

Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Areebha Mustafa

Name of School : Po Leung Kuk Ngan Po Ling

Book Title : The Secret History

Author : Donna Tartt

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"I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell."

And what a story it is.

This cryptic statement is given by Richard Papen, the protagonist of *The Secret History*, at the end of the first chapter

of the novel. It promises readers that an intriguing tale lies ahead; all we have to do is flip the page and keep reading. Interestingly enough, the biggest twist of the book has already been laid out at this point: the murder of Edmund Corcoran (or Bunny, as his friends call him), is the driving force behind the story, and it is the first scene of the book. Even before embarking on the second chapter, we know what's going to happen; we're just not sure in what fashion it will transpire.

From then on, we're introduced properly to Richard, who we learn is a nineteen-year old college student living in a small town called Plano in California. We've barely even learned these things about him before Richard's already having a falling out with his parents and deciding to leave home to attend Hampden College, a liberal arts college in Vermont. There he will go against his parents' wishes of him studying medicine and begin pursuing literature instead.

Once at Hampden, though, he finds himself blindsided. He quickly takes note of a mysterious group of students on campus that are unlike any other people he's ever met: cold, enigmatic Henry Winters, who speaks seven languages and bears a scar from a cryptic accident;

childish, irksome Edmund Corcoran, who everyone calls Bunny; elegant, haughty, pince-nez-wearing Francis Abernathy; and the twins Charles and Camilla McCauley, never apart, both as equally pleasant and cheerful as the other. None of them interacts with anyone outside of their group, and are subsequently shunned by the student body. But this only serves to further pique Richard's interest. He obsesses over them, fascinated by their beauty, their aura of mystery, their old-money wealth and elegance, how different they are from all the other rowdy hipsters roaming the campus. In an effort to get closer to them, he ends up switching his major and joining the Greek course, ignoring the other students' warnings to stay away.

Though everything starts off well enough - he spends a magical term with his new friends, having weekly dinners at the twins' house, boating in the lake by Francis' estate, rejoicing at finally being part of the group and enjoying his Greek classes -

things take a left turn fast. The others, minus Bunny, decide to secretly carry out a Bacchanal, an old religious ritual from the days of ancient Greece, in an attempt to summon the god Dionysus. They do this one night in the woods near Francis' estate, and end up in a trance, losing all control over their senses. This ends with Henry, still entranced, accidentally killing a farmer.

Bunny finds out about all this after reading Henry's journal, at which point he starts blackmailing the group, threatening to reveal their secret unless they silence him with money and gifts. Once his extortionate demands get too egregious and can no longer be met, they clue Richard in into what's been happening and convince him to help them plan and carry out Bunny's murder. The second half of the book deals with the aftermath of this murder, the lengths they all have gone to to cover it up, and how it slowly gnaws away at them. This finally culminates in Henry killing himself and the rest all drifting apart. Haunted both by

Henry's death and the weight of what they've done, all of their lives changed drastically - Francis becomes stuck in a loveless marriage; Camilla takes care of her grandmother all alone in her big house; Charles, now an alcoholic, has run off with a married woman and lives together in a slum; and Richard, heads back for California, the very place he's trying to run away from.

All of the characters in this book, especially Richard, are driven by what he calls "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs"; an obsession with external appearances. They

share the same longing to escape from the mundane, dreary modernity of life itself into the wild, thrilling excitement and beauty of ancient Greece, a place and era they heavily romanticise. They seem to think that just because something seems pretty on the surface, it can't possibly be rotten from the inside out; and they're downright wrong. The second they do something to truly attach themselves to the ancient Greeks, to make themselves a part of that world instead of simply reading and educating themselves about it, it all ends in tragedy. The harsh reality strips away the gleaming facade and shatters their delusions.

Richard is especially obsessed with outer appearances - the reason he gets so obsessed with the Greek class in the first place is because to him they represent everything he's always wanted to be. They are all wealthy, beautiful, mystifying, slightly above everyone else; he is fooled by this pretence and can't see past it to the real human beings underneath.

But as the story goes on, that very pretence is stripped away. One by one they all fall off their pedestals. Henry, once the intense, fascinating, untouchably perfect savant, turns out to be just as foolish and human as anyone else when he gives up in the end and kills himself to get out of the mess he's put themselves in. Francis is less of a charming enigma and more of a neurotic, anxious hypochondriac with a panic disorder, too weak-willed to go against his grandfather's wishes. Charles is not the gentle, handsome, charismatic Prince Charming-esque figure he seems to be at the beginning of the novel. Rather, he's a violent, reckless drunkard who's been secretly abusing his sister for years. And Camilla, for all her loveliness and charm, at the end of the day, is just another ordinary girl who Richard simply elevates onto a pedestal in his head. We learn very little about her real personality in the book, suggesting Richard doesn't really care about her as a person and simply projects a false, idealised image onto her, much

like he does with the rest of the class.

Ultimately, what this story is trying to tell us is not to be driven by that "longing for the picturesque", not to judge a book by its cover, as cliché as it may sound. Everyone in this novel is driven by the yearning for what seems beautiful on the surface, nevermind the dark, ugly, poisonous things lurking in the depths, and it drives them all to ruin. It's reminiscent of the

classic Greek tragedy, ironically enough, that you know from the very beginning that it's not going to end well, but you keep on reading anyway.