Natural Violence and Escaping Reason
Reading gender and nature in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

*Malin Niklasson*
## Content

**Introduction**.............................................................................................................................1

- **Purpose** ............................................................................................................................2
- **Material** ...........................................................................................................................3
- **Previous research** ............................................................................................................3
- **Theory & method** .............................................................................................................4

**Analysis**..................................................................................................................................10

- **Hampden College** .............................................................................................................10
- **Camilla** .............................................................................................................................14
- **Henry** ..............................................................................................................................18

**Concluding discussion** ........................................................................................................23

**Summary**................................................................................................................................25

**Works cited**............................................................................................................................27
Introduction

In ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis. An analysis of the interrelated dominations of nature – psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and nonhuman nature – and the historic position of women in relation to those forms of domination is the starting point of ecofeminist theory.¹

Those are the words of Ynestra King. While the ideas and methods of analysis put into play by ecofeminist literary criticism is far from new, it is perhaps the intersectionality inherent in the field that makes it so topical and interesting at the moment.

With an increase in knowledge in the last few decades regarding the connection between different hierarchies of power and how they interact with one another, ecofeminism is a variation of a number of different ways to analyse power with the instrument of intersectional criticism. To illuminate and understand the link between different types social structures and domination, we need to explore the expressions of culture and art in our Western tradition and history. We need to keep a wide and ever-evolving perspective on what is worth exploring, and what benefits may be found in looking past not just the traditional canon of Western writing, but also the canon of literature having been labelled ecofeminist. What can we learn from applying ecofeminist theory to contemporary fiction dealing with dualisms at the root of our Western civilisation – Ancient Greece? How can we interpret Ancient themes and principles regarding reason and nature, male and female, mind and body, as represented in modern fiction? What may we find if we look upon a best-selling thriller through the lens of the ecofeminist literary theory evolved at the very same time as the book itself was written?

For this study I will perform an ecofeminist reading of the best-selling novel *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt. The book is the author's debut, and had tremendous commercial success, both in its country of origin, the US, and in the Swedish market. Some would even say that it has reached a level of cult status.² Donna Tartt is an American author, born in Greenwood, Mississippi and educated at University of Mississippi and Bennington College, Vermont. *The Secret History* was first published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and was followed by the two novels *The Little Friend* (2002) and *The Goldfinch* (2013). *The Goldfinch* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014. Tartt has also published a number of short stories and works of non-fiction.


² Hannah Rosefield, “The cult of Donna Tartt”, *Prospect*, 2013-02-12, [https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blog/donna-tartt-secret-history-20-year-anniversary/#.UxHphfI5Ok0](https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blog/donna-tartt-secret-history-20-year-anniversary/#.UxHphfI5Ok0) (2014-05-11).
The Secret History is a thriller, or a murder mystery, set in an American east-coast environment. The plot is centered around a group of students at a fictive private liberal arts college named Hampden College, in Vermont, New England. It is told by a first-person narrator, who is also an active character in the plot. The story starts with the narrator, a young man named Richard Papen, deciding to tell a story from his past. He goes back to how he left his sleepy Californian home town, Plano, to move to Hampden. There he initially attempts to continue his studies in Greek. The Greek teacher however is a peculiar man named Julian Morrow, who only takes on five students at a time, and therefore has no room for Richard in his class. Julian teaches in his own office, and becomes somewhat of a special tutor for his students, all of them majoring in Classics.

After befriending the small group of students, Richard is accepted into the class and into the exclusive clique of friends made up by the five students. The group consists of a set of twins named Charles and Camilla Macaulay, and three other young men named Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy and Edmund 'Bunny' Corcoran. They are all quite eccentric and live a life of decadence with alcohol and drugs.

The intrigue of the story escalates as it is revealed that Henry, Francis and the twins have staged a Bacchanal in the woods near Francis' house and accidentally killed a local farmer while delirious. When Bunny finds out about the killing, he becomes a threat to the group by taunting and blackmailing them. In fear of him outing the secret, the rest of the group murders him by pushing him of a cliff into a ravine. Following the murder, the group goes through a time of paranoia and guilt, which ends up tearing the group apart. When Julian finds out, he washes his hands of the event and disappears from the college. The group is threatened by exposure as Charles is driven mad with jealousy and resentment towards Henry for having a relationship with Camilla. Charles goes after Henry with a gun. Henry ends up killing himself to save the rest of the group.

Purpose

It is my intention to examine how an ecofeminist perspective can be applied to a reading of The Secret History. I aim to show how different hierarchies or structures of power regarding gender and the nature/reason relation are portrayed and interact with each other in the text, which deals with themes of Ancient Greek culture and philosophy. I have decided to base my analysis mainly on the theoretical writings of Val Plumwood, which were published during the 1990's, i.e. the same decade as The Secret History was published. Given the proximity in time, there is also a second purpose to this study. By examining the aforementioned work, I hope to be able to show how the ecofeminist literary criticism of the time corresponds with a work of popular fiction from the same period of time. In order to fulfil the purpose of this essay, I pose the following questions.
How does the concept of nature correspond with the concept of reason in the portrayal of Hampden College in *The Secret History*?

How do the concepts of masculine/feminine correspond with the concepts of nature/reason in the portrayal of the characters Camilla and Henry in *The Secret History*?

**Material**

The object of my study and the primary source material will be the novel *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, published in the US in 1992 and in Sweden the following year. The edition I will refer to from here on is the second edition published by Penguin Books. Quotations or abstracts from the novel will be referred to with the page number in brackets throughout the essay.

**Previous research**

Despite its commercial success, *The Secret History* has been the object of very little research within the field of literary criticism, most likely due to it being published only 22 years ago, and being a debut in a genre of popular literature. From the search I have conducted I have found that Katherina Dodou, assistant professor in English at Högskolan Dalarna have written two conference papers about the book: *Greek Gods in the Twilight Zone: Liminality in Donna Tartt's The Secret History* (2005) and *Gray Haze and Luminous Light: Narrative Mode and Mood in Donna Tartt's The Secret History* (2006).

However, there has been no study of *The Secret History* (or any other of Donna Tartt's novels) through an ecofeminist perspective, to be found, in Sweden or in the international field of literary research. What I have been able to determine through my inquiries in general, is that a large part of the ecofeminist literary criticism has mainly been focused on works of fiction including themes that more or less explicitly revolves around environmental awareness, ecology and the interrelation between humanity and nature. In addition to this, ecofeminist literary theory has highlighted texts written in a different literary tradition than the Western. This is something I will take into consideration, as I have chosen a Western work, in which similar themes are less explicit (at least in terms of environmental awareness).

Although the *The Secret History* has not been the subject of much literary research, it was reviewed upon release in 1992 by some large and prestigious magazines and papers, among them *The New York Times, The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Washington Post*. 

