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**"THE ONLY STORY I'LL BE ABLE TO TELL": AN ANALYSIS OF  
SHAME AND QUEER IDENTITY IN GOTHIC AMERICAN CAMPUS  
NOVELS**

Aubrey Dickens

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Honors Thesis

“THE ONLY STORY I’LL BE ABLE TO TELL”: AN ANALYSIS OF SHAME AND QUEER  
IDENTITY IN GOTHIC AMERICAN CAMPUS NOVELS

by  
Aubrey Dickens

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for  
University Honors

English Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

“THE ONLY STORY I’LL BE ABLE TO TELL”: AN ANALYSIS OF SHAME AND QUEER  
IDENTITY IN GOTHIC AMERICAN CAMPUS NOVELS

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Bachelor of Arts

This thesis analyzes shame and queerness in contemporary gothic American campus novels, also known as “dark academia” novels. The thesis looks specifically at the novels *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, published in 1992 and considered to be the first dark academia novel, and *Catherine House* by Elisabeth Thomas, published in 2020 and a more modern adaptation on the subgenre. The two novels deal explicitly with how shame constitutes identity, specifically in regards to individuals who are depicted as queer or outside of heteronormative expectations of sexuality. Queerness in the context of this paper is defined as any portrayal of gender performance, sexual identity, or sexual interaction that is outside of traditional heterosexual societal norms, also known as heteronormativity. Through both novels, it becomes clear that shame is something that defines the identity and body. Using the university setting, dark academia novels show how shame functions within relationships and institutions surrounding queer individuals. Dark academia queers the traditional coming-of-age story, and further shows how shame can interrupt the experience of maturation within queer individuals and create a sense of arrested development.



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## Introduction

In recent years, contemporary gothic novels taking place on American college campuses, a subgenre colloquially called “dark academia,” have become increasingly popular. In 2021 alone, there were at least six “dark academia” books published. The genre has been growing slowly since the publication of *The Secret History* in 1992 by Pulitzer Prize winning author, Donna Tartt. The queer, mysterious, academic-set novels of the last twenty years have resonated with recent generations, specifically with readers of the last twenty years. A quick look at Google Trends shows that internet traffic surrounding the phrase “dark academia” began in 2016, with a sharp increase in searches beginning in January 2020, reaching its peak progression in December 2020 (“Dark Academia”). Social media outlets like Tumblr, Tik Tok, and Twitter all have hundreds, if not thousands or millions, of hits when you search the phrase.<sup>1</sup> The same popularity is visible on Youtube, with videos like “you’re studying in a haunted library with ghosts (dark academia playlist)” gaining 10 million views and counting (Lee).

Dark academia novels generally have the following attributes: a tight-knit friend group, a gothic atmosphere, an academic setting, and a centering of queer characters and relationships. All of these things were present in Tartt’s *The Secret History*, but in the years since that novel’s publication, the subgenre has played with these constraints and presented nuanced ways of looking at how shame affects the experiences of queer youth. Specifically, the subgenre has come to explore the complex relationship with shame that queer students experience while at the university, and how that impacts their development beyond adolescence. Characters are shamed by their friends, university, and families, often for their experience as someone outside of heteronormative experience.

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<sup>1</sup> As of February 3, 2021.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conceptualizes shame as something that defines and forges identity. She argues that identity is the key element that differentiates shame from guilt, as “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, whereas guilt attaches to what one does” (37). This shame-based formulation of self is theorized to begin as an infant, when you experience “a disruptive moment in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication,” usually in the form of the mother breaking “mutual gaze” with the infant (36). Shame, then, has a complex relationship with identity and with relationality, because it often relies on the severance of connection to constitute a shame response in the body. Therefore “bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else’s` embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with [the individual], can so readily flood [the individual],” because shame is reliant on interaction with other people (37). How one experiences shame is dependent on the reactions of others and the performance of one’s individuality. According to Judith Butler, who argued “that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (194), this then would mean that actions taken because of shame would constitute the identity of the individual. Performance of self, then, is constitutive, and for the shamed, central to identity formation and practice.

This paper explores how dark academia novels, specifically *The Secret History* and *Catherine House*, position shame at the heart of queer interactions. “Queer” is used in this paper to describe any sexual encounters, actions, or identifications that are outside of heteronormative boxes of gender and sexuality. First, I will examine how dark academia came to be and its roots in the Oxford novels and academic satires of the past. Then, I will examine *The Secret History* and *Catherine House* to map out the ways in which these texts in particular and dark academia in general, explore the relationship between shame, identity, and control. Looking at all of this, I

will conclude that dark academia, as a coming-of-age genre, presents the ways that a queer individual's development differs from that of the heteronormative experience, specifically arguing that shame can arrest development, keeping students trapped in the mental state of their youth as they search for closure into adulthood.

