



FOREIGN LITERATURES
ЗАРУБЕЖНЫЕ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2025-30-3-539-547

EDN: ABEMJW

UDC 821.111

Research article / Научная статья

**Donna Tartt's Novel *The Secret History* in the Context
of the Crisis of Postmodernism**

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Abstract. This study aims to identify the unique features of postmodernist and metamodernist discourse in D. Tartt's novel *The Secret History*. The synthesis of these characteristics enables the characterization of this work as a transitional phenomenon, reflecting the crisis of the fundamental attitudes of postmodernism and the formation of the artistic paradigm of metamodernism. The scientific novelty of the work is related to the shift of the text analysis perspective from the consideration of moral issues and genre uniqueness to the inclusion of the novel in the context of fundamental changes of the post-postmodern era. The findings of this study demonstrate that the poetics *The Secret History* are predominantly shaped by the distinctive characteristics of postmodernism, as manifested through the narrator's mosaic consciousness, the absence of moral and ethical imperatives, the intertextual inclusions that contribute to the novel's semantic field, and the dissolution of the dichotomy between 'elite' and 'mass' culture. The subsequent section aims to substantiate the thesis that D. Tartt's debut novel exhibits characteristics that transcend the postmodernist paradigm, thereby unveiling pivotal tendencies inherent in metamodernism: an appeal to the traumatic experience of the past, the issue of reflection, the articulation of authentic sentiments, and the aspiration to establish a cohesive social community, in contrast to the postmodern disconnectedness.

Keywords: D. Tartt, American literature, postmodernism, metamodernism, novel

Author's contribution. Development of the research idea, manuscript writing & editing – Polina Al. Tabakova; research data collection & analysis – Anna Yu. Perevezentseva. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Article history: submitted March 10, 2025; revised May 20, 2025; accepted June 25, 2025.

For citation: Tabakova, P.A., & Perevezentseva, A. Yu. (2025). Donna Tartt's Novel *The Secret History* in the Context of the Crisis of Postmodernism. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 30(3), 539–547. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2025-30-3-539-547>

Роман Донны Тартт «Тайная история» в контексте кризиса постмодернизма

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Аннотация. Цель исследования – выявление специфических черт постмодернистского и метамодернистского дискурса в романе Д. Тартт «Тайная история», синтез которых позволяет характеризовать произведение как переходное явление, отражающее кризис базовых установок постмодернизма и становление художественной парадигмы метамодернизма. Научная новизна работы связана со смещением ракурса анализа текста с рассмотрения нравственной проблематики и жанрового своеобразия на включение романа в контекст фундаментальных изменений эпохи пост-постмодернизма. Проведенное исследование позволяет сделать вывод, что поэтика «Тайной истории» во многом определяется спецификой эстетики постмодернизма. Это выражается в мозаичности сознания рассказчика и отсутствии морально-этических императивов, активности интертекстуальных включений, формирующих смысловое поле романа, разрушении противопоставления между «элитарной» и «массовой» культурой. Во второй части выдвигается и доказывается тезис о том, что дебютный роман Д. Тартт обладает чертами, выходящими за рамки постмодернистской парадигмы, в нем обнаруживаются ключевые тенденции, присущие метамодернизму: обращение к травмирующему опыту прошлого, проблеме рефлексии и выражения искренних переживаний, стремление к созданию устойчивой социальной общности в противовес постмодернистской разрозненности.

Ключевые слова: Д. Тартт, американская литература, постмодернизм, метамодернизм, роман

Вклад авторов. Разработка идеи исследования, написание и редактирование рукописи – А.Ю. Перевезенцева; сбор и анализ исследовательских данных – П.А. Табакова. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 10 марта 2025 г.; отрецензирована 20 мая 2025 г.; принята к публикации 25 июня 2025 г.

Для цитирования: Табакова П.А., Перевезенцева А.Ю. Роман Донны Тартт «Тайная история» в контексте кризиса постмодернизма // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2025. Т. 30. № 3. С. 539–547. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2025-30-3-539-547>

Introduction

The first novel by contemporary American writer, Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*, was published in 1992 and became a worldwide literary sensation: “an immediate critical and commercial success, one of those rare novels that makes as much of a splash in literary circles as it does on the bestseller lists” (Thorp, 2022). Despite having been subject to rigorous scrutiny in academic circles for three decades, the novel continues to be a controversial text, not only within the confines of academia but also in the broader media landscape. The recent resurgence of interest in Tartt’s oeuvre has been attributed to the influence of the internet, which has served to expand the readership of his work to include in the circle of Tartt’s admirers “a whole new generation Z” (Thorp, 2022). *The Secret History* proved to be a novel that united not only different generations but also cultural traditions.

