



**Peters, F. (2015) 'Conformity and singularity in Patricia Highsmith's early novels.' *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 33 (2): 9-19.**

This article was first published in *Clues: A Journal of Detection* at <http://www.cluesjournal.com>

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## CONFORMITY AND SINGULARITY IN PATRICIA HIGHSMITH'S EARLY NOVELS

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This essay explores Highsmith's critique of the American suburbs in the novels of the 1950s and early 1960s. It focuses on *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), highlighting not only Highsmith's critique of conformity but also her recognition of the threat of psychic breakdown for those who resisted cultural norms.

The mid-1950s to the early 1960s constitute a prolific period for Patricia Highsmith. At the height of the Cold War, her work, as this essay shall demonstrate primarily through *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), both reflected the cultural anxieties of the time and mounted a devastating critical attack on conformity and small-town American values. Although Highsmith's early work is now between 55 and 60 years old, her instinctive feel for postwar consumer culture is still relevant today. Twenty years after her death is an apposite moment, then, to reflect on these novels. Are these texts dated period pieces, or do they have some- thing of value, something to teach, about the world today?

Unarguably the best known of Highsmith's work of that period is *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), but that novel, although examining many of the same issues as her other work of the time, in other ways stands apart. This is due partly to the unsettling lack of a guilty conscience on the part of the protagonist, the chameleon-like Tom Ripley, but also because Ripley leaves the United States for the less restrictive Italy, as Highsmith viewed it. As in works such as *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969), this distancing, or "exile," enables her protagonists to cast off the cultural constraints of American suburban life, along with their own failures and problems within that world.

Highsmith herself spent much of the 1950s traveling abroad. During this period she managed to live on the proceeds of her writing without having to work within an

organization. More to the point, she managed to avoid any type of employment that would require her to participate in a group or to subordinate her strong opinions to the desires and expectations of others. Indeed, when she did attempt this type of work earlier in her life, she soon realized that she could not sustain the performance expected of an employee. In a blatantly Freudian maneuver, she became sick and therefore incapable of continuing with the work she hated. This was ironic, as she boasted many times that she was never ill.

Perhaps because Highsmith was largely removed from the United States from the 1950s onward, she could view a facet of U.S. culture with detachment: the American suburban dream (or nightmare, as it appears in her books). As an “outsider” who chose to live her life in Europe, she was able to reflect on what she perceived as the stultifying nature of the American suburbs. In an interview, she said about U.S. suburban life: “I wouldn’t set foot in it. It’s deadly” (Little). The three seminal novels of this period—*Deep Water* (1957), *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), and *The Cry of the Owl* (1962)—all take place in suburban environments and tackle seemingly quite divergent subjects: a cuckolded husband, an obsessive ex-boyfriend, and the consequences of the actions of an essentially moral young man who transgresses the social order by prowling around a young woman’s house at night. Through these disparate scenarios Highsmith picks away at the veneer of respectability that masks myriad dangers and threats lying beneath it. This is not to suggest that she ever proposes an alternative; on the contrary, her cultural critique works by taking readers *inside*. She takes us into the cocktail party, the interiority of the home, the stultifying workplace. Through our identifications with her displaced and dispossessed protagonists, she makes what is apparently commonplace strange and uncanny. Stephanie Coontz points out that “the family” of the 1950s was encouraged to move away from cities and into these small-town communities as part of a drive to hegemonize the political ideology of the time:

On television, David Marc comments, all the “normal” families moved to the suburbs during the 1950s. Popular culture turned such suburban families into capitalism’s answer to the Communist threat. In his famous “kitchen debate” with Nikita

Khrushchev in 1959, Richard Nixon asserted that the superiority of capitalism over communism was embodied not in ideology or military might but in the comforts of the suburban home, “designed to make things easier for our women.” (Coontz 15). Highsmith’s ability to dissect and critique the cultural conformity of the era is as much of an indictment of the suburbs as Ira Levin’s later *The Stepford Wives* (1972). It is perhaps even more remarkable given the intense immediacy of these three novels and the extraordinary way in which she paints such a convincing picture of a way of life she so resolutely avoided.

