

The Promise of Art in Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch

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Abstract

The Goldfinch deals with a long wandering and eventful journey through present day America, captivating one's attention and acuteness. It is a novel of shocking narrative energy and power. It combines unforgettable authentic characters; spellbinding language, and breath-taking suspense; with a philosopher's calm the deepest mysteries of love, identity and art. It's a beautiful, a triumphant, coming-of-age novel, and an old-fashioned story of loss and obsession, survival and self-invention, and the ruthless machinations of fate. This paper is about the importance of art in one's life. In the loss and obsession, the painting of a yellow finch holds Theo, the protagonist of the novel which leads him into the art underworld. The painting becomes a reminder and survivor in the life of Theo. And, it also proves that the Art may addict, saving a person from the ungainly sadness of creatures by pushing and makes them to struggle to live.

KEYWORDS: captivating, acuteness, coming-of-age, old-fashioned, self-invention, survivor, addict.

The Modern period begins around the turn of the 20th century and has its roots in the late Victorian transition from widespread belief in art as a vehicle for pleasure and instruction towards the belief in "art for art's sake." The sense of alienation – i.e., the distance between the serious artist and the general public that marked the early twentieth century has grown out of this sense of art for art's sake. A widening gulf is emerged between and so it is called serious art and popular art. At the dawn of the 20th century, many people had lost their faith in institutional, cultural, or social foundations that could provide stability in the world. The development of psychoanalysis and of comparative mythology in the early 20th century also had a profound impact on artists of the time. Thus, the Modern novels typically focus on themes like the individual in society and the temporality of human existence.

Donna Tartt is a Roman Catholic American writer born in Greenwood, Mississippi on December 23, 1963 and raised in the nearby town of Grenada. She did her B.A., in Bennington College and lives in New York. She has written three novels. They are The Secret History (1992), The Little Friend (2002), and The Goldfinch (2013). And, she won many prizes and awards for her novels. She got WH Smith Literary Award for the novel,

The Little Friend in 2003 and the Pulitzer Prize (Fiction) for the novel, *The Goldfinch* in 2014 and she has been considered as one among the 100 most influential people in 2014.

Tartt enrolled herself in the University of Mississippi in 1981 and so her writing has caught the attention of Willie Morris while she is in the undergraduate. Following a recommendation from Morris, Barry Hannah, then an Ole Miss Writer-in-Residence, admits eighteen-year-old Tartt into his graduate short story course. Hannah addresses Tartt as a deeply literary, rare genius and a literary star.

Tartt's works contain lot of literary themes in them. A number of recurring literary themes occur in Tartt's novels, including those related to social class and social stratification, guilt and aesthetic beauty. The *New Yorker's* critic, James Wood writes: "It's tone, language, and story belong in children's literature" (*The New Yorker*, *The New Curiosity Shop*) and Wood expands his opinion for *Vanity Fair*: "Tartt's novel is not a serious one...it tells a fantastical, even ridiculous tale, based on absurd and improbable premises" (*The New Yorker*, *The New Curiosity Shop*). Thus, the critics say that Tartt's novels were filled with high literary themes such as art, loss, culture, identity and love. The line from the recent *Vanity Fair* Article states that: "It's Tartt - But Is It Art?" (*The Huffington* post).

This paper is on her long-awaited third novel, *The Goldfinch*. The plot centers on a young boy named Theo Decker in New York City whose mother is killed in an accident. He is alone and determines to avoid being taken in by the city as an orphan. And so, he climbs between nights and in friends' apartments and on the city streets. He is captivated by a small, mysterious painting of a goldfinch, which reminds him of his mother and it soon takes him into the art underworld.

The present paper undertakes 'The Promise of Art in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*.' Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. In that way, *The Goldfinch* is a triumph with a brave theme running through it. Stephen King says that, Art may addict, but art also saves us from "the ungainly sadness of creatures pushing and struggling to live" (*The New York Times Book Review*). According to a critic, "Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* is a giant masterpiece about a small masterpiece by Carel Fabritius" (*The Times*, *Books of the Year*). He is a celebrated student of Rembrandt, the Dutch painter. In this novel, the author describes the famous tragedy in Dutch history. It is the explosion of gunpowder factory which destroys a huge part of the town. The disaster at Delft in the 1600s kills Fabritius, his studio and almost all of his paintings.

