

”There is no real me”

An analysis of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* as a social critique

Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

In this master's thesis, I examine how Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) can be seen as a critique of American society and the mass consumer, through the novel's use of features of the postmodern Gothic, its portrayal of consumerism, its usage of the serial killer narrative, as well as how the novel uses unreliability to convey this critique. In addition, I discuss how the character of Patrick Bateman can ultimately be seen as emblematic of the central ideas of this society.

In order to analyse these aspects of the novel, I use theories on the parallels between the Gothic and postmodernism to examine how the Gothic has evolved into a contemporary version of the genre, which can be used to portray the darker sides of humanity, and the consequences of capitalism and consumerism in contemporary society. To analyse the novel in terms of the serial killer narrative as a fictional genre, I use theory on how this particular type of narrative has been influenced by, for example, folklore and the Gothic, and additionally, how a specific type of serial killer narrative, the "wilding" serial killer, can be used to analyse *American Psycho*.

Based on my analysis of the postmodern Gothic, consumerism, the serial killer narrative and unreliability in the novel, I find that Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* uses all of these aspects to convey a critique of capitalist society and consumerism. The novel uses the postmodern Gothic setting to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and the Gothic villain to convey a critique of undesirable personality traits such as greed and narcissism. In addition, it juxtaposes parody and horror to create uncertainty at different levels of the narrative. Society in *American Psycho* is based upon the idea that the most important things are wealth, prestige and material objects. In such a society, where every material has been achieved, people like Patrick Bateman must ultimately find other ways to satisfy their needs for control and power. Furthermore, I find that the serial killer narrative is used to criticise society for making it

possible for a person such as Patrick Bateman to murder and torture as he pleases and get away with it. Lastly, I find that the character of Patrick Bateman can be seen as emblematic of the ideas of society in the novel, and that this type of society is at fault for creating violent serial killers who are able to blend in and remain undetected, and even able to escape any sort of punishment in the end.

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Preface

Since the 1970s, the phenomenon of serial killing has gotten a growing amount of attention (Simpson 1) and in recent years; books, TV shows and podcasts about murders and serial killers have been produced in extreme numbers. The investigation of the twisted minds of these human monsters is something that attracts viewers and readers, and there seems to be a large cultural fascination with serial killing and with violent crime in general, both in regard to true crime stories and fictional accounts of murder and serial murder. Yet, tales about multiple murder and the darker sides of humanity have been used throughout history to convey ideas about society. One example of such a fictional text is Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* from 1991, which is an infamous fictional depiction of a serial killer. The novel caused great controversy already before its publication and ignited the anger of many critics. *American Psycho* uses a sort of murdering-stream-of-consciousness monologue to narrate the story (Simpson 136). The novel follows Patrick Bateman, a twenty-six-year-old investment banker in New York, and his life among other wealthy, young and successful people who all look the same, have similar jobs and go to the same places. Bateman is obsessed with his looks, clothing and expensive items in general, and occasionally he murders, rapes and tortures a variety of different victims. Yet, *American Psycho* is not a typical serial killer narrative where the killer ultimately gets caught and punished. Instead, it is a depiction of a corrupt society where the serial killer, Patrick Bateman, represents all the notions that are associated with success and therefore represents that society. The novel uses features of the postmodern Gothic to convey this message and Bateman in many ways resembles the classic Gothic villains, who are villainous and immoral. Furthermore, *American Psycho* uses notions from consumerism to portray contemporary society and the greed that has infected it, and in addition it plays with unreliability in almost all aspects of the novel to draw attention to the corruption of this society.

The purpose of this master's thesis is to analyse Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* as a social critique in terms of its use of features of the postmodern Gothic, consumerism, the serial killer narrative and unreliability, and finally to discuss how ultimately Patrick Bateman can be seen as emblematic of the ideas of this society.

Theory

In this part, I will account for some of the central aspects of postmodern Gothic literature, with special regards to the Gothic genre and the parallels between the Gothic and postmodernism. Thereafter, I will account for some of the background of the contemporary serial killer narrative in general, with special regards to aspects that are relevant to analysing *American Psycho*.

The postmodern Gothic

The Gothic genre emerged as a reaction to the ideas of the Enlightenment, which caused people to become less superstitious than before and therefore be capable of understanding fear and evil in a new way. The genre can be dated back to 1764 and Horace Walpole's novella *The Castle of Otranto*, which is generally considered as the first Gothic novel (Groom ix). Some of the characteristic features of the Gothic is in relation to its setting, characters and themes. Ruth Helyer states that Gothic literature typically deals with "characters' fears of the forbidden and their repression of unauthorized urges. They warn against extremes of pleasure and stimulation, which are seen to dull the capacity to reason, and encourage the transgression of social properties and moral laws." (Helyer 726) The classic Gothic tales are often set in a remote and deserted castle or mansion that is filled with darkness and mysterious hidden passages. Sudden noises can appear out of nowhere, such as the creaking of a door or clattering of metal. This type of setting creates suspense and an "air of mystery around what the surface aesthetics of

setting and characters are hiding, and more crucially, what can be construed about their inner capacities.” (Helyer 726) The Gothic narrative typically features characters with transgressive behaviour, who are threatening and dark and has “guilty secrets and unpleasant habits.” (Helyer 726) This type of character is typically an immoral and villainous male character, who causes fear and suffering upon an innocent female character, due to, for example, their bestial urges. These evil, monstrous or unstable characters stand in opposition to the acceptable traits in society and can be a way to portray the darker and more problematic sides of humanity. Helyer states that instead of “development, honesty, and credibility they represent regression, deceit, and untrustworthiness.” (Helyer 726-727) In general, the Gothic genre judges the perverse and the evil, as it portrays these characters and their behaviours as something villainous and does not make the reader feel empathy towards them or understand their actions.

Furthermore, Gothic stories have changed themselves through the years to fit within the social reality of their historical context (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31). The castles, graveyards, monsters and ghosts of the early Gothic works have been replaced in accordance with the changing society. The classic Gothic castle has been substituted by another setting, such as the modern city or the desert, and the monsters, or other forms of Gothic villains have been replaced by, for example, the psycho killer (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31). Contemporary Gothic narratives still feature the same elements as their early counterparts and notions of power, desire and darkness are still at the centre of them, they merely come in another form and are established through new techniques (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31). During the 20th century, the Gothic has been expanded and, as a result, is now used in a variety of different contexts, such as, for example, comics, advertisements and film (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31).

According to Fred Botting, the combination of fear and laughter have been a part of Gothic texts since the beginning. This play on opposite emotions creates “an ambivalence that

disturbs critical categories that evaluate their seriousness or triviality.” (Botting 109) The Gothic produces powerful emotions, such as fear, anxiety and laughter, and often in a bewildering mixture. By mixing emotions such as anxiety and amusement, the texts can make the reader disoriented about what to actually think and feel about it. Furthermore, Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that one of the main characteristics of the postmodern Gothic is “its uncertainty not only at the level of narrative, a trait already present in the first manifestations of the gothic form, but also at the level of genre” (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 32). According to Botting, this mixing of genres, forms and narratives has “uncanny effects, effects which make narrative play and ambivalence another figure of horror, another duplicitous object to be expelled from proper orders of consciousness and representation.” (Botting 110) The play on genre, narrative and emotions such as amusement and fear therefore has an effect of horror due to the uncertainty these devices can cause. In addition, one of the notions of the Gothic has to do with disruptions of, for example, perspective and scale, which can cause openings into other spaces or worlds to appear and disappear. In the classic Gothic tales, this could, for example, be through the secret and mysterious paths and doors in a haunted castle. In the Gothic, nothing is stable and everything can change overnight. David Punter and Glennis Byron describes how what we find in the combination of the Gothic and the postmodern then, “is a certain sliding of location, a series of transfers and translocations from one place to another, so that our sense of stability of the map is ... forever under siege, guaranteed to us only by manuscripts whose own provenance and completeness are deeply uncertain.” (Punter and Byron 51) Furthermore, the postmodern Gothic also pays a certain amount of attention to what Byron and Punter calls “the divisions and doublings of the self.” (Punter and Byron 51) These aspects then create a “double sense of dislocated space and threatened subjectivity.” (Punter and Byron 51) Uncertainty, both at the level of setting and space, and regarding the characters and their identities, is therefore at the centre of both the Gothic and the postmodern.

