The Talented Mr. Ripley

Patricia Highsmith

About the author
Patricia Highsmith was born Mary Patricia Plangman in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1921. Her parents separated before she was born and she grew up in New York with her mother and stepfather, whose name she adopted. As a teenager, she wrote stories, and after studying English, Latin, and Greek in college, she had a job supplying comic book artists with plots.

Her first book, *Strangers on a Train*, was published in 1960 and was made into a successful movie by director Alfred Hitchcock a year later. In this story, an architect and a psychopath meet by chance on a train and discuss murder. The idea that normal people and psychopaths are not that far removed from each other is one that recurs in many of Highsmith's books, finding its culmination in the creation of Tom Ripley, suave, attractive, and likeable, but utterly amoral. He is a man with a mind uncluttered by the concepts of good and evil.

Highsmith has been praised as one of the more literary novelists in the crime genre. Graham Greene said she “created a world of her own—a world claustrophobic and irrational which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger.” *The Talented Mr. Ripley* won an Edgar Award for Best Novel of 1956 and she also received the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière and the British Crime Writers’ Association’s Silver Dagger Award.

In 1962, Highsmith moved permanently to Europe. She stayed first in Italy, then England, and finally settled in France. The last years of her life were spent in Switzerland, where she died in 1995.

Summary
*The Talented Mr. Ripley*, by Patricia Highsmith, is the first of five books featuring the con man Tom Ripley. As the story begins, Tom is a twenty-three-year-old living in New York. He comes from a fairly disadvantaged background, having been grudgingly raised by an aunt after the death of his parents, but has aspirations to a better life. An accomplished liar and fraudster, he is currently impersonating an agent of the income tax office and collecting supposedly overdue and unpaid taxes from his unsuspecting victims. However, this scam, apparently the latest in a series of dishonest schemes, is more of a silly game than a serious attempt to get money, as he cannot cash the checks he receives. Furthermore, it appears to have gone wrong and he is expecting imminent arrest when he is approached in a bar by Herbert Greenleaf, the wealthy father of a casual acquaintance. Mr. Greenleaf hires him to go to Italy to try to persuade his son Dickie to come home. Dickie is living a bohemian life as a painter and sailor in a small Italian village called Mongibello.

When Tom tracks Dickie down, he finds that Dickie has what seems an enviable life. A trust fund gives him enough to live on and he owns a house by the sea and a boat. Tom quickly insinuates himself into Dickie’s life but kills him when he fears Dickie is growing tired of him. With his talent for impersonation and deceit, Tom is able to pass himself off as Dickie and completely takes over the lifestyle he has come to love and need.

A superficial resemblance between Tom and Dickie is enough to take in strangers, and Tom tricks Marge as to Dickie’s whereabouts. Tom is forced to shuttle back and forth between his two identities and avoid all Dickie’s former friends. A stroke of luck or sheer genius saves Tom from getting caught, even when he dares to pull off his most radical and desperate final scheme.

Chapter 1: Tom Ripley, a twenty-three-year-old con man, is hiding out in a bar, convinced that he is being followed and about to be arrested for his latest string of minor crimes. Instead, the man following him is the father of Dickie Greenleaf, a casual acquaintance. Herbert Greenleaf asks Tom if he would go to Italy and bring Dickie back home.

Chapter 2: On the ship to Europe, Tom writes a letter to end contact with the aunt who raised him. He makes his way to the village of Mongibello and finds Dickie,
who introduces Tom to his friend and neighbor, Marge. Although Dickie is cool towards him, Tom is able to get Dickie to join him for a drink at his hotel.

Chapter 3: Dickie becomes a little friendlier towards Tom, who is pretending to be impressed by Dickie’s paintings. Dickie asks Tom to move into his apartment. Soon the two of them go for a quick trip to Naples and Rome. When they return, Marge is annoyed. When Dickie decides to spend time with Marge as a way of making up, Tom feels desperate and left out. Dickie finds Tom trying on his clothes when he returns to his apartment and is angry. He also lets Tom know that he is not in love with him, as Marge had earlier suggested.

Chapter 4: Tom receives a letter from Mr. Greenleaf politely ending the financial agreement they had since, after one month, Dickie shows no interest in returning home. Tom is unhappy and tries to convince Dickie to go with him to Paris. Instead they go to Sam Remo, without Marge. During a boat ride, Tom kills Dickie by beating him with an oar and burying his body at sea. He tells Marge in Mongibello that Dickie has gone to Rome indefinitely.

