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# AESTHETICISM IN ZADIE SMITH'S *ON BEAUTY* AND DONNA TARTT'S *THE SECRET HISTORY***

**Abstract**
As a movement that values form over function/purpose, Aestheticism remains relevant to discussions about the role of beauty. Writing somewhat in the tradition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Zadie Smith and Donna Tartt explore the function of beauty in literature, as well as in academic circles. The stance that academia takes regarding beauty has frequently suffered from excessive theorizing. Smith's approach seems to satirize aesthetic discussions about art, which occur mostly within university lectures. Meanwhile, Tartt's ideas of *l'art-pour-l'art*-ism are exaggerated and grow so stripped of context that they result in tragedy. In both novels, Aestheticism is criticized for its tendency to be hermetic, and academia's ruminations on beauty further deconstruct the movement's core ideas and credos.

**Key words**: Aestheticism, Zadie Smith, Donna Tartt, art, beauty

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## 1. Introduction

Originating from the late 19th century, a period which informs much of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, the Aesthetic Movement, or plainly Aestheticism, dominantly represents an artistic reaction to the filth and ugliness of the Industrial era. Advocating for beauty and the ideas of making art for art's sake (*l'art pour l'art*), the movement was popularized by Oscar Wilde and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the Pre-Rafaelites. The movement's ideas that one should pursue art and pleasure are inspired by a rich philosophical background. The aesthetic argument that beauty is proof of another realm (or even God/a divine power) is obviously borrowed from Plato and Neoplatonic philosophy. Ideas from Aristotle's *The Poetics* also communicate with the movement, which advocates for beauty in symmetry, equally found in natural and human/artistic creation. The Aesthetic Movement seems to disagree with these philosophies only insofar as the relationship between form and function, or appearance and purpose are concerned. Whereas Plato and Aristotle do not separate the two – Aristotle even believed that form arises from the purpose or content of a work of art – Aestheticism does so, especially in some rather fatalistic interpretations. Within the conflict between New and Old Hedonism, for example, and the concept of pleasure, Aestheticism frequently chooses the surface-level beauty, beauty that is liberated from any kind of purpose or task in representing, advocating for, or commenting on any real-life issues. The pursuit of beauty thus easily becomes the general pursuit of pleasure (Old Hedonism), rather than the proposed refinement of the senses with new experiences (New Hedonism).

Apart from these philosophies, Aestheticism communicates heavily with Immanuel Kant, among others, particularly with his notions of the autonomy of aesthetic standards, as well as of pleasure and the pursuit thereof. The autonomy of beauty is especially relevant here, because it leads us to ask from what beauty is autonomous and separated. The separation implied in Zadie Smith's and Donna Tartt's novels suggests that it is between beauty and morality, or more precisely, between aesthetics and ethics. By focusing their "campus novels" on the academic pondering of beauty and ethics, the two authors open an important discussion on the ideas of Aestheticism in late 20th-century literature.

## 2. Aestheticism in Academia

Beauty as a concept is at the core of both Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. If Smith's title were not a sufficient indicator, her choice of two art critics as male protagonists – one who teaches aesthetics, at that – might be transparent enough. As for Tartt, it is indicative enough to remember a line from the novel, "beauty is terror" (*TSH*, 42, 44), frequently quoted by her fanbase and critics alike. The parallels between the two novels and their approach to beauty do not stop here. Both novels are dominantly set in an academic environment, showing how students and teachers approach the study and appreciation of beauty, mostly through art. Apart from this, Smith and Tartt are concerned with the relationship and dynamics between aesthetics and ethics, as well as with the abuse of beauty and its connection to the ethical deterioration of individuals and society.

The two authors take a satirical approach to academia and the study of beauty. Avid students of literature, the two of them echo Aestheticism quite a bit, a movement that was popular during the Victorian era. To a certain degree, both novels communicate with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, particularly with Wilde's aesthetic manifesto and his approach to beauty and the pursuit thereof. In particular, what *On Beauty* and *The Secret History* explore in Wilde's footsteps is the discontinuity between form and function, the fracture between the appearance and purpose of beauty, as well as art's disengagement from the current sociocultural contexts. To include the element of academia, this point in particular seems to echo through both novels. The overindulgence in theory and theorization, the intellectual consideration of experiencing beauty, which frequently interferes with the proper experience of art, and the use of pompous language to discuss art and beauty all seem to result in losing track of both the appearance and purpose of beauty and art, as well as subverting the form and function of the two.

In Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, the main male protagonist is Howard Belsey, an aesthetics professor at Wellington College. Struggling with his research on Rembrandt, he also struggles in his marriage; he is married to Kiki Simmonds, whom he cheated on, and they both try to deal with the fact that their life together is crumbling. As a professor, Howard is the embodiment of barren academia. He cannot write, so he wallows in his frustration with the lack of inspiration. His job does not excite him because

he cannot see the beauty in it anymore – for him, his students are just empty sets of physical features, representatives of a younger generation he no longer understands. In addition to this, it is stark how empty of beauty his life is, especially for an aesthetics professor. He forbids any work of art to be exhibited in his home, and he cannot observe beauty in people, either, whether in his wife or in his two sexual conquests in the novel. The only thing that seems to inspire him is his ongoing "cold war" with Monty Kipps, his academic nemesis, a conservative who is similar to Howard in his approach to art and aesthetics, but from a seemingly opposing political perspective. From this dispute arises the central conflict of the novel, which Peter Boxall summarizes with two questions: 1) is it "our duty and task as readers or viewers to humbly appreciate and glorify the beauty of art, as Kipps contends;" or 2) should we rather "adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, as Belsey insists, one which allows us to see how the artwork has been complicit with the ideological dissemination of power" (Boxall 2024: 121)? As it turns out, both approaches are contested by the author and most critics, as this paper later documents.

In Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, the protagonists are a group of students at Hampden College, all majoring in classical studies. They are mentored by Tartt's interpretation of Wilde's Lord Wotton. In this novel, he is Julian Morrow, professor of the classics, keeping his classes small, thus eventually creating the exclusive group of protagonist students. Tartt's interpretation of academia comes across as more snobbish in comparison to Smith's. The students and Julian take particular pride in studying classical literature and ancient languages, feeling that this somehow makes them more worthy than other, ordinary, students. All the students (Henry, Bunny, Charles, Camilla, and Francis), apart from the narrator, Richard Papen, come from wealth, so they represent another echo of Wilde's novel. They seem to base the entirety of their self-worth on two lines from the Aesthetic manifesto: "Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope" (Wilde 2014: 3). Furthermore, much like Dorian Gray, the protagonists of Tartt's novel struggle with hedonism as a concept, eventually succumbing to its depths in their mindless pursuit of beauty.

Both novels expose how easy it is to misunderstand and misinterpret beauty and art using academic language. While discussing *On Beauty*, Gen'ichiro Itakura notes that Howard Belsey "could be read as [Smith's] constructive critique of current academic trends, which are ridiculed in

the fictional Wellington College students" (2010: 28). Similarly, Alexander Dick and Christina Lupton assert that the novel includes "a strong sense that the humanities today are in a state of crisis" and that "Howard's agenda seems to lack all ethical horizons as he plummets into a state of skeptical despair" (2013: 115). In addition, Peter Boxall also posits that academia in this novel has "disavowed the idea of beauty – in Howard's case in an attempt to develop a properly political understanding of the ways in which beauty has served political power" (Boxall 2024: 139). In the novel, we witness a couple of Howard's classes, all of which are obviously satirized, not the least in Victoria Kipps' assertion that they are "properly intellectual" (*OB*, 312). The very first class sets the tone of what can be expected. While stating his aims, Howard insists that he wants from his students "to imagine prettiness as the mask that power wears" and he himself intends to "recast Aesthetics as a rarefied language of exclusion," ultimately exposing art as a Western myth (*OB*, 155). Howard's students aspire to mimic his approach to discussing art and aesthetics, especially through using the pompous and complicated language of art critics. However, they only manage to demonstrate that to "think about beauty is to enter into a kind of shadow thinking, in which thought is found not in itself but in its replication" (Boxall 2024: 124). In the chapter narrated by one of Howard's students, Katie Armstrong, they almost abuse Rembrandt's paintings by drawing from different theories and drowning the work of art in different theses. Howard tasks his students with discussing two of Rembrandt's paintings: *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1659) and *Seated Nude* (1631). This is, however, how he opens the discussion in class:

> "What we're trying to … interrogate here," he says, "is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human. What is it about these texts – these images as narration – that is implicitly applying for the quasimythical notion of genius?"
>
> An awful long silence follows this. Katie bites at the skin around her cuticles.
>
> "To reframe: is what we see here really a *rebellion*, a turning away? We're told that this constitutes a rejection of the classical nude. OK. But. Is this nude not a *confirmation* of the ideality of the vulgar? As it is already inscribed in the idea of a specifically gendered, class debasement?" (*OB*, 252)