Furthermore, both the Gothic and the postmodern are often considered as quite vague and not easily defined categories (Smith 6). According to Helyer, this makes them both encourage more individual interpretations and the use of the imagination (Helyer 727). In general, the Gothic and the postmodern have many features in common. Allan Lloyd Smith, for example, has commented on the fact that the two share many parallels, such as an indeterminacy regarding the narrative, the use of pastiche or parody, criminality and excess and paranoia (Smith 6-16). The Gothic uses indeterminacy in the narrative to create mystery and suspense, whereas the postmodern uses it to break down boundaries and societal structures. Smith argues that in both, we find “a tension of explanation versus complication and mystery; elaboration, complexity, excess, scandal, desire.” (Smith 7) In the postmodern Gothic, there is uncertainty and mystery in the narrative and the characters, who are usually tormented and struggling to submit to the laws and moral rules of society. Pastiche or parody is, for example, used as a way to comment on society. About the typical characters in Gothic fiction, Smith argues that they are “universally remarked to be flat, two dimensional, without development, except as representative of various neuroses and tabooed desires.” (Smith 12) These characters, then, becomes a way to express ideas about humanity and society. In addition, both the postmodern and the Gothic deal with criminality and excess, transgression of boundaries and violation of the moral laws of society (Smith 14-15). According to Philip L. Simpson, these parallels “explain the continued vitality of Gothicism (or neo-Gothicism) within the postmodern world.” (Simpson 32)

The conventions of the serial killer narrative

Stories about serial murder, or multiple murder as it was known as before the 1980s, are nothing new and this type of fiction can be traced back to the folklore tradition. In his book *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*,

Philip L. Simpson argues that it is “surely no accident that these murderers often become associated with monstrous or supernatural traits drawn from folklore.” (Simpson 3) In folklore, the fears of the people would often be embodied in a variety of monsters that could express these ideas. In previous periods, these were expressed through images of imaginary or supernatural monsters, such as werewolves, witches, and vampires, whereas in contemporary times, the serial killer narrative can provide a way for society to project its fantasies or nightmares in a similar way (Simpson 3). Serial killers are often compared to monsters or devils and, according to Simpson, this type of “supernatural image of the human/monster hybrid is, of course, central to the project of rendering the serial killer into a proper folklore demon.” (Simpson 3) Like his folkloric ancestors, the serial killer is notorious and has achieved almost mythical status, especially due to the duality of this type of character. The serial killer is able to, at least somewhat, hide his monstrous and evil side and is thus able to move freely in society and not draw unwanted attention to himself. Simpson describes the serial killer as “a postmodern shape-shifter or changeling child” (Simpson 3), who has two different faces, one nonthreatening, to wear in public, and one evil that only the killer’s victims experience. In this way, the serial killer can hide their monstrous side behind a seemingly human mask, remain undetected and continue with their evil doings. Resembling the monsters of earlier tales, the serial killer is able to sort of shapeshift between their evil and their nonthreatening side, which makes them somewhat invisible in society, just as, for example, the werewolves and the vampires could, although they could not necessarily always control it themselves. The serial killer ultimately remains at least partly human, just like vampires and werewolves who has a similar duality. Furthermore, just like their folklore counterparts, fictional serial killers can come in different variants. Some, like the vampire, will kill and devour other humans to fulfil some sort of urge or lust, whereas others, like the werewolf, to some degree transform into a beastly being that is controlled by more primal urges and is therefore not fully conscious of

what they are doing. Yet, the fictional serial killers are usually inspired by the vampire trope. Simpson states that “fictional representations of contemporary serial killers obviously plunder the vampire narratives of the past century and a half” (Simpson 4). The serial killer, both fictional and as portrayed by the media, is presented as a monster that is in many ways similar to, especially, the vampires of the earlier folk tradition. The serial killer is “a similar human monster, textually coded as generically supernatural but, in part, vampiric.” (Simpson 4) Moreover, by making a human murderer inhuman, through for example monster imagery, the horror of the crimes and the fear it induces can be lessened (Simpson 7). The supernatural is in many ways less disturbing than realising that humans can be capable of committing such heinous crimes. Simpson argues that a “visible, so-called monstrous threat, even if it doesn’t exist, can be combated and ritually purged.” (Simpson 7) The evil as a monster is something that is easier to comprehend than it being entirely human, as this makes it more difficult to destroy and rid the world of. Furthermore, Simpson states that: “Like any “good” monster, the serial killer as a type never really dies in the narratives of multiple murder. Certainly, an individual murderer in the typical serial killer narrative may die, but another will invariably rise from the Gothic setting to take his place.” (Simpson 8) The serial killer can never really be destroyed or purged, as another one will always emerge and due to the fact that the memories of the killer’s horrific actions will continue to linger and haunt and frighten the people (Simpson 8).

In addition, serial killer fiction involves features from different genres. As stated by Simpson, the serial killer narrative has “developed its own subgeneric conventions and plot formulas, while overlapping with and borrowing from a variety of genres, such as horror and detective noir.” (Simpson 9) Serial killer fiction certainly belongs within the genre of horror and uses many of the literary devices from it. According to Simpson, the horror genre can be defined as “that which depicts monsters for the purpose of disturbing, unsettling, and

disorienting its consumers, often for the seemingly paradoxical purpose of reinforcing community identity.” (Simpson 9) Horror stories can become a way to collectively experience and comprehend shared fears that would otherwise be difficult to express. Moreover, Simpson argues that horror does not always involve an aspect of the supernatural, as many of the horror films of the 1970s did, instead it “is better understood as the state of mind induced by one’s confrontation with a violation of *cultural categories*.” (Simpson 10) An example of such a violation is regarding the serial killer. He pollutes the moral environment, due to the fact that the serial killer is recognised as a monster, which makes him tainted and, in a way, infectious like his folkloric ancestors, the vampire and the werewolf. Another common device used in horror is repetition, or doubling, due to the fact that repetition can create further suspense. A serial killer, and his repetitive horrifying murders, is therefore a typical subject within the horror genre (Simpson 10). Moreover, even though serial killers are usually represented as monsters, they still generally have some sort of tragic personal backstory that explains how and why they became what they are, which in some way can earn them the reader’s sympathy and humanise them (Simpson 11). Yet, the serial killers still perform monstrous acts which “propel them into the mythic territory reserved for the most extreme taboo violators. Their random murders pollute, in that they often involve gross injury, mutilation and dismemberment.” (Simpson 11) They violate the laws of society and create chaos through their actions and lack of any real motive.

The subgenre of serial killer fiction can be dated to coincide with the origin of the serial killer term itself around the late 1970s or early 1980s (Simpson 14). In general, the serial killers within this subgenre “defy ready understanding and to observers confirm the darkest fears about the human nature.” (Simpson 14) They do so through their terrible actions, which ultimately makes them “debased and traumatized visionaries, whose murders privately re-empower them with a pseudo-divine aura.” (Simpson 14) In these narratives, human nature is flawed, due to

the fact that these monstrous killers can exist. As Simpson states about most works in the serial killer subgenre, there is “a melancholy sense that mankind, because it is always susceptible to committing evil of this magnitude, is ultimately doomed.” (Simpson 14) Even though the serial killer term and the specific genre of serial killer fiction is fairly recent, these types of narratives are influenced by a variety of things. Simpson describes the serial killer subgenre as a hybrid and a “dark patchwork of earlier genre depictions of multiple murderers and folkloric threatening figures.” (Simpson 14) He argues that the genre has been “reworked over the years into the contemporary moment and packaged for mass reconsumption in pseudo-demonic forms” (Simpson 14). This form, then, has been inspired by the vampires and werewolves of the folk legends, yet is at the same time a way to reflect the cultural anxieties of American society at the time.

The contemporary serial killer narrative is heavily influenced by the Gothic. According to Simpson, the serial killer is “a neo-Gothic villain and demon lover.” (Simpson 15) Just like the classic folklore devils, the serial killer has become a part of a contemporary mythology, where the evil and malicious lurks just around the corner in people’s everyday lives (Simpson 16). Simpson describes this contemporary mythology as a paranoid mythology, where the actors, for example, sexually violate or physically abuse their loved ones, worship Satan, or “kill strangers in order to keep their heads in the freezer and their sex organs in a pot on the stove.” (Simpson 16) A common theme of this contemporary mythology is that of multiple murder, or serial murder. The popularity of the serial killer narrative in recent years, can be viewed as an expression of a need for some degree of order and universal myths to lessen the pressure of the paradoxes and struggles of contemporary society (Simpson 16). Simpson argues that the reason why the contemporary serial killer narratives resonate with the American public is due to the fact that they express ideas that a lot of people can relate to, namely an “extreme frustration with not only the dehumanizing complexities of mass democracy ... but the

representational ambiguities of the postmodern world.” (Simpson 17) The serial killer turns toward a more primal stage, where violence and immediate fulfilment of urges are central, due to frustrations over a lack of transcendental meaning (Simpson 17). Furthermore, serial killer narratives are heavily influenced by the Gothic genre’s tendency to transgress all boundaries in the narrative. Transgressing these boundaries, or breaking the rules of society, becomes the central purpose or idea of the text, as opposed to having a conscious ideological agenda (Simpson 19). Simpson argues that the “safest ideological conclusion to draw from these narratives is that they are relentlessly pessimistic about human nature, which is seen as polarized into saint and sinner” (Simpson 19). These narratives also deal with the relationship between, and the breaking of boundaries between, other polarized pairings, such as good and evil, female and male and high and low culture. Simpson argues that the serial killer’s behaviour in these narratives, is “almost always constructed as an acting-out of what everyone else in the narrative feels an urge to do in the first place but is prohibited from only by customs and practice, which illustrates the Gothic’s deeply pessimistic underbelly.” (Simpson 20) The serial killer thus does exactly what everyone else wants to do, but are restricted from due to the moral rules of society. The serial killer then becomes an emblem of society’s forbidden desires and the darker side of humanity.

Simpson divides serial killer fiction into four movements or general thematic patterns: the neo-Gothic, the detective procedural, the psycho profile and the mytho-apocalyptic (Simpson 25). For the purpose of this thesis, only the psycho profile movement will be discussed, as it is the one that resembles the type of narrative in *American Psycho* and due to the fact that the neo-Gothic, or postmodern Gothic, has already been accounted for.

