

Good essay on how
guys scratch
represents the
imposter theme in
hardboiled fictio...

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns Phaedrus that "in every one of us there are two guiding and ruling principles" (Plato, 54). These two principles are of the same two conflicting natures found in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*. Just as Plato's virtuous horse and his dark, intemperate horse ride side by side guided by the same charioteer, for Highsmith, "good and evil, live side by side in the human heart, and not merely in differing proportions in one man and the next" (Highsmith, 180). Highsmith demonstrates that in the same way Plato shows the dark horse leads astray in increments, the human soul is led to evil gradually, starting first with a mere "scratch" on the surface. The scratch reveals an identity that he had hiding behind his normal façade. That normal façade, Bruno would argue, is an imposter, and the real him is capable of a horrendous crime. This is proved when Bruno brings him to that ledge. This changing identity represents the imposter figure in detective fiction. The ability to commit evil then, to take a life, is something every man can be brought to if he allows the proper circumstances to permit a self-inflicted "scratch" that once made infects the rest of the body. Though one might assume as much, the scratch for Guy was not his conversation with Bruno on the train or his reluctance to turn him into the police after he had suspected him of murdering Miriam. These incidents, while serving as circumstances that promote a scratch, do not significantly alter the mentality of Guy, something essential for the dark horse to begin to lead the chariot. In presenting his brilliant plan for the perfect murders, Guy's virtuous horse is still in control as he "Thrusts him [Bruno] away" at his continued suggestion of committing murder and ends such talk with the abomination "

I'm sick of this" (Highsmith, 35). Even after letters, maps, and a gun arrive encouraging and bullying Guy to commit murder, he does not waiver in his abhorrence and rejection of everything Bruno: " He burnt all the letters he had, then hurried to get ready for Long Island." (Highsmith, 127).

Bruno's attempts to lure Guy into crime go beyond his wanting his father dead. As Socrates says in the Phaedrus, " he who is the victim of his passions and the slave of pleasure will of course desire to make his beloved as agreeable to himself as possible" (Plato, 55). The desire to make Guy agreeable causes Bruno's attempts to continue and allow Guy continued opportunities to make a self-destructing scratch.

It is important to realize that Bruno's primary purvey of attempts to get to Guy should not be seen as the beginning of Guy's fall, but rather continued temptations leading to his fall which started as the mere scratch of embracing, rather than repelling against, something of Bruno. Guy's decision to keep an alligator billfold with gold corners because " He hated to throw away a beautiful thing" (Highsmith, 140) is Guy's Eden apple moment when for the first time in knowing Bruno, he allowed something of Bruno to stay with him. This scratch was what eventually led to his fall.

Guy, who months early had thrown away a " handsome belt because he happened also to loath lizard and snakeskin" (Highsmith, 95) had decided to keep an alligator (surely not so different from the repugnant lizard and snake) skin billfold and in doing so stopped righting his dark horse every time it attempted to veer off course. This seems part of his disguise. He is really a predator underneath, the good guy is just an imposter. Sometimes, it takes bringing the true self out, which is exactly what Guy did. Just as the

tragedy of Bruno was “ not the morning” of his alcoholic seizure but “ years ago when he had taken his first drink by himself” (Highsmith, 225), the tragedy of Guy is not that he killed Bruno’s father, but instead that he allowed himself to be led to that end by a scratch of contamination that led to his dark horse gaining control of the chariot. The result is that this second horse “ which had always been obedient as the first” was able to dictate Guy’s course rather than be dictated and Guy was able to leave “ the middle waters” where most people lived and murder. (Highsmith, 180). Guy was wearing a good guy mask. Even he thought it was the real him. He turned out to be an imposter, even to his self.

Guy always had the inherent desire to get rid of Miriam. His desire led him to the path of damnation. He was so intrigued by the idea that Miriam had to leave his life, one way or the other that he got embroiled into a game of life and death. It is his fault that Miriam got killed. Guy never thought of turning in Bruno to the police, either because he was inconvenienced by Miriam’s death, or because he was scared that Bruno might blackmail him further. Subsequently, this paramount pressure of keeping Bruno’s bargain makes him a murderer, too. The killing of Bruno’s father makes it certain that Guy also had the killing streak in him, and that is why he identified himself with Bruno, the psychopath. He turned himself to the detective in the end, because he believes he deserves to be punished. But, the truth is he is cheating the feeling of guilt on himself. He was also a murderer, deep down, and it was just Bruno’s intervention that brought that streak in Guy out. The outer goodness had hidden the inner rottenness in Guy. But Guy was always an imposter; his hidden self came to light eventually.

Works Cited:

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