

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Social status and economic capital have by far been viewed as symbols of power, this being relevant throughout numerous different cultures across the globe. As argued by Baum, social and economic capital are significant determining factors in the inequality experienced by individuals throughout cultures as they contribute to an existent power struggle within society, especially in the capitalist world of today (2000, 410). A contributing factor to the significance of these capitals in the United States is the phenomenon of Fordism first occurring in the 1930s, which introduced the concept and application of mass production and mass consumption (Migone 2007, 173). According to Migone, this phenomenon drove the rise of American consumerism, further aiding in the accentuation of a class system (2007). The presence of these factors and their effect on the concept of a class system, therefore, acts as a cause for conflict and a trigger for unequal treatment from one party to another.

Evidence of this occurrence is apparent in the lack of public healthcare, education, and other basic needs in certain sectors of American society, this mainly being due to said sectors' and communities' inability of meeting a class standard of economical and societal expectations, revealing the United States' lower life expectancy rate despite maintaining a high GDP (Baum

2000, 409). Although these forms of capital are prioritized within a society, the spectrum and focus on each varies depending on what is considered to be of utmost significance and value by the majority of the individuals within said society. A person's stand within this field of cultural production is related to their taste and whether it aligns with the taste of the majoring society, considering them being the dominant class (Bourdieu and Bennett 1986). This brings a new factor into the equation; cultural capital. This is correlated to their specific environment, thus signifying how it shapes them within the environment itself, eventually providing them with their acquired status. Taking this into consideration, an individual's environment and history have a significant impact on their status. An individual's surrounding atmosphere therefore contributes to their behaviour, habits, and overall social gaze, also referred to by Bourdieu as *habitus* (Grenfell 2010). This relevance on status ceases to promote equality, seeing as it prioritizes the people of the upper class, along with their interests, instead of the general public.

Donna Tartt is an American author known to defy this concept, as most of her works of literature implicitly mention these issues and incorporate satire as a way of critiquing this reality of elitist behaviour. Her works include titles such as *The Goldfinch* and *The Little Friend*, in which both works dabble in the world of the rich, yet emphasize the despair of their stereotypically fulfilling lives. This main concept is also apparent in Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). The novel tells about the lives of a group of elite Classics students at a university campus referred to as Hampden College, situated in

Vermont. The students establish a certain distinction by living their lives tastefully, in stark contrast to the majority of the individuals at the school. While most students spend their youth having fun at college parties and following the latest trends, the peculiar group of elite students act more reserved with their interests in fine dining, classic literature, ancient languages, and a clear obsession with Greek history and mythology. This 'elitist' behaviour inaugurates heterodoxy to arise against a doxic state of acceptance towards American pop culture, also referred to as the doxa (Bourdieu 1977, 164). As the small group, also synonymously referred to as the murder clique due to their act of murder, coexists with the majoring society at the campus field, they eventually run into friction, also known as hysteresis, due to a difference of beliefs and habits, resulting in extreme consequences; the murder of their friend.

The murder clique consists of four individuals; Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, Charles Macaulay, and Camilla Macaulay. They coexist alongside the majority of the students at Hampden College, only running into them when completely necessary, and live their lives in voluntary seclusion. Their only preferred contact is with their two other classmates, Bunny and Richard, the latter being the narrator of the novel. This choice of correspondence of partial voluntary isolation between the murder clique and the majority of Hampden College therefore forms a unique relationship in which each group (the majority and the murder clique) survives according to its own rules of life,

before being forcefully confronted to one another, and wrecking havoc as a consequence in the event of hysteresis.

Hysteresis, according to Bourdieu, occurs in the process of habitus adaptation, resulting in the rise of negative sanctions (1990, 62–64). Negative sanctions arise as a consequence of the inability to adjust to more present conditions due to a set of ill-adjustable dispositions caused by primary conditioning, also known as habitus (Bourdieu 1990, 62). In this novel, Tartt elaborates on the power dynamics at a campus, by making a difference in environment and taste very obvious. This is done with the purpose of emphasizing the effect of an individual's surroundings in the legitimization of significance on cultural capital compared to other forms of capital.

This specific trademark in Tartt's writing is evident in the comparative study of her works with the works of Honoré de Balzac, entitled *Precarious Provenance: Legitimacy, Surrogacy and Betrayal in the Value of Art and Family in Honoré de Balzac's Le Cousin Pons and Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch*. The comparative analysis discovers how Tartt reveals aspects of American society and their true behaviour towards history and the arts. The analysis leaves the interpretation of bourgeoisie Americans of the 21st Century to be a society that only appreciates the materialistic aspects of art, lacking the ability to comprehend its cultural background and values (Coburn 2017, 100).

A study conducted by Kyriakidou of the title *The Secret History of Hamden Campus: A Study in Elitism and Murder* reinforces this notion by

providing further analysis on American society and its ideals by incorporating Bourdieu's theory of spatial modalities. The study succeeds in revealing an interpretation of the narrative and indications on *The Secret History*, portraying how people of privilege tend to abuse their surroundings. This abuse is conducted in the effort of bending situations to be in their favour and personal benefit, discouraging the notion of the 'American dream' (Kyriakidou 2018, 72).

