In the 'Hallowed Halls' of Dark Academia

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Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to explore the flourishing online subculture and phenomenon known as Dark Academia, with a particular emphasis on its aesthetic background. The phenomenon of Dark Academia represents both a social media trend and an evolving literary genre that attained notable popularity during the course of the global pandemic, becoming a prominent factor on various social media platforms and in the literary world. The paper sets out to examine the fundamental concepts and key elements of the subculture in question, while investigating its origins and subsequent evolution on the platforms Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok. Through this analysis, the aim is to gain insight into the current defining characteristics of Dark Academia, as exemplified in a selection of literary texts, with special attention to the collection of short stories published in the anthology *In These Hallowed Halls: A Dark Academia Anthology* (2023).

Keywords: Dark Academia; *In These Hallowed Halls*; Donna Tartt; *The Secret History*; TikTok; Tumblr; campus novel; academic fiction; social media trends

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Introduction

The term 'Dark Academia', or 'DA' for short, refers to a subculture and social media trend that is characterised by a glorified and, in certain aspects, elitist portrayal of the academic world with an emphasis on intellectual, philosophical and scholastic interests. The concept is centred on an idealised notion of higher education, focused on the pursuit of absolute knowledge within the confines of ancient libraries, prestigious educational institutions, and Gothic mausoleums. Aesthetically, Dark Academia represents a particular fashion sense, identified by the use of tweed blazers, oversized knitwear, academic uniforms, and a fascination with items associated with the academy. It is education-centric, almost obsessively so, yet paradoxically, its focus on knowledge in certain instances may appear to be an act of academic rigour rather than genuine intellectual curiosity. In the context of social media, *The Secret History* (1992), written by Donna Tartt, is most frequently associated with the concept of Dark Academia, evoking a sense of recognition among the general public if mentioned, particularly when the subject matter is linked to other popular cultural phenomena as well, such as references to ancient Greek and Roman mythology or the mystical world-building of *Harry Potter*. Below is an

example illustrating how the aforementioned elements may be combined to create a unifying concept for those who identify as Dark Academic:

> ⇄ helnight
>
> **helnight**
>
> everyone who is into dark academia now used to either have an obsession with greek mythology, were really into poetry and philosophy, tried to be motivated for school, loved history or considered themselves either a ravenclaw or a slytherin
>
> 6,744 notes　　　　　　　　　⋯ ⇄ ♡

Figure 1. Screenshot from Tumblr, posted by @helnight (28 Janaury, 2020), https://www.tumblr.com/helnight/190517220003?source=share

The phenomenon of Dark Academia received significant attention during the period of the global pandemic, due to the enforced closure of universities, the suspension of academic activities, the loss of the traditional college campus environment, and the withdrawal of common academic experiences on a global scale. In addition to the alternative methods of distance learning and the use of digital educational platforms, such as Zoom classrooms, many turned to reading as a source of entertainment and intellectual stimulation, while simultaneously discovering the aesthetic qualities of literature. This phenomenon thus combined the key concepts of the aesthetically pleasing side of academia with the life-imitating adventures found in the genre of campus fiction, which eventually led to a novel trend. Tim Brinkhof points out that Dark Academia soon became a source of rekindling a passion for the Literae Humaniores, driven by a desire for nostalgic tuition and an aspiration towards greater knowledge, establishing "the ultimate student fantasy: an escapism for those who, if they had the money, would stay in school for the rest of their lives" (Brinkhof, 2022).

The principal aim of this paper is to outline the basic characteristic features of the newly emerging genre of Dark Academia. This is achieved through an analysis of selected novels and an investigation of the phenomenon on social media platforms, notably Tumblr, and subsequently on Instagram and TikTok. The findings of this investigation, i.e. the theoretical framework consisting of the typical features of Dark Academia, will be applied during the analysis of the anthology *In These Hallowed Halls: A Dark Academia Anthology*, published in 2023. This collection traces the interconnections between prestigious academic environments, the

coming-of-age narrative, murder and mind-games, and secrets hidden at every corner. Through this analysis, the aim is to gain insight into the defining characteristics of Dark Academia as represented in other literary works beyond the collectively reclaimed "ürtext," namely *The Secret History* (Raphel, 2022), and to determine whether the short stories included in the collection can be classified as Dark Academia or not. While doing so, both aesthetic and literary aspects will be explored.

