**Academia, Politics, and Politicization in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission***

“They still believed, deep down, in the power of the intellectual elite. It was almost touching” (Houellebecq, 2016, p. 147).

**Introduction**

Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel *Submission* invites multiple readings that branch out in different directions *ad libitum*. One such direction is reading the novel as a satirical critique of French society (Scurati, 2017; Brühwiler, 2021) that traces the disintegration of the traditional political body in the face of the challenges France and Europe are currently forced to confront. As such, immigration, multiculturalism, the dissolution of the nation-state, the vision of the European Union, French identity, ethnicity, and religion are among the topics raised in the novel.[[1]](#footnote-2)

*Submission* relates an alternative history of France where, at the 2022 presidential elections, the struggling Republican Party and the Socialists join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood party to defeat the radical right. This victory has egregious implications. While the newly elected president initially appears moderate and levelheaded, the Muslim theocracy he establishes ceases to represent the values of the secular state. It complicates French political life and challenges France’s traditional republican values. Women are banned from the workplace and required to veil their faces; all citizens receive free primary education, but secondary and university education is privatized; institutions become Islamized; polygamy and child marriages are legitimized. All of these events are woven into a plot centering on François, a forty-something university professor specializing in the writings of Karl-Joris Huysmans, from whose perspective the events are related.

Read as a satire, *Submission* is faithful to the author’s signature postmodernist poetics of destabilization and deconstruction (Buchweitz, 2015). The novel’s infrastructure relies on an apparent “constitutive ambivalence” (Novak-Lechevalier, 2017, p. 154), wherein the novelistic techniques undermine the reader’s ability to arrive at any semblance of a bottom line thesis that might be proposed by the author. Scholars have observed that the layers of irony engulfing the text make it impossible to extract a precise target of the novel’s critique (Morrey, 2020; Scurati, 2017).[[2]](#footnote-3) As Henry F. Smith (2022) points out, François’ proposition “you know I am not *for* anything” (emphasis in the original, p.?)[[3]](#footnote-4) is indicative of the author’s nihilistic stance and narrative techniques (Smith, 2022, p. 182).[[4]](#footnote-5)

The use of black irony (Courteau, 2018, p. 84) and cynicism are intended to unsettle the reader, to resist or counteract interpretation, and to elicit awareness of incongruities. However, the most prominent structural device that prevents the identification of a fixed satirical target in the novel is the narrative voice of François. As Douglas Morrey (2020) remarked, “the ironic treatment of Houellebecq’s narrator means that many of the apparent ideological positions voiced in the novel should be regarded with considerable caution” (p. 350). The reliability of the narrator is constantly put into question,[[5]](#footnote-6) casting doubt on the narrator’s propositions and undermining his stances since it is difficult to decipher “the position of the implied author against which to measure that of the narrator” (reference?). The unreliable François clearly violates many of the standards upheld by today’s culture and widely accepted norms and values. François’s treatment of his female students gives plain evidence to that: he maintains transient sexual relations with his students, which are short-lived and last no longer than the academic year, with the exception of Miriam, to whom he grows attached (pp. ?). This flagrant, self-avowed abuse of power is either an “unwitting self-exposure or unintentional betrayal of personal shortcomings” (Nünning, 2005, p. 100). Conversely, it can be read as an intentional provocation by engaging in unequivocally problematic conduct. Whatever the case, by making the narrator ethically dubious, his reliability is undermined, as is the critique of French society as one ready to cede its liberal values and sacrifice women’s rights in exchange for civil peace and prosperity since, as we clearly see, this same liberal elite never lived up to its proclaimed values with regards to women in the first place.

Hence, as a satirical depiction of contemporary France, *Submission* intends to dismantle, unmask, and disturb (Scurati, 2017, p. 170–171; Almeida, 2015; Blanchard, 2018), but the precise object of attack remains unfocused. There is an unstable tension between certainty and indeterminacy, which is an invitation to evade closure. Nevertheless, if we shift our attention to the narrator as a member of the academy, suddenly, the irony is focused, fixed, and stable, meant to alarm and alert against a social phenomenon by depicting an unambiguous object of ridicule, which is by definition the object of satirical critique. Satire criticizes specific human behavior by portraying that which it seeks to condemn as ridiculous. In this case, the satire of *Submission* attacks the vices and whims characteristic of academic life and shows us how depravity mixes with intellect in the minds of academics. In parallel, it works to delineate the limits of human understanding.