Subsequent film adaptations of Highsmith’s texts became increasingly concerned with style and have, it may be argued, effectively obscured the political and cultural critique offered by her work. Anthony Minghella’s 1999 film adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (following a 1956 *Studio One* TV version) meant that her name became more prominent for a time; despite the success of the film the fundamental “strangeness” of her texts did not lead to any notable upsurge in critical readings of her work. The commercial success of the film version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, along with another and much earlier adaptation, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1951 *Strangers on a Train*, has meant that she is better known to the general public through film adaptations of her work rather than as an author. *The American Friend* (dir. Wim Wenders, 1977) is a loose adaptation of *Ripley’s Game*, which, although it was a critical success, is an example of the 1970s American *auteur* movement. *Plein Soleil/Purple Moon* (dir. Claude Chabrol, 1960), an earlier adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, demonstrates a particularly European 1960s. *The Two Faces of January* (dir. Hossein Amini, 2014) is arguably an example of the triumph of style over substance. The Sirk-influenced director Todd Haynes’s *Carol* (2015) has received positive reviews at the Cannes film festival, but the film is not yet in public release. The apparently plot-driven character of the novels may have encouraged the proliferation of such adaptations; but the very mixed results demonstrate, if nothing else, the folly of promoting plot above the real complexity of her work, concealed beneath the surface simplicity and lucidity of her writing style. This is a criticism that applies equally to some of the critical writing on Highsmith, which so often imposes

singular meanings on her work rather than recognizing the ways in which her writing resists order and foregrounds disturbance.

Paradoxically, it might well be the critical and aesthetic failure of most of the film adaptations that has contributed to the undeserved neglect of her crucial and profound contribution to the body of American writers and cultural critics of the postwar period. Highsmith exposes a world characterized by randomness, of collapsing values and certainties that are (always inadequately) concealed by a reassuring insistence on conformity, blandness, and status within the community. She rarely commentates directly on politics in her novels (*Edith's Diary*, 1977, is an exception). But they *can* be read as political insofar as they offer a critique of a specific time and place, in the case of the novels discussed here, the United States during the transitional period between the 1950s and the 1960s.

It is important to bear in mind that Highsmith was writing at a time when the indeterminacy of set boundaries between the “literary” novel and crime fiction was far less flexible than it is today. In fact, many readers and critics now credit her with dismantling many of these boundaries. She takes her place within a history of subversions that *always* existed within a multiplicity of subgenres. Recently, authors such as Ruth Rendell (especially writing as Barbara Vine), Val McDermid, P. D. James, and Elizabeth George, have followed her. These writers, like Highsmith, foreground the psychological and cultural; whereas some have adopted the police procedural form and there is clearly still a thriving market for the whodunit, Highsmith has left a strong legacy.

### This Sweet Sickness

One main strand running through Highsmith's novels of this period is that of conformity—what it means to live in this particular small town at that particular time, the location of the boundaries, and the penalties that await the individual if he (or she, in Edith's case) oversteps these boundaries in reality, in fantasy, or by accident. In fact, the accidental nature of life and the human situation is a central feature of Highsmith's

novels; whether by fate or misfortune, her protagonists frequently find themselves in a spiral that, once set in motion by an often inconsequential action, they cannot control. What often frustrates those trying to explicate or interpret her texts, however, are the ways in which her protagonists seem incapable or desirous of removing themselves from situations that, although perilous, are perfectly escapable.

