

# **Do fictional portrayals of psychopaths add to our understanding of psychopathy?**

## **Introduction**

Psychopathy is arguably the most avidly depicted personality disorder in popular media. As a personality disorder characterised by reduced empathy and bold egotistical traits, it inevitably draws interest, curiosity and fear. Most people's exposure to psychopaths stems primarily from popular media, and its influence is particularly noteworthy because lay people are generally not knowledgeable about mental illnesses (1). Nevertheless, psychopathy is a widely contested concept, with still no clear professional consensus on its meaning, definition or clinical features. Moreover, the term is frequently used interchangeably with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) and dissocial personality disorder (DPD), but its ostensible relationship with these DSM and ICD counterparts is questionable, given their limited conceptual and empirical overlap (2). Misconceptions and myths abound, undoubtedly not helped by constant revisions of the concept in professional literature and driven by media depictions of extreme violence or audacity. Exploring fictional portrayals of psychopathy is important, not least because of the impact such portrayals have on propagating misperceptions and stigma, but moreover because they offer the potential to further our understanding when viewed through this alternative lens. This essay seeks to examine how popular media contributes or detracts from our understanding of psychopathy. It focuses specifically on Patricia Highsmith's novel "The Talented Mr Ripley" (3) and the cinematic depiction of the same title. It sets out the definition of psychopathy used, summarises the novel and the film and explores how they contribute psychological as well as sociological insights into psychopathy.

## **Definition of psychopathy**

The most influential work on psychopathy was Cleckley's "Mask of Sanity" (4) which was the first work to delineate clear criteria for diagnosing psychopathy. The Cleckley criteria were used by Robert Hare, to construct the most broadly accepted measure of psychopathy, the Psychopathy Checklist (PCL) and subsequent revised PCL-R. This checklist contains 20 items, scored using a semi-structured interview and a review of file records (30 points is diagnostic in USA, 25 in the UK). The scale comprises 4 subcategories of dimensions including (1) interpersonal (superficial charm, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, conning / manipulative), (2) affective (lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callous / lack of empathy, failure to accept responsibility), (3) lifestyle (need for stimulation, parasitic lifestyle, lack of realistic long-term goals, impulsivity, irresponsibility), and (4) antisocial (poor behavioural controls, early behavioural problems, juvenile delinquency, revocation of conditional release and criminal versatility) (5). Most analyses of the PCL-R suggest that it is derived from two moderately correlated dimensions; the first being affective and interpersonal, and the second dimension comprising antisocial and impulsive lifestyle (2).

## **Fictional portrayals of psychopathy**

A review of 126 cinematic psychopaths concluded that earlier portrayals presented a "demonised" psychopathy, with later portrayals giving way to a more romanticised or "elite" psychopathy, presenting anti-heroes with redeeming characteristics (e.g. Tony Soprano, Frank Underwood), or whose psychopathy equipped them to succeed in certain adaptive niches (e.g. Hannibal Lecter) (6). A recent study exploring fictional portrayals of psychopaths found that only 21% met Hare's criteria for psychopathy, with a focus on violence and limited insight into their background (7). Exposure to fictional psychopaths has also been found to be associated with more endorsement of "flattering distractor" traits e.g. "unusually intelligent" and "excellent at reading people" (1) Overall, there is a tendency to view psychopaths as more violent and more endearing than warranted.

These heterogeneous findings highlight the gaps between psychiatric and media portrayals of psychopathy, which is understandable given media's brief to entertain and interest. McWilliams' (8) analysis of the tactics popular media uses to pique our fascination include how fictional psychopaths specifically display calmness and courage under fire, have an appearance of vulnerability, are charming, attractive and intelligent, generally more sympathetic than their victims (e.g. Bond villains) and with a backdrop to their story that is often beautiful or aspirational.

