

Moral Ambiguity and Identity Construction A Lacanian Analysis of Tom Ripley in The Talented Mr. Ripley

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الغموض الأخلاقي وبناء الهوية: تحليل لاكاني لشخصية توم ريبلي في رواية السيد ريبلي الموهوب

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Abstract

Employing Jacques Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis, this paper examines the moral ambivalence and identity formation of Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The exploration of Ripley's desire for social ascension and self-idealization sheds further light on the interplay between imaginary, symbolic, and real orders in Lacanian thought. The purpose of this research is to explore how Ripley's malleable identity and moral ambivalence mirror wider constructs of success and belonging. Some of the burning questions that lie beneath are: How do Ripley's desires for an idealized self-line up with Lacan's mirror stage? How does the symbolic order affect his innate choices like committing crime? And how is the tension between desire and lack manifested in what he does? The paper's methodology consists of a close reading of Highsmith's novel, tracing key passages where Ripley's psychological motivations and identity shifts are most evident. The descriptions of Ripley's behaviour and the conclusions drawn from it based on Lacanian concepts like the mirror stage, objet petit a (object of desire), and the symbolic order are applied to deconstruct Ripley's behaviour and the implications that follow. The results indicate that Ripley's criminality arises from his obsessive endeavour to bridge the gap between his disparate sense of self and an idealized version of himself, shaped by societal expectations and his own ingrained beliefs of inadequacy. His moral ambiguity isn't just an aspect of character, but a structurally necessary element of identity formation in Lacan. This analysis shows that Ripley's behaviours are more than a matter of immorality; they are indicative of something more profound, of an existential crisis, a fight to instantiate coherence in a decentred world. Beyond their scorpions and playgrounds, we can trace Patricia and her addict friend, an explorer of identity, through the twin mirrors of her own psychoanalysis and that of Jacques Lacan, whose mirror stage proved ideal for constructing her films on the corruptible.

Keywords: Lacan, Psychology, Morality, Ambiguity, Identity, Construction, Tom Ripley, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

الملخص

باستخدام نظرية جاك لاكان في التحليل النفسي، تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية في التناقض الأخلاقي وتشكيل الهوية لدى توم ريبلي في رواية باتريشيا هايسميث "السيد ريبلي الموهوب". إن استكشاف رغبة ريبلي في الصعود الاجتماعي وإضفاء المثالية على الذات يلقي المزيد من الضوء على التفاعل بين الأنظمة الخيالية والرمزية والحقيقية في الفكر اللاكاني. والغرض من هذا البحث هو استكشاف كيف تعكس هوية ريبلي القابلة للتغيير وتناقضه الأخلاقي تصورات أوسع للنجاح والانتماء. ومن بين الأسئلة الملحة التي تكمن تحت هذا: كيف تتوافق رغبات ريبلي في الذات المثالية مع مرحلة المرآة لدى لاكان؟ وكيف يؤثر النظام الرمزي على اختياراته الفطرية مثل ارتكاب الجريمة؟ وكيف يتجلى التوتر بين الرغبة والافتقار في ما يفعله؟ تتكون منهجية البحث من قراءة متأنية لرواية هايسميث، وتتبع المقاطع الرئيسية حيث تكون الدوافع

النفسية وتحولات الهوية لدى ريبلي أكثر وضوحًا. يتم تطبيق أوصاف سلوك ريبلي والاستنتاجات المستخلصة منه بناءً على مفاهيم لاكان مثل مرحلة المرأة، والشئ الصغير (موضوع الرغبة)، والنظام الرمزي لتفكيك سلوك ريبلي والآثار المترتبة على ذلك. تشير النتائج إلى أن إجرام ريبلي ينشأ من مساعيه الوسواسية لسد الفجوة بين شعوره المتباين بالذات ونسخة مثالية من نفسه، تشكلت من خلال توقعات المجتمع ومعتقداته الراسخة بعدم الكفاءة. غموضه الأخلاقي ليس مجرد جانب من جوانب الشخصية، ولكنه عنصر ضروري هيكليًا لتكوين الهوية في لاكان. يُظهر هذا التحليل أن سلوكيات ريبلي أكثر من مجرد مسألة عدم أخلاقية؛ إنها تشير إلى شيء أكثر عمقًا، إلى أزمة وجودية، وصراع من أجل تجسيد التماسك في عالم غير مركزي. وراء عقاربهم وملاعهم، يمكننا تتبع باتريشيا وصديقتها المدمنة، مستكشفة الهوية، من خلال المرايا المزدوجة لتحليلها النفسي وتحليل جاك لاكان، الذي أثبت مسرح المرأة الخاص به أنه مثالي لبناء أفلامها حول القابلية للفساد. الكلمات المفتاحية: لاكان، علم النفس، الأخلاق، الغموض، الهوية، البناء، توم ريبلي، "السيد ريبلي الموهوب"