In *The Organisation Man*, William Whyte explores the consequences of the shift in the 1950s to a new emphasis on conformity, not just as a result of peer pressure but also as a consequence of the ways in which the world of work was moving toward what he calls “false collectivisation,” observing the ways in which the continuity of the group actively irons out the potential dissonance of the individual voice:

The most misguided attempt at false collectivisation is the current attempt to see the group as a creative vehicle. Can it be? People very rarely *think* in groups; they talk together, they exchange information, they adjudicate, they make compromises. But they do not think, they do not create. (Whyte 50, emphasis in original)

Whyte’s concept of false collectivism, of the shift from individualism to conformity, seems to work against the grain of the idea of the individual, the “little man” who singlehandedly creates an empire. This, it can be argued, is what had driven the American work ethic throughout the 1950s, exemplified perhaps by Ray Kroc, who took over the fledgling McDonald’s and transformed it into the multinational business that it is today. As a man who “was convinced he had seen the future and it was hamburgers” (Halberstam 162), Kroc is the antithesis of the concept of false collectivization. As David Halberstam explains, he is but one example of the myth of the American success story:

As he turned into the populist as business tycoon, he became convinced that business schools made their students arrogant, and for a long time McDonald’s was conspicuous for its lack of MBA’s. Kroc believed in himself and his special

version of the American dream: if he only kept trying, surely one day lightning would strike and he would become rich and successful. (160)

As Halberstam goes on to illustrate, however, this most individual of individualists then ruled over his empire with a fist of iron, stifling even the most mundane rumblings of difference and dissent within his corporation. Thus two seemingly opposed stances can be seen to co-exist in 1950s America. On the one hand is a belief in the drive for individualism; on the other, the stifling need and desire for conformity in an atmosphere of post-war consumerism and endless consumption of objects. According to Highsmith enthusiast Slavoj Žižek, her exploration of the inert and the paradoxical drive toward the obsession with objects prefigures the recent cultural anxiety about overproliferation and elevation of the object with its inbuilt obsolescence:

This feeling for the inert has a special significance in our age, in which the obverse of the capitalist drive to produce ever more new objects is a growing mountain of useless waste, used cars, out-of-date computers etc, like the famous resting place for old aircraft in the Mojave desert. (Žižek, "Not a desire")

In *This Sweet Sickness* David, as well as Vic in *Deep Water*, exemplify the way Highsmith uses her central characters to expose the tension between, on the one hand, the desire for the aesthetic object and, on the other, a truly visceral repulsion at the shoddy and everyday conditions of existence that cannot be avoided. Highsmith's own limited experience of the world of paid work and her antipathy toward it, perhaps exacerbated by working in a New York department store (obviously a job at the heart of the consumer experience), can be seen as one of the central thematic drivers in her novels. Throughout her texts, the protagonists drift through life with the buffer of vague trust funds from distant relatives. If they are employed, their workplace is one that is tainted, tawdry, and diminishes them.

*This Sweet Sickness* begins with a description of David's jealousy: "It was jealousy that kept David from sleeping, drove him from a tousled bed out of the dark and silent boarding house to walk the streets" (7). He terms his life in the town of Froudsberg "The Situation": "It was now just the Situation. The Situation was the way it was and had been so for nearly two years. No use bothering with the details. The Situation was like a rock, say a five- pound rock, that he carried around in his chest day and night" (7) At this point, David has been working as a scientist, a job that he dislikes but one that allows him to save for what the reader is led to believe is his future marriage to Annabelle Stanton. It is subsequently revealed, however, that he only knew her for six weeks and had never asked her to marry him despite writing to her every day. Instead, he assumed that she was the only woman for him and that she must know this as well. In fact, in the intervening two years, Annabelle has married Gerald Delaney, viewed by David as gross, ugly, and far beneath what he perceives as the pure and transcendent Annabelle.

David has no life but merely exists throughout the week in a rundown guesthouse in lumpen Froudsberg. Highsmith describes this room in a typical passage that, through its characteristic attention to detail, summons up and captures a hopelessness and creeping depression merely by referencing an ordinary but monstrous objectivity:

The carpet was large and worn out, brushed threadbare by brooms and carpet sweepers, its two holes more or less concealed by the hideous brown bed with its too short counterpane of machine-made crochet, and by the plain writing table on which stood a row of David's books. The maroon easy chair was the newest piece in the room and probably twenty years old. (15)

At weekends, David escapes this existence and conducts his fantasy life in his perfect house in Hartford, bought under the Nietzschean pseudonym "William Neumeister" (literally "new master"). Although there is no practical need for the house to be in this name, its function is to further distance him from the very un-Nietzschean world of Froudsberg with all of its vulgarity and *ressentiment*.



