

The Secret History Study Guide

The Secret History by Donna Tartt

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Plot Summary

The Secret History by Donna Tartt is an intricate glimpse into the lives of six students at Hampden College in Vermont and the impressions of one of those students who arrives mid-way through the relationships of the others.

The six main characters are Richard Papen, a California native who wishes to get out of his home town and continue his studies in Greek, the only topic in which he feels comfortable; Henry Winter, a tall, handsome trust fund baby from the Midwest, who maintains a secretive and iconoclastic existence; Francis Abernathy, a gay trust fund baby who is tormented by his mother's addictions and new husband who is practically the same age as he; Camilla MacAulay, one half of fraternal twins from Virginia who is the most caring of the group; Charles MacAulay, the other fraternal twin from Virginia who becomes an alcoholic; and Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran, a student from Connecticut who takes great pains to keep up the family front of wealth and social stature which has fallen by the wayside.

The group of six friends is involved almost exclusively in an Ancient Greek studies program run by the enigmatic Professor Julian Morrow. Morrow has a long history of hobnobbing with royalty and celebrities and some level of involvement with a rogue nation overseas, which may or may not make him the subject of federal scrutiny. Morrow is the typical scholar in that he seems to care about little else but his subject. Morrow is very fond of his students, almost casting them in a light in which they can do no wrong.

The immersion in Greek culture, legends, myths and language is complete for the group. It seems to affect Henry the most. The crux of the story regards a sequence in which Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles perform a Bacchanal, an ancient Greek ceremony designed to allow the participants to commune with Dionysus. The ritual is legendary in that it has never been able to be recreated in the same way the Greeks performed it thousands of years ago. Through much trial and error, the four students manage to recreate the rite. In the process, a man is brutally murdered.

As a result of the murder, Bunny, who had been cast out for his lack of commitment to the rite, begins to blackmail the four students. Everything begins to fall apart and friendships turn from common threads to threats, blackmail, alcoholism, and at times, near insanity. Richard allows himself to become involved, a fact which he will regret for the rest of his days. It is never clear why this happens, beyond Richard's almost manic need to belong.

The episodes with Bunny become extreme enough that Henry decides to kill him. The murder, arranged to look like an accident, occurs at the beginning of spring. The investigation into the disappearance and death take a significant toll on every member of the group, particularly Charles who has a mental breakdown.



The friendships disintegrate when Charles pulls a gun on Henry, claiming that Henry ruined his life. The gun is taken away from Charles, and Henry, either wishing to get out of the situation or wanting to know if the Greeks were right about death equating sleep, commits suicide.

The story ends with Henry dead, Charles and Camilla separated forever from their once obsessively close relationship, Richard in California, Francis in New York recovering from a suicide attempt and enjoying his new wife, and Julian overseas somewhere, completely removed from the situation.

Book I, Chapters 1-2

Book I, Chapters 1-2 Summary

Bunny Corcoran is dead. Richard Papen is in some way responsible.

John Richard Papen grew up in Plano, California, a drab town with flat land and little to do beyond working in his father's filling station. California bored Richard, and uncertain what he wanted to do with his life, he went to college to study pre-med. Richard's parents wanted their son to have a good, financially solid life but gave little regard to Richard's wants and needs. Eventually, Richard fell in love with literature and switched majors without telling his parents.

During this time, Richard spent a great deal of time and energy wandering aimlessly around town. It was clear that he needed to get out, and although Richard had expressed a desire to attend Hampden College in Vermont, Mr. Papen was not willing to sign financial aid papers or pay any tuition if Richard was going to continue studying literature. Richard persevered and went through the application process anyway and after a year succeeded in getting the funds to pay for school. In Richard's mind, leaving Plano was crucial to his existence. Richard claimed: "From the sound of it, had I stayed in California, I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction."

Richard settled in to his room at Hampden and felt relatively isolated while trying to familiarize himself with its various programs. Richard wanted to continue studying Greek but his counselor, who taught French, told Richard that the Greek classes were closed and all but impossible to attend due to the strict guidelines set by the professor. The professor was able to make his own decisions and only took five students a year, every selection based on personal preference instead of academic standing. Richard will not be deterred and goes to visit the Greek professor, Julian Morrow. Professor Morrow wants nothing to do with Richard and tells him so before asking the boy to leave his office.

Richard becomes obsessed with getting into the Ancient Greek studies program and manages to meet the students under Morrow's tutelage. Richard eavesdrops on the students in the library until he has the chance to introduce himself. The students were Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran, Charles Macaulay, Camilla Macaulay, Henry Winter, and Francis Abernathy. The students were rather cold, rude and condescending. In order to fit in, Richard decides he needs to buy new clothes and gets an advance from his work study position with the psychology department. The next time Richard visits Morrow, the professor is cordial and interested in him as a student. Richard becomes a part of the class.

Part of Morrow's requirement is that all students in the class switch advisers. Professor Laforgue is not happy to be losing Richard as a student and warns the boy that



committing himself totally to Morrow may not be in his best interest. Morrow's students seem to be inseparable both on and off campus. Richard is seen as an outsider and they often grill him about Greek studies, certain authors and passages. Richard often falters since he does not have nearly as much experience as the rest of the class, particularly Henry, who is a genius.

Richard is surprised when Bunny invites him to lunch. An obtrusive girl named Judy Poovey bumps into Richard as he is leaving to meet Bunny and warns Richard about the group. Judy dislikes all of them and advises Richard to get out. Richard becomes defensive. The lunch with Bunny is grand, and Richard learns a lot about the rest of the group, particularly Henry. Henry had been in a bad accident as a child and could do nothing but read. That is how he became so proficient in Greek studies and learned to speak eight languages and read hieroglyphics. Bunny tells Richard that Henry is very wealthy and extremely secretive about his home and family life. At the end of the lunch, Bunny says he forgot his wallet and tries to get Richard to pay. Richard has no money. Bunny calls Henry, who pays the check. Henry apologizes to Richard, appalled that Bunny would pull the old trick on a stranger.

Richard is invited to the twins' house for dinner. The rest of the group joins them and because he is hung over, Richard has a terrible time and leaves. The next day, Richard oversleeps and just makes it to class. The group has suddenly turned ice cold again. Richard accidentally eavesdrops on Julian and Henry and isn't quite sure what the conversation means but it sounds secretive and suspicious. Richard is at a party when he meets a girl who knows the group. The girl relays an unpleasant incident where Henry seriously injured a friend of hers. The girl warns a drunken Richard that the group is suspected of devil worship, but Richard shrugs it off. To Richard's surprise, Camilla comes to the party and whisks him away to join the group at the twins' family home in the country.

The weekend in the country is perfect for Richard and soon he becomes a regular addition to the excursions. Richard feels he has become quite close with the members of the group on an individual basis and is pleased. As time goes on, Richard begins to question himself about the odd incidents and behavior surrounding the group and wonders why he didn't notice it earlier. There were consistent injuries and obsessions with weather, among other things.