Through readings of these previous studies, a gap is discovered in the period of the American society being analyzed, and the subjects of the Bourdieuan approach within the novel. Another gap is evident in the power dynamic of the novel and the majority of discussions on the topic of the effects of hysteresis. In previous researches, wealthy individuals were portrayed to be positioned in powerful standings within the society, with the general public or people of 'lesser' wealth struggling to prove their worth and maintain their existence. *The Secret History*, however, denies this stereotypical concept as it displays the people of conventionally 'higher' status, both economically and socially, to be 'othered' by the dominant society due to a difference of cultural understanding and preferences. Given this gap, the writer analyses the social arena within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* for the purpose of gaining a more conclusive understanding regarding the power dynamics present in the interactions of the murder clique in relation to the dominant group and how they establish heterodoxy, and the murder clique's strategies in coping with a clash of habitus; also referred to as

hysteresis, amidst the possibility of negative sanctions in their adaptation process (Bourdieu 1990, 63–64).

In the context of today's current situation, people have become more aware of the issues arising as a result of classism, realizing how preferences or taste contribute largely to the establishment of their status and the undermining of certain individuals or groups. This produces the growing popularity of tolerance in the fight for equality, apparent throughout the multiple calls of action in the past decade that bring awareness to issues regarding economical and social constructs of race and gender. Significance is no longer placed on any form of capital with the understanding of how each individual experiences different circumstances. This notion continues to grow in awareness, especially in the diverse country of North America. However, knowledge of cultural capital and its significance in the 'othering' and unequal treatment of certain parties is rarely made apparent.

Although the eradication in the glorification of social and economic capital has been steadily applied, conflict regarding the class system continues to live on, resulting in constant hysteresis of various forms arising within communities where differences are to be found. This is due to the existence of other less common forms of capital and their status of being highly influential in the social dynamic of a society; cultural capital being one of the most prominent. Cultural capital is continuously used as a tool in the act of defining a person's status, as can be seen in the phenomenon of student migrations to urban cities in pursuit of education (Chen 2020). Students continuously face

discrimination due to their preferences in activities, which is influenced by their culture, and therefore, taste. The significance of taste is also evident in the present-day phenomenon of the Korean-wave, in which individuals interested in the cultural products of Korean origin, are faced with discrimination, and are being othered merely due to their preferences in entertainment which do not fall in line with the mainstream media (Yoon 2019, 185)

This existence of these issues in our current time proves the significance cultural capital holds. Regardless of its publication being in the year 1992, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt is a piece of American fiction that proves to be significant even to this day, especially with its recent rise to fame in the trend of Dark Academia which can be found on numerous different social media platforms (Elan 2021). An article by *The Guardian* has recently discussed the female characters within the novel in accordance to modern issues of feminism by stating how they are purposely disregarded by the male narrator, leaving them with a lacking sense of depth (Clements 2019). Another article accentuates the novel's premise of beauty and terror going hand-in-hand, alongside the idea of loss of control (Kidd 2021). With this idea, Kidd elaborated on the pretentiousness of the characters and their apparent classism, critiquing it as a parody of the elite, yet still relatable to the society of today, despite its bleak representation (2021). Its popularity continues to prevail in current media and social platforms due to its satirical standpoint on the issues of classism and gender. Therefore, this research is conducted with a purpose

of elaborating the issues discussed in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) in accordance to Bourdieu's theories on habitus and hysteresis in order to contextualize the findings to situations relevant to our current society.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

In the context of the issue being analysed, this study proposes a focus on the habitus and hysteresis of the characters in *The Secret History*, with research questions as follows:

1. How is the field of cultural production within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* portrayed?
2. What does the field reveal in regards to the dynamics occurring within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*?

1.3 Objective of the Study

Corresponding to the research questions previously mentioned, in an effort to fulfill the above questions with appropriate answers, this study aims to:

1. Identify the field of cultural production within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.
2. Explore the field in relation to the dynamics within Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to call attention to issues of classism and elitism, specifically in the introducing of how it is not only economic and social capital that act as contributors to this hierarchal system of class, but cultural capital as well. With the rise of awareness of such issues, the idea of equality improves to be more reachable, as the factors hindering this goal are identified. With the book acting as a reflection of society, the identification of these obstacles become potential points in the eradication of such issues of inequality and the promotion of tolerance of differences. With the knowledge of habitus and its correlation to this classicist behaviour, it is hoped for that dread is not associated with the knowledge of the existence of different cultures, but acceptance and embracement of divergences. In addition, this study aims to contribute to further analyses conducted on similar topics of habitus, hysteresis, and classism.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Elite: Individuals of influential position that rise above ordinary situations and persons, whose decisions and actions are undertaken through a specific possession of power due to their pivotal stance within society (C. W. Mills 2018, 1).

Habitus: A system consisting of dispositions accumulated through an internalized understanding of

surrounding elements, resulting in the production of significant practices and meaningful perceptions; thus making it a system structuring and structured by practices (Bourdieu and Bennett 1986)

Capital: A concept of assets in which they are accumulated, exchanged, transformed, objectified, and embodied through systematic implantations by bringing value and prestige (Bourdieu 1977, 179).

Hysteresis: A conflict of previously existing elements, specifically habitus, that arise as a result of dispositions lacking the ability to adapt due to a state of primary conditioning (Bourdieu 1990, 62–64).

Doxa: A pre-reflexive form of conjecture, considered as truth and deemed as the most “natural” practice due to an internal predetermined sense of limits affected by habitus and field (Bourdieu et al. 2019, 66–68).