### **The Rise of Dark Academia**

Campus novels can be traced back to the early 1900s and the "Oxford novel." In America, campus-set novels did not become popular until the last hundred years or so. While there were academic novels in America early in the 1900s, most of the time these novels merely included academic elements, such as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920). Literary scholar John O. Lyons notes that "*This Side of Paradise* devotes only a third of its length to Amory Blaine's life at Princeton," and that it seems to fit more in the structure of a coming-of-age novel, not a campus novel (28). In his scholarly examination of campus-set novels, *Postwar Academic Fiction* (2001), Kenneth Womack states that "academic novels enjoy[ed] frequent publication during the latter half of the [twentieth] century," arguing that this was due to "the increasing accessibility of postsecondary education" (1). Up through the 1970s, campus novels often tended to be more focused on professors rather than students, such as in *Changing Places* (1975) or *Lucky Jim* (1954). Because of this, most scholarship focuses on professor-centered campus novels, or what Richard G. Caram termed the "professorroman" (Caram 42). The professorroman generally critiques the academy's morals and values; centers on some sort of metaphorical rebirth within the academic year or in the life of the central characters; and spends a good deal of time on the professor's preoccupation with romantic love (Caram 49-50). The preoccupation with romantic love often involves guilt for their romantic interactions, as

the central sort of romance is an affair or power imbalance, such as the wife swapping that occurs in *Changing Places*. Even though books like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* or Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995) were far more focused on satire, romance remained a necessary side plotline. The academic world, then, was posited as a place where committed relationships go to die, and individuals who have no regard for commitment or traditional relationships prosper.

The professorroman was a play on the idea of the bildungsroman or coming-of-age story. Bildungsroman is a term coined by Karl Morgenstern and popularized by Wilhelm Dilthey which often refers to “almost any novel that focuses on the development of a young protagonist” (Boes 647). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a bildungsroman as “a novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person” (Bildungsroman, n). When defining the two German words which make up bildungsroman, “bildung” means “education” and “roman” means “novel” (Bildungsroman). Thus, a more apt definition would be the “education novel,” though usually, education is meant to refer to the moral education of the protagonist (Bildungsroman).

In the 1980s, the American campus novel shifted from satirical, professor-based stories to gothic, student-centered stories, signaling a shift towards the bildungsroman within a university setting. The release of *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt often marks the greatest shift. Tartt's debut novel, which sets a traditional Greek tragedy amongst a group of classics students at a fictional Vermont university, was the first widely-read entry into the genre of the academic novel that utilized gothic elements. Its mixture of the gothic, the classic, and the contemporary catalyzed what is considered “dark academia” today.

After careful reading of an array of novels including *If We Were Villains* (2017), *Bunny* (2019), *The Raven Boys* (2012), *The Lying Game* (2017), *People Like Us* (2018), *Plain Bad*

*Heroines* (2020), *The Divines* (2021), *The Orchard* (2020), and more, I found that post-Tartt dark academia novels generally feature the following elements: a central character who is an outcast, typically by race, class, or sexuality; a strong central friendship group the protagonist joins, often with obsessive or unhealthy bonds between them and strange initiations or conformations to join the group; an obsession with some element of academic scholarship, most commonly a fascination with the Greco-Roman Classics; a lessened moral compass due to the obsessions of the central characters with academia and with their fellow students, often leading to violent criminal activity; and a stark change in the nature of the central character, often due to their friendships or their studies. Furthermore, these texts often include a homoerotic undertone or an explicitly queer relationship; a queer-coded or explicitly queer character; or gothic descriptions of settings that create a sense of isolation for queer-coded characters. Most importantly, at the heart of all this, there is shame: shame for homoerotic or homosocial dynamics, guilt for criminal activity, or shame for changes in identity. Whereas shame was built into the romantic tensions of earlier academic novels, shame is at the heart of the dark academia subgenre insofar as it presents the queer student experience and how a queer student experiences development beyond adolescence.

Despite this significant generic shift, all three major works of literary criticism on American academic novels have centered on the professor and professorroman. Feminist scholar Elaine Showalter briefly mentioned *The Secret History* in her book's introduction, but beyond that one name drop, there is no examination of the text itself. The same can be said about both John O. Lyon's and Kenneth Womack's studies. Though some critical discussions of *The Secret History* exist, they are few and far between. The more recent *Catherine House* (2020) has not received any critical discussion. The novel is one that has received rave reviews both from

customers and from professional critics. A lot of critique has centered around the confusion the book creates, with Kirkus Reviews referring to the book as feeling almost “uneven” due to the disorienting central perspective (Catherine House). The novel takes on complex ideas and is not easily placed into one marketable genre. *The Washington Post* commented that it is a book that “wraps itself around your brain, drawing you closer with each hypnotic step” (Abu-Jaber).