### **The Talented Mr Ripley – divergences and commonalities**

Highsmith's first novel focuses on the unlikely friendship between an impoverished awkward Tom Ripley and the wealthy charismatic Dickie Greenleaf. In the film, Ripley is a bathroom attendant who borrows a Princeton blazer to play the piano for a party in a wealthy estate. He is mistaken for a Princeton graduate by shipping magnate Herbert Greenleaf, who offers him \$1,000 to travel to Italy to persuade his son, Dickie, to return home to his dying mother and the family business (9). Ripley successfully tracks down Dickie and his fiancé Marge. Despite their initial wariness, Tom charms them with his honesty about his mission, his impersonations and pretends to share their interests, worming his way into their trust and expatriate life of luxury. The film makes Tom's sexual longing for Dickie' explicit and his pain as Dickie tires of their friendship. This conflict culminates on a boat in San Remo, when Dickie breaks off their friendship, and taunts Tom regarding his feelings, and rejected by Dickie, Tom murders him with an oar. Later, when accidentally misidentified as Dickie, he goes on to assume his identity, killing again when Dickie's friend Freddie becomes suspicious, and a third time when he is confronted with his disguise being blown to his lover, destroying any chance of any lasting happiness.

However, the original novel is more subversive and profound. It persuasively sets out how psychopaths are made, not born. The novel describes Tom's backstory, an orphan raised by a cruel and abusive aunt, who only manages to escape after numerous failed attempts at the age of 20. He is a man of no means and expensive tastes, living painfully on the fringes of society with no real friendships and resentful of his shabby apartment, vulgar friends and low status job. He uses his spare time and intelligence to run a pathetic IRS scam in which he torments innocent people with demands for payment in cheques he cannot cash. When asked to travel to Italy to fetch Dickie by his father, he undertakes the voyage as an escape from himself (10). Although painfully insecure, he is adept at reading others and skilful at ingratiating himself with Dickie. When Dickie tires of their friendship, Tom calculatedly decides to kill him. Tom uses his skills in lying, impressions and forgery, to conceal Dickie's death and assume his identity, living off his trust fund and ultimately forging a suicide note asking for his inheritance to be left to Tom, securing his lifestyle and status. His sense of alienation from himself is complete in his casting off Tom and fully embodying the identity of Dickie.

### **Psychopathy in the Talented Mr Ripley**

Highsmith's Ripley embodies Hare's features of psychopathy with captivating clarity. Ripley is clearly proficient at superficial charm, managing to deceive countless acquaintances with his self-deprecating innocence. His grandiose sense of self-worth is evident throughout the novel, he clearly feels he is owed a better life and is unscrupulous about doing what he can to attain it. There are countless instances of pathological lying and manipulation: forging cheques, suicide notes, paintings, as the need arises (8). In terms of affect, the film portrays a man tortured by society's refusal to accept him and his homosexuality. However, Highsmith's Ripley is strangely limited in the range of emotions he experiences – he cries twice only, once when sent a voyage basket and once when reassuming the role of Tom he had dispensed of when he reinvented himself as Dickie (11). His callous lack of empathy is glaring, he not only murders an innocent friend, but seems to experience no profound sense of guilt or remorse about having done so.

Ripley has no compunction about living a parasitic lifestyle, frequently living off friends in New York before attempting to do the same in Mongibello. He attains Dickie's trust fund and inheritance after his murder and eventually marries a French heiress. He is impulsive, none of his murders being planned in any great detail, despite being contemplated well in advance. The question of whether he lacks any long-term goals is contentious, he leads a meaningless existence in New York, but seems single-minded in his pursuit of his pointless goal to be wealthy and powerful (8). He displays remarkable and skilful criminal versatility, demonstrating the features of psychopathy faithfully.

### **Developmental trajectory to psychopathy**

The need to entertain was undoubtedly key to Highsmith's creation of Ripley, who stated "I couldn't make an interesting story out of some morons" (12). In keeping with McWilliams' devices, Ripley is charming and talented, capable of making swift decisions under pressure, undoubtedly more intelligent and gifted than his station in life belies. His victims epitomise American superficiality, and the seductive backdrop of the story enhances our appreciation of the character by association.