3
In the review in *The Washington Post Book World*, critic Amanda Vaill calls attention to the many literary references in the book - Maecenas, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Laforgue among others, coming to the conclusion that these symbolise the bond to civilisation which the group of protagonists attempts to break. The review presents the chapter where Julian says that the more intelligent man is, the more repressed and the more he needs a way of channelling the primitive impulses that he is trying to kill, as the thesis of *The Secret History*.³

While the critic presents a summary of the plot and the events of the book, very little is said for the portrayal of nature or gender specifically in the book. Vaill points out the portrayal of Bunny as the character which most “forcefully rise from the pages”, and notes that in comparison to him the others seem “rather bloodless”. Furthermore Vaill goes on to criticise the “thematic machinery” invoked by the book's large amount of literary references, which she feels is a burden to the story and the characters.⁴

The review in *The New York Times* however focuses less on the literary references and more on the plot, on the group's idolising view of Julian and on Bunny's murder. Critic Michiko Kakutani also points out hints in the book to Henry symbolising Dionysus or the Devil. This review focuses more on Henry as the leader of the group, and Julian's influence on the events. The book is described as “[f]orceful, cerebral and impeccably controlled”, which is ironic, since those are also the characteristics of Henry as a character.⁵ None of the reviews make any statements regarding feminism or gender stereotyping, and to the extent nature is mentioned it is only in reference to the Bacchanal.

**Theory & method**

For my theoretical approach I use a number of texts from the field of ecofeminist literary criticism. I will use Val Plumwood's theory on the dualistic structure of Western thought and how it relates to domination and hierarchies of power through what she calls “the master model” in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993). I also use Camille Paglia's book *Sexual Personae* (1990) as a theoretical perspective on the Apollonian/Dionysian dualism and how it manifests itself in the novel.

To the extent it is relevant, I will use additional texts from the ecofeminist field of study in order to present a historical background of the ecofeminist field, as well as historical handbooks to

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.
explain the themes of Ancient Greek mythology in the book. I have chosen to perform a close reading of two of the main characters in the novel. This is partly in order to make the material manageable given the size of the essay. But it is also because these characters are involved in a romantic relationship with each other, as well as essential characters for the dynamic of power within the group, which makes them especially interesting to discuss. I will also perform a close reading of the portrayal of Hampden College, hoping to illuminate another aspect of what an ecofeminist reading may uncover or analyse.

**Ecofeminist literary theory**

Ecofeminism is a movement, rather than just a field of literary criticism. The movement is both theoretical and activist, and it has emerged at the intersection of two different types of power analysis. Ecofeminist literary criticism intertwines a feminist and an ecological perspective.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecofeminism as a theoretical discourse on the subject of the link between the oppression of women and the subordination of nature.\(^6\) In other words, ecofeminist theory is based on the idea that the evolution of the Western industrial civilisation (and it's oppression of nature) interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subordination of women. This, due to the preconception that women are closer to the nature than men are.“Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy”, and no natural hierarchies exists. Instead, we justify social domination by projecting man-made hierarchies onto nature.\(^7\)

This idea of earth as a coherent and interconnected web, and that everything and everyone is a part of nature, *are nature itself*, appears in the work of Barbara T. Gates as well. In “A Root of Ecofeminism” she objects to the preconception that ecofeminism is essentialist and that it supports the idea that women have a stronger connection to nature than men do. Ecofeminism, Gates argues, is built on the belief that we are all a part of nature, which means no one can be closer to nature than someone else.\(^8\)

Ecofeminism links questions from both the field of feminist literary criticism and the field of ecocriticism, for example by examining the dualistic structures within Western thought, what function they have in the creation of the symbolic structures of gender, sexuality, nature and culture.\(^9\) In the introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, we

---

9 Glotfelty 1996, p. XXII-XXIV.
read that:

One project of ecofeminism has involved a critique of the dualisms of white Western patriarchal culture, dualisms such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, human/animal and white/nonwhite, which construct white male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, people of color, animals, and the natural world.\(^\text{10}\)

**Dualism**

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood states that “the western model of human/nature relations has the properties of a dualism”.\(^\text{11}\) But it is not only the studies of ecology and feminism and the corresponding dualisms of these fields (human/nature and masculine/feminine) which hold a key position within Western thought. Thus it is a question of the identity of a master, rather than simply a masculine identity when it comes to the dominating part of dualism. According to Plumwood, the interlocking dualisms run like “a fault-line” through the Western conceptual system, creating a structure. She lists 17 contrasting pairs that she deems to be the key elements of this structure, but points out that the list can never be complete, as any distinction can be treated as a dualism. Among the most relevant pairs for my analysis are reason/nature, male/female, male/female, mind/body (nature) and human/nature (non-human).\(^\text{12}\)

Plumwood argues that gender plays an important role in this structure, through the concept of reason. This is because reason is a part of gender ideals, more specifically the male ideal, which claims to be universal and often invoke “the elite male identity of the master”. Hence, reading down the left side of the list is to read a list of qualities traditionally associated with men and humanity, while the opposite side of the list show qualities traditionally excluded from the male ideal and thereby appropriated to women.\(^\text{13}\)

As for the logic of dualism, Plumwood emphasises the difference between a dichotomy and dualism: “[a] dualism is more than a relation of dichotomy. […] In dualistic construction, as in hierarchy, the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior.”\(^\text{14}\)

Moreover, Plumwood explains that while a hierarchy can be open to change, once it becomes cemented by a process of domination which forms culture and constructs identity, the inferiorised group almost always is forced into internalising this inferiorisation into its identity and

---

\(^{10}\) Gaard & Murphy 1998, p. 9.
\(^{11}\) Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 1993, p. 41.
\(^{12}\) The rest of the list includes the pairs culture/nature, rationality/animality, reason/emotion, universal/particular, civilised/primitive, production/reproduction, subject/object, among others.
\(^{13}\) Plumwood 1993, p. 42-44.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 47.
play a part in its own undervaluation. Such a hierarchical relationship is given an intense and
established cultural expression in the form of a dualism, creating the perception that equality is
completely impossible. She lists the following properties as being characteristic for dualism:
backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism and homogenisation /
stereotyping.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Backgrounding} is a form of denial in which the dominant group (the master) denies being
dependent on the dominated group (the slave). This can be done in different ways, for example by
creating a hierarchy of activities, where the activities of the slave is seen as unimportant.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Radical exclusion} is not a term of separation but rather hyperseparation, which the master
uses to establish the other as inferior, and not just different from itself. By emphasising, magnifying
or even maximising the number or the importance of differences between itself and the other, the
master doesn't just create the inferiority, but also attempts to eliminate the possibility of solidarity
and identification between a dominate and a subordinate. It creates polarisation, since \textit{radical
exclusion} can only be possible if the illusion of a separation which is not open to change is
created.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Incorporation} or relational definition is another important aspect of dualism. Not only does
the master separate itself from the inferior, it also defines the other as a negative, something lacking,
in relation to itself. By claiming that the master's qualities are primary, the slave is defined by what
it lacks, what it is not.\textsuperscript{18}

The concept of \textit{instrumentalism} is explained as how the relationship created between the two
sides of a dualism may be portrayed as being for the good of everyone, the master as well as the
other, but in reality the other is forced to prioritise the needs of the master. The subordinate becomes
an instrument, a means to the master's end. Since the needs and demands of the other is denied, the
other becomes objectified, and is measured by its usefulness as a “resource”.\textsuperscript{19}

Another aspect important in dualism, is \textit{homogenisation or stereotyping}. For dualism to
work, the dominated group needs to appear “suitably homogeneous”, otherwise it cannot conform
to or confirm its constructed nature. Thus the master group denies the differences within the
dominated group, since diversity within the “others” can lead to the undermining of stereotypes and
prejudice against the dominated group. Plumwood exemplifies \textit{homogenisation} within gender
stereotyping with the idea of a homogeneous and eternal male (or female) 'nature'.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} Plumwood 1993, p. 47-55.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 48-49.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 49-52.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 53.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 53-55.
Dualism in Platonic philosophy

In the dualistic structures of Western thought ageing back to Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, the reason/nature division is connected to the mind/body division. In Plato's account, the body (along with passion) is to be dominated and controlled by reason, and only used in the interest of the mind.