The novel *The Secret History* by D. Tartt is included in the context of the epoch of aesthetic paradigm shift, when the postmodernist discourse is gradually levelled, and the characteristic features of postmodernist literature, such as the loss of historicity, the violence of simulacra, the strategies of deconstruction and rebellion, gradually lose their appeal and turn into a kind of stamps. There is a desire for ways to overcome the ‘indifferent irony’ and ‘insubstantiality’ of postmodernism (Morozov, 2019), to search for spiritual depth – or to return to it. Radical negation and postmodern sensibility generate a sense of insecurity (Hebdige, 2003), there is an alienation of human subjectivity due to its determination by external social constructs (Rectenwald, 2021). A pervasive sense of tension and decay is evident in the following themes: violence (*American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, 1991); disjointed and discrete reality (*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, 1992; *Underworld* by Donald Richard DeLillo, 1997); and transhumanism (*Vacuum Flowers* by Michael Swanwick, 1987).

From the critique of the position of negation come the tendencies characteristic of American literary practice of the 1990s to revive traditional forms, synthesis of experimental and traditional styles, accentuation of the personal and expansion of the canon by including previously marginalised voices, and multiculturalism. According to T. Savvas and K. Coffman, since about 1989 American literature has been turning to artistic verisimilitude, analysis of the material nature of the text, freedom from the ironic modus (Savvas, Coffman, 2019).

D. Tartt’s debut novel emerges in an environment of vulnerability of postmodernist consciousness – the space of the work is still subject to play, deconstruction and intertextual inclusions, but it already outlines the future trends of metamodernist literature – a special subjectivity, a departure from the linguistic determinism of poststructuralists. G. Lushnikova notes that “the boundary between postmodernism and post-postmodernism is very blurred, it is quite difficult to draw a demarcation line between specific works on this parameter. The task is complicated by the fact that even in the work of one writer there is a mixture of distinctly pronounced features of postmodernism and new trends described within the framework of post-postmodernism <...>” (Lushnikova, Osadchaya, 2021, p. 204).

Results and Discussion

D. Tartt's Novel *The Secret History* in the Postmodern Paradigm

The Secret History becomes a transitional work, as it synthesises the features of two cultural and worldview systems. Will firstly consider the postmodernist attitudes that are realised in Donna Tartt's debut novel.

Literary discourse problematises the nature of the correlation of ethical categories in *The Secret History*. However, the emphasis on the moralising beginning seems misleading, since the novel, which is very much in line with the postmodernist worldview, goes beyond the opposition between good and evil. It is worth recalling a telling moment of the travesty of the plot of *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky in Tartt's text: in the scene before Bunny's funeral, when Richard, at the sight of the tears of the murdered student's father, inwardly repents of his crime: "Oh, God... God help me, I'm sorry" (Tartt, 2004, p. 357), however in the very next paragraph the tragic tension is abruptly reduced by Mr Corcoran's disgruntled exclamations, and the sudden emotional change is completed by the father's inappropriate offer of a beer in the mournful state: "Any of you kids care for a beer?" (Tartt, 2004, p. 358). The art modality is then reconfigured again and returns to a confessional narrative: "I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them" (Tartt, 2004, p. 365).

Such a break in the tone of the text is characteristic of postmodernist fiction writing. The narrator Richard's consciousness, modelling reality, encounters external interference and generates ambiguity of perception – the general mood of inner repentance and accommodation of guilt is cut short, a situation of 'uncertainty' arises. The category of veracity in the postmodern work is blurred, clear binary oppositions disappear. *The Secret History* as a postmodern text is not centred around the idea of 'crime – punishment', but shifts the boundaries of stable ideas.

The category of the beautiful in the novel takes on the guise of the horrifying, the disgusting and the mortal: "Death is the mother of beauty", "terror", "terrible" (Tartt, 2004, pp. 38–39). Richard's courtesan admiration and adoration of Camilla is replaced by animal lust, a lust for a violent act. The divine and sacred appears not as an organising and ordering principle, but as a primordial and violent force: "let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn" (Tartt, 2004, p. 38). Here the postmodern sensibility that creates the continuous relativity of the artistic text manifests itself. Richard's vulnerable and susceptible consciousness emphasises details, shifts the focus, raises doubts about what is happening. The entire narrative is built on halftones, life appears to the narrator as elusive, unclear, and the impossibility of grasping reality is asserted: "couldn't quite get the drift of" (Tartt, 2004, p. 143).

