Death, Doubles and Dissociation:

Reading Donna Tartt's The Secret History *and Bret Easton Ellis's* Lunar Park *Through the Lens of Gothic-postmodernism*

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Abstract

This thesis applies the theory of Gothic-postmodernism formulated by Maria Beville to the novels *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *Lunar Park* by Bret Easton Ellis. As a relatively new theory, Gothic-postmodernism has not been applied to many novels. Moreover, little scholarship has been devoted to discussing Tartt's writing. Therefore, with this thesis I hope to contribute to the field of Gothic-postmodernism and to add to the academic work on *The Secret History*. Through a close reading of the two texts, the thesis examines the authors' use of Gothic and postmodern characteristics and the ways in which they work together to create sublime terror. It is shown that sublime terror primarily takes three forms: the loss of self, the loss of reality, and death. In line with Beville's argument that Gothic-postmodernist literature expresses the fears of contemporary society, my thesis also pays attention to which societal anxieties are evident in the novels. I argue that two main fears are present in *The Secret History*: fears about the corrupting influence of university campuses and the dangerous knowledge imparted there, and concerns about immoral youth. As an American novel written after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, *Lunar Park* reflects anxieties about living in post-9/11 America. It also demonstrates parental fears regarding vulnerable children. In concluding, the thesis suggests that even though both novels exhibit the features of many different genres and are very dissimilar novels, it is the features of postmodernism and the Gothic which are the most significant in both, making the theory of Gothic-postmodernism a particularly useful lens through which to read them. Furthermore, this thesis proposes that far from being an irrelevant genre in literature today, the Gothic has evolved to play a role in postmodern fiction.

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Introduction

"It was a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable" (Tartt 43). So writes Donna Tartt in her novel *The Secret History*. Although said in reference to Euripides's ancient Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*, the words are also applicable to what many people felt, and perhaps continue to feel, about Gothic fiction. As Jerrold E. Hogle recounts, the Gothic has a long and varied history. The first published novel to call itself Gothic was the 1764 counterfeit medieval tale *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (Hogle 1). After this, the 1790s saw an explosion of Gothic fiction in continental Europe, Britain and briefly in America, followed by the diffusion of Gothic elements into other genres such as the Victorian novel (Hogle 1). The 1890s then saw a resurgence of Gothic literature and in the 1900s the Gothic expanded into a wide range of media such as films, romance novels and television series (Hogle 2). Today the Gothic remains a popular genre of both literature and film, as well as an object of critical analysis. However, academics such as Fred Botting believe that the genre's literary importance has diminished with the shift in focus to popular films which bear merely superficial Gothic characteristics (117). Scholar of the Gothic Maria Beville disagrees. While she concedes that the Gothic as a term has been overused and interpreted with excessive license recently, she believes that critics such as Botting fail to take into account fundamental Gothic aspects in postmodern texts (Beville 7). Beville argues that the Gothic is "the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity; a mode that is far from dead and in fact rejuvenated in the present context of increased global terrorism" (8).

This thesis will apply the theory of Gothic-postmodernism developed by Beville to the novels *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt (1992) and *Lunar Park* by Bret Easton Ellis (2005) in order to argue that even though both novels exhibit the features of many different genres, it is the genres of postmodernism and the Gothic which are most significant, making the theory of Gothic-postmodernism an especially useful lens through which to read the texts. Gothic-postmodernism, as formulated by Beville in her book *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (2009), is a relatively new theory which has not been applied to many novels, particularly by scholars besides herself. Although there is a large body of scholarship on postmodernist or contemporary Gothic fiction, it is important to note that Gothic-postmodernism is distinct from this and uses Gothic as the adjective to describe postmodernist fiction which uses Gothic tropes (Beville 10). Despite the commercial and critical success which Tartt's novels have achieved, little scholarship has been devoted to

discussing her work. What scholarship is available on *The Secret History* has focused on aspects such as trauma, the classical intertext, gender and nature, and narrative misdirection, although *The Secret History* has also been read as an example of the Schoolhouse Gothic, and a master's thesis by Stacey Litzler has applied Beville's theory to the novel. There is a far larger body of scholarship on Bret Easton Ellis and *Lunar Park*. However, discussion rarely seems to include any mention of the Gothic, instead examining aspects such as authenticity and representations of reality, although Beville herself analyses the novel using her theory. Therefore, with this thesis I hope to contribute to the field of Gothic-postmodernism and to add to the academic work on *The Secret History*.

Tartt's novel was chosen for this thesis not only because I believe that it is a novel which deserves more academic attention, but also because terror and the sublime appear to be major themes, suggesting that it can be fruitfully read through the lens of Gothic-postmodernism. Set in New England, *The Secret History* tells the story of a close-knit group of Classics students at the elite liberal arts college Hampden. The group consists of Henry Winter, the intellectually brilliant but emotionless leader; the wealthy and flamboyantly dressed Francis Abernathy; secretive twins Camilla and Charles Macaulay; jocular but bigoted Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran; and newcomer Richard Papen, who has fled his mundane middle class life in California for the more aesthetically pleasing Vermont. Reflecting years later upon his time at Hampden, Richard describes his acceptance into the group and how, under the influence of their charismatic Classics professor, Julian Morrow, the class, excluding Richard and Bunny, conduct a Dionysiac bacchanal, during which they accidentally kill a farmer. By chance Bunny finds out and begins blackmailing them. Unable to meet his demands for money and increasingly worried that he will reveal the truth, the friends decide to kill him with Richard's help, making his death look like a hiking accident. The second half of the novel describes the psychological deterioration and drifting apart of the group. Driven to alcoholism, jealous of Henry's relationship with his sister and worried that Henry is planning on killing him to silence him, Charles confronts Henry and the others with a gun in Henry's hotel room. During the ensuing struggle he accidentally wounds Richard. Hearing the gunshot, the hotel owner tries to force his way into the room and Henry shoots himself in order to protect the others. After his death, the group splits apart, but never recovers from the traumatic events.

At first glance, Ellis's *Lunar Park* appears to be a strange choice for a novel to study alongside *The Secret History*. Written more than a decade later and full of horror movie tropes, it does not seem to have much in common with Tartt's cerebral novel. However, the

two texts share certain concerns such as the terror inherent in the loss of self and reality. Moreover, I thought that it would be interesting to study a post-9/11 novel together with a pre-9/11 one since the societal fears which they express are likely to be different. A pseudo-autobiography, *Lunar Park* describes the suburban life of the famous but controversial author Bret Easton Ellis, best known as the writer of *American Psycho*. A relapsed alcoholic and drug addict, Bret moves to the suburbs after marrying the actress Jayne Dennis, the mother of his son Robby, who has offered him a second chance. Shortly after arriving, and uncomfortable in his role as husband and father, Bret experiences a series of horrific events, including the monstrous transformation of his step-daughter's toy bird, the ghostly return of his dead father with whom he had a traumatic relationship, and the coming to life of several of his fictional creations, including the serial killer Patrick Bateman. Although it is never clear whether these events are real or drug and alcohol induced hallucinations, they are enough to drive Bret back to Manhattan, especially after the disappearance of his son and the subsequent failure of his relationship with Jayne.

In this thesis, a close reading of the novels will be undertaken, paying particular attention to their Gothic and postmodern aspects, and the presence of sublime terror, especially how it is evident in the loss or fragmentation of the self, the loss of reality, and death. The ways in which the Gothic-postmodernist aspects of the novels are used to express the fears of contemporary society will also be emphasised. As already stated, the main theory which will be employed is Maria Beville's theory of Gothic-Postmodernism, which she defines as "a hybrid mode that emerges from the dialogic interaction of Gothic and postmodernist characteristics in a given text" (8-9). It emphasises the role of the Gothic sublime and its concern with the unrepresentable and asserts that the Gothic and the postmodern are linked by terror related to the loss of reality and the self, and to death (Beville 9). Significantly, Gothic-postmodernist literature is thought to address our desires for terror and to expel the fears of postmodern society (Beville 10).

Beville lists a number of characteristics which define Gothic-postmodernist fiction, including the blurring of borders between the real and the fictional; narrative self-consciousness; the sublime effects of terror; unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; Gothic thematic devices such as the doppelgänger, haunting and an atmosphere of mystery and suspense; and representations of otherness by means of shadows and gloom, turbulent landscapes, and monstrous characters (15). Characteristics such as these will be highlighted in my analysis of the novels. Since terror plays such an important role in Beville's theory, she dedicates a considerable amount of space to its discussion. According to

her, sublime terror is Gothic-postmodernism's "central dialogical element" and "the most apparent common denominator between the Gothic and postmodernism" (16). Beville also claims that awareness of terror is a source of cultural fear (23). It is this which enables Gothic-postmodernist fiction to express the fears of contemporary society. In postmodern times, terror involves a rejection of concepts of truth and reality, a fascination with the rise of technology and media, and an isolated sense of self (Beville 23). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have also added to the pervasive feeling of terror found in present society. As Beville uses the term terror, it is in its most basic sense a personal experience which involves a state of hesitation or suspension and hints at unimaginable horrors (24). Additionally, it is sublime in that it is unique, timeless, and unquantifiable; a totalising experience in which the self is encountered in its simplest knowable form (Beville 26).

Some of Beville's other remarks are also of relevance. Although sublime terror is the main link between the Gothic and the postmodern, it is not the only source of overlap. Issues common to both genres include crises of identity, the fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and philosophies of being and knowing (Beville 53). These are a few of the aspects which this thesis will include. Furthermore, Beville states that Gothicism in postmodern texts is thought to manifest through the sublime as experienced through terror, suspense, and horror; the supernatural; metamorphosis; the grotesque; and an obsession with death (55). Features such as these will also be central to characterising the novels as Gothic-postmodernist.

Beville also describes a technique for reading Gothic-postmodernist novels. Following this technique, the methodological approach of this thesis will consist of close textual analysis and the broad application of various theories of the sublime and the postmodern, many of which are used by Beville and are therefore in accord with her overall approach. A twofold reading of each novel will be performed (Beville 9), first for *The Secret History* in chapter one and then for *Lunar Park* in chapter two. Firstly, the Gothic and postmodern features of the novels will be identified. The first section of both chapter one and two is therefore devoted to discussing the postmodern features of *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* respectively to determine whether the novels can be viewed as postmodern. Several postmodern theories will be employed here. Brian McHale's approach to defining postmodern fiction in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (2015) will be used to think about the novels as postmodern texts. McHale uses Roman Jakobson's concept of the dominant to explain the central focus of postmodernism. The dominant, as described by Jakobson, is the focusing component of a

work of art (McHale, *Postmodernism* 15). According to McHale, the dominant of modernism is epistemological or to do with knowing, while the dominant of postmodernism is ontological or to do with being (*Postmodernism* 15). Questions of world-making and modes of being are therefore privileged (McHale, *Postmodernism* 15). One of these questions is what happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation and the boundaries between them are violated? (McHale, *Fiction* 10). This question will be considered in relation to the novels and it will be shown that they are focused on the ontological issues of the loss of self and reality.

Bran Nicol's book *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (2009) will likewise be used to identify postmodern features of the novels. Nicol argues that the most characteristic technique in postmodern fiction is metafiction, the process by which a text reflects on or refers to itself as a work of fiction, foregrounding its own status as an artificial construct (35). He also draws attention to aspects such as the unreliable narrator, ideas about the existential implications of authoring and "the tendency of postmodern narrative to keep conjectural possibilities open" (131). An additional concept will be key to discussing the postmodern elements of the novels, namely Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, described in his books *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, first published in French in 1976. According to Baudrillard, in postmodernity we are governed by "the principle of simulation … rather than the outdated reality principle" (*Symbolic Exchange* 42). Simulation involves the hyperreal, "the meticulous reduplication of the real" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 140) which excludes any distinction between the real and the imaginary (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 4). Notably, this is achieved through technological advances. Since both novels depict the blurring of the line between the real and the unreal, including by means of a recurring film metaphor, the concept of the hyperreal will be useful to explain the postmodern loss of reality which the novels' protagonists experience.

The second section of chapter one and two of this thesis will be used to discuss the Gothic features of *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park*. Fred Botting's book *Gothic* (2005) will be used to identify conventional Gothic tropes present in the novels. Botting's argument that terror evokes cathartic emotions and facilitates the expulsion of the object of fear is also of interest (5). According to him, "terror activates the mind and the imagination, allowing it to overcome, transcend even, its fears and doubts, enabling the subject to move from a state of passivity to activity" (48). This argument will be used in the thesis's conclusion to argue for the importance of Gothic-postmodernist literature. Regarding key concepts for the analysis of Gothic features, Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny will be used to discuss

the haunted house and doppelgängers in *Lunar Park*. Formulated in Freud's essay "The Uncanny," originally published in 1919, the uncanny is defined by Freud as something which has long been familiar, and which causes fear (220). Freud calls such frightening objects and phenomena *unheimlich*, stating that they ought to have remained hidden and secret but have instead been revealed (225). He points to doubles, the return of the dead and inanimate objects coming to life as instances of the uncanny. Since all of these phenomena occur in *Lunar Park* and form a large part of the terror inherent in the novel, Freud's theory will be helpful in explaining why they are terrifying.

After discussing the postmodern and Gothic features of the novels, in section three of both chapter one and two the texts will be identified as an articulation of Gothic-postmodernism due to the interaction of these features. The approach will be unified by the overarching concept of sublime terror, divided into three parts: loss of self, loss of reality and death. According to Robert Doran, the sublime "is one of the most important and often-discussed concepts in philosophical aesthetics, literary theory, and art history" (1). Although a great number of theories on the sublime exist, a few are considered foundational, including that of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-François Lyotard. In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757, Burke claims that "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*" (36). With this claim, Burke formulates the sublime as centering around terror, which he believes is the strongest emotion which can be felt (36). Furthermore, in its highest degree the sublime causes "astonishment," which involves a state of hesitation and suspension, and the mind to be completely occupied by the object of terror, leaving one unable to reason (Burke 53). Significantly, the sublime also produces pleasure alongside terror, the combination of which produces what Burke terms "delightful horror" (67).

Like Burke, Kant links the sublime to both terror and pleasure. In his essay from 1764 "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime," Kant states that the sublime "arouses satisfaction, but with dread" (14). Later, in his 1790 book *Critique of Judgement*, Kant develops this idea and claims that the sublime produces simultaneous feelings of displeasure and pleasure (88). Moreover, the mind is both attracted to and repelled by the sublime object (Kant, *Judgement* 76). Kant also argues that the sublime is ill-suited to presentation and does violence to the imagination, making it unrepresentable (*Judgement* 76). These ideas were later taken up by Lyotard. In his essay "Answering the question: what is the

postmodern?" (1992), Lyotard asserts that the sublime occurs when the imagination fails to present an object which could accord with a concept (6). It is therefore unpresentable. He makes this point again in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994) and agrees with Kant that the sublime involves the contradictory feelings of pleasure and displeasure (109). Although it is not a theory of the sublime but rather a key concept in postmodernism, Fredric Jameson's theory of the waning of affect will be used in this section to describe the emotional states of the two novels' protagonists during moments of sublime terror. The waning of affect is introduced in Jameson's work *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1997). He believes that postmodernity has caused a change in the feeling and expression of emotions in art and fiction. Modern experiences of isolation, alienation and anomie are less prevalent and "feelings … are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (Jameson 16). Jameson connects this new emotional tone to a "disturbing sense of unreality" which "comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect" (27). Such affect is described in terms of anxiety and loss of reality, or euphoria and intoxicatory intensity (Jameson 27). Significantly, Jameson links representations of postmodern emotional states to the sublime, stating that they "can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime" (6).

After discussing the sublime terror in the novels, the thesis will analyse the ways in which they express contemporary societal fears by means of Gothic-postmodernist elements. While no key theories as such will be used here, certain secondary texts are helpful in identifying possible societal fears. The first of these, and applicable to *Lunar Park*, is Baudrillard's "The Spirit of Terrorism" (2002), in which he considers the consequences of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and argues that there is now "a global profusion of terror" (10). Sherry R. Truffin's chapter "Nightmarish Democracy and the Schoolhouse Gothic" is relevant to *The Secret History*. Truffin identifies the novel as an example of the Schoolhouse Gothic, a subgenre which she claims represents teachers as "figures of power who may appear to wield an inexhaustible and inscrutable authority" ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 164). Also relevant to Tartt's novel is Kirk Curnutt's paper "Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s," in which he discusses societal fears of immoral youths completely lacking in empathy, and articles such as Don T. Martin's "Reflections of a Graduate Student at Ohio State University During the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, 1965-1970."

The conclusion of the thesis will then briefly sum up the findings, discuss in which ways the novels differ in their use of Gothic-postmodernism and in which ways they are

similar, answer the question of why the findings are important, and suggest directions for future research. Is the Gothic still relevant in literature today as a serious genre and object of study? Do Gothic-postmodernist novels enable us to confront the pervasive fear experienced within contemporary society and if so, how? The thesis will suggest that although *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* display the characteristics of many different genres, it is the genres of postmodernism and the Gothic which are most significant, making the theory of Gothic-postmodernism a particularly useful lens through which to read them. It will also suggest that far from being an irrelevant genre in literature today, the Gothic has evolved to play a role in postmodern fiction.

1. **"Beauty is Terror":** *The Secret History*

1.1 "Just Like a Fiction": Postmodern Features

To apply the theory of Gothic-postmodernism to *The Secret History*, it is first necessary to identify the novel's postmodern features so as to determine that it can in fact be viewed as a postmodern text. According to Bran Nicol, "postmodernism is a notoriously slippery and indefinable term" (1). First used widely in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators, as applied to literature it described a new trend which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques, extended them, or adapted them (Nicol 1). More generally, postmodernity is seen as the era of consumerism, late capitalism, and the dominance of the virtual and digital (Nicol 2). Postmodern fiction is thought to be too diverse in style to be a genre. Instead, Nicol treats it as a category which contains several different kinds of postmodern fiction all sharing a particular aesthetic, set of principles or value system (xvi). He follows Brian McHale in using the concept of the dominant to think about what it is that postmodern novels share. Developed by Roman Jakobson, the dominant is described as the focusing component of a work of art (McHale, *Postmodernism* 15). McHale believes that while the dominant of modernism is epistemological or to do with knowing, the dominant of postmodernism is ontological or to do with being (*Postmodernism* 15). Questions of world-making and modes of being are therefore privileged, and worlds are multiplied and juxtaposed (McHale, *Postmodernism* 15). As will be shown later, ontology in both *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* is primarily linked to the loss or fragmentation of the self and the loss of reality.

