

Tom Ripley: Philosophizing with an Oar

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“To become what one is, one must not have the faintest idea what one is.” - Friedrich Nietzsche.

In a 1981 interview from “Armchair Detective” with Patricia Highsmith, in which she is described as particularly philosophical, when asked about the closeness of the artist to the criminal says that “an imaginative writer is very free-wheeling; he has to forget about his own personal morals, especially if he is writing about criminals. He has to feel anything is possible.” This revelation from Highsmith feels eerily close to what authors whom she has called brilliant and “her master,” in reference to Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, say about the duty of one seeking out an existentialist life. That they must abandon all which they learned in churches and schools about boundaries and moral codes in search of their own form of expression which ultimately would lead to a truer self than we may find through any kind of psychoanalysis or ethic which we could subscribe to. Because of the influences which Highsmith had at the time of her writing “The Talented Mr. Ripley”, the experiences which she puts Tom through and her own personal experiences, as opposed to a Freudian reading which is common among critics I argue that her most used character would draw on these authors in the creation of a truly free self beyond any conception of good and evil, out to destroy any imposed self be it outwards or inwards in order to become an existential hero while demonstrating true artistic expression.

In his article the “Age of Anxiety: Patricia Highsmith, Existential Psychology, and the ‘decline’ of American Naturalism” Benjamin Mangrum attempts to posit the existential themes

which we can find throughout Highsmith's novels of the 40's and 50's as a commentary of sorts on the rejection of "socioeconomic or structural conditions" (Mangrum 2) to explain society and the interactions of people within it for a different, psychological, theory that was a result of the rise of writers like Freud who pushed for an understanding of the world through gaining an understanding of oneself and the urges which we may have inside of us that reflect a truer self. Mangrum states that it was Highsmith's literary mission to highlight the growth of these therapeutic psychologies and the effect they had on American cultural history such as violent tendencies and class conflicts beginning to be relegated to the largely autonomous area of the psyche. In line with the growth of psychoanalysis as an accepted method of decoding societal patterns throughout the 1950's (Burnham 159) Highsmith would have had a front seat to the movement and an especially useful point of view to share her ideas about the movement through her novels. In the Age of Anxiety, the murders committed by Highsmith's characters are seen as the expression of latent desires within the psychologies of the novel's main characters.

It is the aim of this paper however to show that Highsmith had no intention of merely questioning the Freudian theory of hidden selves, one that she had ample reason to despise and as Mangrum even states she strongly distrusted (Mangrum 6), and instead that Highsmith, in line with her "masters" and other existential influences was using Tom Ripley, to demonstrate an existential ideal in the real world and in some ways reflect on the inability of these people to be examined under the same templates which psychoanalysis attempts to place us all in, effectively denying the Freudian template. To quote Dostoevsky which Highsmith had transcribed in her notebook (Wilson 128) after reading "The Idiot": "Don't let us forget that the motives of human action are usually infinitely more complex and varied than we are apt to explain them afterwards".

Beginning in November of 1948 Highsmith underwent many rigorous sessions of psychoanalysis with Eva Klein Lipshutz (Wilson 147) in an effort to discover the origin of her lesbian urges. Upon undergoing this therapy and reading up on the state of psychology at the time it became clear to her that homosexuality at the time was still seen as a disease even by the supposedly advanced field. Highsmith ended the therapy and understandably was left with a bad taste in her mouth for these supposed moral guidelines of a system which had been so lauded at the time for truly figuring out the human psyche. It is no wonder that during this era of her life such thinkers as Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard became so influential on her realm of thought with their discussion of the importance of choices on making a man who he is as opposed to what society makes him or what horrible things we may think can be found in repressed memories and Rorschach tests. Highsmith read the existentialists voraciously throughout this time in her life leading up to the writing of "The Talented Mr. Ripley" while also engaging in a European tour of her own. Such works as "The Sickness unto Death" by Kierkegaard, "The Stranger" by Camus, "Existentialism" by Sartre, as well as "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" and "Ecce Homo" by Nietzsche are all mentioned throughout her biography as influences on developing her philosophy at this crucial time in her life. Highsmith was most fascinated as mentioned earlier with the idea common to all of our above authors that it is instead our choices in which we find our true selves instead of any societal or psychological template; positing that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre), a phrase which implies a sense of personal freedom that Highsmith found appealing and was later even further taken by in "The Stranger" by Camus in which the main character, Meursault's, honesty to his own personal values was revolutionary to Highsmith. Reading this just before beginning work on The Talented Mr. Ripley, gave Highsmith the ability to create an existential hero who she would spend years of her life with.

