

Uniwersytet Wrocławski  
Wydział Filologiczny  
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej

Lech Zdunkiewicz

**Empathy and Sympathy Elicitation Strategies in Highsmith's and Minghella's  
*The Talented Mr. Ripley***

Doctoral thesis under the supervision of:

Prof. Dominika Ferens

Dr. Wojciech Drąg

Uniwersytet Wrocławski  
Wydział Filologiczny  
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej

Lech Zdunkiewicz

**Strategie budowania empatii i sympatii dla bohatera na przykładzie powieści i  
filmu *Utalentowany pan Ripley***

Praca doktorska pod kierunkiem  
dr hab. Dominika Ferens, prof. UWr  
dr hab. Wojciech Drąg

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## INTRODUCTION

“Likability is no guarantee of audience involvement,” screenwriting theorist Robert McKee writes, “it’s merely an aspect of characterization” (142). Many creative writing manuals are permeated with similar assertions—empathy, not sympathy, is vital to the audience’s engagement in a story. While various research fields offer data that could help verify such an assumption, only a few have attempted to bridge storytellers’ dogmas with empirical evidence (see Gulino and Shears 2018). This dissertation will attempt to corroborate McKee’s hypothesis on narrative empathy<sup>1</sup> and narrative sympathy<sup>2</sup> and their relation to character engagement and narrative enjoyment.

My immediate goal is to describe, categorize and assess the effectiveness of what I call “empathy facilitators.” By this term, I refer to various textual/visual cues and techniques that promote empathic and occasionally sympathetic engagements with literary and film characters. Thus I limit my area of research to literary and film strategies of character engagement. I source the facilitators from various literary, film, and storytelling theorists’ works. Those include Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Edward Branigan’s *Point of View in the Cinema* (1984), Robert McKee’s *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and The Principles of Screenwriting* (1997), Greg Smith’s *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (2003), Karl Iglesias’s *Writing for Emotional Impact* (2005) and Margrethe Bruun Vaage’s “Fiction Film and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement” (2010), as well as postulates made by such novelists and screenwriters as Frantisek Daniel (1993), David Ebenbach (2003) and Paul Gulino (2013). I verify theoretical assumptions with empirical data from published research and my own two limited survey studies.

Assessing the effectiveness of various empathy facilitators requires that they be considered elements of a sustained strategy targeting a specific character. For this reason, I carried out the

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<sup>1</sup> I understand narrative empathy as the audience’s imaginative experience of a character’s situated psychological states.

<sup>2</sup> I understand narrative sympathy as the audience’s character-oriented feelings of pity or concern.

mentioned survey studies, which monitored audiences'<sup>3</sup> immediate reactions to engagement strategies in Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and Anthony Minghella's adaptation by that same title (1999). These two works likewise serve as the primary sources. However, I often supplement facilitator descriptions with samplings from exemplary sources such as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913), Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), or Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Chapter One outlines the methodological framework used to categorize empathy facilitators into four aspectual categories: motivational, affective, perceptual, and epistemic. It begins with an elucidation of the terminological tangling, which results from the fact that scholars using various approaches have conducted autonomous scrutinies of narrative engagement. I propose to consider phenomena such as character engagement and identification from a perspective that best caters to the analysis of how narrative elements can influence the audience's reactions. By character engagement, therefore, I mean the effects of empathic and sympathetic engagements, as well as character identification.

The theoretical contributions of film studies scholars Berys Gaut, Murray Smith, and Amy Coplan serve as the basis for understanding and categorizing character engagement modes. Gaut's model assumes that empathic engagement involves the audience with a character based on the aforementioned aspects. If coinciding with a positive moral evaluation of a given character, this aspectual alignment may evolve into what Smith calls sympathetic identification. On a side note, I later argue that Minghella attempts to promote this empathy- and sympathy-based form of character engagement in his adaptation. While Smith's model describes recognition and alignment as stages preceding sympathetic identification, I propose considering them to be gradations of empathic engagement. Next, I discuss other attempts at explicating empathy. I consider the common demarcation between "cognitive" and "affective" empathy, alternatively "embodied" and "imaginative" empathy. Such attempts testify to researchers' awareness of the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term "audience" to refer to both readers and spectators. When describing processes particular to either the novel or film, I revert to the appropriate terms.

aspectual nature of empathy. However, they fail to encompass the complexities beyond the intellectual and emotional appeals. For this reason, I consider Coplan's definition of empathy to offer the most practical framework for the analysis of engagement strategies.

Before detailing the mechanics of empathy facilitators, I consider a few "outstanding variables" by which I refer to extraneous influences that may complicate the audience's reactions to characters. A study of empathic engagement strategies should be limited to the consideration of elements that remain within storytellers' control. Chapter Two describes narrative procedures that promote a motivational alignment with a character. The facilitators that I discuss include Carl Plantinga's character goal orientation and goal pursuit (2009). While character goal orientation focuses on narrative signposting that promotes the audience's recognition of a character's goal and motivation, goal pursuit considers characterizations resulting from a character's actions undertaken to achieve an objective. I discuss the latter's potential for the elicitation of sympathetic identification. Chapter Three describes the facilitators that appeal to the affective aspect of empathy. These include Karl Iglesias's virtue displays and victimizations (2005) considered from the perspective of Frantisek Daniel's notion of dramatic subjectivity and objectivity (1993). Additionally, I describe Margrethe Bruun Vaage's scenes of empathy (2010) and Greg Smith's emotion markers (2003) as affective facilitators specific to the medium of film.

Chapter Four includes descriptions of perceptual and epistemic empathy facilitators which promote alignment with a character's visual and cognitive perspectives. I detail what I call "character's time perception," a facilitator that aids the audience's experience of narrative time from the perspective of a character. Next, I discuss chronology manipulation, such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, and various recalibrations of narrative timelines. These techniques function much like specific rhetorical devices if employed to elicit sympathy or mitigate antipathy. For this reason, these facilitators may overlap with what Affective Disposition Theory calls moral disengagement cues (Zillmann and Cantor 1976), or storytellers' efforts at mitigating audiences' negative moral judgments of a character. In turn, Wayne Booth's notion of "inside views" (1961) refers to all forms of narration that allow the audience subjective access to a character. Those

include such techniques as free indirect speech or narrational implicature or projections. Many of the described perceptual and epistemic facilitators mark the focalizer of a subjective narration. I discuss various perspective markers, including Vaage's POV structures (2010) and sound perspective markers (both film-specific markers).

In Chapters Five and Six, I analyze Patricia Highsmith's and Anthony Minghella's engagement strategies. Data collected from two survey studies that map audiences' responses to the *Ripley* novel and adaptation serve as a reference frame. Chapter Five discusses the plot of Highsmith's novel, confronting major empathy facilitators with respondents' reactions, concluding that Highsmith's strategy relies primarily on empathic engagement. Aside from the consistent use of free indirect speech and projections, Highsmith builds an overarching epistemic and perceptual alignment by allowing her readers to partake in Tom's journey of self-discovery. The analysis in Chapter Six focuses on how the engagement strategy in Minghella's adaptation develops within the narrative's plot. Respondents' reactions show that while initially, they are willing to sympathize with Tom Ripley, his murder of Dickie Greenleaf marks the end of their sympathetic identification with the protagonist. From that point, despite Minghella's application of sympathy elicitors, their engagement becomes primarily empathy-based.

In Chapter Seven, I carry out a comparative analysis of Highsmith's and Minghella's strategies to argue that, where Highsmith relies on a highly subjective form of narration to maintain her readers' alignment with Tom, Minghella endeavors to elicit sympathy for his protagonist. He employs a considerably more nonsubjective narration, relying on victimizations and virtue displays to promote initial sympathetic identification. I argue that he obscures Tom's ultimate goal orientation, a quest for family, with the character's romantic endeavors. As a result, Minghella fails to rebuild spectators' sympathetic identification with Tom. I conclude that my limited investigation suggests that motivational alignment may serve as a good indicator of sympathetic identification. Moreover, it seems that respondents of both studies found ways of enjoying their respective stories despite their reported feelings of cognitive dissonance. I propose

that storytellers and researchers would benefit from additional empirical research concerning engagement strategies and the effectiveness of individual empathy facilitators.

## **CHAPTER ONE: CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT**

Character engagement is the umbrella term that refers to the audience's interest in a story's characters. This phenomenon has been considered by film and literary theorists and storytellers. It draws much attention because character engagement affects a story's enjoyability (see Jose and Brewer). Critical approaches to character engagement include psychoanalysis, conflict theory, and cognitive perspectives. In film theory, the psychoanalytic approach focuses on spectators' "identification with the camera." It considers their reactions to characters to be "secondary, tertiary cinematic identifications" (Metz 259). By contrast, conflict theorists remain preoccupied with how character identification may be used to perpetuate or subvert social hierarchies (see: Creed; White; Curran and Donelan). In both cases, the mechanisms that affect character engagement are at the peripheries of their analytical scopes. Both approaches offer limited parallels with creative writing manuals and other sources that detail storytellers' observations, which are considered in this study.

Conversely, the cognitive approach provides the most overlap. It identifies and analyzes the phenomena using empirical analysis to support or undermine theoretical assumptions. For example, the mentioned camera is not studied as a variant of spectators' perception. It is discussed as a tool that can mark focalization or externalize a character's emotions. The cognitive approach allows us to consider, for example, how a camera's placement or movement can influence spectators' interpretation of a character, rather than discuss the ontological relationship between spectators and the spectated (see Baudry). In other words, it offers the most practical tools.

### **1.1 Hierarchy of terms**

I would like to address the divergence in terminology and clarify my understanding of various terms. As far as the preceding discussion is concerned, I argue that engagement does not presuppose identification. Identification is not synonymous with character appeal. The value I

attribute to these phenomena is based on the following assumptions: (1) Storytellers are concerned with their stories' capacity to sustain their audience's interest. (2) The audience's interest is sustained, not exclusively, through character engagement.<sup>4</sup> (3) Character engagement can be facilitated, amongst others, by empathy or empathic concern.

While some writers might prioritize perceived artistic merit, most creative writing manuals instruct those aspiring to work as professional storytellers to focus on sustaining the audience's interest and emotional engagement (see: Iglesias 50; Truby; McKee 10; Field 4). Researchers have also paid considerable attention to this matter. Affective disposition theory (Zillmann and Cantor 1976) has guided investigations into "narrative enjoyment" and continues to be an important frame of reference. Studies show that "the intensity of the dispositions formed towards characters, in conjunction with the outcomes they experience, leads to enjoyment" (Janicke and Raney 486). The strength of the bond with the protagonist proportionately influences spectators' investment in the story's outcome. This bond becomes increasingly important for narratives that challenge audiences' story schemas,<sup>5</sup> meaning stories that operate outside the audience's experiential presumptions. As the 2012 study conducted by Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney has shown, "protagonist sympathy predicted enjoyment" significantly more in narratives that lacked character justification scenes. Such scenes are meant to explain and excuse a character's immoral

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<sup>4</sup> Theoretician Carl Plantinga discusses a whole separate sphere of film's appeal which he has dubbed "artifact emotions." This term refers to our admiration of the film's *mise-en-scene*, its technical aspects, innovativeness, etc. (74). Aside from artifact emotions, audiences may also find a film to be appealing through "representational emotions" (Gaut 136). These are the affects directed at the story or characters. Story-directed emotions include feelings of "curiosity, suspense, anticipation, surprise, startle" while the character-directed emotions may include empathy and sympathy but also "antipathy, neutrality, cognitive assessment, emotions, motor mimicry, and/or emotional contagion" (Plantinga 69, 102).

<sup>5</sup> I understand a schema to be an "organized set of related concepts or objects" based on a person's experiences. A schema is set within a frame, or a spatial-temporal limit within which we have come to expect a given set of concepts. A schema also includes scripts or specific associated actions. As screenwriter Paul Gulino and cognitive psychologist Connie Shears explain, a birthday party schema might include a set table, a cake with candles and wrapped presents. The frame for such a schema might be a family home. A birthday schema script might also include actions of arriving guests, singing birthday songs and so on (2018). A story schema, by contrast, is "a mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the way in which stories proceed" (Mandler 18). It is a person's expectations of narrative conventions. A common story schema might entail a protagonist who wants something badly and is faced with obstacles. At first the protagonist fails but after gaining the necessary experience they manage to overcome the adversities and attain what they need. This experience teaches them something.

behavior, often citing their past traumas, righteous motives, or desperation (see [4.2](#)). The aim is to suspend the audience's moral judgment of that character. A lack of justification scenes may lead the audience to consider morally dubious characters as villainous. In such cases, character engagement caters to the enjoyment of the narrative.

Character engagement, as mentioned, refers to audiences' interest in what happens to a story's character. Needless to say, if the audience is interested in whether a story's events will unfold to the benefit or injury of a particular character, their interest in the story is sustained. Creative writing theorists assume that we must be emotionally invested in a character to be interested in them. These character-inspired affects can be positive or negative as long as the audience evades apathy (see: McKee 138; Iglesias 51). Conceivably, there exist narratives where one remains interested in what happens to characters without being aware of any emotional engagement towards them. For this reason, I do not equate character engagement (interest) strictly with emotional engagement with a character (empathy, sympathy, and antipathy). Instead, I consider it one of character engagement's possible variants.

## **1.2 Character identification**

Character identification is an important aspect of emotional engagement, and it is likely one of the most pursued forms of character engagement (see: Coplan, "Empathy and Character Engagement" 101; Grodal 158; Neill 177-76; Murray Smith, "Engaging Characters" 89; Gaut, "Empathy" 136). What the term refers to is, nevertheless, a subject of debate. Some suggest that identification involves the imagining of being a character. More extreme interpretations propose the phenomenon involves "reliving of a character's emotions" and may be "accompanied by a loss of conscious awareness of oneself and one's surroundings" (Busselle and Bilandzic 323-25). Others argue that the term is too vague and should be abandoned or replaced (Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror* 95-96). However, Berys Gaut makes a compelling argument in favor of "identification." He claims the term expresses spectators' "folk wisdom" to judge the merit of a

film based on whether they “could really identify with a [given] character or not” (“Identification and Emotion” 200). He distinguishes between the two extremes by labeling them as the identification and the assimilation views, where identification refers to an “imaginative projection” of the spectator “into characters’ minds” and an emotional responding “from that perspective.” Assimilation occurs when spectators “respond as external observers of a character’s plight” (137).

Film theorists’ discussion, in some instances, involves an overlapping of the term “identification” with “empathy,” which is a confusing oversimplification. Nevertheless, Gaut’s and Smith’s models offer a valuable framework for the discussion. Gaut maintains that identification is “aspectual” in that spectators may come to identify with a character in four different ways. This is a critical distinction in contrast to the common understanding of empathy as “feeling with others” (see: Keen 83; Busselle and Bilandzic 324; Batson 15). Gaut observes, that aside from the affective aspect, identification includes perceptual, motivational, and epistemic aspects. The same is true for empathy,<sup>6</sup> which I consider a stronger gradation on the same spectrum (see [1.4](#)). Respectively, to identify perceptually with a character means imagining to be seeing what the character sees; “affectively, is to imagine feeling what [they] feel”; motivationally, is to imagine wanting what they want; and epistemically, is to imagine believing what they believe (“Empathy” 137, 152). Gaut recognizes that the aspects of identification are independent. One does not entail the remaining three, though it may promote the other aspects of identification. The argument proposes a form of gradation. It seems that identification based solely on the perceptual aspect will be weaker than that based on, for example, the perceptual and affective aspects. The most potent form of identification is when the audience engages on all four levels.

Interestingly, Gaut argues that imagining that one sees, feels, wants, and believes as a character is different from experiencing the same. This experiencing, he distinguishes, is empathy, whereas the imagining he calls imaginative identification. The two are separate

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<sup>6</sup> Gaut equates identification with “empathic identification or empathy” (“Empathy” 138).

phenomena. Still, it is plausible, he writes, that “empathy requires imaginative identification in at least some aspects” (“Empathy” 138). It follows that matching a character’s feelings, wants, and beliefs forms a stronger bond than imagining them from a character’s perspective (see [1.4](#)).

Murray Smith proposes the second model, focusing on spectators’ engagement rather than identification. Audience engagement, he writes, relies on “acentral” or impersonal imagining. He differentiates it from “central” or “personal” imagining, which requires that the audience posits themselves as the protagonist of an imagined scenario. Engagement, Smith argues, is what other researchers call empathy. In other words, empathizing with a character who is macheting their way through a jungle requires that the audience imagine themselves in that scenario. They wield the weapon, feel the jungle’s humidity and suffer the bug bites, not the character. This imagined experience allows them to identify with the character’s hardships. However, considering that not all narrative experiences involve audiences on a visceral level, Smith proposes the mentioned phenomenon of “acentral” imagining. This “other-focused personal imaging” involves imagining how “some other, specified agent [in this case, a story’s character] sees the world” (*Film, Art*, 179). It seems that because acentral imagining does not require the audience to recast themselves in a narrative scenario, it integrates more seamlessly with their experience of an unfolding story. In other words, the audience might not even be conscious of their engagement, whereas with central imagining, the involvement might even interfere with, or occur after, the experience of a narrative. As Smith notes, acentral imagination is essential to “engaging with fiction” while central imagination might be prompted by “fantasies, dreams, or hallucinations” (*Engaging Characters* 79).

Smith calls the acentral form of engagement “the structure of sympathy.” “Structure” refers to its three levels: recognition, alignment, and allegiance (*Engaging Characters* 83-86). The first level, recognition, details the audience’s construction of characters or situations based on the “referential notion of the mimetic hypothesis” (82). Smith argues that spectators’ perception is based not only on the recognition that the description (be it through text or image) refers to their “knowledge of textual and artistic conventions (genre conventions, editing conventions, and so

forth) [otherwise known as story schemas] but also knowledge of the real world, in whatever way that is defined by particular audiences” (53). Recognition requires that the audience constructs their understanding of a situation or action based on their story schemas and personal experiences. I think of it as the audience’s successful conceptualization of what a given narrative element is communicating.

The second level, alignment, is “akin to the literary notion of ‘focalization’” (83). Smith proposes that this process of character identification is made possible through “two interlocking functions, *spatiotemporal attachment*, and *subjective access*” (83, italics original). These refer to narrative time and the degree to which the audience perceives a given character, their perspective, and inner states. The audience can therefore align with a character who is the story’s focalizer serving as the point-of-view filter of the narrative. I, therefore, understand recognition to be a building block of the multifarious and prolonged connection, that is, alignment.

Finally, the third level of engagement Smith calls allegiance. In his words, “it is closest to what is meant by ‘identification’ in everyday usage” (75). It involves the audience’s moral evaluation of a character in which they assess their similitude to the characters “on the basis of a wide range of factors, such as attitudes related to class, nation, age, ethnicity, and gender.” Therefore, sympathetic allegiance will occur if the audience finds a character to hold, for example, similar attitudes, beliefs, or biases to their own. Antipathetic allegiance results from judging the character to be unlike them (75). But, as Smith argues, this moral evaluation involves both the “cognitive and affective dimensions... being angry or outraged at an action involves categorizing it as undesirable or harmful to someone or something, and being affected— affectively aroused—by this categorization” (84). Aside from the perceived similitude, judgment should elicit the audience’s emotional reaction. Interestingly, the aforementioned affective disposition theory argues that “the behaviors and motivations that the characters display determine the strength of liking” (Shafer and Raney 1029). In other words, the strength of the audience’s sympathy or antipathy is relative to the severity of their moral judgment.

Much of the above applies primarily to film, but literary psychologists Maria Kotovych, Peter Dixon, Marisa Bortolussi, and Mark Holden propose akin distinctions in the identification process. They differentiate between “affinity,” “participation,” and “transparency.” By “affinity,” they understand “the reader’s attitude towards the character,” which may vary in the reader’s leaning. By “participation,” they understand “the adoption of the attitudes of the character” by the reader. Thus, “transparency” comes to refer to the “cognitive aspect of identification” that stands for the reader’s understanding of the character’s “behavior and attitudes” (261-62). In other words, what they call affinity and participation, Smith respectively calls judgment and sympathetic identification. This conceptualization of transparency demonstrates the researchers’ awareness of the aspectual nature of what constitutes identification. Besides affect, it involves recognizing a character’s beliefs, perceptions, and motivations.

Moreover, transparency parallels the cognitive discreteness of what Smith calls recognition. I make this comparison to indicate that Kotovych’s team observes comparable qualities in the same phenomenon that Gaut and Smith have observed in a different narrative medium. There is enough common ground to extend Gaut’s and Smith’s models to describe empathic engagement in both film and literature.

In summary, Gaut and Smith both describe forms of identification (imaginative identification and acentral imagining, respectively) that they hold separate from the phenomenon of empathy. Gaut maintains that imaginative identification does not involve seeing, feeling, and believing as a character does but is limited to the imagining of what they might be experiencing — in empathy, I see, feel, want, and believe as the character does; in imaginative identification, I imagine what the character must be seeing, feeling, wanting, and believing. On the other hand, Smith proposes that empathy differs from acentral imagining in that it requires the audience to place themselves as the experiencer of a given scenario. Acentral imagining requires that the audience only imagine how the character sees the world. For Smith, empathy entails what I would see, feel, want, and believe in that same situation, whereas acentral imagining involves what the character must be seeing, feeling, wanting, and believing.

Therefore, it seems that there is much overlap between what Gaut defines as imaginative identification and what Smith calls acentral imagining. However, Gaut’s definition suggests the audience shares in the character’s affects, which leaves room to interpret empathy as a simulation. Conversely, Smith stresses that the phenomenon requires the audience to imagine themselves as the protagonist. Both researchers exclude the possibility of a fusion between perceivers and the perceived (Baudry 43).

### 1.3 Empathy

Although Gaut’s and Smith’s notions of identification overlap with what I call “empathic engagement,” I prefer to adopt Amy Coplan’s explanatory concept for three reasons (see [1.4](#)). Firstly, as this film-philosophy theorist notes, the advantage of focusing on empathic concern rather than identification is that the former “refers to a psychological process that empirical scientists have studied” (“Empathy and Character” 102). The second reason I prefer empathic engagement as an analytical tool is that, on a colloquial level, identification refers to a recognition that one resembles a character. This recognition may be promoted by an immediate feeling of superficial similitude based on such characteristics as physical appearance, mannerisms, or speech patterns. Communication studies and marketing researchers call such a mechanism “homophily” (see: Gilly et al. 85; Johnson et al. 3). This form of identification does not require a narrative context, unlike the more complex forms of empathic engagement.

Moreover, character identification might imply sympathy for a character. This is something that Murray Smith recognizes by referring to his model as “the structure of sympathy” (*Engaging Characters* 86). Feeling sympathy may coincide with empathic engagement, but equating the phenomenon with identification will obscure the distinction between empathy and sympathy. Thirdly, empathic engagement may occur with a character with whom one finds very little in common. For example, I may recognize a sociopathic antihero’s perspective, beliefs, and motivation; as a result, I may become interested in the outcome of their endeavor even though I

find limited similarities between myself and that antihero. This, I argue, is a form of empathic engagement.

Gaut draws a superfluous divide between imaginative and empathic identification if we think of both phenomena as gradations on the spectrum of empathic engagement (see [1.4](#)). As mentioned, Gaut argues that “imaginative affective identification” requires that one imagines feeling as a character feels while empathic identification entails feeling as a character does. Such a divide into the imaginative and emotional aspect of identification can be traced to other fields. Psychology research distinguishes between “several systems mediating empathy: phylogenetically early emotional contagion systems and more advanced, cognitive perspective-taking systems engagement” (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz and Perry 617). Cognitive psychologists Simone Shamay-Tsoory, Daniela Perry and cognitive neurologist Judith Aharon-Peretz provide evidence that, as far as neural origins are concerned, both systems function independently, seemingly justifying the rift in film and literary studies (617–18). Literary scholar Suzanne Keen defines empathy as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect” (4). Accordingly, this ability to share emotions is automatic and is not necessarily a conscious response. Essentially, it is emotional contagion.

Research in neuroscience has determined the importance of the mirror neuron system to “motor actions ... emotion recognition or evaluation and emotional empathy” (see: Carr et al.; Seitz et al.; Jabbi et al.; Schulte-Ruther et al.). By contrast, the imaginative, “cognitive” empathy involves “a process of understanding another person’s perspective” (Dvash and Shamay-Tsoory 283). This form of response stands for the ability to imagine the states of other individuals; however, it does not involve the sharing in those states. In other words, a subject might be able to recognize that an observed individual is experiencing distress but does not themselves engage in the simulation of the experience.

It is important to note that when referring to empathy for characters I mean “narrative empathy.” The distinction is between empathy “with real others” versus “narrative empathy,” which refers to engagement with (most notably) a character in a story (Keen 68). This is not to

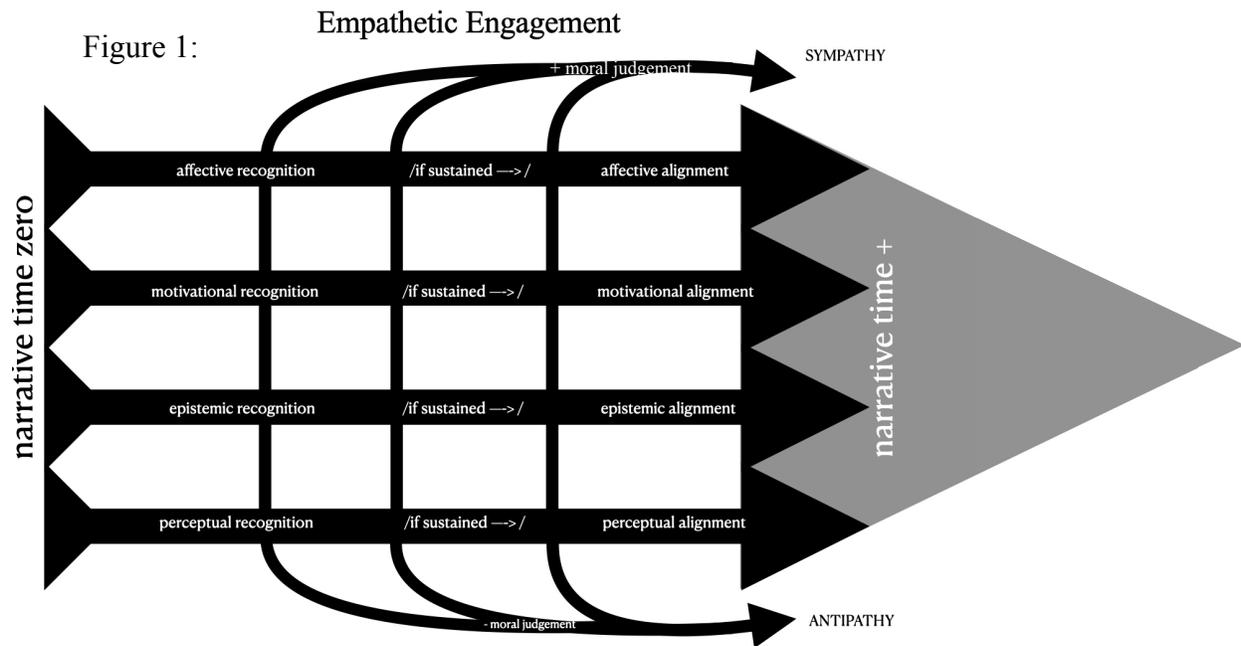
say that narrative empathy is limited to fictional characters. Wayne Booth argues that readers may align with various other elements of the narrative. “What we call ‘involvement’ or ‘sympathy’ or ‘identification,’” he writes, “is usually made up of many reactions to authors, narrators, observers, and other characters” (158). Furthermore, it is important to note that Booth does not use the modifier “fictional” when referring to characters. Empathic engagement may occur with all characters appearing in a story, regardless of whether they are based on real people or whether the story itself is a factual account. To illustrate this, Steve Jobs of Walter Isaacson biography *Steve Jobs* (2011) can be regarded as a character within a story. Such an approach accounts for the fact that the empathy facilitation strategies discussed in this study can be applied outside of fictional narratives. Importantly, if we are concerned with audience engagement strategies, we will likely consider empathy towards the protagonist before any other possibilities as the most reliable avenue for sustaining interest.

A final observation is that empathic capacity is often erroneously perceived as a positive characteristic rather than an ability. As biologist Edward Wilson observes, in the context of social dynamics, “a sharp sense of empathy can make a huge difference, and with it an ability to manipulate, to gain cooperation, and to deceive” (chapter 4). The conceptualization of the phenomenon as a useful tool that can be used for constructive and destructive purposes applies to the narrative context. It elucidates why the audience that empathizes with an antihero, such as Tom Ripley, is free to feel either sympathy or antipathy towards him.

#### **1.4 The Spectrum of Empathic Engagement**

Empathic engagement is a process that (if successful) leads to empathy for a character. This process consists of “imagining” and “experiencing” a simulation of that character’s state. The same empathic engagement strategy may promote both forms of response. The audience’s response to various empathy facilitators will likely include “imagining” and “experiencing” to different degrees. Their reaction will depend on multiple factors, many of which will be beyond

the storyteller’s control (see [1.5.a](#)). Therefore, the audience’s interest in the narrative outcome for a given character is more relevant than their response type. If they care about what happens to a character, it is safe to conclude that they empathize with that character.



Furthermore, I argue that empathy is aspectual. Like Gaut’s imaginative identification, it includes the affective aspect (imaginative experience of what a character feels), the perceptual (imaginative experience of what a character sees), motivational (imaginative experience of what a character wants), and epistemic (imaginative experience of what a character believes). All four aspects are likewise conducive to, and constituent of, empathic engagement. I adopt Amy Coplan’s definition of empathy with a modification. Coplan argues that empathic engagement occurs when a “spectator simulates the character’s situated psychological states, including the character’s beliefs, emotions, and desires, by imaginatively experiencing the character’s experiences from the character’s point of view, while simultaneously maintaining clear self/other differentiation” (“Empathy and Character” 103). I widen the definition to include not only spectators but also readers, as this study pertains to both film and literature. Furthermore, I understand “imaginative experiencing” to be inclusive of both “imaginative” and “experiential”

responses. Importantly, when empathizing, the audience will never experience states identical to those presumably experienced by the characters. Several facets prevent this, such as the audience's awareness of the constructed fictionality of a story or the differences between self and other-oriented emotions. Finally, I refer to the collective reader and spectator as "the audience." Contrarily, when describing processes particular to the novel or film, I revert to the appropriate terms.

As far as the aspectual nature of empathic engagement is concerned, Coplan reduces Gaut's four aspects—epistemic, affective, motivational, and perceptual—to three corresponding units: "beliefs, emotions, and desires" ("Empathy and Character" 103). She eliminates the perceptual aspect for the sake of the epistemic (beliefs)—the boundaries of what a character sees and what a character believes may overlap. Often, the story submerges the audience in an inconspicuous focalization that expresses a character's subjective interpretations of reality. For example, in Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the narrator describes the character Freddie Miles in the following manner (for a summary of the novel, see [chapter 5](#)):

Tom thought he was hideous. Tom hated red hair, especially this kind of carrot-red hair with white skin and freckles. Freddie had large red-brown eyes that seemed to wobble in his head as if he were cockeyed, or perhaps he was only one of those people who never looked at anyone they were talking to. He was also overweight.

The narrator informs us of what Tom thinks of Freddie by providing a description that supports his opinion. Since this section, as well as the entire novel, uses Tom Ripley as the focalizer, we might assume that the unbecoming image of Freddie is likewise the product of Tom's subjectivity. In other words, in seeing as Tom sees, we also seem to be thinking of Freddie the same way Tom does. It is difficult to distinguish between the epistemic and perceptual aspects in such a case. In contrast to this might be a situation in which the audience shares a

misconception with a character that is later corrected. For example, in Anthony Minghella's adaptation of the novel, spectators, much like Tom, are led to believe that the confrontation at the Venice police station will end in Tom's incarceration (for a summary of the film, see [chapter 6](#)). Just like the protagonist, they are surprised to find out about the change of the lead investigator. Their resultant alignment is epistemic since they share in Tom's incorrect beliefs. Still, it is safe to assume that a subjective narration will blur the distinction between the epistemic and perceptual aspects to a greater extent than a non-subjective narration.

Murray Smith defines subjective narration in film as one that grants a high "degree of access to the subjectivity of the character." Intersubjective narration refers to films that grant subjective access to more than one character (*Engaging Characters* 150-51). It follows that nonsubjective narration refers to a form of storytelling that grants no subjective access (Vaage 175). All three variants act as gradients on a single spectrum. I think of a highly subjective narration as similar to the first-person-limited narrator who serves as the story's protagonist. Audiences are limited to the narrating hero's perception, beliefs, emotions, and motivations. A less restrictive variant of the subjective narration would be akin to the third person limited. The narrator still confines the audience to a spatiotemporal attachment with a single character or focalizer (Bal 136); as a result, they experience an epistemic and perceptual alignment with that character (they know and believe as much as the character knows and believes). However, the narrator grants them greater liberty to interpret the remaining characters and their world, as they are not filtered through the focalizer's perspective. Intersubjective narration is comparable to the third-person-omniscient view. The narrator grants the audience equal subjective access to several, if not all, characters in the story. Finally, the nonsubjective narration is comparable to the third-person objective. Audiences are granted equal peripheral access to all characters. In film, the setup which best conveys this type of narration is a long static shot with few or no cuts; the camera simply records the characters' interactions from a distance. To avoid shuffling between the various terms, I will use Smith's notions of subjective and nonsubjective narration to analyze both the film and the novel.

## 1.5 Choice of methodology

In contrast to Gaut's model, Smith's structure of sympathy focuses on the process by which character identification occurs rather than identifying the aspects that it involves. Borrowing from the two models could provide a valuable instrument for measuring audience response. Gaut's approach allows us to verify whether a spectator has connected with a character within a given aspect. While Smith's model may account for psychological processes involved in forming empathy for a character, it systematizes the narrative mechanisms that need to be in place to allow engagement. For example, assuming that I empathize with Tom Ripley, Gaut's model could allow me to identify that my empathic engagement involves the perceptual and motivational but not the affective or epistemic aspects. Assuming that I want to achieve empathic engagement in all four aspects, I could employ Smith's structure to understand why no connection in the perceptual or motivational aspects has been established.

Expanding on the above example, I could explore the lack of perceptual connection by considering whether the storyteller has provided enough clear textual cues to nurture the audience's recognition of Tom's perception. Essentially, the audience should categorize Tom based on their story schemas and personal experiences. They might conclude that Tom's outlook is that of an aesthete.<sup>7</sup> If I establish that the audience has an idea of this, the next step would be to discern whether the storyteller has used a sustained subjective narration, meaning whether they have provided enough effective empathy facilitators. The audience should be afforded the opportunity for a sustained recognition of what it must be like to see the world as a lover of beauty.<sup>8</sup> A successfully prolonged experience would amount to an alignment with Tom's

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<sup>7</sup> Note that recognition is not diagnosis. It does not require a concretized labeling; instead, a general sense of what is meant suffices. Recognition in the above scenario may amount to a statement such as "Tom enjoys nice things," whereas "Tom is a sociopathic social climber who collects art to solidify his status" is a diagnosis.

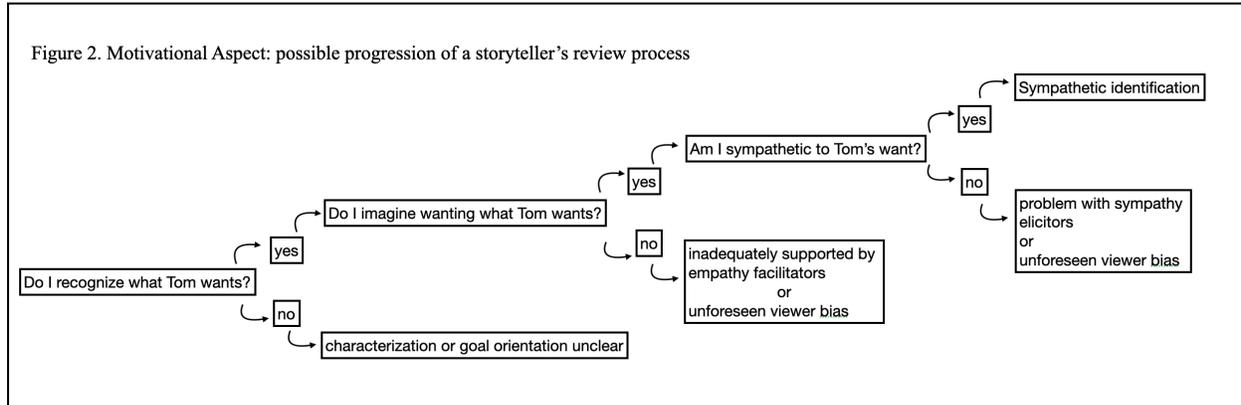
<sup>8</sup> Point-of-view shots or descriptions coupled with montage or juxtapositions that communicate Tom's enamoredness with the attractive and his vexation with the insipid, may enable such an effect.

perception. If such measures were undertaken but the audience failed to connect, we could consider if any outstanding variables might have inhibited their empathic engagement.

I do not consider what Smith calls “allegiance” (84) in this empathic engagement model. This step of his “structure of sympathy” no longer pertains to empathic engagement and instead seeks to establish whether the audience has passed a “sympathetic or antipathetic” moral judgment of a character. This is consistent with ADT’s notion of “moral judgment” (Zillmann and Cantor). Significantly, the audience may judge a character as either morally congruous or incongruous with their values regardless of their recognition or alignment with any of their aspects. Empathic engagement is independent of their moral judgment. The audience may pass a moral judgment any time after being introduced to a character. If prompted, this judgment may be reevaluated later during the narrative. For example, the audience may pass a moral judgment on a character based on an impression made by that characters’ introduction. In *Ripley*, Highsmith introduces a minor character, Bob Delancey, by explaining the circumstances under which Tom became Bob’s guest. The “sordidness” of his apartment, we are told, shocked Tom (8). Consequently, readers pass a negative moral judgment of Bob (and by doing so, they align themselves with Tom’s perception of this character) despite not having read any scenes portraying Bob. By contrast, in Minghella’s adaptation, the introduction to Marge Sherwood’s character may prompt a positive moral judgment if, for example, spectators find Gwyneth Paltrow’s smile to be endearing.

Furthermore, the audience may remain empathically engaged even if they pass a negative moral judgment. For *Ripley*, this means they will continue to imaginatively experience Tom’s states despite finding him antipathetic. As the example hopefully demonstrates, the described model could systematize the identification of engagement strategy flaws and thus prove helpful for storytellers (see figure 2).

To reiterate, by empathic engagement, I understand that audiences align with a character’s situated psychological states based on one or more aspects, including the epistemic, affective, motivational, and perceptual. Audiences imaginatively experience the character’s presumed states



from the character's point of view while simultaneously maintaining a clear self/other differentiation. In other words, audiences remain aware of the boundaries between them and the character. More importantly, they are not limited to the states of the characters with whom they empathize (Coplan, "Empathic Engagement" 147–49). This means that aside from feeling empathy, the audience might also experience sympathy, antipathy, pleasure, displeasure, suspense, and a variety of other affects that are not experienced by the character.

Furthermore, empathic engagement involves at least two steps: the audience's recognition of a character state based on their story schemas and real-life experiences and the audience's alignment with a character using a sustained subjective narration. During a narrative, the audience will make moral judgments of a character based on their recognitions. The judgments occur independently of the empathic engagement process; they are subject to reevaluation, resulting in sympathy or antipathy for a character. Apathy signals a lack of empathic engagement.

### 1.5.a Outstanding variables

Outstanding variables are elements outside the storyteller's control that complicate audiences' reactions to characters. As screenwriter and storytelling theorist Paul Gulino argues, "inevitably people will view the same character in different ways based on the notion of top-down processing" (*Empathy*). For example, the audience might base their perception of a story's characters on actual human beings that these characters resemble. This experience-based

processing of the narrative entails a transfer of held moral judgments from the audience's real-life acquaintances to characters. If character A reminds me of a person B, whom I dislike, I might remain antipathetic towards this character despite the storyteller's best efforts. This is not to say that such a situation irreversibly blocks empathic engagement. One can attempt to win the audience's favorable judgment by, for example, imbuing their protagonist with universal or "humanistic qualities" (see: Iglesias 70-74).

Aside from the mentioned bias of associating a character with a liked/disliked real-life acquaintance, in film, spectators' may be influenced by "meta-emotions," which may include an emotional contagion of a group screening. Spectators may, for example, be influenced by the affective response of their fellow audience members. Additionally, the mentioned artifact emotions might also affect empathic engagement. Spectators might feel inclined to experience empathy towards a protagonist if they find the "film as a constructed artifact" aesthetically pleasing (Plantinga 69). In other words, if the audience sees the fictional world or how it is presented to be attractive, they might feel more inclined to empathize with the story's characters than if they found the setting displeasing or unremarkable.

Wayne Booth argues that identification does not have to be limited to protagonists. It can include the audience's engagement with "authors, narrators, observers, and other characters" (158). The manner a film or novel is marketed might influence the empathic response of audiences by managing their genre and content expectations. These expected "generic differences," as Keen argues, may "invite (or retard)" engagement (87). For example, the cinematic trailer of Minghella's adaptation primed many spectators to expect Tom Ripley to be a psychopathic killer. Such expectation management might have caused some spectators' interpretations of the film to diverge from what Minghella had intended (see [7.2](#)). The most common outstanding variable is audiences' varying sensitivities. Some of them may be susceptible to given empathy facilitators more than others. For example, I have screened scenes from Lukas Moodysson's 2002 film *Lilja-4-Ever* to a number of my classes on multiple occasions. Because the narrative employs ostentatious victimization scenes (see [3.2](#)), invariably,

the students' responses are polarized. The more sensitive are moved by the protagonists' undeserved mistreatment, while the more resilient report feeling unsettled by what they describe as "manipulative storytelling techniques." Similarly, audiences' familiarity with fiction and film conventions is changing; what might have been considered an acceptable form for relaying narrative exposition a few decades ago might today be seen as transparent and irritating. Perception of such norms will continue to change in unforeseeable ways. Finally, studies show that the audience can adopt attitudes that limit or heighten their empathic engagement with characters (see: Vorderer, Cupchik, and Oatley; Małecki et al.). Although these studies pertain to literature, similar attitude adoptions would likely affect spectators' engagement with characters in a film. Other outstanding variables may include fluctuating societal norms, individual's sensibilities (amongst others towards sex, violence, a given ideology, and ethics), the circumstance under which an individual experiences a story, emotional contagion that may affect a group viewing, familiarity with a narrative's context, and so on.

## **1.6 Degrees of engagement**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of empathic engagement strategies in Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Minghella's adaptation of the novel. The hope is that this comparative analysis, backed by two survey studies, will yield evidence of how the strategies' constituents may function in other narrative contexts. I evaluate the efficiency of Highsmith's and Minghella's engagement based on these constituents, which I call *empathy facilitators*, that is, various triggers intended to evoke empathic engagement.

I do not use the terms "elicitor" or "elicitation" for two reasons. Firstly, I want to avoid confusion with a process Murray Smith calls elicitation of imaginative engagement, which includes sympathy (*Engaging Characters* 75). Secondly, the terms connote the assumption that applying these triggers guarantees empathic engagement and that each facilitator autonomously carries elicitation potential. This misconception characterizes a few studies which I refer to

below. An empathy facilitator promotes but seldom guarantees effectiveness, especially when applied independently.

My research indicates that a facilitator will help promote empathic engagement when working with other facilitators. For example, inside views into characters strongly complement character goal orientation. If the audience recognizes a character's affects, beliefs, and motivations, they will likely care about the outcome of their goal pursuit. The application of empathy facilitators can be compared to the striking of a guitar string. The sound produced will quickly wane unless the chord is struck repeatedly. The best result is achieved if the line is struck in combination with others to create an enticing harmony. This contrasts with sympathy and antipathy, which result from the audience's moral judgment. They produce a sustained effect like the pressing of an organ key. Their influence can be altered by the character's subsequent actions that prompt the audience to reevaluate their previous judgment. In other words, it is safe to assume that a sympathy elicitor, such as a display of virtue, will produce sustained sympathetic engagement that will be altered only when a given character demonstrates morally dubious motivations or acts in a way that merits a moral reevaluation.

For this reason, I dedicate more attention to empathy facilitators than sympathy elicitors. That said, the two types of triggers may work in conjunction, and their relationship is symbiotic (see [1.7](#)). Lastly, an essential condition required for eliciting empathic engagement is a skillful implementation of the facilitators. For example, an overtly ideologic victimization scene may alienate audiences rather than promote engagement. Likewise, the use of objective virtue displays may produce the opposite of the desired effect (see [3.1.a](#)).

I will verify my observations with empirical data collected from two survey studies conducted on limited groups of respondents. The empirical part of the study takes on a reader/spectator response approach. Such a perspective benefits little from Gaut's distinction between imagining what a character feels and feeling what a character feels (previously imaginative identification vs. empathy). The same facilitator will inevitably produce a varying degree of engagement for each respondent. A victimization scene, for example, might cause one

respondent to merely imagine what the character experiences. Yet it may cause a different respondent to experience an approximation of that state.<sup>9</sup> Such a degree of reaction may result from respondents' varying sensitivities or may be brought about by other outstanding variables. Those may include everything from respondents' aesthetic tastes, which may produce artifact emotions, to the circumstances of their narrative experience, such as meta-emotions (see [1.5.a](#)). Thus, if limited to elements within a storyteller's control, a study of empathic engagement strategies can provide limited but helpful evidence. Rather than determining the level of intensity of engagement, one can conclude whether a particular empathy facilitator has succeeded or failed to prompt a respondent's clear recognition of a character's state. I argue that such an understanding is similarly produced by imagining what a character experiences, experiencing a simulation of that character's experience, and the intermediate states, all of which are gradations of empathic engagement.

On a side note, various scientific approaches propose similar ways of bisecting empathy. Notable is the dichotomy of affective and cognitive empathy. Psychologists Simone Shamay-Tsoory and Daniela Perry and neurologist Judith Aharon-Peretz provide evidence that, as far as neural origins are concerned, the cognitive and affective systems function independently (617–27). Similarly, film theorist Margrethe Bruun Vaage proposes dividing the term into “embodied” and “imaginative empathy.” She understands embodied empathy as “latching onto the [character's] sensuous, bodily or affective state” (167). It is essentially the spectator's involuntary response to audiovisual stimuli that unfold on the screen. A recognizable example of an embodied empathy “facilitator” is the “push/pull” shot characteristic of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) (discussed in [3.4](#)). The achieved “bending” of the perspective simulates the protagonists' sense of vertigo. This kind of facilitator is meant to create a more visceral engagement.

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<sup>9</sup> Communication studies researchers have made attempts to classify audiences' narrative engagement levels. For example, Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic categorized perceivers' involvement based on their “narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence” (321). However, their proposed dimensions require additional scrutiny as they imply the audience's “loss of self-awareness” (325).

Vaage, in turn, understands imaginative empathy to involve the audience's puzzlement with a character. Controlled restriction of knowledge prompts spectators to "imagine what it would be like to be the [intriguing] other" (167). Arguably, the affective aspect, as defined above, accounts for what Vaage calls "embodied empathy" and what Shamay-Tsoory and Aharon-Peretz call "affective empathy." The remaining perceptual, motivational, and epistemic aspects describe the same phenomenon as "imaginative empathy" and "cognitive empathy" entail.

### **1.7 Empathy Facilitators**

Empathy Facilitators are various textual/visual cues, triggers, and techniques that promote empathic engagement. This section will classify the most common facilitators according to the four aspects: affective, motivational, perceptual, and epistemic. As mentioned, the divide between perceptual and epistemic aspects may often become blurred. I will therefore discuss them in a single section. Significantly, the facilitators are not as effective when utilized independently. Instead, they need to function as elements of a larger strategy targeting a given character. Empathy engagement's potency is proportionate to the number of successfully implemented facilitators.

Moreover, the audience's alignment with a character needs to be continuously reinforced by facilitators for the duration of a narrative. A common strategy is to punctuate a narrative's beginning with a victimization or a virtue display empathy facilitator while also marking the protagonist with inside views, focalization markers, and POV structures. Their use will define the narration tone, a constituent part of what Greg Smith calls "mood." Mood, he argues, "encourages us to experience emotion, and experiencing emotions encourages us to continue in the present mood" (*Film Structure* 42). It acts as an "orienting state" for eliciting emotions. Therefore the application of inside views, focalization markers, and POV structures should be maintained consistently throughout the narrative. Next, the audience's alignment will be sustained through goal orientation, which will likely be redefined a few times throughout the

story. Emotion markers might underscore the protagonist's realizations. Their dramatic experiences might be additionally expressed through character time perception, while the character's emotional aftermath might use scenes of empathy.

Discerning the distinction between affective empathy and sympathy may be difficult if we confuse storytellers' perspectives with the psychologists'. This may be especially true if we consider that some sympathy elicitors may additionally facilitate empathy. For example, a character's action designed to merit a positive moral judgment may additionally align the audience with that character's perspective (see [1.5](#)). It is, therefore, necessary to specify that sympathy is an other-oriented emotion "elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need," or feelings of care and concern for another's wellbeing (Batson 11). In sympathizing with a character, I feel concerned for their wellbeing. This may be concurrent with that character's concern for themselves. It is vital to differentiate between the other-oriented, and self-oriented concerns as distinct affects, especially since sympathetic identification<sup>10</sup> with a character may seem to abate this difference.