Many of the postmodern features of *The Secret History* concern ways of being. The first of these is the narrator's lack of a stable self. Upon his arrival at Hampden College, Richard, the narrator, discards his mundane past in favour of a glamorous false identity, one with "orange groves, failed movie stars, lamplit cocktail hours by the swimming pool, cigarettes, ennui" (Tartt 28). He is able to do this because "my years [in Plano] created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup … On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history" (Tartt 5). It is not only Richard's unremarkable past which allows him to construct a new identity, but also the fact that he is "gifted at blending [himself] into any given milieu" (Tartt 207). Moreover, over time his lack of a stable self increases, until his fabricated self is not merely a role which he is playing but a part of who he really is: "I had more or less become the character which for a long time I had so skillfully

played" (Tartt 365).[1] In these words, the postmodern idea that the self is shifting and created, rather than stable and authentic, is evident. Jameson claims that in postmodernism "the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (14). Fragmentation excludes stability and a unified whole and, as will be shown later, it is a postmodern source of sublime terror.

The Secret History also shows a postmodern concern with ontological questions of world-making. According to McHale, typical postmodernist questions relate to the ontology of the world which the text projects (*Fiction* 10). Such questions include "What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (McHale, *Fiction* 10). In *The Secret History* there is a close encounter between the world of madness and the world of reason. The former world takes the shape of the bacchanal which the Classics group conducts. As an ancient Greek Dionysiac ritual aimed at inducing divine madness, it is directly opposed to rationality. *The Bacchae*, Euripides's play which depicts a bacchanal, is described by Richard as "a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable" (Tartt 43). While the group's own bacchanal is never described fully or directly, enough information is given to make it clear that the participants lost all reason and rationality. Firstly, they believe that they were joined by Dionysus himself and claim to have witnessed other inexplicable events such as "a pack of dogs. Snakes twining around my arms. Trees on fire, pines bursting into flames like enormous torches" (Tartt 403). It is never clear whether these events are real or simply hallucinations, but they indicate that the group's state of mind was deeply disturbed, as does the fact that afterwards they are unable to talk for a few hours (Tartt 196). The most convincing evidence of their total loss of reason is the violent murder which they commit. Trespassing on private property, they encounter a farmer and, out of their minds, accidentally kill him. The madness of their act is emphasised by the brutal nature of the murder. Together they appear to engage in an act of sparagmos and rip the farmer apart, Charles "pulling as hard as he could, and all of a sudden becoming aware that what he was pulling at was a man's arm, with his foot braced in the armpit" (Tartt 189).

This violent world of madness is contrasted with the everyday world of reason. Richard notes that "the world certainly hadn't been kicked out of its orbit overnight. People were hurrying to and fro, on their way to class, everything business as usual" (Tartt 330). This is a world dominated by mundane concerns, academic pursuits, and rationality. It is

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[1] While fabricating a history is arguably an epistemological act, transforming into the fabricated self is ontological.

therefore entirely different from the world of the bacchanal. The result of placing these two worlds in confrontation, one of which involves possibly supernatural events, is the breakdown of the boundary between the real and the unreal. Furthermore, it serves to highlight the postmodern belief that truth, reality and experience are subjective and personal (Beville 48). According to sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, as explained by Nicol, reality is not given but is instead a fiction that we collectively subscribe to, produced as a result of the interaction between given elements of the world, social convention, language, and individual perception (8). Thus, there are multiple realities rather than one stable reality.

Postmodern features not directly related to ontology are also found in *The Secret History*, namely the fusion of genres, intertextuality and metafictional references made by the narrator to writing a story. Instead of limiting her novel to one genre, Tartt combines the characteristics of many to create a hybrid text. The first genre which the novel engages with is indicated by its opening lines: "The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation" (Tartt 1). The fact that Bunny is dead and that this has led to a grave situation suggests that a crime has been committed, and subsequent paragraphs not only make it clear that he has been murdered, but even reveal who his killers are. As A.O. Muntian and I.V. Shpak point out, the novel is therefore a detective story in reverse, also known as a "whydunit" since the main interest lies in discovering the motive of the crime.

The Secret History also bears characteristics of the campus novel in both its setting and characters. Set at the fictional Hampden College, the novel depicts an elite group of students, the Classics class, who are isolated from the rest of the campus and the town and even from the rest of the faculty, having "virtually no contact with the rest of the division" (Tartt 13). There is also a confrontation between this group and the poorer, less educated rural townsfolk in terms of sociocultural dynamics (Muntian & Shpak). Moreover, in the beginning Richard acts as the outsider to the group until he is accepted. These are all characteristics of the campus novel (Muntian & Shpak). Other genres that contribute attributes include the philosophical novel, the psychological thriller and, importantly, the Gothic novel. Litzler views the fusion of genres as a form of postmodern bricolage or creation from a diverse range of available genres (2). It is also evidence of the postmodern tendency to mix high and low culture, in which popular genre fiction is combined with more

sophisticated and intellectual literary features (McHale, *Postmodernism* 80).[2] Detective stories and Gothic novels both belong to popular genre fiction, while the novel's metafictional aspects and inclusion of other languages are more highbrow qualities.

Intertextuality is another postmodern feature of *The Secret History*. Throughout the novel Tartt refers to a wide variety of writers, literary works, and literary topics, either indirectly through allusion or by means of quotations. Some of the quotations are untranslated Greek, Latin, and French. Their purpose may be to encourage the reader's active engagement with the text since they need to look up translations if they wish to understand the meaning. Nicol asserts that postmodern fiction requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer (xiv). Attempting to understand the translations would be one way for the reader to take an active role. On the other hand, Litzler suggests that they cause anxiety for the reader in attempting to interpret the text (17). This may perhaps mirror a postmodern societal sense of anxiety. Furthermore, Francois Pauw argues that Tartt "borrows the atmosphere, moral framework, and part of the plot of … Euripides' *Bacchae* – as an important subtext of her novel" ("Part 1" 147). *The Secret History* therefore demonstrates intertextuality at a larger structural and thematic level as well. As with the novel's fusion of genres, Litzler considers its intertextuality to be a form of bricolage, one which is used by Tartt in an attempt to reveal the invisible forces of postmodern society by bringing into play multiple meanings and interpretations (19). Additionally, the intertextuality contributes to a sense of destabilisation and indeterminacy (Litzler 19). This may accord with the postmodern notion that there is no one stable truth.

The final notable postmodern feature of *The Secret History* is its metafictionality. According to Nicol, the most characteristic feature of postmodern fiction is metafiction, the process by which "a text highlights its own status as a fictional construct by referring to itself" (16). As narrator, Richard makes numerous references to the fact that what he is recounting is a story, for example on the second page of the novel: "I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell" (Tartt 2). Moreover, he is not only telling a story but writing an account of it: "This part, for some reason, is difficult for me to write" (Tartt 311). Reflections such as this provide a way for the text to refer to itself. Beville states that metafiction serves as epistemological exploration regarding the nature of existence and reality in relation to fiction (46). By drawing attention to itself, the novel exposes reality as

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[2] Campus novels themselves might straddle this high/low division since it is a marketable genre with at least the appearance of intellectual preoccupations.

constructed, mediated and discursive, just like the reality of the text (Nicol 16). Significantly for its status as a Gothic-postmodernist text, the fact that the novel is presented as a written account enables it to fit into the tradition of Gothic novels being presented as found documents.

Metafiction also indicates that we cannot accept the reality in the text at face value (Nicol 16). This links to the unreliable narrator, another feature common to postmodern fiction. As Nicol conveys, "All narrative constantly involves artifice: telling a story is not an innocent act, involving a natural sequence of events which are simply 'extracted' and recounted. Rather narrative involves selection, organization, and interpretation on the part of the narrator" (Nicol 27). By deciding which parts of the story to tell and choosing how to portray the other people in his tale, Richard acts as an unreliable narrator. He reflects that "It has always been hard for me to talk about Julian without romanticizing him. In many ways, I loved him the most of all; and it is with him that I am most tempted to embroider, to flatter, to basically reinvent" (Tartt 576). If Richard experiences this temptation regarding Julian and acts upon it, he likely does so with other characters too, which throws his reliability into question. Additionally, Richard admits to being a liar when he describes the detailed fake childhood that he has created (Tartt 5). The fact that he is looking back through the past also adds to his potential unreliability due to the fallibility of memory (Litzler 23). Richard therefore joins the ranks of other unreliable narrators such as Nick Carraway from *The Great Gatsby*, tellingly one of his favourite books (Tartt 79).

Identifying all of the above postmodern features in *The Secret History* suggests that it can be classified as a postmodern novel. Applying McHale's method of defining postmodern fiction using the concept of the dominant has shown that many of the novel's postmodern characteristics are ontological in that they are related to questions of world-making and modes of being. Such characteristics include the narrator's lack of a stable self and placing different worlds in confrontation. Other features such as the novel's metafictionality, fusion of genres, intertextuality and unreliable narrator are also typically postmodern. Thus, *The Secret History* appears to fulfil the first requirement for the application of Belville's theory of Gothic-postmodernism; being a postmodern text.

1.2 "A Triumph of Barbarism Over Reason": Gothic Features

The next step in applying the theory of Gothic-postmodernism to *The Secret History* is describing its Gothic characteristics. According to Belville, the essence of the Gothic genre

is a preoccupation with the sublime experience of terror (34). In Belville's view it is this which has enabled the genre to survive into contemporary times, in spite of the fact that due to popular culture the Gothic as a term has been over-used and over-creatively interpreted, becoming a romantic idea and alternative aesthetic (35). She believes that certain elements of the original manifestation of the Gothic have been preserved (36). Such elements include "explorations of self and reality and the terror of the end" and a concern with "issues that we cannot know or directly represent," all of which relates to terror (Belville 106). In fiction, postmodern or otherwise, traditional Gothic conventions therefore generate terror (Belville 41). As Ana Rita Catalão Guedes explains, referencing M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham, the term Gothic came to be extended to a type of fiction that did not necessarily include supernatural elements, but focused on the macabre and uncanny, had an atmosphere of terror, and dealt with violence, taboo subjects and altered psychological states (10). This is the way in which the Gothic aspects of *The Secret History* function. The novel could perhaps also be considered an example of the American Gothic, which Botting describes as being concerned with psychological motivations, distortions of imagination, and leaving boundaries between reality, illusion, and madness unresolved (75). This thesis will now discuss some of these features and others.

One of the recurring themes in Gothic fiction is supernaturalism. *The Secret History* depicts possible supernatural events in relation to the bacchanal. When relating the events of that night to Richard, Henry remarks that "Charles had a bloody bite-mark on his arm that he had no idea how he'd got, but it wasn't a human bite. Too big. And strange puncture marks instead of teeth" (Tartt 188). Thus, it appears that the group encountered some sort of monstrous creature. Henry also relates how "Camilla said that during part of it, she'd believed she was a deer; and that was odd, too, because the rest of us remember chasing a deer through the woods, for miles it seemed" (Tartt 188). Metamorphosis is another Gothic convention, as well as a classical one, and one which here forms part of the possible supernatural occurrences. It is likewise present in the group's belief that they were accompanied by the Greek god Dionysus who shifted into a variety of shapes: "There was a fifth person with us for part of the time … Sometimes it was a man, sometimes a woman. And sometimes something else" (Tartt 403). It is unclear whether these supernatural events really did occur or whether they were hallucinations brought on by days of fasting and experimentation with hallucinogenic substances. This uncertainty causes a breakdown of the boundary between fiction and reality and is itself a Gothic feature whereby any single

meaning is obscured (Botting 2). It also corresponds to the stylistic tendency of the Gothic to leave the truth in doubt through formulations such as "it seemed."

A similar breakdown of borders is evident in the liminality which Richard feels. Beville claims that Gothic characters are typically in-between and transitional, exceeding boundaries (141). Throughout the text, Richard is caught between various states: waking and dreaming, reality and fiction, life and death. He frequently experiences the sensation that reality is dreamlike. Hampden appears to him as a surreal land (Tartt 11), time occasionally moves in a surreal fashion, Richard wanders in "a perpetual twilight" due to overmedicating (Tartt 553), and he recalls events in a dreamlike manner: "confused details of the previous night floated back to me like a dream" (Tartt 392). Furthermore, he is often half-asleep and half-awake, "in some strange country between dream and waking" (Tartt 477). Richard's hallucinations also give reality a nightmarish quality. His hallucination of the gibbets on Commons lawn persists even once it is over, leaving him with the intermittent impression that "the world would drop away and there loomed a gallows, medieval and black" (Tartt 553). He also appears to hallucinate Henry after his death: "I saw Henry himself, over her shoulder, standing in the corner in his gardening clothes" (Tartt 613). However, Francis also claims to have seen him, suggesting that perhaps they truly have been seeing his ghost. This possibly supernatural event erodes the boundary between fiction and reality, the mixture of which is noted by Julian in a metafictional remark: "Life has got awfully dramatic all of a sudden, hasn't it? Just like a fiction" (Tartt 393). Lastly, Richard experiences a confusion between life and death on at least one occasion: "For a few delirious moments I wondered if I was dead" (Tartt 322). Richard's liminality and the novel's potentially supernatural events leave the boundaries between reality, illusion, and madness unresolved, which Botting claims is characteristic of the American Gothic (75).

A major Gothic feature of *The Secret History* is its depiction of turbulent natural landscapes and weather, as well as manmade Gothic settings. One of the stock features of Gothic fiction is desolate landscapes (Botting 2). Such landscapes typically include ruins and wild natural settings (Botting 16) which are often viewed as sublime. Tartt describes the novel's natural surroundings in detail, regularly using images that create a foreboding atmosphere. Early on, Richard remarks on "The shock of first seeing a birch tree at night, rising up in the dark as cool and slim as a ghost. And the nights, bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars" (Tartt 12). In these words, nature assumes both a Gothic aspect and a sublime one. It is ghostly, dark, and chaotic, evokes a feeling of surprise, and is beyond the mind's ability to imagine. According to Burke, one

source of the sublime is magnificence, which he defines as an abundance of things which are splendid or valuable (71). He gives the starry sky as an example, arguing that its sublimity is heightened by its apparent disorder (71). Similarly, Kant claims that sublime nature evokes ideas of power and magnitude (*Judgement* 77). Since the nights are "bigger than imagining" they evoke such ideas. Other images of nature in the novel are also Gothic. Trees in particular take on ominous associations: "Bare willows clicked on the windowpanes like skeleton fingers" (Tartt 103). The woods, a traditional Gothic setting, are "deathly still, more forbidding than I had ever seen them – green and black and stagnant, dark with the smell of mud and rot. There was no wind; not a bird sang, not a leaf stirred. The dogwood blossoms were poised, white and surreal and still against the darkening sky" (Tartt 298). Here, Gothic elements of darkness, silence and decay are combined to create a mood of tension and suspense.

Weather in the novel is equally Gothic. It is shown as dark, oppressive, and tumultuous: "The air had a heavy quality and the sky over the mountains was overcast and stormy" (Tartt 367). At times it also bears frightening qualities: "A thick fog lay in the valley below, a smoldering cauldron of white from which only the treetops protruded, stark and Dantesque" (Tartt 380). Once again, such descriptions create a tense atmosphere which might mirror the inner turmoil of the story's characters. The weather is at its most turbulent and threatening in the depiction of winter which seems to take on a malevolent life of its own. As Malin Niklasson argues, "In the depiction of the winter months in Hampden nature becomes associated with death and mortality" (11). While his friends go home for the Christmas holidays, Richard chooses to stay behind in Hampden to avoid returning to Plano and seeing his parents. Unable to afford proper accommodation, he stays in the warehouse of an ex-Hampden student who runs a musical instrument workshop and lets students stay for free if they occasionally work on the instruments. Upon arriving, he discovers that the warehouse has a hole in the roof which lets in the snow and wind, and after staying there for a few weeks he realises that it is cold enough to be life-threatening. Although Richard narrowly escapes death, he is left with permanent lung problems and winter becomes a recurring source of fear. According to Kant, nature can be sublime when it is a cause of fear (*Judgement* 90). Thus, weather in the novel is both sublime and Gothic, just as the natural landscapes are.

In *The Secret History*, the built environment as well as the natural one is Gothic. The cemetery near the college is a traditional Gothic setting, featuring "a flat, straggled line of tombstones, rickety and carious, skewed at such angles that they gave a hectic, uncanny effect of motion, as if some hysterical force, a poltergeist perhaps, had scattered them only

moments before" (Tartt 68). The mention of the poltergeist connects to notions of cemeteries as haunted places, giving it a further Gothic aspect. Likewise, the church in which Bunny's funeral service is held has a "doomy, horrorhouse atmosphere" (Tartt 465) and the poor ringing of the church bell outside causes it to clang "unevenly to and fro like a bell at a seance" (Tartt 468), reinforcing ideas of haunting and perhaps of the burden of the dead upon the living. The country house owned by Francis's aunt acts as another Gothic setting, being reminiscent of a traditional Gothic European castle. When Richard first sees it "the moon came out from behind a cloud and I saw the house. It was tremendous. I saw, in sharp ink-black silhouette against the sky, turrets and pikes, a widow's walk" (Tartt 84). These architectural features transform the country manor into a typical Gothic residence, an impression which is heightened by the cloudy sky and illuminating moonlight. The interior is similarly Gothic: "The entrance hall had a sweet, musty smell and was so dim it seemed almost gaslit; the walls were spidery with the shadows of potted palms and on the ceilings, so high they made my head reel, loomed distorted traces of our own shadows" (Tartt 84). The inside of the house is therefore dominated by shadows, darkness and gloom which contribute to the Gothic atmosphere by generating a sense of mystery and evoking emotions alien to reason (Botting 21).

The final Gothic setting of the novel is Hampden College. Truffin argues that fiction depicting schoolteachers as horrific figures of power and the institutions that they represent forms a sub-genre of Gothic fiction which she calls the Schoolhouse Gothic ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 164). She classifies *The Secret History* as one such text and claims that in this type of literature, school settings are ancient, enchanting, and unreal, yet isolated, claustrophobic traps ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 165). At least one part of Hampden is suggestive of Gothic European ruins; the Lyceum, "old and covered with ivy," where the Classics class is held (Tartt 15). Although the rest of the campus might not be similarly old and decaying, it is nevertheless described using Gothic imagery: "At the top of a rise, I saw the gables of Monmouth House, bleak in the distance. The sky was cold and empty. A sliver of moon, like the white crescent of a thumbnail, floated in the dim" (Tartt 69). These words convey a Gothic image of darkness, foreboding nature and gloom which is increased by the numerous Gothic sounding names such as the Battenkill River and Deep Kill Road. Hampden is also both unreal and enchanting. The first time that Richard sees it he takes note of its great natural beauty, "the sun rising over the mountains, and birches, and impossibly green meadows," and remarks that "it was like a country from a dream" (Tartt 11). Yet alongside this splendour, Hampden is isolated. Located in a remote town in rural New England, the

college's students remain separated from the townspeople by location, wealth, class, and education. In this secluded space they are "strangely prone to hysteria" and the "hermetic, overheated atmosphere made it a thriving black petri dish of melodrama and distortion" (Tartt 425-426). Thus, it is clear that the college's isolation causes negative psychological effects, supporting Truffin's point that in the Schoolhouse Gothic "school is experienced as psychological and social trauma" ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 165).

