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Murmurs, Masks, and Murder: Deviancy in Patricia Highsmith's "The Price of Salt", "The Talented Mr. Ripley", and "Strangers on a Train"

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Murmurs, Masks, and Murder:

Deviancy in Patricia Highsmith's The Price of Salt, The Talented

Mr. Ripley, and Strangers on a Train

submitted by

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Introduction: What is Deviancy?

The novelist Brigid Brophy once wrote that Patricia Highsmith “does for the melodrama of coincidence [what Socrates did for the tragedy of fate]” (Brophy 665, qtd. in Mawer 12).

Whether or not this display of effusion can be supported is uncertain—Highsmith’s biographers seem likely to disagree with it—, but Highsmith’s impact on crime fiction cannot be ignored.

Perhaps the most accurate statement about her is Ian Hamilton’s damning-with-faint-praise that Highsmith “is the crime writer who comes closest to giving crime writing a good name” (1147).

Mary Patricia Highsmith, born in 1921, was always a bit of a stranger to convention. Her second story, about a girl who steals a book, was written because “she was tempted to steal a book from [her high school]” (Schenkar 567). She found it “‘relaxing’ to watch snails copulate” (Schenkar 570). When she received the first copies of her eventual bestseller *Strangers on a Train*, her first thought was that they were “taking up a lot of space in the world” (Schenkar 221). When her American agent “reported that the reason editors said her paperbacks weren’t selling in the States was that they were ‘too subtle’ and that there was ‘no one likeable in the book’,” Highsmith retorted that “‘Perhaps it is because I don’t like anyone’” (Schenkar 24). Unable to settle down romantically, she pursued straight married women and lesbians with whom she fought constantly; the implication was that wherever Highsmith went, she left a string of broken hearts and empty beds in her wake.

But as strange and hostile as Highsmith was, the culture in which she wrote was even worse. Condemnation of popular culture, combined with the inquiries into the allegiances of anyone considered politically suspect, had created a culture of fear within the artistic community. As David Cochran writes, “Artists had learned their best strategy was to avoid anything that

smacked of political controversy or presented too dark and unflattering a vision of American society. As actress Judy Holliday—a friend of Highsmith herself—“commented after testifying before [the House Committee on Un-American Activities] for having campaigned for Henry Wallace in 1948, ‘I don’t say “yes” to anything now except cancer and cerebral palsy’” (13). During the writing of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, psychologist Frederic Wertham published his now infamous treatise *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he argued that crime and superhero comic books — in which he saw “violence; sadism and cruelty; the superman philosophy” — would undoubtedly lead to juvenile delinquency (15). Whether it was conducting the Cold War or passing the Taft-Hartley Act, which required labor leaders to sign loyalty oaths, “the dominant political and economic classes sought to assert their control and narrow the range of options available” (Cochran 3).

Though confronted with these complications, Highsmith refused to let herself be swayed by societal pressure. Her most famous novels—and even her early, lesser-known novels—force the reader to re-evaluate every aspect of their everyday life. Normalcy is not infallible in Highsmith’s canon: within its organized, mundane structure lie opportunities for one to rebel, no matter what systems are put in place to prevent it. Even morals are not safe from Highsmith’s magnifying glass: though her anti-heroes were deviant by society’s standards, Highsmith’s literary methods caused the reader to question the wrongness of the characters’ supposed deviancy. Though her earlier characters may have shown supposedly “normal” characters their darker sides, in at least one case, this darkness is not very intense; in fact, it’s almost mundane. However, in order to understand the subtleties of Highsmith’s deviant characters, we must first begin by defining what deviancy *is* in her canon. Although this list is by no means exhaustive, it sums up some of the most common aspects of Highsmith’s deviants.

First and foremost, the deviant character in Highsmith's novels is non-heterosexual: a response to a society whose obsession with communism led to the nightmare of the collaborator hiding amongst us. In 1950, when the Senate conducted a formal inquiry into "the presence of 'homosexuals and other moral perverts' in government", their report concluded that "One homosexual can pollute a government office", using what Cochran writes was "the same type of language used to describe communists" (126). Even before the report was issued, critics picked up on the connection; Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote that communism was "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" (Schlesinger Jr. 151, qtd. in Cochran 126). The descriptors for communists and their allies were strongly tied to effeminacy; Cochran points to the term "pink" as an example of this phenomenon (126).

But even without its ties to communism, homosexuality still posed a threat to the American dream, represented by "the nuclear family, nestled snugly in its [suburban] home" (Ibid). At a time when "'normal' heterosexual behavior culminating in marriage represented 'maturity' and 'responsibility'", anyone who broke from that standard was "by definition, irresponsible, immature, and weak" (May 94, qtd. in Cochran 127). This immaturity was seen as the result of what Philip Wylie deemed "Momism": the spoiling of a son by his overbearing mother (as I'll briefly discuss in the following chapter).

Because of their perceived immaturity, Highsmith's deviants tend to be driven by emotion, rather than reason. While a character such as Bruno is able to plot a seemingly foolproof double murder, he is driven by his passions: his plot stems from his irrational hatred for his father, and he is all too eager to rant about him to a complete stranger. Furthermore, he is easily able to commit murder, but is obsessed with emphasizing to Guy how much he likes him.

Bruno, of course, is not unique in this regard: as Anthony Hilfer notes, “Highsmith characters may shrug off one person’s murder while agonizing whether they have been *inconsiderate* to another” (123). Yet this irrationality makes sense in the context of the Cold War: in a society obsessed with revealing each other’s actions as unethical and unpatriotic, an obsession with manners, and thus a reversion to the most basic standard for ethicalness, may be the only response.

Even in their private actions, Highsmith’s deviants remain driven by feeling, to the point where one might call them sensualists. This drive can manifest itself in various ways, ranging from passionately caressing the taut sheets of a bed, to having extremely sensual sex. Due to their focus on passion, Highsmith’s deviants also tend to be extremely dominant in some way: a logical response to a society intent on controlling every facet of people’s lives. For example, Thomas Ripley’s feelings about Dickie demonstrate a burning desire to control him, while throughout *The Price of Salt*, Carol subtly demands submission and obedience from Therese.

As commentators on Cold War society, Highsmith’s deviants are hyper-conscious of, and uncomfortable with, societal structures such as capitalism and suburbia. This discomfort might be found in most of her fiction, but it is particularly prominent in *The Price of Salt*: Therese works in a department store, but is clearly uncomfortable with the way it subtly ostracizes poorer customers, while Carol’s actions in her own suburban home reveal that she feels highly out-of-place. As a result, deviant characters tend to be chameleon-like in their ability to blend in with everyday society—we see an extreme example of this in Thomas Ripley’s case—, though as one sees in Bruno’s case, their physical appearance can easily give away their status. As an extension of this, the deviant character is comfortable with ambiguity. In a society centered around dichotomies “between us and them, good and evil, innocence and guilt”, Highsmith’s

characters succeed in blurring the boundaries between supposedly concrete ideas, to the point where “[t]he one rule that holds for Highsmith’s world is that characters certain of who they are, how things are, what is good and evil, true and false, real and unreal, are *always* in the wrong” (Cochran 127, Hilfer 124).

Lastly, the deviant character is usually flawed in some way, however seemingly insignificantly. Cochran points to “David Kelsey’s obsession with an old girlfriend in *This Sweet Sickness* [...] and Robert Forester’s voyeurism in *The Cry of the Owl*” as strong examples of this. This flaw does not have to necessarily be evident from the beginning; one of the strengths of Highsmith’s subtle writing was that although “[the] character is seriously warped, [...] the reader only realizes it gradually as the problem slowly drives the character to extremes” (123). Sometimes, this flaw is an exaggeration of a problem within society—as with Tom Ripley’s lust for material wealth—and thus is meant to serve as social critique, and thus make the reader feel ill-at-ease with a clearly problematic system.

As one might notice, at least one of these traits is present in the reader, no matter who they may be. Featuring these universal traits in her deviant characters allowed Highsmith to highlight the hypocrisy and illogical standards of Cold War-era society, thus allowing her contemporary readers to rethink the supposed strength and infallibility of the world in which they lived, and become more likely to sympathize with these characters. Perhaps Al Roberts, the protagonist of Edgar Ulmer’s 1945 film *Detour*, summarized Highsmith’s philosophy best when he declared, “That’s life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you” (Cochran 3).

Highsmith’s early works tend to have a common theme: a seemingly normal character encounters a clearly deviant character who takes them away from their organized, mundane world and brings them closer to their darker desires, though this darkness is highly subjective.

However, *Strangers on a Train* and *The Price of Salt* handle the effects of “the deviant inside” somewhat differently: Guy’s life worsens as a result of his meeting Bruno, while the transformation that Therese undergoes as a result of meeting Carol seems to cause her to mature somewhat (though not in the Cold War sense of heterosexuality). How the reader reacts to the “deviant inside” is also somewhat dependent on which perspectives they experience. The reader experiences the story solely through Therese’s perspective; as a result, our reactions to Carol’s actions are colored by Therese’s interpretation of her words and actions. This method seems to emphasize the coldness and superiority that attracts Therese to her, since even in narrative form, she is distant. *Strangers on a Train*, meanwhile, takes a more multi-faceted look at “the deviant inside” through its perspective shift between Guy and Bruno, thus allowing the reader to get inside the minds of both the “normal” and “deviant” characters, as well as to track the former’s descent into deviancy. As a result, the reader gets a better understanding of the “normal” character’s innermost desires, since the “deviant” personifies them.