In Platonic philosophy, nature can mean a great many things, according to Plumwood. Nature can encompass body, passion, emotion, the visible world, animal, wild non-human landscape and beings, slave, barbarian, feminine, reproductive nature, realm of changes (of becoming, biological life) matter as excluded from cosmos (chaos) or universal order. Only in the last sense (where nature is the rational order of the universe, in opposition to chaos) is nature defined as something positive. One must remember that nature as a universal order (cosmos) includes all workings of rational scientific principles, even when it is applied to the destruction of the environment. And in all the other cases, nature is defined as the inferior to reason. Platonic philosophy is based on the dualism that puts the sphere of reason (and all things associated with it) above the sphere of nature (and all things associated with it).

The Apollonian and the Dionysian

For my interpretation of the terms Apollonian and Dionysian, I have chosen to base my analysis on the definitions of these concepts given in the book Sexual Personae, by Camille Paglia. Since this is not a work of ecofeminist theory, I have chosen to use only the chapter dedicated to Apollo and Dionysus for my interpretation, and disregard the rest of Paglia's work. In the book she often uses the term chthon in opposition to Apollonian or in lieu of things associated with the Dionysian. Chthon means earth. This is not an uncomplicated term, as in Greek mythology, Dionysus is an Olympian, ouranic, god (a god of the sky) while chthonian gods, spirits or deities are generally gods living below the earth (gods of the earth). However, the cults of the ouranic gods existed side by side with the chthonian cults, and people made little distinction between the two. Dionysus lived, not on Mount Olympus and not in the earth like the chthonian deities, but within liquids such as wine and semen, but as Dionysus function somewhat included the earth, he can be seen as a chthonian deity.

Paglia states that the Apollonian is the line drawn against nature. She quotes Nietzsche’s analysis of the Apollonian-Dionysian relationship, as she claims that Apollo is the god of Western individuation, and of exclusion. As Apollo links society and religion, he is an expression of how the

Greek gods symbolise a social order, or hierarchy, as they are authoritarian and repressive. Apollonian is that which is put in opposition to the chthonian “nature”.23

Sexual Personae then goes on to describe the Greek god of Dionysus as a god of liquidity, of an invisible flood of organic life that connects us to plants and animals. The liquidity, she argues, is demonstrated in the mature female body and experience, in menstruation, childbirth and lactation. Dionysus is the brutality of mother nature, connected to all things utterly non-human and non-moral. This brutality can be seen for example in sparagmos, the dismemberment and bloody mutilation of an animal or human being in which Bacchanals end.24

“Dionysus […] shifts through all forms of being, high to low. Human, animal, plant, mineral: none has special status. All are equalized and sacralized in the continuum of natural energy. Dionysus leveling the great chain of being, respects no hierarchy.” Sparagmos, according to the Greek writer and historian Plutarch, is a metaphor for this.25

"The Apollonian and Dionysian, two great Western principles, govern sexual personae in life and art. My theory is this: Dionysius is identification, Apollo objectification.”26 Paglia describes the relation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian as a human dilemma of order versus energy. Apollo is what constitutes civilisation, but also convention and repression, while Dionysus is energy unbound in all its madness and destructiveness. The Apollonian is the created ideal while the Dionysian is nature dissolving matter into energy in order to begin again.27

Traditional accounts of the myth of Dionysus and the cult dedicated to him, such as the writings of Apollodorus of Athens focus on his ability to drive madness into humans (especially women) when he is rejected.28 Contemporary textbooks recount largely the same thing, that women were thought to be more susceptible to the power of Dionysus and that “[m]any rejected him and his cult of ecstatic identification with transhuman forces. They might as well have denied the tides of the sea or the hurricane, and those who denied him paid for their false understanding.”29

Apollo is only accounted for briefly in the writings of Apollodorus, and in contemporary sources he is described as having “embodied aristocratic values and the power possessed by men of knowledge […] His connections with the inner world made him the god of prophecy.”30

The concept of nature in the following analysis will be read through descriptions of the landscape, the weather and that which is portrayed as non-human or animal, connected to the body

23 Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae [Electronic resource], 1990, p. 72-73.
24 Paglia 1990, p. 95.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 96.
27 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 135.
or in opposition to that which constitutes reason. Culture will be read as that which is portrayed as human-made, tied to the education of the mind, morality and that which is portrayed as reason. The concepts of masculine and feminine will be read in relation to that which is traditionally associated with men or women in Western thought, or that which is explicitly described as masculine or feminine. It will also be read in relation to the exclusion or inclusion, and portrayal of characters introduced as men or women, and their sexuality.

Analysis

First and foremost, it should be said that *The Secret History* is a popular thriller, and as such it follows a number of conventions belonging to the genre. The most relevant of these is perhaps the use of stereotypes. The book plays on the classic stereotypes of a coming-of-age story, with the sensitive young scholar, the wise old professor and the exploration of love and sexuality through a seemingly unattainable love interest. On a meta-level it can also be read that the form is actually the message, the literary and historical references being stereotypical for academic exclusivity and youthful bragging, as well as a way to play on other thrillers and coming-of-age stories in literary history.

Hampden College

*The Secret History* is narrated by the active, explicit first-person narrator Richard, and it is through his eyes and memories that the reader is made acquainted with both the places where the story is set and the other characters. The main part of the plot is set at Hampden College, a progressive liberal arts college in Vermont, New England. The area is described as something out of a childhood storybook: “Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.” (p. 10)

At first, Hampden is described through its contrast to the narrator's home town Plano, in northern California. Plano is portrayed as “flat land, and filling stations and dust” (p. 114) with “waves of heat rising from the blacktop”. (p. 5) The narrator also states that his background in Plano is “disposable as a plastic cup” (p. 5), and appears to almost regard both Plano and his past there to be “dead” in a way. This is emphasised both in his decision to reinvent a new past when he arrives at Hampden and in the decision to never return. Vegetation, mountains and snow (the Hampden countryside) becomes a symbol for life and culture, while drought, plains and heat symbolises a lifeless existence. Interestingly, Hampden can be described as a symbol for both nature and reason (or culture, as reason is associated with in Western thought), while Plano is
counterpointed against both of them – as a symbol for mass culture, commercialism or even “working class culture”. The exclusion of nature in the portrayal of Plano is evident in the way it is described through human-made “things” rather than landscape, for example the aforementioned “filling stations” and “plastic cups”. This can be seen as either a way of highlighting the oppression of the working class (perpetuated in the exclusion of the working class from both nature and culture) or as a way of emphasising the need for both nature and culture to be nurtured in order for life to function.