The exclusiveness of the Classics class intensifies the elite nature of Hampden. Firstly, it is almost impossible to gain entry since Julian generally teaches no more than five students whom he selects based on his own personal criteria. Secondly, the students in the class choose to separate themselves from the rest of the college which they look down upon. Their lack of even basic knowledge of recent historical events and disinterest in modern society further isolates them, turning them into an insular group in an already insular setting. Key to Truffin's formulation of the Schoolhouse Gothic is that school settings act as traps ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 164). She points out that Richard is trapped, not by a physical trap but by a social one ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 168). Initially, he is pleased by the thought that Bunny's murder has bound him and his friends together and transformed their friendship, turning them into "friends-till-death-do-us-part," but later his pleasure turns into disgust: "Now it made me sick, knowing there was no way out. I was stuck with them, with all of them, for good" (Tartt 519). The Classics group and the murder which they commit therefore act as a social form of Gothic entrapment. Truffin also states that "Richard is empowered through absorption into an insular "pack" that causes him to become increasingly detached from reality and from himself throughout the novel" ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 169). While he may be empowered in some ways, his close identification with the group causes the loss of perspective and self, trapping him within a detached reality. Thus, as a Gothic setting, Hampden is insular and entrapping.

Another of *The Secret History*'s key Gothic features is the turmoil of the psyche. According to Truffin, psychological deterioration is central to the Gothic experience ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 169). She claims that in the Schoolhouse Gothic, "Characters become paranoid, suffer from hallucinations that may or may not be alcohol- or drug-induced, and experience psychic disintegration or detachment from the self" ("Schoolhouse Gothic" 165). These words are highly applicable to all the living members of the Classics group, with the possible exception of Henry, but to Richard most of all. After Bunny's murder his psychological state worsens considerably, and he suffers from a range of terrifying emotions, the first of which is depression. Even before playing a role in Bunny's death, Richard feels "a

deep melancholy that would not lift for many weeks" (Tartt 121). Later, it increases to "a black, inarticulate tangle of anxiety and gloom" (Tartt 519). He also feels extreme fear which causes "a horrible, erratic thumping in my chest, as if a large bird were trapped inside my ribcage and beating itself to death" (Tartt 332). One of the most prominent emotions that Richard experiences is guilt. Although it takes him some time to feel any remorse for Bunny's murder, once he does it takes the shape of nightmares which serve as a form of psychological punishment (Pauw, "Part 2" 19). One such nightmare involves Bunny's corpse which needs to be hidden: "With a rush of terror I realized that I had to hide the body somewhere, where I didn't know; I plunged my hands into the icy water and grasped him beneath the arms and tried to pull him out, but it was no good" (Tartt 331). At other times, the nightmares have a traditional Gothic setting, such as "a prickle of marble spires, dim mausoleums, pale in the growing darkness" (Tartt 478). They also include typical Gothic tropes, such as a mysterious figure who seems to be Bunny, risen from the dead and seeking revenge (Tartt 478).

Richard's disintegrating psyche is further evidenced by the paranoia which he exhibits. While looking at a porcelain figurine of an elephant clock with a mahout to strike the hours, he begins to feel that the mahout is watching him: "There was something diabolical about the mahout, and every time I looked up I found him grinning at me in an attitude of cheerful malice" (Tartt 348). His paranoia therefore has a hallucinatory quality to it since he is attributing sentience to an inanimate object, a clear sign of mental instability. The description of the Furies seems to represent Richard's range of negative emotions. During one of his classes, Julian discusses these goddesses of vengeance and retribution from ancient Greek religion and mythology: "And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much *themselves* that they couldn't stand it" (Tartt 39). This is what appears to happen to Richard. He observes that when he is alone, he experiences "a sort of general neurotic horror, a common attack of nerves and self-loathing magnified to the power of ten. Every cruel or fatuous thing I'd ever said came back to me with an amplified clarity … old insults and guilts and embarrassments stretching clear back to childhood … paraded before me one by one, in vivid and mordant splendor" (Tartt 356). Richard is therefore haunted by an internal monologue of horror, anxiety and self-hatred that draws upon everyday occurrences in what could be a Gothic form of punishment. Faced with the possibility of living with such mental turmoil for the rest of his life, Richard briefly considers committing

suicide, but realises that "Horrific as it was, the present dark, I was afraid to leave it for the other, permanent dark" (Tartt 551).

Francis has no such fear. After Richard and along with Charles, he is perhaps the member of the group most affected by his part in Bunny's death. Shortly after it occurs, he experiences "A sudden rush of fear. Heart palpitations. Trembling and sweating" (Tartt 491). What Francis believes is a heart attack is proven to be psychosomatic symptoms characteristic of panic attacks. Three years after Henry's death, he attempts to commit suicide. Even though he is ultimately unsuccessful, his actions show that he failed to recover from his psychological anguish. The same can be said for Charles. While being questioned by the police regarding Bunny's disappearance, he relates that "A couple of times I was so panicky I thought I was just going to black out or break down or something" (Tartt 508). Like Richard, his disturbed mental state results in dreams of Bunny and, unlike Richard, the consumption of alcohol as a coping mechanism which leads to him becoming an alcoholic. Although Camilla, the remaining member of the group, appears to fare better than the others, she too drops out of college, choosing to devote herself to the care of her grandmother and ceasing all communication with her twin Charles. Thus, the turmoil of the psyche thought to be key to Gothic fiction plays a large role in the novel, affecting most of the main characters and replacing the supernatural forces of many traditional Gothic novels with psychological ones.

Two other Gothic features of *The Secret History* are noteworthy, Henry's status as Gothic villain and the description of the Classics students. Pauw claims that Henry is occasionally portrayed with a hint of the demonic since "His austere dress and the lack of emotion behind his well-mannered façade lend him a somewhat macabre aura, exacerbated by a propensity for violence and cynical manipulation" ("Part 2" 23). As these words suggest, Henry can be read as a Gothic villain. Firstly, he demonstrates a sinister absence of emotion. When Richard first sees him, he takes note of his "expressionless and blank" eyes (Tartt 17). Later, he observes that after taking numerous pills Henry's state "might have seemed a suspiciously narcotic one except it differed so little from his customary manner" (Tartt 460). This complete lack of affect extends to Bunny's murder, which Henry prefers to think of as a "redistribution of matter" (Tartt 339), dehumanising Bunny and removing all need for guilt. Such an extreme lack of empathy paints him as a cold and calculating villain. Furthermore, Henry is the mastermind behind not only the bacchanal, which leads to the death of the farmer who stumbles upon it, but also the plan to kill Bunny. As Richard realises, "he, in some senses, was the author of this drama" (Tartt 396). As such he is manipulative, using

Richard without him being aware of it until later: "And it wasn't just a question of having kept my mouth shut, I thought … *Because they couldn't have done it without me*. Bunny had come to me, and I had delivered him right into Henry's hands. And I hadn't even thought twice about it" (Tartt 550). Henry's devious nature and lack of morality cause Richard, Charles, and Francis to worry that he might be planning to kill one of them or is at least capable of it. Although this might simply be due to paranoia, based on Henry's previous actions it appears to be a valid concern. Thus, Henry can be viewed as one type of Gothic villain; emotionless, immoral, calculating, and murderous.[3]

The final Gothic feature of the novel is the portrayal of the Classics students. A close reading of Richard's first sight of them reveals that every member of the group has some unsettling associations, not only Henry. Bunny walks with "his fists thrust deep into the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers" (Tartt 17), which foreshadows his greed and demands for money, one of the factors which leads the others to decide to kill him. Francis wears "a black greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked and made him look like a cross between a student prince and Jack the Ripper" (Tartt 18). The mention of the serial killer links to ideas of violence and terror, and presages Francis's later turn to murder. The last members of the group, the twins Charles and Camilla, are first mistaken as a couple by Richard. He later discovers that they do in fact have an incestuous relationship, a common Gothic trope. Moreover, as twins they act as doppelgängers, another element typical of Gothic fiction. Viewed together, the group resembles "long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party" (Tartt 18), a ghostly image.

In conclusion, a variety of Gothic features can be found in *The Secret History*.[4] The possibly supernatural events, liminal states and deterioration of the psyche generate terror, while also portraying distortions of the imagination and unsettling the boundaries between reality, illusion and madness. Depictions of turbulent natural landscapes and weather, and other Gothic settings create an atmosphere of tension and fear. While some of these settings are traditional, such as the cemetery and church, Hampden College acts as a more unusual kind of Gothic setting, a school which is enchanting and unreal, yet also an isolated, claustrophobic trap. Furthermore, the novel's characters all have unsettling aspects about them which make them suitable Gothic figures, and Henry resembles a Gothic villain. To

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[3] Charles is also reminiscent of another Gothic figure, the tyrannical patriarch. His behaviour towards Camilla is controlling, abusive and violent, as well as incestuous.

[4] Other features not mentioned due to lack of space include images of death, shadows and darkness linked to emotional turmoil, the trope of fate and omens, and numerous ghostly images.

identify the novel as an articulation of Gothic-postmodernism, the thesis will now discuss the ways in which the Gothic features interact with the postmodern ones.

1.3 "To Throw Off the Chains of Being": Gothic-postmodernism and Sublime Terror

In order to classify a text as Gothic-postmodernist, Beville states that it must meet the following criteria: it serves as an exploration of the subjective experience of terror, horror is given the locus of the individual human subject through the medium of the Gothic imagination, accepted oppositions such as self/other are destabilised, and Gothic and metafictional literary devices are amalgamated (59). As this final point suggests, if *The Secret History* is to be read as a Gothic-postmodernist text, it is necessary to explore the ways in which the postmodern and Gothic aspects of the novel interact. According to Beville, sublime terror is the central element and common denominator between the Gothic and the postmodern (15). Moreover, "It is as a route to self and reality that the terror of the Gothic-postmodernist novel primarily relates" (Beville 30). Therefore, in this section the sublime terror present in the novel will be discussed and divided into three parts: loss of self, loss of reality and death. As a recognisable but unknowable experience, death plays an important role in sublime terror and Gothic-postmodernist fiction, which Beville believes is concerned with representing the unrepresentable, that which cannot be directly represented (110). Loss of self will be described first.

As a postmodern character who actively constructs his self-identity, it is not surprising that Richard's sense of self is unstable and vulnerable to loss. His loss of self primarily occurs during what can be seen as a psychotic break. While alone with Camilla the following event takes place: "Camilla's face burst into glowing bloom. A terrible sweetness boiled up in me. Everything, for a moment – mirror, ceiling, floor – was unstable and radiant as a dream. I felt a fierce, nearly irresistible desire to seize Camilla by her bruised wrist, twist her arm behind her back until she cried out, throw her on my bed, strangle her, rape her, I don't know what" (Tartt 546). In this unexpected scene, Richard experiences the temporary loss of reality as well as loss of self. For an instant the world becomes dreamlike and surreal, and the boundary between reality and fantasy breaks down. Richard is briefly overcome by violent urges so unlike his usual non-aggressive character that it is as if he becomes a different person for those few moments, demonstrating the loss of self. While this is so unlike him as to seem unbelievable, Jameson's views on the postmodern condition in fiction and art are helpful in accounting for this episode. He believes that the dominant experiences in

postmodernism are of drugs, schizophrenia, and the fragmentation of the subject (14).

Consequently, no stable or true self exists. The self which Richard presents here appears to be fragmented; split off from his usual personality. Furthermore, the fact that Richard constructs a self-identity which he prefers has already been discussed as proof of the fact that his self is unstable. Therefore, shocking as this momentary change in him is, it is not inconceivable that it should occur.

Notably, during this episode Richard describes experiencing a feeling of "terrible sweetness" (Tartt 546). Burke, Kant and Lyotard all claim that the sublime involves both positive and negative emotions. Burke describes the feeling evoked by the sublime as "delightful horror" and asserts that it is "the most genuine effect of the sublime" (67). Kant argues that the mind is both attracted and repelled by the sublime object and that, therefore, delight in the sublime does not involve positive pleasure, but respect or admiration, which he terms "negative pleasures" (*Judgement* 76). Lyotard follows Kant, stating that the sublime involves "two contradictory sensations, pleasure and displeasure, 'attraction' and 'repulsion'" (*the Sublime* 109). Richard's sensation of "terrible sweetness" embodies all these ideas, suggesting that what he is experiencing is an instance of the sublime. Additionally, Lyotard states that "The sublime feeling is an emotion, a violent emotion, close to unreason" (*the Sublime* 228). Richard's desire to attack Camilla physically and sexually is certainly violent and doing so would demonstrate a loss of reason. Thus, the postmodern fragmentation of the self is a source of sublime terror.

The bacchanal is another key instance of the sublime loss of self in the novel. While it is never directly represented, perhaps because it is unrepresentable, what descriptions there are give the impression of a world of madness colliding with the mundane world of everyday life, as discussed previously. The postmodern terror which this provokes is combined with the sublime terror inherent in the loss of self. Henry describes the ritual as being like "a film in fast motion, the moon waxing and waning, clouds rushing across the sky … Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no 'I' … It's more as if the universe expands to fill the boundaries of the self" (Tartt 186-187). This description has several important implications. The expansion of the universe seems to signal infinity, something which Burke believes is important for the sublime (58) and which Botting lists as a characteristic of Gothic fiction (2). The event also appears to be unpresentable. According to Lyotard, the sublime involves a "magnitude or power of force that exceeds its power of presentation" (*the Sublime* 52). Therefore, the sublime cannot be presented directly. This may be why the participants of the bacchanal are

unable to fully describe what happened and resort to using vague allusions and comparisons, such as "like a film."

Most important is the loss of self which Henry mentions, the absence of the ego which he presents as a sublime experience: "the primal appeal – to lose one's self, lose it utterly. And in losing it be born to the principle of continuous life, outside the prison of morality and time" (Tartt 182-183). With these words he depicts the self as constraining and suggests that transcending it enables one to become connected to a greater whole. According to Paul Crowther, Kant grounds the sublime in "self-transcendence from the sensuous level of our being" (15). In being outside of the perception of time, it seems to be exactly this which the bacchanal's participants undergo, further suggesting that their experience was sublime. Furthermore, Henry uses sublime Gothic imagery to convey that their transcendence of self was not under their control, claiming that "I had a feeling that I'd never had, that reality itself was transforming around us in some beautiful and dangerous fashion, that we were being driven by a force we didn't understand, towards an end I did not know" (Tartt 185). It is as if they were under the control of a mysterious, possibly supernatural, force. Crowther argues that in Kant's view the sublime is caused by powers which exercise authority over us and transcend the self (15). It seems to be one such power which the Classics group was affected by. Lastly, Julian's lecture on bacchanals links loss of self directly to the sublime. He claims that "Beauty is terror" and asks "what could be more terrifying and beautiful … than to lose control completely? To throw off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves?" (Tartt 44). Combining terror and beauty echoes both Kant and Lyotard, who theorise that the sublime produces simultaneous feelings of displeasure and pleasure, as well as Burke's notion of "tranquillity tinged with terror" (123). The loss of self which the bacchanal causes is therefore another important instance of sublime terror in *The Secret History*.

Terror is also inherent in the loss of reality. In Tartt's novel, this mainly takes the form of dissociation through intoxication, dreams, hallucinations, Richard's sickness during winter, and the filmic quality of life. Such dissociation bears aspects of both the postmodern and the Gothic. While discussing the postmodern novel *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, McHale highlights its layering of ontological levels, including dream, hallucination, and fantasy (*Postmodernism* 100). Later, when discussing another novel, he uses the term "ontological hesitation" to refer to the ways in which characters fluctuate between states (*Postmodernism* 148). This layering and fluctuation seem present in *The Secret History* as well. Throughout the text, Richard moves between reality, dreamlike states, hallucinations,

and the feeling of being stuck in a film. He, along with the other members of the Classics group, is often intoxicated. They drink almost constantly and drugs such as tranquilisers, sleeping pills, painkillers and cocaine leave him "roaming in a fluid, pleasant daze" (Tartt 320). Under their influence he has horrific hallucinations with Gothic overtones: "The first time I had looked out my window, dazed with Fiorinal, and seen the upright support posts rising stark from the lawn, I was flooded with black irrational terror: gibbets, I thought, they're putting up gibbets, they're having a hanging on Commons lawn" (Tartt 553). Hallucinations such as this one inevitably cause terror. Even when not intoxicated, reality has the feeling of a dream for Richard. He remarks that "there was something not quite real about any of it, something like a dream" (Tartt 68). At times, this dreamlike feeling is associated with shadows and darkness, Gothic tropes which give reality a nightmarish quality: "The lamplight was eerie, and, standing there motionless in our bathrobes, sleepy, with shadows flickering all around, I felt as though I had woken up from one dream into an even more remote one, some bizarre wartime bomb shelter of the unconscious" (Tartt 147). As this description indicates, fluctuating between states can cause anxiety and fear and lead to the breakdown of reality.

Richard's chronic hypothermia and pneumonia during winter also cause the loss of reality by creating "a sort of mental darkness" which leads him to doubt his own existence and lose his sense of identity (Tartt 130). When he walks home through the snow "things got white around the edges and it seemed I had no past, no memories" (Tartt 132). In addition to this temporary loss of self, his illness brings terrifying nightmares and hallucinations: "All my moments which were not consumed with efforts to escape the cold were absorbed with morbid Poe-like fancies. One night, in a dream, I saw my own corpse, hair stiff with ice and eyes wide open" (Tartt 132). When he is not dreaming about his own death, he is hearing voices which "spoke to me in the roar of the water, in the hissing snow: *'Lie down,'* they whispered, and *'Turn left. You'll be sorry if you don't'*" (Tartt 134). Due to this sense of unreality which winter causes, nature becomes a source of fear, as Kant believed it could as part of the sublime (*Judgement* 90).

An additional, particularly postmodern layer is placed on top of the ontological levels of dreams and hallucinations, namely the filmic quality of life. Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal is helpful in describing this feeling. As explained by Paul Sheehan, in Baudrillard's view of postmodernity the real is inaccessible and created through representations; simulations of reality (30). In place of the real exists the hyperreal, "the meticulous reduplication of the real" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 140). As a result, there is a loss of

meaning and individuals become detached from the world which seems fake and filmic (Litzler 33). Richard expresses this idea when he observes that "nothing seemed real, and I felt as though this were some complicated film I'd started watching in the middle and couldn't quite get the drift of" (Tartt 172). Significantly, the hyperreal also causes the loss of reality by breaking down the boundary between truth and fiction. According to Baudrillard, "Simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (*Simulacra* 4). This is something which Richard experiences throughout the novel, regularly moving between reality and filmic representations of reality, such as in the following scene: "At the landing I stopped to rest and felt my surroundings slide out of focus: static between stations, everything snowy for a moment or two before the black lines wavered and the picture snapped back; not quite clear, but recognizable. Jerky camera, nightmare commercial" (Tartt 136). As the word nightmare suggests, the feeling of unreality brought about by the hyperreal filmic quality is a source of terror. It therefore contributes to the fear caused by a lack of reality and more generally to the novel's sublime terror.

