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*American Psycho*'s Critical Barrage:

Examining Bret Easton Ellis's Most Controversial Novel

Criticism written on Bret Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho*, during its first decade, from 1991 to around 2001, could easily be divided between texts that opposed the book and texts that supported the book. Since the novel was, and still is, so controversial, many critics (and even the first publisher to initially pick up *American Psycho*, Simon & Schuster, who eventually canceled publication) argued that it should be eliminated and never printed by anyone. In some countries today, including Australia and New Zealand, the book is not sold in stores or lent in libraries to anyone under the age of eighteen. The controversy over *American Psycho* went so far that Ellis received death threats from various readers who believed Ellis's work was so offensive that he was a murderer himself. But, in the last eight years, from 2002 until the present, the book has received much more serious criticism, especially on topics of feminism (mostly regarding the book's portrayal of violence toward women), masculinity, psychotic tendencies, individuality and materialism, and the satirical way in which the book presents contemporary American society. Although there is still a lot of bias in both directions—critics seem to start off their essays as either being pro- or anti-*American Psycho*—a significant body of literary criticism now exists, and many critics have even compared it to major canonized works that portray American society, such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*. When it comes down to it, *American*

*Psycho* is a literary force, selling an initial 100,000 copies within twenty days of its release (and subsequently being removed from the *New York Times* bestseller list for inappropriate content) and still sells an annual 22,000 copies nearly two decades after the original publication. Often compared to such works as *Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn* for being banned unjustly, *American Psycho*'s vast and ongoing controversy has created much attention amongst the general public and literary critics and scholars.

The most vehement argument against *American Psycho*, in 1995, came only a few short years after its publication. "Snuff This Text! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away with Murder?" by Roger Rosenblatt adamantly opposed the book. Rosenblatt calls the contents of the novel "moronic and sadistic...pointless, themeless...everythingless" (144). He comments on the extreme violence and the numerous descriptions of expensive bath products, clothing, and food items, saying that the book is boring and nothing more than an extended airplane catalogue of expensive goods. Rosenblatt claims that one would assume that Ellis would not approve of Bateman's lifestyle, but that these assumptions must be false because Ellis "writes so comfortably about the violence in *American Psycho*" (145). Rosenblatt does not attempt to explain *why* Ellis took this approach but simply dismisses it as irrelevant material that only adds to the novel's monotony. He contends that the publisher of the novel, Vintage Book, must have considered the audience of the book to be "lowlife." Rosenblatt tosses the book aside as "meaningless drivel" (146). Yet, Rosenblatt's comments capture Ellis' aims. The book is, purposefully, a satire of American culture, especially that of wealthy New York yuppies. Caught up in the violence and bourgeois descriptions within the novel, Rosenblatt misses the point that he accidentally emphasizes, calling readers "lowlife" and by saying that Patrick Bateman has no motivation for his actions: the events and descriptions within *American Psycho* are absurd and

meant to be so. They are, however, a portrayal of the meaninglessness of the materialistic society of the eighties and nineties in American and especially New York. By passing over the ludicrousness of the novel, Rosenblatt simply augments the theme of *American Psycho*: that we are, in the words of Patrick Bateman, “not there.” If the readers of *American Psycho* are lowlifes, as Rosenblatt calls them, then they cannot see past the insane violence of the text, and therefore must be as non-alert toward life as Bateman. Rosenblatt fails to consider that *American Psycho*'s readers may have a deeper intellect than he suggests. This article led the way for more anti-*American Psycho* criticism, some more specific in scope than Rosenblatt's.

Feminist critics such as Lorie Moore condemn *American psycho* as a work that would do nothing more than incite violence against women and present women as weak objects of men's perverse, psychotic desires. In “Trashing Women, Trashing Books,” Moore suggests that *American Psycho* should be thrown out, just as the novel threw out women. Moore argues that Patrick Bateman, as well as Bret Easton Ellis, is “as weak as the women he tortures” (145). She suggests that because Patrick Bateman cannot control his murderous tendencies and cannot find a meaningful outlet for his desires and emotions, he is frailer than those he rapes, abuses, murders, and sadistically tortures. What Moore fails to consider, though, is that Bateman's psychotic tendencies are not thrown only on women. He murders a male bum, a male co-worker, and a male child, but does not rape or torture his male victims because he has no sexual desire toward them. Bateman's obvious inclination toward torturing and raping women is satirical of the homophobia of the eighties and nineties. The murders are as meaningless as any others that Bateman commits throughout the novel. This further emphasizes the nonsensical actions of Bateman that Ellis stresses so purposefully. Bateman hardly thinks about any of the deaths he causes. His desire for murder stems from his psychotic state and nothing he does is rational or