Some film researchers argue that sympathy entails processes constituent of empathic engagement (see: Greg Smith, *Film Structure* 98; Plantinga 100). Such a consideration demonstrates problems that may arise from the blurring of a perspective that is useful to storytellers and better serves psychologists. To clarify, a storyteller may benefit from conceiving of a sympathy that presumes "no shared experience" (Coplan, "Empathic Engagement" 145). An example of this might be a scenario in which the audience feels sympathy for a depressed and suicidal character. Their concern is incongruous with the character's apathy in such a case. If they additionally hope to see the character recover, then it is likely that they are not only affectively but also perceptually, epistemically, and motivationally misaligned. From a storyteller's perspective, they are empathically disengaged from the character. Despite this, a psychologist may argue that in the above case the audience's sympathy for the depressed character entails

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<sup>10</sup> Sympathetic identification with a character involves a synchronization of sympathetic and empathic responses. To achieve this, storytellers will most often couple a highly subjective narration with sympathy elicitors such as the mentioned virtue displays or victimizations.

recognizing that character's state, that is, some form of empathy. Such deliberation, however useful when working towards a patient's recovery, can be distracting for those whose goal is to manage audience engagement. Storytellers will be primarily interested in whether or not their audiences experience character-oriented affects or affective synchronization with a given character and less concerned with the complex psychological processes that make either phenomenon possible.

To further illustrate this, the audience may not identify with a character that they find to be sympathetic. For example, a likable antagonist might merit the audience's positive moral judgment. But if the audience is motivationally aligned with the protagonist, they will find it difficult to empathize with an antagonist whose role impedes the hero's progress. Accordingly, a likable mother warns her son (the protagonist) of the repercussions of skipping school. In this story, the audience has been primed to believe that skipping school will entail a magical adventure. They, therefore, want what the protagonist wants. That said, they might share in the boy's concern over whether his act of disobedience will cause his mother discomfort. The audience is affectively aligned with the hero's other-oriented concern in such a case. Put simply, they empathize with the protagonist by feeling sympathy for his antagonist. Again, a psychologist might argue that the boy must have formed a recognition of what his mother might feel by empathizing.<sup>11</sup> As mentioned above, such a diagnosis is less relevant for a storyteller whose primary concern is to manage the audience's aspectual alignment with the boy protagonist.

Maintaining a broad perspective over the confusing detail is crucial when navigating between the empathic engagement choices. For example, storytellers may opt for varying degrees of subjective narration to elicit empathy for their protagonist (see [chapter 4](#)). It would benefit them to understand that the more nonsubjective a narration style becomes, the less capable it becomes of sustaining an empathic engagement. Therefore, a highly nonsubjective narration would benefit from the application of potent sympathy or antipathy elicitors to preserve the

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<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, one could argue that moral judgment which results in antipathy or sympathy is contingent on recognition. It would follow that a positive moral judgment stems from the empathic engagement process (see Figure 1).

audience's attention. Paradoxically, the disadvantage of a nonsubjective narration, namely the inability to lock the audience in a perceptual and epistemic alignment with a character, is one of the narration's assets. The unconstrained perspective enables the use of several powerful devices, which in turn can heighten the audience's sense of suspense (assuming that they feel concerned for one of the characters involved); for example, a nonsubjective narration may make use of dramatic irony, since the audience does not need to be limited to what the protagonist sees, knows, and believes (see: Gulino, *Screenwriting* 7-17; Howard and Mabley 68-76). The additional benefit may be that a nonsubjective narration may allow the audience to choose characters with whom they wish to sympathize; alternatively, they may simultaneously feel concerned<sup>12</sup> for the wellbeing of more than one character. Familiarity with the ramification that each narration style entails concerns most commercial storytellers. Therefore, it makes sense to simplify the methodology so that it provides clear distinctions between empathic and sympathetic engagements as well as sympathetic identification.

Sympathy for the focalizer of a subjective narration will likely elicit sympathetic identification. In other words, I understand sympathetic identification to be a synchronization of two phenomena: a character-oriented feeling of pity and concern and an affective, perceptual, epistemic, and/or motivational alignment with that character. Sympathetic identification, not sympathy, entails empathic engagement (Carroll, *Philosophy of Motion Pictures* 181–82).

Finally, I would like to address the notion that sympathetic engagement requires comprehension of the narrative situation, whereas empathic engagement does not (see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* 102-03). As Smith argues, to feel concerned for a character's wellbeing, I must first understand their predicament. While this is correct, believing that empathic engagement may occur independently of the audience's narrative understanding essentially equates empathy with emotional contagion. That misconception, Coplan argues, is common among researchers ("Empathic Engagement" 145). To empathize, I must recognize a

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<sup>12</sup> Although it is difficult to imagine narrative scenarios in which the audience empathizes simultaneously with more than one character, a study concerning such a possibility could be very beneficial to both scholars and storytellers.

character's situated psychological states. To do so, I must understand the narrative situation. Wincing at the sight of a character who bangs their finger with a hammer is not empathy but motor mimicry. A shot in which a camera lingers on a close-up or even pushes in on that pained face promotes emotional contagion.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true if other audience members strengthen our emotional response by reacting similarly. I consider the described scene an empathy facilitator, which film theorist Carl Plantinga calls a "scene of empathy." Neither motor mimicry nor emotional contagion depends on spectators' "involvement in a narrative nor investment in a character" (Coplan, "Empathic Engagement" 105). Arguably, the over-reliance of many contemporary blockbuster films on motor mimicry fails to involve spectators on a deeper level. That said, the phenomenon can help promote a sustained empathic engagement if, for example, a reaction close-up of a protagonist sustains or facilitates further alignment with that character. In a film about the biblical Noah, emotional contagion could guide the audience's motivational and epistemic alignment with the protagonist in his resolve to build an ark despite his hammered fingers. In other words, the scene of empathy will trigger motor mimicry, which may lead to empathic engagement, but only if spectators understand the narrative situation.

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<sup>13</sup> I understand emotional contagion as the "tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (Hatfield et al. 1994, 48).

## CHAPTER TWO: MOTIVATIONAL EMPATHY FACILITATOR

Film theorists argue that the audience feels concerned about the outcome of a character's goal pursuit when they empathize with that character (see: Plantinga 141; Tan, *Emotion* 181). While this is true, we also empathize with characters because they have goals. "Wanting something very badly" is likely the most relatable quality of a character in a story (Gulino, *Screenwriting* 10). In popular fiction, this desire becomes the foundation for dramatic tension. Screenwriting professor Paul Gulino argues that desire shapes two kinds of dramatic stories, "chases and escapes." But, as he argues, essentially both are goal-oriented strategies: "either someone wants something and is having trouble getting it, or is trying to escape something and having trouble doing so" (10). Such a formulation is interesting when juxtaposed with a popular misquotation of the novelist and writing teacher John Gardner: "there are only two plots in all of fiction: somebody goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town." Novelist David Ebenbach argues that such a premise suggests that all stories are essentially "driven by the actions of characters and that they must center on a time when something changes in the life of those characters" (84). The difference in these two distillations of the dramatic and the restrained stories<sup>14</sup> comes down to the significance they place on their character's *goal orientation*. A highly goal-oriented narrative presents a character actively overcoming a series of obstacles as they move towards a clearly defined goal. A restrained story might feature a protagonist experiencing change, such as overcoming an existentialist crisis.

The experience of a story without any goal orientation would (in the best case scenario) amount to something more akin to art appreciation. Consequently, such narratives remain the domain of experimental films, theatre, and literature. Arguably, stories with limited goal orientation do not enjoy "the mass popularity of the active, goal-oriented" narratives (Plantinga 102). Instead, they must rely on other elements, such as the story's subject matter, the

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<sup>14</sup> I borrow the term "restrained narrative" from Margrethe Bruun Vaage. By it, she refers to dedramatized films that adopt nonsubjective narration (175). I propose that the definitive quality of restrained narrative be limited goal orientation.

storyteller's superior craftsmanship, or artistic vision, to appeal to their audience. When a character's objective is incoherent, abstract, or unclear, the audience must often "engage imaginatively" to understand what motivates the character (Vaage 162). This requires an active engagement with the story, which may be more demanding of the audience.

Film theorist Noël Carroll argues that goal-oriented films are more easily understood because they have been "emotionally predigested" for spectators. In a goal-oriented film, the characters' emotional states are presented in scenes and sequences that guide narrative understanding and expectations ("Film, Emotion, and Genre" 29). A clear goal orientation makes it easier for the audience to find correlations between the unfolding story and their knowledge of narrative conventions (those may include scripts such as "rescue the damsel" and "recover the Macguffin"). This simplifies the identification of a character's emotional state, thus facilitating story comprehension and empathic engagement (Greg Smith, "Local Emotions" 121). For example, in a dramatized story such as Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, by the end of chapter four, readers understand that Tom's goal is to influence Dickie Greenleaf to return home from Europe.

Furthermore, Highsmith's protagonist is motivated by his hope of escaping his potential troubles with the law. Therefore, when his antisocial disposition causes him to feel "almost physically ill" during his visit to the Greenleafs' home, the audience contextualizes the situation as an obstacle to his goal. Tom's uncontrollable symptoms put him at risk of offending his hosts and possibly losing his assignment. The protagonist seems aware of this as he uses a mirror to monitor whether his mouth is visibly "turned down at the corners" (*Talented* 17). If Tom's goal was unclear, the interpretation of a strange gesture would require the audience's imaginative inquiry—is Tom trying to conceal his envy? Has this visit summoned recollections of past traumas? Is this gesture purely symbolic? Does it require additional research to be understood? If deprived of clear goal orientation, the audience has to imagine the possible states that the character is in. This requires that they assess different emotional states "to build a fuller picture of the character" (Vaage 173). Such a "restricted knowledge view" could be mistaken for an

empathy facilitator. However, because they primarily arouse the audience's curiosity (rather than empathy), restricted knowledge views are less instrumental to empathy elicitation strategies.

Goal-oriented perception is relatable outside the narrative context. Cognitive philosophy theorists propose that the “emotion prototype” is structured according to “object” and goal orientation. As Greg Smith explains, the emotion of fear, for example, has an object—I am afraid of something. Such an emotion will also promote a goal—to distance me from the object of fear. Thus emotions are seen as being “action tendencies” in that they spur the will to act (“Local Emotions” 104). It seems that a lack of action tendency and, consequently, goal orientation may often be equated with states such as boredom, apathy, or depression.

Moreover, as Plantinga argues, “most responses to the environment are determined not solely by the information available in the environment, but by how that information relates to a person's goals” (52). If my objective is to arrive at work on time, I will likely view encountered objects (vehicles, traffic lights, commuters) as aiding, impeding, or non-affecting elements. Thinking about how I could expedite my future trips to work would require narrative imagining or “story,” which, as cognitive linguist Mark Turner argues, “is the fundamental instrument of thought” (4). Thus, it seems that the appeal of goal-orientated narratives comes not from being “emotionally predigested” but instead from the fact that they reflect our cognition.

## **2.1 Character Goal Orientation**

*Character goal orientation* refers to the storyteller establishing a goal and motivation for a character in a story. A motivational empathy facilitator operates under the assumption that the audience will find a character's motivated pursuit of a goal relatable. Screenwriting theorist Karl Iglesias notes that traits such as “attitudes, actions, and motivations” influence identification more than perceived physical or racial similarities, and he cites examples of films with highly identifiable, non-human characters: *Bambi* (1942), *The Lion King* (1994), *Toy Story* (1995), and *Finding Nemo* (2003) (62). Likewise, communication studies researchers note the significance of

character motivation in the engagement process (see: Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 182; Shafer and Raney 1029). Because the audience is likely to mirror a character's emotional states, the strength of a character's determination will be reflected in their response. The more a character wants something, the more the audience will care about the outcome (see: Iglesias 54; Field 63). "The measure of the value of a character's desire," Robert McKee points out, "is in direct proportion to the risk he's willing to take to achieve it" (150).

Along with other screenwriting theorists, McKee proposes thinking of character motivation in terms of stakes. Those may serve as clear motivation markers in a story. If we understand what will happen to a character if they fail to attain their goal, then we are likely to understand their motivations; if a character like Tom Ripley is willing to risk his freedom to achieve his objective, then readers understand his motivation to be strong.

As with the remaining facilitators, character goal orientation holds little potency on its own. The facilitator can be effective if the audience's motivations align with the character's. For example, a character suffering from claustrophobia is trapped in an elevator. The fact that the audience recognizes their goal—to escape the elevator—does not mean that they are necessarily engaged. If an application of supporting facilitators, such as projections, allows the audience to simulate that character's sense of neurosis, then their motivation will likely align with the character's efforts to find relief in a spacious, outdoor setting.

Character goal orientation, as Plantinga argues, is effective at heightening emotional response once the audience has formed an "allegiance with a character" (102). This is not to say that this empathy facilitator requires empathic engagement before implementation. Plantinga recognizes the additional benefit of goal orientation. If the audience recognizes a character's goals that they identify with, they are more likely to hope that these goals will be achieved. "Strong desire," he asserts, "leads to concern, and concern in the face of threats and obstacles elicits emotional response" (102). It is noteworthy that this emotional response is not a constituent of empathic engagement unless the elicited emotion simulates a character's state. For

example, when a character like Tom manages to achieve his immediate goal, those in the audience who identify with him share in his resulting elation.

A clear establishment of a concrete goal, coupled with the character's strong motivation, will result in a strong character goal orientation. A vague establishment and an abstract goal will yield a weak goal orientation. Notably, the modifiers "strong" and "weak" do not necessarily gradate the facilitator's utility as far as empathic engagement is concerned. Though a strong goal orientation makes it easier to recognize characters' emotional states, it does not guarantee alignment. For example, intersubjective narration that presents a polyphonous world of strongly motivated characters with clearly defined goals will inhibit the storyteller's control over empathic engagement. Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter" (1969) may serve as an example. The narrative is a patchwork of story variants, all of which feature goal-oriented protagonists. The story lacks a single focalizer, making it difficult to control the reader's empathic engagement, not that this was Coover's intention (see: McHale 21; Heckard 220).

On the other hand, a highly subjective narration employing several empathy facilitators will likely yield enough focus to facilitate engagement with a poorly motivated character with an abstract goal. An example of such a narrative is Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral" (1983). In it, the narrator passively opposes the arrival of his wife's blind friend. Neither he nor the readers have the proper insight into his motivations; nevertheless, many will empathize with the protagonist.

Characters' goals may be immediate or ultimate.<sup>15</sup> An immediate goal might be to overcome an obstacle within a narrative's scene. In the early sequences of Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1981), Indiana Jones's immediate goal is to traverse the

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<sup>15</sup> Such a categorization has some overlap with what novelist K. M. Weiland terms as character's "wants" and "needs." She defines them as follows: "Your character will spend most of the story pursuing an outer, plot-related goal related to the Thing He Wants. But what the story is really about, on a deeper level, is his growth into a place where he, first subconsciously, then consciously, recognizes and pursues his inner goal—the Thing He Needs" (chapter 2). Both of these notions are variants of what I call the ultimate goal. I would define the difference as follows: Weiland's "want" refers to the ultimate goal that *the character* believes will make them happy, while Weiland's "need" refers to the ultimate goal that *the storyteller* knows would result in the character's sense of fulfillment.

booby-trapped corridors of a temple to attain his ultimate goal—the golden idol. The ultimate goal establishes the story's dramatic tension, and it will likely change during the narrative. Furthermore, goals could be classified based on their potential for empathy facilitation. An unconscious (from the character's perspective), abstract and intangible goal would likely elicit weak motivational alignment.

In contrast, a conscious, concrete, and tangible goal marks a goal orientation more distinctively, thus holding a more substantial empathy facilitation potential. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, the knight's vision of a maiden bearing a grail marks a strong ultimate goal orientation. The knight will consciously pursue a tangible object. On the other hand, in Jacques Tati's *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (1953), the protagonist's intent of spending a relaxing vacation is an example of weak ultimate goal orientation. David Ebenbach makes a noteworthy argument that storytellers often opt to have concrete and tangible goals representing characters' abstract and intangible desires; a character's will to succeed at their job (concrete) may express their desire to attain a sense of self-worth (abstract) (57). It is likely that those strong goal orientations, which are underpinned with characters' unstated, inner longings, carry the broadest empathy elicitation potential.

The audience can align themselves with either the immediate or ultimate goal of a character while rejecting the other. A typical example of this is found in romantic narratives. If the audience judges the protagonist to be sympathetic, they will likely want to see them succeed with the ultimate goal of finding true love. However, the character may pursue an immediate dream, which the audience recognizes as a romantic mismatch. In such a situation, they may remain aligned with the character's ultimate goal but be conflicted with the immediate one, which they recognize as an obstacle.

Carl Plantinga argues that despite a close motivational alignment, the audience will likely hold other ultimate goals particular to them. As they experience a narrative and become invested in a character's struggle to attain an objective, the audience develops an intense interest in the narrative outcome. Finishing the story and finding out how it ends becomes an additional goal

that they develop alongside aligning with the protagonist's goal orientation (52). Furthermore, a motivationally aligned audience will remain removed from the protagonist's congruent goal. If they want a given sociopath, such as Tom Ripley, to get away with murder, they want this to happen only within that "world of the fiction" (154). If Tom happened to be a real person, they would feel more inclined to desire his capture. This differentiation is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it is essential to recognize that the audience's (other-oriented) response will always be nonidentical to the assumed (self-oriented) reaction of a character in the story. The audience only simulates a character's psychological state. Secondly, this rift demonstrates that the audience maintains a clear self/other differentiation while imaginatively experiencing the character's states.

### **2.1.a Highsmith's goal orientation**

Both the novel and the adaptation of *Ripley* provide a strong goal orientation for the protagonist (for a summary, see [chapter 5](#)). In her writing manual, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (1983), Highsmith advises writers to begin stories with what she calls "lines of potential action." She understands them as sentences denoting "the desire of a character for something [or someone]" (69). She stresses the importance of establishing a character's goal orientation from the narrative's onset. In *Ripley*, Highsmith makes Tom's goal clear in the very first paragraph, "Tom walked faster. There was no doubt that the man was after him" (1). His immediate objective is to lose the man who is following him. By the end of the first chapter, Highsmith provides an inside view, "Tom's heart took a sudden leap.... He wanted to leave New York," thus establishing Tom's new immediate goal (7). She keeps his goal orientation very clear by simply stating what he wants: "Tom wanted to leave" (5); "He wanted to be back at the bar" (6); "Tom wanted to get out of the apartment" (17); "He wanted his time for thinking," and so on (25). Alternatively, she employs dialogue to inform us of Tom's intents: "I'll do everything I can to make Dickie come back," Tom promises Mrs. Greenleaf (15).

Highsmith undoubtedly demonstrates an awareness of goal orientation's engagement potential. However, as with most empathy facilitators, the manner in which these mechanisms are implemented dictates their effectiveness. The above examples employ a stating-not-showing technique, which, as empirical research suggests, does little to promote empathic engagement. It turns out that audiences are more responsive to less direct means of communicating goal orientation (see [4.3.b](#)).

Highsmith similarly keeps readers informed of Tom's ultimate goals. Once he accepts Greenleaf's offer to travel to Europe, he desires to start a new and legitimate life abroad.<sup>16</sup> This, however, Highsmith does not relate solely through an inside view. Instead, she devises scenes on the ship where Tom buys a cap which he imagines could make him look like a "country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American eccentric" (*Ripley* 26). She has Tom refrain from stealing a copy of Henry James's novel, "though it would have been easy, so easy," suggesting that he is trying to part ways with his illicit compulsions (27).

Furthermore, Tom writes a letter to his aunt, definitively cutting himself off from her "piddling cheques," and promises himself to "stick to a job once he got it" (26, 28). He eliminates an easy retreat route, thus indicating his resolve. Through these scenes, Highsmith not only makes his ultimate goal clear but also inspires hope that her protagonist might rehabilitate himself.

Once Tom meets Dickie and his girlfriend, Marge, he envies their life of leisure, noting that they are "answerable to nobody." He realizes that his first immediate goal in Europe is "to make Dickie like him" (40). Highsmith does not give her readers the chance to lose sight of her protagonist's aim. She repeatedly has Tom gauge "how high his stock is shooting up with Dickie" (44). Once he accomplishes this objective, his immediate goal shifts to sustaining his friendship. It is Marge who becomes Tom's first major obstacle to this immediate goal. She manipulates

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<sup>16</sup> Arguably, this ultimate goal is underpinned by an unstated ambition for self-improvement, which is a highly abstract desire. The audience will more likely be focused on the more tangible means of achieving this want. Those may include his endeavors to elevate his social and economic status, or as is the case in the above example, to have a fresh start.

Dickie into feeling guilt for having favored Tom's company over hers. Dickie responds by attempting to placate her with romantic gestures (57). Disgusted, Tom fantasizes about strangling Marge. Readers who have aligned with Tom's aim for social rehabilitation in Europe might fear that his proclivity for malice will mark his undoing. In this regard, Marge serves Highsmith as a distractor from what causes Tom to fail in this immediate goal pursuit. Carlo, an Italian drug dealer, proposes that Tom smuggle "dope" in coffins to Paris. Tom cannot control his displeasure when Dickie refuses to partake in this "adventure" (68). He is disappointed with Dickie's failure to share in his appetite for petty crime; more importantly, he is upset by Dickie's disregard of Carlo, "as if he were some kind of animal which interested him, and which he could kill if he decided to" (66). Tom, it seems, is drawing a parallel between Carlo and himself. He becomes convinced that Dickie perceives him the same way. This leads him to realize that he will not sustain their friendship. Rather than admitting failure, Highsmith has Tom shift towards a new objective. After learning that Dickie's father will no longer sponsor his European assignment, Tom decides that he wants "to kill Dickie" (77). Highsmith continues using a clear demarcation of Tom's immediate goal until the novel's end.

While Tom pursues his immediate goals, Highsmith signals his genuine desire. For example, Tom dressed in Dickie's clothes impersonates him, noting "how much he looks like Dickie" (60). Tom's ultimate goal of making a new life concretizes when he decides that "he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself" (77). Becoming Dickie and living under his identity becomes his new ultimate objective. A final goal orientation occurs after the launch of the investigation into Dickie's murder. Tom becomes preoccupied with obstacles that impede his evading of justice.

The fact that Highsmith makes Tom's goal recognizable does not mean that her readers will align themselves with his motivation. For example, Tom's early aim is to escape New York. After establishing this objective, Highsmith devotes the subsequent chapter to explaining his motivation. Tom lives in a "dingy brownstone" with a "smelly john down the hall that doesn't lock." His "filthy" room looks "as if it had been lived in by a thousand different people." She

provides imagery, such as “tangles of string and pencils and cigarette butts and decaying fruit,” to make her readers feel uncomfortable in the imagined space (8). After doing so, she is quick to promise them a new and exciting setting. Tom thinks of “sailing for Europe, probably in a first-class cabin... dressing for dinner... talking with people at his table like a gentleman” (9). This juxtaposition compels readers to want what Tom wants. If they wish to be transported from the rundown apartment to a glamorous European locale, their goals align with Tom's.

She strengthens this synchronization by signaling Tom's stakes. If he fails to leave New York, not only will he remain in his decrepit surrounding, but he will also face apprehension by the police (17). Highsmith attempts to align her readers' motivation each time she establishes a new objective for Tom. As the protagonist sets sail for Europe, his ultimate goal shifts to starting a new, legitimate life. Highsmith describes the excitement he feels, comparing him to immigrants who “left everything behind them in some foreign country ... and sailed for America” (26). She devises scenes where Tom playfully imagines being “a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman” and so on (26). Moreover, she punctuates his elation with moments of panic. As Tom rests in his Mongibello hotel room, he hears:

The voices of some Italian boys who were talking under his window drifted up as distinctly as if they had been in the room with him, and the insolent, cackling laugh of one of them, bursting again and again through the pattering syllables, made Tom twitch and writhe. He imagined them discussing his expedition to Signor Greenleaf, and making unflattering speculations as to what might happen next. (39)

Readers who have experienced relocating to a foreign country will possibly find Tom's mood swings relatable. Highsmith ensures that readers recognize Tom's goals and his motivations. Such a practice will become increasingly important in the latter part of the novel. After Tom's murder of Dickie, which occurs less than halfway through the story, most readers'

alignment with the protagonist's motivation will become questionable. Highsmith, therefore, ensures that Tom's reasons for pursuing Dickie's lifestyle remain understandable. More importantly, she makes his stakes clear. Tom wonders, "supposing they got him on the fingerprints, and the will, and they gave him the electric chair?" Failing in his immediate goal pursuit will result in his incarceration or loss of life.

### **2.1.b Minghella's goal orientation**

Minghella is similarly scrupulous about signaling Tom's immediate and ultimate goals (for the film's summary, see [chapter 6](#)). After introducing his protagonist and the setting, he establishes Tom's objective. Before the film's opening title sequence draws to a close, Mr. Greenleaf asks, "could you ever conceive of going to Italy, Tom, persuade my son to come home? I'd pay you. I'd pay you 1000 dollars" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft 4*). Minghella uses dialogue to establish Tom's goal and signal his potential motivation. Scenes set in Tom's basement studio depict Tom's economic situation as dire. Tom seems to have no serious occupation or relations. Greenleaf's money, therefore, understandably acts as an initial motivator.

Unlike Highsmith's protagonist, Minghella's Tom is not a petty criminal. This deprives him of his literary counterpart's additional motivation of escaping justice. Minghella instead provides scenes that demonstrate Tom's high motivation. Having learned that Dickie is fond of jazz, Tom spends his time up until his departure, blindfolded, listening to records and trying to memorize the music of famous jazz artists. Once he arrives in Mongibello, Tom pursues his immediate goal by surveilling Dickie through binoculars, learning about his girlfriends, Marge and Silvana, as well as the fact that Dickie named his boat "Bird," after Charlie Parker. Considering the innocuousness of Tom's mission—to convince a fellow American to return home—spectators may find his overzealousness surprising, perhaps even menacing. At the very least, they recognize that Tom is highly motivated.

After Dickie rejects his initial attempts to befriend him, spectators still understand Tom's new strategy to serve the same ultimate goal. Tom releases the seam of his tote bag spilling jazz

records to the ground. Delighted by the titles, Dickie invites Tom to a “vile” club in Naples (15). Minghella uses a series of close-ups of Tom’s face to establish his growing fascination with Dickie. By doing so, the filmmaker establishes a new immediate goal.

After their trip to the jazz club, Dickie types a letter to his father, informing him of Tom’s arrival. In the dialogue that follows, Dickie reveals Tom’s new mission, “now you’re a Double Agent and we’re going to string my Dad along” (16). The subtext is that Tom will somehow have to “buy into” Dickie’s life. In the following scene, spectators learn that Tom might have an ulterior motive for remaining within Dickie’s sphere of interest. He “carefully tests the cadences,” trying to make himself sound like his hosts as he repeats their overheard conversation, “‘No, I like him.’ ‘Marge, you like everybody’” (17). While Tom’s sinister goal is not clearly established, Minghella foreshadows it in earlier scenes. When Tom disembarks from the ship in Italy, he introduces himself as “Dickie Greenleaf” to Meredith Logue (7). Later, as he surveils Dickie on the beach, Tom pronounces words from an Italian phrasebook, “*Questo e la mia faccia* [This is my face],” over a binocular POV shot that rests on Dickie’s face. The spectator might therefore anticipate Tom’s foreshadowed scheme.

This suspicion informs the interpretation of the protagonist’s subsequent actions. As Tom learns about Dickie’s life from Marge, questions about his ulterior motives may arise. Later, he selects a passage from Shakespeare for Dickie to copy onto a postcard, only to study Dickie’s handwriting and signature. This creates further suspicion that his ultimate goal may be to steal Dickie’s identity. On the surface, Minghella continues to develop Tom’s fascination with Dickie, introducing a sexual tension as the two play chess. Tom makes an indirect proposal which Dickie rejects (23). Again preceded by suspicion, the seduction attempt prompts speculation as to Tom’s motives. Minghella reinforces spectators’ distrust in the following scene, in which Tom studies Dickie’s signature as he “signs and collects a large wad of notes” from the American Express office (24).

Tom’s first impediment to maintaining Dickie’s attention comes from Freddie Miles, Dickie’s social and economic equal. The man occupies Dickie, excluding Tom from their

revelries, in four scenes. Tom's alienation from their company acts as a victimization empathy facilitator (see [3.2](#)). "The thing with Dickie," Marge explains to the abandoned Tom, "it's like the sun shines on you and it's glorious, then he forgets you, and it's very, very cold" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 29). Tom attempts to lift his spirits by dancing "to the mirror, spectacles abandoned and dressed as Dickie in his tuxedo... He adjusts his hair, catches one of Dickie's expressions" (27). Dickie intrudes on this "dressing up session," interpreting Tom's actions as symptoms of his sycophancy (27-28). Spectators have reasons to doubt his diagnosis; Tom's misstep might be innocent play, but it might also be a rehearsal for becoming Dickie—an eventuality Minghella has been foreshadowing. The ambiguity of Tom's motivation impedes spectators' alignment with him. If his motivations for captivating Dickie's attention are read as sinister, then spectators will feel reluctant to identify. If they interpret them as a naive fascination, they will more likely be engaged. This is consistent with Iglesias's argument that characters' "motivations must be compelling and worthy of empathy" (53).

While Tom's true motivations remain obscured, he attempts to regain Dickie's good graces. He promises to keep secret Dickie's involvement in the suicide of his mistress Silvana. When Dickie informs him that Silvana was pregnant and that he refused to help her, Tom responds, "I'm not going to say anything—to Marge, or anybody, the police—It's a secret between us and I'll keep it" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 33). Ironically, his attempt at keeping Dickie "in thrall" through a dark secret is what precipitates Dickie's rejection of Tom. As the two depart on their farewell trip to San Remo, "Ripley plays his familiar game of studying" Dickie's and his reflections blending in the train window. Again, the peculiarity of his behavior does not provide any clarification as to his motives. When the two characters finally confront each other, Dickie rejects Tom's demand for a relationship, "brotherly" or otherwise. Tom maintains, "I'm not pretending to be somebody else, and you are. I'm absolutely honest with you. I've told you my feelings" (37). Tom's externalization does not clear spectators' doubts as to his motivations. Multiple manifestations of Tom's clandestine designs for Dickie prevent this.

Furthermore, as their argument escalates, Tom does not consider a barehanded confrontation. He intuitively reaches for an oar, a potentially lethal weapon. Arguably, this is an odd impulse. After killing Dickie, the idea to steal his identity comes to Tom only after a hotel receptionist mistakes him for his friend. An emotion marker, which is a fast dolly on Tom's face, clarifies this. Unlike Highsmith's Tom, Minghella's protagonist did not contemplate the murder and appropriation of his victim's identity. It, therefore, seems that his preparations to assume Dickie's role were unconsciously motivated. After the murder, Tom's ultimate goal remains to escape justice while reaping the benefits of Dickie's life for as long as possible.

In his screenwriting manual, Karl Iglesias recommends that a character's motivation should merit the audience's positive moral judgment. "If a character robs a bank because of greed," Iglesias argues, "we don't empathize with that character. But if he robs a bank to pay for a loved one's operation ... we identify with that" (53). Communication studies empirical research confirm this assumption. Maja Krakowiak and Mina Tsay-Vogel have found that "altruistic character motivations facilitated moral disengagement" (193). In their study, the respondents felt less inclined to be disengaged by morally ambiguous actions of characters they felt were motivated by selfishness.<sup>17</sup> In Ripley's murder scene, Minghella attempts to exploit this concept on a visceral level. He uses tight framing and accelerated editing to instill the dialogue exchange leading up to the murder with a sense of claustrophobia and discomfort. The effect is that spectators' desire to escape the suffocating atmosphere aligns with Tom's desperation to escape Dickie's disdain.

Tom's grabbing of the oar to deliver a blow might elicit conflicting emotions. The close-ups force spectators to experience the gory struggle from discomfiting proximity. They want the scene to end, much like Tom, who yells "Stop! Stop! Please!" while pounding "Dickie again and

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Gulino and Connie Shears cite examples of narratives that feature morally dubious protagonists with clearly established motivations. The titles they include are Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Miloš Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), David Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010), and Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). That list could be supplemented by numerous contemporary streaming media shows such as Beau Willimon's *House of Cards* (2013-2018), Rob Smith's *The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story* (2018), Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble's *You* (2018-present), and David E. Kelley's *The Undoing* (2020).

again.” Strangely, spectators share in Tom’s short-lived sense of relief when Minghella finally cuts to a long shot, thus releasing them from the confines of the tight framing. Tom and the spectators catch their breath as the boat rocks “gently, the sun sparkling indifferently on the waves” (39). In this way, the filmmaker manipulates the spectators into sharing Tom’s motivation and goal. They feel discomfort which they want to escape. As a result, spectators feel more inclined to interpret the murder as an unforeseen consequence of Tom’s goal pursuit (for an in-depth analysis of the murder scene, including respondents’ reactions, see: [4.1](#); [7.4](#)).

Although motivational alignment might not occur or, at best, disintegrate after Dickie’s murder, Minghella’s strong goal orientation strategy facilitates spectators’ recognition of Tom’s wants, while the ambiguity as to the nature of his desire adds complexity to his character. This room for interpretation is what Vaage calls “restricted knowledge.” She argues that such ambiguities “prompt the audience to engage in empathic understanding to make sense of the character” and in that sense promotes empathic engagement (173). The ambiguity of Tom’s motivation might appeal to some spectators.

## **2.2 Goal pursuit**

Where goal orientation refers to narrative signposting that promotes the audience’s recognition of a character’s goal and motivation, I discuss the facilitator’s potential for characterization and the elicitation of sympathetic identification under the subcategory of goal pursuit. Screenwriter Anna Thomas (2009) argues that the spectator finds characters’ attempts at overcoming obstacles highly identifiable. Seeing the character complete a task or achieve a goal evokes an additional sense of satisfaction that furthers character engagement. The facilitator relies on the audience’s familiarity with the feeling of struggle, failure, and achievement. Research on the Zeigarnik effect in psychology shows that our brains gravitate towards uncompleted tasks. We tend to forget completed activities, and after “achieving closure,” we seek and conduct “innovative activities” (Burke 163). Likewise, in a dramatized narrative, the moment

a character achieves an objective, the audience looks to shift their attention to a new goal pursuit. If, however, a given goal completion releases the dramatic tension, meaning a character's solution to the predicament seems final, the audience will expect the narrative to end. In either situation, the audience's alignment with a character's sense of completion will be secondary to their alignment with a goal pursuit. That said, this motivational empathy facilitator may elicit a congruent affective response (such as gratification or fulfillment) as well as the audience-specific sense of admiration or sympathy for a character. In the latter case, the facilitator will be promoting sympathetic identification. Goal pursuit, therefore, is a facilitator that overlaps the motivational and affective aspects of empathy; if the audience finds a character's objective completion to be admirable or inspiring, it may also act as a sympathy elicitor.

A goal pursuit may end in a scene where a protagonist succeeds where other characters have failed. King Arthur's pulling a sword out of the stone establishes his unique competence and evokes gratification<sup>18</sup> (Green 21). In John Lasseter's animated film *Toy Story* (1995), the protagonist, Sheriff Woody, possesses the ability to maintain calm in the face of an impending birthday party. This sets him apart from the other toys. Similarly, Tom Ripley's affinity for "forging signatures, telling lies, impersonating practically anybody" gives him a unique skill set that makes his overcoming of obstacles exciting (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 12). Karl Iglesias argues that audiences find appeal in expert characters, "the best at their job, sought-after experts in a particular field," citing examples such as Indiana Jones and James Bond (73). By this, he refers to the facilitator's mentioned capacity for eliciting sympathetic identification, as the mentioned characters' qualities will likely prompt the audience-specific affective response.

Goal pursuit can mitigate the audience's moral judgment of an antihero. An ethically dubious character, such as Frank Underwood of Beau Willimon's *The House of Cards* (2012-2018), might merit spectators' moral disengagement. His ability to weave Machiavellian schemes may fascinate the audience to the point that they will be willing to

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<sup>18</sup> Gratification derived from a character's performance of a heroic feat might be coupled with a sense of admiration, but as this affect is specific to the audience (and not the character), it does not elicit empathic engagement but rather sympathy.

withhold their moral judgment. However, goal pursuit is not limited to the use of a unique proficiency. As Anna Thomas (2009) observes, a character's overcoming of a daily routine can constitute a form of goal achievement that is especially identifiable. For this reason, many popular films employ the schematic daily routine in their introductory sequence (see: Gulino, *Screenwriting* 14; Vogler 87).

As mentioned, the pursuit of a goal provides more potential for alignment than achieving that goal. The outcome of the endeavor creates an additional opportunity for eliciting affective responses and, as such, is secondary to the pursuit. An unsuccessful goal completion, for example, may facilitate empathic engagement as effectively as a successful variation. If a character's valorous attempt at a goal inspires recognition or alignment, their failure may develop into a victimization scene, which will further facilitate empathic engagement. The opening sequence of director Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) depicts the protagonist's spectacular attempt at securing the "Cross of Coronado." The protagonist's introductory close-up coincides with his discovery of his first antagonists, the tomb raiders. The filmmakers use the goal orientation to establish their character. Indiana Jones, spectators learn, is courageous and motivated by his belief in humanism. Still, his death-defying feats fail as the town's sheriff seizes the cross from his hands. The unsuccessful goal completion may espouse an identifiable, "hard work went to waste" sentiment. Moreover, it results in the undeserved mistreatment of the protagonist, which additionally functions as a type of empathy facilitator (see [3.2](#)).

In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell suggests that the protagonist's introductory goal pursuit may be a blunder that sets the story in motion. A princess who retrieves her favorite toy from a pool by employing the help of a toad, or a knight who, in the hot pursuit of game, becomes ensnared by an untraversed forest, are examples of goal pursuits that lead to further complications (39-49). The causal connection of a goal pursuit with further complications is, of course, the motor of the "canonical forward-directness" of a "linear

narrative,” or a story that involves characters whose pursuits are either blocked or fulfilled (see: Grodal 138; Plantinga 93; Mandler).

In Minghella’s adaptation, the first notable scene of a goal pursuit comes in the fifteenth minute of the film. Tom has accepted Marge’s invitation to lunch and he wants to use this opportunity to communicate to Dickie the nature of his mission. Instead of simply stating, “your father sent me here to persuade you to return to America,” Tom applies his unique skills to additionally impress Dickie. When pressed to demonstrate his ability to do impressions, Tom impersonates Dickie’s father, Mr. Greenleaf, recalling the man’s line of dialogue, “could you ever conceive of going to Italy, Tom, and bringing him back?” (*Shooting Draft* 19). Minghella stays on a close-up of Dickie’s perplexed reaction, withholding his response until the next scene. At this stage, most spectators will be aligned with Tom. Therefore, this dramatic pause accentuates the anticipation that both they and Tom feel. How will Dickie respond?—both spectators and Tom want to know. In this sense, we could say that Tom’s goal pursuit promotes both a motivational and an affective alignment. Spectators want what Tom wants and feel a congruent anticipation. Moreover, in the discussed goal pursuit scene, Minghella uses close-ups of Dickie’s face as he expresses his admiration for Tom’s talents to encourage spectators to appraise his impersonation similarly. Emotional contagion will likely affect spectators’ judgment. Therefore, they will be unlikely to find the performance unconvincing because Dickie serves both as an authority on the subject and as a catalyst of affective mimicry (see Doherty 187).

Highsmith uses similar techniques in her novel. In *Ripley*’s second chapter, she establishes Tom’s unique abilities through a goal pursuit scene. Tom is engaged in fraud and extortion, posing as a “collector of Internal Revenue.” He contacts “carefully chosen” prospects based on location, occupation, and salary. “Artists and writers and freelance people,” Tom believes, will be more likely to have made an error on their tax return and less likely to “pay the New York office a personal visit” (10). Highsmith thus establishes her protagonist’s diligence and perspicacity. She informs her readers that his efforts had amounted to “one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three

dollars and fourteen cents,” additionally implying Tom’s proficiency, or alternatively inviting moral disengagement by deflating the extent of his crimes.

Before leaving for Europe, Tom decides to extort one last check. He calls a Mr. Reddington and explains that due to a “computational error,” the man owes money to the Internal Revenue Service. Highsmith presents a telephone dialogue exchange during which Tom is always one step ahead of his interlocutor. When Mr. Reddington demands to come to see the collector in person, Tom adopts a tone of “a genial old codger of sixty-odd, who might be patient... but who wouldn’t yield by so much as a red cent.” In case the man asks about his records, Tom has prepared “a lot of hash about... interest at six percent annum accruing from the due date of the tax until paid on any balance... which he could deliver in a slow voice as incapable of interruption as a Sherman tank” (12). Though his ability is impressive,<sup>19</sup> Highsmith must prevent the reader from identifying with Mr. Reddington. She does this by focusing the scene on Tom’s ability. Mr. Reddington’s potentially pity-eliciting reactions function as obstacles to Tom’s goal. As a result, readers are more likely to ask, “would I be able to execute a similar ruse?” rather than, “would I be deceived by a similar ruse?” Highsmith further guides perspective-taking by ensuring the scene is read through an “amusement” or “game” filter. Before Tom confronts Mr. Reddington, she informs her readers that Tom would not be able to cash any of the checks, so to him, the extortion “amounts to no more than a practical joke, really. Good clean sport” (10). Aside from ridicule, the beneficiaries of Tom’s guile experience no harm. Additionally, Highsmith maintains the amusement perspective with humor. For example, the metaphor comparing Tom, an impenetrable tax collector, to a Sherman tank might speak to readers’ similar experiences with government bureaucrats.

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<sup>19</sup> Some readers may additionally be stimulated by actions they would not have the nerve or the skill to perform. Wouldn’t this be better placed in the body of the text?

## CHAPTER THREE: AFFECTIVE EMPATHY FACILITATOR

When theorists and researchers define empathy as “feeling with a character,” they reduce the phenomenon to its affective aspect. This common practice has afforded the affective empathy facilitator the most attention. In this section, I focus on those facilitators whose primary purpose is to elicit the audience’s affective response congruent to that of a character in a story. By this, I mean the congruent emotions presumably felt by the audience and the character. While facilitators oriented towards the remaining (perceptual, motivational, and epistemic) aspects may evoke congruent affective responses, such as the described goal achievement, I do not consider this their primary function. In this subcategory, I include those facilitators whose primary role is to promote affective alignment with a character.

### 3.1 Virtue Display

In her writing manual *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, Patricia Highsmith admits that she found making a “criminal hero non-repugnant” to be “damnably difficult.” Her suggestion to writers wishing to emulate her style is to give “the murderer-hero as many pleasant qualities as possible—generosity, kindness to some people, fondness for painting or music or cooking... These qualities can also be amusing in contrast to his criminal or homicidal traits” (46-47). Blake Snyder’s recognized “save the cat” notion is a similar recommendation. Accordingly, a story should start with a “scene where we meet the hero and the hero does something—like saving a cat—that defines who he is and makes us, the audience, like him” (xv). While “liking” implies enjoyment, it is essential to clarify that both Highsmith and Snyder refer to the elicitation of sympathy. If readers ask the question—why do I like Tom Ripley?—the possible answers may include, “because I sympathize with him” or “because I find him enjoyable.” “Entertainment industry” jargon is imprecise in such instances (xii). As I understand it, sympathy refers to the audience’s feeling of concern for a character’s wellbeing.

Enjoyment refers to their assessment of a character's entertainment value. For example, I may enjoy Tom Ripley's or Frank Underwood's narrative presence. I am entertained by their resilience, problem-solving skills, and propensity for surprising solutions. Concurrently, I do not feel pity for them when they experience misfortune (unless it comes as mistreatment by a character whom I judge to be even more morally reprehensible). In other words, to sympathize with a character is not the same as to "like" them. However, the aim of endowing the protagonist with virtues is to elicit concern for that character's wellbeing. For this reason, when most writing manuals refer to a character's likability, I understand them to be referring to their sympathetic resonance rather than enjoyability.

I use the term "virtue" as a derivative of Karl Iglesias's notion of "humanistic virtue." By it, he refers to character qualities such as "love, politeness, justice, generosity, compassion, and tolerance," arguing that when we recognize such virtues in characters, "we can't help but care about them" (70-73). Scholars agree that positive attributes are conducive to a sympathetic identification, with some considering such qualities a prerequisite (see: Carrol, *Philosophy of Motion* 180-83; Tan, "Film" 23-24; Plantinga 188-89). As far as the antihero is concerned, Iglesias seems to agree with Highsmith's notion. "The reason we accept anti-heroes as protagonists," he writes, "is that their flaws and immoral traits are balanced with positive, humanistic attractors." Of these, I argue, the ability to "love someone or something deeply" holds the most potential for facilitating both empathic and sympathetic engagement (Iglesias 64, 72). There are numerous examples of popular criminal characters who remain devoted to their families and friends, such as the earlier mentioned Walter Neff of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Vito Corleone of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), and Walter White of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). However, as both Highsmith and Minghella aspire to portray Tom as a sociopath, his resulting character would be in conflict with a display of this specific virtue. The "incapacity for mutually intimate relationships" is one of the definitive qualities of the antisocial disorder according to the American Psychiatric Association ("Antisocial

Personality” 764). In other words, if Tom is to be perceived as a sociopath, both storytellers have to resort to other, less convincing virtuous qualities.

A virtue display aims to influence the audience to sympathize with a character.<sup>20</sup> This makes such a procedure merit a “sympathy elicitor” classification. I choose to include it under the affective empathy facilitator subcategory for several reasons. Firstly, sympathy and antipathy for a character stem autonomously from the empathic engagement process (recall figure 1). They both rely on the same initial processes; first impressions excluded, the audience must first recognize a character’s quality or action and only then pass a moral judgment. More importantly, sympathetic identification shares a sort of symbiotic relationship with empathic engagement. The more we empathize with a character, the more willing we might be to sympathize with them. The reverse of this can also be true: feeling sympathy for a character might make the audience more receptive to an empathic engagement strategy. I base these assumptions on the mentioned empirical findings. Mentioned studies such as those conducted by Vorderer, Cupchik, Oatley, or Małeckı et al. show that readers can adopt attitudes that limit or heighten their empathic engagement with characters (see [1.5.a](#)).

Secondly, in the affective aspect, empathy and sympathy may overlap. A useful distinction between them can be created by categorizing empathy as a phenomenon that refers to states congruous with a character (including affects), whereas sympathy refers to audience-specific affects. This means that the audience’s feeling of a character-oriented pity or concern does not have to be indicative solely of sympathetic identification. A character in a story may witness an event that we recognize inspires their concern. For example, a protagonist knows that her love interest did not study for a decisive pop quiz because the previous night he was too busy saving her from an ensnarement on a train track. She writhes as she hears the teacher call out his name.

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<sup>20</sup> Virtue displays should not be confused with the journalistic concept of “virtue signaling.” Although the two phenomena are related in that they aim to attain a given public’s approval, virtue display is made distinct by the fact that the storyteller is the one responsible for the manifestation of the “moral act” rather than the demonstrator. Furthermore, audiences tend to grant characters displaying virtue the benefit of the doubt when it comes to the sincerity of their actions. This is in contrast to virtue signalers who are labeled thus because of their perceived moral calculatedness.

If the audience similarly squirms at this event, they experience an affective response (pity, concern) congruent to the heroine's. They closely (not identically) match the affects she experiences. Their engagement is, therefore, primarily empathic.

In contrast, the same scene can play out with the love interest acting as the focalizer. Again, the audience is informed that the boy did not study for a decisive pop quiz because he was too busy saving his love interest from a charging freight train the previous night. Seeing his anxiousness as the teacher calls his name will likely make the audience feel pity and concern for the boy. While the character might feel similar affects, we might presume that the audience is affectively aligned with this character. However, psychologists differentiate other-oriented concern from the concern felt for one's own wellbeing (Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Morris 184-85).

Moreover, the boy's experience is likely to be dominated by unease and preoccupation with how he should proceed. There is a more significant discrepancy in the audience's and character's affective experience than in the previous example. Sympathetic identification overtakes empathic engagement here. Interestingly, such a response is facilitated by expository information: the boy failed to study because he was risking his life saving his love interest. The activity demonstrates his virtue and, as such, it prompts the audience to pass a positive moral judgment on his character. Had the boy been partaking in narcissistic frivolities, the audience would feel less inclined to sympathize with his ordeal. I discuss this example to advance the argument that sympathetic identification entails some aspects of empathic engagement (Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* 98, Plantinga 100). The elicitation of sympathetic identification through virtue display promotes empathic engagement.

### **3.1.a Objective and Subjective Displays**

Czech filmmaker Frantisek Daniel makes a compelling argument for distinguishing between subjective and objective drama (not to be confused with subjective and nonsubjective narration). Simply put, subjective drama requires that the audience "knows and cares about the characters involved" while objective does not require any "engagement or knowledge" (Howard

and Mabley 32-33). A protagonist trying to rescue his love interest from ensnarement on a train track as a freight locomotive charges at them is a scene that builds its suspense on the mechanism of objective drama. A character getting killed by a speeding train is an objectively disturbing scene. It requires no expository knowledge or character engagement to elicit an emotional response. Shuffling the trapped victim's age, race, sex, or even species would undoubtedly fail to negate most audiences' sense of concern. Of course, a storyteller may employ a parodic or self-reflexive tone to portray such a situation so that it appears humorous. Thus, it is essential to note that Daniel's understanding of the term "objective" implies the acknowledgment of the mimetic hypothesis; in a real-life scenario, a bystander's teary-eyed amusement with a train-wreck would undoubtedly stand out as a departure from the involuntary gasp or other displays of dread common to the remaining witnesses.

The scene described above, in which the female protagonist feels anxiety for her love interest as she sees him being called upon by the teacher, is an example of subjective drama. The audience needs more information to feel concerned about what will happen next. The information that the boy is unprepared for a decisive pop quiz because he spent the previous evening saving the protagonist builds empathic engagement and informs the audience about the stakes. Deprived of such exposition, a scene about a student getting called upon by a teacher would produce minimal suspense. Reliance on objective drama, Frantisek Daniel argues, "usually leaves the audience bored and uninterested within a short time" (33).