Highsmith mercilessly exposes such vulgarity throughout the novel; indeed, the reader is led into identification with David and his particular perspective. One example is David's reaction to the apartment that Annabelle—his ideal of aesthetic and moral perfection—shares with her husband, Gerald. David's observations place Gerald in an abject position:

He had expected clutter and the dreary appurtenances of an existence such as theirs, but the sight, the tangibleness of it all now made it far more horrible to him. There was the picture of a hideous, gray-haired relative on the television set by the aerial, a pair of mole-colored house slippers in front of the armchair in whose seat lay the gaudy comic section of the Sunday newspaper. Glancing at Gerald's shoes—small, unshined—he noticed that the laces were not tied and deduced that he had interrupted Gerald in his reading. (59)

Throughout Highsmith's texts, examples abound of this abhorrence of the ugly and the terror of entrapment in the suburban quicksand of the anti-intellectual, the culture of TV, and the masses—or "herd," in Nietzsche's language. The extraordinary venom of her description of the apartment almost turns into farce, introducing a darkly comic element into what is one of her bleakest novels. Highsmith launches her critique of the ugly, the dull, and the conformist not by describing people, but by describing rooms and the objects within them—the detritus of everyday life. The description of Gerald's shoes—small, insignificant, dirty, untidy—encapsulates a life that cannot raise itself above the basest level of humanity, a level that Highsmith contrasts with David's hoped-for existence—one of control as well as aesthetic and moral beauty, free of the mass commercialization of the era.

There are two elements at play in *This Sweet Sickness*—the psychic and the cultural—which are, of course, ultimately intertwined and inseparable. It can be argued that it is this entwinement that gives the novel its power and also forces the reader to identify with David, who spends the entirety of the novel on the very brink of reason. Culturally, David occupies a place that Highsmith posits as superior to that of those who

surround him, exemplified by Gerald. Although his difference from the masses is also marked by his relationship toward things, these objects are different—fine, weighted by tradition, solid and not marked by the explosion of mass culture and consumption. David’s home distances him both geographically and psychically from Froudsberg, and his life within it is defined by its difference from the other part of his life: “While his potato was baking, he put a Brahms symphony on his stereophonic machine, and set the gleaming mahogany table with silver, wine glass, and linen napkin for one. Then he laid a book on geology within reach in case he should want to read while he ate” (20).

In some respects David can be seen as representing an example of those who resist the pull to become the “organisation men” of William H. Whyte’s astute and incisive 1950s commentary. David, along with other Highsmith’s protagonists such as Robert in *The Cry of the Owl*, never really “fits into” the organization, the workplace. As can be seen in *The Cry of the Owl*, as soon as a problem arises in the lives of the protagonists, this difference becomes apparent, and the “masses” close ranks against the individual.

Highsmith cleverly presents protagonists who are pitted against the worst excesses of the postwar surge of mass consumerism and mass culture. Characters like the unfortunate Gerald are seen as locked into a physical persona with no hope of improving their lot in life. What does it matter if Gerald dies; after all, he does wear horrible, small shoes that are unshined, and he only reads the comics pages. When David kills Gerald, the act is a consequence of David’s pathological refusal to allow Gerald into his weekend house, as if his presence inside would spoil or taint it: “David clenched his fists until they burned with unreleased strength, furious that Gerald had found his house, invaded his doorstep” (81) David Cochran argues that the characters in Highsmith’s writing, especially those of the 1950s, are “firmly situated within the context of the dominant images of Cold War culture—the horror of the nuclear age, the anonymous and debasing quality of mass culture, and the banality of the suburban ideal” (157). It is true that Highsmith, in her unremitting dissection of the individual and notions of individuality, shows that, although the concept of the free individual is valorized in postwar United States,

individuality is based on some shaky ground, and there is a chasm between individual desires and the level of attainment that can be achieved without descending into madness.

