

Sociopathic Characteristics of Henry Winter in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*: A Psychological Reading

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the character of Henry Winter in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. It aims to support the interpretation by analyzing Henry's sociopathic characteristics and his manipulation pattern toward other characters throughout the novel. The researcher proceeds to apply Cleckley's characteristics of sociopathy to analyze Henry Winter. To account for the novel's first-person narration, the analysis incorporates Genette's focalization theory (1972) and Minderop's theory of characterization (2005) to extract the data. The findings reveal that Henry Winter exhibits seven interrelated sociopathic characteristics: 1) superficial charm and 'good' intelligence, 2) absence of delusions or irrationality, 3) absence of nervousness, 4) untruthfulness, 5) lack of remorse, 6) unreliability, and 7) suicide as a cover for his irresponsibility, presented as self-sacrifice. The narrative's theatrical elements, which show classical sacrificial symbolism, bridge scientific psychology with literary interpretation. The findings show that Henry's manipulations are layered through those seven characteristics. This research then contributes significantly to psychoanalytic literary criticism and broadens academic discourse on *The Secret History*.

Keywords: *Sociopathic Characteristics; Hervey Cleckley's Characteristics of Sociopathy; Henry Winter; The Secret History*

INTRODUCTION

Literature and psychology both seek to understand human behavior and the mind through different approaches. Jonathan Kellerman, as cited in Dar (2022), highlights the inherent connection between psychology and fiction, as both aim to deepen understanding of the human condition. This intersection is further supported by Endraswara (2008), who describes literary psychology as viewing literary works as psychological expressions that reveal characters' internal thoughts, motivations, and behaviors, allowing for in-depth psychological interpretation.

Literary psychology does not only facilitate detailed character analysis but also provides psychologically complex figures, thereby enhancing readers' engagement with the narrative. This perspective enables the examination of characters for inherent flaws, psychological disorders, or abnormal behavior patterns, with sociopathy being a particularly complex condition of interest. Jazrawi (n.d.) notes that psychopathy is frequently depicted in popular media, and Zehavi (2024) clarifies that references to "psychopath" should be understood as relating to "sociopath," although the two terms are not entirely synonymous. This research will adopt the term "sociopath."

Bentham (2014) observes that mass media have transformed the portrayal of sociopaths, making them popular characters in literature, film, television, and music. Keesler (2014) notes that early depictions were explicit and dramatized, but over time, they have become more nuanced, requiring critical interpretation to identify sociopathic traits. Hesse (2009) argues that accurate labeling of sociopathic characters necessitates comprehensive characteristics. The increasing complexity of sociopathic portrayals has also drawn the attention of psychiatrists like Hervey Cleckley, who analyzes these characters in literature. In *The Mask of Sanity* (2015), Cleckley discusses how fictional representations of sociopaths often reflect real-life behaviors, noting that sociopaths act impulsively and seek power or satisfaction without remorse. He cites examples such as Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) and Mr. Burlap in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928).

While many studies have examined sociopathic characters in classic literature, contemporary novels remain largely unexplored. Notably, *The Secret History* has not yet been the subject of academic research, making it a suitable literary case study for this research.

Published in 1992, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is recognized for its contribution to the "dark academia" genre, as stated by Garret (2019), which explores themes of betrayal and murder within an elite academic setting. The novel *The Secret History* not only explores "who" committed the murder but also emphasizes "how" all the narrative is framed through the unreliable perceptions of the narrator, Richard Pape. Richard's idealization of others, particularly his romanticized view of Henry Winter, clouds his judgment and blinds him to Henry's manipulative nature, ultimately leading to the conspiracy surrounding the murder of their friend, Bunny Corcoran. Given Henry Winter's central role in shaping the plot, this research focuses on him as the primary subject of study.

Henry Winter is portrayed as a brilliant and privileged young man, whom he uses to manipulate his peers into committing immoral acts. A key aspect of Henry's character is his consistent pattern of manipulation, especially towards Richard. His actions are calculated yet reckless, demonstrating a willingness to exploit or harm others, including murdering without guilt. Ultimately, Henry's suicide

is framed as a noble self-sacrifice influenced by his distorted admiration for ancient Greek principles. This characterization aligns with the term sociopath, and the research aims to present his sociopathic traits as depicted in the novel.