The psycho profile type of serial killer narrative typically has the serial killer as its protagonist, yet it “may adopt any tone or stance toward its subject.” (Simpson 25) In them, fictional serial killers operate in a supernatural and almost godlike manner and are often able to

seduce victims and kill at will without getting caught by the police (Simpson 135). Even though these characters in a way resemble an eternal literary idea, depictions of the Gothic killer will in any case be tightly linked to the given historical context the narrative is written in (Simpson 135). Simpson states that the serial killer “chooses to write an identity on the body politic through what came to be known to sociologists and laymen alike in the 1980s as “wilding.” Wilding is defined as brutal, apparently motiveless attacks committed by malefactors on luckless strangers.” (Simpson 135) The concept of “wilding” is now viewed as an expression of “American individualism run rampant in the economic, political, and social arenas and thus culturally sanctioned to some degree” (Simpson 136). During the last part of the 1980s, the idea of the “wilding” serial killer grew to an almost iconic status, due to the fact that their tremendous egocentrism and focus on fulfilling their own immediate needs in many ways resembled that of the faces of capitalist society, such as Donald Trump (Simpson 136). In a society where self-centredness and a lack of empathy will help people towards financial gain and power, the serial killer does not stand out and is potentially able to remain undetected. Simpson argues that because the serial killer “conceives of and carries out actions in a manner not dissimilar to the violent methodology of the larger social structure” (Simpson 136), the killer and his egocentrism and narcissism is nothing noteworthy. This fact makes him almost unstoppable in a world of institutional violence and gives him the possibility to remain invisible (Simpson 136). A lot of the recent serial killer narratives shows this exact notion through a killer who is “in full wilding mode” (Simpson 136), killing, torturing or raping as he sees fit, without giving much concern to the possibility of being caught, but who still somehow evades police detection and, in relation, avoids capture and punishment (Simpson 136). Furthermore, in these narratives, the killers rarely ever come to any sort of “true moral reckoning with their consciences” (Simpson 136) and even if they are eventually captured by law-enforcement, they still manage to escape personal accountability and justice. They do so due to the fact that they

are able to distance themselves from the blame for their crimes and instead spread it among a society where it is possible for such monsters to be created (Simpson 136). These narratives thus become a critique of the type of society that creates the serial killers and not of the serial killers themselves. There is no satisfying retrospection, no personal progress and no specific explanation other than a criticisable and possibly corrupt society where these monstrous humans can emerge and thrive.

Analysis

Firstly, in this part, I will briefly introduce Bret Easton Ellis and his works, as well as some of the characteristic stylistic features in his writing. Secondly, I will account for some of the controversy that happened before, during and after the publication of *American Psycho*, which led to its status as a scandalous novel. The purpose of these parts is to provide a bit of background information regarding the author and the publication of the novel. Thereafter, I will analyse *American Psycho* in terms of its features of the postmodern Gothic, how consumerism is portrayed in it, how it uses the serial killer narrative, as well as how the novel uses unreliability in different aspects of it, all of which the novel uses to convey a societal critique.

Introduction to Bret Easton Ellis

Bret Easton Ellis (1964) published his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, in 1985 when he was only twenty-one and was still a student at Bennington College in Vermont (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's 2*). According to Julian Murphet, this college appears in a fictionalised version as Camden College in all of Ellis's works (Murphet 12). Since then, he has written six other works of fiction: *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), *American Psycho* (1991), *The Informers* (1994), *Glamorama* (1998), *Lunar Park* (2005) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010). According to Sonia Baelo-Allué, all his novels “explore the apathy, boredom and alienation of affluent white

Americans, especially during the 1980s and 1990s.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s* 2) His protagonists are usually rather unlikeable young rich white males, who narrate the stories in a monotonous tone. Furthermore, his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, became a huge commercial success and both Ellis and his work were seen as sort of representative for his entire generation (Murphet 13). Following the success of the novel, Ellis became quite wealthy and moved to New York, where he, in his own words, “sort of got sucked up into this whole yuppie-mania that was going on at the time” (qtd. in Murphet 14), which would later provide him with inspiration for *American Psycho*. Ellis became a part of the “brat pack”, a group of young writers who was “overly hyped” and has an “excessive sense of their own importance” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s* 23). They all used a minimalist style in their writing and focused on wealthy young characters.

Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that the fact that “Bret Easton Ellis has received glowing praise together with harsh condemnation can be explained by the insistence of many reviewers and critics of measuring him against artificially dichotomized standards: his fiction is either pornographic gore or serious postmodern literature.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s* 1) According to her, Ellis uses aspects of both low and high culture, which leads to his works being categorised as belonging to quite different and opposite categories of literature, depending on who reads it. Baelo-Allué further argues that Bret Easton Ellis “represents a type of contemporary writer who falls between the high and the low, who uses popular culture references, styles and subject matter in a literary fiction that aspires to be more than mere entertainment.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s* 1) Ellis’s writing does use a lot of references to and features taken from popular culture, yet it still contains a deeper meaning and has an agenda that goes beyond simple entertainment. Some of the characteristic features of Ellis’s novels include narcissism, vanity, shallowness, flat characters, unreliable narrators, a parodic tone, as well as references to other fiction and popular culture in general (Baelo-Allué, *Bret*

Easton Ellis's 4). According to Baelo-Allué, Bret Easton Ellis's style can best be defined as "blank fiction", which is a style of writing where the author uses "an atonal blank prose where no feelings are conveyed, and where narrators are passive and seemingly unconcerned with moral issues." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 35) In this type of mass society narratives, there is "no sense of community to provide values, and, since they lack a sense of moral value, people in mass society turn to fake moralities, mass culture and mass consumption." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 34) The characters are flat and self-obsessed and society itself is deeply flawed. According to Baelo-Allué, the characters in Ellis's fiction are "often so immersed in consumer culture that they have no real personality; in fact, they speak through mass culture." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 34) Ellis's characters use references to songs, brands, clothing items and other types of cultural artefacts to define and describe themselves and others.

The reception of *American Psycho*

As mentioned, Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero*, was an immediate success, but his second one, *The Rules of Attraction*, was a failure (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 79). The fame and success that followed his debut, combined with the critique he and the other similar writers had received, had in some way set him up for failure. According to Baelo-Allué, many reviewers thought that "the success of the brat packers' first books had been an illusion and their second books proved their lack of literary significance." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 79) Furthermore, there was a general belief that Ellis was glamorising sex, drugs and consumerism, due to his lengthy descriptions of these, as opposed to criticising it, which is what he was actually doing (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 80).

Then, in 1991, Ellis wrote *American Psycho*, which caused a lot of controversy already before it was even published. According to Baelo-Allué, the novel "brought Ellis back into the

spotlight” and “caused a great deal of controversy since it was a politically incorrect novel at a time when political correctness seemed to engulf everything.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 2) The graphic depictions of sexual violence in the novel were taken out of context and printed in the national media, which was the central cause of the controversy (Murphet 65). According to Julian Murphet, Bret Easton Ellis was “certainly aware of the offensive nature of the book’s violent sections, but believed that, when taken in the full context of the satiric and stylistic concerns of the novel as a whole, they would be properly understood.” (Murphet 65) Only about five percent of the novel are made up of these graphic depictions of violence and Ellis was extremely shocked about the fact that the novel would cause such an outrage (Murphet 67). The novel has also gotten critique for manipulating the reader and for the lack of a proper navigating narrator to help guide the reader through the underlying meaning of the narrative. One example of how repulsed some people were, is the fact that the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) called for a boycott of the novel, with the argumentation that *American Psycho* was simply “a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women.” (Murphet 68) According to Baelo-Allué, they even “opened a telephone line with a recorded passage from the book about a woman who is raped and tortured with an automatic nail gun.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 84) Yet, all this disgust happened before the novel was even published and it was based solely on the leaked excerpts of the novel.

Another problem in relation to the publication of the novel was regarding the numerous references to brand names, people and companies (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 84). Some actual companies, such as American Express, considered taking legal action due to the nature of the novel and did not want to be associated with it in any way. As a result, the name of the company that Bateman works for was changed from the real American Express to the fictional Pierce & Pierce (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 84). Following the controversy, Ellis even received death threats and got his publicity tour cancelled as a result of these (Baelo-Allué, *Bret*

Easton Ellis's 15). He was paid a huge advance on the novel, which, according to Baelo-Allué, was a clear sign of his celebrity author status (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 15). Yet, Simon & Schuster, the publishing house, ended up cancelling the publication of *American Psycho* as a result of the controversy. Instead, the novel was picked up by Vintage Books, who published it as a trade paperback instead (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 15). Julian Murphet argues that they doubtlessly did this “with an eye to the media interest as a guarantee of sales” (Murphet 67).

Furthermore, some people tend to directly link the author and their fiction together, and this caused some trouble for Ellis. Ellis was deemed a misogynist by the people who did not differentiate between the work and the author and who thought that Bret Easton Ellis and Patrick Bateman represented the exact same ideas. Some thought that he should be skinned alive and that he was a “sick young man” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 87). According to Baelo-Allué, he has defended himself by stating that “Bateman is a misogynist. In fact, he’s beyond that, he is just barbarous. But I would think most Americans learn in junior high to differentiate between the writer and the character he is writing about. People seem to insist I’m a monster. But Bateman is the monster. I am not on the side of that creep.” (qtd. in Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 87)

Ultimately though, the extremely critical reception and all the public attention that followed it, gave the impression that the novel actually had some deeper meaning to it (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 87). Baelo-Allué argues that to “dismiss it as mere rubbish failed to do justice to the public attention it received; after all, gore and sensationalist books are printed everyday and they are not reviewed nor do they cause controversy.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 87) In a way, *American Psycho* hit a nerve in a society that was becoming increasingly effected by mass consumption and capitalism, while at the same time being infused with violence and prejudice, all of which the novel attempts to put in the spotlight and criticise.