But none of this can fully account for the ways in which Highsmith draws the reader into identification with a protagonist like David in *This Sweet Sickness*. Highsmith makes clear that David's desire for Annabelle, a human being with wants and desires of her own, is not for Annabelle as autonomous individual, truly other to him. Rather, his desire for her is merely his desire for the ultimate object he needs to create his perfect environment, and the novel ends with David jumping to his death with "nothing in his mind but a memory of her shoulder naked, as he had never seen it" (Highsmith, *Sweet* 250) Throughout Highsmith's novels the chasm is shored up, maybe in less obvious ways than in *This Sweet Sickness*, by consumer goods and by the repetition of obsessive and destructive forms of behavior.

There are several ways in which Highsmith leads the reader into identification with David. She uses the strategy of examining situations through his eyes—a strategy deployed in many of her works. Although the novels are not written in first person, the narration fits so closely with the protagonist's perspective that it may lead readers to think so. In this way readers see the shabby rooming house and the horrible surroundings of Annabelle's life through David's sensibility that regards taste, refinement, and order as central. But this is never an easy or comfortable identification; although Highsmith, on the one hand, pulls readers into David's reality, she indicates very early in this novel that his reality is founded on a premise rooted in fantasy. By making David a creature of taste and aesthetic sensibility (as she does with so many of her protagonists), Highsmith is able to sustain the novel. David's peculiarities are less evident if he can be read as an aesthete who could provide Annabelle with a more beautiful, more rewarding life than that for which she has settled.

David's aesthetic stance and his curiously asexual desire for Annabelle are defining features of this novel. Indeed, the whole premise of the novel is that Annabelle will not turn to David; Effie—the woman who desires David and who represents a

chance of a relationship rooted in a real, physical possibility—is viewed with repulsion by David and dies, albeit accidentally, by his hand. Indeed, he kills her when he discovers her in his bed, an action that he sees as defiling his perfect house:

Effie did not get up. He supposed she was waiting for him to pick her up and comfort her, and he smiled a grim smile and went into the bathroom to wash his hands. He filled his hands with water and washed his face and scrubbed it with a towel. He was through with the house. Effie had ruined it. (*Sweet Sickness* 212)

If this novel is thus based on a kind of impossibility—the impossibility of fulfillment or resolution contained in its very structure—then it could be asked: What kinds of psychic structures is Highsmith articulating through the text? Jacqueline Rose poses a pertinent question on the subject of identification, an area where Freud was often vague:

So which is it? Do we find it virtually impossible to believe in the mental existence of others; or do we automatically and without reflection assume that they are a version of ourselves? And is this second option—which Freud called identification—an indispensable condition of understanding, as he puts it, or its opposite, a way of assuming that everyone is and has to be the same? (134)

Clearly David suffers an inability to see others, specifically Annabelle, but also other characters around him, as separate from him in any fundamental sense. And when he is forced into a situation—as when Effie’s desire for him pushes him into recognition—he is incapable of accepting it. Instead, he strikes it away (as in the case of Effie) or simply refuses to assimilate it (as in the case of Annabelle’s child).

*This Sweet Sickness* is also an account of a descent into psychosis, not only an indictment of a particular culture and time but also of a breakdown. Freud’s analysis of the difference between mourning and melancholia is helpful here to highlight the

psychic impasse used by Highsmith as the basis of this novel: David's total resistance to believing that Annabelle does not, perhaps never did, love him. Freud shows that both mourning and melancholia have their basis in the same demand. In mourning: "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (Freud 253). Although the process of mourning is painful because "it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them" (Freud 253), this is usually accomplished. Freud also warns that if the unwillingness to abandon the original libidinal position is overwhelming, then a psychotic stance can be taken up: "This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (253).

