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Alienation and Dislocation versus Homeliness and Norm in Patricia Highsmiths "Strangers on a Train" and "The Talented Mr Ripley"

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Patricia Highsmith (1921–1995), a notable American novelist and short story writer of the 20th century, known mostly for her mystery stories, defied simple categorisation in her violent, complex, psychologically stimulating novels. Highsmith is mainly credited for her psychological thrillers, and a number of film adaptations based on her works were made and gained her much acclaim in the literary world. Having written 22 novels and 8 short-story collections, the author won a variety of literary awards including those for *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Despite her American upbringing, first career paths and significant experience as a writer, reviewer and literary critic in the USA, Highsmith's works were particularly successful in Europe, especially since the late 1950s. Besides, throughout her life, the American writer travelled to various places around the world, however, she never felt fully satisfied with one location. After her extensive world travels, Patricia Highsmith concluded that she “would know hundreds of people in different cities and yet she would still be lonely. ‘I am forever-seeking,’ she said” (Wilson, 12).

The writer's feelings of desolation and abandonment are frequently reflected in her works of fiction and aid in the creation of her characters and the depiction of the place. In fact, Highsmith's sense of loneliness and estrangement significantly affects her picturing fictional homes which stand for refuges, hiding places, mansions and castles and are often featured as full-blown characters (“Patricia,” 2006). Homes play crucial roles in the works of the American writer, yet they are hardly associated with domesticity, hospitality and stability. Luxurious mansions and magnificent castles epitomise temporary asylums and places of exiles rather than genuine secure harbours providing domestic warmth and comfort. More importantly, fictional homes frequently symbolise dream factories that shelter the lunatic concoctions of the unstable minds of their dwellers, like David's, the main protagonist's secret weekend house of *This Sweet Sickness* (1960) or constitute impenetrable fortresses and private prisons, such as Belle Ombre, a splendid stone house belonging to Tom Ripley, the eponymous character of *The Talented Mr Ripley* and a repeat protagonist of *The Ripliad* or Charles Anthony Bruno's huge and desolate mansion in *Strangers on a Train* (1950).

The sense of place is a crucial motif in Patricia Highsmith's fiction. Space which plays a significant role in her novels and short stories constituted an integral part of the novelist's childhood, adolescent and adult experience, determining her relations with others. During adolescence, Highsmith suffered from the cramped conditions in New York apartments she shared with her mother Mary Coates and her stepfather Stanley Highsmith, after whom she took the name. She expressed her sense of confinement, the feeling of lack of privacy and inner anguish in the personal diaries the author kept for a number of years. Thus, the writer later paid close attention to the spaces in which she lived, and developed a sustained interest in architects and their creations, both of which are reflected in her literary oeuvre and pictorial work (“Patricia,” 2006).

Homes play major roles in Highsmith's fiction, reflecting the works' ambience and mood. In fact, the author has created a world of her own – claustrophobic, irrational, labyrinthine, chaotic and disorientated. Her novels and stories, largely influenced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka, reflect existential concerns and simulate existentialism by envisioning a modern world filled with bedlam, absurdity and preposterousness. Similar to the solitary individual scrutinized and extolled by existential writers and philosophers, Highsmith's

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protagonists are cut off from previously secure bearings of community, habit, tradition, and religious assurance and placed in crisis situations where they must nakedly face the reality, confront and answer absolute questions of identity, ethics, faith and deace (Rubin, 11). These protagonists, though often dwelling in luxurious apartments and grand mansions, are portrayed as the prisoners of their wealthy domestic cells, and their vagabond lifestyles, eccentricity and deviation from socially accepted norms are viewed as hazards to the domestic harmony and peace enjoyed by most "ordinary" US citizens.

The aim of this article is to examine the problem of alienation and dislocation in the context of homeliness and norm in the United States after World War II in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*. The emphasis is laid on the study of normality, morality and oddity reflected in the main characters' home environment and their relations with other protagonists, epitomising "decent" American citizens. Charles Anthony Bruno and Tom Ripley, Highsmith's visible anti-heroes – psychopaths and killers, depicted as unfulfilled artists, social outcasts, alienated from their community, mostly due to their homosexual inclinations and "extravagant" behaviour, symbolise the abnormal and deviant side of the American life. With respect to homeliness and domesticity, the two characters embody rebellious men whose lifestyle and home environment challenge traditional domestic values that were cherished and promulgated by the American society and government in the late 1940s and 1950s. Patricia Highsmith's protagonists are exposed to the suspicious meticulous examination of an orthodox and frightened society that rejects them and hounds them, thus reinforcing their misanthropy. It is worth remarking that as a lesbian, the American writer was imbued with a feeling of social non-conformity from an early age and later, her status as an American living in Europe also marginalized her, making her as much of an outsider in her chosen home as she had been in her country of birth (Fort Worth, Texas). Therefore, it should be emphasised that Highsmith's living in deeply conservative American society and having tense relations with her mother and stepfather affected her writing. It was her sense of loneliness, dejection and anguish that shaped her description of fictional homes as cramped, claustrophobic places and influenced the creation of the characters who operate outside the norm and live on the fringe of society.

