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Chronotopic hybridity in the contemporary campus novel: *The Secret History*

Abstract:

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) has proven difficult for reviewers and readers to categorise: is it a campus novel, crime fiction, a Greek tragedy? In tandem with Mikhail Bakhtin's essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope of the Novel* (1981) I use Adena Rosmarin's text *The Power of Genre* (1985) and her model of employing genre as an interpretive tool for understanding a literary work, as a touchstone for this chronotopic analysis of Tartt's novel. Bakhtin demonstrates that multiple chronotopes may be present within a single text, though one usually emerges as ascendant (1981, 252). My analysis demonstrates that there is no clearly dominant chronotope in *The Secret History* and I suggest instead, that it is a polychronotopic novel that consists of multiple major chronotopes.

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Introduction

In the two decades since its first publication, Donna Tartt's 1992 debut novel *The Secret History* has received minimal critical attention, although it has achieved considerable popular success. *The Secret History* has proven difficult for reviewers and readers to categorise: is it a campus novel, crime fiction, a Greek tragedy? In tandem with Mikhail Bakhtin's essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope of the Novel* (1981), I use Adena Rosmarin's text *The Power of Genre* (1985), and her model of employing genre as an interpretive tool for understanding a literary work, as a touchstone for this chronotopic analysis of Tartt's novel. Bakhtin demonstrates that multiple chronotopes may be present within a single text, though one usually emerges as ascendant (1981: 252). In illustrating the tension between what initially appear to be intervallic chronotopes of crime fiction and Greek tragedy, challenging the foregrounded campus chronotope, I argue that Tartt has created a hybridised narrative, within which each chronotope competes with and is necessarily dialogic with its others. My analysis demonstrates that there is no clearly dominant chronotope in *The Secret History* and I suggest instead, that it is a polychronotopic novel that consists of multiple major chronotopes.

Genre as an interpretive tool

Adena Rosmarin takes Ernst Gombrich's analysis of art history and the 'techniques of making and reading visual representations' as a starting point for an analysis of literary modes; the foundation of Gombrich's 'making precedes matching' formula, taken from his 1960 text *Art and Illusion*, is the concept that an artist makes pictures utilising inherited 'schemata', (artistic convention), accordingly adjusting his work through direct observation of the world, thereafter correcting his schema (Gombrich, 1960: 118). Rosmarin draws on Gombrich's pictorial schema and correction methodology to develop a model of genre as a flexible instrument that may be used to apprehend a literary work: 'The history of art teaches [...] that visual representation is like all other suasive enterprises in that it begins with a schema or premise that the painter modifies to meet the demands of his purpose and audience' (1985: 11). In taking the dramatic monologue genre as a test case, Rosmarin offers a pragmatic approach that asks the reader-critic to proceed with reading an individual poem of this type as if it were a dramatic monologue (by employing a schema) but not to take for granted that it actually is (by employing a modification): 'genre is a kind of schema, a way of discussing a literary text in terms that link it with other texts and, finally, phrase it in terms of those texts' (1985: 21). Thus, one may first read a text as though it were of a particular genre, in order to interpret its relationship to other texts and gauge its similarity and divergence from other works of its kind, and then proceed from this knowledge to establish how it may be classified. She asks the reader-critic to move from the general to the particular, from schema to correction, in determining a text's genre, 'We are able, then, to read texts that are different as if they were similar because we are able and willing to make the edifying mistake of classification' (1985: 21-22).

Rosmarin asserts that when a text emerges, its meaning is intertextually dependent on and derived from other texts. For example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) with inclusions of stream-of-consciousness narration, insertions of scenes written as script and experimental language is a text that most did not know how to interpret or code generically when it first appeared in print. To allow genre to operate as an interpretive tool, the reader-critic could first read *Ulysses* generically as a novel against his/her prior conception of a novel, and subsequently consider modifications to this assumption. This is a pragmatic, applied approach that would see *Ulysses* alter and contribute to our concept of novel as genre, be considered a hybridisation of several/many genres, or invent a new genre entirely. To this end, I read *The Secret History* first as crime fiction and alter my generic expectations as subsequent chronotopes emerge.

