

# Shaping Dark Academia: Merging Darkness with Intellectual Beauty

Cyntia Kálmánová

## Abstract

Torn between being an online aesthetic subculture and a literary genre, Dark Academia has gained considerable popularity in recent years, particularly in terms of visual culture. This cultural phenomenon is characterised by a romanticised, pictorial allure of academic pursuits and a studious lifestyle, most often portrayed through carefully crafted, picturesque social media content. Observed from a distance, its quaint charm is only apparent: a distinctive colour palette, haunting academic or opulent settings, and intellectual integrity. Its foundation, however, is rooted in the Classics, existentialist philosophical ideologies and the Gothic tradition, where the pursuit of knowledge and beauty is intricately entwined with great peril. The present paper aims to explore how 'academic aesthetics' interweave both literature and ambience to create a unique identity in which intellectual isolation and doomed love play a fundamental role. The paper will analyse how elements such as the Romantic sublime and the Gothic grotesque mould the Dark Academia narrative, illuminating the phenomenon's darker connotations.

**Keywords:** Dark Academia; aesthetics; social media trend; Classics; Gothic; Romanticism; classic texts; intellectual obsession; sublime

**Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL:** Language and Literature – Studies of Literature – Comparative Study of Literature

**DOI:** 10.36007/eruedu.2025.1.114-123

## The academic aesthetics

The sense of rediscovering the aesthetic value of learning has skyrocketed on social media platforms as the actual gates of education have been uncertainly closed in the days of the pandemic. The newfound accessibility to fulfil the need for learning and socialising gave rise to a plethora of aesthetically pleasing movements, all produced online and steeped in academic necessity. This passion for education incorporated everything from collecting bookish items, finding serenity through calligraphy and sketching, posing in front of imperial ivy-covered campus gates, or sporting fashionably preppy attire. In essence, this phenomenon materialised as an aesthetic subculture, a sublime interpretation of classical ideas and a nostalgic token perfected for visual remembrance.

All 'academic' aesthetics share an enthusiasm for classical literature and philo-

sophy, for the Romantics and especially their Byronic tragic heroes; the immersion in a variety of languages such as Ancient Greek and Latin, Old French, German or Italian; the Western European influence of architecture, and the Gothic. Ultimately, these academic aesthetics create a “microcosm”,<sup>1</sup> a cohesive (online) society, a visual group identity that perceives learning, thinking and reading as something dignified and exhilarating, incorporating almost all aspects of the aforementioned enthusiasm into its core concept. The ‘academic’ aesthetic became particularly favoured with its subgenre, the Dark Academia trend which, in turn, can be traced back to earlier study motivational and inspirational posts tagged as #studyblr on the social media platform Tumblr. Subsequently, after its revival on TikTok during the lockdown era (for example Bateman 2020; Lee 2024, 420; Millán 2023; Nguyen 2022, 64-65; Ranasinghe 2022, 82), a whole new variety of aesthetics followed its surge in popularity, initiating a perception that “Whether it is BookTok and its community of bookworms, DracoTok and its legion of *Harry Potter* fans, CottageCore TikTok and those romanticizing farm life, or even the app’s mainstream dancing teens, TikTok builds community” (Boffone, 2022, 4).

Dark Academia thrives on its ability to conjure up a vivid and almost tangible characteristic image of an individual who might casually quote Shakespeare or Plato in response to a question, who reads and studies dead languages as a hobby to prove a point, has a distinctly *‘I am above it all’* demeanour, is pretentious and eccentric; in all, *The Secret History*’s perfect Henry Winter replica. The entire aesthetic of Dark Academia rests on its success in creating a certain quality, which in most cases includes an inherent “Eurocentrism, lack of diversity, and academic elitism” (Monier 2022). For *The New York Times*, Pamela Paul in her article “The Season of Dark Academia” (2022), highlights the captivating essence of the subculture when she expresses that

*Of course* the cloistered halls of academia are fertile ground for stories of mystery, suspense and high-minded murder. The combination of privilege, secrecy, esoteric knowledge and very serious poetry is irresistible to anyone who lies awake at night reading or angsty in bed, or scrolling through TikTok past midnight for inspo. It’s also a deeply romanticized view of higher learning with its idealization of paperbound matter, leather book bags and unapologetic elitism. (Paul 2022)