An analogous classification can be made of virtue display facilitators. In its most basic form, Blake Snyder's "save the cat" scene is an objective demonstration. Seeing a character performing overtly altruistic feats requires no expository knowledge to promote engagement. It might, however, produce the opposite effect. Audiences tend to recognize a storyteller's manipulation, especially if a character's introduction involves petting dogs, kissing babies, or giving alms to the poor. Much like subjective drama, a subjective virtue display requires expository knowledge, but it is ultimately more effective. A scene depicting a piano player performing in a recital would facilitate limited engagement unless the character displayed an

unprecedented level of virtuosity. Having expository knowledge that this undistinguished piano player is inconveniencing himself for the sake of a contused fellow musician would likely promote a favorable moral judgment of the piano player. This is exactly the scene that Minghella employs when introducing Tom in his adaptation. The audience meets the protagonist as he accompanies a young soprano during a recital on Central Park's West Terrace. Musically, his performance is overshadowed by the singer's. Spectators do not realize that the introduction acts as Tom's virtue display until a later dialogue exchange informs them that Tom was "filling in" for the soprano's boyfriend, who sprained his wrist. The subsequent scene shows Tom rushing to his menial job in the opera house cloakroom, "past the droves of arriving concert-goers" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 3). Performing in a recital is not an ostensibly altruistic feat; hence, the demonstration scene is not objective. It is the exposition that allows us to understand that Tom has helped his friends and because of this is late for work. This exposition will enable us to appraise Tom's actions as worthy of a positive moral judgment. The fact that the information is provided after the virtue display does not impede its effectiveness but merely delays spectators' recognition.

Perhaps a more extreme example of a subjective demonstration of the virtue scene involves a character performing an ostensibly reprehensible act, such as breaking the law, albeit out of altruistic motives. In Lars von Trier's film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), the protagonist kills her employer to recover her embezzled money, which she needs for her son's surgery. A moral disengagement cue additionally mitigates the scene; the employer asks to be killed. The act, nevertheless, is reprehensible, though it demonstrates the protagonist's virtue: an extraordinary devotion to her child. A second subjective demonstration comes when the protagonist refuses to use the funds to pay for a lawyer to save herself from the death penalty. Essentially, she chooses death to save her son's eyesight. Her secondary motivation is to ensure that her employer's murder served some purpose. Considering the extreme nature of these virtue displays, it is reasonable to assume that they represent a strategy that poses a threat of backfiring. However, if

audiences' reactions reflect its effectiveness, it is worth noting that while contemporary critics remained polarized, the film received very high popular ratings ("Dancer in the Dark").

In *Ripley*, Highsmith demonstrates an innovative application of virtue displays (for the novel's summary, see [chapter 5](#)). She uses this empathy facilitator to suggest to her readers that Tom, the aesthete, is better suited to live a life of the upper classes than his wealthy acquaintances. Unlike Dickie and Marge, he prefers sightseeing over lounging in cafes; he opts for Cinquecento decor instead of their "American Bohemia"; Tom plans to spend money on Etruscan pottery rather than on sailboats and refrigerators.

Highsmith includes an objective virtue display early in the novel. During the setup of Tom's initial goal orientation, he is invited home by his sponsor-to-be, the Greenleafs. There he meets Mrs. Greenleaf, Dickie's mother. The woman, Tom learns, suffers from leukemia and is distraught by her son's absence. During dinner, she breaks down and cries. Tom consoles her by saying, "Mrs. Greenleaf... I want you to know that I'll do everything I can to make Dickie come back." Oddly, Tom feels "guilty" for having made this assurance although, as the narrator specifies, "he meant it." "He wasn't trying to fool anybody" (15). Making an honest promise to a cancer-ridden mother is an ostensibly virtuous act. It certainly invites a positive moral judgment. However, Highsmith manages to conceal her sympathy elicitation by focusing the scene on Tom's inexplicable sense of guilt. Thus, the scene's primary function is to foreshadow Dickie's ill fate while underhandedly facilitating engagement with Tom.

### **3.1.b Relationship of Engagement**

Because a successful application of a virtue display may promote a positive moral judgment, this empathy facilitator may also elicit sympathy. Its effect may be more sustained than that of facilitators used to promote only empathic engagement. The Minghella study, discussed later in detail, gave me the limited potential to monitor the relationship of sympathetic and empathic engagement with Minghella's Tom Ripley (see [6.1](#)). I found that the film's opening virtue displays, coupled with the victimization scenes, produced a strong sympathetic

engagement in about 83% of respondents. The beginning of the second act saw a decrease in strong sympathetic engagement down to 50%.<sup>21</sup> The levels of strong sympathetic engagement remained in the low 50 percentiles until Tom's murder of Dickie. This scene caused 38% of respondents to reevaluate their positive moral judgment of Tom. Now, only 13% of them reported a strong sympathetic engagement, while about 67% reported feelings of antipathy. These numbers saw minimal change during the remainder of the film.<sup>22</sup> The empathic engagement saw a similar, dramatic fall after Tom's murder of Dickie. However, over the next 20 minutes, Minghella managed to rebuild it for about 65% of all respondents. This was despite the dominant feeling of antipathy towards Tom.

These results suggest that while empathic engagement can be managed independently of spectators' moral judgments, sympathetic engagement facilitates empathic engagement. Sympathetic attitudes towards characters affect the audience's willingness to empathize. This leads me to assume that Minghella's sympathetic engagement strategy would have been more successful had he had supplemented it with at least one prominent virtue display after Tom's murder of Dickie (for the film's summary, see [chapter 6](#)). Arguably, Minghella demonstrates Tom's sensitivity and love of beauty in the described opera scene (see [3.3](#)). However, the mitigation of a murder would have likely required an act of selflessness or sacrifice for the benefit of another character. For example, although Tom seems to befriend Peter Smith Kingsley in the latter part of the film, the relationship is one-sided: Peter takes Tom into his home; Peter supports Tom during the investigation; Peter attempts to build Tom's self-esteem. Had Tom done something selflessly for Peter, spectators would likely have reevaluated their negative moral judgment. Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble's streaming media series *You* (2018) uses such a

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<sup>21</sup> I speculate that scenes depicting Tom spying on Marge and Dickie caused a third of respondents to retract their initial positive moral judgments of Tom.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, as the narrative progressed, respondents' strong empathic engagement constantly wavered. The number of respondents identifying with characters other than Tom fell from 30% to about 17%, after about half an hour into the narrative. I interpret this as testimony to the effectiveness of Minghella's perspective markers. More importantly, empathic engagement levels were independent of the sympathetic engagement, and they also seemed to be far less stable.

strategy. The story features a sociopathic protagonist whose morally reprehensible acts are invariably followed by scenes of virtue display. Judging by the series' popular ratings, the procedure is successful ("You: Season 1"). This is not to suggest that *You* is a comparable cinematic achievement to *Ripley*.

Yet although Tom and Peter's relationship seems like a missed opportunity for a virtue display, such implementation would likely have marked too great a departure from Highsmith's character. Tom, as Dickie assesses, is a "leech," an opportunist, a social climber incapable of altruism. More importantly, such an action would have suggested that Tom has the capacity for mutually intimate relationships, which would cast doubt on his antisocial disorder. This is essentially the effect that *You*'s empathic engagement strategy achieves. The protagonist, Joe Goldberg, functions as a sociopath with an ON and OFF switch, which the storytellers flip indiscriminately. Their overcommitment to an engagement strategy undermines their protagonist's authenticity. In my opinion, although Minghella's choice to limit Tom's virtue display impedes spectators' sympathetic engagement, it also extricates the narrative from the formulaic tone that impairs many antihero narratives.

### **3.2 Victimization Scenes**

Victimization scenes, as described by Karl Iglesias, depict the protagonist in a situation where he or she experiences undeserved mistreatment, injustice, or misfortune. Although their ultimate goal is to evoke pity (sympathetic engagement), they achieve this through empathic engagement. The audience recognizes "a [narrative] situation and its emotional consequences" based on personal experiences (68). Victimization scenes rely on the universality of the unjust experience to allow audiences to draw parallels between their private (and sometimes minuscule, by contrast) ordeals and the very dramatic ones that their protagonists endure. Iglesias provides examples of such circumstances that include "unrequited love," "false accusation," "physical and

emotional abuse,” “loneliness and neglect,” “physical or mental handicaps,” and feeling of guilt and regret (68-73).

The victimization scene has seen many interpretations, and, as a result, audiences are familiar with this device. Consequently, an improper application of this facilitator will not only fail to engage the audience but will also disaffect them. Most conspicuous examples of failed victimization scenes abound in propaganda narratives. As the first act of Mikhail Romm and Dmitriy Vasilev’s film *Lenin in October* (1937) draws to an end, the titular protagonist is reduced to sleeping on the floor of an impoverished household. Its members, needless to say, representatives of the proletariat, stay awake to behold him in admiration. For contemporary spectators, it is not solely the moral reprehensibility of Lenin’s character that frustrates the empathy elicitation efforts. Tom Ripley is similarly a sociopathic killer, yet, like the Soviet filmmakers, Minghella manages to utilize victimizations to a significant effect. The alignment fails in *Lenin* because the contrivance of the situation makes the scene unintentionally anti-mimetic. The common error, as seen here, is to hyperbolize the good of the victimized protagonist or the evil of the persecutor. In *Lenin*’s case, the resulting moral two-dimensionality defeats the remaining mimetic conventions of the biographical narrative (Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* 54).

Minghella introduces *Ripley*’s protagonist with a series of victimization scenes that remain veiled by the alternate narrative purpose they serve. After the film’s opening piano recital, Tom rushes to work as a theatre attendant. In the restroom, the other “men talk over, round, and through him” (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 3). Despite his musical talent, spectators recognize that Tom suffers an injustice imparted by his socially inferior status. But the victimization is purposely underplayed by Minghella’s direction. Tom does not seem perplexed by the shuffling theatre-goers, nor do their expressions seem particularly condescending. The primary aim of the scene is to inform spectators about Tom’s background and not the nature of his class struggle. Still, Minghella reinforces his protagonist’s victimhood in the following scenes; Tom “peers through the curtain at the performances,” which he cannot afford to enjoy, and is later

reprimanded by a caretaker for playing the concert piano after hours (3). The depiction of the disadvantaged young man facilitates engagement while simultaneously serving a narrative purpose. Minghella justifies Tom's later risk-taking by establishing that the character has everything to gain and nothing to lose. Minghella's character introduction demonstrates that victimizations may prove effective if empathy elicitation remains subordinate to the dramatic developments of the story. The positive moral judgment that such scenes may evoke will last until the character performs an action that undermines the current evaluation in the audience's judgment.

Highsmith, like Minghella, employs victimizations when introducing her character. After accepting his mission from Herbert Greenleaf, Tom sails for Europe to persuade the man's son to return home. He spends his time onboard the ship remembering his past. Highsmith uses inside views of Tom's memories to inform her readers that he is an orphan. Later in the novel, they learn that his parents have died tragically and that his father's sister, Aunt Dottie, inherited the insurance money (*Talented* 28). She took the responsibility of raising Tom, but not without making her resentment of the unwanted burden known. In Tom's retrospective, Highsmith constructs a victimization in which Aunt Dottie humiliates the twelve-year-old Tom in front of "a woman friend of hers." "Stuck in a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam," she sends him "out with the thermos to get some ice water at a filling station." When the traffic starts moving, Aunt Dottie amuses herself by preventing him from boarding the vehicle. "Sissy! He's a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!" She says "gaily to her friend" (28). In this scene, Tom, the orphan, endures an undeserved injustice and humiliation. Highsmith underscores Tom's victimization by describing his physical reaction to these memories: "he writhed in his deck-chair as he thought of it" (28). A written description is not as effective of an empathy facilitator as a filmed "close-up of an emotional face" (Vaage 160). Nevertheless, Highsmith's efforts to evoke affect for Tom are evident.

Highsmith also employs more irregular victimizations. Tom is pained by what might be regarded as pleasant occurrences. For example, before he sets sail for Europe, Tom has to suffer

through his New York acquaintances' surprise visit; "there they all were, mostly Bob's lousy friends, sprawled on his bed, on the floor, everywhere... he tried to greet them all, tried to smile, though he could have burst into tears like a child" (23). The guests tease Tom about getting caught in his room with a girl. To the antisocial Tom, what might seem like an expression of camaraderie is a noisy intrusion, which nearly causes his emotional breakdown. Highsmith's strategy potentially targets the more introverted readers who might find an aversion to socializing relatable. Tom's extreme emotional states serve to characterize his antisocial disposition.

### 3.3 Scenes of Empathy

Scenes of empathy or "close-ups of emotional faces" act as an empathy facilitator in the affective aspect (Vaage 160). Carl Plantinga describes them as moments in a film when a "face of a favored character is dwelt on for some length in a close-up... [usually] at emotional high points in the narrative" (126). This facilitator relies on motor mimicry and emotional contagion to affectively align spectators with the character. The idea is that they "catch" the perceived emotion priming them to engage with that character. It is important to note that scenes of empathy are particular to film engagement. In nondramatic literary fictions, storytellers may produce descriptions of their characters' emotions, but the empathy that results from such passages is not immediate but rather a product of cognitive evaluations (Carroll, *Philosophy of Motion* 185–91)

Theoretically, increased time and frequency that such emotional faces occupy the screen should heighten the facilitator's potential for empathic engagement. However, more importantly, scenes of empathy prove more effective if an intense interest in a character has already been established. In other words, they help signal empathy-worthy characters to the audience or strengthen the already established empathic engagement.

The midpoint of Minghella's *Ripley* contains an excellent example of a scene of empathy. Tom, who has recently killed Dickie, is masquerading as his victim at the opera. As he watches the second act of the opera *Eugene Onegin*, he seems conscious that the spectated duel scene

mirrors his predicament. A crescendo in the opera's woeful score accentuates a dramatic camera movement that precedes the gunshot. It swoops over the opera attendees' heads, closing in on the emotional close-up of Tom. The character observes Onegin, who has just killed his friend, and he "can barely hide his emotion" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 45).

However, Minghella is not overindulgent in eliciting sympathy from Tom's tears. Most of the scene consists not of Tom's close-up but his POV of the stage. The opera's action dominates the four shots of the protagonist's face, which vary in length from three to five seconds. The conservative use of this device does not draw the spectators' attention away from the narrative. Still, because Tom's character already engages them, because the emotional close-ups are bolstered by two other empathy facilitators, as well as the musical score, and because the scene is underscored by irony,<sup>23</sup> the spectator is skillfully manipulated into mimicking Tom's affect. The spectators likely feel sadness, pity, and, importantly, confusion. If they feel pity, they might be unclear at whom this emotion is directed. If this occurs, then they are aligned with the protagonist's state. Minghella manages to compel spectators to mimic not only the peripheral sadness that they observe on Tom's face but also his obscured emotional confusion that marks the inception of his qualms of conscience.

### **3.4 Emotion Markers**

Emotion marker is Greg Smith's term for "highly visible textual cues used for the primary purpose of eliciting brief moments of emotion" (*Film Structure* 44). He limits the definition to refer to procedures intended to evoke congruent emotions, such as jump scares where both a character and spectators are startled by something appearing in the frame (Draven 160-65). I propose widening the definition to include affective cues that serve a narrative purpose while also aligning spectators affectively. If understood this way, the most iconic emotion marker would be

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<sup>23</sup> Unlike Onegin, Tom did not kill Dickie out of honorable necessity. Furthermore, it is unclear whether he is weeping for his victim or for himself.

the Vertigo-effect, also known as the “push/pull” or the “dolly zoom.” This simultaneous change of camera position and focal length is named after Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* (1958). The effect is achieved by moving the camera away from one’s subject while synchronously zooming in. This causes the subject’s size to remain consistent in the frame, while the changing focal length makes the background appear as if it were encroaching on the subject. Hitchcock used the technique to elicit empathic engagement with his protagonist. Spectators were meant to feel as if experiencing a spell of vertigo. Contemporary use of the technique usually highlights moments of an important revelation, communicating the character’s emotional state and facilitating an empathic response (Hockrow, chapter 5).

In *Ripley*, Minghella utilizes several emotion markers, two of which are strikingly more dramatic. The first is the discussed sweeping camera movement used in the opera scene. It is used in combination with the previously described empathy facilitator, scene of empathy. The move punctuates the use of the close-up of Ripley’s emotional face. A more dramatic use of the emotion marker commences the final sequence of the film’s last act. Spectators see a high angle, sideways, long shot of Tom lying on the sofa. He is having a nightmare, and the soundtrack blends the voices of his victims with music. The camera circles down, spinning twice around the horizon’s axis before settling on a close-up of the awakened Tom, “his head full of ghosts” (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 73). The shot lasts about thirty-five seconds, and it is the most ostentatious camera move in the film. Utilizing the notion that an overturned horizon disorients the audience, the movement creates a dizzying feel that simulates Tom’s discomfort. The soundtrack provides the necessary context to understand the nature of the nightmare, albeit the montage of the dialogue snippets is similarly overwhelming. The device occurs late in the film after Tom’s actions have inspired antipathy in most viewers. Minghella, thus, uses the emotion marker to force his spectators into affective alignment with his protagonist, at least for the duration of the shot. More importantly, his sparing use of this device makes the two ostensible markers stand out as clear emotional punctuations of the film.

The emotion marker relies on the immediacy of experience to be effective as an empathy facilitator. Attempts in literary fiction to have the physicality of the text mirror the protagonist's experience often succeed in slowing down the cognitive evaluation of the situation rather than helping simulate the affect. A notable example comes from John Barth's short story "Lost in the Funhouse," where the story's semantic structure attempts to resemble the corridors of a funhouse maze. For example, readers might follow a narrative strand, only to arrive at a labyrinthine dead-end of a sentence fragment:

Though right-handed, she took her left arm from the seat back to press the dashboard cigar lighter for Uncle Karl. When the glass bead in its handle glowed red, the lighter was ready for use. The smell of Uncle Karl's cigar smoke reminded one of.

However, literary fiction can use time manipulation to punctuate a character's state, much like filmmakers use the slow and fast motion effect (see [4.1](#)).

## CHAPTER FOUR: PERCEPTUAL AND EPISTEMIC FACILITATORS

Perceptual and epistemic facilitators are the stylistic cues that align the audience with a character's visual and cognitive perspective. As these two aspects often overlap, I include them under a single section. Literary theorist Suzanne Keen notes that "most theorists agree that purely externalized [nonsubjective] narration tends not to invite readers' empathy" (97). It follows that a highly subjective narration, which filters narrative events through a character's perspective, invites empathic engagement. When Murray Smith writes of a story that grants a high "subjective access" to a character, he refers to an effect produced primarily by the perceptual and epistemic empathy facilitators. "Subjective narration," as Vaage calls the same approach, refers to a narrative's employment of internal focalization (Bal 136). In such a story, the audience is granted access to the perspective, affects, motivations, and beliefs of a single focalizer, often the protagonist. They explore the character's perspective, lines of thought, and beliefs about the world, themselves, and other characters. Subjective narration can be applied in both literature and film. Often it involves processes that use a character's preconceptions to influence various diegetic elements. By showing the story through a given character's eyes, the storyteller hopes to ensure that his or her audience "travels with [that character] rather than stands against her" (Booth 245).

These perceptual and epistemic facilitators are most directly responsible for developing a narrative tone. This expression of storytellers' or characters' attitudes towards the narrative content conditions the audience and affects empathic engagement (Turco 50-53). Though the narrative tone is expressed through different means in film and literary fiction, the guiding principles remain the same (see: Bordwell 12; Deleyto 159-60; Kuhn 263-64). A character-bound or an external narrator, as used in literature, can be adapted to film through cinematographic devices, the *mise-en-scène*, or editing. However, while some analogies between textual and visual representation may be convincing,<sup>24</sup> as media studies researchers Markus Kuhn and Johan

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<sup>24</sup> Amongst others, Gerald Genette's idea of focalization lends itself to such comparisons.

Schmidt argue, others “must abstract from a number of diverse principles of aesthetic organization before stating similarities” in their perception. Regardless of whether one can draw parallels for all perceptual and epistemic facilitators across the mediums, what remains true is that the tone they produce is constituent of the atmosphere<sup>25</sup> or what Greg Smith calls “mood.” This, he argues, is important to empathic engagement because elicited “emotions depend on moods as orienting states” (*Film Structure* 42). For example, a comedic mood might diminish the potency of a *victimization* facilitator. If the audience is distanced from the characters by a satirizing or ironic tone, they are unlikely to find the protagonist’s slip on a banana peel empathically engaging. On the other hand, several victimization scenes may work together to evoke a tragic mood. This mood, in turn, should promote the elicitation of the audience’s responses.

In *Ripley*, Highsmith constructs a mood of foreboding and moral ambiguity (for the novel’s summary, see [chapter 5](#)). She introduces her readers to the protagonist as he evades being tailed by an unknown man, whom he would prefer to “be a pervert [rather] than a policeman” (1). The setting is 1950s Greenwich Village, but Highsmith does not describe 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue or “Raul’s” bar, where Tom confronts his pursuer. She relies on readers’ familiarity with Manhattan or their “generic” imaginings of the island. Tom’s stalker is “a businessman, somebody’s father, well-dressed, well-fed, greying at the temples,” yet despite his “silver elegance,” his approach causes Tom to feel a “pang of desperate, agonized regret... his face was more confusing to Tom than if he had focused a gun on him” (3). The tone of the narration stimulates the reader to look for menace under the facade of elegance. Amongst others, the metaphor comparing a facial expression to a gun suggests such an interpretation. Throughout the novel, Highsmith maintains this cynical attitude towards the novel’s glamorous locations and the socialites that inhabit them. In the described scene, the tension is soon relieved, as Tom finds out the man is the father of one

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<sup>25</sup> Arguably, in film and literature mood can be created by means of setting, tone, and descriptions (Turco 50). However, there can be additional aesthetic elements specific to each medium that influence mood. For example, in film the historical state of recording technology will influence spectators’ perception, while in literature the language’s datedness may similarly promote or hinder engagement.

of his acquaintances. Highsmith proceeds to construct a motivational empathy facilitator, but the mood of suspense and ambiguity prompts readers to regard Tom's *goal orientation* with increased excitement. They expect the seemingly innocuous mission to be underlined with danger.

The opening of Minghella's *Ripley* creates an entirely different mood (see [3.2](#)). Though his images include Highsmith's elegant socialites, the feeling he evokes through framing, *mise-en-scène*, and direction is that of stifling anxiety and looming tragedy (for the film's summary, see [chapter 6](#)). The tone is operatic rather than cynical. As mentioned in previous sections, mood and the constituent narration tone can orient elicited emotions. An objectively dramatic scene of someone getting run over by a train may be molded by manipulating diegetic elements to elicit laughter rather than tears. More commonly, mood and tone work with the narrative current rather than against it. In her novel, Highsmith builds a mood of anxiousness and moral ambiguity that makes her readers wary of an impending catastrophe. Thus Tom's innocuous interactions with the story's socialites keep readers in a state of heightened apprehension. The elicited anxiety, in turn, helps maintain Highsmith's mood.

Similarly, Minghella's use of an operatic tone<sup>26</sup> bolsters his adaptation's glamorous though foreboding mood. The spectators observe the film's initial scenes of leisure with concern, aware that this paradise will soon be lost. Their dread reinforces the film's mood. Moods, therefore, act as enhancers of empathy facilitators while the states that these facilitators elicit symbiotically sustain the mood. In other words, moods do not promote empathic engagement directly, but they remain a crucial element of a successful engagement strategy.

#### 4.1 Character's Time Perception

Character's time perception refers to an empathy facilitator, which helps the audience experience time from the perspective of a character. The regular pace can be either slowed

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<sup>26</sup> I would differentiate Minghella's tone from that of a standard film melodrama, as his narrative produces cognitive dissonance, by straying from conventional characterizations, scenes and plot lines. In my opinion, it is a highly polished film that holds artistic merit.

downed or sped up. When such manipulations are executed to help the audience experience temporal alignment with a character, the technique aids empathic engagement. It is noteworthy that temporal alignment often facilitates affective alignment. For example, a character might sense the stretching of time when they feel fear, anxiety, excitement, and other affects. By experiencing a similar extension of time, the audience may match the character's emotions.

In film, the device most associated with time-pacing is the slow or fast-motion effect.<sup>27</sup> A cited example of slow-motion is the ambush scene of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which depicts the death of the titular characters. It employs high-frame rates (slow-motion) to visually retard the characters' perforation by bullets and applies a fast-paced, multiple-camera montage to stretch out the perceived time. The editing pace allows the spectators to experience the heightened awareness of Bonnie and Clyde as they encounter death, thus facilitating empathic engagement. At the same time, the slow-motion effect lyricizes their defeat in an attempt to elicit pity and sorrow.

In *Ripley*, Minghella does not employ high-frame rates to promote empathic engagement with the protagonist. Instead, he uses subtle slow motion and montage to dramatize the death of Silvana, Dickie's Italian mistress. The techniques work to evoke pity for the dead girl and her family. As spectators learn that Silvana committed suicide because Dickie refused to help her, the images promote their negative moral judgment of Dickie. This evaluation, in turn, works for Tom's benefit as a moral disengagement cue.

Tom's final confrontation with Dickie occurs near the film's midpoint. Here, Minghella relies on a focus pull, camera pans, and varying editing pace to communicate Tom's time perception. Working with the renowned editor and sound designer Walter Murch, Minghella starts the scene with a comfortable two-shot of both men in a boat. The filmmakers then cut to a close-up of Dickie as he declares, "I think we've seen enough of each other for a while" (37). The camera racks focus from Dickie's close-up to the extreme close-up of Tom's profile. The

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<sup>27</sup> The technique requires that a take be filmed using faster or slower frame rates than the one intended for final playback.

protagonist's theme music underscores this change, which commences in the background. Spectators feel mounting pressure as Tom remains silent for about six seconds.

Interestingly, in the screenplay, the action description, "Ripley stares at him, his eyes suddenly reptilian," does not translate into the image (37). Spectators do not see Tom's face and hence have to imagine whether he feels angry, hurt, or surprised.<sup>28</sup> The audience might feel inclined to engage in imaginative speculation to understand Tom's disposition. In this case, the change of focus slows time as they anticipate Tom's move and prepares them for the visual metaphor. In a close-up, Dickie informs Tom, "you can be quite boring." The camera pans following the line of dialogue from Dickie's lips to Tom's ears. It is as if Tom has finally heard what his host has been expressing in this and earlier scenes. Dickie's rejection metaphorically hitting Tom is underscored by a vocal cue in the score. This vocalization builds tension in the spectators as it does in Tom; Dickie has hinted at his exasperation, but he has never stated it so clearly. Those who have been empathizing with Tom might have partaken in his hopeful delusion. If so, Dickie's words strike them as they strike Tom. Otherwise, the film's mood makes them fear the dreaded tragedy about to occur.

The pause in dialogue filled by the emotive score lasts for ten seconds. Again, time is stretched, and the spectators' sense of tension builds with the characters'. As Tom reciprocates, Minghella does not release us from the claustrophobic close-ups. Tom criticizes Dickie's immaturity *en-face* while Dickie turns to the camera with his profile. What follows is fifteen quick back-and-forth cuts between the two men. The editing speeds up the perception of time as the escalation grips spectators. When Dickie springs up to threaten a punch, Minghella cuts to a long shot to spatially orient his spectators. He quickly resumes the strategy of the fast intercutting of close-ups, with each edit lasting no more than two seconds. Time speeds up to the point where spectators may miss Tom's snatching of the paddle. The music soundtrack cuts on his blow to Dickie's head. For a moment, there is silence as Tom, and the spectators try to comprehend what has just happened. The editing pace briefly slows down to around three seconds per cut. The

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<sup>28</sup> This is another example of Vaage's "restricted knowledge."

spectators' reactions are likely congruous to Tom's horrified expression at the "Suddenly split open line of blood" bursting on Dickie's head (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 38). Minghella inserts a scene of empathy, the described affective empathy facilitator, into this character's time perception.

Time speeds up again as fast-paced cuts between disorienting close-ups of bloodied faces produce an image of a primal struggle. Screams overpower the soundtrack until Tom beats down Dickie with the oar. He drops his weapon on a jump cut, and time is slowed down and condensed. Minghella releases his spectators from the close-ups to a long shot. The camera holds on Tom for twelve seconds allowing him and the spectators to catch their breaths as the awareness that Tom has killed his friend sinks in. Next follows a slow tilting down to the "sun sparkling indifferently on the waves." A long fade reveals Tom lying "by Dickie in the bottom of the boat, in the embrace he always wanted" (39). This last description suggests that Minghella might have intended for the long takes and fades that follow to evoke some pity for Tom. It is highly contestable that they achieve this. Instead, the simultaneous slowing down of time through long takes and transitioning forward using fades marks a point of divergence between the protagonist and most spectators. Nevertheless, Minghella uses a focus pull, camera pans, editing, tight framing, and the soundtrack to facilitate the spectator's alignment with Tom's time perception. This does not negate but possibly mitigates the spectator's negative moral judgment of Tom.

In literary fiction, control of time can be achieved similarly by using summaries, ellipses, and slow-downs (Bal 94-97). A cited example of a slow-down is the kiss that the protagonist of *In Search of Lost Time* (1913) bestows on his romantic interest:

I learned, from these obnoxious signs, that at last, I was in the act of kissing Albertine's cheek... At first, as my mouth began gradually to approach the cheeks which my eyes had recommended it to kiss, my eyes, in changing position, saw a different pair of cheeks; the neck, observed at closer range and as

though through a magnifying glass, shown in its coarser grain a robustness which modified the character of the face.

Proust slows down the act of kissing by relating the nuances of his protagonist's perception. Though the above quotation is an extreme example, Highsmith similarly attempts to align her readers with Tom's time perception. While traveling to San Remo, Tom has the following idea: "A crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration was swelling in him, hampering his breathing. He wanted to kill Dickie" (76). This idea springs from the series of defeats he suffers: Marge steals Dickie's attention away from Tom (59); Tom learns that Marge has accused him before Dickie of being a "queer" (61); Tom draws a correlation between Dickie's disdain for a drug dealer and himself (66); Tom learns from a letter that Mr. Greenleaf has withdrawn his stipend (70). Because Highsmith has characterized Tom as emotionally volatile, readers are, in a sense, prepared for the acceleration of time that expresses his loss of ability to think rationally.

From the inception of Tom's idea to kill Dickie, Highsmith keeps her readers submerged in his consciousness as he contemplates the details of the murder. The fast pace excludes the possibility of Tom's questioning the rationality of such an action. Highsmith allows brief glimpses of San Remo between Tom's rumination, "San Remo. Flowers. A main drag along the beach again, shops and stores and French and English and Italian tourists. Another hotel, with flowers in the balconies" (78). Highsmith condenses time and makes it seem like Tom acknowledged the changing scenery through a peripheral vision while remaining focused on his objective. The effect she achieves is of hurried apprehension. Tom rushes to the murder as if afraid he might have a change of heart if he stopped to think. Highsmith provides an inside view that confirms such a concern: "He felt afraid, but it was not of the water, it was of Dickie. He knew that he was going to do it, that he would not stop himself now, maybe couldn't stop himself, and that he might not succeed" (79). As mentioned, the fast pace allows readers to experience Tom's loss of the ability to think rationally, as if his breaks have failed. In this manner,

readers are spurred into the murder: “Tom lifted the oar and came down with it on the top of Dickie’s head” (80). Once the first blow falls, the pace slows down as Highsmith takes her time to describe every hit to Dickie’s head.

The rush into the murder scene postulates a convincing perspective of a sociopathic perpetrator. Tom focuses on his desire to satisfy his bloodlust, making the murder, in retrospect, seem inevitable. He ignores the ethical dilemma as well as any potential legal consequences. Such “impulsivity or failure to plan ahead” is consistent with the APA’s psychiatric descriptions of Antisocial Personality Disorder (“Antisocial” 659-63). Moreover, from an empathic engagement perspective, the depiction might appeal to readers’ familiarity with the shame of rejection or their failings with short-temperedness; alternatively, some might find Tom’s enviousness relatable. Regardless of that, Highsmith’s choices seem all the more interesting when considering their impact on the story’s dramatic tension.

Storytelling manuals urge writers to employ retardation or a controlled postponing of the audience’s gratification of expectations that results in the buildup of anticipation. Applying retardation before inevitable and dreaded events allows storytellers to capitalize on the dramatic tension (see: Gulino, *Screenwriting* 24; Iglesias 88; McKee 289-92). A character’s time perception can be used to “postpone [character’s] goal achievement by shifting [the audience] toward a more affectively charged perception” (Greg Smith, *Film Structure* 77). It, therefore, seems that Highsmith’s choice to rush towards one of the most dramatic moments in the story is a lost opportunity for dramatic tension buildup. After having made up his mind to kill Dickie, Tom could have toyed with his victim-to-be, showing him breathtaking views from a cliff, preparing his lunch with a sharp knife, fixing the tight noose of his tie, etc. However, Highsmith’s choice to serve her character’s psychological perspective rather than the narrative’s dramatic tension makes Tom’s antisocial disorder palpable for readers, and the approach feels less formulaic.

#### 4.1.a Chronology Manipulation

“As you create your story,” storytelling theorist Robert McKee instructs in his manual, “you create your proof; idea and structure intertwine in a rhetorical relationship” (113). McKee inherits the notion that storytelling techniques may be regarded as tools of persuasion from the likes of Roman Jakobson or Wayne C. Booth. Mikhail Bakhtin similarly notes the early twentieth-century trend in literary criticism to view the novel “as a rhetorical genre,” to analyze its devices “from the point of view of their effectiveness as rhetoric (106). Considering that the aim of chronology manipulation as an empathy facilitator is to present narrative events in an order that reflects most positively on a character, the scrutiny of this device invites the use of rhetorical devices as an analytic framework.

The following paragraphs describe a few possible time manipulations based on established rhetorical techniques. Given that both Highsmith’s and Minghella’s *Ripley* are told chronologically with little time manipulation, I will illustrate it with examples from other narratives.

Chronology manipulation can be achieved through flashbacks, flash-forwards, or a complete recalibration of the consecutive timeline. In general, storytellers use these modifications to elicit sympathy or mitigate negative moral judgment. Therefore, chronology manipulation’s potential for facilitating empathic engagement would have to be evaluated on the basis of individual examples. Noteworthy is the timeline inversion of Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* (2000), which allows spectators to experience the narrative through the mindset of the protagonist who suffers from anterograde amnesia. The chronology manipulation makes a perceptual and epistemic alignment possible; thus, Nolan’s choice facilitates empathic engagement.

Although *Memento* is an example of a successful timeline alteration in a fictional narrative, the telling of nonfiction narratives with fixed chronologies merits the application of this device. Otherwise, a storyteller can mold a fictional storyline to achieve similar effects without rearranging the timeline. Suppose the plot requires that the story’s antihero unjustifiably hurts

“character A” (negative moral judgment) and selflessly helps “character B” (positive moral judgment). In that case, the storyteller is more or less free to arrange the events within the story’s chronology in a manner that best suits an engagement with the protagonist.

The notion of “amplificatio,” or the rhetorical device used to expand a simple statement using “comparison, division, accumulation, intimation, progression,” may be used to temporally expand events that are significant for a character (Lanham 8). This can achieve the described character time perception through the slowing of time. Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk* (2017) explores an idea akin to amplificatio. The narrative contains three storylines depicting the British war effort at the onset of the Second World War. Although all developments center on the evacuation of allied forces from Dunkirk, each storyline takes course over a different timeframe. The perspective detailing the soldiers trapped on land encapsulates a week’s worth of events. The thread, depicting the relief efforts of a civilian crew on a sea vessel, details a day’s worth of action. Finally, the storyline featuring British pilots’ air battles consolidates an hour of developments. The various perspectives are molded and intercut with each other in a way that obscures their differing timeframes. The storylines appear to have temporal unity disrupted only by the untwining chronology. For example, the civilian crew first rescues a shell-shocked soldier from the sea. Later, that same soldier is aboard a still undamaged vessel from which he is then rescued. Arguably, this time manipulation reflects the workings of memory; Nolan based his script in part on interviews with Dunkirk veterans (Greene). More importantly, the effect simulates the soldiers’ frantic efforts to escape death. Nolan explained that his focus was “not who [the characters] are, whom they pretend to be or where they come from. The only question I was interested in was: Will they get out of it?” (Gonzales). The disregard for continuity and chronology reflects the soldiers’ distressed mindsets, prioritizing survival over temporal continuity. Still, in *Dunkirk*, Nolan elicited empathic engagement primarily through emotion and perspective markers, the masterful implementation of which merits a separate examination.

A more aggressive application of amplificatio could dictate a retelling of the same narrative event, each time with added information or depicted through a new perspective (Lanham 8-7).

For example, Pete Travis's film *Vantage Point* (2008) revisits an assassination attempt on a president from various characters' perspectives. I describe the application of a related idea, the Rashomon effect, in the "projections" section of this chapter (see [4.3.c](#)).

The "antagonize," or "balancing an unfavorable aspect with a favorable one," could be applied to mitigate the negative moral judgment of a character (Lanham 191). The simplest example would be a juxtaposition of a character's misdeed, such as a transgression or unjust mistreatment of another character, with a virtue display. In the 2005 film *Munich*, director Steven Spielberg and screenwriters Tony Kushner and Eric Roth intercut the story's inciting incident, the 1972 Olympics massacre of Israeli athletes, with Mossad's subsequent revenge assassinations. The flashbacks to the terrorist attack remind the spectators of the evil that the Israeli assassins seek to avenge. In this regard, they serve as moral disengagement cues that suspend the spectators' antipathetic reaction to the protagonist (the Mossad squad leader). On the other hand, the flashbacks also promote the narrative's argument; they draw parallels between the atrocities committed by both the Palestinian and Israeli terrorists.

The notion of "auxesis," or a way of increasing significance by placing items in a "climactic series," may be applied to order a character's achievements (or misdeeds) from the least to the most dramatic (Lanham 27). Arguably, Tom Rob Smith's limited series *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2018) employs a chronologic structure that achieves an effect comparable to an auxesis.<sup>29</sup> The narrative features a sociopathic protagonist based on the spree-killer Andrew Cunanan. The historical events have a fixed timeline that Smith rearranges to increase empathic engagement with the protagonist as the story unfolds. The first episode starts with the spectators' "point of familiarity with the story," that is, the murder of Gianni Versace (Tom Smith, "The Assassination"). Unacquainted with the character's background,<sup>30</sup> spectators

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<sup>32</sup> A longer version of the argument pertaining to "The Assassination of Gianni Versace" series was published in *Anglica Wratislaviensia*, vol. 57, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Some spectators might be familiar with the real-life protoplast of the series' protagonist. Nevertheless, storytellers often depart from their factual reference. I assume that even in the case of the audience's familiarity with Andrew Cunanan, they cannot be sure how closely the protagonist's backstory will resemble his counterpart's biographical details.

observe Cunanan's reaction to the committed crime; the lack of expository information inhibits recognition and alignment. Instead of progressing linearly, the plot takes a step back in time. Spectators learn of the events that precede Versace's murder, namely Cunanan's arrival in Miami and his attempts at building a relationship with his victim. Smith frustrates sympathetic engagement with his antihero by exposing Cunanan's condemnable traits, such as deceptiveness and manipulative behavior. Concurrently, he builds a rapport with Cunanan's victim, Gianni Versace, ensuring that spectators pass a negative moral judgment on Cunanan.

Smith repeats the regressing-in-time procedure to explore the protagonist's preceding murders. Each time he reveals more about Cunanan's obsessive nature. Midway through the series, Smith allows insight into Cunanan's motivation. Spectators learn about the character's inner conflict. Cunanan cannot overcome his obsession with a bohemian architect who used to be his lover; he is incapable of accepting the man's rejection. This foreshadows the growing inevitability of yet another murder. In the series' penultimate episode, Smith regresses to the childhood events that were most formative of Cunanan's psyche. He employs misfortune-mistreatment scenes to facilitate empathic engagement with the antihero<sup>31</sup>. He breaks the established temporal pattern in the final episode by returning to the events that concluded the initial episode. After Versace's murder, the police hunt ensues, and Cunanan takes refuge in a boathouse, where he suffers an emotional breakdown. Smith facilitates spectators' engagement with the protagonist by employing attraction scenes and projections that convey Cunanan's apprehension and disintegrating mental condition.

Smith arranges the events from Cunanan's life in a pattern that reflects the use of auxesis. Spectators progress from situations that inspire antipathy to those which increasingly invite empathic engagement. The result is that some spectators might even sympathize with the killer. Without the use of chronology manipulation, this effect would not have been achieved; Cunanan's past victimhood would have been obscured by the present atrocities he commits.

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<sup>31</sup> Such measures are often undertaken in other series featuring murderous characters, such as James Manos, Junior's *Dexter* (2006-2013) or Andrew Sodroski, Jim Clemente, and Tony Gittelsohn's *Manhunt: Unabomber* (2017).

Preston Sturges's films yield easy parallels between temporal manipulation and rhetorical devices. In that respect, his 1948 dark comedy *Unfaithfully Yours* is a compilation of such techniques. Interestingly, Sturges uses his protagonist's fantasies to explore his alternate futures. The story concerns a symphony conductor who, having learned of his young wife's supposed infidelity, imagines three possible outcomes while conducting three music pieces.

Sturges's mastery of rhetorical devices is evident in his dialog. As his protagonist visits a detective hired to spy on his wife, the sleuth informs him:

it's only circumstantial evidence. Why don't we give her the benefit of the doubt? Maybe she couldn't open her toothpaste. You was in England... so she goes down and gets this guy to do it for her. Or maybe she seen a mouse in her room, and it upset her and she wanted company. Aw, of course, that one's kind of thin.

The detective uses an "apophasis," or a device which entails "pretending to deny what is really affirmed," as well as an "aporia," or a "true or feigned doubt or deliberation," to imply the protagonist's wife's infidelity (Lanham 191, 58).

The narrative structure that follows mimics the use of an "expeditio" or a "rejection of all but one of possible alternatives" (Lanham 183). During his concert performance, the protagonist first explores the possibility of murdering his wife and framing her presumed lover. This proposition he finds most advantageous. As he conducts the next piece, he imagines forgiving his wife and offering the lovers his money and blessing. This is an honorable yet impractical solution. Finally, he envisions forcing his wife's lover to play a game of Russian roulette. This fancied venture ends tragically for the protagonist, suggesting that such a course, though chivalrous, is too risky. After the concert, he settles on pursuing the first course. The floundering chaos that ensues acts as a screwball application of an "apodioxis," or a "rejection of an argument as absurdly false" (186). The protagonist clumsily devastates his apartment as he bugles his ploy

to kill his wife. The best solution turns out to have been the most ridiculous one. While the protagonist presents a limited potential for sympathetic engagement—he is ultimately Sturges’s vehicle for brilliantly indignant dialogue—the chronology manipulations allow spectators to align themselves with the character’s motivation, perception, and beliefs about his wife.

#### **4.2 Moral Disengagement Cues**

Moral disengagement cues are epistemic facilitators intended to influence the audience’s moral evaluation of characters’ morally dubious actions, such as hurting other characters. Therefore, a moral disengagement cue will most often be a scene or an event that justifies such actions. The vindictive premise of Quentin Tarantino’s diptych *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004) hinges on the first volume’s opening scene. The protagonist’s wedding rehearsal is interrupted by a group of assassins who massacre all the attendees, including the protagonist’s fiancée. This opening acts both as a victimization scene and a moral disengagement cue. The protagonist, who miraculously survives the attack, embarks on a relentless pursuit of vengeance that fills the entirety of the two films. Her excessively violent conduct towards her transgressors requires that spectators be morally disengaged. In other words, if spectators believe that the assassins deserve punishment, then the spectators’ enjoyment of the film will be unchallenged by cognitive dissonance.

The notion of cognitive dissonance is central to the theory of moral disengagement cues. Social psychologist Leon Festinger argues that if one experiences a conflict between the elements of their cognition, or “the things a person knows about himself, about his behavior, and about his surroundings,” that person will invariably “exert pressures in the direction of bringing the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality” (9-11). In other words, a person experiencing cognitive dissonance will always attempt to return to a state of consonance by rationalizing or ignoring the contradictory elements. On this ground, commutation studies researchers stipulate that the audience will use moral disengagement cues as rationalizing factors

that allow them to continue the enjoyment of a narrative despite a protagonist's morally dubious actions.

Affective Disposition Theory<sup>32</sup> (ADT) (Zillmann and Cantor 1976) proposes a seven-step model for “affective responding during suspenseful drama,” which accounts for the disposition formation in viewers.<sup>33</sup> Much like Murray Smith's structure of sympathy, ADT's model maintains that viewers pass a “moral judgment” on characters. Communication studies researchers Sophie Janicke and Arthur Raney have found that the audience is prone to suspend their judgment of morally questionable protagonists for the sake of enjoyment. They argue that it is the audience's need for character “identification” that prompts “moral disengagement” (493). Previous studies demonstrated that character identification encourages the audience “to justify a character's immoral behaviors” (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 181). The reverse of this also appears to be true; a justification of a character's immoral behavior (through a moral disengagement cue) encourages empathic engagement. In other words, if the audience finds a character engaging, they will work with, and not against, the storyteller's efforts. They will seek justifications that will allow them to remain involved in the narrative.<sup>34</sup>

Undeniably moral disengagement affects the empathic engagement of morally dubious characters, especially antisocial antiheroes. By this, I mean antiheroes who are foremost defined by their limited capacity to empathize and as a result, are less inhibited when it comes to hurting

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<sup>32</sup> A longer version of the argument pertaining to Affective Disposition Theory was published in *Anglica Wratislaviensia*, vol. 57, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> ADT's model of disposition formation distinguishes between the following stages: (1) perception, assessment; (2) moral judgment; (3) affective disposition; (4) anticipation, apprehension; (5) perception, assessment; (6) response to outcome/emotion; (7) moral judgment. The original model accounts for variations of spectators' disposition formation, including possible loops that may occur between various stages (407-12).

<sup>34</sup> While the audience's tendency to gravitate towards cognitive consonance seems undebatable, the idea that cognitive dissonance will disrupt narrative enjoyment requires verification (see: Shafer and Raney 1037; Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 181). The respondents of my limited survey studies reported enjoyment of both Highsmith's novel and Minghella's adaptation despite their experience of cognitive dissonance. The described dissonance resulted from their feelings of antipathy for Tom and a simultaneous reluctance to see his incarceration or punishment. Alternatively, they reported a feeling of an overall dissonant reaction to the narratives. A few respondents noted having found the story “highly enjoyable” despite feeling “extremely disappointed” by Tom's ultimate escape from justice (see [7.7](#)).

other characters.<sup>35</sup> The Toms of Highsmith's novel and Minghella's adaptation fit this definition to a varying degree. Highsmith's protagonist is characterized in a way that seems consistent with the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic criteria of the antisocial disorder. He has an egocentric drive, lack of conscience and empathy, and most notably, an "incapacity for mutually intimate relationships" ("Antisocial Personality" 764).

By contrast, Minghella's Tom remains a deeply disturbed man with a limited ability to form relationships but with a greater capacity to empathize. The adaptation's protagonist initially is much more sympathetic. Minghella is more concerned with his spectator's moral disengagement than Highsmith.

Minghella precedes Dickie's murder with several victimization scenes which double as moral disengagement cues. The significant prelude to Tom's rejection comes with Freddie Miles's visit to Mongibello. Freddie and Dickie enjoy a swim in the sea while Tom sits alone on the boat, reading. Marge joins him and attempts to console Tom, recognizing his sense of abandonment. She tells him about Dickie's propensity for intense, short-lived friendships. "It's always the same whenever someone new comes into his life—Freddie, Fausto, Peter Smith-Kingsley," she says, "and that's only the boys" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 29).

Additionally, she informs Tom that he has been excluded from the men's immediate merriment and their future skiing trip to Cortina. Tom is "devastated [by the news], Marge notices, [she] can't look at him" (30). Minghella uses a highly identifiable situation, an exclusion from friendship, to elicit empathic engagement and possibly sympathetic identification with Tom. Furthermore, the scene provokes spectators' antagonism towards Dickie. This intent is reinforced later when Dickie admits to Tom that his mistress, Silvana, has committed suicide because of his reluctance to help her (33). Dickie's mistreatment of both the woman and Tom compels spectators to pass a negative judgment on him; perhaps it also inspires their hopes to see Dickie punished.

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<sup>35</sup> This is in contrast to previous eras, which defined the antihero as deeply flawed characters who stood in opposition to their world (see: Grant 26; Horwath 83-91; Simmons 135). I believe the contemporary antihero, propagated in the era of streaming media, gravitates towards the sociopathic model.

Similarly, Minghella uses class differences to foster resentment for Dickie. When Tom suggests a trip to Venice, his host reminds him, “You can’t stay on here without money” (34). Earlier, he condescends to Tom by saying, “I love the fact you brought Shakespeare with you and no clothes” (22). These subtle reminders of Dickie’s economic superiority are an invitation to classify him as a representative of a condescending upper-class. Minghella intends such cues to mitigate Tom’s moral judgment. If the spectators believe that Tom is justified in his act of violence or believe Dickie deserves to be punished, they are morally disengaged.

Minghella attempts to mitigate the negative moral judgment that the murder scene might elicit. Unlike in the novel, his Tom does not contemplate the murder, nor does he distract his opponent before striking him. Instead, he confronts Dickie about his feelings. He is ridiculed and threatened, and thus (again) justified, before he “smashes [Dickie] across the head with the oar.” Minghella endeavors to frame the subsequent lethal violence as Tom’s act of self-defense. Dickie “launches himself at Ripley,” and the men “lock together in a life or death wrestle to get control of the oar” (38). When the struggle ends, Tom “sprawls there, sobbing, next to Dickie, horrified by what he’s done” (39). Tom’s remorse is significant. Iglesias argues that audiences connect with a protagonist “even more” when they recognize that the character regrets having made a mistake. “This gives us a point of identification with the protagonist,” he writes, “he’s human, and he makes mistakes just like we do” (70). The severity of the mistakes determines the prospect for identification. Most spectators will find Tom’s crime unforgivable. Nevertheless, his shame and regret might appease the severity of their judgment. The recognition that Tom did not want Dickie to die might sustain a minimal amount of sympathetic engagement. This would not have been possible had Tom taken pride in his deed, as Highsmith’s protagonist seems to do.

