

Manifestations of love
and longing in the
world of tom ripley.



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the book *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, we are introduced to one of the most fascinating and puzzling characters in modern literature; Tom Ripley. Tom Ripley is a character who is both contradictory and simple in his desires. He wants the approval and love from a relationship with Dickie, but we question whether he would be able to feel and return these same feelings. He is always on the move, always chasing something better – a desire which is often mirrored through his travels and his constant craving to visit the mythical cities of old – and culminates with his aspiration to reach the heroic Greek Islands. A careful reader, perhaps, can uncover how Tom Ripley's sense of longing and love for a lifestyle ordinarily out of his reach, drives the entirety of the novel.

We see the roots of Ripley's longing for a new life, fresh beginnings, and material possessions manifest themselves in the very first chapter. When discussing Dickie's age with Mr. Greenleaf, we get to delve into the inner workings of Ripley's mind. Ripley seems to despise his status, and where he is at in life, as seen when he lists some of his unfortunate – and downright disturbing – circumstances when comparing himself to Dickie; “living from week to week. No bank account. Dodging cops now for the first time in his life.” (Highsmith, 6). The list is written in snappishly short sentences, which suggests a growing sense of anger and frustration over his situation in life. Eric Targan believes this dissatisfaction sprung from childhood, as he was orphaned, but also verbally abused by his aunt. (Targan, 310). When recounting his memory of Dickie Greenleaf, Tom describes him as being pleasing in his appearance – perhaps as more handsome than he was. This marks the beginning of Tom idealizing and romanticizing Dickie, a running

habit throughout the novel – even once Tom has killed Dickie. Particularly, Tom emphasizes Dickie’s aura of luck, such as when he describes Dickie’s “happy-go-lucky face” (Highsmith, 6), this is significant when we observe that this is a trait that Tom believes to be practically void in himself. Whereas Tom’s longing for a clean slate made him feel miserable when considering his dreary situation in Chapter One, it changes his world view to one full of excitement and possibilities when he is contemplating his future in Europe as he is sailing on the ship. Tom explores possible career options for after he has finished with Dickie, and now uses long, expansive sentences, complete with explanation marks, and numerous commas to suggest his new openness to possibilities – creating a feeling that anything could happen.

Tom’s longing to transcend his class is obvious in the way he romanticises Europe. Jacqui Miller believes this stems from a belief that “Europe is the place of high-culture and an unearned income, leisure-class lifestyle”. Establishing from the outset Tom’s longing for a comfortably luxurious lifestyle and an elevated status. Upon arriving in Italy, we turn to the question of whether Tom feels any love for Dickie, and whether it has an outcome of what he will do in the rest of the novel. Upon first meeting Dickie, Tom is desperate for his approval, as he admits that it is what “he wanted more than anything else in the world” (Highsmith, 40). From this line, it becomes clear that whether Tom loves Dickie, that Dickie has become the temporary centre of his world. This is seen best in all the lengths that Tom goes to, to entertain Dickie. An example of this is when he is listing his many talents to Dickie. Tom sneaks in foreshadowing for observant readers, when he intersperses his talents that he will be utilizing to conceal the murders he

will commit. But he also makes a reference to what he is doing in that immediate moment, when he says that he can “ do a one-man show in a nightclub in case the regular entertainer’s sick.” (Highsmith, 45). This is a rewording of Tom’s current situation, as he was required to spontaneously entertain Dickie himself, when no other satisfactory person could be found. It also reflects Tom’s current world-view; he is not only entertaining Dickie, but is also grasping new opportunities as they arise, and creating an act as he goes along. This ‘ one-man’ show is replicated later in Tom’s disturbing imitation of Dickie, in which he pretends to kill Marge. The beginning of the passage hints at Tom’s underlying feelings towards Dickie. He copies the strange “ higher pitch” and “ little growl” of Dickie’s voice that only a lover or a con-man would detect, and is able to link these changes to Dickie’s moods – showing how sensitive and close towards Dickie that Tom feels. He then pretends to strangle Marge, while saying “ You were interfering between Tom and me – No, not that! But there is a bond between us!” (Highsmith, 61) This last quote is interesting, as by ‘ that’ we can assume that Tom means a sexual relationship between him and Dickie, which he disputes, but he still insists upon a bond between them. An explanation for what this ‘ bond’ might be – if not sexual – is that Tom sees Dickie as being his second identity – his better half – who has the life he never had. Which brings us to the question; for how long did Tom know that he was going to kill Dickie, beforehand? Was he originally copying Dickie’s mannerisms and observing his habits with the overall intention to become him?

Edward A Shannon seems to think that Tom treated almost like a pleasurable activity – pretending to be someone he’s not – when he points out that Tom “

