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**“Some Torture That Perversely Eased”:
Patricia Highsmith and the Everyday
Schizophrenia of American Life**

David Cochran

In a series of crime novels written between 1950 and the '60s, Patricia Highsmith staked her claim as the quintessential chronicler of the dark underside of post-World War II American culture. Her universe both inhabited the comfortable and complacent world of the period's dominant culture and existed beneath it, in the seamy underside of the middle-class ideal, where the image of the happy suburban family masks a murderous hatred and the charming, successful businessman is a dangerous sociopath. Highsmith's work represented a radical break with the era's dominant cultural narratives. Placed in the context of the Cold War and suburban ideal, her fiction signalled a sustained critique of the major cultural assumptions of the period, challenging the rigid dichotomies and vision of America as a savior of the world that marked the official foreign policy paradigm and the dominant gender assumptions and concept of the home and family providing salvation that constituted the official domestic ideology.

Highsmith gained national and international fame when her first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950), was turned into a film by Alfred Hitchcock in 1951. She quickly established a reputation in both the United States and Europe as one of the best writers in the field of suspense literature, winning the Mystery Writers of America scroll and the *Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere* in

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France for *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and the best foreign crime novel from the Crime Writers Association of England for *The Two Faces of January* (1964). She earned an avid following in England and on the European continent because of her consistent attempts to expand the boundaries of the category of suspense fiction, and the encomiums written about her often have some variation on the patronizing theme that "She is the crime writer who comes closest to giving crime writing a good name."¹

As Highsmith has written, working within generic boundaries creates both problems and benefits. After *Strangers on a Train*, she found herself labelled a suspense writer, "which means also to find oneself fated to no more than three-inch-long reviews in the newspapers, squeezed in among good and bad books which get the same brief treatment—and by bad books, I mean the books of careless hacks."² At the same time, the market for suspense literature has a floor of sales, "meaning that a certain number of any such books will be bought, no matter how bad they are," providing some element of financial security. "But there is no doubt," according to Highsmith,

that in America the suspense and mystery book has a cheapness hanging about it, a reputation for superficiality, a stigma of inferiority to the straight novel, which is just as automatically assumed to be more serious, important, and worthwhile because it is a straight novel and because the author is assumed to have a serious intent in writing it.³

Within the genre's confines, however, Highsmith has said, the suspense novelist has a great deal of room to raise fundamental questions about the nature of such issues as justice, morality and courage and, implicitly, to cast a critical eye on the world we live in.⁴ After all, such authors are working in a great literary tradition. "I think most of Dostoyevsky's books would be called suspense books, were they being published today for the first time," she has said. "But he would be asked to cut, because of production costs."⁵

Since 1963, Highsmith has lived abroad in England, France and Switzerland. Because of her expatriate status, her European popularity and the stylistic differences between her writing and that of most American suspense novelists, Highsmith has often been mistakenly classified as a European author (one issue of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* even referred to her as “an American-born British mystery writer”).⁶ But Highsmith’s work must be understood as a product of post-World War II American culture. Nearly all her major characters are American, she has said, because she is most comfortable writing about them, and her dominant theme focuses on “showing the American’s everyday or garden variety of schizophrenia.”⁷

These characters are firmly situated within the context of the dominant images of Cold War culture—the horror of the nuclear age, the anonymous and debasing quality of mass culture, and the banality of the suburban ideal. In *A Game for the Living* (1958), for instance, Highsmith (in a rare instance of self-conscious authorial intrusiveness) described the protagonist Theodore:

He believed the world had no meaning, no end but nothingness, and that man’s achievements were finally all perishable—cosmic jokes, like man himself. Believing this, he believed as a matter of course that one ought to make the most of what one had, a little time, a little life, try to be as happy as possible and to make others happy if one could. Theodore thought he was as happy as anyone logically could be in an age when atomic bombs and annihilation hung over everybody’s head, though the word “logically” troubled him in this context. Could one be logically happy? Was there ever anything logical about it?⁸

In *The Price of Salt* (1952, written under the pen name of Claire Morgan), the main character, Therese, temporarily working in a department store at Christmas rush, views the store as the intensification of the major elements of American society, marked as it is by wasted chores and ersatz freneticism which

prevent people from making human contact.⁹ And many of Highsmith's stories focus on the way in which the home, far from providing a retreat from the world, frequently serves as a battleground where love quickly turns to hate, anyone can be a murderer, and the quest for an idyllic family life is, as often as not, a form of psychopathology. In short, Highsmith's vision of America in the postwar era is like the schoolhouse in *The Glass Cell* (1964)—a beautiful, four-story brick building with an American flag on top, but built out of such faulty materials that it is useless as anything but a monument to corruption and incompetence.¹⁰

