

Fall 12-7-2018

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**American Dream Gone Wrong: Patricia Highsmith's Dark Suburban Domesticity**

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A Thesis

Submitted to the English Department and Honors College  
of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
and graduation with University Honors

December 2018

Completed within:

ENG 4340H Topics in Contemporary  
American Literature: Undercurrents of the  
1950s

Dr. Bill Albertini

Fall 2018

Secondary Advisor: Dr. Heath A. Diehl

## Abstract

This thesis explores how Patricia Highsmith's novels, *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water*, critique the American suburbs and show how the American Dream is more of a fantasy, than a realistic goal that people can achieve. Her novels reveal how the American dream becomes unattainable, or one's pursuit of it somehow goes wrong, leaving their lives unfulfilled and them resentful. Furthermore, I argue that the American Dream, itself, goes wrong for some individuals, and the pursuit of this unrealistic Dream can lead individuals to trouble in their personal or professional lives. Ultimately, through my analysis of Highsmith's texts, it becomes clear that the American Dream is more of a hoax that nobody can ever truly attain than a reality. The popularity of both recent domestic noir novels and Highsmith's novels, antecedents to the contemporary domestic noir genre, indicate a growing displeasure with the common narrative that anyone can achieve success through the American Dream, as these novels present an unsettling domestic setting with unmet expectations and lots of failure. These domestic noir novels compel readers to recognize the in-between space situated between the fictitious narratives that life can be either wholly good or wholly bad, and I argue that by presenting the fallacy of the American Dream, these novels show that there is no such thing as an American Dream for all individuals. The American Dream goes wrong, as it forever stays out of reach, remaining nothing but a dream.

## Introduction

For Americans, the American Dream is a Dream that both supersedes and encompasses all their more minor dreams. Although the American Dream “is devoid of clear meanings,” it still spouts forth the possibility of everyone, all Americans, being free and able to develop “health, prosperity, and some measure of happiness in self-development and personal achievement” (Bloom xv). Primary components of the American Dream include a heterosexual marriage, a family, a home in the suburbs, a stable and enjoyable career, happiness, and safety. Clearly, however, happiness appears in different forms for different people, so I contend that instead of there being one American Dream for all, there are different versions of the American Dream, adapted for each individual’s own unique determinants of happiness and achievement. If everyone has a slightly different version of the American Dream, then someone’s version of the Dream may involve inhibiting the Dream of another, as some gain pleasure from another’s pain, whether intentional or not. Furthermore, I perceive the American Dream as something that an individual either achieves or does not; although someone can be on their way to achieving the American Dream, as they check off the various required boxes, someone cannot only complete some of the prerequisites and feel fully satisfied, like they would feel if they truly reached the Dream. Attaining the middle-class American Dream is akin to living in a utopian society; the individual who achieves good health, a sufficient fortune, and happiness has the “ideal” life free from any flaws; or, that is what people like to believe about the American Dream.

To provide additional context for the common narrative of the American Dream, particularly in the 1950s, I am going to illustrate how the American Dream functions in a popular form of entertainment, television sitcoms. These shows portray happy families who have most certainly achieved the American Dream. In the sitcom, *Leave It to Beaver*, the Cleaver family,

the epitome of the idealized “1950s family” including a male breadwinner and female homemaker with two children, lives a happy life, having fulfilled the American Dream. The Cleaver family is financially stable in their two-story suburban home, the father, Ward, has a nice white-collar job, and the mother, June, happily takes control of the domestic affairs, caring for her two sons. Brothers, Wally and the Beaver, frequently get into trouble, as young boys have the tendency to do, but they work to earn forgiveness from their parents whenever they make mistakes, and during each episode, they learn their lesson. This sitcom from the 1950s maintains and reinforces established and stringent heteronormative gender roles. In one episode, Ward explains to Wally why women cook inside and men cook outside:

Well it's sort of traditional, I guess. You know, they say a woman's place is in the home, and I suppose as long as she's in the home, she might as well be in the kitchen... Women do all right when they have all the modern conveniences, but us men are better at this rugged type of outdoor cooking, sort of a throwback to caveman days. (“Beaver’s Guest”)

*Leave It to Beaver* blatantly maintains the heteronormative gender expectations of the period, on which the American Dream depends. This sitcom of an all-American, happy family encapsulates the American Dream, checking off all the required boxes and always ending every episode with a happy resolution.

When people think of the 1950s, they usually think of the common narrative of the happy, nuclear family, dominated by strict gender roles and expectations, as depicted in *Leave It to Beaver*. Life revolves around the home, where the woman resides, until her husband comes home from work every day, hungry for a home-cooked meal. Considering how the times have changed, it is surprising that there are recent novels focused on the home and the woman's place in the home. However, what is not surprising in this more progressive time is that these novels

twist the common narrative and acknowledge the darkness in the ordinary domestic life while rebelling against prescribed gender roles and expectations. These novels fall under the domestic noir genre, a relatively new sub-genre of the crime and thriller genres. According to Julia Crouch, the author who first used the term “domestic noir” in 2013:

In a nutshell, Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (Julia)

Based on this description of the domestic noir genre, imagine watching *Leave It to Beaver* if it fell under this genre and not the sitcom genre. The Cleaver family would not have attained the American Dream, the mother, June, would likely not be content in her position as domestic housewife and mother, and the episodes would not conclude in happy, resolved endings. The domestic noir genre challenges established norms, unsettles readers with the bleak depictions of marriages, family, or other aspects of the American Dream which should contain an element of happiness, and essentially exposes how the American Dream becomes unattainable for individuals under certain circumstances.

As Crouch acknowledges in her blog, many current works included in the domestic noir genre focus on females (Julia). These recent works illustrate how the American Dream is unattainable for women under certain circumstances, namely due to the circumstance of being female in a patriarchal society. Domestic noir novels emphasize the darkness in the domestic sphere, such as the conflicts people hide behind closed doors. Inspired by my personal exploration in the domestic noir genre, I immediately thought that *The Blunderer* (1954) and *Deep Water* (1957), novels written by Patricia Highsmith, a crime fiction author whom Crouch

identifies as one she enjoyed, could reside as early works under the domestic noir genre due to their presentation of the American Dream as something unattainable and the depiction of the domestic sphere as unstable and dangerous (Julia). Supporting my initial assessment of Highsmith's novels, in the chapter, "The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir," Fiona Peters mostly discusses *Deep Water* and the domestic sphere, arguing that Highsmith is one of the literary antecedents of the newly coined genre, "domestic noir" (11).

While Highsmith's novels tend to cast men as the protagonists and central characters, her novels, nonetheless, focus on domestic troubles and the crumbling of the façade of the American Dream. By writing the central characters as males, Highsmith sticks with the norms of her time period, but in many ways, she makes the male characters out to be more effeminate men and less dominant than the traditional male figures. Victoria Hesford looks closely at *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water* to analyze masculinity in the domestic sphere and how domestication is a process of emasculation. I concede that domestication can be a process of emasculation, particularly in several of Highsmith's novels because her male characters frequently do not represent traditional forms of masculinity, so they carry out murders to elevate their own standing as men; however, I struggle to view domestication as a process of emasculation purely because the domestic sphere provides men with a platform to be the head of the family and fulfill their patriarchal American Dream. *Cowboys, Communists, and Queers* provides a reason for my apprehension: "Because they [men] were rarely as efficacious, powerful, or fulfilled in the workplace as they expected to be, they fashioned their families as the sites in which they could exercise their authority and prerogatives as 'breadwinners'" (Savran 8). Men, therefore, gain a sense of power and fulfillment in the domestic sphere, which Hesford addresses, acknowledging "domesticity as the source of masculine power as well as the threat to that power" (219). Through my discussion of

the artifice of the American Dream, I will show how Walter and Vic, the protagonists of *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water*, respectively, lose their power and thus their chance at reaching the American Dream. This loss of power spurs the men to assert their masculinity through murder, grasping at anything in order to bring the Dream back in sight. The alignment of masculinity with murder makes readers perceive masculinity as violent and toxic, a view which current domestic noir novels also maintain. Consequently, these current domestic noir novels, like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, install power in the female characters. Despite the power difference in gender, which I attribute to the changing times, Highsmith's *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water* share some features with recently published novels in the domestic noir genre, making them early predecessors of this popular genre.

Highsmith, herself, proves to be an interesting figure for analysis, as her life influences her novels. Even before she was born in 1921, Highsmith was exposed to violence, as her parents got divorced and her mother tried to abort her, but the procedure failed (Cochran 116). Then, as a teenager, Highsmith read Karl Menninger's *The Human Mind* and particularly enjoyed the sections about mental breakdown and crime, already exhibiting a deep curiosity in violence and the reasons people commit crimes (Walton 23). She was a lesbian author and thus had personal experience living on the margins of society, neglecting to conform to society's inflexible demands and vision of the ideal heteronormative family. Likewise, Highsmith was an outsider in the United States, as she traveled overseas for most of the 1950s and lived in Europe, where "her work was then, and remains today, more widely read and critically acclaimed... than in the USA" (Peters, "The Talented Ms Highsmith" 24). Fiona Peters also speculates that by living abroad, Highsmith was distanced from the American suburban lifestyle just the right amount for her to be able to effectively critique the conformity in the suburbs and view life in the suburbs as

a nightmare, rather than as the Dream (Peters, “Conformity and Singularity” 10). Therefore, Highsmith’s *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water* follow this mindset and involve a dangerous, threatening domestic setting, which is nothing like the common narrative of the American Dream presented in sitcoms.

My thesis is about the darkness in the normal, because the domestic setting is conventionally perceived as normal, mundane, and anything but thrilling, a notion which Highsmith flips on its head by representing the domestic sphere as dangerous, a contradiction to the safe domestic setting essential to the American Dream. Highsmith’s version of the world is dark: the suburbs are unsafe, marriages are not what individuals expect, and the private sphere offers little protection. Part of what makes her novels so thrilling is their grounding in “the normal.” Rather than crafting elaborate and fantastic villains, Highsmith chooses the individual whom readers would least expect to be guilty of such horrific deeds as murder. While others have examined Patricia Highsmith’s novels under the backdrop of the Cold War, I will be specifically analyzing two of her works, *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water*, which are highly compatible and thematically similar, to determine, in Patricia Highsmith’s version of the world, how the domestic sphere and the quaint suburbs of the 1950s factor into and sometimes cause horrific atrocities that were waiting to bubble over from under the cover of the happy domestic façade. Overall, I argue that through the context of murder, Highsmith characterizes 1950s America as a dangerous, disappointing place where the idyllic American Dream resides as a fantasy, flawed and out of reach for the average individual.

Subsequently in my thesis, I introduce the failings of the American Dream in Highsmith’s *The Blunderer*, focusing on the protagonist’s failed marriage and how the perception of others, particularly in a suburban setting, acts to construct one’s identity. Next, I use Highsmith’s *Deep*

*Water* to discuss conformity in American suburbs, a principle part of the American Dream.

Patricia Highsmith's novels are set in the American suburbs and focus on seemingly normal men in relationships who become murderers to reveal the fantasy of the American Dream, as life is dangerous everywhere and the domestic sphere does not keep people safe. Characters lose themselves and their moral compass in their pursuit of the American Dream and their resentment at having not yet attained the Dream. In Highsmith's domestic noir novels, the American Dream goes wrong and ultimately becomes unattainable.

### ***The Blunderer* (1954)**

In Highsmith's *The Blunderer*, the protagonist, Walter Stackhouse, is unable to completely attain the American Dream as he feels cut off from his friends at the hands of his controlling wife, Clara, among other reasons throughout the course of the novel. He wants to divorce Clara, but she attempts to overdose on pills, forcing Walter to continue their loveless marriage despite being accused of infidelity and of not loving his wife. Sick of being accused of something he has not done but wants to do, Walter engages in an affair with Ellie Briess. Then, while reading the newspaper and learning of the mysterious murder of Helen Kimmel at a bus rest stop, Walter begins wondering whether he could do it to Clara. He has a moment of opportunity but is unable to find his wife among the throng of bus passengers, leaving him with a bad feeling about where she could be. Soon after, Clara's body turns up at the bottom of a cliff near the rest stop, and blame slowly begins to fall on Walter. As evidence piles up, Walter begins to look guiltier and guiltier for a murder he has not committed. A police officer, Lieutenant Corby, investigates Walter and Melchior Kimmel, a secondary main character and the husband of the other dead woman, and the two men become entangled in a devastating web of lies, manipulation, and violence.

I am analyzing Highsmith's *The Blunderer* to orient my readers toward the reality of the American Dream as something unattainable for some individuals and something detrimental for many who are actively pursuing the Dream. In *The Blunderer*, Highsmith ultimately concludes that the American Dream with an idyllic marriage and guaranteed safety is a mere fantasy which cannot actually work out in reality through her recognition that Walter's marriage has fallen short of his expectations and driven him to an outside woman, that the suburban home offers little protections, and that pursuing the Dream results in his death. *The Blunderer* disrupts the established notion of safety and security in the domestic sphere and in the suburbs, showing readers how the American Dream can go wrong and provide individuals with a false sense of security about their "perfect" lives while everything around them slowly disintegrates.

One central component of the American Dream involves a happy, heterosexual marriage. Walter has his heterosexual marriage with Clara, but he is far from happy in his marriage; he feels as if his marriage has fallen short of the expectations he had before tying the knot. Clara controls Walter's choice of career and friends, alienating him from his true desires and people with whom he would enjoy spending time (Highsmith 22, 24-25, 52). She proves to be a snake constricting his life and freedom from inside the home; thus, she succeeds in alienating Walter to the point that others no longer expect him to join them in their fun fishing trips or parties since he always must decline their invitations (Highsmith 27, 35). By estranging him from his friends and relatives, Clara limits his freedom, keeps him in the house, and shows Walter how the domestic sphere and marriage can be an unsettling place with unexpected outcomes. She is more quarrelsome than good-natured, does not let Walter go on weekend fishing outings with his friends, and refuses to have children, without which, Walter's American Dream cannot be attained (Highsmith 25-26). Walter is unhappy, and Clara is, as well. Even though she, herself,

drives Walter away by means of her actions, Clara seems to fear losing Walter and the stability of their relationship, and part of the fear emerges as accusations against his fidelity to her, a common anxiety people in relationships must overcome for the long-term success of the relationship. Clara's accusations of infidelity hint at her own struggle with the marriage aspect of the American Dream not quite turning out in the typical, happy fashion as she likely hoped. She throws Ellie Briess into the middle of their relationship and argument to justify to herself the reason Walter might be asking for a divorce because she thinks it cannot truly have anything to do with her own faults and because she genuinely fears he has already betrayed their marital vows and crushed her Dream (Highsmith 53). Both characters feel fears intricately connected to domesticity, alluding to Highsmith's vision of marriages as dangerous forces that provoke fear and anxiety in people, a far cry from the idyllic marriages presented in 1950s sitcoms, like *Leave It to Beaver*.

Through Clara's accusations in her and Walter's unhappy marriage that once did meet the marriage requirements of the American Dream, Highsmith simultaneously illuminates the way perception can shape identities. If people are going to think one way about a person, even if they are incorrect, then why should the person not become what others think they already are? Highsmith concludes that people become what others think they are, and that public perception strongly shapes people's identities, since people care about what others think of them to a large extent. When someone faces slander, accusations, and judgment for an issue or crime with which they are unaffiliated, then the person may feel like being guilty will make no difference to their life because they are already being treated as guilty. They are paying for the action without receiving the benefits that go along with whatever action people think they have done. For example, Walter begins his affair with Ellie because his wife, Clara, believes he is already

engaging in an affair with the woman. Repeatedly, before Walter and Clara even spend any alone time together, Clara accuses him of being unfaithful, saying, “I don’t believe you. You’ve been seeing her on the sly—evenings when you don’t come home at six-thirty” and continuing these accusations after her hospitalization, “I was right about Ellie, wasn’t I?” (Highsmith 54, 65). Walter is compelled to endure these accusations without being at fault and receiving any sexual gratification from the woman he secretly desires. After Clara snarkily proposes that Walter spends the night with Ellie instead of staying home with her since she believes that he is having an affair, Walter thinks, “that’s a fine idea,” and then proceeds to go to Ellie’s new apartment where they consummate the affair with sex (Highsmith 76-80). Unfounded accusations based on Clara’s distorted perception force Walter into the role of an unfaithful husband. Their marriage does not stand the test of accusations or temptations, as there is little trust between the couple, so it is clear that neither Walter nor Clara can fulfill the happy heterosexual marriage component of the American Dream.

Because Walter’s American Dream is lacking due to Clara’s inability or refusal to fulfill all his expectations, Walter wants to kill Clara and be with Ellie. Murder seems like the only means by which Walter can achieve his American Dream. At one point in their relationship before the novel begins, Clara is everything that Walter wants in his life, and he “remembered how pleasant she had been, how irresistible those first few weeks,” but she turns out to not be good enough for him: “his marriage had fallen short of what he had hoped” (Highsmith 96, 27). Once he secured the heterosexual marriage part of his American Dream, he stopped being happy in his relationship and wanted more, indicating that almost as soon as Walter got his original ideal marriage, he set his sights on something better, still reaching for the happy heterosexual marriage. He has troubles with his wife, so he goes to Ellie who shares his Dream of having a

happy marriage, good home, and children (Highsmith 84). He perceives her as his way out of his deficient life and into a meaningful life, having attained the American Dream: “Walter wondered if he and Ellie would ever have a child who was gifted in music. He was imagining being married to Ellie... He was imagining introducing her to Chad [his friend]. She and Chad should like each other” (Highsmith 145). Walter’s Dream grows even bigger with Ellie, as he perceives her to be the ideal woman who fulfills or exceeds his expectations and behaves much better than Clara. Rather than abandoning his Dream after his marriage with Clara goes poorly, Walter dreams up an even better Dream so that he can gain more satisfaction from his life.

Owning a suburban home is another step in the path to achieving the American Dream. Suburbia was created by William (“Bill”) Levitt in 1951 after he discovered “how to mass produce the American Dream” at “a price most people could afford” (“The Rise of Suburban Areas”). Yet, for some, like Walter, owning this nice suburban home acts as a slap-in-the-face, since his nice home and community reminds him of what he does not have. Highsmith’s *The Blunderer* has a predominately suburban setting, which works to make the relationship crumble, rather than making the relationship successful due to the completion of another item on the American Dream checklist and feeling the closeness that suburbs often give people. Walter specifically chooses a suburban community for its idyllic aspects, describing where he lives as “the kind of village where you marry a healthy, good-natured girl, live with her in a white house, go fishing on Saturdays, and raise your sons to do the same thing” (Highsmith 15). He dreams of the idyllic life that achieving the American Dream would give him and lets his Dream influence the home he purchases. Yet, Walter’s initial attraction to his specific suburban community, predicated on the all-American values of a quality heterosexual marriage, strong nuclear family, and manly activities, only contributes more to his disenchantment of his relationship and life.

The reality of his marriage with Clara shuts down all his fantasies about their suburban lifestyle. Problems arise and resentments fester when spouses have drastically different versions of the American Dream swimming in their minds. The idyllic suburban setting fosters resentment in Walter because he wants more than his situation can give him and is unable to bring his American Dream to reality.

The suburban setting of *The Blunderer* first serves to protect Walter from public scrutiny because people in his community, those who know him, vouch for his innocence and vehemently oppose any accusations against him. His friend, Bill, tells Walter, ““I said I’d go down the line that you hadn’t a thing to do with her death... I said you were the mildest of guys I ever knew”” (Highsmith 146). Later, Bill continues to affirm Walter’s innocence despite the evidence mounting against him, saying: ““I told Corby I was absolutely sure you’d never do a thing like this. I know what they say about people who do. I mean that you can never tell about them. I feel differently about this”” (Highsmith 188). His trust proves how community members unite together, as suburbs and close-knit communities never want to feel as if a threat is coming from the inside. When tragedies strike a small community, people, even nowadays, want to pin the blame on an outsider, rather than admitting that someone who is part of their community could have done something terrible. Acknowledging that terror can come from inside the presumed safe spaces means acknowledging that genuine safety cannot be found anywhere, shaking the very idea of what it means to live in the suburbs as part of the American Dream.

As evidence accumulates and Walter makes additional blunders, the suburban setting turns on him, and where Walter once finds shelter, he now finds persecution through people’s accusations. He becomes an outsider in his own safe haven; after all, others have to maintain their own versions of the American Dream which prioritize safety in the domestic setting, so they

cannot tolerate a potential murderer in their midst. After Kimmel releases the story to the newspapers, Claudia, his long-time maid, announces to Walter, ““I’d like to quit—if you don’t mind, Mr. Stackhouse,”” moving away from him with physical, intense fear (Highsmith 228-229). The community who once vouched for Walter continues to turn on him, as new details surface. Ellie refuses to tell whether she believes Walter is innocent or guilty, and his coworker, Dick, says that he does not know, a vague answer that seems indicative of the undisclosed belief that Walter is, in fact, guilty (Highsmith 240, 244). The suburban community no longer protects Walter; instead, people seek protection for themselves from him. As quickly as people affirm his innocence in the beginning of the novel, before his blunders come to light, people quickly close the community doors to him when his innocence begins to waver. Doors are closed to those in the out-group, and someone accused of murder certainly belongs to the out-group, as people do not want to be associated with someone like that. Contrary to the suspicious actions and evidence against him, Walter, for most of the novel, is innocent, so his community wrongly persecutes him. Once again, Highsmith shows how the American Dream is limited in scope, as someone’s Dream may prevent another from attaining their own version of the Dream. By presenting how the suburbs vacillate in their opinions of the inhabitants, Highsmith critiques the American suburbs for caring too much about their exterior appearances and enabling people to gain unwarranted protection or persecution, depending on the situation.

Attaining the American Dream also depends upon maintaining some feeling of safety, so neighbors necessarily have to shun someone whom they suspect of murder in order to preserve their own safety. The community first protects Walter because he is one of them and because it is scary to acknowledge that anyone can be a murderer since that involves acknowledging that the safety granted by attaining the American Dream is more superficial and fictitious than they

would like to believe. Later, however, the community prioritizes their own safety over the inclusion of Walter Stackhouse in their suburban neighborhood. His American Dream gets crushed in yet another way, as the doors of his close-knit suburban community close to him and keep him as isolated as if he were an outsider, thus sustaining the attitude of exclusivity.

Similarly, his home, one of the principle aspects of the American Dream, leads Walter to a physical danger, beyond the domestic danger of the failing marriage I discussed earlier. Rather than acting as a physical and emotional shelter for him, his home opens Walter up to additional scrutiny and threats. Lieutenant Corby finds the newspaper clipping in Walter's home, which provides the basis for the momentous and incriminating connection between Clara's murder and that of another married woman from earlier that year (Highsmith 150-151). The paper clipping is one of Walter's many blunders, but it becomes a problem since Corby searches his home and his maid, whom Walter has been privileged enough with wealth from a successful career to employ, has put the newspaper clipping back inside his notebook since she thought he accidentally dropped it (Highsmith 151-152). Two components of the American Dream go wrong for Walter in this situation: his home and his wealth. Outside forces infiltrate the safety of his suburban home and make it clear that the private sphere is not necessarily private, as things done inside the home can eventually be turned against the individual in the public sphere. Additionally, the wealth that Walter and Clara have accumulated in their pursuit of the American Dream cause the issue of the paper scrap being retained and thus available for Corby's detection. If Walter does not have a maid, then nobody would be tidying up but himself, eliminating any possibilities of misguided attempts to help Walter save his paperwork, since he knows his true intentions, and he would be the only one tidying. His house, purchased with his wealth, one of the primary components of the American Dream, backfires in its job to protect the inhabitants and creates

insurmountable problems for Walter. Thus, Walter's pursuit of the American Dream drags him into deeper problems, while simultaneously revealing the fallacy of an ideal, safe life for those who own homes and have checked off many of the required boxes for the completion of the American Dream.

His suburban home proves to be physically dangerous for Walter after the death of his wife, as Kimmel loathes him for rekindling the investigation. First, Kimmel violently threatens Walter with exposure of an exaggerated version of the truth if he does not provide sufficient payment of fifty thousand dollars (Highsmith 206). Kimmel, a guilty man, cannot let Walter get away with bringing him back under the police's radar; he has a "terrible hunger for revenge" and "could only think of crushing Stackhouse [and] stabbing him" (Highsmith 248). Therefore, Kimmel finds out where Walter lives, destroying the constructed notion of the safety of a suburban home being impervious to attacks, and tries to pay him a visit:

Kimmel stood again before the front door. He debated ringing the bell. It would be pleasant to irritate Stackhouse, to start him seriously worrying about his physical welfare... He could even kill Stackhouse tonight, now that he had shaken off his shadower, and to hell with an alibi. He would leave no traces. He would lie again.

Kimmel trembled as he thought of crushing Stackhouse's throat between his hands.

(Highsmith 254)

Walter's home could have potentially been the site of his own murder, if he were home at the time of Kimmel's visit, but luckily for Walter, he chooses to sell the home and go where he might be free of the memories and public scorn (Highsmith 144). This excerpt further exposes Kimmel's violence and the lack of physical safety and security that this home affords Walter. According to Peter Morrall in *Murder and Society*, "the home offers a viable killing arena, not

only because of the relationships within it, but because it is shielded from observation and creates its own rules of conduct” (121). The American Dream is a false construct of an idyllic, utopian life, which is simply not possible in reality, since, for example, homes in the suburbs do not necessarily offer protection from the invasion of outside forces, home addresses provide an easy way for an enemy to track someone down, and the privacy in homes functions to instigate murders in the domestic setting by granting murderers protection from immediate detection.

The American Dream also requires individuals to achieve success in careers that they love, but Walter’s career struggles after he is accused of killing Clara, so once again, he fails to achieve all aspects of the American Dream. First, his workplace no longer becomes a place of refuge for him away from his house. His office becomes compromised before his home, Corby questions him there, and Kimmel, providing a pseudonym, visits Walter in his office where anyone could see or overhear him trying to threaten Walter into paying the bribe (Highsmith 162-164, 206-208). Once Kimmel knows where he works, there is no telling what the murderer might do. Then, the accusations and piling evidence lead Walter’s coworker to cancel their plans of starting their own law practice together as partners (Highsmith 243). Owning and working for his own law practice is one of Walter’s most important parts of the American Dream, so this blow hurts him, but he persists, alone, despite knowing his business may suffer due to his notoriety. Walter dreams of being a self-made, self-reliant man, who achieves great success and no longer needs to be someone else’s lackey. Being his own boss is part of his Dream, and he gets to fulfill that part, but owning his own firm falls short of his expectations, as on the eighth day, he has only two cases (Highsmith 256). Furthermore, because of the evidence piling up against him, Walter’s old boss, Cross, “is going to do all he can to get [Walter] disbarred,” which would spur the end of his entire white-collar career as a lawyer. His entanglement in Clara’s

death proves fatal to Walter's career, which was previously on an upwards slope, and crushes his possibility of attaining his ideal career and the American Dream.

Initially, Walter gets incriminated in the death of his wife for an additional reason beyond the suspicious evidence: he wants her to die. Walter plays the role of disgruntled husband, fantasizing about murdering his wife, but he never has the chance to act out his fantasies. Walter's thoughts incriminate him in the death of his wife since he *wants* his wife to die, so that he can be free from the manipulation keeping him prisoner in his own marriage. Yet, Walter neither directly nor intentionally contributes to his wife's death. He is just a normal man who married the wrong woman in his pursuit of the American Dream and now wants a way out. Through the public's resolute accusations of Walter's guilt in Clara's death, even though he is genuinely innocent, "Highsmith characterizes the truth as inconsequential to the public perception of each man's culpability" (Schrynemakers 38). This idea relates back to how Clara's perception of Walter as a cheating spouse solidifies to such an extent that Walter does eventually become the cheating spouse. Likewise, Walter does not remain innocent of murder for long. By the end of the novel, Walter commits murder, largely to protect himself, but it turns out that he kills the wrong man: "A wave of sickness and terror broke over him" at the realization that he has killed an innocent bystander, not Kimmel (Highsmith 263). Regardless of whom he kills, Walter crosses the line from physical innocence to physical guilt. His desire to kill Clara as a means of being free to pursue a better version of his American Dream gets him into this entire mess and ends up making him into a murderer. Murderers cannot attain the American Dream behind bars, and after Walter kills the wrong man, Kimmel kills Walter, forever ending his pursuit of the American Dream (Highsmith 263-264). The reckless pursuit of the American

Dream incriminates Walter in his wife's death, leads Walter to become a murderer, and results in Walter's death; therefore, pursuing the Dream with intensity proves to be fatal.

Highsmith uses Walter and Clara's failing, unhappy marriage in *The Blunderer* to critique the American Dream, painting it as a hopeless fantasy that leaves those enchanted by the Dream disappointed. Likewise, she sets the novel in a suburban setting, which turns grisly with murder and accusations, to better establish her argument against the plausibility of the American Dream, which involves owning a home in the suburbs with a loving spouse and family. Public perception from inside the home and outside the home each serve to turn Walter into the man he is when he dies at the conclusion. The supporting characters' initial support of Walter and then rejection of him highlights a flaw and irony of suburban exclusivity which privileges a close-knit community and values putting on good appearances for the sake of fitting in with the community's standard. Reading *The Blunderer* in the 1950s would have left readers thinking more critically about the suburban American Dream, considering the novel's message that as one pursues the American Dream, their hopes turn into disappointments when circumstances and their focused pursuit limit their ability to attain their longed-for Dream. In later novels, Highsmith's view of the American Dream as a futile Dream that many can never achieve due to their circumstances is reiterated using new murders and a new cast of characters equally as motivated by the American Dream.

### ***Deep Water (1957)***

Like *The Blunderer*, Highsmith's *Deep Water* is set in the American suburbs with relatively "normal" characters and exposes much about life in the 1950s suburbs, revealing how the American Dream does not result in a success story under all conditions. *Deep Water* follows the peculiar, but ultimately "normal," husband and father, Victor Van Allen. After years of

enduring his wife Melinda's public infidelities, Vic begins to feel a sense of injustice, so he lies about having murdered one of Melinda's previous lovers to scare her current lover, Joel Nash, and the subsequent one, Ralph Gosden, away. Not too long after that, however, Vic drowns her next lover, Charley De Lisle. Due to the suspicious circumstances, Melinda accuses Vic, but the majority of his small-town, suburban community backs him up and pleads his innocence. Months go by without any problems, but when Melinda finally acquires another lover, one who intends to take her away, Vic soon succumbs to murder, once again, as he pushes the man, Anthony Cameron, over a cliff and then sinks his body in the town's quarry. Once again, blame falls on Vic, but his close friends believe in his innocence. However, a suspicious community member in cahoots with Melinda catches Vic covering up blood and soon goes to the police. The police show up to arrest Vic, but in his anger, he strangles Melinda before they apprehend him.

I want to gain a better understanding of how Highsmith's character, Vic, quickly snaps out of complacency and into a violent state of murderous revenge against his wife in their quiet suburban community, in order to help my readers become more aware that terror can come from the domestic sphere, stemming from jealousy, resentment, feelings of inadequacy, infidelity, and/or a yearning for personal gain. Ultimately, Vic is the way he is because the American Dream has failed him by giving him a loveless marriage with an unfaithful wife and no power to change the way their relationship has progressed. Despite his attempts at attaining the ideal life and being an individual in a society of conformists, Vic believes in and hopes for the same American Dream as nearly everyone else, ironically turning himself into a conformer who feels superior to others because he has a distaste for conformity. Vic's unconventional masculinity also sets him apart from other males and fuels his murders, as he thinks he needs to be the heteronormative masculine man, the patriarch of his nuclear family, in order to attain the Dream.

In *Deep Water*, Highsmith shows how the American Dream can go wrong for some “normal” individuals by using murder to condemn heteronormative masculinity, the American suburbs, and the conformity prevalent in the 1950s.

Once again, Highsmith crafts a seemingly innocent and harmless character who falls to the dark side of the moral compass and commits horrific crimes. As a caring father, committed husband, and enterprising businessman, Vic appears law-abiding and upstanding to his suburban community. Granted, he is described as a little strange, but he embraces his peculiarities in spite of others, as I will discuss later in this section. Highsmith grounds Vic in the “normal,” making his experiences, even those outside of the norm of his community such as raising snails, appear as mundane as possible. At the end of the day, Vic is a normal man who just wants to attain the American Dream of having a perfect life with his perfect family. However, the first reason the American Dream becomes unattainable for him is because he does not possess the traditional markings of masculinity required of the head of the nuclear family in the 1950s.

Good looks are likely part of most people’s American Dream: good looks for themselves, as well as good looks for their spouse and future children. As far as his appearance goes, Vic does not possess any remarkable or unusual characteristics; he is utterly normal and either average or below average in his looks. Readers immediately acquire a sense of Vic’s bland appearance as soon as they open the novel:

Victor Van Allen was thirty-six years old, of a little less than medium height, inclined to a general firm rotundity rather than fat, and he had thick, crisp brown eyebrows that stood out over innocent blue eyes, His brown hair was straight, closely cut, and like his eyebrows, thick and tenacious. His mouth was middle-sized, firm, and usually drawn down at the right corner with a lopsided determination, or with humor, depending on how

one cared to take it. It was his mouth that made his face ambiguous—for one could read a bitterness in it, too—because his blue eyes, wide, intelligent, and unsurprisable, gave no clue as to what he was thinking or feeling. (Highsmith 13-14)

Looks do not mean everything, but people tend to place a substantial amount of weight on one's external appearance, so looking normal and average could make an individual's life complicated. Since the author notes Vic's "general firm rotundity rather than fat" and neglects to comment on any muscular build, readers must infer that Vic does not possess a muscular build (Highsmith 13). Based on the above description of Vic, I think that Melinda's infidelity may have just as much to do with Vic's personality as it does with his appearance.

Melinda, like Vic, is also after the American Dream—but one with her at the center—so she cheats on her normal, boring husband and seeks out more conventionally masculine and exciting men for her delight. Vic thinks about the first lover readers meet, Joel Nash, observing that he has "those regular features that women who liked him would describe as not *too* regular" and conceding that "most women would call him handsome" (Highsmith 15). In this passage, we get a clear sense of the oppressive, unrealistic requirements imposed upon men. In order to be considered handsome and be the object of a woman's Dream, men must have regular looks, but cannot look too regular, with emphasis on "too." Vic, I suppose, is one of the men who, unfortunately, have an appearance that is just *too* regular. Melinda's affairs originate from her desire to be with a handsome man, the man of her version of the American Dream, because she "was never able to resist what she thought was a handsome face;" she chooses others and resists Vic because he does not have a handsome enough face for her (Highsmith 15). Different individuals' versions of the American Dream work against each other. For example, Melinda

cannot attain her American Dream of being free to be with handsome men whom she chooses without destroying Vic's American Dream of having the ideal marriage with his wife.

Height does not matter much to Melinda as a marker of good looks, since Vic and most of her boyfriends are not tall. However, she tends to prefer things that Vic lacks. Charley De Lisle is an esteemed pianist, so he comes wielding talent and power, and that is enough to woo Melinda (Highsmith 76). Vic cannot teach Melinda how to play the piano, marking him as useless in that regard, and he cannot even maintain her interest with conversation, since she scoffs at his interests, thinking they are completely dull (Highsmith 77). The next boyfriend also assumes a more heteronormative form of masculinity than Vic, as Mr. Cameron has a solid, massive build perfect for his occupation as a contractor and enjoyment of the outdoors (Highsmith 18). Although Vic does spend time outside, he remains outdoors in the suburban setting, spending his time in his own yard, rather than taking up the heteronormative manly pursuit of the great outdoors in the way Cameron does. The other men offer more as men than Vic does to Melinda, so she cuckolds her effeminate husband and leaves him with pent-up feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and betrayal.

Reading about Melinda's affairs and disdain toward her husband, one might wonder why Vic and Melinda get married in the first place, rather than pursuing their own ideal lives, whether it includes a monogamous relationship or not. Vic believes "people thought Melinda stayed with him because of his money, and perhaps that did influence Melinda to some extent," since Vic's inheritance bestows him with \$40,000 each year (Highsmith 31). Melinda may have chosen Vic because he is a steady figure. Furthermore, Vic wonders why women think "that they would prefer a man who demanded nothing of them sexually" (Highsmith 22). Having a steady, wealthy man at home likely seems like a decent opportunity for Melinda, who can gain the

benefits of a relatively bland husband, in her eyes, while also stepping out on him to pursue more exciting men. Vic marries Melinda in the first place because “at twenty-two she had had a certain iconoclasm and imagination in her rebellion that had attracted Vic because it was like his own” (Highsmith 29). However, like Walter’s experience with his girlfriend who became his wife, Melinda falls short of Vic’s expectations. What he once appreciated about her now causes their marital problems and sparks resentment in Vic: “Now it seemed to him that she had lost every bit of that imagination and that her iconoclasm consisted in throwing costly vases against walls and breaking them” (Highsmith 29). Additionally, as Melinda begins to lose interest in Vic, Vic also begins feeling bored of his wife, since he feels he has many interests, but she disregards absolutely all his interests (Highsmith 29). When Melinda gets her husband, she is not satisfied enough and wants more (i.e., exciting, handsome boyfriends); when Vic gets the rebellious and imaginative wife, whom he desires, his expectations fall far short of the reality and crush his American Dream.

At a certain point, Vic can no longer contain his feelings of resentment toward himself, Melinda, and her lovers, so he starts murdering to reclaim his role as Melinda’s husband and assert his heteronormative masculinity. In *Cowboys, Communists, and Queers*, Savran notes that in the 1950s when men were expected to be aggressive and go-getting, “‘effeminate’ men with more fat on ‘the inner side’ of their thighs than most of their Cold War buddies... were, at best, made the butts of wisecracks; at worst, they were silenced, reviled, and driven to suicide” (8). Savran expresses how the heteronormative gender politics of the time placed a lot of severe pressure on men, influencing those who did not fit in the prescribed gender roles to even go as far as committing suicide. As previously mentioned, Vic’s rotund body is not particularly attractive to Melinda compared to the bodies of her boyfriends, especially Cameron’s buff figure,

so the gender norms drive Vic to kill others, rather than killing himself, as Savran states men in the 1950s did. Vic's effeminacy and feelings of inadequacy lead him to murder as a means of justifying himself and fulfilling his American Dream of being the man of the house. He perceives the masculine gender as one requiring violence and force, so he kills in order to get his life back and attain the American Dream. He can only have his Dream if he has Melinda all to himself, so he feels as though he must eliminate the outside invaders and the threat to his marriage's stability. Remember, someone's version of the American Dream may give them happiness but pain to another. Thus, by committing the murders, Vic, in a way, temporarily gets his wife back, since she ceases her affairs, but crushes her Dream of freely pursuing other men whom she finds more handsome than her betrothed. Monogamy does not appeal to Melinda, but it is necessary to Vic. Therefore, heteronormativity and Vic's pursuit of what we now call toxic masculinity destroy the characters' possibilities of achieving the American Dream, since husband and wife each want different things out of their marriage.

At the conclusion of the novel, Vic has turned to violence to justify his masculinity and killed three individuals: Charley, Cameron, and Melinda. He first crosses the line by murdering Charley; as they are alone in the pool together, Vic thinks he "would have loved to grab him by the shoulders and hold him under, and even as he thought of it, Vic swam toward him" (Highsmith 98). The murder is only completed because Vic does not take the time to process his thoughts; he simply calmly acts on his thought and desire. Highsmith's character can no longer put up with being cuckolded anymore, so before he knows it himself, he is a murderer. His pursuit of the American Dream has turned deadly. He kills his next victim, Cameron, because he knows that his marital situation is at its most tenuous moment. Therefore, when he sees Cameron on the street, Vic makes a quick decision: "He had decided to take Mr. Cameron to the quarry. It

had come into his mind all at once” (Highsmith 219). Vic kills Cameron at the quarry, but once again, he is just automatically acting on his anger without much forethought. With both men, he lets his anger reach explosive proportions, and they are the ones who pay the price for his inability to properly express emotions and his inability to accept his own form of masculinity as acceptable in his version of the Dream. He kills Melinda out of revenge and because there is nothing left for him to do but relinquish Trixie to her and go to jail, and he does not want her to have his daughter whom she already neglects (Highsmith 269-270). Perhaps he thinks that if he cannot have his Dream, then she should not be allowed to have hers and survive in the arms of yet another new man, either? Overall, these passages reveal how the pursuit of the American Dream leads Vic to murder out of anger and for revenge because to him, murder is the most logical path to have his wife all for himself and to prove his masculinity to her.

The act of killing comes as easily to him as just thinking about it because he does what he can to fulfill his American Dream. After Vic drowns De Lisle, “he could not keep himself from taking some comfort in the thought that Phil or Horace or any other man might have killed him, too, under similar circumstances” (Highsmith 143-144). In this quotation, Vic’s gender expectations that men are to be the violent ones are revealed, as he does not think about how any *woman* might have also killed but only how “any other *man* might have killed” (Highsmith 144, emphasis mine). Vic kills someone, despite being a law-abiding man up to that point in his life, so he feels as though others who appear similarly upstanding are perfectly capable of also committing murder if they are provoked to the extreme. The thought that he is just like anyone comforts Vic and seems to justify his murder by bringing it into the realm of the “normal.” To Vic, committing murder is as simple as any other everyday action that he might take to improve his life.

In addition to adhering to specific gender roles and expectations, owning a nice suburban home was paramount to achieving the American Dream. Setting *Deep Water* in the suburbs allows Highsmith to critique the very place she finds deadly and suggest that the suburbs are not safe havens and ideal living spaces, as the propaganda insists. The suburbs in Highsmith's novels become a place of murder, deception, and infidelity, rather than a safe space for a loving family to live in peace. Likewise, Highsmith challenges the close-knit feeling common amongst suburbanites by showing how the close-knit community is unable to spot a murderer, so they end up protecting one and vouching for him. The irony of a place predicated on its shared value of safety sheltering a murderer from prosecution does not go unnoticed in *Deep Water*. An essential component of the American Dream, life in the suburbs, gets flipped on its head and proves how the superficial American Dream is not the end-all-be-all for all individuals.

After De Lisle's murder, Melinda thinks the suburban setting will benefit her, threatening Vic with, "I think you ought to know that the whole town's wise to you" and "there's going to be—there's going to be a public uproar about you," (Highsmith 128). Typically, one would think that Melinda would be correct, but Charles De Lisle is an outsider in the community compared to Vic, and the community only tolerates Melinda because she is married to Vic, so the suburban setting does not work to Vic's detriment as she hopes. Her accusations prove futile in corrupting the public opinion against Vic, who has so long been perceived as a good person; even after Ralph joins in on her accusations, "Vic's reputation had held" (Highsmith 176). Rather than the community rallying to protect each other from murder and crime, the community unwittingly protects the murderer's reputation. Highsmith thus highlights an essential flaw in the suburban design of creating a close-knit community: false trust in people simply because they are neighbors. As depicted in *Deep Water*, people in the suburbs mistakenly place their trust in those

who do not deserve trust just because they are neighbors and must, therefore, be up to par with a certain standard of life. Thus, trying to attain the American Dream goes wrong for people, as they live in a suburb with a false sense of security.

Suburbs rely on a certain amount of conformity. Think back to the creation of Levittown and mass-produced housing in the 1950s, where homes were constructed with many similarities to permit lower costs but had just enough architectural variety “to eliminate dreary monotony” (“1950s newsreel”). Standardization essentially birthed cookie-cutter homes, so if similarities in architecture were “in” at the time, then no wonder people tried to be alike in other ways, as well. Highsmith critiques suburbanites’ conformity to the community’s values, illustrating another flaw of the suburban component of the American Dream. The supporting characters in the novel reflect the emphasis on conformity, while Vic, the novel’s murderer, intentionally tries to live according to his own values, rejecting his society’s regard for conformity and suburban unity, even after he benefits from the close-knit suburban community when his longtime neighbors and friends come to his aid and testify to his innocence. In addition to benefitting from the suburban setting and conformity, Vic, himself, actually does hold suburban and conformist values in many of his actions, making him hypocritical.

First and foremost, seeking out the American Dream, a formulaic Dream involving a good heterosexual marriage, a family, a home in the suburbs, and a career, that many others also yearn to attain classifies Vic as a conformist. Readers see how much Vic tries to do in order to attain his version of the American Dream, including killing his wife’s lovers so that he can have her all to himself. Additionally, Vic is a caring father, maintaining the nuclear family dynamic of providing for his family and fulfilling the fatherly role by spending time with Trixie and helping her with homework, he tends the yard and garden, as if he worries about what his neighbors

think about his yard's appearance, and he hosts and attends dinner parties with his neighbors. Similarly, Vic is a conformist in his desire to fit in and not be ostracized on account of his wife's behavior. He is tired of constantly being judged and pitied for being cuckolded, so he tries to stifle Melinda's affair "before it got all over town" (Highsmith 75). In a suburban community like Little Wesley, news travels fast, and people will silently judge others. Thus, Vic frequently conforms to the typical behavior of his suburban neighbors.

Nonetheless, Vic strives to be a nonconformist. This dissonance between his actions and his thoughts also show how the American Dream falls short for Vic who wants to attain the American Dream but is not ready to accept the side effects of achieving the long sought-after American Dream. Highsmith explicitly addresses the issue of conformity towards the end:

The only thing [Trixie] had brought home to tell him was that one of her classmates had said that people liked to pick on people who were different from other people... it seemed to be the old story of the conforming majority against the nonconformer, in this case his nonconformance being his income, he supposed, his nonprofitable publishing business, his tolerance of his wife's affairs, his televisionless household, and perhaps even his superannuated car. (Highsmith 255)

Vic understands that he is seen as a nonconformist for a variety of reasons, and he thinks that his nonconformance is what brings public scrutiny upon him; people tend to overanalyze and criticize those who are different, as one of Trixie's classmates tells her. Vic is also unusual and a nonconformist to some degree based on his emotional detachment from others, his intense emotions that he keeps bottled up preferring to feign a carefree attitude, and his strong concern for his snails. The American Dream is unattainable for genuine nonconformists because the entire American Dream involves living an ideal life like other people.

Yet, Vic has little concern for being perceived as odd or unusual. In fact, I would argue that Vic revels in being considered unusual due to his intentional nonconformance and believes that he is better than others on account of those differences:

Vic knew that Horace and Phil Cowan and everybody else who knew the situation—which was nearly everybody—considered him odd for enduring it, but Vic didn't mind at all being considered odd. In fact, he was proud of it in a country in which most people aimed at being exactly like everybody else. (Highsmith 28)

Highsmith goes beyond the suburbs, a microcosm of the entire nation, in this passage; through Vic, she critiques the entire country for valuing conformity above all else. Thus, she challenges the uniquely American value of individualism because in a country of conformers, the individual better align with the masses or else they will be subject to backlash. Ignoring individualism, American exceptionalism, and being the “city upon the hill,” Highsmith’s version of America classifies conforming suburbanites who put on a façade of perfection, a norm of the time, as a degenerate, murderous, and adulterous group. Furthermore, this passage continues to orient readers to a flaw about the suburbs: everyone knows everyone else’s business, as “nearly everybody” knew Vic’s marital situation (Highsmith 28). If one has achieved the ideal life by attaining the American Dream, then they should get some privacy. However, life in the suburbs takes away individual privacies, another flaw of the Dream. At the end of the novel, “feeling very happy and calm, Vic kept looking at Wilson’s wagging jaw and thinking of the multitude of people like him on the earth, perhaps half the people on earth were of his type, or potentially his type, and thinking that it was not bad at all to be leaving them” (Highsmith 271). Vic’s distaste for conformity allows him to justify his murders even further because leaving the conformists makes him happy and makes his crimes worthwhile; he would rather be in jail, a place which

inhibits his American Dream, than with those who conform and act like Wilson. Unfortunately for Vic, he can never separate from himself, so his nonconformist attitude must come to terms with his conformist actions.

Vic is the murderer, the villain in *Deep Water*. However, readers are compelled to align themselves with Vic and root for him, in a way. As a reader, I sympathized with Vic about his marital problems, and while I certainly neither condone murder nor equate the effects of murder with those of infidelity, I can say that for parts of the novel, Melinda seems to be a bigger villain than Vic, but her only crime is cuckolding her husband. As radical as it sounds, Highsmith's emphasis on choosing "normal" people for her novels' murderers implies that she does not think there is an actual villain and that there are no wholly good or bad people; everything is gray. A human cannot condemn another human for morally reprehensible actions when everyone is capable of making the same actions if placed under the right circumstances. The action is wrong and abhorrent, but the human, itself, is, and always has been, utterly normal. Normal enough to be driven to murder, and normal enough to fit the model of any other human, as well. Highsmith is Vic, her readers are Vic, everyone is—or could become—Vic. *Deep Water* presents the American Dream as unattainable for all individuals, as there are those, like Vic, who do not fit the heteronormative standard of masculinity. The novel also establishes the American Dream as flawed, since the suburbs can backfire and protect criminals, and conformity, common in the required context for the American Dream, the suburbs, takes away one's individuality which is a prominent aspect of the American Dream.

### **Conclusion**

Through *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water*, among her other novels, including her debut work, *Strangers on a Train*, Patricia Highsmith critiques the American Dream and presents it as

a hopeless fantasy that can only exist in one's mind, not in reality. To Highsmith, the American suburbs do not offer extra protection for their inhabitants, as her seemingly normal, middle-class murderers, Walter and Vic, illuminate how crime and murder can happen anywhere, even in a suburban community where people feel safe. By doing so, she also reveals the artifice of the American Dream and how the persistent pursuit of the Dream catalyzes the crimes and murders that end up taking place. Pursuing the American Dream at all costs creates bigger problems for Walter and Vic, as Walter dies and Vic goes to jail, resulting in neither character being able to enjoy the benefits that their determined pursuit may have reaped. Her novels counter the claims raised in sitcoms that life in the suburbs with a nuclear family is perfect, no matter what, because the family members are always there for one another, exposing a fact which people rarely want to believe, that loved ones can, and do, turn on one another or lie to seek their own personal gain without much thought. Patricia Highsmith's suburban world is threatening, dangerous, and scary, purely because of its grounding in the normal. As an early example of a domestic noir author, Highsmith presents a complicated view of a 1950s heterosexual American marriage in the heteronormative suburban setting, illustrating that life involves more danger than one cares to admit or acknowledge because admitting the possibility of danger takes control away from the individual and takes away some of the allure of the realization of the American Dream as a panacea.

Owing to the fact that *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water* center on the white, middle-class American suburbs at the heart of the American Dream, there is no question that Highsmith's novels are literary antecedents of the domestic noir genre that readers know today, as Peters asserts. As further evidence of Highsmith's connection to this genre, she commences her chapter with examples of recent domestic noir novels, such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Paula

Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*, and A.S.A. Harrison's *The Silent Wife*, highlighting the fact that Flynn read and enjoyed Highsmith's *Deep Water* (Peters, "The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir" 11). Thus, Peters asserts that Highsmith influenced one of the biggest names of the domestic noir sub-genre, as today, most debut domestic noir authors find themselves compared to Flynn or their works dubbed "the next *Gone Girl*." However, Highsmith did not only influence domestic noir writers, she wrote domestic noir novels, herself, and did so in a way that transgressed and challenged gender boundaries while carefully emphasizing the dangers lurking in the domestic sphere that crush individuals' ability to fulfill their American Dream (Peters, "The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir" 13-14).

Today, domestic noir novels frequently grace the bestseller lists, as readers find themselves deeply interested in the dark places of the domestic sphere. I predict that the popularity of domestic noir novels has much to do with today's unstable political climate in a heteronormative, patriarchal society in which women are taught from a young age to protect themselves from men who cannot control themselves. Living vicariously through the strong female characters in domestic noir novels who act for themselves, fighting against the patriarchy, female readers find solace and a way of coping with their own fears in the words of the novels, as well as in the fact that there are people out there who recognize that life is challenging for women. Likewise, Highsmith's novels may have served as a release for readers during the unstable 1950s in America. In the article, "'We must be ready every day, all the time': Mid-Twentieth Century Nuclear Anxiety and Fear of Death in American Life," Oline Eaton examines the Cold War fears and anxieties of the mid-twentieth-century by looking closely at the prevalent propaganda and narratives of the time period and how celebrities functioned as a release of anxiety for the normal, not famous, citizens. Eaton claims that the celebrity figure makes both

small fears like marital problems and grand fears like “frightening, incomprehensible world events” less foreboding, as the connection to an individual diminishes the magnitude of the fear (68). If celebrities could function as a release, then novels could, as well, and Eaton even corroborates this possibility by mentioning how the elevated states of anxiety and fear “are visible in the literature subsequently produced by authors who experienced this emotional climate first hand” (69). Therefore, I believe that part of the popularity of Highsmith’s domestic noir novels stems from their ability to make readers vicariously experience the dangers in the domestic setting through fiction, making them feel better about the potential dangers of their own lives. For example, her novels, such as *Deep Water*, could function as a release valve for readers whose marriage is not as bad as that of Vic and Melinda, as they know they will never succumb to the infidelity and murderous revenge characteristic of Highsmith’s unhappy couple.

The popularity of domestic noir novels, particularly Highsmith’s novels, is important to acknowledge because it indicates readers are contemplating the tenuous state of their domestic lives in middle-class suburbia and possibly seeing the world through the dark, critical lens of domestic noir. These novels expose readers to the view of the American Dream as an unattainable, detrimental illusion, predicated on the false notion that anyone can attain the Dream. The American Dream is conditional in that it is geared towards white, middle-class Americans; others experienced difficulty attaining any of the Dream’s components. For example, “the new middle-class families of Levittown... were all white” and Levitt refused to sell homes to African Americans (“The Rise of Suburban Areas”). Therefore, all Americans really could not attain the American Dream, since the Dream closes itself off to people of color and those who lack privilege. The fallacious American Dream establishes itself as being possible for all

Americans, but back in the 1950s, it was only possible for those Americans with privilege, and even now, many individuals are excluded from the American Dream.

After repeatedly reading about the dissolution of marriages, unmet expectations, and murders, readers thinking critically slowly realize that the failure of the American Dream in the domestic setting challenges the idea of dichotomies. Life, to these astute readers, appears no longer wholly good or wholly bad; everything is in the middle. No place is safer than any other, and no capital-D Dream shared by all holds a higher priority than any other dream. Since the American Dream relies on the privileging of good over bad, the crumbling of the dichotomy, due to the failure of the Dream, works in a circular nature to challenge and terminate the American Dream. People should, therefore, find another dream or Dream by which they can govern their lives and aspirations. One limited Dream for all Americans does not acknowledge individual differences in what produces one's happiness and sense of fulfillment or achievement. Someone achieving their version of the American Dream may end up in conflict with another person's American Dream, indicating the tenuous state of there being a Dream that a plethora of people share.

Lastly, the ideas raised in *The Blunderer* and *Deep Water* are important to the real world because they suggest to me that nobody can ever completely attain the American Dream. As the novels reveal, circumstances largely beyond the male protagonists' control prevent their attainment of the American Dream. This is true, but there is more to the situation than external influences, such as the behavior of another sentient being not meeting one's expectations, destroying individuals' chances of achieving the American Dream. The construct of a dream, itself, contributes to the farce of the American Dream being attainable because dreams eventually get bigger. Once an individual reaches their first goal and does attain their version of the

American Dream, they eventually become dissatisfied with what they do have and reach for more. Thus, it seems to me that individuals will eternally be chasing after the American Dream, always seeking a better, more ideal life than they currently have. The American Dream goes wrong, as it forever stays out of reach, remaining nothing but a dream.

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