delights in imitating Dickie long before he decides to kill him." (Shannon, 23). This theory on their 'bond' as Tom sees it, is reinforced when we consider the second part of the passage; Tom seems a lot more calm and devoid of passion as he carefully considers how his appearance is similar to Dickie's. He observes that if he tweaks small features about himself (like his hair) that he can easily merge into his better alter-ego. Tom so much as says this when he is walking around Paris after he has killed Dickie, and observes that "he had two people to take care of" (Highsmith, 104) as if he and Dickie are just opposite sides of the same coin. Tom focuses on the finer aspects of life, such as when he and Dickie are in Cannes and he mentions that he would have been willing to "have paid whatever it cost at the best hotel on the ocean front" (Highsmith, 75). This is interpreted as being Tom's desire to 'live well' and with security, while enjoying Europe in the way he thinks it is supposed to be enjoyed. Tom's fascination with objects is revisited when he eyes Dickie's rings while he contemplates killing him on the train. We already know what Dickie's rings look like from when Tom initially notices them upon first meeting Dickie. This preoccupation with Dickie's rings - which is carried on throughout the entire novel - is central because it seems to be a label or a signifier of Dickie's privilege and upper-class status - something that Tom cannot buy, but ultimately longs for, and wishes to steal. Targan perceives that Dickie's rings possess his initials, and by wearing them, Tom thinks that he can inhabit Dickie's being (Targan, 311). We know that Dickie often likes to dress poorer than he really is, such as when he wears soiled pants, or simple "terracotta" shirts, but it is these rings that he never takes off that reminds everybody around him - and Dickie himself - of his true station in life.

On the train ride back to Mongibello after killing Dickie, Tom admits he is “happy, content, and utterly confident, as he had never been before in his life.” (Highsmith, 86) and this is largely because of the prospect of Dickie’s lifestyle and unlimited material possessions spread out before him. He seems hyperaware of the tactility and appearance of objects, such as when he caresses the sheets and blankets and marvels at them. This gives us an insight into what Tom craves and loves: material possessions, as they are what makes him truly happy. He describes Dickie’s clothes and accessories lovingly, even casually mentioning his love for them; “they were all his and he loved them all” (Highsmith, 97). This sentence could be understood as being a frivolous statement made by Tom in the moment, but throughout the passage Tom takes the time to gloss over the little details that make them a part of Dickie – such as the “sagging pockets” of Dickie’s sweater, and the “well-worn alligator wallet from Gucci’s” (Highsmith, 97). As Shannon points out, Tom seems to be of the belief that “Dickie is his clothes” (Shannon, 24) and just by donning his clothes can Tom transform into Dickie. A lot of the book is defined by how Tom has an internal longing to transcend his class and live the life he feels like he deserves, and he often recreates this for himself through his focus on possessions. Tom loves the idea of being Dickie, so when he is forced to send Dickie’s possessions to storage, he is devastated at the thought of becoming Tom Ripley again. He compares it to “putting on a shabby suit of clothes.... That had not been very good to begin with.” (Highsmith, 148) this highlights his deep dissatisfaction with his natural identity, and when paired with the fact that he cries over Dickie’s clothes, suggests that Tom feels as if Dickie as a part of him, the part that he longs to be. As was mentioned before, Tom does not only love possessions, <https://assignbuster.com/manifestations-of-love-and-longing-in-the-world-of-tom-ripley/>

but he loves the status and lifestyle that Dickie's position and money affords him. Even after being questioned by officers in Venice, he is still eager enough to plan the luxurious meal he plans to eat. Similar to when he is describing possessions, he describes luxury in general in lavish detail, emphasising "creamy sauce over delicate pasta" showing that Tom makes an effort to make sure he savours and enjoys. Upon first arriving in Paris, Tom seems to be in love with how 'chic' and sophisticated it is and he wishes to let "the atmosphere seep in slowly," (Highsmith, 97) In this sense, Tom hopes to be influenced by Paris itself, and to absorb the old-world sophistication and class into himself. Throughout the book, we are aware of Tom's hedonistic love for possessions and luxury, but it is not until the end of the novel does he directly address his feelings towards them.

For Tom, possessions gave a person a sense of self-worth, security, and the freedom to live life on their own terms. Throughout the passage, we get the impression that this is the sincerest Tom has ever been throughout the novel, and he unabashedly admits that he loves his possessions' "quality, and the love that cherished the quality." (Highsmith, 193). Perhaps what this reflection reveals is that Tom loves himself most of all, in the sense that he holds most dear the things that allow himself to live a life of ease and which please him and make him happy. It is normal to love the things that make a person happy, for most people it is our relationships with others. But Tom Ripley is not most people, instead, he forms relationships with objects. He is ecstatic when he gains access to them, cries when they are separated, and cherishes them above all. In the last chapter where Tom anticipates his journey to the Greek Islands, do we see that travel is transformational in

Tom's eyes. He exhibits the desire to arrive "as a living, breathing, courageous individual." (Highsmith, 215) and draws on the 'heroic' history of the Greek Islands by quoting The Odyssey when he imagines the 'wine-dark sea'. Is Tom comparing his journey to The Odyssey, and himself to Odysseus? Perhaps, in the sense that The Odyssey was a journey fraught with dangers and obstacles, and that Odysseus was only able to save himself through his ingenious use of cunning, wit, and disguises. Targan likens Tom to being a type of "shapeshifter" (Targan, 311) where he conforms and fits into whatever ideal that fits his fancy. Where it had once been the easy glamour of Dickie, we see him transform into the brave Odysseus in front of our eyes.

From the outside, Tom can be viewed as the quintessential self-made American male. But beneath the picture-perfect veneer of Thomas Ripley, we discover a man shaped by his consuming hate of his birth-station, who longs for a better life and elevated status so desperately that he is prepared to kill for it. We witness a man who is devoid of any meaningful relationships, but instead fills his days with marvelling over collected possessions and experiences that he loves and adores. When we watch him prepare to shape a new destiny for himself at the closing of the book, we recognize a man whose obsession with materiality and status is so powerful that it can shape not only his world view, but his perception of his identity and himself.