Much of Highsmith's work can be understood as a sustained metaphor for the Cold War. In the official Cold War worldview, Americans needed to renounce the traditional isolationism which had marked their relations with the rest of the world. The United States necessarily must involve itself in the affairs of other countries to serve as a democratic and civilizing force, exporting the benefits of American culture. Within this broader sociopolitical context, many of Highsmith's stories focus on Americans living abroad, involved in their own personal crises in a variety of European and Third World settings. Unlike Daisy Miller, however, Highsmith's Americans are not wide-eyed ingenues. Rather they are largely an unsavory lot of con men, insufferable whiners and cold-blooded murderers who wreak chaos and destruction wherever they go. From Mexico (*A Game for the Living*) to England (*The Story-Teller*) to southern Europe (Italy in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Those Who Walk Away*, Greece in *The Two Faces of January*) to Tunisia (*A Tremor of Forgery*), Highsmith's protagonists belied the preferred inscribed message of the official Cold War vision that Americans came in peace.

The first and most brilliant example of this character type was Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.¹¹ The story begins with a twenty-five-year-old Tom living in New York, engaged in a minor scam in which he poses as an Internal Revenue Service

agent demanding back taxes from various people. But as Tom is more interested in perpetrating the hoax than in profiting from it (he does not even cash the checks), he considers the con nothing more than a practical joke, "good clean sport."¹²

In New York, Tom is approached by Herbert Greenleaf, a wealthy shipping magnate whose son, Dickie, is an acquaintance of Tom's (Greenleaf mistakenly believes the two are closer friends than they are). Expressing concern that Dickie has no interest in the family business and has moved to a small village in southern Italy to become an artist, Greenleaf asks Tom to travel to Italy and convince Dickie to come home. Tom accepts, travels to Italy and befriends Dickie. Increasingly fascinated with Dickie's life, Tom begins mimicking Dickie's manner of walking and surreptitiously dressing in his clothes. Further, Tom grows jealous of Dickie's girlfriend Marge and resents her telling Dickie that she thinks Tom is gay.¹³ When Dickie begins trying to squeeze Tom out of his life, Tom murders him and assumes Dickie's persona. Eventually, Tom fakes Dickie's suicide, forges a will leaving all his money to Tom, and escapes punishment.

As Anthony Hilfer has argued, Tom Ripley is a "protean man" whose character is fundamentally based on his "non-essentiality, his lack of a determinate identity."¹⁴ Like the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's classic novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Tom grows to understand that as an individual he is absolutely invisible. His existence is merely a series of roles he must play and all relations with others are, according to Hilfer, "external and illusory, a matter of surface appearances."¹⁵ At first this realization fills Tom with a sense of dread. But gradually, like Ellison's protagonist, Tom realizes his invisibility can be liberating as well. Early in the book, Tom buys a hat and learns that even such a small costume change can create an entirely new role.

A cap was the most versatile of headgears, he thought. He could look like a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a

plain American eccentric, depending on how he wore it. He had always thought he had the world's dullest face, a thoroughly forgettable face with a look of docility that he could not understand, and a look also of vague fright that he had never been able to erase. A real conformist's face, he thought. The cap changed all that.¹⁶

Tom ultimately realizes that "Dickie Greenleaf" is merely another role and that he is as capable of playing it as Dickie is. Thus he murders Dickie and becomes "Dickie." Tom trains himself to jump in and out of character, eventually even fooling a policeman by talking to him at one point as Dickie and later as Tom. Like the title character of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, the real identity of Tom Ripley becomes lost in the series of masks he takes off and puts on at will. He becomes nothing more than the roles he plays. As he comes to understand, "If you wanted to be cheerful or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to act those things with every gesture."¹⁷

In Tom Ripley, Highsmith portrayed the logical culmination of the American success ethic. As historian Karen Halttunen has argued, in the mid-nineteenth century, the confidence man was a common figure in Victorian culture. Advice manuals warned young men to beware the wiles of this unscrupulous type. But beginning in the late-nineteenth century, with the rise of modern corporate capitalism, emphasis gradually shifted away from the Victorian ethic of character toward the development of such traits as personal magnetism and executive management, all of which, in Halttunen's words, "pointed to a growing willingness to regard success as a form of confidence game. In late-nineteenth-century success ideology, the manipulation of others through artifice was coming to be accepted as a necessary executive skill."¹⁸ By the twentieth century, the confidence man had largely vanished from American success literature; instead his tactics of role-playing and personal manipulation were being touted by the likes of Dale Carnegie as the means for "winning

friends and influencing people." In his perfection of these skills and the final success of his endeavor, Tom Ripley symbolizes the ultimate triumph of American success ideology. But in placing Tom in an international setting and depicting this American success story as based on a completely amoral worldview which easily rationalizes cold-blooded murder, Highsmith challenged the Cold War paradigm which pronounced America's fitness to dominate the world.