meaningful. Therefore, the novel is not meant to be a model for living the moral life, but instead a satire not meant to be taken literally. The very nature of the novel suggests that if it does, in fact, incite violence in its readers, then the readers must be psychotic to begin with. And, although there is a lot of violence against women, Ellis does not discount their humanity.

Bateman's secretary, Jean, is in fact a very powerful character. She is the only one in the novel that can draw positive feelings out of Bateman. Although the protagonist never goes so far as to be cured of his psychotic tendencies, he feels unfamiliar warmth for Jean. Although she seems immediately pathetic, wrapped up in a hopeless romance for Patrick Bateman, she lives day-to-day feeling unfulfilled but still persists. She has a strong perseverance and is a successful woman as a secretary for a powerful executive. Although she says she is not sure what she wants to do with her life, and that being a secretary is not her ultimate career, she is far from submissive to Bateman. She follows his orders because he is her superior, but she practically does his job for him as his mental state disallows him from properly carrying out simple tasks related to his job, such as scheduling and canceling appointments. Because of this, Jean is actually superior to Bateman. Moore seems to pass over these aspects of the novel, just as Rosenblatt passes over the majority of the meaning and themes throughout the novel. As *American Psycho* leapt into its second decade of existence, critics began to take the novel more seriously, the controversy over the novel no longer a major topic of the news, lingering and slowly dissipating.

In 2002, Sonia Baelo Allué wrote an article about *American Psycho* entitled "Serial Murder, Serial Consumerism." Her essay evaluates the ways in which popular culture influenced Ellis's text and also the similarities between consumerism and murder:

As part of this seriality we find the consumerist patterns followed by the main character, a serial killer called Patrick Bateman, who consumes in all possible ways: buying, eating and destroying. The three forms of consumption are produced in series, the text thus building a close link between the seriality of the serial killer and the seriality of mass culture, a link that may account for the interest aroused by the figure of the serial killer in Western societies, and especially in US society. (267-8)

Allué argues that *American Psycho* does not just represent American society but reflects everything going on in the cultural politics of America. The novel shocked and offended so many readers, she claims, simply because they could see themselves within the work. Allué calls *American Psycho*, and all of Ellis's writing, "blank fiction," and goes on to say that "the influence of mass culture can be seen in blank fiction's interest and use of surfaces" (268). She describes blank fiction as novels and stories without a strong attitude or tone and without a change within the protagonist. Blank fiction, Allué explains, is written without strong feeling and without a clear moral or ethical stance. According to her, blank fiction can cause readers to feel absolutely no change between the beginning and the end of the novel, and that it is natural for readers to come out of reading blank fiction feeling nothing that they didn't feel before reading the novel. However, this does not mean that blank fiction will *always* affect readers in this manner. In fact, Allué suggests that *American Psycho* has meaning hidden behind its blank prose. Allué implores Ellis's audience to see that he is influenced by "popular and mass culture" and that he "is very conscious of the influence that [culture] has exerted on his generation but he does not judge this influence as something negative, but he is aware of its significance" (269). She recommends that readers should stop being so negative, like Ellis. Allué, not caught up in

jumping on the bandwagon and screaming at Ellis (having published her article over a decade after the publication of *American Psycho*), is able to see that the novel is “more complex” than surface-level violence and shock-factor “since Patrick Bateman, the serial killer of the novel, kills in series, but the series of murders does not lead anywhere” (270). She sees *American Psycho* as going far beyond the controversy it has created, and says that there is much more to the novel than critics originally saw. Allué defends *American Psycho* and Bret Easton Ellis, saying that “Bateman’s personality is constructed through the images and messages he receives through mass and consumer culture” (276). The media surrounding Patrick Bateman feeds his torment and psychosis. He is caught up in fitting in and having an amazing outward appearance, which is fed by the pornography, popular television, magazines, news, and culture surrounding him. In every way, *American Psycho* is just like Patrick Bateman: nothing more than a reflection of the culture surrounding the book and the protagonist. Allué says the book “is a way of denouncing consumerism from within, from the mind of its most extreme representative, he who serially consumes objects and people: the serial killer” (276).