In this article, I will advance a reading of *Submission* as a university novel wherein academia is the focus of critique. The political intrigue in which François is embroiled and his colleagues’ reactions—or lack thereof—to the amazing events taking place outside the gates of academia serve as the background to a critique of the academy, specifically the humanities. The “good for nothing” intellectual elite (p. 1) are indifferent, inept, and disinterested in voicing an opinion. When it does speak out, it is only in the service of personal objectives (Rousseau, 2018, p. 121; Michel, 2016; Knausgaard, 2015; Morrey, 2020, p. 349). [[6]](#footnote-7)

The context in which the novel’s events are presented is typical of the academic novel. This context is foregrounded at the charged points of the beginning and end of the novel and serves as the primary locus of its action. The first chapter walks us through the milestones in François’s academic career from its inception, while the last chapter details his rejuvenated career at the Sorbonne after converting to Islam. The campus environment, both in the geographical and the conceptual senses, is the novel’s milieu throughout. The academic novel focuses on academic life—the Humanities department in particular in this instance. Here its characters are far removed from the amazing events taking place beyond the gates of the university. The juxtaposition of what is taking place in the academy and what is taking place outside it creates a sense of absurd disconnection. Chantal Michel (2016) notes, “in times of crisis, moved by fear, resigned and apathetic, François and his colleagues think only of their survival and their interests, and they content themselves with hoping for a return to a safe world…. Lempereur and others take advantage of their apathy to act behind the scenes” (p.?).[[7]](#footnote-8) *Submission* reexamines the humanities’ responsibility and commitment to society, as well as their complex relationship with politics, both on- and off-campus. By doing so, Houellebecq challenges his readers and questions some of the basic concepts and premises that shape academia as it is today.

# *Submission* as a Campus Novel

A campus novel[[8]](#footnote-10) is set within the enclosed world of a college or university and highlights the follies of academic life. It is a satirical genre that maps political and social developments in the academic world and pokes fun at the faculty’s unproductive, useless, or ineffectual character and their disconnection from the reality beyond college life and everyday existence as a whole. The academic novel investigates ethical and philosophical questions that are endemic to the genre. As Womack (2005) notes, these novels may question the “relevance of literary theory to the problems that plague the world beyond the halls of the academy” (p.335) or critique “the academy’s capacity for engendering genuine educational and social change when its most cherished principles evince little practical application” (p.333).

Campus novels pay close attention to the politics of exclusion, that is, the perpetual threat of begin removed from the community (Womack, 2005, pp. 329–340). This threat functions as a foreboding obstacle to the individual scholar’s success. All academic novels are constructed around the tension between idealism and competition, which can also be understood as the tension between scholarship as an end in itself and scholarship as a means to an end. As Womack (2005) explains, in principle, or perhaps just in appearance, academic life is safe and comfortable (p. 327). It is primarily a communal life, even if it is fundamentally rooted in individualism. On the one hand, it is a realm where one can take part in intellectual discourse with colleagues, but, on the other hand, it is an arena where one must compete against the same colleagues. And since the quality of one’s research and one’s scholarly productivity do not necessarily guarantee professional success, there is a fundamental inequality in academic life, which leads to unforgiving competition and interpersonal conflicts.

In *Submission*, Houellebecq touches upon several issues concerning the academic lifecycle*,* invoking classic themes of the campus novel, such as academic professionalization, which leads to faculty being indifferent to the student “customers.” François is a faculty member who finds teaching purposeless. He is physically present on campus solely one morning a week, during which he teaches all his classes and has little connection with his students. He loathes interacting with them and could not care less about them. Even though he only teaches one day a week, he still finds a way to complain about rude students who bother him with unimportant questions about insignificant poets (pp. 45–46). He displays apathy and a lack of interest in the doctoral candidates he is meant to supervise (pp. 49). To his mind, mandatory teaching and the professor’s duty to educate the next generation of students constitute a fall from the golden age of dissertation writing (p. 13).