These issues were even more explicitly raised in *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969). This story focused on Howard Ingham, an American author who has travelled to Tunisia to work on a film script. Early on, Howard loses his reason for remaining in Tunisia when his partner, the film's director, commits suicide. Yet for reasons he cannot articulate he remains in a small village on the Tunisian coast. As Highsmith showed, American cultural imperialism extends even to this isolated outpost, as Howard sees a counterfeit pair of Levi's in a store—a good copy, he thinks, except that the label reads "This is a genuine pair of Louise."¹⁹

Howard makes friends with Francis Adams, a middle-age widower who announces, "I consider myself an unofficial ambassador for America. I spread goodwill—I hope—and the American way of life. Our way of life," which immediately causes the sardonic Howard to think of Vietnam. Adams believes in the twin pillars of Democracy and God, "a sort of Billy Graham, all-around God with an old-fashioned moral code thrown in. What the Vietnamese needed, Adams said in appallingly plain words, was the American kind of democracy." But, as Howard thinks, what Americans are really exporting to Vietnam, are "the capitalist system in the form of a brothel industry, and the American class system by making Negroes pay higher for their lays." Similarly, when Adams talks of the need to Christianize the world, Howard thinks, "Christianity and atom-bomb testing had spread themselves just about everywhere."²⁰

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Eventually Adams reveals that he works making secret weekly broadcasts that are beamed behind the Iron Curtain—"pro-American, prowestern pep talks," he calls them.²¹ Howard finds the broadcasts so absurd he thinks Adams must be paid by the Soviets. Dubbing Adams OWL ("Our Way of Life"), Howard ponders the amount of damage this one, well-meaning, misguided man can do.

What was the matter with OWL's silly illusions, anyway, if they kept him going, if they made him happy? The harm OWL did (and he might, by his absurdity, and by making nonsense of the Vietnam War, be doing some good) was infinitesimal compared to the harm done by America's foreign policy makers who actually sent people off to kill people. Perhaps it took some illusions to make people happy.²²

Like most of Highsmith's novels, the plot of *The Tremor of Forgery* is minimal, building its suspense primarily on atmosphere and character. During his stay in Tunisia, Howard wonders whether a person makes his own standards or if he and his standards are merely the creation of his surroundings. Amazed by the cavalier attitude toward such practices as pedophilia, theft and murder exhibited in Tunisia, Howard comments that "Africa does turn things upside down." Adams responds that this fact should make Westerners cling ever more tightly to the values of civilization and Christianity. But when a thief breaks into his bungalow and Howard hits him on the head with a typewriter, he neither knows nor cares if he has killed the man. Adams encourages him to confess in order to keep from sinking to the level of an Arab. But Howard sees no reason to, as no one else seems to take the matter seriously. When Howard tells his girlfriend Ina, she urges him to hold to civilized standards and tell the police. But as Howard's friend Anders says, Ina simply does not understand life in Tunisia.²³ At a time when the United States was at the height of its involvement in Vietnam and atrocity stories were becoming increasingly commonplace, Highsmith conveyed

both the vapid banalities which characterized America's defense of its role in world affairs and the amazing rapidity with which Americans could forget their vaunted standards of civilization and decency.

The Cold War metaphor also marked Highsmith's standard plot line, which involved two characters locked in “a dreadful marriage of hate” (to use I. F. Stone's description of the United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War²⁴)—a match of wits and emotions, spiraling downward with tragic consequences. Each person in this struggle is committed to the defeat of the other and yet, at the same time, dependent on him, for this other provides the only meaning in the character's life. In *Those Who Walk Away* (1967), for instance, Ray Garrett realizes his father-in-law Ed Coleman, who blames Ray for his wife's (and Coleman's daughter's) suicide, derives his *raison d'être* from his vendetta against Ray.

Ray began to realize that Coleman's anger against him went much deeper. It was the deepest thing in Coleman's existence now. Coleman would obviously risk his own life, or life imprisonment, for it. People did that for love quite often. Coleman was doing it for hatred.²⁵

This “marriage of hate” is, occasionally, a literal marriage, as between Vic and Melinda van Allen in *Deep Water* (1957) or between Sydney and Alicia Bartleby in *The Story-Teller* (1965).²⁶ Or, very rarely, it is a struggle between two women, as in the short story “The Cries of Love,” in which two elderly women sharing a room in a rest home plot elaborately to destroy the other's most valued possessions, and yet cannot bear the loneliness of living apart from each other.²⁷ But typically what Highsmith describes as her “pattern” focuses on “the relationship between two men, usually quite different in make-up, sometimes obviously the good and the evil, sometimes merely ill-matched friends.”²⁸ The ensuing struggle between these characters draws out the worst in both, as the conflict gradually sub-

sumes all other interests and motives. And yet the characters often bring to this battle a strange sense of fair play. In *The Two Faces of January*, Rydal Keener is on the verge of ending his continuing cat-and-mouse conflict with Chester McFarland by leading Chester into a trap set by the police. But at the last second, unwilling to bring to a premature conclusion a contest he feels should be settled between the two of them, Rydal tips Chester off, allowing him to escape.²⁹