Dark Academia evokes a particular sensibility as well which Simone Murray describes as “Less a cohesive movement or delimited subculture than a loose cluster of atmospherics and ‘vibes’, (...) suffused with the quality of “bookishness” that Jessica Pressman defines as “creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture”” (Murray 2023, 348). Robbert-Jan Adriaansen also echoes this idea, but extends the consideration to the “affective curation of *Stimmung*, referred to as an ‘atmosphere’, ‘mood’, or ‘vibe’” (Adriaansen (2022, 110), which can unify the aesthetics. Tori F. Lee provides an imaginative example of how Dark Academia fits into this proposition, arguing that “As it slowly incorporates all five

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microcosm>

senses in three short sentences, the vignette presents not just an image of Dark Academia, but its affective *Stimmung*: first Latin, then darkness — sight — then a single light, then music — sound — coffee — taste, and perhaps smell — then nostalgia, the coffee is forgotten, the sensation of hair around your eyes — touch — and ink on your hands” (Lee 2024, 422). This atmosphere is further developed by the incorporation of a romanticisation of classical literature into the daily lives of the members of the aesthetic community. Importantly, this is also visible at the core of the phenomenon, given that Dark Academia “de-exceptionalizes elite scholastic environments as much as it romanticizes them” (Quiring 2021) and builds on its “Classical antiquity (...): a means of engagement with a public curious about the ancient world, but dangerous in its reinforcement of existing structural inequities in the discipline” (Lee 2024, 421).

Therefore, focusing on interlocking elements of both literature and atmosphere and evoking all the senses, Dark Academia can be described as “*Long Black coats, thunder but no lightning, red wine, blood, forests in winter, a single guttering candle, latin, bones, all of history in your hands, Tchaikovsky, piles of old books, the hour before sunrise, complicated cravats, Hozier, true crime, Donna Tartt, secret diaries*”,<sup>2</sup> or alternatively, its slightly less refined version, ‘Chaotic Academia,’ which is all “*(...) scribbled notes in pencil or biro, kill your darlings, untied laces, so much coffee, all nighters, crying in the library, Mozart, writing film scripts for fun, rain Storms, moorland, swimming in the dark, movie soundtracks while studying, procrastination, muddy boots, unsent letters*”.<sup>3</sup> Basically, Dark Academia, takes the essential elements of intellectualism and academic settings that are found in academic fiction but infuses them with a heightened philosophical weight, thus creating a narrative that ventures into tragedy, psychological thriller and murder mystery territory.

Then again, other academic enthusiasts may find the Dark Academia aesthetic too unconventional or furtive, and are in need for something ‘*lighter*’ in means of representation. Consequently, a range of additional trending iterations followed suit, including sub styles such as ‘Classic Academia’, ‘Light Academia’, ‘Romantic Academia’, or ‘Witchy Academia.’ While all these variants are conceptually descended from Dark Academia, they differ from one another by evoking a diverse array of unique sensory impressions, moods, and concepts.<sup>4</sup> This portrayal most frequently embraces elements such as fashion, decor or a specific colour palette, and it is increasingly focused on the inclusion of literature that embodies the particular vibe associated with the distinct academic aesthetic:

2 @dandelion-jester, “Academic aesthetics,” posted on February 25, 2020. <https://www.tumblr.com/achillies/623153809931272192?source=share>

3 @dandelion-jester, “Academic aesthetics,” posted on February 25, 2020. <https://www.tumblr.com/achillies/623153809931272192?source=share>

4 Annalise Herrmann: “Dark Academia, Light Academia, & Cottagecore: Breaking Down 3 Popular Internet Aesthetics”. Available online: <https://www.wallflowerjournal.com/lifestyle/dark-academia-light-academia-amp-cottagecore-breaking-down-3-popular-internet-aesthetics>

I am dreaming about being a part of a secret academic society for Romantics... invitations are sealed with a wax rose emblem and inked in cursive... initiation involves either a haunting moonlit ritual in the woods or candlelit ritual in an long-lost chapel, in white silk dresses or black velvet cloaks...

meetings involve reading classical poetry and holding ghost story contests and discussing the best kind of flowers to send to one's enemies... the diet consists solely of picnics of marzipan fruit, crystallised violets, cheese and wine... there are masque balls and pre-raphaelite art and everything is a little dreamy and a little radical and a little unreal... ♀♡<sup>5</sup>