Chapter 5: Tom moves to Rome and writes a letter to Marge as Dickie, saying he wants to spend the winter alone in Rome and that Tom is returning home. As he is now receiving Dickie’s monthly checks, Tom makes plans to spend time in Majorca. Before he can leave however, Dickie’s friend Freddie Miles comes looking for Dickie. As Tom and Freddie talk about Dickie, Freddie notices that Tom is wearing Dickie’s silver identification bracelet and becomes suspicious. Tom kills Freddie with an ashtray, pours alcohol down his throat, and takes his body by car to a wooded area, where it is dumped.

Chapter 6: The next day, the police visit Tom, who is impersonating Dickie. The police have found Freddie’s body and want to question “Dickie” about Freddie’s activities the day before. They tell Tom/Dickie not to leave town. Later, Tom reads about the murder of Freddie and also about the finding of a blood-stained boat near San Remo. Two police officers visit again, this time looking for Tom Ripley. Tom, as Dickie, says that Tom has returned to America.

Chapter 7: Tom starts to feel nervous and desperate about the situation he has gotten himself into, and makes plans to go to Palermo, Sicily, to get away. Then Marge calls the apartment. She is calling from the hotel lobby looking for Dickie. Tom says Dickie will be back soon, and tells Marge to wait for him at a nearby coffee shop so they can talk. Tom waits for Marge to leave the hotel lobby, then goes down to ask for Dickie’s mail. He is given a letter written by Marge only moments before, and reads it happily, as Marge indicated that she knows the relationship is over and is returning to the United States. Tom then leaves Rome for Palermo. While in Palermo, he is given letters addressed to Dickie from two banks, which are questioning the signature on some of Dickie’s checks that Tom had cashed. Tom writes to them, as Dickie, and sends a new signature, so that his most recent forgery will not be suspected.

Chapter 8: Tom is given another letter addressed to Dickie by hotel staff. The police are summoning Dickie to Rome to answer questions about Thomas Ripley. Tom desperately thinks of what to do next, and decides to go to Venice. He sends two of Dickie’s suitcases filled with Dickie’s clothes, and two paintings, to the American Express Company there, under the name Robert S. Fanshaw. He goes to Venice by bus, then checks into a hotel. He decides to identify himself to police, and is soon visited by an officer from Rome. Tom realizes that the police think Dickie is running from the law. Relieved that he is not under suspicion, and also becoming increasingly bold, Tom makes plans to write a new will in Dickie’s name, hoping that this will make him wealthy.

Chapter 9: Tom writes a letter to Mr. Greenleaf suggesting the Dickie killed himself. He had also written a letter to Marge suggesting this, and receives a letter back from her thanking him for his kind letter, but mentioning also that she disagrees with the idea that Dickie could have committed suicide. Later, Marge arrives unexpectedly in Venice and Tom invites her to stay with him, although he really does not like her. She accepts the invitation.

Chapter 10: Mr. Greenleaf, who had been in Rome, sends word that he will arrive in Venice later that morning. The meeting between Mr. Greenleaf, Marge and Tom goes well, and Tom is also relieved to learn that the fraud he had committed back in the United States was not going to be uncovered. He is feeling very lucky.

Chapter 11: At Tom’s apartment, Marge discovers Dickie’s rings. Marge then decides that Dickie was going to kill himself, after Tom explains that Dickie had given him the
rings. She calls Mr. Greenleaf and he also comes to this conclusion. Later, Mr. Greenleaf introduces Tom to an American detective. After a conversation about the rings, and Freddie, the detectives appears to believe that Dickie may be in hiding because he is, in fact, the person who killed Freddie.

Chapter 12: Tom writes a letter to Mr. Greenleaf saying he had found an old letter containing Dickie's will. The suitcases belonging to Dickie, in storage in Venice for Tom to use later, have been found by police. This serves to act as proof that Dickie may in fact be alive and in hiding. Tom heads to Greece, and upon his arrival learns that he is not under suspicion at all. He also receives a letter from Mr. Greenleaf, who agrees to abide by the will Tom says he had found in Dickie's suitcase and had sent him. Tom is now wealthy and free, and he asks the taxi driver to take him to the best hotel in Athens.

Background and themes

The Talented Mr. Ripley is an ingeniously plotted psychological thriller. At its heart is the character of Tom Ripley, callous, calculating and amoral. In the course of the novel, he lies, cheats, deceives and kills. He is totally cold, yet we warm to him. We want him to succeed and we applaud him when he finally escapes justice.