Peter Plagens calls Patrick Bateman “pretty much a blank,” effectually agreeing with Allué. He calls Bateman’s “amalgamated desires for consumer perfection” a “big kink” (58), meaning that it adds to the blank canvas. He calls the novel “more than an exercise in extreme sexual violence” in that, behind the immediate description of Bateman’s crimes, there is meaning within the novel that is in opposition to Bateman’s actions (59). Plagens suggests that the content of *American Psycho* is objectionable, but the meaning behind the surface-level visuals is powerful, representing contemporary culture creating “a basis for re-evaluation of the current state of America” (59). He compares the violence depicted in the novel to violence depicted in the Bible, suggesting that this type of violence has come before and that readers should look past

it in order to find the meaning. Plagens says that Ellis is a “near-great writer” but says the novel “is far from a masterpiece” (59). He looks at the book critically, setting the violence aside, to see a decent novel that, like Allué says, represents modern culture.

Steven Schneider suggests that *American Psycho* is definitely shocking, but that it should only lead to readers “reconciling” their own “remorse” (262). With these words, Schneider says that Americans must have remorse if any of Bateman’s characteristics are reflections of their own. He says that Patrick Bateman may not have a soul, but readers “are possessed of a soul” (265) and should see the violence in *American Psycho* as nothing more than a reflection of society that should cure them of consumerism and help them re-realize their souls. In other words, Schneider wants readers to be shocked by the violence in the text in order to see the difference between Patrick Bateman and themselves so that they do not lose all hope for humanity. What Schneider wants is for people to take the book as a serious representation of the negative aspects of American society. In this way, Schneider sees the text as something positive and beneficial to culture, rather than detrimental.

John Berry, also a defender of the text, outlines the outrage against *American Psycho* but then goes on to say that the controversy surrounding the novel matters very little, since the novel is a serious work. Berry says the real outrage lies in people critiquing the book based on “standards and taste” (6). He claims that “book publishing needs the courage to risk books that break out of the boundaries that have trapped it in an intellectually bankrupt pursuit of best sellers” (6). Berry, like Allué, refuses to accept *American Psycho* as meaningless. He claims that the culture described in *American Psycho* by Ellis is being lived out by the surface-level criticism published after the release of the novel.

Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine agree with Berry in their article on *American Psycho* which describes Patrick Bateman as a “Double Portrait,” much like society, in which the surface and the interior of individuals and culture as a whole vary greatly. The authors of this article defend *American Psycho* as a piece of constructed work, meaning that everything within the novel is entirely constructed based on the culture surrounding the time during which the novel was published. Kooijman and Laine say Patrick Bateman is “an unreliable narrator who believes his actions [murders] have really taken place” (280). They suggest that the world surrounding *American Psycho*—American culture and politics—are as unreliable as Bateman’s narration. This suggests, according to Kooijman and Laine, that the culture in America during the eighties and early nineties is not actually as brutal and murderous as Bateman. The protagonist’s actions are metaphors for the consumerism and shallowness of society. Although they admit the text could be offensive to some, Kooijman and Laine say that readers should look beyond that to see that *American Psycho*’s exaggeration of the sad state of American society demonstrates the fact that our culture, unlike Bateman’s state of mind, is not yet beyond repair

Anna Quindlen takes the stance that whether the novel is offensive or not, it should still be published. Although she does not comment on the actual text of *American Psycho*, Quindlen discusses the publication process of the novel. She says it “survived the revulsion of many of the people involved in its publication” after being “derailed by bad publicity” (143). Quindlen says that having the confidence to publish a potentially controversial novel is the only way to make readers evaluate themselves and the culture surrounding them in order to effect change in society. She feels bogged down by “a world in which people have told me [*American Psycho*] is a horrible book though they haven’t read it, a world in which appearance is worth two of reality” (143). Quindlen argues that the negative criticism the novel received only emphasizes the point

of the text: that America is a society so caught up in materialism and consumerism that it can't see the very murders it is committing by banning books. Quindlen sees *American Psycho* as a powerful text and views critics like Roger Rosenblatt as the enemy to the progress of society.