John Frow expands on this concept of genre as instrument, proposing that 'Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place' considering texts to be 'performances of genre rather than reproductions of a class to which they belong' (2006: 10 & 3). Stephen Neale, writing about film, describes a similar reading practice to Rosmarin's Gombriichian schema/modification process:

The process-like nature of genres manifests itself as an interaction between three levels: the level of expectation, the level of the generic corpus, and the level of the 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both. Each new genre film constitutes an addition to an existing generic corpus and involves a selection from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time. Some elements are included; others are excluded (1990: 56).

Neale also argues that 'genres are instances of repetition and difference' with difference integral to the economy of genre, as repetition alone would be insufficient to attract an audience (1980, 48-50). Each text can create a new example of a genre and mediate the meaning of its predecessors, which tallies with Bakhtin's notion of genres as changeable and dialogic.

Taking cues from Jacques Derrida's *Law of Genre* essay that 'texts do not participate in genres within a vacuum but are placed in them by humans applying codes and reading for genre marks' (Kearns 2005: 203), Rosmarin conceives of genre as a hermeneutical frame and interpretive space for the reader-critic. She subsequently transforms this hermeneutic circle into a 'strange loop' that is mutable and never closed:

Genre, in other words, is a finite schema capable of potentially infinite suggestion. It is a special case of what Douglas Hofstadter calls a "strange loop" [...] how does a "strange loop" differ from "normal" representation, which also seeks to capture the infinite in the finite? By making its beholder or reader aware of the "gaps" that he must fill or bridge in order to make sense. A strange loop calls attention to itself (1985: 44).

Finally, Rosmarin's definition of genre also incorporates value: 'genre is most usefully described as a tool of critical explanation, as our most powerful and reasoned way of justifying the value we place or would place on a literary text' (1985: 49).

Genre as an interpretive, communicative tool can contribute to the enhancement of enjoyment in reading and can help to reach a consensus of value with other readers. Thus, Rosmarin's concept of genre as investigative tool dovetails directly with Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes, which he argues form 'the basis for distinguishing generic types' which 'lie at the heart of specific varieties of the novel genre, formed and developed over the course of many centuries' (1981: 250-1). These differently nuanced definitions of genre underpin my methodological exploration of the chronotope as investigative tool in this analysis.

I consider genre to be a broader approach to justifying the value of the text where chronotope justifies the value of spatial-temporal formations. My motivation to employ the chronotope as a device to examine genre and assist in the close reading of a text, aligns with Susan Baker's use of the chronotope in reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1998). She writes that 'attention to chronotopes can help to define genres as value-laden, even underline generic mixing and ideologically-saturated generic dialogue' (1998: 351). Chronotopes then, provide a coherence and an understanding of the spatio-temporal qualities of a written text, film, artwork or other creative endeavour. Michael Holquist in the glossary for *The Dialogic Imagination* characterises the chronotope as a 'unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented' (1981: 425). Following this, and also Sue Vice's understanding that a chronotope 'can be used to analyse local images in a text which are based upon a link between time and space' (1997: 208), I examine 'local images' featuring spatio-temporal intersections, as well as the broader effects the principal chronotopes create, throughout Tartt's *The Secret History*.

Genre hybridity, intervallic and multiple chronotopes

Bakhtin allows for the existence of multiple chronotopes within a novel, indicating that 'Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships' though he considers it common that these interactions will produce one chronotope that envelops or dominates the others, using the term 'hybridisation' to discuss this interplay (1981: 252). In *Modern Genre Theory* David Duff defines generic hybridisation as the 'process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work' (2000: xiv). Duff proposes that genres evolve 'because the act of belonging to a genre involves both adoption of and resistance to its conventions. [...] Hence too, the notion that the possibilities of a genre can be exhausted' (2000: 8). Frow, in *Genre* similarly states that 'new genres are constantly emerging and old ones changing their function' (2006: 10). Further, Morson and Emerson in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* suggest that:

Genres (and their attendant chronotopes) constitute a part of a particular society's contribution to understanding actions and events. When they are new or vital, specific genres may be highly "productive" in shaping thought or experience. But genres also

continue “to exist stubbornly” even after they have exhausted their capacity to generate new insights (1990: 371).