*The Secret History* and *Catherine House* exemplify how shame can interact with identity in dark academia. Both books center around characters who experience homoerotic or homosocial bonds with fellow characters, and whose identities are defined by the shame they are experiencing. Both books are set before 2000— a time that was even more violent and shame-inducing for queer university students. The shame present in both books affects the characters on mental and physical levels, defining the central character’s narration and creating an unreliable narrator. Shame is present every step of the way through these stories: it propels the action forward and dictates the narrator’s point of view. Further, shame arrests the development of the queer student, keeping them from developing through a simple innocence to experience pathway. Queer student characters become trapped within their shame, unable to grow beyond it.

### **Internalized Shame in *The Secret History***

*The Secret History* queered the genre of academic novels, creating the homosocial and homoerotic motifs known in the genre today and introducing new ways of examining shame and identity. *The Secret History* presents the university as a setting where shameful experiences of queerness occur but focuses more on the ways that individuals can shame one another and thereby shape or impede the development of queer students. While other dark academia novels, and specifically *Catherine House*, focus on the symbolic oppression of the institution, *The Secret*

*History* frames student friend groups as institutions of power. Bunny, a fellow classics student who is murdered, represents a powerful institution more than any character. He shames characters, controlling their actions and preventing them from expressing queerness. That shame functions to halt the traditional coming-of-age, or bildungsroman, structure. By looking at how shame works in the text, we can see how dark academia as a genre is shifting to argue that queer coming-of-age differs and creates new ways of grappling with that difference.

The novel's use of retrospective narration examines how one's relationship with one's past self functions to create identity. One way that shame can constitute identity, specifically as seen in *The Secret History*, is through the "metaphor... of the inner child" (Sedgwick 40). By "present[ing] one's relation to one's own past as a relationship," you can understand how identity is formed in shame from the past and into the present (Sedgwick 40). It is through understanding past shame that one can understand present identity because that shame affected the decisions and actions that led to current interpretations of self. The novel's protagonist, Richard, looks back on his inner child and examines how the shame and trauma of his collegiate experience has limited the experiences he is able to recall and has arrested his development. Richard is older now, and claims that after all these years, this is "the only story [he's] able to tell" (4). He muses that "at one time in [his] life [he] might have had any number of stories to tell, but now there is no other" (4), implying that this story has become a core part of his identity. His retrospective narration, a narrative style seen in popular coming-of-age novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), at once fits the traditional the coming-of-age structure and also departs from it. Instead of telling the story of his college years because they represent his growth into an adult, he is telling the story because he is stuck within it. There is no growth from innocence to experience, but instead a movement from innocence to shame.

The queerphobic comments and shame that Bunny, a fellow classics student, used to antagonize Richard have colored Richard's view of his college experience and further arrested his development. Bunny's antagonistic queerphobia took place during Richard's young adult years, and thus, colors his perception of his time at Hampden College. The shame invoked there has weighed heavily on him, so much so that only a decade later he can tell no other story than the one he considers to be a defining moment of his life. This shame, then, has traumatized him and arrested his development. Looking back now at age twenty-eight, he is writing a story to try to understand the "inner child" (Sedgwick 40). He clarifies that at the time of writing, he is "twenty-eight years old," and that he "had never seen New England or Hampden College until [he] was nineteen" (7), placing an almost longing distance on the college version of himself and the adult version of himself. He talks nostalgically about the past, talking about his eighteen year old self as something to aspire to return to, despite the experience being deeply complicated. He seems almost halted within his college years, unable to move past them until he has adequately told the story or relived it. This attachment to his past, the fact that his college experience is the only story he feels capable of telling, begins to show how dark academia changes the innocence to experience arc. Instead of presenting Richard as someone who has learned from their past and come out the other side as a new person, Richard is presented as stuck in the past, trapped within the identity that was shamed, unable to move into adulthood.

The murder of Bunny, who symbolizes structural queerphobia, further illustrates how Richard is frozen within his adolescence. Bunny's consistent blackmail of his fellow classics students leads to his murder. He shames and blackmails Richard for his past and threatens to expose his friend Francis' sexuality. Richard expresses that he doesn't "really have the heart to recount all the vile things [Bunny] said and did to Francis" (218), but says that there were