The dualistic struggles that dominate Highsmith's stories reflected the official American ideology, which portrayed the United States engaged in an on-going conflict with the Soviet Union. For Americans, the Cold War paradigm was built on a series of rigid dichotomies—or binary oppositions—between us/them, good/evil, innocence/guilt. But in Highsmith's fiction, such binary oppositions were consistently broken down. She succeeded marvelously in muddying the distinctions between, for instance, innocence and guilt. In *The Blunderer* (1956), for example, Walter Stackhouse reads in the newspaper about the death of Helen Kimmel and guesses, correctly, that her husband murdered her. Unhappy in his own marriage, Walter begins collecting information about the Kimmel case and even goes to visit Kimmel. But when Walter's wife Clara commits suicide, this fascination with the Kimmels is used as evidence that Walter killed her. Eventually Walter realizes his technical innocence is irrelevant in face of the fact that he had plotted Clara's death, whereas Kimmel's actual guilt is similarly irrelevant since he has succeeded in putting the police off his trail.³⁰

Similarly, in *The Story-Teller*, Sydney—an American writer living in England, working on a television crime series—wonders what it feels like to be a murderer. Thus when his wife Alicia decides to move out for a while to give their troubled marriage some space, Sydney decides to pretend he has murdered her. He fills his notebook with descriptions of the imaginary murder and the feelings he is “experiencing,” and even takes an old, rolled-up carpet out and buries it in the woods to

see how difficult it would be to dispose of a body. When the police come to investigate Alicia's disappearance, Sydney delights in the opportunity to find out how it feels to be a suspected criminal, even acting guilty during questioning. But when Alicia does not turn up, all of Sydney's playacting is construed as real evidence, and his actual innocence cannot save him. When an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Lilybanks, dies of a heart attack because of the strain of living next to a “murderer,” Sydney realizes that even the binary opposition between truth/falsity is meaningless. Mrs. Lilybanks, Sydney understands, had died because of an “attitude,” which, in turn, had been based on his “attitude.” “Both things were quite false, yet had important and very real effects.” Similarly, Mrs. Sneezum, another neighbor, had an attitude, one of suspicion.

[Her] conventions were attitudes, too, just as false as heathenism and the worship of pagan gods (or as true), yet since hers tended to maintain law and order and family unity, they were the attitudes this society endorsed. Religions were attitudes, too, of course. It made things so much clearer to call these things attitudes rather than convictions, truths or faiths. The whole world wagged by means of attitudes which might as well be called illusions.³¹

Highsmith worked to break down the binary oppositions between us/them and good/evil in the way she encouraged the reader to sympathize with her criminal protagonists. As she wrote in her how-to book, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, an author needs to create “likable criminals.” To do so, she suggested “giving the murderer-hero as many pleasant qualities as possible—generosity, kindness to some people, fondness for painting or music or cooking, for instance.”³² Vic, in *Deep Water*, possesses all these qualities and, until the end, his capacity for murder is seen as a minor character flaw in an otherwise charmingly eccentric personality. In other works, Highsmith introduced characters who are attractive and successful and

have, seemingly, only insignificant flaws—such as David Kelsey's obsession with an old girlfriend in *This Sweet Sickness* (1960) and Robert Forester's voyeurism in *The Cry of the Owl* (1962).³³ But often that character is seriously warped, though the reader only learns this fact gradually as his problem slowly drives him to extremes.

The characters in Highsmith's fictive world often symbolize the interconnectedness of such opposites as good and evil. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Strangers on a Train*, where the social misfit, Bruno, develops a fawning attachment to the handsome and successful architect, Guy Haines. After a chance meeting on a train, Bruno concocts a plot in which he and Guy would murder a person who is making the others' life miserable. Because they have no known connection, there would be no motive for the murders and the two would be absolved. Though Guy is horrified by the idea, he is strangely fascinated by Bruno. At one point Guy ponders the closeness, even wholeness, of opposites.

But love and hate, good and evil lived side by side in the human heart, and not merely in differing proportions in one man and the next, but all good and all evil. One had merely to look for a little of either to find it all, one had merely to scratch the surface. All things had opposites close by, every decision a reason against it, the male the female, the positive the negative. The splitting of the atom was the only true destruction, the breaking of the universal law of oneness. Nothing could be without its opposite that was bound up with it.³⁴

Applying this concept to his own situation, Guy realizes that to live, he has only to crush the other (i.e., Bruno) half of his self. "But there were too many points at which the other self could invade the self he wanted to preserve, and there were too many forms of invasion." Moreover, Guy thinks, if he acknowledges the evil within himself, is there not also a need to express it? "[H]ow else," he wonders, "could one really explain in mankind

the continued toleration of wars, the perennial enthusiasm for wars when they came, if not for some primal pleasure in killing.”³⁵

