

IV. Imagination: Fictionalizations of the Elite Educational Experience

1. Introductory Remarks

When John Humperdink Stover boards the train to New Haven, “leisurely divest[ing] himself of his trim overcoat” (1) in guarded anticipation of “[f]our glorious years, good times, good fellows” (Johnson 13) at Yale College, he is one of the first fictional characters to explore, and thus to an extent to create, the elite educational space. Part football fiction, part poignant social critique, Owen Johnson’s 1912 novel *Stover at Yale* stands at the beginning of a long and rich literary tradition in the United States, a tradition that produced some of the most popular and commercially successful narratives along with some of the most memorable protagonists in the American cultural inventory.¹ Its present obscurity notwithstanding, *Stover* was immensely successful both as a college story and as a critical intervention in debates about education and snobbery at Yale; and numerous references in later works of fiction attest to the novel’s lasting influence in shaping the image of collegiate America—it was, after all, the “text-book” (33) guiding Amory Blaine and his classmates through their years at Princeton in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s debut novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920).

In his article on “Academic Novels” in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* (2002), Rob Morris explains in a somewhat prosaic manner that campus fiction is concerned with two main questions: “What happens on a college campus? and What is college for?” (1). Even a cursory glance at the many instantiations of the genre demonstrates, however, that fictional explorations of the (elite) educational space do much more than that. Campus novels, films, and television series contribute, in various ways, to conversations about class,

1 *Catcher in the Rye*, *Love Story*, and *Dead Poets Society*, to name but a few examples.

stratification, and (in)equality; they offer powerful negotiations of the implications of race and gender in institutional settings; they ask pertinent questions about the issues of belonging, Americanness, merit and mobility. For many of us, moreover, they are the first and often primary source of information and imagery to explain what elite education is and does. Fictional texts thus form a seminal part of the epistemology of elite education in the United States—a blue print, almost, of how to experience and understand the elite campus—and, as such, they constitute some of the most important primary materials to examine in this study.

This chapter explores the epistemological mode of imagination and its contributions to the discourse of elite education by way of a comprehensive analysis of Curtis Sittenfeld's 2005 novel *Prep*. The chapter's position in the book—preceded by the analyses of sociological and journalistic studies and self-representational materials—is not coincidental: I propose to read the realm of fiction as an imaginative space that embraces the critical-analytical as well as the affirmative mode of knowledge production. The unique epistemological contribution of fictional texts to the discourse, I suggest, is their ability to contain and complicate the various contradictions and the 'messiness' of elite education in the United States. In so doing, fictional texts add to the overall ambiguity of the elite educational experience and its cultural ramifications. They reiterate and thus consolidate its peculiar charisma and attraction, but they also expose some of the utopian positions presented by the critical materials—most notably the possibility of a classless eliteness—as faulty and impossible to put into practice.

In choosing Sittenfeld's novel, which is set at a boarding school rather than a university, I depart from the focus on the collegiate space that has characterized the previous two chapters. There are a number of reasons for this decision: First, exclusive high schools, and prep schools in particular, form an important part of the system of elite education—a "set of tightly interlocking parts," as Deresiewicz calls it, that consists not only of colleges and universities, but also includes "private and affluent public high schools" (2). Second, prep school novels form an important subgenre of the student-centered campus novel, from classics such as John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959) to more recent publications like Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2003) or Christine Schutt's *All Souls* (2009). By and large, they follow the same conventions as the collegiate campus novel with regard to structure and content—the protagonist, usually a social and cultural outsider, enters the exclusive campus and has to navigate his or her new surroundings, often feeling overwhelmed

and out of place. The similarities between the two variants of the genre are reflected, moreover, in Walter Benn Michaels's decision to discuss *Prep* alongside Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), a novel that resembles *Prep* quite closely in all respects but its collegiate setting. The connection between prep school and college in the realm of fiction is also illustrated by the journey of Owen Johnson's protagonist Stover, who migrates from his prep school in *The Lawrenceville Stories* (1910) to college in *Stover at Yale* (1912). A third reason for focusing on *Prep* is that the novel's treatment of the issues that interest me in this study—merit, class, eliteness—is exceptionally nuanced and productive, and thus lends itself well to analysis. The text's main insights, moreover, apply to the collegiate realm as much as the prep school, and its analysis therefore complements and enriches my exploration of the epistemology of elite education in important ways.