**Hampden, winter and death**

In the portrayal of Hampden and its surroundings, nature appears to be slightly *backgrounded* at first, in contrast to the reason of the Greek scholars and everything associated with them. But soon it shifts, and nature becomes an acting subject, mainly in the form of winter.

In the depiction of the winter months in Hampden nature becomes associated with death and mortality. The narrator is left alone in Hampden, as he chooses to stay behind instead of going back to California for winter break. Here, nature appears to be cruel and unforgiving. Staying in Hampden is a way of avoiding the lifeless existence in Plano (that literally holds no place for him any longer, as his bedroom has been made into a sewing room). However, the winter in Hampden is another kind of lifeless existence, as the narrator loses track of time, becomes “invisible” and is about to die from exposure without anyone knowing where he is. Richard becomes paranoid and starts to doubt his own existence:

> And each time I crossed the footbridge over the river, twice a day, I had to stop and scoop in the coffee-colored snow at the road's edge until I found a decent-sized rock. I would then lean over the icy railing and drop it into the rapid current [...] perhaps some attempt to prove to it that I, though invisible, did exist. (p. 131)

He also describes falling down “like a dead man” and dreaming of seeing his own corpse, frozen to death. Hampden never becomes a place of “dead” nature or lifelessness, far from it. Instead it is more of a forceful acting subject than ever, it is Richard who becomes dead. He is no longer in control of his own destiny and left to the power of nature. His life is stripped of the reason and intellectual content that the rest of the group and Julian stand for. Richard's body deteriorates more and more, the longer he is separated from anything but the cold weather, but it is perhaps his mind that is affected the most.

Cold weather, rain and snow is a recurring and symbolic part of the portrayal of nature in the
book. The snow plays an important role in Bunny's murder, not just as a thrilling backdrop, but as an active subject as it hides his body beneath it. In addition to this, there are a lot of examples of how the portrayal of the nature around Hampden, and particularly the weather, is closely associated with destruction and death. Just before Bunny's murder, Richard talks about the weather and the woods as ominous: “[t]his is Kansas before the cyclone hits” (p. 296) and “[t]he woods were deathly still, more forbidding than I had ever seen them – green and black and stagnant, dark with the smells of mud and rot”. (p. 298) And while there are plenty of relatively subtle references such as “... icicles cracked and plunged like daggers from the sharp peaks of the roof” (p. 266) to the nature symbolising death and danger, there are also more explicit remarks to the nature itself being deadly. For example Henry claiming that “upstate Vermont. It's a primitive place. People die violent natural deaths all the time”. (p. 190)

The symbolism of death is significant in Western thought, based on Ancient Greek culture but also Christianity. Platonic philosophy is, according to Val Plumwood, both anti-ecological and anti-life.31 This is due to the idea that the meaning of life on earth is actually the afterlife, the so-called “world of Forms”, the sublime (or in Christianity's case Heaven). Plumwood attributes this partly to the age of Plato being strongly influenced by war, and that in order for people to want to fight and die for something, there needs to be something else – another life – worth sacrificing the earth and mortal life for. This is essentially the idea of ‘eternal life’ for humans as the meaning of death.32

In Plato's philosophy, reason takes the place of honour when it comes to overcoming death in the form of nature, and nature in the form of death.33 Reason is given supremacy over “the world of changes”, and the fear of death.34 In the novel, Julian can be seen representing this idea, as he glorifies death and terror, claiming that beauty is terror and the one true desire of humans is to live forever. (p. 41-45) While Julian is essentially the one to encourage the group to arrange the Bacchanal, and through it – live only in the body and the moment, so close to death as nature that they feel more alive then ever, he represents the idea of eternal life through reason. Living without thinking is not the same as living forever, instead one must contain the escape from reason only to the Bacchanal itself, much like a temporary carnival.

The need to restrict Dionysian frenzy to the temporary Bacchanal is mentioned by Julian in class:

32 Ibid., p. 97-98.
33 The Platonic view of death can be seen as a response to the Hellenistic idea of death as a tragic shadow over life, or the Homeric perception that honour and the afterlife is a mere consolation for death, but never a replacement for life.
34 Plumwood 1993, p. 97-99
Julian refers to the Dionysian passions as “destructive”, and in the civilised ideal of the Apollonian, they are. Emotion, darkness, nature and animal – these are all concepts traditionally associated with mortality, the female gender and nature. It's the concept of chaos and energy – destructive to the universal order of reason. And while he glorifies the ritual, and encourages the group to pursue this “escape from reason”, he also praises the civilisation and intelligence causing the repression that warrants the need for “escape”. He compares the group to the ancients and calls alternative methods to combat the repression “vulgar and less efficient”. This demonstrates how firm the dualism is in his ideals, that he cannot consider a “civilisation” where the “repression of the old, animal self” is not necessary, or in which the dualisms emotion/reason, animal/human or nature/human are renegotiated into non-hierarchical systems of thought. Or as described in Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, the dualism is cemented as an “unbridgeable separation, a separation not open to change.”

Open windows are also a recurring image in The Secret History, perhaps as a symbol for how nature finds a way into the closed rooms of reason and culture of Hampden. The last chapter of the book, before the epilogue, ends with Henry shooting himself to death, and even here the imagery is present. The draft of the door makes the open window inhale the curtains, before breathing them out, “with something like a sigh” (p. 605-606). Nature becomes the acting subject with which the narrator's recollection ends, exhaling a sigh at the death, like a character in a tragic drama, getting the last word in the end.

The Lyceum and the country house
The place on campus which holds Julian's office is called the Lyceum. The term is a reference to Ancient Greek academics, most commonly connected to the school of Aristotle, and the Lyceum at Hampden is located near a grove, just like the original Lyceum. The name is a reference to Apollo, and as the very safe haven on campus were only Julian and the Greek class is allowed, it is a place where one enters into “the sublime” during lessons. This is like a concentrated Hampden in the

36 Ibid., p. 51.
academic, Apollonian sense, a place reserved only for reason. In the Lyceum, it is not only the world of non-academics that is excluded, but also the realm of nature (as an uncontrolled sphere with needs of its own). As Bunny once also points out, by the rules of Ancient Greece, that would also mean the exclusion of women. Thus Camilla is an exception in this case, something between the upper and lower spheres of the dualistic structure.

