

Amber Kolar

Dr. Goldsmith

February 12, 2019

WR 222

### Killer Rhetorical Analysis

“I recognize attempts at analysis are largely useless. ... I am sorry, as well, to present such a sketchy and disappointing exegesis” (Tartt 557). These are words from Richard Papen, the narrator and protagonist of *The Secret History* (a fictional novel written by Donna Tartt). Richard communicates this just after describing how he and his colleagues were able to murder one of their college classmates. Following a scanty description of his crime, Richard spends two sections of a chapter attempting to reflect on what he has done and having little luck. The argument he ultimately makes through his rhetoric is that even though the crime will always haunt him, it is too impossibly horrible to thoroughly comprehend; therefore, he claims, the murder by itself will never invoke in him any meaningful emotion or epiphany.

Throughout this reflective portion of *The Secret History*, although the narrator’s argument may be understandable to—and, at some points, even directed exclusively towards—the novel’s reader, the rhetoric suggests that the true intended audience is Richard himself: he, by writing this part of his story, is desperately trying to put a finger on what exactly his experience relating to the murder even is. One piece of the Richard’s rhetoric which helps to reveal this is a pair of anecdotes. At two different points in this passage, the narrator mentions how he has read about other notorious killers and describes in detail what he has found. While telling these stories, Richard uses logos by being objective with the comparisons he makes between himself and these other murderers, who he outright states are what he views as evil people (Tartt 552). “In a certain way, though, I know how my colleague feels” (Tartt 558), he—at one point—

specifically writes, referring to a serial killer from one of his stories. Moreover, Richard makes a move nearly opposite to defending himself after telling the first of his comparative anecdotes when he urges the reader, “chalk [these similarities] up to ... whatever you like” (Tartt 553). By writing all this, Richard is displaying that his goal in creating this passage has little to do with winning the favor of the reader; he is—in fact—indifferently inviting the reader to think anything about him while simultaneously providing reasons one might side against him. Therefore, these logically-told anecdotes are certainly not meant to persuade the reader of anything. However, the fact that Richard is comparing himself to these killers with so little bias does support the idea that he might be trying to find an experience he can relate to in order to make sense of his own. Other evidence suggests that the main thing at stake in this passage is the narrator’s own peace of mind. This evidence includes the explorative tone of the passage—created by diction such as “I’m not entirely sure” (Tartt 557) and “neither can I bring myself to believe” (Tartt 553)—as well as a constant vacillation between contrasting ideas. Richard’s vacillation is especially apparent in the first sentence of the passage: “I do not consider myself an evil person (though how like a killer that makes me sound!)” (Tartt 552). The only real conflict the narrator seems to see is a need to sort out his own thoughts and mental state. Richard’s disregard for the reader’s opinions paired with the nature of his comparative anecdotes only supports the idea that his troubled mind is creating the stasis of the passage. It is safe to assume that Richard is his own audience and that his relaxing his bewildered mind is his goal.

With this passage, Richard shows how he wishes he could fully grasp what he has done and come to terms with it, but what he ends up concluding is that his effort to do so is useless—that the surreal nature of the idea of having killed a colleague makes it impossible to comprehend. This message is communicated in several pieces throughout the passage. For

example, in a metaphor, Richard states that leading up to the murder he was to commit, he felt as if he and his accomplices “were plotting not the death of a friend but the itinerary of a fabulous trip that [he], for one, never quite believed [they]’d ever really take” (Tartt 556). This metaphor helps to illustrate a clearer image of how surreal this experience felt. To quote Richard’s diction, this whole situation formed an “air of unreality” (Tartt 555) that clouded what would have been his usual perspective. Another piece of the message is laid out when Richard explains, “I watched it all happen quite calmly—without fear, without pity, without anything but a kind of stunned curiosity—so that the impression of the event is burned indelibly upon my optic nerves, but absent from my heart” (Tartt 555). Here, Richard is juxtaposing his logical, cognitive experiences with his emotions to help break down the paradox of how—despite him failing to understand the magnitude of his friend’s murder emotionally—the crime is still something that haunts him enough that he feels the issue requires some sort of impossible, greater conclusion. It is because the memory is embedded in his mind that it follows him, even though it is so unreal that it is “devoid of emotional power” (Tartt 555). Because Richard takes the time to explain all this, it makes sense to assume that he is troubled by having the memory of his friend’s death follow him. As a matter of fact, this idea is confirmed when he makes the following personification: “Some things are too terrible to grasp at once. Other things—naked, sputtering, indelible in their horror—are too terrible to really ever grasp at all” (Tartt 558). The imagery Richard creates with this diction is harnessing pathos to explain that having his secret history follow him everywhere is entirely unpleasant. In fact, Richard’s use of the word “naked” (Tartt 558) specifically may even suggest that he feels exposed after what he did; this is a feeling brought on by shame. Unfortunately for the narrator, with this quote, he is also landing on the

conclusion that he may not ever be able to get over the shock of what he has done and experience the grieving which he believes to be necessary to come to terms with the murder and move on.

The narrator of *The Secret History* finds himself in a difficult situation after helping his colleagues murder a friend of his. The act of murder itself, he discovers, “seem[s] the easiest thing in the world” (Tartt 556), but that is only because he is putting himself in such a bizarre situation that the grief he ends up yearning to experience in order to move on is impossible for him to find. Therefore, he winds up being haunted by his seemingly-incomplete memory of the crime. This entire situation is so difficult for Richard to work out that he takes time to walk through it all rhetorically. However, even after these efforts, the only conclusion he comes to is that he may never reach a conclusion at all.

Works Cited

Tartt, Donna. *The Secret History*. 1st ed., vol. 1 1, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992, pp. 552-558.