Fay Weldon, an English author of mostly feminist works, wrote an article entitled "Now You're Squeamish?" This essay regarding *American Psycho* is meant to persuade culture that many other offensive books have been written before, and *American Psycho* should stand on its own merit as a meaningful text that reflects society. She says, "of all the things you ought to censor—should have censored because we now live in a world so terrible, so full of "Abandon Hope" scrawled in blood-red on our city walls—why pick on wretched, brilliant Bret Easton Ellis?" (C1) Weldon agrees with Quindlen that critics like Rosenblatt shouldn't waste their time attempting to "snuff" out books like *American Psycho*. She claims Ellis is brilliant not only for his style of prose, but for his precise depiction of American society. She says "the feminists—that's me too—see Ellis's book as anti-women. So it is. So's the world, increasingly" (C4). Weldon argues that Ellis's book may be offensive, but it should be, because it directly represents the world about which it is written—American culture. Weldon claims that this is just another depiction of the world we live in. She asks only that people stop criticizing books for being offensive, because the list is endless. Instead, she suggests that people see their own society reflected in the offensive material in books such as *American Psycho* and use the material as a basis for examining the offensiveness of current culture because anything offensive represented in literature suggests that real-life actions along the same lines must exist. And if readers aren't capable of seeing this, she says, then they should just not read the books (C4).

Roger Cohen suggests that we separate Ellis from his work. When readers of the book, and the American audience in general, start to compare authors with their protagonists, Cohen

argues, they cannot see beyond the “monsters” they create in the novels and their authors. Cohen looks at the death threats sent to Ellis (thirteen of them in total) as idiocy. Threats like that merely perpetuate the violence that readers are so incensed about to begin with (Cohen C18). Cohen cites responses made by Ellis regarding the outcries over *American Psycho*: “it is particularly dismaying at a time when serial killers are a recurring theme in popular culture” (C18). Cohen uses this quote to argue that the audience of *American Psycho* is only offended because the book represents what they are a part of. What Cohen sets out to do, to separate an author from his text, helps readers see the text as something that can stand on its own.

In 2000, Patrick W. Shaw published *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, a book about theories of violence through American fiction. He argues that violence is evolutionary and also the product of disease (such as Bateman’s psychosis). He goes so far as to praise *American Psycho* by saying it keeps the reader “interested in...the pathetic life of Patrick Bateman” (191). He goes on to say that “once Ellis taps into our own violent instincts, he plays them as Holden Caulfield [the protagonist of *Catcher in the Rye*] imagines playing women like a sexual violin” (Shaw 193). Shaw argues that many critics have overlooked the literary value of *American Psycho* by not viewing Bateman as an unreliable narrator whose “horrendous crimes...might never happen in reality” (195). Shaw is onto something, here: what many critics have previously overlooked is that the violence in *American Psycho* is insubstantial. The shocking way in which the violence is presented is ironical, juxtaposing its meaninglessness against the way in which it stands out to the reader. Shaw says that “Ellis contrasts form and function to heighten the intensity of the violence he portrays” (196). Ellis suggests that Bateman’s psychosis goes beyond murder, rape, and torture, so far as the automated teller machine talking to him, his feelings of extreme jealousy over a mere business card, confessing all of his crimes to his lawyer who does

not even know who he is, and describing a park bench that supposedly followed him for six blocks. One cannot analyze the gruesome scenes in *American Psycho* and expect to gain anything from them. Shaw even says that to analyze these scenes would be “in itself a bit psychotic” (194). The scenes in *American Psycho* that most readers undoubtedly find hard to stomach are used only as variance from the everyday actions of Patrick Bateman in order to highlight the true meaning of the story, which is, in the words of Shaw, to “reveal the rawest, most honest appraisal of society’s animalistic heritage” (198). Ellis’s writing is not meant to be poetic and beautiful, but rather something unadulterated and naked which will shock readers into realizing the ludicrous society in which Americans live (Shaw 199).