It is no wonder that Katie is confused and dumbfounded by this introduction, after coming to class hoping "to share with peers feelings of excitement and rapture in front of the beautiful language spoken by art" (Lopez 2010: 354), only to be met with a theory-clad introduction by her professor. He discusses works of art, approaching them as sterile, strictly mechanical notions. He challenges the concept of genius and discusses Rembrandt's status as an artist rather than his actual art. Taking the focus away from the art and onto the artist, he directly contradicts the Aesthetic manifesto by Oscar Wilde, which states that "[t]o reveal art and conceal artist is art's aim" (Wilde 2014: 3). In other words, he does not allow beauty and art to speak for themselves but rather insists on drowning them in intellectual rambling, engaging in "the lowest form of criticism" (Wilde 2014: 3). What is even more striking, as Gemma Lopez highlights, is that Howard is a representative of academia that "can only drive people away from the beauty of its subject matter by openly refusing to discuss beauty" (2010: 362). Itakura detects the target of Smith's satire here as "the abuse of inattentiveness to beauty [which] is associated with moral atrophy as well as intellectual poverty," particularly as perceived in "Western – or more specifically, British – literary humanism" (Itakura 2010: 33). This argument is supported by the claim that "neither Howard nor Monty is truly touched or moved by art or beauty; they only appropriate it for their own selfish purposes" (Itakura 2010: 33). In other words, both men see art and beauty as tools for pursuing academic success and establishing themselves as authoritative figures. This is most evident in their approach to beauty, which Itakura describes as an "overload of theory and a 'posttheory' cry for empirical grounding" (Itakura 2010: 34). The aforementioned Howard's class reads almost as a deconstruction of art to the absurd, almost as if Howard and his students are wrapping the work of art in layers of theoretical interpretations, sometimes of the artist more than his art. The professor "too quickly moves away from the realm of art to a jargon-fuelled, ideological combat zone that the Anglo-American Humanities have now allegedly become" and students follow suit (Itakura 2010: 31) with his daughter noting that he has "already privileged the term" they were discussing (*OB*, 253). Zora Belsey, perhaps more than anybody else, is the embodiment of the obsession with theory. In another class (that of Howard's friend and mistress, Claire Malcolm), she challenges her professor's ideas of the pastoral in poetry by saying: "But after Foucault [...] Where is there to go with that stuff?" (*OB*, 219). Alexander Dick and

Christina Lupton find in this scene a satire of "the experience of 'theory' in all its wit, digressiveness, and difficulty – that embodies the very *alterité* they were advocating intellectually and politically" (2013: 123). However, this alternativeness is rather contradictory. By the time Howard and Zora express their ideas, they have been rather worn out. Postmodernist and poststructuralist theories are echoes of the former century, and the ideas of deconstruction and power relations have become a bit mainstream, especially in contemporary humanism that Smith targets in the novel. In other words, the protagonists' dismissiveness of art and beauty through postmodern theory is revealed to be not *avant-garde* and innovative, but rather stale and ordinary. Ironically enough, this staleness is also revealed when Howard notes that he sees himself in his student, Mike. Mike's obsession with Heidegger (which perhaps further symbolically implies the dissonance between form and content) is ascribed to his young age, but his approach to art and beauty is lauded. As opposed to all of them stands Katie, who approaches art innocently, yet purely and emotionally. She admires both the work of art and what it represents. Furthermore, art inspires her to contemplate real-life issues, as well as to recognize how she herself relates to what the painting, *Seated Nude*, seems to discuss:

> She was a shock, to Katie, at first – like a starkly lit, unforgiving photograph of oneself. But then Katie began to notice all the exterior, human information, not explicitly in the frame but implied by what we see there. Katie is moved by the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs, the muscles in her arms suggestive of manual labour. That loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more. Katie – a stringbean, physically – can even see her own body contained in this body, as if Rembrandt were saying to her, and to all women: "For you are of the earth, as my nude is, and you will come to this point too, and be blessed if you feel as little shame, as much joy, as she!" This is what a woman is: unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience – *these are the marks of living*. (*OB*, 251–52)

Katie allows the painting to communicate with her; she stands mesmerized before the sheer beauty of the image, but also considers the message and implications behind the beautiful appearance, thus merging form and content. She exemplifies the idea proposed by the novel (incidentally,

originally taken and modified from Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) that beauty is "related to uselessness, to a lapsing of the terms and conditions of use" (Boxall 2024: 124), since talking about beauty cannot come close to experiencing it directly. To an extent, this is a prominent idea in the novel, as stated by Gemma Lopez, namely "academia's inability to enjoy beauty as opposed to feelings of rapture in front of art displayed by those characters in the novel who describe themselves as lacking academic expertise" (2010: 353). Katie is also an example of how beauty has the power "to enlighten us" and reveal new dimensions of reality "otherwise unavailable" (Itakura 2010: 35). Andrew Bowie notes that, among other things, the purpose of art and beauty, and our experience of them, is "surely that it should take one somewhere else, not just to where one has already been or already is" (2003: 71). Accordingly, Itakura implies that Katie's experience changes her life and sees it as a confirmation of Elaine Scarry's claims that "beauty keeps the beholder and the beheld alive" (Scarry 1999: 89-90 as per Itakura 2010: 36). Perhaps this is the reason why Howard's final lecture could be interpreted as a sign of some kind of a life change. The person who infamously hates everything (as commented on by everyone at some point in the novel), or as Boxall calls him, "the professional debunker of the ideology of the aesthetic" (Boxall 2024: 125), suddenly has an epiphanous experience, both in relation to Rembrandt and his estranged wife, Kiki, who sits in the audience. While showing *Hendrickje Bathing* (1654), he contemplates the woman depicted in the painting. He focuses on "a pretty, blousy Dutch woman in a simple white smock paddled in water up to her calves" but also on Kiki, thanks to whom he is inspired to note that the Dutch woman's "hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped on paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety—chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come" (*OB*, 442–43). While contemplating the painting in an almost Joycean depiction of epiphany, Howard lives through an experience much similar to Katie's. By focusing on the details of the woman represented, meticulously and conspicuously non-theoretically, he demonstrates the power of beauty to capture and mesmerize the beholder. He is stimulated to think about the sheer beauty of Rembrandt's lover, but also of his own. Art here shows its power to move each beholder individually, to enlighten certain aspects of life pertinent to the individual observer. Itakura also notes that Howard changes in this scene, once "[d]eprived of

the protective armour of academic jargon," and that the parallel observed between Hendrickje and Kiki shows "his now better understanding of the beauty of the painting" and suggests that "he has begun to appreciate the beauty, inner and outer, of his wife" (2010: 38). In a similar line of thought, Boxall here observes "an insistence on the untranslatability of beauty, and on the impotence of the critical languages that we have to account for it" (Boxall 2024: 142). Symbolically, Howard forgets his notes in his car, so he is physically removed from the critical language, which allows beauty the necessary moment to shock and illuminate him.

In *The Secret History*, academia is equally ridiculed for its approach to beauty. Much like Howard Belsey, Julian Morrow is a sterile aesthetist, whose views on beauty only poison his students. More precisely, his words "influence what his students view as beautiful" (D'Aniello 2021: 13). His idea that "beauty is terror" is as pompous as Howard's theorizing, but it is quite more dangerous and deteriorating in nature since it uncovers his megalomania and snobbishness. When he discusses how "[w]hatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it," he not only sets the standard for what beauty is to him and his students, he also manages to expose his own grandiose perception of himself (and his fellow souls) as akin to "souls like the Greeks" (*TSH*, 44). His inferiority complex becomes the main motivation for his vengeance on beauty and life, in general. By putting ideas into his students' heads (particularly Henry's, who seems to be the most impressionable when it comes to Julian), he tries to embody theories and schools of thought that Howard only theorizes about. In other words, Julian tries to impose theoretical interpretations onto art, beauty, and life alike. This is why, eventually, Richard and the remaining part of the clique will be forced with the following realization:

> There is nothing wrong with the love of Beauty. But Beauty – unless she is wed to something more meaningful – is always superficial. It is not that your Julian chooses solely to concentrate on certain, exalted things; it is that he chooses to ignore others equally as important. (*TSH*, 577)

The same fissure between form and content in art and beauty seems to be the key part of the conflict in this novel as well. Beauty as a superficial physical manifestation merits nothing, and those who tend to pursue it for its own sake lose a significant part of the aesthetic experience. In Tartt's novel, the characters are concerned with aesthetics as with "the philosophy

or art" (Kleven 2023: 3). They tend to intellectualize everything from literature to things and people they see and interact with, always through a pretentious lens of aesthetic superiority. Malin Sophie Kleven notices that this practice translates onto characters' looks and comportment, expressed "visually," in particular "through their clothing, rooms, tastes, etc." (2023: 3). This argument can be further seen in the protagonists' relationship with Bunny; in part, he is ostracized from the group for his appearance and behavior, especially once he starts deviating from their projected ideas of aesthetics. In the novel, Camilla remarks that the problem was that "various unpleasant elements of his personality which heretofore [they] had only glimpsed had orchestrated and magnified themselves to a startling level of potency" (*TSH*, 249). Ironically, it will be the way he eats his sandwich that will be his downfall. Tartt chooses to parody her characters by making them offer Bunny's unattractive manners while eating as an excuse for why they decided to kill him, when it is obvious what their real motive is. Sophie Mills posits that it is Bunny's "ordinariness [that] denies him place in the elite," and that "his commonplace appetites, beautifully symbolized by the grilled cheese sandwich and milk he is caught eating while the others are all fasting in preparation for the ritual" is what separates him from the group (2005: 15). What is more, his ordinariness might just separate him from their empathy and mercy, as the rest of the protagonists will not even grant him those when they decide that he must die. Even after, while participating in his funeral, they observe Bunny's family through a detached lens. Their exclusively intellectual ideas of beauty not only prevent them from seeing and experiencing it truly, but also deny them access to basic human emotions, most of all, compassion. Furthermore, the beauty of the college itself becomes part of their personal aesthetics that defines them as people. Hampden College becomes not just a site indicative of prestige and privilege, but also a reflection of their choosing beauty in every aspect of their lives, which in turn somehow makes them more worthy. Richard himself, albeit unconsciously, bases a larger portion of his self-worth on the fact that he is a student at Hampden and that he becomes a member of the prestigious clique he admires as much for their beauty as for their intellectual capacities. When thinking of Hampden, he creates a pastoral image of an aesthetic haven in the following passage:

> Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn

> road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.
>
> […]
>
> Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England and was dead to the sweet dark rhythms of the little mission towns. For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Plano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence. (*TSH*, 10)

His idealization of college space reads almost as what Simone Murray deems "fetishistic lingering over images of picturesque university buildings" (2023: 351), out of which the concept of dark academia arises. The aesthetics and especially the atmospherics of the campus offer the students a chance of personal aesthetic (re)definition. Richard decides to run away from his ordinary life in the West, following his European-centric ideas about intellectualism and university life. In this environment, he hopes to find meaning, but also beauty in its most quotidian form. His pursuit of beauty will thus include not only changing his appearance, but also the place of living, searching for work suitable for a Hampden student, and his longing for Camilla, who will remain ever elusive and evasive, herself in pursuit of beauty she sees embodied in Henry, even after his death. Concerning their general pursuit of beauty, they will be further obsessed by Julian's ideas that "art imitates nature and that mimesis, or imitation, is central to the creation of art" (Kleven 2023: 7). These ideas are echoes of Oscar Wilde, too; namely, his claims that "Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study […] we see things in her that had escaped our observation" but that "the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature" (Wilde 2020: 2). Ironically, Tartt's protagonists never step away from studying art, or at least from what they learned while studying art. One reason for this might be that they perceive the college as a "set-dressing for a solipsistic performance of external styling rather than genuine intellectual labour" (Murray 2023: 352). Their preoccupation with aesthetic theories and philosophy burdens even their infamous reenactment of pagan (Dionysian) rituals, which is

why they never achieve any true unity with nature, or the return to it, as depicted by the Romantics, for example. Furthermore, much like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in Tartt's novel there are prominent ideas that the pursuit of beauty involves living for beauty, or living in celebration of beauty, even in everyday activities. However, as these quotidian activities are too simple for sophisticated people like Tartt's protagonists, they will be prompted to find better ways of achieving beauty in life, sadly, through tragedy.