Book I, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Richard Papen had no idea what he was getting into at Hampden College. The utmost thought on his mind is getting out of Plano, California and away from the family business. Richard's parents seem to have little kindness or regard toward their son, particularly when Richard switches from pre-med to literature and announces that he wants to attend school in Vermont. The process of being accepted at Hampden College and the financial aid process are long and laborious and take one year to complete.



Once at Hampden, Richard feels isolated. Having developed a love of literature and Greek studies in California, Richard tries to transfer into the Ancient Greek Studies program at Hampden. Much to Richard's dismay, there is only one class that offers the subject and due to the eccentric professor's criteria, it will be almost impossible for Richard to get into the program. Richard is more determined than ever to get into the program after he meets Professor Julian Morrow. Morrow is rude and dismisses Richard with no hope. Eventually, Richard meets Morrow's class of five students and manages to get into the class.

Morrow and the class are quite secretive and soon Richard finds himself isolating with this new group of people to which he desperately wants to belong. As a whole, the group is condescending and rude toward Richard. There are times when Richard himself wonders why he is trying so hard to fit in with this group of rich kids who take great pride in flaunting their knowledge of the classics. In addition, there are many peculiar habits between the five friends, many of which leave Richard puzzled, yet even more curious.

Throughout the first weeks and months of Richard's tenure at Hampden, he becomes more familiar with the class and enjoys parts of it tremendously. The group begins to spend weekends at a grand house in the country, where much drinking takes place.



Book I, Chapters 3-4

Book I, Chapters 3-4 Summary

The holidays approach and everyone makes plans for Christmas vacation. Because of the expense to heat the college during the winter months, the school is closed through January and February. All the students have plans except for Richard, who does not want to go home and is completely broke. A referral service directs Richard to a housing arrangement he will be able to afford, even with his small work study paycheck. The place is a warehouse devoted to a mandolin business, operated by an old hippie. Richard accepts the arrangement, which is free, except he will be expected to work for the hippie carving and cleaning.

The warehouse turns out to be a disaster. It is unheated, except for the hippie's room. There is a large hole in the roof and no heaters. Richard spends every night freezing except for a handful of nights he stays in a hotel. Richard spends as much time away from the warehouse as possible, staying at work, sitting in restaurants and taking refuge anywhere there is heat. Every day, Richard walks several miles to and from the college, regardless of the harsh Vermont weather. Despite the dire conditions, Richard remains too embarrassed by his financial situation to ask anyone for help, particularly his wealthy friends to whom he has lied about his finances.

Eventually, Richard becomes extremely ill and collapses on the street where he is found by Henry. Richard is surprised to see Henry because he and Bunny had decided to spend the holidays in Italy. Still, Richard is grateful to be rescued and spends several days in the hospital with pneumonia. After Richard is released from the hospital, he moves in with Henry until school starts again.

While Richard stays with Henry, the most secretive, intelligent and peculiar member of the group, he learns quite a bit about Bunny's family. Although the family seems to be very wealthy and holds a high social status, they are broke and living off credit. Bunny never received money from them and has been taught that it is better to mooch than work for a living. Richard now understands why everyone is always buying Bunny's meals and other necessities.

Bunny returns from Italy and goes to Henry's apartment. Henry avoids him and makes up an excuse to leave Bunny behind. Francis stops by and Richard hears the friends arguing, although he can't hear what the fight is about. Bunny returns to the apartment and Henry speaks with him in private. School starts and Richard moves back to the dorm.

Henry, Francis, Charles and Camilla seem to have gone missing, and even Julian has no idea where to find them. After several days, Richard becomes concerned. Bunny is relaxing in the Commons room, sick, and refuses to tell Richard what happened between him and Henry on the trip to Italy. Bunny only says that Henry is a fraud and is



not the type of person everyone believes him to be. There are hints of sexual activity between certain members of the group but Bunny won't elaborate.

Richard still has a key to Henry's apartment and goes there to get a book he'd forgotten. While there, Richard discovers that the apartment has been cleaned out. He locates the book along with a phone number and a flight reservation number. Curious, Richard calls the number and discovers that Henry had booked four one-way tickets to Buenos Aires.

On Monday, everyone is in attendance during the class in Ancient Greek. Richard is completely baffled. Everyone is acting in a most peculiar way, so that even Julian notices. Eventually, Richard finds out that the four were planning to flee the country until they discovered that there wasn't enough money to live on due to some glitches at their individual banks. Richard wants to know why the group is trying to flee the country and why no one told him. A ghastly story comes out about one of the group's activities.

Henry, Francis, Charles, Camilla and Bunny made plans to conduct a Bacchanal ceremony and had been working on it for months. The ceremony was based on one conducted by ancient Greeks in order to commune with Dionysus. The group tried many methods in which to achieve the right atmosphere but repeatedly failed. Eventually, a period of fasting accomplished the stage of readiness and the ceremony was held. Bunny was supposed to participate but did not adhere to the rules and refused to fast. The group eliminated him from the ceremony.

The ritual induced an altered state in which the group experienced a series of hallucinations. Each suffered from amnesia regarding most of the evening although everyone had claimed to see Dionysus and became one with the universe. When they came out of the fugue, the group was many miles from their starting point, scratched and bruised, and covered in blood. Hazy recollections revealed that during the ritual, the group attacked and killed a local farmer.

Bunny learned of the Bacchanal and began to blackmail the group. Henry and Francis gave him thousands of dollars and Henry paid for the holiday trip to Italy. Bunny insisted on making public reference to the murder and carried a newspaper clipping of the report detailing the man's death. Bunny would not stop talking about it.

Book I, Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Richard's embarrassment regarding his lacking finances keeps him from asking for help from others regarding a place to stay. The student's pride results in a long winter, filled with horrendous living conditions and a sure path toward exposure and pneumonia. The fact that Richard refuses to give up his pride to ask for help shows immaturity and foolishness. Finally accepting Henry's offer to stay at the apartment shows that Richard is beginning to let his guard down.

Before the holidays, Richard begins to feel like part of the group. After everyone returns from winter holidays, they revert to earlier behavior in which Richard is treated like an outsider. This puzzles Richard but there seems to be nothing he can do about the



situation. The casting out of Richard is a necessary measure for the group as they put great effort into recreating the Bacchanal. Although everyone but Bunny has taken a liking to Richard, involving a relative stranger in their bizarre rituals is simply too risky.

Bunny's unwillingness to talk puzzles Richard. Even though Bunny is angry at Henry, it is obvious that the loyalty between friends runs deeper than any disagreement. Richard suspects that Bunny has information but refuses to share. Feeling left out once again, Richard is determined to find out the group's secret. Meanwhile, the rest of the group is struggling to keep their activities quiet and feel increasingly threatened by Bunny and his propensity to talk incessantly.



Book I, Chapter 5

Book I, Chapter 5 Summary

Francis is extremely distressed about the incident and seems to be falling apart. The group gathers at Francis' apartment and discusses the incident, including police involvement. Richard realizes that the group's strange behavior was due to shock regarding the murder. Several of them cannot sleep and Camilla loses her voice for several days. The group confides in Richard about the Bacchanal and relays their distress about Bunny, who is constantly talking about the event even though he wasn't present. Bunny does not have any proof of what happened in the woods, regarding the murder, but claims to have figured it out after he stumbles across the group while they are covered in blood. Bunny does not believe the story about someone hitting a deer, particularly since there are no marks on any of the cars.

The extended trip to Rome with Henry is a bribe in order keep Bunny quiet, but it failed. The entire time Henry and Bonnie are in Rome, Bunny complains about the hotel, having no money, and virtually everything else from the food to the museums. Bunny refuses to leave Henry's side.

While in Italy, Henry has a migraine attack and is very ill and bedridden for several days. Bunny continues to be insufferable while Henry is in great pain. Other than complaining, Bunny offers no help to Henry, regarding his illness and leaves Henry alone for long periods of time. Bunny becomes enraged and confronts Henry about the murder, saying that he has uncovered proof that the group mutilated the farmer. Henry becomes furious when he realizes that Bunny read his diary. Because Henry only wrote in Latin in his diary, he was sure that Bunny would not be able to read it. Henry was right, yet Bunny takes the diary to a translator so that he could read its contents. Bunny also steals and uses Henry's credit card. Eventually, Henry is at the end of his wits and leaves Italy in the middle of the night.

Francis and Henry relay several stories to Richard about Bunny's habit of mooching money and food. The behavior is getting increasingly worse, to the point that Charles and Camilla are being treated like servants by Bunny. Bunny begins to brag about a two-month summer tour of France that he will be taking with Henry.

Charles and Camilla apologize to Richard for everything that has happened. The group, sans Bunny, has dinner at an inn to discuss the situation. Things seem like they might return to normal until the group goes to Francis' house in the country for the weekend. Bunny's insults increase dramatically and he takes great delight in making rude comments about everything, including the behaviors of Catholics, which deeply offends Charles and Camilla. Bunny also ridicules Charles regarding his drinking and harasses Francis about being gay. Bunny is relentless about questioning Richard regarding his schooling and family life. It is obvious to everyone that Richard has been lying about his background but no one says anything in order to spare his feelings and embarrassment.



Bunny pushes Richard constantly. Bunny also attacks Camilla, constantly saying that she is inferior because she's a woman and not a very good one at that.

Henry approaches Richard with questions about chemistry and dosage of medicine. After a long talk, Henry confides in Richard that he plans to poison Bunny with a rare type of mushroom. In order to avert suspicion, Henry plans to take the same type of mushroom, only in a much smaller quantity, so that he will only become sick and not die. Richard explains that it is impossible to know the appropriate dosage of a poison that has not been tested or measured and attempts to talk Henry out of the plan. Henry continues to insist that it's a viable plan for quite some time then dismisses it in favor of another murder plot. Richard finds out that Julian knows everything.

Bunny gets drunk and confides in Richard about the murder. The group decides that Bunny must be kept under surveillance to ensure that he does not talk to anyone about the murder. Camilla goes on a double date with Bunny and his girlfriend to make sure Bunny doesn't tell the story.

The core of the group is gone and Richard realizes that they have gone to the ravine, the place where they have decided to kill Bunny. Richard feels horrible and somewhat left out but agrees to go with Judy to a party. Bunny is at the party. Richard decides to go to the ravine to tell the group that Bunny is at the party, drunk and most likely will not show up that day. Shortly after Richard's arrival, Bunny shows up at the ravine and questions the group about what they're doing in the woods. The group pretends to be on a nature hike, looking for a new type of fern. The group decides to go ahead with the plan to kill Bunny which includes pushing him off the edge of a cliff and into the ravine where he will fall onto the rocks and break his neck.

Book I, Chapter 5 Analysis

Despite the bizarre story and consequences of the farmer's murder, Richard believes the group and is curious about the ceremony. Richard is still astounded that someone would try to recreate the Bacchanal and is even more surprised that it actually worked. Although there was a great amount of shock surrounding the murder, Richard wanted to know what each person had seen and if Dionysus was in fact present. The entire ceremony is fascinating to Richard, and he is disappointed to learn that no one seems to remember anything in vivid detail.

Bunny's attempt at blackmail shows how deep his desire to live off others runs. The group didn't realize how serious Bunny and his family takes the concept of mooching instead of working and each resents the effort to profit from their terrible fortune.

Despite knowing their friend's proclivity for trying to get something for nothing, the group is terrified, yet not completely convinced, that Bunny would go through the threat to report them to the police. Richard is shocked to discover that the group would give in to such demands as Bunny makes, but it is clear that there is too much at stake to take the



chance. Even if no one was convicted, each family may have chosen to cut off the money and none of the students could bear that consequence.

The group may have been saved if there had been a way to dismiss Bunny's claims about the murder. The downfall was the misfortune of meeting up after the murder, when the group was covered in blood with no signs of a car accident. Bunny is so intent on his plan that he cannot see what is happening in regards to his own demise.

Bunny violates every form of trust and friendship when he starts to viciously and relentlessly attack the rest of the group. There are many things of which the group does not speak, including the amount of alcohol Charles has been drinking, Richard's lies, and the fact that Francis is gay. Bunny attacks each person and refuses to let up.

Richard is shocked when Henry comes to him to ask about chemistry and how to measure the amount of poison contained in a rare mushroom. Henry will not be talked out of the plan to kill Bunny even though Richard tells him that it is dangerous because there is no way to know how much poison there is in each mushroom. Richard is horrified at the tale of the dogs being used as guinea pigs and struggles to think of some way to get Henry to abort the plan. Richard even goes so far as to attempt to correct Henry's faulty scientific calculations regarding the amount of poison necessary to commit the crime. Eventually, Henry decides that the poison is too risky and that the plan is too well thought out, therefore adding an element of premeditation to the crime.

At this point, Richard tells himself that he should cut ties with the group before becoming involved any further in this action. However, Richard does not cut ties and ends up being an accessory to the crime.



Book II, Chapter 6

Book II, Chapter 6 Summary

Book II begins with Richard stating he does not believe he is an evil person. Although Richard never considered himself to be a good person, he never considered himself to be a particularly bad one either. There seems to be no real explanation about what happened at the ravine. Richard believes that no one in the group is actually bad but that the events occurred the way they did due to weakness or an overexposure to Greek prose.