In her book *American Dream, American Nightmare*, also published in 2000, Kathryn Hume says that *American Psycho* has no “moral norm” and is pleasing to “misogynists, sadists, masochists, and horror freaks” but simultaneously “deprives us of [a] comfortable defense” by likening him to “white corporate America” (190-191). Hume is suggesting here that, because Bateman is so much like typical upper-class white men, readers are left without any real defense; no matter what, one could argue that the readers of the book are very much like the character in the book. American culture, like Bateman, is obsessed with materialism and image, both aspects of the animalistic tendencies of Americans to succeed and be the best and survive at any cost. Patrick Bateman, like many other Americans, seeks only to “make a killing” (Hume 191) in the capitalistic epitome of our culture: New York City’s financial district, especially Wall Street. Unlike Rosenblatt, Hume even claims that *American Psycho* is relatable to readers:

The manipulation of the reader is one of the novel’s most interesting features. By giving us an aristocratic protagonist—private money, Harvard, perfect body, handsome face, expensive clothes, competence in the money world—Ellis is

going against real-life norms and glamorizing his character. Historically, serial murderers do not fit this profile, and glamour is rarely something they can claim.

(193)

Ellis relates his protagonist to the reader, but then ironically portrays him as a homicidal maniac. Many people would even desire to be Patrick Bateman were it not for his psychotic state. Ellis attempts to say that by giving in to the same desires as Patrick Bateman, Americans could possibly end up in the same sad state. That is a risk of the capitalist society in which we live and prosper. At the same time, Ellis is comparing the money-grubbing tendencies of Americans to psychosis. Rosenblatt accuses Ellis of committing murder by writing *American Psycho*, but Ellis suggests that the common desire for the glamour that Bateman achieves is no different than committing murder by demonstrating the negative effects Bateman's success has on himself and others. Patrick Bateman is "right at home [as a] distinctly American kind of psychotic" (Hume 194).

*American Psycho* may have drawn controversy, not merely because of its gruesome depictions of violence, but because the protagonist, a psychotic killer, is a reflection of the culture of the readers. Anyone given to materialism is guilty of contributing to the "serial consumerism" of America that inspired Ellis to write the novel (Hume 267). Only by looking beyond the physical aspects of *American Psycho*, the immediate text, the brutal descriptions, and the mundane, sometimes nonsensical, monotonous voice of Patrick Bateman can one see American society reflected on the handsome face of the protagonist. Allué suggests that it goes beyond this, though. American society is not reflected in Patrick Bateman, but vice versa. Patrick Bateman is a reflection of American culture: "Ellis is very conscious of the influence that TV has exerted on his generation but he does not judge this influence as something

negative, he is simply aware of its significance. Ellis's main influence is then popular and mass culture" (Hume 269). Hume finds further evidence of the reflection of society in Patrick Bateman: "Bateman himself narrates all the events portrayed in the novel, deploying the same flat tone to describe both his daily routine and his horrific killings" (269). By melding Bateman's day-to-day activities with his horrific homicides, Ellis has bridged the gap between the psychotic state of America and the psychotic state of a serial killer. In doing so, he further emphasizes the metaphorical murders that society commits every day by living in vast consumerism. The metaphor is that consumerism is killing society by eliminating its personal values and giving heavy meaning to image. Like Bateman, society has murdered identity by giving into materialism. Consumerism forces people to be alike by creating an ideal image for which the majority of people strive. What makes *American Psycho* controversial, then, beyond its detailed descriptions of unfathomable violence, is the personal offense it causes its readers to feel.

To understand why the novel is an ironical depiction of 1980s, American culture, one akin to other critiques of the American Dream, it is important to explore the text. *American Psycho* begins with the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, and his co-worker and friend, Timothy Price, riding in a taxi toward Bateman's fiancée's brownstone in Manhattan. Price discusses his positive characteristics; "I'm resourceful...I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society *cannot* afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*" (Ellis 3). This statement succinctly defines the dream of many Americans in the 1980s: to be better than everyone else and to be invaluable. Bateman, along with his friend, Price, is obsessed with obtaining this dream. It drives him to paranoia, jealousy, rage, and a lust for power and domination which causes him to torture, rape, and murder numerous victims.

Bateman's narration is full of descriptions, sometimes lengthy and list-like, of his surroundings, especially his material belongings, clothing, and appearance. In the second chapter of the novel, he describes his apartment, making references to items such as "the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace," "an original David Onica [painting]," "a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba" and even goes into details like the TV being a "high-contrast highly defined model" and adding, "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 24-5). Bateman's obsession with his material wealth surpasses psychotic. He can name the designer of any item he owns, and can even name designers of clothing others are wearing simply by the way it is stitched, or other certain characteristics. Bateman is the epitome of materialistic America.