The postmodern Gothic in *American Psycho*

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is an example of a novel that uses some of the features of the postmodern Gothic. According to Sonia Baelo-Allué, *American Psycho* is “a narrative that encompasses and combines 20th-century gothic techniques and effects, together with a sharp social critique of the decade of the 80s in America.” (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31) As mentioned, the Gothic mode is often used to provide a critique of society and the traits that are deemed unacceptable in a given society at a given time, and *American Psycho* similarly provides a critique of American society in the 1980s. In *American Psycho*, the classic Gothic setting, such as a ruined castle or a forest, has been substituted by the modern city and the Gothic villain, the monster, has been replaced by Patrick Bateman, the narcissistic murdering psychopath (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 31). *American Psycho* is set in New York, where Patrick Bateman lives and works. Already at the very beginning of the novel, the setting of a busy modern city is set, as Bateman and his colleague Timothy Price are driving through the city in a cab: “*Abandon all hope ye who enter here* is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First and is in print large enough to be seen from the backseat of the cab as it lurches forward in the traffic leaving Wall Street” (Ellis 3). The city is busy, thriving and with a sense of urgency. The first sentence echoes Dante's *Inferno* and the description over the gate to Hell, which suggests that by entering the narrative of *American Psycho*, one must be ready to leave all hope behind, as they are entering a hopeless world where there is no way out. Baelo-Allué argues that these opening words “present the story as unfolding in an ‘inferno’, a living hell located in New York (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 94). The modern city is vast, mysterious and filled with hidden passages and sudden noises, much like the castles or mansions of the classic Gothic tales. In this type of setting, you never know what could be waiting around the corner. In the modern city setting in *American Psycho*, many places are enclosed in darkness. Bateman frequently

goes to a variety of restaurants and clubs and is often out prowling the dark streets at night. At one point, for example, after Bateman has just killed a man, he describes that: “I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave, almost slipping in the puddle of blood that has formed by the side of his head, and I’m down the street and out of darkness and like in a movie I appear in front of the D’Agostino’s” (Ellis 159). Bateman seems to be slipping in and out of the darkness of the city, keeping out of sight and thereby out of detection. Here, he suddenly appears in front of the supermarket, almost as if he just moved through a secret tunnel in a Gothic castle. The darkness in the setting provides mystery about what the setting, in this case the city, and the characters, in this case Patrick Bateman, could potentially be hiding. Furthermore, like the homes of the typical Gothic aristocratic villains, Bateman’s home and office are far more grandiose and pompous than the majority of the population (Helyer 737).

Bateman in many ways resemble the classic Gothic villains, who are usually immoral, villainous and causes suffering for other characters, usually the young, innocent and female ones. Just like the Gothic villains, Bateman does so due to some sort of urge within him. Bateman has a “*need to ... engage in ... homicidal behaviour on a massive scale*” (Ellis 325) and wants his pain “to be inflicted on others” (Ellis 362). However, these Gothic villains typically stand in opposition to the society they live in and the personality traits that are acceptable within it. In *American Psycho*, no one seems to really care about anything or condemn Bateman’s tendencies. Of course, no one seems to actually be completely aware of Bateman’s murders and other violent acts, but no one seems to care about the signs of it anyway. He is in many ways just like the rest of them, cold and obsessed with looks, money and prestige, and consequently he does not stand out in terms of his personality traits. In the world of *American Psycho*, then, Bateman is not a typical villain and is not that different from the rest of the characters. Yet, the society and the characters are ultimately portrayed as immoral and unpleasant, and the novel thus points to the darker side of humanity and a critique of such a society. In addition, Patrick

Bateman is an extremely stereotyped character, just like the characters in Gothic fiction usually are. Helyer describes him as “a psychotic serial killer, but also a rich and eligible young man whose family is said to own “half of Wall Street.” He does not need to work and represents perfectly the rich, yet troubled aristocrat of the eighteenth-century Gothic novels.” (Helyer 728)

Bateman is a physically attractive young man, who works out and is fashionable. He wears the right designers and has the right types of furniture and electronic devices, and the other characters often asks his opinion about what to wear and how to wear it. Yet, Bateman is not content, instead he is bored and extremely obsessed with being better than the rest of his peers. In addition, Bateman’s family and upbringing is surrounded by mystique, as not much information about it is provided, other than the fact that they seemingly own half of Wall Street and the fact that his mother is a patient in a psychiatric care facility, but for unknown reasons. This type of secrecy or mystery about family or a character’s upbringing is another typical feature of the classic Gothic story (Helyer 735).

As mentioned, one of the characteristic features of the postmodern Gothic is how it combines and plays on opposite emotions and on genre, form and narrative. Ruth Helyer argues that the Gothic genre can be defined as “a hybrid, a self-conscious and parodic mixing of multiple genres and strands.” (Helyer 741) This parodic combination of different genres is certainly a part of almost every aspect of *American Psycho*. One example of this is *The Patty Winter’s Show*, a fictional talk show that is Patrick’s favourite television program and that he watches every time it is on, or records if he is unable to watch it. *The Patty Winter’s Show* seems to be a mixture of multiple genres, ranging from a normal talk show and to what seems like a freak show (Helyer 741). The topics of the show are anything from “Perfumes and Lipsticks and Makeups” (Ellis 90) and “Salad Bars” (Ellis 216) to “Shark Attack Victims” (Ellis 137) and “Concentration Camp Survivors” (Ellis 212). According to Baelo-Allué, the “juxtaposition of these two kinds of subjects implies that society does not really distinguish

between the two, and at the same time shows that the subject of *American Psycho* is as horrifying as the contents of newspaper stories or TV programmes.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 98) In a similar way, *American Psycho* itself mixes a variety of genres, and is, according to Helyer, demonstrating “characteristics of comedy, autobiography, spoof horror, bleak social commentary, conventional horror, and pornography.” (Helyer 741)

As mentioned, the combination of fear and laughter, and thereby of, for example, horror and comedy, is a characteristic feature of the Gothic (Botting 109). Just as in the classic Gothic tales, *American Psycho* uses this combination to express a critique of society and of, for example, the personality traits that should be deemed undesirable. Helyer states that Bateman is “articulate and clever, with a talent for summarizing a situation, or a character, in an amusing and apt manner, and in much the same way as the traditional Gothic tales, his frightening side is so excessive it can border on the comical.” (Helyer 730) An example of this comical effect in the novel is when Bateman wants to murder Luis Carruthers. Bateman tries to strangle him but is unable to tighten his grip and Luis mistakes his actions for flirtation:

“I’ve seen you looking at me,” he says, panting. “I’ve noticed your”—he gulps—“hot body.”

He tries to kiss me on the lips but I back away, into the stall door, accidentally closing it. I drop my hands from Luis’s neck and he takes them and immediately places them back. I drop them once again and stand there contemplating my next move, but I’m immobile.” (Ellis 153)

Bateman who thinks that everyone is in love with him and can usually kill people at any moment and without hesitation, is suddenly caught off guard and is unable to go through with killing Luis. Another example of where Bateman’s frightening side becomes almost comical, is when he at one point tries to cook and eat a girl he murdered, but is unsuccessful: “Maggots already writhe across the human sausage, the drool pouring from my lips dribbles over them, and I still

can't tell if I'm cooking any of this correctly, because I'm crying too hard and I have never really cooked anything before." (Ellis 333) The scene is grotesque and bordering on nauseating, yet at the time it ultimately becomes comical due to the fact that Bateman, the vicious and morbid cannibal, is drooling over a maggot-filled sausage of human meat, while crying about not being able to cook properly.

As mentioned, one of the main characteristics of the postmodern Gothic is its uncertainty regarding both genre and narrative (Baelo-Allué "*American Psycho*" 32). In relation to the form, *American Psycho* is inspired by, for example, the language of film, as it replicates the plot of many of the serial killer or slasher movies of the time. In accordance with the slasher film genre, the torture, rapes and murders in the novel are described in a detailed and highly graphic way. In relation, Patrick Bateman is constantly renting films throughout the novel, and films of the slasher genre seems to be some of his favourites, both actual films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Ellis 147) and invented ones, such as *The Toolbox Murders* (Ellis 268). Baelo-Allué states that Patrick's "favourite films are slasher and pornographic movies, films which will inspire his horrific actions." (Baelo-Allué "*American Psycho*" 32) At times, it even appears as if Bateman's own reality is like a film. For example, he uses descriptions such as "as if in slow motion" (Ellis 235) and, literally, "like in a movie" (Ellis 159).

Furthermore, the narrative technique that is used changes several times throughout the novel. Occasionally, the narrative becomes difficult to follow, due to the fact that Bateman seems to be losing touch with reality at times and he therefore becomes unable to narrate the events. An example of this is when, at one point, Bateman is going out with a woman named Patricia, and he suddenly, in the middle of her long outburst, stops narrating what she says and instead begins to narrate what seems like nonsense: "J&B I am thinking. Glass of J&B in my right hand I am thinking. Hand I am thinking. Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking." (Ellis 78) Furthermore, at one point, Bateman even directly addresses the reader after

he steps on a blind man's foot and asks: "Did I do this on purpose? What do you think? Or did I do this accidentally?" (Ellis 79) This suggests that Bateman, at least in some degree, wants the reader to consider his actions and his motives for them. The use of these different narrative techniques suggests a high degree of deliberately trying to show how Bateman is losing touch with both reality and with himself. Yet, at the same time it suggests that Bateman in a way has some degree of control over the narrative, as he asks the reader questions and only narrates certain parts of his experiences and his thoughts.