Richard offers no specific details regarding Bunny's murder except to say that it was fast and that the act would haunt Richard for many years to come. On the day of the murder, the group has little contact with one another. Richard is increasingly nervous and can't sit still. At his wits end, Richard decides to go to Judy's room. Judy convinces Richard to go to a party. At the party Richard becomes incredibly drunk and ends up going home with a girl he met there. The next day Francis goes to Richard's room and is completely freaked out. It began to snow and everyone is worried that Bunny's body will not be discovered in a timely fashion. Francis makes sexual advances toward Richard and is only stopped by a knock on the door. Charles comes into he room to discuss the situation.

The group gathers at the Commons to discuss the snow and Bunny's disappearance. Before Richard can become involved in the conversation, he is interrupted by Dr. Roland, who requests Richard's presence in his office. After discussing work for half an hour, Richard runs into Judy, who is angry and obviously jealous about Richard's one night stand the night before. Henry asks Richard to go to the theater so Richard can tell the group about the movies they were supposed to have seen as part of their alibi. After three days absence from Greek class, Julian begins to worry about Bunny and becomes concerned that no one seems to know where he is or if Bunny is ill.

The group is surprised that no one seems particularly worried about Bunny's disappearance. Even Marion, Bunny's girlfriend, seems more annoyed than concerned. The group tries to figure out a way to involve the authorities so that their silence won't seem suspicious.

Bunny's friend Cloke approaches the group and discusses Bunny's disappearance. Cloke confides to the friends that he has been dealing drugs, something that is not at all a surprise to the group. Cloke comments that Bunny has been carrying around a large amount of money over the past few weeks, and he's afraid that Bunny has gone out on his own and become involved with the New York drug dealers. Cloak and the group decide that someone needs to go to Bunny's dorm room to see if there are any clues regarding his whereabouts. Henry and Charles make a quick decision to get security involved. Charles and Cloke go to Bunny's room and discover that all of Bunny's things are still there and that no one has been in the room for several days. Charles calls



Marion who comes over to inspect the room. Marion calls security and security calls the police.

Charles speaks to Bunny's dad, who does not seem concerned about his son's disappearance. The police speak at length to Henry and Charles about Bunny. The next morning, a swarm of people set out to search for Bunny in hopes of collecting the \$50,000 reward offered by Bunny's parents. Because of the snow, the body is not found.

There is a news flash that someone had seen a suspicious vehicle on the day Bunny supposedly disappeared. The group is frantic until they hear the news report from a business owner, who gives details saying he saw Bunny in a car with a bunch of Arabs. The man is clearly lying in order to get the reward. Fortunately for the group, the lies will steer the police in another direction. Bunny's family arrives at Hampden. The entire family is acting very strange and do not seem at all mournful. The FBI becomes involved and investigates Cloke and his drug activities. Charles is interviewed by the FBI and is fingerprinted, as is Henry. Cloke attempts to flee the school, but is caught and returned. The snow melts, and it begins to rain. A girl walking her dog in the woods stumbles across Bunny's body.

Book II, Chapter 6 Analysis

Richard apologizes to the reader for the lack of details regarding the murder. It is too horrible to think about in this context and the image continues to run through Richard's mind like a movie in fast-forward. The scene of the murder haunts Richard for a very long time and overtakes much of his daily life. The group is surprised that no one seems terribly concerned about Bunny's disappearance. Marion's involvement with Bunny was obviously not as serious as most had believed.

There is ample reason to worry that the group will be questioned about their lack of concern. Each person, in his own way, begins to fall apart, nearly suffering various forms of mental collapse. Richard is deeply affected to the point he cannot rest and eventually goes to Judy for some medicinal relief. The one night stand with the strange girl is nothing but a distraction.

Richard is so exhausted by the experiences of the past few days that he does not have the strength to refuse Francis' advances. In reality, Francis is only slightly attracted to Richard. The pair begins to engage in a sexual interlude as a way to regain a sense of closeness and to wash away the horror of Bunny's death if only for a short time. Richard is grateful to Charles for interrupting and once again, Bunny's death returns to the forefront.

Cloke seems to be genuinely concerned about Bunny's disappearance, beyond his own suspicious involvement in a possible motive for the drug dealers. Cloke's confession gives the group a sense of hope as it would be easy to shift blame onto the nameless drug dealers who could have easily killed Bunny for entering into their dangerous world

uninvited. The added bonus of the girl claiming to see Bunny downtown allows the group to breathe easy, if only for a minute.

Bunny's family acts almost unconcerned with Bunny's disappearance and turns the meeting at the hotel into a type of party. However the family seems to be appropriately distressed in front of the TV cameras. Richard is puzzled by the family's bizarre behavior and wonders if they are more concerned about keeping up appearances than their own son and brother.

The story given by the owner of the garage is obviously nothing but a lie, but the group is relieved that suspicion may be cast elsewhere.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

While Bunny did not have a tremendous number of friends at school it seems that everyone knew him and was mourning his death. Everyone seemed to have a story or comment about Bunny, and even people who didn't know him well sobbed and claim to be devastated about his loss. Richard talks about the college's propensity toward hysteria and how Bunny's death only encouraged this trend. Richard believed that in some way the "formulaic expression of homage and death" was a sort of isolated phenomenon.

Richard begins to think that perhaps his annoyance and anger with Bunny was misplaced. It is obvious that people really did like Bunny. However, when somebody dies, that person's character seems to become exaggerated. Richard cannot deny that Bunny always offered a sense of color and entertainment to any event or place. Each member of the group reacts strangely. Henry goes home with Bunny's parents under the guise of helping them through the rough times; Cloke holes up in Charles and Camilla's apartment and drinks a tremendous amount of beer; and Richard falls under the constant care of Judy and two friends, much to his annoyance and relief.

Francis goes to Richard's room to report news from the Corcoran's home in Connecticut where Henry staying until the funeral. The media is convinced that Bunny's death involved drugs or alcohol. Bunny's alcohol level was relatively low and there was no trace of drugs in his system, yet the newspapers and television reports are insistent. The media treats the death much like a prom night accident of a teenager, although Bunny was 24 years old. The focus of the family turns to defending Bunny's honor.

Shortly before the funeral Richard receives a letter from Julian who has unexpectedly left town. Julian tells Richard that he is devastated by Bunny's death and may not return to college for the next semester. Francis and Richard drive to Connecticut for the funeral. A large number of family and friends join together at the house the day before the funeral. By all accounts, it is a horrible experience and Bunny's friends could not wait to get away. The family still acts in a most peculiar way, easily switching from grief to cheer and near frivolity. Mrs. Corcoran seems more interested in the condition of the flowers being delivered than the loss of Bunny.

There is a fight between Francis and Charles, because Charles stole France's car keys and went missing for an hour. During the evening it also becomes clear that there had been a fight between Charles and Camilla, although no one would say what happened. Henry becomes the victim to another vicious migraine and runs out of medication. Richard feels sorry for Henry, knowing he will not be able to endure the funeral while in so much pain. Richard and Cloke steal medication from Mrs. Corcoran to help Henry. As the night leads into the next day, the group counts the minutes until they can leave the Corcoran house and get back to Hampden. The funeral itself is a long drawn out



process and the group somehow manages to survive; their guilt and fear being mistaken for grief.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Death hysteria is a common reaction to any tragic accident, particularly in a small area like Hampden. It is human nature to feel grief when someone dies tragically, and it is more pronounced when the person is someone one knows, even peripherally. At such a young age, death still seems to be nothing more than a remote possibility and the death of a classmate brings about thoughts of one's own mortality.

Henry goes to Connecticut under the guise of helping the Corcorans, an act that is almost expected from such a close friend. Although there is suspicion of potential involvement of Cloke in Bunny's disappearance, Cloke is invited to stay at the house with a large number of other students, friends and family on the night before the funeral.

Although grief acts out in strange ways, Richard is flabbergasted at the scene at the Corcoran house. It is akin to a party with people running around, drinking, and unbeknown to Bunny's parents, smoking pot. The Corcorans seem to be interested in trivial things, more so out of lack of interest in the funeral than the need to keep busy.

Even the friends experience a strange connection while in the house. Richard is puzzled by Charles' arguments with Francis and Camilla and wonders what is happening around him. Julian's declaration of resignation from Hampden surprises Richard. Julian has always been reserved to the point of being removed from the rest of the campus, but Richard expected the professor to stick with them regardless of the circumstances. Julian, however, knows that self-preservation is a must.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Richard and the rest of the group finally manage to get away in the afternoon after the funeral. Everyone is anxious to get back to Hampden and forget the entire experience, although that is unlikely to happen. On the drive home Charles and Camilla are still not speaking, although no one seems to know the reason. Over the next couple weeks, the group tends to keep their distance from one another. It is not a surprising turn of events considering that they had been inseparable in the weeks leading up to Bunny's death.

Francis calls Richard to say that he is having a heart attack. After a lot of discussing and arguing, Richard takes Francis to the emergency room. Francis refuses to allow the doctors to examine him, and eventually it is decided that Francis is suffering from anxiety. The doctor only allows Francis to leave after he takes the name of a psychiatrist. Francis reveals to Richard that he has already seen a psychiatrist. The first time was when his mother sent him to some strange boarding school in Switzerland as a child.

The relationship between Charles and Henry rapidly disintegrates. Charles becomes incredibly angry and blames everything on Henry. Charles and Camilla seem to have mended fences and though they are getting along, there is still an edge of tension in the air. Henry goes to Richard's room and asks Richard to go to the police station and get Charles out of jail. Charles had been pulled over for drunk driving in Henry's car. Henry says that he cannot go to the police station because of the situation with the car. Henry also uses the excuse that both he and Charles dealt with the police a lot during the investigation into Bunny's death and that he needs a break.

Henry pays Charles' bail and the next morning Charles is released. Charles and Richard go back to Charles and Camilla's apartment. Richard is shocked when Charles kisses Camilla, passionately. Camilla does not seem to mind. Richard understands that sexual tension between the twins was not his imagination. Francis eventually tells Richard that the twins have sex on occasion and that there is jealousy regarding Henry and Camilla. Charles and Francis have also had sex on occasion. Richard discovers that Charles and Henry both believe they're going to be arrested for the murder. The FBI uses a standard trick in order to try and trip up the friends, although it does not work. Still the relationships among the friends are beginning to fall apart.

Camilla moves out of the apartment and disappears. It has become apparent that Camilla is involved in a relationship with Henry. Camilla has not told Charles where she has gone and Charles panics. Richard finds Charles passed out inside a giant snail at the child's playground. Charles becomes ill and goes to the hospital where he is diagnosed with dehydration and bronchitis.



Francis and Richard devise a plan to find Camilla and tell her about Charles. Camilla is staying at a fancy hotel under an assumed name. Richard and Francis locate her and give her the news. Camilla reveals that she left because she and Charles had a fight, and that Charles had tried to kill her. Camilla is bruised and burned and nothing anyone could say would make her see Charles. Camilla also says that she is staying with Henry because Charles is afraid of him. Francis and Richard believe the statement is untrue and that Camilla is sleeping with Henry. Despite Julian's former comment, he returns to Hampden and class resumes as normal.

Richard confronts Henry at his apartment and accuses Henry of having no emotion for other people. Henry agrees and says that he has spent too much of his life giving in to emotion, but that Bunny's death had cured him of it. Francis and Richard make arrangements to see Charles at the hospital. When Richard goes to Francis' apartment, Francis is asleep. It is obvious that Francis has spent much time drinking. Francis says he does not want to go to the hospital but Richard talks him into it and suggests they have lunch with Julian first.

Over lunch, Julian tells Richard and Francis that he received a letter in his mailbox from Bunny. Rather, the author claimed to be Bunny, but Julian was convinced that it was a forgery. Because the letter had been misplaced, there was no telling how long it had been lying about before he was delivered to Julian. Richard and Francis both read the letter, and know right away that Bunny actually did write it. The letter is a confession to everything. Still they go along with Julian's assumption that it was a cruel joke. Richard and Francis are completely panicked.

Richard and Francis go to Camilla to tell her about the letter and to suggest that Henry find a way to steal it from Julian's office. The friends learn that Henry is already in Julian's office. Richard goes to the Lyceum to tell Henry about the letter. When Richard arrives, Henry is already reading the letter and doesn't want to leave Julian's office in order to talk to him. The exchange between the friends is rather strange and puts Julian on guard. Richard is afraid that Julian will notice the distinct image on the back of the letter as being the logo of the exclusive hotel Bunny and Henry stayed at while in Rome. Henry and Julian notice the logo at the same time, and Henry comes up with a feeble explanation and intimates that Bunny committed suicide. Although Julian realizes the gravity of the situation, he gives the letter to Henry and tells him to keep it.

The entire group goes to Julian's class but the professor does not arrive. Julian is never late and everyone begins to worry. Soon the Dean of Studies comes to the Lyceum to announce that Julian has left the college and the country and has no plans to return. The Dean tells the students that there will be no opportunity to receive their degrees in Classics and that they will have to switch schools or extend their college careers. Richard is panicked because he has no money and does not know what he will do. It is almost as if the last three years of his life have been wasted. Henry becomes absolutely furious with Julian and says that the professor took the coward's way out. Henry admits that he loves Julian like a father and feels betrayed.



The relationship between Henry and Charles disintegrates completely, and Charles believes that Henry is trying to kill him. Richard and Francis convince Charles to go to the country, where he will be safe. Henry figures out what happened and calls Francis' country house. Charles overhears, borrows the caretaker's truck and disappears. Richard and Francis are beside themselves and go to Camilla. Charles shows up and the group tries to figure out how to save him from himself and the alcohol. Charles pulls a gun on Henry and says he is going to kill him because Henry has ruined his life. There is a struggle and Richard is shot in the stomach. Henry takes the gun away from Charles and shoots himself in the head. Henry dies.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Richard and Francis realize the gravity of the situation when they read the letter Bunny had written to Julian. Part of Julian knows that the letter is real yet it is easy to assume that because the typed pages are so poorly written that it could not have been produced by one of his students. There is a mixture of arrogance and denial that allows Julian to delude himself for a short time.