The final cause of sublime terror in *The Secret History* is death, a common Gothic trope, and a phenomenon which Baudrillard considers ever-present in postmodern life (*Symbolic Exchange* 226). In Burke's view, the greatest source of terror is death, which he names "the king of terrors" (36). Not only does it bring about the loss of self, but it is also feared because although it is recognisable, its true nature remains unknowable (Beville 97). As such, death is unpresentable, conforming to Kant's belief that that which is sublime is poorly suited to presentation (*Judgement* 76), as well as to Lyotard's claim that the sublime occurs when the imagination is incapable of presenting an object which agrees with a concept ("the postmodern" 6). The novel reflects the unrepresentable nature of death, depicting it in disjointed flashes and by means of a repeated film metaphor.[5] The first death that occurs is the farmer's. Accidentally murdering the farmer during the bacchanal, Henry relates the aftermath of the act to Richard using short, violent descriptions: "his neck was broken … his brains were all over his face … There was a dreadful mess. I was drenched in blood" (Tartt 189). Rather than describing the act itself, Henry seems to be limited to briefly recounting the result.

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[5] Henry's suicide is the one death in the novel that is portrayed coherently and in some detail. Nevertheless, its unrepresentable nature is alluded to by the image of his mouth falling open as if in a silent scream. Beville considers screams to be non-verbal expressions of the unrepresentable encountered through sublime terror (103).

Bunny's murder, the central death of the novel, is depicted in a similarly fragmented manner, once again highlighting the unpresentable nature of death. Richard forgoes providing one coherent, complete account and instead describes it in glimpses such as the following: "stupid terror; the whole world opening upside down, his life exploding in a thunder of crows and the sky expanding empty over his stomach like a white ocean. Then nothing. Rotten stumps, sowbugs crawling in the fallen leaves. Dirt and dark" (Tartt 551). Death is reduced to these few pieces, most of which are merely indirect associations. Such fracturing is also combined with a film metaphor which both signifies a loss of reality and acts as a way of representing the unrepresentable. Richard notes that "It is impossible to slow down this film, to examine individual frames. I see now what I saw then, flashing by with the swift, deceptive ease of an accident: shower of gravel, windmilling arms, a hand that claws at a branch and misses … Cut to Henry, stepping back from the edge. Then the film flaps up in the projector and the screen goes black" (Tartt 310). By comparing Bunny's death to a movie, Richard may be attempting to make sense of it and present something which by its very nature eludes representation. However, Richard himself acknowledges that acts of sublime terror cannot ever be truly comprehended: "Some things are too terrible to grasp at once. Other things – naked, sputtering, inedible in their horror – are too terrible to really ever grasp at all" (Tartt 312). This inability to reason can be linked to Burke's idea of astonishment. He argued that in its highest degree, the sublime causes astonishment which involves a state of suspension and hesitation, with the mind completely occupied by the object of terror (53). Therefore, one is unable to reason.

The deaths of Bunny and the farmer are also notable for other sublime effects which they have upon Henry and Richard. Henry describes his life before the murder as "very stale and colorless" and the world as "an empty place" (Tartt 556). Afterwards he feels that he can "live without thinking" and that he is free to do whatever he wishes due to a sensation of "power and delight, of confidence, of control. That sudden sense of the richness of the world. Its infinite possibility" (Tartt 557). The act of taking another person's life appears to have given him a feeling of agency and self-determination. His description also suggests that the experience has an agreeable side to it, the "delightful horror" spoken of by Burke (67). In addition to being macabre and thus potentially linking to the Gothic, such an emotion may be considered postmodern. According to Jameson, postmodern art and representations of the subject are characterised by a new emotional tone involving "intensities" which he believes is best understood using older theories of the sublime (6). In particular, postmodern emotions are defined by the waning of affect in which more typical sentiments are replaced by free-

floating, impersonal feelings, including "a peculiar kind of euphoria" (Jameson 16).[6] It appears to be this emotion which Henry experiences and which Richard becomes familiar with after Bunny's death. He privately acknowledges that "Bunny's murder had thrown all subsequent events into a kind of glaring Technicolor. And, though this new lucidity of vision was frequently nerve-wracking, there was no denying that it was not an altogether unpleasant sensation" (Tartt 557). The vibrancy and intensity which this description conveys have resonances with Jameson's remark that the "present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness," bringing euphoria and intoxicatory intensity alongside anxiety (27). Additionally, the combination of the sensations which the deaths evoke aligns with Kant's belief that the sublime produces simultaneous feelings of pleasure and displeasure (*Judgement* 88).

As the above discussion has shown, sublime terror in *The Secret History* arises from three sources: the loss of the self, the loss of reality, and death. These three elements combine terrifying aspects of both the Gothic and the postmodern to tie the two genres together and create the single genre of Gothic-postmodernism. Firstly, the postmodern unstable self is particularly vulnerable to loss and fragmentation. Taking the form of a temporary psychotic break, Richard's brief loss of self links to Gothic ideas of madness. The bacchanal, the second part of loss of self, serves as a postmodern confrontation between worlds, specifically the world of madness and the world of everyday life. It also contains Gothic supernatural features. Loss of reality takes the shape of dissociation, involving the Gothic trope of dreams and hallucinations, and demonstrating a postmodern layering of ontological levels, as well as the hyperreal filmic quality of life. Lastly, death is another common Gothic trope and is thought by Baudrillard to be omnipresent in postmodern life. All three sources of sublime terror attest to the theory that the sublime is unpresentable and that it causes simultaneous feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Due to the interaction of the postmodern and Gothic elements, it appears that *The Secret History* can indeed be read as a Gothic-postmodernist text.

1.4 "Teen Satanists": Societal Fears in *The Secret History*

In Beville's view, Gothic-postmodernism serves to present our desires for terror and to expel the fears of postmodern society (10). Her point is supported by Steven Bruhm, who

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[6] Henry's suicide seems to demonstrate this euphoria as well. As he shoots himself "His expression was one of rapt concentration, of triumph, almost, a high diver rushing to the end of the board; eyes tight, joyous, waiting for the big splash" (Tartt 612).

claims that "The Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history" (260). If they are correct, then it is necessary to identify which contemporary societal fears are represented in Tartt's novel. Two main fears are evident in *The Secret History*: fears about university campuses and the dangerous knowledge imparted there, and fears about immoral youth. Universities may be sources of cultural anxieties for a few reasons. Firstly, many Ivy League universities are infamous for hosting secret societies. These mysterious groups are insulated and typically associated with macabre practices that have connotations of the Gothic. Writing in the far-right digital magazine *The New American*, Alex Newman asserts that Yale's secret societies practice perverse occult rituals, engage in subversive practices and immoral acts so terrible that they "cannot be repeated," and infiltrate the government and other positions of power (Newman). Although such beliefs are undoubtedly biased by political views, articles such as Newman's indicate that secret societies are a source of fear for at least certain members of the population.

While no such society exists at the fictional Hampden College, the Classics class is an isolated group, separated from the general student population and alienated from the broader community of rural New Englanders due to their wealth and privilege. Their desire to live in the past and ignorance of current events isolate them further, making them more insular. Moreover, their obsession with ancient Greek rituals could easily lead them to be mistaken for a cult, another secretive group which can be an object of fear. Francis points this out: "'Bitten and scratched to pieces?' Francis said. 'Tongue-tied? Half mad? If we'd gone to the police they would have charged us with every unsolved death in New England for the last five years'" (Tartt 196). His words convey what many people believe cults to be capable of. Indeed, more widespread than the concern over secret societies was the moral panic concerning Satanism which swept America in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as detailed by Jenny Reichert and James T. Richardson (48). This panic was closely related to the "religious cult" scare which occurred in the '70s and '80s. Both "led to defining participants as misguided, mentally unfit or evil, and both were viewed by some as threats to the moral fabric of society" (Reichert & Richardson 48). The actions of Henry and the others could certainly be considered morally threatening. Furthermore, "Groups were accused of spreading false teachings and seducing young people away from their normal and expected career paths" (Reichert & Richardson 48). The Classics professor Julian's actions could perhaps be viewed in this manner, particularly because his job is to impart the "right" kind of knowledge. Instead, his teaching leads his students into immorality and unhappiness. The fear

of Satanism and cults was also related to "the heresy of false religions" (Reichert & Richardson 48). Ancient Greek polytheism would likely be considered one such religion and the bacchanal as participation in it. Lastly, Satanic groups were thought to commit ritualistic murder (Reichert & Richardson 49). While unplanned, the killing of the farmer could be viewed as a ceremonial murder, occurring as it does during a ritual.

Universities can also be sources of fear when they are seen as places of unreason rather than enlightened rationality. This was the case during the student protests against the Vietnam War during the '60s and '70s. According to Don T. Martin, "The growing unpopularity of the Vietnam War was turning most campuses into arenas of political conflict. To many persons … this idea was repugnant for it differed with the traditional image of the university as a forum for calm inquiry and the reasoned pursuit of academic values" (2). As these words suggest, critics of the protests felt that youth were being pushed away from reason and having their passions cultivated instead. This anxiety was heightened by authorities who portrayed student protestors as riotous mobs (Martin 5), as well as by the media. As Devan L. Bissonette discusses, publications such as *Life* questioned the morality of protestors, while *Time* "lashed out at their arrogant, deluded and violent minds" (65). Thus, there was "a false perception … that violence and student protest went hand in hand" (Bissonette 68). Politicians also contributed to this perception. Christopher L. Connery claims that "The Republic Party … had worked relentlessly to create a popular demonization of students, faculty and intellectuals" (90). Although it is set a few years after the protests, *The Secret History* reflects the fear that students were being guided away from reason towards violence. The members of the Classics class, excluding Richard and Bunny, fully embrace unreason and give free rein to their passions when they conduct the bacchanal, an act which disastrously results in murder.

Lastly, universities can be places of fear when they are believed to impart dangerous knowledge and when they are viewed as sites where authority figures such as teachers might lead students into committing wicked acts. According to Ian James Kidd, there is a societal concern that instead of cultivating virtue, education can and does damage character (221). Truffin's discussion of the Schoolhouse Gothic is relevant to thinking through this fear. She points out that "People have become increasingly uneasy about the role of the academy, increasingly suspicious of its guardians, and increasingly convinced that something sinister lies behind its officially benign exterior" (*Schoolhouse Gothic* 6). One of the reasons for concern is that teachers are powerful figures who may seem to wield unlimited authority (Truffin, "Schoolhouse Gothic" 164). Julian is one such figure. His apparent intellectual

authority turns him into a figure of admiration, with Henry going so far as to consider him "a divinity in our midst" (Tartt 356). This gives him the power to shape the thinking of his students, particularly since he can dictate the knowledge which they are exposed to. Richard's acceptance into the Classics programme is conditional on allowing Julian to assume complete control of his studies, forcing him to drop all but one of his classes with other professors. Richard reflects that "To do what he asked was tantamount to my transferring entirely out of Hampden College into his own little academy of ancient Greek" (Tartt 32). Julian therefore has the opportunity to dominate his students' thinking. Furthermore, he is invested with paternal authority. Truffin argues that "Schoolteachers act *in loco parentis* and are thus granted the authority to victimize children" (*Schoolhouse Gothic* 8). To Richard, dismissed by his own parents, Julian is "the sole figure of paternal benevolence in my life, or, indeed, of benevolence of any sort. To me, he seemed my only protector in the world" (Tartt 570-571). Julian is therefore a father figure for both Richard and Henry, and his ostensible care for his students engenders trust in himself which is later revealed to be severely misplaced.

In fact, the knowledge which he imparts is proven to be dangerous. As Truffin remarks, the humanities are viewed as "fair-minded, civilizing, liberating discourses" (*Schoolhouse Gothic* 10). This is an impression which Julian himself attempts to convey. However, the knowledge which he communicates is dangerously liberating since it causes an embrace of unreason which results in violence. During his lecture on the irrational and the ecstatic in Greek culture and thought, Julian presents loss of self as a desirable thing. This inspires the idea of attempting to recreate the conditions necessary to attain Bacchic ecstasy (Pauw, "part 2" 8), which in turn leads to the murder of the farmer and Bunny. Thus, responsibility for their deaths may ultimately lie with Julian. Not only does he know about the group's plans for the bacchanal, but he approves of them, and when he finds out about the murders his true nature is revealed. He is "not the benign old sage … but ambiguous, a moral neutral, whose beguiling trappings concealed a being watchful, capricious, and heartless" (Tartt 574). Far from being just a moral neutral, he is deeply immoral since he "wouldn't care if [they had] killed half a dozen people" (Tartt 585). He is also predatory, preying upon the very people whom he is meant to educate: "The secret of Julian's charm was that he latched on to young people who wanted to feel better than everybody else; that he had a strange gift for twisting feelings of inferiority into superiority and arrogance" (Tartt 576). Thus, his character fits into fears of the dangerous academic leading impressionable young students into committing evil acts.

The second societal fear present in *The Secret History* is the anxiety over immoral youth. Describing moral panics, Thomas Johansson states that "Through sensational headlines in the mass media, a melodramatic vocabulary and the construction of … groups of young people who threaten societal values and are considered to be violent and dangerous to 'ordinary people' – a moral panic is created" (22). As James C. Howell relates, this is what occurred in 1977 and again in the 1990s when panic arose over juvenile offenders (2). One of the contributing factors was "the superpredator myth," the mistaken belief that waves of predatory youth would cause a bloodbath (Howell 2). This public fear of young people was reflected in the fiction of the time. Discussing coming-of-age novels from the '80s and '90s, Curnutt states that "Sensational stories of 'youth gone wild' appeal to 'dominant fears of a loss of moral authority' by crediting the adolescent condition to a crumbling infrastructure of familial and institutional oversight once said to regulate the passage into adulthood" (94). Such novels display the fear that young adults have lost all empathy and have devolved into beings of pure sensation (Curnutt 99).

This is highly applicable to the members of the Classics group who show a distinct lack of remorse for the death of the farmer. Henry calls it "an unfortunate accident" (Tartt 194), while Francis defends their actions by saying "I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed" (Tartt 220). Likewise, no one feels any remorse for murdering Bunny until some time has passed, and Henry and Camilla fail to express any even then. Indeed, Henry thinks of his plans to kill Bunny as nothing more than "a chess-problem. A game," showing his disregard for human life (Tartt 281). Although he may not bear as much of the responsibility as Henry does, Richard does choose not to help Bunny and thereby displays a lack of morality. He remarks to the reader that "I suppose it would be interesting to say that at this point I felt torn in some way, grappled with the moral implications of each of the courses available to me. But I don't recall experiencing anything of the sort" (Tartt 277). Thus, like the other characters he shows a startling lack of empathy, conforming to societal fears that youth are intensely immoral and prone to acts of violence.

In conclusion, *The Secret History* can be fruitfully read through the lens of Gothic-postmodernism. It is mostly postmodern at the level of content rather than form, although it does exhibit a fusion of genres, intertextuality, and metafictional references to writing a story. In line with McHale's theory of the dominant of postmodernism (*Postmodernism* 15), it has a clear ontological focus evident in the narrator's lack of a stable self and different worlds being placed in confrontation, namely the world of madness of the bacchanal versus the world of reason of everyday life. Furthermore, it bears a variety of Gothic features, including

many traditional tropes such as turbulent natural landscapes and weather, a character that can be seen as a Gothic villain, and Gothic settings. Even though it depicts possible supernatural events in relation to the bacchanal, the novel's terror is largely psychological. The turmoil of the psyche experienced by the main characters, Richard in particular, is extremely prominent. Thus, like numerous later Gothic novels, it is characterised by an atmosphere of terror and suspense, the inclusion of violence and taboo subjects, and altered psychological states, rather than horrifying supernatural occurrences. Most importantly, the postmodern and Gothic features combine to create sublime terror inherent in the loss of self and reality, and death.

2. "The Increasing Horror of Urban Life": *Lunar Park*

2.1 "As If a Boundary Were Being Erased": Postmodern Features

Published more than a decade after *The Secret History*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* is concerned not with young adults obsessed with ancient rituals, but rather with a middle-aged author confronting the terrors of suburban family life and the creative power of writing. Despite its differences from Tartt's novel, *Lunar Park* shares its postmodern focus on questions of ontology, including what happens when different worlds are placed in confrontation and boundaries between them are violated. In this case, Ellis depicts encounters between a supernatural world and the rational world of logical, explainable events. The novel's protagonist Bret, a mostly fictional version of the real author, [7] becomes aware that "There was another world underneath the one we lived in. There was something beneath the surface of things" (Ellis 256). This something proves to be a terrifying supernatural world of toys and fictional characters come to life, monstrous transformations, and ghostly and digital hauntings.[8]

Contrasted with this paranormal world is the rational one of everyday reality located in the fictional suburb of Midland,[9] "bright, clean, sane" (Ellis 92), a world in which Bret's responsibilities as husband and father are the greatest sources of fear. In order to hold on to this world, Bret seeks rational explanations for the events that he witnesses, ranging from the children misbehaving to "Drunk out of my mind on a combination of vodka and Klonopin, I had woken up my children because I believed we were being attacked by our pet" (Ellis 364). While the large amounts of alcohol and drugs that Bret regularly consumes make explanations like this believable, the same account of the events given by other more reliable characters increases the likelihood that at least some of them truly did occur. However, there are also times when characters contradict what Bret has seen. Thus, there is a constant movement between the two possibilities, supernatural and rational, which Bret describes as pivoting "back and forth between the illusory and what you knew without a doubt was true and real" (Ellis 219). By the end of the novel readers are still uncertain whether the supernatural events were real or hallucinations, leaving them in a state of hesitation and violating boundaries between the knowable and explainable, and the mysterious and

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[7] To avoid confusion, "Bret" will be used to refer to the character and "Ellis" to the author.
[8] Discussed further in section 2.2 of this chapter.
[9] Interestingly, the name "Midland" suggests a liminal space.

irrational. *Lunar Park* therefore demonstrates "the tendency of postmodern narrative to keep conjectural possibilities open" (Nicol 131).

A second confrontation between worlds is present, namely that of the fictional world of the novel and the real world in which it is published. *Lunar Park* can be classified as a metafictional pseudo-autobiography with real biographical elements. The opening line "You do an awfully good impression of yourself" introduces the pseudo-autobiographical format by indicating that Ellis is attempting to reproduce himself in fictional form (Ellis 3). According to Timothy C. Baker, autobiography is "a form that claims a certain truth value" (498). In keeping with this, the prologue presents a largely true and arguably realistic portrait of Ellis (Baker 492). It uses real people and places from his life, as well as facts, such as descriptions of his published novels and his position as a founding member of the literary Brat Pack. The later inclusion of real people as characters, such as Jay McInerny, further adds to the novel's realism. Moreover, as a pseudo-autobiography, *Lunar Park* participates in the tradition of Gothic novels claiming to be real found documents, although not necessarily consciously, an impression which is heightened by the novel's own assertions of truth. Early on, it is claimed to be a true story: "Regardless of how horrible the events described here might seem, there's one thing you must remember as you hold this book in your hands: all of it really happened, every word is true" (Ellis 45).

Despite declarations such as this, the novel is highly metafictional. D. Southward quoting Patricia Waugh states that metafictions "self-consciously and systematically draw attention to [their] status as an artefact," thus aligning with postmodern ideas of deconstruction, pastiche, and irony (5). Ellis regularly reminds the reader that his novel is a fictional construct. Firstly, the shadowy figure of "the writer" is introduced and makes omniscient comments on the events, thus breaking the illusion of reality. Secondly, as Southward points out, within the text Bret discusses the novel's autobiographical influences, process of textual construction, events leading to its production, and the first and last lines, all of which draw attention to its artificiality (6). Ellis also includes more general reflections on writing, for example "This is what a writer does: his life is a maelstrom of lying" (218). Such remarks further highlight the constructed nature of the text by prompting the reader to consider what Ellis is doing with his own writing. Therefore, *Lunar Park* combines elements of truth with overt references to its fictionality, which in the words of Laura Findlay causes it to sit "uneasily between a 'factual' memoir and a fictional account" (472). This in turn complicates the confrontation between the fictional world of the novel and the real world, causing a confusion between fiction and reality and collapsing the border between the two.

Such violation of boundaries is characteristic of postmodern literature's concern with ontology (Nicol 33).

Lunar Park's destabilisation of the idea of authorship and consideration of "the existential implications of authoring," a phrase used by Nicol in his discussion of other postmodern novels (76), is also related to ontology. Ellis's novel presents a world in which fiction has the power to affect reality, sometimes negatively. This is mainly evident in the killer who is inspired by the violent murders committed in Ellis's previous novel *American Psycho*. It is unclear whether the murderer is a copycat killer or, as Bret believes, the character Patrick Bateman who has come to life, but in either case Bret feels responsible and thinks that in his own way he has committed the murders. If it is a copycat, then it is his work which inspired them, while if it is truly Bateman, then he is accountable for his creation. Both possibilities demonstrate that an author's writing can significantly impact the world, a prospect which Bret has feared: "Sitting in my office in front of Kimball, I realized at various times I had fantasized about this exact moment. This was the moment that detractors of the book had warned me about: if anything happened to anyone as a result of the publication of this novel, Bret Easton Ellis was to blame" (Ellis 182). These words imply that to create something through writing can be to write it into existence, opening the possibility for it to materially change people's lives.

If Bateman truly has entered the real world, the implications for authoring extend beyond the writer's ability to shape the world and their guilt or responsibility for doing so. Bateman being alive also embodies the idea that literature exists independently of the author as a separate entity in the world (Nicol 182). Furthermore, it suggests that writers can be disempowered due to their lack of control over their work. Bret loses control when his creation takes on a life of its own, breaking down the boundary between fiction and reality and, Findlay argues, undermining notions of truth, reliability, stability and unity, thus contrasting with the notion of the godlike author (475). The idea of the all-powerful writer is further dismantled by the presence of "the writer," a figure which appears to be more knowledgeable than Bret and able to alter reality to his liking. While this may appear to support the concept of the omnipotent author, Bret is able to hide certain things from the writer and go against his wishes at times, suggesting that no writer is almighty. In conclusion, Ellis positions himself "as a fictional subject who both controls and is controlled by the written word, who constructs, yet is constructed" (Findlay 474). Thus, Ellis is paradoxically a passive, controlled character, and a controlling author.

Lunar Park also exhibits a postmodern concern with the ultimately unsuccessful search for truth and meaning. Beville claims that the breakdown of the barrier between reality and fiction, such as is present in the novel, causes epistemological and ontological uncertainty which leads to a desire for knowledge of the self and reality (54). Therefore, doubt is the central concept behind a character's enquiry (Beville 46). In the novel, Bret declares that "I wanted to crush the phony specifics and get at some larger truth – whatever it was" (Ellis 239).[10] For Bret this larger truth is personal in nature, relating to the appearance of characters from his previous novels, the possibly supernatural events which are plaguing him, his father's death, and the mysterious disappearance of about a dozen local boys which causes him to fear for his own son. Each case involves uncertainty and in each Bret endeavours to uncover the truth. He attempts to track down the man whom he thinks is Clayton, the protagonist of his first novel, and put a stop to the murderous activities of Bateman; hires a demonologist to discover the cause of the apparent hauntings and put an end to them; stumbles across what seems to be a recording of the night his father died and tries to determine whether he was murdered and, if so, by whom;[11] and questions his son and tries to look through the files on his computer in an effort to discover what is happening to the missing boys.

However, in each case Bret is ultimately unsuccessful. It is never clear whether his characters are merely hallucinations or real people pretending to be them, or whether they are truly the characters come to life. Additionally, he never finds Clayton and it is uncertain whether the murders ended because Bret stopped Bateman or because the actual killer was caught. Likewise, the truth about the supernatural events is not revealed and it is not definitively proven whether they are hallucinations or real. Bret also fails to discover the truth about his father's death and does not find out where the missing boys go. Furthermore, he is unable to stop his own son from disappearing. By the end of the novel he is forced to acknowledge that "I would never find explanations … Everything would remain disguised and remote" (Ellis 417). In the postmodern world where there is no objective truth and multiple potential realities rather than a single stable one, the search for a final truth is always futile and no true conclusions can ever be drawn. Consequently, Bret is an example of how postmodern "characters' epistemological quests succumb to ontological uncertainty in a world … where nothing is stable or reliably knowable" (McHale, *Postmodernism* 74).

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[10] The word "phony" resonates in the history of post-war American quasi-autobiographical literature due to its use by Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

[11] One of many allusions to *Hamlet*, whose titular character seeks to discover the truth of his father's death.

The above discussion of *Lunar Park*'s postmodern features suggests that, like *The Secret History*, it can be classified as a postmodern novel, thereby meeting the first requirement for successfully applying the theory of Gothic-postmodernism to it. Its major postmodern characteristics are ontological in nature, involving a confrontation between worlds that results in the breakdown of the boundary between fiction and reality, and a consideration of the existential implications of authoring. The concern with the unsuccessful search for truth and meaning is also typically postmodern. Other, more minor, postmodern features are worth taking note of. Bret acts as an unreliable narrator due to his consumption of alcohol and drugs, not bias and temptation to romanticise other characters as is the case with Richard in *The Secret History*. As Beville points out, this makes the traditional Gothic plot of finding reasonable explanations for supernatural events impossible since the reader does not know what is real (175). The novel is also intertextual, making connections between different forms of media like music and film (Findlay 470), and including extracts from Ellis's other novels and quotes from reviews of his work. Now that the postmodern elements of the novel have been established, I will examine the Gothic characteristics.

2.2 "Chaos, Mystery, Death": Gothic Features

According to Beville, *Lunar Park* is the contemporary novel that defines the genre of Gothic-postmodernism due to the fact that it "rediscovers the psychological aspects of terror through traditional Gothic tropes," while at times also engaging in a postmodern parody of the Gothic (171). The purpose of such Gothic conventions is to generate terror (Beville 41). In *The Secret History* the source of this terror is primarily psychological, while in *Lunar Park* it arises from external events and phenomena which appear to be supernatural in nature, at least through the eyes of Bret. Many of the Gothic features of the novel are therefore tropes which are commonly found in horror literature. Also applicable to Ellis's novel is what Botting terms the "homely Gothic," a type of Gothic fiction in which the terrors are close to home and disruptions between the inside and the outside occur, as well as between reality and delusion, all of which is signified by the presence of ghosts and doubles (74). These features and others will now be discussed.[12]

One of the most common stock features in Gothic literature is the haunted house. Botting claims that as both building and family line it is the place where fears return (2) and the site of internal and external pressures (84). Thus, it signifies the return of the past and the

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[12] This discussion treats the supernatural events as if they are not merely hallucinations.

uncanny. As theorised by Freud, "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). It involves two parts, the *Heimlich* and its opposite the *Unheimlich*. On the one hand, the *Heimlich* "means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud 224-225). The *Unheimlich* is that which ought to have remained hidden and secret but has been revealed (Freud 225), something which has been repressed and now recurs. As David B. Morris states, it therefore causes terror by confronting us with a part of ourselves which we have denied but can never truly escape (307). In the novel Bret has spent his adult years attempting to forget his childhood, particularly his father, a man whom he describes as "a problem – careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, paranoid" (Ellis 7). Even after his parents' divorce this tyrannical figure continued to control Bret's life, until the publication of his first book when he became independently wealthy, enabling him to escape his father.

However, Bret discovers that he cannot escape the past when his house begins to transform into the childhood home that he shared with his father: "The carpet looked darker, shaggier, the pale beige now morphing into something that bordered on teal or green" (Ellis 130). Although these changes fill him with fear, he is unable to determine why until some time has passed. When he eventually realises what the house is transforming into it is evident that he is afraid because it is recognisable: "I now realized what had been bothering me about the furniture and the carpet: the chairs and tables and sofas and lamps were arranged just as they had been in the living room of the house on Valley Vista … This was why the house had felt so sharply familiar to me. I had lived in it before" (Ellis 252). Frightening precisely because it is familiar, the house is an uncanny place where the past is repeated. According to Freud, a recurrence of the same situation leads to feelings of helplessness since involuntary repetition creates the idea of something fateful and inescapable (237). Such feelings are heightened by the fact that the house seemingly transforms on its own as if it is sentient and the fact that it is no longer a place of safety, but rather a permeable space in which terrors are both allowed in and already present.

One of these terrors takes the form of a digital haunting, fitting for the prevalence of technology in postmodernity. As Beville states, Ellis appropriates terror in relation to technology by merging ghosts and electronic media devices (180). Bret repeatedly receives mysterious emails from the Bank of America. He relates that "I had been receiving these e-mails since the beginning of October, unaccompanied by any explanation or demand. I had called the bank several times since I had an account at that branch (where my father's ashes were still stored in a safe-deposit box) but the bank had no record of these sent e-mails" (Ellis

101). The first one was sent on October the third and all are sent at 2:40 a.m. Each one also includes a recording of the night of his father's death, although the event itself is not depicted, perhaps due to the unrepresentable nature of death (Beville 97). The date is his father's birthday and the time is his time of death, which implies that Bret is being electronically haunted by his father, as does the movie *1941* which repeatedly plays on the family television, despite the fact that it is not part of the scheduled programme. 1941 is the year of Bret's father's birth and is thus one of many signs of his return. Ellis therefore reformulates the traditional Gothic haunting by means of a technological connection with the dead.

Bret's house is also the site of a more classic Gothic haunting by the ghost of his father and other horrific, supernatural creatures. He describes the ghost by saying that "It was tall and had a vaguely human form, and though it was skeletal it had eyes. Rapidly my father's face was illuminated in the skull" (Ellis 401). As monstrous in death as he was in life, Bret's father is a source of the uncanny. Freud lists ghosts and the return of the dead as causes of the uncanny (241) and, moreover, states that the uncanny is something repressed which recurs (241). Bret has repressed his memories of his father and removed him from his life to the point where he ignores his wishes about scattering his ashes. However, his father cannot be forgotten. Inanimate objects coming to life are uncanny too (Freud 246). As a children's toy transformed into a violent monster which invades the domestic space of Bret's home, the Terby is a particularly frightening object. Bret explains that it is "the bird doll I had bought Sarah in August for her birthday. It was a monstrous-looking but very popular toy that she'd wanted badly yet the thing was so misconceived and grotesque – black and crimson feathers, bulging eyes, a sharp yellow beak with which it continuously gurgled" (Ellis 62). Conforming to the common horror trope of toys come to life, the Terby soon reveals malevolent intentions and begins to cause destruction, "crawling along the length of the ceiling, hooking its claws into it" and killing small animals (Ellis 74). It becomes more monstrous in a slow process of transformation, with "wings webbed with black veins bulging tightly beneath the doll's skin" (Ellis 344), and later enters the pet dog Victor and alters his body in a series of grotesque images of horror.[13] Beville considers such metamorphosis to be a manifestation of the Gothic in postmodern writing (55). It may also be considered an example of what Ruth Helyer describes as Ellis's use of excess which borders on the comical in a manner similar to traditional Gothic tales (730).

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[13] "Its eyeballs bulged until they were pushed out of their sockets and hanging down his muzzle on their stalks … It had what looked like wings now – they had sprouted out of both sides of the dog's chest" (Ellis 430).

A third and final monster haunts Bret's house, a creature "waist high and shapeless –
a mound. It was covered with hair entangled with twigs and dead leaves and feathers. It had
no features … Within the hair, a bright red hole ringed with teeth appeared" (Ellis 346-347).
Characteristically of the *Unheimlich* it is accompanied by a feeling of familiarity and Bret
soon realises that it is a childhood creation, just as the Terby is revealed to be a fictional
invention from a story which Bret wrote at the age of seven. According to Freud, the uncanny
often exists "when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when
something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality" (244).
This is what occurs when Bret's fictions come to life, breaking down the boundary between
the fictional world and the real one and becoming a source of terror. Therefore, Bret displays
a mysterious creative power which is both Gothic, in that it is unnatural and gives frightening
life to monstrous creations, and postmodern in its violation of boundaries.

The power of fiction to shape reality brings to life not only Bret's childhood creations,
but also characters from his mature writing, answering the postmodern question of whether it
is possible for fiction to become a part of reality (Nicol 62). The protagonist from *American
Psycho*, Patrick Bateman, is the most significant of these characters. Bret's memory of
writing the novel is the first sign that Bateman is not merely a fictional invention but capable
of affecting reality. He claims that "someone – *something* – else took over … The book was
written mostly at night when the spirit of this madman would visit … When I realized, to my
horror, what this character wanted from me, I kept resisting but the novel forced itself to be
written. I would often black out for hours at a time only to realize that another ten pages had
been scrawled out" (Ellis 18). It is as if Bret was taken over by an inhuman, supernatural
force embodied in the character of Bateman, losing his agency in the process during a nightly
haunting. Moreover, the book itself appears to become a supernatural object. Bret declares
that "even years later I couldn't look at the book, let alone touch it or reread it – there was
something, well, evil about it" (Ellis 19).

This evil does not remain confined to the pages of the novel but enters the real world
when it appears that Bateman has fully come alive and is murdering people in the same ways
that he does in *American Psycho*. If true, as the author Bret has the destructive power to
create characters who commit evil acts that have real consequences. Thus, the creative power
of the writer is presented as dangerous and something to be feared. According to Truffin,
protagonists such as Bret fear what they create because their creations are projections of their
anxieties ("Creation Anxiety" 57). After being warned that he would be responsible if any
harm came to others because of his books, Bret seems to have anxieties about his

culpability.[14] Indeed, he believes that "in my own way, I had committed them [the murders]. I was responsible" (Ellis 44). His concerns about his accountability become personified in Bateman through an uncanny process of the fictional becoming real, thereby rendering the boundary between reality and fantasy uncertain and creating an ambivalence typical of the Gothic (Botting 15).

Lunar Park's use of setting and turbulent weather is the next notable Gothic feature. While the setting of The Secret History is more traditionally Gothic in its inclusion of buildings resembling Gothic ruins and foreboding natural environments such as the woods, Ellis's novel locates the Gothic in the suburbs. He depicts a neighbourhood which is dreamlike and fragmented, with Bret noting that "Part of the town we lived in seemed dreamed up and fractured" (Ellis 110). As a disjointed and surreal space, the suburb is liminal. In her discussion of the Suburban Gothic, Bernice M. Murphy claims that "The suburb is, after all, an in-between space by definition: located beyond the heart of a town or city, yet still existing within its urban orbit" ("Defining" 317). It is therefore a site which demonstrates the boundary-crossing typical of the Gothic. Furthermore, Bret's neighbourhood is characterised by an unsettling homogeneity since all the houses look the same, perhaps indicating the expected conformity of its residents. Bret's neighbours, the Allens, live in a house which "was almost an exact replica" of his own (Ellis 196). Such repetition contributes to the "soul-destroying homogeneity" of suburban communities (Murphy, "Defining" 316), a quality which in the Suburban Gothic gives rise to fears of insularity, conformity, the loss of individual identity and depersonalisation, all of which are embodied in the tropes of the haunted house, return of the repressed and doppelgänger (Murphy, "Defining" 318).

Suburban conformity in Lunar Park takes the form of a frightening adherence to the social and familial expectations of the rich and elite. One of these expectations is that parents desire to have and attempt to raise perfect children, even going so far as to heavily medicate them for a variety of "problems." At a child's birthday party Bret observes that "all the kids were on meds … that caused them to move lethargically and speak in affectless monotones" (Ellis 161).[15] In the novel children are numbed through an extreme form of parental control which reflects the parents' obsession with their children and efforts to shape them, govern their lives and prepare them for success. Georgina Colby describes this as a "project-type

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[14] These anxieties are heightened by the fact that Bateman acts as one of Bret's doppelgängers, as will be discussed later.

[15] An example of the waning of affect which Jameson believes characterises postmodern characters.

approach" to raising children, one which annihilates childhood and dehumanises the child (146). As Bret remarks, "there was something off about the obsession with their children that bordered on the fanatical. It wasn't that they weren't concerned about their kids, but they wanted something back, they wanted a return on their investment – this need was almost religious" (Ellis 198). Such behaviour acts as a suburban revision of the tyrannical actions of traditional Gothic parents and their desire to profit from their children. The portrayal of residential life as a source of fatigue and pain is also part of Ellis's suburban reconsideration of the Gothic. The social engagements which Bret is expected to attend leave him feeling "stricken and exhausted" after only a few minutes and instil in him a strong desire to escape back to the city, suggesting that the suburb is a place of entrapment (Ellis 195).

Lastly, the presence of fear is an important part of the Suburban Gothic. According to Colby, the enclosed suburban community in which Bret lives "has internalized the external culture of fear" (144). Although Bret and Jayne move to the suburbs to get away from what she sees as the growing horror of urban existence, life there proves to be equally governed by principles of fear (Colby 144). From the parental fear of child abduction to worries about unidentifiable enemies, Bret's neighbourhood is ruled by fear, resulting in a space which is strictly regulated. Overall, *Lunar Park*'s setting aligns closely with the Suburban Gothic, which in Murphy's view depicts a nightmarish place of entrapment, unhappiness, mindless conformity and materialism, a place where the most dangerous threats come from within ("Defining" 319). Ellis's revision of the typical Gothic setting exists alongside his inclusion of scenery and elements found in classic Gothic locations. The graveyard is one of the most prominent. Even though it is initially a fake graveyard built behind the house for a Halloween party and therefore used to parody the Gothic, it becomes a source of real terror when it appears to transform into an actual burial site: "The ground beneath the headstone was burst apart – as if something buried there had clawed its way out … The headstone was streaked with dried blood. And scrawled on it in red letters was **ROBERT MARTIN ELLIS 1941-1992**" (Ellis 143). Like disturbed graves in traditional Gothic tales, this one signals the rise of the dead and thus, the return of the past. Additionally, it is accompanied by typical Gothic natural imagery, such as trees which "looked black and twisted beneath the orange light of the moon" (Ellis 139).