Introduction

The Talented Mr. Ripley (1955) by Patricia Highsmith is a classic example of modern psychological crime fiction, grappling with identity, moral ambiguity and the human capacity for deception. The hero of the book, Tom Ripley, is an aspiring criminal with motivation and ambition, an otherwise blank slate morally, and the criminality flows from his desire to escape the drudgery of the everyday and live the glamorous life he imagines for himself. Ripley is not just a flawed man but one that is shaped by society in the most realist sense, well before the term became a talking point and grounds for writing a Marilynne Robinson novel. The article readopts Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical approach to analyze Tom Ripley, focusing especially on the relationship of Lacan's imaginary, symbolic, and real orders through which Tom's identity is constructed and reconstructed.

We gain penetrating insight into Ripley's psychological development and ethical ambiguity when we interpret Ripley through Lacan's psychoanalytic lens. Psychoanalysis includes concepts like the mirror stage (the process through which the self is constructed by identifying with an idealized image) and the symbolic order (yang, the cultural structures and rules that govern behavior), both of which are relevant to Ripley's struggle; I think he would be in analyzation with a psychoanalyst. As Evans (2006) and Homer (2018) assert, Lacan's theories are pertinent to examining issues of identity formation and desire within the realm of literary texts. Ripley's dogged attachment to money, prestige, and acceptance mirrors Lacan's conception of the objet petit a, the object of desire which studies human action (Lacan, 1977).

Scholarship on Highsmith's work generally examines her blurring of the introduce the leading character, or protagonist, and the adversary, or antagonist, such as Symons (1985) asking us to identify her as "one of the great crime novelists. Although psychological frameworks like Alfred Adler's theory of inferiority complex have been employed to gauge Ripley's actions (Cochran, 1997), Lacan's concepts provides an in-depth understanding of Ripley's fractured self. This applies Lacanian psychoanalysis to aspects of Ripley's character in order to delve more deeply into existential and even social forces, filling in this apparent lack in the literature.

This study seeks to answer these fundamental questions: In what way could Lacan's idea of the mirror stage elucidate Ripley's identity formation? How does the symbolic order shape his moral ambiguity and criminal tendencies? And how does Ripley's quest for an impossible ideal self usher in his moral decay? Methodologically, the paper makes use of close textual analysis of Highsmith's novel, delving into key moments that expose Ripley's psychological and moral complexity.

This study offers an understanding of Ripley by aligning a Lacanian theoretical reading with a psychoanalytic approach to literature. It contends that Ripley's moral ambiguity and identity construction are not just key elements of his characterization but indicative of wider cultural anxieties over authenticity, success and belonging.

Literature Review

Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel, The Talented Mr. Ripley, has been a touchstone for thematic scrutiny in psychological, sociological and literary studies. The book's engagement with issues like moral ambiguity, identity formation, and criminal psychology has led scholars to employ a wide range of theoretical perspectives, from existentialism to psychoanalysis to social theory. This literature review reviews key research into Highsmith's work with an emphasis on The Talented Mr. Ripley, followed by an overview of how this paper contributes to extant literature.

Highsmith's knack for dulling the moral distinction between hero and villain has long been acknowledged. And as Symons wrote in 1985, she was "one of the great crime novelists," crediting her pretty fancy style that manages to create everyone, criminal or otherwise, into an actual person. This aspect of Highsmith's writing — her ability to create protagonists who are both sympathetic and morally subversive — is something Nicol (2010) discusses at length, citing how the central figures in her work tend to resist the expected social codes of behaviour. That duality is especially pronounced in Tom Ripley, whose charm and resourcefulness are coupled with a talent for murder.

And while such studies effectively illuminate the moral ambiguity of Highsmith characters, they don't probe deeply into the psychological mechanics of their behavior. It is this gap that opens up the possibility for a Lacanian analysis, one in which the subjectivity of the protagonist's moral ambiguity is symptomatic of fragmentation of identity, repressed desires, and unresolved conflicts.