Although the “deviant inside” model permits the reader to hide behind an outwardly normal character onto whom desires can be projected, sometimes, the relationship between the reader and the deviant must be made blatant. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Highsmith uses multiple methods in order to glamorize deviancy and make the reader confront—and even celebrate—their id. But these methods are useless without a relatable main character, so Highsmith makes sure that Tom Ripley is a highly likeable protagonist through his sardonic take on society, as well as writing the story from his perspective. These methods also serve as a break from moralistic literary tradition, in which one would see the deviant fully punished for their misdeeds.

Although Highsmith’s methods could be heavy-handed at times, in the long run, they were highly influential for the thriller genre. Her ability to transform the deviant from an object

of scorn into a social critic and partial representation of the reader meant that crime fiction became a more legitimized genre. What had previously been considered pointless trash now became an opportunity to analyze an unjust society in great detail. Though Highsmith herself was close-minded, her characters paved the way for a more diverse representation of misunderstood people. By analyzing Highsmith's models of deviancy in the late 40s and early 50s, we get a better understanding of the evolution of the literary techniques that would typify her work. Even our views of Cold War fiction undergo a change as a result of this analysis: the genre becomes less a neutral mirror of society's fears, and more a running commentary on the hypocrisy of the era, even if this commentary had to be done in secret at times. Lastly, Highsmith's model of deviancy causes us to question the validity of common depictions of deviancy, as well as become suspicious of how easily psychology is weaponized in order to persecute the subjective "other". Though people like Bruno and Tom are clearly immoral, their complex personalities are a break from the stereotypes previous used as shorthand in designating deviancy.

“The Deviant Inside”: The Price of Salt and Strangers on a Train

Introduction: complexes and contrasts

The post-World War II period was a thorny time for artists who wished to break away. As William Graebner writes, “Americans were virtually obsessed with creating, or affirming the existence of a ‘culture of the whole’ [...] They labored to construct or imagine intellectual, technological, political and social systems that would encompass and enfold culture on a nationwide and even worldwide basis” (Graebner 69, qtd. in Cochran 7). The one great “American mind” was something to strive for; totalitarianism was represented by what Schlesinger called the “man without anxiety” (and thus the free-thinking man) (Schlesinger 56, qtd. in Cochran 7). But Highsmith, an eternal rebel against unity and “the American way”, had other plans in mind.

The fact that Highsmith wrote Strangers on a Train and The Price of Salt around the same time serves as a testament to her literary versatility: the novels are complete opposites in some respects. Although both feature homosexuality as a theme, in Strangers on a Train, it is mostly subtextual, whereas The Price of Salt centers around an obvious lesbian relationship. This theme also plays into the kind of deviancy demonstrated in each novel; whereas Strangers on a Train features what can best be described as “loud” deviance (e.g., phallic guns, Oedipal complexes, and murder), The Price of Salt contains something akin to “quiet” deviance. No murder takes place, the closest thing to police action is the private investigator hired by Harge to tail Carol and Therese, and the only deviancy that occurs is homosexuality, and even this is described in sensual and emotional terms. Furthermore, just as the intensity of each protagonist’s deviancy differs, so does their reaction to this self-discovery (as I’ll discuss later in this chapter).

The novels also diverge in terms of background, in that one could be said to be Highsmith's fictionalization of an incident in her life, whereas the other sprung only partially from Highsmith's experiences. In December 1948, a 27-year-old Patricia Highsmith was working in the toy department at Bloomingdale's when, "one morning[,] into this chaos of noise and commerce, there walked a blondish woman in a [mink] coat". After some uncertainty about what to purchase, Mrs. Kathleen Wiggins Senn purchased a doll, gave Highsmith her delivery details, "paid[,] and departed". Though, Highsmith admitted, "it was a routine transaction", something about it had thoroughly struck her: afterwards, she was left feeling "odd and swimmy in the head, near to fainting, yet at the same time uplifted, as if I had seen a vision". That evening, in the space of about two hours, Highsmith wrote "some eight pages in longhand" of The Price of Salt's plot. A few days after this chance meeting, she came down with chickenpox. Yet to Highsmith, this was essential to the novel's creation: as she wrote in the afterword to the 1993 edition of The Price of Salt, "One of the small runny-nosed children there must have passed on the germ, but in a way the germ of a book too: fever is stimulating to the imagination" (277-278). Initial titles for the novel included "The Bloomingdale Story", "The Argument of Tantalus: or THE LIE", "Blasphemy of Laughter", and "Paths of Lightening" (Schenkar 269-270).

Despite only meeting Mrs. Senn once, the encounter lit the flame of obsession within Highsmith. On June 30, 1950 - the day after she finished her first draft of The Price of Salt -, Highsmith took the train from Penn Station in Manhattan to Ridgewood, New Jersey in order to pay a pilgrimage to the address etched in her mind from a year before: 315 Murray Avenue, Mrs. Senn's house. After taking the wrong bus due to the attention she received from passengers when she asked the driver for directions, Highsmith "hovered on a nearby street and watched [...] as a 'pale aqua automobile [came] out of Murray Avenue, driven by a woman with dark glasses and

short blonde hair, alone, and I think in a pale blue or aqua dress with short sleeves” (Schenkar 273). But Highsmith couldn’t tell whether or not it was Mrs. Senn (“the hair was different”), and so, as she wrote, her “heart leapt but not very high” (Ibid). Upon her return, she “carefully preserved her ticket back from that ride, Ridgewood to New York on the Erie Railroad” on that day’s diary page, then wrote a “‘tragic little poem’ about the sighting—‘if it was one’” (Ibid). Six months later, Highsmith returned to Ridgewood to stalk Senn again; she found the house “deserted and ‘something of a fairy tale[,] something of a castle”. Yet her lack of contact with Mrs. Senn was somewhat of a blessing, in Highsmith’s eyes: as she wrote in her diary, “Alas, should I see her, my book would be spoilt! I should be inhibited!” (Ibid). But Highsmith’s “Carol” was unaware of all this, and would never read the novel she inspired. As Andrew Wilson notes, “On [October 30,] 1951, [Senn] walked into her garage, closed the doors[,] and switched on the engine of her car” (172). Highsmith never found out.

Meanwhile, unlike The Price of Salt’s mysterious woman shopping at the department store, or The Talented Mr. Ripley’s young man on the beach, Strangers on a Train sprang from multiple sources. The plot “form[ed] in [Highsmith’s] mind by a process of parthenogenesis[,] springing to life without any external influence” as she took a walk in Hastings-on-Hudson with her parents. On December 16, 1945, she began writing an outline of the plot, which originally “centered around [...] two men, Alfred and Laurence, both of whom wanted to kill women they no longer loved” (Wilson 122). On June 23, 1947, after significant plot revision --though the “central theme of the double murder” remained a constant--, Highsmith formally began writing Strangers on a Train. Potential titles included “Criss Cross”, “The Other” (which Highsmith considered to be “the best yet”), “The Other Side of the Mirror”, and “At the Back of the Mirror” (Schenkar 407, 171, Wilson 124, Schenkar 570). A significant amount of the novel was written

over the course of two months in 1948, when Highsmith lived at Yaddo, an artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York to which Truman Capote had recommended her.

Bruno, on the other hand, was the product of several external influences. His name, according to Wilson, was “a “[union] of murderer and victim” Bruno Richard Hauptmann and Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., whose trial transfixed a 14-year-old Highsmith (52). The character's personality was partially inspired by “B”, a “‘completely dissolute’ young man” Highsmith met in Texas when she was 17, and who might have shown her pornographic pictures. Highsmith herself remarked that he was “a very spoiled boy who was very much like Bruno [...] an adopted boy in a wealthy family and completely worthless, and he was sort of a genesis of Bruno” (Schenkar 86). During the process of writing the novel in the summer of 1948, Highsmith “pasted a newspaper picture of the grinning young killer Robert Murl Daniels in her seventeenth cahier and [wrote] the name ‘Bruno’ beneath it” (Schenkar 519).

In studying these two novels at the same time, we see the prototypes of the tropes for which Highsmith became famous. Normalcy is seen as inherently problematic, due to its confining institutions, and those who adhere to it--the prisoners of society--are viewed as boring or hostile. Deviancy, meanwhile, is a means of freedom: those who encounter their inner deviant should be considered liberated, even if this does not always end happily. Naturally, since these are her first novels, the narrative progression leaves a little to be desired -- an accusation leveled at The Price of Salt is that it drags at times -- but the slow burn of developing guilt and self-realization that Highsmith would eventually perfect in The Talented Mr. Ripley is present even here.

After the success of Strangers on a Train¹, Highsmith was labeled as a “suspense writer”: a title with which she was uncomfortable. According to her, being categorized as such “mean[t] [...] 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”. Furthermore, in calling her a “suspense writer”, it implied that her work was of inferior quality to more mainstream literature: as she remarked, “[I]n 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” (Cochran 117). Yet Highsmith also recognized that “the suspense novelist has a great deal of room [...] to cast a critical eye on the world we live in” (Ibid). In writing suspense the way she did, Highsmith served as a guide to the seedy underbelly of society: a Virgil to our Dante. Perhaps this is why her earliest novels involve “normal” characters being led into deviancy: they’re meant to represent Highsmith’s then-unsuspecting public.

