

# Class, clothing and landscape: a deconstruction of the talented mr. ripley



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Anthony Minghella's 1999 film adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, explores the issues and struggles associated with the quest to find one's own identity. Minghella's film employs a post-structuralist analysis, seeing Tom and the individual not as an independent being, but rather "a 'dissolved' or 'constructed' subject... [who is] really a product of social forces" (Barry 65). Tom's notion of self is in constant flux throughout the story, and both the audience and the characters within the film "enter a universe of radical uncertainty" (Barry 61)—unable to discern Tom from Dickie as he moves back and forth between personas, never quite able to zero in on his true self. To deconstruct Tom's identity and convey its continuous instability, Minghella utilizes Tom's costuming and his desire to move from a position of low class to that of the wealthy elite while also highlighting the contrasting landscapes of New York and Italy. In the film, Tom Ripley first appears sporting a Princeton jacket while playing classical music on the piano at a small upper-end party in New York City. Although the viewer is not yet aware that Tom has not attended Princeton, it is quickly made clear after he exits the party, returning the jacket to a friend who was unable to play the piano because of a broken hand. But before returning the jacket, while sitting on the piano bench at the party, Tom is approached by Herbert Greenleaf, a wealthy shipping tycoon whose son also attended Princeton. Even though Tom has never been to Princeton and does not know Greenleaf's son Dickie, he lies to Mr. Greenleaf and asks him how his son is doing. The power that the Princeton jacket has in terms of social mobility is contrasted with Tom's clothing in the following scene. After returning the jacket, Tom rushes to his day job where he is an attendant at a theatre.

Dressed in all white, Tom is seen in the theatre bathroom brushing off men's  
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black suits and throwing away their trash, with no one ever looking at him. While wearing his white attendants uniform, “ he is invisible whereas with the Princeton jacket he is noticed, recognized as a member of the upper-class” (Street 38). Tom desperately yearns to be part of this upper class and Minghella captures this in the same scene as Tom leaves the bathroom and goes to the upper balcony of the theatre. Parting the thick black curtains with his face half concealed behind them, Tom peers down at the stage over the tops of the audiences’ heads. His longing, melancholic gaze is seen momentarily looking in on the life he so desperately wishes to have, just before his stare is caught by a member of the audience, prompting Tom to shut the curtains and run away. While wearing his own clothing, Tom is an extremely soft spoken and nervous individual who is easily persuaded by others. In his meeting at the shipping yards with Herbert Greenleaf, Tom does not even accept the task of going to Italy to find Dickie and bring him home before Mr. Greenleaf says, “ great, I’ll give you \$1, 000”—riding off in his car, leaving Tom standing alone on the docks. Tom’s apartment is another early indication of his wavering personality and class-status. He lives alone in a run-down, dusty, unfurnished dwelling below street level; like his identity which has been in flux since we first met Tom, his apartment is unfinished and unfurnished, unable to provide us with any reflections or indications as to his true self. After packing all of his belongings into one suitcase for the trip to Italy, Tom even calls the driver sent by Greenleaf “ sir”, which prompts a bewildered look and laugh from the driver. The driver says that “ the Greenleaf name opens a lot of doors” to the perpetually smiling Tom, who has most likely never been chauffeured anywhere in his entire life. Wishing to continue receiving the treatment and respect the

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borrowed Princeton jacket afforded him earlier, Tom next makes use of the Greenleaf name as he arrives in Italy. When running into Meredith, the daughter of a famous textile magnate, Tom introduces himself as Dickie Greenleaf, and the name arouses much excitement in Meredith who is happy to meet both an American and another wealthy individual. But Tom's pretending to be Dickie is almost thwarted as Meredith comments on Tom's single suitcase in comparison to her cart teeming with bags. Tom's first two attempts to be an upper class member of society have now set-up a situation where he can only lie to both Herbert Greenleaf and Meredith in order to maintain his newly afforded position. The borrowing of the jacket forces Tom to pretend he is a Princeton graduate and the use of Dickie's name now requires him to play another role solely for Meredith. When Tom first meets Dickie shortly thereafter, he is instantly enamored with the affluent, charismatic, and handsome jazz enthusiast. Dickie's life in Italy is everything that Tom's life in New York is not: it is bright, lavish, sun-tanned, and Dickie lives fast and hard, telling Tom that in order to find his house in Italy, "I took a boat out—first thing I liked, I got it." Dickie's wardrobe is stylish and ever-changing while Tom lives out of his single suitcase, wearing plain white dress shirts and a corduroy jacket. Even Dickie's beach sun-tanned body is contrasted against Tom's when Dickie says to his girlfriend, "you ever see a guy so white, Marge?" Tom and Dickie's classes are sharply contrasted through not only their bodies and clothing, but through their abilities as well. Although Tom reads Shakespeare consistently throughout the film, Dickie comments on Tom's inability to ski or sail a boat, saying: "Such low class, Marge, does this guy know anything?" Tom's infatuation with Dickie's class status and his lifestyle causes Tom to imagine being Dickie. He first stands in <https://assignbuster.com/class-clothing-and-landscape-a-deconstruction-of-the-talented-mr-ripley/>