In Patricia Highsmith's novels homes are not only endowed with spatial attributes or refer to the background and family roots of the main anti-heroes. Being refuges, hiding places and dream-like, visionary spaces, they affect the complex interior world of the protagonists. Highsmith's homes aid in creating tension and apprehension as well as reflect cruel, sadomasochistic relations between the protagonists. *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*, the novels which were made into successful movies, first by Alfred Hitchcock in 1951 and then by René Clément in 1960 under the title *Plein Soleil (Purple Noon)* as well as in 1999 by Anthony Minghella, feature socio-paths and murder, and, more importantly, offer a thorough examination of the psychology of guilt, and abnormal human behaviour in a world devoid of firm moral ground. Furthermore, they introduce the readers into the questions of fading identity and double personality (Liukkonen, Pesonen, 2008). As was previously underlined, in these works homes are featured as fully-blown characters, illustrating the protagonists' inner selves, assumed and mistaken identities.

Prior to the analysis of homeliness and norm in *Strangers on a Train* one ought to refer to the social-historical context of the USA in the 1950s as well

as to the author's personal history as a writer. It is worth emphasising that in her book *Highsmith* outlines the contradictory feelings and tempestuous relationship between the protagonists that not only build the tension in the story but above all illustrate the author's anxiety over the homophobic hysteria in the United States after World War II. *Strangers on a Train* was the writer's debut novel, but her sense of anxious foreboding was already fully formed in the crucible of Cold War paranoia that surrounded her. For Highsmith, a lesbian novelist, that paranoia was shot through with anxiety, because American Cold War politics intertwined with an intense homophobia that labelled homosexuals as an official security risk. Hence, as Highsmith wrote in her notebook at that time, her creative goal was "Consciousness alone, consciousness in my particular era, 1950" (Wilson, 158). What is important, she expressed that consciousness through guilt. Beginning with the character of Guy Hines in *Strangers on a Train* and continuing through 18 novels and collections of short stories, Highsmith's inverted version of guilt creates the crime, not the other way around. Furthermore, the novelist's statement implies that, through her works of crime fiction, she strives to raise awareness and display grim realities of society. In her endeavour to create social consciousness, Highsmith refers to the public concern for the abnormal citizen and the feared other (Weinstein, 2014). When *Strangers on a Train* was written, the concept of the psychopath began to surface as a feared figure within society. Interestingly enough, the notion of the other manifested itself not through skin colour or ethnicity, but through certain personality traits and behaviour that the rest of the society regarded as abnormal, such as impulsiveness, instinctive action, hiding or masking one's identity, lack of stabilisation and professional life. In this regard one should cite Foucault who refers to the phenomenon of psychopathy as, "The great indefinite and confused family of 'abnormals,' the fear of which will haunt the end of the nineteenth century" (Foucault, 51). Thus, Cold War paranoia of the other and the enemy at home aided in the formation of the psychopath.

Highsmith responds to societal hysteria by creating Charles Anthony Bruno, a character that incarnates these abnormal characteristics, and by writing a novel that addresses the fears and anxiety of US citizens (Weinstein, 2014). Bruno's deviant behaviour, sadomasochistic inclinations, male insecurity and manic depression deserve to be scrutinised in terms of his domestic situation and home life. In the conversation with Guy Hines, Bruno admits to him that he does not have a truly satisfactory home life and confesses to his interlocutor that he lives; "In a house I call the Doghouse... There's dogwood all around it and everybody in it's in some kind of doghouse, down to the chauffeur" (Highsmith 1950, 16). The fact that Charles calls his house a "Doghouse" and later, when Guy turns up at Bruno's home to murder his father, he uses the same name for his residence, may suggest that the place is inhabited by mysterious characters who commit secret and questionable acts. In addition, the name implies a masculine, animal relationship that ties to the homicidal desires of Bruno and Oedipal relationship between him and his mother (Weinstein, 2014). Charles confides in Guy that everyone in his house is in some kind of a doghouse, like Bruno's father, a wealthy, arrogant man who is not faithful to his wife; Mrs Bruno who is imprisoned in a loveless marriage and has to endure her husband's affairs; and Bruno, a young adult who acts like an adolescent and suffers from a classic Oedipus complex. More importantly, the protagonist uses the word "house" instead of "home" to describe where he lives. The distinction between these two terms implies