After Bunny's murder the grove outside the Lyceum is desecrated by the large amount of people having helped with the search. (p. 395) It is run down and there is litter on the ground. This can be read as a disturbance in the world of reason, a mirror image of how the Dionysian is in constant battle with the Apollonian. While Dionysus is associated with nature, he is also, according to Paglia, the god of the masses, not separating between high and low, energy passing through everything. Dionysus is chaos, and can be seen as mirrored in the chaos disrupting the reason of the Lyceum and Hampden in general.38

The Bacchanal staged by Henry, Francis and the twins does not take place at Hampden College, but in the woods near Francis' family's country house. It is portrayed as an Eden of childish laziness, close to the woods and a lake, with a large library of books and a piano. This is the place where the group spends the weekends in the beginning of the book, isolated from the college with the exception of Julian coming to dinner from time to time. It is the perfect Apollonian home that the group wants to build for themselves – which is made explicit in a conversation about moving there permanently after graduation. It is also the place of the planning and execution of the Bacchanal, and once it has been staged, the house is more or less abandoned for the winter, perhaps echoing the days of innocence as lost and the change from Apollonian to Dionysian, from reason to nature.

Camilla
Camilla Macaulay is the twin sister of Charles, and the only female student in the Greek class. In the beginning she is mainly described in relation to Charles. They are very often described as merely “the twins”, and it is told early on that they are orphans. Camilla is described as beautiful, both through the eyes of the narrator and by Bunny, who describes her as unfeminine by saying that she “runs around half the time in her brother's sloppy old clothes” and that she “[l]ooks too much like her brother”. He also remarks that she lacks “a mother's firm hand”. (p. 61) The narrator states that she has a low, throaty voice, slightly masculine posture and boy-feet. At one point, Richard even remarks that Camilla “looked like a little boy”. (p. 510) When faced with the revelation of their incest, Richard admits to having fantasised about the twins having sex, partly due to their

38 Paglia 1990, p. 97.
resemblance of each other as a thrilling aspect (p. 513), suggesting that Camilla's sexual appeal to him is based on her masculinity.

**Camilla, Artemis and Apollonian divinity**

Richard remarks early on that both twins look angelic in their blonde hair and pale clothes. On several occasions Camilla is connected with the divine or dream-like, and she is compared to a statue of Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon. (p. 61) Diana, was both a goddess of childbirth and female fertility, but also the protector of nature and animals – making her the goddess of hunting. She is the Roman equivalent of the Greek Artemis in classic mythology.\(^{39}\)

The connection to Diana/Artemis is made even stronger by the fact that Camilla is the one who transforms into a deer and is “chased” by the others through the woods. According to Greek mythology, Artemis once transformed herself into a deer in order to make two hunters kill each other.\(^{40}\) It is also said that she “enjoyed human sacrifice”.\(^{41}\)

Artemis is described by Paglia in *Sexual Personae* as “a sexual persona, a projected personality. […] she is a condensation of [the Olympians'] Apollonian character”.\(^{42}\) She is Amazonian will and sexuality, but in an Apollonian individualistic way. Artemis was, despite being goddess of childbirth, a virgin and according to Paglia this has very little to do with religious sexual morality the way we know it, and more to do with her being purely Apollonian. “She is Western personality as a *thing*, matter cleansed of the chthonian.” and “[s]he is one of the Greeks' greatest Apollonian ideas, pitiless and frigid.”\(^{43}\) This can also be seen in relation to Camilla being described as unfeminine, as disliking women like Marion (Bunny's stereotypical “girlish” girlfriend) and having the subject of how her gender was perceived in Ancient Greek as a sore spot. She tries to embody the same Apollonian ideals as the rest of the group, and as Richard remarks, she stands as calm as a “Madonna” at the sight of Bunny falling off the cliff, displaying Artemis-like pitilessness.

Towards the end of the novel, when her relationship with Henry is made public, Richard thinks about Pluto and Persephone, god and goddess of the underworld (and death), while referring to Henry and Camilla. (p. 555) According to the myth, Persephone is abducted by Pluto into the underworld, which suggests Camilla is no longer seen as the individualistic, unfeminine huntress, but rather a victim of the violent and unpredictable Henry.\(^{44}\) On the other hand, despite how passive she is portrayed in the murders in comparison to the others, she seems, along with Henry, to be

---


\(^{40}\) Apollodorus 1997, p. 38.


\(^{42}\) Paglia 1990, p. 76.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 76-80.

\(^{44}\) Apollodorus 1997, p. 28-34.
rather emotionally unaffected by the deaths. Either way, it is a change in the references to Apollo and Artemis as Olympians, and the gods of the underworld as chthonian.

The loss of innocence is present as a theme in the portrayal of Camilla. Both her perceived innocence in the eyes of Richard, first as he sees her indifference in the face of violence and death, but also as he learns about her incestuous relationship with Charles, her sexual encounters with Francis and her relationship with Henry. Before these revelations, the narrative is scattered with remarks implying her innocence. Her kiss tasting of popsicle, or the fact that “she was not exactly the sort of girl one expected to find making out with someone in a locked bathroom”. (p. 449) The loss of innocence in the eyes of others can be connected to honour. In Western thought, as explained earlier, the dualistic structure is such that qualities traditionally associated with women are regarded as inferior to those associated with men. As men are part of the dominating side of the dualistic structure, women are more likely to be instrumentalised and stereotyped, as is exemplified by Charles’ behaviour towards Camilla. While they are both jealous of each other's lovers, he is the one who puts value into her honour, which is much more prone to be devalued due to her sexual behaviour than his is. Paglia describes the relationship between Apollo and Artemis as follows:

Apollo and Artemis represent not conflict but consonance. They are mirror images, male and female versions of one personality, a motif not returning until the incestuous brother-sister pairs of Romanticism. The fraternal androgyne Apollo and Artemis are, with Athena, the most militant of Olympians in the war against chthonian nature.\(^{45}\)

In *The Secret History*, Charles may be taught the same Apollonian ideals of law, justice and beauty as the rest of the group, and he is portrayed as somewhat androgynous; a mirror image of his sister, sleeping with men and women alike. Yet he is far more connected to the body than Henry, for instance. He has a drinking problem, and his violent, carnal qualities are portrayed as more out of control. It is likely that he can be seen more as a reflection of Camilla, rather than a reincarnation of Apollo himself.

Francis remarks that Camilla would live in the same openly promiscuous manner as Charles, was it not for his jealousy and possessiveness. He also goes on to say that “[n]either one cares about anybody but himself – or herself, as the case may be”. (p. 516) Perhaps this is because they are not in fact two different characters, but one and the same. They do not need to care for one another, only for themselves, as that is the same thing. In the epilogue, it is written that Camilla and Charles no are no longer on speaking terms. Francis' statement about Camilla only caring for herself is interesting, since Henry says more or less the same thing about himself to Richard. (p. 556) This

\(^{45}\) Paglia 1990, p. 74.
corresponds quite well with the Apollonian ideal of individuality, and the superiority of the self in the self/other dualism.\textsuperscript{46}

\section*{Camilla, nature and gender stereotyping}

As previously discussed, Camilla is transformed into a deer during the Bacchanal in the woods, and in addition to the connection to the Artemis-myth, this can be seen in the context of her being the only female in the group, and in dualistic Western thought women are traditionally associated with animals to a higher extent than men. On the other hand, when told in Camilla's point of view, she remembers a pack of dogs, which indicates that she might not be the only one who transformed into an animal. This theory is supported by the claim that the group ran for miles, in bare feet, with the men chasing Camilla as a deer. If this is the case, the connection between femininity and animals is somewhat undermined, subscribing instead to more modern connotations with man as the animalistic virility in his general 'nature' and as a hunter of women to conquer.