In contrast to the certitude of the dichotomous Cold War paradigm, Highsmith created a world rife with confusion. As Guy thinks, “[I]f everything was as ambiguous as he believed, how could he really be sure.”³⁶ Or, in *A Game for the Living*, Theodore comes to understand that “[a]mbiguity was the secret of life, the very key to the universe.” But this understanding enervates and immobilizes Theodore. “It was a curse to be able to see two sides of things, perhaps three.” As another character tells Theodore, for all his existential vocabulary about choice, “it’s harder for you to make a simple decision than for anybody I know.”³⁷ Only those who have an explanatory “illusion” or “attitude” are capable of decisive action. Thus Ray, in *Those Who Walk Away*, finds something admirable in Coleman’s madness, his illusion that Ray had ruined his life by driving his daughter to suicide, because at least he has “conviction” making him capable of action.³⁸

As with foreign policy in the postwar era, domestic ideology was also built on a series of dichotomies. According to the dominant vision, a family, house in the suburbs and successful job equaled mental health and happiness, whereas the absence of these things led to sickness. But Highsmith consistently worked to break down these oppositions too. Especially in her view of American men, Highsmith subverted many of the ideological bases of the suburban ideal.

Highsmith’s stories focused primarily on men, but women were very much in evidence as the objects of men’s obsession. Several of her male characters are seeking some idealized version of the stereotypic happy family. Robert Forester, in *The Cry of the Owl*, enjoys surreptitiously watching Jenny working in her house because of the vision of domesticity she presents. Coming off a bitter divorce, Forester finds that Jenny is helping him recover a sense of purpose. What, he wonders, lies beneath the

sense of routine that Jenny has come to symbolize? "Chaos? Nothingness? Evil? Pessimism and depression that just might be warrantable? Just plain death, a stopping, a void so frightening nobody cared to talk about it?"³⁹ But Forester discovers that his quest for an idyllic family life is unobtainable. Jenny is not the stable, domestic woman he has imagined her to be, and what begins as Forester's seemingly innocent attempt to imagine a happy family life ends in murderous chaos.

Similarly, David Kelsey, in *This Sweet Sickness*, has created an elaborate fantasy existence of a comfortable family life built around his former girlfriend Annabelle. A young, handsome and successful engineer, Kelsey lives a secret double life, having bought a house in a neighboring town where he stays on weekends and imagines living with Annabelle. But Annabelle is married to someone else and has no interest in Kelsey. In fact, the cultured and sophisticated Annabelle of Kelsey's imagination bears little resemblance to the real woman, who is rather plain and unimaginative. Meanwhile Kelsey has no interest in real women, spurning the advances of his neighbor Effie, whom he dismisses as the coarse product of a debasing, sex-obsessed popular culture. As Annabelle tells him, "You're quite heartless—in a way, Dave. You seem to live entirely in your own head and you don't know anything at all about other people, the people around you." Finally, Kelsey's sickness makes impossible his attempt to create a happy family life. Just before his suicide at the novel's end, Kelsey realizes that "Nothing was true but the fatigue of life and the eternal disappointment."⁴⁰

As one of the few female artists working in the *roman noir* genre in the post-World War II era, Highsmith exhibited a strong fascination with the social construction of gender roles, the official repression of sexual deviance and the potentially pathological effects of the return of the repressed. Throughout her *oeuvre* runs a strong subtheme of homosexuality among her male characters (though interestingly, this theme is most explicit in *The Price of Salt*, her only novel during this period to feature female

main characters). A strong homoerotic attraction marks many of Highsmith's male relationships. Bruno, in *Strangers on a Train*, dislikes all women except his mother, seeing them as stupid and promiscuous. He is fully devoted to Guy and grows jealous when Guy would rather spend time with Anne. After both he and Guy have committed their murders, Bruno has the passing thought that if he were to kill Anne then he and Guy could really be together. But this relationship does not run only one way. Though Guy professes to hate Bruno, he secretly admits to himself that somehow he enjoys seeing him—"some torture that perversely eased." At another time, Guy pictures himself as Bruno's lover, an image that infuriates him, but which he cannot deny.⁴¹

Like Bruno, Tom Ripley is uninterested in women and develops a strong attraction to Dickie Greenleaf. Haunted by a humiliating childhood memory in which his aunt had derided him as a "sissy," Tom rankles at any insinuation that he is a homosexual. At the same time, his attitude toward Dickie is marked by homoerotic feelings both strengthened and twisted by his refusal to consciously admit them. He grows jealous of the time Dickie spends with Marge, and the first time he dresses in Dickie's clothes he imagines himself, as Dickie, telling Marge he does not love her because of his feelings for Tom. Later Tom (as Dickie) once again imagines telling Marge to leave him alone because he and Tom are happy together.⁴²

