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## INTRODUCTION: RE-EVALUATING PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

### FIONA PETERS

The guest editor of this theme issue on Patricia Highsmith provides an overview of the contents, which features analyses of Highsmith's works and their adaptations for film such as *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

This theme issue of *Clues* marks 20 years since Patricia Highsmith's death in 1995. A resident of Switzerland since 1982 after many years in France, she had long been absent from her native United States. Personal and literary reasons explain her antipathy toward the country of her birth. Highsmith never fitted comfortably into any generic category and at times during her career, especially during the 1980s, she had difficulties in finding and securing an American publisher. This was less problematic in Europe where Highsmith was published by Diogenes Verlag of Zurich and was viewed as a "psychological" writer; such a classification meant that the contradictions within her work were more often celebrated rather than criticized. Indeed, Highsmith was "a favourite of Diogenes' owner Daniel Keel, who rate[d] her as a psychological writer ahead of Georges Simenon" (Peters 5).

Although Highsmith unarguably is more appreciated within the academy now than in her lifetime, it remains perplexing that even today she is not rated as highly as towering figures such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, a writer she very much admired. In a recent article, Richard Bradford states that it was she

who shifted the boundaries and conventions of crime writing: “Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) overturned all the previous conventions of crime writing—Ripley is at once horrifying and magnetic, and he gets away with murder—and any pretence to the maintenance of a moral consensus disappears completely in the novels of Joseph Wambaugh and James Ellroy.”

It has been 60 years since the 34-year-old Highsmith wrote *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, which followed *Strangers on a Train* (1950), *The Price of Salt/Carol* (1952), and *The Blunderer* (1954). By her death, she had written 20 novels (the final Ripley text *Ripley Under Water* appeared in 1994, and *Small g: A Summer Idyll* was published posthumously in 1995); volumes of short stories; a nonfiction book, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (1983); and a children’s book.

Although more than a half-century old, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* has in no way lost its power to shock, to fascinate, and to influence the way that readers new to Highsmith view the crime-fiction genre. Many students may be familiar with Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Raymond Chandler, but it is Highsmith who grabs and sustains their attention. The essays in this collection mark the 20th anniversary of her death and discuss her work in disparate approaches, but they are united by certain themes—in particular, the ways in which Highsmith remains open to opposing views and perspectives.

The opening essay, Fiona Peters’s “Conformity and Singularity in the Early Novels of Patricia Highsmith,” steps back to the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Highsmith was prolific and traveling between the United States and Europe before she made a permanent move to Europe in 1963. Her “heroes,” however, remained Americans—whether they were traveling

abroad, such as Howard Ingram in *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969), or displaced from the city to the suburbs, like Edith Howland in *Edith's Diary* (1977). In this early stage of her career, she tended to focus on the American suburban communities of the post–World War II period, settled by the generation contemplating changes in the American psyche and critiqued in books such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (a 1950 book read by Highsmith), which discussed the rise in consumer culture and depersonalization. Through a reading of the psychic disintegration of David Kelsey in *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), the essay examines how Highsmith mounted a devastating critical attack on conformity and small-town American values.

Samantha Walton, in “‘Sooner or later most of us get hooked’: The Question of Insanity in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*,” also considers the pathological elements of Highsmith's early novels. She points out that Highsmith's novels are “notorious for their tacit complicity with amoral killers” and references the reading by the eight-year-old Highsmith of psychologist Karl Menninger's works, particularly *The Human Mind* (1930). This essay examines how psychoanalytic insights into the unconscious were not peculiar to Highsmith's fiction, as Freud had influenced the writers of the Golden Age, but that Menninger especially impressed her because of his theories about the mind of the psychopath. Although it is unclear whether Ripley falls into the psychopath category, the inclusion of *Strangers on a Train* with the psychopathic Bruno and hapless Guy enables Walton to reflect upon the links and developmental line between the two texts.

At age 13, Highsmith read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and labeled him “her master,” as Ilse Schrynemakers points out in “Patricia

Highsmith, Dostoevsky, and the Apocalyptic Imagination.” This essay also focuses on Highsmith’s early writing, specifically *Strangers on a Train*, *The Blunderer*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Schrynemakers explains that Raskolnikov, the killer hero of *Crime and Punishment*, achieves rehabilitation for his crimes through confession, regret, and recognition of the value of connecting with humanity. She argues that, in the cold-war period of American history, themes of duplicity and unrest were paramount in noir fiction, but Highsmith’s work incorporates these noir ideas as well as themes of evil and moral choice. Schrynemakers charts the ways in which postwar Americans experienced cultural anxiety, based in part on the threat posed by the atomic bomb. She argues that Highsmith’s work of this period highlights the threat to the individual’s sense of civic duty and the concurrent psychological and social problems arising from the period’s separation from a shared humanity, thus revealing the pointless nature of moral choices.

Concentrating on the first Ripley novel, Bruce Wyse—in “Living ‘As If’: Ripley’s Imaginary and the Problem of Other People in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*”—examines Ripley’s apparent adeptness at “reading the dispositions, expectations and intentions of other people.” Wyse argues that, although Ripley often is right about people, he is not infallible. The uncertainty surrounding his interpersonal affairs is revealed, according to Wyse, by the frequency of the phrase “as if” throughout the novel, which functions to reveal the ways in which Ripley’s own simulation of an “inferable interiority” also might apply to the seeming transparency of those around him. Ripley’s mimetic identity based on the appropriation of Dickie Greenleaf’s life might therefore be illustrative of, according to Wyse, a Lacanian idea of an imaginary fusion, thus allowing Ripley to eliminate the difference between him- self and Dickie. By murdering Dickie, he “becomes Dickie,” eliminating

the “as if.”