front of a mirror impersonating Dickie's conversations with Marge and then later dresses up in Dickie's clothing while dancing and singing in front of a mirror. Tom's dressing up in Dickie's clothing "symbolizes Tom's recognition of a more perfect image of himself" (Street 42), as a member of the elite upper class. But when Dickie walks in on Tom, his brief fantasy is shattered and Tom must relinquish Dickie's identity back to him once more. Tom later explains himself, confessing to Dickie that he is in love with his life, saying: "I've gotten to like everything about the way you live...if you only knew my life back home in New York." When in Dickie's company, Tom feels as though he is no longer a theatre attendant from the dark and crowded streets New York City. Instead, Dickie's fortune and the wide-open, sunny, beautiful Italian landscape allow Tom to escape from his low class status and feel as though he is part of the privileged minority. But again, Tom's dream is destroyed when Dickie tells him that he is actually looking forward to Tom's departure back to America: "You can be a leech. You know that. Who are you, huh? Some third-class mooch?" But this time, Tom is unable to bear returning back to his former life in New York City—he attacks Dickie, killing him on the small boat in open sea. After Dickie's death, the hotel receptionist mistakes the visibly shaken-up Tom for Dickie. At this moment, Tom realizes that he does not have to return to New York, but can instead continue to live prosperously through assuming Dickie's title. Tom's clothing also starts to become much more elaborate after Dickie's murder (Street 45). He not only uses Dickie's title and money to check into fancy hotels, but he buys expensive tailored suits and an ornate Italian leather-embossed wallet. Tom also steals Dickie's old clothing: "His usurpation of another man's clothing signifies the appropriation of his identity and an improvement in social status

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that arises only through murder” (Keller 73). Although Tom briefly enjoys his newly acquired status and identity, “ at the same time he can never relax for fear of discovery: the ‘ wholeness’ of his new identity is therefore illusory” (Street 45). Tom’s yearning to become a wealthy, respected member of a higher class has caused him to commit murder and play multiple roles just in order to maintain that status and its privileges. While a rich lifestyle seemed like a positive thing to Tom initially, the fame and notoriety of this new position has now fully inverted only to attract negative attention to Tom. At the opening of the film, both the New York City streets and Tom’s home were crowded and confining while the Italian landscape was liberating; but as the Italian police investigate Tom, who is now posing as Dickie, Italy suddenly becomes very claustrophobic as Minghella centers his scenes around dark indoor locales, narrow alleyways, and shooting through grates and fences to signify Tom’s ensnarement. As Tom is investigated more and more by the authorities, he is now cast as “ the traditional tragic overreacher, the individual who aspires above his place in the social and cosmological hierarchy, a place to which he was not born” (Keller 71). While Tom is trapped in Italy and forced to continue his transformations between identities, he meets Peter Smith-Kingsley, an openly gay man with whom Tom can somewhat unwind; “ With Peter there is no need for Tom to wear elaborate, initialed clothing in order to feel secure” (Street 47). And although Kingsley encourages Tom to “ be himself”, Tom is never fully able to act on this request. Due to the circumstances, “ Tom’s stability with Peter is then only as secure as the moment and Tom is never able to shake off Dickie’s shadow” (Street 48). As Tom succeeds in fooling the authorities and even Herbert Greenleaf into believing that Dickie has committed suicide,

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Minghella briefly allows the audience to believe that Tom will get away with the murders and the assuming of Dickie's identity. As Tom and Peter Smith-Kingsley depart on a cruise in the final scene of the film, on the deck of the boat, Tom is staring off as Italy shrinks in the distance when he randomly runs into Meredith and her aunt. Because of the initial lie he told Meredith upon arriving to Italy about being a Greenleaf, Tom is now "faced with a bitter irony" (Keller 72)—because Meredith knows Tom as Dickie and Kingsley knows Tom as himself, Tom must not let the two meet and is forced to kill one of them in order to maintain his secret. Tom returns to his confined cabin and stands before Peter Smith-Kingsley: just before taking his life, Tom says: "You know, I thought I'd rather be a fake somebody, than a real nobody." In Minghella's version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, both the audience and the characters within the drama never fully see Tom as a unified individual with a concrete identity. Tom's aspirations to escape from his lower class service-based lifestyle to that of a respected upper class member of society are ultimately inverted when he is trapped by the police in Italy and his only means of continuing his new way of life is by committing murder and acting out various roles. Minghella highlights "the mutability of identity", particularly by the contrasts of costuming and setting within the story itself (Street 35). While Tom Ripley searches for his identity along with the supporting characters and audience members, Minghella suggests that the search of a definitive self is perhaps futile. Works Cited Barry, Peter. "Post-structuralism and Deconstruction." *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Third Edition. Ed. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2009. 60-73. Alden Library Electronic Course Reserves. Keller, James R. "'Naught's Had, All's Spent': Shakespeare, Queer Rage, and the Talented Mr. Ripley." <https://assignbuster.com/class-clothing-and-landscape-a-deconstruction-of-the-talented-mr-ripley/>

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