Publication

Therese Belivet, a 19-year-old set designer engaged to a man whom she does not love, is working at Frankenberg’s department store when she meets the older, mysterious Carol Aird. The two women immediately become enchanted by one another, but after Carol’s husband Harge

¹ The *New Yorker* “highly recommended” this “horrifying picture of an oddly engaging young man, who has all the complexes you ever heard of”, while the *New York Herald Tribune* declared it to be “one of the year’s most sinister items [...] a highly persuasive book [...]” whose readers would be “held by [the] evil kind of suspense [of this] rarely perceptible study in criminal psychology”. However, in the *Tribune*’s eyes, the novel suffered from inconstant “credibil[ity]” and “not entirely convincing” characters (Wilson 168).

finds out about their relationship, Carol is forced to choose between her child and her lover, while Therese must fight to preserve her first meaningful romantic relationship.

Although The Price of Salt's plot deviated from that of the stereotypical lesbian pulp², its marketing did not, as evidenced by the evolution its cover underwent between hardback and paperback editions (see Appendix A). In its first 1952 edition, published by Coward-McCann, The Price of Salt sported a relatively serious cover: a plain gray background, with "SALT" written in a pile of salt, and "A MODERN NOVEL OF TWO WOMEN" written below (Image 1). In comparison, on the cover of the 1953 Bantam Press paperback edition, Carol and Therese are depicted in pulpy "good girl art" style: a blond Therese, clad in lavender, lounges on a couch, while a black-clad Carol smokes a cigarette, her hand on Therese's shoulder. A man, most likely Harge, stares at them. At the top, letters nearly the same size as "Claire Morgan" (Highsmith's pseudonym) proclaim this to be "THE NOVEL OF A LOVE SOCIETY FORBIDS" (Image 2). Yet these images belie the transformation that the two women undergo as a result of their encounter.

Therese: the potential deviant

At the beginning of the novel, Therese can best be described as somewhat of an innocent: engaged but not yet married, working temporarily in a department store, and "a stage designer apprentice just beginning to be an apprentice" (4). She is uncertain of where she will be next summer; perhaps Europe, but it doesn't seem "real" (Ibid). In short, her life is "a series of

² Yvonne Keller, in her analysis of 1950s and 1960s lesbian pulp novels, discusses these stereotypical pulps, which she calls "virile adventures", in great depth. Although these adventures, like "pro-lesbian" works "offer lesbian characters, illicit and frequent sexual activity, prosaic writing, and a tendency toward sensationalism, virile adventure stories are generally intended for a straight male, white, working-to-middle-class, voyeuristic audience [...] Titillation, prurience, and "male adventure" abound; the book frequently ends with the development, consummation, or marriage of a heterosexual couple; and women are depicted as objectified" (Keller 400).

zigzags[;] [a]t nineteen, she [is] nervous” (5). Her life is directionless – typical for someone still classified as a young adult— and Therese seems to be somewhat of a blank slate. Yet within her lies the potential for deviancy. Abandoned by her mother and raised in an Episcopalian orphanage, Therese clings tightly to her memories of Sister Alicia, whose “small blue eyes always [...] [saw] her differently [...] from all the other girls” (6). When Sister Alicia gives her a pair of knitted green gloves for her eighth birthday, Therese cherishes them like one might cherish a sacred relic: she keeps the gloves “at the bottom of her tin locker at school, for years after Sister Alicia had gone away to California. The white tissue had become limp and crackleless like ancient cloth, and still she had not worn the gloves” (5-6). Even after they become too small for her to wear, Therese still hangs onto them. This action should not come as a surprise: until she meets Carol, Sister Alicia is the only one who sees Therese as a unique individual--“[different] [...] from all the other girls”--and holding onto the gloves allows Therese a physical reminder of her true self. It also emphasizes the Highsmithian trope of the object as a evocator of emotions: a similar instance occurs when Therese “stares” at a candlestick holder (a “beautiful thing”) given to her by Carol in order to “[feel] it quench some forgotten and nameless thirst inside her” (238).

Even as a potential deviant, Therese is acutely aware of the connection between capitalism and confinement: as she remarks to herself, “Twenty-five Yearers”—like “lifers” in prison’—“[at Frankenberg's] got four weeks' vacation...Frankenberg's also provided a camp for summer and winter vacationers. They should have a church, too, [...] and a hospital for the birth of babes. The store was organized so much like a prison, it frightened her now and then to realize she was a part of it” (4). It is as if people’s lives are merely transitions from one prison to another—be it consumerism, suburbia, or war—and the only way to stay alive is to participate, even

unwillingly, in the cycle. In Therese's eyes, even the marketed objects want to rebel against the system: as she watches a small toy train express its "wrath and frustration on [its] closed oval track", she "fe[els] it curse[s] the hand that threw its switch each day. In the jerk of its nose around the curves, in its wild dashes down the straight lengths of track, she could see a frenzied pursuit of a tyrannical master" (8). As an outsider working within this system, however, Therese also sees the flaws in it: in this case, the undercurrent of disposability. The individual object, in a society that emphasizes similarity, can be easily overlooked, as evidenced by Therese's urge to give the poorer customers the dolls they want for free, since "Frankenberg's won't miss it" (10).

Even before she meets Carol, Therese is somewhat of a sensualist. Near the beginning, the reader is told that Therese "liked red, especially garnet-red, and she loved red velvet" (13). But the intense reaction that she has to the dress that Mrs. Robichek bestows upon her is what reveals her true self, if only for a moment:

It was the dress of queens in fairy tales, of a red deeper than blood. She stepped back, and pulled in the looseness of the dress behind her, so it fitted her ribs and her waist, and she looked back at her own dark-hazel eyes in the mirror. Herself meeting herself. This was she, not the girl in the dull plaid skirt and the beige sweater, not the girl who worked in the doll department at Frankenberg's" (14).

For Therese, whose workplace is centered around identity—whose mirrors serve as confirmation of our identities if we are proud of them and harsh confrontation if we are not—, her true self can only shine through when she is alone in her own mind.

Therese's potential for deviancy is further marked by her discomfort in her relationship with Richard, her fiancé. Although the two have had sex with one another, Therese's feelings are anything but positive about it. In one scene, when Therese remembers the couple's first time

together, her memories are steeped in regret: “She remembered the first night she had let him stay, and she writhed again inwardly. It had been anything but pleasant, and she had asked right in the middle of it, ‘Is this right?’ How could it be right and so unpleasant, she had thought” (51).

Their relationship is one of ambivalence and instability: Therese is uncertain about going to Europe with him, skeptical that his friend could help her find a job, and “self-conscious and foolish” when she embraces Richard (21). Disgusted by the heterosexual “normalcy” that a marriage with Richard would entail, Therese is open to the possibility of “abnormalcy”.

Therese’s initial time at Frankenberg’s only serves to emphasize her immaturity. Until she meets Mrs. Robichek—a surrogate mother of sorts—, she is ill-at-ease in the department store; even after this, her life is still filled with uncertainty. However, the store is also the site of the start of her transition into womanhood. Therese’s true sexual awakening comes immediately after a metaphorical period - after her leg is gashed by a shipping cart, there “[is] nothing to do but buy a sanitary napkin from the slot machine” and tie it to her leg to stanch the bleeding (31). Immediately thereafter, Carol’s and her eyes meet.

Carol: the dominant deviant

From their very first glance, Carol and Therese’s relationship is a game of dominance, similar to the one enacted in The Talented Mr. Ripley. This was present even in Highsmith’s initial encounter with Senn: as Schenkar remarks, “To an imagination like Patricia Highsmith’s, Kathleen Senn’s ‘routine transaction’ in Bloomingdale’s [...] had all the features of a sexually charged sadomasochistic fantasy. On one side of the Bloomingdale’s counter was the young, poor, seemingly subservient salesgirl; on the other side, the older, wealthy, apparently dominant Venus in furs” (268). It was no surprise, then, that this dynamic would transfer into The Price of

Salt. During her time at Carol's house, Therese senses that Carol "[demands] another word, another phrase from [her]" (23). She commands Therese to "'Come and play something [on the piano].'"'; when Therese resists, Carol says "imperatively, 'Oh, I don't care how you play. Just play something.'" (Ibid). Her manner of speaking is tinged with dominance and authority: when she "softly" tells Therese to remove her shoes, we are told that she does so "in a tone that commanded obedience" (59).

However, one critic views this dominance as something far more insidious. In her analysis of The Price of Salt, Schenkar accuses the novel of being permeated with "the odor of mother-daughter incest", and points to the alleged similarity of Carol and Therese's journey to Humbert Humbert and Lolita's "drive [which] begins [...] as an unacknowledged and incestuous honeymoon" (50). Rather than a tango of dominance, Carol and Therese's relationship is instead "a parody of mother-daughter relations [...] almost as unsettling as Humbert and Lolita's awful caricature of father-daughter love" (Ibid). But Schenkar seems to assume that her reading is contextual rather than subtextual, and refuses to cite specific passages to prove her point. Her biography of Highsmith is not the only instance of her attempting to push this theory; in her introduction to a selection of Highsmith's work, she writes that The Price of Salt "glows with a luminous halo of incest and a little light pedophilia" and that a 19-year-old Therese is "jail bait-aged" (Selected Novels and Short Stories xiv). In the end, this aspect of Schenkar's reading remains wholly subjective.

As cool and emotionally distant as Carol is, her disdain for mainstream Cold War culture serves as an amplification of the discomfort that Therese briefly experiences in previous scenes. In a conversation with Therese, Carol declares that "It's getting to be a disease, isn't it, not being able to love? [...] Maybe it's the times. If one wanted to, one could make out a case for racial

suicide. Man trying to catch up with his own destructive machines” (125). Here, Highsmith advances a bold viewpoint: that because man is beginning to reach the limit to which he can destroy the land, he must instead turn upon himself and his countrymen. Furthermore, by having Carol describe love as a “disease”, she emphasizes the increasing pathologizing of the individual within society: if they do not experience the “appropriate” feelings for the “appropriate” people, they must submit to the medical/psychological community and have their perceived abnormalities excised with surgical precision. Therese’s thoughts seem to confirm this: she is immediately reminded of Richard’s “mingling [of] war and big business and Congressional witch-hunts and finally certain people he knew into one grand enemy, whose only collective label was hate. Now Carol too” (Ibid). In encountering Carol, Therese has found an outlet for her anti-capitalist opinions.