that he does not perceive his house as a home due to his inability to create close meaningful relationships with members of his family and therefore he cannot see the abode as a place of warmth, comfort and domestic peace. For Charles Anthony the house embodies his hostility and anguish and becomes a doghouse because of its cold, functional nature and the animalistic, masculine qualities it carries (Weinstein, 2014). In this way, Highsmith challenged the concepts of homeliness, norm and domestic stability, promulgated by US government, society and media in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Moreover, one cannot fail to notice that in *Strangers on a Train* the concept of home is closely linked with the notion of masculine power and empowerment. As was previously mentioned, in the classic Oedipal complex, with his father alive, Bruno is unable to possess masculine qualities and consequently he views homicide as the only alternative. As Hesford observes, "In his (violent) need to control...[he] mimics, in a perverse way, the discourse of national security that demanded a return to, and defense of, the home as the site of a national power that was so masculine" (Hesford, 225). Following the statement of the critic, one may see that the power of Bruno's father is established in the family's mansion and his authority over Charles. Thus, for Bruno the only way to claim the power role is to have his father murdered. The same applies to Miriam and Guy in Miriam's emasculation of her spouse through her committing adultery, therefore humiliating him in the domestic sphere. Hence, the murder of Miriam Hines and Mr Bruno challenge Hesford's hypothesis, since they are attacking the home in order to protect it, however, they regain this sense of masculinity through the violence and brutality they use within the home.

Strangers on a Train is a dark, sombre novel aptly describing the link between the notions of home, violence and power as well as displaying tempestuous, obsessive relationships between the protagonists. Added to that, it is a moody and disturbing excavation of guilty paranoia, and the author's inverted version of guilt creates tension. One of the features of Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*, is the book's relation to the sensational, sadomasochistic aspect of the thriller. It is especially noticeable during the conversations and meetings between Guy Haines and Charles Anthony Bruno which reflect tempestuous, queer, homoerotic relations between two male characters. Moreover, when put aside Alfred Hitchcock's film which clearly shows positive and negative characters, Guy Haines as an innocent victim with whom the audience sympathise, and a culprit, Bruno, in Highsmith's novel it is hard for the reader to feel compassion and sympathy towards one of the main protagonists. In the novel Charles Anthony Bruno is a physically repugnant character who kills Hine's wife, yet at the end he dies in a boating accident far removed from a merry-go-round, whereas Guy Haines is a promising architect who does indeed go through with the murder of Bruno's father. Contrary to the movie in which Guy is shown as a tennis player and a decent man who refuses to carry out his part of the crazed bargain, in the novel he is pursued, arrested and jailed by a tenacious detective. In Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* Bruno feels connected to one person only by murdering another, and Guy's descent offers no relief for a reader searching for somebody to root for, thus the shared decline of Bruno and Guy constitutes less a morality play than a bizarre, grotesque spectacle of disintegration (Walker, 2005). As the author once stated: "I find the public passion for justice boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares whether justice is ever done or not" (Highsmith 1990, 51). Therefore, instead of illustrating a moral, *Strangers on*

a Train creates a pervasive and inexorable tension, a gnawing pressure that erodes the characters from the inside.

In Patricia Highsmith's book the relationship between the two male protagonists is complex and queer, and it is their relation, not Guy's attitude towards Anne Morton and his ex-wife Miriam, which is thoroughly analysed by the author and which becomes the central motif of the novel. It is difficult to describe Bruno either as a heterosexual ("he didn't care too much about sleeping with women") (Highsmith 1950, 208) or a homosexual. Nevertheless, it is Guy for whom he feels the strongest attraction, yet whom he mostly tortures, threatening him with exposure until Hines surrenders and murders for him. Guy, on the other hand, apparently resents Charles Anthony yet he protects him and he keeps the deal that Bruno forces him to make, leading him to wonder whether Bruno is not in fact his own "cast-off self, what he thought he hated but perhaps in reality loved" (Highsmith 1950, 163). As the novel progresses, the relationship between Guy and Bruno becomes more and more complex and ambiguous. Furthermore, Highsmith explores a sexual attraction between Guy and Bruno, which is not a healthy one on the part of Bruno. As a matter of fact, the man is too deranged to engage in anything healthy and normal, and his strange relationship with his parents, especially with his mother, precludes him from developing either healthy hetero- or homosexual relationships. Still, the dynamics between Guy and Bruno seem fascinating, particularly when one witnesses Guy's emotional and moral deterioration. Some readers may perceive Hines as a victim when in fact he is sane, and as such, must be held responsible for his actions.