A more literary and nature-influenced duality characterises Light Academia, being the ultimate undimmed, more delicate sibling-core to Dark Academia. It is "*Sunshine in shallow water, white cotton, lacy dresses, champagne, the plays of Oscar Wilde, summer rain, wind rustling the pages of a book, jacket over on shoulder, Maurice, frost covering new flowers, Florence + the machine, roses, bare feet, girls school, old books about species of plant or butterflies, biological Diagrams, flowers in your hair, perfect notes*".<sup>6</sup> The colours are softer, the grainy, darker sepia giving way to a sandy, pale fawn; a neutral undertaking. Similarly, Romantic Academia draws even more inspiration from the classic romantic sense of freedom with its "*Billowing pirate sleeves, Lord Byron, theatre, violets, achilles, reading poetry aloud, bloody cheekbones, love letters, doodling in class, doc Martins, long ball dresses, gothic churches, dead poets society, sword fights back stage, wind and mist and violent Storms, tea, long journal entries, wide brimmed hats, museums*".<sup>7</sup> This strong affiliation to the concept of Romanticism, operating both as a literary and artistic source highlights the two sides of the same coin, the contrast between Dark and Light Academia. This is clearly noted by Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime* (2019), pointing out that "Any aesthetic, pressed beyond a certain point, becomes or implies a psychology" (Weiskel 2019, 83), proving that even colour schemes serve a purpose beyond merely creating a 'vibe'.

No matter how many pieces can be carved out of Dark Academia to fit into a new aesthetic alternative, its fundamental essence remains firmly rooted in the artistic and classical insights of certain European cultures, including the Renaissance, Romanticism, and Gothic period. It is deeply influenced by nature, individualism, and emotion; it is both the worrisome rationalism and it is the awe, the inspiring beauty as opposed to the ruthless, the 'sublime,' which is "one of those terms like *inspiration, vision, apocalypse, imagination, the daemonic* – and, of course, *transcendence* – whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible

5 @wistful-giselle, posted on November 2, 2019. <https://www.tumblr.com/wistful-giselle/188773844929/i-am-dreaming-about-being-a-part-of-a-secret>

6 @dandelion-jester, «Academicaesthetics,» posted on February 25, 2020. <https://www.tumblr.com/dandelion-jester/623153809931272192?source=share>

7 @dandelion-jester, «Academicaesthetics,» posted on February 25, 2020. <https://www.tumblr.com/dandelion-jester/623153809931272192?source=share>

by enabling us to grasp experience in terms sanctioned by the past-the essential critical gesture, already sophisticated in antiquity” (Weiskel 2019, 4).

## The solitary scholar re-imagined

“Illegible handwriting, coffee rings on notebooks, putting gloves on only to take them off again, dark lipstick, maurice (1987), walking to class when it’s not raining enough for an umbrella but just enough to fog up your glasses, stone buildings, leaves that aren’t quite crunchy, deadlines, pen smudges, leaving class only to find out its dark outside, cinnamon, cold noses, swaying trees, half moons, cuffed sleeves, silence”<sup>8</sup>

As the opening quote of the introduction illustrates, solemn grandeur is a powerful visual pull inherent in the context of the imagination of Dark Academia. At first glance, it comes across as a mundane routine that is absentmindedly carried out in the academic milieu, something that is easy to visualise and allows the imagination to run wild: chaotic desktops adorned with tiny marble statues, antique lampshades and magnifying glasses; ink-stained papers of a homework assignment with haphazardly crossed out sentences; teacups or coffee mugs with long forgotten sips that have grown cold during the day; the overwhelming melody of a clock’s pendulum mocking the wasted hours of the evening. The minutes are closing in on the time to find the right answers, to solve a problem, and the halls are empty, only shadows cascade the darkened corners soundlessly. The notion of Dark Academia is one that embodies the concept of loneliness in scholarly pursuits to the greatest degree, while simultaneously romanticising this fascination with isolation and melancholy as a means of seeking arcane knowledge. The mood it evokes, however, is no accident. It is intrinsic to this fascinating interplay between the sublime of the Romantic and the grotesque of the Gothic.