“practical jokes,... remarks about faggots and queers,” (218) and many more questions and comments that threatened to expose Francis to the greater populace. With these actions, Bunny represents those powers which choose to shame and restrict queer students. He represents the threat of exposure and the violence associated with that exposure. After his queerphobic remarks and actions, he is pushed off a cliff and left to die. Richard witnesses the murder but does nothing to stop it or afterwards. Bunny dies in part because of Richard’s inaction—he is *exposed* to the elements and his body is encased in ice. Richard seems to think that the death “might have been left...at quiet tears and a small funeral, had it not been for the snow that fell that night” (3). The snow “covered him without a trace” (3) and then the “state troopers and the FBI and the searches from the town...walk[ed] back and forth over his body until the snow above it was packed down like ice” (3). Because he is never found and his death isn’t memorialized, Bunny becomes a fixed presence in Richard’s mind. Furthermore, because of his repeated shaming actions, Bunny becomes a voice in Richard’s head who shames every action he takes to the extent that Richard changes the way he acts and represses. The shame Bunny placed on Richard has become a permanent, frozen fixture in Richard’s mind that prevents him from growing beyond his adolescent self.

Richard’s sense of panic regarding being associated with queerness stem from the queerphobic remarks made by his supposed friend, Bunny, which work to further closet him and arrest his development. In this sense, Bunny’s shaming of queer behavior becomes something that defines Richard. Bunny is the first real friend that Richard makes at the university, and he very quickly becomes someone toxic and harmful to Richard. In the first scene Bunny and Richard are together, Bunny repeatedly makes queerphobic remarks about the waiter, calling him a “fag,” a “queer,” and “Twinkletoes,” as well as verbally accosting the waiter and stating

outright that queers should be “burn[ed]... at the stake” (50, 51, 54). Richard concludes that Bunny is the kind of man to “run down homosexuality and mean it,” because while he’s known men “who run down homosexuality because they are uncomfortable with it, perhaps harbor inclinations towards that area,” (55) Bunny seems particularly vitriolic towards the community. Richard’s first friend at his university shames queerness right off the bat, and because of that, Richard associates shame with his university experience.

Richard then exhibits distinct behavioral changes around Bunny because of the queerphobic shame Bunny imparts. When he sees Bunny the day after the events at the restaurant, Richard feels “hot, and rather sick” (67) and quickly leaves the room that Bunny is present in. The shame Bunny exhibits along with the discomfort he feels around Bunny lay the foundation for an internalized queerphobia. He feels the need to excuse himself from the room or change his behavior once Bunny is around to avoid feeling any more shame. Given that sexuality is a part of identity that can be kept hidden, moments of overt violence towards others can affect queer individuals just as intensely as acts of violence against themselves. Richard fears becoming the metaphorical waiter in any situation, and therefore withdraws even further into “the closet.” The closet, as well as the idea of “coming out,” are defined most clearly by Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet* as “all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of... politically charged lines of representation,” specifically queer representation (71). Richard withdraws further into a safe space lacking any association with queerness, repressing any queer impulses he experiences and stunting the development of that part of himself.

In addition, Richard’s internalized queerphobia inhibits the development of healthy interpersonal relationships and causes him to view these relationships through a lens of shame. Indeed, Richard starts to read all situations through the lens of queer shame. For instance, when

Henry and Bunny have a falling out in Rome, Richard is unsure of the reason for it and wonders if Henry “made a pass at” Bunny (141). He begins to scrutinize all those he’s come to suspect as being queer in his dealings at the university, listing Francis, their professor Julian, and friend Charles as possible contenders. He does not believe Henry to fit such criteria, especially because Richard “had lived with Henry for a month” and says there wasn’t “the faintest hint” of any tension between them (141). He assumes that the main reason that Bunny would be violent towards another character is because of queerness. Richard tries to characterize the others in his life based on whether Bunny could be violent towards them. There is a protective instinct to the panic, an attempt to distance oneself from other queer individuals and queer experience. Richard reevaluates his experience living with Henry, afraid he may have in some way associated himself with queerness. The idea that there was not a “faintest hint” (141) of tension between them seems to comfort him, to convince him that he is safe and that the panic is unwarranted. His paranoia dictates how he feels about his relationships, and when he can ascertain that there is no queerness involved in his relationship, he is able to let go of his panic. All this time spent analyzing the behaviors surrounding him is yet another example of how Richard regulates himself and becomes stuck in his state of adolescence. A good portion of his mental energy is spent on over-analyzing the scenarios that surround his queerness, instead of on self-reflection or coming to terms with his own queerness. He is trapped in a psychological prison dictated by shame, too busy trying to understand the actions of others to attempt to understand his identity.