Good vs evil: Just as in her first novel, Strangers on a Train, Highsmith explores the idea that there is no great difference between the psychopath and the ordinary citizen. She shows us just how easy it is to cast off the veneer of civilization and share the point of view of a murderer. Tom has no conscience, but we presumably do. Yet we side with him. His evil deeds are chronicled precisely and in detail. The facts are laid out before us and we cannot say we don't know. We are given a privileged view of the inner workings of Tom's mind, but by an objective, almost clinical, third person narrator who does not try to manipulate us or sway our emotions. At the end we are as guilty as Tom is. We admire him and his audacity. This realization is a disturbing one and contributes greatly to the power of the novel.

Film adaptations: The Talented Mr. Ripley has twice been made into a movie. It appeared first under the title Purple Noon in 1966, and more recently in 1999 by Oscar-winning director Anthony Minghella. The more recent movie, starring Matt Damon as Tom, Jude Law as Dickie, and Gwynyth Paltrow as Marge, was a big box office success. In this later film, the homosexual theme was more evident.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Research: Have students check the Internet for information about “genre” in story writing. Students then get into groups to list and describe the different genres of stories they have learned about.

2 Discuss: Ask students: What sorts of genres do you like to read? Which genres are you not so interested in? Which genres do you think are popular and have been around for a long time? Which genres do you think are very specialized and quite new?

3 Write: Ask students to give well-known examples of different genres. Ask students if they can identity authors who are famous for writing certain genres (for example, Agatha Christie is famous for writing murder mysteries). Students can work in pairs and then share the information with the class.
The Talented Mr. Ripley

Chapters 1–3, pages 1–17
Before reading

4 Discuss: Talk about movie adaptations of books.
Ask students: Which do you prefer, reading a book or watching a movie? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two ways of telling a story? If a book is made into a story, do you like to read the book before you see the movie? Can you think of any books you've read where you've also seen the movie? How were they different? Which was better?

5 Guess: Talk about the picture on the front of the book. Ask students: Who do you think is the person in the picture? Where is the story set? What feelings do you get about the main character from the way he is standing on the cover picture? What kind of story do you think this is going to be? How does the cover artwork give us clues about the type of story it is?

6 Research: Ask students to use the Internet to find additional information about the author and her works, this story, and any film adaptations. You may also suggest that students divide into groups to watch the two film versions of this story. Later, have the students discuss the similarities and differences between the two different movies.

While reading

7 Sequence: Have students put the following events in the order in which they happen:
- Tom meets Dickie Greenleaf and Marge on the beach.
- Tom writes to Aunt Dottie.
- Tom takes a bus to Mongibello.
- Tom and Dickie go to Rome.
- Tom books into a hotel in Mongibello.
- Tom meets Herbert Greenleaf in a bar.
- Dickie invites Tom to lunch.
- Tom boards a ship going to Naples.
- Herbert Greenleaf tells Tom that his wife is seriously ill.
- Tom takes Freddie Miles.
- Dickie shows Tom his paintings.
- Tom gives Dickie a shirt and some socks from his mother.

8 Read carefully: Tell students to read carefully the first two paragraphs on page 16. It is the scene where Tom puts on some of Dickie's clothes, then has an imaginary conversation. Ask students: What do Tom's words and actions in this scene tell us about Tom Ripley?

9 Discuss: Ask students: Why do you think Chapter 2 is called "A New Start"? Why is Chapter 3 called "Friendships and Jealousies"?

After reading

10 Check: Have students check their predictions from the previous activity as to meaning behind the chapter titles.

11 Role play: Discuss with students the reasons Tom thinks of for agreeing to Mr. Greenleaf’s request. Does he plan on bringing Dickie home? What are his real plans? Then get them to dramatize the internal conflict Tom might have if he was a normal person.

Chapters 4–6, pages 17–41
Before reading

13 Predict: Ask students to read the letter to Tom from Mr. Greenleaf on page 18, at the beginning of Chapter 4, and imagine the following: Does Tom decide to return to the United States after reading the letter? If not, what does Tom decide to do?

14 Guess: Why do you think Chapter 3 is called "A Loss of Control"? Why is Chapter 4 called "A New Identity"?

While reading

15 Check: Have students check their predictions from the previous activity as to Tom's response to Mr. Greenleaf’s letter.

16 Discuss: In small groups, have students compare and contrast Tom's motives for committing the murders of Dickie Greenleaf and Freddie Miles.

17 Brainstorm: Ask students to list the arguments that Tom might think of to convince himself that he could actually succeed at impersonating Dickie Greenleaf.