The loss of his paintings haunts him and he is obsessed by the destruction of his city. Fabritius is one of the greatest painters of his day, and the greatest ages of painting. Among all his works, some of the paintings survive, after explosion. But here in Donna Tartt's, '*Goldfinch*' survives till last and it draws the protagonist of the novel, who longs for his mother's love into the underworld of art. Here, the novelist places Fabritius's tiny bird at the center of a voluminous story that soars across the United States and around the planet, lighting on themes of beauty, family and destiny.

Art is a recurring theme in this novel. Tartt's new novel, *The Goldfinch* reveals the promise of art in the life of a young boy, Theo who survives from the fictional bombing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and also meets another catastrophe in New York. A dying stranger instructs Theo to save Carel Fabritius's 1654 painting of a goldfinch. In Museum, Theo gains a painting but he loses his mother. He longs for his mother's love and he clings to one thing that reminds him of her: a small, mysteriously captivating painting which ultimately takes him into the art underworld. He feels alienated from love and throws himself at the center of a narrowing, ever more dangerous circle, but the only thing which comforts him at last is his stolen art, that the painting of a bird.

Tartt describes that, "the goldfinch painting is a constant motif: a source of anxiety; a note of beauty; a reminder of the past; a spiralling life of crime. The bird in the painting is chained at the foot and it is also an emblem of the melancholy that pervades the book, and a symbol of art's capacity to last contrasted with the fragility of life" (Metro, Donna Tartt's *The goldfinch*: Attention grabbing and satisfyingly thoughtful).

Theo's mother is an art lover; she likes the portrait paintings of Frans Hals, a Dutch Golden Age portrait painter during her period. She spends some time in front of a Hals portrait of a boy holding a skull. One day, on the way to school, because of rain, Theo and his mother takes shelter inside the museum. While she walks in the museum, Theo leans forward and looks at the painting of his survivor, 'Goldfinch'. Like his mother, Theo also becomes a lover of art. Thus, the art and the paintings of great master's influence them.

At once, the terrorist's bomb explodes in the Museum of Art and it kills his mother. In a strange, mesmerizing episode in the midst of terror and chaos, Theo encounters an elderly man, Welty Blackwell and a girl named Pippa. Then, he escapes from the Museum bombing by clutching a tiny, priceless painting of a chained bird by Dutch Old Master. Later that night, he learns that his mother is among the dead.

The loss haunts Theo and he finds his life adrift in this condition. The only thing which consoles him from the past incidents is his stolen painting from the Museum of Art. Social workers settle him in a safe place and he reaches the house of Mr. Barbour. With his painting, Theo lives in Barbour's house. Here, Theo considers the painting of the bird as a living one and it comforts him from all worries and sorrows.

In the museum, Theo meets an elderly man named Welty, the business partner of Hobie who gives him a ring of his family heirloom and asks him to return it to Hobie. When Theo enters into the workshop of Hobie, he finds some of his works in the shop. Theo has been influenced by Hobie's works of art and describes Hobie's kitchen as, "On the sideboard alongside a silver tea set, painted animals straggled two by two into a Noah's Ark" (146). Hobie explains himself to Theo about his art of Noah's Ark and says that, it is one of his first antiques that he ever buys it, thirty years ago.

As a lover of art, Theo reveals all about his past memories and his stolen painting to Hobie. Because, after taking the painting from museum bombing, Theo happens to see a tiny black and white photo of the painting in the business section of the Times. The only thing which catches his eyes is the caption under the photo: "The Goldfinch, Carel

Fabritius's 1654 masterpiece, destroyed" (196). Here, Theo quotes the text from Times about his painting: "The loss of even one of these pieces is impossible to quantify...Along with the twelve pieces lost and presumed destroyed, another 27 works were badly damaged, although restoration, for some, is possible. In what may seem a futile gesture to many, the Art Loss Database" (196). So, Theo plans to give the painting either to Hobie or Mrs. Barbour.

