

What drives tom
ripley's campaign to
change his life?



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The Talented Mr Ripley, written by Patricia Highsmith in 1955 is a psychological thriller that follows Tom Ripley, an antihero who is given an opportunity to change his life. In the novel, Highsmith clearly accentuates one of the main motivators of Ripley, as the chase for money, possessions and items of materialistic values that he didn't receive when chasing the "American dream." She also subtly pulls out subconscious feelings including his innate desire to be someone else and a member of a superior class, hinting at his own insecurity. Furthermore, Highsmith shows us that Tom Ripley is driven by emotion just as much as materialism, emphasizing his desire to be loved and his tragic past. Overall, Highsmith shows the readers three main drivers of Ripley's campaign to change his life; His value of materialistic objects, his subconscious value of a higher class, and his emotional value and vulnerability.

Perhaps the clearest driver of Tom Ripley throughout his campaign, is that of his chase for Materialistic objects, that he believes are the markers of a good life. As an American, he glimpses the realization of the "American Dream"—financial success and happiness—derived from the erasure of an old identity and construction of a new one through Dickie's success in Europe and this ultimately drives him to transform his life. When Tom first meets with Mr Greenleaf he subconsciously compares himself to Dickie, thinking about "An income, a house, a boat." as the markers of having "the time of his life." This comparison between himself and Dickie simply centers on the materialistic possessions that each of them have and shows Tom's fixation on possessions as a major drive. After murdering Dickie, Tom immediately takes items of money-oriented value. He takes "Dickie's silver lighter, a

pencil stub, the alligator wallet and several little cards." As he then debates when to go after the murder, he decides not to go to Paris so he can see to see about Dickie's belongings." On the train back, he envisions " the pleasures that lay before him now with Dickie's money, other beds, tables, seas, ships, suitcases," and other items that are symbols of the American dream that he has been chasing. From these quotes, it appears that one of the reasons for Dickie's death and subsequent alteration to Tom's life, was so he could become reach the level of " success" that Dickie had through possession of Dickie's objects. A final look at Ripley's chase of possessions is when he risks his entire escapade, simply to forge a letter and take Dickie's, he " leaves his income and possessions" to himself. This final section of the novel caps off with Ripley thinking of " Dickie's money" which he relates to " freedom", capping off Tom's relationship between money and the value of materialistic objects. Overall, Highsmith uses Tom's apparent fascination with possessions rather than human connections to show this as a major driver for him to change his life; a look perhaps at Highsmith's criticism of the American dream and its impact on those who it fails.

Another powerful motivator of Ripley, from the very beginning of the novel, is that of his value for class and from this his desire to escape from his own insecurities. Ripley begins the novel, " living week to week, dodging cops for the first time in his life" and being low in the class system which is part of the reason he makes the move to change his life. We learn of his disgust, at his " lousy friends" and despite the fact that he is one of them, he is ecstatic at the idea of saying " Good-bye to all the second-rate people he had hung around and had let hang around him." Highsmith clearly illustrates to the

audience Ripley's motivation to "begin a new life" free from "past mistakes." When Ripley then begins his travel to Europe he rejoices from the fact that he will receive no more "piddling cheques for the strange sums of six dollars and forty-eight cents and twelve dollars and ninety-five" which further symbolizes his want to climb the social ladder. Then when Ripley kills Dickie, Highsmith orchestrates his first action as taking "Dickie's green ring". A signet ring is symbolic of an identity and usually used to indicate class and hence this ring is used by Highsmith as a motif to show the killing of Dickie as a move by Ripley to move up the class structure. Towards the end of the novel, when Tom invites Marge to lunch, she expresses shock at how quickly Tom climbed up the social rankings, asking "is this all this yours?" in response to "the high coffered ceiling." A little bit later, Marge appears to be "dazzled." This section of the novel serves to show that Tom Ripley's motivation and driver to change his life appears to be his past life of "second-rate people" and his desire to become something more. Overall, Highsmith uses small moments within the novel and symbolism with motifs such as the rings to point the reader towards class as a major compeller towards Ripley's obsession to radically change his life.

Perhaps the core driver that Highsmith accentuates during the beginning of the novel is Tom's emotional vulnerability crafted from his tragic past and ultimately his desire to be loved. Before Tom departs to Europe, we learn that "his parents had drowned in Boston Harbour" and that he grew up with an abusive aunt who called him "a sissy from the ground up." The fact that he grows up without parents and with no apparent close relationships builds the groundwork for his desire to build connections and change his life. When

Tom is about to depart, he remarks to Cleo that " he's [Mr Greenleaf] really adopted me like a son." When he gets the bon voyage basket, Tom begins to " sob" feeling for the first time the connection that he so desperately seeks. Despite the fact that all Mr Greenleaf has done was paid him for a trip to Europe, Tom's overreaction shows us his emotional vulnerability and his desire to be loved. This motivation is also experienced as we watch Tom's connection to Dickie. As soon as Dickie begins to sour towards Tom and their relationship, Tom realizes that " they were not friends" and that from this he feels a " painful wrench." He Speaks of " a shock of his realization which seemed more than he could bear" and tells Dickie that he " wants to die." This final admission before he kills Dickie, shows the reader that if Tom does not receive his personal connection that motivated him to move to Europe, then, he would have to kill Dickie and assume his relationships and standings.

Overall, Highsmith uses Tom's tragic past and fragile connection with Dickie to show the audience how Tom is driven by his emotional vulnerabilities and lack of love and human connection. Thus, Highsmith paints Tom's venture to change his life as a split between three main motivators, his chase for materialistic possessions, his subconscious and conscious envy of higher classes and his emotional vulnerability and lack of family connection. Through these three contributors Tom begins his trail of murder and deceit, simply in an attempt to improve his own life. Overall, The talented Mr Ripley, is used by Highsmith and her clever characterization of Tom Ripley as the failure of the American dream and the impacts that following your motivations can lead to if they are followed without restraint.