## 3. Aestheticism, Aesthetics, and Ethics

Focusing on Aestheticism's insistence that beauty should be free of any purpose, task, or role, as well as of connections to social issues, one must discuss the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. This observed conflict is precisely the axis around which both Smith and Tartt construct their novels. Arguably, both authors embark from the same point, and it is what Thomas Docherty defines as a "contest between sense and sensibility,"
a dichotomy that sees reason as a more potent element, whose main task is to "effectively regulate the senses, enabling thereby a mode of criticism that is geared towards truth" (2003: 25). This implies that thinking about the aesthetic experience is favored over the direct experience itself, which is perhaps why the authors choose to set their novels within academia. Given that Smith has admitted being inspired by Elaine Scarry, it is safe to say that *On Beauty* reflects Scarry's ideas on the "banishing of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades,[1]" in particular because of the "political complaints against beauty" (Scarry 1999: 39). Andrew Bowie also echoes this approach, stating that art essentially is "a product of the bourgeois era" and that the aforementioned contest or crisis in humanities comes from "the revelation of the ideological nature of how art was used by the dominant classes to cover up social contradictions in the name of an illusory harmony" (2003: 69). While this argument could be contested as a blatant generalization, it could also be argued that the interpretation of art and beauty within humanities has been focusing a lot precisely on the social implications of injustice and discrimination omitted in the works of

[1] Given that Scarry's work was written in 1999, these "two decades" refer to the 1970s and 80s, but reading them from the contemporary perspective also confirms the detected trends, at least in the humanities as we know them today.

art pertaining to a specific period. One must only think about the current "canceling" of novels and films such as *Gone with the Wind,* solely because they affirm bigotry and racial standards of the era, with no apparent point of criticism aimed at them. This further aligns with Scarry's argument that "our responses to beauty are alterable, culturally shaped" (Scarry 1999: 51), which in turn further complicates the autonomy of the aesthetic experience.

In Smith's novel, this is most evident in Howard Belsey. His approach is eerily associative with what Bowie, drawing on Immanuel Kant and his universality of aesthetic judgment, describes as "the freedom of the subject which seeks a community of agreement with others in relation to its affective and other responses to art and natural beauty" (2003: 75). Howard sides with the overly intellectual side that claims to be aware of the political implications of art and mindful of how it sometimes may cover the social issues that a self-respecting leftist (which Howard proclaims to be) could not turn a blind eye to. Therefore, he takes care to flaunt his political and theoretical knowledge so much so that even other characters joke about it. For example, while thinking about the beauty of a rose, Claire jokes that, for Howard, it is "an accumulation of cultural and biological constructions circulating around the mutually attracting binary poles of nature/artifice" (*OB*, 225). He sees the danger of indoctrination everywhere, even in Mozart, of whom he states that he is "fine" but that he prefers "music which isn't trying to fake [him] into some metaphysical idea by the back door" (*OB*, 72). This comment is even more ironic, considering it is made at the event in the park when the family watches a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*, during which Howard does not actually listen to the music or the lyrics. His snobbish approach to art transfers as well onto his daughter, Zora, who is aspiring to be him, at least academically. At the same event, while the rest of the family is enjoying Mozart's *Requiem*, Howard is asleep, and Zora listens to some lectures, aiming at the interpretation of the musical part, thus "focusing on having more of a learning experience than an emotional one" (Mureșan 2023: 24). Even later that evening, when they meet Carl, a local hip-hop artist and street poet, Howard shows how deeply he is burdened by his knowledge and predisposed to interpret everything through his academic career. While Kiki is admiring Carl's beauty, Howard ponders where he knows him from. It will turn out that Carl only vaguely reminds him of Rubens' painting of "the four African heads" (*OB*, 77), which itself is ironic, since it can be claimed that the main

(and/or only) point of reference between the two is the color of Carl's skin. Certainly, it is most peculiar for an art professor to refer in this way to a painting he should know under the title *Four Studies of a Head of a Moor* (1614/16).