The light is of importance as well when it comes to the portrayal of Camilla. Richard often describes her sitting by the window, or how his emotions and his perception of her is changed or magnified by the way she is illuminated by the sunlight or moonlight. Perhaps this is to be attributed to his love for her, but it is also worth noting that the sun and the light is traditionally thought of as Apollonian (and associated with Artemis) in Greek culture whilst darkness is generally thought of as Dionysian.\textsuperscript{47} At one point, Richard sees Camilla illuminated by a ray of sunlight in his room, which invokes the impulse to strangle or rape her. He attributes this to a “terrible sweetness” which boils up in him. (p. 546) He wants to dominate her, to hurt her, as he feels himself betrayed by her relationship with Henry and her sexual history. The sexual innocence he imagined in her, that he is attracted to, is in fact not there, and she is reduced from the virginal Artemis to a woman with sexual desire, with a sexual body, and therefore she is to be dominated according to the master/slave dynamic.

Camilla as the only female in the group, is not portrayed as particularly feminine, except through the desire and affection of the narrator. At one point, Richard addresses the question of her being the only woman in the group explicitly:

\begin{quote}
Being the only female in what was basically a boys' club must have been difficult for her. Miraculously, she didn't compensate by becoming hard or quarrelsome. She was still a girl, a slight lovely girl who lay in bed and are chocolates, a girl whose hair smelled like hyacinth and whose scarves fluttered jauntily in the breeze. But strange and marvelous as she was, a wisp of silk in a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Plumwood 1993, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{47} Paglia, 1990, p. 73.
forest of black wool, she was not the fragile creature one would have her seem. In many ways she
was as cool and competent as Henry; tough-minded and solitary in her habits, and in many ways
as aloof. […] Things would have been terribly strange and unbalanced without her. She was the
Queen who finished out the suit of dark Jacks, dark King and Joker. (p. 252)

This episode is interesting, because the reader is used to Camilla as an individual with needs of her
own either being excluded by being represented only as a “twin”, or described as masculine and
unattainable. The quote is an example of gender stereotyping, suggesting that a woman generally
can't be the only female without becoming “quarrelsome” in order to compensate, and describing
Camilla's “typically girlish” qualities. Camilla's presence is said to “balance” the group dynamic,
even though one out of five hardly suggests a balance in representation. This is quite common in
gender stereotyping, females in male-dominated situations are often perceived by men as being of a
larger number than they actually are. If the group was equally divided by male and female, it is
likely that it would be perceived as a majority of women.

Still, Camilla is also described as an equal to Henry, not as a complement or counterpoint,
but by being the same as him. A mirror image, like Apollo and Artemis, making her transcend the
dualistic structure which her gender is a part of, challenging the perception that the Dionysian is
feminine, and the Apollonian masculine.

**Henry**

Henry Winter is portrayed as the leader of the group, which becomes more and more clear as the
plot progresses. “He, in some senses, was the author of this drama”, to use the words of the narrator.
(p. 396) Henry is well over six feet, with dark hair, square jaw and coarse, pale skin. He wears “tiny,
old-fashioned, [glasses] with round steel rims”. (p. 17) He wears dark English suits and is said to
have blank, expressionless eyes.

At first, Henry is portrayed as not only stoic and a prodigy of intelligence, more specifically
philology, but also as quite rude and mysterious. Throughout the story, his significance for the plot
grows, and roughly half-way through the book it becomes clear that he is the dominant male in the
group, the one the others look to for guidance. Henry however, looks to Julian for guidance, for the
ideal he wants to embody himself. At one point Henry calls Julian “a divinity in our midst” (p. 356)
and while Julian has affection for Henry as well, and favours him to the rest of the group, it is not a
relationship of equals.
Henry, Julian and Apollonian reason

Julian, resembling the great teachers of Ancient Greece (like Aristotle, Pliny and Plato) not only teaches their philosophy but embodies their ideals as well. The aristocratic but well-mannered contempt with which he looks upon those intellectually inferior to him, his principle-based sympathy for royalists rather than revolutionaries (conserving a 'natural order', or hierarchical system) (p. 394), his “blindness” to the personal sphere (p. 365) and his dislike of big displays of emotion. (p. 485) All these aspects of his character reflect not only his view of reason as superior to nature, but his place in the master model as the dominating. The personal sphere is traditionally associated with women, and an example of how Julian here follows the idea that the pursuit or love of women is of a lower standing than the “Platonic” love between men, is his tendency to blame Bunny's problems or faults on his girlfriend Marion (a woman who is portrayed as a 'girliegirl' and not a masculine scholar like Camilla, nonetheless). (p. 271)

Henry, like Julian, believes in the definition of justice in Plato's *The Republic*: “[j]ustice, in a society, is when each level of a hierarchy works within its place and is content with it”. It is safe to assume that a white, rich, intellectual, young, heterosexual man like Henry sees himself at the top of such a hierarchy (or in the words of Plumwood, “the master”) and that his decisions throughout the book can be seen in relation to that. However, the *radical exclusion* of the qualities appropriated to the lower side of a dualistic structures means a form of repression also within the dominant group. Henry seeks a way to express the things he represses in himself in order to live up to the Apollonian ideals Julian teaches and embodies, in the Bacchanal. In *Sexual Personae* Paglia writes that Dionysus is a liberator, the god who enables you for a short time to stop being yourself, and thereby set you free.48

This thought corresponds with the quote marking the division between the two parts of the novel – the one ending with Bunny's murder and the one describing its aftermath. The quote is attributed to E.R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational* and says: “Dionysus [is] the Master of Illusions, who could make a vine grow out of a ship's plank, and in general enable his votaries to see the world as the world's not.” (p.307) The Bacchanal, while allowing Henry to see “the world as the world's not”, the freedom is meant to be short-lived.

Henry and the Bacchanal

Regarding the proceedings of the Bacchanal, Henry tells Richard that “[d]uality ceased to exist” when they were in Dionysian ecstasy, however, according to the Apollonian/Dionysian relationship as a dualism of Western thought, being in a purely Dionysian state would mean being that which is

excluded from the Apollonian, and only that. Incorporation, as an aspect of dualism means that the inferior (Dionysian) is defined by what it isn't, in relation to the superior (Apollonian). If we are to interpret Henry's statement in relation to this, it would mean that the Dionysian frenzy eradicates duality, and therein stops being Dionysian by definition, becoming something else, something undefined – or inexplicable, when using the tools of Western thought.