First and foremost, in order to gain a better understanding of the concept of Romanticism, Michael Ferber, in his book *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (2010), explores the definitions of the ‘*Romantic*’ and draws attention early on to a significant tradition: “It is worth remembering, in view of the indelible label later generations have given them, that in Britain neither the exactly contemporaneous ‘Lake School’ (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Lamb) nor the next generation (Byron, Shelley, Keats, Hunt) nor anyone else called themselves Romantics at the time” (Ferber 2010, 7). Ferber investigates the complicated dilemma of searching for just a single feature that could define Romanticism, while at the same time identifying a plethora of overlapping disaccords. He presents Harold Bloom’s depiction of Romanticism as “‘the internalization of quest romance’, a transformation of the heroic quests in medieval romances into interior spiritual journeys,” citing as an example “Childe Harold, the hero of Byron’s ‘*romant*’, written in Spenserian stanzas

<sup>8</sup> @trinitysbooks, posted on September 29, 2019. <https://www.tumblr.com/trinitys-books/188028302584/illegible-handwriting-coffee-rings-on-notebooks>

that evoke the action-filled *Faerie Queene*", while explaining that this character in fact has not done "anything very heroic, and his 'pilgrimage' has no destination" (Ferber 2010, 10). Ferber also mentions M. H. Abrams's book, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) to emphasise that "it evokes the belief of English and German poets and philosophers that the divine is immanent in nature, as well as in the human psyche, as opposed to being transcendent in God" (Ferber 2010, 10).

The Romantic era often celebrated the narrative of the tragic hero, driven by a sense of intense and conflicting emotions, characterised by deep passion, rebellion and a detachment from society. Consequently, one of the original branches of Dark Academia is the fusion of the works of Romantic authors with the imagery of Gothic architecture, a yearning depiction of the solitary, brooding scholar, deeply immersed in his studies, the outsider, both psychologically and physically disconnected from the surrounding public (see for example Murray 2023, 354; Nguyen 2022, 62). This motif of isolation is closely linked to the portrayal of the intellectual prodigy in both genres, who is withdrawn from society or even exiled due to his prominent fascination with dismissed and rejected ideas. In terms of Dark Academia, therefore, the link between the Gothic and the Romantic is a very close one.

In the fictional world of Dark Academia – whether referring to its aesthetic culture or its literary version – this Romantic tension between the pursuit of intellectualism and personal transcendence often takes on a dark and obsessive turn, characterised by an enduring sense of Gothic macabre and the allure of forbidden knowledge. The reason for this phenomenon is that Dark Academia provides critical insight into the elite and secretive campus life narrative, a world filled with elements of mystery, philosophy and existentialism, where the stories "narrate initiations of students into poetry and the classics, but do not treat the classics as representatives of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur," as the pristine imagination of Neoclassicism had it," instead the focus is on "a deeply Romantic undertone that sees death, murder, and destruction as just one step away from intellectual brilliance" (Adriaansen 2022, 109). Gothic literature also depicts this extreme, with characters falling too deeply in love with forbidden, maddening ideas, and ultimately breaking under the weight of the overly destructive secrets they encounter. In Dark Academia, this obsession with the pursuit of the unknown often mirrors the Gothic: the characters frequently cross the line in their relentless search for the unimaginable to be proven, or in their quest for the sublime, often at great personal and social cost. In Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*, for example, the protagonists, a secluded group of students immersed in of ancient Greek philosophies and with a persisting interest in the concept of beauty as terror, are destined to follow the path of classical tragedy:

'And I believe Aristotle is correct. After all, what are the scenes in poetry graven on our memories, the ones that we love the most? Precisely these. The murder of Agamemnon and the wrath of Achilles. Dido on the funeral pyre. The daggers of the traitors and Caesar's blood—remember how Suetonius describes his body being borne away on the litter, with one arm hanging down?'

'Death is the mother of beauty,' said Henry.

'And what is beauty?'

'Terror.'

(...)

'And if beauty is terror,' said Julian, 'then what is desire? We think we have many desires, but in fact we have only one. What is it?'

'To live,' said Camilla.

'To live forever,' said Bunny, chin cupped in palm. (Tartt 1993, 41-42)

The classical reference here resonates with Dante Alighieri's perception in the *Divine Comedy*, more specifically in *Inferno*, the exploration of the macabre, in which philosophers, scientists, and even artists are placed in Hell because their knowledge was misused or lacked moral grounding (Ferrante 1984). At one point in *The Secret History*, the group re-enacts an ancient Dionysian ritual – a Bacchanal, with the intention of losing their bound sense of self and inhibition, thereby achieving an ascent into the divine beauty of madness, which ultimately leads to the murder of an innocent. It is a narrative that draws on the classic themes of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, where seeking the arcane is ultimately punished; it is a game of engagement in an almost Faustian bargain, a sacrifice made in the pursuit of perfection regardless of the cost:

'You had better watch out,' she said. 'I have heard some weird shit about those people.'