The origins

The concept of Dark Academia should not be considered as an entirely new phenomenon. Initially popularised on social media, it has since undergone rapid transformation and evolution, establishing itself as a distinct genre. As stated by Maryann Nguyen in her article "Nostalgia in Dark Academia" (2022), it has experienced "two major timelines in terms of its development and reach in the mainstream" before it was acknowledged in the literary world (Nguyen 2022, 63). However, some defining characteristics of Dark Academia have remained unchanged over the years. It is still perceived as "bookish; university-based; Eurocentric; and dandyish" (Murray 2023, 349), along with an "air of mystery, artistic irrationalism, Romantic madness, and […] murder (with the question mark)" (Adriaansen 2022, 109).

Dark Academia originated from an online forum dedicated to all topics related to literature and books. The majority of researchers engaged with this phenomenon agree that the concept first emerged on the social networking website Tumblr, with the earliest examples dating back to 2014, where the entire concept functioned as a kind of 'mood board', a primarily aesthetic collection of bookish items to be shared, admired or discussed (see for example Adriaansen 2022, 108; Murray 2023, 349; Nguyen 2022, 63). Tumblr was an ideal platform for such a concept, offering broad, online space for visual representation.

In her article "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement" (2017), Allison McCracken describes the platform as "an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of media analysis" (McCracken 2017, 152). Consequently, Tumblr swiftly developed into a secure environment for the creation of a wide range of diverse visual content, the majority of which was specifically fandom-related, with users curating their posts into a lifestyle-inspired archive. As Robbert-Jan Adriaansen observes in his article "Dark Academia: Curating Affective History in a COVID-Era Internet Aesthetic" (2022), these posts were designed to be browsable with the option to include tags underneath them, thereby forming specific communities based on shared cultural interests (Adriaansen 2022, 107). The users were able to express their opinions and feelings, even anonymously, by using the 'like', 'comment', or 'reblog' options, while simultaneously creating their own online identity on the platform (McCracken 2017, 154). The platform thus offered the potential for a virtually]limitless exploration, which users were able to curate according to their own particular interests (Stein 2017, 87).

For those fascinated by Dark Academia, the mere concept of the phenomenon

functioned somewhat as a nostalgic return to the past. The paradoxical nature of this online community, which seeks liberation from modern technology and the contemporary world, yet is unable to effectively function in a non-digital environment, evoked a sense of longing for a bygone era, characterised by a distinct vintage aesthetic. Previous research and articles have indicated that such 'vibes' revolve around the idea of composing handwritten letters or typing them meticulously on old and faded typewrites, often leaving behind coffee stains visible on the margins of the paper, to symbolise the time and effort invested in expressing the sentiments conveyed in the messages; while other images focus on the academic life as it might have been experienced in a nineteenth century Oxbridge setting or at Ivy League private schools, situated amidst the ever-changing harvest foliage of New England (see for example Bateman 2020; Burton 2021; Devloper 2022). These settings include images of hauntingly neo-Gothic architecture, buildings of historic significance, headquarters of secret societies, all dark and vigorous. Likewise, the interiors of these settings echo a similar atmosphere. Typically, the Dark Academia interior evokes a sense of depth and mystery through the use of muted tones, reminiscent of foggy, autumnal woodland, complemented by intricate staircases, built-in bookshelves with a smooth-gliding ladder, antique world- or celestial globes as centrepieces, chandeliers, oil paintings or tapestries showcasing portraits and long-before-fought battles, as well as various musical instruments (see for example Bateman 2020; Burton 2021; Devloper 2022). These segments combine practicality with an element of arrogant classism, creating a somewhat traditional, yet unique ambience. Nevertheless, the nostalgic reflection on the fictional world of Dark Academia is characterised by an equal intensity of focus on both the settings and the participants.

