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## **Classism and the Fervent Pursuit of the American Dream: A Further Look into Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley***

*John Waterman*

In Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), Matt Damon's character, the eponymously named "Tom Ripley" travels to Italy to attempt to persuade Jude Law's character, "Dickie Greenleaf" to return to New York after his extended stay in Europe. When Tom arrives, he swindles his way into Dickie's life and eventually befriends him and his fiancée, Marge. As the story progresses, Tom becomes more and more obsessed with Dickie's way of life; his days spent in his beautiful Italian home surrounded by beautiful Italian women and fueled by beautiful American money. Ultimately, Tom ends up killing Dickie and taking his place, spending the rest of the movie scrambling to keep up appearances and killing off loose ends. Ripley's journey, his desire to be a "somebody" and the resulting consequences highlight Minghella's critique of the American dream for upward social mobility: that when avarice and the desire for status are the sole drivers in the pursuit of a better life, one is often left off in a worse state than the one he began in.

Even in the very beginning of the movie, the audience becomes privy to Tom's deep seeded desire to acquire power and money. From 4:08 to 4:15, we see Tom peeping through a curtain in an attempt to catch a glimpse at the opera taking place on the other side. He stares longingly at the actors before a well-dressed lady turns around and notices him, causing Tom to quickly dart back behind the deep black curtain. The opera embodies status and class, and the only thing Tom desires is to be a part of it, to enjoy it, but the black curtain and the well-dressed lady that scares him off represent his lack of means to properly enjoy it and the "no-outsiders-allowed" temperament of the people that are involved, respectively. Tom wants to feel involved, to feel like his is part of the upper-class, but the reality is that he simply is not a participating member. This idea is further compounded at 5:57, where Tom is seen stuck between two black bars, in the middle of his grimy little apartment, forced to listen to the screaming of his neighboring tenants. As much as Tom

would love to escape, he is stuck right where he is, slightly above the lowest of the low, but nowhere near the highest.

Tom's desire to stay in power after he is commissioned to retrieve Dickie becomes evident the moment he lands in Italy. At 9:15, he tells a woman his name is "Dickie, Dickie Greenleaf". After he has successfully entered Dickie's inner circle, he even states, "I'll do anything for you [Dickie], you're the brother I never had. I'm the brother you've never had" (47:08). Tom is so strongly motivated by his greed that he is literally willing to do "anything" to keep it. After he kills Dickie and takes over his life, the audience sees Tom enjoying himself, even sitting in an expensive private box watching an opera with a beautiful woman by his side (1:09:13), the very situation he had previously been shut out of. Soon after, however, things start to go horribly wrong for Tom, as he is forced to kill Dickie's friend, Freddie, to cover his tracks (1:26:22). As the police start suspecting him, Tom's new life falls into shambles, and by 1:39:48, he has completely fallen out of Dickie's life and back into his own. By the end of the movie, Tom is forced to kill the only person who truly loves him, his friend Peter (2:11:28), and by 2:14:04, the black bars have fallen back upon him, this time completely surrounding his image until they completely engulf him, leaving him no better off than he was when he first began, living in his tiny apartment and peeping at operas from behind a curtain.

Minghella's little film opera turns out to be a tragedy, the story of a man driven by greed and the desire to be a "somebody" leading to the ultimate loss of all he held precious in his life. Through Tom Ripley's demise, Minghella comments on all who push boundlessly and recklessly into the unknown in pursuit of power, and states, with much finality and sorrow, that the perfect ideal of the American Dream, the idea that anyone can make it to the upper-class so long as they push themselves to the upper limit, is nothing more than a fool's errand.