The Secret History has made use of a less familiar (or less exhausted), perhaps minimally explored sub-genre within crime fiction, that of the ‘whydunit’, which is why I believe it was difficult for many to recognise it when first published. Louise Conley Jones elaborates on the whydunit’s appeal, ‘Sometimes the result of character-driven whydunits is an ambivalent view of the crime. When the actions of a criminal become psychologically explicable, they can also become understandable and even rather pardonable’ (1999: 499). This is a generic structure that contrasts chiefly with the well-known, perhaps exhausted whodunit (a work involved with establishing the identity of the criminal(s)), and in using the whydunit, Tartt is more concerned with exploring the motives the characters had for killing, than setting up a denouement that reveals the killer.

Generic hybridity is also the territory of the intervallic chronotope. Morson and Emerson consider the intervallic chronotope to be one that ‘interrupts—is an interval in – the predominant chronotope of the work’ (1990: 404). Examples cited include Bakhtin’s reading of William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, where Bakhtin credits the title as an explicitly developed intervallic chronotope, referencing the inherent ‘theatricality, of a kind of play separated from but related to the life in which it is an interval’ (1981: 166). While Morson and Emerson regard the intervallic chronotope as being well suited for ‘exploiting this potential of dialogically interacting chronotopes,’ such that the concept foregrounds ‘the possibility of viewing action from two different chronotopic perspectives’ and underlines the ‘fact that each chronotope is one of many possible chronotopes,’ they still suggest that a dominant chronotope remains (1990: 404). Bart Keunen indicates that readers will naturally be inclined to read one chronotope as dominant over others and that the:

overarching chronotope plays an important part in the process of interpretation, because the nature of its spatial indications (an idyllic setting, a commercial-industrial environment, a desolate landscape, the simultaneous chaos of a city) and its specific vision of temporal processes (the cycles of nature, the historical development of society, the subjective moment, the discontinuous temporal experience of a dream or of intoxication) set the boundaries within which fictional events can take place (2007: 279).

However, Lynne Pearce in *Reading Dialogics* defines a polychronotopic text as one in which the ‘presentation of chronotopes’ are ‘multiple and coexistent’ (1994: 71). Further, she states that some chronotopes can be viewed as competing influences that may strive to gain dominance but are restricted:

In the same way that the different voices represented within a text may be constantly seeking to dominate one another, so do the chronotopes, though the mark of the fully chronotopic text, like its polyphonic equivalent, is that the contending forces are held in equilibrium. One chronotope may seek to dominate – it may, indeed, hold temporary sway – but it is not allowed to swallow up the others with which it is juxtaposed (1994: 175).

This comparative, interpretive process that the reader undertakes, of contrasting what seems at the outset to be the primary chronotope with lesser (though not less significant) intervallic chronotopes, returns to Rosmarin's schema/modification process of genre investigation, in turn inviting a re-evaluation of the seemingly dominant chronotope. However, when two or more chronotopes vie for ascendancy in a novel, and it is unclear which is dominant, as is the case in Tartt's novel, the text becomes polychronotopic.

The Secret History

The Secret History has variously been compared by critics to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, or aligned with themes of either Greek tragedy, 'Southern gothic' or '80s brat-packers' Brett Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney. Tartt, when presented with these appraisals and asked how she would categorise her book replied, 'Well, as evidenced by all these disparate comparisons, I don't think it fits into an easy or convenient category' (2002: 566). She has also fashioned a deliberate break from a more standard crime fiction genre by constructing a whydunit instead of a whodunit. In an interview with Jill Eisenstadt, she stated that she does consider *The Secret History* to be a whydunit, indeed an exploration of guilt and sorrow, and not a whodunit detective fiction (1992: 56).

The reception for *The Secret History* on its release was scathing at worst and reverential at best. Reviewers debated whether the book 'was or wasn't a 'whodunit', a college coming-of-age story, a campus novel, a thriller, a novel about the nature of evil' (Hargreaves 2001: 66). It seemed often to suffer from being misread and miscategorised, or underperforming in the genre(s) to which it had been nominally ascribed. Tartt was also read as a first time novelist who was punching above her weight: Pearl Bell in the *Partisan Review* suggested it was a book with 'pretensions to erudition and moral seriousness' (1993: 65). Lee Lescaze in a *Wall Street Journal* review agreed: '*The Secret History*, a work that amply demonstrates that a little learning is a tiresome thing' (Hargreaves 2001: 68).