Dickie’s death in the novel is a result of Tom’s cool calculations. Understanding that he had depleted his host’s hospitality, Tom has the “brilliant” idea that “if he killed him... he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself” (77). Highsmith does little to encourage a moral disengagement by her readers. Still, Tom’s unjustified murder of Dickie, does not cause readers’ empathic disengagement. There are at least four explanations for this.

Firstly, Highsmith's sparing use of moral disengagement cues might have been prompted by her belief that if a "book is entertaining [then], there is no reason why the reader should have to 'like' the hero" (*Plotting* 47). Indeed, her claim is supported by empirical evidence. Social scientists Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney have found that removing moral disengagement cues from revenge narratives does not affect the reported enjoyment. However, their study shows that participants had to find other ways of judging the antihero's morality to avoid hindering their enjoyment (1040). Such challenging of familiar story patterns precipitates the audience's recalibration of their story schema. They encounter an element that upsets their narrative expectations. The unpredictability of an innovative story heightens dramatic tension, thus promoting a gratifying narrative experience.<sup>36</sup>

While challenging story schemas can enhance the audience's narrative experience, most popular storytellers prefer a conventional approach, as it runs a lower risk of alienating its audience.<sup>37</sup> Moral disengagement cues, much like a story's genre, influence the audience's expectations. Having encountered moral disengagement cues in antiheroic narratives, the audience may form a story schema that allows them to anticipate that an antihero's justification scene will transpire into morally objectionable actions carried out by that character. In other words, if a storyteller presents a scene in which an antagonist victimizes an antihero, we will suspect that the antihero will eventually take revenge on the persecutor. Highsmith, however, provides little foreshadowing to Tom's decision to kill Dickie (77). As described above, after

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<sup>36</sup> A commonly cited example of this is the execution of the character Eddard Stark in the novel *A Game of Thrones* (1996), the first of the seven installments of the epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Writer George R. R. Martin exploited readers' familiarity with the fantasy genre by introducing a character that most recognized to be the saga's redemptive hero. The common expectation is that such an empathically engaging protagonist will survive until the grand narrative's culmination. Eddard's unobstructed execution in the saga's first installment upset readers' narrative expectations. The result was that they came to fear that a similar fate might befall any remaining empathically engaging characters in the story. The same effect was exploited in the HBO adaptation of the series (see Riley).

<sup>37</sup> A known example of overdrawn experimentation is Alfred Hitchcock's infamous London bus bombing scene from *Sabotage* (1936). The director admitted in an interview with François Truffaut that his choice of focusing the action on a boy who unwittingly carries a bomb elicited "too much sympathy from the audience, so that when the bomb exploded and he was killed, the public was resentful." Hitchcock claims that the shock dissipated the spectators' further attentiveness (Truffaut).

signaling to her readers the direction of the narrative, instead of creating dramatic tension through retardation, Highsmith rushes to the murder scene (see [4.1](#)). The effect is that the reader may be startled by the sudden development. Tom's resulting unpredictability heightens the dramatic tension for the rest of the novel. Each time a character comes into contact with Tom, readers may fear for that character's safety. I appreciate this elaboration on how innovations become new templates.

Paul Gulino and Connie Shears refer to a model that might explain the audience's narrative engagement, which occurs without "identification with the main character, or even empathy" (95). Psychologist Annabel Cohen's Congruent Association Model with Working Narrative (CAM-WN) explains narrative comprehension. She proposes that the interplay of the audience's "bottom-up" and "top-down" processing creates an evolving mental space called "working narrative" that constitutes their conscious experience of a story. Simply put, the model explains how new narrative information (such as new diegetic elements or narrative techniques) interfaces with experiential knowledge (schemas) (Cohen 192). Gulino and Shears explain that the model accounts for a clear self/other differentiation. Audiences comprehend that "although the characters [they] see in a film may be in danger or pain, [they as the audience] are not." This does not abate a "core tie" with the protagonist, which is comparable to adopting a character as a "family member" (21-23). What follows is that readers may view Tom Ripley as a sort of "adopted" cousin. They disapprove of his actions but ultimately allow him the minimum allegiance that one might allot to the black sheep in the family. This is the second possibility for why Highsmith's lack of moral disengagement cues does not gravely affect her readers' engagement. Although audiences may be more likely to empathize with those who are members of their own "family, ethnic or racial group," such a relationship does not rely on empathic engagement but instead on a tribal sentiment (Seale 339). This sense of belonging seems more compatible with a longer narrative form like a novel or a TV series.

The third case for Highsmith's diminished need for moral disengagement has to do with her medium. In contrast to film, the two features that benefit empathic engagement in literature are its

capacity to offer increased potential for spatiotemporal attachment and what Wayne Booth calls inside views of characters (see [4.3](#)). Spatiotemporal attachment or the amount of time “the narration restricts itself to the [description of] actions [thoughts, and beliefs] of a single character” in a story is determined by, amongst others, the narrational range (Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* 83). A novel of around 100,000 words, such as *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, will arguably give readers about four times more narrative time with the protagonist than the adaptation’s 140-minute runtime. This, of course, is a rough estimate that does not account for all determining factors such as focalization shifts or reading speed. Nevertheless, prolonged spatial-temporal attachment increases the opportunity for empathic engagement. As Booth argues, “the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views” will aid sympathy elicitation for “characters who do not have strong virtues” (378).

The antihero’s pervasiveness is peaking in the age of streaming media. Critically acclaimed series’ rankings include a number of shows that feature antisocial protagonists such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Better Call Saul* (2015–), *The Americans* (2013–2018), *House of Cards* (2013–2018), and many others. Considering that a TV series’ runtime is more comparable to a novel’s narrational range, it seems that filmmakers are taking advantage of this extended runtime, to experiment with building empathic engagement with morally ambiguous characters. Unlike them, Minghella was inhibited by his film’s temporal limitation. This might be the reason for the discrepancy between his and Highsmith’s application of moral disengagement cues.

Although filmmakers may adopt a voice-over and various empathy facilitators such as *projections*, to externalize the thoughts, emotions, and beliefs of their characters, these measures lack the immediacy of comprehension made possible by a narrator who grants readers an inside view of a character. This is the fourth and perhaps most apparent advantage that Highsmith possesses as a novelist. When observing Minghella’s version of Dickie’s murder, spectators will recognize that Tom feels panic, fear, and regret portrayed in his close-ups. Concurrently, when Highsmith describes the murder, she alternates between “staying on the surface” and using inside

views to navigate the reader through Tom's actions and states.<sup>38</sup> We, therefore, know that Tom is "afraid to touch [Dickie], afraid to touch his chest or his wrist to feel a pulse" (81). This is more information than a single close-up of Tom's face can provide. To establish not just his fear but the cause of it, filmmakers would require several shots.

The inside views facilitator exposes the film medium's most serious limitation. In Highsmith's *Ripley*, once the murder is completed, Tom looks at the boat's cement anchor, estimating whether it will be heavy "enough to hold a body down" (81). As he disposes of Dickie, the narrator informs the readers that Tom feels as if the body's arms are stretching "like rubber" and that Dickie's shoulders feel heavy "as if they were magnetized to the boat bottom" (81-82). Needless to say, such specificity, effortless, it seems, in prose, would require much ingenuity and screen-time to establish on film. Moreover, Highsmith limits her readers to Tom's subjectivity. Their attention is kept away from Dickie's anguish. The narrator informs readers that "Dickie's hands slid towards [Tom] on the bottom of the boat," but this is mentioned in the context of Tom's fatigue. Dickie's reluctance to die is framed as an obstacle to Tom's goal. Such control of subjectivity is challenging to achieve in film. Most filmmakers, including Minghella, will therefore rely on a more objective point of view. Thus, because Minghella does not keep the camera focused solely on Tom's actions and reactions, the spectator of the murder may stray from empathizing with Tom and start to sympathize with his victim.

### 4.3 Inside Views

Inside views are Wayne Booth's term for narration that grants readers subjective access to a character. It is closely related to Gérard Genette's notion of "internal focalization," which "represents a view of the fictional world through the eyes of a character" (Fludernik 153). Booth

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<sup>38</sup> Novelist and literary scholar David Lodge uses the phrase "staying on the surface" to refer to the use of an objective narrator or the camera-eye perspective. As he argues, the choice to stay on "the surface of human behaviour" may result in an "absence of psychological depth" which readers may register with a surprised attentiveness, and perhaps uneasiness (118).

argues that inside views “are the most successful of all devices for inducing a parallel emotional response” between readers and characters (249). While this claim may be debatable, it remains true that alignment cannot occur without recognition, and recognition of characters’ internal states is most easily achieved using inside views. This empathy facilitator is not limited to literature as filmmakers may employ voice-over narration to inform spectators about a character’s feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, though such procedures are often ostentatious and less effective. For this reason, in this section, I will concentrate on inside views used in literature (I discuss Minghella’s successful use of this device in [6.2.h](#)).

A study conducted by Willie van Peer and Henk Pander Maat on Dutch teenagers tested whether inside views influenced their interpretation of characters’ motivations. They presented their respondents with three story versions: the first was devoid of inside views, while the remaining offered inside views of one of the two principal characters. The textual alterations, in some instances, may seem dissociated. For example, the story’s spatiotemporal orientation favors the father character in all three prepared variants. In such a situation, readers may interpret the inclusion of inside views of characters other than the father as a contrivance.

Nevertheless, the researchers concluded that “sympathy for a character in the story (as driven by the internal focalizations of that character) indeed shape [readers’] interpretations of characters’ actions” (van Peer and Pander Maat 229). This study verified researchers’ initial assumption that “internal focalizations,” or inside views, promote character engagement. Likewise, it demonstrates the interdependency of empathy facilitators; the recognition of a character’s motivation is necessary to achieve the character—audience goal alignment.

In Booth’s conceptualization, inside views may differ in the “depth,” “the axis of their plunge,” and reliability (163). Firstly, depth refers to an inside view’s psychological and moral insight. The narrator may stay on the “surface of human behavior,” narrating only character actions and dialogue to achieve an effect similar to a film’s screenplay (Lodge, 118). This is what narratologists refer to as “external focalization,” or a neutral view, “in which characters are described from the outside only without any inner view” (Fludernik 102). Such narration restricts

readers from seeing a character's inner states, much like the voice of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975):

He stands in the mist; after a while, steps occur in the house, descending a staircase. The door opens, and there is Miss Callendar, in the ornate doorway, in a black trouser suit, with a suspicious, dark expression. 'Oh, it's you,' says Miss Callendar, 'how did you find out where I live?' 'It wasn't easy,' says Howard. 'It's not supposed to be easy,' says Miss Callendar. (206)

In the described scene, the novel's protagonist meets with one of his romantic interests after a break in their relationship. Bradbury uses the adjectives "suspicious dark" to modify Miss Callendar's physical appearance rather than her mood (see Lodge 117-20). Interestingly, the narrator constructs his dialogue using simple, non-modified attributions, or dialogue tags, thus further limiting authorial editorialization.

Alternatively, the narrator may dive deeper, offering descriptions of a character's sensory experience. They inform us how the world feels to the character through imagery. This is the standard depth that Highsmith's narration maintains for much of the novel:

Tom drank [the brandy] off, slightly sweetish, medicinal-tasting...to bring him back to what his mind knew was usually called reality: the smell of the Nazionale in Dickie's hand, the curlycued grain in the wood of the bar under his fingers, the fact that his stomach had a hard pressure in it as if someone were holding a fist against his navel, the vivid anticipation of the long steep walk from here up to the house, the faint ache that would come in his thighs from it. (69)

This type of inside view attempts to elicit a perceptual alignment with the protagonist. Specific imagery makes it easy for readers to imagine how the character sees and responds to his surroundings. This approach may provide some psychological depth if considered in its narrative context. In the above scene, the inside view facilitates readers' alignment with Tom's anxiety as he realizes Dickie's lack of affinity for his passion. The focus on sensory details underscores the heightened tactility with which Tom experiences this realization. What follows is that readers' perceptual alignment may lead to a recognition of Tom's epistemic state. His perception of the world tells of his new-formed belief that Dickie disdains his economic inferiors. This realization terminates Tom's goodwill towards Dickie. Readers may recall that Tom relates to intellectual supremacy which he manifests through his deviousness towards the naive. Dickie, despite his hopes, has proven to belong to this inferior class which, in Tom's judgment, deserves to be beguiled.

Readers' recognition of Tom's said beliefs would not be immediate. To ensure readers' comprehension of the described beliefs, it might seem like a good idea to state them explicitly. In other words, the narrator could resort to what I call a "stating-not-showing" inside view, which refers to an outright declaration of a character's psychological state: Tom was sad; Tom felt cold; Tom thought he was right, and so on. Interestingly, such a technique is far less effective in its ability to facilitate empathy than any reader-made inferences.<sup>39</sup>

In Booth's analysis of inside views, the device's "axis of plunge" refers to the values that it explores: morals, intellect, aesthetics, and psyche. For instance, he argues that Jane Austen, in her 1816 novel *Emma* "goes relatively deep morally, but scarcely skims the surface

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<sup>39</sup> Highsmith's greatest weakness lies in her over-reliance on the mentioned stating-not-showing inside views. She tells us that Tom felt "some of his terror leaving him... like something melting very slowly inside him" (207). Earlier, he believed "that something else was going to happen tonight" (128). Then, "he wanted to see Greece as Dickie Greenleaf with Dickie's money, Dickie's clothes, Dickie's way of behaving with strangers" (139). This straightforward presentation aids readers' recognition of character states. However, as studies show, it creates no more empathic resonance within a reader than a street sign does in a driver. In fact some critics suggest that over-reliance on this technique may make the text appear "unliterary," hampering all engagement (Kotovych et. al 280). A sounder strategy, it seems, is to use stating-not-showing inside views to punctuate low-emotion plot points that are essential to story comprehension. Emotionally important moments will be better served by inside-views such as free-indirect speech or narrational implicature.

psychologically” (245-49). Therefore, the axis of the plunge is affected by the narrative mode from which the narrator provides glimpses of characters’ interiors. Highsmith’s third-person limited voice makes Tom the exclusive focalizer of the story. Readers share a spatiotemporal attachment to the protagonist throughout the narrative. They see and know only as much as Tom does. The sustained inside view of Tom thus is a seamless and integral part of Highsmith’s narration.

It is tempting to argue that in Highsmith’s case, a first-person voice would have offered a greater consonance, or “relative closeness to the related events” to the inside views (Keen 98). Like his contemporary—Humbert Humbert of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Tom could relate the tales of his depravity. Such proximity, it seems, should foster identification. But the assumption that the level of immediacy is proportionate to its capacity to facilitate empathic engagement is a misconception.

A study conducted by Caspar J. Van Lissa et al. on a group of Dutch high school students tested the empathy facilitation potential of narrative perspectives. The respondents were divided at random into two groups. Each was presented with a version of the same story. One group read the original first-person account, whereas the second read a third-person variant. The researchers found that the change of the point of view did not affect empathic engagement. However, the third-person perspective “significantly increased trust for the character compared to the first-person perspective” (53). The researchers argued that the conversational nature of first-person narration activates readers’ “real-world frames” urging them to seek inconsistencies between what is said and what is communicated. In contrast, the third-person voice “mediated (and authenticated)” the main character (59). It seems, however, that the respondents equated the implied author with the third-person narrator, or they saw little difference between the two. One can conclude that the degree of the presumed distinction (between the author and narrator) informs readers’ impressions of the narrator’s reliability.

The control of the degree of involvement between the audience and the protagonist is critical in the case of an antihero. By managing their distance to the events and characters,

storytellers ensure that the audience “views the materials with the degree of detachment or sympathy felt by the implied author” (Booth 200). In *Lolita*, Nabokov’s perspective choice leaves him little alternative than to tell an apologetic tale. He manages to make Humbert Humbert’s immediacy tolerable through his character’s erudition, his poetic language, and colorful euphemisms. Highsmith’s perspective choice allows her more flexibility. By filtering Tom’s story through a narrator, she decreases our proximity to her sociopathic character. The second advantage is that the third-person voice creates a sense that the storyteller finds Tom acceptable. If readers happen to empathize with Tom, the illusion that the implied author accompanies them in their engagement mitigates their guilt.

#### **4.3.a Free Indirect Speech**

There are many variants of the inside view. However, one offering a more profound psychological insight into a character will involve a symbiotic description of a character’s affective, epistemic, motivational, and/or perpetual disposition in “an attempt to give the reader an effect of living thought and sensation” (Booth 324). The narrator may transmit such information using streams-of-consciousness and imagery. Highsmith instead uses free-indirect speech, which grants inside views relating to beliefs, emotions, and motivations rather than just character thoughts (McHale 22). As an Italian crime investigator leaves Tom’s hotel room, Highsmith blends the voice of her narrator with Tom’s voice to describe his elation:

He could have flown—like a bird, out of the window, with spread arms! The idiots! All around the thing and never guessing it!... The one thing they were bright about was that Dickie Greenleaf might have killed Freddie Miles. But Dickie Greenleaf was dead, dead, deader than a doornail, and he, Tom Ripley, was safe!... He was suddenly ravenous. He was going to have something luscious and expensive to eat--whatever the Grand Hotel’s specialty was, breast of pheasant or petto di polio, and perhaps cannelloni, to begin with, creamy

sauce over delicate pasta and a good valpolicella to sip while he dreamed about his future and planned where he went from here. (162)

Highsmith transmits Tom's affects by comparing him to a bird taking flight; she conveys his belief that he is unburdened by relating his thought process; she also states his immediate desire, an expensive celebratory meal. The result is that readers recognize his states, thus enabling their alignment with Tom in one or more of the mentioned aspects.

As the narrator relates Tom's opinions of the police, the division between her and Tom becomes blurred. Arguably, the narrator becomes Tom. Considering their propensity to follow and mimic, readers may feel inclined to assume Tom's affects. Thus, their empathic engagement with the implied author might be transferred to the protagonist. Psychologists Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi explored the role of free-indirect speech in transferring impressions between the narrator and a character in their 1996 study "Literary communication." They presented respondents with a story relying primarily on free-indirect speech to relate a conversation between two characters. They found that altering the story so that only one character's views were conveyed through a free-indirect speech made respondents' "evaluations of the characters and inferences about the narrator closely match." In this case, free-indirect speech made readers perceive the thoughts and actions of the character they had access to as "more justified and rationalized" (409).

Research conducted by Maria Kotovych et al. (2011) yielded similar results. It shows that even dialogue-oriented free-indirect speech seemed to instill the character's utterances with the narrator's authority. Their text alterations entailed "changing free-indirect either to indirect speech (by adding tags such as "he thought that") or to direct (quoted) speech" (282). Kotovych concludes that readers find the "thoughts and behavior" of a character recognizable if "that character is associated with the narrator through the use of free indirect speech" (285). This seems a reasonable claim if we assume that readers process the narrator's voice and characters' dialogue in the same way they might process a conversation. In daily discourse, interlocutors

seek out subtext or discrepancies between what is said and what is communicated, almost involuntarily.

When a character speaks in a story, readers feel inclined to interpret their intention similarly. In *Annie Hall* (1975), Marshall Brickman and Woody Allen constructed a scene around a related notion. During one exchange between the film's main characters, Annie and Alvy, subtitles appear detailing their parallel thoughts. When Annie says, "Well, I-I-I would-I would like to take a serious photography course soon," her subtitle reads, "He probably thinks I'm a yo-yo." The subtitles reveal both characters' insecurities in contrast to their verbal displays of sophistication.

Kotovych proposes that readers tend to find a narrator's voice more trustworthy than a character's. When a reliable narrator speaks, he or she has the authority comparable to someone giving a speech or lecture. Readers are thus more willing to find that such a speaker has thought their words through and is being honest. When this acquiescence is transferred via free-indirect speech to a character, readers feel more at ease to progress to recognition of what is meant, rather than remaining in the tangles of interpretation.

Considering the researchers' findings, it would be an error to think that empathic engagement strategies should require that all speech of an empathically promoted protagonist be changed from indirect or quoted speech to free-indirect speech. This would invariably reduce the potency of the device. Instead, one might make a note of Highsmith's standard mode, which is restricting the use of free indirect speech to (emotionally or dramatically) important moments, which instills her protagonist's lines with the implied author's authority.

#### **4.3.b Narrational Implicature**

The example from the preceding section concerning Tom's elation after evading justice relies on a simile, narratorial implicature, and free-indirect speech to engage readers. The section would lack its potency had Highsmith omitted the opening simile of Tom flying with spread arms. This imagery works primarily to construct a "narratorial implicature" that generates the

engagement. Kotovych et al. (2011) adopt the term to refer to passages that require readers' inferring to comprehend the narrator's knowledge and beliefs. This recognition facilitates empathic engagement, which may be transferred from the narrator to characters using inside views.

Storytellers may create narratorial implicature through various means; however, each time, they rely on the assumption that "readers process the narrator as a conversational participant." For example, a narrator may express "unreasonable or unjustified attitudes" (Kotovych et al. 288; see: Grice). In J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), the narrating protagonist expresses his critique of virtuosity: "If you do something too good, then, after a while, if you don't watch it, you start showing off. And then you're not as good anymore" (136). Readers infer that the narrator must have some knowledge or experience that justifies his attitude.

Alternatively, a narrator may signal their implications by using more ostentatious language. Highsmith describes Tom's condition living under Dickie's identity as follows: "he felt alone, yet not at all lonely... he was himself—and yet not himself. He felt blameless and free, although he consciously controlled every move he made" (106). Over a single paragraph, she makes several contradictory statements about his state. This signals to the readers that they should look for subtextual meaning. In this instance, the narrator's point is that Tom's identity shuffling brought about his sense of cognitive dissonance.

A third manner a narrator might create narratorial implicature is by introducing a "superficial incoherence" in the text (Kotovych et al. 266). For example, in John Cheever's short story "The Enormous Radio" (1947), the narrator introduces the protagonist in the following way: "Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins." Readers may infer that the narrator believes they have sufficient knowledge of the American collegiate culture to understand the reference.

The most common examples of narratorial implicature entail using literary devices to communicate the narrator's or character's state without expressing it explicitly. Thus, readers

understand implicitly that when Highsmith writes, “he could have flown--like a bird, out of the window, with spread arms,” she is communicating that “Tom felt free and light.” This information comes in the context of Tom’s belief that he has escaped justice. “Getting away with murder” is not an experiential prerequisite to finding such an experience of elation relatable. Readers may refer to similar impressions of freedom, perhaps recalling the final school bell that announced their summers. Such a connection of readers’ and the character’s experiences creates a thread of recognition that fosters empathic engagement.

Kotovych et al. (2011) conducted a series of experiments that demonstrate that narrational implicature increases empathic engagement.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, the researchers’ findings also reveal that the use of explicit informing or stating-not-showing inside views (e.g., Tom felt scared; Tom wanted love; Tom thought he was brilliant) decreases engagement. Kotovych presented three groups of respondents with three versions of a first-person story. The original, or “implicit,” version included an introduction that implicitly informed the readers about the narrator’s condition. In the “explicit” version, researchers altered the introduction to state the narrator’s condition explicitly. The next story was altered to remain stylistically consistent with the introduction. The third version included a new, unrelated story introduction that was stylistically consistent with the remainder of the text. The results showed that only the explicit group reported a lowered “transparency” or recognition. Since recognition precedes empathic engagement, one can conclude that the explicit version hindered empathy elicitation. Researchers concluded that “that this effect of the explicit [introduction] must lie in its content, not merely its writing style,” and that an over-reliance on the explicit form makes it difficult to maintain an engaging, literary style (279-80).

For Highsmith, state-not-show inside views are an efficient tool for creating a coherent plot. It might also arguably frustrate her empathic engagement strategy. For instance, this is how she describes Tom’s efforts at acting:

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<sup>40</sup> Kotovych uses the term “transparency,” which corresponds to the *recognition* phase of the empathic engagement process as I describe it.

He had wanted to be an actor...He had thought he had the necessary talent and that all he would have to do was show a producer a few of his original one-man skits--Mrs Roosevelt writing 'My Day' after a visit to a clinic for unmarried mothers for instance--but his first three rebuffs had killed all his courage and his hope. (29)

Highsmith relates Tom's past primarily through explicit statements. To authenticate her protagonist's ability to entertain and later impersonate Dickie, she needs to transmit this information. Still, the details as to the content of his one-man skit seem oddly specific in contrast to the explicit presentation of events. It creates the impression that Highsmith could have developed this expository passage into an anecdote that imaginably could end with the mentioned producers staring at Tom wide-eyed. In keeping with Kotovych's findings, instead of stating, "he had wanted to be an actor," Highsmith would have garnered greater engagement by using narrational implicature. Readers would have gleaned Tom's aspiration if, instead, Highsmith had related his acting exploits using a humorous hyperbole. She could have achieved this without exceeding a similar word count. Yet the matter-of-factness of her voice seems to establish credibility for her narrator, and it does not distract readers from Tom's goal pursuit.

#### **4.3.c Storyteller's Engagement with the Protagonist**

Researchers have approached narrator reliability from various perspectives. Some propose to regard it as an interpretive construct through which readers address textual inconsistencies (see Sternberg and Yacobi). Others debate if an author's intent for readers to doubt the narrator's credibility should be considered the defining mark of unreliability or if the author's ideological bias should be taken into account as well (Fludernik 113). From the storyteller's perspective, a practical way of conceptualizing the narrator's reliability is to consider the discrepancy between the voice and the implied author. Readers can consider whether playing the narrator's part requires that the implied author put on a costume, speak with a different accent, pretend to be of a

different age or background. The more significant the discrepancy, the more likely it is that the author will feel obliged to impress readers with the personality of his or her narrator. The narrator thus becomes more of a character who relates a story than an inconspicuous teller.

A storyteller's "second self-created in the work" may differ from the narrator (Booth 137). A canonical example of this is Salinger's Holden Caulfield. The narrating protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye* opens the novel by stating that if he shared any of that boring "David Copperfield kind of crap" about his life, it would give his parents "two hemorrhages apiece" (1). Readers understand that the narrator is dramatically removed from our implied author construct. Alarmed by a potentially unreliable narrator, they anticipate symptoms of dishonesty, exaggeration, and self-delusion. In *Ripley's* case, Highsmith and her narrator seem to be closely linked. There is no glaring discrepancy in their intellectual capacity, sensitivity, or even sense of humor. Under such terms, *Ripley's* narrator is reliable in that he or she depicts Tom's perils to the best of their ability.

Tom seems to share an essential quality with the implied author. When he composes his first letter to the Greenleafs, he writes a fictional account of his future with Dickie: "he got so carried away that it went on for eight or ten pages... until the table was covered with sheets of paper and the first call came for dinner" (27). Much later, he "sobered himself by deliberately concentrating on the little problem that he hadn't solved yet: Marge had also probably told the Italian police that she had talked to Tom Ripley at the Inghilterra. The police were going to wonder where the hell he went to" (138). Tom, unwittingly, resembles a writer. He loses himself in his "creative" compositions and considers the same plot points that his implied author would have contemplated. He certainly possesses the imagination of a novelist. While vacationing in Palermo, Tom observes:

Wonderful to look at the dusty arches of its facade and to think of going inside tomorrow, to imagine its musty, sweetish smell, composed of the uncounted candles and incense-burnings of hundreds and hundreds of years. Anticipation!

It occurred to him that his anticipation was more pleasant to him than his experiencing. Was it always going to be like that? (139)

This inside view exposes Tom's intellectual state. Not only does he imagine the sensory experience of the Palermo Cathedral without having visited the structure, but he also poses questions that relate to the creative writing process (see Lamott). I draw the analogy between Tom and the implied author for a reason—the narrator betrays a sentiment for her creation. This, I believe, is the most essential condition for any empathy elicitation strategy. Sentiment for one's protagonist will invariably seep into the text. If the storyteller identifies with his or her character, then it is likely that they will enact various empathy facilitators, consciously or otherwise.

The fact that Highsmith opted for a reliable narrator does not mean that it is the most efficient choice of an empathy elicitation strategy. As Booth argues, the story should dictate the narrative mode. The storyteller should therefore consider “which particular character shall tell this particular story, or part of a story, with what precise degree of reliability, privilege, freedom to comment.” What follows is that the decisions, for an example of the narrator's point of view, will be “choices of degree, not kind” (164-65). Highsmith's maneuvering between a limited third-person viewpoint and Tom's stream of consciousness is an example of this. She both is and is not Tom.

There are general guidelines that apply to inside views. A sympathetic narrator will take a sustained inside view and combine it with character goal orientation. By granting readers inside views into character's affects, beliefs, and desires, the storyteller creates concern for the outcome of their pursuits (Plantinga 94-95). Booth argues that this happens independently or even despite characterization (246). Furthermore, inside views, especially those of a decision-making process, may act like an unchallenged rhetorician. They are therefore capable of “blinding [readers] to the possibility” that they have aligned themselves with goals that they would typically deem unworthy (324). Thus, audiences may hope for a positive outcome for a morally objectionable character.

Similarly, just as the storyteller may choose to sustain an inside view of one character, they may withhold it for others. Again this choice is essential when writing a story featuring an antihero (249). One only needs to imagine the altered impact of Dickie's murder scene if Highsmith had chosen to oscillate between the killer's and victim's inside views (see [4.1](#)).

#### **4.3.d Projections**

Projections are elements of a highly subjective narration. Film theorist Edward Branigan uses the term to refer to a technique in which diegetic elements "reflect a character's mental state," thus making it explicit (132-33). A familiar example of this technique in cinema would be the drunk montage, which uses various visual effects to simulate a character's intoxicated perception of reality. Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945) exploits this device successfully. Nevertheless, I will use this term to refer to the more inconspicuous externalizations of characters' states, which similarly manipulate the audience's interpretation of various diegetic elements.

I call "projections" a narrative application of the "Rashomon effect." Essentially, this facilitator externalizes various epistemological frameworks, such as thoughts, knowledge, and memory, demonstrating how they might influence interpretations of events. The phenomenon was scrutinized in Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950). Since then, researchers have described the effect from the perspective of various disciplines such as communication studies, psychology, and sociology (Anderson 249).

In literature, as mentioned, projections have come to define the unreliable narrator. They refer to depictions that reflect the narrator's or focalizer's biases. In *Ripley*, Highsmith's descriptions often reflect Tom's judgment of a described character. A notable example is Freddie Miles's character (see [1.4](#)). Such an application of projections manipulates readers into sharing in the protagonist's judgment. As I have already argued, this device may be inconspicuous, even to the storyteller, as they may unwittingly take on the protagonist's prejudices or produce a character that mirrors those of their own. When adapting Highsmith's novel, Minghella

commented on the pervasiveness of Ripley's projections: "In a way," he argued, "you feel that the sensibility of Ripley colored almost every other character [Highsmith] ever wrote" (Argent 63). In *Ripley*, arguably, this "coloration" is most evident in Marge's character.

Highsmith establishes Tom's antipathy to the "thick-skulled" Marge almost from the novel's onset (138). Aside from projecting Tom's dismissive attitude onto her action descriptions, Highsmith devises scenes where the woman's behavior seems unsound. After the launch of the Italian investigation into the disappearance of Dickie, Herbert Greenleaf, arrives in Italy. He meets with Tom and Marge to inform them about the American detective he has hired to help with the search. As they sit down for lunch, the man "glanced around as he spoke, as if he hoped that Dickie would come walking in at any moment." Highsmith gives readers insight into the bereaved father's state with this description. While Tom acts with sensitivity to Mr. Greenleaf's condition, Marge interrupts the conversation (which concerns her romantic interest) to remark: "'Tom has the most beautiful house!' Marge said, starting in on her seven-layer rum cake. Tom turned his glare at her into a faint smile." Perhaps, her underestimating the situation's gravity is a result of her blissful naïveté; it is conceivable that Highsmith wanted to suggest that her elitist upbringing sheltered her from the reality of unsolvable problems. Alternatively, Highsmith might be implying that Marge's actions are indicative of her propensity for wealthy men; Tom observes "that Marge and Mr. Greenleaf got along very well, though Marge had said she had not known him before she met him in Rome" (184). There could be several other interpretations. However, the scene will likely create a curious impression on readers. Marge's gaiety is disrespectful of the fact that her romantic interest is missing and, as readers know, dead. Their sympathy for the bereaved Mr. Greenleaf espouses antipathy towards any character who remains insensitive to his pain. They are, thus, willing to share in Tom's annoyance with the heavy-handed woman. The striking irony is that Tom is the sole reason for Dickie's disappearance. Highsmith thus manipulates readers into resenting Marge while ignoring the fact that the considerate Tom is Dickie's killer.

It is pointless to speculate to what extent Marge's behavior is skewed by the projection of Tom's animosity towards her, as there exists no real Marge to serve as a reference. Nevertheless, I feel that Marge's actions are a misrepresented projection because I refer to Minghella's version of her character. In the adaptation, Marge is not only incapable of enjoying a seven-layer rum cake, but she intuitively suspects Tom's involvement in Dickie's disappearance. I mention this because I argue that a projection can espouse more narrative enjoyment if it remains conspicuous to the audience. If the audience is aware that a character's biases distort a narrative, they will be more receptive to those colorings. Instead of fearing manipulation, the audience will be at ease to enjoy a defamiliarizing viewpoint.

A common way of signaling the contrivance of a projection is to provide the audience with a counter-perspective. Perhaps the best-known film to juxtapose characters' conflicting perspectives on the same narrative events is the mentioned *Rashomon*, which is based upon Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove" (1922). While the short story details three accounts of a crime, the film expands the formula by adding a fourth perspective. The story concerns a samurai's murder and his wife's rape by an outlaw called Tajomaru. Each of the parties involved, including the dead samurai, recounts their versions of the debacle. The characters project their idealized selves onto their accounts, distorting the facts to make themselves appear more courageous and honorable. When the Tajomaru relates his duel with the samurai, he describes a valorous battle between two skilled swordsmen. However, when an eye-witness retells the same fight, he reports the clash as a graceless scuffle between two panic-stricken men. The narrative not only provides four distinct interpretations of events. It also clearly marks the focalizer of each perspective and provides a simple framework for interpretation—the focalizer's bias taints each version.

Pete Travis's film *Vantage Point* (2008) is a more recent application of a multiple-perspective account of a single event. The narrative depicts various characters' views of an assassination attempt on a president, but unlike Kurosawa's adaptation, the film does not present conflicting story variants. Instead, it hinges on characters' perceptual diversities assembling a

complex plot, a puzzle piece at a time. A more interesting revisiting of the Rashomon effect is Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi's TV series *The Affair* (2014-2019). The narrative initially details the perspectives of Noah Solloway and Alison Bailey, two married individuals who engage in the titular affair. At first, the storytellers depict the characters' nuanced views of the same events. Noah's telling of his encounter with Alison shows the woman as ostentatiously seductive, while Alison's focalization presents Noah as the romance's initiator. Eventually, the narrative unravels as the storytellers opt to depict different story events from different perspectives, rather than the same story events from conflicting viewpoints.

Nevertheless, both the *Vantage Point* and *The Affair* cater to spectators' narrative comprehension by keeping each focalization bracketed by focalization markers. As a result, spectators do not need to decipher and systematize the conflicting projections. Instead, they are free to discern the ontological hierarchies of the presented story variants. The appeal of such narratives is that they allow for independent empathic engagements with deeply conflicted characters. The resultant recasting of the protagonist-antagonist opposition demonstrates the profound effectiveness of empathy facilitators.

Projections, however, do not need to be limited to the manipulation of story events. Instead, a character's disposition can pollute other diegetic elements, such as the film's *mise-en-scene*. For example, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Amelie* (2001) uses a bright color palette in the production design, accentuating the color red. This is a projection that externalizes the protagonist's optimism and romantic disposition. As mentioned before, this fact might escape some spectators' attention, as the film does not provide alternative story variants with contrasting color palettes.

Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) is an example of a narrative that projects the protagonist's outlook onto the story world while providing an inconspicuous counterpoint that signals the perspective's intended contrivance. The film centers on the character of Eddie Mannix, a film studio executive who acts as the film's focalizer. The storytellers intentionally hyperbolize the protagonist-antagonist opposition to present a comics-like depiction of the complex sociopolitical situation of 1950s Hollywood. Mannix acts as the protector of his "dream

factory” against the scandal-mongering media, communist saboteurs, capitalist seducers, and temperamental movie stars. All the while, he tries to be a good man, partaking in daily confessions, resisting his cigarette addiction, and displaying concern for his wife and child. His perspective affects not just the *mise-en-scene* of the film but also the acting. Mannix conducts himself as a concerned father figure while his actors and directors behave like cantankerous children. All the diegetic elements act as projections of his perspective. Spectators can infer this if they are familiar with Mannix’s real-life counterpart. During his career at MGM, the Hollywood “fixer” had not only been involved in numerous affairs but he was also linked to organized crime and was associated with several murders, most notably of his wife’s lover, actor George Reeves (Fleming 24-25; 260). The filmmakers’ omission of such details evidences Mannix’s bias. The Coens additionally emphasize their narrative’s subjectivity by employing a narrator who fosters the story’s fairytale tone. The result is that the spectators recognize the manipulations as an application of the Rashomon effect rather than a partisan apology for a morally dubious executive.

In *Hail, Caesar!*, the Coen brothers successfully harness most diegetic elements to cater to a single character’s perspective. Still, an indiscriminate application of projections might produce an anti-mimetic two-dimensionality, reducing characters into naive depictions of angels and demons. In other words, if projections are not employed as conspicuous character externalizations, the audience might mistake them for being representative not of the focalizer but the storyteller’s worldview. Thus, interpreted narratives risk being dismissed as bigoted, stereotypical, or ideological.

#### **4.4 Perspective markers**

Many of the described perceptual and epistemic empathy facilitators, including character time perception and inside views, mark the focalizer of a subjective narration. They signal the character who serves as the story’s locus of perspective. As mentioned earlier, empathy

facilitators rarely elicit empathy autonomously. The reason for this may be more apparent if we recognize that perspective markers are, in fact, empathy facilitators. It would be unreasonable to expect this perspective signposting element to arouse empathy in the audience. Its function is to communicate which character filters the story with their subjectivity. However, sustained use of this device, especially when orchestrated with other empathy facilitators, can engender a strong empathic engagement.

Literary critics who have disputed focalization's capacity to elicit empathy have often relied on imperfect studies. They might speculate that adding or removing a single perspective marker in a narrative will affect the audience's empathic engagement. Often such expectations are dictated by a research's limitations. An augmentation of more than one perspective marker would undoubtedly complicate the interpretation of the study's results. In their mentioned investigation, Van Peer and Pander Maat assume that inserting a character's inside view into a text will influence respondents' interpretations of the narrative (see [4.3](#)). However, the simple inclusion of characters' thought descriptions may prove futile if it is not coordinated with other perspective markers. For example, a failure to amend a story's spatiotemporal character attachment to correspond to the focalization might create an aesthetic dissonance that could discourage further engagement. If a reader is granted access to a single character's perspective, they will likely expect a sudden switch in a spatiotemporal attachment (from character A to character B) to indicate a focalization shift. Readers will then expect to be granted access to this new character B. If this does not occur, the new action will seem like a focalization break performed for the sake of exposition, which readers might interpret as the storyteller's shortcoming.

A similar 2001 study (Andringa et al.) found that adding the protagonist's voice-over narration to Peter Delpout's film adaptation of *Emma Zunz* (1984) did not affect empathic engagement. Many screenwriting instructors discourage using a voice-over unless it functions as a counterpoint, meaning that its juxtaposition with the accompanying image generates new meaning through contrast (see: Howard and Mabley 61; McKee 334-35; Russin and Downs 557). Successful implementation of a voice-over in a film often requires that the narrative be structured

around this device. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) is a notable example. The story is conveyed in the form of the protagonist's confession, which he records on a dictaphone. The narrative is told through flashbacks that cater to the spectators' hopes that the narrating character will evade justice. In the case of the *Emma Zunz* experiment, the film was not altered aside from the supplementation of Emma's voice-over. The device relates her thoughts and exposition without creating subtext or irony through contrast with the image.

Consequently, the audience may judge the voice-over to be the filmmaker's expository shortcut. Much like a state-not-show inside view, such a method will not facilitate empathic engagement. Considering that the original *Emma Zunz* employs a dedramatized narration, it is possible that even in its unaltered version the film fails to promote any empathic engagement. Margrethe Bruun Vaage draws a similar conclusion on the study, noting that the titular Emma might have been "too unsympathetic, incomprehensible, or downright insane to empathize with her" (174).

In Highsmith's *Ripley*, Tom is the sole focalizer for the entire novel. Highsmith uses devices such as free indirect speech to keep her readers bound to her protagonist's outlook. Narratives with multiple focalizations, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (1996), contain their focalizations in separate books, chapters, or sections, thus utilizing perspective markers in a manner akin to Highsmith's. A typical role of a perspective marker is to keep readers submerged in a character's point of view rather than to mark various focalizations. However, many experimental narratives, those that switch focalizations with every paragraph or sentence, such as Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) or Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (1969), are more dependent on the device's focalization demarcation capabilities. Such stories may have to ensure that the agents of their focalized segments remain identifiable. Therefore, they might rely on any of the empathy facilitators mentioned in this study and various other techniques particular to their modes of narration. For example, in "The Babysitter," Coover presents the perspectives of six

focalizers.<sup>41</sup> The story progresses seamlessly from one perspective to another, revealing a different character's vision a paragraph at a time. Each version of the story offers alternative plot developments and endings. Coover keeps his readers aware of the changing focalizations and the story variants by ostensibly disrupting the continuity of the stories or by using the self-reflexive exaggerations that are characteristic of his metafictional style.

Considering that the most essential elements of storytelling grammar<sup>42</sup> can be employed as a perspective marker, this tool's variety and application depend on the inventiveness of storytellers. For example, camera movements such as pans, tilts, and booms hold no obvious engagement potential. However, together they may form systematized conventions that can align spectators perceptually with a given character. Video essayist Evan Puschak describes director David Fincher's techniques that "lock you into the behavior of the characters." The filmmaker utilizes camera movement to mirror the motion of characters on screen. For example, at the beginning of a scene, a protagonist, such as Francis Underwood of *House of Cards* (2013), might be sitting at a desk. The camera is set up to match their eye level. When he stands up, the camera immediately booms up to match Francis's eye-line. When he leans forward on the desk, the camera tilts down; the camera tracks alongside when he walks through the office. Puschak notes that Fincher's camera mirrors the character's every movement, even a shrug or the "slightest change in posture." Achieving a perfect synchronization between the actor and camera requires numerous repetitions. Where an average Hollywood director needs about ten takes per shot, Fincher reportedly shoots anywhere between twenty-five and sixty-five takes (Ducker). When applied for the film's duration, this painstaking technique produces unprecedented empathic engagement. It causes the spectators to unwittingly align themselves with the character's perception.

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<sup>41</sup> A longer version of the argument pertaining to Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" was previously published in *Language and Literary Studies of Warsaw*, vol 8, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> I refer here to the comprehensive vocabulary compiled by narratologists such as Gérard Genette or Mieke Bal, which identifies numerous "storytelling techniques that can be found in narratives across media." These elements are intuitively recognized and understood by audiences regardless of their familiarity with the terminology (Mittel 37).

Figure 3:



As mentioned, the potency of an empathy facilitator increases when it is coordinated with another. Brad Bird's animated film *Ratatouille* (2007) couples the POV structure with an emotion marker, specifically the Vertigo "push-pull," to achieve a very powerful effect. In the pictured sequence, the film's protagonist becomes mesmerized by a cook appearing on a television screen. The scene begins as an over-the-shoulder POV shot of the television set. The camera pulls back as the lens zooms in. The increasing focal length causes the distant TV to appear as if it was advancing while the protagonist's silhouette in the foreground remains roughly the same size. The television grows inconspicuously until it occupies most of the frame. The effect allows the spectator to simulate not only the protagonist's line of sight but more importantly his psychological state. As he becomes captivated by the TV, all the other objects in the room become irrelevant. The push/pull effect simulates this idea by visually removing all other diegetic elements

#### 4.4.a POV Structures

In film, a point of view shot is a perspective marker that presents spectators with a character's line of sight. The shot may include part of the onlooking character in-frame (as in an over-the-shoulder POV), or it may leave the image unobscured. Essentially, it allows spectators to share in a character's perception. In a film employing objective narration, the filmmaker will cut a dialogue scene to oscillate between the interlocutors' POV shots. In such cases, the framing and camera movement may denote additional information, such as the characters' power dynamic. A dramatic example comes from Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008). Towards the film's finale, the protagonist, Batman, apprehends his antagonist. The villain hangs headfirst over a precipice. He is framed upside down in opposition to the protagonist. However, as he speaks,

the camera tilts to compensate for his position. Thus the framing shows the suspended antagonist in an upright position. The framing mirrors the power balance, as the antagonist reveals his final scheme. In this case, the camera movement subverts the idea of a POV as a perspective marker; unlike the audience, Batman continues seeing the Joker in the upside-down position. Arguably, this choice reflects the Joker's state more accurately than Batman's and, as such, acts as an empathy facilitator for the antagonist.

POV structure is Vaage's term for a standard sequence edited around the POV shot (159). A model progression would include an intercutting of a character's close-up looking at an object of desire with the POV shot of that object. Each cut back to the character reveals a change in emotion: Tom is hesitant; POV shot; he becomes increasingly nervous; POV shot; he takes a deep breath, and so on. Minghella uses this device in *Ripley's* Spanish Steps sequence. Some time after murdering Dickie, Tom arranges for Marge, who is anxiously seeking her fiancée, to meet Meredith, a woman who knows Tom as "Dickie." Tom spectates the orchestrated meeting from the top of the Spanish Steps.

The shot progression is a variation of the POV structure. Tom's close-up switches to an over-the-shoulder POV, looking down at the Piazza di Spagna. The filmmaker cuts closer to the cafe as Meredith arrives. Next, spectators see Meredith's over-the-shoulder shot with Tom in the distant background. Minghella cuts back to Tom's close-up as he scans the square, then back to a long shot of Marge and her friend as they approach the same cafe. Minghella then cuts to a new close-up of Tom, punctuating his growing anticipation.

Similarly, we see Marge and her friend walking in the foreground as Tom looks down at them in the distant background. Spectators see Tom's POV as Meredith recognizes the arriving couple, followed by four shots of the ensuing interaction. Minghella returns to a long shot of Tom as he looks on, smoking a cigarette, and next cut to another POV shot of the cafe before a dialogue scene ensues. Meredith admits to the heartbroken Marge that she had been seeing Dickie, adding, "I think you'll find he's coming home to you" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 49). The use of this POV structure allows Minghella to synchronize spectators with Tom. Like the

onlooking protagonist, they observe the scene feeling the same growing excitement. Spectators are aligned both perceptually and affectively.

This intricate shot progression serves one other purpose. Meredith's exchange with Marge marks the film's longest spatial detachment from Tom. This is significant because Tom serves as the film's only focalizer. Spectators could interpret a complete departure as an unwarranted change of focalization, which could distract from Tom's goal pursuit, and in turn, hinder engagement. And yet, Minghella needs the spectators to witness the conversation that takes place in Tom's absence. He invents the discussed POV structure to mitigate the focalization shift. Technically, from where Tom stands, he would not hear the exchange. For this reason, Minghella cuts twice to Meredith's and Marge's over-the-shoulder shots of Tom, creating a sense of interaction between the cafe scene and Tom, which allows the spectators to ignore the break in the convention.

Minghella employs a similar POV structure in the Festival of Madonna scene, which arguably marks the film's most significant focalization departures from Tom. The scene consists of Dickie's close-ups and his point-of-view shots as he observes the villagers' celebrations of the feast of the Assumption. Minghella intercuts between Dickie and his line of sight. Interestingly, Tom is present during the episode but is kept off-screen for most of the close-ups. Because of the framing, which includes a five-second extreme close-up of Dickie's eyes, he, not Tom, is the scene's focalizer. Consequently, the scene is about Dickie's realization that his mistress, whose body emerges from the bay's waters, had committed suicide. This inconsistency makes this and the subsequent scene stand out in the entire film. Minghella does include one shot in which Tom looks at Dickie, and the camera pans with his line of sight. This, however, is not enough to keep Tom as the focalizer.

The filmmaker could have employed a layered POV structure to avoid a focalization shift. Had every reaction shot of Dickie been framed as Tom's POV and intercut with Tom's reactions to Dickie, the scene would have played a different role. Instead of functioning as an incident of Dickie's recognition, it would have performed as a scene about Tom's examination of Dickie's

frailty. This departure in focalization demonstrates the effectiveness of the POV structure. If applied in contrast to the film's focalization convention, it can create a dissonance that may distract the spectators. Alternatively, vacillating between focalizations, a more objective narration may grant the audience greater freedom to choose the character they prefer to sympathize with.

An approximation of a POV structure may be found in fictional narratives too. In *Ripley*, Highsmith includes a description of Tom's reaction to Dickie's painting:

Tom winced with almost a personal shame. It was Marge again, undoubtedly, though with long snakelike hair, and worst of all two horizons in her eyes, with a miniature landscape of Mongibello's houses and mountains in one eye, and the beach in the other full of little red people. (45)

Her choice to precede the painting's description with Tom's reaction primes readers to imagine a blundered artistic vision. But unlike in the case of the film, whose POV structure relies partly on affective mimicry, a description, such as the above, will allow readers to align themselves with the character's epistemic but not affective state. Had Tom's reaction been presented in a series of shots, spectators would have been more likely to simulate Tom's "almost personal shame."