Transformations

As a result of her meeting Carol—the object of her previously unrealized desires—Therese undergoes a significant transformation of self. She is even willing to forget Sister Alicia and throw away the gloves that she gave her: an action which signifies both the intensity of Therese’s fervor for Carol, and the fact that Carol has replaced Sister Alicia as Therese’s object of desire. Highsmith, of course, [seizes upon this]; immediately after Therese thinks about throwing away the gloves, Carol declares that “One gets over things” (267).

When the two lovers stop in Waterloo for the night, they finally have a chance to consummate their attraction to one another. But their passion transcends mere physicality; as deviants, and thus people more steered by their senses than their minds, their sexual activity is naturally raised into the realm of the sublime. While Highsmith discusses body parts (e.g., lips,

necks, and shoulders), it is sensation that dominates the moment: “the tingling and terrifying pleasure that spread in waves from Carol’s lips over [Therese’s] neck, her shoulders, that rushed suddenly the length of her body” and “erases” her words (180). This passion leads to a kind of erasure of the physical self in favor of something that transcends even the mind, and therefore the rational: Therese’s “body...seemed to vanish in widening circles that leaped further and further, beyond where thought could follow” (Ibid). The act concludes with emotion and certainty: a stark contrast to the ambivalence and annoyance present within Therese’s relationship with Richard. Therese “[does] not have to ask if this were right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect” (Ibid). This scene also served as a break from traditional lesbian pulp, which served solely to titillate its male readers. Michael Tolkin, in his obituary for Highsmith, wrote that The Price of Salt contained “the only scene of contented lovemaking in anything she wrote”; Noel Mawer echoes this sentiment in her discussion of the novel (Tolkin BR8, qtd. in Mawer 283). Russell Harrison, meanwhile, theorizes that the “positiveness verging on sentimentality” inherent in the scene stems from the fact that the “sex...cannot result in procreation” (11).

But sensuality is not the only aspect that Therese learns from Carol: by the end of the novel, Therese has taken on some of Carol’s dominance as well. When the lovers meet in a restaurant for what they assume will be the last time, and begin to leave, Therese literally makes a stand for herself and her relationship: “Therese stood up. She couldn’t leave Carol sitting here at the table where their two teacups were, with the ashes of their cigarettes in front of her. ‘Don’t stay. Come out with me’”. Carol, who is used to subtly issuing orders, as well as being in a physical position of dominance, is clearly taken aback: she “glance[s] up with a kind of questioning surprise in her face” (270). Though the two have been apart for some time, Carol’s

absence has not caused Therese to regress to her more submissive ways; rather, it has given her a chance to [hone her newly-found skills]. It should be no surprise, then, that the last line of the novel is “Therese walked toward [Carol]”: she has matured to the point of taking the literal first step towards an adult relationship (276). She has become, in Carol’s words, “all grown up—with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes”, and, it is implied, grown-up actions and speech (264). Though Therese has encountered “the deviant within”, her seamlessly and comfortably incorporating the previously-repressed aspects of herself means that her story ends happily, and on her own terms, rather than society’s.

Parting glances: a brief discussion of endings

The Price of Salt’s ending, in which Carol and Therese are given a chance to rekindle their relationship, was a blatant break from a literary tradition of deviancy—no matter how slight—being punished by psychological, sexual, or even physical death. As Highsmith noted, “Prior to [The Price of Salt], homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing—alone and miserable and shunned—into a depression equal to hell” (279). With the publication of the novel, queer readers finally received a vision of a hopeful future: as one appreciative reader wrote, “Yours is the first book like this with a happy ending! We don’t all commit suicide and lots of us are doing fine” (Ibid). Yet this ending also seems to have been limited by the standards of the day. Rather than leave her characters with a decidedly happy ending, Highsmith had to leave their future open, albeit positive. Perhaps such a blatant support of homosexuality would not have made it successfully

past the censors, or perhaps Highsmith, reflecting on her own lengthy trail of unhappy relationships, would not have been able to stomach it.

Yet this ending was also an exception to the standard that Highsmith would eventually set for her novels: that of the triumphant deviant. Therese and Carol do not come to the end of the novel with smirks on their faces, and the reader is not left with a sense of psychological satisfaction, since the couple has not gotten away with anything akin to murder. But even within the closing lines, there is a note of triumph: Therese and Carol are on the verge of reuniting, and thus have triumphed—however quietly—over a society that stands against their love. One may call it classically Highsmithian, due to the note of triumph against society, but it does not achieve this title by the same methods that Highsmith's other works do.

In what would eventually be deemed her most woman-positive novel, Highsmith advanced a bold claim: not all deviancy was detrimental to the so-called “sufferer”, and that sometimes, the largest amount of suffering came from not acknowledging and accepting one's true self (even if it went against society). While The Price of Salt succeeded due to its characters' clash with--and triumph over--society, Therese's easy self-acceptance was something to which not all of Highsmith's readers could relate. Highsmith would soon discover that her deviants were more interesting when they fought with themselves.

Brief normalcy: a split-second snapshot

At the beginning of Strangers on a Train, Guy Haines is the very image of Cold War normalcy. An architect, Guy is literally responsible for the construction of the social institutions against which Highsmith's deviants rebel (e.g., country clubs, offices, and stores). He studied Plato in high school: a fact which suggests formal, traditional education. Even his physical appearance screams responsibility and normalcy, to the point of old-fashionedness: brown eyes,

clothing that “suggested a style of the last century, like his black hair that grew high and loose on top and lay close in back. The rise of hair and the slope of his long nose gave him a look of intense purpose and somehow of forward motion, though from the front, his heavy, horizontal brows and mouth imposed a stillness and reserve” (9). Yet his status as a picture of normalcy is almost immediately threatened: a few pages into the novel, his foot brushes up against Charles Anthony Bruno’s, and their complicated relationship begins.

Blatant deviancy

In contrast to the chameleon-like deviants who would eventually come to characterize Highsmith’s work, Bruno’s appearance clearly marks him as deviant. Because the first chapter is written from Guy’s perspective, the reader looks upon Bruno’s body with what Josh Lukin calls “an aesthetic revulsion so great it borders on moral contempt” (159). Every aspect of Bruno’s head and face screams of deviancy: the “pallid, undersized face”, the “narrow bulging forehead and the lantern jaw,” and especially the “[degenerate] scoop” of the face (11). His skin, “smooth as a girl’s”, emphasizes his lack of complete masculinity (Ibid). But what truly marks Bruno as deviant is the “huge pimple in the exact center of his forehead [...] a topmost point that had erupted” upon his face, fueled by the “impurities” of the skin around it (Ibid). (Lukin views this as an “[allusion] to the anthropology of Lombroso and Nordau, suggesting that Guy sees Bruno’s physical characteristics as redolent of the criminal or even the *epicene*” (159).) Bruno seems to view it as a symbol of his negative emotions as well, and laments to Guy that ““It’s a boil. It’s everything I *hate* boiling up in me. It’s a plague of Job!” (21). At first, his appearance stands in direct contrast to Guy’s classic appearance. Yet after Guy murders Bruno’s father, he develops his own “plague of Job”, or rather, mark of Cain: “the white scar from the woods—the scar that

would always show” and thus mark him as deviant (188). As the novel continues, Guy’s link to Bruno is further emphasized: on his honeymoon, Guy’s skin browns quite visibly, to the point where he is compared to the “half-Portugese ship’s boy” (211). When read in juxtaposition with the description of Bruno’s “rust-brown [suit-clad] body”, this detail cannot be easily written off as mere coincidence. The fact that Guy’s scar is the “only [thing that] remained white”, and thus becomes even more prominent, should also be taken into consideration (Ibid).

Freudian deviancy

In Strangers on a Train, Freudian psychology serves as shorthand for deviancy and dysfunction. Throughout her life, Highsmith strongly aligned herself with Sigmund Freud’s work. As Schenkar writes, “it was [...] Freud’s interpretations to which Pat usually returned. His bold, artistic analyses attracted her, his misogynies were congruent with her own [...] For most of her life, Pat would explain [...] life to others, in more or less Freudian terms. Her novels do the same thing” (191). When Guy receives a black Luger from Bruno so that he can commit the murder, his perception of it is steeped in priapistic grotesqueness: it “topple[s] out” of the package, and Guy can’t help but notice its “outrageously large. Idiotic of *someone* to have made a gun so big!” (148). In comparison, Guy’s own “discreet[ly] beaut[iful]” pearl-handled gun is the perfect size to get the job done, in his eyes. Every aspect of its “perfect machinery” seems to represent the ideal man: “inquisitive, willing, strong with a reserved and gallant strength”, and when Guy frets about being caught with it, his first thought is to claim “*It’s not really a gun in my pocket. I’ve never thought of it as a gun*” (125, 148).

But it is the ever-present theme of the Oedipus complex that best demonstrates Bruno’s deviant mindset. Philip Wylie, in his 1942 work Generation of Vipers, theorized that “[deviant]

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” (Cochran 127). Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Bruno, who, according to Cochran, “represents the classical Oedipal pattern” (Ibid).