In *American Psycho* there is no comforting narrator to navigate the reader through the narrative and help decipher the meanings of the countless references and literary devices. This fact was, according to Julian Murphet, one of the significant factors that contributed to the controversy surrounding the novel and its publication. The novel lacked a reliable guide to help people understand it. Murphet states that making "meaning of the various inscriptions, the layers and layers of language which make up the novel, was a task made deceptively facile for some readers by the sheer visceral force of the work's most infamous passages." (Murphet 24)

Furthermore, the narrative voice in the novel does not commit to any of the typical conventions of the first-person narrative. Murphet argues that the narrative voice in *American Psycho* gives the reader a "kind of *non-self*, a self defined not by freedom and the open horizon of the undetermined, but by repetition and tunnel vision." (Murphet 25) The voice completely lacks any real signs of personality or individuality. It does not show any emotion or put any emphasis on certain parts of the narrative, instead everything is narrated in the same monotonous and repetitive style. Ultimately, then, the novel does not offer an insight into the individual experience of the society it portrays, instead it gives us "the unreflexive repetition and monomania of a voice that has not escaped the cocoon of its own routine, and enacts the inhumanity of pure habit." (Murphet 25)

As previously mentioned, another characteristic feature of the postmodern Gothic is in relation to its uncertainty regarding the characters and their identities. *American Psycho* uses uncertainty regarding the identity of the characters in quite a comical way. Numerous times throughout the narrative, characters are mistaken for one another and it becomes almost impossible to know if people are actually who Bateman thinks they are. An example of this is when Bateman is at Harry's with Todd Hamlin and George Reeves and Bateman is trying to figure out who someone is:

“Guys, guys,” I say. “Who’s sitting with Paul Owen over there? Is that Trent Moore?”

“Where?” Reeves.

“They’re getting up. That table,” I say. “Those guys.”

“Isn’t that Madison? No, it’s Dibble,” Reeves says. He puts on his clear prescription eyeglasses just to make sure.

“No,” Hamlin says. “It’s Trent Moore.”

“Are you sure?” Reeves asks. (Ellis 85)

They are not sure who the person is and not just the way that they cannot remember his name, they are unsure about who he is of the many Wall Street guys who all look almost exactly alike. Several similar situations happen through the novel and Bateman and the rest of them spend quite a lot of time trying to figure out who people are, where they work and so on.

Furthermore, in *American Psycho*, repetition is used as a literary device to create suspense, but also, and more frequently, as a comic effect. The aspects that are frequently repeated are, for example, long lists of items of clothing and brand names, what the topic of *The Patty Winters Show* is on a given day, gruesome descriptions of murders and torture, the fact that Patrick Bateman needs to return some videotapes and discussions about where to eat dinner or, as mentioned, who a certain person is. Baelo-Allué argues that the “narrative rhythm of the novel is marked by the intertwined forms of seriality: that of Bateman’s never-ending

killings, and his serial consumerism of surrounding mass culture.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 95) These repetitions drive the plot forward and appear to be at the centre of Bateman's life.

As mentioned, the contemporary Gothic narratives still have the same notions at the centre of them, namely power, desire and darkness, and these themes are undoubtedly an essential part of *American Psycho* and the society it portrays. The people in Bateman's world, and especially in his circles, are all obsessed with precisely desire and power. Everyone wants to be better than each other, be the wealthiest, the one with the best clothing, best home décor or the best haircut. The Gothic genre is categorised as a literature of excess (Botting 1) and excess is everywhere in the world of *American Psycho* and its characters.

Consumerism in *American Psycho*

American Psycho takes place in a society that has been infected by capitalism and consumerism. As mentioned, Patrick Bateman and most of the other characters are obsessed with looks, money, prestige and immediate fulfilment of needs. Bateman seemingly has everything and does not even really have to work for a living, due to the fact that he comes from an extremely wealthy family. Yet, this is not enough for him. Punter and Byron states that: “It is as though in a world where every material goal has been achieved and every need is capable of being satisfied virtually instantaneously, it is necessary that these achievements and satisfactions turn directly into their opposite, that the desire that should apparently have been slaked mutates into ever more bizarre forms.” (Punter and Byron 253) Even though Patrick Bateman can get almost everything he wants and has an abundance of material items, money and prestige, this still is not enough and does not satisfy him. Instead, these desires transform into new inexplicable cravings and new ways to gain power and control and, in the case of Bateman, he kills and tortures people in order to fulfil these needs. Furthermore, Bateman has

many of the characteristic features of a sociopath. He does not feel any real emotion and appears to be dissociating at times. At one point, he quite directly describes this himself:

There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being—flesh, blood, skin, hair—but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. (Ellis 271)

Here, Bateman is losing touch with his own humanity and his own identity. He feels as if he is being erased and losing his capability of feeling emotions. Baelo-Allué argues that if consumerism is taken to an extreme, it “invades everything and becomes our only means of relating to and judging others.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 105) Bateman's whole identity is constructed around consumer goods and therefore he is losing touch with himself.

Another aspect of this type of society can be seen in how Bateman and his peers are constantly trying to be better than each other. It is very important to have the most expensive clothing, the business card that stands out the most or the newest and best CD player. Bateman's descriptions of objects, settings and characters often resemble descriptions from a catalogue. One example of this is when he describes his own living room: “The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame)” (Ellis 24). Bateman describes the rest of the objects in his living room in the same way and uses an extreme degree of detail to describe the different components, materials and so on of everything. For him, these details appear to be important, as they make the items differ from the common version of them and thus makes them more exclusive. Furthermore, Bateman is extremely obsessed with his

looks. One example of this is his lengthy morning routine, where he spends a huge amount of time, and money, on things such as special lotions and shampoos. Additionally, Bateman is extremely worried about his health, or at least about how his body looks, and has a long list of things he tries not to eat, such as things that contain sodium (Ellis 11) and fried food (Ellis 13), and he often works out at an exclusive health club, called Xclusive (Ellis 65).

In addition, Bateman and his colleagues all look very much alike. As mentioned, they look so similar that they cannot even distinguish between most of the others. Already at the beginning of the novel, this fact is established as Bateman several times describes that both himself and the other men have slicked-back hair, suspenders and horn-rimmed glasses (Ellis 5). In order to fully be accepted by Bateman and the rest of them, it appears to be crucial to dress and style your hair and clothing in a similar way. This fact is established, for example, when Bateman is at a dinner party at Evelyn's, where one of the guests, Evelyn's artist friend, Stash, "looks nothing like the other men in the room" (Ellis 12). Bateman describes how "his hair isn't slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses, the clothes black and ill-fitting, no urge to light and suck on a cigar, probably unable to secure a table at Camols, his net worth a pittance" (Ellis 12). To be accepted by Bateman, you have to look a certain way, smoke cigars and wealthy and powerful enough to get tables at the right restaurants, just like himself. Another example of the importance of wearing the right thing is when, at one point, Bateman meets some of his colleagues, and states that "Carruthers is not dressed well: a four-button double-breasted wool suit, I think by Chaps, a striped cotton shirt and a silk bow tie plus horn-rimmed eyeglasses by Oliver Peoples." (Ellis 30) Even though Carruthers' clothing here seems to resemble that of the rest of them, he is not dressed well enough in Bateman's opinion. Yet, he does not give any further reason as to why this is the case. In addition, Bateman and his colleagues are always trying to be just a tiny bit better, richer or better looking than each other. An example of this is at one point when Bateman has just gotten a new business card and shows

it to the others. Bateman has been waiting for the right moment to show it to the others and is excitedly waiting for their reactions. Yet, instead of Bateman getting the praise for the new business card that he was hoping for, it turns into a contest where the others show their slightly more special business cards. When Bateman sees Van Patten's new business card, he states that: "A brief spasm of jealousy courses through me when I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type." (Ellis 42) It is crucial for Bateman, and the others, to have the most special things, in this case the most tasteful business card, and thereby the most prestige and respect from the others. Another example of their constant competing with each other is when Bateman and Scott are arguing about who has the best CD player:

"Does Aiwa have digital remote control?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Computer controls?"

"Uh-huh." What a complete and total *dufus*.

"Does the system come with a turntable that has a metacrylate and brass platter?"

"Yes," the bastard lies! (Ellis 96)

Bateman is trying to find proof that his is better and that Scott's does not have as many impressive technological features as his does.

As mentioned, Bateman and the others in his social circles are constantly mistaking each other for other people. This contributes to the novel's overall almost parodic effect, where the rich and powerful who would do almost anything to be the best, or at least better than their colleagues, ultimately becomes one big mass with no sense of individuality or real agency.

As mentioned, many passages of the novel are described almost like a magazine where Bateman mentions the brand names, and sometimes prices and functions, of various items, such as his own and other people's clothing, electronic devices or the interior of places. Philip L. Simpson argues that this textual strategy "not only illustrates its title character's obsessive

nature but also sets up a self-aware distance between the reader and the narrative” (Simpson 148). This distancing strategy was probably an attempt to avoid too much controversy over the gruesome and graphic depictions of a serial killer’s crimes, but if that was the case, Bret Easton Ellis failed, according to Simpson (Simpson 148). Although the parts of the novel that describe the murders, torture and rapes are extremely graphic, and are, according to Simpson, “likely the most graphic in the subgenre of serial killer fiction” (Simpson 148), these passages are described in an identically monotonous and extremely detailed way as the rest of the novel. The fact that these descriptions lack any sort of emotion, fits perfectly with Patrick Bateman’s complete and utter lack of empathy or any other real emotions, and this absence of emotion is true for many real-life serial killers as well (Simpson 148).

Furthermore, Bateman sometimes seemingly casually mentions disturbing things in the middle of his long lists of brand names and items of clothing. One example of this is at one point where Bateman describes his outfit as he is on his way to pick up groceries:

blue jeans by Armani, a white Polo shirt, an Armani sport coat, no tie, hair slicked back with Thompson mousse; since it’s drizzling, a pair of black waterproof lace-ups by Manolo Blahnik; three knives and two guns carried in a black Epi leather attaché case (\$3,200) by Louis Vuitton; because it’s cold and I don’t want to fuck up my manicure, a pair of Armani deerskin gloves. Finally, a belted trench coat in black leather by Cianfranco Ferré that cost four thousand dollars. (Ellis 155)

Bateman simply mentions the weapons as if they were any other item in his lengthy description of his outfit of the day, and does not put any sort of special emphasis on these items, thereby suggesting that, at least in his opinion, there is nothing noteworthy about these particular items in relation to the rest on his list. Ultimately, the consumerist society makes it difficult for Bateman to differentiate between products and people. He is used to getting almost everything

he wants and when this does not satisfy him, he kills and tortures people instead, in an attempt to fill the emptiness that he feels inside and stop his pain.