Strangers on a Train is an in-depth study of crime, guilt and madness. Patricia Highsmith scrutinises the psyche and motives of her anti-hero, a psychopath Charles Anthony Bruno, and the capacity of an ordinary, decent person (Guy Hines) to become a senseless killer. The author employs omniscient narration to explore the minds of Bruno and Guy. The realistic narrative of the two murders is both shocking and humorously banal. In fact, the novelist depicts both the criminals as unfulfilled artists or manipulative maniacs. The last characteristic applies to Bruno who is pathologically obsessed with the planning of perfect crimes. His principal aim is to find a proper accomplice to his father's murder. As a result of his manipulation and unscrupulousness Guy Hines, an apparently decent person with artistic gifts and a promising future, a man of a deep sense of social responsibility, turns into a fearful wreck and becomes a vicious murderer.

As was mentioned before, in Patricia Highsmith's novel one can hardly identify or sympathise with one of the characters. Unlike in Hitchcock's film which influences the audience's attitude towards the characters and events and which accentuates emotional factors (the character's feelings are evoked strongly and convincingly enough that we may share them), moral considerations (we feel that the character is in the right, thus we share her or his moral perspective), physical point of view (we share a character's field of vision), commonality (we recognize a character's thoughts and feelings as familiar to our own experience), admiration (we find aspects or features of the character compellingly attractive and therefore worthy of imitation, mostly on an idealized fantasy level) and shared curiosity (we are equally in the dark and wish to discover the truth as much as the character does), in her novel Highsmith skilfully perverts the workings of sympathy towards the main characters by depicting them and their relation as queer and bizarre. The shared decline of Bruno and Guy reflects their moral disintegration

and fall, therefore while reading the book one could not make a distinction between positive and negative characters, between a hero and an anti-hero, contrastingly to Hitchcock's film.

Overall, *Strangers on a Train* is a powerful psychodrama, an in-depth study of the characters, motifs and circumstances of their crimes as well as the diagnosis of social and political situation in the USA in the 1950s. In contrast to Alfred Hitchcock's film which centres on the convoluted plot and suspenseful events, Highsmith's book is darker, more sombre, with the author focussing on the characterisation of its protagonists and on the exploration of their internal world. It is also worth mentioning that Patricia Highsmith's novel became the inspiration for other film directors, such as Robert Starr who filmed the story in 1969 under the title *Once You Kiss a Stranger*, though it did not gain much attention, and Danny de Vito, whose spin-off *Throw Mamma From the Train* (1987) which turned the story into black comedy, was well received.

When set beside a suspenseful *Strangers on a Train*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) is distinguished as a psychological thriller in which the novelist created her most popular, appealing and enduring character, an anti-hero, Tom Ripley. Highsmith's most famous and ambivalent protagonist appeared in several sequels, among them *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), in which he both masquerades as a dead painter and kills an art collector, *Ripley's Game* (1974), a story of revenge, in which the protagonist is paired with a first-time murderer, *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980), and *Ripley Under Water* (1991), the final character's adventure, in which Ripley is pursued by a sadistic American, who knows too much of his past. Despite a huge popularity of *The Ripliad*, it is *The Talented Mr. Ripley* which draws the readers' and literary critics' special attention due to the author's dexterous depiction of a bisexual serial killer who, like Dorian Grey, lives a double life, yet remains unpunished for his actions. Similar to *Strangers on a Train*, this story was made into successful movies, first by René Clément in 1960 under the title *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*) and secondly by Anthony Minghella in 1999.

The Talented Mr. Ripley constitutes a profound (psycho)analysis of a protagonist, a charming criminal of intelligence and cunning who goes unpunished for his crime. Ripley became Highsmith's most enduring character, who could be regarded as a sadist and an understanding husband, a parody of upper-class mentality and a criminal only by force of circumstances. It is interesting to notice how the author seduces us into identifying with her villain and sharing his selfishness. In Highsmith's story Ripley is convinced that getting his own way is worth whatever price anyone else might have to pay and it seems that there is a little of this egocentricity in each of us. Moreover, similar to *Strangers on a Train*, the author depicts the main character who is strongly attracted to another man, and expresses his obsession with crime. Although it is not overtly stated, there is an obvious allusion to homoerotic attraction – the criminal essentially wants to become the other man and assume his identity. What is more, by creating and portraying the main characters as gay criminals the author endeavours to suggest how this criminality results from restrictions placed on homosexuals and by assuming the queer, or abnormal perspective of a gay man her novels imply how violence and criminality can proceed from repressive sexual norms (Hart, 2011). Hence, according to Patricia Highsmith, repressed emotions may lead to murder.