The feature that Highsmith achieves brilliantly is McWilliams' appeal to vulnerability (6). A sympathetic elucidation of the aetiology of Ripley's psychopathology and the factors that sustain it are skilfully woven through the book. Research on forensic patients often demonstrates loss and disruptions to attachment processes (13). Kohut also emphasises a "deficit" rather than "conflict" at the core of mental disorders, suggesting that narcissist rage arises from lack of an empathic response to psychological needs during identity development, causing a failure to develop a coherent sense of self (14). Tom loses any meaningful attachment figures at a young age and his upbringing by an abusive aunt aptly describes the childhood trauma that devalued his natural intelligence and deprived him of a cohesive sense of self. This chimes with Tom's self-hatred and only becoming real to himself after he shed his non-identity and became Dickie.

Tom variously describes the assaults on his needs as a child, realising he had to be "an animal..or starve" and how realising this, he stole a loaf of bread and devoured it "feeling that the world owed a loaf of bread to him, and more" (14). His childhood is saturated with fantasies of murdering his aunt. Given many conceptions of criminality suggest it represents a repetition of past unconscious conflicts in action (13), we could argue that Ripley's criminal acts perfectly represent physical manifestations of these childhood deficits and attachment failures. Unrequited sexual longing aside, in the film Dickie confirms all of Tom's worst beliefs about himself – that he is not worthy of love and unwanted, despite all his best efforts. In this scene, as in the book, one cannot but feel Tom's murderous rage, not just at Dickie, but at his parents, his aunt and the world at large. Highsmith to some extent, demonstrated how an intelligent and talented individual who was constantly belittled and humiliated by his circumstances, could be turned into a psychopath.

Furthermore, empathic parenting and the experience of oneself in the mind of another underpins the capacity to relate to others (13). Tom's adeptness at reading others enables him to ingratiate himself, however, these relationships are not sustained. There are hints this lack of authenticity is wearing, not just for these characters, but for Tom himself, who ultimately addresses this void by casting off Tom and becoming Dickie. Moreover, Tom is painfully aware of his separation from others, his dawning realisation seems instrumental in his decision to relinquish any further attempts "it struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for all the people that he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future.. he would never know them" (10).

## Sociological trajectory to psychopathy

It's hard not to have a sociological reading of Highsmith's novel, in which someone as clever and accomplished as Tom Ripley occupies such a low role in employment and society. Indeed Tom refers to this injustice repeatedly in the book, his disgust with the lack of refinement in his community, his emotional reaction to small tokens of kindness, his rage at his position in society, and his description of stealing a loaf of bread, feeling it was the least the world owed him. Tom despairs at his "dullest...conformist face" which is contrasted with Dickie's non-conformism and charisma (10). Tom recognises that Dickie does not have any discernible talent or intelligence, telling a private detective that "Dickie was a very ordinary young man who liked to believe himself extraordinary" (10). However, Dickie's wealth and privilege enable him to play the rebel and still move effortlessly through society, in a way that Tom, stymied both by his abusive upbringing and lack of status, cannot. The superficial tactics used by the privileged classes to prop up their superiority are criticised repeatedly in the book, from Dickie's refusal to get an icebox, to Meredith only being comfortable with those who "have it (money) and despise it". This book, as much as being a description of psychopathy, is a description of all things wrong with our society. It satirises society's pointless and unfounded adoration of the privileged (10). Tom ultimately acquires Dickie's identity, not just for his wealth, but for the freedom and ease that such a position in society brings. It's not hard to see the subversive elegance of what Highsmith achieves, by forcing us to empathise with the injustice of Tom's situation and to be complicit in his attempts to redress this imbalance.