Throughout the novel, Bruno’s childishness—a product of his Momist upbringing—is emphasized. In conversations with his mother, he is constantly called “darling” and “angel”. After talking about his mother, Highsmith describes him as looking “uncertain and young”. Even his physical body demonstrates his arrested psychological development: at one point, his hands are compared to a “baby’s hands” (22). When he asks Guy how old he thinks Bruno is, Guy responds “‘Maybe twenty-four or five,’ [...] intending to flatter him, for Bruno looked younger” (21). As a result of his psychological immaturity, Bruno is sexually immature as well; he “had never been able to stop thinking it was a silly business”, and during one “terrible” attempt, “he had started giggling”. As is the case with Wylie’s deviant men, Bruno is drawn to his mother instead; all other women are, in Cochran’s words, “stupid and promiscuous” to him. There is no shame in Bruno’s sentiments towards his mother: he proudly proclaims to Guy, “I never seen another woman like my mother”, and informs him that the two “even go to parties together”. He refuses to leave his parents’ house—despite his hatred of his father—because he “like[s] to be with [his] mother”. But his words are eclipsed by his private thoughts when it comes to showing his feelings about his mother: “[H]e watched his mother’s legs flex as she tightened her stockings. The slim lines of her legs always gave him a lift, made him proud. His mother had the best-looking legs he had ever seen on anyone, no matter what age [...] He was going to liberate

her soon, and she didn't know it". By having Guy murder his father for him, Cochran concludes, "Bruno completes the Oedipus cycle".

Like any classically Freudian male character, Bruno suffers from castration anxiety, as shown by his possessiveness of his inheritance and his attitude towards his father's hobby. When he first describes his life to Guy, Bruno phrases his relationship with his father in terms of robbery and "cutting in" as a response to perceived insecurity: "I mean it's a hell of a thing, isn't it, when your own father robs you...He thinks my mother and I have too good a time as it is. He's always scheming up ways to cut in" (17). Meanwhile, Bruno's father collects cookie cutters; something which Bruno's mother views with disdain, as "[she]'s always telling him to go back to [them]" (20). Paradoxically, Bruno's father is both the castrator and castratee: his hobby of collecting a stereotypically feminine item is forced upon him by his wife, yet this hobby also plays into his son's anxieties.

However, Bruno's relationship with his mother is not the only deviant relationship in the novel: as the careful reader will observe, Guy's encounter with Bruno marks the realization of his repressed homosexual feelings. When Bruno sneaks into his room shortly before Guy commits the murder, Guy engages in a dialogue with himself about his reaction: that "[a]s he had imagined, in nights before this, he was quite happy that Bruno had come. *Really Bruno? Yes*" (144). However, this is followed by somewhat of a dismissal of his feelings: he describes them as "familiarity and [...] something brotherly" (146). Yet after Bruno leaves, "it hardly seemed he was gone. There was just the two of them in the room still" (Ibid). By the time Bruno begins buying him items in an attempt to win his approval, Guy is able to imagine a situation where he is "Bruno's lover [...] to whom Bruno had brought a present, a peace offering" (205). Near the end of the novel, Guy finally admits the real reason why Bruno keeps appearing in his life:

“[b]ecause [Guy] himself derived something from seeing Bruno, some torture that perversely eased” (218). These emotions are not one-sided, either: at one point, after they have committed the murders, Bruno contemplates strangling Guy’s mistress Anne as well-- that way, “Guy and he could really be together” (250).

The self-sabotaging deviant

But unlike Therese, Guy’s experience with his inner deviant leaves him miserable and under arrest. This negative ending is the result of Guy’s extreme self-loathing, as well as his rejection of his negative emotions, and, by extension, Bruno. Throughout the novel, Guy expresses a constant need to be punished for his perceived sins. As he remarks 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” (41). As Cochran writes, in Highsmith’s work, “even the most seemingly well-adjusted [“men of action”], 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 built” (127). His meeting Bruno only amplifies his desire to purge his negative aspects. Although this is made clear through his passive-aggressive attempts to expel Bruno whenever he appears, Guy’s dreams—and thus the uncensored messages of his unconscious—most clearly his desire to perfect himself. In one particular dream, Guy sees Bruno, and “jump[s] from his bed to fight him. ‘Who are you?’”, he asks, as he attempts to strangle Bruno. But as an extension of Guy’s self, Bruno cannot be killed off so easily. “‘You,’ Bruno answer[s] finally”, as he shakes off Guy’s hands around his throat (181). Guy and Bruno are “really two versions of the same being, with a ‘link’, as [Mary Kay Mahoney] describes the phenomenon [...], that is ‘predestined, necessitated by something within

Guy himself rather than by random chance” (Mahoney 107, qtd. in Mawer 273). By constantly rejecting Bruno—and therefore a portion of himself—Guy continues to set himself up for failure and misery. Even when he obeys Bruno’s bidding, and kills off his father, however, Guy still ensures his own death. As Mawer writes, “When the disintegrating Guy [...] finally commits the murder his double, Bruno, has willed, Guy assures his own destruction: ‘destructiveness against others is a pathological phenomenon comparable to suicidal impulses,’ Erich Fromm observes [...] The killing of another human being is Guy’s way of destroying himself” (58).

In contrast to The Price of Salt’s parting lines of confidence, certainty, and self-controlled actions, Strangers on a Train ends on a note of resignation to one’s uncontrollable fate: Guy knows “that he had to face Gerard. That was part of it all, and always had been. It was inevitable and ordained, like the turning of the earth, and there was no sophistry by which he could free himself from it” (281). Guy’s final actions are not his own: he “trie[s] to speak, [but] [says] something entirely different from what he had intended. ‘Take me’” (Ibid). In resisting himself, Guy only succeeds in forcing himself further into submission to the law: the ultimate arbitrator of society.

Although both novels imply that each of us has a repressed side, lying in wait for the right person to bring it to the surface, how we deal with this side makes all the difference. If we fight it, we are certain to bring some form of death upon ourselves; if we accept it, we experience personal triumph --however small it may be--against our repressors. Noel Mawer writes that the “only self-knowledge gained [from reading Strangers on a Train] is that each of us harbors a primitive, unsocialized side, which will, if it is allowed to surface, commit any crime”; that Guy’s fault lies in his inability to “reconcile those facets of himself” (223). In The Price of Salt, Highsmith seems to advance a slightly different argument: if we allow ourselves to act out our

“natural” (that is, unhindered by society) side, we become more complete people. Highsmith realized early on, however, that having someone enact this self-realization for us was un-necessary. While both novels begin with “normal” protagonists, their normalcy is merely a stepping stone for the deviant character to present themselves: a narrative aspect with which Highsmith would soon do away. By the time she wrote The Talented Mr. Ripley, Highsmith had no need for someone like Guy to tell her stories.

Deviancy as Reader Seduction: The Talented Mr. Ripley

Background

In June 1952, while travelling in Positano with her then-lover Ellen Hill, Highsmith saw a young man whose image would soon ensnare both author and reader alike. As she remarked, “I noticed a solitary young man in shorts and sandals with a towel flung over his shoulder, making his way across the beach...I could just see that his hair was straight and darkish. There was an air of pensiveness about him, maybe unease. And why was he alone?...Had he quarreled with someone? What was on his mind? I never saw him again” (Wilson 179). Though two years passed between this enigmatic sighting and the commencement of the novel, it was the start of her perhaps most famous character.³ Her writing process for the novel was sparked by a string of recent setbacks in her life: as Andrew Wilson writes, “she had an infected tooth, her possessions were scattered across the country and her lover had just left her... [I]nstead of wallowing in self-pity, however, Highsmith started to flesh out the plot of a book which would become one of her most powerful and celebrated novels” (Wilson 191). Her first notes for the novel, “jotted down” at the end of March 1954 while living in a rented cabin in Lenox, Massachusetts, concern the main character, who at that point, was an amalgamation of Tom and Dickie: “an amateur painter, half homosexual, with an adequate private income, who found himself caught up in a smuggling plot. As the story progressed, she envisioned him discovering that he had a talent

³ Yet decades later, Highsmith would contrarily claim inspiration for a different character: at her last professional appearance in the States, Schenkar tells us, after she began to describe the young man in Positano to the audience, “it was’--here she paused dramatically, and everyone expected her to say Tom Ripley, because that had always been her shorthand explanation to the press about how she’d conjured up Tom--’Dickie Greenleaf!” (544). One of her *cahiers*, in which she writes that “Richard Greenleaf” is “the boy on the beach at Positano” seems to support this (Wilson 192). Perhaps it is best to adopt Wilson’s viewpoint that Highsmith “split [the image of the boy] in two in her imagination like a scientist dividing a cell under a microscope...to create the characters of...Dickie...and Thomas Ripley” (Ibid).

for--and took a pleasure in-- killing, and as a result, he is used by a gang to carry out their dirty work" (Ibid). Even in this early stage, sexual indeterminacy and performance are essential to the character (whose "name should be Clifford, or David, or Matthew"): as Highsmith noted, "Like Bruno [in Strangers on a Train], he must never be quite queer - merely capable of playing the part if need be to get information to help himself out of an emergency" (Wilson 192).

Writing took only six months: as Highsmith stated years later, "It felt like Ripley was writing it...it just came out" (Wilson 191). Originally, Dickie was not the murder victim; instead, it was his father, who, as Joan Schenkar notes, "in various versions, is pushed from a cliff by both Dickie and Tom or stabbed and filled with opium so Tom Ripley can 'engage[...]'in a smuggling operation" (Schenkar 202). Early potential titles included "Pursuit of Evil", "The Thrill Boys", and "Business is My Pleasure" (Wilson 191).