In the following, I proceed in three steps: I begin with a brief expository section that discusses the role of fiction in the discourse of elite education and reflects on the ambivalent treatment of campus novels in the popular and critical landscape. The second section, "*Prep* in the Discourse," explores in detail the position of the novel in its different discursive contexts: publicity and marketing, professional and lay reviews, and academic criticism. The highly successful marketing campaign that accompanied *Prep*'s publication, I suggest, positioned the novel in a depoliticized discourse revolving around the nodal point 'preppiness'. The reviews, by contrast, followed a markedly different trajectory and emphasized *Prep*'s engagement with the issues of class, status, and agency. Academic criticism, the last discursive position I discuss in this section, focused on the novel's alleged affirmation of certain grand narratives of the neoliberal era. Walter Benn Michaels places *Prep* squarely within what he calls the 'neoliberal imagination', and argues that the scholarship novel as such serves to strengthen the illusion of class diversity at elite institutions. He furthermore faults *Prep* for rephrasing the problem of inequality in the rhetoric of identity. While I partly agree with his conclusions, I also contend that *Prep* is more complicated than that. The novel refuses to follow the structure of the neoliberal narrative of mobility qua merit, and instead confronts the reader with a protagonist who is passive, static, and almost paralyzed by her circumstances. I argue that in so doing, *Prep* continually pushes the reader herself into the position of the neoliberal observer, thus opening up the potential for both affirmation and subversion of neoliberal values.

The third section, "*Prep*'s Cultural Work," offers a close reading of the text itself and discusses its engagement with diversity, class, and merit/mobility. I

begin with an examination of the social taxonomy the protagonist, Lee Fiora, proposes to make sense of her elite surroundings. Lee and the elite school both, I argue, embrace what I call the ‘diversity paradigm’, a semiotic structure that allows for, and sometimes even encourages, conversations about some identity markers (race, ethnicity, and gender) while rendering others—especially class—invisible. In its appropriation of the diversity paradigm the novel is firmly in line with current instrumentalizations of multiculturalism as a means of masking socio-economic inequality. In a second step, I discuss in some detail the ways in which the narrative, driven and guided by the protagonist, articulates class and the various cultural and social implications of socio-economic otherness. In its complex and multilayered treatment of class, *Prep* contributes important insights to the discourse of elite education. Lee’s attempts at navigating Ault’s social landscape demonstrate the ‘peculiar dialectics’ of class (Jones) as a category located at the intersection of material and psycho-cultural factors. The narrative’s insistence on the relevance of class and on the importance of affect and embodiment in the performance and experience of socio-economic otherness constitute a much-needed intervention into a discourse that is all too often concerned primarily with questions of access and statistical representation. In the third and concluding part, I return to the notion of mobility through merit and interrogate the ways in which it relates to an expanded conception of a neoliberal imagination and aesthetics. *Prep* complicates its own stance toward the hegemonic value system by subverting the ‘normalcy of mobility’ (Jones)—though whether this inspires a critical politics of resistance against the dominant neoliberal narratives of what it means to be(come) a deserving, successful human being or an affirmation of these very narratives seems to remain within the eye of the beholder.

2. Exposition: Fiction in the Discourse of Elite Education

Campus fiction, regardless of whether it focuses on prep schools or colleges, is a staple of the American cultural imagination in general, and of the discourse of elite education in particular. What, beyond mere entertainment, is the epistemological contribution of this kind of fiction? The British novelist and academic Malcom Bradbury describes the importance campus novels assumed for him as a first-generation college student as follows: