

The talented mr ripley essay



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The Psychoanalytic Theory is a means of literary critique which provides a framework for insightful character analysis. Its tenet is based on Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche which identifies the id, the ego and the superego as the three theoretical constructs in terms of whose activity and interaction mental life is described. According to such model, the irrational, instinctual trends of the mind are the id; the rational, realistic part of the psyche is the ego; and its critical and moralizing function is the superego.

By applying such Freudian concepts to Tom Ripley, the protagonist in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the reader is better able to understand the forces that guide his actions and the inevitable repercussions he must face. It is clear that the uncoordinated and instinctual trends of Ripley's id, ego and superego are the reason for his downfall into a life of crime and isolation.

Tom Ripley's id is the dark, inaccessible part of his personality which he cannot control and which urges him to consider murder as his only option to satisfy his overriding desire to belong to a higher, richer social class. Although he has been hired by Herbert Greenleaf to travel to Italy to convince his son, Dickie, to return home, Tom murders Dickie in order that he may assume his identity and insinuate himself into Dickie's enjoyable lifestyle.

That Tom's id is of a negative nature and in contrast to his ego is evident when Dickie "...knew that he was going to do it, that he would not stop himself now, maybe couldn't stop himself..." (Highsmith 100) Tom's id is subject to the observance of the pleasure principle and strives to bring about

the satisfaction he craves to become someone like Dickie, making Tom feel entirely justified in adopting whatever means he deems necessary to pursue his goal.

That Tom is unable to control his id is also apparent when he kills Freddie Miles, Dickie's friend, for stumbling across Tom's impersonation of Dickie. Although Tom's id battles with his ego, his id ultimately encourages him to kill Freddie rather than find another way out. The struggle between these two parts of Tom's psyche is in full force as, " 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. " (Highsmith 137) but it is clear that his id wins the battle when Tom decides that, " This was the only way out. " (Highsmith 137) Although the ego tries to negotiate with the id, Tom's id is driven by its overriding ambition to become somebody and overcome resistance, which propels Tom to kill again to maintain the lifestyle he has acquired. Although Tom has already killed twice, his id continues to make him act irrationally, which is most evident when he contemplates murdering Dickie's friend, Marge, when she becomes suspicious of Tom's involvement in Dickie's disappearance.

Given that Tom is unable to control his id and see that what he is doing is villainous, he falls into a life of crime and "...the murders he commits are best understood as exaggerated attempts to flesh out the empty core that lies at the heart of [him]. " (Whiting, n. pag.) While Tom's id controls much of his life, his ego occasionally surfaces to make him realize that he cannot always have what he wants, resulting in feelings of isolation and drift. When

Tom recognizes that the best method of covering the murders is to revert back to his own identity, he does so with a sense of sadness.

His conscious decision to readopt his own identity is his ego acting reasonably yet, "...he felt that identifying himself as Thomas Phelps Ripley was going to be one of the saddest things he had ever done in his life. " (Highsmith 189) Tom's ego acts with its own strength and makes him be truthful, but because Tom does so only to protect himself, and his self-dislike makes him want to remain Dickie Greenleaf, he experiences feelings of depression and loneliness. Furthermore, Tom's ego surfaces when he begins to realize that his greed rushed him into killing Dickie, and that if he had not done so he could have possibly shared a life with him.

His common sense tells him that, "...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, or had simply waited for them to separate of their own volition, then none of this would have happened, and he could have lived with Dickie for the rest of his life, travelled and lived and enjoyed living for the rest of his life. " (Highsmith 137) Tom's ego helps him to understand that he cannot always get what he wants immediately and that if he had compromised and waited, he might have been happier, and it is this realization that makes him feel isolated and alone.

By the end of the novel, Tom's ego resurfaces and he changes his attitude toward others. While before he only thought of what he wanted, he now "... was inspired to spend hours with [Mrs. Cartwright] in the deck chair, talking to her and listening to her talk about her life in England and Greece..."

(Highsmith 267) As Tom realizes that the evidence that has been unveiled thus far in the murders is pointing towards his guilt, he begins to reason that his new life may come to an end and he recognizes other people's solitude because he too feels the same way.

While Tom's id and ego are at odds with each other, his superego never fully develops for he sometimes experiences guilt for his wrongdoings but does not accept full responsibility for having committed them, resulting in his self-imposed isolation. While Tom is ashamed for both the murders of Dickie and Freddie, he still believes that both crimes were necessary.

His need to justify his actions is evident when he acknowledges that, " He hadn't wanted to murder, it had been a necessity [and]...tears came in his eyes as he stared up at the campanile of the cathedral, and then he turned away and began to walk down a new street. (Highsmith 172) In this instance, "...what has actually disappeared ...is the classical superego, the internalization of clearly defined criteria of right and wrong transmitted within a particular culture by parents to their children. " (Galenet, n. pag.) Given that Tom lost his parents at a young age and was raised by an aunt that did nothing but ridicule him, he does not embody societal values which would reject murder as a choice for any situation, but discards a moral choice for an immoral one that grants him immediate gratification.

Although Mr. Greenleaf finally concludes that his son committed suicide and grants Dickie's estate to Tom, Tom's undeveloped superego does not have him reject the money he receives by forging Dickie's will. That his only concern is of being caught for his crimes is evident when, " He saw four

motionless figures standing on the imaginary pier, the figures of Cretan policemen waiting for him, patiently waiting with folded arms. He grew suddenly tense and his vision vanished. (Highsmith 273) The fact that Tom sees visions is an unconscious sign of his sense of guilt, yet he is detached from the act as he fails to realize that accepting Dickie's money is immoral as he has killed him to get it. Tom's absent superego is once again obvious when he recognizes that murdering was worth the price he might have to pay for doing so. He weighs the consequences of his actions against the experiences he has had since killing Dickie and decides that murdering was well worth it.

That Tom does not regret his chosen path is evident when he contemplates, "...could that death in the electric chair equal in pain, or could death itself, at twenty-five, be so tragic that he could not say that the months from November until now had not been worth it? Certainly not. " (Highsmith 267) The fact that he risks his freedom and life to live someone else's life is a blatant declaration of his state of loneliness and friendless existence. In analyzing the activity and interaction of Tom Ripley's id, ego and superego, the reader is able to discern that they are the reason for the character's downfall into a life of crime and seclusion.

This is most apparent as Tom's id forces him to murder Dickie to assume his identity and to murder Freddie and contemplate murdering Marge to avoid suspicion for Dickie's death. Additionally, Tom's ego surfaces when he chooses to revert back to his own identity, when he realizes he acted rashly in killing Dickie and when he begins to treat others with compassion.

Furthermore, as Tom's superego never fully develops, he feels shame for

having murdered but still accepts his actions as having been necessary, accepts Dickie's estate money without remorse and acknowledges murder as being worth the chance to be Dickie Greenleaf.

As the three functional aspects of Tom's mind are uncoordinated and instinctual, it is no wonder that he acts as he does and that his life becomes one of murder for gain and emptiness of self. Ultimately, on a close scrutiny of the character of Tom Ripley, the reader realizes that Highsmith's novel is a social commentary on the isolation and loneliness resulting from an aggressively materialist society.