Another issue at stake is the perpetual hunt for job security, as there are few positions available, and candidates must compete with one another to secure them. The novel demonstrates the complex and contradictory ethics of this situation, and tenure and promotions are constant subjects of discussion among the characters. A central theme of this discourse is research and the consequent bumpy path to publication. In order to advance, one needs to constantly make decisions that have ethical implications—with whom to ally, what to research, etc. Houellebecq hints at the mechanism by which people advance professionally, including promotion through flattery rather than the meeting of objective standards of excellence (p. 24). We even see Steve granted tenure due to his excellent sexual performance as Chantal Delouse’s (the former university president) lover (p. 29). Newly appointed university president Robert Rediger’s opportunism manifests itself in the form of scientific falsification, as he “distorts the texts” in his thesis, performing de facto academic forgery (p. 229). All take part in this kind of wheeling and dealing, competing over academic positions with other academic superstars who are offered better contracts with outstanding salaries and benefits. The cumbersome process of writing and research is also addressed (as François puts it, “I made progress on the footnotes, but I got stuck working on the introduction” (p. 257)), as are declining education standards () and the limited reading audience for scholarship (p. 108).

Every year, when academia finds itself facing a new situation brought about by some type of disruption in the community, the faculty adapts anew. Every year the small world that academics have created for themselves disappears when the students scatter at the end of the academic year. This phenomenon manifests itself in a distorted way in François’ life, in his relationships with his female students, as discussed earlier. In the background of Houellebecq’s depiction of the social, ethical, and financial aspects of an academic career subsist currents issues in academia, which include the need to deal with the unstable nature of human existence as influenced by global economic downturns, budgetary cuts, growing social divides on campus, and the increasingly extreme character of identity politics.

A campus novel is habitually set within the confines of campus, however, *Submission* weaves the depiction of academic life with the depiction of events unfolding outside. Read as a campus novel, *Submission* offers a tragicomic outlook on the connection between the intellectual world and politics since the action among the faculty staff is occurring simultaneously with the radical political developments taking place outside the campus gates. The term “politics” is employed here in its broader sense, as designating any activity designed to preserve or change the mode of existence and living conditions within a complex social system. The two contexts are manifestly juxtaposed, and the novel concentrates its attention upon the nature of this connection. It offers a repetitive series of scenes that circumscribe, complicate, and reexamine the place of academia and its relation to political trends and upheavals. It thus raises the question of academic responsibility for society, especially in times of crisis. Evidently, the novel’s “Republic of Science” ignores political reality even when the latter encroaches upon its hallowed halls of learning.

In his response to these questions, Houellebecq leads us in two different directions. On the one hand, over-involvement in politics has debilitating implications for research and education. On the other hand, under-involvement in political life, which amounts to the disengagement of the ivory tower from the teeming reality below it, has grave consequences both in terms of social irresponsibility and a negative return on government investment.

Over-involvement

The obvious manifestation of the politicization of academia is personified by the intellectual who serves political interests or seeks promotion by associating with those with money and power. In *Submission*, such opportunism is exemplified by academics who take part in efforts to boycott Israel as a stepping stone to academic promotion and then promulgate the Islamic party’s concepts in writing and in action.

Academia is susceptible to politicization since it is an arena founded on high-stakes competition with colleagues, a fundamentally unequal space where the quality of one’s scholarly output is not the only thing that counts. Competition over tenure, combined with coping with constant budget cuts, growing social divides on- and off-campus, and in particular, the growing radicalism of identity politics and “cancel culture” require academics to take an overt political side. Conversely, academics can abstain from politics by embracing their elevated status and purported disengagement from real life.

The political career of François’ superior, Prof. Rediger, is marked by direct involvement in politics. In return for converting to Islam and propagating Islamic politics, he is rewarded not only with a professorship butalso an appointment as president of the universityafter the Sorbonne is purchased by the Saudi government.Following the elections, he is compensated for his loyalty by being appointed Minister of Higher Education or “secretary of universities—a post they’d revived just for him” (p. 221). Rediger’s political bias goes hand in hand with inaccuracies in his research. As he himself admits to François, “they gave me my doctorate, but it wasn’t much of a thesis.Nothing like yours. Anyway.My reading [of Nietzsche] was, as they say, selective” (p. 200). Once appointed university president, Rediger declares that in order to work at the Sorbonne, one must convert to Islam. To protect their personal interests, faculty members are thus forced to comply and thus proceed to work toward dismantling the secular republic and enabling an Islamic republic to tighten its control over France’s culture.

