

Fear and Loathing in Higher Education

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C. P. Snow's novels on life in Cambridge, especially 'The Masters', could be retitled Fear and Loathing in Higher Education. Forget the noble pursuit of truth—Snow shows us that the real sport in academia is inflating one's ego while quietly suspecting everyone else of plotting your downfall and engineering theirs.

Scholars transform into gladiators

Take the Cambridge dons in *The Masters*. The moment a vacancy for head of college appears, genteel scholars transform into gladiators armed not with swords but with passive-aggressive compliments and obscure footnotes. These men, who can split hairs over metaphysics for hours, suddenly devote their intellectual gifts to calculating who smiled at whom during dinner and whether that smile signalled treachery.

Egotism

Egotism in Cambridge is not a character flaw; it's a professional requirement. To be modest is to risk invisibility. Each fellow needs to be "the clever one," even if it means publishing papers nobody reads or dropping Latin quotes into conversations about the weather. For some, brilliance is measured less in ideas than in how many colleagues they can make feel inadequate at high table.

Paranoia

Next comes paranoia, academia's favourite bedtime companion. Everyone suspects everyone else of whispering in corridors, scheming in common rooms, and plotting over sherry. Did the Dean pause before shaking your hand? Clearly, he's voting against you. Did the bursar cough? A signal to the Department Head! Snow captures it all: highly trained, highly intelligent scientists and philosophers unravel into pathetic, nervous wrecks at the prospect of a colleague gaining the upper hand.

Noting much has changed

What makes Snow's satire so brutal is that it hasn't aged a day. Wander into a modern university and you'll still find egos straining at the seams, faculty meetings that resemble medieval conclaves, and paranoid glances that suggest every new initiative is a coup in disguise. Replace sherry with flat whites, and *The Masters* could be happening right now.

Perhaps this is the secret truth Snow uncovered: academia is less about knowledge than about theatre. Behind every lecture on the Enlightenment or quantum physics is a performance—an anxious don preening, second-guessing, and rehearsing the lines that will make them seem indispensable.

So, the next time someone praises the lofty ideals of higher education, remember C. P. Snow. The ivory tower, he reminds us, is just as human, petty, and absurd as anywhere else—only with fancier gowns.

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