Psychological analyses by critics of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* tend to fall on Alfred Adler's theory of inferiority complex. (1997), Ripley's criminality derives from a profound sense of inadequacy and with it the impulse to compensate through social climbing, which puts him in chronic conflict with his upper-class aspirational self. *Devil in the Children: Ripley and Post-feminist Fatherhood* Wilson (2010) does explore how Ripley's upbringing and socio-economic background lead their child to pathological need for acceptance and validation.

Yet these Adlerian interpretations fall short in encapsulating the complexity of Ripley's identity construction and his evolving moral compass. A more powerful explanation for Ripley's internal struggles lies in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory — primarily, his theories of the mirror stage and objet petit a. Through this Lacanian reading of Ripley, this paper seeks to expand the analysis of the character beyond the psychological on the level of character, to the structurally determined identity and socio-political and moral ambiguity.

The turn towards violence and identity construction is central to crime fiction, where characters navigate the tension between societal expectations and their individual identities. According to Malmgren (2001), it is a characteristic of crime fiction protagonists that they are essentially fragmented individuals, caught between their real and ideal selves. Such observation aligns with Lacan's concept of the divided self, whereby the subject is always trapped between the imaginary and the symbolic orders.

Within Highsmith's work, Ripley's identity formation becomes not only a deeply individual experience but also a critique of success and belonging in the American psyche. Class and cultural norms [are] important aspects of Ripley's aspirations (Black, 2010), and his criminal acts are as much about survival as they are about ambition. Grounding Ripley's identity within this framework, this paper explores how Lacan's recognition of his subjectivity, being formed in relation to an ideal self that consequently, he can never achieve, governs Ripley's behaviour.

While Highsmith's novels have been the subject of much scholarship, there are few such studies that utilize Lacanian psychoanalysis in examining *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Existing studies inquire into Ripley's psychological traits or his relationship with societal norms, but rarely address the structural and symbolic dimensions of his identity. Using Lacan's mirror stage, objet petit a, and the symbolic order, this paper aims to bridge this gap and explore deeper interpretations in order to better understand Ripley's moral ambiguity and identity formation.

Highsmith scholarship, and scholarship on moral ambiguity and psychoanalytic sleight of hand, has been the foundation for this study. Still, what is left is the need of more theoretically sophisticated ideas, which will take into account, between the relationship of identity, morality and social arrangements. Using Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this paper contributes to the burgeoning field of interdisciplinary studies in crime fiction and provides a new interpretation of one of Highsmith's most fascinating characters.

Methodology

In this article, the author presents a qualitative research methodology that is based on a close textual analysis to examine the psychological and moral dimensions of Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The analysis draws on Jacob Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, notably his notions of the mirror stage, objet petit a and the symbolic order. Using application of these theoretical devices the study explore the process of formation of identity, negotiation with societal expectations and justification of the criminal act of Ripley.

Theoretical Framework

Ripley's character is interpreted through Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts. The research was conducted in the following steps:

The Mirror Stage: (Lacan, 1977): Lacan describes the mirror stage as the process through which an individual first forms an identity of themselves through the image of an external self: "Mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is propelled from need to desire" (p. 2). This is applied to make sense of Ripley's upbringing and his obsessive chase of a perfected self, constructed from society's ideal of success.

Lacan (1977) describes objet petit a as the unattainable object of desire that propels human behavior: "It is what is lost in the real and becomes the object of the subject's desire" (p. 64). This study investigates the way Ripley's desire for wealth and social status and acceptance and the significance of belonging and how these issues lead to his ethical ambiguity and how his desire for wealth, social status and acceptance and the importance of belonging represent this concept.

The Symbolic Order: The symbolic order can be understood as the rules and structures of society that people have to navigate. "It is the locus of the Other, the law that structures human reality" (Lacan, 1977, p. 42). This idea is then used to explore how Ripley's actions are shaped by the expectations of his society and his efforts to fit into and also overturn these standards.

The study engages in a reflexive fashion in which Lacanian theory not only elucidates Ripley's behaviour but also pushes readers to interrogate their own ideas about morality, identity, and social norms.

This study's exploration of Tom Ripley's identity and moral ambiguity draws on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. The published works of Lacan and their associated concepts represent a radical rethinking of Freudian psychoanalysis, highlighting the crucial functions of language, desire, and the unconscious in constructing human behaviour. Below is a summary of the main Lacanian concepts that will be applied in the analysis.