The significance of the body in the Bacchanal is intriguing, as Henry explains that the Dionysian ritual required cleanliness of the body, through fasting and bathing. The idea of the body being unclean seems strangely Apollonian, and so does the superstition which occurs afterwards when Henry makes the twins, Francis and himself, “purify” their blood with pig's blood because they have been “polluted” by the murder of the farmer. In fact, Apollo being the god of prophecy points to another aspect of Henry as a character, referencing his likeness to Apollo. Henry, is said in the beginning of the book to be good at reading bird signs, and when a pregnant dog runs in front of the car he sees it as a “bad omen”. Even more prophetic seems when spring comes fast and warm in April, and he states that it “won't last”, before the snow returns to bury Bunny's body. (p. 272)

Yet another interesting aspect of the body when reading Henry as a character, is his headaches. At particularly stressful moments, Henry gets serious migraines, rendering him in a helpless state. It is as if nature shows its power over him by having his own body betray him, playing with him in a most brutal and unforgiving manner. According to Platonic philosophy, the decay of the body is insignificant, since the mind is the more valued part of the dualism. The earthly body is mortal, and reason is more important than strength. The headache rendering Henry incapable of rational thought could be seen to depict a struggle between mind and body (or even how the mortal body stands in the way of sublime reason), but it can also been interpreted as a criticism against the hyperseparation of the mind from the body altogether.

Henry tries to use poisonous mushrooms as murder method, going as far as testing it on his neighbour's dogs, this can be seen as an example of how Henry tries to use nature for his own means. He tries to control nature, as well as treat the animals as if they are of a lower order, and can be killed if it is in the interest of the master. As Plumwood's master model suggests, the master denies the needs and aspects of the inferior which can not be of use to the master itself. Henry tries to instrumentalise nature in a manner that pleases his needs or his sense of beauty, cultivating flowers in his garden but exterminating insects, or even by relying on the weather for the day of Bunny's murder. Henry explicitly does not want to apply logic or reason to Bunny's murder, as that is something human-made, and therefore traceable by humans. Instead he relies on nature to play its

49 Plumwood 1993, p. 52.
50 Ibid., p. 100.
51 Ibid., p. 53.
Henry, Bunny's murder and the aftermath

As discussed earlier, Julian teaches the group about beauty in the beginning of the novel. His reasoning is that death is the mother of beauty, and beauty is terror, while the one desire of the human is to live forever. This is a recurring theme in *The Secret History*. When Camilla steps on a shard of glass, she is described as having “her head thrown back like a dead girl's, and the curve of her throat beautiful and lifeless”. (p. 108) Bunny's murder is said to have brought out a feeling within both Henry and Richard of lucidity, making everything appear in “Technicolor” and when the tragic search for Bunny takes place, Julian is pleased with the aesthetics of it. Even Henry himself is said to be more beautiful after Bunny's murder, after hardly being considered handsome at all. This intimate connection between death, life and beauty is also portrayed in Henry's reasoning after the two murders:

'Except that my life, for the most part, has been very stale and colorless. Dead, I mean. The world has always been an empty place to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I felt dead in everything I did.' He brushed the dirt from his hands. 'But then it changed,' he said. 'The night I killed that man.' [...] 'It was the most important night of my life', he said calmly. 'It enabled me to do what I've always wanted most. [...] To live without thinking.' (p. 556-557)

Ironically, to live without thinking is, by the rules of the dualistic master model of Western thought, the opposite of living forever. As thinking is associated with the mind (and reason), it is separate and superior to the body (and nature). The body is mortal, and so the only way to live forever would be to live without body, only in the mind. While Henry feels most alive when he is close to violence and death (in the sense “death as nature”), he is also further from eternal life and the sublime “world of Forms” than ever, as it is essentially anti-life.

Henry sees the *sparagmos*, the violence, the power over life and death as a part of nature, and this is enhanced by the allusions to nature being deadly in the book. Even his last name, Winter seems to connect him to this association of cold, death and nature. However, his reasoning after the Bacchanal is as pragmatic as anyone's, and as he invokes the Platonic view of justice, it is clear that he sees his right to use violence as the superior in some way to those he uses it against, a sanction granted by the very Apollonian ideal he was trying to escape. This Apollonian approach to violence, this “law of the successful” is perhaps also what establishes his place at the top of a hierarchy of fear. Camilla claims that she is “afraid of Charles and Charles is afraid of Henry”. (p. 547) Charles'
violence against Camilla is the violence of a drunk jealous person, an irrational violence of mental instability and emotion. Henry's violence is the justified violence of reason. It is the means to an end. In the Bacchanal, when Henry kills the farmer in Dionysian frenzy, the violence is Dionysian, irrational and beyond morality, natural in the sense “nature as chaos”. Whether Henry's violence is one in control through reason, or out of control through nature, Henry establishes himself as the strongest, the successful.

For instance, Henry himself refers to murdering Bunny as “redistribution of matter”. (p. 339) Matter is the inferior in the reason/matter (physicality) dualism. At first glance, it may seem as an example of the domination described above as Henry objectifies Bunny. But taking upon himself to redistribute matter, could, according to Paglia also be seen as an identification with the Dionysian. It could also be seen as a pure identification with nature (in the sense “nature as death”).

Towards the end of the book, Henry feels himself betrayed by Julian, and the discovery that the Apollonian ideal he has strived to lived by, is a lie, and that Julian is simply cold and selfish. In the final chapters of the book, Julian's philosophy, highly selective and strictly dualistic, is clearly criticised: “Julian […] will never be a scholar of the very first rate, and that is because he is only capable of seeing things on a selective basis.” (p. 577) Julian's betrayal is also described by Richard as the reason for Henry's suicide: “I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use. Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice.” (p. 612)

Despite being in love with Camilla, Henry admits to having loved Julian more than anyone in the world, including his own father. (p. 586) Through Julian's abandonment of the group in order to save his reputation, he betrays not only the ideals he has taught them, but also the highest form of love. In Platonic philosophy, the higher form of love is the love between two men, which uses bodily beauty as a way of reaching the higher sphere of the forms (the sublime). This love is more a love of the idea in the person, than love for the person itself. The pursuit of women and reproduction is a part of the lower form of love.

The novel ends with an epilogue, narrating the events after Henry's suicide until a fictional present day of some sort. At the end of the epilogue, Richard describes a dream he's had of Henry, in which he meets him in the afterlife, asking him if he's happy there. Henry replies: “'Not particularly' [...] 'But you're not very happy where you are, either.'” (p. 629) This implies that the afterlife, the world of Forms (where reason is what overcomes death) was not Henry's true desire.

---

52 Plumwood 1993, p. 43.
53 Paglia 1990, p. 96.
54 Plumwood 1993, p. 81.
However, the life he desired to live, without duality – with Apollonian order and Dionysian energy, was not possible in his earthly existence either.

**Concluding discussion**

In this essay, I have attempted to show how the dualistic structures of Western thought correspond with each other in the portrayal of two characters and the setting in a novel dealing with themes of Ancient Greek culture and philosophy. The discussion of these themes aim to show how they can be understood through an ecofeminist perspective. From the analysis of a close reading of the novel, the following conclusions can be made.

In the *The Secret History* the main characters struggle with the duality of Western thought as constructed and represented in Greek philosophy and art, and in the Apollonian ideals they are taught and encouraged to follow by their teacher Julian. Reason (and everything associated with it) is described as superior to nature (and everything associated with it). As they (but perhaps mainly Henry) attempt to escape this reason and become non-human (i.e. in identification with nature and “the old, animal self”) during a Dionysian ritual, they are unable to reconcile the idea of an Apollonian hierarchy of reason with the Dionysian concept of living without thinking, accepting no hierarchies – identifying themselves with nature. As Henry's repressed and civilised personality has been relieved of its’ “destructive passions” in the Bacchanal, his ordered life falls apart. One might interpret this as the Bacchanal having unleashed darkness and madness in him and the other characters, but had it not been for the strict repression of emotions due to the civilised intelligence of the Apollonian (male) master identity and its hierarchical nature, there would be nothing to escape from.

