



Key Vocabulary: The Secret History by Donna Tartt

Vocabulary Word	Definition	Context
Aberration	Deviation from what is normal or expected	"But why should that be such an aberration ?"
Acrid	Having an irritatingly strong and unpleasant taste or smell	"The kitchen was full of acrid smoke."
Alacrity	Brisk and cheerful readiness	"I set to work with alacrity and a sense of power."
Ambivalent	Having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone	"I was ambivalent about the whole thing."
Anathema	Something or someone that is intensely disliked or loathed	"To a scholar, the disappearance of a document is at worst an anathema - the scholarly equivalent of a mother's losing her child."
Avant-garde	New and experimental ideas and methods, especially in the arts, or the people introducing them	"The avant-garde groups have taken over the academy."
Bacchanal	A wild and drunken party or celebration	"We stumbled out of the bacchanal in the wee hours of the morning."
Capricious	Given to sudden and unaccountable changes of mood or behaviour	"But the gods are capricious and we are all hostages to fortune."
Chicanery	The use of trickery to achieve a political, financial, or legal purpose	"The newspapers, with their persistent insinuations of financial and political chicanery , would have been enough to drive anyone mad."
Dionysian	Relating to the sensual, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of human nature, often in contrast to the rational and ordered Apollonian aspects	"His art was more Dionysian than Apollonian, emphasizing emotion and instinct over reason and order."
Dishevelled	Untidy, disordered in appearance	"His long, dishevelled hair fell into his eyes."
Ennui	A feeling of listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from a lack of occupation or excitement	"He was consumed by ennui , feeling like he had nothing to look forward to."
Ephemeral	Lasting for a very short time	"The visit was ephemeral , but the memory was lasting."
Esoteric	Intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest	"The program she designed was esoteric and extremely complicated."
Expiate	Atone for (guilt or sin)	"He felt he had a debt to expiate ."



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Harbinger	A person or thing that announces or signals the approach of another	"The crocus is a harbinger of spring."
Hypnagogic	Relating to the state immediately preceding sleep	"He experienced hypnagogic hallucinations as he drifted off to sleep."
Incipient	In an initial stage, beginning to happen or develop	"He could feel a heady sense of triumph at the incipient thought."
Ineffable	Too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words	"The ineffable beauty of the sun setting over the mountains took my breath away."
Inscrutable	Impossible to understand or interpret	"His face was inscrutable ."
Languid	Displaying or having a disinclination for physical exertion or effort; slow and relaxed	"He gave a languid wave of his hand."
Languor	The state or feeling, often pleasant, of tiredness or inertia	"She lay in the hammock, feeling a sense of languor wash over her."
Lugubrious	Looking or sounding sad and dismal	"His lugubrious expression belied his inner joy."
Myriad	A countless or extremely great number of people or things	"The night sky was filled with a myriad of stars."
Obsequious	Obedient or attentive to an excessive or servile degree	"He was surrounded by a group of obsequious followers."
Ostensible	Stated or appearing to be true, but not necessarily so	"The ostensible reason for his visit was to discuss business, but I knew he had another agenda."
Paragon	A person or thing regarded as a perfect example of a particular quality	"She was a paragon of beauty and grace."
Pernicious	Having a harmful effect, especially in a gradual or subtle way	"The pernicious effects of social media on mental health are well-documented."
Prevaricate	Speak or act in an evasive way	"He tried to prevaricate when asked about his involvement in the scandal."
Proclivity	A tendency to choose or do something regularly; an inclination or predisposition toward a particular thing	"His proclivity for gambling landed him in deep debt."
Prodigal	Spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant	"He had lived a prodigal lifestyle, squandering his family's wealth."
Quixotic	Extremely idealistic; unrealistic and impractical	"His quixotic dreams of changing the world were admirable but unrealistic."



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Rococo	Characterized by an elaborately ornamental late baroque style of decoration that was popular in 18th-century Europe	"The palace was decorated in an elaborate rococo style, with intricate carvings and gilded details."
Sardonic	Grimly mocking or cynical	"He gave a sardonic smile and said, 'Oh, great. Another meeting.'"
Scintillating	Sparkling or shining brightly; brilliantly and excitingly clever or skillful	"The conversation was scintillating , filled with wit and humor."
Solipsistic	Relating to or characterized by the theory that only the self exists or can be proved to exist	"He had a solipsistic worldview, believing that only his own perceptions were real."
Sycophant	A person who acts obsequiously toward someone important in order to gain advantage	"He was nothing but a sycophant who would do anything to curry favor with the boss."
Transgress	Infringe or go beyond the bounds of (a moral principle or other established standard of behaviour)	"He had transgressed the bounds of common decency."
Ubiquitous	Present, appearing, or found everywhere	"The iPhone is now ubiquitous in modern society."
Visceral	Relating to deep inward feelings rather than to the intellect	"Her reaction was visceral - she felt it in her gut."
Vitriolic	Filled with bitter criticism or malice	"He launched into a vitriolic attack on his opponent."
Zealot	A person who is fanatical and uncompromising in pursuit of their religious, political, or other ideals	"He was a zealot who would stop at nothing to further his cause."

Historical and political context of the book

"The Secret History" is a novel by Donna Tartt that was first published in 1992. The book is set in the United States, specifically in a small liberal arts college in Vermont, during the 1980s. While the story takes place in a relatively modern setting, it is heavily influenced by both historical and literary traditions.

One of the key historical influences on the novel is the concept of the "Secret Societies" that were prevalent in many American universities during the 19th and 20th centuries. These societies were often shrouded in secrecy, and their members were drawn from the upper echelons of society. Many of these societies were exclusive and selective, and they often engaged in rituals and practices that were frowned upon or even prohibited by the university administrations.



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The political context of the novel is also important, as it was written during a time of significant cultural and political change in the United States. The 1980s were marked by a conservative political climate, with the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Christian Right. At the same time, however, there was also a countercultural movement that was characterized by a rejection of traditional values and an embrace of alternative lifestyles and worldviews.

Tartt's novel reflects both of these trends, as it portrays a group of students who are deeply alienated from mainstream society and who reject the values and norms of the university community. At the same time, however, the novel also contains elements of traditionalism and conservatism, particularly in its portrayal of the classics and its emphasis on the importance of knowledge and learning. Overall, "The Secret History" can be seen as a commentary on the changing nature of American culture and the tensions that exist between tradition and innovation, conformity and rebellion.