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Trauma as a Vehicle for Sympathy
Jackie Sanders

In Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, main character Tom Ripley continuously makes decisions that jeopardize himself and those around him. He is first introduced hiding from the police, vulnerably seeking shelter from the world. As the novel progresses, more information about Tom's traumatic past appears. His scarring childhood and repeated failures haunt him and influence every decision he makes, and the attempted repression of these events only helps in subconsciously motivating his psychopathic mind. However, this hurt and humiliation in the past make him appear weak, vulnerable and more captivating to readers. His suffering serves as an outlet that we, as readers, use to justify his actions. Ultimately, Highsmith uses Tom's traumatic past as a mechanism to make readers sympathize with him, despite his villainous energy.

Tom's heartbreaking stories of childhood circle around his Aunt Dottie's tough love towards him. He shows readers Aunt Dottie's harshness by remembering the time she called him a sissy. He reflects, "Aunt Dottie insisted that his upbringing had cost her more than his father had left in insurance, and maybe it had, but did she have to keep rubbing it in his face? Did anybody human keep rubbing a thing like that in a child's face?" (40). Anyone who reads this type of raw emotion cannot help but feel sorry for Tom. At the point when he says this, we are unaware of what he will do in the future, so we have no reason not to sympathize. By mentioning Aunt Dottie's resentment of his father, he also inadvertently hints at his father's weakness. His father's money could not even take care of his child, and that is failure to Aunt Dottie, and, as a

result, Tom begins to feel the burden as well. From this first retrospection, readers are on Tom's side and hope that the future brings him more happiness.

Tom's description of Aunt Dottie leads to more information about Tom's relationship with his deceased parents. Because both his mother and father died when he was so young, he immediately switches into a family full of women. He lacks any sort of male role-model, and this matriarchal upbringing subconsciously hurts him more than he realizes. When Herbert Greenleaf proposes the quest to Italy, Tom enjoys the attention given to him. For the first time in his life, he has a father figure who supports him. After Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf give him a going-away basket, he reflects, "to him, they had always been something you saw in florists' windows for fantastic prices and laughed at. Now he found himself with tears in his eyes, and he put his face down in his hands suddenly and began to sob" (37). Here, Tom is so touched by even the simplest signs of affection. Highsmith has Tom not only cry, or have one tear fall down his cheek, but actually sob. The power in this emotion really reaches the core of Tom, and reflects back to his parents' absence. Of course, he knows that the Greenleaf's support him because he plans to bring back their son, but in turn Mr. Greenleaf's obvious affection drives Tom's fascination with Dickie and deepens his desire to takeover his life. Here, Highsmith paints the picture that Tom is more deserving of loving parents than Dickie, because Dickie does not even want any contact with them. The readers, again, feel sympathy towards Tom and see his vulnerable sobbing as a sign of humanity and a result of repressed feelings.

The audience's compassion appears again when Tom is trying on Dickie's clothes and Dickie angrily walks in. Reading it from Tom's perspective, we almost feel angry with Dickie for reacting so negatively because we can justify Tom's actions. We, as readers, know of Tom's past and have seen fragments of his history, and seeing the episode from Tom's traumatized

point of view gives us a rationale. Even though Tom's behavior is abnormal, his faulty childhood explains his reasoning and leaves readers hoping Dickie does not hate him.

As the novel continues and Dickie lashes out at Tom more frequently, Tom's thoughts fill with self-doubt. Right before Tom kills Dickie, Dickie yells at Tom a final time and quotes a line of William Wordsworth's poem in order to insult Tom. This insult obviously affects Tom, as Highsmith writes, "it startled Tom, then he felt that sharp thrust of shame... he remembered Aunt Dottie's taunt: *sissy! He's a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!*" (96). Here, both Aunt Dottie and his father reappear; Aunt Dottie's insult still remains and continues to pop up in Tom's mind whenever he feels upset, and his father's absence hangs around in a ghostly manner. Dickie found the line in one of Marge's poetry books that he borrowed from her. By having Dickie use an insult that indirectly pairs himself with Marge, Highsmith preys on Tom's self-worth. Tom's biggest fear is Marge, who threatens to take Dickie and everything else away from him.

Although the future only brings more trouble for Tom, readers again cannot help but sympathize with him during Freddie's murder. Freddie shows up to Tom's apartment unannounced, and Tom begins to panic. Tom describes Freddie as "the kind of ox who might beat up somebody he thought was a pansy, especially if the conditions were as propitious as these. Tom was afraid of his eyes" (136). This intimidating description of Freddie makes us worry about Tom's safety, and how he will defend himself if challenged. It portrays Freddie as the "bad guy," while Tom is the weakling, and the supposed victim. Once again, from knowing about Tom's weaknesses and past failures, the audience feels nervous about Tom's defense. When Tom suddenly attacks Freddie, Highsmith describes, "he hit the neck again and again, terrified that Freddie might only be pretending and that one of his huge arms might suddenly

circle his legs and pull him down” (137). Here, readers are not hoping Freddie will wake up and kill Tom, because the murder is seen from Tom’s point of view. The raw emotion makes his vulnerability apparent throughout the course of violence. The way Highsmith uses the words “terrified” and “pretending” show Tom’s paranoia and fear that only results after constant failure. Reading this, we feel so immersed in the action that our hearts beat faster, hoping that Tom’s repeated striking has some sort of impact (both literally and figuratively.) His traumatic past plays on our soft spot for him and as a result we do not see it as a merciless beating.

Ultimately, brief glances into Tom’s rocky childhood give readers a reason to have a soft spot for Tom and, as a result, sympathize with him. We, as observers of Tom’s mind, admire his dexterity throughout the novel, despite his troubled history. However, we do not initially realize this trauma fuels his paranoia and ultimately drives him to murder Dickie and Freddie. He feels that the only way to escape his past is to assume a new identity without a broken family or cowardly thinking. When we finally realize at the end that we are sympathizing with deranged man, Highsmith’s writing capability emerges. No matter what Highsmith makes Tom feel or act upon, she knows her readers will believe in him and, perhaps even subconsciously, hope he succeeds. Her ability to manipulate readers into sympathizing with a psychopath is an immensely powerful tool in which she uses to envelop her audience into the crime.