The space of the text of the novel *The Secret History* is constructed through morbid consciousness, mythological and intertextual elements and descriptions of the transitional states of sleep and illness. The blurred boundaries between reality and dream/delusion, as well as discontinuous time, correspond to postmodern epistemological uncertainty. Like Deleuze's 'rhizome', haphazardly interwoven

and unconnected escapes, Tartt's text is branched, full of labyrinths of rooms and halls, disparate objects, and the interiors are characterised by landscape fluidity. The plot of the novel tends to be chaotic – the students' desire to live forever is embodied through an attempt to recreate a Dionysian mystery, to break the framework of habitual existence, to deconstruct the personality and to free themselves from the ego: “lose this maddening self, lose it entirely” (Tartt, 2004, p. 34). The fragmentation of the external affects the narrator's consciousness as well, which is clinicalised by schizophrenic symptoms. F. Jameson in his article *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* defines schizophrenia as one of the characteristics of the postmodern consciousness, understanding it as “an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (Jameson, 1987, p. 119). Similarly, Richard's mosaic thinking, which captures and concentrates specific images of space, mixes and deforms them – they either freeze or blur. The artistic space of the novel is devoid of structural and figurative constancy, postmodernistically “alien to the rigidity and closed conceptual constructions” (Chotchaeva, Sosnovsky, 2017, p. 179). Tartt's text is presented as “hyperreality”, where “fictions become fact, traditional signifiers lose meaning, and individuals seem lost and detached from a world that has come to seem fake and filmic to them” (Litzler, 2013, pp. 32–33).

Another feature of postmodernism in the novel *The Secret History* is intertextuality. Julia Kristeva, continuing the ideas of M. Bakhtin, defines such a contamination of texts as a “constant dialogue”. D. Tartt creates a highly allusive space in her novel, referring not only to works of antiquity, but also to medieval, realist and modernist literature. Such a dense and active intertext creates a semantic multilayering of the work and expands the interpretative field. In this way, the postmodernist idea of the plurality of reality is embodied – the narrative is illuminated by “a dazzle of fractured colour” (Tartt, 2004, p. 25) of past epochs. The artistic reality of *The Secret History* is inextricably linked to a host of other literary traditions, refracted and modified in the mind of the narrator: “Richard's own narrative re-writes or overwrites the meaning of the original text by snapping out of context scenes and phrases of his choosing...” (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 60). The novel recreates a range of literary and cultural practices – ancient Greek mysteries, funeral rites, sacrifices, medieval courtesies, military battles and desperate *jazz age* fun.

The multilayered and heterogeneous nature of the novel is also linked to the characteristic postmodernist breaking of the line between high and low art, which refers to Lyotard's “sunset of metanarratives”, the deconstruction of the canon and the collapse of big ideas in the cultural space. In the context of the genre's nature, the text represents “mixture of ‘high’ (philosophical novel, social satire, Bildungsroman) and ‘low’ (crime thriller, melodrama, campus novel) genres” (Mäkelä, 2022, p. 1505). The phenomena of mass art penetrate into the field of great literature, creating a special situation of division of reading plans: the reception of a work can be carried out at different levels, with decoding of those meanings that the reader is able to grasp. In the spirit of postmodern irony, Tartt synthesises elements of elitist academic and pretentious kitsch culture. The kitschy culture

gnaws at the monumentality of the events in the novel – the mystery action, murder and ritual purification are hidden under *Burger King* signs, posters of *The Fleshtones* and magazine clippings on the doors of dorm rooms.

It can be noted that the poetics of the novel *The Secret History* corresponds to many features of the postmodern worldview – the absence of a structured model of the world, chaotic, polydiscursive, a mixture of mass and elite culture. The narrator's consciousness is discrete and models a world that is not subject to clear moral and ethical categories.

The Crisis of Postmodernist Attitudes in the Novel as a Turn towards a Metamodernist Worldview

Despite the great influence of postmodern aesthetics on *The Secret History*, the work traces the features of the transition to a new cultural era. A clear distinction between postmodernist and metamodernist discourses is hardly possible, but it can be argued that the attempt to see in D. Tartt's debut work the features of the emerging artistic paradigm is productive.

Metamodernism is one of the modern concepts that seek to encompass and capture the reality after the decline of postmodernity. The term gained a foothold in academic discourse with the publication in 2010 of the essay *Notes on Metamodernism* by T. Vermeulen and R. van den Akker, in which the authors attempted to describe structural cultural phenomena originating in the 1990s. The concept emerges in response to the collapse of ideas of decentredness and the absence of veracity, when postmodernism, having levelled subjective experience and psychologism, begins to outlive itself. Metamodernism declares the rejection of cruel irony, indifference, imitation, cynicism and continuous play, offering instead of them “to rise from the bankruptcy of postmodernity” (Van den Akker, 2020, p. 45), “to reconstruct, revitalise discourse and grand narratives” (Serbinskaya, 2017). It is a search for “depth and spirituality” in the midst of a consumer society, nuclear crisis and ecological catastrophe. Metamodern consciousness grows up “on the rubble of twentieth-century surrealism and multiplicity” and seeks to “give man hope for life after simulacra” (Serbinskaya, 2017).