In about 2017, following its migration to other social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest, and eventually being popularised on TikTok during the lockdown days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dark Academia shifted to a much more personal level. Rather than solely relying on images to evoke nostalgia, members of this online community began to alter the phenomenon into a "nostalgic fantasy for academic learning for the sake of learning without the outside burdens of the real world" (Nguyen 2022, 64). For most users, the most popular feature of Dark Academia was that it enabled them to portray, or imagine themselves in, any role connected to academia that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. It offered a means of envisaging oneself as a professor or a student at an imaginary, esteemed university located on the other side of the globe, or as a poet residing in the remote and windswept expanse of the moorland, seeking inspiration in an attempt to bring their poetry to fruition.

In her article in *The New York Times*, Kristen Bateman described Dark Academia as a "subculture" enthralled with "all things scholarly" and its "look best described as traditional-academic-with-a-gothic-edge," while reporting on newer demographics as well, indicating that the users are primarily "14 to 25 years old" and Dark Academia posts have already gained "over 18 million views on TikTok" and "over 100,000 posts on Instagram" (Bateman 2020). The setting and the decor became intertwined with the concept of Dark Academia as a lifestyle, an on-

line-lived campus journey, and an idealisation of the university experience that was otherwise unattainable during the lockdown period.

The article "What is "Dark Academia," and why is it trending on social media in 2022?" (2022) by Tim Brinkhof provides an overview of the numerous interpretations of the phenomenon. These include, for example, references to it being described as a "school library" or a "grandpa's study," as well as the idea of "cursive notes written in Latin" and "cutouts of Greek statues," or "reading Beat poetry while listening to Chopin, preferably on vinyl" (Brinkhof 2022). As a result, with the assistance of image-centric platforms, and with its roots on Tumblr, Dark Academia turned more and more into a fantasy land of education, "a niche within the broader framework of aesthetics" (Adriaansen 2022, 110). The focus shifted from the importance of learning and the pursuit of knowledge to the representation of aesthetic elements, including fashion and makeup looks, along with simply collecting books associated with conventional academic themes. It even ceased a bit to function as a community of shared interests and instead became a tool for mainstream marketing, displaying slogans such as "As Seen on TikTok" and featuring items "made popular by TikTok" or "dedicated to #BookTok" in Barnes & Noble stores (Boffone 2022, 4). In other instances, academic settings quickly became locations for self-promotion, serving merely as a backdrop for #bookstagram or #booktok posts (Demopoulos 2024).

Nonetheless, within the bookish world, Dark Academia has only relatively recently begun its rise as a subject of interest and controversy. In an article titled "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*" (2023), Simone Murray refers to the discovery, or rather re-discovery of the concept of Dark Academia as a pivotal moment, noting that "reports had the quasi-ethnographic tone of an anthropologist discovering a lost tribe and parading its exotic specimens before a fascinated western audience" (Murray 2023, 347). In the introduction to a special edition of her novel *If We Were Villains* (2017), a book which is regarded as another notable example of the Dark Academia genre, the author M. L. Rio writes about how her perspective on the world and the phenomenon of Dark Academia has evolved since the book's initial publication. She explains that she did not set out to write the next Dark Academia hit, because at that time "nobody had heard of "dark academia"," and she wrote *If We Were Villains* because she "simply felt a strong pull towards belletristic pursuits", seeing her "own obsessions celebrated and charmingly exaggerated in fiction which explored the peculiar construction of life and relationships inside academy and conservatory walls" (Rio 2021, 7).

In this light, Donna Tartt was indeed ahead of her time when she wrote *The Secret History*, ridiculing the obsession with the vibes of academia. In "The cult of Donna Tartt" (2013), Hannah Rosefield examines the background of the story behind *The Secret History*. Rosefield claims that while Tartt was studying at Bennington College in Vermont, she had a connection to a group of East Coast writers who were famous for their stories about drug use, something that was rather trendy in the era of the 1980s and early 90s, so-called "literary cool" (Rosefield 2013). For example, Bret Easton Ellis, the group's principal figure, was a friend and classmate

of Tartt and it is plausible to suggest that a certain similarity of character may have been influenced by this acquaintance.