Intimations of homoeroticism also run through *The Glass Cell*—in Carter's relationship with Max—and, more overtly, in *The Tremor of Forgery*—in Howard's relationship with the admittedly gay Anders.⁴³ But for Highsmith, the theme of homosexuality is not meant to be taken literally. Rather it functions as a symbolic device to undermine the certainties of postwar American culture. Homosexuality, in the Cold War period, served as a common bogeyman in much the same way communism did. In fact, a strong connection existed between the two. Between June and December 1950, for instance, the Senate engaged in a

formal inquiry investigating the presence of "homosexuals and other moral perverts" in government. In the same type of language used to describe communists, the Senate report concluded, "One homosexual can pollute a Government office," and gays were barred by executive order from employment in all federal jobs.⁴⁴ The link between homosexuality and communism became common in American culture. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for instance, once described communism as "something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuals in a boys' school."⁴⁵ This equation of communism and homosexuality can also be seen in the popular right-wing image of an effete and ineffectual Eastern establishment which had "lost" China, as well as in the term "pink," used to describe communist sympathizers, but also closely associated with effeminacy.⁴⁶

Similarly homosexuality threatened the sanctity of the suburban ideal. The nuclear family, nestled snugly in its home, represented the essence of the American dream. But homosexuality challenged that concept, signalling a pernicious deviance which threatened the very fabric of the American way of life. "According to the common wisdom of the time," social historian Elaine Tyler May has written, "'normal' heterosexual behavior culminating in marriage represented 'maturity' and 'responsibility;' therefore, those who were 'deviant' were, by definition, irresponsible, immature and weak."⁴⁷ As Philip Wylie argued in his enormously successful bestseller *Generation of Vipers* (1942), such men were the victims of overbearing mothers who had effectively emasculated their husbands and smothered their sons with attention. This "Momism" had created in the son a strong sense of dependence on the mother and thus made nearly impossible any healthy relationship between himself and other women.⁴⁸

By portraying homosexuality as a running undercurrent in postwar culture, Highsmith tapped into these popular images to challenge the validity of Americans' self-conception. Far from

the virile men of action who populated Cold War culture—from John Wayne to Mike Hammer—keeping Americans safe from communism and effeminacy, Highsmith presented a gallery of weak, insufferable, craven, murderous male characters. Like Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*, some are victims of Momism. But even the most seemingly well-adjusted, like Guy, are obsessed with the weakness they are forced to keep hidden deep inside themselves, convinced that if unleashed it could rapidly undo everything they have so painstakingly worked to build. As Guy thinks at one point, “There was inside him, like a flaw in a jewel, not visible on the surface, a fear and anticipation of failure that he had never been able to mend. At times, failure was a possibility that fascinated him.”⁴⁹ For Guy, this weakness is crystallized and brought to the surface in his perverse attraction to Bruno, which, as he knows it will, proves his undoing. Thus for Highsmith, homosexuality symbolized the inherent counterforces built into the dominant cultural values, threatening at all times to subvert them.

Highsmith extended her critical investigation of the era’s dominant gender assumptions by working several variations on the Oedipal conflict, with attendant implications regarding American men. Like the era’s dominant social and political culture, Highsmith’s universe was male-centered. But unlike the dominant cultural icons, her men possess deep psychological flaws making them unfit for the moral leadership American policymakers claimed as their inheritance.

Bruno, in *Strangers on a Train*, represents the classic Oedipal pattern. As he tells Guy on their first meeting, he hates his father but gets along well with his mother. “‘We even go to parties together.’ He laughed, half ashamed, half proud, and suddenly uncertain and young. ‘You think that’s funny.’” He is beset by castration fears, saying of his father’s refusal to give Bruno his inheritance, “I just mean it’s a hell of a thing, isn’t it, when your own father robs you. Now he says he won’t give [the inheritance] to me because I won’t work, but that’s a lie. He

thinks my mother and I have too good a time as it is. He's always scheming up ways to *cut* in."⁵⁰ A bit later he says that his father's hobby is collecting cookie cutters. "My mother's always telling him to go back to his cookie cutters."⁵¹ In getting Guy to murder his father then, Bruno completes the Oedipal cycle.

Bruno's mother represents the type against whom Wylie railed. She has emasculated her husband, forcing him into the decidedly unmasculine habit of collecting kitchen utensils. She has created, in Bruno, an unhealthy attachment to her, making impossible any healthy relationship with another woman. Bruno announces his distaste for all women, and when Guy reminds him that his mother is a woman, Bruno responds, "I never seen another woman like my mother." When he conceives the plan to exchange murders with Guy, Bruno is proud of himself but disappointed that he will not be able to tell his mother. After murdering Miriam, he imagines giving an interview in which he would brag of his plan. As he answers imaginary questions, he thinks, "What significance did it have that your victim was female?"—then wonders, "Where had that question come from?" But in context of the era's popular cultural imagery, it is obvious where the question came from. Suffocated by an overbearing mother, rendered incapable of building normal romantic relationships, Bruno is little more than, in Guy's words, a "neurotic child."⁵²

