve family are portrayed as foils to the white trash Ratliffs.

As such, each of Tartt's novels approach class-tensions through the lens of cultural capital, possession of which acts as a boundary between highbrow and lowbrow or middlebrow characters. Tartt's novels chime with Humble's belief that although middlebrow fiction is often treated with disdain by critics, such texts "skilfully manipulate the apparently contrasting narrative pleasures, walking a tightrope between the overly emotional (lowbrow) and the entirely cerebral (highbrow)."[4] Often then, middlebrow texts appeal to readers who wish to find a balance between a pleasurable and easy read (lowbrow) and a book which concerns itself with difficult narrative styles and techniques which will allow the reader to feel as though they are gaining cultural capital through a challenging book. The themes and styles of a middlebrow book may be complex so long as the plot and characters are enjoyable and gripping enough to keep readers turning pages. This seemingly contrasting set of desires has led to middlebrow fiction often being used as a means for people to "self-educate" themselves, since middlebrow books often contain knowledge which will elevate a reader's cultural capital. Significantly, the balance between the emotional and the cerebral is achieved in Tartt's books through the themes she chooses to write about. Tartt often elects to write from the point of view of the outsider character, thus allowing readers to glean understanding of the things her protagonists try and learn in order to 'fit in' to the society of their choosing. Again, this theme is present in all three

[4] Humble, "The Reader of Popular Fiction," p. 95.

texts, ranging from knowledge of Classics in *The Secret History,* Houdini-esque escapism in *The Little Friend* and antiques in *The Goldfinch*.

Furthermore, through the use of paratextual devices such as book cover jackets and quotes from critics included in the first few pages of each novel, Tartt's status as a middlebrow author is cemented. *The Secret History* and *The Little Friend* have simple, minimalist cover designs, which are intended to appeal to both highbrow and lowbrow readers. With *The Goldfinch,* the use of the famous Fabritius painting as the focal point of the cover allows readers to feel linked to the art in the novel. This is significant as it again allows for a middlebrow "self-education." People picking up the book know from the cover design that the novel will feature knowledge of art history, and those who wish to learn more about the subject through fiction are therefore enticed to purchase the novel. Additionally, quotes from reviews used at the start of each book have often been taken from a mixture of both highbrow and lowbrow sources, from the *New Yorker* to popular author Stephen King. This again suggests the publishers who put together the paratextual elements of Tartt's novels are aware that audiences for the texts range in cultural capital and tastes. Therefore, this mixture of reviews from a range of media sources allows for inclusion of all brows and implies to readers that the novels are so well-written that they are able to transcend the prejudices of the literary hierarchy system.

While it is difficult to know Tartt's intentions behind the texts, owing to her reclusive image, it is possible to infer from the paratextual elements of her published works, the reception of these novels, and the content of the books themselves, that she is writing from a distinctly middlebrow perspective. By

highlighting issues of class prejudice and the anxieties surrounding cultural capital in American culture, Tartt has produced three novels which can not only be seen as enjoyable for readers, but which can also be seen as far more intellectually stimulating and nuanced than they might initially appear.

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