Bateman also describes his morning grooming routine, which includes "an ice-pack...a deep pore cleanser lotion, an herb-mint facial masque...an Interplak tooth polisher...a water-activated gel cleanser, a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub." He even explains why he chooses Vidal Sassoon shampoo over any other brand, because it "is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older" (Ellis 26). This only takes up roughly a tenth of Bateman's entire grooming routine. His clear addiction to an impeccable image causes him to spend hours, daily, worrying about every last detail. He also spends countless hours improving his physical body. He belongs to a club, Xclusive, where he works on perfecting his workout routine, which includes over one thousand crunches. But Bateman's obsession with his image and the material go beyond such obvious aspects as physical fitness and designer clothing.

Bateman is addicted to image so thoroughly that even trivial matters can raise irrepressible anxiety within him. While going to dinner one night, he narrates, "I'm on the verge of tears by the time we arrive at Pastels since I'm positive we won't get seated but the table is good, and relief that is almost tidal in scope washes over me in an awesome wave" (Ellis 39). Simply sitting at a bad table, because it would look bad, nearly causes Bateman to lose his temper. He then spends a large part of dinner attempting to impress the "hardbody waitress" by flirting when ordering his food while trying not to "let her think I'm *too* interested" (40). Later in the evening, he pulls out his new business card, trying "to act casual about it" (44). After receiving a few compliments, a few of his co-workers pull out their cards. First, Van Patten's causes a "brief spasm of jealousy" because of the "elegance of the color and the classy type" in Bateman, and forces him to clench his fist in anger. Price compliments Van Patten's card, saying it is better than Bateman's, so he narrates, "I cannot believe that Price actually likes Van Patten's better. Dizzy, I sip my drink then take a deep breath" (44). It seems ludicrous for Bateman to be dizzy over something so trivial as business cards, but to him, any aspect of his image that is not better than everyone else's is a detriment to the achievement of his American dream. But Bateman's anxiety goes even further when Price reveals his card: "Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum, compared to this card" (44-5). Then Bateman even becomes "depressed" when they see the final card in the group, which belongs to Montgomery. Bateman ignores his food for the rest of the meal because he is so distraught over the exchange of business cards.

Bateman's addiction to image goes beyond psychotic. The mind of a normal human being would not allow one to be overcome with rage, jealousy, anxiety, and depression over mere business cards. Yet Bateman cannot control himself. Another example of Bateman's

inability to control himself comes when he is at a dry cleaners in order to get blood stains out of his expensive sheets. He screams at the Chinese woman behind the front desk, “If-you-don’t-shut-your-fucking-mouth-I-will-kill-you-are-you-understanding-me?” in a frenzy of anger and frustration (Ellis 82). He clearly considers himself superior to this woman, who he hates not only because of her race, but because she does not understand him. He mocks her, saying, “Stupid bitch-ee? Understand” (83). Bateman’s out-of-control emotions go far beyond swearing at an employee at a dry cleaners.

The most shocking aspect of *American Psycho* is the vast number of murders that Bateman commits, which include torture and rape before and after killing the victims. All of Bateman’s insecurities, caused by his desire to be essentially perfect, all culminate in him being a serial killer. He murders hookers, co-workers, homeless bums, a homosexual, an ex-girlfriend and a small boy at a zoo, among others. Throughout his nights of murders, he continues to maintain an appearance of outward perfection. To anyone who sees him, he appears to be the embodiment of the American dream. But his achievement of this dream merely causes him to seek even more power and more excitement that can never be fulfilled by materialistic desires. His obsession turns into murderous tendencies which cannot be cured, as he says himself: “My need to engage in...homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected...But I...have no other way to express my blocked...needs” (Ellis 338). One can only guess at exactly what his “blocked needs” are, but given his characteristics, one can assume they involve his appearance, position in society, wealth, etcetera.