Normalcy as seduction

When Highsmith began work on her novel in 1954, she was fighting against a society where *normalcy* was seductive, in a way. In the 1950s, normalcy was clearly stated: a white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-middle-class existence, free of any sexual perversions. By setting clearly defined-standards, society made it easier for people to be drawn in. For those who participated in Cold War normalcy consciously, it provided a sort of strange brotherhood: if you were willing to give up certain aspects of your individuality in favor of embracing other people's standards, then you were among people just like you who willing to call you one of their own. But as accepting as this brotherhood could be, it was equally dangerous: refusal to conform to all of its standards could lead to the label of "deviant" and the curse of social ostracization. By basing his self-worth on the positive gaze of others (which he receives when he successfully

mimics normalcy--itself a standard shaped by others, not the self), Tom serves as a parody of American culture during the Cold War.

Methods and representations of deviancy

One possible reason why The Talented Mr. Ripley makes deviancy glamorous to its readers is because its *author* found it glamorous. When she sat down to write her most famous novel, Highsmith was writing for an audience of one: herself. This is evident from the very beginning of Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction, her instructional manual for would-be crime novelists, when Highsmith advises her acolytes that “The first person you should think of pleasing, in writing a book, is yourself” (1). Furthermore, Highsmith admits that “I think Ripley himself should have received [The Mystery Writers of America’s Edgar Allen Poe Scroll]. No book was easier for me to write, and I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing” (Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction 69).⁴ Even such a minor detail as Ripley’s middle initial reflected Highsmith’s deep connection to the character: as Schenkar writes, “After all, when she gave Ripley a middle initial, it was her own. Tom signs himself in three different novels as ‘Thomas P. Ripley.’ *P* was for Phelps--but it was also for Patricia and undoubtedly for Plangman [Patricia’s biological father’s last name], too” (425). When one writes thoroughly about their passion, there is a strong possibility that their readers will become just as ensnared.

Ambiguity plays a strong role in Highsmith’s methods, according to some critics.

Reginald Hill, reviewing Anthea Cohen’s Guardian Angel, wrote that in the “esoteric tradition of Patricia Highsmith[,] [i]t leaves you uncomfortably uncertain of what you feel, whom you sympathize with”; that is, the reader’s attraction to, and subsequent seduction by, Tom Ripley is

⁴ In fact, as Wilson notes, “[a] few years later, when the certificate became mildewed, Highsmith removed the glass to clean it, but before she hung it back on her bathroom wall, she scribbled in the words ‘Mr. Ripley and’ before her own name” (199).

the result of a metaphorical wrench thrown into the works of their morality (Hill 454, qtd. in Hilfer 4). Graham Greene, in his forward to Highsmith's novel Eleven, takes a slightly different approach: that the plot's uncertain treatment of deviancy is what draws the reader further in. As he writes, "It makes the tension worse that we are never sure whether even the worst of them, like the talented Mr. Ripley, won't get away with it or that the relatively innocent won't suffer...or the relatively guilty escape altogether" (Greene 9, qtd. in Hilfer 123). This ambiguity also speaks directly to the severely binary morality that characterized Cold War America: the dichotomous society where one is either "normal" or "deviant", an "All-American" citizen in favor of democracy or a "Commie"-sympathizer. As David Cochran writes, "For Americans, the Cold War paradigm was built on a series of rigid dichotomies between us and them, good and evil, innocence and guilt. In Highsmith's fiction, such oppositions were consistently broken down. She succeeded marvelously in muddying...distinctions" (122). Highsmith's constant ambiguity, which affects who the reader sympathizes--or even identifies--with forces the Cold War-era reader to reconsider the supposed correctness of the binary social system to which they are subject.

For some critics, Highsmith makes deviancy attractive as a logical response to American literary canon and international relations. Cochran, for instance, argues that "[i]n Tom Ripley, Highsmith portrayed the logical culmination of the American success ethic" (119). As Cochran writes (citing historian Karen Halttunen), the archetype of the "confidence man" shifted from a mid-nineteenth-century scoundrel whom "advice manuals warned young man to beware", to the product of a late nineteenth-century "corporate capitalis[tic]" society that "'pointed to a growing willingness to regard success as a form of confidence game'", to the Dale Carnegie role model for "winning friends and influencing people" (Halttunen 204, qtd. in Cochran 119-120). By

Ripley's "perfection of these skills" (and his literally getting away with murder because of this), Cochran concludes, "Tom Ripley symbolizes the ultimate triumph of American success ideology" (120). In writing this escalation of the classical American success story, however, Highsmith also makes a strongly political statement about the Cold War: by "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 that pronounced American's fitness to dominate the world" (Ibid). David Pizer, in his essay "Patricia Highsmith's "The Talented Mr. Ripley": The Literary Subtext", makes a similar argument: that "The Talented Mr. Ripley [*sic*] is thus is not merely a crime novel dealing with the European adventures of an American rogue killer. It also seeks to challenge, through its literary subtexts, "overconfident" generalizations about America's moral superiority" (54).

If one approaches the novel from a more psychological viewpoint, there may be a more simple answer for how Highsmith makes deviancy so seductive: by writing a plot that appeals to the metaphorical devil on the reader's shoulder. Terrence Rafferty writes that "Most of Highsmith's books depend on some sort of guilty recognition...a startled, reluctant acknowledgement of qualities we hadn't known we had or desired until we saw them in someone else"; that "everything turns inward, the way a train window we've been watching the landscape through becomes, as night falls, a dark mirror. We look outside and suddenly we can't tell where we're headed anymore; we see instead a just-recognizable image of ourselves" (75). Though Highsmith may have served as the literary conduit for Ripley's voice, as the reader gets pulled further into the story, it might not be Ripley's hands gripping the bloody oar-- it might just be their own.⁵ Tony Hilfer makes a similar argument, albeit a more psychological one: that "what

⁵ This, of course, is what Dr. Wertham feared would literally occur to readers of crime comics, and thus should not be taken literally in any sense.

one responds to in Ripley is not the triumph of the id but the evasion of the superego. Not his spasmodic violence but his 'singular lack of guilt' makes him specially appealing to the hyperconscientious. The fantasy evoked is not of violence but of impunity" (129). While readers of The Talented Mr. Ripley might not fantasize about murder, each of them knows the thrill of committing the forbidden without being caught. One roots for Ripley because he symbolizes all the little sins only the doer knows of: the purloined cookie from the jar; the forged signature on a school permission slip.

On a more conspicuous level (or at least one more easily detected), Highsmith's depiction of "normalcy"--that is, the conventionally attractive and heterosexual--as undesirable and hollow ensures that the reader will view deviant characters (i.e., Tom) as attractive and complex. When Tom first meets Marge, he views her in a positive light (albeit tinged with a certain backhandedness): "she wasn't bad-looking, Tom supposed, and she even had a good figure, if one liked the rather solid type" (48). As time goes on, though, Tom perceives more and more flaws: how "she didn't look as if she had that kind of sense of humour, anyway"; the "naive clothes she wore"; how "she had the look of a mother or an older sister now - the old feminine disapproval of the destructive play of little boys and men"; how "her speech...was abominable, both her choice of words and her pronunciation" (59, 70). When Tom voyeuristically watches Marge and Dickie kiss, he notes "disgusted[ly]...the big bulge of her behind in the peasant skirt below Dickie's arm that circled her waist" (77). It is no surprise, then, that the climactic scene where Tom acts out the role of Dickie for the first time (though in private) culminates in the symbolic murder of Marge: "Marge, you must understand that I don't *love* you," Tom said into the mirror in Dickie's voice...."Marge, stop it!" Tom turned suddenly and made a grab in the air as if he were seizing Marge's throat. He shook her, twisted her, while she sank lower and lower,

until at last he left her, limp, on the floor” (78). Even this does not still Tom’s disgust for her: immediately after this playacted violence, he looks out the window at Marge’s house and imagines sex between Dickie and Marge to be hideous: “awkward, clumsy, unsatisfactory for Dickie, and Marge loving it. She’d love it even if he tortured her!” (Ibid). This sadistic fantasizing stands in contrast to Tom’s mindset after murdering Freddie Miles: “Tom laughed at that phrase ‘sexual deviation’. Where was the sex? Where was the deviation? He looked at Freddie and said low and bitterly: ‘Freddie Miles, you’re a victim of your own dirty mind’” (147). This too, however, emphasizes Highsmith’s uglification of “normalcy”: whereas heterosexual couplings are easily imagined as sadistic, Tom refuses to see his feelings and actions as perverse. Even Dickie, the very object of Tom’s feelings, is eventually revealed as ugly (though it takes somewhat longer for Tom to shift perspective). True, in the early stages of his and Dickie’s interactions, Tom views Dickie as “not particularly brainy, and who probably spent most of his time playing” (61). But even this seemingly dismissive observation is turned into an opportunity to spend more time with Dickie; after all, “he didn’t think he was wrong in feeling that Dickie was bored at the moment and needed someone to show him how to have fun” (Ibid). As their friendship progresses, Tom finally becomes bold enough to outright admit to himself that “Dickie was handsome. He looked unusual with his long, finely cut face, his quick, intelligent eyes, the proud way he carried himself regardless of what he was wearing” (65). When Dickie finally snaps and yells at Tom “You’re under no obligation to do what I do!”--a blatant condemnation of Tom’s imitation of him--, however, handsomeness suddenly becomes hostility as Tom takes note of

the sun-bleached eyebrows white and the eyes themselves shining and empty, nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless, without relation to him.