Further, Richard’s panic also manifests in his distancing of himself from queerness linguistically and intellectually. He claims that he is “rather more disinclined that way than not” (141). Richard’s vague language regarding his “disinclination” speaks of a man who is uncomfortable with the topic, as most of the time when he talks about it there’s a certain

bluntness, but when he speaks of his own inclinations, it's in a more vague, roundabout way. There is a tentativeness to Richard's discussion of queerness, a fear of pushing too far into what this could mean for his identity. Later he says that while homosexuality does not disturb him, as he doesn't "suppose that anyone who has devoted much energy to the study of Classics can be very much disturbed by homosexuality," (217) Richard still struggles himself, not being "particularly comfortable with it as it concerns [Richard] directly" (218). Intellectual distance allows him to move away from his own feelings of shame on queerness, but when that is removed, the shame takes hold. He is only able to comfortably discuss queerness when it does not relate to himself directly and is more of an idea than a reality. The university, in a strange way, provides him with a haven from the panic, while still triggering a further closeting. Richard is using language to try to maintain a distance from queerness due to the shame and panic that he experiences. Intellectual distance is yet another barrier for Richard understanding himself. He is left trapped in the mindset of his youth because he is unable to think of queerness outside of the intellectual, safe version of queerness that he sees in his studies.

When Richard does experience a moment of same-sex intimacy, he shames himself throughout the experience, replicating the violence that he suffered at the hands of Bunny and demonstrating how shame is inherently violent. Richard's first queer experience is when his friend Francis kisses him and begins to pursue sex, which takes place in a campus dormitory. Richard is conflicted throughout this experience as to whether he should respond to Francis. Though he does tell Francis to stop, saying "cut it out" and "give me a break," he does so while he "start[s] to laugh" (289), which Francis reads incorrectly as consent and continues, teasing, "It's fun... I promise you" (290). Richard recalls their kiss as "a real kiss—slow and deliberate" and finds himself "kissing [Francis], too" (289). The description of this moment is noticeably

absent of emotional statements, other than that of being “drunk” and that Richard’s “nerves began to stir” (290). This once again emphasizes his attempt to distance himself from queerness, to repress his emotions and maintain distance even when in the middle of a queer encounter. Richard is “panic-stricken” (290) when he thinks they have been caught, but other than that, shows no remorse or distaste for what was about to occur before they were interrupted. The setting of this scene at the university dormitory associates the shame of the moment and the possibility of being caught within the university, tying his shame more directly to his adolescent experience. He seems to be at odds with the shame he has experienced regarding queerness earlier in the text and his own internalized shame, as he acts on the impulses and engages with Francis. An experience that should have allowed Richard to experiment with his own feelings and act on latent impulses becomes yet another site of shame, something of which he is too anxious to be able to read fully the implications. It stalls him within the moment, preventing him from considering how this queer encounter could affect his identity and who he will become.

Furthermore, Francis’s own shame and repression reinforces the violence against queer actions. Richard tries to clarify that he is not attracted to Francis, only to have Francis respond coldly that he is not attracted to him either, saying, “You were there” (336) to cut off the conversation. The only signal of how this conversation went was that after it happens, the two “drove the rest of the way to school in a not very comfortable silence” (336). Again, a passive, vague description describes a queer interaction. The only individual who is openly gay in the novel shames Richard for his assumptions about queerness. Passive language keeps him from considering how this shame has become internalized and stalled his development. Passive language also doubles down on the violence, reinforcing the shame that Bunny has placed earlier. It is only in keeping things unsaid that there is distance; as Richard attempts to discuss

what happened, he puts Richard and Francis in danger of violent retribution. When Richard finally does want to deal with the possible implications of his sexual encounter, he is shamed, stopping any ability for him to come away with more knowledge about himself. Before he can learn what this experience means for his identity, he is met with violence that stunts him in his feelings of panic and shame in regard to queer behavior. Thus, in the sense of a coming-of-age novel, there is no reflection on the sexual encounter and what this means for Richard. He is left unable to move past this moment, instead being trapped within the confusion that the moment has left behind.

Richard's expression of verbal affection for another male character, Henry, is not until the epilogue of the novel, exemplifying the ways in which the shame and repression of queerness stunts emotional and mental development. When speaking with Camilla, Richard tries to convince her to marry him, as they have both experienced a similar defining trauma, and Richard thinks this could be a foundation for a relationship. She refuses, claiming she cannot "because [she] love[s] Henry" (555). This is the moment in which Richard replies, "I loved him, too" (555). Though this is not a declaration of love but of affection, it is said in the context of one, comparing the love Richard felt as Henry's friend to the romantic love Camilla felt. Camilla is unfazed by this, saying, "I know you did... but it's not enough" (555). This moment, years after the many instances of shame and completely outside of the university, is the first time that Richard is able to express affection for another man. It is only years after, in being able to look back at this person who has now died and at the shame and trauma that he experienced, that this affection, maybe not homoerotic but certainly homosocial, is something that Richard is able to admit to himself. He is trapped within the feelings of shame and the panic that he felt as a college student, still grappling with the implications of queerness a decade after the events of his college

years. Even during a moment that shows growth on Richard's part, he is met with violence as Camila brushes off his confession as being "not enough."