A darker critique of the book explores the symbolism that Ripley represents, and contrasts this with Minghella's cinematic interpretation, which makes the script an explicitly gay story and places sex central to the plot (15). In the film Dickie and Marge are in love, and Tom is in love and lust with Dickie. Tom is taunted and ostracised, called a "little girl" by Dickie and only strikes Dickie defensively after Dickie attacks Tom. Tom is seen to regret his actions and impersonating Dickie is portrayed more as a mechanism to escape punishment than to exploit his friend's death. Minghella's Tom is a tormented man trapped in a nightmare of his own making (15). The film essentially exhorts sexual tolerance and critiques the repressive pressures a normative set of values places on an individual (15).

This conventional reading belies the complexity of Highsmith's characterisations. Highsmith's conception of the sexuality of the characters was far more diverse and opaque. Although it's implied that Tom harbours a strong sexual desire for Dickie, this is moderated by his ambivalence regarding his sexuality and Marge's reference to his asexuality. Dickie's sexuality is not overtly identified either, with Tom hinting at his conflict "why didn't he break down, just for once?", adding to the sexual confusion in the novel (16). This is different from the explicitly sexualised interpretation of the film in which Tom is locked out of the heterosexual space occupied by Dickie and Marge. Desire is key to the novel but what drives Tom is not sexual desire, but a cultured life and possessions that offer him assurance of his existence. Tom's longing is reserved for Dickie's possessions, his white shirts, cotton sheets and cufflinks, and the American dream he believes he has been deprived of. Highsmith's novel focuses the reader on the social and political contexts that created and limited Tom Ripley, who was primarily an American obsessed with ascending the ladder of class and privilege. Tom despises his job, any vulgarity or lack of culture he encounters, and stands in stark contrast to Dickie and Marge's easy wealth and privilege. In the book Tom is not a victim of sexual intolerance and frustrated desire. He represents an "eroticised materialism" (15). In his use of his skills of manipulation and in extending his desire for wealth to its darkest limits, Ripley represents a scathing critique of American success ethics and classism observed by Highsmith (15).

## Conclusion

This essay's examination of the Talented Mr Ripley concludes that the film, much like many that preceded it, presents a romanticised and palatable version of psychopathy for its viewers. It shortcuts the complexities of the novel and focuses on issues that are relatable and overt i.e. sexual intolerance and the impact of thwarted desire. However, the darkly subversive book, is far more enlightening and disturbing in elucidating the developmental and sociological processes driving the emergence of a psychopath.

Highsmith's novel forces the reader to consider the position of a desperate and socially anxious man who took on the hopeful task of retrieving an acquaintance from Italy as a last-ditch attempt to start afresh (16). It vividly describes the impact of Tom's abusive upbringing and the hostile social milieu in which he lived, forcing us to applaud his success in turning his fortunes around through the force of his intelligence and talents, albeit in a monstrous and callous way. The novel also describes how Ripley's psychopathic traits stood in the way of him forming genuine relationships, and even more painfully, his full awareness of his alienation from others. Ripley's failure and painful disconnection from others, and his subsequent renouncement of the world and his need to live within its rules and boundaries, become comprehensible and relatable. However, in his full espousal of amorality, Ripley represents a threat, "an average man living more clearly than the world permits" and by doing so, playing out murderous fantasies (12).

Highsmith's novel specifically highlights the fragility of privilege and our Western obsession with it. Ripley is a status-conscious social climber prepared to kill to secure his position in society, a society he could move in comfortably once he had assumed the trappings and privileges previously denied to him (17). The novel forces us to acknowledge that Ripley expresses emotions and experiences common to us all, jealousy, envy and a very normal material desire for more. In vicariously sharing Ripley's experience, we are brought uncomfortably close to understanding how a preoccupation with wealth and status, and the pressures of a hostile system, could force a person to become a remorseless criminal. Ripley in his stark representation of Western values of success and acquisition, and his murderous desire for the wealth and status of the privileged classes, suggests that Highsmith found these values disturbing and yet "horrifyingly mainstream" (15). The book's exploration of these themes does more than expand our understanding of psychopathy, it succeeds in generating relatedness and empathy, regardless of the discomfort that engenders.

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