You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes, to see love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside, and in Dickie's eyes Tom saw nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror (89).

Following this revelation, Tom vehemently refuses to allow himself to see Dickie in any positive light; he becomes an unabashed enemy, from Tom's perspective. In the last few days before the murder, Tom views Dickie's cheerfulness as "the cheerfulness of a host who has loathed his guest and is afraid the guest realizes it, and who tries to make it up at the last minute" (96).

Narrative voice plays a subtle but highly influential role in why the reader sympathizes with Tom. At the beginning of the novel, the narrative reflects Tom's frantic mental state as he tries to escape Mr. Greenleaf, whom he fears is a policeman sent to arrest him: "Was this the kind of man they would send after him? Was he, wasn't he, was he?" (1). His cockiness and appropriation of a certain linguistic and mental "accent" (in order to be truly convincing to others) also spills over into the narrative: an example of this occurs when he is on the phone with a Mr. Reddington⁶, another victim of his tax scheme. As Highsmith writes, "He sounded like a genial old codger of sixty-odd, who might be as patient as could be if Mr. Reddington [*sic*] came in, but who wouldn't yield by so much as a red cent, for all the talking and explaining Mr Reddington might do. George McAlpin represented the Tax Department of the United States of America, suh" (14). Later, when Marge and Tom attend a party, Highsmith combines subtle (but biased) description and a statement of Tom's inner reaction: "'That's what Venice is for--a good time!' Mr. Maloof kept saying idiotically, taking the opportunity to put his arm around Marge and maul her a little as he tried to make her stay, and Tom thought it was a good thing that he

⁶ When one considers that Mr. Reddington's occupation is an artist -- a suspect person due to his refusal to adhere to the definite in favor of dealing in the subjective, his name seems less coincidental and more an indication of Communist sympathies: another possible morally suspect (by Cold War standards) character (Highsmith 12).

hadn't eaten yet because he would have lost it right then" (249). These Tom-originated views of the world are at odds with traditional literary practice: the novel is written in third person---a viewpoint that is assumed to be far more neutral than first. Highsmith subverts third-person neutrality in order to infuse it with first-person bias.

In the climactic murder scene, the reader is finally exposed to the closest thing the novel will get to explicit homosexual activity. However, Ripley is a classically deviant character, and thus any sexual activity he partakes in will be deviant as well. As the two men speed across the water in their rented motorboat, Tom realizes that "he could have hit Dickie, sprung on him, or kissed him, or thrown him overboard, and nobody would have seen him at this distance" (103). The actual moment of the murder, meanwhile, is steeped in phallic imagery, as Tom "picked up the oar, as casually as if he were playing with it between his knees, and when Dickie was shoving his trousers down, Tom lifted the oar and came down with it on the top of Dickie's head" (104). Tom, for whom no "indication that he has had sex with a man (or a woman, for that matter)" is ever given, must substitute violence for sexual contact. However, at least one critic argues that reading Tom's thoughts and actions as homosexual clashes with the ambiguity that first attracted the reader. As Tony Hilfer writes, "To anchor Tom's identity in latent homosexuality[...] is to read against the clear indications in Highsmith's novel that Tom's strength is in his indeterminacy of identity, in an emptiness of self that allows the superior performance of roles" (134). But saying that Tom experiences homosexual feelings does not necessarily mean that he is a homosexual man. Though he is an extremely devoted actor throughout the novel, his uncensored thoughts are the only certain (i.e., non-performative and thus unambiguous) attribute that he possesses. Though he may be a fluid character, there are some things that remain constant about him.

Governmental corruption, even at its most mundane level, is also a representation of deviancy in The Talented Mr. Ripley, albeit a less conspicuous one. At the beginning of the second chapter, the reader discovers that Tom spends his days posing as an Department of Internal Revenue official and collecting cheques at his apartment from people who allegedly had miscalculations on their income tax: those who “seldom hired professional tax men to compute their taxes, while they earned enough money to be logically accused of having made a two- or three-hundred dollar error in their tax computations” (12). Though he experiences some negative feelings about his situation (he collects the cheques but does not cash them, out of the fear that “he couldn’t get away with cashing the cheques, even with a forged letter for whatever the sum was”), his actions are perfectly reasonable in his eyes: he dismisses these acts of fraud as “no more than a practical joke, really. Good clean sport” (Ibid). For Tom, this trickery is a natural thing, perhaps even inherent to the government. If he is subject to the temptations of his “job”, then so much the better -- it merely adds to the illusion of the “other self” that he wishes to show to the world. As Kelley Wagers writes, this governmental playacting “succeeds” because of “Highsmith's particular method of rendering inseparable ties between commonplace investment and criminal passion”. However, Wagers views Tom’s act through the lens of corporate culture, not from the viewpoint of all-permeating deviancy: that “in Ripley's case, the desire most in question is no less mundane or scandalous than the mid-twentieth-century dream of incorporation,irresistibly self-destructive and self-aggrandizing” (238-239).

Ironic deviancy: Dickie as deviant and Tom as normal

Throughout the course of the novel, Dickie is seen as the pinnacle of “normal” by Tom. Ironically, however, Dickie is viewed as deviant by his own parents. Rather than prepare for a

life in his family's shipbuilding business, as Mr. Greenleaf tells Tom, "just now he ignores anything that I or his mother try to tell him" (3). Dickie's sojourn in Europe means a focus on the impractical, the Dionysian side of life, whereas his father wishes for him to translate these hobbies into more practical matters; as Mr. Greenleaf tells Tom, "There's no harm in [painting], but he hasn't got the talent to be a painter. He's got great talent for boat designing, though, if he'd just put his mind to it" (4). Furthermore, the Europe that Dickie escapes to is not the fractured, turmoil-filled Europe of the Cold War, but an idyllic land in which he is free to do as he pleases, not as he is obligated to: the Europe that, a year later, James Baldwin's David will flee to in order to experience homosexuality once more. In eschewing responsibility in favor of lazing in Europe, Dickie is a somewhat-literal Bohemian. And so the Greenleafs designate Tom--the novel's true deviant character--to be their proxy in order to seduce Dickie with the same normalcy by which they have been ensnared. This proxyship manifests itself both through words and through objects: when he attends the Greenleafs' for dinner, Tom is greeted genially as "my boy" by Mr. Greenleaf and presented with a traditional wristwatch ("a plain white face with fine black Roman numerals in a simple gold setting with an alligator strap") (16, 27). (Of course, as the very picture of normalcy, it is "just the style Tom might have chosen for himself" (27).) Because their own son is deviant in their eyes, the Greenleafs assume and confer normalcy onto Tom.

Fetishism and Foucault: subtextual deviancy

While the general critical consensus seems to be that Tom experiences attraction to Dickie, not all literary critics agree that Tom is attracted to Dickie himself, or even people at all. In his essay "Where Was the Sex?: Fetishism and Dirty Minds in Patricia Highsmith's 'The

Talented Mr. Ripley", Edward A. Shannon argues that the desire that Tom feels is not people-oriented, but rather, fetishistic (in the Freudian sense of the word). An example of this occurs on the train as Tom flees San Remo by train: how "the white, taut sheets of his berth on the train seemed the most wonderful luxury he had ever known. He caressed them with his hands before he turned the light out" (111). But it is the next moment that proves to be the most telling for Shannon: "Tom had an ecstatic moment when he thought of the pleasures that lay before him now with Dickie's money, other beds, tables, seas, ships, suitcases, shirts, years of freedom, years of pleasure. Then he turned the light out and put his head down and almost at once fell asleep, happy, content, and utterly, utterly confident, as he had never been in his life" (112). Tom's "orgasmic 'moment'", as Shannon argues, does not center around his permanent subjugation of Dickie, but rather, the (mostly) material pleasures he will finally be able to afford with his money. Russell Harrison, meanwhile, makes a similar argument--though he shies away from Shannon's view that Tom experiences true lust for objects--, and claims that this aspect was not included by choice: "Here,[...] we come to a subtext of the novel that does not seem to have been consciously inserted into the novel[...] and that will become increasingly prominent in Highsmith's novels, to such an extent, indeed, that it can be said to constitute something of their true content" (26).

However, in writing Tom off as a mere fetishist, Shannon fails to consider the emotional buildup that Tom experiences with Dickie. If he were only attracted to Dickie's possessions, why would he take note of how physically attractive Dickie is, and why would he be so venomous towards Marge when he sees the two passionately embrace? Let us return, for a moment, to the decisive moment where Tom's enchantment with Dickie is irrevocably severed:

Tom felt a painful wrench in his breast, and he covered his face with his hands. It was as

if Dickie had been suddenly snatched away from him. They were not friends. They did not know each other. It struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time[...]For an instant the wordless shock of his realization seemed more than he could bear. He felt in the grip of a fit, as if he would fall to the ground. It was too much: the foreignness around him, the different language, and the fact that Dickie hated him (89).

If Tom's desires are object-oriented, why does he experience such deep emotion when he realizes that he and Dickie have never truly known one another; when he feels a pain as if "Dickie"--not his possessions--"had suddenly been snatched away"? Though Shannon's argument holds some truth, to call Tom an absolute fetishist is to disregard essential context. Perhaps it is best to call him a sensualist with homosexual feelings.

Regardless, even if one vehemently adheres to the belief that Tom experiences fetishism rather than homosexuality, to do so would not exclude him from the canon of queer characters. As Annamarie Jagose writes (and which Shannon himself quotes throughout his essay), queerness is not limited solely to identity or interpersonal relationships. Rather, "queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability--which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect--queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire" (Jagose 3, qtd. in Shannon 22). In writing a character who blatantly fetishizes possessions and objects (though this researcher argues that it is on the same level as his feelings for Dickie), Highsmith provides another example of deviancy: even if Tom's desires are object-centered, he still constitutes a queer (and therefore deviant) character.