However, labeling a character as a sociopath requires a nuanced examination using a psychological framework. Additionally, sociopathy can appear indistinct when filtered through the narrator's perspective. Analyzing Henry Winter's sociopathy necessitates a deeper approach that considers how Richard Pape's biased and unreliable viewpoint shapes Henry Winter's characterization. Thereafter, this research aims to analyze Henry's sociopathic characteristics as focalized through Richard Pape, classifying them based on Cleckley's theory of sociopathy as outlined in *The Mask of Sanity* (2015).

Furthermore, despite the intricate psychological themes in *The Secret History*, there has been no academic research specifically examining Henry Winter as a sociopath. The research aims to contribute to the broader academic discourse on psychological character construction in contemporary fiction, complementing existing analyses of *The Secret History*, including Turner's (2010) exploration of the influence of Greek tragedy on the novel, Johansson's (2025) analysis of nostalgia, and psychological readings by Cheima (2024), Grip (2019), and Litzler (2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of sociopathy in literature often focuses on character behavior traits as depicted throughout narratives. Various studies have examined sociopathic characters using different psychological frameworks. For example, Widiastri, Saraswati, and Harjani (2023) analyze Kaz Brekker in *Six of Crows* using Kathleen Smith's and Xuanxin Wen's theories, supported by Mahroof Hussain's psychoanalytic approach, while Wibowo (2021) applies Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised to Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, and Henry (2019) applies Huffman's theory in analyzing Amy Dunne from *Gone Girl*. Murtadha (2019) analyzes Sherlock Holmes through multiple frameworks, including Genette's focalization, emphasizing how sociopathic traits are interpreted through Dr. Watson's

perspective. Samková (2017) examines Hannibal Lecter, questioning whether such "charming sociopaths" evolve or remain fixed in their nature. These studies primarily focus on sociopathy from the perspective of the character exhibiting the behavior, rather than from other characters' or the narrator's viewpoints.

In contrast, film and television studies often analyze sociopathy through observable behavior and visual performance. For instance, Angraini (2016) and Alfani (2017) both study Louis Bloom in *Nightcrawler*, but from different theories—Angraini using psychoanalytic theory and Alfani applying Cleckley's characteristics. Similarly, Antoko, Natsir, and Valiantien (2018) analyze Dexter Morgan by applying both Hare's PCL-R and Cleckley's characteristics. Murti (2009) studies Joshua Cairn in *Joshua*, although the theoretical underpinnings are less explicit.

Despite the detailed psychological readings of sociopathic characters in existing studies, there is a notable gap in applying Hervey Cleckley's framework to literary fiction with a first-person narrator. The narrative perspective significantly influences character interpretation, as highlighted by Shakib (2011) and Prather (2014), who discuss the effects of unreliable narrators on reader perception. This research aims to fill the gap by analyzing Henry Winter's sociopathic characteristics in *The Secret History*, focusing on how these traits are constructed through his actions and dialogue, filtered through Richard's unreliable perspective. This approach marks a methodological divergence from film analyses, emphasizing the importance of narrative perspective in character interpretation. The study will incorporate Genette's theory of focalization and Minderop's characterization methods, that was also employed by Murtadha (2019), further positioning narrative viewpoint as central to the analytical process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research employs Hervey Cleckley's characteristics of sociopathy as a concept to analyze the character of Henry Winter. Cleckley described sociopaths as outwardly charming yet emotionally detached individuals. Emotional detachment is a central trait in the sociopathic profile, alongside

fifteen others that together form the sixteen-point characteristics of a sociopath.

Importantly, Cleckley did not determine a fixed number of traits that must be present to identify someone as a sociopath. His approach was qualitative, relying on a holistic and interpretive understanding of a person's psychological, emotional tendencies, and behavioral patterns, rather than a rigid checklist designed for clinical diagnosis. The research focuses on seven of Cleckley's characteristics that are thematically relevant and narratively observable in *Henry Winter*, which include:

1. **Superficial charm and "good" intelligence:** While not all sociopaths exhibit this, sociopaths present themselves as friendly and other counterfeit charm. The charm sometimes subtly reveals itself through their intelligence, creating good sense and sound reasoning, which leads others to perceive them as normal.
2. **Absence of delusions and irrationality:** Sociopaths do not exhibit signs of "insanity"; instead, they frequently come across as intelligent, rational, and emotionally well-adjusted, and they often justify unethical actions. As Cleckley points out, "he also appears to react with normal emotions" (Cleckley, 2015).
3. **Absence of "nervousness":** Sociopaths typically do not experience 'nervousness' or anxiety, even in distressing situations that would unsettle most individuals. Any tension they do feel is usually triggered by external threats rather than internal guilt.
4. **Lack of remorse or shame:** Sociopaths do not feel guilt for the harmful actions they cause. Cleckley notes that "usually he denies emphatically all responsibility and directly accuses others as responsible" (Cleckley, 2015).
5. **Untruthfulness and insincerity:** According to Cleckley, sociopaths are skilled deceivers, lying effortlessly without typical signs of dishonesty, which is crucial to their interpersonal relationships.