Subsequently, in Lili Anolik's interview study, "The Secret Oral History of Bennington: The 1980s' Most Decadent College" (2019), Amy Herskovitz, a member of the Class of '85, reflects on the period, noting that "In hindsight, we were a cold group of people, though in my head we were just terrified. There were a lot of references to Get the Guests from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? We'd go after people" (Anolik 2019). Maura Spiegel (Language and Literature Faculty 1984–92) subsequently asserts that "The students at Bennington weren't driven by grades, but there was a weird rigor. You had this feeling that life was performance art, that everybody was living in his or her fantasy," to which Jonathan Lethem (Class of '86) adds that "There was the sense that people were playing dress-up, faking it until it became real. I saw the classics clique crossing Commons dressed up like they were at Oxford and I thought, *Oh, that's what you're making yourself into*", while Todd O'Neal (Class of '83) essentially declares that "*The Secret History* isn't so much a work of fiction. It's a work of thinly veiled reality—a roman à clef" (Anolik 2019).

By re-living the years spent at Bennington College, Donna Tartt succeeded in establishing an entirely new genre of academic fiction, diverging from the conventional understanding of a campus novel, which typically centres on campus life and coming-of-age narratives, or the academic novel, which features adults working as academics (Williams 2012, 561–562). Murray notes that she "cleverly hybridises genres, combining the satirical bent of the campus novel with the plot-twists of crime fiction" (Murray 354), while Ted Gioia refers to *The Secret History* as a "unconventional novel […], a murder mystery in reverse which (like Hitchcock's film) starts with the crime, and then tantalizes the audience not with "who done it" but rather the more unsettling question of why".[1]

Interlocking the genre and the aesthetic

In her article, "The Dark Academia aesthetic: nostalgia for the past in social networks" (2023), Lara López Millán suggests a potential unison regarding the origins of this aesthetic. She proposes a trio of fictional works that serve as a reference point to "help to clarify the aesthetic code of the community" (Millán 2023). She introduces a Tumblr post from January 2017, posted by the user @holocene-days, in which the author notes that "the holy trinity of dark academia that is kill your darlings, dead poets society, and the secret history [sic]" (see Figure 2).

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[1] Gioia, Ted: The New Canon. Available at http://www.thenewcanon.com/tartt_the_secret_history. html Accessed: 17 August 2024.
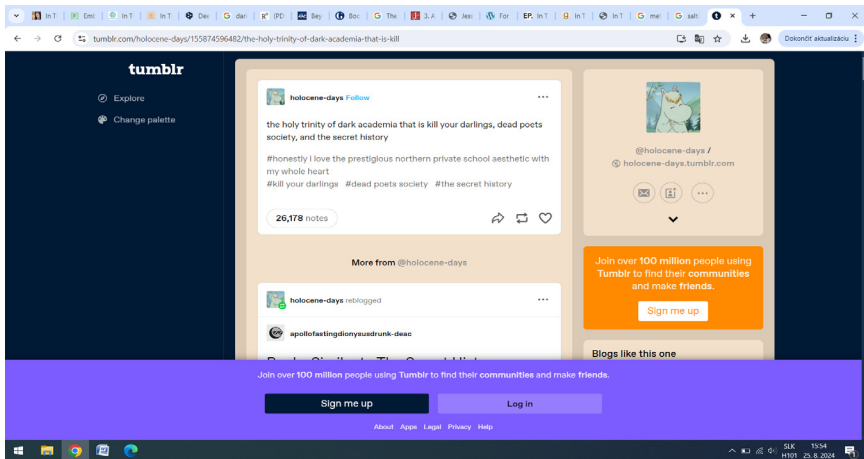
Figure 2. Screenshot from Tumblr, posted by @holocene-days (15 January, 2017), https://www.tumblr.com/holocene-days/155874596482/the-holy-trinity-of-dark-academia-that-is-kill?source=share