Theo cares and likes the painting as a living thing. He keeps the painting inside the bag and put it under the sofa in his mother's dark and cool bedroom. Then, he wraps the painting, sheet by sheet, and tapes it up with the same tape that he uses a few months before to wrap his mother's Christmas present. He hides the painting under his bed, because it always seems to be like the safest place in the world to hide something. Thus, Theo likes the painting very much and so he hides it in the safest place.

Theo decides to leave the suitcase in the package room of his old building, where he feels sure that the doormen, Jose and Goldie will look after it. While leaving New York, Theo escapes from the doormen by not tagging the suitcase or entering it into the official record with the help of his doormen, Goldie. In the airport, there are lots of police and stiff with fear, he expects that the security will open his suitcase and discover the painting in the check-in line. But, the police never doubt him so Theo and his painting escape from a dangerous situation.

In Las Vegas, at Xandra's house, Theo plans to remove the wrapper from the painting. But, he hesitates to take the paper off. The painting slides out more easily than he expects and he finds a gasp of pleasure in himself. Because, for the first time he sees the painting in the light. The muted colours of the painting blooms with life.

Theo says that, the goldfinch steadily gazes at him, with shiny, changeless eyes. It shows the love and care of Theo towards his painting and also the way that he treats it as a living one and spends all his days and nights with it. The only thing which strikes in his mind every time is about the painting. After the death of Theo's mother, the painting is his only comfort. So he takes it with him wherever he goes.

In that way, he takes it to Las Vegas and brings his painting safely to home by covering it into the pillowcase. During night, Theo wakes up and grapples under his bed to make sure the pillowcase is still there or not. It shows that, every time Theo thinks and dreams about the painting and it looks rich, dark and light-absorbing ground for him. He describes the bird in the painting as: "yellow feathers, flash of crimson and bright black eyes" (427). Thus, the painting draws Theo into the underworld of art.

When Theo becomes disappointed in his life and passes a newsstand, there he finds a headline: 'Museum Masterwork's Recovered in Bronx Millions in Stolen Art.' He reads that police has recovered three paintings which has been missed from the museum since the explosion from a Bronx home. The news, it is a pages-long article and they mention that, in this incident, the police arrested the whole family regarding the matter. It is Rembrandt's painting costs forty million as it values in early times.

Theo dedicates his life to art by selecting the course of studio art in his early-college programme. He spends his nights by reading Eugene O'Neill, the United States playwright's books or one of Welty's many furniture books or Janson's fat and satisfying History of Art. Theo doesn't know anything about the painting, since he attains fifteen years old. He tucks it under his arm and walks out with it. The sight of the bundle seems to be lonely and pathetic. Mr. Lucius Reeve, a swindler who lives in New York and preys upon wealthy blackmails Theo by saying that the art has been taken by him. It makes him to worry about much for his painting, but the man, Reeve doesn't know where the painting is or the details about it.

The painting of Theo undergoes a cleaning in the early nineties; it is the period of post-conservation. Horst, the art lover from Germany and the friend of Boris says that he knows the painting of Theo's 'Goldfinch'. He likes the painting very much because it appeals to a child. Ulrika, a girl who loves Horst for money, her brother named Sascha plans to steal the painting from Theo to clear his debts. But, their plan fails and doesn't work out in selling the painting of Theo. Horst takes care of that painting like his own baby. In Theo's obsession about his past life, the painting remains with him as a tiny fragment of spirit, faint spark and bobbing on a dark sea.

The painting remains in Boris' car and so, his car driver, Anatoly goes to pick up Theo's painting. But, Sascha steals the painting of Theo and the friend of Horst, Georgian, an art collector helps him to find the painting of a little yellow bird. With the painting, Boris, Theo and the friends of Boris happily travel in the car after a great incident. At that time, Boris lifts the briefcase and takes 40 rocks from it. Then, he divides it and gives it to Gyuri and Shirley T., the friends of Boris for their kind service.