The situation of melancholia, as Freud describes it, is similar to mourning in certain respects, although melancholia is not so much part of a process as a state in which the subject becomes fixed in a state of unperceived or unrecognized loss—in other words, it cannot allow into consciousness the fact of that loss. Freud explains that melancholia, like mourning, can be precipitated by the loss of a loved object:

The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet in other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and, it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. (Freud 254, emphasis in original)

In *This Sweet Sickness* Highsmith describes in a few pages the “reality” element of David’s relationship with Annabelle, one that she clearly represents as idealized and, in its own way, based on fantasy. In this passage she almost describes a “love at first sight scenario”: “When Annabelle had smiled and said ‘Hello’ to him that spring day at the church bazaar grounds, he might as well have answered, ‘I want to spend the rest of my life with you. My name is David. What is your name?’” (30). However, this passage follows scenes in which other characters point to previous problems in his love relationships, indicating how he is viewed by those around him. When his uncle and aunt, who have raised David after his parents’ deaths, tell him that Annabelle has married someone else, Highsmith points to their response to him without allowing readers into their perspectives:

And his Uncle Bert, in his shy but matter-of fact way, not looking at David as he spoke, had told him that he thought this was another case of his “picking the wrong girl—like that Joan Wagoner.” David had said nothing, but it infuriated him that Bert had put Annabelle on a par with Joan Wagoner, a girl he found it hard even to remember, a girl he had known at seventeen or eighteen! Joan had married some ass too. That was the only similarity. When his uncle and aunt had seen him off on the plane, they had looked at him with sad, wondering expressions, as if they had just learned that he had some terrible disease they could do nothing about. (30)

Throughout these few pages, Highsmith constantly refers to elements of David’s relationship with Annabelle that show it as an idealized fantasy rather than one based on, in a Freudian sense, any kind of reality testing. He took a job he did not want that was far from her so that he could make enough money for their marriage, yet had not asked her to marry him. He intended to ask her on his return:

He hadn’t said “wait for me” and hadn’t told her in his letter that he wanted to marry her, because he preferred to say that in person. After all, she had said to

him only two months before, “I love you David.” The fact she had called him David at that moment instead of Dave somehow made it all the more serious and true. (28)

In the next passage Highsmith shows, by the use of the term *inevitable*, how far the obsession that dominates the rest of the text has gone: “They had known each other six weeks when he left for the east, not long perhaps, to know someone before marriage, but by then David knew Annabelle was going to be his wife. It was inevitable and right, and it seemed to him that she knew it too” (32)

Highsmith’s description of David’s relationship with Annabelle sets readers off on a path marked by its unsatisfactory nature. After all, as the relationship is lacking and based in fantasy on the part of the protagonist, why does he not see that his love for Annabelle is hopeless and move on to another love object? By revealing so much so early on, Highsmith makes it clear that the problem is not the love lost, but the psychic structure of the protagonist prior to the love that seemingly exists in the first place. The references to a previous attachment—its importance denied by David, the pitying looks from his family—all show a fundamental, melancholic structure to the novel, represented by David.

David then shifts into ruminating about his mother, who died when he was 14. In her usual way, Highsmith talks about the financial aspects of his upbringing, but intersperses this with hints about the sense of loss that would merit the kind of mourning to which Freud refers to as “normal”: “Only once in a while, certainly not more than once a month, his mother would sit on his bedside and kiss him goodnight” (33).