Throughout “The Age of Anxiety” Mangrum brings up various issues that Tom faces in the novel, how he overcomes them, and the existentialist theory that this reflects. Mangrum runs the gamut from Nietzsche’s theory of beyond good and evil, an effective denial of any statement about what is wrong and right, to Kierkegaard’s theory of the sickness unto death caused by searching in vain for a false self. These theories are presented in such a manner that they seem to cohabitately within Highsmith’s main characters, particularly Tom. This is effective if these characters are to be looked at as commentary on a society which had run amuck with Freudian fever as Mangrum is positing. But if we are instead to look at Tom as a demonstration of an ideal that has characteristics which ought to be emulated as I am positing then the conflicts between the present existentialists must be dealt with. The most effective way of doing so is to expand on some of the ideas we see in Mangrum’s paper as well as implement other theories which Highsmith was aware of and was using in order to synthesize a perfect existentialist as opposed to a combination of various attributes which leaves us with a messy and truly undefined character. Many of the ideas that Mangrum has left us with do stick in the estimation of Tom as an existential ideal, specifically the moral transgressions that Tom makes throughout the novel. However, while Mangrum presents these as merely a means of Highsmith questioning the reader about where our moral guidelines come from, upon an analysis of the text the transgressions that Tom makes seem infinitely more important than this. If the moral transgression theory was instead to be presented along side two of Nietzsche’s other arguments, a whole new depth of character opens up to us and the decisions made by this character seem much more in line with what Highsmith herself believed.

In “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, Nietzsche outlines his philosophy on a parable about the camel, the lion, and the child. The parable is what Nietzsche sees as someone who is progressing

along the existential path. Most people he says get stuck as the camel, constantly taking on other people's burdens as moral guidelines to guide them in their life: "All these most difficult things the spirit that would bear much takes upon itself: and like the camel, which, when laden, hastens into the desert, so hastens the spirit into the desert" (Nietzsche 1883, 25). This described degradation of the spirit, or the self, is a direct result of an acceptance of the moral values which are imposed on it, and it is this exact thing that Tom is transgressing against with his murders and taking on of other characters identities. At this point we come to the next distinction between the Age of Anxiety and this paper, that of the importance of the murders. To Mangrum the violence of the murders is important as it demonstrates the psychology that is crucial to his interpretation of Highsmith's intentions, without the violence we do not have the conflicted character struggling against an internal pressure from his Id. If, however, we focus on how the victims of the murders fit into parable from Nietzsche it seems that the murders are meant to be seen as metaphorical with Tom's transgressions against moral boundaries not only meant to question societal templates but to instead deny all templates that others would attempt to place on you; in effect, the murders are Tom in an act of self-overcoming becoming the Lion. "To create freedom for oneself, and give a sacred "No" even to duty: for that, my brothers, the lion is needed." (Nietzsche 1883, 26).

This metamorphosis from one state to the next is not an easy task and like an actual metamorphosis requires an act of self-destruction and self-overcoming. Herein lies the importance of viewing the murders as metaphorical acts of self-bettering by Tom. Tom and Dickie are presented in the novel in similar ways, both distinctly American with high aspirations and longing for a new start in Europe. The way that these characters arcs as well as personalities are paralleled truly demonstrates just how connected the two characters are,. Early in the novel

Dickie begins influencing Tom in several ways, for example how Tom responds to the flamboyant men on the beach. After initially reacting with awe to the acrobats, upon Dickie insulting them “Tom deliberately kept himself from even glancing at the acrobats again” and even concedes to calling them a derogatory name (Highsmith 94). This concession to Dickie’s will, however, builds a resentment within Tom. To Mangrum this resentment builds from Tom’s repressed self and results in a brutal actualization of these urges as he smashes in Dickie’s head with an oar. However, if we are to view the event in the full light of Highsmith’s knowledge of existentialism and her attitudes towards Freudian theory, particularly about repressed urges as mentioned earlier, it seems that there must be something more to these murders as well as the one near murder of Marge.