The same is true of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Julian and his students dominantly perceive beauty through an academically conditioned lens free of ethics. Given that they take such pride in studying the classics, every concept of beauty is measured against the standard pertaining to classical studies. The detachment from reality and any real standards of morality is implied from the very beginning of the novel, when Richard Papen muses on "the fatal flaw," a literary concept, as something seen in life, as well, and he identifies his as "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (*TSH*, 5). To imply that his being an accomplice in murder is just a fatal flaw is relativization, to say the least; it becomes even worse when he calls it "*l'histoire d'une de mes folies*" (*TSH*, 5). It is, however, an example of how the protagonists perceive real life only within the context of aesthetic and theoretical standards within which they find a community. Like the protagonists of Smith's novel, Tartt's might also be considered to fall in line with Scarry's interpretation of beauty (although they are technically its predecessors, with the novel's being published prior to Scarry's text). Particularly, they exemplify Scarry's ideas that beauty is "life-affirming, life-giving," so much so that any removal from beauty (or beauty from one's life) is perceived as "a retraction of life" (Scarry 1999: 20). Furthermore, this also resonates with Wilde's ideas that "[o]ne does not see anything until one sees its beauty" and that it is only then that the observed object "come[s] into existence" (Wilde 2020: 18). This might explain why they impose aesthetic interpretation onto everything around them, even people. For this reason, both Bunny and the farmer they killed in their pagan ritual reenactment are perceived as casualties, rather than individuals – neither of them fit their aesthetic standards and, therefore, might as well not exist.

The characters' blindness to any ethical implications of their actions is chilling, at best. Kleven goes as far as claiming that "ethics and education exist independently of one another" in Tartt's novel and that the protagonists assume "roles and characteristics from each other as well as from […] where they draw aesthetic inspiration" (2023: 1). Furthermore, the ethical dilemma in this novel is problematized by another ethical dilemma. Namely, "[q]uestions about what is morally acceptable or responsible when

it comes to crafting and upholding an aesthetic of learning are answered by considering who makes ethical judgments and on what basis" (Kleven 2023: 7). While this, too, can sound like relativization, it is indicative of the same strategy Howard Belsey uses in *On Beauty*. By defending themselves through furthering an intellectual debate, Tartt's characters (both the clique and Julian, as their mentor) show that they genuinely do not understand the concepts they discuss. Their engagement with philosophical concepts and their real-life consequences is exposed to be only surface-level, because they rarely depart from ideas of aesthetic-making for themselves. In other words, even when they engage in discussions on ethical issues and moral values, they rarely consider them outside of the aesthetic context of pursuing beauty in life, which in itself they understand poorly. One reason for this blindness might lie in the fact that they create a microcosm of their clique, isolated both from the outside world and the remaining part of the college community, which "allows them to form their own concept of beauty which is shared by them but separate from society" (D'Aniello 2021: 4). One might argue that this extends to their conceptualization of ethics and morals, as well. Moreover, this isolation might be argued to be the reason why they are so easily manipulated by their teacher, Julian, who himself shows that he does not genuinely understand what he teaches them, or at least that he is not aware of the entirety of the implications that the concepts bring. He is a representative of academia standing at the opposite end of Howard Belsey, for example. He is a classicist, for whom "Picasso is an abomination while postmodernism is summarily dismissed as the field of an untalented 'swine' of an art student" (Mills 2005: 15). Yet, when he discusses principles, such as the infamous Apollonian and Dionysian conflict, it is not clear whether he understands them completely. He explicitly calls himself (and his students) people of control, which might classify them under the Apollonian principle, but prompts his students to act according to the Dionysian principle and embrace exaggeration and, essentially, bacchanalia.

Another example of how the members of academia do not genuinely understand what they engage with and/or teach is *On Beauty*'s Monty Kipps. Howard's mortal academic enemy stands as his opponent on the binary axis, at first glance. Not only do they disagree on Rembrandt, but they also, and more importantly, disagree on the essential political stances they take. While Howard is a liberal leftist, Monty is a conservative. Whereas Howard advocates affirmative practices that might result in better