But not all of Highsmith's male protagonists followed a classic Oedipal trajectory. For instance, David Kelsey in *This Sweet Sickness* remains at a pre-Oedipal stage, a pattern outlined by Tania Modleski in her discussion of Edgar Ulmer's classic noir film *Detour*. When Annabelle leaves Kelsey, he responds (like Al Roberts in *Detour*) less like a jilted lover and more like a child who has been abandoned by his mother. As Modleski described the process, "the heroine's early abandonment of the hero may be seen to correspond to the child's unwelcome discovery that his mother has a life independent of his own."⁵³ Kelsey creates an elaborate fantasy life in which he and Annabelle share

a happy (and seemingly chaste) life in a remote house he has bought. But to explain his absence every weekend to his neighbors, Kelsey fabricates a sick mother, to whom he is hopelessly devoted and must regularly return home to help.⁵⁴ But women only exist for Kelsey on this idealized plane, in which mother and wife are conflated into one comforting image of home. In reality, Kelsey finds women tedious and small-minded.⁵⁵

As Modleski argued, regarding *Detour*, the fundamental psychological fear expressed is that of "women's independence, self-sufficiency and wholeness, and of the anger and greed stimulated in the male by the specter of female autonomy."⁵⁶ In the same way, Kelsey is furious to discover Annabelle has a life apart from him. Her independence inspires a series of increasingly hysterical fantasies in Kelsey which set in motion a chain of events culminating in murder and suicide.

Highsmith spun yet another variation of the Oedipal conflict in *The Two Faces of January*. Rydal Keener, a young American, has moved to Greece to escape the influence of his father, a brilliant Harvard professor, with whom he has long been estranged. When he receives word of his father's death, Rydal decides against returning home for the funeral. Then he sees Chester McFarland, a small-time American con man who has escaped to Athens just ahead of the law. Chester is a dead ringer for Rydal's late father, and his young wife Colette vaguely reminds Rydal of his cousin Agnes—whose teen-age love affair with Rydal had been the source of his falling out with his father.⁵⁷ Thus Rydal enters into a relationship with Chester and Colette, self-consciously seeking to work out his ambivalent feelings toward his father.

Rydal comes across Chester just after he has accidentally murdered a Greek policeman who has come to question him and, without hesitation, Rydal helps Chester dispose of the body. As Rydal thinks, his decision to help Chester must imply "a lurking respect for his father," a thought which makes him uncomfortable.⁵⁸ Writing to his brother, Rydal states:

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[Chester] is helping me to see Papa a little better, maybe to see Papa with less resentment, more humor; I don't know, but God knows I would like to get rid of resentments. I am older now. That's what matters, of course. By an odd coincidence, his wife, much younger and quite attractive and vivacious, reminds me of—that unhappy mistake of my youth. A psychological purge by some sort of re-enactment that I don't even understand yet is going on in me—and I am sure it is all for the good.⁵⁹

But Chester distrusts Rydal, certain the young man plans to blackmail him. He also grows increasingly jealous of Rydal's friendship with Colette. Thus Chester and Rydal have a fierce argument, which reminds Rydal of his fight with his father over Agnes. Chester tries to kill Rydal, but accidentally kills Colette instead.⁶⁰ Then the two engage in an extended chase across Europe, with both being pursued by the police.

As Rydal alternately pursues and flees from Chester, he still seeks to understand his feelings toward his father. He maintains a strange respect for Chester, even helping him escape from the police on one occasion. In the end, Chester is captured and mortally wounded. In a disappointing, too-neat conclusion, Chester makes a deathbed confession, proclaiming his guilt and absolving Rydal of all blame. When Rydal learns of Chester's confession, he thinks, "It was like hearing of his own father breaking down, hearing of something unbelievable." Finally, Rydal admits to himself that he respects and cares for Chester and, by implication, his father. But he knows the police will never be able to understand this attitude, for it is "impossible to explain, to the bureaucratic mind, the intricacies of his emotions in regard to Chester, in regard to Colette."⁶¹

Highsmith's art produced disturbing themes which worked to undermine the certainties of the postwar American consensus. Her subterranean explorations into the national character challenged the moral and psychological fitness of Americans at a time in which they were proclaiming themselves moral lead-

ers of the world. Highsmith's universe destabilized the era's dominant assumptions by positing a world in which even the most fundamental beliefs may be overturned. As the British novelist and critic Brigid Brophy has argued, Highsmith began this deconstruction of the orthodox paradigm by her very approach to the literary genre in which she worked. Mystery and crime novels, according to Brophy, normally seek to reassure the Ego. The chaotic, violent, irrational events that take place normally occur around the hero, whose job it is to unravel the seemingly irrational events and fit them into a logical paradigm. Highsmith though, in Brophy's words, worked to “dissolv[e] the hero's integrity as an Ego. The suspense is no longer whether the violent events will catch up with him; it's whether he will do them. And even if he doesn't do them in fact, he does in fantasy; he's admitted ownership of the violent material in the book.”⁶²

Similarly Highsmith admitted ownership of the violent material lying just beneath the surface of American culture. When situated in the socioliterary context in which she wrote, her work subverted the simplistic dualisms of the dominant culture. Building on themes common to Cold War culture—the increasing internationalization of American influence, the family ensconced in its comfortable suburban home, the fear of “deviant” sexuality—Highsmith gave these images new and unsettling readings, undermining the verities by which Americans defined themselves in the postwar period.