The Saudi money not only dictates a specific lifestyle but has significant bearing on research and teaching. The quality of academic research drops, and the professors disengage from their students and become indifferent to the quality of education. When Rediger offers François a teaching post, he tells him he wants to bring to the university “truly honorable professors, possessing a truly cosmopolitan consciousness” (p. 202). He goes on to admit his failure to enlist faculty “who are truly respected, who have real international reputations” and offers François “plenty of money.”He concedes that a teaching position at the Sorbonne is no longer that prestigious but promises that “nothing would be allowed to interfere with your real work….No hard classes…. No dissertations to advise” (p. 202). In other words, Rediger wants François to serve as the crumbling university’s window dressing.

Under-involvement

The chief contemporary trend satirized in *Submission* is the under-involvement or depoliticization of academia in the sense of its seclusion in its ivory tower and separation from the seething reality below. François declares himself to be “about as political as a bath towel” (p. 37) and publicly admits that politics and history do not interest him. He merely observes events. While he does wonder, “was it really over for the two parties that have dominated French political life since the birth of the Fifth Republic?” (p. 60), he never takes a stand either way. He, who knows how to assign meaning to texts and connect authors, periods, and ideas, demonstrates impatience and impotence in the face of the concrete collapse of the democratic system. He views himself as a spectator rather a participant in the proceedings:

I’d always loved election night. I’d go so far as to say it’s my favorite TV show, after the World Cup finals. Obviously there was less suspense in elections, since, according to their peculiar narrative structure, you knew from the first minutes how they would end, but the wide range of actors (the political scientists, the pundits, the crowds of supporters cheering or in tears at their party headquarters … and the politicians, in the heat of the moment, with their thoughtful or passionate declarations) and the general excitement of the participants really gave you the feeling, so rare, so precious, so telegenic, that history was coming to you live. (p. 58)

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In his efforts to avoid getting involved or getting contaminated by reality, he goes so far as to flee to the provinces. The depths of his apathy and incompetency are on display in a scene that inverts moral hierarchies: hungry and running out of gas, François stops at a gas station to fill up his tank and finds that it has been looted. He discovers “the cashier lying on the floor in a pool of blood” and goes on to narrate: “I went back into the shop and stepped reluctantly over the body…. After a moment’s hesitation, I helped myself to a tuna-vegetable sandwich from the sandwich shelf, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin guide.” He then gets back into his car and continues on his way. This description presents the epitome of moral degradation. François skips lightly over a human corpse to procure a sandwich. We can only assume that his hesitation is engendered by his inability to pay because there is neither a cash register nor a cashier to take his money. The corpse, on the other hand, fails to solicit any further attention or action. And François is not alone in his apathy:

For years now, probably decades, *Le Monde* and all the other center-left newspapers… had been denouncing the “Cassandras” who predicted civil war between Muslim immigrants and the indigenous populations of Western Europe. The way it was explained to me by my colleague in the classics department, this was an odd allusion to make…. But in fact, the media’s attitude had changed over the last few months.… They’d even stopped denouncing the “Cassandras.” In the end, the Cassandras had gone silent, too. People were sick of the subject…. “What has to happen will happen” seemed to be the general feeling. (pp. 41–42)

The French newspapers discount the prophets of doom as “Cassandras.” François’colleagues, however, only address this issue insofar as it relates to their expertise—the allusion to the myth is inaccurate. They prove unable to separate the wheat from the chaff; rather than relating to the context in which the myth is being used—the “marginal” external events, such as the Muslim party seizing control of the state—they split hairs over the modern use of the mythological figure’s name. Their understanding of the situation remains abstract, and they do not apply their knowledge to draw conclusions about reality, staunchly refusing to be political in the most practical sense of the term. It is worthwhile noting that François entertains these musings on his way to a party held at the “Museum of Romantic Life,” ironically emphasizing academia’s disconnection from reality. In their indifference, suggests Houellebecq, they become party to the usurpation and inversion of everything France stands for.

In another scene, François acknowledges that there is a high probability that “the two parties that have dominated French political life since the beginning of the Fifth Republic [are] going to disappear” (p. 71). He decides that this matter is significant enough to merit his viewing of a television debate between the candidates and therefore plans to watch the debate while eating a microwave dinner. Again, this is an instance of an inversion of hierarchies. The fateful and the serious are juxtaposed with the trivial and the banal, the latter eventually prevailing. Even though he has decided that it is important to watch the debate, François gets caught up heating his dinner after his microwave malfunctions and misses the debate.

