

# THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY

Directed by Anthony Minghella  
Produced by William Hornberg and Tom Sternberg  
Distributed by Paramount Pictures and Miramax Films  
Released in 1999

A prime candidate for the most uncomfortable film since *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is, nonetheless, elegant, elegiac, and engrossing. A powerhouse cast of Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Cate Blanchett, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Jack Davenport, Philip Baker Hall, and James Rebhorn go for broke in this tale of pathological deception. And Matt Damon is perfect as Ripley. Damon's face can be exploited as handsome or goofy, depending on the lighting and camera positions, making his dual existence all the more believable. There's nothing wrong with the plotting, the costumes, or the music. It's an exceptional evocation of a time gone by, loaded with suspense and surprises. What isn't clear is whether the subject matter is too unpleasant to make for a good film. While undeniably *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is more tasteful than the reprehensible *Hannibal* (2001), it may be asking too much to have a protagonist this twisted as the relentless focus of the story. There's no getting away from him. (Yes, he's in every scene.) While films with anti-heroes are common, and successful, the anti-hero must have a goal the audience can identify with—revenge is a common one.

What is Tom Ripley's goal? He wants to assume the identity of a man he has killed (was it *murder*?) after a vicious row gets out of hand.

The goal isn't commendable.

In the first half of the film we can sympathize with Tom. Swept up in the luxury of a rich-man's Italy he is nonetheless maligned and embarrassed by Dickie, who is inconstant and arrogant, struggling with demons of his own. The director tries to compensate for Tom's increasingly odd behavior by forcing us to care. He's poor, he's regaled for being pale, he's ripped to shreds for being boring and vacuously garrulous. So as the film proceeds we have more reasons to sympathize with Ripley, but as his wrongs mount we have more reasons to despise him. Does the film keep the balance right until the end, when Ripley kills his handsome, kind, and totally benign lover to keep Meredith from discovering his true identity? Can we still accept him as a worthy, but flawed, protagonist up to that point?

If the film hasn't crossed that line when Tom bashes in the head of the annoying but perfectly harmless Freddie, then it occurs when Tom confronts Marge with a straight-razor in his hand (his bizarrely chipper countenance and Marge's near-hysteria produce the most chilling scene in the film).

Even as we try to make sense of the three killings, identifying with Tom is more a matter of understanding his homosexuality. When he's caught mincing around in Dickie's tuxedo, Dickie is aghast. We are, too...but we're also embarrassed for him. It's a great character-

defining moment. The decision by director Minghella to keep the protagonist a homosexual (44 years after the Patricia Highsmith novel was published) was brave and right. Even though the idea of a homosexual killer could not be without controversy at a point where the sexual revolution, continuing apace from heterosexual to homosexual spheres, had rendered by 1999 any criticism of sexual decisions as something gauche, it's still necessary for this character to be gay.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* is about unrequited love. It's just that Ripley's a boy, not a girl. When the boy he loves rejects him, he is crushed. Thus, the film's biggest flaw (again, there aren't many) may be that the true climax of the film is right there on that outboard boat. The rest of the story is the mechanics (and the cost) of getting away with it. If Ripley really does think he can become Dickie then new layers of meaning immediately present themselves. However, it's more reasonable to interpret Ripley's actions in assuming Dickie's identity as self-serving, not self-delusional. And, even interpreting the film this way, the ending still packs a punch—Ripley kills his new (true?) love, Peter, to keep Meredith from discovering the deception that Ripley undertook before he even met Dickie. This is the ultimate irony of the story: When he first meets Meredith he poses as Dickie Greenleaf in order to impress her and to feel better about himself. Without Dickie he's a nobody! Without him around, without pretending to be him, Tom can't get the time of day. The only character who really cares about him is Peter. But when he finally wants to be plain-old Tom, with the police stymied and the trust-fund money tumbling into his lap, he has to be Dickie. It's really vanity, not homicidal jealousy, that is his undoing.

And so, having killed Peter, we can see that Tom didn't really love Dickie or Peter! With apologies to Oscar Wilde, we do not kill what we love. Tom's mistake comes back to haunt him, preventing him from being with Peter. But Tom could have accepted his fate and spared Peter (just as he could have spared Freddie).

There's no mistaking what he does to Dickie, why he does it, and how horrible it is. If Ripley couldn't have him then nobody could. Indeed, the rest of the movie is a discovery of what really happened on that boat. It wasn't self-defense or some kind of freak mistake. At the film's conclusion we can finally see that it *was* murder, but it certainly wasn't plain and simple.