Boris promises Theo, that he will take care of his painting. But, Theo's fingertips run around the edges of the board seem to be doubts like Thomas across the palm of Christ. Boris wraps and ties the painting safely and tucks it under his arm. Still that time, Theo's condition seems to be very high and coming down. He falls in and out of vivid waking dreams about his past life as uncut diamonds and glittering black insects. He dreams about his mother constantly, only as absence, not presence. In the morning, when he opens his eyes, he finds Boris in front of him. Theo pleases Boris to take the painting far from him. But, Boris gives two million euro as his Christmas gift to Theo and says that it is the reward money for the information regarding the recovery of painting.

Boris has some idea about the painting from where they get it. There is an apartment in Frankfurt; it belongs to the old girlfriend of Sascha. It is the place where the people keep the stuff safely. Dima, the boy who works under Theo and whose cousin's sister-in-law marries a Dutchman called Anton, a Dutch citizen. He helps them by informing the art police about the paintings and tells it has been taken by the Germans that he knows while they discuss in the bar. He shows the cop, the picture of finch that he has seen, it is their plan. Thus, they get ransom, the museum gets the painting, the cops get to close the case, insurance company gets its money back, public is edified and everyone wins at last.

Boris seems to be very happy, because they get rewards for the painting as "one of great art recoveries of history" (830). Boris gives the reward money to his friends as his Christmas gift and thirty per cent of the money to Anton and Dima. Then, he says that in

the multiple works of historic greatness, one of the famous Dutch painters is Rembrandt. Horst also likes that painting, which is in the hands of Theo very much and it seems to be the only comfort for Theo in his loneliness. Horst says: "It's one of the most famous paintings in the world" (832).

When Theo loses his stolen painting, Boris convinces Theo by telling him about the arrival of painting in Theo's life in these lines: "Well, if you didn't take picture from museum, and Sascha didn't steal it back, and I didn't think of claiming reward...Maybe the one had to be lost for the others to be found?" (836) Then, Hobie asks about the stolen paintings to Theo and says that artist's copy and the Manet too. Hobie is an old copyist who tells him about Picasso. According to Picasso, "Bad artists copy, good artists steal" (845).

Finally, Hobie says that he never loses those paintings because the originals are still out in the world. Pippa and Theo go up to the Dutch painting exhibition and Theo observes that the painting above his head is still point where it all already hangs: "dreams and signs, past and future, luck and fate" (845). Thus it shows that the painting resembles many meanings and it is a riddle to find it.

Hobie says Theo, about the effect of great paintings: "...if a painting really works down your heart and it changes the way that you see, and not think and feel...I love this painting because it speaks to all mankind. That's not the reason anyone loves a piece of art. It's a secret whisper from an alleyway" (849). Thus, Hobie explains Theo about the real nature of paintings and its effects upon human beings. Then he concludes by saying that, 'the beauty alters the grain of reality' (852).

According to Theo, the painting is his only secret which lifts him above from the surface of life, and helps him to know his own identity. Fabritius' painting seems to be a tiny one, stand-alone masterpiece and unique. It makes the young Theo to imagine him like the young Rembrandt during his lifetime. The mysterious thing behind the 'Goldfinch' is the loneliness that separates every living creature from others.

Even though, Theo's girl leaves him, the paintings console him a lot. The German Proverb says that 'Art holds fast when all else is lost' (Inspirational Stories). This has been reflected in the life of Theo, in his obsession the painting of a small bird holds him very fast and makes him travel into the underworld of art. Thus, the painting teaches Theo that they can speak each other across.

Thus the paper focuses on the promise of art in promoting survival. The painting that the protagonist of the novel steals from the bombed art museum is an inspiration for him to live in the world and it seems to be a reminder of his mother who died in the museum bombing. Being whisked away from his former life by his gambling father, he meets Boris and lives a life of instability and danger; however, throughout the novel, the trope of the painting that 'a lonely little captive' (the bird) only saves him. The painting of a yellow finch provides Theo to continue his memory of his beloved mother and find himself through it. It proves that the art is a basic human instinct with a diverse range of form and expression and also provides a way to experience one's self in relation to the universe.

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