Millán identifies similarities between the film *Kill Your Darlings*, written by Austin Bunn and directed by John Krokidas (2013), *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir (1989), and novel *The Secret History*, written by Donna Tartt (1992). These works, she posits, share a "close relationship with the academic world and the arts", particularly in terms of their focus on "literature and writing in *Kill Your Darlings*, poetry and theatre in *Dead Poets Society*, and classical culture, Latin and Greek in *The Secret History*" (Millán 2023).

However, it can be argued that these works represent only a small subset of the subculture. It is also quite significant to distinguish between characterising Dark Academia either as a source of aesthetic inspiration or a distinct genre in its own right. The image of autumnal colours, misty meadows and the smell of late-night bonfires appear to be a recurring motif in the aesthetic approach of Dark Academia. This image is also evident in the collectively reclaimed ur-text of the genre, *The Secret History*, for example when Richard Papen observes the cufflinks of his new uniform, and despite them being "beaten up and had someone else's initials on them, […] they looked like real gold, glinting in the drowsy autumn sun which poured through the window and soaked in yellow pools on the oak floor—voluptuous, rich, intoxicating" (Tartt 1993, 26). As the seasons change, the shift from summer to autumn evokes the sense of new beginnings. This transition is characterised by a bittersweet sentiment, simultaneously evoking a sense of hopefulness and melancholy. In a Dark Academia novel, it is the anticipation of a new academic year. However, as Oliver Marks, the protagonist of *If We Were Villains* (the other book regarded as a prime example and ur-text of the Dark Academia genre, a modern Shakespearean tragedy re-imagined), reflects in his narrative, the forthcoming academic semester also functions as a prelude to a series of unfortunate events, foreshadowing the tragic fate of a playwright of their own: "It had been a warm au-

tumn so far. Enter the players" (Rio 2017, 12).

If we are to consider Dark Academia as a uniquely distinct genre, it is necessary to establish a set of criteria that would define and differentiate it from other similar literary genres with which it shares certain characteristics. One distinctive feature of Dark Academia is its critical approach to its subject matter, which goes beyond a mere aesthetic portrayal of the institution to address the injustices inherent in the academic environment. This novel approach of portraying a general frustration with the academia – whether past or present – is evident in R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022), where the academic voice strongly intensifies the plot. The setting of an alternative Oxford appears to offer a utopian imagination of power and knowledge dedicated to the use of language and translation, but ultimately revealing the truth that "An act of translation is always an act of betrayal" (Kuang 2022, 153), while narrating from the perspective of a culturally, sexually and racially diverse list of main characters. Similarly, Olivie Blake's *The Atlas Six* trilogy (2020, 2022 and 2024) and Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House* series offer insights into the psychological and physical suppression that often underpin the glorified perspective of the academic community. Blake's novels question the roots of devotion and sacrifice involved in becoming a caretaker of a long-lost or long-forgotten knowledge in the magical world of the Alexandrian Society, where nothing is what it seems, while highlighting diversity in gender, race and identity. Bardugo, like Blake, also attempts to shed light on racism and sexism in academia, but by investigating the ancient, elite secret societies of Yale in New Haven and following the sinister, occult activities of these elite, privileged social circles, as portrayed through the pages of *Ninth House* (2019) and *Hell Bent* (2023).

The 'Hallowed Halls'

"The window seat had the perfect view across the college quad. Right now, in the late-autumn morning light, it looked too pretty to be real" (Weinberg 2023, 13).

The opening line of the most recent Dark Academia collection, *In These Hallowed Halls: A Dark Academia Anthology* (2023), serves as the inaugural quote in this chapter. As indicated on the back cover, the anthology, *'a beguiling, sinister collection'*, edited by Marie O'Regan and Paul Kane, comprises twelve short stories *'from masters of the genre',* all of which are characterised by a Dark Academia sensibility. The collection features notable authors such as Olivie Blake and M. L. Rio, who are regarded as some of the most prominent writers within the genre. As previously noted, Blake is perhaps best known for her *The Atlas Six* series, while Rio is celebrated for her critically acclaimed novel *If We Were Villains*.