6. **Unreliability:** Cleckley identifies sociopaths as having the ability to create an initial impression of reliability while subsequently abandoning responsibility and demonstrating indifference to consequences.
7. **Suicide is rarely carried out:** Cleckley asserts that true sociopaths tend to possess a specific "immunity" to suicide; he also acknowledges that this immunity is not absolute. They may threaten suicide, but seldom attempt it.

METHODS

The study collects data from Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, focusing on language that reveals Henry Winter's sociopathic behavior through narration and dialogue. The data collection process involves several systematic stages:

1. Initial Reading: A thorough reading of the novel to understand the storyline and Henry Winter's character.
2. Re-readings: At least three re-readings to identify excerpts that explicitly or implicitly showcase Henry's sociopathic traits as defined by Cleckley. This includes monologues and dialogues involving Richard Papen and other characters, with relevant quotes marked for further analysis.
3. Annotation: The marked quotes are re-read and annotated to classify data related to sociopathy characteristics.

Additionally, secondary sources, including theoretical books, scholarly articles, and reputable digital materials, are reviewed. Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity* serves as the main theoretical framework, while other literature helps contextualize the research and identify gaps.

For data analysis, a descriptive qualitative method is employed, focusing on interpretation rather than numerical data. The analysis occurs in two stages:

1. Narrative Analysis: Utilizing Genette's theory of focalization, the research examines the novel's internal focalization, primarily through Richard's first-person perspective, to analyze Henry Winter's portrayal.

2. Characterization: Following Minderop's concept, the study focuses on indirect characterization, revealing traits through speech, thoughts, effects on others, actions, and looks (STEAL).

The collected data will be categorized according to Cleckley's sociopathic characteristics, highlighting Henry's manipulative tendencies and other sociopathic behaviors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter analyzes the sociopathic characteristics of Henry Winter in *The Secret History*, focusing on his portrayal and interactions as narrated by Richard Papen. The analysis spans all ten chapters of the novel, including the prologue and epilogue. A theoretical framework based on Cleckley's sociopathic characteristics is employed not for psychiatric diagnosis but as a literary interpretation device. This framework helps explore how sociopathy is represented through narrative strategies like focalization, recognizing that Richard's subjective perspective shapes Henry's character.

Overall, the analysis sits at the intersection of literary psychology and narratology, examining sociopathic behaviour within the novel's narrative structure.

1. Superficial charm and "good" intelligence:

Henry Winter exemplifies a sociopath, characterized by his ambiguous intelligence. While he is portrayed as brilliant, he uses this persona to manipulate the perceptions of those around him, particularly Richard.

Data 1:

"Look here, Henry, we've got someone to meet you," he said. Henry glanced up. His expression did not change. He shut his eyes and then reopened them, as if he found it extraordinary that someone such as myself should stand in his path of vision. "Yes, yes," said Bunny. "This man's name is Richard—Richard what?" "Papen." "Yes, yes. Richard Papen. Studies Greek." Henry brought his head up to look at me. "Not here, surely," he said. "No," I said, meeting his gaze, but his stare was so rude I was forced to cut my eyes

away. [...] Henry leaned over his shoulder and inspected the page. "Hmm, archaic locative," he said. "Very Homeric." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry Winter does not appear warm or friendly towards Richard. His demeanor is reserved and indifferent, particularly towards strangers, as demonstrated in their first encounter, where he coldly responds to introductions. In a quoted exchange, Henry's lack of interest and rude stare make Richard feel judged and diminished, revealing Richard's internalized sense of unworthiness. Despite feeling humiliated, Richard answers Henry's questions but does so weakly, indicating his desire for acceptance and admiration from Henry and his peers in the Greek class. Henry captivates Richard with his exceptional knowledge, offering a sharp critique of Richard's suggestion during their conversation. Richard is further intrigued by the fact that Henry is a linguistic genius.