Its transgression of genre lines was treated with suspicion. Misread as a whodunit by Bell, she believed it fell short of its genre requirement of being suspenseful, considering it a 'detective story' with 'no mystery, since we are told the who and how of the murders before they occur' (1993: 64). In contrast, James Kaplan read it as a clear whydunit; in his *Vanity Fair* article he labelled Tartt's book a 'hotly awaited highbrow chiller' and 'a huge, mesmerizing, galloping read, [...] gorgeously written, relentlessly erudite,' with the real mystery in the novel being 'the *why* – the who, what, when, where, and how all being known virtually from the word go' (1992: 248). Alexander Star wrote in approval of Tartt's handling of her narrative, particularly in Book II as members of the Classics students' group begin to disintegrate: 'The psychic toll of their unknown crime is a descent into despondency and madness. It is the accumulation of these troubles, narrated with detached foreboding, that gives the book its slow creeping force' (Hargreaves 2001: 73).

The majority of critics misread the generic complexity and hybridity of Tartt's novel. Not until academic articles appeared three years after initial publication, addressing the abundant classical allusions and elements of intertextuality such as Brian Arkins's, 'Greek Themes in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' (1995), Francois Pauw's, 'If on a Winter's Night a Reveller: The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*' (1994), and Barbara Melvin's, 'Failures in Classical and Modern Morality: Echoes of Euripides in *The Secret History*' (1996), had there been any real attempt to try to assess the novel in terms other than its non-adherence to genre norms:

There are two facets to *The Secret History* centering on classical issues which simultaneously make the work powerful and yet have contributed negatively to its critical reception. These are the author's use of classical ideas and her contrast with modern American morality (Melvin 1996: 53).

Tracy Hargreaves provides a sound overview of the novel and its primary themes in *The Secret History: A Reader's Guide* (2001). John Mullan also assesses the novel's structural underpinnings and the manner in which the whydunit format directs the reader's attentions in *How Novels Work*:

the whole terrible point of the narrative seems to be given away in advance. But while this sacrifices uncertainty, it purchases a sense of fatality. [...] The students' tricks and rivalries will, we know, turn nasty, so we are ready to detect their nastiness (2006: 30-31).

Raphael Lyne mentions it briefly regarding modern authors' use of classical artistic models as a 'spur to creativity' applied to modern predicaments in *Neoclassicisms* (2008: 131). While there exist critiques and scholarly appraisals of Tartt's novel, to my knowledge *The Secret History* is yet to be considered in terms of its chronotopicity and its specific genre hybridity; this is my chief reason for evaluating it in this paper.

Tartt's novel is divided into two parts, Book I and Book II, beginning with a prologue, establishing on the first page that the narrator, Richard Papen, has taken part in the murder of his friend Bunny Corcoran. From the outset, several chronotopes are operating at once and genre expectations are thwarted. The crime fiction chronotope is the first encountered. Someone has been killed, and unexpectedly, the reader knows who did it within the first two paragraphs: 'We hadn't intended to hide the body where it couldn't be found' (1992: 1). As previously mentioned, instead of setting up the generic conventions for an expected whodunit for a novel publicised as a 'murder mystery', it is participating in the lesser-known whydunit. The who and the what are known, but not the why and the how.

In conjunction with this, the Greek tragedy chronotope appears with Richard's question of, 'Does such a thing as "the fatal flaw," that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? [...] I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs' (1992: 5). Genre hybridity is subtly established with these sentences: Melvin points out that Tartt

introduces the classical Greek concept of fate at the very beginning of the story, as one of the primary echoes of classical Greek thought running through it. The concept

of a predetermined *moria*, or fate, is a subterranean theme throughout the work which surfaces at key points in the action (1996: 54).

Similarly, Pauw indicates that while *The Secret History* is formally a novel it has ‘a number of characteristics in common with tragedy as a genre’ in that ‘the narrative has tragic overtones from the very first page of the prologue, [...] the first sentence of Book I actually refers to Aristotelian *hamartia*,¹ thus preparing the reader for a moral and psychological framework reminiscent of Greek tragedy’ (1994: 148). It is in this manner, via an accumulation of intertextual references and classical allusion throughout that Greek tragedy permeates the novel, interlaces with the leading whydunit crime chronotope, and becomes recognisable as a major chronotope once several students stage a bacchanal in the middle of Book I and is foremost in the suicide at the end of Book II.