Although Julian has a strange background and has undoubtedly been involved in all kinds of illegal activity overseas, the professor realizes the gravity of the situation with his students and flees the country. This behavior makes sense given Julian's proclivity to separation from others and often unwarranted secrecy. Although many attribute the behavior to Julian's ties with foreign government, it is simply part of his personality.

The situation between Henry and Charles is destined to end badly. Henry has become colder and more self-involved than ever, reserving time only for Camilla whom he claims to love. Charles struggles against his jealousy over Camilla's relationship with Henry. While part of Charles knows that his love for Camilla exceeds that of a normal sibling relationship, another part fights against anger at being abandoned. The only way Charles can seem to fight his own guilt and anger is through alcohol.

Charles' escape from the country house causes panic, not only because of the possibility that something could go terribly awry but also because Charles is physically and mentally unstable.

Henry shows his true disregard for anything beyond his own desires and quest for knowledge when he decides to commit suicide. The adventure with these friends is over and rather than ride it out, Henry would much rather move on to the next world to see what awaits.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Neither Francis nor the twins return to Hampden. Richard stays at school and completes his coursework, graduating with a degree in English Literature. Francis comments that it's funny that only Richard graduated out of the six members of the group. Communication between the friends is sparse and at times, non-existent. Richard never hears from Charles again. Camilla makes calls and sends postcards at times but nothing else. Francis and Richard both live in New York for a time but only see each other twice.

Richard falls in love with a girl at school, and eventually they move to California so she can follow her dancing career. There is talk of marriage but eventually the couple breaks up. The girl tells Richard that he is uncommunicative and that the look in his eyes sometimes scares her.

Richard and Camilla both receive goodbye letters from Francis. Both panic and fly to New York to find Francis in the hospital with slit wrists. It turns out that Francis was in love with a lawyer named Kim, but when Francis' grandfather found out that Francis was gay, he threatened to cut Francis out of his will unless there was a wedding. Francis ends up marrying Priscilla and moves into a marvelous New York apartment. Camilla brought news of Charles although the two no longer speak. Charles ran off with a married woman, went into treatment although no one knows if it was a lasting success. Charles lives somewhere in Texas but that is all Camilla knows.

Richard and Camilla can't bear to part company once again. Richard still loves her and proposes. Camilla refuses because she still loves Henry. Richard finally lets go of Camilla and drives back to California.

Epilogue Analysis

The epilogue serves as the final piece of the puzzle, although it is never really clear what Richard decided to do with his life beyond graduate school in California. There is sadness over lost friendships and lost lives and everyone seems to wonder how things might have turned out if the Bacchanal had never occurred and Bunny had lived. It is clear that Charles will never recover from the events at Hampden and will most likely spend his life working low-paying jobs and struggling with alcoholism.

Francis' choice to remain in his grandfather's good graces annoys Richard but there is an understanding that it is difficult to give up a life of privilege. There is no real sense of closure between Richard and Camilla. Richard will return to California and Camilla will return to Virginia to take care of her dying grandmother. Nothing Richard can say will change Camilla's mind.



Characters

Richard Papen

John Richard Papen was born and raised in Plano, California. Papen is an only child, raised by middle class parents who operate a filling station. Papen's parents seem to tolerate Richard at best and throughout the book, the relationship becomes even more strained to the point where there is hardly any communication whatsoever. Even during breaks, Papen doesn't go home due to lack of money, a place to stay, and lack of interest on behalf of his parents, who had sold his furniture and converted his bedroom into a sewing room shortly after he moved to Vermont.

The story was supposedly written when Papen was 28 years old, many years after the series of events. During the time at Hampden College in Vermont, Papen is 20 years old and somewhat naïve to the ways of the world. It is through a desperate need that Papen decides to leave California for Vermont. There was already a chasm between Papen and his parents after he dropped out of pre-med and spent the next year trying to figure out what to do next.

The Ancient Greek studies program appeals to Papen and the subject is one he explores at Hampden. Papen is disappointed when Julian Morrow refuses him entry into the class. Papen is not discouraged, however, and eventually succeeds in becoming one of Morrow's students. Papen later sees this turn of events as a life changing one, and perhaps one that should not have been made.

Julian Morrow and the class are secretive and nearly inseparable. The students become family, full of skeletons and personalities that often clash. Papen desperately wants to fit in, although his pedigree does not match up to some of the others', particularly those who come from money and an enviable social stature.

Throughout the story, Papen learns a great deal about himself and the behaviors of others. There are many instances in which Papen is astonished over his propensity toward blindness in reference to the behavior of others, especially when that behavior is not altogether honest, forthcoming, or personally beneficial. It takes Papen a long time to realize that he has been tricked and much like a lamb going to slaughter went along without any type of fuss.

Henry Winter

Henry Winter is one of the main members of Julian Morrow's Ancient Greek studies class. Winter is by all accounts a genius with an extremely secretive personality. Winter is seen as the leader of the group, imposing in his manner and knowledge about a vast number of topics. Winter is also the wealthiest of the group, often spending great sums of money on friends and trips, although he claims to be restricted with his finances through parental intervention.



Although the friends spend a great deal of time with Winter, it seems that few truly know him. Bunny often says that Winter is a fraud and one who cannot be trusted, although Bunny exhibits characteristics which make people doubt his comments. Winter is known as being the one closest to Julian and is a scholar through and through. As a child, Winter was involved in a serious accident which required a lengthy period of bed rest that allowed nothing but reading or watching TV. As a result, Winter developed a love for the classics and languages. At the time of the story, Winter speaks seven or eight languages, even the character himself is unsure. The languages include Italian, Greek, Latin and Arabic. Winter is also able to decipher hieroglyphics.

It is perhaps this thirst for knowledge that links Winter to Julian. Papen is never able to figure out the nature or depth of the professor-student relationship although the two seem to be intimately aware of the other, personally and professionally. Throughout the book, it is apparent that Winter is self serving and self absorbed, as well as being manipulative. Winter often comes off as aloof and uncaring, traits that increase throughout the story.

Edmund

Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran is the student who is murdered by the group. Corcoran pretends to be one who has a high social standing and a great deal of wealth. although he survives by mooching off friends, particularly Winter. According to Winter, Corcoran's family has made a life long commitment to putting on airs even though they are deep in debt and flat broke. Corcoran's parents taught him that it is far better to mooch than work and that there will always be someone willing to pick up the tab. Throughout the story, that person is most often Winter.