Julia Kristeva takes a step further than Freud in her analysis of melancholia and links it to a specific cultural/historical point. Melancholia “would correspond to a tendency toward a union with Lacan’s Real: that is, for Kristeva, with the mother and death” (Lechte 34). Žižek argues:

All culture is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalise—to

*cultivate* this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis. It is not only that the aim is no longer to abolish this drive antagonism, but the inspiration to abolish it is precisely the source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension. (*Sublime* 5, emphasis in original)

What Žižek describes so clearly here is a structure of the human subject in Jacques Lacan's schema, something that relates to culture but, as suggested above, is also radically resistant to it. Most important, cultures that attempt to prescribe and confine the individual in the kind of "organisation man" scenario examined by Whyte suffer the most extreme upsurges of reaction. Kristeva likens her reading of melancholia to a tendency or a shift toward union with Lacan's Real, as outlined above, and with the mother and death. In so doing, she seems to cast the melancholic as a necessary outsider within his cultural milieu. If this analysis is applied to Highsmith's 1950s novels, then it can act as a unifying tool for other readings of these works that point to the Cold War, the existential angst of her protagonists, and other theories that have attempted to explain Highsmith's texts in cultural and historical terms.

Cochran describes many of Highsmith's works of this period as metaphors for the Cold War and cites couples such as Vic and Melinda in *Deep Water* and pairs of male protagonists that are bound-up in a literal or metaphorical "marriage of hate." In this essay he usefully discusses Highsmith's challenges to binary oppositions and links these constructions, as she herself does not, with the Cold War: "For Americans, the Cold War paradigm was built on a series of rigid dichotomies—or binary oppositions—between us/them, good/evil, innocence/guilt" (Cochran 166). He goes on to point out that part of the process of identification lies in the breakdown of these oppositions: "Highsmith worked to break down the binary oppositions between us/them and good/evil in the way she encouraged the reader to sympathize with her criminal protagonists" (167).

Although it is not central to the overall theme of the essay, Cochran does read



some of Highsmith's male characters as subversive in their aberrant relationship to a "normal" model of sexuality and highlights the ways in which homosexuality and the idea of "mother fixation" were underlying scapegoats of the period:

By portraying homosexuality as a running undercurrent in postwar culture, Highsmith tapped into these popular images to challenge the validity of American's self-conception. Far from the virile men of action who populated the Cold War culture—from John Wayne to Mike Hammer—keeping Americans safe from communism and effeminacy, Highsmith presented a gallery of weak, insufferable, craven, murderous male characters" (Cochran 173).

Barbara Ehrenreich examines the intersections during this era of rebellion, between conformism and heterosexuality, especially leading to the ultimate "goal": marriage. She argues that the popularity of normative psychologies, including the ego-psychology appropriation of Freud that Lacan so loathed, meant that the men of the time were coerced into the very mess that Highsmith critiques: "By the 50s and 60s, psychiatry had developed a massive weight of theory establishing that marriage—and within that, the breadwinner role—was the only normal state for the adult male. Outside lay only a range of diagnosis, all unflattering" (Ehrenreich 15).

In *This Sweet Sickness* Wes, David's colleague who might be regarded as his only friend, urges David to stay a bachelor; a particularly visceral passage explains his view of marriage, as it likens Wes's wife, Laura, to a devouring arachnid: "When Wes went to work, he went off with one of those strands attached to him, and he followed it back at night to the web and the spider" (Highsmith 74). Clearly, Highsmith is no feminist or proto-feminist, yet she effectively and repeatedly cuts through the ideologically promoted gender binaries of the period. Cochran argues that Highsmith approaches her cultural critique from an unusual perspective for a female writer, a perspective that works to expose the emptiness of the cultural icons of the era:

Highsmith extended her critical investigation of the era's dominant gender

assumptions by working several variations on the Oedipal conflict, with attendant implications regarding American men. Like the era's dominant social and political culture, Highsmith's universe was male-centred. But unlike the dominant cultural icons, her men possess deep psychological flaws making them unfit for the moral leadership American politicians claimed as their inheritance. (173)

This examination of *This Sweet Sickness* is relevant to Highsmith's other U.S.-based novels of the time. However, it is arguable that the "Cold War paradigm" reaches far beyond that particular historical period and that the "formalisation of anxiety" that she describes so incisively, could apply to the cultural anxieties that are experienced today, twenty years after her death.

*Keywords:* Cold War; Highsmith, Patricia; masculinity; obsession; suburbs

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