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The Monster of Wall Street

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The scathing social satire that is Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* uses a unique stream-of consciousness narrative that draws the reader into the text by way of a fascination with the narrator. Patrick Bateman, a wealthy and powerful Wall Street elite who divides his time between giving fashion advice and frequenting New York's trendiest restaurants and clubs, also happens to be a delusional psychotic and ostensibly a serial killer. The interior monologue shifts between a narrative that sounds like a schizophrenic's journal of descent into madness and then occasional breaks through the fourth wall that address the reader directly. Ellis has created a voice for his protagonist that is full of hostility, yet self-aware of his insanity. Bateman's compulsive need to judge himself and others by their material wealth and fashion grows tedious by the end of the novel, and David Eldridge astutely observes that the "assumed style was evidently a deliberate aesthetic choice, one which satirized 'the absolute banality' of the yuppie culture Bateman represents" (Eldridge 22). The protagonist's obsessive materialism, combined with a depravity of social connectivity and the acts of horrific violence, psychosis, and rejection of morality places his character beyond the possibility of receiving empathy from the reader. Ellis seems to intend for his audience to become disgusted with both Bateman and his concept of a yuppie Wall Street subculture that allows such a monster to thrive in 1980s Manhattan. Ellis creates a terrifying depiction of a monster lurking in the upper echelons of Wall Street by day, and stalking the alleys of the city for victims at night. The character that Ellis creates is both shallow and intelligent, successful and insane, and to some degree symbolizes the predatory nature of 1980s capitalist and consumerist culture. As such, Ellis's Bateman, and *American Psycho* itself, reach beyond a simple social satire of the Reagan-Era Wall Street to comment on a particular moment in American history.

Throughout the text, Bateman struggles with balancing his compulsion toward violence and maintaining the calm composure that he takes pride in, though he can barely mask his hatred of his social network and residents of the city that he feels is full of

degenerates. Bateman is obsessed by appearance and judges everyone, including himself, almost exclusively upon their social impression and standing. Despite this shallowness, Bateman is acutely aware of the meaninglessness of appearances, the futility of any personal attempt to overcome his disposition, and often has realizations that only the violence that he engages in makes him feel important:

Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface, was all that anyone found meaning in...this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged... (Ellis 375)

The distance between the narrator and his closest friends also speaks to the shallow and careless attitude of the Wall Street elite that Bateman identifies with. Characters often misidentify acquaintances and mix up names, sometimes intentionally for assertive effect, and sometimes out of an apparent apathy. Bateman's social circle is indifferent to sexual infidelity and rampant drug use, instead paying more attention to who is sitting with whom at which restaurant and quibbling about which nightclub is the trendiest. A conversation with a supermodel attests to how Bateman uses the lack of attention from his colleagues to slip in brief confessional statements:

"I'm into, oh, murders and executions mostly. It depends." I shrug. "Do you like it?" She asks, unfazed. "Um...It depends. Why?" I take a bite of sorbet. "Well, most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don't really like it," she says. "That's *not* what I said" I say, adding a forced smile, finishing my J&B. "Oh, forget it". (Ellis 206)

Bateman is only comfortable sharing his real feelings when he knows the listener is too vapid to understand, or when he knows no one is listening; this apparent comfort both conflicts with and confirms his obsessive need for social acceptance and approval.

Ellis achieves a voyeuristic distance between the reader and the main character through the protagonist's cold and distant interior monologue, and a sense of disassociation even within Bateman's own mind is constantly apparent to the reader. There is very little emotion apparent in the main character's thoughts, even during the pornographic passages or the committal of horrific violence. Bateman may in fact show more emotion when reacting to people's clothing, or in the occasional second person breaks in the narrative for music reviews that comprise entire chapters. Bateman shows a general lack of emotive dialogue outside of narrative shifts, and the typically hollow stream-of-consciousness narrative allows the author to create a "profoundly alienating first-person narrative, in which Ellis adopts and remains in the persona of Bateman, resulting in a seemingly endless litany of grooming products, restaurant menus and designer labels" (Eldridge 22). Bateman constructs his own world through the images and media he surrounds himself with, ranging from Wall Street offices and East Village clubs to period specific slasher films and hard-core pornography. Eldridge explains the main character's lifestyle as a "fictive culture in which 'surface' is everything, and 'must have' designer suits and restaurant reservations are valued more than the life of a man, woman or child", yet his protagonist is losing his mind and craves ever more intense violence, thus "presenting his increasingly excessive violence as an allegory for the consumerist excesses of the 1980s (Eldridge 23).

In order to put a great distance between reader and protagonist, Ellis develops a character who appears to have reached the pinnacle of success while hating himself and everyone around him. The alien nature of Bateman's endless monologues about fashion and social censure seems to be enough to make any attempt by the reader to relate to the main character unlikely, yet Ellis uses graphic descriptions of the abhorrent violence and sexual debauchery of the protagonist to make him even more impossible to relate to. The degree to which Ellis takes the sex and gore permeating *American Psycho* can be

understood as a manifestation of the misogyny, racism, and malice that Ellis perceives within the Ivy League W.A.S.P. culture of Wall Street.

While many social subgroups are parodied in the novel, rich white men are the primary target, somewhat confirming “Ellis’s somewhat dubious claim that he had intended *American Psycho* to be a ‘feminist novel’ (Eldridge 24). This claim, though, requires the audience to understand Bateman’s psychosis and violence as the harshest possible satire. The backlash to the publication of the novel, including being banned in some countries and boycotted in many others is evidence of “A key difficulty with the novel... that it aggressively requires the reader to provide the critical condemnation of Bateman’s attitude and actions – for, in the first-person narrative, no such condemnation can be found within Bateman’s own perspective” (Eldridge 24). While the reader is left to figure out that they are supposed to hate Bateman rather than identify with him, it is a short leap for the reader to realize that Bateman represents the moral bankruptcy of Wall Street and hyperbolic violence of capitalism in a highly exaggerated form.

The violence that Bateman commits against his victims is so grotesque that it manages to subtly distance itself from the horror literature of the era in which the novel was written. Many critics have focused sharply on the gore of the novel; “Ellis’s graphic physical horror...reminded one or two critics of the extreme ‘splatterpunk’ horror writing of the late 1980s which was designed to be ‘stomach-churning’ in its effect” (Eldridge 21). Yet the torture scenes that are reminiscent of modern day horror cinema are laid out so graphically and unrealistically that the author expects the reader to question if Bateman is really just imagining his murders. Often, the protagonist’s descriptions conflict with narration elsewhere or do not seem plausible and creates an unreliable narrator; and Eldridge points out how this may be yet another mode of satire in the novel, as “For Bateman to actually get away with murders that are so grotesque as to be absurd it requires the people around him to be so cold and self-absorbed as not to care or not to notice” (23). Indeed, the violence begins to sound more like a self-aggrandizing fantasy

based on the horror movies that Bateman watches, demonstrating that the “Equally explicit descriptions of sex, which usually precede (and overlap with) Bateman’s vicious attacks, are themselves ‘replays’ of the hardcore pornography Patrick reads and watches and then cannibalizes” (Eldridge 28). Eventually, when the depiction of violence becomes impossible due to contradictions in plot, the reader is supposed to begin doubting the validity of Bateman’s account. Most significantly, the chainsaw sequence is the first point at which audiences are directly prompted to question Bateman’s reality. Until this moment, the murders and tortures have been presented in a realistically plausible manner, but the Grand Guignol of Christie’s murder defies even incredulous belief (Eldridge 31). If the reader, then, cannot even believe the interior monologue of the protagonist, it seems clear that Ellis intends to use this sense of doubt to further criticize Bateman, while creating a fascinating account of someone slowly losing their mind.

This final method Ellis employs to divide the reader from any chance of relating to Bateman include the character’s ultimate psychosis and failure to remain consistent. The change is gradual, taking place over roughly four years elapsed in the novel, and when Bateman comes to questioning his own reality after the reader has already done so, the most likely verdict seems to be that he is either a delusional psychotic or sociopath. The fact that Bateman is never caught, despite the extent and number of his crimes, is evidence that the culture that he inhabits permits his actions, does not care, or simply could not believe that a rich, good-looking stock broker is capable of such atrocities. Eldridge interprets the indifference or gullibility of supporting characters to never suspect Bateman as a criticism of the 1980’s culture of consumerist worship of the wealthy and affluent, for “When Bateman is confronted with a real-estate agent who may have literally whitewashed the scene of his most horrific crimes, the only possible reason for this to occur would be to prevent any interruption to the making of profits” (24). The insane hallucinations that become more frequent toward the end of the novel are the final nail in the coffin for any reader with a shred of empathy left for the main character, and

allow the audience to judge Bateman with the prejudice that Ellis has expertly fostered towards the Reagan-era Wall Street yuppie culture. By the end of the novel Bateman is haunted by anthropomorphic visions of threatening park benches, and ATM machines that command him to cause further social panic. Perhaps the most egregious example of Bateman's hallucinations involves a curious satire of 1980's daytime talk shows that develops from a parody, into an exemplar of Bateman's psychosis where he recounts that "On The Patty Winters Show this morning a Cheerio sat in a very small chair and was interviewed for close to an hour" (386).

The extreme violence and sex crimes committed by Bateman alongside his vicious spiral into madness all alienate the main character enough for readers to despise him. The distant tone used in the narration and distasteful selfishness and hatred are further reasons not to identify with Bateman, but the point of all this is for the reader to relate those extremes with a lack of morality and ethics in the elite and self-absorbed culture of Reagan-Era Wall Street. Ellis's innovative method of satire forces the reader to at once become horrified at the protagonist, while simultaneously associating him and his behavior as a personification and perversion of the host culture. It is after all, his colleagues that ignore his confessional remarks, feed his hatred of minorities and homosexuals, and ultimately permit this monster to exist in the bastions of American power and wealth.

Works Cited

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