The serial killer in *American Psycho*

In *American Psycho*, Bateman is able to blend in and hide his murderous side. As Simpson argues about the serial killer, he is “a postmodern shape-shifter or changeling child” (Simpson 3), who has both a nonthreatening and an evil face, and is therefore able to hide his evil face behind the nonthreatening and seemingly human face. Several times throughout the novel, Bateman is described as “the boy next door” (Ellis 11) and as a person who would never hurt anyone, even though he does not appear to be a particularly pleasant person. Yet, according to the acceptable personality traits of Bateman’s circles, he does not stand out. In addition, Bateman does not always seem to be particularly fond of being referred to as this lovely boy next door. This notion is, for example, seen during a conversation with Timothy Price and Evelyn: “Patrick is *not* a cynic, Timothy. He’s the boy next door, aren’t you honey?’ ‘No I’m not,’ I whisper to myself. ‘I’m a fucking evil psychopath.’” (Ellis 19) Here it seems to annoy Bateman to be referred to as “the boy next door” and thereby not be recognised as the evil serial killer that he actually is and appears to base a part of his identity upon. Even though he blends in and is able to avoid detection as a result of this, he wants people to know what he is really capable of.

In addition, the fact that nobody really cares about each other and each other’s actions, is a contributing factor to Bateman’s ability to easily blend in and not be noticed as the murdering psychopath he actually is. Numerous times throughout the novel, Bateman casually, or sometimes not so casually, slips information about his homicidal side into conversations with people. An example of this is when, at one point, Patrick and Evelyn are talking about wedding plans, Evelyn about which type of band and food she would like and Patrick about how he

would want to bring an assault rifle and shoot Evelyn's family. Yet, Evelyn does not react or respond to this, and Patrick states that "she doesn't hear a word; nothing registers. She does not fully grasp *a word* I'm saying. My essence is eluding her." (Ellis 120) Another example of this is during a conversation Bateman has with David Van Patten and Craig McDermott: "'You know, guys, it's not beyond my capacity to drive a lead pipe repeatedly into a girl's vagina,' I tell Van Patten and McDermott, then add, after a silence I mistake for shock, finally on their parts an acute perception of my cruelty, 'but compassionately.'" (Ellis 312) To which McDermott answers: "We all know about *your* lead pipe, Bateman," (Ellis 312) They did not in any way understand what Bateman actually meant, and his hopes that someone would actually recognise his cruelty for once, without being one of his victims, has been destroyed. Furthermore, even when Bateman directly confesses to his crimes to Harold Carnes, or at least to his answering machine, he does not believe him and does not even really know who he is. Carnes refers to Bateman as "Davis" (Ellis 372) and thinks that whoever he then believes is named Bateman is "such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody" (Ellis 372). Nobody really cares about each other and each other's actions and this ultimately leads to society becoming an accomplice in the gruesome crimes.

Besides being a homicidal maniac himself, Bateman also has an obsession with other serial killers, both actual real-life and fictive, and he often brings them up in conversations with other people. At one point, McDermott is complaining about this and states that Bateman always brings serial killers up, and "always in this casual, educational sort of way. I mean, I don't want to know anything about Son of Sam or the fucking Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy or Featherhead, for god sake." (Ellis 147) Bateman brings up serial killers and their murders in the same way as he would bring up something he read about how to wear certain clothing items or something he read about some celebrity. Yet, even though he often talks about serial killers, no one seems to really think twice about this or to consider it strange or deranged, and the others

still think of him as quite harmless and as just like them. One example of this is when Bateman is at Harry's with Todd Hamlin and George Reeves and they end up talking about women:

“Do you know what Ed Gein said about women?”

“*Ed Gein?*” one of them asks. “Maître d’ at Canal Bar?”

“No,” I say, “Serial killer, Wisconsin in the fifties. He was an interesting guy.”

“You’ve always been interested in stuff like that, Bateman,” Reeves says, and then to Hamlin, “Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and *Fatal Vision* and Charles Manson. All of them.”

“So what did Ed say?” Hamlin asks, interested.

“He said,” I begin, “ ‘When I see a pretty girl walking down the street I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her and be real nice and sweet and treat her right.’ ” I stop, finish my J&B in one swallow.

“What does the other part of him think?” Hamlin asks tentatively.

“What her head would look like on a stick,” I say. (Ellis 88-89)

All three of them laugh about this, even though Bateman probably thinks the exact same thing as Ed Gein when he sees a woman on the street.

Furthermore, like his folkloric ancestor the vampire, Bateman kills, tortures and rapes to fulfil an urge or lust. As he states at one point, his “*need to engage in ... homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected*” (Ellis 325). According to him, he has a “need” to inflict violence on and kill other people, as opposed to just wanting to do so. At one point, Bateman even describes his murderous urges as his “nightly bloodlust” (Ellis 268), which echoes descriptions of his vampiric ancestors. The similarity to the vampire becomes almost comical at one point, after Bateman has just killed a man and he is “running down Broadway, then up Broadway, then down again, screaming like a banshee, my coat open, flying out behind me like some kind of cape.” (Ellis 160) Bateman is thrilled after satisfying his bloodlust and

appears to almost be ready to take flight after the kill. The fact that his coat looks similar to a cape makes him appear even more vampiric and the detail that he is screaming like a banshee is another nod to folklore, where the scream of a banshee would be an omen of death. In relation, like the vampire, Bateman even consumes parts of his victims.

Furthermore, about Bateman and his victims, Baelo-Allué states that he is “a rich white heterosexual yuppie that conceals a sexist, racist, xenophobic serial killer. His victims are mainly women, black people, beggars, children, homosexuals, that is to say, those that he considers under him in his particular social scale.” (Baelo-Allué, “*American Psycho*” 32) Most of Bateman’s victims are high-risk victims, meaning that they are more likely than others to become the victim of a violent crime, due to the fact that they often put themselves in high-risk situations. Bateman’s victims include several homeless people and sex workers, and both groups belong to the high-risk segment. In relation, high-risk victims are also less likely to be reported missing and thereby the possibility of getting away with the crime is heightened by this choice of victim. Although a couple of other murder victims are found throughout the novel, none of Bateman’s victims seem to be found and thoroughly investigated, at least not to the point where Bateman becomes aware of it. Nevertheless, at one point, when Bateman is out looking for a target, he comes across a black homeless woman that he considers killing, but then it strikes him that “she’s too easy a target to be truly satisfying” (Ellis 156). This suggests that Bateman does in fact have some preferences regarding the difficulty of his targets. A similar notion can be seen when Bateman seemingly randomly kills a child, who is barely five, at the zoo. Bateman contemplates that:

Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I’m suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child’s life. This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost. It’s so much worse (and more

pleasurable) taking the life of someone who has hit his or her prime, who has the beginnings of a full history, a spouse, a network of friends, a career, whose death will upset far more people whose capacity for grief is limitless than a child's would, perhaps ruin many more lives than just the meaningless, puny death of this boy. (Ellis 287-288)

Bateman thought that this murder would have satisfied him, and it does so for just about a second, but then he realises that killing a child, in his opinion, does not cause as much grief and pain as killing an adult would. He wants to cause as much pain as possible and thereby bestow his own pain onto others. Yet, as mentioned, most of his other victims belong to high-risk groups and are someone who, quite often at least, do not have a spouse, a large network of friends or a stable career. Bateman's own reasoning regarding why this particular murder does not quite satisfy him does therefore not completely make sense in relation to his usual choice of victims. In addition, several of his victims appear to be victims of opportunity, meaning that killing them seems to be a spur of the moment decision when a satisfactory target presents itself. Yet, he often carries knives or guns around with him, which would suggest at least some degree of planning. Even though he murders approximately as many women as men, he appears to have a tendency towards misogynistic violence, as the descriptions of these murders are often in a lot more graphic detail and they often contain rape, torture and dismemberment as well (Murphet 80).

Furthermore, Patrick Bateman is a perfect example of Simpson's notion of the serial killer in "full wilding mode" (Simpson 136). As mentioned, the idea of the "wilding" serial killer achieved almost iconic status during the last part of the 1980s, due to how this type of characters in many ways resembled the faces of capitalist society, such as Donald Trump (Simpson 136). Interestingly enough, Donald Trump is Patrick Bateman's idol and he seems obsessed with him and strives to be just like him. Usually in narratives that feature a serial

killer, there will be at least some type of comforting ending, yet in *American Psycho* there is not, and this is one of the things that, according to Baelo-Allué, caused the novel to become controversial, as opposed to other books that depicts violence. She argues that: “The difference is that these writers offer the consolation that the serial killer gets discovered, punished and stopped, whereas in *American Psycho* society does not care.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis’s* 90) As mentioned, one type of fictional serial killer is the “psycho killer” in “full wilding mode” (Simpson 136). Patrick Bateman is a perfect example of a killer who does exactly as he pleases and who ultimately avoids capture and thereby punishment for his actions. Furthermore, Bateman does not have any “true moral reckoning” (Simpson 136) or seem to in any way want to change his murderous lifestyle. Bateman himself does not think there is any possibility that he will change. At one point he states that his “rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now and it’s useless to hope my disgust will vanish” (Ellis 232). Over the years he has become even more violent and he is certain that this will never change.