Nevertheless, in this anthology, there are ten additional authors who have yet to be as firmly linked to the Dark Academia label as Blake and Rio have been. Consequently, the question thus arises as to whether there is a concept that will ultimately determine the authentic interpretation of the concept of Dark Academia.

As a potential point of reference, a definition of "Dark Academia" is provided at the end of the synopsis for *In These Hallowed Halls*, which describes it as follows:

Definition of dark academia in English:
dark academia
1. An internet subculture concerned with higher education, the arts, and literature, or an idealised version thereof with a focus on the pursuit of knowledge and an exploration of death.

2. A set of aesthetic principles. Scholarly with a gothic edge – tweed blazers, vintage cardigans, scuffed loafers, a worn leather satchel full of brooding poetry. Enthusiasts are usually found in museums and darkened libraries.

The book opens with an Introduction, wherein the editors solicit the readers' opinions regarding the connotations of the genre, asking whether the phenomenon of Dark Academia evokes the image of "Mysterious and dangerous occurrences in various seats of learning? Students, and sometimes their tutors, in peril? Murder? Magic? Ghosts? Dusty books in old libraries? Clandestine cults and secret societies devoted to ancient rituals?" or even "All or none of the above?" (O'Regan-Kane 2023, 11). These questions are quite beneficial in understanding the way Dark Academia is being viewed, as it appears that there is still no clear distinction between characterising it as a literary genre or an aesthetic subculture.

As already indicated, beyond the initial aesthetic approach observed on the Tumblr website, the concept of Dark Academia has already undergone a shift in orientation, moving from a picturesque perspective to a critical one. This transition marks a significant evolution, establishing its distinct identity as a literary form. As an intertextual literary genre, it may be considered an offshoot of campus fiction, more precisely the campus novel, complemented by elements of the Gothic, and narratives of mystery and thriller (Nguyen 2022, 56). Nevertheless, it would appear that it is still functioning, at least in part, as a kind of post-it note version of the aesthetic itself. While a 'set of rules' might appear to establish the core of Dark Academia – as illustrated by the synopsis of *In These Hallowed Halls* –, it is possible this framework is largely overlooked in the narrative's aesthetical concept: the image of an academic figure, wearing a tweed blazer and oval reading glasses, hastily running to the lecture hall while grappling with unspoken secrets, or a tired student looming over their messy desk, reciting old Latin tenses in preparation for an upcoming test, takes over the overall message of a Dark Academia story.

For instance, it would certainly appear that the academic setting is of paramount importance. It functions as an integral component of what has been designated Dark Academia-like. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to suggest that this is not the sole factor that should be taken into account when categorising a book as Dark Academic. *In These Hallowed Halls*, comprising twelve short stories, represents a departure from the conventional Dark Academia narrative. Instead, it offers a diverse array of tales that, while still rooted in the aesthetic, explores a more nuanced and multifaceted representation of the genre. It would therefore be bene-

ficial to examine this anthology from the perspective of identifying the essential elements that these stories share or in what they differ, in order to ascertain their classification as part of this new, evolving genre.

After considering the elements and framework of the original two novels, which are regarded as seminal works within the Dark Academia genre, namely *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *If We Were Villains* by M. L. Rio, it can be argued that the majority of the short stories in *In These Hallowed Halls: A Dark Academia Anthology*, upon initial examination, align more closely with the aesthetic representation or belief system associated with the concept.