Data 2

"That still sounds fishy, a poison counteracting a poison." "Not at all. The Persians were master poisoners, and they say—" [...] "The Persians?" I said. "Yes. According to the great—" "I didn't know you read Arabic." "I don't, at least not well, but they're the great authorities on the subject and most of the books I need haven't been translated" [...] "When were these things written?" "Around the middle of the fifteenth century, I should say." I put down my pencil. "Henry." "What?" "You should know better than that. You can't rely on something that old." "The Persians were master poisoners" [...] "Poisoning people is quite a different matter from curing them." "People have used these books for centuries. Their accuracy is beyond dispute." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Richard is undeniably drawn to Henry's intellect, but as the narrative unfolds, this intelligence becomes increasingly ambiguous. For instance, Henry's reliance on

archaic, untranslated sources is further illustrated in a conversation about poison, where Richard expresses skepticism and challenges Henry's judgment, pointing out the impracticality of relying on such old texts. Still, Henry dismisses this concern, asserting the accuracy of these "practical handbooks." With Henry's absolute confidence, Richard ultimately refrained from further argument.

Data 3

"Henry, I believed, had a plan. What it was I didn't know [...] but now, anxious to believe that someone, at least, had the situation in hand, I imbued them with a certain hopeful significance." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry's intelligence positions him as the one capable of resolving the crisis, and the group's growing resentment towards Bunny further reinforces their belief in him. This dynamic allows Henry to manipulate their perceptions and rationalize his heinous decisions. Richard observes that even Francis, who is visibly frustrated, feels powerless to act against Bunny. Richard then expresses his belief that Henry has a plan to address the situation, which gives him a sense of hope and trust in Henry's leadership. Ultimately, Henry's ability to sway the group's moral judgment highlights how his ambiguous "good" intelligence can lead to a collective loss of ethics. In this way, he emerges not only as the mastermind behind Bunny's murder but also as the catalyst for the group's descent into self-justification.

2. Absence of delusions and irrationality

Henry acts out of rational judgment or inflated self-belief, continuing to elaborate on his pseudo-rationality. This characteristic is crucial to show how Henry's 'rational' judgment manipulates his friends into complicity.

Data 1

"I said we decided to try to have a bacchanal." "Come on." "We did." I looked at him. "You must be joking." "No." "That's the weirdest

thing I've ever heard." He shrugged. "Why would you want to do something like that?" "I was obsessed with the idea." "Why?" "Well, as far as I knew, it hadn't been done for two thousand years." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry's demonstration of rationality is evident in his initiation of the Bacchanal, which he justifies by claiming it hadn't been done for two thousand years. Despite Richard's disbelief and skepticism, Henry remains disturbingly composed and explains his obsession with the idea. Richard's passive acceptance of Henry's vague yet eloquent rationalizations subtly aligns him with Henry's reasoning, even as he narrates his initial doubts. Following the Bacchanal, Henry reflects on the murder of a farmer and that leaving the body behind was "the smartest thing we could have done," which indicates his tendency to rationalize horrific actions. Richard, present during this conversation, does not challenge Henry's reasoning. This lack of scrutiny allows Henry's version of events to stand unchallenged, reinforcing his pseudo-rationality and making his justifications appear plausible.

Data 2

"Reason is always apparent to a discerning eye. But luck? It's invisible, erratic, angelic. What could possibly be better, from our point of view, than allowing Bunny to choose the circumstances of his own death?" (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

In contrast to the Bacchanal, Bunny's murder is meticulously plotted by Henry, whom the group trusts to mastermind the act due to their perception of him as "the smartest in the group." This blind trust highlights how easily Henry convinced them to proceed with the plan. In his revised plan after the poison plan, Henry proposes to push Bunny off a hill to stage an accident, relying on chance rather than meticulous planning. He frames this uncertainty as a tactical advantage, arguing that an "accident" would

better obscure their involvement. Henry rationalizes this risky approach by stating that luck is "invisible" and "erratic," making it preferable to a calculated scheme.

Data 3

"Really, there's nothing to worry about," he said, shaking out the match. "It seems risky, but if you look at it logically it couldn't be safer. It won't look like a murder at all. And who knows we have reason to kill him?" (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Despite the uncertainties surrounding their plan, Henry reassures the group by claiming, "there's nothing to worry about... if you look at it logically it couldn't be safer." His confidence, however, is not grounded in clear reasoning but rather in an overinflated sense of self-assurance. This overconfidence stems from two sources: his narcissistic belief in his own intellect, which blinds him to the dangers of his actions, and the trust his friends place in him due to his perceived "good" intelligence. Henry's irrationality is characterized not by clinical delusion but by a functional irrationality rooted in narcissism and grandiosity, which ultimately corrupts his judgment and entangles his friends in complicity.