In addition, as opposed to the typical serial killer narrative, *American Psycho* offers no real motive or explanation for how Bateman became the murderous psychopath that he is. The novel offers almost no knowledge about his past and there are no significant events in his upbringing to justify his tendencies, not that killing and torturing people could be justified either way. Helyer notes that: “The nearest he comes to explaining his actions is claiming that an irresistible urge has come over him, usually triggered by something as banal as an owl in the zoo appearing to look at him, or the sight of a woman breastfeeding her child” (Helyer 733). Seemingly random events can trigger his bloodlust and Bateman sometimes mention these as an explanation for why he suddenly feels these urges. Usually, narratives about serial killers will offer at least some type of explanation, such as, for example, abuse during their childhood or abandonment, or at the very least provide some background information about how these tendencies evolved through the characters life. Helyer argues that this fact, not knowing

Bateman's background and his motives, combined with the extremely detailed descriptions of his violent attacks, "creates an atmosphere of discomfort that is not easy to dispel." (Helyer 733) The fact that there is no explanation for Bateman's tendencies and actions makes it even more frightening and disturbing than if there had been an explanation for it. In relation, in an introduction to *American Psycho*, Irvine Welsh, author of, for example, *Trainspotting*, states that the novel "holds a hyper-real, satirical mirror up to our faces, and the uncomfortable shock of recognition it produces is that twisted reflection of ourselves and the world we live in." (Welsh vii) Through his monotonous and repetitive style of fiction, Bret Easton Ellis ultimately comments on the bleakness and extreme focus on keeping up appearances that in many respects classifies America in the 1980s. Behind the graphic descriptions of violence, the tedious and constant repetitions of designer brands, restaurants and clothing items, lies a social commentary that resembles some recognisable tendencies in modern capitalist society. Welsh argues that there is "no suggestion that either love or faith can save the day. All that remains is the impression that we've created a world devoid of compassion and empathy, a fertile breeding ground for monsters to thrive and multiply, while hiding in plain sight." (Welsh vii) In *American Psycho*, there is no comforting ending, no personal growth and no punishment for Bateman's actions. Ultimately, the only real explanation is that society is to blame for making it possible for such monstrous humans to flourish and succeed. Yet, even though the novel does not offer the reader any possibility to hide from the realities of this social critique, it does present this critique through the use of irony and dark humour, and consequently it softens the blow (Welsh vii-viii).

Unreliability in *American Psycho*

American Psycho has features of unreliability in almost all aspects of it. Unreliability is present in both the narrative, the plot and the characters. Patrick Bateman's narration is in many

ways quite unreliable, or at least extremely subjective. For example, in his mind, almost every female he meets is hitting on him or is in love with him. According to Bateman his secretary, Jean, is in love with him (Ellis 61), the receptionist at his health club, Cheryl, is in love with him (Ellis 65) and so on. Whether or not this is true is not known, but there is nothing other than Bateman's own thoughts about it to suggest that it is true. Furthermore, the narrative is unreliable in terms of, for example, how it changes perspective and leaves periods of time out of it. At certain points, the narrative loses track of what happens, and the reader is kept in the dark about some events. In addition, at one point, the perspective changes from first-person narration to the third-person perspective. This happens when Bateman is in the middle of a large police chase and is close to being caught. Patrick describes that: "the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab" (Ellis 335-336). Here, the narration changes perspective in the middle of a sentence, as the events begin to escalate. Patrick crashes the cab he uses to get away from the police and he suddenly begins to narrate as if he was out of his body and not in control of the events anymore. According to Baelo-Allué, this change of perspective happens as a reaction to things getting out of control for Bateman. After he has gotten away from the police and back to the safety of his office, the perspective changes again, due to the fact that when "the danger of getting caught disappears, Bateman recovers his narrative power." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 117) Furthermore, the gaps in the narrative are another significant aspect. Sometimes chapters end or begin in the middle of a sentence and sometimes parts of the narrative are redacted. Baelo-Allué argues that "Bateman's identity is unstable since, when he is outside his safe world of yuppie perfection or serial-killer impunity, he is completely at a loss and even loses his capacity to narrate. As readers we also lose our insight into his thinking." (Baelo-

Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 118) The parts of Bateman's life that he does not include in his narrative are events that happen outside of his comfort zone. One example of this is when Bateman wanders off after having an anxiety attack and finds himself in a "shabby delicatessen on Second Avenue" (Ellis 146) where you do not need to have a reservation and where all the food is kosher. Bateman is outside of his usual world and, as a result of not being able to handle this, he storms out while yelling profanities at the waitress and states that he runs "out of the delicatessen and onto the street where this" (Ellis 147), and the chapter simply stops there. Bateman loses his ability to narrate what happens after he leaves the delicatessen and the reader is left in the dark about what happens until the next chapter begins, where Bateman is, once again, discussing fashion with his colleagues. Furthermore, at several points, Bateman directly suggests that some of the events of the narrative is not real. An example of this is when Bateman is at a restaurant with Bethany and asks for a non-smoking section: "A pang of nausea that I'm unable to stifle washes warmly over me, but since I'm really dreaming all this I'm able to ask, "So you say there's *no* non-smoking section? Is this correct?" (Ellis 222) Here, Bateman suggests that not everything is real, or at least that his own line between reality and dreaming has been blurred.

In addition, the novel features several unreliable occurrences in the plot, especially towards the end of the novel, as Bateman appears to be spiralling out of control and slowly losing touch with reality. As mentioned, the fictional talk show *The Patty Winters Show* features a variety of different topics ranging from quite common ones to rather morbid ones. Yet, towards the end of the novel these topics get even more obscure and the show has guests such as Bigfoot, who Bateman finds "surprisingly articulate and charming" (Ellis 366) and a Cheerio "in a very small chair" (Ellis 371). Both times, these peculiar guests on the show are simply mentioned casually during one of Bateman's long lists of things such as what somebody is wearing or what he is drinking, and no thought really seems to be given to the fact that these

beings could not possibly have been on a talk show or even be real. This adds to the readers potential confusion about what is going on in the narrative, and what is real and what is not, especially when there is no narrative guidance to help make sense of it all. Another example of this is at one point when Bateman is walking down the street while feeding pieces of a girl's brain to dogs: "Walking down Fifth Avenue around four o'clock in the afternoon, everyone on the street looks sad, the air is full of decay, bodies lie on the cold pavement, miles of it, some are moving, most are not." (Ellis 370) Here, Bateman has completely lost touch with reality and has instead warped it into his own twisted version. Helyer argues that Bateman has created "his own version of reality, an apocalyptic reality that validates *his* priorities and perspective" (Helyer 740). For Bateman, a world where everyone could see how evil and malicious he really is, would be perfect. Furthermore, the fact that no one seems to notice things such as blood and blood-soaked sheets, or at least not do anything about it, seems rather unreliable. Bateman's maid apparently cleans his home even after he has killed someone there. He describes how he is keeping an eye on "the maid as she waxes the floor, wipes blood smears off the walls, throws away gore-soaked newspapers without a word." (Ellis 367) Bateman even seems to notice the fact that it is a bit strange that she cleans up blood and gore without saying a word. Yet, whether or not Bateman's version of the events at this point are real or not, is difficult to know. He could be imagining this, but it is also possible that the maid simply does not care as long as she gets paid or that she is afraid of Bateman. Bateman seems to think it is a result of the society they live in and states that it hits him "that she too is lost in a world of shit, completely drowning in it" (Ellis 367), suggesting that she is feeling just as lost and empty as him and therefore does not even care about anything anymore.

Another strange event happens when Bateman at one point stops by Paul Owen's apartment. A little over five months earlier, he tortured and killed two escort girls there and left their bodies, yet there have been no reports of any bodies being found and "no hints of even a

rumor floating around.” (Ellis 352) When Patrick arrives at the apartment, it has been cleaned and refurnished to some degree and is now up for sale. Once again, it is difficult to be sure about what is real and what is not in Bateman’s narrative, and it certainly is possible that he never even killed anyone in Paul Owen’s apartment. Yet, the real estate agent is acting strange towards Bateman. He describes how she suddenly “realizes something that causes the muscles in her face to tighten. Her eyes narrow but don’t close.” (Ellis 355) This suggests that the real estate agent suddenly realises who Bateman is, meaning that he is the one who is responsible for what happened in the apartment. In addition, Bateman notices that the apartment is filled with bouquets of flowers and that he can smell them all the way out in the hall, which would suggest that they are trying to cover up some sort of bad smell. The real estate agent asks him if he “saw the ad in the *Times*?” (Ellis 355) To which he answers that he did. Yet, there was never any advertisement, suggesting that she was simply testing Bateman to be completely sure about the fact that he is the malicious person who killed the two women in the apartment. However, instead of calling the police or in any other way attempt to bring Bateman to justice, she asks him to leave and not make any trouble. The real estate agent ultimately does not really care about Bateman’s actions, or at least she does not care enough about it to risk losing money. Paul Owen’s apartment is supposedly worth quite a lot and if word came out that people had been killed there, it would probably become quite a lot harder to sell, at least at a reasonable price. This suggests that the real estate agent is yet another corrupt and egocentric person in this society and that these events actually happened. Additionally, even though Bateman killed Paul Owen, at least according to his narrative, and the fact that his disappearance is being investigated, he might not actually be dead. According to Harold Carnes, Paul is very much alive and is currently in London, where Bateman said on his answering machine that he would be (Ellis 209), and therefore Bateman could not have killed him. Yet, as mentioned, Carnes does not even know who Bateman is, he refers to him as “Davis” (Ellis 372), and could

consequently just as easily mistake someone else for Paul Owen, especially if he already thinks that he is in London. Therefore, it is not quite possible to be certain of whether or not Paul Owen has in fact been seen alive or if it is just yet another case of mistaken identity in the novel.