In order to highlight the works that are more closely aligned with the essence of the genre and less so with the aesthetic principle, it seems necessary to give particular consideration to the anthology's first definition of Dark Academia as '*An internet subculture concerned with higher education, the arts, and literature, or an idealised version thereof with a focus on the pursuit of knowledge and an exploration of death*'. In this vein, the following titles may be considered as illustrative examples: "1000 Ships" by Kate Weinberg, "X House" by J.T Ellison, "The Hare and the Hound" by Kelly Andrew, "Phobos" by Tori Bovalino, and "Playing" by Phoebe Wynne. These texts are unified in their emphasis on the tense and the dark atmosphere of an academic fantasy that is centred on a secret tied deeply to knowledge. Moreover, they actually diverge from the sole imitation of the visual appeal of the academic aesthetic. The underlying theme of these stories can be defined as an excessive and obsessive pursuit of ultimate knowledge, sought with the intention of using its power to control and manipulate. The narrative presents professors and students absorbed in their academic pursuits, particularly obsessed with their ideas and beliefs, to the extent that the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred. Additionally, each text exhibits a distinct fascination with mysticism, human nature in tragedy, distorted morality, and even murder, while also incorporating the underlying element of critique that ultimately unites them.

From an aesthetic perspective, the majority of the stories can be considered typical examples of the subculture in question. The opening passages of these texts frequently depict a new semester at a university, or alternatively, they provide a detailed and vivid description of the campus setting, evoking a sense of autumnal gloom, such as stepping into a "misty mid-October afternoon," (Fargo 2023, 154), or walking amidst "Japanese maple trees" displaying "unnatural blood-red hues" (Yang 2023, 209). The environment is usually "bucolic," and "stately," "very, very north, where people are quite mean, just as a matter of survival" (Blake 2023, 31), with the architecture being described as "classic Gothic," or looking like "it belonged in the British countryside, perched in decaying solitude," where "Isolation and cold breed a certain kind of madness that disguises itself well" (Ellison 2023, 125–126). Other settings include libraries and archives, which feature "arched windows," and the experience to enjoy "the smell of old paper and leather, the feeling of touching real history with [...] bare hands (Fargo 2023, 154).

In other instances, some of the stories published in the anthology align with the second definition of Dark Academia, as previously mentioned, wherein a greater emphasis is placed on the concept of '*Scholarly with a gothic edge*'. In such

cases, professors and academics attempt to unravel – or at the very least, comprehend – the thrilling mysteries and haunting apparitions that often intertwine with their academic pursuits. There is, however, the possibility that these two definitions could potentially coexist. In order to emphasise a particularly intriguing approach, it is worth considering the works of Olivie Blake and Helen Grant. In their respective works, "Pythia or Apocalypse Maidens: Prophecy and Obsession among the Delphian Technomantic Elite" and "The Professor of Ontography," both Blake and Grant endeavour to experiment with the manner in which Dark Academia excels: namely, by enticingly interweaving the past with the aspects and predicaments of the future. Blake, for example, re-imagines the predictions of Delphi oracles in the form of a supercomputer. Set in a futuristic, academic context, the narrative depicts the collision of two contrasting forces: the advancement of technology and the pursuit of higher understanding to the point of complete social alienation. The work draws parallels with both Cassandra's prophecies, which were ultimately ignored, and Shelley's own visionary venture in "The Mortal Immortal" or in *Frankenstein*. In "The Professor of Ontography," Grant draws inspiration from M. R. James, specifically "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," and from the Gothic horror tale "Lot 249" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in order to portray a chilling vision of academia's dark underbelly where the experiment with the old and new mesh together.[2]

To conclude, in essence, Dark Academia embraces a nostalgic inspiration for the classical arts, manifesting an "obsessive focus on learning…voracious readings of classics" (Burton, 2021) and even exhibiting "self-discovery through individual and collaborative learning" (Ranasinghe 2022, 82), covering both aesthetic and fundamental aspects within its conceptual framework. Additionally, Murray posits that "DA is fundamentally dependent on the affordances of digital media" and that "it could never have emerged without them" (Murray 2023, 360). This is closely linked to the uncertainties of the pandemic, the declining accessibility of higher education, and the cyclical coexistence of hopefulness and hopelessness. And perhaps this, the intertwining of reality and imagination, is best represented by the erudite, chaos-filled stories of *In These Hallowed Halls*, which makes the anthology so uniquely different. It is essentially M. L. Rio who provides the most insightful commentary on the alluring aspect of the concept of Dark Academia, suggesting that "it seems only natural that readers would recreate the cultish devotion to arts and letters upon which the genre subsists. Art imitates life. You are what you read".[3]