#### **4.4.b Sound Perspective markers**

A point-of-view structure may also use sound to mark a given character's auditory perspective. In *Ripley*, Freddie Miles's disruptive presence in Mongibello is underlined by the sound design. As the characters sail onboard Dickie's boat, Minghella cuts to a close-up of Tom. He sits holding a book, turned away from the camera, but his ear is centered in the frame. Spectators hear the dialogue exchange between the offscreen Dickie and Freddie. Their voices are as clear as they would have been heard in a close-up. This communicates to the spectators that Tom is only pretending to be reading, but he is eavesdropping on the conversation. After the scene ends, Minghella cuts back to the same close-up of Tom. Spectators hear the faint

whispering of the offscreen Marge. Tom reacts to this sound effect. He turns and looks below the deck. Minghella then cuts to his point of view shot, which reveals the source of the whispers. The sound strengthens the effectiveness of the POV structure.

More dramatic examples of auditory perspective markers may be found in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). The filmmaker employs an intricate sound design to simulate the soldiers' battlefield experience. The most notable example of a perspective marker comes from the Omaha Beach sequence. As the film's protagonist, Captain Miller, storms the enemy defensive positions, he is met with heavy machine gunfire. The soundtrack includes explosions, gunshots, whizzing bullets, screams of the wounded, shouted orders, etc. However, as Miller takes cover, a nearby explosion stuns him. Here, Spielberg employs several empathy facilitators, the most ostensible one being the dramatic change in the sound design. The battle sounds become muted as the shell explodes, and an ominous hum overpowers the soundtrack. The spectators experience the auditory simulation of Miller's shock. This, as mentioned, is coupled with a few other facilitators. What is essentially a victimization scene additionally employs a POV structure, cutting between Miller's close-up and his line of sight.

Interestingly, Spielberg chose to use a mix of frame rates. As the initial mortar shell explodes, the motion of Miller's close-up slows down, synchronizing with the numbing soundtrack. This clarifies that spectators are hearing an approximation of Miller's auditory perspective. The next point of view shots, which include soldiers crying, being torn by explosions, or looking for their severed limbs, likewise employ the slow-motion effect.

Aside from depicting an undeserved misfortune, the Omaha Beach scene uses various stylistic effects, such as the fast shutter speed, faded colors, and hand-held camera motion, to mimic a documentary film aesthetic. The focalization markers collaborate with the *mise-en-scene* to elicit empathic and sympathetic engagement. On the one hand, spectators experience a simulation of the character's state; on the other, their realization of the character's life-threatening predicament makes them dread Miller's stunned condition, making him vulnerable to enemy fire.

The storyteller's choices instill the objective drama of a battle massacre with the subjective drama of Miller's hampered ability to act.

Subtle implementations of sound perspective markers abound in Steven Spielberg's earlier-mentioned film *Munich* (2005). Sound designer Ben Burt used sound effects to mark the character's perspective and direct spectators' attention. The film relates the story of a Mossad squad delegated to assassinate individuals involved in the planning of the 1972 Munich massacre. The sound design focuses on the squad members' various perspectives as they prepare to kill their first target, Wael Zwaiter.

As Zwaiter addresses the audience in a courtyard patio, the filmmakers cut to an interior shot of a vehicle. The sound perspective shifts. Now spectators hear the incessant talk of an Italian prostitute whose silhouette they see in the foreground. The camera pans to reveal one of the Mossad agents sitting behind the wheel. Through the windshield, spectators see Zwaiter speaking to the crowd. His remote voice is appropriately muffled, but the woman's proximate monologue does not obscure it. The agent concentrates on hearing Zwaiter and not his companion, who serves only as camouflage. Spectators share his auditory perspective, which is maintained even as the camera zooms in on Zwaiter, leaving him the only figure in the frame. The move does not affect the sound perspective. Zwaiter's faintly heard speech continues to struggle against the woman's proximate, though offscreen, voice.

Then the filmmakers cut to an exterior long shot of the cafe. Despite the busy city location, the distant cafe scene dominates the soundtrack. It is not drowned out by traffic or conversations of the foregrounded cafe loungers. One of these figures gets up from his table. Spectators recognize that this is another member of the Mossad squad. It is his auditory perspective that they now hear. As he walks, the sound of the vehicle's engine comes to the foreground. For a moment, it overpowers Zwaiter's interactions with his cafe audience. Spectators will recognize that this is the car of the first Mossad agent. The sound design focuses spectators on the danger that looms over the oblivious Zwaiter.

Because most of the shots are panoramic in that they combine several relevant narrative elements, the sound design allows Spielberg to foreground them from the busy background. This grants him a subtle control over the spectators' attention. Additionally, the auditory perspective demarcation, which often works in contrast to the image, allows the filmmaker to situate the audience with the Mossad squad. This is significant because as Zwaiter appears to be a benign scholar, spectators may feel more inclined to sympathize with him than his assassins. The auditory and visual divergence fosters a cognitive dissonance; spectators will feel increasingly conflicted about the assassins' mission. This aligns them with the Mossad squad's similar qualms. The sound perspective markers not only direct spectators' attention by marking focalizations, but they also promote the tone of growing paranoia.

## CHAPTER FIVE: HIGHSMITH'S *RIPLEY* STUDY

This chapter presents the method and results of a survey study concerning readers' response to Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. I analyze empathic and sympathetic engagement strategies in the novel, progressing consecutively through the story, using the section demarcations I indicated during the survey study. I refer to the data from corresponding questionnaires as a basis for assessing Highsmith's facilitators and strategy mechanism. In the conclusion, I provide my arguments for why Highsmith's unconventional engagement strategies prove effective.

Highsmith's novel is a psychological thriller that centers on the character arch of the story's sole focalizer Tom Ripley. At the beginning of the novel, the antisocial antihero is a petty swindler operating in New York City. Highsmith attempts to elicit initial sympathy by suggesting that his emotional instability is a consequence of his troubled past; Tom was orphaned at an early age and later brought up by his abusive Aunt Dottie. In the story's onset, Herbert Greenleaf, a shipping tycoon, approaches Tom with an offer to potentially change his life. Tom agrees to sail to Mongibello, Italy, to convince Greenleaf's son, Dickie, to return home. When he sets sail, Highsmith establishes that Tom's willingness to role-play and invent details about his past is symptomatic of his identity crisis. The trip to Europe comes as a welcome opportunity to reinvent himself.

Having learned that Tom is his father's emissary, Dickie Greenleaf distances himself from Tom. As the protagonist attempts to befriend the young man, he becomes obsessed with Dickie's bon-vivant lifestyle. Tom engages in a rivalry for Dickie's attention with Marge, Dickie's expatriate girlfriend. After convincing himself that Dickie scorns him because of his inferior social status, Tom kills the shipping heir to steal his identity. After this point, Highsmith does not attempt any significant sympathy elicitation for her protagonist. Instead, her engagement strategy relies primarily on readers' empathic bond with Tom, which her highly subjective narration enables.

Dickie's murder precipitates an investigation by the Italian police and, eventually, an American detective hired by Herbert Greenleaf. Tom's emotional swings exacerbate his problems as he spirals further into his murderous tendencies. Highsmith attempts to morally disengage her readers by employing, amongst others, victim-tainting projections. Eventually, the circumstances force Tom to pin the blame for his misdeeds onto Dickie. As a result, he abandons the assumed identity and returns to his old self. He does this not before discovering his core values—Tom Ripley, he realizes, is destined for a relationship not with people but with luxury and culture. The book ends with Tom's successful evasion of justice as he escapes to Greece after inheriting Dickie's trust money.

## 5.1 Study's Method

I conducted a survey study to map readers' engagement with Highsmith's protagonist. To monitor their empathic and sympathetic responses during their reading of *Ripley*, I asked a group of fourteen respondents to read Highsmith's novel and record their immediate reactions. Respondents would read the story and, upon reaching a designated mark, they were asked to answer a corresponding survey. There was a total of nine surveys that they eventually completed.

To limit my interference with their reading experience, I ensured that each survey prompt was placed after a chapter break. Each section, spanning anywhere from one to six chapters, encapsulated a significant turning point and focused on the protagonist's single-goal pursuit. For example, survey five referred to chapter 12, which details Tom's sudden whim to kill Dickie, as well as his execution of this idea. Such a division of the novel allowed me to isolate the more pronounced empathy facilitators and record respondents' reactions after they completed the given fragment. Thus, the graphed data reflects the progress of readers' engagement for the duration of the novel (see figure 4). A significant drawback of this study is the limited pool of respondents, all of whom could be detailed as twenty-to forty-year-olds with higher education. One respondent was a native speaker, while the remainder knew English as a second language. Three respondents

had seen an adaptation of the film.<sup>43</sup> I, therefore, do not claim the study's results to be definitive and instead use them to verify my assumptions about the effectiveness of various facilitators and Highsmith's overall engagement strategy.

To minimize the distraction from the narrative, for most questions I adopted the Likert scale, which included five possible answers: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neutral, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree. I mapped the reported empathic and sympathetic engagement separately, taking a uniform positive mapping of the two engagements to indicate sympathetic identification. The only instance in which readers reported high empathic and sympathetic engagement occurred between chapters 3 and 6.

The surveys' questions were constructed to assess respondents' sympathy and empathy for the protagonist. A given questionnaire consisted of two core questions and two to three corroborating queries. Among the core questions were "Do you like Tom?" and "Do you understand Tom?" To simplify the answering process, I chose "liking" to indicate sympathetic engagement (although the term may be inclusive of affects other than concern for the protagonist's wellbeing). Assessing one's "liking" of a character seems to be a more familiar process than the assessment of one's "sympathy." Importantly, liking a character signals the reader's sense of an other-oriented affect, making it a fair indicator of sympathetic engagement. Concurrently, I chose "understanding" to be a marker of empathic engagement, as it informs us of the audience's recognition of Tom's motivations, feelings, beliefs, and/or perceptions.

The corroborating questions included: "Do you pity Tom?"; "Do you have an idea what Tom wants?"; "Do you want Tom to succeed?"; "Do you like character X?"; and "Do you want Tom to be punished?" I understood respondents' reported pity for Tom to indicate their sympathy. When I crosschecked this data with results of reported "liking," I found that all corroborating responses (expressing pity) corresponded almost exactly with the core answers (expressing liking) until chapter 9. Afterward, reported pity consistently scored higher than reported liking;

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<sup>43</sup> The reactions of the respondents familiar with a *Ripley* adaption and the native speaker did not stand out from the general response of the group.

for example, if 50% of respondents would report feeling pity for Tom, the number reporting liking would be significantly lower, such as 27%.<sup>44</sup>

I interpreted positive answers concerning the understanding of Tom's desires and a reported wish to see him succeed as indicative of motivational recognition and motivational alignment, respectively; I compared respondents' liking or disliking of various characters with Tom's expressed attitudes towards those characters to verify respondents' perceptual or epistemic alignment/misalignment with the protagonist. I checked the data reflecting respondents' individual alignments with the reported understanding of Tom to calculate the empathy levels. I found most corroborating questions to correspond with the core responses. The exception was limited to the corroborating questions that pertained to the motivational alignment. I found that the reported "wanting to see Tom succeed" was consistent with expressed "liking of" Tom rather than "understanding." In other words, a motivational alignment was indicative of sympathy rather than empathy.

I assigned numerical values to answers in accordance with how they predicted empathic and sympathetic engagement; thus 2 = "strongly agree"; 1 = "agree"; 0 = "neutral"; -1 = "disagree"; and -2 = "strongly disagree." I calculated each respondent's engagements into two numerical values for each survey. One referred to reported empathy, the other to sympathy. Any discrepancy between the core and corroborating questions was compensated by assigning a median value. Therefore, if a respondent thought that they "disagreed" (-1 value) about having liked Tom but "agreed" (1 value) that they felt pity for him, I adjusted their score to reflect "neutral" (0 value) of sympathetic connection. The final step was to average the scores of all respondents for each survey and to map the means reflective of the audience's collective experience, which is illustrated by figure 4.

I assigned the value of "0" to the lack of engagement, labeled "apathy." Empathic engagement that would drop below this mark would indicate readers' disinterest with the protagonist; such circumstances did not occur during this study. In contrast to empathy, a fall of

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<sup>44</sup> These particular percentages refer to the section spanning chapters 10-11.

sympathetic engagement below the “apathy” limit would not demonstrate readers’ disinterest. Instead, it would signal their sense of antipathy towards Tom. As follows, higher negative values for sympathy (such as “-0.9” reached in chapter 16) would reflect stronger reported antipathy.

## 5.2 Study’s Results

Upon reviewing the answers to the surveys, I found that most respondents consistently offered analogous responses. One respondent (V), however, did express an above-average engagement with Tom (her results showed a sympathetic identification that lasted until the story’s end), while another (respondent VI) demonstrated above-average antipathy towards the antagonist. Interestingly, respondent VI admitted that an outstanding variable made her answers biased; she associated Tom with a disliked real-life acquaintance. While the negative impression affected her engagement with the protagonist, the respondent nevertheless reported enjoying the story.

While the three opening chapters demonstrate Highsmith’s ability to build empathic engagement with her protagonist despite respondents’ finding him antipathetic, the subsequent chapters (4-6) manage to elicit a short-lived sympathetic identification with Tom. The reason for this might be that readers found the described narrative situation of a journey relatable. Moreover, chapters 4 through 6 see the implementation of the novel’s most ostentatious sympathy elicitors. Highsmith, however, does not endeavor to sustain readers’ sympathies. The chapters that detail Tom’s initial interactions with Dickie and Marge show a steady decline in sympathetic and empathic engagements.

Tom’s murder of Dickie, which occurs in chapter 12, impacts empathic engagement levels negatively, to the point where respondents almost became disengaged with Tom. We can observe a similar reaction to the same narrative event in Minghella’s *Ripley* study (see [6.1](#)). While it remains outside my two studies’ bounds to determine whether the two types of engagement differ across the two mediums (the novel and film), it is tempting to speculate on how the results

presented in figures 4 and 5 reflect the storytellers' varying choices. For example, responses to Minghella's film seem to propose a symbiotic relationship between empathic and sympathetic engagements; dramatic narrative events consistently show a similar impact on both sympathy and empathy levels. In the novel, the two types of employment appear to behave more independently. For example, as already mentioned, Tom's introduction (chapters 1-3) elicits respondents' empathy while simultaneously arousing antipathy towards the protagonist. Next, in chapters 4-6, Highsmith's application of victimization and inside views causes a dramatic increase in reported sympathy while empathic engagement levels remain relatively stable. While fluctuations of sympathy levels seem to have little effect on empathic engagement in the novel, the same observation cannot be made of the inverse relationship. The narrative section, which lasts from chapters 16 to 26, sees a steady increase in sympathetic engagement, although Highsmith does not implement any significant sympathy elicitors.<sup>45</sup> It seems that the empathic engagement, which Highsmith successfully sustains for the duration of the 84 pages, has a positive impact on sympathy levels. In other words, it is possible that in the novel, sustained empathic engagement promotes sympathetic engagements, while sympathy bears a limited effect on empathy levels. This may be because Highsmith's medium allows her to employ a much more subjective narration, which secures her readers' empathic engagement independently of sympathy.

Respondents' reactions to the story's culmination were evenly divided; half reported disappointment while others felt satisfied with the outcome. Interestingly, 70% felt upset by the narrative's lack of restoration of justice, suggesting that Tom's evasion of punishment was the most significant factor in their response. One respondent wrote, "I dislike Tom as a person, but there is something fascinating about his mind which makes me like him at the same time." Eight out of the nine respondents who described their reactions in an optional open-question expressed a similar cognitive dissonance.

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<sup>45</sup> It is possible that Tom's harassment by the representatives of law enforcement elicited some pity. If that was the case, being that such mistreatment was well-deserved (Tom murdered two characters), it is likely that the sustained subjective narration inclined respondents to reevaluate their judgements of Tom.

The ending did not solely catalyze such a conflicted reaction. I would speculate that, for most respondents, it began as early as chapter 10. We see a rift occurring between the responses to the corroborating questions (expressing pity) and the core questions (expressing liking). Most respondents disliked Tom but did feel a minimal level of pity for him. In contrast to the reported disappointment with the narrative outcome, all but one respondent (who reportedly remained neutral) expressed having found the story enjoyable. Cognitive dissonance, it therefore seems, does not necessarily impede narrative enjoyment.

## 5.2 Analysis of chapters 1-3

The narrative section that includes chapters 1 through 3 establishes Tom's initial goal orientation to secure Herbert Greenleaf's funding of a European tour. It ends with Tom's achievement of this immediate objective. As figure 4 shows, this section disparately influenced the two examined forms of engagement. While respondents reported a growing empathy for the protagonist, they synchronously saw their sympathy levels fall below the marked line of "apathy." This means that respondents were finding Tom to be antipathetic. The disparity in the two engagements is caused by Highsmith's coupling of a highly subjective narration, which submerges readers solely in Tom's psychological states, with his negative characterization. Tom's described reactions prompt readers' suspicions that he may inflict unjustified injury upon the remaining characters. The empathy/sympathy rift is significant to note as it demonstrates that the two forms of engagement may act independently.

Highsmith begins her novel with what she calls a "situation"<sup>46</sup> or "some kind of trouble" (65). Readers know that Tom is being followed when they read the novel's third sentence. "We do not know if Ripley is a crook who ought to be followed," Highsmith explains, "but one man following another, or a man who thinks he is being followed, is a situation, and the reader wants to know ... what will happen" (*Plotting* 66). Therefore, the novel's opening scene is

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<sup>46</sup> Storytelling theorists, as Paul Gulino explains, refer to this as "the hook" (*Screenwriting* 14).

a conscious commencement of Highsmith’s character engagement strategy. She not only attempts to grasp readers’ interests by intriguing them with a “situation,” but she also establishes Ripley’s immediate goal orientation.

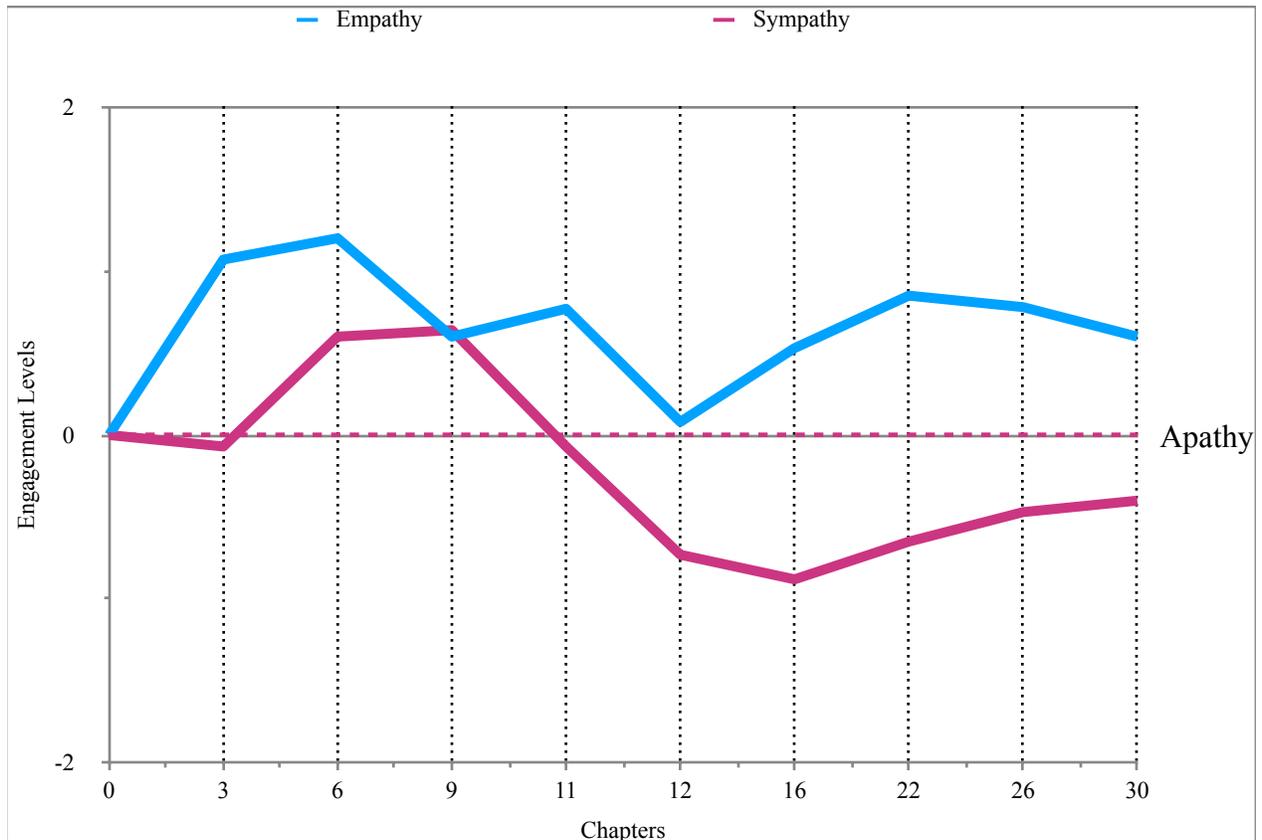


Figure 4: Reader’s engagement with Highsmith’s protagonist in *Ripley*

When Tom confronts his pursuer, he finds out that Mr. Greenleaf wants to talk about his son. Relieved that he is not being confronted about “grand larceny or tampering with the mails,” Tom agrees to sit down, knowing “just what to say to a father like Mr. Greenleaf” (Highsmith, *Ripley* 3). From the onset, Highsmith keeps her readers aligned with Tom’s perception and beliefs through inside views. Their recognition is limited to the protagonist’s psychological states, while their knowledge of his interlocutor is aligned with Tom’s perception of the character. The man is Herbert Greenleaf, who tells Tom about his son’s leisurely lifestyle in Europe. This catalyzes the protagonist’s goal orientation as he expresses jealousy:

Dickie was lucky. What was [Tom] himself doing at twenty-five? Living from week to week. No bank account. Dodging cops now for the first time in his life. He had a talent for mathematics. Why in hell didn't they pay him for it, somewhere? Tom realized that all his muscles had tensed, that the match-cover in his fingers was mashed sideways, nearly flat. He was bored, God-damned bloody bored, bored, bored! (6)

Rather than resort to a stating-not-showing inside view,<sup>47</sup> Highsmith uses free-indirect speech to align readers with Tom's epistemic and affective state. They recognize his propensity for comparing himself with others and the resulting frustration with his status. When the narrator states that Tom feels "God-damned bloody bored," she uses narrational implicature<sup>48</sup> to imply his jealousy; his anger betrays his unacknowledged resentment of Dickie's privilege.

The preceding quotation exemplifies Highsmith's most effective empathy facilitation on the semantic level. Her free indirect speech and narrational implicature allow clear recognition and alignment with Tom's states. Both of these devices are significant to her story. Being that Tom is a sociopath, free indirect speech lends him the narrator's credibility. If readers perceive the narrator as reliable, they feel the implied author was vouching for the character's words or thoughts. In this case, Highsmith's perceived authority puts readers more at ease with the sociopathic protagonist. For this narrative section (chapters 1-3), respondents' reactions evidence the effectiveness of Highsmith's procedures; 85% of the participants reported recognition of Tom's motivations. Their high empathy levels were facilitated primarily by Tom's goal orientation and the use of narrational implicature. Despite this, 38% found Tom's introductory characterization to invite an antipathetic judgment versus the 23% who found Tom likable (the remaining 39% were neutral).

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<sup>47</sup> Stating-not-showing inside views refers to a narration that explicitly informs the audience of a character's inner states e.g. Tom felt scared; Tom wanted love; Tom thought he was smart (see [4.3.b](#)).

<sup>48</sup> Narrational implicature is Maria Kotovych's term which refers to passages that require readers' inferring to comprehend the narrator's knowledge and beliefs (see [4.3.b](#)).

Highsmith maintains reader engagement during Tom's initial interaction with Mr. Greenleaf by intriguing them with implicatures concerning the protagonist's sinister nature. She informs them that Tom fears the police. From the onset of the conversation, Tom convincingly misleads his interlocutor. His success lies in his ability to imagine the interactions he later alleges took place. For example, as he claims that Dickie has shown him his drawing of ship models: "he could see them now, precise draughtsman's drawings with every line and bolt and screw labeled ... he could have gone on for several minutes describing details for Mr. Greenleaf's delight" (6). Tom is willing to invent memories, and more importantly, he seems very experienced at doing so. Aside from arousing curiosity about Tom's nature, this characteristic betrays, as I later argue, Highsmith's affinity for her protagonist. In the subsequent chapter, the author establishes Tom's unique abilities, a technique that promotes character appeal. She demonstrates his adeptness at fraud and impersonation, as Tom extorts cheques from "artists and writers and freelance people" posing to be a "collector of Internal Revenue" (10) (see [2.2](#)).

When Tom visits the Greenleafs in their Park Avenue home, he consciously introduces inconsistencies into his background story. He does this to assess his hosts' credulity. By this point, Highsmith has already established Tom's primary objective, to attain the Greenleafs' sponsorship of a European assignment. She ensures readers recognize Tom's motivation by describing his dingy New York reality. The fact that Tom, adept at influencing his socio-economic superiors, endures a lowly lifestyle might raise questions. Contemporary readers might speculate about the cause of his inability to apply his talents in a conventional career. The described Park Avenue scene emphasizes Tom's competence and relentlessness in goal pursuit. Additionally, the ominous characterization creates a dramatic tension; 50% of respondents reported fearing what the protagonist might do rather than feeling concerned for his wellbeing (the latter was expressed by 36%).

Highsmith ensures that her attempt to intrigue by insinuating Tom's malevolence does not disengage readers. The cancer-ridden Mrs. Greenleaf laments her son's absence during Tom's visit. The protagonist responds by demonstrating virtue; he promises Mrs. Greenleaf to do all he

can to help (see [3.1.a](#)). Later that night, Tom begins feeling physically ill. He realizes that this state has been caused by his mention of “the only thing he had said that was true: My parents died when I was very small. I was raised by my aunt in Boston” (16). Highsmith implies that Tom’s antisocial disposition stems from his childhood traumas. This victimization facilitator proves too incidental to cue respondents’ moral disengagement that would allow them to forgive Tom for misleading the desperate Greenleafs. However, this same narrative element inspires a significant moral reevaluation once dramatized.

From the novel’s onset, Highsmith establishes Tom’s paranoia. Her protagonist lives in a constant fear induced by his propensity for lies and illicit ventures. When she establishes that a mere “wide-eyed, panicky-look” from a druggist can make Tom’s legs feel “like jelly,” readers recognize the protagonist’s vulnerability (16). Tom does infringe upon the law, but he suffers the consequences of his choices. This seems to mitigate respondents’ moral judgment of his character; the low levels of antipathy they report are alleviated in the subsequent chapters.

## **5.2 Analysis of chapters 4-6**

Chapter 4 through 6 relate events that are episodic to Tom’s new goal pursuit, his attempts to persuade Dickie Greenleaf to return home to his family. Instead, the section focuses on Tom’s deliberations about his past and future as he sails for Europe. As figure 4 shows, this is the first (and only) section in which respondents, as a group, exhibit sympathetic identification with Tom.<sup>49</sup> This entails that their reported empathy and sympathy levels act synchronously, with sympathy remaining above the line of apathy. Put simply, respondents both empathize and sympathize with the protagonist as Highsmith successfully promotes their moral reevaluation of Tom by introducing victimization scenes.

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<sup>49</sup> Note that in figure 4 both sympathy and empathy levels are positive and experiencing a comparable growth; this is the only instance of such synchronization that is indicative of a sympathetic identification.

Highsmith continues the strategy of heightening Tom's appeal by fronting his emotional fragility throughout the story. Before he departs on his European assignment, the novelist gives readers a glimpse of "the only one of [Tom's] friends he felt like telling about his European trip." Cleo is an eccentric artist who maintains a "nocturnal atmosphere" in her apartment and paints miniature images on "pieces of ivory no bigger than postage stamps" (20). Despite their relationship's platonic nature, readers may infer that it is essential to Tom for several reasons. Firstly, he believes that Cleo is the only person worthy of complete confidence; amongst others, he reveals to her that "[Greenleaf] has really adopted me like a son" (21). She is the only character to inspire his sense of trust, disarming his need for pretense. Highsmith's biographer Joan Schenkar notes that Cleo is the only artist that Tom the aesthete esteems; he "is both disappointed by Dickie Greenleaf's mediocre paintings and disgusted with Marge Sherwood's dilatory attempts at novel writing" (chapter 15). One of the reasons for which Tom presumably feels close to Cleo is that she does not expect him to court her, or as the narrator puts it that "he might ask her out to dinner or the theatre or do any of the ordinary things that a young man was expected to do with a girl." Neither does she expect "him to make a pass at her"; she respects Tom's wish not to be seen off to Europe; while "the only physical touch [Tom] could recall her ever having given him" is a squeeze on the shoulder (22-23). Put simply, Cleo seems aware and mindful of Tom's antisocial disposition.

Although it is a significant episode in Tom's New York life, his involvement with Cleo fails to espouse sympathy for the protagonist. Most respondents reported indifference (29%) or disinterest (43%) in seeing Tom's relationship with Cleo develop. One possible reason for this is that the friendship is too incidental to influence a positive moral judgment. Cleo meets Tom's aesthetic and behavioral expectations. She reacts to his achievements in a pleasing manner, and, in return, Tom brings her presents, drinks her wine, and admires her art. Aside from this non-committing interplay, the relationship fails to involve Tom emotionally. Once their night of farewell-making is over, the narrator mentions only a single exchange of their correspondence in the novel.

As Karl Iglesias argues, demonstrating a character's ability to "love someone or something deeply" is the most potent variant of virtue display (see [3.1](#)). Had one of Tom's goal pursuits been motivated by his desire to impress Cleo, had his sacrifices been made for her benefit, or had their severance caused him torment, then it is likely that this relationship would have elicited readers' sympathy. Instead, the arrangement is convenient because it does not challenge Tom to overcome his affective limitations.<sup>50</sup>

Highsmith's further attempt to improve Tom's sympathetic resonance comes in an incident that concludes chapter 5. After surviving the unwanted sendoff onboard the ocean liner,<sup>51</sup> Tom discovers the Greenleafs' departing gift—a fruit basket. The narrator informs us that to Tom, such compliments "had always been something you saw in florists' windows for fantastic prices and laughed at" (24). He responds by putting his face down in his hands and crying. Readers may be intrigued by the cause of this reaction, but, more importantly, such a demonstration of Tom's vulnerability might elicit their empathy.

Once Tom sets sail for Europe, Highsmith employs more overt victimizations. The protagonist recalls the psychological abuse he suffered at the hands of his aunt Dottie (see [3.2](#)). In contrast to its previous mention in chapter 3, the victimization occurs in a flashback scene. Tom, readers are informed, resents Dottie's intermittent alms as an insult, especially since the cheques are made out "for the strange sums of six dollars and forty-eight cents and twelve dollars and ninety-five as if she had had a bit left over from her latest bill-paying" (28). It is possible to interpret this attitude as symptomatic of his antisocial disorder. Tom abhors both her abuse and her seeming generosity. Thus, the narrator taints readers' perception of Aunt Dottie with Tom's

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<sup>50</sup> A character engagement-centric retelling of *Ripley* might entail that Tom kills Dickie to enlighten his and Cleo's mutual fascination with the notion of a perfect murder. He excitedly reports every detail of this experience to his friend only to find that she is repulsed. Tom's bewilderment and sense of betrayal might likely have mitigated the negative moral judgment that the murder might have aroused. This would have been especially true if Tom attempted to win back Cleo's friendship. Without the slightest (even ethically dubious) commitment to someone or something, Tom remains "reptilian," though fascinating (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 37).

<sup>51</sup> Against Tom's wishes, his flatmate Bob Delancey and his "lousy friends" invade Tom's ocean liner cabin. Highsmith's protagonist has to exert "extreme self-control" to prevent himself from bursting "into tears like a child" (23). This is another example of a victimization that fronts Tom's childlike vulnerability.

projection (see [4.3.d](#)) However, the fact that the mistreatment is dramatized rather than related through a stating-not-showing inside view (as was previously the case), respondents are successfully affected; all but one (who remained neutral) reported an epistemic alignment with Tom in his judgment of his ex-guardian. Notably, the effect is promoted by the victimization's framing. The incident's emotive locus is Tom's sense of acquired freedom rather than self-pity; he is optimistic enough about his future to alleviate his ego of his aunt's patronizing cheques. The victimization is thus motivated and does not function solely to make readers feel sorry for Tom. The added benefit is that all of the respondents found his attitudes convincing. As Tom writes his final letter to Dottie, he does not take the opportunity to vent his animosity:

“Dear Auntie ... I just wanted you not to worry and not to send me any more cheques, thank you. Thank you very much for the last one of a month or so ago. I don't suppose you have sent any more since then. I am well and extremely happy. Love, Tom.” (27-28)

Instead, his words betray a passive-aggressive tone. He implies that his independence from his aunt causes him to feel “extreme happiness.” Still, Tom maintains decorum as if afraid of openly challenging her authority. Such a frame of mind seems convincingly characteristic of a victimized dependent's perception of his oppressive caregiver. Readers may observe that Tom remains at affective extremes by this point in the narrative. His moods swing up from “ecstatic moments,” especially when he fantasizes about his unwarrantedly golden future, down to failure or fear-inspired sensations of “dizziness and nausea” (86, 36).

As mentioned, all of the scenes contained in this section are incidental to Tom's goal pursuit.<sup>52</sup> They function as anecdotal plot points that neither progress nor impede Tom's quest. In other words, Highsmith devised them to fulfill different functions. Aside from serving as victimization empathy facilitators, the scenes characterizing Tom as a disturbed young man

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<sup>52</sup> At this point in the novel, Tom is determined to persuade Dickie to return to America.

foreshadow his future transgressions.<sup>53</sup> They also provide the foundation for Highsmith's overarching empathic engagement design.

Similarly, the narrator's detailing of Tom's touristic excitement—seeing glimpses of Paris and the leaning tower of Pisa; enjoying a wine-doused three-course meal; staying at a fine hotel—are anecdotal to his goal pursuit. Tom does not spend his time preparing for his encounter with Dickie, nor does he use the new experiences to advance him closer to his objective. These scenes' primary function is to describe travel experience, which, as the survey shows, aided respondents' alignment with Tom; only one out of fourteen reported a disengagement with Tom's "feelings about going to Europe." Overall, the anecdotal scenes successfully increase respondents' sense of empathy (the section marks the highest reported empathy levels in the novel). More importantly, the victimizations prompt a moral reevaluation of Tom, which results in respondents' significant shift from a feeling of antipathy to sympathy.

## **5.2 Analysis of chapters 7-9**

Chapters 7 through 9 are structured primarily around Tom's immediate goal pursuit, to persuade Dickie to return home to his family. Bearing in mind the promise he made to Dickie's ailing mother, it would be unsurprising to find that most readers would be aligned with his motivation. However, only 57% of the respondents claimed to recognize Tom's objective, of which only one reported the wish to see Tom's goal pursuit succeed. The reason for this motivational misalignment may once again be found in Tom's sinister characterization. His propensity for dishonesty and volatile disposition may cause readers to doubt the benevolence of his impulses. Considering figure 4, we see that participants' average sympathy levels remain unaffected by the fall of empathic engagement, which scores lower than sympathetic engagement for the first (and only) time. The former shows a minor rise from the degree reached in the

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<sup>53</sup> Tom recalls his fantasies of "tearing the big brooch off [aunt Dottie's] dress and stabbing her a million times in the throat with it (30). Later he proceeds similarly with Dickie, striking him repeatedly with an oar (80).

previous section despite the absence of significant sympathy elicitors. Such a reaction supports the premise that sympathy may be elicited by a single facilitator and will continue to be sustained until the character's action prompts a moral reevaluation (see [1.6](#)). Highsmith can maintain Tom's sympathy levels by postponing a negative moral judgment of Tom.

The section begins as Tom's initial attempt at his goal pursuit fails. Dickie clarifies that he does not want to interact with anyone associated with his father. Tom, thus, comes to realize that Dickie and his girlfriend's carefree lifestyle is a serious impediment to his mission. Highsmith uses a stating-not-showing inside view to inform readers that this realization gave Tom "a heartbreaking surge of envy and self-pity" (40). While six of the respondents might have found Dickie's and Marge's leisurely lifestyle of sun-soaked sailing and martini lunches appealing (three admitted to "siding with" Marge and three with Dickie), this stating-not-showing device is rarely effective, which might explain respondents' discussed motivational misalignment.

Readers may consider Tom's conclusion that his best course of action will be "to make Dickie like him" reasonable (40). His choice may even be interpreted as a demonstration of virtue. Tom could have abandoned his mission to enjoy the rest of Greenleafs' allowance on a European tour. Instead, he makes his goal pursuit a matter of honor. In this way, Highsmith provides a basic foundation for an affective and motivational alignment. As respondents' empathy levels for this section demonstrate, she is successful in preventing a disengagement that results from the negative moral judgment cues; Tom's disturbing mood swings, his propensity for jealousy, a sense of entitlement, as well as his fantasies of a new life<sup>54</sup> in a foreign land that offers him a clean slate arouse suspicions that he is incentivized by more than just his will to win the Greenleafs' respect and gratitude (26).

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<sup>54</sup> During the trip to Europe, he buys an English cap, revels in its potential to make him "look like a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American eccentric, depending on how he wore it" (25-26). Later, realizing that his aloofness towards other passengers is generating interest, he speculates about how they might be perceiving him: "Is he an American! I think so, but he doesn't act like an American, does he? Most Americans are so noisy. He's terribly serious, isn't he, and he can't be more than twenty-three. He must have something very important on his mind" (30-31).

In chapter 9, after three days of indisposition, Tom approaches Dickie once more. He does his best to charm the man, joking about his upset stomach, inviting him for drinks and lunch, and even stepping into the dreaded bay waters<sup>55</sup> to appear as if he were an ordinary tourist. Aware of Dickie's resentment towards his father, Tom realizes that he will need to mimic Dickie's disloyalty for Herbert Greenleaf. He betrays his patron by revealing to Dickie that Herbert has sponsored his European trip. Tom's amused disregard for Dickie's father wins Dickie over. His attitude towards Tom shifts from resentment to enchantment<sup>56</sup> (42). He finds Tom's peculiar impersonation of a British lady on a metro train comical. Marge, however, reacts by "looking a little blank" (44). From this moment, she becomes the obstacle to Tom's desire to befriend Dickie. Highsmith uses projections to influence readers' alignment with Tom's appraisal of Marge. For example, the narrator describes her house in the following manner:

Marge's house was a rather sloppy-looking one-storey affair with a messy garden at one end, a couple of buckets and a garden hose cluttering the path to the door, and the feminine touch represented by her tomato-coloured bathing suit and a bra hanging over a window-sill... (43)

The voice conveys Tom's spitefulness by comparing Marge's perceived untidiness to the idea of "feminine touch." Respondents seemed uninfluenced by Tom's biases towards Marge; 35% reported liking Marge versus 14% who aligned with Tom's judgment of this character. Despite this, 71% expressed sharing in Tom's skeptical assessment of Dickie's emotional involvement with Marge. Such an epistemic alignment, Richard Bradford argues, influences Highsmith's readers to the point that they "begin to feel that the detached, entitled figures upon whom [Tom] revenges himself deserve what comes to them" (chapter 7). Such is the case of

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<sup>55</sup> The narrator reveals that Tom has suffered from aquaphobia ever since his parents "drowned in Boston Harbor" (19).

<sup>58</sup> This scene offers a parallel to Tom's dinner visit at the Greenleafs. There, his moment of sincerity about his past prompts a near nervous breakdown. Full disclosure with Dickie results in Tom's exhalation. A possible interpretation of this is that Tom recognizes that the Greenleafs are indifferent to his victimized childhood. Dickie, on the other hand, seems to approve of Tom despite his revealed conniving nature. Acceptance, it seems, is Tom's unacknowledged desire.

Freddie Miles, Tom's future victim, whom Tom meets for the first time in this chapter. Highsmith uses a state-not-show inside view to express Tom's opinion of Freddie: "Tom thought he was hideous. Tom hated red hair, especially this kind of carrot-red hair with white skin and freckles" (48). While this initial interaction is insignificant, Highsmith will successfully taint Freddie's characterization with projections which will cue a moral disengagement from his murder.

Much of chapter 9 details Tom's assessment of Dickie. He is unimpressed with his paintings and banal observations (45, 50). "He wanted Dickie to be much more," the narrator states (46). Highsmith transmits Tom's impression that Dickie's appearance and manner of being are an appealing facade. In a Neapolitan cafe, he observes that Dickie "was wearing broken-down sandals and rather soiled white pants now, but he sat there as if he owned the Galleria" (50). Dickie, Highsmith's descriptions imply, functions not so much as a presentation of a man but rather a representation of a lifestyle, one that Tom covets.

As the two men depart on a spontaneous trip to Rome, Tom notes that "they were the same height, and very much the same weight...they wore the same size bathrobe, socks, and probably shirts" (51). Considering earlier characterization, this information foreshadows the protagonist's transgression. Readers cannot ignore that during the same excursion, when the intoxicated men see an Italian girl home, Tom makes a bizarre comment: "you know what most crummy Americans would do in a case like that—rape her" (51). Even considering the context of the United States' supremacy over post-war Italy, Tom's conjectures reveal his dark side. Unsurprisingly, 71% of respondents were more concerned with Tom's potential undertakings rather than with his wellbeing (14%). Most continued to perceive Tom as a threat rather than a threatened protagonist.

For this reason, respondents experience a sense of anxiety as Tom cultivates influence over Dickie. Chapter 9 ends with a description that frames Marge as the antagonist; Tom realizes that "she seemed to know that Dickie had formed a closer bond with him in twenty-four hours ... than

she could ever have with Dickie (53). Highsmith marks his immediate goal, as well as his immediate obstacle.

## 5.2 Analysis of chapters 10-11

As this section begins, Highsmith successfully caters to readers' comprehension of Tom's goal pursuit: "By the time his money ran out, Tom thought, Dickie would probably be so fond of him and so used to him that he would take it for granted they would go on living together" (54). Tom monitors Dickie's amusement levels to partake in his expensive lifestyle. However, as Dickie grows concerned about Marge's discontent, Tom begins to experience "an amorphous yet very strong sense of guilt." Envy eclipses his sense of remorse when Tom sees Dickie kissing Marge (58). While the protagonist's affect is presented through a stating-not-showing inside view, the latter is revealed through narrational implicature, making readers' recognition of Tom's jealousy more probable. This is significant because Tom's guilt should have elicited sympathy. While 64% of respondents reported an understanding of Tom and his desire, on average, 50% felt expressed pitying his inner torment.

This section sees a significant drop in sympathetic engagement with Tom (see figure 4). The protagonist's reaction to Dickie and Marge's intimacy might have provoked respondents' negative moral judgment. After witnessing their display of affection, Tom amuses himself by trying on Dickie's clothes and fantasizing about strangling Marge. Through narrational implicature, Highsmith communicates Tom's conviction that he would make better use of being Dickie Greenleaf. He is surprised that his rivalry with Marge, which Highsmith implies is essentially about who gets to sail with Dickie to "Tangiers, Sofia, Cairo, Sevastopol," has espoused his host's suspicions that Tom might be "queer" (56). This marks the loosening of Tom's grip over Dickie. His influence completely dissipates once he realizes that Dickie disdains a petty smuggler, who implicitly represents Tom's old, New York self (see [4.3](#)). Resultantly, Tom sees Dickie's eyes as "nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless,

without relation to him” (68). The description that follows uses narrational implicature and projections to distance the protagonist (and readers) from Tom’s victim-to-be. This, coupled with Dickie’s ability to pivot between rapture and indifference towards Tom, promotes a negative moral judgment of Dickie. Highsmith does this in preparation for the murder in the subsequent chapter. Respondents’ reactions to Dickie attest to the success of Highsmith’s strategy. On average, 71% of participants reported a feeling of indifference or antipathy towards Dickie. After quarreling about the smuggler, Tom realizes that “Dickie doesn’t want [him] to go to Cortina. It was not the first time Tom had thought that. Marge was going to Cortina now” (69). Marge’s victory over Tom signifies the failure of Tom’s immediate goal pursuit.

Highsmith motivates the forthcoming murder by further deteriorating Tom’s condition. After realizing his bond with Dickie is illusory, Tom learns that Mr. Greenleaf will no longer finance his assignment. The lack of emotional and financial stability causes his characteristic descent into despair; he feels “nothing except a faint, dreamlike lostness and aloneness” (71). Tom oscillates between sadness, euphoria, and anxiety; in the previous chapter, Tom experienced elation over Dickie’s life, enjoying post-lunch “highs” on wine and food. By depicting his tendency to reside at emotional extremes, Highsmith characterizes Tom’s emotional fragility, which authenticates his murderousness.

## **5.2 Analysis of chapter 12**

Chapter 12 details Tom’s urge to kill Dickie as well as the execution of this idea. Consequently, this section marks a significant drop in respondents’ empathy and sympathy levels (see figure 4). Realizing he has exhausted his host’s hospitality, Tom decides to take advantage of what he judges to be his final days with Dickie. He proposes they take a trip to Paris, and his “hands shake” with dejection when Dickie agrees only to a trip to San Remo (73). On the one hand, readers may interpret his state to be primarily resulting from his sense of dereliction. Tom could afford to travel to Paris on his own, as Dickie observes, by using the funds that Herbert

Greenleaf has provided him, but Tom is willing to travel only with Dickie. He feels dejection not over a lost opportunity for some complimentary sightseeing but rather his abandonment by Dickie. Tom's situation, therefore, may be interpreted as a victimization.

On the other hand, his exacting attitude seems unappreciative of his host's generosity; he feels he deserves to be entertained. Such a mindset might prompt a negative moral judgment. Tom's longings are recognizable, but readers may be disaffected by his inability to act with dignity, which might partially be responsible for respondents' decreasing sympathies.

Before San Remo, the two men decide to visit Cannes. There, Highsmith prepares significant victimization. As the two men idle on the beach, Tom observes a group of acrobats forming a human pyramid. Dickie insinuates that Tom's interest lies in the athletes and not their show. Tom relates this incident to his past experiences; Aunt Dottie would call him "a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!" Tom exhibits naïveté, seemingly oblivious to the potential sexual implication of his actions. Even as he pursues Dickie thinking of "a half-dozen taunts" with which to retaliate, he displays a childlike innocence (76). Thus, his undeserved mistreatment should have elicited readers' pity for Tom, which is not evident in figure 4. Such results might have arisen from my pairing of the Cannes victimization with the murder scene in a single sequence. Had the two narrative situations been isolated in separate surveys, respondents' reactions to Tom's premeditated brutality would likely not have obscured their response to his mistreatment. When comparing their moral judgments with those of the participants of the Minghella study, we see that the novel's depiction of Dickie's murder resulted in an observably less significant drop in sympathy for Tom than did the adaptation's version of the same event (compare figures 4 and 5). This might attest to the Cannes victimization acting as a moral disengagement cue prompting respondents' antipathy of Dickie. Before his murder, on average, 71% of respondents reported indifference or a disliking of his character. Had their assessment of Dickie been more favorable, Tom's actions would have caused a more significant drop in both sympathetic and empathic engagements.

Tom first develops the “brilliant” idea that “he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself” while traveling to San Remo (77). Highsmith employs character time perception to align readers with Tom’s excitement and surprise them with the murder that transpires. She speeds up time to simulate Tom’s conscious preoccupation with his scheme; he rushes to the killing as if afraid of changing his mind (see [4.1](#)). The murder scene employs a highly subjective narration that marginalizes Dickie’s agony: “Tom hit him in the side of the neck, three times, chopping strokes with the edge of the oar as if the oar were an axe and Dickie’s neck a tree” (80). The simile, comparing Dickie to a tree, exemplifies Highsmith’s efforts at distancing readers’ from Tom’s victim. When he dies, instead of referring to him by his name, she describes a “prostrate body relax[ing], limp and still” (80). The focus remains on Tom’s states, not on Dickie’s: Tom is frightened by “Dickie’s groaning protest”; Tom becomes “aware of tiring”; Tom regains his “breath back painfully”; Tom is “afraid to touch” Dickie’s body, and so on. Any descriptions of what Dickie might have felt as a dull gash on his head filled “with a line of blood” would facilitate readers’ alignment with him rather than his killer.

After the deed is done, Highsmith distracts her readers from a moral evaluation of Tom by propelling the action forward as her protagonist struggles with the corpse. Dickie’s body, which resists Tom with its “amazing weight,” is framed as an obstacle within the protagonist’s goal pursuit. This diverts readers’ attention away from the victim’s plight. Tom’s endeavor eventually causes him to fall overboard. Again Highsmith employs character time perception to facilitate a perceptual alignment. As Tom falls into the sea, she slows the time: “he saw water underneath him, and his own hand outstretched towards it, because he had been trying to grab the gunwale and the gunwale was no longer there. He was in the water.” The description of Tom’s fall yields an image of his point of view, additionally prolonged through word repetition. Next, “the water closed over his head again with a deadly, fatal slowness, yet too fast for him to get a breath, and he inhaled a noseful of water just as his eyes sank below the surface” (82). The impression this description creates is reminiscent of a video speed-ramp or an effect where slowed-down footage

suddenly accelerates, thus accentuating the momentum of the depicted action. Likewise, the use of adjectives draws attention to time manipulation.

Highsmith continues using the time perception facilitator to construct a scene of Tom's symbolic crossing of a new life's threshold: "He suffered in advance the sensations of dying... water thugged into his ears blotting out all sound except the frantic sounds that he made inside himself, breathing, Struggling, the desperate pounding of his blood" (82). She uses a similar repetition in her description to prolong the described moment, thus simulating a slowing down of time. The imagery, in this case, the descriptions of Tom's auditory experience, aligns the reader perceptually in a manner reminiscent of cinematic sound design (see [4.4.b](#)). These affective passages may distract readers from the murder. Perhaps they might even prompt them to interpret Tom's near-death experience as a sort of cleansing penance. Yet figure 4 does not seem to depict such a tendency. Even though respondents' assessments of Tom fell from low sympathy to antipathy, Highsmith likely managed to mitigate the murders' disengaging consequences; otherwise, a murder of an innocent character could have produced a moral evaluation more akin to the one demonstrated in respondents' reactions to Minghella's film.

## **5.2 Analysis of chapters 13-16**

This narrative section concerns Tom's grappling with the new reality that is his living under Dickie's identity. The mapping of respondents' engagement levels for this section shows a drop in reported sympathy levels and a concurrent rise in empathy. This agrees with the earlier theoretical assumption that the two forms of engagement can be managed independently. Respondents' antipathy for Tom reaches its lowest levels at the end of chapter 16. From this point, it is rebuilt until the story's end.

Highsmith continues depicting Tom's pattern of emotional extremes. Leading up to the murder, her protagonist felt despair over Dickie's rejection. In chapter 13, he experiences "an ecstatic moment when he thought of all the pleasures that lay before him now with Dickie's

money, other beds, tables, seas, ships, suitcases, shirts, years of freedom, years of pleasure” (86). This itemization enumerates pieces of what constitutes Tom’s long-term objective as established in the novel’s opening chapter. During his initial meeting with Herbert Greenleaf, Tom grew envious of Dickie’s having an “income, a house, a boat” (6). Since he has secured these goods, readers may align themselves with his belief that he has achieved his ultimate goal. His new ultimate goal, it seems, is to escape the consequences of his actions. However, Tom has one more vital journey to complete.

Throughout the story, Highsmith keeps hinting at Tom’s identity crisis. In New York, her protagonist functions as a petty conman, socializing with people he regards as “second-rate.” When sailing for Europe, he feels he is escaping his old “dismal” self and “starting a new life” in Europe, comparing himself to the nineteenth-century immigrants who reinvented themselves in America (26). Highsmith makes Tom’s quest for a new identity clear when he buys an English cap, which he feels is a functional instrument for signaling status.

Some readers might interpret Tom’s initial fascination with Dickie as a signal that the protagonist has been seeking friendship or a sexual relationship; his identity aspirations would thus be understood as means of achieving this goal. However, those who recall his unilateral relationship with Cleo Dobbelle, the painter of miniatures, should suspect that Tom’s incapacity to form meaningful relationships eliminates any form of intimacy as a potential objective. Furthermore, Highsmith systematically foreshadows Tom’s unrecognized self-grooming for his takeover of Dickie’s identity. Tom’s plummet into the water after the murder marks his symbolic death and the re-emergence of the new man. At this point, the protagonist’s assessment of Dickie might become clear to both him and the readers; as the narrator suggests, Tom harbored no genuine affection for the man, and at times even he found him banal. Though some readers might have suspected his infatuation with Dickie, after the murder, it seems the protagonist wants to convince himself that he was only impressed with Dickie’s wardrobe, his pose, and his wallet. A possible interpretation might be to compare Tom’s relationship with Dickie to a consumer’s with a model who advertises luxury brands. The allure usually informs a fantasy of being like the man

sporting the luxury product rather than being his sidekick. If readers make this recognition—Tom’s ultimate goal orientation is a life of luxury and travel—they align themselves epistemically with the protagonist, as he too is only discovering his true identity. This is Highsmith’s overarching engagement strategy, aligning readers with Tom on his journey of self-discovery.

Upon his return to Mongibello, Marge stands as an obstacle to Tom’s acquisition of Dickie’s possessions. He takes pleasure in tormenting her with the news that Dickie has decided to move to Rome. He feels the victor of their rivalry for Dickie and, thus, reassured in his intellectual supremacy over her. Conceivably, Tom’s mistreatment of Marge weakens readers’ sympathetic engagement with him. However, considering respondents’ sympathy levels for Marge (43% reported “liking” her character), these scenes’ impact on his moral judgment seems diminished.

The protagonist projects his condescending attitudes onto Marge’s characterization during their interactions. Tom appears to be able to predict Marge’s premonition that he intends to live with Dickie in Rome: “Tom felt the question creeping up to her lips—she was as transparent as a child to him” (89). However, Tom has shown similar apprehensions about Marge’s accusations, suggesting that his ability to read her results from their similitude rather than disparity; as readers learn, both attempt to veil their sexual inexperience with a pretense of worldliness. This implied innocence likewise accentuates Tom’s ultimate goal orientation: his search for identity (see [7.3](#)).

Highsmith begins using Dickie’s correspondence, which Tom writes on his behalf, to inform readers of her protagonist’s epistemic states<sup>57</sup>. Tom premeditates the content of the letters he intends to write as he gloats at his victory over Marge, who is “shocked to silence” (90). Mimicking Dickie’s gentleness, Tom informs Marge that Dickie’s “going away” will help him “discover how [he] really feels about [her]” (92). The note is a euphemistic denial of her romantic interest, yet formulated in a way that could encourage a rejected lover’s wishful self-delusion. Arguably, such a stance indicates a narcissistic inability to fully discard a partner’s admiration.

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<sup>57</sup> In Minghella’s adaptation, the letter-composing served a similar purpose, significantly improving respondents’ engagement with Tom (see [6.2.h](#)).

By composing such a message, Tom betrays his psychological evaluation of Dickie and his familiarity with courtship tactics. This may be surprising considering his acknowledged disinterest in the matter.

In chapter 14, when Tom practices conversing as Dickie with imagined interlocutors, Highsmith services the dramatic question of his identity crisis. Tom observes how “it was strangely easy to forget the exact timbre of Tom Ripley’s voice.” As he perfects his new role, Highsmith suggests, Tom’s grasp on the division between fiction and reality is obscuring. Conceivably, readers who have been informed of his emotional frailty may begin questioning the state of his sanity. Such premonitions gear with her strategy, as Highsmith remains aware of her protagonist’s being the narrative’s source of dramatic tension. She foreshadows that Tom’s elation will be short-lived as he thinks “of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow being Dickie Greenleaf” (98). This reference to *Macbeth* signals that Tom, much like Shakespeare’s titular character, will be forced to commit more atrocities in an attempt to escape justice. Most respondents were affected by this and similar signposting; 71% expressed apprehension over Tom’s potential infractions.

Highsmith capitalizes on such fears as Tom reads Marge’s letter addressed to Dickie. In it, she advises her friend to dismiss Tom’s company. Aside from citing fears of Tom being a bad influence, she states her opinion that “he is just nothing” (94). Her unwittingly direct insulting of Tom creates dramatic irony. Readers wonder how Tom will react—will he also kill Marge? Highsmith again imbues the correspondence with narrational implicature informing readers that Marge seems more upset with her being deposed by Tom rather than with her loss of Dickie’s love. Instead of revealing Tom’s reaction, she sustains readers’ tension by proceeding to Dickie’s letter to the Greenleafs (written by Tom).

Tom’s second impersonation of Dickie’s letter-writing is another example of Highsmith’s use of inside views. Through narrational implicature, she casts light on the protagonist’s emotional immaturity. Tom assumes that Dickie would attempt to appear dutiful to his father and caring for his mother. “I’ll be leading a very quiet, studious life until next summer,” he writes. It

is doubtful whether such reassurances made by a twenty-five-year-old would be taken seriously by his parents. But Tom, readers are informed, “felt rather pleased with the letter” (96). He assumes that placating disapproving parents by making empty promises is a convention maintained in adulthood. In other words, he believes Dickie, much like himself, was incapable of maintaining a mature relationship with his family.

After the initial takeover of Dickie’s life, Tom rewards himself by taking a trip to Paris, where he feels free to experiment with being Dickie. Notably, his impersonating serves no purpose other than to perfect the act and an escape from himself. Highsmith makes such an analogy when she describes Tom’s sense that his performance of Dickie’s role gives him a satisfaction similar to what “a fine actor probably feels when he plays an important role” (106).

The scenes in Paris, where Tom spends his leisure in cafes or visiting the Arc de Triomphe, might invite some engagement. Respondents may have found his state of elation relatable, and perhaps these scenes motivated the rise in reported empathy (see figure 4). Though they describe what seems a relatable tourist experience, Tom’s affects are not directly stimulated by the excitement of travel. Instead, it is the murder of Dickie that affords him a sense of control expressed through taking hold of his possessions. Again, this high point is marked by an itemization which includes a “brown belt with the brass buckle, the old brown grain-leather shoes... a well-worn alligator wallet from Gucci’s” and other beautiful possessions that Tom has taken over from Dickie (97). For the duration of the Parisian episode, Tom lives under the auspices of reinventing himself in Europe. Highsmith makes this clear: “this was the clean slate he had thought about on the boat coming over from America, This was the real annihilation of his past and of himself, Tom Ripley, who was made up of that past, and his rebirth as a completely new person” (98).

A few passages later, Highsmith employs narrational implicature to signal the delusion of his success. On Christmas Eve, Tom attempts to partake in a midnight mass as if to make sacramental his celebration of a new self. He imitates the solemnity of the gathered Frenchmen, and yet he fails to enter the cathedral. Afterward, he forces himself to eat a late dinner; he drinks

a cup of milk which he finds to be “almost tasteless, pure and chastening, as Tom imagined a wafer tasted in church.” Tom’s childlike play at being “a gentleman, with nothing in his past to blemish his character” is similar to his conversation rehearsals with Dickie’s imagined friends; it is an attempt to charm fiction into becoming a reality (99).

Back in Italy, Tom receives Marge’s letters of disappointment addressed to Dickie. His momentary pity becomes overshadowed by his fear of Marge’s visit to Rome. Tom rents an apartment rather than a hotel room to diminish her chances of finding him. He ignores Marge’s correspondence despite its signaling that she is “eating her heart out for [Dickie]” (106). He is repelled by her letters and takes every opportunity to punish Marge. His continuous mistreatment of the heartbroken girl steadily bolsters readers’ antipathy towards Tom. Likewise, his confrontation with Freddie Miles provokes a negative moral judgment, which Highsmith attempts to mitigate.

Freddie Miles, Dickie’s American friend, discovers Tom living in Dickie’s Roman apartment. Tom, dressed in his victim’s clothes, fears being discovered. Seconds before he kills Freddie, Highsmith grants readers the following insight into Tom: “He tried to think just for two seconds more: wasn’t there another way out? What would he do with the body? He couldn’t think. This was the only way out” (110). She constructs this glimpse into her protagonist’s mind by using free-indirect speech. The narrator relates Tom’s thoughts in a way that blurs the distinction between her and the protagonist. As with the previous example, the implied author “becomes” Tom, transferring her authority onto him. As mentioned before, researchers have found that such use of free indirect speech prompts readers to perceive the thoughts and actions of the accessed character “to be more justified and rationalized” (see: Dixon and Bortolussi 405-30; Kotovych et al. 260-88). In this case, Highsmith ensures her readers recognize Tom’s reluctance to kill Freddie as well as his inability to find an alternative to the situation. Those who believe the narrator’s words will have aligned themselves epistemically with Tom. They will, hence, be morally disengaged from the murder. Additionally, Highsmith employs projections to misrepresent Freddie through the prisms of Tom’s prejudices (see [7.1](#)). Both of the measures

seem adequate; Highsmith's conclusion to the murder, "how sad, stupid, clumsy, dangerous and unnecessary his death had been, and how brutally unfair to Freddie," is surprisingly reflective of respondents' reactions (16); participants' responses span the Likert scale, with 43% reporting feeling pity for his character and 43% reporting indifference to his death.

## **5.2 Analysis of chapters 17-22**

After Tom successfully disposes of Freddie's body, Highsmith signals a new immediate goal orientation. For the entirety of chapters 17 to 22, the narrative remains focused on Tom's endeavors to live as Dickie Greenleaf. Interestingly, his attempts at escaping justice, which the objective entails, did not significantly impact respondents' hope for Tom's punishment (54%) than did his murders of Dickie and Freddie (57%). This shows a minimal increase in respondents' motivational alignment, encouraging sympathetic identification with Tom. Chapters 17-22 see an overall rise in reported sympathy levels. Highsmith achieves this effect despite her reserved use of sympathy elicitors. Tom's continued unjustified mistreatment of Marge should have weakened readers' sympathetic engagement with his character. I believe that the rise in reported sympathy resulted from Highsmith's ability to successfully maintain readers' growing empathic engagement for the duration of forty-four pages. The prolonged alignment with Tom's psychological state caused an instinctive reevaluation of his character. In other words, sustaining her readers' sense that they understand Tom Highsmith made them less judgmental of his actions.

After Freddie's murder, Tom's plan to escape Rome is obstructed by the police. Inspector Roverini, whom Tom judges to be "neither particularly bright nor stupid," heads the murder investigation (121). Highsmith upholds the same strategy for all of Tom's interrogations; by withholding the police's state of knowledge, she forces readers into a perceptual and epistemic alignment with Tom. They know and believe about the investigation only as much as Tom knows and believes. To add to the tension, Tom's perspective is limited, and he is forced to "assess his

behavior from the polizia's point of view" to imagine what the investigators might know or suspect (123).

Highsmith begins to frustrate Tom's goal pursuit by making it increasingly difficult for him to remain living as Dickie. The newspapers make Dickie's (Tom's) address public as the investigation ensues. Fearing he might be confronted by Dickie's acquaintances, Tom moves to a hotel, where he is tracked down by Van Huston, a man who was part of Dickie and Freddie's social circle. He calls Tom's room requesting to meet in person, but Tom manages to take refuge in a cafe, where he learns from a newspaper headline that the police had discovered his blood-stained boat in San Remo. The detailed article causes Tom to recall images of "Dickie sitting in the stern at the throttle, Dickie smiling at him, Dickie's body sinking through the water with its wake of bubbles" (126). Through this inside view, Highsmith implies that Tom is endangered by outside forces and his emotional fragility. She continues building the sense of ensnarement; upon his return to the hotel, Tom finds that several people, including Marge, were trying to contact him. This causes him to imagine Marge's current whereabouts: "He could see her troubled eyebrows, her tousled hair as she sat brooding about what might be happening in Rome" (128). These imaginings are Highsmith's mode of revealing parallel actions without abandoning Tom's focalization<sup>58</sup>. They evolve into an inside view that marks the novel's only significant use of a dream to signal Tom's psychological state. Tom imagines seeing "Dickie smiling at him," soaking wet, informing him that he had survived by swimming (128). Tom attempts to regain composure by resuming the role of Dickie, going so far as "thinking about what Dickie would be thinking about" (129). His reaction suggests that Tom believes he is partaking in an ontological struggle—there can be only one Dickie Greenleaf, and it better be him.

The above-described applications of inside views impacted respondents' recognition of Tom's epistemic states. 77% reported either an "understanding" or a "high understanding" of Tom, with the rest remaining neutral. Although the facilitators communicated Tom's inner

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<sup>58</sup> Minghella attempts similar departures from a spatiotemporal attachment with his protagonists (see [4.4.a](#))

torment through narrational implicature, they did not significantly affect respondents' sympathetic engagement. As mentioned, Highsmith constructed the encapsulating narrative sequence in a way that keeps readers focused on Tom's goal pursuit. For this reason, what could function as his victimization is instead interpreted to be an obstacle to Tom's being Dickie. His torment does not act as a catalyst for any sense of remorse or act of contrition. Instead, the facilitators cater to a better recognition of Tom's state as he pursues his objective, and, as such, they primarily promote empathic engagement.

The day after his nightmare, the police confront Tom with their San Remo discovery. Again, their knowledge and suspicions are veiled from Tom and the readers. Nevertheless, the protagonist manages to circumvent this obstacle. The inspector permits Tom to travel to Palermo, escaping the acquaintances who could expose him as Tom Ripley. His objective, which is to continue being Dickie, seems secure.

Highsmith calls readers' attention to the many incriminating details that the police fail to use against Tom. At one point, her protagonist realizes that his passport is not stamped following the travel details that he had disclosed to Marge. If found by the police, this inconsistency could bring suspicion upon him. Highsmith produces several ruminations during which Tom considers potential plot holes. She follows such passages with free indirect speech detailing the protagonist's recurring concern that the police might be intentionally withholding their awareness of such evidence. For example, Tom grows suspicious when the inspector allows him to leave Rome despite the San Remo boat discovery: "Could it all be a trick, really? Were they just letting him have a little more rope in letting him go to Sicily, apparently unsuspected?" (134). In part, Highsmith adopts such a strategy to appease crime fiction enthusiasts whose inclinations may include looking for plot inconsistencies. She dispels potential objections by signaling her competence and control as a storyteller. At the same time, she establishes that Tom's eventual evasion of the law is made possible through his superior intellect; he is a better investigator than his pursuers. Nevertheless, Tom's ability to escape justice despite his many blunders caused frustration in a few respondents. "The story," one of them wrote, "sometimes was annoying for

me because of Tom's stupid luck. On the one hand, I wanted him to be punished, but on the other hand, I cheered him on."

Tom's excursion to Palermo includes a few anecdotal scenes<sup>59</sup> that serve as a commentary on Tom's evolving goal pursuit. Firstly, readers may note the acceleration with which Tom ascends his extreme affective states. As he arrives on the island, thinking of tailing the police and "Marge beating him to Palermo by plane" keeps him apprehensive (138). He is quick to overcome his paranoia when he amuses himself with the idea of writing to Marge to confirm her suspicion that "he and Dickie were very happy together" (138). The regained sense of control affords him a few days of blissful sightseeing. The episode serves to inform the reader that Tom's pleasure lies not in tourism but in his ability to travel as "Dickie Greenleaf with Dickie's money, Dickie's clothes, Dickie's way of behaving with strangers" (139). Such a circumstance raises the stakes of his goal pursuit; if being Dickie is what matters most to Tom, his failure to attain this objective should be significantly more devastating. The goal is soon put in jeopardy by Tom's following realization:

He had imagined himself acquiring a bright new circle of friends with whom he would start a new life with new attitudes, standards, and habits that would be far better and clearer than those he had had all his life. Now he realized that it couldn't be. He would have to keep a distance from people, always. (143)

Tom realizes that his being Dickie frustrates the possibility of recognition by high society. Only he can appreciate the excellence of his achievement, which is a small consolation, considering his hunger for acceptance. Some might argue that this is Tom's punishment; however, the insight does not produce regret. Instead, it causes the protagonist to reevaluate his immediate goal pursuit.

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<sup>59</sup> Amongst others, Highsmith provides another inside view that depicts Tom's affinity for being a writer; this betrays the novelist's engagement with her protagonist, which, I argue, may be the most significant factor behind a successful character engagement strategy (see [4.3.c](#)).

Tom's ability to remain Dickie is further complicated when a letter from Dickie's trust informs him that his recent check signatures may have been forged. This complicates Tom's ability to appropriate Dickie's resources. Furthermore, the police request his return to Rome for further questioning. Such a turn of events forces Tom to abandon his immediate objective. The costs of being Dickie have exceeded the benefits. The moment of this realization marks Tom's first honest self-assessment. As he reassumes his former identity, Highsmith compares the action to putting on "a shabby suit of clothes, a grease-spotted, unpressed suit of clothes that had not been very good even when it was new" (148). This inside view, which communicates Tom's self-loathing, promotes further empathy by providing respondents with an insight into his epistemic state.

Tom copes with his sense of failure by abandoning Dickie's role though he remains in his performative mindset. His being Tom Ripley becomes an act comparable to being Dickie Greenleaf. The narrator informs the reader that "overdoing almost the old Tom Ripley reticence with strangers, the inferiority in every duck of his head and wistful, sidelong glance" gave him "pleasure" (149). Highsmith foreshadowed her protagonist's loss of his old identity when Tom noticed that speaking like Dickie made him forget the exact timbre of his voice. It seems that without an identity, Tom is a nameless performer. Thus, his ultimate goal orientation to overcome his identity crisis remains unaltered.

After assuming his costume, Tom travels to Venice, where he presents himself to the police. Shortly, the Rome investigators arrive to confront him. None of them have noticed the resemblance between Tom and the man who presented himself as Dickie. Realizing that his performance is convincing, Tom attempts to provide the investigators with Dickie's potential motive for killing Freddie. He insinuates that the two men might have quarreled over Marge. As the interrogation seems to relieve Tom of the police's suspicion, Highsmith uses free indirect speech to report Tom's elation over his sense of freedom and to communicate his bravado, which substantiates his spontaneous idea to forge a will by Dickie "bequeathing [Tom] his money and his income" (162).

## 5.2 Analysis of chapters 23-26

By forfeiting his immediate goal pursuit, a life under Dickie's identity, Tom manages to vindicate himself before the Italian Police. Consequently, he assumes a new objective: securing Dickie's money for himself. This becomes his new immediate goal pursuit around which Highsmith structures this section. We may note that the engagement levels for chapters 23 to 26 demonstrate the same phenomenon as observed in the previous section. Namely, we see a gradual rise in reported sympathy despite the lack of application of major sympathy elicitors. As I have argued, this effect is achieved by Highsmith's ability to prolong readers' empathic engagement with Tom. As we observe in figure 4, the reported empathy levels see a minimal drop. In other words, it seems that a sustained empathic engagement can promote readers' sympathy even if it wavers.

It is noteworthy that respondents' feedback begins to manifest their sense of cognitive dissonance. By this point, 43% of the respondents reported feeling concerned for Tom versus 47% who expressed antipathy. Concurrently, 65% report wanting to see Tom punished, while 29% express "siding" with the police's story. The latter percentage is interesting because respondents have no access to the investigators' psychological states. This could mean that respondents' reported "siding with a character" does not necessarily evidence their empathic engagement. If this were the case, the number of respondents siding with Tom would have been consistent with reported empathic engagement. Instead, "siding with" seems to be indicative of a motivational alignment which in turn may be reflective of sympathetic identification.

Chapter 23 details Tom's attempts to convince Herbert Greenleaf and Marge that Dickie may have committed suicide. These endeavors constitute his goal pursuit; Tom needs to ensure Dickie is taken for dead before he unveils his forged will. By now, Tom has resumed living under his own identity. Ironically, this regression has earned him the interest of the Venetian expatriate society. Aside from being made the feature of social gatherings and gossip, Tom experiences the limelight of the Italian media. He is gratified by a newspaper describing him as a "well-to-do

American visitor” living in a Venetian “palazzo” (165). It seems that he has successfully reinvented Tom Ripley’s public perception.

To accentuate her protagonist’s forging of a new identity, Highsmith describes his dedication to furnishing his palazzo with antiques that looked like “an embodiment of cinquecento music” (166). He is content perpetuating his ideal of a “civilized bachelor.” Yet the cultivation of such a style of living will require subsidies from Dickie’s trust. Highsmith establishes this aspect of Tom’s goal orientation before Marge reenters the stage. The novelist uses the character’s presence to subvert readers’ expectations. Firstly, Marge’s attitude to Tom has changed dramatically. She no longer perceives him as a rival and instead enjoys his company, as if she too has accepted this new version of Tom. Furthermore, Highsmith ensures that all narrative elements are conducive to romance.

As the two lonely expatriates rendezvous in Venice, Marge seems to have recovered from her break-up with Dickie. She sees no harm drinking Tom’s martinis, accompanying him to parties, or sleeping at his palazzo. Marge fosters the romantic mood by insisting they take private gondolas rather than taxis or that they enter his home through the ornate waterfront entrance, and so forth. Tom maintains equal pretense, insisting on meeting Marge at the station, offering her a room in his home, and bestowing her “affectionate pecks on the cheek” as they speculate on Dickie’s current whereabouts. Eventually, they get trapped together on the front steps of Tom’s home. The situation would be ripe for a first kiss in a different genre, but readers’ access to Tom makes them aware that despite his outside gentility, he finds Marge repulsive. Rather than kissing, he fantasizes about pushing her into the canal; he is repelled by the idea of her underwear being “draped over his chairs;” he is irritated by her “giddiness” (176, 180). He sees Marge as blemishing his new self-image symbolized by his palazzo.

The dissonance produced by the contrast of the idyllic setting and Tom’s antagonistic focalization is comparable to respondents’ reactions to Tom. In other words, the effect that the story evokes is engrained into its aesthetic. Put simply, the tone contradicts the mood (see [4](#)). The incongruence of Tom’s reaction to his situation makes his perceptual and epistemic states seem

unique, and perhaps because of this—convincing. Additionally, it might be possible that a challenging alignment with a defamiliarizing view offers readers greater narrative enjoyment than an accessible alignment with a relatable outlook. Highsmith enables such an experience by catering to readers' recognition of Tom's perception of Marge.

While appearing cordial to a vexing individual might be a relatable situation, it is questionable whether Tom's noble treatment of Marge elicits engagement. The protagonist is not motivated by a sense of compassion for the recently deserted Marge but rather by self-interest. This does not invite a positive moral judgment. Tom must endure Marge's contemptible presence if he wants to influence her to authenticate Dickie's forged will. Marge functions as an obstacle to his goal pursuit. For this reason, his struggle with her is more likely to elicit empathy than sympathy.

Herbert Greenleaf is another character who stands in Tom's way of acquiring Dickie's trust. The protagonist attempts to convince his victim's father that Dickie showed signs of being suicidal. One such attempt comes at a dinner that the two men share with Marge. Tom grapples with confining his anger over the girl's blissful mood, which seems inconsiderate of Mr. Greenleaf's sense of loss (see [4.3.d](#)). Tom appears to be one of the few characters affected by Dickie and Freddie's deaths. Others, such as expatriate Rudy Maloof, find gossip a source of entertainment, much to Tom's resentment. Of course, the protagonist's respectable attitude is unlikely to prompt a moral evaluation, as he has killed both Dickie and Freddie. Instead, it stands as a source of irony.

The letter that Tom receives from his New York acquaintance Bob Delancey serves as a reminder of the distance Tom has traversed in search of his new identity. It also introduces new tension by informing the readers that the New York police have found Tom's old address used by an Internal Revenue Service impersonator. This is part of Highsmith's strategy of misleading readers into thinking that a most trivial shortcoming will bring about Tom's incarceration. More importantly, Tom's reading of Bob's letters confronts his past self. This allows Tom to concretize the feeling that "he loved possessions... Possessions reminded him that he existed, and made him

enjoy his existence. It was as simple as that” (193). This realization marks Tom’s successful transformation from a petty criminal into a connoisseur of materialism. He has found his new identity, and, importantly, 71% of the respondents recognized this turning point. When questioned about Tom’s values, most listed egotism, materialism, or both.

Highsmith is quick to undermine Tom’s certainty about his self-knowledge when he realizes that his deliberation on possessions has made him forget about being a murderer. After Marge discovers Dickie’s rings in Tom’s apartment, the protagonist readies himself to kill her. He does so by imagining “beating [Marge] senseless with his shoe heel” as well as “imagining the exact words that he and Mr. Greenleaf would say to each other afterward” (196). The act of imagining is vital to Tom. On the one hand, it depicts his hampered ability to differentiate between fiction and reality. On the other, it betrays Highsmith’s relationship with her protagonist. Once again, his mind mirrors that of a writer. He imagines what may happen; the scenes that his choice will lead to exist in his mind before he can act them out, much like they may exist in the writer’s mind before they are set down on paper:

What seemed to terrify [Tom] was not the dialogue or his hallucinatory belief that he had done it (he knew he hadn’t), but the memory of himself standing in front of Marge with the shoe in his hand, imagining all this in a cool, methodical way. And the fact that he had done it twice before. Those two other times were facts, not imagination. (197)

Highsmith seems to invite a parallel between Tom’s actions and her writing; Tom cannot undo what she has written, just as she cannot unwrite what he commits. Perhaps the above passage demonstrates Highsmith’s belief that Tom has written the novel at hand (Andrew Wilson 203). It shows that a strong affinity for her protagonist informed her engagement strategy.

## 5.2 Analysis of chapters 27-30

The section that spans from chapter 27 to the novel's end sees a decline of empathy and a rise of sympathy levels. As figure 4 shows, the earlier ascent of respondents' sympathy continues, but it does not overtake the line indicating apathy. This means that respondents, as a group, never rebuilt the sense of sympathy for Tom, which they demonstrated during the narrative's chapters 4 to 7. Highsmith's effort at sympathy elicitation in the novel's final chapters prompts a moral reevaluation.

Empathic engagement is lost despite the novelist's continued use of highly subjective narration. There can be at least three possible reasons for this. The first has to do with Highsmith's dependence on a limited array of unvarying empathy facilitators, which consistently externalize the same set of psychological states, eventually causing the audience's empathic engagement to stagnate; Tom's vacillating affective highs and depressions might have fatigued readers (see [6.2.i](#)).

The second reason is that they might have felt cheated by the implied author. Since Dickie's murder, the narrator has consistently foreshadowed that Tom's minor oversight will catalyze a restoration of justice. When this does not occur, readers realize that Highsmith used foreshadowing to mislead them consciously. Such a violation of a storytelling convention undermines their engagement. The final reason is that the audience might have felt more comfortable reporting affinity for an antihero they thought would get punished. Their belief that Tom would be imprisoned might have preemptively disengaged their current moral judgment. Once they realized that Tom would not only escape justice but also be rewarded with Dickie's trust, they felt prompted to sever their engagement with him.

In the survey, 70% of the respondents reported feeling disappointed by the lack of restoration of justice. Meanwhile, 50% of all participants felt dissatisfied with the narrative's outcome. That said, the remaining half reported satisfaction, with no respondents claiming neutrality to the ending. This even split may be symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance that

most respondents reported. A commonly made observation was that the narrative was frustrating though enjoyable. Indeed, all but one of the respondents reported enjoyment of the story, with 40% of them claiming high narrative enjoyment. This means that Highsmith's final narrative outcome did not significantly impact the audience's narrative enjoyment.

Chapter 27 begins with Marge informing Herbert Greenleaf about Tom having Dickie's rings. This re-establishes the preceding tension generated by Tom's endeavors to escape justice; Tom's immediate goal orientation, to secure Dickie's trust, becomes further obstructed when Greenleaf's American detective, McCarron, arrives in Venice to confront Tom. Highsmith reuses the same engagement design that she applied in Tom's dealings with the Italian police. Using inside views, she aligns readers epistemically with Tom's beliefs while denying them subjective access to the detective. Before their meeting, Tom convinces himself and the readers that "everything depended on what kind of man the detective would be. Everything depended on the first impression he made on the detective" (199). Once again, Highsmith obscures the investigator's beliefs and judgments, ensuring readers' alignment with Tom's perspective. "Out of that placid yet alert Irish face could come anything," Tom thinks as he studies the detective, "a challenging question, a flat statement that he was lying" (201). Tom's apprehensiveness over what detective McCarron will think or do becomes the readers' apprehension. This can occur despite their potential motivational misalignment; some readers may anticipate McCarron's arresting Tom. Still, they remain perceptually and epistemically aligned with Tom.

Highsmith, likewise, reuses the same foreshadowing methods that she used with the Italian investigation to hint at the detective's failure. The signal comes in the form of Tom's assessment of the man, "McCarron looked like a typical American automobile salesman or any other kind of salesman, Tom thought—cheerful, presentable, average in intellect" (204). The protagonist assumes that the man will fail to imagine Tom might have stolen Dickie's identity. Highsmith's recycling of established methods without any variance might have been one of the reasons why she was unable to produce new empathic resonance.

Highsmith attempts to elicit new sympathy for Tom by implementing a virtue display empathy facilitator. Tom's interrogation forces him to reevaluate his victim Dickie. He tells McCarron "that Dickie was a very ordinary young man who liked to think he was extraordinary" (207). Essentially, he admits to the detective the disillusionment he had with Dickie before deciding to kill him. When Tom feigns sorrow for Dickie to veil his distress over the investigation, like a method actor, he recalls images of the dead man. This reveals his feelings of regret:

If he'd only gotten his sightseeing done all by himself, Tom thought, if he only hadn't been in such a hurry and so greedy, if he only hadn't misjudged the relationship between Dickie and Marge so stupidly... none of this would have happened, and he could have lived with Dickie for the rest of his life, traveled and lived and enjoyed living for the rest of his life. (207)

In theory, a virtue display, such as Tom's regret over his murder of Dickie, should have prompted respondents' moral reevaluation of Tom. This did not happen because respondents recognized Tom's motivation. He feels sorry for having killed Dickie, because it prevented him from achieving his immediate goal. Tom regrets his loss instead of pitying his victim. For this reason, the virtue display fails to elicit sympathy.

After a month passes without any progress on the investigation, Tom decides to mail Herbert Greenleaf a picture of Dickie's will. He realizes the risks that such an action entails, but "the very chanciness of trying for all of Dickie's money, the peril of it, was irresistible to him" (215). Tom's need for adrenaline is further fueled when he learns that the police have discovered his storage with Dickie's belongings. Highsmith foreshadows that his fingerprints may be used to identify him as Dickie's killer. She maintains this pretense until the novel's penultimate page. First, Tom believes he will be arrested; next, he is sure that Dickie's forged testament will arouse suspicion. When neither takes place, Tom realizes "it was no joke. It was

his! Dickie's money and his freedom. And the freedom, like everything else, seemed combined, his and Dickie's combined" (225). The reference to a "joke" suggests that Highsmith anticipated that her lack of restoration of justice might produce readers' bewilderment. She does indicate that Tom's punishment might be his condemnation to a life of fear of the police. As mentioned, most respondents did not feel that this was an adequate punishment.

### 5.3 Study's Conclusions

Highsmith's empathic engagement strategy is successful, although she fails to espouse sympathetic identification with her protagonist for most of the narrative. I assume that she intended to make her protagonist appear sympathetic based on the recommendations she provides in her writing handbook *Plotting and Writing of Suspense Fiction* (1983). It follows that one aspect of her sympathy elicitation strategy includes an attempt to endow Tom with as "many pleasant qualities as possible" (46). Tom is an intelligent, ambitious, and self-aware aesthete. Moreover, he is competent, as the novel's title suggests. However, these positive characteristics do not outweigh his antisocial behavior, of which Highsmith was aware. "Though I think all my criminal heroes are fairly likable, or at least not repugnant, I must admit I have failed to make some of my readers think so," she wrote, citing her audience's reactions to Ripley (46).

Sympathetic engagement fails because Tom is a self-serving character incapable of forming meaningful relationships. Richard Bradford agrees with this interpretation of Highsmith's protagonist. "Tom Ripley," he argues, "lives in a world occupied exclusively by Tom Ripley. Outside it, there are individuals he can pretend to treat with affection or respect, but for whom he reserves lazy contempt. His only interest is in faking things: paintings and feelings" (chapter 12). What Bradford describes is the consequence of Highsmith's highly subjective narration, which focalizes on a sociopath. Such a perspective motivates the instrumental treatment of supporting characters. Though such a narration might hinder engagement, my limited study suggests that

Highsmith not only managed to make her protagonist “interesting” for her readers, but she also succeeded in making him empathically engaging (46).

Ripley’s 1955 release was met with excellent reviews in the American mainstream newspapers. Most critics focused on Tom’s character, finding him a believable, engaging, “repellent and a fascinating” depiction of a sociopathic character<sup>60</sup>. Bradford notes that most reviews agreed that Highsmith’s success rested on the fact that despite her protagonist’s moral repugnance, she “somehow insulated him from the reader’s inclination to judge” (chapter 8). Writer and critic Anthony Boucher complimented Highsmith’s “unusual insight into a particular type of criminal,” arguing that Ripley was a “three-dimensional portrait of what a criminal psychologist would call a congenital psychopathic inferior” (Andrew Willson 210). The critics’ conflicting attraction to the character leads me to find parallels with respondents’ reactions, many of them found Highsmith’s protagonist antipathetic yet distressingly relatable. The cause of such a dissonant engagement is a successful empathic engagement coupled with negative moral judgments of his character.

Filmmakers’ eagerness to adapt Highsmith’s novel attests to *Ripley*’s lasting appeal. In 1956 director Franklin J. Schaffner and writer Marc Brandel adapted the story into a forty-five-minute episode of the anthology series *Studio One* (1948-1958). Four years later, René Clément co-wrote the screenplay with Paul Gégauff for the French-language film *Purple Moon* (1960). In 1999 Anthony Minghella directed the Academy award-winning film discussed in this study. Aside from the audiovisual adaptations, *Ripley* was also made into a BBC 4 radio program (2009) and a stage production at the Northampton’s Royal Theatre (2010). Over the last ten years, interest in the novel has not waned. In 2020, film industry-oriented media reported that filmmaker Steven Zaillian would direct a miniseries based on Highsmith’s five Ripley novels for the Showtime network (Petski).

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<sup>60</sup> In 1956 Highsmith won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel. A year later she was awarded the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière for her creation (“Guide”).

The popular perception of Tom Ripley has undoubtedly changed since the initial release of Highsmith's novel in 1955. Since then, he has come to be regarded as the prototypical imposter or the "most famous literary psychopath" (Bradford, chapter 11). Ripley continues to be a point of reference for many contemporary antiheroes. Critic Richard Lawson notes that the spectators of *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2018) drew instinctive parallels between Ripley and the show's protagonist Andrew Cunanan (Lawson). *The New York Times* columnist Megan O'Grady cites recent examples of life imitating art, noting the Ripleyesque aspiration of recent "imposters and charlatans" such as Anna Sorokin, Christian Gerhartsreiter, or Jessica Krug (O'Grady). The result of such notoriety might be that contemporary readers filter Highsmith's protagonist through the lens of popular culture. He may be perceived primarily as a product of fiction, much like Mickey Mouse or Frankenstein's Creature, and only secondarily represent a troubled social climber. Such an interpretation may act as a moral disengagement cue; Ripley's murders are not disturbing because an iconic sociopath commits them. In my analysis, I disregard this and similar viewpoints as outstanding variables that exist beyond a storyteller's control. Instead, I base my research on the assumption that Highsmith's empathic engagement strategy was successful, whereas her sympathy elicitation efforts failed in many cases.

On the structural level, Highsmith's empathy-building strategy relies on its highly subjective narration that remains focalized solely on the protagonist. The narrator never departs from Ripley's perspective, nor does the voice afford any spatiotemporal detachment. "Keeping a single point of view throughout a book, as I did in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*," Highsmith explains, "increases the intensity of a story—and intensity can and should offset a possible monotony of a one-person viewpoint" (*Plotting* 90). She believes that confining readers to a "frenetic prose, and the insolence and audacity of Ripley himself" affords her story more tension than would the freedom to intercut two or more focalizations (75). The additional benefit of abandoning parallel perspectives is that readers have no alternative viewpoints to align with.

The results of the Highsmith study support the theory that empathic and sympathetic engagements can be managed independently. Referring to figure 4, this is especially evident in

sections chapters 1 to 3 and 12 to 16, which show a simultaneous rise in reported empathy and a decline in sympathetic engagement. Another observation that can be made based on the outlined engagement levels that span chapters 16 through 26 is that a successfully sustained empathic engagement seems to promote sympathy. I make this observation because Highsmith does not produce any significant sympathy elicitors in the mentioned narrative span, which could have affected the reported increase in sympathy. Lastly, as the analysis of the section spanning chapters 22 to 26 suggests, empathy may see incremental growth as long as the storyteller engages the audience with defamiliarizing facilitators; they must rely on innovative engagement mechanisms. Alternatively, they must reveal the character's evolving psychological states. The reusing of techniques or psychological states may frustrate empathic engagement or cause it to stagnate. Please note that all three observations, to be conclusive, would have to be verified by more extensive studies.

## CHAPTER SIX: MINGHELLA'S *RIPLEY* STUDY

This chapter presents the method and results of a survey study concerning spectators' response to Anthony Minghella's film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. As in the preceding study, I analyze empathic and sympathetic engagement strategies progressing consecutively through the narrative, maintaining the same section demarcations introduced in the survey study. I refer to the data from corresponding questionnaires as a basis for my assessment of Minghella's facilitators and strategy. In the conclusion, I provide my arguments for why his empathic engagement strategies prove effective; I discuss his sympathetic identification-building efforts and consider how his approach could have been supplemented.

Minghella's film is a departure from Highsmith's psychological thriller. Tom Ripley remains the story's sole focalizer, yet the filmmaker attempts to promote a sympathetic identification with his antisocial antihero. As the narrative begins, Minghella successfully elicits sympathy for his protagonist by depicting him as a disadvantaged yet ambitious musician who endeavors to make a living in New York City. A coincidence prompts Tom to the path of crime; he borrows a college jacket, leading Herbert Greenleaf, a shipping tycoon, to assume that Tom had known his son at Princeton. The man offers the protagonist a thousand dollars to travel to Italy, to persuade his son, Dickie Greenleaf, to return home. Tom, depicted as a destitute aesthete, cannot but agree. Minghella builds spectators' motivational alignment by juxtaposing Tom's dire living conditions with his enthusiastic preparations for the mission. Therefore, the trip to Europe comes as a welcome opportunity to better his socioeconomic situation.

Once in Mongibello, Tom attempts to impress Dickie Greenleaf with his personality before revealing the reason for his visit. It is his feigned fondness of jazz that earns him Dickie's attention. As the two men immerse themselves in revelries of the Italian Riviera, Tom becomes obsessed with Dickie's lifestyle. Freddie Miles, Dickie's less spectacular counterpart, intrudes on their summer, catalyzing Dickie's withdrawal from the socially inferior Tom. The protagonist attempts to salvage the situation by confessing his love to Dickie. The confrontation escalates

unexpectedly, resulting in Tom's murder of Dickie. The distraught protagonist forms the idea to steal his victim's identity only after being mistaken for Dickie by a hotel clerk. Minghella attempts to disengage moral judgment of Tom by framing Dickie's murder as an act of retribution but also self-defense.

Minghella propels the audience into Tom's new goal of evading justice and living as Dickie. His endeavors force him to kill Freddie Miles, whose murder precipitates an investigation by the Italian police. Tom is forced to abandon Dickie's identity, but he remains preoccupied with the expatriate community. He develops a relationship with Peter, who seems willing to ignore Tom's disadvantaged background. Minghella attempts to morally disengage his audience by reinventing Tom's relationship with Kingsley and evidencing Tom's sense of guilt. These qualms of conscience and apprehensions cause him to further spiral into his murderous tendencies. After outmaneuvering both the Italian Police and Herbert Greenleaf's private investigator, Tom inherits Dickie's trust money. He believes he has escaped justice but then chooses to kill his remaining friend to evade detection by one of the American socialites. By choosing freedom, he condemns himself to a life of fabrications and solitude.

## **6.1 Study's method**

I conducted survey research to map the audience's reactions to the protagonist of Minghella's *Ripley* adaptation. The results provided a point of reference that I used to verify the effectiveness of Minghella's engagement strategy. Much like with the previous study, the goal was to monitor spectators' empathic and sympathetic responses during the duration of the narrative. I asked a group of thirty respondents to watch the film and record their immediate reactions via a series of ten surveys. To allow for this, I divided the 139-minute film into ten sequences, ensuring that each section encapsulated a complete goal pursuit storyline, such as "Tom accepts a call to adventure" or "Tom attempts to befriend Dickie." This allowed me to isolate the more pronounced empathy facilitators within smaller film segments. I assume that

respondents' reactions recorded shortly after their experience of a given empathy facilitator reflect that facilitator's resonance. Such an approach allowed me to monitor the progress of the engagement strategy for the duration of the film's runtime. The severe disadvantage is that the surveys prevent respondents from having an uninterrupted, immersive story experience. Each questionnaire effectively disrupts their concentration and possibly interest<sup>61</sup>. The survey questions also force spectators to evaluate their attitudes towards characters and situations consciously, thus guiding their attention in a contrived manner. This can be an issue because, as mentioned, previous studies have demonstrated that audiences may knowingly adopt attitudes that limit or heighten their engagement with characters (see: Vorderer, Cupchik, and Oatley; Małeckie et al.). For this reason, I attempted to limit the time and cognitive effort necessary to complete each survey, restricting open questions to the last questionnaire.

The group consisted of second-year international graduate students who attended my elective courses on storytelling techniques, taught in English at the University of Wrocław, Poland. I instructed my students that the results of our study would inform their creative writing projects, and as such, they were to remain attentive to their affective responses to the film. Each student received a link to a website that contained the dissected film and survey. Respondents viewed the film on their personal computers outside of the classroom. Such circumstances make it impossible for this study to account for outstanding variables that have to do with the viewing experience, such as the audience's emotional contagion. Moreover, the limited scope of the group makes it difficult for me to make observations about the effectiveness of given empathy facilitators outside the context of Minghella's film. The study, therefore, serves primarily as a verification of my assumptions, theorizations, and analysis presented in chapters 2-4.

I reduced each questionnaire to two essential questions, accompanied by a few supplementary queries. The essential questions read: (1) Do you feel you understand Tom?; (2) Do you feel that you like Tom? The wording "do you feel" intended to elicit an intuitive response

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<sup>61</sup> Arguably, TV commercials have a similar effect on spectators, so most of my respondents were probably conditioned for the interrupted viewing. This unideal form might therefore diminish the intensity of their reactions but not obscure them to the point that would render the study inconclusive.

that would minimize respondents' impulse to engage in critical analysis. I chose "understanding" to be a marker of empathic engagement as it informs us of spectators' recognition of Tom's motivations, feelings, beliefs, and/or perceptions. Concurrently, I chose "liking" to be indicative of sympathetic engagement, although the term may be inclusive of affects other than concern for the protagonist's wellbeing (see [3.1](#)). I did this to simplify the answering process. Importantly, liking the character signals the spectators' sense of an other-oriented affect, making it a fair indicator of sympathetic engagement. To compensate for the ambiguity, I designed supplementary questions to verify whether or not a respondent's sense of "understanding" and "liking" of Tom is symptomatic of either engagement. The questions included: Do you identify with any other character more than Tom? Do you want Tom to get caught? Do you want Tom to get away with it? Do you feel sorry for Tom? Respectively, a respondent's reported identification with a character other than Tom indicates a break in his or her engagement with the protagonist; the expressed desire to see Tom's success or failure signals the respondent's alignment or misalignment with Tom's motivation, thus indicating the effectiveness of empathic engagement. In contrast, an admittance of feeling pity for Tom corroborates the reported sympathetic engagement.

The respondents replied using the Likert scale, which included five possible answers: (1) definitely, (2) very probably, (3) possibly, (4) probably not, and (5) definitely not. I assume that the more enthusiastic responses "definitely" and "possibly" indicate respondents' positive engagement with the protagonist. I mapped the reported empathic and sympathetic engagement separately. I understand the uniform positive mapping of the two engagements to be indicative of sympathetic identification, meaning that if spectators report both high empathic and sympathetic engagement, they are aligned with a character whom they judge to be sympathetic. Again, this is the industry-prescribed form of engagement, and as Minghella admits, it is his preferred quality of dramatic fiction; "I want to feel in film. I want to understand, and I want to see the parallels," he argues (*Stayton* 59). Conversely, inconsistent mappings demonstrate a lack of identification and that the strategy is dependent on either empathy or sympathy.

I assigned numerical values to answers in accordance with how they predicted respondents' empathic and sympathetic engagement; thus 2 = "definitely;" 1 = "very probably"; 0 = "possibly"; -1 = "probably not," and -2 = "definitely not." I calculated each respondent's engagements into two numeric values for each survey. One referred to reported empathy, the other to sympathy. I compensated for any discrepancy between the "core" and "supplementary" questions by assigning a median value. Therefore, if a respondent thought that they "possibly" (0 value) liked Tom but "definitely" (2 value) felt pity for him, I adjusted their score to reflect a "very probable" (1 value) sympathetic connection. I then averaged the scores of all respondents for each survey and mapped the mean reflective of their collective experience.

The lack of engagement, labeled "apathy," I appraised a value of negative 0.5 to account for the value shift resulting from my deviation from the usual Likert answer pool (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). As follows, my neutral response "possibly" implies more probability of affirmation than the answer of "neutral." For this reason, I shifted the limit of positive engagement down by half a value. It is important to note that empathic engagement that drops beyond the mark of "apathy" indicates the audience's disinterest with the character. On the other hand, a fall of sympathetic engagement below the engagement limit demonstrates the audience's sense of antipathy towards Tom.

It is beyond this study's capacity to account for respondents' exact degree of engagement (recognition, alignment, or allegiance). As mentioned, the survey's design intended to facilitate the immediacy of feedback by minimizing interference with the narrative experience rather than obtaining detailed data necessary to diagnose respondents' accurate states of involvement. For this reason, the numerical value assigned to the reported levels of engagement might vary with each respondent's interpretation of questions and personal responding. Therefore, a score of "1.5" might be indicative of one respondent's "alignment" and another's "allegiance." I propose the understanding of the mapping simply as a basic overview of the audience's engagement or disengagement throughout the narrative's progression.

