

# The Secret History Vs If We Were Villains



**The Secret History vs If We Were Villains** are two remarkable novels that explore themes of art, friendship, and the complexities of youth. Both

stories delve into the lives of students immersed in the world of literature and performance, yet they take different paths in their exploration of morality, ambition, and the darker sides of human nature. This article will compare and contrast these two works, focusing on their themes, character development, and narrative styles, as well as their impact on the reader.

## Overview of the Novels

### The Secret History

Published in 1992, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* follows a group of elite students studying ancient Greek at a small liberal arts college in Vermont. The narrative is framed by a murder, which sets the tone for a suspenseful exploration of the characters' psychological and moral dilemmas. Central to the story is Richard Papen, a transfer student who becomes enamored with a tight-knit group led by the enigmatic professor Julian Morrow.

### If We Were Villains

On the other hand, M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*, released in 2017, tells the story of a group of Shakespearean actors at an elite arts conservatory. The novel opens with the aftermath of a murder, leading readers through a series of flashbacks that reveal the complex relationships among the characters. The protagonist, Oliver Marks, finds himself entangled in a web of ambition, jealousy, and betrayal, as the group's obsession with Shakespeare blurs the lines between reality and performance.

## Thematic Exploration

Both novels delve into the theme of art and its influence on life, but they do so through different lenses.

### Art and Morality

- *The Secret History*: Here, art serves as a catalyst for moral ambiguity. The characters are deeply influenced by their studies of Greek philosophy and literature, often grappling with the ethical implications of their actions. The pursuit of beauty and intellect leads them to rationalize heinous acts, raising questions about the cost of art and the nature of evil.

- *If We Were Villains*: Conversely, *If We Were Villains* explores art as a

means of self-expression and identity. The characters' passion for Shakespeare fuels their actions, but it also becomes a double-edged sword. The dialogue and themes of the plays bleed into their real lives, leading to a tragic outcome that highlights the dangers of losing oneself in a role.

## Friendship and Betrayal

Both novels emphasize the complexities of friendship, particularly among young adults who are still forming their identities.

- The relationships in *The Secret History* are marked by an intense bond that quickly deteriorates into betrayal and violence. Richard's desire to belong leads him to make morally dubious choices, ultimately resulting in tragic consequences for the group.

- In *If We Were Villains*, the friendships are equally intense, but they are framed within the context of performance. The characters' relationships are tested by jealousy and rivalry, as their passion for acting creates an environment where betrayal is almost inevitable. The line between love and hate becomes blurred, leading to a heartbreaking climax.

## Character Development

Characterization plays a crucial role in both novels, drawing readers into the psyche of each protagonist and their peers.

## Complex Characters in *The Secret History*

Tartt's characters are meticulously crafted, each representing different facets of intellectualism and morality:

1. Richard Papen: The outsider who becomes embroiled in the group, serving as the lens through which readers experience their world.
2. Bunny Corcoran: A charismatic yet self-serving character whose presence is pivotal to the group's dynamics.
3. Camilla and Charles Macaulay: Siblings who embody contrasting traits of loyalty and ambition, adding depth to the group's complexity.
4. Henry Winter: The intellectual leader, whose charisma and manipulation drive much of the plot.

The depth of these characters adds layers to the narrative, making their eventual downfall more tragic.

# Dynamic Characters in If We Were Villains

Rio's characters, while equally complex, are more archetypal, representing various aspects of the artistic struggle:

1. Oliver Marks: The protagonist whose perspective shapes the narrative, revealing his internal conflicts as he navigates the pressures of artistry and friendship.
2. Jasmin and Wren: Strong female characters who challenge traditional gender roles within the context of Shakespearean performance.
3. The Four Male Friends: Each represents different facets of masculinity and ambition, which play a crucial role in the unfolding tragedy.

While the characters in *If We Were Villains* may feel more familiar to readers, their struggles resonate deeply with anyone who has grappled with identity in the arts.

## Narrative Style

The narrative styles of both novels contribute significantly to their impact on the reader.

### First-Person vs. Third-Person Narration

- *The Secret History* employs a first-person narration that immerses readers in Richard's thoughts and emotions. This perspective creates intimacy, allowing readers to experience his internal conflicts and moral dilemmas firsthand.

- In contrast, *If We Were Villains* utilizes a third-person, omniscient narrator, providing a broader view of the ensemble cast. This style allows for multiple perspectives on the events, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the characters' lives and the inevitability of their tragic fate.

## Pacing and Structure

- Tartt's novel features a slow, deliberate pacing that builds tension over time, mirroring the gradual descent into chaos experienced by the characters. The structure is non-linear, with flashbacks enhancing the mystery surrounding the murder.

- Rio's novel also utilizes a non-linear structure, but it leans more towards a fast-paced narrative that reflects the urgency of youth and the pressures of performance. The dialogue is rife with Shakespearean references, adding

layers of meaning to the characters' interactions.

## **Conclusion: Impact and Reception**

Both *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* have garnered critical acclaim and a devoted readership. They resonate with anyone who has experienced the intensity of youth, the pursuit of art, and the complexities of friendship.

- *The Secret History* is often praised for its literary depth and psychological insight. It has become a classic, influencing a generation of writers and readers interested in the darker aspects of academia and intellectualism.

- *If We Were Villains*, while perhaps less widely known, has created a niche following among fans of Shakespeare and contemporary young adult literature. Its exploration of the intersection between life and art has resonated deeply, leading to discussions about the nature of performance and identity.

In conclusion, while *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* tackle similar themes of art, friendship, and morality, they do so in distinct ways that reflect the unique voices of their authors. Both novels leave a lasting impact, inviting readers to ponder the complexities of human nature and the often-blurred lines between reality and fiction.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What are the main themes explored in 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains'?**

'The Secret History' delves into themes of elitism, morality, and the consequences of intellectual arrogance, while 'If We Were Villains' explores friendship, betrayal, and the performative nature of identity, particularly in the context of Shakespearean influences.

### **How do the settings of 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains' influence the narratives?**

'The Secret History' is set in an elite college environment that fosters a sense of isolation and intellectual superiority, while 'If We Were Villains' takes place in a more theatrical setting, emphasizing the performative aspects of the characters' lives and their relationships.

## **In what ways do the character dynamics differ between 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains'?**

'The Secret History' features a more complex, often toxic dynamic among a small group of students, highlighting jealousy and moral decay, whereas 'If We Were Villains' focuses on a tight-knit group of friends and the impact of their Shakespearean roles on their real-life interactions.

## **How do the authors of 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains' use literary references?**

Donna Tartt in 'The Secret History' uses classical literature as a backdrop for philosophical discussions, while M.L. Rio in 'If We Were Villains' directly incorporates Shakespearean plays into the plot, reflecting the characters' lives and drawing parallels between their personal dramas and the plays.

## **What psychological elements are present in both 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains'?**

Both novels explore psychological themes such as obsession, identity crisis, and the impact of peer pressure. Characters in both stories grapple with their desires and the dark sides of their ambitions, leading to tragic consequences.

## **How do the endings of 'The Secret History' and 'If We Were Villains' differ in terms of resolution?**

'The Secret History' concludes with a sense of unresolved tension and ambiguity regarding the characters' fates, while 'If We Were Villains' offers a more definitive resolution, albeit with lingering questions about the nature of guilt and redemption.

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