The key concepts of the trend are “new sincerity”, the return of historicity, the principle of “oscillation” (fluctuations between the irony and ambiguity of postmodernity and the “enthusiasm” and hope of modernity), the transition to neo-romanticism and magic realism. In the novel *The Secret History*, certain transitional tendencies are only outlined, and the turn to metamodernism is expressed in the internal conflict of postmodern ideas themselves.

In contrast to the crisis of postmodern irony, which took away from society the possibility of sincere representation and deep feeling, a special subjectivity of metamodern consciousness emerges, which exacerbates the problem of personal feeling. There is a need for true stories, psychologism and a shift from the primacy of construction to content. Richard's story is a retrospective living of trauma, a concentrated suffering around which the narrator's whole personality is centred.

The narrator's life is fractured – his childhood years have been forcibly erased from his memory, his adult life has been one of loneliness and social isolation.

The world-collage of the novel is governed by old and new gods, Christian morality and ancient Indian ideas, the structure of ancient thought and the disparate impressions of modernism. In this space, death appears as an extension of the labyrinth of life that neither ends suffering nor provides answers. Richard experiences his failure and tries to find a point of support in the company of friends. The narrator's deep reflection is not a postmodernist game, but rather a turn towards a metamodernist feeling, an emotional thrust. Richard seeks to register the experience of guilt without finding a suitable verbal expression for it. The state and behaviour of Julian's students after Bunny's murder is a metamodern flickering. None of them says directly what they feel and experience, because postmodernism has taken away the words for sincere expression. The characters experience the ethical experience of 'guilt', which, according to L. Wittgenstein, cannot be verbalised because it is 'supernatural' (Wittgenstein, 1989, p. 224), deeply personal and eludes the world of language. The attempt to talk about it again is a metamodernist desire to re-enter the subjective, inner consciousness.

It is also a transitional feature of the novel that the impossibility of creating a stable community along with the desire for it becomes a transitional feature. The postmodern consciousness is separated and feels the fragility of ties. Philosopher Byung-Chol Khan, analysing the society of the last decades, notes the breakdown of the opposition of *Self* and *Other*, which leads to the destruction of social relations and "deep tiredness" (Khan, 2023). Metamodernism contrasts the destruction of the individual and fragmentation with the need for socialisation, responding to the idea of individualism and personal responsibility that has become more acute in society. *The Secret History* is in many ways an exploration of the nature and limits of conviviality and the possibility of building intimacy in the modern world. Richard strives to find a sense of belonging and unity in "an amnesia-land, a kind of skewed Heaven where the old landmarks were recognizable but spaced too far apart, and disarranged" (Tartt, 2004, p. 346). His intense sense of otherness makes him want to join community of Julian's students. Richard moves from idealising his friends to recognising their individual characters and experiences. The relationship between Julian's students is painful and acute – Richard makes many assumptions in an attempt to find the root of their connection: "And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too" (Tartt, 2004, p. 7), "At one time I had liked the idea, that the act, at least, had bound us together; we were not ordinary friends, but friends till-death-do-us-part" (Tartt, 2004, p. 425). The recognition of addiction is lived painfully by the narrator: "I missed them more than I would have admitted" (Tartt, 2004, p. 140). Love and fear, hatred and care remain unspoken, withheld – the same problem of postmodern alienation of the individual, the crisis of language, is manifested.

Communication in the group is built on contrasts and extremes, including erotic attraction, envy, and cruelty. But the main thing that unites the classical students is the desire to escape from the world of the plastic soullessness of modernity, to

remain young, to embalm the experience of community, to live forever and know that everything will remain exactly as it is now.

Conclusion

D. Tartt's debut novel reflects the crisis of postmodernism paradigm emerging in the literature of the last decade of the twentieth century. Artistic techniques characteristic of postmodernism, are clearly manifested in this work, but new trends are also emerging. Postmodernist aesthetics is demonstrated in the deformation of artistic space, unstable perceptions of the boundaries of good and evil, perception of reality through the prism of distorted consciousness, painful irony. Active use of intertextual inclusions, the interaction of which turns out to be fundamentally important for the formation of the semantic field of the novel, is also a characteristic feature of postmodernism. At the same time, irony is accompanied by a desire for sincerity and spirituality, and moral nihilism coexists with mental anguish and remorse.

Therefore, the novel *The Secret History* is characterised not only by postmodern fragmentation and fluidity, but also by an appeal to inner tragedy. D. Tartt's novel is included in the context of the literature of trauma, rejection of chaotic and faceless modernity, existential fear of death and loneliness. The work actualises not a postmodern ironic and abstracted consciousness, but a vulnerable and sensitive metamodern consciousness.

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