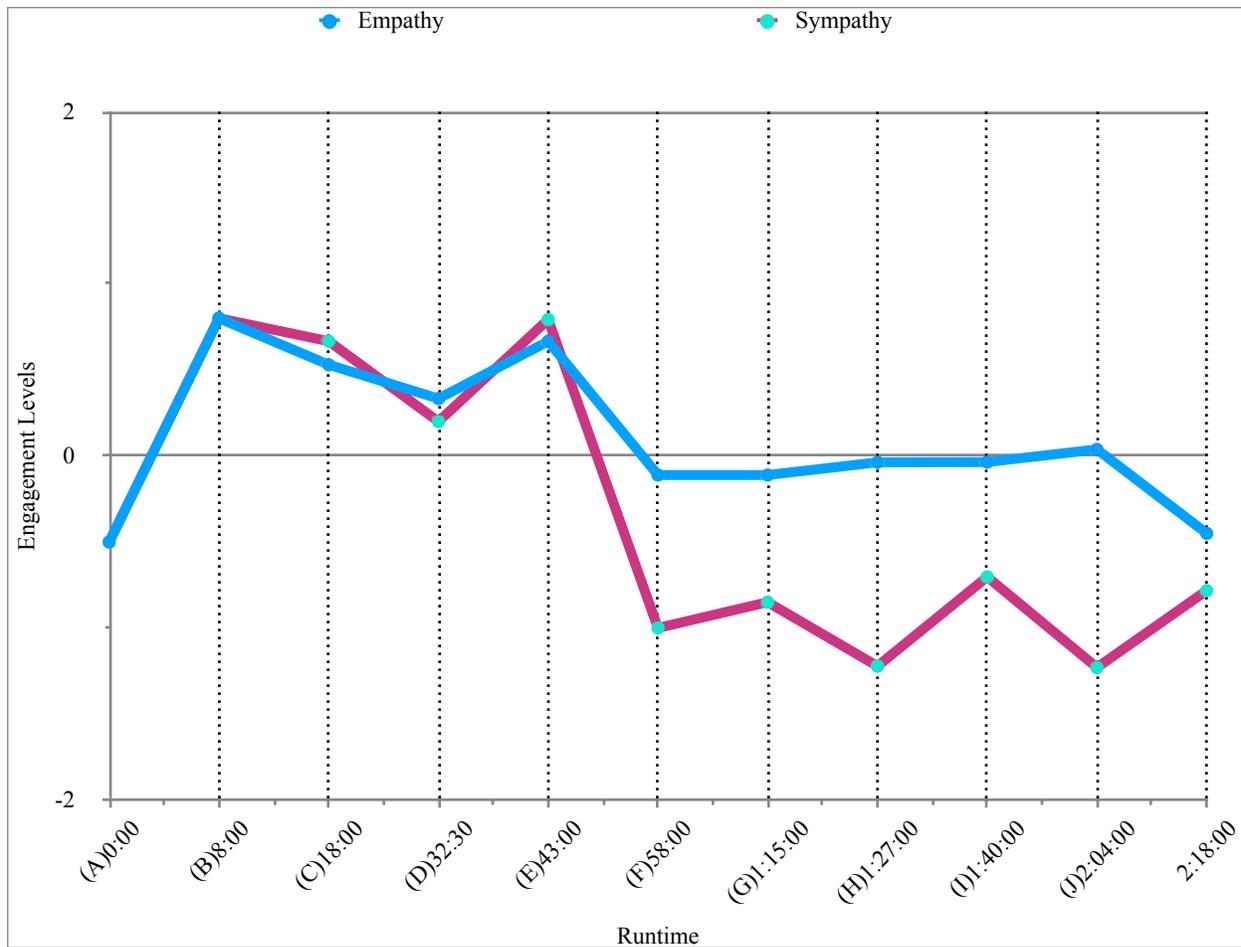


Figure 5: Audience's engagement to Minghella's *Ripley*

## 6.2 Study's Results

Upon reviewing the answers to the surveys, I found that three out of thirty respondents consistently entered contradicting answers, for example, claiming to feel pity and antipathy for Tom and expressing the desire to see both Tom's punishment and his escape from punishment. I observed that this resulted from their answering all of the survey questions with the same answer, either "definitely" or "definitely not." In other words, these three respondents answered the questions haphazardly as if wanting to bypass the survey. It is difficult to discern whether they

grew frustrated with the film or the interruptive nature of the surveys.<sup>62</sup> I excluded their answers from the engagement mapping, diminishing the number of respondents to 27. Given that this study concerns techniques storytellers employ in dramatic fiction (often with the intent of promoting broad appeal), the analysis of the collective audience's response provides more insight than the individual diagnosis of the compromised cases. The fact that 27 out of 30 respondents demonstrated an engagement in Minghella's narrative attests to the compelling and emotive quality of the film, mainly as the remaining respondents' feedback corresponds with Ripley's critical and popular reactions.

Tom's murder of Dickie, which occurs in the 56. minute of the film, has the most dramatic impact on the audience's engagement (see figure 5). Until that point, the empathic engagement levels correspond with reported sympathy. This means that the empathy facilitators employed in the film's introductory sequences successfully elicit sympathetic identification. Respondents find Tom to be both sympathetic and relatable. However, once he kills Dickie, the two engagements become disjunct. The murder prompts respondents to pass a negative moral judgment, resulting in their antipathy towards this character. Minghella does not produce any cues that would allow them to reevaluate their moral assessment. The result is that the audience remains empathically engaged with a character they dislike. This finding demonstrates that the two forms of engagement can be managed independently. For example, sequence G, which spans from 75. to 87. minute, sees a simultaneous drop in reported sympathy and a rise in reported empathy levels. The fragment of the film depicts the murder of Freddie Miles, Tom's second victim, which causes the audience to pass a second negative moral judgment on the protagonist. Nevertheless, the employed empathy facilitators successfully deepen the audience's alignment with Tom. The effect is that their submergence in the character's perspective deepens while their disapproval of his choices grows.

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<sup>62</sup> It is possible that these respondents might have been demonstrating a low tolerance for cognitive dissonance and were thus expressing their confusion. However, considering that the survey was conducted during the onset of the Covid pandemic, I feel that students' connection weariness might have been a more significant factor. This irregularity demonstrates the setback of my choice to use the Likert scale instead of open questions.

As the answers from the supplementary questions show, respondents are invested in what happens to the character. Still, they experience a conflicting outcome preference because of their feelings of antipathy. Until Tom's third and final murder in sequence J, 55% of the respondents report wanting to see the protagonist punished; 20% admit preferring to see him escape justice; the remainder do not specify a preference. One of the undecided respondents explained that, in part, she wanted to see Tom get apprehended, but at the same time, she wanted Tom to continue evading justice so that the story could continue. This type of cognitive dissonance seemed to end after Tom's third and final murder, which caused 75% of respondents to answer in favor of punishment. In this particular antihero narrative, the audience remained engaged despite the experienced psychological strain. Such a finding stands in contrast to the assumptions made in Shafer and Raney's above-mentioned 2012 study on the enjoyment of antihero narratives—Minghella's audience, it seems, does not need to “find ways to like the protagonists despite [his] sins” to remain invested in the story's outcome (1037).

In the context of Minghella's film, the interrelation of empathy and sympathy is evident. Although their levels see independent modulations, the divergence remains minor. The story's most dramatic plot twist impacts both engagements. In other words, it seems that both engagements share in a symbiotic relationship; most empathy facilitators will congruently influence both empathic and sympathetic engagement with Tom. For example, if an empathy facilitator manages to align spectators epistemically with Tom, his held beliefs will, in turn, guide the moral judgments passed by the spectators. Returning to Freddie's death in sequence G, we observe that his killing does not elicit as severe a moral judgment as Dickie's murder (see figure 5). This results from Minghella's effective employment of moral disengagement cues; Tom's earlier victimization at the hands of Freddie aligns us with Tom's perceptions and beliefs about Freddie. As a result, spectators are prompted to feel that Freddie deserves to be punished by Tom.

The final observation made in this study results from my misconception about the role of empathy's motivational aspect. When preparing supplementary questions, which I intended to corroborate the core questions, I found that my assumption that respondents' alignment or

misalignment with Tom's desire would indicate their empathic engagement. Instead, I found that the answers were unrelated. Respondents expressed hope for a particular outcome for Tom regardless of whether or not they felt they understood him. However, I found a correlation between the reported sympathy and motivational alignment. Respondents who expressed feeling sympathy for Tom consistently stated that they wanted to see a positive outcome for Tom. The reverse was also true; those who expressed antipathy for the protagonist wanted to see him fail in his goal pursuit.

It might be unsurprising that spectators who like a character want to see him achieve his objective. However, as I argued that motivational alignment indicates empathic engagement, I found many instances of respondents being in a "definite" conflict with Tom's desires while simultaneously claiming to be "definitely" understanding of his perspective. These results support the notion that empathy is indeed aspectual. More importantly, the audience need not be simultaneously aligned in all four aspects to become empathically engaged. We may, as the above instance suggests, experience all of a character's simulated states except for their desires; we imagine seeing, believing, and feeling as Tom does while remaining indifferent or even antipathetic to his wants. In conclusion, it seems that while a motivational aspect is a constituent of the empathic engagement process, an alignment with a character's desire is a good indicator of the audience's sympathetic identification. Much like feeling pity or concern for a character's wellbeing indicates sympathy, it may well be that wanting what a character wants is symptomatic of identification with that character.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence A**

The film's opening sequence, which establishes Tom's background, motivation, and goal orientation, manages to build the highest level of sympathetic identification with Tom Ripley. In large part, its success lies in the mood that Minghella constructs. The story opens with a music piece, "Lullaby for Cain," juxtaposed with a fragmented image of Tom; the spectators will

eventually learn that this is the protagonist's reflection in the cabin mirrors from the film's final scene. His voice-over informs them that he wishes to erase himself, and the incident precipitated his presumed downfall. Minghella evokes an air of operatic tragedy underscored by the lyrics of the woeful song: "Ah, such fleeting paradise/ such innocent delight/ to love/ be loved" (*Shooting Draft 1*).

The music shifts from being a non-diegetic element to being performed by a singer at the Central Park west terrace. The recital, it turns out, honors the Greenleafs' "silver wedding anniversary" while the scene, into which the music transitions, prepares Tom's goal orientation as he meets his future patrons. The spectators' memory of the opening image and voice-over primes them to seek out Tom's blunder. He is an outsider to the Park Avenue crowd. As Mr. Greenleaf mistakenly asks him about his son Dickie at Princeton, Tom "hesitates," before responding, "How is Dickie?" (2). The exchange is shot on medium close-ups, one of the Greenleafs and a reversal on Tom. Both images, however, are dominated by Mr. Greenleaf's figure, which occupies the most central position reinforcing his superior position. This might help spectators recognize Tom's innocent lie as a tragic blunder. Minghella continues this type of framing as Tom exits the elevator with the Greenleafs. Notably, Matt Damon, the actor portraying Tom, performs with the nervousness of someone aware of his inferior status.

As I argue in Chapter Four, mood enhances the effect of applied empathy facilitators. This case informs the spectators' awareness of the victimization that follows. Tom, dressed in a white blazer, stands out in the "thick mass of men in [black] tuxedos grooming themselves at the basins." They hand him money as he brushes their jackets without acknowledging his presence. Spectators realize that this is Tom's usual position in interactions with men such as Greenleaf. Again the mood of anxiety is amplified as spectators understand how seriously Tom has overstepped his boundaries. The classical score, once again, seamlessly transitions into a diegetic source motivating Minghella's operatic tone. All these choices work to prepare the brief though telling scene. As the concert continues, "Ripley peers through the curtain at the performance." Here, Minghella inserts the first significant emotion marker, a close-up of Tom's face as he

appreciates the music. It is interrupted when “a haughty woman in the box turns around, and he closes the curtain.” Minghella cuts to Tom playing Bach on the concert piano to the already abandoned auditorium and being interrupted by a janitor who turns on the lights (3). Minghella’s tone and mood make the irony of Tom’s position clear. While the likes of the Greenleafs listen to music because they are expected to, Tom is drawn to it because he enjoys beauty. Like Highsmith’s Tom, he seems more fitting to occupy their position.

Importantly, Minghella employs subjective virtue displays; spectators learn that Tom is willing to help his friends and appreciates beauty. This information is revealed through implicature rather than demonstrated through scenes specifically designed to serve as virtue displays (see [3.1.a](#)). This makes the facilitator more inconspicuous than an objective virtue display, which spectators would likely register as the storyteller’s manipulation. Similarly, the opening victimization scenes, which primarily display Tom’s social and economic inferiority,<sup>63</sup> are subdued because Tom does not seem overtly affected by them. Rather than suffering or feeling self-pity, he perseveres. These empathy facilitators successfully promote respondents’ positive moral judgment; 83% reported liking or strong liking of Tom. This sympathetic engagement, in turn, facilitates respondents’ alignment with the protagonist’s goal orientation. The sequence’s victimizations and virtue displays are further promoted by Minghella’s subjective narration, which focalizes on Tom. To this end, the filmmaker employs a strict spatiotemporal attachment with his protagonist while limiting the use of emotion markers to Tom.; spectators do not see the emotional close-ups of any other characters in this sequence. Unsurprisingly, none of the respondents reported identification with any of the secondary characters that appeared in the story thus far.

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<sup>63</sup> The injustice of Tom's social position is further emphasized using spatial imagery. Greenleaf’s anniversary is staged on a rooftop overlooking Central Park, while Tom's apartment is in the basement of a dingy building.

## 6.2 Analysis of Sequence B

As figure 5 indicates, both sympathetic and empathic engagements see a slight decrease in this sequence. Their close alignment from the previous narrative section means that respondents still seem to identify sympathetically with the protagonist. As Tom disembarks the ship in Italy, he meets his potential romantic interest, Meredith Logue. Minghella cuts from a long shot to a close-up as Tom introduces himself as Dickie Greenleaf. His lie is punctured by non-diegetic music, a disquieting vibraphone-driven theme that enters the soundtrack. This is the second instance of Tom misleading his interlocutors; however, he elaborates on the lie. “My father wants me in New York. He builds boats. I’d rather sail them,” he tells Meredith. Tom’s pretending to be Dickie Greenleaf, at this point, does not merit a significant moral reassessment. The use of music does, however, forewarn the spectators that similar transgressions will continue to transpire in this sequence.

After Tom arrives in Mongibello, he spies on Dickie and Marge through his binoculars. Considering the nature of his goal, to persuade Dickie to return to New York, the spectators might find his overzealousness unnerving. Tom’s ensuing mode of operation evokes a similar reaction. He pretends to run into Dickie and Marge on the beach and lies about knowing Dickie at Princeton. These deceitful tactics prompted respondents’ moral evaluation of Tom. The number reporting sympathetic engagement with the protagonist fell by 33%. Now, only half of all respondents like Tom.

In contrast to sequence A, the narration becomes more objective. Once Tom meets Dickie and Marge, Minghella begins intercutting close-ups of the three characters. Thus Tom cedes his on-screen monopoly. The camera movement is no longer limited to mirroring only Tom’s changing positions; it also begins to follow Dickie. Minghella also loosens spectators’ spatiotemporal attachment to the protagonist. Two dialogue exchanges between Dickie and Marge occur after Tom leaves the scene. In other words, spectators witness more than Tom sees. After having made his acquaintance with Dickie and Marge at the beach, Tom walks off-screen.

Dickie then looks at Marge to tell her that he does not remember meeting Tom at Princeton. Two scenes later, as Dickie arrives several hours late for lunch at Marge's house, she reproaches him. Dickie attempts to explain himself when Marge cuts him off, "we ate everything without you," she tells him, "Tom Ripley is here" (*Shooting Draft* 11). Only then does Minghella cut to a long shot to show Tom emerging from Marge's villa.

Neither of the described cases marks an actual departure from Tom's focalization. Spectators may assume that Tom overhears these exchanges. Still, Minghella does not support such a presumption by cutting to Tom's reactions as he presumably listens in on the conversations. Thus, spectators are shown intimate experiences of characters other than Tom. While none of Dickie or Marge's close-ups constitute emotion markers, they do provide enough immediacy to allow spectators to begin identifying with these characters. Considering that Dickie's late arrival at Marge's house additionally serves as her victimization (Dickie, the spectator knows, is late because he was with his mistress), it is unsurprising that at the end of sequence B, six respondents reported identifying with Marge, while only two with Dickie. In total, the loosening of the narration's subjectiveness, coupled with Tom's threatening behavior, caused one-third of all respondents to engage with characters other than the protagonist.

The drop in sympathetic identification that occurs in sequence B is not critical. Both sympathetic and empathic engagements with Tom could have suffered a more severe decrease had Tom failed to reveal his ploy to Dickie. By his own accord, he relates his conversation with Herbert Greenleaf in New York. "I'd pay you," Tom says, impersonating Greenleaf's husky voice, "if you would go to Italy and persuade my son to come home. I'd pay you \$1000" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 13). Aside from mitigating the negative moral judgment of Tom, the scene functions as his virtue display; Tom demonstrates courage by making himself vulnerable to Dickie.

Meanwhile, the camerawork underscores the effect that his impersonation has on Dickie. The scene initially is shot in medium close-ups, but when Tom begins imitating Herbert, Minghella cuts to a tight close-up of Tom while maintaining a medium close-up framing of

Dickie. Tom suddenly appears much larger and more powerful than his interlocutor. The camera then slowly pushes in on Dickie's face as he becomes impressed with Tom's ability. The spectators will likely mimic Dickie's reaction and thus will be led to believe that Tom is, in fact, a skillful impersonator.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence C**

In sequence C, both engagements continue their synchronized decline that commenced in the previous section. Again, the alignment of empathy and sympathy suggests that respondents are experiencing a sympathetic, albeit deteriorating, identification with Tom. Tom's initial goal pursuit, marked especially by the described moment of truthfulness with Dickie, has failed. As the sequence begins, he is expected to leave Mongibello. The protagonist thus reverts to his strategy of deceit. Upon saying farewell to his newfound friends, Tom pretends to drop his collection of jazz records. Seeing his favorite albums, Dickie reacts enthusiastically and invites Tom to a Naples music nightclub, where the two bond over music. They make a pact to "string" Mr. Greenleaf for money, and Tom moves into Dickie's house. Minghella quickly challenges what may appear to be a successful goal completion with a scene that prompts a moral reassessment of Tom. After eavesdropping on a conversation about himself, Tom looks over his host's toiletries and impersonates Marge and Dickie's voices, repeating the overheard exchange. Minghella maintains the tension in the otherwise idyllic sequence by using POV structures. In extreme close-ups, Tom observes Dickie's ring before commenting on it. This is part of Minghella's foreshadowing strategy. It also makes spectators grow wary of what Tom might do, especially as he continues deceiving his companions, amongst others, about having a fiancée.

Enthralled with each other's company, Dickie and Tom make plans to visit Rome, Venice, and Cortina. Minor victimizations undercut the bonding; Dickie repeatedly jests about Tom's inferior economic status, while Marge tacitly complains about his interminable presence. These mild mistreatments do not manage to overturn respondents' negative moral evaluations.

Furthermore, Minghella's continued use of objective camerawork does not favor Tom in terms of screen presence aside from the mentioned extreme close-ups of Tom's eyes as he observes his host's behavior. As a result, seven respondents reported identifying with a character other than the protagonist.

Interestingly, four favored Dickie while only three now reported identifying with Marge. The shift in favor of Dickie might have resulted from his portrayal in this sequence as an amiable bon vivant. Dickie neither causes Marge further pain (seeming to have abandoned his mistress) nor does he become aware of Tom's deceit. His naiveté might have afforded him some respondents' sympathy.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence D**

Sequence D sees a successful application of Tom's victimization, prompting respondents' empathy and sympathy levels to increase. As shown by figure 5, they mark the highest point achieved before in sequence A. The victimizations commence as Tom and Dickie depart on their planned trip to Rome; Dickie scoffs at Tom for wearing the same old corduroy jacket and proposes to buy him a new one. The mistreatments compound with the introduction of Freddie Miles. Rather than sightseeing, Dickie prefers dining and listening to jazz with the man who is his social equal. Tom is excluded from these revelries, which Minghella reinforces with his framing. Tom is often portrayed in cluttered, single medium close-ups in opposition to the more comfortable two shots of Dickie and Freddie. In his shooting script, Minghella denotes the same idea describing Tom standing "outside the booth, holding both of their jackets like a manservant" (26).

Tom returns alone to Mongibello, where he amuses himself by dancing in Dickie's clothes. The childish peculiarity of his action implies that such amusement might be rooted in a lonely childhood. If this action does not elicit sympathy for the protagonist, then Dickie's intrusion upon him is more likely to achieve the effect. Tom hides behind a freestanding mirror which reflects

Dickie's figure. This creative two-shot juxtaposes Tom's vulnerability and shame with Dickie's disdainful gaze. The protagonist's victimization continues the next day as Tom joins his wealthy acquaintances for breakfast. Freddie condescendingly implies that Tom is a scrounger in front of Marge and Dickie.

Once again, Minghella's narration allows one-third of all respondents to identify with characters other than Tom. In this sequence, participants seem to favor Marge, with eight reporting identification with her character in contrast to the two respondents who engaged more with Dickie. Marge's appeal might have been promoted in a scene where she attempts to console the alienated Tom. Tom sits alone on the sailboat as Dickie and Freddie "play at killing each other," splashing in the azure waters. Marge approaches him to explain that she understands his isolation, implying that she has learned to cope with Dickie's infidelity. Despite Marge's congeniality, Minghella chooses to frame her from a low angle and Tom from a high one. Such positioning marks her dominance over his position, especially since Tom turns away from the camera upon learning that he has been excluded from Dickie's further vacation plans. Considering that this sequence marks the highest rapport expressed for Marge's character corroborates respondents' expressed pity for Tom (67% reported feeling sorry for him). Her offering of consolation to the protagonist would not have been an effective empathy facilitator if the respondents felt indifferent about him. Put simply, Marge's virtue display earns her extra sympathy because her actions are directed at an engaging character.

A scene later, Minghella employs a POV structure to visualize what he describes in his script as Tom feeling "mesmerized, aroused, and absolutely betrayed." As Tom observes Dickie's below-deck lovemaking with Marge, he is in turn observed by Freddie, who scornfully asks, "Tommy—how's the peeping?" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 31). In contrast to the negligible victimization scenes of the previous sequence, the above-described facilitators managed to elicit sympathetic identification with Tom in 60% of the respondents.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> While the scene depicts Tom violating Dickie and Marge's privacy, which might have caused some respondents to pass a negative moral judgment, it seems most found the shaming of Tom to overshadow his misdemeanor.

Minghella's mood development is relevant to the sustained sympathetic identification, which potentially bolsters the empathic resonance of Tom's goal pursuit in sequences B through D. Because the mood emanates through the film's *mise-en-scene* and acting, it is not explicitly addressed in any of the surveys. Its effects, however, likely informed the engagement levels reported in all the individual questionnaires. As Tom leaves his "dingy apartment" and embarks on the new, exotic locales of Europe, spectators have already been informed that his objective is to persuade Dickie to return home. Likewise, they recognize that his primary motivation is the thousand dollars Herbert Greenleaf had promised him. But there are two other less obvious, though arguably more identifiable objectives, that Tom strives to achieve. The first one is underlined by the mood of excitement over the prospect of new experiences, complete anonymity, and social clemency that may have been a 1950s Western tourist's prerogatives. Minghella refers to this as the "American in Europe" theme. His depiction of travel, locales, costumes, the Italy of the "Il Boom"<sup>65</sup> undeniably conveys the notion "of going to Europe to remake yourself or to take time off from the circumstances of home" (Argent 71). This is what Tom, and possibly the spectator, wants.

Sequence A's foreshadowing of a looming tragedy is sustained in the spectators' consciousness by Tom's compulsive resorting to deception. The tension mounts due to the fear that the outsider's lack of restraint might have a dark side. "We think we can behave badly as long as we're outside the perimeter of our own lives," Minghella explains, "that we can go somewhere else to behave in a way we'd never believe in behaving at home" (Argent 71). This idea permeates the expatriate characters' self-indulgent behaviors.<sup>66</sup> The recognition of such a lifestyle's appeal allows for a stronger allegiance with Tom or any of the American characters.

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<sup>65</sup> Minghella describes the aesthetic of this period as "a thin veneer of the modern. The sophistication of *La Dolce Vita*, had glossed but could not entirely hide the more primitive mores of the country" (Minghella, "Italy" 82).

<sup>66</sup> Dickie's "Silvana" or Freddie's mentioned "Madonna" serve as examples of natives who find themselves incapable of penetrating the bubble that safeguards the Americans' pleasure island experience. None of the respondents reported having identified with Silvana or any of the Mongibello residents, whom Minghella purposefully keeps at the narrative's peripheries.

Minghella molds the characters of Dickie and Marge to serve as the magnetizing renderings of the modern aristocracy (Falsetto 98). Likely, many respondents could not help but join Tom in his yearnings to be accepted into this elite club. The relatability of this second goal may be indebted to Jude Law's and Gwyneth Paltrow's performances. However, Minghella relates, these characters are based on his teenage memories of an encounter with Marge and Dickie's real-life equivalents. "They were exquisite," Minghella explains. "I mean, just 'kissed' people." This experience "of feeling grotesque" and the fear of never being admitted to that "world of privilege and beauty" admittedly shaped his direction of the actors (98). I mention these confessions as I argue that Minghella's engagement strategy most likely did not emerge from an arithmetically calibrated application of empathy facilitators but instead resulted from his attempt to convey his personal beliefs, yearnings, and perceptions.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence E**

Tom's murder of Dickie, the pivotal moment of the film, seems to counterbalance the effectiveness of all empathy facilitators in this sequence. After Freddie departs from Mongibello, Tom, Dickie, and Marge watch the town's Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrations from a high vantage point. Chaos ensues when the villagers discover Silvana's drowned body in the bay's waters. This scene marks one of three instances where the film's narration departs from Tom's focalization. Minghella enlists a POV structure that registers Dickie's perspective, focusing on his response to his Italian mistress's death (rather than Tom's reaction to Dickie's reaction) (see [4.4.a](#)). Dickie consoles himself by playing the saxophone while Tom informs him that he knows why Silvana has killed herself. Minghella liberates him from an awkward close-up cluttered by the foregrounded lampshade as he delivers his lines. Tom assumes a dominant position over Dickie with the camera looking up at Tom and down on his guilt-stricken host.

In the following scene, Minghella maintains low-angle close-ups of Tom, as Dickie informs him that it is time that they parted their ways. Although Dickie maintains initiative with his

choices after Silvana's death, his framing implies his powerlessness in contrast to Tom's. As the two men depart on their farewell trip to San Remo, Tom acts in a way that possibly merits respondents' negative moral judgment but simultaneously reveals his goal orientation. He observes Dickie as the man dozes on the train. Tom resists his eagerness for physical proximity; he observes Dickie's profile, reflected in the corridor window, superimposed over his own face. The image foreshadows Tom's usurpation of Dickie's identity. "Dickie suddenly catches him staring" and makes his annoyance known over what he calls "that spooky thing," which, accordingly, Tom always does on trains (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 34).

As they attend an evening jam session, Dickie casually solicits Tom's confession. He admits having suspected that Tom has maintained his "cream of America" pretenses for his "benefit." More interested in "the drummer who's playing an extrovert solo" than in Tom, he misses Tom's admittance that his experience with Dickie has been "one big love affair" (35). This scene and the one leading up to the murder are rejections of Tom. However, respondents' reactions show that these victimizations failed to disengage a moral judgment of Tom.<sup>67</sup> The murder marks the first instance in the narrative in which respondents' sympathetic engagement fell below the "apathy" mark, demonstrating that they have formed an antipathetic response to Tom.

Minghella manages to sustain a level of empathic engagement that does not transgress into apathy. On a conscious level, this result was aided by the fact that Tom did not premeditate the murder and instead was prodded into it by Dickie's verbal violence. Viscerally, however, it was Minghella's continued marking of Tom's focalization with such facilitators as character time perception that aided alignment with Tom, particularly in the murder scene (see [4.1](#)).

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<sup>67</sup> It is possible that some respondents' fears or hopes for Tom and Dickie's sexual relationship impacted their engagement. Being that individuals' attitudes towards onscreen homoeroticism vary and fluctuate, personal sensibilities and societal norms are included in the aforementioned "outstanding variables," or factors which, to a large extent, remain outside a storyteller's control. In the cited scenario, I speculate that the main reason why Tom's victimizations failed to morally disengage respondents is because the protagonist's negative traits (manipulativeness, dishonesty, and neediness) eclipsed the disengagement cue. Furthermore, it is important to remember that, by this point in the narrative, nearly a third of all respondents were reporting siding with Marge. Tom's relationship with Dickie would have inevitably caused that character pain which respondents did not wish to see.

Nonetheless, Dickie's death incites a cognitive dissonance in most respondents. "I hated Tom at this point," one respondent admits, "but really wanted him to get away with the murder. I felt betrayed because I continued to empathize with him, and he was disgusting." Despite the prevailing sense of antipathy, only three respondents reported having a stronger sense of identification with Tom's victim.

## 6.2 Analysis of Sequence F

After having disposed of his victim's body, Tom returns to the hotel, where he is mistaken by the receptionist for Dickie. This propels him into the "American in Europe" expatriate reinvention (Argent 71). Tom's new goal orientation emerges as he returns to Mongibello to deliver a forged letter from Dickie to Marge. From this point, Tom attempts to live under Dickie's identity. He grapples with his first obstacle during the following three scenes: he must convince Marge that Dickie is alive but refuses to see her. Tom remains passive, and Minghella reduces his on-screen presence to that of an observer. Marge becomes the subject of most of the close-ups. Tom's shots, in turn, sporadically mark his reactions to Marge's attempts to comprehend Dickie's supposed decision to move to Rome. As she admits to Tom that there's a side to Dickie, "when our heads are on the pillow, I know no-one else sees it, which is really tender," it becomes clear that the point of these scenes is to elicit pity for Marge which complicates engagement with the protagonist (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 65).

During Tom's interactions with Marge, Minghella includes one important emotion maker that allows spectators to glimpse the protagonist's psychological state. He cuts to Tom as he observes Marge walking "along the beach and out onto the jetty, forlorn" (65). This image arguably symbolizes her sense of loss.<sup>68</sup> Tom reacts to this by clenching his face and looking away. For a moment, he is visibly guilt-ridden before his eyes shoot back up in seeming defiance

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<sup>68</sup> We could understand the image as a complex metaphor. The pictured sea could stand for the potential of the future that awaited Marge. Dickie's sailboat would therefore stand for Marge's relationship with Dickie. Without her lover, Marge is limited to the jetty that protrudes only a few meters into the water.

of the pity he feels for Marge. The shot lasts six seconds, and it is debatable whether spectators will register the inner struggle that this emotion marker attempts to externalize. A montage that follows serves as Tom's virtue display. The protagonist checks into the Grand and Goldoni hotels, respectively, as Dickie and Tom. He spends time practicing Dickie's signature and passing messages between his old and new personas. His ability to confidently inhabit both roles demonstrates his competence and arouses curiosity about his scheme.

Shortly afterward, Tom encounters Meredith, an American socialite who knows him by the name of "Dickie." Meredith betrays a growing infatuation with Tom, confiding in him, "the truth is if you've had money your entire life, even if you despise it, which we do—agreed?—you're only truly comfortable around other people who have it and despise it" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 65). With this confession, Tom seems to earn a formal acceptance into the "elite aristocracy" of the expatriate community (Falsetto 98). Having achieved this goal, spectators may assume that the protagonist's ploy may solidify his position as the suitor of the Logue Textiles heiress. His demonstration of romantic dispositions alleviates the toll Dickie's murder took on respondents' engagement. Both sympathy and empathy see a slight rise in the mappings. However, sympathy does not surpass the line demoting apathy (see figure 5). This means that most spectators still find Tom to be antipathetic.

The most significant empathy facilitation in this sequence occurs in the opera scene where Minghella uses one of the more ostensible emotion markers of the film. The discussed sweeping camera movement punctuates the shot progression, which otherwise functions as a scene of empathy (see [3.3](#)). The opera *Eugene Onegin*, as Minghella describes it, is "about a man who kills his best friend." However, the performance that unfolds on stage (two men duel, and then the winner embraces his dead opponent) creates a firm visual reference to Tom's murder of Dickie, the recognition of which does not require a familiarity with the opera's libretto. Minghella explains that he hoped that this scene would reveal that Tom "understands the reality of his actions for the first time. He has made his way to the box at the opera, but it's all

hollow” (Falsetto 90). This episode, though emotive, does not amend the respondents’ moral judgment of Tom.

During the opera’s intermission, Tom encounters Marge. The scene is punctuated by an unnerving music cue as Tom struggles to remove Dickie’s ring from his finger. This unexpected interaction signals the perilousness of Tom’s position. He must prevent Meredith and Marge from meeting as this would expose his living under two identities. His restlessness is intercut with Marge’s scrutinizing gaze signaling her growing suspicion. “I don’t understand why Tom’s still in Rome,” she tells Peter, her companion, in a shot that may be a short breach of the protagonist’s focalization.

Tom manages to escape from the opera with Meredith. He breaks off their potential relationship under the pretense that she reminds him of his ex-girlfriend. This and the previous interactions with the female characters prompted seven respondents to feel pity for Marge, Meredith, or both. Nevertheless, the study’s participants expressed mixed desires for the sequence’s outcome; 48% reported wanting to see Tom get caught, while 37% expressed hope for the opposite outcome. Such polarization might indicate the expressed cognitive dissonance produced by empathic engagement with an unsympathetic protagonist.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence G**

Sequence G sees a simultaneous drop in sympathy and rise in reported empathy, with the former reaching its lowest mark in the entire film (see figure 5). Having orchestrated a chance meeting between Meredith and Marge, Tom spectates the interaction from the top of the Spanish Steps. Minghella uses a complex POV structure to motivate a dialogue exchange that must occur without Tom’s presence (see [4.4.a](#)). The protagonist’s manipulative behavior might function as a virtue display in that he demonstrates his cunning. It might also prompt a negative moral judgment as the arrangement might appear, as Meredith expresses it, “a little cruel.”

The montage that follows depicts Tom renting an apartment, sipping wine, playing the piano, and opening self-addressed presents, one of which includes a bust of Hadrian, which will serve as his next murder weapon. Freddie Miles intrudes upon Tom's leisure. Minghella has already characterized the man as supercilious; he was responsible for Tom's victimizations in sequence D. Freddie is exceedingly condescending as he interrogates Tom about Dickie's whereabouts. Tom defiantly smirks at Freddie's insinuations. "You're a quick study, aren't you?" Freddie says to Tom, "Last time you didn't know your ass from your elbow" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 54-55). Crescendoing music complements the rising tension until Tom "beats down" Freddie with the mentioned bust. This murder is less graphic than Dickie's, with the strikes being obscured by quick, disorienting cuts. The resultant negative moral judgment is correspondingly less severe, being mitigated by Freddie's disdainfulness and the editing, both of which act as moral disengagement cues. As could be expected, only three respondents reported identifying with Freddie more than with Tom. However, the murder caused respondents wishing to see Tom apprehended to increase from 48% to 55%.

## **6.2. Analysis of Sequence H**

The following 13 minutes of the film concern Tom's dealings with the aftermath of Freddie's murder. The police arrive to question him at his apartment. Tom sits in the foreground while the camera pans with inspector Roverini as he walks, asks questions, and casually examines the apartment. This synchronization of movement (camera with actor) can align spectators with Roverini. The visual, however, is primarily suggestive of Tom's ensnarement, and it is this idea that seems to take precedence as only one respondent reported identifying with the police inspector.

Minghella attempts to externalize Tom's qualms of conscience by using an inventive POV structure. As Tom rides his scooter through an alley, he becomes distracted by reflections in mirrors that have been set out on display. In a quick progression of three close-ups of reflected

images, spectators glimpse Dickie, who looks up at Tom. The protagonist reacts by crashing his motorcycle. As he rises to his feet, his inverted image, reflected in a fractured mirror, provides an encapsulating visual of his deteriorated state.<sup>69</sup> The mirror scene undoubtedly makes Tom's inner torment recognizable. The erraticism of his subsequent action underscores the same condition.

When Marge surprises Tom in front of the American Express office, he takes her to Dickie's apartment. This choice nearly exposes him in front of the police. As the second interrogation ensues, Roverini informs Tom of the recent discoveries which make for circumstantial evidence against him. Minghella once again employs POV structures. While Roverini looks over the apartment in an overt display of his suspicion, Tom lurks in the corner of his apartment, observing the inspector through a slit in his wardrobe door. His focalization is marked and punctuated by an emotion marker. As the police announce Marge's arrival, the camera dollies in on Tom, underscoring his desire to capitulate. Once again, the framing and editing convey his sense of entrapment rather than aligning spectators with the inspector. When the police depart, Marge approaches Tom's door. She sees his shadow on the threshold and mistakes it for Dickie's. In their previous interactions, she dominates the scene while Tom only complements it with his reactions. "Whatever it is, whatever you've done or haven't done, you've broken my heart," Marge cries in a close-up. Tom listens to her behind the closed door displaying apprehension but not guilt. In other words, the confrontation works primarily to elicit pity for Marge and, secondarily, to illustrate Tom's ensnarement.

It is possible that the omission of Marge-oriented scenes in the film would have increased empathic engagement with Tom. However, Minghella's choice to display the character's pain creates a sense of sincerity. Tom's choices have real consequences, and sympathetic individuals are hurt as a result of his actions. The exclusion of Marge's suffering would have depreciated the film's moral dimension, arguably reducing *Ripley* to a superficial thriller. In other words, the

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<sup>69</sup>A closer study would be necessary to determine the extent to which character externalizations achieved through symbolic imagery affect spectators' engagement.

concessions Minghella made to his character engagement strategy improved his story rather than impaired it.

In the film's 98th minute comes the most effective empathy facilitator in this sequence. Minghella offers an inside view that obliquely externalizes Tom's thoughts and beliefs. He achieves this through a voice-over that narrates Tom's letter to himself on Dickie's behalf. Used as a counterpoint to the images of Tom packing his belongings, the voice-over creates a contrast between Dickie's earlier expressed feelings about Tom and the confessions that Tom makes in his place. This does not distract spectators from the fact that Tom is, in reality, expressing his pain; "I've made a mess of being Dickie Greenleaf, haven't I?" He says. This admittance of guilt coupled with the preceding victimization scenes merited respondents' moral reevaluations, resulting in a significant increase in sympathetic engagement.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence I**

Sequence I shows a significant drop in sympathetic engagement. Having abandoned Dickie's identity, Tom escapes to Venice under his real name. Peter accompanies him to the police station, where he acts as a translator. Upon learning that he will be confronted by an investigator arriving from Rome, Tom panics and wants to abandon the plan. Spectators, much like Tom, assume the officer to be inspector Roverini. In this way, they are epistemically aligned with Tom; they believe what Tom believes. Minghella reinforces this engagement with an epistemic facilitator. As the inspector arrives at the station, he employs a POV structure: Tom, horrified, turns to see the entering investigator. A column initially obscures the cut to his POV, but as the man passes, Tom recognizes that he is not Roverini. Minghella cuts to the reaction close-up of Tom, which displays bewilderment similar to that of the spectators'. This unexpected change of police staff saves Tom from exposure and allows spectators to experience a plot twist in alignment with the protagonist.

The interrogation is filmed with *en-face* close-ups of inspector Verrecchia and reverse medium close-ups of Tom, in which his figure is flanked by the inspector and Peter's bodies. The framing grants the police officer power and control and reinforces Tom's feeling of vulnerability. When Verrecchia reveals Dickie's suicide letter, which Tom composed in the previous sequence, the protagonist reacts with indignation so convincing that it might confuse some spectators. Thus the tension is relieved momentarily as Tom achieves his goal of deceiving the police.

The following scene, which takes place in Peter's apartment, concerns Tom's moment of sincerity with his new companion. Only the confessions he made to Dickie before killing him exceed the veracity of this one. "If I could get a huge eraser and rub everything out... starting with myself... the thing is, Peter, if..." Tom says before falling silent (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 69). This is the closest he comes to confessing his murders. The regret and expressed wish to "clean everything out" prompts a positive reevaluation of his character. This rise in sympathetic engagement would have likely been indicated had the survey taken place right after this scene. Instead, any rapport won for Tom is obscured by Marge's sense of loss, demonstrated in the subsequent scenes.

Additionally, Tom's relationship with Peter fails to recover a sense of sympathy for Tom (to push the engagement above the indicator of apathy) because he does not make any sacrifices for Peter (see [3.1](#)). The POV structure in Santa Maria della Pieta is another moment of connection. Tom is moved to tears by Peter's ensemble playing Vivaldi's "Stabat Mater." Although emotive, this facilitator similarly does not hold the capacity for rekindling a sympathetic engagement. It does, however, work to improve the reported understanding of Tom.

Marge arrives in Venice bearing the news of an American detective that Mr. Greenleaf has hired to investigate Dickie's case. Her demeanor to Tom is now passively aggressive. Upon seeing his new apartment, she exclaims, "we'll have to tell Mr. Greenleaf how far his dollar has stretched... look at you. To the manner born" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 71). Minghella elicits sympathy for Marge showcasing her sorrowing beauty; her framing, costuming, and lighting yield portraits reminiscent of the Venetian school. Her visual ennoblement singles Marge out

from the remaining characters who, unlike her, do not suspect Tom of killing Dickie. Marge's insight is additionally reinforced by an emotion maker when she sits down under the San Marco arcades to talk with Mr. Greenleaf; the camera dollies in on her face as she hears Tom reassure the distressed father that he will "do anything to help Dickie" (72).

Herbert Greenleaf's conspicuous torment forces Tom to be confronted with the pain he has caused. In a moment of trepidation, Greenleaf asserts, "people always say you can't choose your parents, but you can't choose your children" (73). This line serves as an illustration of Minghella's theme (see [7.5](#)). More importantly, it catalyzes one of the most expressionist emotion markers in the film; as Tom experiences a guilt-ridden nightmare, the camera swoops above him (see [3.4](#)). Once again, any elicited pity dissipates when Marge confronts Tom about Dickie's rings, which she has found in his apartment. "I have to tell Mr. Greenleaf. I have to tell Mr. Greenleaf. I have to tell Mr. Greenleaf," she repeats hysterically. Tom promises to explain the situation and closes the bathroom door to get dressed. His change of expression reflected in a mirror signals his intent of killing Marge. As he grabs for his razor, his hesitance is once again reflected in a mirror. The duality of his nature, signaled by the imagery, is eclipsed by the unfolding drama; it is debatable whether such visuals significantly impact the spectator's understanding of Tom. As he emerges from the bathroom, the razor hidden in his pocket, Tom has seemingly transformed into the cinematic sociopath. Calm and in control, he approaches Marge, professing love to her. The woman is frightened, and, in contrast to her earlier depictions from this sequence, the harsh lighting and lack of makeup produce unflattering, naturalistic close-ups. The confrontation marks a minor departure of focalization from Tom as Minghella employs a POV structure from Marge's perspective.

As Tom nears, the woman looks down at the "red stain that appears on the pocket of his robe" (76). In his script, Minghella does not signal such a shift in focalization. Tom looks "absently" at the spreading bloodstain, not Marge. It is probable that this shift was conceived in the editing room and resulted out of limited scene coverage. Marge appears in a soft-focus shot, which similarly evidences the limited alternatives of successful takes at Minghella and editor

Walter Murch's disposal. Nevertheless, the focus of the scene shifts from Tom's dilemma, evident in the script, to Marge's fear. Perhaps this lapse shows that even an experienced storyteller like Minghella would have to acknowledge that focalization is more easily controlled in text than film. As a result, six respondents reported identification with Marge at this time.

In the following scene, Tom's confrontation with detective MacCarron is an example of achieving epistemic alignment. As the protagonist arrives at Greenleaf's hotel suite, he is greeted by the sleuth's aloof gaze. This image arouses suspicion in both spectators and Tom that he will be finally held accountable for his actions. The scene's dialogue works to sustain this impression; "Marge has been telling us about the rings," Greenleaf informs Tom, "perhaps you didn't mention them because there's only one conclusion to be drawn" (78). Spectators are united in Tom's belief that this conclusion is the truth—Tom has killed Dickie and stolen his rings. The protagonist steps out on the balcony and looks out onto the waters as if wanting to escape. MacCarron blocks his only exit through the door, but the revelation that he makes contradicts both spectators' and Tom's expectations. Greenleaf intends to transfer a "good part of Dickie's income from his trust" into Tom's name, thus hoping to buy his discretion (80). Once again, spectators align themselves with the protagonist's surprise. This affective matching is made possible only because spectators believe what Tom believes. The employment of such facilitators enabled Minghella to sustain respondents' empathic engagement despite their negative judgment of Tom.

## **6.2 Analysis of Sequence J**

Relieved that he is no longer under suspicion, Tom embarks with Peter on a ferry bound for Athens. Onboard, he discovers he is sailing with Meredith and her family, who know him as Dickie Greenleaf. The film ends with Tom strangling Peter to avoid detection. This murder, which occurs only in the soundtrack juxtaposed underneath Tom's pained close-up, elicited sympathy for the protagonist and deteriorated respondents' empathic engagement. In other words, they reacted similarly to the critics and other spectators. Literary scholar Gene Phillips argues

that this dissatisfaction might have resulted from a premonition that Tom was not “punished sufficiently for his crimes to satisfy the traditional standards of conventional morality” (257). Minghella admits in an interview that Tom’s final act of killing Peter Smith-Kingsley, a “musician who is capable of loving Ripley for who Ripley is,” was intended as a punishment for Tom’s misdeeds. By “pretending to be Dickie Greenleaf,” Minghella argues, Tom “has already annihilated himself,” thus the symbolic “killing the possibility of love with Peter” acts as a demonstration of this idea (James 76). Reviewing my respondents’ comments, I believe that the cause for this commonly dissonant reaction is much simpler—this final murder severs all remnants of empathic engagement with Tom because they do not find the murder to be the only inevitable solution to the protagonist’s predicament. Respondents reported finding the motivations for his action perplexing, meaning they could not imagine wanting what Tom wants, which is to escape justice at all cost. Seeing Tom choose incarceration to avoid killing the sympathetic Peter would have made for a more redemptive, thus satisfying, ending.<sup>70</sup>

### 6.3 Study’s Conclusions

Minghella’s adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* did not earn the accolades that his acknowledged masterpiece *The English Patient* (1996) had garnered. The latter had won nine Academy Awards, including “best director” for Minghella, while *Ripley* earned five nominations but failed to win in any category (“Oscars”). Nevertheless, the immediate critical and popular reactions mainly were positive (see “The Talented Mr. Ripley - Movie Reviews”). The New York Times critic Janet Maslin called Minghella’s film a “glittering new thriller,” praising all but the

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<sup>70</sup> I would speculate that to align his spectators motivationally with the murder, Minghella would have needed to establish the horrors that awaited Tom at an Italian penitentiary, making it clear to spectators that surrender is not a viable alternative. Furthermore, he would have needed to exhaust the possibility that Peter might accept Tom after learning of his homicidal tendencies. In other words, Tom would have had to confess his murders to Peter in an attempt to win his allegiance. Once this failed, Tom could proceed to kill Peter, as he does in the film. It is possible that such elucidation of character motivation would have tempered spectators’ divorcement from the protagonist. Still such a prioritizing of audience engagement would have detracted from the auteur’s intention of creating a narrative that challenged spectators’ story schemas.

narrative's ambiguous culmination. Her viewpoint, Gene Phillips notes, does well to summarize the "critical disagreement about the film's ending" (257).

As figure 5 shows, Minghella's endeavor to build a sympathetic identification with his character was successful until sequence E, which features Tom's murder of Dickie. Both sympathetic and empathic engagement lines seem to be rising and falling in synchrony up to that point. However, the moral evaluation brought about by the protagonist's crime of passion caused most respondents to judge Tom to be antipathetic, thus inhibiting their identification with him. This occurred despite Minghella's attempts to disengage the audience from passing a moral judgment on Tom. The wavering of the sympathetic engagement pictured in figure 5, which lasts from sequence F towards the narrative's end, is symptomatic of the auteur's attempts to re-elicite empathy for his protagonist. Most of such efforts fail to rekindle sympathetic identification because Tom does not successfully display virtues worthy of a significant moral reevaluation, namely he does not demonstrate having formed a meaningful relationship with any of the characters; Minghella's reimagining of the source material, discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, was likely undertaken with the intent of eliciting sympathy for Tom. Nevertheless, sequences E through J show that spectators can empathize with an antipathetic protagonist.

The interrelation of empathy and sympathy in Minghella's film is evident. The story's most dramatic plot point impacts both engagements, thus demonstrating that many used mechanisms simultaneously affect Tom's empathy and sympathy levels. It seems, therefore, that empathic and sympathetic engagements invariably affect one another. Testing the possibility of entirely disjoint empathic and sympathetic responses would require a study of narratives that employ unconventional engagement strategies, such as seen in Highsmith's *Ripley*. Additionally, while this study shows that spectators can empathize with an antipathetic protagonist, it would be interesting to see whether a story that elicits a strong sense of sympathy for the protagonist while inhibiting their empathic resonance would as successfully sustain the audience's investment in the outcome. In other words, could a story about a character whose actions invariably procure positive moral judgments but whose feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and motivations remain

outside of the audience's scope of understanding successfully sustain audiences' interest in a dramatic narrative?

The final observation concerns my misconception about the role of empathy's motivational aspect. I assumed respondents' alignment or misalignment with Tom's desire would indicate their empathic engagement. Instead, I found a motivational alignment to predict sympathetic engagement and a lack of motivational alignment signaling an antipathetic disposition towards the protagonist.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: HIGHSMITH VERSUS MINGHELLA

Highsmith's novel and Minghella's adaptation elicit different forms of engagement.<sup>71</sup> For most of her novel, Highsmith relies on empathic engagement, allowing her readers to remain submerged in her unsympathetic protagonist's perspective. By contrast, Minghella endeavors to elicit sympathetic identification with his protagonist. The disparate approaches result from the storytellers' distinct motivations for telling their stories. Highsmith makes the nature of her experiment explicit when she writes, "what I predicted I would once do, I am doing already in this very book... that is, showing the unequivocal triumph of evil over good, and rejoicing in it. I shall make my readers rejoice in it, too" (qtd. in Schenkar). Put simply, the writer conceptualizes her story as an experiment on engagement with an especially dark antihero.