### **Institutional Shame in *Catherine House***

*Catherine House* further explores how shame arrests development and how institutions can play the role of an antagonistic force in dark academia literature. Whereas *The Secret History* examines how shame forms identity and queers the coming-of-age novel, *Catherine House* explores how shame can be weaponized to socialize queer individuals into gender and sexual normativity and how that shame affects mental and sexual development. Characters in *Catherine House* are put through traumatic experiences which shame them into heteronormative behavior and triggers an arrested development similar to that in *The Secret History*. When queer student characters within *Catherine House* attempt to assert their identities and develop into adulthood, they are met with violence that prevents them from self-reflection or growth.

*Catherine House* as a novel explores the way that institutions can create an environment of shame, and how that environment of shame becomes a part of the adolescent body. Sedgwick examines this phenomenon when she argues that shame "attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of... almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, [and] a script for interpreting other people's behavior towards oneself" (62). When one is in an environment that provokes consistent shame, that shame will shape and mold the body to avoid that experience. Such shame aversion lays the foundation for internalized homophobia and trauma. In the context of *Catherine House*, the shaming events that affect the body, and thus, the identity, are made literal through magical realism.

While the students chose to attend the university, they were unaware of its toxic environment and violent practices, and therefore cannot be seen as consenting to the harm it enacts. The events of the novel take place at a university called Catherine House, a “postsecondary school more selective than any Ivy League,” devoted to “liberal arts study” (8). In the novel’s academic setting, violence and other violations are used to keep students from discussing their (allegedly shameful) pasts. *Catherine House*, then, utilizes the fictional university to show how institutions can create an environment that shames, controls, and violates the queer student, changing the way they perform their identity to be safe and accepted. Like Richard, who coerced into an experience he did not consent to in the aftermath of trauma, Catherine House students are coerced to attend the university with grand promises of escape from traumatic pasts. The students then are left trying to figure out how to survive within the university, most often changing their identity to avoid shame and violence. With students changing their identity to fit an environment, they are unable to find an identity that fits them. Their growth into themselves is stalled by the literal restraints placed upon them.

*Catherine House* figures the past as a site of violence for queer characters, preventing them finding emotional growth within intimacy. For example, the protagonist Ines interacts with another student named Mandy, who is unable to allow herself to experience intimacy due to a past trauma that has physically scarred her and emotionally shamed her. After Ines has sex with her, she “[runs] [her] hand over Mandy’s back” (42), notices a scar, attempts to reach out and touch it, and is stopped by Mandy “hiss[ing]” the word, “Don’t” (42). The act of hissing is in itself violent, situating the discussion of the past within a context of violence. This causes Mandy to pause for a moment, before elaborating vaguely that, “It wasn’t her fault, you know...it was mine too. We both hurt each other” (42). There are two instances of shame present here. The

original event invokes shame in Mandy, making it something she violently tries to keep hidden. Further, in bringing up the event, Ines breaks not only Mandy's rules, but the school's rules, invoking guilt and shaming herself. It is in this instance that Ines realizes that at Catherine, "none of [her] classmates spoke of their pasts...all their misshapen histories," and that "all of [the students], for one reason or another, had nowhere else to go" (42). Two encounters with queerness, both Mandy's past relationship and Ines and Mandy's intimacy, are tinged with shame. The school's prohibition of discussions of one's past colors their relationship to their sexuality, invoking shame in a moment that otherwise may not have been shameful. Shame becomes an indirect way to structure the lives of queer students. Though shame constricts the level of emotional intimacy able to be achieved, physical intimacy is still allowed in the context of Catherine House, which, for a book set in the 90s, would situate the university as a fairly liberal setting. The issue with the shame that comes then, is that it keeps Ines from having any meaningful discussions on the nature of her queer experience. Though she can express physical intimacy, the lack of emotional intimacy keeps her from experiencing a relationship that could help her grow and change. The exploratory side of coming-of-age is allowed, but the reflection and emotional connection of that experience is not. Ines becomes a child play-acting as an adult, taking advantage of the ability to experience sex and intimacy, but not participating in connections that could help her grow.

A way that Catherine House codifies an oppressive environment of shame is through a ritual called the "coming in" ceremony (72). The ceremony being called the "Coming In" ceremony makes it the symbolic opposite of "coming out," or sharing one's queer identity with others. Instead of being encouraged to admit their identities, students are required to hide the elements of themselves that could be deemed shameful to the institution's normative standards.