Corcoran is pompous, loud and arrogant, yet people tend to like him for his colorful presence. Throughout the story, Corcoran seals his own fate when he begins to mock the group about the first murder, constantly talking about it, and eventually begins to blackmail all the group's members, save for Papen who was not present at the scene. Eventually, even Papen becomes the butt of Corcoran's biting remarks and insults. The group continues to be paranoid that Corcoran will be overheard or tell someone else about the murder and therefore decide that their friend must die.

Charles Macaulay

Charles Macaulay is a wealthy student at Hampden College and twin brother to Camilla. Charles is also a core member of the group.

Camilla Macaulay

Camilla Macaulay is a wealthy student at Hampden College and twin sister to Charles. Camilla is also a core member of the group.



Francis Abernathy

Francis Abernathy is a wealthy student at Hampden College, caretaker of his aunt's country house, and member of the core group.

Julian Morrow

Julian Morrow is the professor of ancient Greek studies at Hampden College.

Judy Poovey

Judy Poovey is a girl from California, who lives in Richard's dorm.

Professor George Laforgue

Professor George Laforgue is Richard's first adviser and French professor.

Dr. Richard Roland

Dr. Richard Roland is the dean of the department of psychology and Richard's boss

Cloke Rayburn

Cloke Rayburn is Bunny's oldest friend. Rayburn is also the campus drug dealer.



Objects/Places

Hampden College

Hampden College is a small school located near Battenkill, Vermont. The school is set in a picturesque area, complete with wooded areas and snowy mountains. The town of Hampden is small and rural, with the biggest nod to culture being a local movie theater, the Orpheum Theater.

The college itself is comprised of an eclectic mix of people. Many of the students come from wealthy families although some students, like Papen, are surviving by the skin of their teeth. A great deal of the story revolves around the Lyceum, where Julian Morrow's office is located. Morrow's office is on the top floor of the Lyceum and is a shrine to the classics, literature and language of the Ancient Greeks. No one but Julian and the students are allowed inside the classroom, which is more luxurious and spacious than any other space on campus.

Also mentioned are the Commons, a routine meeting place for the group, several dorm rooms, including Papen's and Judy Poovey's, the cafeteria, and the office of Dr. Richard Roland who is Papen's boss. The school itself seems to have an air of old world sophistication and exudes exclusivity.

Abernathy Country House

The Abernathy country house is the place where the group often spends weekends as an escape from school. The house belongs to Francis Abernathy's aunt, who rarely uses it and yet intends to keep it in the family. The architecture of the house is grand, complete with pikes, turrets and a widow's walk. The interior of the house was much like an old family mansion, complete with old portraits of family members encased in gold gilt frames, high ceilings, and a library that housed a grand piano. There are grand marble fireplaces, Gothic panels and frescoes, and crystal chandeliers. The library contains a wealth of books, including many first editions and rare finds. Papen was immediately enthralled by the house and all it had to offer. It was on that site that Papen began to feel like part of the group even though he remained excluded from many of their activities. It is only much later that Papen learns that his presence at the house was a requirement since the group wanted to get to know him and be able to use and manipulate him into playing along with their games and charades.

The house was large enough to accommodate the entire group quite easily. Afternoons were often spent on the lake or on front porch rockers where scotch and bourbon were heartily consumed. The house is secluded enough for required privacy and therefore was used as the site of the Bacchanal, during which a local farmer was murdered and mutilated.



Plano, California

Plano, California is Richard's hometown.

Julian Morrow's Office

Julian Morrow's office is the place where the class convenes to learn ancient Greek.

Dr. Roland's Office

Dr. Roland's office is the site of Richard's work study program.

Monmouth Hall

Monmouth Hall is the location of Richard's dorm room.

The Commons

The Commons is a place where the group often gathers to talk.

The Brasserie

The Brasserie is a local restaurant frequented by the group.

New York

New York is the home of Francis Abernathy.

Boston

Boston is the home of Charles and Camilla Macaulay.

Rome, Italy

Rome is the place where Henry and Bunny spent their winter holidays.

Themes

Greek

One of the main themes in *The Secret History* is the study of Ancient Greek. This includes the language, heritage, literature and practices of the ancients. The class takes the subject very seriously and is encouraged to explore every aspect of the culture by Professor Julian Morrow. Professor Morrow is said to be the foremost authority of Ancient Greek studies on the east coast and perhaps beyond. Morrow's secretive methods almost succeed in turning the class into a type of cult. No one outside the class is permitted into Morrow's office or classroom.

There are a great number of references to Greek literature, characters and language throughout the book. One of the most important references to the practices of the ancients is the Bacchanal rite held at the country house. The ancients knew a great deal about various drugs, poisons and altered states and claimed to be able to use these things in order to achieve a highly-conscious state in which they could see and commune with Dionysus.

The group, and in particular Henry, becomes obsessed with re-creating the Bacchanal and after many tries, succeeds. As a result, the group claims to have seen and communed with Dionysus or some other higher being. The memories of the night of the rite are fleeting although there is talk of incredible feats of strength and other powers that led to the murder of the farmer. There are a number of Greek references that are obscure and may prove difficult to the reader with no knowledge of the culture.

Murder

The core of the book is the murder of Bunny Corcoran. The story explores the events leading up to and surrounding the act of murder and gives insight to the things that might cause an otherwise ordinary person to commit such a heinous crime. The first murder in the book is an accident. Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles are finally able to achieve the altered state like the ancient Greeks and as a result are completely out of control of their own actions. The details of the evening are sketchy at best and the only things the group remembers is the presence of animals, which may or may not have been themselves, running through the woods, being one with the universe, and attacking something that startled them. The something turned out to be a man whose property they had stumbled upon. The group attacked the man and mutilated his body much like one would expect from a pack of wolves.

The fallout of the first murder led to the second when Bunny began to blackmail the group. Bunny's behavior becomes erratic and cruel. The group fears for their lives if they should be caught and decide that Bunny must die. The fallout after Bunny's murder is surprising to everyone. Only Henry seems to have gained something good from the



act, a sense of removing himself from the world. Henry sees death as the Greeks did, believing that it is like sleep. In the end, the murders completely splinter the minds and bodies of all involved.

Friendship

The theme of friendship is prevalent throughout the book, albeit not in the common way. Friendship does promote loyalty and love but also creates monsters and negative emotions when used against one another.

Richard arrives at Hampden alone with no friends. Because Richard desperately wants to study Greek, he makes an attempt to break into the close knit circle of five friends who are the sole students of Julian Morrow. The friends seem cold and aloof to Richard as well as being completely loyal to one another. The group of friends is practically inseparable and their conduct and language is unusual enough to make them appear as their own society. Richard eventually does break into the group, but the friendships are never easy or honest. There is always a sense of mystery and mistrust that serves to undermine all else.

Throughout the course of the book, Richard realizes that while Henry may be his friend, their relationship is one built on manipulation and lies. Only Richard, Charles and Francis seem to be real friends with a sense of commonality, although their lives are very different.