Like older Gothic tales, Ellis also uses images of darkness and turbulent weather. One such instance is when Bret remarks that "It looked as if the entire world were dying and turning black. The darkness was eclipsing everything" (Ellis 141). Such extreme darkness is almost malevolent, as is the wind in the following description: "Freezing air scorched the

campus, piercing it. Piles of dead leaves blanketing everything exploded upward and suddenly formed cones that raced across the ground … The wind subsided briefly but then another huge sheet was literally pushing me out of the parking lot … You could actually hear the wind snarling" (Ellis 275). Here, the weather appears to be sentient and malicious, actively working against Bret.[16] His feeling that the wind is "the dead screaming" (Ellis 275) makes it macabre and gives it further Gothic connotations. In summary, Ellis reformulates the setting of traditional Gothic novels, shifting it from decaying ruins to the liminal space of the suburbs, a place which is marked by insularity and conformity. Along with this revision, he also includes images of darkness, turbulent weather and the graveyard, all aspects which are present in classic Gothic texts.

The oppressive father is another major Gothic feature of *Lunar Park*. According to Murphy, characters in the Suburban Gothic are haunted by their familial pasts and families become a source of fear ("Defining" 319). In line with this, one of the most prevalent tropes in Gothic fiction is the tyrannical father figure (Botting 2). With his violent temper and abusive, controlling personality while alive, Bret's father closely fits this image. Bret relates that his father "had always been a problem – careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, angry, paranoid – and even after my parents divorced … his power and control continued to loom over the family" (Ellis 7). Using a particularly postmodern form of upbringing, he teaches his children that "the world lacked coherence, and that within this chaos people were doomed to failure" (Ellis 8), and shapes Bret by creating, criticising and destroying him, showing that the self is constructed. Thus, like other Gothic fathers, Robert Ellis was a source of terror that Bret needed to escape from, an act which he believes he has accomplished once his father dies, filling him with "a monumental relief that he was gone" (Ellis 21).

However, Bret comes to realise that "As much as I wanted to escape his influence, I couldn't" (Ellis 8). In an uncanny repetition of the past, Bret becomes like his father.[17] He too is careless, an alcoholic, angry, and paranoid, and the relationship that he had with his father is replayed through his relationship with his own son Robby. Just as his father frightened him, Bret frightens Robby who tells him that "you scare me. You're so angry all the time. I hate it" (Ellis 328). Moreover, before his death Bret's father "had become a hermit, someone who either didn't know his son was lost to him or refused to believe it" (Ellis 264). Bret is

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[16] It may perhaps also serve as an objective correlative for Bret's emotional turmoil.
[17] It is interesting to note that Bret himself may be considered a Gothic villain. Southward argues that instead of the house haunting Bret, he haunts the house and his family and thereby becomes a postmodern tyrannical Gothic villain, trapping his victims in a prison of his own making (3).

unable to see that Robby is lost to him as well until it is too late and like his father did for him, he creates a shrine of photographs and newspaper clippings of Robby (Ellis 446). Furthermore, Robert's inability to provide Bret with what he needs and connect with him is mirrored in Bret's own failure to accomplish this with Robby. According to Esther Peeren, "this vicious cycle of obligation and nonfulfillment … manifests as the Gothic nightmare of the novel" (315). Equally Gothic is the literalisation of Bret's helplessness to escape his father by means of Robert's return from the dead and subsequent haunting of his son.[18] He first appears as a ghost at the college where Bret works: "his face was white and his stare was fixed on me and he was holding out his hand" (Ellis 276). As a ghost he intrudes further and further into Bret's life, his fearful presence crossing over from memory to reality and slowly becoming more horrific, until he manifests in the house as a "skeleton-thing" (Ellis 401), the monstrous Gothic tyrant transformed into a true monster. No longer able to repress his memories of his father, Bret recognises that the past must be acknowledged: "this was what happened when you didn't want to visit and confront the past: the past starts visiting and confronting you" (Ellis 256). The return of Bret's father is therefore uncanny since it signifies the return of the dead and the recurrence of that which has been repressed (Freud 241).

One final Gothic feature of *Lunar Park* is noteworthy, namely the protagonist's deteriorating mental state. Like Richard in *The Secret History*, Bret's psyche is in turmoil and he experiences a range of negative emotions characteristic of Gothic fiction. According to Botting, Gothic texts typically present an internal world of despair, anxiety, and guilt, as well as psychological disturbances such as hallucinations and madness (7). Delusions, paranoia, and alienation are similarly common (Botting 63). Helyer argues that mental suffering is likewise regularly found in postmodern literature, claiming that "In a fragmented postmodern world of isolated individuals beset by guilt, anxiety, and despair, internalizing fear produces narratives which center on psychological disturbance" (728). Bret's disturbed psyche is indicated by his frequent feelings of despair, pervasive sensation of panic, and ever-present guilt. He describes how "Something in me dropped and exploded – a moment of pure, almost visceral despair" (Ellis 72) and relates that "The strange guilt I felt – the sense of having done something wrong – never left me in that house" (Ellis 98). Furthermore, Bret exhibits paranoia, mentioning that "That's what drove me crazy: the dog knew that *I* knew that it hated me and *liked* it" (Ellis 88). By attributing human abilities and malicious human qualities to a pet dog, he demonstrates a paranoid and troubled psyche.

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[18] There is a strange symmetry to Robby and Robert which speaks to fears of circularity. Robby disappears while Robert, who should be gone, returns as a revenant, thereby subverting the natural order.

Bret also feels alienated from both others and himself. He declares that "I was the loner, the outsider, the one whose solitude seemed endless" (Ellis 197). Not only is he unable to connect with others, but he feels that he does not belong in his son's life. Moreover, he dissociates from himself, self-alienating through language. Waking up from a particularly bad hangover, he becomes a haunting figure: "I tore the top sheet off the bed and draped myself in it. I walked out of the room a ghost" (Ellis 77-78). From this moment for the next few pages he begins referring to himself as "the ghost" and "it," as if he is watching himself from a distance. Later, he refers to himself as "you" (Ellis 283). Thus, Bret remains detached from himself and others. Botting says that Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable power which threatens loss of sanity (5). After the seemingly supernatural events which Bret witnesses, he appears to descend into madness: "I kept talking to myself, but I was a man trying to have a rational conversation with someone who was losing it" (Ellis 253). This testifies to his extremely poor psychological state. While he seems to largely recover by the novel's end, the pure terror which he experiences has lasting effects, turning his hair white and prompting him to carry a gun at all times.

In summary, psychological turmoil is one of the many Gothic features of *Lunar Park*. Other aspects unsettle the borders between reality and fiction, such as fictional creations coming to life. Possibly supernatural events generate terror while leaving conjectural possibilities open as it is uncertain whether they are real or the result of hallucinations, thereby creating an ambivalence typical of the Gothic. Ellis transforms the traditional Gothic setting by relocating it to the suburbs, a suffocating place of disturbing conformity and parental control, as well as fear. This brings the Gothic terrors close to home, and the uncanny therefore plays a significant role in the novel. It is embodied in the haunted house, the return of the dead, inanimate objects becoming sentient, and the fictional becoming real. Traditional Gothic images of darkness and turbulent weather contribute to the revised setting. Lastly, the Gothic trope of the tyrannical father is present in Bret's father returning to haunt him. The past is also repeated by Bret becoming like his father, thus creating a Gothic cycle of repetition. I will now examine the presence of sublime terror in the novel as it is created by the interaction of the postmodern and Gothic features.

2.3 "For One Brief, Awful Moment I Had No Idea Who I Was": Gothic-postmodernism and Sublime Terror

According to Beville's theory of Gothic-postmodernism, sublime terror is the central aspect and unifying factor of the Gothic and the postmodern (15). A consideration of it is therefore necessary when reading a novel through the lens of Gothic-postmodernism, since any text classified as such must include an exploration of the subjective experience of terror (Beville 59). As with *The Secret History*, sublime terror is inherent in three different phenomena in *Lunar Park*: the loss of self, the loss of reality, and death. Loss of self in the novel takes the form of Bret's fragmentation into various doppelgängers, a process which is both Gothic and postmodern. In his list of stock features found in Gothic fiction, Botting includes monstrous doubles who signify evil (2). He also states that such doubles are representations of an internal and irreparable division in the psyche which threatens loss of identity (86). The instability of the self is a similarly common aspect of postmodernity. Jameson writes that "'psychic fragmentation' is a better term for what ails us today" (90) and Beville claims that the fractured self is evidence of the postmodern rejection of the concept of wholeness (186). Additionally, she maintains that the primary focus in a Gothic-postmodernist text is the plural nature of identity (151). Doppelgängers therefore have an important role to play in reading *Lunar Park* through the lens of Gothic-postmodernism.

The first of Bret's doppelgängers is Clayton, a college student who shares his name with the protagonist of Bret's novel *Less Than Zero*, making him not only a double, but possibly also a fictional character come to life. Moreover, he attends Bret's Halloween party dressed as Patrick Bateman, which transforms him into a figure of fear and in turn connects Bateman to Bret. Aimee, a student whom Bret is attempting to have an affair with, points out Clayton's resemblance to both Bateman and Bret: "'I thought he looked a little like Christian Bale.' We were both silent for a long time, because Christian Bale was the actor who had played Patrick Bateman in the film version of *American Psycho*. 'But he also looked like you,' Aimee said" (Ellis 122). In fact, it appears that Clayton may actually be Bateman. When asked if he is, he does not deny it, instead saying "'We're a lot of people'" (Ellis 336). Later, Bret himself becomes aware of his resemblance to Clayton when he finds out that it was him that he saw in Aimee's car: "I couldn't concentrate on anything except the fact that I kept thinking I had been in that car with Aimee Light. I thought the guy in the passenger seat was myself" (Ellis 167). Bret acknowledges their similarity again when watching the video of his father's death, relating that "At first I thought the face reflected in the window was mine … But the face wasn't mine. His eyes were black, and the face belonged to Clayton" (Ellis 269). Being present at the time of Bret's father's death suggests that Clayton might be

responsible for it. If true, as Clayton's creator and double Bret himself bears some responsibility, as he does for the deaths of the people seemingly murdered by Bateman.

Reflecting on the murders, Bret himself feels that in a way he committed them (Ellis 44). His perception of himself as the perpetrator and his resulting horror and shock show that there is terror in the suggestion that the self is unknowable to itself. A hidden capacity to commit immoral acts is revealed in Bret through the actions of his self-created doubles. Truffin argues that creation is reproduction and that the monstrous products of the imagination reveal the monster within ("Creation Anxiety" 59). Bret's reaction to the news that a character which he created is seemingly committing murders demonstrates that a revelation of this nature causes terror.[19] Terror is also provoked by the uncanny. Freud claims that the uncanny can involve doubles, what he describes as "a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (234). Baudrillard too connects doppelgängers to the *Unheimlich*, stating that they make both the strangeness and the intimacy of the self to itself visible (*Simulacra* 66). Furthermore, he links doubles to death, writing that a double is "an imaginary figure, which … haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death" (*Simulacra* 66). The doppelgänger therefore suggests that the fear of the loss of identity and the fear of death amount to the same thing, since if the subject does not have their own identity, but rather a shared one, they confront non-existence. Thus, the double brings together two forms of sublime terror. In summary, Bret's loss of self through fragmentation into doppelgängers causes sublime terror in three ways: by suggesting that the self is unknowable to itself, by acting as a source of the uncanny, and by being associated with death.

Bret's second doppelgänger is the writer, a shadowy figure who seems to exist only in Bret's head, yet has wishes that directly contrast with Bret's own and the power to make them come true. Bret's remark that "the writer's life encourages drama and pain" is embodied in this figure, an almost supernatural force who takes control and shapes events according to his dark vision (Ellis 218). Unlike Bret, he is in control of events and so might be used by Bret's fractured mind as a coping mechanism to deal with the terrifying proceedings which he witnesses. However, the writer also takes away Bret's agency, treating him as if he is merely a character in a novel, for example "when the writer forced me to look more closely" (Ellis

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[19] "Fear kept bolting me upright. I suddenly realized that I was straining not to defecate. I had to grip the desk for support" (Ellis 186).

304).[20] Significantly, what the writer wants is death and horror: "The writer yearned for chaos, mystery, death. These were his inspirations. This was the impulse he leaned toward" (Ellis 312). Accordingly, he demonstrates a longing for terror, suggesting that there is a pleasurable aspect to it. Burke claims that the sublime involves both terror and an enjoyable sensation which he terms "delightful horror" (67). Kant holds the same belief, asserting that "the sublime arouses satisfaction, but with dread" (*Observations* 14). Consequently, the writer might represent the irrational part of the self which is drawn towards terror. Not only does he yearn for this Gothic force, but he shapes the world according to it, for example: "*Look how black the sky is*, the writer said. *I made it that way*" (Ellis 318). In addition to signifying the pleasure in sublime terror, the writer adds another level to the narrative structure as Peeren proposes, suggesting that Bret himself may be a spectre conjured by another author and that if so, "The way authorship is repeatedly configured as a phantasmagorical activity situates *Lunar Park* on the … intersection of the Gothic and the postmodern" (308).

The final main doppelgänger is Bret's father. While he serves as a double, it is to a lesser extent than Clayton and the writer, and Bret's mirroring of him enables the past to be repeated. During the events of the novel, it is made clear that Bret is becoming what he fears by transforming into his father. Not only does he come to share many of his negative characteristics, such as his anger and alcoholism, but he briefly becomes part of his ghostly father in a monstrous process of physical transformation. When Bret confronts the supernatural creature that his father has become in returning from death, he observes that "My father's face flashed on again, followed by Clayton's. As the faces rapidly interchanged, sharing the skull, the resemblance between the two men could not be questioned. It was the face of a father being replaced by the face of a son" (Ellis 402). Since Clayton looks like a younger Bret and acts as his doppelgänger, the face is also that of Bret. When he witnesses this fragmentation of self, Bret is "stunned into rigidity" (Ellis 401). According to Burke, in its highest degree the sublime causes a state of suspension and hesitation, which he termed "astonishment," due to the mind being completely occupied by the object of terror (53). This is what appears to happen to Bret. He also screams "while standing perfectly still" (Ellis 398). Beville argues that in Gothic literature the motif of the scream signifies a non-verbal reaction to the unrepresentable encountered through sublime terror (180). The disintegration of Bret's self seems to strain his imagination to the utmost,[21] resulting in a moment outside of

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[20] Since Bret is in fact a character in *Lunar Park*, this can be seen as a metafictional reference to the novel.
[21] As Kant believed occurred during a confrontation with a sublime object (*Judgement* 98).

time and language (Beville 138). In conclusion, each doppelgänger seemingly accords with a facet of sublime terror. As a fictional character brought into the real world and thus effacing the boundary between fiction and reality, Clayton is an example of the uncanny (Freud 244). The writer's longing for terror demonstrates the pleasurable aspect of the sublime, while Bret's father evokes the astonishment which the sublime is thought to cause and shows that the sublime is often unrepresentable. Together they establish that loss of self is a source of sublime terror.

The second cause of sublime terror in *Lunar Park* is the loss of reality, which takes two forms: dissociation through drugs, alcohol and "writing" different scenarios, and the breakdown of the boundary between fiction and reality. Similarly to the characters in *The Secret History*, Bret's copious consumption of alcohol and drugs is used to dissociate from the real world by leading to him "spacing out" (Ellis 19). In addition to the possible hallucinations which it causes regarding the potentially supernatural events, Bret's drug use causes confirmed hallucinations, for example that "a bookstore owner in Baltimore was in fact a mountain lion" (Ellis 30). Moreover, Bret cannot account for his own actions: "I woke up in the guest bedroom with no idea of how I'd gotten there" (Ellis 77). Both his lack of memory and the illusions which he witnesses testify to his disconnection from reality. Bret also uses alcohol and drugs with the aim of escaping from the real world and thereby managing his fear of both real societal events and the possibly supernatural occurrences. Children trick-or-treating early at dusk with their parents are taken by him as "a sinister reminder of the missing boys … which moved me to stop at a liquor store" (Ellis 129), and Bret deals with the news that Bateman may be alive and committing murders by imbibing Ambien and vodka (Ellis 188).

Bret's creation of different scenarios is also used as a coping mechanism and form of dissociation. As events in the novel progress, Bret envisions alternative, more pleasant situations to replace the frightening ones which are truly occurring. He links his ability to imaginatively alter his personal reality to his job as a writer, claiming that "I was adept at erasing reality. As a writer, it was easy for me to dream up the more viable scenario than the one that had actually played itself out" (Ellis 216). According to him, this skill is employed by authors to flee themselves, enabling them to escape the self and reality. It may also be a way of representing indirectly what would otherwise be unrepresentable since the sublime involves a magnitude which exceeds its power of presentation (Lyotard, *the Sublime* 52). By presenting a substitute for the unrepresentable sublime, Bret may be demonstrating its "presence in absence" (Beville 109). As part of constructing this substitute, Bret tells himself

that "it was all a dream" (Ellis 219) and begins referring to everything that really happened as "the dream" (Ellis 222). This dream takes on a postmodern, digital aspect when reality begins reasserting itself and Bret notes that "The dream was cracked and I needed it to keep streaming" (Ellis 225). The word "streaming" indicates that it is digital. Like Tartt with *The Secret History*, Ellis makes use of a film metaphor to describe the unreal quality of life. Bret "began realizing a new film with different scenes and a happier ending," enabling him to cope with his terror (Ellis 218). The dream is then directly represented as a film: "The dream safely projected onto the wide screen, where it played as an alternative to what I was actually seeing" (Ellis 227), allowing Bret to escape into a fictional version of reality.