Minghella admits to being uninterested in a similar exploration. The purpose of his film, he explains, is to allow the audience to "rehearse what it [would be like] to give up on yourself, and [to explore] the punitive consequences of that" (Argent 69). Thus, he envisions *Ripley* to be a story of a "child who makes a small mistake, tries to cover it up, and in the process, sets off on a journey of bigger and bigger mistakes" (64). He aims to help spectators understand Tom's "humanity" and to "see how that humanity gets corrupted" (68).

Minghella's film deviates from Highsmith's novel, amongst others, by introducing or reinventing secondary characters. More significantly, Minghella rewrites the protagonist to make him merit the spectators' sympathetic identification. Where the novel's Tom is a brilliant though sociopathic social climber, Minghella conceives an outsider spurred to violence by his unrecognized longing for a family. The filmmaker's vision led him to forgo Highsmith's bold engagement experiment for the sake of an industry-tested strategy, aiming to elicit primarily sympathetic identification.

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<sup>71</sup> A longer version of the argument contained in this chapter was published in *Text Matters*, vol. 11, 2021.

## 7.1 Redefined Characters

While some argue that Minghella's more relatable tragic hero earned a broader consideration for *Ripley*,<sup>72</sup> it is Highsmith's Tom who is often considered to be one of the most popular "sociopaths" in literature (Massey 167-68). In part, Highsmith's success lies in her ability to invent an engaging character who, throughout the *Ripley*, remains a believable representation of the antisocial personality disorder. The American Psychiatric Association describes the affliction as "a failure to conform to lawful and ethical behavior, and an egocentric, callous lack of concern for others, accompanied by deceitfulness, irresponsibility, manipulateness, and/or risk-taking" ("Antisocial Personality" 764). Highsmith convincingly characterizes Tom as a man with an egocentric drive, a lack of conscience, a limited ability to empathize, and most importantly, an "incapacity for mutually intimate relationships" (764). Arguably, her Tom satisfies the criteria of sociopathic behavior prescribed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Tom's attempts to befriend characters in the novel are underscored by self-serving pragmatism. As mentioned in social interactions, Tom is often "God-damned bloody bored," all the while remaining self-monitoring (Highsmith, *Talented* 6). His first interaction in the novel is riddled with evidence of his emotional instability. His moods swings from "ecstatic moments" of fantasies about his unwarrantedly golden future to failure or fear-inspired sensations of "dizziness and nausea" (36, 86).

In the novel's first chapter, Tom is cornered into a conversation by Herbert Greenleaf. During the exchange, Tom notes "that all his muscles had tensed" (7). Such self-monitoring, psychologist Martha Stout maintains, is a telling quality of sociopaths. She argues that "lack of

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<sup>72</sup> Literary scholar Edward Shannon argues that Highsmith's novels are often eclipsed by their film adaptations. He provides an earlier example of Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 adaptation of Highsmith's 1949 novel *Strangers on a Train*, which "earned more critical respect and attention." Accordingly, such was the case with Minghella's *Ripley* (17). In a similar vein, Andrew Wilson argues that "Minghella's film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and the reissuing of her novels" have brought about a positive reevaluation of Highsmith's work (463).

conscience” may render such individuals incapable of experiencing a range of affects. To veil their lack of empathy, sociopaths might mimic the observed displays of emotions (6-7). Highsmith attempts to capture that quality by relating that Tom remains untouched by Greenleaf’s humiliating desperation while finding it necessary to fake “maniacal politeness”(7). He becomes invested in the conversation only once he realizes that its outcome could afford him a paid trip to Europe.

Highsmith does not attempt to deemphasize her protagonist’s emotional instability. On the contrary, she accentuates Tom’s objectionable feelings. Her antisocial antihero initially may arouse readers’ curiosity. However, once his increasingly egotistical tendencies spiral into the homicidal domain, most readers pass a negative moral judgment on Tom (see [5.2](#)). Highsmith does not attempt to mitigate readers’ antipathy by using moral disengagement cues. Instead, she employs a sustained subjective narration, relying most often on projections and inside views. In other words, Highsmith filters the story solely through her protagonist, thus, aligning readers with Tom’s affects, perspective, motivations, and beliefs.

An example that demonstrates the staple of Highsmith’s strategy is her portrayal of Tom’s second victim, Freddie Miles. The man is the first character to suspect that Tom might have killed Dickie Greenleaf. In the adaptation, Minghella deploys moral disengagement cues to mitigate the effects of Freddie’s death at Tom’s hands. In short, his revised Freddie is substantially more contentious and condescending towards Tom, whom he considers to be his social inferior. Such characterization makes Freddie’s death seem like an act of justified retribution. Highsmith takes a very different approach. Her Freddie is not demeaning but inquisitive and creates the impression of an innocent bystander. However, Highsmith attempts to align readers against him by tainting Freddie’s descriptions with Tom’s projections (see [3.4](#)). For example, when the character confronts Tom, she describes him in the following manner: “Freddie was the kind of ox who might beat up somebody he thought was a pansy, especially if the conditions were as propitious as these” (109). She consistently uses projections to describe this “ugly, freckled,” or

“uninteresting” character. Since Highsmith employs a reasonably reliable narrator, readers cannot doubt Freddie’s objectionability. This aligns them perceptually with Tom.

Minghella, as mentioned, opts to transfer the coloring resulting from Tom’s sensibilities from description to action and dialogue. Thus Minghella transforms what in the novel is Tom’s subjective perception into a more objective characterization; an obvious narrator does not mediate Freddie’s self-righteous attitude. The filmmaker treats most of the novel’s characters in a similar fashion. Notably, he simplifies Dickie as well as his relationship with Marge. All traces of the novel’s conflicted youth with artistic aspirations are veiled by the film’s philandering socialite.

To strengthen Dickie’s free-spiritedness, Minghella introduces a new character into the story, Silvana, to embody his numerous illicit affairs. Unlike Tom, Dickie sees no contradiction in “ogling girls” one day and “getting married” to Marge the next (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 37). This contrasts with the novel, where even the intimacy between Dickie and Marge is not made explicit. Highsmith’s Dickie is far from promiscuous, showing reluctance to take advantage of Marge’s infatuation (*Talented* 62). Their delicate relationship is further complicated by Marge’s reportedly zealous conversion to Catholicism, which Dickie believes to be the aftermath of a “mad crush” that she had on an Italian skier (46-47). Highsmith’s Marge betrays a passion for her new country, not only by embracing its religion but also by writing a book about Mongibello, which she supplements with her photographs. However superficial, such virtue displays set her apart from Minghella’s version of the character; in the film, Marge, albeit genial, is not shown to have a meaningful relationship beyond the American expatriate bubble.

To facilitate a sympathetic identification with the protagonist, Minghella attempts to morally disengage his spectators from Tom’s murder of Dickie. He does this by systematically promoting a negative moral judgment of Dickie. This is evident in the changes he introduces to Dickie’s virtue display. Highsmith’s Dickie, in Tom’s judgment, is a “lousy amateur painter,” but one who finds solace in his work (*Talented* 45). By reinventing him as a fickle musician, Minghella deprives him of the possibility of being, as Highsmith’s Herbert Greenleaf suggests, a

fine ship designer; in contrast to a capability that would allow him to make detailed sketches, his proclivity to play the saxophone or drums cannot aid his foreseeable career in his father's company. Aside from his smile and charisma, the only other sympathy-eliciting quality that the film's character possesses is the hint of the "secret pain" that Tom discovers while studying his handwriting sample. When he confronts Dickie about this, the man responds, "It must be a deep secret, cause I don't know about it" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 23). This deep secret refers to the mistrust and prejudice that his father extends to Dickie. "So many of the things which happen in the film," Minghella explains, "come about because of an essential suspicion and lack of trust that Herbert has for his own son" (Argent 68). Dickie, the narrative implies, has been shaped by his father's aloofness.

## 7.2 A Tragic Hero or a Victim

Minghella envisioned the story to be about Tom's search for a family, which instead ends in his appropriation of a family name. However, many critics saw the narrative as constituting not an archetypical tragedy but rather a tale of social injustice. The filmmaker's biblical references—to Cain and Abel and the Prodigal Son—though stated explicitly in his screenplay, are only implied in the film. On-screen, they remain overshadowed by sex and murder. This might have caused the rift in spectators' interpretations of the protagonist; some see a vulnerable youth searching for love; others—an ambitious sociopath carefully calculating his interactions.

Matt Damon's depiction of Tom Ripley serves well to illustrate the point. His self-reflexive role required a gradation between his performance and his character's performances. It is rarely clear whether Damon's Tom is being honest or disingenuous. Still, the screenplay indicates that until his first murder, he remains transparent to both Dickie and Marge. After Tom befriends Dickie, their short-lived camaraderie is interrupted by Freddie Miles's entry. The estranged Tom sits alone on Dickie's sailboat as his friends frolic in the azure waters. Marge, recognizing his distress, approaches. In the screenplay, Minghella specifies in the action description that she is

“conscious of [Tom’s] isolation” (*Shooting Draft* 29). The scene is meant to inform spectators that Tom feels jealous and betrayed. However, those primed to Tom’s manipulateness, either by the prior reading of the novel or a viewing of the film’s trailer,<sup>73</sup> will assume him to be either consciously eliciting Marge’s compassion or veiling anger. From the screenwriter’s perspective, such spectator-preconditioning falls into the category of outstanding variables (see [1.5.a](#)). Regardless of the filmed scene’s interpretation, in the screenplay, it is evident that Minghella intended for Tom to share in a moment of sincerity or connection. In contrast, the novel’s character remains isolated by his “incapacity for mutually intimate relationships.”

The above-described exchange is not an exception. Minghella invents a string of scenes in which Tom solicits affection or at least acknowledgment. These constitute his journey to finding a family. Not coincidentally, such revisions introduce narrative shifts which allow Minghella to solicit spectators’ sympathy. Tom’s overt vulnerability and seeming desire for connection bolster the potential for sympathetic identification.

Many critics and theorists who analyze Minghella’s alteration of Tom’s character focus on the changes introduced in the character’s sexuality (Bronski 44; Williams 49; Schwanbeck 357). For example, Edward Shannon argues that where Highsmith’s Tom is “apparently asexual,” Minghella introduces scenes that attest to his attraction to Dickie (22). If this choice is interpreted as an attempt to fortify the story with a critique of social injustice, it is understandable that researchers might argue that “Minghella’s Tom is first and foremost a gay man besieged by a hostile, straight world” (Shannon 18).

Wishing to escape criticism of having tied homosexuality with sociopathy, Minghella reinvents the character of Peter-Smith Kingsley to serve as Tom’s centered and rooted gay counterbalance. “It seemed important to separate out sexuality from Ripley’s own disturbance,” Minghella explains. “He’s not disturbed because of his sexuality. He’s disturbed, and therefore is disturbed about his sexuality” (Argent 67). The unheeded effect of this amendment is that it

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<sup>73</sup> Most versions of the trailer feature the following scenes: Tom spying through binoculars; Tom befriending Dickie; Tom performing chilling impressions; Tom handling potential murder weapons; Tom smiling sinisterly; Marge asking, “why is it when men play, they always play at killing each other?”

renders Shannon's interpretation inapplicable. In contrast to Tom, Peter is highly regarded by his expatriate peers and is free to live as he desires. The post-war circumstances in Italy make it possible for him to berate a high-ranking justice official about Leonardo and Michelangelo's sexuality (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 66). His implied superiority results from the fact that he is rich and British. Consequently, the film does not lend itself to being read primarily as a criticism of the 1950s attitudes towards sexuality, nor can it be understood as scrutiny of Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance; the expatriate community disdains Tom despite his cultural background. What is left is the protagonist's notion that it is "better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody" (84). The only reason, therefore, that Tom cannot live like Peter, Dickie or Marge is because he is poor. Put simply, the rewriting of Peter's character potentially reduces the story's social injustice aspect to a banal class struggle, one that prompted critic Michael Bronski to declare that Ripley "looks and feels great, but falls short of anything resembling art, of provoking us the way that great art can and does" (42). However, if the complexities of Tom's character are kept proportionate, the film's relationships lend themselves to a deeper psychological exploration.

### **7.3 Goal Orientation and Desire**

While Edward Shannon's reading of Minghella's Tom is reductive, his observations about Highsmith's protagonist are valid. In the novel, evidence of Tom's yearnings is circumstantial. Highsmith's Tom harbors an apparent desire for Dickie's attention. But as romantic themes see no significant development in the novel, the unacknowledged attraction gives Tom an extra layer of complexity. More importantly, Highsmith contrives such ambiguities to confuse her readers. Her strategy is to withhold the information that Tom's primary desire is for the status that Dickie's identity entails. Significantly, Tom is also unaware of this fact.

Highsmith produces several accounts to trifle with readers' expectations. Tom, for example, resents the fact that Dickie is having an affair with Marge. To him Dickie functions as an aesthetic concept which, in his mind, the "unsophisticated-looking" Marge disrupts (*Talented* 15).

Literary scholar Susan Massey notes that “Highsmith claimed that there was much of her own personality in Ripley’s representation” (168). Much like Tom views Dickie as an aesthetic concept, one that he prefers to be untainted by the likes of Marge, it is conceivable that Highsmith held analogous ideas about Tom. This might be the reason she chose to keep her “favorite character” unencumbered by relationships with his fictional inferiors. Furthermore, Highsmith’s narrator informs readers of Tom’s enjoyment of drag skit performances (29); they are told that he remembers keeping chaste company with “queer” men in New York and that Tom recalls that one of his party routines included declaring to the gathered that he was giving both sexes up since he could not make up his mind as to which he preferred (62). The latter reference is likely the passage that led Shannon to assert Tom’s asexuality.

As the plot of the *Ripley* novel unfolds, ambiguities as to Tom’s ultimate goal orientation persist. After having an unresolvable (in Tom’s mind) argument with Dickie, the men decide to partake in a final farewell trip. As Dickie naps on the train, Tom observes him. Highsmith uses an inside view to relate the “crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration [that] swelled in him, hampering his breathing” (76). She invites her readers to interpret Tom’s state as an eruptive passion. Highsmith informs them in the subsequent sentence that these emotions amount to Tom’s wanting to “kill Dickie” to steal his identity. This realization seems to have a transformative effect on Tom. “The danger of it,” the narrator relates, “even the inevitable temporariness of it which he vaguely realized, only made him more enthusiastic” (77).

Highsmith frequently reasserts Tom’s unwitting search for a new identity. During the trip to Europe, he buys an English cap and delights in its masquerade potential (25-26). Being an enthusiast of impersonations, Tom observes that “the main thing about impersonation ... was to maintain the mood and temperament of the person one was impersonating and to assume the facial expressions that went with them” (102). Highsmith produces several more foreshadowings of Tom’s transformation when he revels at Dickie’s clothes and jewelry (59).

The confusion concerning Tom’s identity overarches Highsmith’s empathy elicitation strategy. On the ground level, she keeps her readers submerged in Tom’s experience using

empathy facilitators such as the mentioned projections. On the dramatic level, she ensures that the readers' confusion is aligned with the protagonist's. The resulting engagement is both affective and epistemic. As mentioned, Tom remains at emotional extremes throughout the novel. His moods pivot when he feels his future is either secure or jeopardized. In such moments, Highsmith utilizes free indirect speech to promote readers' alignment with Tom (see [4.3.a](#)). As the story develops, Tom grows more aware of the temporariness of his living under Dickie's identity. He knows he will have to move on, but Highsmith withholds the realization of his true identity until the novel's conclusion.

The author makes her character's inclination clear in the final act. Once Tom is settled into Dickie's identity, he passes his evenings looking at his trophies, realizing that "he loved possessions" (193). Any trace of Dickie's stolen identity is eclipsed by the beautiful items. It is they that define the protagonist. Having experienced his turbulent journey of self-discovery, the confused readers arrive at Tom's realization—he is a consumer with an undeniable aesthetic sensitivity.

#### **7.4 Sympathy and Antipathy**

In the film, Dickie, whom Tom has murdered, is nominated as the chief suspect of Freddie Miles's murder. His father, Herbert Greenleaf, becomes involved in the investigation. Upon arrival in Europe, he says to Tom, "You know, people always say you can't choose your parents, but you can't choose your children" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 73). Minghella comments on Greenleaf's dialogue, noting that "there's such a disappointment in his own son, and you feel that is the key to Ripley's escape: Herbert Greenleaf thinks the only person who is capable of behaving badly in the world is his own child" (Argent 68). Unlike in the novel, Herbert Greenleaf is at the heart of Tom's search for a family. Significantly, it is he who sits at the top of the film's most significant love triangle that is central to Minghella's engagement strategy. The absent

father figure that Greenleaf represents is the presumed root of all tragedy that unfolds in the adaptation.

Shannon claims that Minghella's Tom desires to have a relationship with either Dickie or Peter. Again, this detail is significant to the engagement strategy. Either Tom is capable of caring for others, which, as the mentioned studies show, is a trait that promotes the audience's empathic engagement, or Tom is Highsmith's self-serving sociopath. If the latter were true, Minghella would need to embrace a more innovative empathy-facilitation approach.

Wanting to convey Tom's attraction to Dickie, Minghella introduces a bath scene into the film. The two men play chess while Dickie soaks in the tub. After he rejects Tom's subtle offer of "sharing a bath," he "holds his look momentarily before flicking [Tom] with his towel" (*Shooting Draft* 22). While the sensual undertones are clear, the scene does not function as Tom's virtue display. The protagonist's enamorment, which otherwise could work as a sympathy-eliciting quality, is contestable as many spectators might interpret Tom's seduction attempt as a display of his manipulateness.

Conceivably, such a scene might promote a negative moral judgment of Tom. Aware of this, Minghella reinvents Peter. The character supports Tom during the murder investigation until he falls prey to Tom's murderous tendencies. After Tom kills Dickie, he espouses the audience's antipathy, which could be mitigated amongst others by a virtue display. That considered, Minghella explains the symbolism of Tom's murders in the following manner: "Ripley [is] killing lust or desire or passion with Dickie and then killing the possibility of love with Peter" ("Italy" 76). In other words, the filmmaker assumes that the latter interaction held the potential for a mutually intimate relationship. Such a development would have amounted to a significant virtue display, one that could have promoted a moral reevaluation of Tom.

A positive assessment of Tom matters to Minghella's strategy as it is a prerequisite to the sympathetic identification which the filmmaker aims to elicit. Spectators pass moral judgments independently of the empathic engagement process; however, to identify sympathetically, they first need to empathize with a given character. In other words, empathic engagement allows for a

positive moral judgment of a character to establish a sympathetic identification (see: Greg Smith, *Film Structure* 98; Plantinga 100). On the other hand, Highsmith's strategy relies primarily on facilitating empathy, which may be promoted despite a negative moral judgment. A reader may be empathically engaged by Tom despite disliking him. For this reason, readers' antipathy towards the protagonist is not such a grave concern for the novelist.

Minghella's revision of Dickie's murder manifests the sympathy elicitation efforts essential to his method. In the novel, Dickie's death results from Tom's cool calculations (see [5.2](#) Analysis of chapter 12). The killing occurs as the two men set out to sail around San Remo. Though Minghella retains "the oar" as the weapon of choice, Tom does not contemplate the murder, nor does he distract his opponent before attacking him. Instead, he confronts Dickie about his feelings. He is ridiculed and threatened, and thus justified, before he "shocks himself" by striking.

The ensuing murder plays out more like an act of self-defense (see [4.2](#)). Minghella's spectators have sufficient motivation to suspend their moral judgment. The filmmaker describes the murder's culmination in the screenplay as Tom "lying by Dickie at the bottom of the boat, in the embrace he's always wanted" (38). The image that plays on-screen shows Tom folded in a fetal position. He seems childlike next to Dickie's outstretched body. It is as if he is embracing an older brother. This is a compelling coda to a murder that escalated from Dickie's threats to beat some sense into Tom, who assumes the stance of an abused boy, pleading for Dickie to "stop it." Minghella explains that "it's quite possible in the way that I've staged and written the sequence on the boat that Dickie could have ended up murdering Ripley" (Argent 66).

The filmmaker goes further to mitigate the audience's feeling of antipathy. He encourages spectators to pass a negative moral judgment on Dickie to justify his murder. Dickie's mistreatment of Silvana (Minghella's invented character) makes Tom's questionable talents for "forging signatures, telling lies, impersonating practically anybody" trivial by contrast (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 12).

Despite Minghella's use of empathy facilitators such as virtue displays, victimization scenes, and moral disengagement cues, many spectators fail to reevaluate significantly their negative moral judgment of Tom. Spectators' sense of antipathy is never overridden after Dickie's murder (see figure 4). Tom's relationships with all the characters are self-serving. As the film's Freddie Miles says to him, "you live in Italy, sleep in Dickie's house, eat Dickie's food, wear his clothes, and his father picks up the tab" (*Shooting Draft* 29). There is a single instance of Tom offering his help to Dickie, volunteering to blame Silvana's pregnancy and death. His proposal is duplicitous as it leaves Dickie "somehow in thrall to Ripley" (32). This leads me to believe that Minghella's engagement strategy would have been more successful had he supplemented it with at least one prominent virtue display after Tom's murder of Dickie. Arguably, Minghella demonstrates Tom's remorse and love of beauty in the film's opera scene; however, the mitigation of a murder would have likely required an act of selflessness or sacrifice for the benefit of another character (see Iglesias 72). Although Tom seems to befriend Peter in the latter part of the film, the relationship is again one-sided (see [3.1.b](#)).

### **7.5 Cain and Abel**

As Tom's interactions are self-serving, he demonstrates the same incapacity to form intimate relationships as his literary counterpart. Interestingly, Herbert Greenleaf is the only character whom Tom initially does not want to disappoint (see [2.1.b](#)). Minghella's film commences with the song "Lullaby for Cain," which proposes an analogy for Tom and Dickie's relationship. The filmmaker intersperses his narrative with suggestions of their brotherhood. Even Tom's bath scene innuendo, "we never shared a bath," references a sibling's childhood tub-sharing. In their final confrontation, Tom says to Dickie, "you're the brother I never had. I'm the brother you never had" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 33). In effect, Tom's post-homicidal embrace of Dickie's body evokes Cain's shame of killing Abel.

As the narrative unfolds, spectators learn that the implied sibling rivalry was for Herbert Greenleaf's attention. As Tom composes Dickie's suicide letter, he makes Dickie admit to Tom that "in all kinds of ways you're much more like the son my father always wanted" (3). This acknowledgment, echoed in Greenleaf's later dialogue, is an ingenious inside view that informs the spectators of Tom's ultimate desire—he wants to have a family. Tom states his resentment of Dickie, whom he blames for his failure; in his exchange with Marge that promptly follows Dickie's murder Tom says, "one day we're all one family, the next day [Dickie] wants to be alone" (41).

Herbert Greenleaf functions as the only father figure in the film. To Dickie, Herbert exists essentially as a source of an "allowance" and a constant reminder of his inadequacy. "That's my son's talent," Herbert tells Tom, "spending his allowance" (12). In the final act, we learn from MacCarron, Greenleaf's detective, that his prejudice towards Dickie was not unsubstantiated. "At Princeton Dickie Greenleaf half-killed a boy," MacCarron tells Tom, "at a party. Over some girl. He kicked the kid several times in the head. Put him in the hospital" (76).

Minghella sees a parallel between the shortcomings of the would-be brothers. "Dickie's actions are almost as reprehensible and careless as Ripley's are," he argues (Argent 66). In this context, Mr. Greenleaf's insinuation that he would have preferred to have Tom as his son reveals the poor state of his fatherhood. After Dickie's presumed suicide, Mr. Greenleaf decides to transfer "a good part" of Dickie's income from his trust into Tom's name" (Minghella, *Shooting Draft* 80). The symbolism of this action is clear: the man passes the shreds of his fatherhood onto Tom. Thus, the protagonist seems to find the family he sought. The irony is that Mr. Greenleaf will remain the absent father as he had been for Dickie. The two "brothers'" fatherlessness is the implied root of their self-centeredness, anger, and their resulting proclivity for violence. In other words, both men are essentially the same estranged, tragic character—this idea is at the core of Minghella's story.

## 7.6 With a Little Sex

Highsmith's engagement strategy entails that Tom is not a victim but a perpetrator. Unlike Minghella, she does not attempt to appeal to our sympathies by relying on Tom's victimization, virtue displays, or moral disengagement cues. Instead, she allows the readers' and Tom's realizations to occur concurrently.

Minghella's changes introduced into Highsmith's narrative inspire accusations that he "larded the character with a conscience" (Falsetto 97). Such conclusions indicate a narrowly focused interpretation that Minghella's pursuit of sympathetic identification may have induced. Tom's incapacity to form meaningful relationships renders him more akin to Highsmith's sociopath. For this reason, Minghella's narrative of a misguided search for acceptance may have been better served by an empathy-focused strategy. That said, perhaps the recognition of Minghella's biblical allusions provides an interpretative framework more conducive to a broader response.

Critics and scholars' tendency to focus on the sexual elements of Minghella's narrative narrows their analytic scope. As a result, the film's complex protagonist is often reduced to a single characteristic; in readings such as Edward Shannon's, lust eclipses Tom's desire for family and acceptance. This divergence from Minghella's stated objective is relevant as it dictated his choice of an empathic engagement strategy. While the filmmaker's protagonist seeks "love in all the wrong places," the story's tragedy ultimately unfolds because of the father's withdrawal from his prodigal son (Argent 68). This idea is grounded in the film's narrative and does not require the knowledge of the auteur's intent to be understood.

Those spectators' interpretations that stray from Minghella's intent are outstanding variables outside his control. If sex obscures Ripley's search for a family, the resulting narrative experience might frustrate Minghella's sympathy elicitation efforts. That said, the filmmaker's gravitation towards an industry-tested formula might be to blame. The notion brings to mind the opening scene from Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), in which a Hollywood

director explains his vision to his producers: “I wanted to make you something outstanding, something you could be proud of, something that would realize the potentialities of the film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is.” The studio executives are unimpressed. “With a little sex in it?,” one of them asks. “With a little sex in it,” the director reluctantly agrees.

## General Conclusions

I base my understanding of empathic engagement on the research of film studies scholars Berys Gaut and Amy Coplan. Firstly, Gaut maintains that narrative identification is “aspectual” in that the audience’s alignment with a character may be based on four aspects: (1) the affective, (2) perceptual, (3) motivational, and (4) epistemic (Coplan “Empathy” 137-52). This is an essential distinction in contrast to the common understanding of empathy as “feeling with others,” limiting the phenomenon to the affective aspect (see: Keen 83; Batson 15). Therefore, empathic engagement entails that the audience imaginatively experiences psychological states congruously to a character while maintaining a clear self/other differentiation. Coplan argues that film spectators remain aware of the boundaries between them and the character (“Empathic Engagement” 147–49). More importantly, they are not limited to the states of the perceived characters, as this would suggest that empathy and sympathy are mutually exclusive. Therefore, empathizing with a character will involve at least one of the following: (1) having one’s feelings align with what the character feels; (2) having one’s perception align with what the character sees; (3) having one’s wants to align with what a character wants; and (4) having one’s beliefs align with a character believes.

Sympathy (empathic concern), in contrast to the affective aspect of empathy, is audience-specific. While affective empathy involves imaging what it would be like to feel what a character feels, narrative sympathy refers to feelings of care and concern for a character’s wellbeing. This difference is often reduced to “feeling with” versus “feeling for” a character. In other words, sympathy is a character-oriented affective state that the character presumably does not experience (Batson 11). I detail this distinction between sympathy and the affective aspect of empathy because it delineates the significant difference in Highsmith’s and Minghella’s strategies. In contrast to the novelist, the filmmaker facilitates spectators’ imaginative experience of congruent psychological states and attempts to elicit pity for his protagonist.

In the case of sympathetic identification, the audience will both sympathize and empathize with a character. For instance, if a protagonist, such as Tom, is publicly berated for their low economic status by a philandering socialite, the audience might be angered by the assailant and become resentful of their privilege. Conceivably, the protagonist experiences similar states. Thus the audience aligns themselves with the character both affectively (they and the character are angry with the socialite) and epistemically (both consider the socialite unjustifiably arrogant). However, they may additionally pity the character. As a result, they are concurrently empathizing and sympathizing with the character. This sort of empathy and sympathy-based engagement is consistent with what Noel Carroll describes as a sympathetic bond (“On Some Affective” 177-79).

Returning to the previously described scenario, the audience is empathically engaged if the exchange causes them to feel hostility towards the philandering socialite without arousing pity for the protagonist. However, they have not formed a sympathetic bond with the main character (this is most often Highsmith’s mode). What impedes their feeling of sympathy is a lack of a “positive moral judgment.” Affective disposition theory’s model for affective responding during a suspenseful drama maintains that spectators pass a moral judgment on characters for the duration of a narrative. If a character continuously displays positive attributes and behavior, such as helping others, the audience will most likely assess that character positively. According to Murray Smith’s comparable model, the “structure of sympathy,” such a judgment will lead to a “positive allegiance” or a sympathetic identification (*Engaging Characters* 83-86). However, if the character displays negative qualities or conduct, such as killing a friend, the resulting negative moral judgment might lead the audience to form an antipathetic disposition. To counter this, storytellers can rely on moral disengagement cues. This device, which amongst others includes “dialog, innuendo, allusions,” intends to influence the audience’s moral evaluation of characters (Shafer and Raney 1038). Therefore, a moral disengagement cue will most often be a scene or a narrative event that justifies destructive behavior.

Empathic engagement strategies rely on the storyteller’s application of what I call “empathy facilitators.” These are various textual/visual cues and techniques that promote

empathic engagement in the affective, motivational, perceptual, and epistemic aspects. These devices are rarely effective when employed independently. Instead, they need to be implemented as elements of a larger, sustained strategy targeting a specific character. The facilitators include a wide range of theoretical notions such as Wayne Booth's "inside views" (163), Edward Branigan's "projections"(132-33), Greg Smith's "emotion markers" (*Film Structure* 45), Karl Iglesias's "victimization scenes" and virtue displays (70-73), Margrethe Bruun Vaage's "POV structures" (159), and others.

Many of the assumptions made by film industry experts, such as Robert McKee or Frantisek Daniel, are rarely contradicted by empirical findings. The likely reason for this may be that much of what constitutes the recognizable Hollywood empathic engagement strategy has been informed by private research over the span of many years. I refer to the procedure of test screenings conducted by major Hollywood studios. Finished or nearly finished movies are shown to audiences selected through a "rigorous" recruitment process. Upon a completed viewing, the spectators are asked to answer questionnaires that help the studio executives gauge their response (Marich, 40-41). Minghella relied on a similar process when editing his final version of *Ripley* ("Italy" 73).

Empathy facilitators may simultaneously elicit empathy and sympathy, as in the described victimization scene. For this reason, engagement strategies often produce an interweaving of the two response types. A significant difference between empathy and sympathy is that the former's resonance with the audience is fleeting. Empathic engagement with a character can be established and maintained for only as long as a facilitator promotes it. If, for example, the narrative switches focalizations from a protagonist to a different character, the audience will cease to empathize with

the protagonist.<sup>74</sup> They may, however, continue to sympathize because, in contrast to empathy, sympathetic resonance is sustained until a new moral reevaluation of the character is prompted. The audience will continue to feel pity and concern for a character as long as the character abstains from actions that merit negative moral judgment. Because of this difference, the two types of engagements can be promoted independently, although many empathy facilitators may provoke both empathic and sympathetic responses.

I have argued that empathy and sympathy for characters in fiction and film are symbiotic. Sympathetic identification fosters empathic engagement, and the reverse is true as well. The audience is more likely to sympathize with characters whose situated psychological states they find recognizable. To understand this process, it is essential to properly differentiate between empathy's affective aspect and sympathy. Empathic emotions are those felt congruently with a character; I may feel frustrated by an antagonist, much like the protagonist feels. Sympathy concerns audience-specific emotions (character-oriented pity, fear, and concern) which the character does not experience. Because of this distinction, storytellers may foster empathy towards characters whom the audience finds antipathetic.

Elicited empathy resonates only so long as empathy facilitators support it. A lack of subjective narration will impede empathic engagement. Moreover, as my Highsmith survey study seemed to suggest, a repeated and unvaried reliance on the same type of facilitators will gradually decrease the mechanisms' potential to sustain engagement. By contrast, sympathetic identification, which derives from the empathic engagement process, is more sustainable. This

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<sup>74</sup> As of 2022, I am not aware of any study that would try to determine the possibility for the audience to simultaneously empathize with two characters while experiencing such a narrative. This excludes buddy-film or collective-hero scenarios where two or more characters experience the same narrative situations in a similar manner effectively acting as elements of the same larger character. Likewise, I do not mean a situation in which, for the duration of a narrative fragment A, the audience empathizes with a character A, and afterward, for the duration of fragment B, they empathize with character B. I refer to a circumstance in which empathic bonds form with two characters for the duration of the same story fragment. Though highly implausible, a study verifying this assumption would benefit character engagement studies. Such research would have to monitor respondents' reactions during the course of the narrative's experience so as to avoid complications made by respondents' retrospective reflections.

connection with a character takes hold once the audience has passed a positive moral judgment of that character and lasts until the character's actions prompt a reevaluation of that judgment.

The audience's alignment with a character's motivational, perceptual, and epistemic aspects precedes a sustained affective engagement. If I do not recognize the psychological states that motivate a character's affective response, I will not feel congruently with that character. Despite this interdependence, efforts to classify the described empathy facilitators according to their effectiveness would be aimless. Independent of each other, these cues may be considered basic units of storytelling grammar with limited empathy eliciting potential. When coordinated, they can form complex systems that promote sustained empathic engagement. That said, it is possible to discern the common denominator of both Highsmith's and Minghella's empathic engagement strategies. Arguably, it may be the most crucial component of their endeavors.

We may find a glimpse of this shared sensibility in Highsmith's remark on the process of writing *Ripley*: "no book was easier for me to write, and I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it, and I was merely typing" (*Plotting* 75). Some aspects of the narrative, such as Tom's affinity for plotting and storytelling, evidence the author's identification with her protagonist. In his 2021 biography of the writer, literary theorist Richard Bradford notes that Highsmith "would talk about [Ripley] like he was a person who was very close to her" (chapter 10). Although he argues that the protagonist bears little resemblance to Highsmith, Bradford believes the novel to be a "most fascinating exercise in autobiographical fiction ever produced" (chapter 7). Biographer and playwright Joan Schenkar notes a similar connection between Highsmith and her favorite "criminal hero." Accordingly, Ripley is a distillation of Highsmith's comic book creations, yet endowed "with both her weakest traits (paralyzing self-consciousness and hero-worship) and her wildest dreams (murder and money)" (chapter 11).

Highsmith identified with her protagonist, and the same can be argued for Minghella's attitude towards his adapted version of Ripley. While writing the script, he looked for common traits and experiences that would connect him to his main character. "In some ways," Minghella admits in an interview, "Ripley is just an extreme version of everybody, as is often the case in

fiction. Fiction gives back to you a distorted version of yourself, but recognition is the key element. So I suppose I tried to borrow from within myself what seemed to correlate with Ripley” (Argent 65). Unable to identify with Ripley’s murderous tendencies, Minghella stated that he, nevertheless, attempted to empathize with the character’s dark side:

The questions I would ask myself when I was working on that film were things like, ‘What would it take for somebody to extinguish the life of somebody else?’ ‘What really does it require to feel that that’s a solution?’ ‘How would I get to a place where I could kill somebody?’ The film is incredibly personal for me. (Falsetto 97)

Both Highsmith and Minghella express an investment in their protagonists. Such a disposition is highly conducive to creating a successful empathic engagement strategy. If a storyteller understands, sympathizes with, and relates to their protagonist, they will recognize that character’s situated psychological states. In such a case, all that is left to do is to communicate the character’s perspective, beliefs, motivation, and affects to the audience. “A writer who identified with their protagonist,” Paul Gulino points out, “might portray them through actions in a way that privileges their qualities that might garner an emotional connection with a broad swath of the viewing or reading public without being aware of how, precisely, that emotional connection has been achieved” (*Empathy*). An experienced writer, therefore, may build empathic engagement for a character without deliberating on the type of empathy facilitators they employ.

On the other hand, “an unconscious emotional connection can also lead a writer to create a character that most people find repulsive, creating a bewildering situation for the writer” (Gulino, *Empathy*). Dramatist Samson Raphaelson cites an example of such a scenario. Reportedly, his friend, a playwright “who worshiped Benjamin Franklin,” attempted to write a drama about the statesman. His affinity with the historical figure led him to create an infallible character who, as Raphaelson argued, was “a dull man—in fact, a nonexistent man.” In other words, while a

storytellers' emotional investment in characters will usually be conducive to creating engagement, their immediacy, if "blinding," may produce the opposite of the desired effect ("February 24").

Wayne Booth notes the danger of storytelling techniques as instruments for engagement elicitation. Such a perspective may reduce the "inexplicable processes of the creative imagination to the crafty calculations of commercial entertainers." However, determining whether the storyteller used an empathy elicitation strategy consciously or not is immaterial if one acknowledges that even the "most unconscious and Dionysian of writers succeeds only if he makes us join in the dance" (xiv). I mention this to acknowledge that, in my analysis of both works, I do not try to conjecture which of the storytellers' choices were conscious or calculated.

In my two survey studies that monitored audiences' reactions to Highsmith's *Ripley* and Minghella's adaptation, I found that the novel serves as an example of a narrative that builds engagement primarily on empathy. Most respondents of the Highsmith study reported feeling antipathy towards Tom from the story's onset. Concurrently, they remained engaged by his character. The reactions of the Minghella study respondents likewise demonstrate a divergence in the two engagements. After Dickie's murder, Minghella manages to sustain empathy for Tom despite the spectators' reported antipathy. As a result, many respondents of both studies reported feelings of cognitive dissonance. Their dislike of Tom seemed to contradict their reluctance to see his immediate apprehension by law. Both studies' respondents found the narratives enjoyable despite their feelings of said dissonance. Such findings stand in contrast to the assumptions made by, amongst others, Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney. It seems that cognitive dissonance does not impede the audience's enjoyment of a story.

Before both studies, I assumed that reported motivational alignment would be a good indicator of empathic engagement. The results have disproved this hypothesis. Those respondents who reported a high understanding of Tom and his motivations often declared hope to see the protagonist's goal pursuit foiled. The factor that remained consistent with such a declaration was a reported antipathy towards Tom. However, those respondents who reported a high

understanding of Tom and expressed hope to see him successfully complete his goal pursuit also declared feelings of sympathy for the protagonist. In other words, the motivational aspect of empathy proved to be a good indicator of sympathetic identification rather than empathic engagement. This means that respondents who disliked Tom managed to align themselves with him in any of the empathy aspects except for the motivational one. The alignment of the motivational aspect may require that the audience feels sympathy for the character. More comprehensive studies would be necessary to verify such findings; however, by wanting a character to fulfill their desire, the audience demonstrates sympathetic identification with that character.

Both studies were designed to provide an overview of audiences' reactions to Highsmith's and Minghella's narratives over the course of the experience. Because of this, the data is telling of the overall performance of the engagement strategies rather than the effectiveness of the individual empathy facilitators that constitute them. Such an insight would require additional research which would focus on a given facilitator's application across different narratives. One such study could determine the effectiveness of facilitators that employ symbolism to externalize characters' inner states. In Minghella's adaptation, for example, the filmmaker consistently presents spectators with reflections of the protagonist, which appear on surfaces of fractured mirrors. The images manifest the protagonist's inner turmoil, and though it seems that they may aid in recognizing Tom's state, it is debatable whether they facilitate alignment.

As the mentioned study demonstrates, Highsmith successfully elicits empathy for her antipathetic protagonist by employing a highly subjective narration. An uninterrupted spatiotemporal attachment anchors her strategy to Tom. The fact that he acts as the narrative's sole focalizer is evident by her use of empathy facilitators. Exceptionally consistent is Highsmith's application of projections and inside views. Tom's attitudes towards them taint the character and events presented in the story. When relating the protagonist's significant states and realizations, the writer uses free indirect speech, which gives her authority. Finally, Highsmith elucidates Tom's immediate goal orientation by explicitly stating his desires. Contrarily, she uses

misdirection to obscure the protagonist's ultimate goal orientation. Because readers share in the confusion of Tom's identity search, this procedure promotes an epistemic alignment that arches over most of the narrative. Through these means, Highsmith can sustain empathic engagement with Tom even though most readers find him antipathetic. The novelist pays little attention to sympathy elicitation. Her efforts at espousing pity and concern amount to a few significant victimizations that manifest themselves through scenes and characterization. However, they fail to mitigate the negative moral judgments prompted by Tom's actions and thoughts.

In contrast to Highsmith, Minghella endeavors to elicit sympathetic identification with Tom. Such a strategy requires both empathic and sympathetic engagement. While he initially succeeds in maintaining both forms of engagement, Tom's murder of Dickie prompts the spectators' irrevocable negative moral judgment. From this point, Minghella's spectators' engagement with Tom is comparable to Highsmith's readers. Tom is judged to be antipathetic but engaging. This occurs despite Minghella's elicitation efforts, which he continues to employ until the narrative's conclusion.

In comparison to Highsmith, Minghella employs a considerably more nonsubjective narration. Still, he relies on a similar spatiotemporal attachment to his protagonist. Minghella's use of POV structures consistently marks Tom as the story's sole focalizer (with a few exceptions). The filmmaker successfully uses victimization and virtue displays to promote initial sympathetic identification with his protagonist. He orchestrates the editing pace to mirror Tom's time perception, most notably during Dickie's murder scene. He punctuates the protagonists' qualms of conscience employing two notable emotion markers and scenes of empathy. As my study has suggested, Minghella's inventive use of a voice-over as an inside view prompts a significant moral reevaluation of Tom.

Similarly to Highsmith, Minghella maintains a clear, immediate goal orientation for his protagonist. Unlike the novelist, he obscures Tom's ultimate goal orientation, a quest for a family, with the character's romantic endeavors. These, functioning as virtue displays, fail to promote a moral reevaluation of Tom, one that would rekindle a sympathetic identification. The

protagonist's relationships with Meredith and Peter fail to demonstrate Tom's capacity for mutually intimate relationships, as he remains unwilling to make sacrifices for their benefit. Consequently, respondents continue to consider him unsympathetic, and their engagement in the latter half of the narrative is based predominately on empathic engagement.

Considering both works, it might be tempting to judge which of the two engagement strategies has proved more successful. Assuming that the storytellers intended to encourage narrative enjoyment, the discussion would need to consider several factors, including moral assessment, sympathy, and character identification. Success, however, could be defined as the narrative's potential for "influencing social attitudes." Though recent research demonstrates the importance of empathy and sympathy in achieving such ends, it does not provide any evidence in favor of either of the phenomena (see: Vorderer, Cupchik, and Oatley; Małecki et al.). Thus it is challenging to defend either encouragement of empathy or elicitation of sympathy based on a single theorization such as this study. However, considering the discrepancy between Minghella's stated intentions and the actual effect achieved in his film, it is clear that both storytellers and researchers would benefit from empirical findings that could help assess the general effectiveness of various audience engagement strategies.

## Summary

This study aims to describe, categorize, and assess the effectiveness of what I call “empathy facilitators.” By this term, I refer to various textual/visual cues and techniques that promote empathic and occasionally sympathetic engagements with literary and film characters. I source the facilitators from multiple literary, film, and storytelling theorists’ works as well as creative writing manuals written by novelists and screenwriters. I verify theoretical assumptions with empirical data from published research and my own two limited survey studies. The latter monitors audiences’ immediate reactions to engagement strategies in Patricia Highsmith’s novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and Anthony Minghella’s adaptation by that same title (1999). I often supplement facilitator descriptions with samplings from outside of the primary sources citing the work of such storytellers as Marcel Proust, Akira Kurosawa, or Steven Spielberg.

Chapter One outlines the methodological framework used to categorize empathy facilitators into four aspectual categories: motivational, affective, perceptual, and epistemic. It elucidates the terminological tangling of notions such as empathy, sympathy, and sympathetic identification. Chapter Two describes procedures that promote a motivational alignment. The discussed facilitators include Carl Plantinga’s character goal orientation and pursuit (2009). Chapter Three describes the facilitators that appeal to the affective aspect of empathy. These include Karl Iglesias’s virtue displays and victimizations (2005) considered from the perspective of Frantisek Daniel’s notion of dramatic subjectivity and objectivity (1993). Additionally, I describe Margrethe Bruun Vaage’s scenes of empathy (2010) and Greg Smith’s emotion markers (2003) as affective facilitators specific to the medium of film.

Chapter Four includes descriptions of perceptual and epistemic empathy facilitators which promote alignment with a character’s visual and cognitive perspectives. I detail what I call “character’s time perception,” a facilitator that aids the audience’s experience of narrative time from the perspective of a character. Next, I discuss chronology manipulation, such as flashbacks,

flash-forwards, and various recalibrations of narrative timelines. In turn, Wayne Booth's notion of "inside views" (1961) refers to all forms of narration that allow the audience subjective access to a character. Those include such techniques as free indirect speech or narrational implicature in literature or projections in film.

In Chapters Five and Six, I analyze Patricia Highsmith's and Anthony Minghella's engagement strategies. Data collected from two survey studies that map audiences' responses to the *Ripley* novel and adaptation serve as a reference frame. I find that aside from the consistent use of free indirect speech and projections, Highsmith builds an overarching epistemic and perceptual alignment by allowing her readers to partake in Tom's journey of self-discovery. Minghella's strategy primarily involves the elicitation of sympathetic identification with the protagonist.

In Chapter Seven, I carry out a comparative analysis of Highsmith's and Minghella's strategies to argue that, where Highsmith relies on a highly subjective form of narration to maintain her readers' alignment with Tom, Minghella endeavors to elicit sympathy for his protagonist. He employs a more nonsubjective narration, relying on victimizations and virtue displays to promote initial sympathetic identification. I argue that he obscures Tom's ultimate goal orientation, a quest for family, with the character's romantic endeavors. This inhibits spectators' alignment in the motivational aspect.

## Streszczenie

Niniejsza dysertacja opisuje, kategoryzuje i ocenia skuteczność „prowokatorów empatii”, czyli narzędzi literackich i filmowych stosowanych do budowania więzi z postaciami. Owe techniki zostały zaczerpnięte z prac teoretycznych oraz podręczników powieściopisarskich i scenopisarskich. Poddane zostają one weryfikacji na podstawie danych pozyskanych z dwóch badań ankietowych.

Ocena skuteczności prowokatorów empatii wymagała, by rozpatrzyć je w ramach konkretnych strategii. Dlatego na podstawie zebranych danych podjęta została próba utworzenia zarysów więzi odbiorców z protagonistami powieści Patricii Highsmith „Utalentowany pan Ripley” (1955) oraz jej adaptacji autorstwa Anthony’ego Minghelli (1999). Opisy poszczególnych prowokatorów są dodatkowo opatrzone przykładami z twórczości między innymi Marcela Prousta, Akiry Kurosawy czy Stevena Spielberga.

Rozdział pierwszy porządkuje prowokatory empatii wedle czterech aspektów: motywacyjnego, afektywnego, percepcyjnego i epistemicznego, objaśniając splot terminologiczny pojęć takich jak empatia, sympatia oraz identyfikacja z postacią. Rozdział drugi opisuje prowokatory stosowane do budowania więzi w aspekcie motywacyjnym. Przedstawia między innymi techniki takie jak „ukierunkowanie na cel” Carla Plantingi. Rozdział trzeci dotyczy się prowokatorów budujących więź afektywną. Należą do nich schematy Karla Iglesiasa nazywane „demonstracją cnoty” i „niezasłużonym nieszczęściem”, które są rozpatrywane z perspektywy pojęcia dramatu podmiotowego i obiektywnego Franciszka Daniela. Ponadto opisuje on zabiegi filmowe nazywane „scenami empatii” przez Margrethe Bruun Vaage oraz „znacznikami przeżycia” przez Grega Smitha.

Rozdział czwarty opisuje prowokatory aspektów percepcyjnego i epistemicznego. Narzędzia te promują dopasowanie się odbiorcy do poznawczej perspektywy postaci. Zaliczają się do nich „symulacje percepcji czasu” oraz „manipulacje chronologii”, takie jak retrospekcje, czy „wybiegi w przyszłość”. Idea „wglądu wewnątrz postaci” Wayne’a Booth’a odnosi się do form narracji, które umożliwiają odbiorcy dostęp do myśli i stanów psychicznych postaci. W jej skład wchodzi techniki, takie jak mowa pozornie zależna czy implikatura narracyjna.

Rozdziały piąty i szósty są poświęcone analizom strategii w utworach Patricii Highsmith i Anthony'ego Minghelli. Jako punkt odniesienia służą dane zebrane z wspomnianych badań ankietowych, które tworzą obraz więzi odbiorców z bohaterem ewoluujących w trakcie przebiegu akcji obu utworów. Poza konsekwentnym stosowaniem mowy pozornie zależnej i projekcji oraz prowokatora aspektu epistemicznego Highsmith umożliwia czytelnikom utworzenie więzi w aspektach epistemicznym i percepcyjnym, synchronizując ich poznawczą optykę z perspektywą introspekcyjną protagonisty. Strategia Minghelli sprowadza się do próby zbudowania więzi na podstawie identyfikacji odbiorcy z bohaterem.

W rozdziale siódmym podjęto próbę analizy porównawczej obu strategii. Dla podtrzymania więzi czytelników z bohaterem Highsmith stosuje subiektywną narrację. Jej strategia opiera się przede wszystkim na więzi empatycznej. Minghella z kolei usiłuje wzbudzić sympatię dla swojego protagonisty. Stosuje bardziej obiektywną narrację, opierając się na wspomnianych prowokatorach, „demonstracji cnoty” i „niezasłużonego nieszczęścia”. Zabiegi te skutkują przelożeniem na pierwszy plan romantycznych dążeń bohatera, tym samym przesłaniając odbiorcy jego pragnienie, jakim jest przynależność do rodziny, co utrudnia utworzenie więzi w aspekcie motywacyjnym.

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