3. Absence of "nervousness"

Henry's remarkable calmness following both the farmer's death and Bunny's murder highlights his inflated belief in his intellect, which he uses to justify his actions. This calm demeanor influences the group's emotional detachment, enabling them to suppress their guilt.

Data 1

"No. At that point I had no reason to think he'd do anything of the sort. [...] Julian knew what we were trying to do, but I was still pretty certain Bunny wouldn't talk to him without checking it with us first. And, as it happened, I was right." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

The conversation reveals that the group's decision to conceal the murder is driven by

deliberate self-preservation rather than remorse. Henry, in particular, remains remarkably calm and untroubled by the situation, believing that Julian, who introduced the Bacchanal and has been a guiding figure, will support and protect them. He even claims that Julian is "delighted" by their actions, which contributes to Henry's lack of jitters when Bunny threatens to expose the truth. Responding to Richard's concerns, Henry chillingly asserts that he has no reason to believe Bunny would act against them, indicating his confidence in the group's control over the situation.

Data 2

"Henry smiled. 'Actually, it's very lucky you happened by.' [...] 'Why, looking for new ferns,' he said, and took a step towards him" (Tartt, 1992).

Analysis and Description:

Just before pushing Bunny off the cliff, Richard narrates how calm Henry's demeanor is, noting his smile and nonchalant comments, which starkly contrast with the gravity of the moment.

Data 3:

"When you're worried about something," he says, "have you ever tried thinking in a different language?" (Tartt, 1992).

Analysis and Description:

In the aftermath of the murder, Henry offers traumatized-Richard questionable advice, suggesting that he distract himself by thinking in a different language. This response fails to acknowledge Richard's distress and instead aims to redirect his panic, keeping him psychologically subdued. The following morning, when Julian inquires about Bunny's whereabouts, Henry lies effortlessly, claiming Bunny will be late. His ability to deceive and his emotional detachment after such a horrific event reveal his fundamental incapacity for remorse.

Data 4

"Honestly. Two hours. I don't know if I could've made myself go through with this if

I'd known what nonsense we were letting ourselves in for" (Tartt, 1992).

Analysis and Description:

Henry's absence of anxiety under pressure is a notable characteristic, particularly evident after a two-hour police interrogation about Bunny's disappearance, where Henry downplays it. Their later interaction with a police officer shows how Henry responds to questions about Bunny with polite ease and engages in small talk, treating the encounter lightly. Even when questioned by federal agents, Henry remains calm and unassuming, downplaying his intelligence to appear less threatening. He speaks Italian to charm the agents and provides vague answers to avoid incrimination, while keeping his friends in the dark to maintain his informational advantage. Henry's calmness, confidence, and even enjoyment during these crisis moments align with Cleckley's characteristics of a sociopath.

4. Lack of remorse

Throughout the storyline, Henry consistently demonstrates a lack of remorse, which is a key aspect of his emotional detachment.

Data 1

"You killed somebody," I said, "didn't you?" Henry looked at me for a moment, and then, to my utter, utter surprise, he leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Good for you," he said. "You're just as smart as I thought you were. I knew you'd figure it out, sooner or later, that's what I've told the others all along." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

One of the earliest indications of Henry's complete lack of remorse occurs after the bacchanal when Richard confronts him about the farmer's death. Instead of expressing guilt, Henry responds calmly and even laughs. His reaction is disturbingly nonchalant, as he describes the death as "an accident" with a shrug. Richard, shocked, does not offer moral judgment but passively listens. This lack of remorse is further illustrated in a later conversation among

Henry, Richard, and Francis, where they discuss the murder. Francis acknowledges the gravity of their actions, stating, "It's a terrible thing, what we did," but Henry responds matter-of-factly, admitting he feels bad but not enough to face jail time.

Data 2

"How can you possibly justify cold-blooded murder?" Henry, lighting a cigarette, replied, "I prefer to think of it ... as redistribution of matter" (Tartt, 1992).

Analysis and Description:

As plans to kill Bunny by pushing him off a cliff develop, Henry's lack of remorse becomes increasingly evident. In the weeks leading up to the murder, Richard notes that Charles questions how Henry can justify "cold-blooded murder." Henry dismissively responds that murder is a mere reduction of human life to matter.