During the ceremony, students are pierced with a set of pins similar to those used in chiropractic treatment or for sewing which are then connected to a small monitor at the top which physically ties them to the school. The experience is phallic, symbolizing the way Catherine forces heteronormativity and patriarchy onto their students. This is explained through a process of magical realism invented by the book called “plasm” (25), which not only ties them to the school, but purges their body of negative influences, aka shame, of the past. The ritual suppresses the individual student’s identity and supplants it with an institutionally approved one. All the students are left “lying... with the pins buried along their hair and beneath their clothes,” rendering them to look like “little aliens” (66). The Coming In ceremony takes the physical body and renders it alien to the students themselves, twisting it into something unrecognizable. The ritual presents this experience as being all at once, expressing the accumulation and excess of violence that inhibits and then inhabits the queer body at a time when it’s meant to be coming into its own. The excess of shame and violence renders the queer body unrecognizable, acting as yet another barrier for the queer individual to understand and come into their body and themselves.

Furthermore, the ceremony requires the sharing of shameful secrets in front of the rest of the students, forcing public shaming and encouraging repression. The university positions these secrets as shameful, instead of an important part of their growth and development. This creates an environment of self-loathing and prevents the students from growing past these experiences. A lot of the students, who are shown as explicitly queer, must repress violent experiences that came because of their queerness. Before the coming in ceremony, students are instructed not to sit near anyone they know. Ines’ roommate, Baby, who has been shown thus far to have a homosocial relationship with Ines, “turn[s] to [Ines] with panic in her eyes” (62). She does not

want to leave the safety her friend provides, and Ines can sense this, so she says, “Don’t listen to them...sit next to me” (62). She directly disobeys an order from the university. When Viktória, the headmaster, brings students up one by one to share their trauma, Baby is one of the few whose stories are portrayed by the text. Baby admits to the entire school that she feels she “will never be someone happy” as she is “someone alone” (70). Viktória brushes aside this admittance of personal failure and self-reflection, saying that, “You can be good... in the house” (70). Baby explicitly remained with her roommate, ignoring the instructions of the school, and was made to recount her trauma and feelings of low self-esteem to the entire school. After doing so, the headmaster of the school focuses in on how much better she can be because of the university. The moment of sharing a traumatic experience is brushed aside, and the shame that the student was feeling is repurposed to further connect the student to the university. Her disobedience is met with punishment and public humiliation.

The institution takes on the role of an abuser—triggering shame out of supposed “love” and then claiming to be the solution to that shame. Students must willingly repress their past to be able to find acceptance and be considered normal. This is a form of internalized violence as students repress anything that does not fit into the university mold, especially queerness. The queer Catherine House students attempt to repress their past traumas and shame themselves for past mistakes, the more they are hurting themselves and preventing themselves from developing into mature adults. These students rely on the university to help them understand the process of coming into themselves, but the university instead shames them for what they have experienced. Within the environment of repression, they are unable to reflect on how the past has affected their current identity. For the queer students of Catherine House, their identities, and the way the past shames that identity, become unknowable to them. The way the past interacts with their self-

actualization becomes something that is shameful, preventing them from coming into their full selves.

When students doubt the world *Catherine House* has created, they are met with violence, therein signaling the ways structural power attempts to reproduce normativity through repression. For example, Ines shows doubt in the institution and is met with a violent assault on her body. As the doctor performs an annual gynecological exam, she spouts the rhetoric of the school, “You’re going to have so much fun here, soon you’ll forget to even think about the past” (25), and encourages a particular institutional allegiance while Ines is in a vulnerable position. When Ines questions the university and its use of plasm in response, claiming that she “thought [plasm] was a hoax” (25), the doctor aggressively conducts the pap smear, “[snaps] off her gloves,” speaks shortly to Ines, and refuses Ines extra menstrual pads when she requests them. The doctor shames Ines for asking questions and then compounds that shame by restricting Ines’s use of necessary feminine hygiene products. Violence, whether that be the aggressive motion of snapping the gloves or the control of necessary medical supplies, is used to control Ines’ actions and keep her in place. Ines’s behavior—departing from the institutional norm in terms of behavior—is met with corrective violence to ensure that she grows within the norm. Doubts do not fit within that norm and must be repressed and kept from spreading to other students. In many ways, the university in *Catherine House* uses violence to control the way students come into adulthood, all under the claim that it is for their own good. When Ines expresses doubt in the norm, she is met with corrective violence to make sure that her experience growing up under Catherine House’s tutelage is as (allegedly) productive and as heteronormative as possible.