Thus, through either over-involvement or under-involvement in politics, academia, and the humanities, in particular, betray society. Society relies on academia for knowledge. If it is too deeply enmeshed in or completely indifferent to politics, it betrays its duty. The French academic, as portrayed in the novel, however, feels no duty to anything, not even to social democracy, which is on the verge of collapse. The very purpose of university studies is parodied, *ad absurdum* in the following piece of narration by François:

The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as well all know. Unless you happen to be an especially gifted student, in which case it prepares you for a career teaching the academic study of literature – it is, in other words, a rather farcical system that exists solely to replicate itself…. Still, it’s harmless, you can even have a certain marginal value… a degree in literature can constitute a secondary asset since it guarantees the employer, in the absence of any useful skills, a certain intellectual agility that could lead to professional development—beside which, literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods. (p. 8)

Houellebecq challenges us to think of higher education as a commodity that offers low return on investment. According to this logic, if the social democratic state funds higher education, it is reasonable for it to expect some kind of benefit in return. Otherwise, a higher education in the humanities does nothing more than perpetuate itself without producing any practical value. If all that interests François is his “friend” Huysmans, then he and his colleagues fail to deliver on the promise vested in them: they have no social impact and are incapable of being agents of change.

**Conclusion**

Atseveral points along the narrative, François directly refers to the academics’ disavowal of responsibility to society, which goes hand in hand with the intellectual elite’s powerlessness and insignificance in the sociopolitical environment: “For the French, an intellectual didn’t have to be *responsible*, that wasn’t his job” (italics in the original, p. 221). Elsewhere, the narrator-protagonist maintains in a moment of candid insight and self-appraisal: “Even if all the university teachers in France had risen up in protest, almost nobody would have noticed, but apparently they hadn’t found that out in Saudi Arabia, they still believed, deep down, in the power of the intellectual elite, it was almost touching” (p. 147).

In *Submission*, the academic who refuses to be a political subject and rejects any autonomous agency outside his academic expertise, and the academic who self-identifies as first and foremost a political subject at the service of political ideologies, lead academia to cede its basic values, the values of the secular republic, the values from which the very notion of a university arose in the first place.Houellebecq’s main target in this satire is the irresponsibility of academia to society.By overtly and directly politicizing universities and by, conversely, alienating academia from society, he depicts them as intellectually and politically insignificant. The hyperbolic, grotesque, and polemic treatment of the academic world is used in the novel as a powerful tool for criticizing the intellectual elites. More than anything, *Submission* shows us the extent to which ambivalence and uncertainty concerning what academia actually is and what should be expected of it lead it to abandon its social responsibility with dire consequences for the entire body politic.

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1. The novel also addresses Houellebecq’s recurring themes of the crisis besetting Western civilization, in particular the crisis of the subject in light of the dissolution of communal ties, the effects of individualism, consumerism, and liberalism on intimate relationships, and how economic competition and market logic influence individuals’ relationships to society and to one another ( Novak-Lechevalier, 2019; van der Goot, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Conversely, some identify multiple, contradictory targets (ref). Very often these polemical readings are influenced by the public, high-profile personality of the author (Sturli, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This and subsequent quotes are taken from Houellebecq (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The author contends that the precarity of the protagonist stands out as a particularity in the novel, as he formulated in an interview with Valérie Toranian: “Quand on enlève tout à quelqu’un, est-ce que il existe encore ? ]…] je réduis donc mon personnage, je l’anéantis״ (Houellebecq 2020, 324). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. # Chantal Michel (2016) notes that this is manifested already at the basic level of the representation of a professor of literature who, in his scholarly readings of Huysmans, confuses the basic distinctions between the discrete conceptual entities of author, narrator, and implied author (p. ?).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. As Guillaume Rousseau (2018) notes, Houellebecq hints that the intellectual elite is good for nothing in the epigraph of the novel, an extended citation from Huysmans’ ---- where the final words are “bon à rien” (p. 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. My translation. See also Edith Perry’s (2018) analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Sometimes also referred to as Professorromane, university fiction, or academic novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)