At twenty-eight, Richard is providing a retrospective written account of his nineteen-year-old self: ‘I suppose at one time in my life I might have had a number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell’ (1992: 2). With this, the expectation of a confessional account of a crime is also established. Whilst there is no mention of college or campus in the prologue, surprisingly, the campus chronotope, not the foregrounded whydunit and ancillary Greek tragedy, emerges as central in Book I. It is not until Book II, with the media frenzy concerning Bunny’s disappearance, the resultant FBI investigation with agents Davenport and Sciola, and the related guilt and disintegration of friendships, that the crime fiction chronotope returns ascendant.

The campus chronotope is clearly dominant in the first section of the novel. It features many sketches of Hampden’s campus and depicts Richard’s perception of his New England college surrounds, such as: ‘Trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of them rotting on the ground and the steady thrumming of wasps around them. Commons clock tower: ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance’ (1992: 13). Images of time and place are enmeshed in this description, the seasonal aspect of late summer is clear in the fallen fruit paralleled with the clock tower that marks a standardised, official human time, and is instantly representative of an established college campus. However, Richard’s attempt to mould a new life in Vermont goes awry; the story arc traces his newly found sense of belonging and relative innocence to wretched understanding, post-murder.

Initially, Richard is excluded from the Classics group, discovering that his admittance to Hampden does not equate to acceptance into the social set that most appeals to him. It appears his access to this exclusive group must be earned. Denial of entry into a desired clique or restricted space is a standard trope used in campus novels; they often present clearly demarcated and hierarchical social structures and strict admission policies or initiation rites. For example, Charles Ryder must pass several tests of character before being granted admission into Sebastian Flyte’s clique in *Brideshead Revisited* (Waugh: 1945). In *The Secret History* the students who comprise this elite group are: Henry Winter, a severe, monied polymath and linguist; Francis Abernathy, a camp, wealthy dilettante; Bunny Corcoran, a floppy-haired aristocratic sponger; and the orphaned, sweet-natured blond twins Camilla and Charles Macaulay. Richard is

able to display his knowledge of Ancient Greek when he overhears the group discussing a grammar problem in the library, which affords him a second interview with the professor, Julian Morrow who grants his entrée. Simultaneously, the crime fiction chronotope is subtly presented within Henry's interrogation of Richard, 'he was like a policeman with the questions', as he is welcomed as the new classmate (1992: 39). Clearly, there is irony in this characterisation: while it accurately illustrates Henry's personality, it also adeptly foreshadows the state police and FBI investigation into Bunny's death in Book II.

Another important spatial marker in the text is that geographically, the Classics class is situated on the campus perimeter; Julian Morrow's office and classroom, 'the Lyceum', is located on the edge of campus. To Richard it is an otherworldly space that affects him greatly, 'Breathing deep, I felt intoxicated. Everywhere I looked was something beautiful – Oriental rugs, porcelains, tiny paintings like jewels – a dazzle of fractured colour' (1992: 28). The Lyceum has a duality: it is a restrictive and privileged, yet productive space for higher learning; it enables a constrained movement between two social worlds and functions as a tower within a tower, segregating an elitist group within an already elite campus. These students are also socially isolated from their cohort and faculty as Julian insists on being their primary teacher, and sole academic counsellor, fostering an intense interdependence. This teaching model, derived from the Ancient Greek template of having only one instructor, is another instance of the trace elements of the Greek tragedy chronotope permeating the campus chronotope throughout the narrative.

For the campus chronotope to dominate the novel, the undercurrents and distinct thematic attentions to Greek tragedy would need to have been downplayed or perhaps be rendered less unambiguous. A clear marker of the Greek tragedy chronotope arrives with the classroom discussion on Dionysian telestic madness, which later leads to Henry, Francis, Camilla, Charles and Bunny making many attempts to recreate a bacchanal to achieve this frenzied state. An explicit reference is made to a Greek tragedy as Richard muses during Julian's lecture, 'I thought of *The Bacchae*, whose violence and savagery made me uneasy, as did the sadism of its bloodthirsty god [...] dark, chaotic, inexplicable' (1992: 44). It is apparent that any quest to achieve the sublime, and partake of an ancient, arcane ritual, will likely come with a sharp cost to its participants.