However, although imagining other scenarios may have benefits, it also comes with danger. Bret remarks that "It took an immense amount of concentration and balance to pivot back and forth between the illusory and what you knew without a doubt was true and real, and you had to hope that you wouldn't unravel somewhere along the trail that connected the two" (Ellis 218-219). Moving between truth and fiction risks the loss of sanity, which in turn can arguably lead to a loss of self and reality that cannot be controlled by the subject. One such loss of reality occurs with the hyperreal. Baudrillard believed that in postmodernity, "the concrete, material foundation to which human systems of signification point" has disappeared and there are only representations or simulations of reality, painstaking copies known as the hyperreal (Sheehan 30). According to Baudrillard, the replacement of the real by the hyperreal has been made possible through technology (Sheehan 31). Films are one such example. Thus, Bret's digital dream leads to the world seeming fake and filmic, for example when he is confronted by his father's ghost and remarks that "it seemed fake, like something I had seen in a movie … The living room might as well have been a screen and the house a theatre" (Ellis 401). It also causes the boundary between the true and the false to break down (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 4), leaving reality indistinguishable from fantasy, as when Bret says "I couldn't tell if an actor was sitting in the passenger seat or if it was my son" (Ellis 327). Consequently, along with the consumption of drugs and alcohol, Bret's "writing" of different scenarios leads to dissociation and loss of reality.

The collapse of the border between fiction and truth, both the truth of the novel and the truth of the real world in which Ellis writes, is also a contributing factor in the loss of reality. It is not only the rewriting of reality by formulating an alternative story which causes the breakdown of the boundary between the two. Both Bret's life and Ellis's life become fiction. Due to Bret's outrageous behaviour and controversial novels, he becomes a figure of public scrutiny and speculation, his life written about in numerous publications. As he says,

"I was on display. Everything I did was written about" (Ellis 13). Since not all the published stories are true, his life is changed into a false narrative. The same is true for Ellis the author. As Colby remarks, the notion that reality is becoming fiction is evident in the novel, since the reality of Ellis's life becomes fiction through the pseudo-autobiographical format (158). While some details about his life are true, others are invented, most notably his relationship with Jayne and the existence of his son. It is possible for the reader to have difficulty telling the two apart, leading to a confusion between truth and fiction.

Lunar Park also makes a metafictional comment on the transformation of Bret's life into literature. Detective Donald Kimball says to him "'You're not a fictional character, are you, Mr. Ellis?'" (Ellis 185). The reader knows that he both is and is not. Moreover, there are times in the novel when Bret seems to be nothing more than a character. He states that "What I felt walking up those stairs was, I had been expecting this. It was all part of a narrative" (Ellis 207). He seems to lose control over his own life, as if he is simply following a plot which has already been laid out by an all-powerful force. The same thing occurs again later: "An invisible force pushed me towards a destination" (Ellis 260). Bret acting like a character in the world of the novel and Ellis turning his life into fiction therefore blurs the boundary between fantasy and truth, contributing to the loss of reality.[22] Notably, Bret seems to take a certain amount of pleasure in this loss. He describes "gradually being comforted by the unreality of the situation. It made me tense, but it also disembodied me … the fear was now laced with a low and tangible excitement. I could no longer deny I was becoming addicted to the adrenaline. The sweeps of nausea were subsiding and a terrible giddiness was taking their place" (Ellis 281-282). Bret's description of feeling both terror and a pleasurable sensation speaks to the "delightful horror" which Burke believes the sublime evokes (67), as well as to Kant's belief that the sublime produces simultaneous feelings of pleasure and displeasure (Judgement 88). It also attests to Jameson's account of "a disturbing sense of unreality" being present in postmodernity, in which the subject feels a mysterious charge of affect involving euphoria and intoxicatory intensity (27).

The final source of sublime terror in Lunar Park is death. Thought by Burke to be the greatest source of terror (36), death is present in the novel on both an individual level and a wider societal scale. Post-9/11 American cities are represented as places of death. According to Baudrillard, modern cities have taken over the function of cemeteries. In his opinion "They are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an

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[22] Bret's fictional creations coming to life and the writer having the ability to shape the world as if it is a novel have the same effect.

entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death" (*Symbolic Exchange* 217). This is reflected in the fear of acts of terrorism and the death that they result in which hangs over cities in Ellis's text. People are described as seeking a safe refuge by moving to the suburbs, cities are enclosed by barbed wire, newspapers are full of images of the dead, and bulletproof vests are sold everywhere (Ellis 40-41). Death seems not only possible but likely. When reading about these horrors in the newspaper and the research which is presented as evidence that the populace is not doing well, Bret notes that "You couldn't help being both afraid and fascinated" (Ellis 82). This speaks to the simultaneous repulsion and attraction which the sublime is thought to evoke; to Kant's belief that it causes "satisfaction, but with dread" (*Observations* 14) and Lyotard's claim that the sublime involves the combination of pleasure and pain ("the postmodern" 9).

On a smaller scale, death is also present in the novel with regards to the murder victims. Their deaths are described using grotesque images of extreme violence, for example: "There were ropes and body parts positioned in front of mirrors; the head and the hands were missing, and the walls were splashed with blood" (Ellis 279). Beville argues that the grotesque is part of a postmodern narrative technique to create a Gothic atmosphere and subvert expectations (187). Such violence might also heighten the terror of death by ensuring that it is painful. Burke contends that he knows of "nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (59). He goes on to say that pain is caused by a superior power, and that therefore terror and pain are connected to strength and violence (60). The fact that the murders may have been committed by Bateman also gives them an added terror, since he is a fictional character who should be incapable of affecting the real world. As Bret is told, "'In the Vintage edition of *American Psycho* … a man is murdered in much the same way'" (Ellis 177). If Bateman is truly the murderer, the breakdown of the boundary between fiction and reality lends the deaths further terror by making an already mysterious and unknowable experience more enigmatic and inconceivable. Additionally, the murders are described in secondhand accounts, perhaps because death is unrepresentable (Beville 97), thereby supporting Kant's point that the sublime is ill-suited to presentation (*Judgement* 76). Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Bret himself comes close to death when he is attacked by the family dog which has been monstrously transformed by the Terby. The consequence of this is that his hair "had turned completely white" (Ellis 440), demonstrating the profound terror which a close encounter with death causes.

To conclude, sublime terror in *Lunar Park* can be divided into the same three sources as in *The Secret History*, namely the loss of self, the loss of reality, and death. Loss of self

takes the form of Bret's fragmentation into various doppelgängers; an element which is both a stock feature of Gothic fiction and a testament to the psychic fragmentation which is thought to haunt the postmodern subject. Freud's theory of the uncanny plays a particular role in the ability of doubles to generate terror. Loss of reality, the second cause of sublime terror, is due to dissociation by means of drugs, alcohol, and creating different scenarios to rewrite reality, as well as to the collapse of the boundary between fiction and reality. Not only does fiction become reality, for example when Bret's imaginary creations come to life, but reality becomes fiction through the novel's pseudo-autobiographical format. Thus, "the world depicted is never wholly realistic or wholly fantastic but always combines elements of the two" (Baker 507). Death acts as the final source of sublime terror. It is present in the text on both an individual level and a societal scale. Post-9/11 American cities are portrayed as sites of death, while the deaths of the murder victims are described using grotesque images of violence, heightening the terror. All three roots of sublime terror demonstrate its unrepresentable nature and evocation of simultaneous feelings of pleasure and displeasure. The thesis will now discuss the contemporary societal fears which the novel expresses.

2.4 "Faceless Enemies": Societal Fears in *Lunar Park*

Critics such as Bruhm believe that the Gothic can be seen as an indication of the fears troubling a certain culture at a specific moment in time (260). In the case of *Lunar Park*, at least two fears are evident: anxieties about living in post-9/11 America and parental fears about vulnerable children.[23] Botting describes the modern city in Gothic literature as a locus of horror and violence (74). This is even more true for American literature published after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. According to McHale, the events of 9/11 acted as an apocalyptic break, creating "The sense of a cultural threshold of some kind having been crossed" (*Postmodernism* 174). Ellis's novel reflects this phenomenon. As Marjorie Worthington points out, "The attack and its aftermath permeate the novel as Ellis constructs a dystopic world in which 9/11 represents the opening of terroristic floodgates" (118). The sense of menace and danger brought about by the attack suffuses the novel's background and takes centre stage in the opening chapter. Bret relates that Jayne has moved the family to the suburbs to escape "the increasing horror of urban life" (Ellis 40). In Colby's opinion she exemplifies the problematic relationship of the individual to the post-9/11 landscape in which proximity to the city and others is feared, leading to a desire for geographical remoteness

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[23] Not discussed due to lack of space is a third fear; that of parenthood itself. Relevant aspects include anxiety over replacement, the repetition of the past, cyclicality, and the failure to be a good father.

(140). In the first chapter, the novel also demonstrates "hyperbole born out of the politics of fear" (Colby 140). An exaggerated description of the city is provided, portraying it as apocalyptic and chaotic:

> Suicide bombers were blowing themselves up in crowded Burger Kings and Starbuckses and Wal-Marts and in subways at rush hour. Miles of major cities had been cordoned off behind barbed wire, and morning newspapers ran aerial photographs of bombed-out buildings on the front page, showing piles of tangled bodies in the shadow of the crane lifting slabs of scorched concrete. More and more often there were "no survivors." Bulletproof vests were on sale everywhere, because scores of snipers had suddenly appeared; the military police stationed on every corner offered no solace, and surveillance cameras proved useless. There were so many faceless enemies – from within the country and abroad – that no one was certain who we were fighting and why. Cities had become mournful places … and grief on an unimaginable scale was rising up over them, reinforced by the stained, tattered photocopies of the missing posted everywhere, which were not only a constant reminder of what had been lost but also a warning of what was coming next. (Ellis 40-41)

The exaggeration of this portrayal of the city is reminiscent of the excess found in Gothic fiction. The urban space is the site of widespread death and destruction, Gothic horrors which give rise to inescapable fear. Both Peeren and Colby link the Gothic aspects of the novel to the terror of 9/11. Peeren claims that setting it in the wake of the attacks provides an additional level of haunting since 9/11 spawns "an infinite series of ghosts in the form of the many 'faceless enemies' that continue to terrorize U.S. cities" (305). Colby asserts that "Through the construct of Bret, Ellis addresses the impact of 9/11 on the bourgeois American subject. In particular, Ellis represents the haunting of the posttraumatic subject through the use of Gothic tropes" (21). Accordingly, the contemporary societal fears of post-9/11 terrorism are figuratively expressed through the supernatural events in *Lunar Park*, and the haunting of Bret might represent society who is haunted by the pervading fear of further violence. In line with the use of Gothic tropes to signify the lingering effects of acts of terrorism, Freud's concept of the uncanny may be relevant to a discussion of the anxiety caused by domestic terrorism, which results in one feeling unsafe in one's own home. Since *heimlich* literally translates to "homely" (Freud 220), the uncanny is inherently connected to the domestic. As seen in the novel, the familiar space of the home fails to offer protection and the neighbourhood as a whole becomes a place of fear due to the unidentified enemies

hiding among the population. Not only does Bret's home fail to provide safety, but it contributes to his terror by transforming into his childhood house. Associated with negative memories and therefore long repressed, the image of Bret's old home fills him with fear. Similarly, the familiar cities and suburbs of America are turned into sites of dread by domestic terrorists who live among the rest of the inhabitants. Freud also theorises that the uncanny is caused by death (241). In the novel there is an overwhelming number of the dead due to terrorist attacks, further adding to societal anxiety.

As already suggested, terror is heightened by the fact that the enemies are faceless, and could therefore be anyone, and are believed to be everywhere. Baudrillard contends that after the attacks on The World Trade Center evil is "there, everywhere, like an obscure object of desire" (*Terrorism* 6). Moreover, terrorists have even "used the banality of American everyday life as cover" and live in the suburbs with their families before "activating themselves suddenly like time bombs" (Baudrillard, *Terrorism* 19). He believes that this makes every individual suspicious, causing a form of mental terrorism (*Terrorism* 19). The inhabitants of Bret's suburb are affected by such terrorism. Their community is enclosed, insular and strictly regulated, something which is most obvious at the local school. Protected by armed security guards and with architecture that is "all based on control," the school is representative of the community's paranoia (Ellis 223). Colby states that the paranoia of the suburb's residents can be read as a social mise-en-abyme of the general climate in America post-9/11 (147). Part of this general climate is a pervasive media culture of terror. Bret relates that "The newspapers kept stoking my fear. New surveys provided awful statistics on just about everything. Evidence suggested that we were not doing well … The populace was confounded, yet didn't care … Anxiety was soaking up most people's days. Everyone had become preoccupied with horror. Madness was fluttering everywhere" (Ellis 81). As Colby suggests, there is a sense of fatalism imposed by the constant stream of negative media reportage (142). Despite widespread fear and anxiety people are apathetic, overwhelmed by the omnipresent terror which accompanies life in post-9/11 America and which is propagated by the media. Since it is media saturated (McHale, *Postmodernism* 13), postmodern life brings terrifying events to the awareness of a great number of people, further spreading shared anxieties.

The second societal fear evident in *Lunar Park* is parental fear about vulnerable children.[24] The area in which Bret lives is plagued by a spate of missing children, leading to

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[24] Both *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* demonstrate a concern with youth, whether that be impressionable college students or abducted boys.

worries that they are being abducted. Bret remarks that "so many children were missing that it bordered on an epidemic. About a dozen boys had disappeared since I arrived in July" (Ellis 82). These disappearances result in a society consumed by fear and tension, one in which "security guards [are] everywhere" at the local school (Ellis 223) and "Distrust everybody was the message" (Ellis 83). When out trick-or-treating, Bret observes the anxious atmosphere: "And I noticed how quiet it was, as if no one wanted to attract any unwanted attention from the stranger lurking in the shadows" (Ellis 137-138). This rather Gothic image conveys the idea of a hidden danger lying in wait, much like the faceless enemies do for fears of terrorist attacks.[25] According to Peeren, "a missing child is one of the most visible, frightening, and communicative images possible" (316). Making it more frightening for Bret is the fact that his son and his friends are not scared themselves, but elated: "And the thing that made me squirm with unease on that bench was the fact that not one of the five boys, including my son, had seemed frightened. None of them seemed scared. What bothered me most was how they had to dampen their enthusiasm – their glee – in front of the adult" (Ellis 169). This disturbing reaction is explained later when it becomes clear that the boys are leaving willingly to escape their homes and families. However, this is no less frightening for the parents who are still losing their children, do not know where they go and appear to be powerless to stop them. The fact that the boys wish to leave also implies that the parents have failed in their parental roles.

Societal fears about vulnerable children in the novel relate to worries about school shootings as well as abduction. After reading the newspaper Bret imagines a "wide-awake nightmare" featuring "a rampage at the school, 'I'm so scared' being whispered over the cell phone, what sounds like firecrackers popping off in the background, the ricocheting bullet that hurls the second-grader to the floor" (Ellis 83). As with the fear of kidnapping, this anxiety centres around parents' concerns that they are unable to keep their children safe and therefore fail their parental responsibility. Referring to his stepdaughter Sarah, Bret comments that "She understood that I couldn't protect her" (Ellis 241). Although he is referring to protection from supernatural monsters, it speaks more generally to parents being unable to protect their children from more mundane horrors such as school shootings. The fear of mass violence is also suggestive of societal concerns related to violent media such as video games since school shooters are often thought to be desensitised by exposure to

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[25] Connecting 9/11 to the missing children, Colby argues that they echo the missing people post-9/11 and the fear of the other caused by the attacks (146).

fictional acts of violence. Bret's creation of brutal works of literature such as *American Psycho* therefore takes on additional significance.

In conclusion, as the above has shown, Beville's theory of Gothic-postmodernism can be usefully applied to *Lunar Park*. Like *The Secret History* it is mostly postmodern at the level of content rather than form, although the novel is highly metafictional and regularly draws attention to its status as a written work, for example when Bret discusses the process of textual construction, thus highlighting its artificiality. Moreover, the text accords with McHale's concept of the dominant of postmodernism through its ontological focus (*Postmodernism* 15). This is mostly evident in its placing of different worlds in confrontation, namely a supernatural world and the rational world of explainable events, and violation of boundaries between them. There is also a confrontation between the fictional world of the novel and the real world in which it exists, since it is a metafictional pseudo-autobiography with real biographical elements. Thus, it violates the border between fiction and reality. Other postmodern features include a consideration of the existential implications of authoring whereby fiction is shown as having the power to affect reality, and a postmodern concern with the ultimately unsuccessful search for truth and meaning. Ellis's novel exhibits many Gothic features too. Unlike in *The Secret History*, the supernatural plays a very prominent role. The haunted house signifies the return of the past and the uncanny; there is a postmodern digital haunting; Bret is tormented by the ghost of his father and other horrific, supernatural creatures; fictional characters such as Bateman come to life; and there are traditional Gothic tropes like turbulent weather, psychological turmoil and a tyrannical father. Lastly, there is a reformulation of the typical Gothic setting by locating the Gothic in the suburbs. Together, these postmodern and Gothic features work to create sublime terror arising from the loss of self and reality, and death.

Conclusion: Locating Gothic-postmodernism

This thesis has applied Beville's theory of Gothic-postmodernism to *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* in order to examine the authors' use of both Gothic and postmodern characteristics and the ways in which they work together to create sublime terror. It has been shown that both novels exhibit the qualities which Beville believes Gothic-postmodernist texts should possess. They blur borders between the real and the fictional, demonstrate narrative self-consciousness, pay attention to the sublime effects of terror and unrepresentable aspects of subjectivity and reality, make use of Gothic thematic devices, and include representations of otherness, such as turbulent landscapes and monstrous characters (Beville 15). The postmodern features of the two texts enable them to be classified as postmodern novels. Both display an ontological focus related to a concern with questions of world-making; specifically, placing different worlds in confrontation and violating the boundaries between them. *The Secret History*'s other postmodern features include a fusion of genres, intertextuality, and metafictional references to writing a story, while *Lunar Park*'s include taking the form of a metafictional pseudo-autobiography, considering the existential implications of authoring, and an unsuccessful search for truth and meaning.

Both novels also employ a variety of Gothic features which are used to generate terror, such as possibly supernatural events, liminal states, turbulent natural landscapes and malevolent weather, psychological deterioration, and Gothic villains. Likewise, they both demonstrate an important focus on sublime terror, considered to be the central element and common denominator between the Gothic and the postmodern (Beville 15). Sublime terror in the texts can be divided into three parts: the loss of self, the loss of reality, and death. Regarding the loss of reality, it is interesting to note that both texts feature a cinematic way of handling the feeling of unreality and of representing the unrepresentable by means of a film metaphor. Perhaps this reflects the prevalence of the digital in postmodernity and the ways in which it is affecting experiences of terror, or perhaps it could be related to Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and his claim that we are governed by the principle of simulation (*Symbolic Exchange* 42). Finally, the novels express different contemporary societal fears, thus supporting Beville's view that Gothic-postmodernist texts represent the anxieties of postmodern society. This conclusion will now reflect further on how the juxtaposition of these texts illuminates Gothic-postmodernism's relation to issues of location and terror, and will consider other directions which the thesis's approach might open up.