Notes

1. “The Talented Miss Highsmith,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, September 24, 1971, 1147.
2. Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1972), 141.
3. *Ibid.*, 142-43.

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4. Ibid, 143-44.

5. Ibid, 1-2.

6. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 2, 192.

7. Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, 36.

8. Patricia Highsmith, *A Game for the Living* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1958), 5.

9. Claire Morgan [Patricia Highsmith], *The Price of Salt* (New York: Arno Press, 1952), 4.

10. Patricia Highsmith, *The Glass Cell* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 17.

11. Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (New York: Penguin, 1955). Ripley would later be featured in a brilliant series of Highsmith's novels, including *Ripley Under Ground* (New York: Vintage, 1970); *Ripley's Game* (New York: Vintage, 1974); *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (New York: Vintage, 1981); *Ripley Under Water* (New York: Vintage, 1992). But in these later novels, Ripley's character was subtly but significantly altered as he developed a strong (albeit more than a little twisted) personal moral code.

12. Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 14.

13. Ibid, 66-70.

14. Anthony Channell Hilfer, "'Not Really Such a Monster': Highsmith's Ripley as Thriller Protagonist and Protean Man," *The Midwest Quarterly*, 25.4, Summer 1984, 370.

15. Hilfer, 366.

16. Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 31.

17. Ibid, 165.

18. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1982), 204.

19. Patricia Highsmith, *The Tremor of Forgery* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), 68.

20. Ibid, 14, 25, 53.

21. Ibid, 56.

22. Ibid, 74.

23. Ibid, 140, 192, 201, 220, 223.

24. I. F. Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952), 34.
25. Patricia Highsmith, *Those Who Walk Away* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1967), 128.
26. Patricia Highsmith, *Deep Water* (New York: Harper, 1957); Highsmith, *A Suspension of Mercy* [original American title, *The Story-Teller*] (New York: Penguin, 1965).
27. Patricia Highsmith, "The Cries of Love," in *The Snail-Watcher and Other Stories*, 81-90.
28. Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, 144-45.
29. Patricia Highsmith, *The Two Faces of January* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 181-82.
30. Patricia Highsmith, *The Blunderer* (New York: Penzler, 1956).
31. Highsmith, *A Suspension of Mercy*, 133-34.
32. Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, 42.
33. Patricia Highsmith, *This Sweet Sickness* (New York: Harper, 1960); Patricia Highsmith, *The Cry of the Owl* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1962).
34. Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train* (New York: Penguin, 1950), 163.
35. *Ibid*, 172, 220.
36. *Ibid*, 190.
37. Highsmith, *A Game for the Living*, 87, 97, 181-82.
38. Highsmith, *Those Who Walk Away*, 246.
39. Highsmith, *The Cry of the Owl*, 8.
40. Highsmith, *This Sweet Sickness*, 36, 123, 239.
41. Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*, 20-22, 108, 187, 198, 228.
42. Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 34, 68-69, 154.
43. Highsmith, *The Glass Cell*, 70-90; Highsmith, *The Tremor of Forgery*, 47 and *passim*.
44. John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59-60.

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45. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 151.

46. For a good discussion of the links between Communism and homosexuality in popular culture, see D'Emilio, 57-73.

47. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic, 1988), 94.

48. Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942), 51-53, 191-216.

49. Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*, 14-15, 25, 37, 56.

50. *Ibid*, 14-15. Emphasis added.

51. *Ibid*, 17.

52. *Ibid*, 20-22, 56, 96, 82.

53. Tania Modleski, "Film Theory's Detour," *Screen*, Vol. 5, November-December 1982, 76.

54. Highsmith, *This Sweet Sickness*, 86.

55. *Ibid*, 66.

56. Modleski, 78.

57. Highsmith, *The Two Faces of January*, 11-14.

58. *Ibid*, 20-23, 35.

59. *Ibid*, 83.

60. *Ibid*, 97, 105.

61. *Ibid*, 181-82, 200, 202.

62. Brigid Brophy, "Highsmith," in Brophy, *Don't Never Forget: Collected Views and Reviews* (New York: Holt, 1966), 151-52.

David Cochran is a lecturer in the history department at Southern Illinois University—Carbondale.