If we instead view the murders as metaphorical instances of Tom in an immense act of self-overcoming we are still able to keep the turmoil that occurs in Tom’s mind about said acts but are also able to reconcile Highsmith’s views about psychoanalysis with her knowledge of the importance of self-willed acts in existential theory. The psychological chaos that we see in Tom just as he is about to bludgeon Dickie to death is built up through all of their interactions. Initially Tom sees Dickie as a perfect model for himself to follow, doing everything he can to imitate and grow more intimate with him. This feeling is betrayed when he sees Dickie holding Marge intimately through a window in chapter 10, “Tom really wouldn’t have believed it possible of Dickie!”. This is immediately followed by Tom rushing home and throwing out some of Dickie’s art supplies. This is the first rejection of Dickie’s self who proclaims himself as an artist much to Tom’s loathing.. Immediately upon this first rejection we see Tom enact his own art form, one which he feels he is much better at than Dickie is at his craft, forgery. Tom dresses in Dickie’s clothes and imitates things that he wishes Dickie would say, an attempt at creating a

new Dickie from himself. However, upon being interrupted in this process by Dickie, and another instance of Dickie's will being imposed upon Tom, that being the anti-homosexual view shared by both of Tom's murder victims, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back is then placed upon Tom enabling him to transcend to the lion. It is on the train that we see the turmoil of Tom's mind finally resolve into a total rejection of Dickie and his values that Tom feels are constantly influencing him, "He wanted to kill Dickie [...] his failing had not been his own fault, not due to anything he had done, but due to Dickie's inhuman stubbornness." (Highsmith 95)

This so called "Energy wasted on negative ends" (Nietzsche 1908) drives Tom to draw Dickie into an intimate setting, the nighttime boat ride, and bludgeon him to death with an oar, a part of the story we see repeated with the murder of Freddie and one that can easily be related to a work of Nietzsche's called "Twilight of the Idols, or, how to Philosophize with a Hammer" in which Nietzsche advocates pulling the things one idolizes into as close a contact as possible, recognizing them as external influences on our lives and morals which we should put no merit in, and finally bashing them into a thousand pieces. As Tom does the same to Dickie we see that it has an almost freeing effect on him, he is able to become what he sees as an idyllic self and travel across Europe, attempting to become the Child, the final stage in Nietzsche's metamorphosis, "The child is [...] a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement" (Nietzsche 1883, 26). This constant state of wonder that the child is able to experience is found by Tom in the ensuing chapters as he explores Europe, vagabonding with a reckless abandon constantly taking in sights and constantly forgetting all he has been taught from the world around him. This state of bliss, however, is constantly overwhelmed by traces of the self he overcame returning to haunt him resulting in a backslide with Tom returning to the state

of the lion and finally climaxing with the near murder, or rejection, of Marge and the full rejection of Freddie Miles before finally being able to return to a state near the child

What then is the metaphorical purpose of these rejections? While the murder of Dickie was a synthesis of rejecting a camel in the dual sense of rejecting imposed moral values while also rejecting a poor artist who is acting in a manner that is untrue to how he and the thinkers who influenced Highsmith thought artists ought to act. The rejections of the other two proposed victims break these parts into separate examples. The first of these murders, or expressionistic acts of Tom's own self, is against Freddie Miles. This murder follows much the same pattern as Dickie's with the only exception being that Freddie is not an artist. What Freddie does do however is threaten Tom's own sense of his self. Occurring in another intimate setting, the bedroom that he and Dickie are allegedly sharing, this causes Freddie to behave in a homophobic manner very similar to that of Dickie's which had such a strong influence over Tom in our earlier analysis. Freddie also represents an exact example of the ugly American trope which Tom seems to constantly work against. On the Cruise ship we see this rejection of the ugly American from Tom in his desire to be seen as an intelligent and mysterious figure, he accomplishes this by becoming a sort of mysterious figure, an early example of his forgery of personas as art work, and donning a hat to dissuade being seen as a boisterous American who doesn't even speak the language of the places he is visiting. His questioning of the nature of Tom and Dickie's relationship, brought on by their sharing of a room in the hotel and Tom wearing Dickie's jewelry, as well as Freddie essentially being the manifestation of the ugly American causes the same anger which we saw on the beach and train-car, the scenes in which Tom's will bent towards Dickie, to rise again. It is in this moment that Tom once again has drawn the source of will that is attempting to sway his own into a very intimate setting and smash this source over the

head with an ash tray thus freeing his own authentic self through an active choice to eliminate the opposition. The lack of artistry references is not totally lacking in this scene, however, as the expression of Tom's art by wearing Dickie's rings is one of the initial tips to Freddie that something is amiss.