The bacchanal that only four of them, Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles, achieve operates within a liminal frame; it is an in-between state presaging metamorphosis. In terms of local spatio-temporal markers, it is an alternate, religious time-space that operates wholly outside of the standard human experience of time and space. In Henry's retelling to Richard of the moment that they 'wake' from their telestic madness, they begin to understand they have killed a farmer and must transition back to their 'modern' selves in order to cover up the crime (1992: 196). The surface reasoning behind their reluctance to report the accidental killing is that they believe they would not receive a fair trial. However, it emerges that the core reasoning, while pragmatic, is less principled: the farmer is unimportant and they imagine they can get away with it. A key feature of Greek tragedy and its chronotope, illustrated in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, is hubris and that violence begets violence (Halleran 2005:

170). Henry, Francis, Charles and Camilla's hubris at this juncture in *The Secret History*, is to believe that their act of brutality against the farmer can be easily concealed and will entail only minimal repercussions.

Bunny proved to be ill-equipped to participate in the Dionysian ritual, thus Henry elected to exclude him from their final attempt. Bunny's resentment at this rejection and his discovery that they killed the farmer leads to his own breakdown of sorts, and to threaten and taunt the four maenads with the death, making their lives unbearable. The dissection of Bunny's menaces against the group discernibly foregrounds the crime chronotope conventions of the whydunit; Conley Jones notes, 'the whydunit has the mission to answer the question of why a crime has been committed' (1999: 498). Richard tries to make sense of their collective action to kill Bunny:

Religious slurs, temper tantrums, insults, coercion, debt: all petty things really, irritants – too minor, it would seem, to move five reasonable people to murder. But, if I dare say it, it wasn't until I had helped to kill a man that I realized how elusive and complex an act a murder can actually be, and not necessarily attributable to one dramatic motive (1992: 266).

In terms of time and space markers for the whydunit chronotope, there is an alternate, separate dimension discernible as Richard's narration is extradiegetic, in that, at the moment of narration he is operating outside of the main story world and primary narrative. This narrative mode, often incorporating a direct address to an implied narratee, 'But I think I would be lying if I told you that' (1992: 267), 'Just for the record, I do not consider myself an evil person (though how like a killer that makes me sound!)' (1992: 323), and 'This part, for some reason, is difficult for me to write' (1992: 325), reminds the reader that it is ostensibly a written account of a crime, recalling events that happened in the past.

Following Bunny's murder at the end of Book I, throughout Book II there is a clear disruption of order, which augurs a change in focus and the foregrounding of the crime fiction and campus chronotopes and a return to the Greek tragedy chronotope as undercurrent. Richard is beset with guilt and disaffection with his classmates. Though they all participated in the murder, under pressure from Agent Davenport's questioning, the group starts to disintegrate and friendships falter through enforced closeness, concealment and mutual distrust, 'with Bun dead and buried, I suppose, there was much less to talk about, and no reason to stay up until four or five in the morning' (1992: 479). Henry's suicide in a hotel room, following Julian's discovery of the group's activities and his rejection of Henry in particular, is the last death. The hotel is an alien setting, a transitory, unfamiliar space. There is only one chronotope prominent in this moment: Greek tragedy. In taking his own life, atoning for his hubris, this scene echoes Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, (1988) in which Oedipus gouges out his own eyes and exiles himself from Thebes after discovering that he had killed his father and married his mother. Henry's death forms the narrative climax and it is as spectacular as any classic Greek character's demise. As Richard explains in the epilogue, 'I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use. *Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice*' (1992: 642).

Conclusion

At the outset, *The Secret History* presents as ‘whydunit’ crime fiction, inviting an adjustment of the reader’s generic expectations as subsequent campus and Greek tragedy chronotopes emerge. Tartt’s book, with its classical intertexts, careful examination of the motives of a murder, and its chief spatio-temporal location as a New England campus, is a hybrid genre with multiple attendant chronotopes. Indeed, as a polychronotopic novel, often there is a blending and cross-pollination between the three major chronotopes: one advances as the others wane, and at times, all three are enmeshed with none prevailing. However, no chronotope is allowed to dominate for the full length of the novel, and it is the interplay and counterbalance between them that facilitates the spatial and temporal complexity of the narrative.

Endnote

¹ *Hamartia*: a tragic flaw or defect in the hero.

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