After reading

18 Write: In pairs, students write a letter from Marge to Freddie Miles, telling him that she is worried about Dickie and describing his sudden decision to move from Mongibello to Rome.

19 Write: In pairs, students write newspaper articles that appeared in the press after the discovery of Freddie's body or after the discovery of the sunken boat near San Remo.

20 Check: Have students check their predictions from the previous activity as to meaning behind the chapter titles.

21 Role play: In pairs, have students take on the roles of Mr. Greenleaf and his wife in a discussion which takes place just before Mr. Greenleaf writes the letter to Tom on page 83. Student A: You are Mr. Greenleaf. You are starting to think Dickie committed suicide and wish to honor the contents of his will. Student B: You are Mrs. Greenleaf. Do you agree with your husband? If so, give reasons to support your belief. If not, have an argument about this issue with your husband.

Chapters 7–9, pages 41–63
Before reading

22 Guess: Ask students: Why do you think Chapter 7 is called “Waiting Game”? Why is Chapter 8 called “The Return of Tom Ripley”?
The Talented Mr. Ripley

23 Discuss: Have students read part of the letter Marge wrote to Dickie and that Tom opened and read for himself, on page 44. Then ask them to discuss the following questions: What does Marge appear to be inferring repeatedly in this section of her letter? What do you think is motivating her to do so? Why does the author write that this letter was “… all [Tom] had hoped for and more?”

While reading
24 Check: Have students check their predictions from the previous activity as to meaning behind the chapter titles.
25 Debate: In pairs, have students debate the pros and cons of Tom identifying himself to Venice police. Have a student list the arguments on the board.
26 Write: In small groups, students write a letter from Tom to Marge in which he tells Marge that he dislikes her, and what his reasons are.

After reading
27 Role play: In pairs, students write and act out a different final scene between Freddie and Tom. Then have other students suggest how this new scene would alter the rest of the story.
28 Reporting: In pairs, students act out the conversation between Lieutenant Roverini and his boss when he returns from Venice to report on his interview with Tom Ripley.
29 Artwork: Have students make an “Information wanted” poster regarding the death of Freddie Miles, or the blood-stained boat found near San Remo.

Chapters 10–12, pages 63–84

Before reading
30 Brainstorm: In groups, students write as many sentences as they can giving information about either Freddie or Marge. They then read them out to the class to see which group has the most information.
31 Guess: Ask students: Why do you think Chapter 12 is called “Tom Ripley's Heroic Journey”?

While reading
32 Write: Have students write a report from the American detective, Alvin McCarron, to his client, Mr. Greenleaf, about what his observations are and what his assessment of the situation is regarding Dickie.
33 Read carefully: Have students read carefully, or reread, the conversation between the detective Alvin McCarron and Tom, on pages 72 to 75. Ask students: How do we know that the detective is not as intelligent as Tom thinks he should be? How does this make Tom feel?
34 Newspaper writing: Have students read the conversation between Tom and his friend Titi on pages 79 and 80. Then ask them to write a newspaper article that contains the information discussed by them.

After reading
35 Role play: In small groups, students choose a scene from one of these chapters and act it out.
36 Discuss: Have a class discussion about the character of Alvin McCarron, based on the conversation he has with Tom. Ask students to think about and give their opinions as to how good McCarron is at his job, as well as what his reasons may have been to take on the job in the first place.
37 Debate: In small groups, have students write down their thoughts as to how Tom manages to get away with everything. Is it luck or smart and quick thinking? Then assign students to debate one side or the other, and have groups recount events in the story where Tom’s success is due to luck or due to skill.
38 Discuss: In small groups, students discuss the following questions: Are you glad that Tom escapes justice at the end? What do you think Tom will do now?

Extra activities
39 Check: Have students check their guesses from the previous “Before reading” activity as to meaning behind the title of Chapter 12.
40 Discuss: Ask students: Why does the author use the word “heroic” to describe Tom’s journey? What exactly does she mean by the term “heroic journey”?
41 Write: In small groups, have students write a new ending to the story and read it aloud to the class. Students then vote on the best new ending, and give their opinions as to whether it was a better ending than the original version.
42 Role play: In small groups, students choose an important scene from any part of the book and act it out.
43 Discuss: In groups, students discuss which was the better story: the book or a movie version.
44 Debate: Teach the term “forensic science” to the class, and ask students whether they have ever watched television episodes of shows such as “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation.” Then have a class debate, or a discussion, about the following statement: Improvements in modern forensic science would have resulted in a different story for Tom Ripley, if it had taken place today. Students should try to give examples of where in the story things would have happened differently.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.