Data 3

"Except that my life, for the most part, has been very stale and colorless. Dead, I mean. The world has always been an empty place to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I felt dead in everything I did." He brushed the dirt from his hands. "But then it changed," he said. "The night I killed that man. [...] It was the most important night of my life," he said calmly. "It enabled me to do what I've always wanted most. "Which is?" "To live without thinking. [...] Before, I was paralyzed, though I didn't really know it," he said. "It was because I thought too much, lived too much in the mind. It was hard to make decisions. I felt immobilized. [...] now, I know that I can do anything that I want." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

As events spiral out of control, Richard confronts Henry about his actions, questioning why he complicates matters for everyone. Instead of apologizing, Henry reveals his indifference, admitting he does not care about others and challenging Richard to acknowledge the same. He describes his life as "stale and colorless" until

the night he killed the farmer, which he views as a pivotal moment that allowed him to live without overthinking. This disturbing perspective frames the murder as an existential awakening, granting him a sense of power and liberation. Henry's indifference to morality is fully acknowledged, and rather than expressing guilt, he tries to draw Richard into his moral void, suggesting they both experienced a "surge of power." Richard's attempts to deny this by realizing that Henry is wholly disconnected from any normal sense of right and wrong.

5. Untruthfulness and insincerity

Henry Winter's dynamic with his peers, particularly Richard, reveals characteristics of pathological egocentricity and an incapacity for genuine love. Sociopaths like Henry are so self-centered that they struggle to form sincere emotional connections. While they may appear to care or show affection, such feelings are often superficial and driven by self-interest.

Data 1

"Henry looked up from his books at me, almost curiously. "You're not very happy where you come from, are you?" he said. I was startled at this Holmes-like deduction. He smiled at my evident discomfiture. "Don't worry. You hide it very cleverly," he said, going back to his book. Then he looked up again. "The others don't understand that sort of thing, you know." He said this without malice, without empathy, without even much in the way of interest. I was not even sure what he meant, but, for the first time, I had a glimmer of something I had not previously understood: why the others were all so fond of him." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Sociopaths like Henry quickly gain trust by studying their targets. Richard, with his distant family background and social instability, is particularly vulnerable. Henry recognizes Richard's need for attention and belonging, as demonstrated in a pivotal moment where he makes a personal observation about Richard's unhappiness.

This comment, devoid of empathy, reveals Henry's keen observational skills and ability to exploit Richard's vulnerabilities, marking the beginning of Richard's fondness for him.

Data 2

"I felt as though I were in the dining car of a train and had been seated by the steward with another solitary male traveller, some kindly stranger, someone who didn't even speak my language, perhaps, but who was still content to eat his dinner with me, exuding an air of calm acceptance as if he'd known me all his life." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry deepens his manipulation of Richard by creating a sense of familiarity and connection. After a difficult day, Henry unexpectedly shows up at Richard's door and invites him on a spontaneous drive for dinner outside Hampden. During the meal, Richard reflects on the experience, feeling as if he is sharing a meal with a kind stranger who exudes calm acceptance, as if they have known each other for a long time. This moment gives Richard a false sense of understanding and acceptance, further solidifying his trust in Henry.

Data 3

"But you were the alarm bell, Richard. Having told you— nothing happened, he'll think, it wasn't so bad—he'll find it twice as easy to tell a second person. And a third. He's taken the first step on a downward slope. Now that he has, I feel that we're in for an extremely rapid progression of events." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry further entangles Richard in his inner circle by revealing the truth about the Bacchanal accident, reinforcing Richard's trust without coercion or threats. Notably, Henry never demands Richard's loyalty, and Richard does not question the key or the clues, believing he is making an independent moral choice, unaware that the conditions for that choice were manipulated from the beginning. By making Richard feel seen,

needed, and valued, Henry makes Richard willing to participate in immoral acts. This is evident when Henry refers to Richard as "the alarm bell," recognizing Richard's role in the group's complicity.

6. Unreliability

Henry Winter exemplifies a gradual irresponsibility following Bunny's death. Notably, he deflects blame onto Charles, despite being the mastermind behind the murder. While Camilla and Francis remain loyal, Charles and Richard start to see through Henry's facade of reliability. This unpredictable behavior and tendency to shift blame reveal a more profound indifference to responsibility on Henry's part.