Discussion

In this part, I will discuss how and why Patrick Bateman can be considered as emblematic of society in the United States during the 1980s.

Already at the very beginning of the novel, it is suggested that not everything in the narrative that will follow should be believed. The epigraph, taken from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, begins by stating that the narrator and the narrative that will follow is, of course, fictional. Yet, it states that: "Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed." (Ellis 1) By using this as an epigraph, Bret Easton Ellis suggests that even though Patrick Bateman and his actions are fictional, and at times quite exaggerated, he still represents people and ideas that indeed do exist in contemporary society and have to exist, given the tendencies that are present in that society. The extract continues by stating that: "I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of our recent past. He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us." (Ellis 1) Baelo-Allué argues that this part "could have been by Ellis, since Bateman is a yuppie executive emblematic of the 1980s in the United States ('our recent past')." (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 93) Suggesting that Ellis, by using this excerpt, makes it clear that he is trying to draw attention to the consumerist tendencies of people in the United States during this time and therefore he actually conditions the narrative from the beginning.

In addition, towards the end of the novel, when Bateman is beginning to exceedingly lose touch with reality and with his own identity, he contemplates about himself and his lack of individuality. Bateman states that: “there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there.*” (Ellis 362) Bateman sees himself as “an entity”, a thing, a being, but not as human or as real at this point. This abstract idea of “a Patrick Bateman” could be in terms of all of his material possessions and appearance. People might think they know Bateman, but no one really knows him, not even really himself, and no one seems to want to know what is hiding behind the surface of a wealthy and successful young yuppie. Bateman further contemplates that: “In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this—and I have, countless times, in just about every act I’ve committed—and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling.” (Ellis 362) Bateman wants everyone to feel the same pain and existential dread that he is feeling. The mass society has crushed him and taken away his identity and all he has left to define himself by is material objects and money. Even though Bateman has confessed all of his crimes and even though he has tried several times to get people to understand that he feels like his life is a living hell, he does not get caught or punished, and therefore there is no relief from his actions and emotions. Ultimately, Bateman does not have any moral reckoning and does not seem to be able to change in any way. As mentioned, this lack of punishment and justice suggests that it is society that is the true villain and not just the serial killer himself. Bateman even states that he is “blameless” (Ellis 362) in all of it, suggesting that the blame should actually be put on the society that makes it possible for people like Bateman to flourish and thrive. Bateman further argues that: “Each model of human

behavior must be assumed to have some validity.” (Ellis 362) Thus suggesting that every possible type of behaviour must be acceptable in some way, due to the fact that it is even made possible to begin with.

Furthermore, Philip L. Simpson argues that “beyond the controversy and distracting surface clutter of Ellis’s writing style, what the novel really offers is a startlingly “liberal” reaction to the ideological excess of the triumph of capitalism in the 1980s.” (Simpson 148) The novel is about a deranged serial killer, but even more so about the negative effects of capitalist society and about the type of people that thrives in this, and Patrick Bateman is a personification of these ideas. Ellis was inspired by the Wall Street guys he met after he moved to New York in 1987 (Simpson 148) and was especially fascinated by the fact that they “didn’t talk about their jobs at all—only about how much money they made, the clubs and restaurants they went to, how beautiful their girlfriends were. It was all about status, about surface.” (qtd. in Simpson 149) Suggesting that the inspiration for Bateman and the narrative, except for the murders and torture, is taken directly from Ellis’s own experiences with wealthy young Wall Street guys. In addition, according to Simpson the most central theme of the novel is “the self-cannibalizing aspects of the 1980s capitalism.” (Simpson 149) In *American Psycho*, Ellis uses extreme forms of greed, self-obsession and violence to express a critique of the corrupt state of the contemporary American society (Simpson 149). According to Simpson, narratives such as *American Psycho* suggest that such a society, based upon money, manipulation and power, ultimately loses its “sense of shared community.” (Simpson 149) If everyone’s main focus is themselves and their wealth, then all empathy and humanity disappear. Simpson argues that: “In an environment where ruthless hoarding at the expense of others’ literal survival is not only tolerated but rewarded, it is axiomatic that violence will accompany avarice.” (Simpson 149) If there is no sense of unity and solidarity with others, then violence will naturally follow. This is exactly what Ellis is trying to demonstrate with *American Psycho* through representations of

violence and greed that are taken to extremes. Furthermore, Bateman is a representation of inclinations that should be avoided. Ruth Helyer argues that the very acknowledgement that Bateman has given in to bestial urges, as opposed to simply being a monster, “makes the unpleasant suggestion that they are lying dormant in all of us, and the only difference between us and Patrick is that he has indulged in them.” (Helyer 727) Meaning that what Bateman does is something that everyone could potentially be capable of, but the difference is whether or not a person gives in to these urges. These tendencies and urges are everywhere in society and Bateman represents the image of success at the time, the wealthy and fashionable Wall Street guy, which suggests that the problem is the whole system. As Baelo-Allué argues: “When a man who is perfectly integrated in society, who follows all the social rules and is *the* ultimate consumer in a capitalistic society, becomes a cruel serial killer, the blame cannot be put only in the individual, the blame reaches the whole of society, readers included.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 115) Everyone is in a way at fault in a society like this, due to the fact that they are part of the system that makes this possible. In addition, Baelo-Allué argues that: “Given that for many Americans in the 1980s the yuppies represented the American dream come true, the negative depiction of this social group becomes a negative depiction of all those who believed in this type of society.” (Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's* 125) Meaning that everyone who thought that this lifestyle was something to strive for, is in a way at fault for making it possible for monstrous people such as Patrick Bateman to exist.

Moreover, the fact that the whole narrative begins with the words “*Abandon all hope ye who enter here*” (Ellis 3) and ends with “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (Ellis 384) suggests that there is no hope in this society and no way out of the gruesome and greedy world that is portrayed in the novel. The concluding sentence of the novel suggests that there is no escape, not for Bateman regarding his bloodlust and not for society regarding capitalism and the divide it has created. Capitalism, and thereby consumerism, has infected contemporary society in such

a way that it is impossible to change it, and to find an exit or a way out of the monotonous and unsatisfying everyday life that people such as Bateman lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) is the story of a young wealthy murderous serial killer, but more importantly, it is a critique of contemporary society and the notions of capitalism and consumerism. Firstly, *American Psycho* uses several features of the postmodern Gothic, especially in relation to setting, character and its use of different genres and narrative forms. It is a narrative that combines contemporary Gothic techniques with a severe social critique of America during the 1980s. In *American Psycho*, the Gothic castle or forest have been replaced by the modern city of New York, where Patrick Bateman works, lives and murders. The modern city is mysterious, vast and full of hidden passages and sudden noises, which, like in the Gothic tales, creates an atmosphere where you never know what could be waiting around the corner. The Gothic villain has been replaced by Patrick Bateman, a narcissistic murdering psychopath, who, like the Gothic aristocratic villains, lives in a grandiose home and is quite immoral and villainous. Yet, as opposed to the classic Gothic villain, Bateman does not stand in opposition to society's ideas about what personality traits are acceptable, instead he is a prime example of them. In addition, *American Psycho* plays on opposite emotions and on genre, form and narrative, and it can be defined as a sort of hybrid that uses a mix of parody and horror to convey ideas about society. The narrative technique changes several times throughout the novel, for example, at times when Bateman is losing touch with reality, he becomes unable to properly narrate the events or to even narrate at all.

Secondly, the society that *American Psycho* takes place in has been infected by consumerism and capitalism. Bateman and most of the other characters are only described through their looks and their clothing, and they do not have any real identity besides these

things. They only care about themselves, prestige and wealth and do not really listen to what each other are saying or notice the fact that there is a serial killer in their midst. In addition, due to this type of lifestyle, Bateman has achieved every material goal and is thus in need of another way to satisfy his needs for power and control.

Furthermore, Bateman is able to blend in and hide his murderous side in this type of society. He is seen as the boy next door by people and as a person who is unable to harm anyone, even though he is constantly dropping hints to people about his malicious side. The fact that Bateman is a part of the elite, combined with the fact that no one really cares about each other, ultimately leads to him being able to avoid detection and punishment. There is no comforting ending in *American Psycho*, due to the fact that society simply does not care and thus becomes an accomplice to Bateman's crimes.

In addition, the novel uses features of unreliability in relation to both the characters, the plot and the narrative. Bateman's narration is often quite unreliable, or at least subjective, both in relation to his interpretation of events and how he at times leaves out parts of his life. Furthermore, several occurrences in the novel are quite unreliable, especially towards the end of the novel when Bateman appears to be spiralling out of control and losing touch with reality. In relation to the characters, unreliability is used, for example, regarding how Bateman and the others are constantly unsure of who someone is. Therefore, they can never quite be trusted when they state something about someone else. The use of unreliability thus becomes another aspect of the novel that contributes to the overall critique of society.

Furthermore, the character of Patrick Bateman can be seen as emblematic of this society. The whole narrative is framed in sentences that suggest that there is no hope in the world in it and that there is no possible way out of it, neither for Bateman nor for society in general. Bateman has been crushed by mass society and stripped of any sort of individual identity, and all that is left for him is the wish to make others feel the same pain and existential dread that he

is feeling. Society in *American Psycho* is based upon money, manipulation and power and Bateman becomes the personification of these ideas. Ultimately, society itself is at fault for even making it possible for such monsters as Patrick Bateman to be created and be able to avoid capture and thus justice. Capitalism and consumerism have infected society and made it impossible for people such as Bateman to find a way out of their unsatisfying and monotonous lives.

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