Beyond worrying about his own appearance, Bateman also judges others’. In the first murder scene of the book, he kills an African-American homeless man. He seems to justify this to himself because of the homeless man’s poor appearance and, in Bateman’s eyes, less-than-

desirable position in society as a bum. He greets the homeless man mockingly by being polite; “‘Hello,’ I say, offering my hand. ‘Pat Bateman.’” He offers the bum food and money, proceeds to wave a ten-dollar bill in front of him, but then instead asks him why he doesn’t get a job. He starts to ridicule the man; “Do you think it’s fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work?” he asks. He tells Al (he eventually asks the homeless man for his name) to “stop having a negative attitude” and to stop “reeking of shit” (Ellis 130). Because of his distaste for this man, because Al is inferior to him, Bateman feels justified in killing him. After he kills Al he throws a quarter at him and says, “There’s a quarter. Go buy some *gum* you crazy fucking *nigger*.” (132). Bateman embodies many of the racist and classist stereotypes of the eighties and nineties. He feels that because he has a job he is superior to Al, and blames all of Al’s poor circumstances on him. Bateman represents the ignorance of society caused by material blindness. He is so caught up in himself, in achieving the American dream, that his priorities and morality are entirely skewed.

At dinner with a few friends, he is having a conversation with friends, attempting to make a point. But he ends up too frustrated to continue the argument, so he just says, “listen. I just want everyone to know I’m pro-family and anti-drug.” (Ellis 157). But Bateman consumes cocaine multiple times throughout the novel, and even kills a young boy at a zoo. The morality Bateman presents to his friends is simply a part of his outer image, but has nothing to do with his inner self. He seeks to perpetuate his American dream, his idealized and perfect life, but this all causes horrific, inner turmoil. His skewed morality goes overboard, causing him to murder. When he becomes anxious or confused because of the conflict of his outer image against his inner self, he seeks to kill. When he stands up from the table after declaring himself as pro-

family and anti-drug, he heads to the bathroom in an attempt to cool down. He doesn't seem to know what to do because he is so frustrated.

In the bathroom, he sees his co-worker and supposed friend, Luis Carruthers. Throughout the narration of the novel, Bateman reveals his dislike of Luis, who he calls, on numerous occasions, a "nerd," a "faggot," and a "loser." He gets enjoyment out of going behind Luis's back and sleeping with his girlfriend, Courtney. Because he is extremely anxious at this point, Bateman seeks some sort of outlet for his frustration. He thinks, "Would the world be a safer, kinder place if Luis was hacked to bits? *My world might, so why not?*" (Ellis 158). Again, Bateman's obsession with himself skews his morality and justifies, in his own mind, murdering Luis. He puts his leather gloves on and attempts to strangle Luis, but for some reason that he can't explain himself, he isn't able to do it. Confused, Luis thinks Bateman is showing affection by placing his hands on his neck. Luis confesses his love for Bateman, which makes him even more anxious, so he leaves the restaurant in a flurry, bumping into people on the way.

Bateman has no ability to control his emotions. He lets them flare up over minor things because they get in the way of his American dream, or his obsession with his image. Through the character and narration of Patrick Bateman, Bret Easton Ellis attempts to reflect American society in a hyperbolic, satirical way by demonstrating the great lengths and extreme measures an individual in American society may take in order to make themselves feel fulfilled. Because Bateman is seeking this fulfillment from sources that will never make him happy, he gets carried away and ends up lost, committing murder to satisfy his bloodlust created by his inability to ever feel satisfaction from his surface-level American dream.

While some have fought against *American Psycho* and others have held onto it as a piece of marvelous fiction, there is a middle ground in which the novel can be viewed rationally as nothing more than a critique on modern American society. The conversation that has taken place in the last two decades around the controversy of *American Psycho* only emphasizes the horror that the citizens of American culture feel over seeing themselves reflected in a serial killer. Though some critics oppose the text, and others praise it, the formidable way in which Ellis shocks the reader has drawn attention to the offensive nature of cultural politics in America. *American Psycho* represents, in its fullest capacity, the media and culture of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First centuries in America. Patrick Bateman's flat tone serves as a bridge between the reader and the protagonist, inviting the reader to see himself as Patrick Bateman and to view his life through Bateman's eyes. Perhaps what the reader will see is not too far removed from the protagonist's own anxiety-driven experiences. No matter how one views the novel, it is a powerful work in contemporary American literature that should be considered amongst the modern canon.