Data 1

"It's funny. We thought we were putting our ace man up front but if one of the rest of us had handled it would've been much better. If it had been you. Or Francis. Even my sister. We could have avoided half of this [...] No thanks to him. I was the one who had to deal with the police. He takes the credit, but it was me who actually had to sit around that goddamned station all hours drinking coffee and trying to make them like me, you know, trying to convince them we were all just a bunch of regular kids [...] If he was the only one they'd had to deal with he would have landed us all in the gas chamber." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Charles grows increasingly aware of Henry's unreliability. Initially, Charles believes that following Henry's scheme will save them, but he soon realizes he is being set up as the scapegoat. His frustration is highlighted in his remark about their misguided belief in Henry as "our ace man up front," which he now sees as a catastrophic mistake. As the situation escalates, Charles recounts his exhausting efforts to manage the police, emphasizing that he bore the burden of responsibility while Henry avoided it. While Charles dealt with the police, trying to present themselves as ordinary kids, Henry was preoccupied with superficial concerns,

such as which book would make a better impression. This absurdity becomes intolerable for Charles, who feels that Henry's arrogance and unreliability could have dire consequences for them all. His hyperbolic statement that Henry would have "thrown us all in the gas chamber" underscores his growing disdain and highlights Henry's unwillingness to accept responsibility, leaving Charles to shoulder the weight of their predicament.

Data 2

"And I mean—I know you like Henry but I think he got pretty flipped out by the whole thing." "What?" "Well, I mean, he's so straight, probably never even had an overdue library book, and out of the blue here comes the fucking FBI all over him. I don't know what the hell he told them, but he was trying to point them in any direction but towards himself." "Like what direction?" "Like me." He reached for a cigarette. "And, I hate to say it, but I think towards you." (Tartt, 1992).

Analysis and Description:

Richard's realization that Henry has been deflecting blame onto others, including himself, becomes clear as the situation with law enforcement escalates. Like Charles, Richard recognizes that he has been manipulated and "used" by Henry. Under pressure, Henry's instinct is to prioritize his self-preservation over the group's welfare, even at the expense of others. This betrayal shatters Richard's illusion of being "trusted" by Henry as a friend, revealing that the trust Henry cultivated was insincere and counterfeit. Henry's strategic choice of individuals like Richard, who are less likely to confront or accuse him, highlights his egocentric and thoughtless nature.

Data 3

"Why had Henry let me in on this, only two months (it seemed years, a lifetime) before? Because it was obvious, now, that his decision to tell me was a calculated move. He had appealed to my vanity, allowing me to think I'd figured it out by myself." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Richard's internal monologue reveals his struggle with contradictions and rationalizations as he grapples with his belief in Henry, despite mounting evidence of betrayal. He questions whether Henry could have set him up without incriminating himself, indicating an instinctive awareness of potential betrayal that he tries to dismiss. However, as time passes, Richard's belief in Henry becomes increasingly difficult to justify, leading him to realize that Henry's decision to confide in him was a calculated move to appeal to his vanity. This dawning awareness confirms that Richard was never a true confidant but rather a pawn in Henry's manipulative schemes. He recognizes that his silence and desire for belonging made him complicit in Bunny's death, stating, "Because they couldn't have done it without me." Richard's perception of himself shifts from innocence to complicity, as he acknowledges that he played a role in delivering Bunny to Henry. Ultimately, Richard realizes that Henry never viewed him as a friend, but rather as a puppet, as evidenced by Henry's reference to him as "the alarm bell." This leads Richard to question whether Henry intended to make him the scapegoat if his plan had failed, recognizing that Henry had always been capable of betrayal and may have been preparing for it all along.

7. Suicide is rarely carried out

Henry Winter's suicide is a complex act that serves both as a means of avoiding accountability and as a way to be remembered as a tragic figure. To understand Henry fully, it is crucial to analyze him from both psychological and literary perspectives, considering his sociopathic traits alongside the symbolic and theatrical elements of his character. Thus, this section analyzes Henry's last sociopathic characteristics within his actions through classical symbolism.

Data 1

"Henry bent and picked up a handful of dirt. He held it over the grave and let it trickle from his fingers. Then, with terrible

composure, he stepped back and absently dragged the hand across his chest, smearing mud upon his lapel, his tie, the starched immaculate white of his shirt." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry's performative act is foreshadowed during Bunny's funeral. There, Henry marks his forehead with dirt, echoing ancient mourning rituals and suggesting that he, too, is marked for sacrifice. This is illustrated in the excerpt where he picks up dirt, lets it trickle over Bunny's grave, and then smears mud on his clothing with "terrible composure." The white shirt, which symbolizes purity, is marked with dirt, indicating that sins cannot be washed away. It is a symbol that foreshadows Henry's tragic trajectory. It embodies Henry's *hamartia*, his belief that one's beauty and purity can be maintained through sacrifice.