There is no denying that Tom Ripley's inhibitions in sexual sphere and social interaction as well as his desperate attempts to change his material and

class status result from his traumatic childhood experience, lack of genuine parental guidance, domestic warmth and stability. The protagonist's 'weird' and 'eccentric' behaviour, attributed to his homosexual inclinations, along with his vagabond lifestyle and lack of professional stability, threatened American norms and standards during an age of conformity, marked by the Red Scare and the Cold War. Nevertheless, in contrast to Charles Anthony Bruno who gets 'punished' for his brutal murder and deviant behaviour, Tom Ripley enjoys complete impunity after committing two crimes. According to Pizer, when set beside the anti-hero from *Strangers on a Train*, Ripley becomes slave to the American Dream of Success and without hesitation resolves to murder in order to fulfil it (Pizer, 2011). Tom's obsession to change his social status, assume the identity of his rich friend, Dickie Greenleaf, inherit his fortune and enjoy domestic peace is a desperate attempt to build his own home, restore order to his life and expunge the memory of his poignant childhood. Besides, similar to the very author, Ripley is American who spends most of his time in Europe where he feels like an outsider and a rootless stranger. Like Highsmith who often travelled to Europe during the 1950s, nourishing her view of herself as an expatriate and an outsider, the eponymous character of *The Talented Mr Ripley* makes frequent trips around Europe, yet he never feels fully satisfied with one location (Cassuto, 135). However, after murdering Dickie and taking over his identity, Tom strives to live a stable life and build his dream home, having 'inherited' Greenleaf's fortune. Ripley gains material success largely thanks to chameleon-like features and a multitude of talents, especially his mathematical aptitude and "proleptic imagination" (Tuss, 2004).

Similar to *Strangers on a Train*, in *The Talented Mr Ripley* the concept of home is closely linked to the notions of masculinity, violence and power. Here, home does not only signify domestic security, warmth and peace that Tom wishes to enjoy but also his personal reputation that Dickie Greenleaf threatens. The boat scene draws the final homosexual connection between the main characters, symbolising Tom's physical and sexual triumph over Dickie as the dominant male: "Tom stood up and brought the oar down again, sharply, all his strength released like the snap of a rubber band" (Highsmith 1956, 101). Since Dickie threatens Tom's masculinity, the main character resolves to defend it in the most masculine way – using violent force (Weinstein, 2014). In Tom's brutal defense of his character he echoes "the discourse of national security that demanded a return to, and a defense of, the home as the site of a national power that was also masculine" (Hesford, 225). In this context, Ripley embodies the Cold War discourse of the defense of one's self and home in order to expose masculinity. In an attempt to restore order to his life and cleanse the impurities from his surroundings, Tom once again resorts to violence and brutality by killing Dickie's friend, Freddie, who accuses Ripley of being gay and discovers his secret plans.

Finally, it ought to be pointed out that with Ripley the novelist created a new kind of criminal, not seen before in crime fiction – his nearest relative and model being the protagonists of Marquise de Sade – his criminal libertines challenge what we understand by good and evil, and also thrive unpunished. As a confirmed psychopath, Ripley imposes his own code of ethics on a world which, with a few exceptions, offers little resistance. As was mentioned before, Patricia Highsmith frequently identified with her anti-hero, and throughout the plot, she polished his complex personality by placing him in chaotic situations, or else assigning to him bizarre, incomprehensible actions. Moreover,

in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, readers find pairs of two males involved in a love-hate relationship. These unsettling duos enact an unconfirmed homo-erotic relation through an abundance of allusions and unspoken comments. Highsmith mirrored herself in these fictional couples, entrusting them with much of her own painful experience in her relation to others. Therefore, the sexually ambiguous Ripley was her favourite character and a kind of a literary alter-ego.

All things considered, homeliness and norm are crucial notions and common denominators in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*. In these two novels the American author carefully scrutinises the problem of alienation and dislocation in the context of domesticity, home and community in the United States after World War II. By the examination of the vicissitudes of her two intriguing anti-heroes, Charles Anthony Bruno and Tom Ripley, incarnating psychopaths and murderers, Highsmith responded to and reaffirmed societal hysteria and anxiety in the United States toward the alluring homosexuals who seduce decent American citizens and cause them to deviate from the norm. In the article I showed how Patricia Highsmith's living in deeply conservative American society, in an era of social-political conformity and moral propriety, influenced her writing and how it shaped her description of fictional homes and the creation of the characters who operate outside the norm and live on the fringe of society.

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