Lacan's theory of identity formation is built on the mirror stage. It characterizes a moment when a person, usually an infant, first recognizes himself or herself within a reflection or external image and develops a critical idealization of a sense of self (Lacan, 1977). But in a deeper sense, this self is also fragmented, because the person can never truly align their lived reality with their idealized self. As Lacan (1977) explains: "Which means with regard to 'I' that it is a convened in a primordial form before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification to other" (p. 2) Within the context of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the mirror stage is employed to explore Ripley's initial identification with the glamorous lifestyle of the affluent, which becomes his inaccessibly desired object.

Objet petit a, Lacan's term for what we desire but cannot attain, drives human action. That object is not a real object but a signifier of the symbolic deposit of that which the individual feels, through their lost/hidden object of primary desire (Lacan, 1977). Ripley's obsession with wealth and social status is read as his attempt to get objet petit a, motivating his ethical and criminal transgressions (e.g. lying to and stealing from others). As Lacan (1977) states:

"In any event, desire is a relation of being to lack. And this lack is the lack of being properly speaking. Not a lack of this or that but "lack of being whereby the being exists" (p. 223).

The symbolic order represents the shared structure of our interactions within human societies. It creates structure, gives importance as well binds the same and creates an individual tension and limitation. Lacan (1977) asserts that: "The symbolic is the order that grounds the subject in the law of language and the social order" (p. 42). In the case of Ripley, his challenge to social norms and his transgressive behaviours come to represent his fraught relationship with this symbolic order.

Using these Lacanian notions, this analysis aims to showcase how Ripley's identity and morality are influenced by his desires, but also by societal structures, as well as the irreconcilable elements of his psyche.

Analysis and Discussion

Utilising Lacan's *The Psychoanalytic Theory* to understand the Lacanian desiring of Tom Ripley within Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* bringing Lacanian theory to bear these Lacanian concepts, i.e. the mirror stage; the objet petit a; and the symbolic order, the analysis into key moments in the novel, demonstrating how Ripley's identity formation and eventual criminality derives from the ways in which he begins to build his identity around the ideas of these concepts. The action goes a long way, even in the field of imaginary psychology.

The mirror stage is known as the moment one identifies with an external image and, consequently, establishes an idealized self-image (Lacan, 1977). This mechanic creates an opposite between the disjointed

reality of the person and the fully formed representation of themselves they wish to become. For Tom Ripley, this perfect self is represented in the character of Dickie Greenleaf, as well as in Dickie's wealthy and suave lifestyle.

From his first encounter with Herbert Greenleaf, Tom senses the chance to penetrate a realm he both covets and yearns for:

"He wanted to go see the Riviera, wanted to see the world. Most of all, he wanted out of New York, out of the shabby apartment, out of the job he loathed" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 16).

This moment illustrates Tom's disdain for his disjointed self, and his internalization of an aspirational life of luxury and leisure. Tom's collision with the Greenleaf family, standing in Lacanian terms, marks the commencement of his quest for the Ideal-I, an unattainable semblance of self exuded by Dickie's financial emancipation.

Tom's efforts to merge with Dickie's life reach their peak sometime soon after in Italy. He studies and copies Dickie's mannerisms, clothing and speech, trying to live up to how he sees the image he admires:

"Tom worshiped him in every way, shape, and form. The way he walked, the way he talked, the way he wore his clothes ... He wanted to be Dickie" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 73)

As Lacan theorizes, however, this point of identification is always an anxiety-producing moment: a moment in which the subject can never quite become the idealized image. This tension becomes visible in Tom's mounting exasperation with Dickie, whose indifference undermines Tom's carefully constructed identity. This dissonance foreshadows the violent culmination of their relationship, in which Tom's fixation on protecting his idealized self results in the murder of Dickie.

According to Lacan (1977), this desire manifests through the objet petit a, which stands for the unattainable object of desire that drives human motivation. For Tom, the objet petit a is not necessarily wealth but the validation and belonging he imagines will materialize with his fusion in Dickie's world. And this desire forever motivates his reason of action, though the thing desired itself remains eternally unattainable.

Tom's sense of want is revealed in his first involving Dickie, when he's envious of this screenshot of charming and social nascency Dickie possesses. Tom's desire for Dickie's approval is underpinned by his belief that acceptance in Dickie's social world will settle his feelings of inadequacy: "He wanted to be Dickie, and Dickie to love him as he had never loved anyone else" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 89). This yearning for love and acceptance illustrates Lacan's claim that the subject's quest for objet petit a is motivated by a primordial lack. The problem, however, is that Tom can never attain this validation, which then snowballs into increasing frustration and desperation.