'Like what?'

'Like they worship the (...) Devil.' (Tartt 1993, 81)

As Heike Grundmann points out, "Shakespeare gave the Romantics all they were craving for: a world that confronted great kings with fools and destitute beggars, characters that were as inconsistent as real human beings are, combining melancholia and obsession, madness and high intellectuality, sublime goodness and grotesque evil – the whole gamut of experience set against the artificial puppeteering of an anaemic Classicism" (Grundmann 2005, 30).

This intense engagement is exemplified by a compilation of pivotal features and themes that are familiar in both the Gothic and the Dark academic traditions, particularly with regard to mortality, the grotesque, and death. The appeal of the Gothic, characterised by its incorporation of the supernatural and the occult, is further appraised by the ambiguous approach of Dark Academia in its exploration of the human psyche. Weiskel contemplates the inherent self-contradiction of humanity by positing the idea that "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human," and proceeds with the rhetorical question: "What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is matter for great disagreement. What, if anything, defines the range of the human is scarcely less sure" (Weiskel 2019, 3). In most cases, Dark Academia leaves behind the ghost stories, the haunted houses and the family curses, however, it does take into account the viciousness of human malice or carnality. The ivy-clad gates and those looming spires serve a dual purpose – as do the colour schemes –, functioning as both architectural features and metaphors for the



complexity of the human psyche, juxtaposed against the vastness of nature's sublime power and recognition of the supernatural, a "profoundly unsettling paradox evoked by the supernatural sublime" (Rodríguez-Hernández-Schaefer 2019, 21).

This paradox aligns with the dark side of knowledge represented in the Dark academic narrative. The allure of hidden secrets, manuscripts awaiting decipherment, the whispers within ancient texts, and the excitement of the mystical can be seen as reflections of the Gothic tradition and the Romantic notion of seeking the unattainable – alchemy, the occult, and the quest for immortality, provoking whether the inevitable downfall of the genius is truly unavoidable, a striking remark on fatalism. The interconnection between the Gothic, Romantic, and Dark academic traditions is evident in the exploration of this sublime immortality, representing the greatest form of obsession, fittingly perfect for both the 'Carpe diem' and 'Memento mori' epiphany. Classical evidence of this can be found in the character arc of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, and "The Mortal Immortal." Its significant parallel is unmistakably present in the genre of Dark Academia, as a means of challenging natural limitations such as love and partnership in order to conquer death and to seize control. This is apparent in V. E. Schwab's *Vicious* as an example, in which the protagonists – or rather, complex antagonists – are two premed students who experiment with near-death experiences to push their perception of scientific knowledge to its extreme in an attempt to create the extraordinary and break the restrictions of mortality: "'Enough,' said Victor. (...) 'You aren't some avenging angel, Eli,' he said. 'You're not blessed, or divine, or burdened. You're a science experiment.'" (Schwab 2014, 330). Another example can be found in Ava Reid's dark folktale about a mortal girl who falls in love with the Fairy King and is bound to bargain with the mystical: "'I will love you to ruination,' the Fairy King said, brushing a strand of golden hair from my cheek. 'Yours or mine?' I asked." (Reid 2023, 190). The elements of love, fondness, devotion and affection are intricately interwoven with the concept of playing God, reflecting on the unchecked balance of intellectual curiosity and the potential consequences of the monstrous – be that the creation or the creator himself.

## Conclusion

However romanticised the glorification of love in academia might be in the context of the Dark academic phenomenon, at its core it is far more inherently grim and analytical than merely aesthetically pleasing. The connection to the Romantic sublime and the grotesque essence of the Gothic is clear in Dark Academia's shared fascination with the mysterious and the arcane, portraying intellectualism and beauty as inseparably attached to a more tragic aspect of human nature. It is the broken balance between light and darkness, love and death, logic and madness.

Combining elements of the movements that originally inspired its development, Dark Academia portrays the shockingly human character of the troubled academic or scholar, the unreliable who is obsessed with their intellectual pursuits up to the



point of self-destruction, ultimately succumbing to their own demons as a result of grappling with the tension between ethical and moral boundaries, because at the end “Tragedy, however sublime, tends to put the sublime in its place, so to speak. There is a powerful drive in tragedy to make sense of everything, if only after the fact, at the end of the play or in a “beyond” posited by the play” (Balfour 2005, 23).

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