Here it is necessary to explore the concept of artistry as it relates to existentialism. "I love artists, modest in his needs: he really wants only two things, his bread and his art" says Nietzsche in "Twilight of the Idols" along with Kierkegaard, Highsmith's "master", who spent his entire life crafting numerous literary personas to serve his art to the world view art as a Lebensraum, or life's work, something to be fully committed to at all times that comes from the depths of ones being. "It is impossible to exist without passion" says Kierkegaard, and it is this lack of passion that Ripley finds so disgusting in the art of Dickie and Marge. "He was only sorry that Dickie fell into this category as a painter, because he wanted Dickie to be much more" (Highsmith 58) Tom thinks about Dickie upon being shown all of the art which Tom describes as monotonously similar. Tom sees his own artistry however as a much better effort and one deserving of praise were it not illegal. This sense of pride Tom has in his work despite the lack of accolades that he has or will be able to accrue from it is one of the strongest pieces of evidence in the novel for Highsmith's intentions to have Tom as a reflection of existential ideals. As Nietzsche says about the true artist needing only the bare necessities and his art, so too says Tom about his work in forgery. At the beginning of the novel while posing as an IRS agent Tom, despite having earned nearly 2,000 dollars in checks which could relieve him of his destitute state is content merely with the continuation of his art form as an expressionistic act in itself. A mirror for his self that he sees as much more valuable than any social standing that it could bring him going so far as to describe his actions as "Good clean sport. He wasn't stealing money from anybody. Before he

went to Europe, he thought, he'd destroy the checks." (Highsmith 17) As Eric Targan points out in "Identity Theft: the amoral vision of Patricia Highsmith" Tom also has massive pride in his forgery of emotions and stories, his ability to think quickly on his feet to come up with effective lies is displayed through the entire novel and his ability to manipulate his own emotions is another facet of his art form remarking in chapter three, which features a masterwork of his forgery abilities, that "he was doing the right thing, behaving the right way" (Highsmith 23) while convincing Mr. Greenleaf to send him to Europe. This mimicry that is Tom's art continues through the novel as we see Tom impersonating Dickie with greater and greater effect, constantly improving his abilities. The Targan essay is also especially useful in confronting the idea of whether or not Tom is in fact a sociopath or one who is actually, as I am positing, beyond any realm of self in which he could be categorized. In "Identity Theft: the amoral vision of Patricia Highsmith" Targan¹ considers the further representation of Tom as Amoral rather than Immoral which seems to suggest that Highsmith did not want her character viewed as a sociopath running through Europe ruining lives but as one who recognized no values which many humans hold to be universal in an attempt the move past his own self which he felt was being held back by societal constraints,

Dickie is obviously not as passionate about his work and sees it as an aside to his other activities; this lack of passion can be directly transposed onto Marge who Tom has an equal level of loathing for estimating her far below Dickie's and especially his level of worldliness. This loathing and down looking can be seen in the first encounter with Marge at Dickie's house when Tom does an impression that Marge does not understand causing Tom to estimate her social

¹ Targan also takes into account the entirety of the "Ripliad" in summing up Tom's character. Due to an event, which I believe shares relevance with the act of allowing Marge to live, Tom actually performs a selfless act of saving a man's family who had done him a favor earlier in the third novel

stock as almost undeserving of his and Dickie's company. It is later on in the novel that Tom begins plotting the murder of Marge as she moves close to his secret. The same rubric from the Dickie murder is present here, an intimate space, in this case, his bedroom and a gondola. The rejection of Marge's self, however, never occurs. This could be explained by a moral inability on the part of Tom to engage in his third murder. On the other hand, it seems more in keeping with the other murders up to this point that Marge has not had enough of an external pressure on Tom's sense of self to warrant an act of overcoming her. While Tom does have the same disdain for Marge which was a part of what got Freddie and Dickie killed, this disdain is more from a sense of loathing her essence rather than her wills influence on Tom's own self. While he allows Dickie and Freddie's views to influence his own, Tom is able to more effectively play Marge and influence her with his own will thus making an act of full rejection against her meritless. He does keep this loathing for Marge and does see her as a camel, but as she is offloading no weight onto Tom herself she is not worth the trouble.

An overarching view of Highsmith and her creation of a character, one that she loved and identified so strongly with that she went so far as to attribute credit to the character on awards she earned from the novel and stated in her journal that she "often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing" (Wilson 199), leads us to a seemingly inescapable view that Highsmith wouldn't create a character that so much bears her own personality and have him intended to be subjected to the same psychological theories that she so reviled as Mangrum seems to suggest we ought to do. This distinction seems not only clear to be made but also essential to understanding Highsmith as an author who's work is not only being referenced more and more frequently but who's characters seem to be plucked from the modern world. The cynicism and humor we find her displaying throughout her novels fits right into the

postmodernism obsessed world we find ourselves in and any author who can show characters so flawlessly interacting and succeeding within such a seemingly uncaring world deserves not only a second look but to have justice done upon her and her influences.

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