Jacqui Miller, in “The Tremors of Forgery: The Palimpsest of Tom Ripley’s Identity,” argues that Ripley’s identity is a palimpsest and that he constantly forges himself alongside the various forgeries in which he engages throughout the “Ripliad.” Ripley’s adoption of Dickie’s identity, his act of forging Dickie’s will, and his construction of an art scam demonstrate that he forges for expediency as well as for the thrill of it—an act of both transgression and transformation. Miller considers the films *Plein Soleil/Purple Noon* (1960), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and *Ripley Under Ground* (2005)—as well as the novels on which they are based—to examine the varied approaches to the character. She concludes that Ripley’s slippery identity allows—indeed, invites—these constant reinventions.

In her article “Frenching Mr. Ripley,” K. A. Laity concentrates solely on one of the films that Miller mentions: *Purple Noon*. Laity argues that the high-definition Criterion edition of *Purple Noon* adds extra life to the visual impact of the adaptation. Laity’s premise is that the film presents the viewer with a vigorous and untroubled heteronormativity, clearly at odds with the representation of Ripley in Highsmith’s novel. Laity argues that the film turns the narrative structure from a liminal to a criminal space driven by heterosexual desire, including Ripley’s desire for Marge; in contrast, the Ripley in the novel finds Marge abject and repellent. Forgery emerges as a theme here, too, but as a device used to strengthen Ripley’s masculine credibility.

Craig A. Warren, in “Patricia Highsmith and the Dark Carnival,” concentrates on *Strangers on a Train* and argues that the novel should be viewed as a founding work of “dark carnival,” a subgenre that emerged after World War II. He identifies the amusement-park sequence in *Strangers on a Train* as particularly appropriate for an examination of Highsmith’s place

within and influence upon the subgenre. Tracing dark carnival's origins as far back as the silent movies of the 1920s, Warren argues that the park space is a liminal one, its exaggerations reflecting upon the values and behaviors accepted within mainstream culture. Highsmith, according to Warren, utilizes Lake Metcalf's Kingdom of Fun as an adult rather than a juvenile space that works to foreground the misogyny that exists outside its gates. Bruno follows Guy's estranged wife Miriam in an environment in which his repulsion at what is described as an abject femininity is enabled to reach a point where he can strangle her with psychic impunity. Warren argues that the amusement park became a popular setting for narratives that foregrounded crime, suspense, horror, and science fiction. In Warren's view, *Strangers on a Train* moves from the staid train compartment in which Guy and Bruno meet to a violent, dark, and transgressive funhouse.

In "Strangers in Tunisia: Poe's Confessional Imp and Patricia Highsmith's *The Tremor of Forgery*," A. B. Emrys also examines *Strangers on a Train*, along with *The Tremor of Forgery*, to reflect upon the ways in which Highsmith follows in the literary footsteps of Dostoyevsky and Poe. The theme of confession is foregrounded in the article, a particular type of confession exemplified in Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse," as an impulse to self-harm rather than a forced admission of the type typically found in detective stories. Emrys argues that the confessional impulse is stronger and closer to Poe in the case of Guy in *Strangers on a Train*, whereas by the time Highsmith wrote *The Tremor of Forgery*, Ingham is able to "confess" his possible murder of an Arab in his hotel bungalow, but does not incriminate himself in the endgame that led to Guy's self-destructiveness.

Bran Nicol's "Those Who Follow: Homosocial Choreography in Highsmith's Queer Gothic," argues that a flaw within the 1999 film adaptation

of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is director Anthony Minghella's decision to make what Nicol believes to be Ripley's latent homosexuality manifest, thus "queering" him. For Nicol, it is more useful to examine the *homosocial* rather than the *homosexual* motivations and context of Highsmith's work. In his essay, Nicol focuses mainly on *The Two Faces of January* (1964), *Those Who Walk Away* (1967), and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* through the male-to-male obsession and stalking within the texts, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea of "between men." Drawing on the societal anxiety prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as using George Hegger's concept of "queer gothic," Nicol argues that queer gothic emerges at moments of anxiety surrounding sexual identity and, more precisely, the perceived threat of the homosexual man to the dominant ideology.

In "The Queer Death of Timothy Porter: Crime and Punishment in Patricia Highsmith's 'The Black House,'" Alexis M. Egan also considers "queer" elements in Highsmith's work, specifically in the titular short story. By queer elements, Egan means nonsexual behaviors that are seen as transgressive of gender norms. She contrasts what she perceives as Ripley's dissembling behavior in *The Talented Mr Ripley* with the naiveté shown by Timothy Porter in the "The Black House." The middle-aged male locals who fantasize in the local tavern about their youthful sexual conquests and general nostalgic memories in the black house of the title inspire Porter to visit the house, after he also learns of a sordid murder that had taken place there years before. Once Porter visits the house, he recognizes that his previous fears about it had been childish and absurd; it is just an old empty house. Afterward, he is surprised at the locals' lack of appreciation when he tells them the "truth" about the house and, after another visit, he dies outside the tavern in a fight provoked by the locals. Egan argues that this short story



allows Highsmith to paint a picture of what happens when a character does not dissemble, when instead he unwittingly attempts to subvert the shared fantasy of old-fashioned masculinity that sustained the men in a challenging, less stable present. This examination of a familiar theme for Highsmith is a fitting close to this celebratory issue.

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