The murder of Dickie is a crucial moment in Tom's quest for the objet petit a. In taking on Dickie's identity, Tom tries to reconcile his splintered self with the idealized image he desires.

"Tom was still becoming Dickie, and although it was wonderful, it wasn't what he thought it was going to be" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 165). This passage expresses the illusory essence of objet petit a, for even though Tom succeeds in taking over Dickie's whole life so that his counterpart undergirds every aspect of his life, Tom is still left unsatisfied because the object he pursued and attained cannot fill this abyss within himself.

Lacan (1977) conceived of the symbolic order as the domain of social convention, language, and law. It is shrouded with restrictions on the person being formed but also the ways in which this person interacts with others. Tom's criminality is an act of subversion of the symbolic order, his desire unfit into the symbolic field established by the Lacanian Mother.

Tom remains well aware of the power dynamics and social hierarchies that determine the terms of the symbolic order throughout the novel. His antagonism toward these structures of power and status is clear in his scorn for the rich, even as he attempts to reach their heights: "He hated them, yet he wanted their admiration" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 49). This ambivalence emphasizes Tom's inconsistent relationship with the symbolic order. He simultaneously craves acceptance via manipulation and rebels against the fetters imposed by the state.

One of the things that makes Tom such a successful criminal is how well he manipulates the symbolic order. Through falsified documents, forged signatures, and twisted tales, he subverts the symbolic structures that sustain social and legal institutions. For example, his fake letters from Dickie allow him to sustain the illusion of Dickie's existence: "The letter looked so perfect, so Dickie-like that Tom's spirits lifted" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 187). Tom's command of the symbolic further emphasizes his dual role as both an agent of and a challenge to the established social order. Yet his behaviour also highlights a deeper and more

profound truth about the nature of the symbolic order: it can be gamed by those who know how the system works.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory offers a particularly illuminating lens through which to analyze Tom Ripley's character arc in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The mirror stage sheds light on Tom's identification with an idealized self, and objet petit a unveils the engine of his unattainable desires. First, the laundry order serves as a reminder that Kyle is subject to external forces.

Through this reading, it is clear that Tom's moral ambiguity is not just a personality trait but a structural necessity of his fractured identity. His transgressions reveal a deeper existential conflict between his impulses and the limits of the symbolic. Literally speaking, "Human desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 1977, p. 235), and it is in Tom's obsessive desire for confirmation and familiarity where we see the fundamental volatility of man's subjectivity.

Conclusion

This study examined Tom Ripley's moral ambiguity and identity shaping in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* as seen from the perspective of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory. The study aimed to answer three central questions by analyzing Tom's journey using Lacan's definitions of mirror stage, objet petit a and the symbolic order: How does Lacan's mirror stage define Ripley's identity construction? How does the symbolic order contribute to the moral ambiguity and criminality we see from him? And how does Ripley's chasing of an impossible ideal self lead to his moral unraveling?

The analysis showed that Ripley's identity was built up on an idealised version of wealth, status and belonging, in keeping with the Lacanian mirror stage. Tom's attraction to Dickie Greenleaf is his first experience of identifying with an alien image, an image that promises a unified and glamorous self. But the tension between Tom's broken reality and this sanitized image is what creates the instability that propels what he does.

Lacan's concept of objet petit a was key to understanding Tom's obsessive quest for validation and success. His longing for wealth and social recognition epitomizes the way in which he seeks the elusive object of desire, which he foolishly thinks will eliminate his sense of absence and inadequacy. As Lacan suggests, though, the objet petit a is in fact always out of reach, and Tom's ultimate dissatisfaction — this time now as Dickie — underlines the impossibility of that existential void being filled.

Tom's character is shaped by the symbolic order in a twofold manner. It forces societal norms and expectations, which Tom attempts to force and play with, showing he is capable of fencing power and domination. But his criminality also displays his refusal to abide by those codes, underlining the moral ambiguity at the heart of his force of nature. Tom's undermining of the symbolic order represents both his cleverness and his failure to align his wants with the dictates of his culture.

Ultimately, this study has shown Tom Ripley's behavior—his actions and their consequences—to not simply be the outcome of private ambition or moral failing, but rather deeply embedded within structural processes that shape what and who a human being is and does. His journey encapsulates the abiding human struggle between the divided self and the unattainable ideal, between desire and the limits of a world. Using Lacan's psychoanalytic model to analyze Ripley, this study has provided a nuanced account of Ripley as a character motivated by both constitutive and destructive impulse, navigating the delicate distinctions between self and other, and moral and immoral.

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