Once again, Highsmith writes a kind of deviancy that is the reader's sins writ large: here,

however, it is the nation's. As Cochran points out, Tom symbolizes the canon of "American success ideology": the fantasy of a capitalist society (or, as Shannon phrases it, "a model of the successful capitalist unleashed on an unsuspecting Europe") (Cochran 120, Shannon 26). In this regard, Tom is a paradox: he is deviant, but his fetishistic lust of possessions makes him the very model of a Cold War-era American male.

Though no sexual intercourse ever occurs between Tom and Dickie, one could argue that their relationship (or at least the relationship that Tom attempts) is one of power-play: a sort of ideological sadomasochistic relationship. Michel Foucault, in a March 1982 interview, mused that "S&M is not a relationship between he (or she) who suffers and he (or she) who inflicts suffering, but between the master and the one on whom he exercises his mastery[...The relationship] resembles a chess game in the sense that one can win and the other can lose" (152). Here, Shannon's argument makes the most sense: Tom wishes to attain Dickie's possessions so that he can achieve true *mastery* over Dickie. If he cannot possess Dickie's body (for it has been repeatedly denied to him), then at least he can possess every other aspect of his life. Furthermore, Foucault argues, the relationship adds a certain mysteriousness that sex itself cannot provide: that "this mixture of rules and openness has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty, which the simple consummation of the act lacks" (192). In writing characters whose interactions are steeped in queerness--but who do not take the plunge into sexual acts---Highsmith has, paradoxically, made them even more deviant. But it is up to the reader to realize that, and one can almost hear Tom Ripley sneering at the would-be "victim of [their] own dirty mind".

The triumphant deviant

Tom's success at the end of the novel not only acts as "a radical celebration of amorality": it is an act of blatant defiance towards a literary canon that had previously punished deviants (Wilson 196). As Michael Cohen declares, "Before [The Talented Mr. Ripley], those who told us candidly of their lust, those whose malice we watched, those who concealed, more or less, their sickness--all of these came to a sticky end. After Ripley anything may happen" (55). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is constantly reminded about what happens to deviants (and anyone else who does not conform to the status quo, consciously or unconsciously). As Mr. Greenleaf approaches Tom, his panicked mind flashes to the possible punishments for the then-unknown crime that he has performed: "Here it was! Tom stared at him, paralysed. They couldn't give you more than ten years, Tom thought. Maybe fifteen, but with good conduct--In the instant the man's lips parted to speak, Tom had a pang of desperate, agonized regret" (2). At one point, Tom encounters someone else who experiences the same paranoia. While using the drugstore's telephone to conduct his tax fraud, Tom receives a call that ends with the threatening statement "'Listen, we're coming right over. To your *house*'" (21). Tom, of course, is filled with a similar fear as before, and "his legs...felt like jelly when he got out of the phone booth" (Ibid). But this time, he is not the target of scrutiny: he sees "the druggist staring at him, wide-eyed, panicky-looking, and the conversation had suddenly explained itself: the druggist sold dope, and he was afraid that Tom was a police detective"--again, Tom is perceived as a vision of normalcy, to the point of being mistaken for the law--"who had come to get the goods on him" (Ibid). But Tom has no sympathy for his fellow deviant and fear-sufferer, and instead continues to focus on his own fear: "Tom had started laughing, had walked out laughing uproariously, staggering as he went, because his legs were still weak from his own fear" (Ibid). Throughout the novel, Tom seems to suffer a thousand tiny moments of instability due to

his paranoia about being arrested for murder; each time, however, his hypothetical execution receives yet another stay. It is no surprise, then, that the last lines of the novel are of Tom triumphantly commanding the taxi driver to take him to ““Il meglio albergo. Il meglio, il meglio!” [‘The best hotel. The best, the best!’]” (295). Though the novel starts on a note of paranoia (an understandable emotion for a character who has been subjected to morality tales, and thus knows the deviant’s traditional fate), it ends with an exclamation of certainty and security, to the point of cockiness. Tom’s is the best ending a deviant could have: his victim’s money soon to be in his bank account, his victim’s parents and the authorities’ trust instilled in him, and the promise of an easy future, one where he is free to commit further crimes. In leaving her deviant protagonist (for the time being) with an optimistic future, unscathed but for the moments of panic that he briefly experiences, Highsmith delivers a direct snub to the literary canon of the morality tale and its traditionally-punished deviants.

Conclusion

Written in an era obsessed by binaries, unity, and structure, Patricia Highsmith's novels are wrecking balls to the monolith that was mainstream Cold War culture. Although deviancy is a central theme in each of her novel, Highsmith's methods of deviancy in three of her first novels . While *Strangers on a Train* and *The Price of Salt* center around the concept of the "deviant inside" (when a supposedly normal character encounters the person who embodies their repressed desires), the reactions of their protagonists to this encounter differ; as a result, their fates contrast sharply. *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, meanwhile, uses the concept of "seductive deviancy" in order to problematize the distance between the reader and the deviant character. As a result of her work, deviant characters underwent a transformation in the literary eye: rather than being empty stereotypes, Highsmith's deviants reflect the flaws within society, including capitalism, hypocritical ethics, and homophobia.

Yet this analysis only covers a fraction of the complexities within Highsmith's work: further topics of study for Highsmith scholars abound. Very little has been written about Highsmith's short stories, particularly the ones she wrote before *Strangers on a Train*: an omission which I believe renders criticism somewhat incomplete. While Joan Schenkar makes brief mention of some of the plots in her biography of Highsmith, she does not delve deeply into their subtext, or their position as Highsmith-authored stories. Were there to be more analysis of these stories, we might be able to track Highsmith's literary progress more thoroughly.

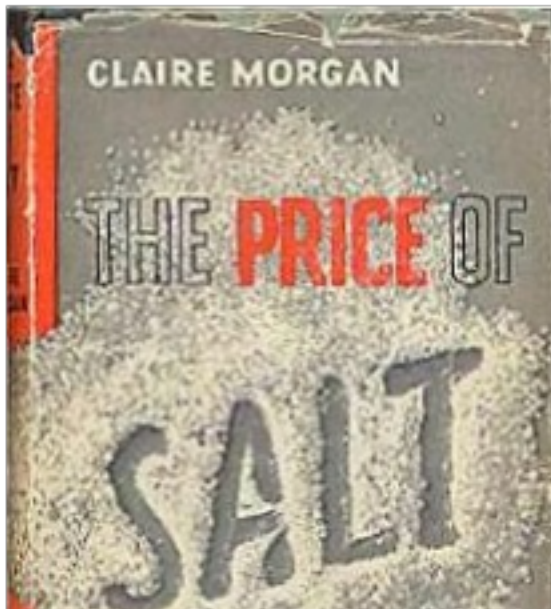
Although discussion of Highsmith's female characters in conjunction with her relationship with her mother has been enacted at least once, there is clearly more work that could be done. According to Highsmith, her mother tried to abort her by drinking turpentine;

something which Highsmith claims she “didn’t mind one bit”, since she didn’t love her at all (Harrison 1). Yet “when Mary [Plangman Highsmith] was sexually viable, Pat wrote her into a slightly more elevated role. Mary was Pat’s Bitch from Hell: the paradigmatic femme fatale who haunted all Pat’s works and whose shadow Pat stalked in so many of her own sexual affairs, night dreams, and fantasies” (Schenkar 19). Schenkar writes that *The Price of Salt*’s complex protagonists differ from Highsmith’s usual female characters--“vengeful bitches like Nickie in The Cry of the Owl; instinctual sluts like Melinda in Deep Water; blank innocents like Annabelle in This Sweet Sickness; nagging wives like Clara in The Blunderer; fantasy figures like Elsie in Found in the Street; [and] passive dilettantes like Alicia in A Suspension of Mercy”--because they are in “the first blush of love” (163). Could this also be the result of Highsmith wanting to have a positive relationship with her mother? If so, Schenkar’s accusation of an incestuous undercurrent in the novel could have some validity.

Although Highsmith made an impact on the genre of crime fiction, literary critics tend to shy away from her most troubling aspect: namely, her bigotry. One could say that she was a deviant who hated other deviants, as well as anyone who wasn’t exactly like her. As Schenkar declares at the beginning of her biography of Highsmith, “she was none too fond of Blacks, Italians, Portuguese, Latinos, Catholics, Koreans, East Indians, ‘Red Indians’, [or] small, dark children” (25). She referred to the Holocaust as “Holocaust Inc.” and “the ‘semicaust’--apparently because it had destroyed only half of world Jewry” (Ibid). Yet paradoxically, much of Highsmith’s life involved Jews. She had “serious love affairs and long, close friendships with” them; they were “her principal employers, her frequent publishers, and they numbered amongst her most consistent supporters” (Ibid). Even women were targets of her vituperation: her friend Barbara Roett declared that ““If she were a man I would have no doubt in

saying that she was a misogynist”, and Highsmith herself wrote that she was “appalled” by the idea of women in libraries, since “they could be menstruating at the same time as reading” (Wilson 300). Yet all of this tends to be tossed aside when analyzing Highsmith’s canon; it is as if Highsmith-the-person and Highsmith-the-author were akin to Jekyll and Hyde. Just as Highsmith problematized normalcy, scholars should try to problematize her work.

Appendix A: Cover comparison



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