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2 In a blog post dated 27 September 2023, Helen Grant discusses some of the inspiration behind "The Professor of Ontography". Available at https://helengrantbooks.blogspot.com/2023/09/dream-antho-launches-in-london.html

3 "A Roundtable Discussion on Dark Academia," CrimeReads (27 September 2023). Available at https://crimereads.com/a-roundtable-discussion-on-dark-academia/

Conclusion

The objective of the present paper was to gain insight into the phenomenon of Dark Academia, which is most often recognised both as an Internet subculture and an aesthetic. In order to explore its original meaning and significance, the paper sought to investigate the creation of this online fantasy of an aesthetically pleasing side of academia, with a particular focus on its fundamental existence in virtual reality as a picturesque mood board, centring around the classics, art and literature, handwritten manuscripts and crumbling marble statues, darkened libraries and ancient Greek passages.

To align the aesthetical aspect of Dark Academia, it seems noteworthy to explore the concept of 'bookishness' as defined by Jessica Pressman. She characterises it as a set of "creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical" (Pressman 2020, 1). Accordingly, given the bookish origins of Dark Academia and its virtual presence, its 'aesthetism' aligns with Pressman's definition of 'bookishness'. More precisely, this aspect refers to a combination of mood, sense and philosophy that is experienced through the phenomenon, extending beyond the beauty inherent in the act of learning. And since Dark Academia is still evolving from a social media aesthetic into the realms of the literary world, there is a certain degree of uncertainty surrounding its classification as a genre of fiction. It is essentially a bookish fascination that has diverged into two seemingly disparate paths, yet is ultimately driven by a common ideology.

As has been previously established, it is believed that the genre originated with the publication of *The Secret History*, shaped by the aesthetic elements of fashion, architecture and the somewhat philosophical lifestyle hinted throughout Donna Tartt's famous novel. Since then, a lengthy list of works has been published under the category of Dark Academia. However, the findings of the present paper revealed the absence of a universally accepted definition of the Dark Academia genre. As demonstrated in the analysis, attempts to define the phenomenon can be observed in *In These Hallowed Halls: A Dark Academia Anthology*. Nevertheless, it became evident that even an anthology explicitly intended to represent the genre of Dark Academia, such as this one, exhibited inconsistencies. The anthology presents two distinct approaches to the defining characteristics of what should be considered as Dark Academia, and reveals a multitude of subgenres, including horror and mystery, magical realism, and psychological thriller. It depicts students and professors, secret sororities and institutions, murders and mysteries waiting to be solved, featuring narratives that explore the paranoia of illicit affairs and ghostly encounters, all cocooned in a seemingly true academic manner. Evidentially, the inclusion of such a diverse range of elements may be the cause of the genre's current state of disunity.

Upon initial analysis, it would seem that the selected stories published in the anthology *In These Hallowed Halls* are primarily concerned with upholding the genre's picturesque purpose, particularly those associated with the aesthetic of

Dark Academia, which emphasises the 'academia'. This is exemplified by the recurring images of exploring quaint Gothic towers and darkened classrooms, as well as characters often clad in tweed jackets and leather loafers. However, the aforementioned critical perspective, which is a defining feature of the Dark Academia genre – evident in its exemplifying texts, as well as in those novels that address the injustices inherent in the phantasmic academic environment and ridicule the obsession with the alluring studious lifestyle –, still requires greater emphasis. In order to clarify and gain a deeper insight into the actual framework of the genre, it is therefore necessary to acknowledge that it alludes to a deeper foundation, deliberately placing emphasis on the actual, underlying 'darkness' of the ivory towers of academia, veiled beneath the surface of seemingly mundane, scholastic endeavours.

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