The staff of Catherine utilize a private symbolic assault to exert control over Ines' shame and identity to correct her behavior and stunt her growth. She is instructed to go to the "Restoration Center," colloquially called "the tower" by fellow students. Given this instruction happens after she doubts and questions authority, it calls to mind re-education camps and conversion therapy, meant to quiet those who dissent and act in ways that do not fit heteronormative expectation. Once she arrives at the Restoration Center, she is instructed to "strip down," and forced to change the feminine product she uses from a pad to a tampon (99). For the entire time that she is at the restoration center, she is nude, her body exposed. The process of the Coming In ceremony is then repeated on an individual level, this time leaving Ines in the nude, being covered in chiropractic plasm pins by a young man who she does not know. Ines has the urge to "try to cover up with the bedsheet," but the young man doesn't "seem to notice [her] nudity" (101). He shows indifference to her shame beyond being able to manipulate it. This process is not gone through once, but multiple times over multiple days, controlling her body in the most intense of ways to get her to change into something malleable for the university. The repeated ceremony takes the vein of physical assault, as a male character invades Ines' body in an attempt to control her.

Whereas Richard in *The Secret History* internalizes his shame and polices himself, Ines internalizes a heteronormative narrative, turns to others to police her behavior, and therefore stunts her development. She goes to a professor, saying, "I'm messed up... I've always been wrong inside. These past couple of years, I've tried to be better, and it almost worked. I was almost happy here. But now I'm fucked up again" (286). The university has infiltrated her mind so deeply with intense shame that she believes that her queerness is a flaw and that she should experience a more heteronormative coming-of-age. Ines is taken back to the Restoration Center,

but as she tries to utilize the language that the university has used to shame her as a source of comfort, she finds that “no matter how many times [she] [says] it, it [doesn’t] feel true” (297) and does not provide her any solace in the face of her own shame and misery. Ines is working to fit within the heteronormative experience, but it comes up hollow because that is not who she is. The shame and violence she’s experienced leaves Ines unsure of her place in the world and unable to grow outside of her experience at Catherine, despite feeling that the strict regimen of heteronormative coming-of-age does not fit her experience.

*Catherine House*, unlike the institution “Catherine House,” refuses easy answers on how to escape the identity-constituting effects of shame, and leaves the finale open ended. While Ines is shown as having attempted to escape the university, she is quickly approached by “brish, precise, and even” footsteps (310). She “turn[s], raising [her] arm,” in the direction of the footsteps, “blink[s] against the light,” and the book ends (310). This ambiguous ending, leaving it open whether Ines is taken back to the university or is allowed to be free of Catherine, mimics the way that Ines’ own identity is left in a state of ambiguity. Her identity has been manipulated, and shame has been utilized so effectively, that the Ines we meet at the beginning of the book is no longer the protagonist we are following. She “blink[s] against the light,” blinded by future possibilities, unsure of what is out there for her that is not the academic institution that has controlled her (310). Her reliance on the university for help in coming into her own is shown by her symbolic moment of being blinded by all the possibilities in front of her. Ines is left with the opportunity to create a new identity, though we are unsure if she will even be able to do so outside of the university, which she relies on for her identity formation. The coming-of-age process is left ambiguously open-ended, and it is unclear whether Ines will follow the standards

set out for her by the university, or work to find who she is within her queerness and outside of the university.

### **Conclusion**

Since *Catherine House*, other dark academia novels have explored shame, sexuality, and coming-of-age. Released a few months after *Catherine House*, Layne Fargo's novel *They Never Learn* (2020), focused on a queer woman who was traumatized for her sexuality while in college. The novel follows this character as she begins systematically killing off people in the university setting, professors and students, who act in ways similar to those who shamed her when she was a student. Fargo presents a character who is so arrested in her development that she has been unable to leave the university and murders behind. Further, this queer character is re-enacting the site of her shame over and over, attempting to find a way to grow beyond it, years after it occurred.

Other dark academia novels have begun to question how race intersects with queerness in adolescent development. For instance, Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades* (2021) depicts two high school students who are shamed by everyone around them for being black and queer. These characters are consistently barred from opportunities for growth and academic success that white students, even white queer students, are allowed. They are shamed by peers and faculty for going after these opportunities simply because they are queer black students. *Ace of Spades* asks how dark academia might critique the shame racial minorities experience for their identities, furthering the discussions started by *The Secret History* far beyond what Donna Tartt may have anticipated.

Dark academia is continuing the conversation of how shame changes the way students can grow out of adolescence. Identity plays a huge part in which students are allowed the arc of

innocence to experience seen so often in the bildungsroman. A goal may be to present a dark academia novel that features queer individuals without shame because of their queerness, but the interplay of shame in dark academia seems to be an integral part of the subgenre. Shame seems to be inescapable, so the goal becomes to present characters that can successfully escape their shame, instead of being trapped in it well into adulthood. Dark academia novels can portray how to overcome that shame and develop into mature, well-rounded adults, despite the setbacks that meet them at every turn. While shame may be hard to avoid, it is possible to overcome. Dark academia novels that show queer students overcoming the shame of their past will be able to present a hopeful future to the queer readers who populate their audience.

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