Lunar Park and *The Secret History* are in some ways very dissimilar novels, differing in terms of style, date of publication, plot, setting and characters. However, they are also interesting novels to examine together since they can be fruitfully compared in terms of geographical location and relation to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Geography has always been important to the Gothic and to the study of regional American literature, which according to Rebecca Janicker emphasises the use of a specific geographical area and its physical environment, local characteristics, customs, and idiosyncrasies (56). Both *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* are set on America's East Coast. Ellis's story takes place in a fictional Northeast suburb, Midland, outside of New York, while Tartt's is set further north in Vermont, New England. A comparison of these settings suggests that place is significant in terms of style and motifs, and perhaps to how the novels are generally received. Due to its setting, *The Secret History* fits into the New England Gothic tradition. According to Murphy, New England serves as the most common setting for American Gothic literature (*Suburban Gothic* 10). The novel thus establishes itself as part of a long Gothic practice.

An important aspect of the New England environment is isolation. Lawrence Buell states that "the preferred settings are small towns, villages, and the countryside" (300). These places are usually sheltered from the outside world due to their geographical marginality (Buell 306). This is true for Hampden College which is located close to a rural town, yet also separated from it by economic and social divides. The Classics class is therefore an insular group in an isolated space, which may serve to heighten the psychological turmoil, sense of unreality and lack of morality which the characters experience. As Kent C. Ryden states, another characteristic of New England literature is hidden moral corruption and violence (206) which contrasts with the "persistent notion of New England as representing an earlier, better time and place" (Ryden 208). Far from being an escape from a corrupt and decadent modern existence (Ryden 209), it is precisely this kind of life which is depicted in *The Secret History* in an act of Gothic subversion. The characters frequently drink and take drugs, spend large amounts of money, and ultimately murder their own friend.

As this shocking act suggests, the rural setting is also notable for its link to bloodshed. Cultural geographer Yi-fu Tuan, referenced by Janicker, argues that rural space in the United States has long been associated with death and violence (60). Janicker links this to American Gothic themes of the harshness of the frontier experience (60), something which is reflected in the Gothic descriptions of nature in *The Secret History*. With New England's long, dark winters, mountains, and forests, the natural world lends itself well to terror. The novel mirrors this by portraying it as wild, threatening and foreboding, and occasionally with a "perceived

malevolence inherent within the very landscape" (Janicker 63). This is evident in winter which takes on a life of its own and almost kills Richard. New England nature is also characterised by juxtapositions between splendour and decay (Buell 291). In the novel, natural splendour coexists with decay, heightening the Gothic aspects of nature through contrast, for example when Richard observes the "trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground" (Tartt 12).

Another feature of New England Gothic is the presence of the occult, such as witchcraft (Buell 360). The bacchanal which Tartt's characters stage can be viewed as an occult ritual, made worse by the fact that "The first versions of a specifically New England identity were heavily religious" (Ryden 197). In this light, the Classics group's turn to ancient Greek religion, a form of worship far removed from Christianity, might make their actions seem more subversive and horrifying, supporting Francis's claim that they could be mistaken for a cult (Tartt 196), an isolated group that, like witches, is thought to practice esoteric knowledge and rituals. As the connection of New England with religion suggests, Puritan attitudes heavily influence literature set in this region. According to Janicker, "a society obsessed with the fundamental depravity of the human will and introspection on the nature of sin led to themes of psychological distortion" (63). In *The Secret History* characters are tormented by their disturbed psyches after their depraved act of murder; haunted by guilt and paranoia, dissociated from reality, and, in Richard's case, subjected to hallucinations. W. S. Winslow claims that Puritanism is also associated with doom due to the belief in double predestination by which some are destined for God's grace and salvation, while others are fated for Hell. In the novel a sense of doom contributes to the atmosphere of tension and suspense evident in lines such as these: "It was a strange, still, oppressive day. The campus seemed deserted … and the green lawn, the gaudy tulips, were hushed and expectant beneath the overcast sky. Somewhere a shutter creaked. Above my head, in the wicked black claws of an elm, a marooned kite rattled convulsively, then was still" (Tartt 297). Doom is also apparent in the trope of fate which appears in the novel, particularly in Richard's observation that he has come to believe in the existence of the fatal flaw and that his own is "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (Tartt 5), implying that this longing led to his role in Bunny's death.[26]

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[26] Lesser aspects of the New England Gothic play a role in Tartt's novel too. Characters in such literature tend to be haunted by secrets (Winslow), for example Bunny's murder. Moreover, their lives are often marked by loss, despair, disappointment, grief, and loneliness (Ryden 205). Like the Puritan introspection on sin, this may influence the emotional turmoil of Richard and the others.

Geography in *The Secret History* differs from *Lunar Park* not only in its connection to the New England Gothic tradition, but also in Tartt's imitation of the European Gothic. Typically, American Gothic expresses "the unique American condition in terms of the wilderness and the city rather than the decaying monasteries that typify European Gothic" (Janicker 62). However, in addition to wild nature, Tartt includes certain ruins and old buildings in the novel, the most obvious of which are the Lyceum and the country manor owned by Francis's aunt. The Lyceum, a college building whose very name harks back to the past, is "old and covered with ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from its landscape" (Tartt 15), and the manor with its turrets, pikes and vaulted ceilings is reminiscent of a traditional Gothic castle. Certain place names also indicate that Tartt is borrowing European settings, such as Monmouth House, referring to a historic Welsh town, and Hampden College, a name which to Richard "had an austere Anglican cadence" (Tartt 10). Furthermore, Richard's dream at the novel's end has him wandering through "an old city, like London" filled with "ruined parks, blasted statuary" (Tartt 627, 628). He then enters a building housing a mysterious machine which forms images of various places, many of which are European and premodern, such as the Parthenon, the Colosseum, St. Mark's Square, Chartres, and Salisbury; all far removed from contemporary America (Tartt 628). Lastly, Tartt provides hints of the medieval, important to the Gothic since it originally appropriates and exoticises the medieval past. As already noted, the gallows which Richard hallucinates is "medieval and black" (Tartt 553), linking to Gothic literature's habit of depicting the medieval period as a time of fear and death. Another intimation of the medieval is present in the "high cold principles" which Richard believes prompt Henry to commit suicide, specifically "*Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice*" (Tartt 612). Such principles are evocative of the medieval code of chivalry.

All suggestions of Gothic ruins and the premodern past are absent in Ellis's novel. In contrast to *The Secret History*, *Lunar Park* portrays a character who has fled the urban horrors of the city only to discover that the suburbs contain terrors of their own. As a post-9/11 American novel, it is significant that the story is set in a suburb close to New York since this creates an immediate association with the terrorist attacks, enabling Ellis to link the Gothic to acts of terrorism. Joseph Crawford argues that "The very conceptual category of 'terrorism' arose as a result of the application of Gothic rhetorical tropes to real acts of historical violence" (x). Richard Devetak agrees and suggests that "A particular type of international relations narrative has emerged with greater distinction after the traumatic experience of September 11: the gothic narrative" by which terrorists are shown as dark,

perverse, and indomitable forces which haunt the civilised world (621). *Lunar Park* reflects this narrative by depicting an America which lives in fear of "faceless enemies" hiding among the population and forming secret plans (Ellis 41). Like the network of terrorists which is believed to exist in the real world, these enemies aim to achieve "total social transformation" by using "the sudden deployment of spectacular violence in those times and places where it is least expected … [relying] on psychological shock to maximise the impact of their attacks" (Crawford 189). Terrorists in the novel therefore blow "themselves up in crowded Burger Kings and Starbuckses and Wal-Marts and in subways in rush hour" (Ellis 40), appearing as an uncontainable and invisible force with almost supernatural powers. Serial killers, similarly invisible until made hyper-visible by media exposure, are also given such powers, becoming another source of fear in the urban landscape. Their extraordinary abilities tend to be emphasised, as well as the unfathomable evil of their acts (Crawford 192). In the novel, Bateman becomes an inhuman figure imbued with supernatural power whose feats are even more astonishing since he is possibly a fictional character come to life.

Additionally, both Bateman and terrorists in the novel are further shown in a Gothic light by depicting them as possessing monstrous characteristics. Monsters typically symbolise deviance, madness, depravity, brutality, and violence (Devetak 633). These are all qualities which *Lunar Park*'s faceless enemies hold, as well as Bateman. Moreover, Devetak claims that "Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda represent a particularly grave danger because they embody the sublime characteristics that Burke says heighten feelings of terror: power, shapelessness, limitlessness and darkness" (636). Thus, sublime aspects typical of the Gothic are shared by terrorists, further uniting the two. As previously mentioned, acts of domestic terrorism lead to the feeling that the home is unsafe. There is a "belief that s*omething* is out there, fanatically devoted to some reprehensible ideology and tirelessly plotting our destruction" (Crawford 191). In *Lunar Park* this is symbolised by the haunted house and the supernatural monsters which invade Bret's home, giving rise to horror tropes common in popular culture, such as ghosts, a doll coming to life, exorcisms and grotesque violence, and ensuring that the novel lacks the realism of *The Secret History*. Like modern horror films, Ellis also utilises a form of excess which borders on the comical (Helyer 730). While it is similar to the use of excess in traditional Gothic literature, its relation to the popular horror genre may be one reason why *Lunar Park* appears to lack true Gothic credibility.

Since Ellis's novel is set in a fictional suburb, the Suburban Gothic is integral to any discussion of its use of geography. According to Murphy, this subgenre arises from "the niggling suspicion that something dark lurks below suburbia's peaceful façade" (*Suburban*

Gothic 1). Furthermore, it is concerned with "playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide" (Murphy, *Suburban Gothic* 2). Thus, horror begins at home. This is evident in *Lunar Park* where family itself is a source of terror and Bret is haunted by his tyrannical father newly returned from death. Additionally, Bret himself is a source of fear and danger. Not only does he repeat the past by becoming like his father and frightening his son, but his monstrous creations occupy the house, putting his family at risk and scaring them. Terror therefore comes from within, transforming the home into a permeable space instead of a place of protection. Murphy states that "In the American Gothic, the family home replaced the castle as the central locus of terror" (*Suburban Gothic* 105). While *The Secret History* imitates the ruins of the European Gothic, Ellis employs the haunted house as the setting of terror. When traditional Gothic elements are included many of them tend to be parodied, for example the Halloween party with its fake cobwebs, plastic skeletons, and mock cemetery. Such parody may be suited to the suburban location in which Gothic symbols are often used as light-hearted forms of decoration during occasions like Halloween.

In summary, the imitation of the European Gothic in *The Secret History* appears to lend it Gothic credibility by suggesting that it is a small part of a prestigious Gothic legacy. The text thought to be the first Gothic novel was published in England and the genre first grew in Europe. Many of the most well-known Gothic tropes are also distinctly European. By emulating some of them Tartt's use of the Gothic appears to be serious and thoughtful. Along with her novel's numerous other Gothic features, many of which are also found in the American Gothic, the incorporation of ruins and hints of the medieval acts as a strong indicator of Tartt's use of the Gothic genre. In contrast, *Lunar Park* lacks European Gothic markers, a fact which can be at least partly explained by its suburban setting which favours haunted houses instead of old ruins. This, in addition to Ellis's use of superficial horror tropes regularly found in popular culture, may help to explain why *The Secret History*'s Gothic elements are identified more frequently than those of *Lunar Park*, which tends to be viewed as a horror novel in the vein of Stephen King. Geography also helps to account for many of the two novels' themes and subjects. Set in Vermont and therefore fitting into the New England Gothic tradition, *The Secret History* exhibits many of its concerns, such as isolation, a terrifying natural world, and the influence of Puritan beliefs. *Lunar Park*'s suburban setting accounts for its focus on issues such as haunting, the return of the past, the suburban neighbourhood as a place of entrapment and unhappiness, and threats coming from within.

The fictional suburb's proximity to New York is also relevant to the depiction of the home as an unsafe space.

The two novels can also be usefully compared in terms of their relation to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As an event which acted as an apocalyptic break (McHale, *Postmodernism* 172), it can be argued that 9/11 is important to any American novel set after this time which expresses societal fears. *Lunar Park* is one such novel. Set an unspecified amount of time after the attacks, it demonstrates anxieties about living in a new era of terrorism during which pervasive fear is caused by widespread death and destruction. The city becomes a locus of horror and violence in which no one is safe. Ellis draws attention to this by exaggerating his description of the city and portraying it as a chaotic place haunted by the ever-present spectre of death. Those responsible for the acts of violence are the terrorists or "faceless enemies" which are hidden among the rest of the population (Ellis 41). Thus, danger is shown as lurking everywhere and the precise sources of terror are unknown. Furthermore, they are external. Terror is also provoked by the constant and inescapable media coverage of violent acts which enables it to be produced on a wide scale and become a part of daily life, resulting in a society haunted by trauma. Lastly, as previously mentioned, terrorists are given extraordinary abilities and monstrous qualities such as invisibility and depravity which transform them into superhuman villains.

Set in the '80s, *The Secret History*'s events occur years before the terrorist attacks. Instead, death takes the form of the murder of two individuals and is linked to broader social concerns about university campuses and the dangerous knowledge imparted there, as well as anxieties about immoral youth lacking in empathy. While these are large-scale societal concerns, they are not necessarily global ones like terrorism is. Fittingly for such individual acts of violence, the sources of terror in the novel are internal. The characters are haunted by their own guilt and troubled psyches and commit the terrifying acts of murder themselves rather than being acted upon by external forces as the population in *Lunar Park* is.[27] Moreover, the Classics group, arguably the villains of the story, are not imbued with supernatural qualities and are therefore very human, unlike the culprits of terrorist attacks in *Lunar Park*, Bateman, and the monsters which haunt Bret. They are also a small group with one person, Henry, as the mastermind, instead of a far-reaching network. Finally, terror in *The Secret History* occurs on a smaller scale than in Ellis's novel. The horrific acts affect only a few individuals and therefore fear is not widely disseminated, nor is it a regular

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[27] This is not to say that *Lunar Park* is without any internal sources of terror. Bret is terrorised by monstrous characters which are manifestations of his own mind and writing.

occurrence or part of daily life. In conclusion, the relation of the two novels to the events of 9/11 affect the kind of societal fears which are expressed, as well as the specific qualities of these fears.

I believe that the findings of this thesis are important for two reasons. Beville argues that the Gothic is still relevant today as a serious genre and object of study, despite its perceived depleted importance (7). This thesis suggests that this is true. The Gothic appears to have evolved to play a role in postmodern novels such as *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* and is therefore not merely present in popular culture in the form of a superficial veneer. Tartt in particular seems to utilize Gothic tropes in a thoughtful manner, purposefully imitating aspects of the European Gothic and combining them with features both suited to the New England Gothic tradition and the broader American Gothic genre. She also combines the Gothic with characteristics of multiple other genres, showing that it is adaptable. While many of the Gothic tropes which Ellis uses are commonly found in horror fiction and film, perhaps suggesting that his novel is closer to the shallow Gothic of popular entertainment, he also revitalizes traditional elements such as doppelgängers and the uncanny. Additionally, his use of horror tropes together with more highbrow aspects such as metafictional references is characteristic of the mixing of high and low culture evident in postmodernist fiction (McHale, *Postmodernism* 80). Moreover, Southward points out that as a metafiction *Lunar Park* comments on the dissociation between a "genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and […] the continuance of traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience" (7). This implies that fantastical forms like the Gothic may be more suited to the societal experiences of today and that perhaps *Lunar Park* is one such example. Furthermore, identifying the Gothic aspects in *The Secret History* has shown that there are critically and commercially successful novels which make use of Gothic features, proving that it is still a relevant and developing genre. While *Lunar Park* may not have garnered the same attention or achieved the same cult status, it is still deemed worthy of study by several scholars, some of whom are increasingly recognizing its Gothic aspects. Taking these two novels into account, it appears that there may be a spectrum along which Gothic-postmodernist novels exist, with some of them, like *The Secret History*, existing at the more Gothic end, and others, such as *Lunar Park*, situated at the postmodernist end.

I would argue that the thesis's findings are also significant because they suggest that Gothic-postmodernist novels might enable readers to confront and expel the pervasive fear experienced within postmodern society, as Beville proposes (87). Many scholars believe that

Gothic literature provides the reader with catharsis. Botting argues that terror activates the imagination, enabling it to rise above its fears and allowing the subject to enter a state of activity (48). He also believes that imaginatively overcoming fear and heightening the sense of self reconstitutes identity against otherness and loss by externalising the object of fear (6). Similarly, Beville states that through the recreation of terror the reader can define the self by being presented with the idea of the unimaginable (56). Although it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to determine whether readers of *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* might truly experience catharsis by expelling common societal fears, what is clear is that the novels do express contemporary anxieties inherent in society, whether that be the fear of living in an era of terrorism post-9/11 or the fear of what horrific acts can result from a lack of empathy and exposure to potentially dangerous knowledge. Representing such fears is the first step in enabling readers to banish them.

As this limitation suggests, there are several directions for future research. Firstly, investigating whether readers of Gothic-postmodernist texts such as *Lunar Park* and *The Secret History* really do experience catharsis by confronting and expelling fears both societal and individual. This would help to determine what effects such literature actually has on readers, if any. Secondly, the societal fear of the relationship between representations of violence in the media and real acts of violence that is suggested by the copycat killings in *Lunar Park* could be explored. It may also link to the school shootings which are mentioned in the novel, since anxieties surrounding them are often connected to fears of desensitisation and children being exposed to violent media such as video games. Additionally, more attention could be paid to the generational aspect in *Lunar Park* and the ways in which it relates to the many allusions to *Hamlet*, particularly the anxieties about fathers and sons, and fears of repetition, of parenting, and even of children. More attention could also be given to the possibility that Bret himself is a Gothic villain. Moreover, more of the Gothic aspects of *The Secret History* could be studied, such as Charles's status as a tyrannical patriarch, the trope of fate and omens, and the many ghostly images. This would help to show just how many Gothic conventions Tartt uses. More generally, I believe that Beville's theory should be applied to more postmodern texts which exhibit Gothic characteristics to see whether it always holds true and to further develop the theory. Doing so may also draw attention to the continuing relevance of the Gothic and to the role which sublime terror plays in these works. Further scholarship should also be devoted to Tartt's work, not only because it is a critical and commercial success, but because she makes use of a wide variety of themes, images, genres, and other literary devices in a manner which allows for multiple rich interpretations

and the application of various literary theories both older and more recent, including Gothic-postmodernism.

        To conclude, both *The Secret History* and *Lunar Park* bear the characteristics of many different genres, but the genres of postmodernism and the Gothic are especially prominent, as this thesis has endeavoured to show. As such, Beville's theory of Gothic-postmodernism is a particularly useful tool for reading the novels. Applying the theory to Tartt's novel alongside Ellis's enables the comparison of two texts different in plot, themes, setting and relation to 9/11 which nevertheless both utilise Gothic and postmodern features in order to create sublime terror inherent in the loss of self, the loss of reality, and death. This shows that the Gothic is still alive in novels which initially seem quite different from each other and that the sublime continues to play a role in literature to this day, suggesting that there is enduring appeal in darkness, unreason, and chaos.

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