Style

Point of View

The point of view used in *The Secret History* is first person, through the eyes of Richard Papen. The use of first person is the obvious choice for this work, lending the thoughts and impressions of an outsider to the school and the group of students involved in Greek studies. While the use of third person omniscient may have given the reader more detail into the inner workings of the group and their activities, the result would have been a series of confusing thoughts, words, and deeds. In essence, there are far too many intricacies in the personalities of the group in order for the third person point of view to be effective.

There are some instances in which Richard's point of view seems to be lacking, particularly in regards to the negative side of his relationship with the group. For example, Richard is told that Bunny never liked him and yet there was little if any speculation as to why Bunny would go out of his way to be around Richard, particularly after Bunny finds out Richard does not have any money. Additionally, there is little said about Richard's discovery that he has been manipulated by Henry. One would expect more rage or at least the complete severing of ties with Henry, neither of which occurred.

The end of the story benefits from Richard's point of view, particularly when it comes to the update on the friends and acquaintances at Hampden. For example, Richard's frustration with Francis over giving in to his grandfather; Camilla's sadness and burden in regards to the care of her grandmother; Cloke's promotion to a prestigious position at a law firm; and the simple acceptance that Marion married one of Bunny's brothers.

Setting

The two main settings in the book are Hampden College, a fictional place located in the town of Hampden, on the outskirts of Battenkill, Vermont; and the Abernathy country house. There are also scenes set in New York City, including Brooklyn, Boston, Plano, California, and several hospitals throughout the eastern United States.

Hampden College is designed to give an air of Anglican heritage and wealth. The school is small, which contributes to the relationships of the students outside the Greek class, and even Richard's interaction with some of the other students, although he considers himself to be rather isolated.

The Lyceum is the setting for Julian Morrow's Greek studies class as well as his office. The room is generously appointed to resemble a home rather than a classroom. Morrow is fiercely secretive about his atmosphere which tends to increase its charm and exclusivity.



The Abernathy country house is a grand estate, although slightly less formal than one might imagine. The house, complete with pikes, turrets, and a widow's walk, is striking in Richard's eyes and seems like one that should be nestled in the remote parts of Europe rather than Vermont. The house is filled with antiques, elaborate family portraits, and an impressive library that houses rare books, a giant marble fireplace, and a grand piano.

Language and Meaning

The Language and Meaning throughout *The Secret History* is rather formal and at times, archaic. The language used by the main characters is proper and exudes a great deal of education and polish.

As students of Greek studies, the students often speak in Greek, particularly when they wish to have privacy from others outside the group. There are a number of short Greek passages which are not defined, although the meaning is often easy enough to decipher. There is also a use of Latin which can be confusing to the reader, as it is also left unexplained. This is not a problem when the reference is a word or two, but phrases, or several phrases strung together, leaves the reader feeling as if he missed out on an inside joke. There are also one or two instances of another language one could assume is Middle Eastern as well as Greek.

While nearly all the text is written in English, there are a number of references to Greek figures, myths and legends which may or may not escape the understanding of the reader. This may be necessary in some instances while in others, references to obscure Greek characters seem superfluous, except perhaps to set the tone and lend an air of authenticity to the story.

Structure

The Secret History by Donna Tartt is a fiction work of 524 pages. The shortest chapter is 14 pages; the longest chapter is 98 pages. The average chapter length is 46 pages.

The work is separated into two books. Book I encompasses chapters 1-5; Book II encompasses chapters 6-8. There is also an epilogue, which is 14 pages long and is used as a denouement and also gives an update on where each major character has gone in his or her life after leaving Hampden College.

While the structure is appropriate for the work, the story would be easier to dissect if two of the chapters were split, covering shorter periods of time and activity. The result of compiling all the information into two chapters can cause confusion for the reader who is inundated with a long series of facts and occurrences.

Overall, the structure of the book is sound. Although the story begins with the premise of a flashback, the events that follow are detailed and in chronological order for the most part. There are only a few superfluous entries, perhaps used in order to give the reader

a complete and rounded sense of the characters, their relationships, and the general atmosphere of the school.



Quotes

"I do not know, nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek, and the year of my life I spent in their company."

Page 9

"From the sound of it, had I stayed in California, I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction."

Pages 10-11

"I had a feeling of déjà vu, when, the next afternoon, Julian and answer the door exactly as he had the first time, by opening it only a crack and looking through it warily, as if there were something wonderful in his office that needed guarding, something that he was careful not everyone should see."

Page 15

"I've known men who run down homosexuality, because they are uncomfortable with it, perhaps harbor inclinations in that area; and I've known men who run down homosexuality and mean it. At first I had placed Bunny in the first category."

Page 52

"Now that I think about it, it seems while we were out there we drank almost constantly -never very much at once, but the thin trickle of spirits, which began with a Bloody Marys at breakfast would last until bedtime, and that, more than anything else, was probably responsible for our torpor. "

Page 84

"From the first moment I set foot in Hampden, I had begun to dread the end of term, when I would have to go back to Plano and flat land, and filling stations, and dust."

Page 98

"I became an expert at making myself invisible."

Page 111

"I ate alone and walked back to my room in the snowy twilight, with a sour, humorless feeling as if I were the victim of a practical joke."

Page 130

"I was tired but couldn't sleep; my irritation and perplexity were growing stronger, kept in motion by a ridiculous sense of unease."

Page 131



"By now my thoughts were so contradictory and disturbing that I could no longer even speculate, only wonder dumbly about what was taking place around me; I had no classes for the rest of the day and thought of going back to my room was intolerable."
Page 147

"How was it that a complex, a nervous and delicately calibrated mind like my own, was able to adjust itself perfectly after a shock like the murder, while Bunny's eminently more sturdy and ordinary one was knocked out of kilter?"
Page 210

"The 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."
Page 250

"When I got back to my room - by a confused, circular route - I fell on my bed without taking off my coat or shoes. The lights were on, and I felt all weirdly exposed and vulnerable, but I didn't want to turn them off."
Page 271

"It was one of the worst nights of my life. The house was filling with people and the hours passed in a dreadful streaky blur of relatives, neighbors, crying children, covered dishes, blocked driveways, ringing telephones, bright lights, strange faces, awkward conversations. "
Page 372

"Julian could be marvelously kind in difficult circumstances of all sorts, but I sometimes got the feeling that he was left pleased by kindness itself and not by the elegance of the gesture."
Page 448

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Richard was so intent on impressing the group at Hampden College?

Why do you think Julian decided to teach Greek at a college for no pay?

Do you think the group knew Richard didn't have money? Discuss.

Do you believe it is possible to create a Bacchanal ceremony like the one outlined in the book? Explain.

Why do you think Richard did not cut ties with the group after Henry first proposed the murder?

Is it possible that Julian knew all the details of what happened? If so, why did he remain silent?

How might the story have changed if Henry, Francis, Charles and Camilla had gone to Buenos Aires?

The group often talked of living together in one big house after school. Do you think this ever would have happened? If so, what might it have been like?