Data 2

"He made us kill a piglet," she says. "Then we took turns holding it over each other, so it bled on our heads and hands. [...] It seemed to me that the wisdom of deliberately covering oneself with blood—even pig blood—immediately after committing a murder was questionable, but all I said was: 'Why did he want to do that?' 'Murder is pollution. The murderer defiles everyone he comes into contact with. And the only way to purify blood is through blood. We let the pig bleed on us. Then we went inside and washed it off. After that, we were okay.'" (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry believes that murder is a form of depravity, and the only way to cleanse that blood is through more blood—essentially, blood cleansed by blood. He views himself as tainted and believes that taking his own life demonstrates loyalty to his friends, even as it implicates them further. Camilla's confession to Richard about the grotesque blood-cleansing ritual they performed after the bacchanal reinforces this theme. She describes how they killed a piglet and let its blood cover them, believing it would purify

them after committing murder. Henry's rationale—that murder pollutes and can only be cleansed through blood—reflects his deep-rooted idealism influenced by ancient Greek.

Data 3

"Henry died, of course. With two bullets to the head I don't suppose he could have done much else... I wonder if that means he didn't want to die; and if so, why he shot himself in the first place." (Tartt, 1992)

Analysis and Description:

Henry's suicide is not driven by guilt or madness; instead, he orchestrates it to resemble a Greek purification ritual, aiming to protect his image and maintain the manipulation that is beginning to unravel. His death is a performance, allowing him to exit on his own terms. By framing his suicide as a sacrifice to purge sins, he manipulates the meaning of his actions, leaving others to interpret it as noble. Richard reflects on Henry's death, suggesting that it was not an act of despair but a deliberate symbolic gesture aligned with the "high cold principles" taught by Julian—*duty, piety, loyalty, and sacrifice*. He notes that Henry's expression before his death was not one of fear but of pride and anticipation. This choice of death becomes a statement that beauty can be harsh and that sacrifice may not always be noble; it can also be obsessive and triumphantly defiant.

CONCLUSION

Henry Winter in *The Secret History* exhibits seven sociopathic characteristics as defined by Hervey Cleckley. These traits are interconnected and particularly evident during the Bacchanal ritual and Bunny's murder, where Henry's layered manipulation stems from his brilliant persona and emotional insincerity. This allows him to project a pseudo-rationality that dulls his remorse and that of others, ultimately leading to his self-sacrifice to maintain his constructed persona. Tartt presents Henry's death as a tragic flaw, romanticizing and critiquing his fixation on "high principle" and his

belief in his invulnerability, which drives him to commit two murders and ultimately suicide.

Tartt challenges the conventional image of a sociopath by portraying Henry as more complex than a mere example of the condition. While his behavior aligns with sociopathic characteristics, it is filtered through Richard Papen's subjective narration, prompting readers to question the perception of sociopathy through an unreliable narrator. This blurs the line between pathology and persona, suggesting that sociopathy framed by beauty becomes harder to identify and potentially more socially accepta.

Ultimately, Tartt questions the certainty of psychological labels by showing how narrative perspective and aesthetic appeal can make sociopathy appear less like a disorder and more like an attractive persona."

Additionally, Tartt critiques academic elitism, depicting all Hampden students as part of the elite, with classics students as the "elite of the elite." This exclusivity consequently distorts the group's moral compass, allowing them to justify disturbing actions. Henry's character shapes the narrative and influences readers' interpretations of morality, revealing him to be more volatile and dangerous than Bunny, though Richard's unreliable perspective obscures this.

This research has demonstrated that the chosen framework effectively identifies Henry's sociopathic characteristics; however, Richard's unreliable narrative complicates a comprehensive psychological analysis of Henry. Future research might explore psychological or environmental triggers for Henry's sociopathy and employ contemporary theoretical approaches to gain a nuanced understanding of his character. Furthermore, examining how elite academic environments contribute to sociopathic tendencies in literature could provide further insights. Comparative analyses with other novels could reveal how fictional sociopathy is shaped by both internal traits and external pressures, ultimately contributing to new perspectives on sociopathic characters through first-person narrators.

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