In the novel, allusions to mythology and ancient history in the portrayal of the characters, such as Camilla's resemblance to Artemis, Julian's resemblance to the great teachers of Ancient Greece and Henry's split Apollonian and Dionysian identity, to name a few, creates a meta-level on which these themes are given a wider historical context. The meta-level is a part of how Camilla, Henry and Hampden College is depicted in relation to the reason/nature and masculine/feminine dualisms, as it also includes the connection between nature and death, between masculinity and reason and the connection between the Dionysian, the feminine and nature. These connections, as we have seen from the writings of Plumwood are a part of the dualistic structure of Western thought.

A close reading reveals that nature as an acting subject is often portrayed through the unpredictable and seasonal weather in Hampden. Nature being depicted as an acting subject is
significant, as the Apollonian, according to Paglia, is also objectification. Being able to identify oneself with nature is Dionysian. Therefore, the depiction of nature being used by humans as a means to an end is not subversive in an ecofeminist view, but nature acting on its own needs regardless of it being “a resource” for humanity is. Even more so, nature being portrayed not as a counterpoint to humanity, but as a whole in which humanity is included, serves as a criticism of the anti-ecological structure of dualism in western thought.

From an ecofeminist standpoint the novel's portrayal of Camilla may be seen as potentially subversive. Camilla transcends the norm of a female in the master model. While she is, through her intertextual association with Artemis and her transformation into a deer, connected with nature and animals, she is also through the same association connected to the Apollonian ideal of cold rationality, hierarchy and reason.

Camilla is masculine, and in that she earns both acceptance in the classroom of “the sublime” and the sexual desire of most of the men in her group. This could be seen as reinforcing the Apollonian ideal of love between two men being superior to the love between man and woman. However, in the end she is still reduced to her gender, as Henry admits to loving Julian more, and dying for Julian. Camilla, for all her pitilessness when faced with death is still associated with life, which is Dionysian, female, inferior. And as she is illuminated by the light in Richard's room, and he sees her, he gets the impulse to kill her, to rape her, the need to dominate her in a sexual way and assert the master identity of his gender.

Camilla as a character demonstrates how, by radical exclusion and homogenisation, “the other” can be undermined by the dualism of Western thought, even as one tries to undermine or transcend the structure itself. She illuminates the inherent flaws of the structure, exposing the hypocrisy of it, and could thereby considered subversive and non-hierarchical, despite being defeated by the constraints of gender stereotyping.

Using Val Plumwood's master model as a theoretical perspective on the reading of Henry as a character, one discovers that he is portrayed as upholding the ideal of the master (being male and associated with reason, civilisation and rationality). He (as a reflection of the ideals Julian stand for) can be seen as a symbol for the dominating sphere in the dualistic structure of Western thought.

In the Bacchanal, Henry wishes to do more than just express his repressed primitive instincts, he wants to step out of his humanity (and by the rule of radical exclusion) become non-human (i.e. animal). What is forgotten here is that humans are also animals. The very base of the human/animal dualism is the idea that what separates the human from the animal is reason, therefore the Dionysian must be in constant battle with the Apollonian, and that is why Henry can only live without thinking if he surrenders himself to nature completely. Identifying himself as a
part of nature, and adopting a non-hierarchical structure of thought would perhaps enable him to
live both in the mind and in the body – reason and nature not excluded from one another. However,
the master defines himself by exclusion, against the other and needs hierarchies in order to maintain
that identity. I would argue that we can see from the text that it is not the Dionysian “escape” from
the “upper side” of the dualism that is his dramatic downfall, it is the distinction – the upholding of
the dualism – itself. Free is not being Apollonian or Dionysian in this case, it is not being restricted
to the dualism in the first place.

*The Secret History*, in it's portrayal of its characters and setting, questions the boundaries and
consequences of dualistic structures, as well as depicting them and reinforcing them through that
depiction. It critiques Western dualism, by saying that there is no escape from the separate spheres
of a dualism, and that in order to transcend hierarchy, one must dissolve the hierarchy completely.
In order to escape reason, one must not look to nature as an opposite, inferior or superior, one must
look at reason and nature as a whole.

It is important to bear in mind that the portrayal of Hampden College, Camilla and Henry is
narrated through the memory of a young, white, heterosexual, male scholar, who in many ways also
embody the Apollonian ideals mentioned in the analysis. Through him the identification with or
objectification of nature and the characters is constructed. The portrayal is dependent on him as a
character. The use of this “master” point of view can be both criticised as excluding other points of
view (with other ideals and understanding of morality and reason), and seen as an example of some
sort. Richard's narrative itself, becomes a depiction of the way dualism work in the understanding of
the world through Western thought.

One may ask then, in what way do the themes of reason/nature and male/female in *The
Secret History* correspond with the contemporary ecofeminist theoretical writings used in the essay?
Well, they correspond by bringing dualism of Apollonian and Dionysian into discussion, as a part of
the dualistic structure of Western thought. In *The Secret History*, the idea of a perfect male “master”,
free from everything that reason excludes (i.e. nature), is criticised as destructive. This criticism is
relevant from an ecofeminist point of view, as it indirectly promotes a non-hierarchical system of
thinking.

**Summary**

In this essay I have performed an ecofeminist reading of Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*
from 1992. The purpose of this has been to examine how different hierarchies or structures of power
regarding gender and the nature/reason relation are portrayed and interact with each other in the
novel, and its themes of Ancient Greek dualistic culture and mythology.

In order to achieve this purpose I have posed the following questions: How does the concept of nature correspond with the concept of reason in the portrayal of Hampden College in *The Secret History*? How do the concepts of masculine/feminine correspond with the concepts of nature/reason in the portrayal of the characters Camilla and Henry in *The Secret History*?

In my analysis and attempt to answer these questions I have applied a theoretical perspective based on the “master model”, as introduced in Val Pumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. My identification and discussion of the Apollonian-Dionysian dualism as a theme in the novel, have been based on the writings presented in Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*.

The result of my analysis, as can be seen from the discussion above, is that *The Secret History* can be seen as both depicting and reinforcing the ideals promoted by the dualism of Western thought regarding nature/reason and gender. But also that the novel can be seen as subversive, from an ecofeminist standpoint, as it questions the consequences of these ideals and the anti-life principle with which they correspond, and portrays them as destructive and hypocritical.

The depiction of Hampden College is characterised by the use of weather as a metaphor for nature as an active subject, while the portrayal of Camilla is largely based on the masculinity of the character in relation to the constraints of the gender stereotype. The portrayal of Henry further demonstrates how the concepts of masculine/feminine and reason/nature are intimately connected to the Apollonian/Dionysian dualism of the ancient Greek philosophy that is the theme of the novel.
Works cited