inclusion of class-discriminated individuals, particularly those ethnically underrepresented, Monty insists that these affirmative practices are insulting and should be abolished. However, while they seem to stand on opposing ends of the spectrum on just about everything, the discrepancy between aesthetics and ethics is entirely shared. Both of them use beauty for their selfish purposes and regard art from an entirely intellectualized perspective. Monty practically abuses Rembrandt's art to make himself a celebrity; he is an embodiment of academic hyperproduction, and it is heavily suggested that his books are written so as to attract attention from audiences and academic circles alike. Even his charity work seems to be done for exercising power, or at least so that he can impose his authority over another set of people. For example, when he returns from his trip to New York, where he sponsors a church, he and his son Michael take special pride in criticizing how the church has been operating, implying that they will restore order immediately, as they know better how things should be done. The most transparent fissure in Monty's understanding of art, however, comes later in the novel. After his wife passes, she leaves a pricey painting, *Maitresse Erzulie*, to Kiki Simmonds, who earlier had an epiphanous experience with it and became inspired to change her own life after interacting with it. Concerned exclusively with its worth, Monty shows no intention of respecting his wife's will and attempts to hide this fact, pretending it was never mentioned. In other words, he chooses to disregard ethics and blatantly lie about his wife's wishes only because he does not want the valuable painting to leave his art collection. Earlier in the novel, when he comes to Kiki and Howard's anniversary party, he is seen bragging about his art collection, which includes many works of struggling Black artists. Yet, his mentioning it comes across as virtue signaling, intended mainly as another badge of self-awarded worthiness. This especially might be what Itakura mentions as "the abuse of beauty" in Smith's novel, and its being associated with "moral depravity and intellectual poverty" (2010: 28). It is definitely resonant of the idea that "the abuse of beauty leads to ethical deterioration" (Itakura 2010: 29). Furthermore, this ethical deterioration and moral depravity is signaled in the novel by both Monty and Howard and has to do with their infidelities. The two cheat on their wives; Howard with Claire Malcolm and Victoria Kipps, and Monty with an implied (student) mistress, who is an underdeveloped character in Smith's novel. As Itakura observes, the two are "only attracted to beauty when it ignites their lust or greed" (2010: 33–34). In Howard's case, his

two affairs perfectly embody the way Aestheticism tends to separate form and content. With Claire, he is attracted to the idea of cheating, not to the woman herself, who he admittedly perceives as less beautiful than his wife, or even completely physically unattractive. With Victoria, on the other hand, he is solely attracted to her physical attributes, but even this fails to excite him at expected levels. The scene of their sexual encounter is depicted as mechanical, with Howard contemplating the implications of the act, rather than experiencing it as it develops. Furthermore, how he approaches making excuses for his affair to Kiki echoes his inability to experience beauty outside of his theoretical framework, completely liberated from any ethical consideration:

> It's true that men – they respond to beauty… it doesn't end for them, this… this concern with beauty as a physical actuality in the world – and that's clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes… but it's true and… I don't know how else to explain what – "
>
> "Get away from me."
>
> "Fine."
>
> "I'm not interested in your aesthetic theories. Save them for Claire. She loves them." (*OB*, 207–208)

In the scene, he tries to portray himself as repenting but then proceeds to imply that one of the motives for his infidelity is the fact that his wife is no longer slim and in shape. "Well, I married a slim black woman, actually," he says (*OB*, 207). Kiki's failure to live up to beauty standards (set by the white part of society, at that, since Howard is painfully disengaged with Black culture) somehow becomes a sufficient excuse for his unethical behavior. Similarly, in *The Secret History*, the elusive pursuit of beauty becomes a sufficient excuse for murder. The reader is mockingly invited by the narrator to side with the characters, to wish they escape punishment for what they did, while the police investigate the case of Bunny's disappearance. However, their posing as victims convinces no one, least of all the author. Tartt mocks them even by their melodramatic reactions to what they did. Francis attempts suicide and fails, Henry does commit it, but his melodramatic departure convinces no one, Camilla is left to chase the unattainable idea of her crush forever, never finding happiness, while Charles leaves their world entirely after becoming a drunk, only

to end up becoming – a farmer (incidentally, the profession of their first victim whom they dehumanized for not fitting into their aesthetic vision of the world). Their whole echoing of Wilde's ideas that art is "a form of exaggeration" (Wilde 2020: 11) comes across as infantile and misguided. Most importantly, it seems to stem entirely from the separation between aesthetics and ethics.

## 4. Conclusion

Both Zadie Smith and Donna Tartt depart from similar premises and seem to arrive at the same conclusion. Namely, both novels essentially suggest that the abuse of beauty and rotten aesthetics will result in ethical demise and catastrophe. While perhaps slightly extreme, this view might come as a useful cautionary tale, especially within the academic climate that persists to this day. The exhaustive tendencies to overly intellectualize conversations around beauty might as well be seen as catastrophic if there is no room for the actual aesthetic experience to be discussed. Furthermore, Smith's and Tartt's novels perpetuate the conversation about beauty as one of the essentially human points of discussion, which in the era of AI art and digitally enhanced images appears to be especially important. Finally, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is a never-ending point of inspiration for art and art critics and audiences alike. While Aestheticism as an artistic movement might not correspond with the contemporary era, its basis might serve as a good starting point for the discussion of beauty in any given period, because the movement itself communicates with different philosophies and approaches to beauty and its function in human life and civilization.

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