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ENG 502

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### Biological Vestiges in *American Psycho*

In an effort to make sense of the violence in Bret Easton Ellis's controversial novel *American Psycho*, most critics have focused on single question: whether the violence in the text, alongside the rhetorically flat, repetitive prose, works to create a sustained and believable satire of consumerist culture in 1980s America. In 1990, directly prior to the novel's official release in 1991, Roger Rosenblatt notoriously encouraged *New York Times* readers to snuff Ellis's book because of its "moronic and sadistic contents" and because Patrick Bateman, the novel's main character and first-person narrator, "has no motivation for his madness" (sec. 7, 3). Rosenblatt's harsh review was just the beginning. More than a decade of similar criticism would follow.

More recently, there has been a trend in scholarship to in one way or another defend, or at least justify, the novel's violence. In a 2008 essay, Berthold Schoene seeks to do so by "pathologiz[ing] modern masculinity in order to highlight and problematize the violent trauma it inflicts on men and their others" (378). More specifically, Schoene's interest lies in identifying the modern male as an ideological construct, one that "promotes a type of male subjectivity that displays [...] similarities to Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism" (379). Autism, Schoene writes, is the male equivalent to female hysteria (380), and in this way the essay strives toward a psychological justification for Patrick's otherwise outrageous behavior. It seems, though, that Schoene's argument loses itself in its attempt to scientifically justify Patrick's outbursts. By categorizing Patrick's behavior as that of an autistic person, Schoene limits his

own argument and, in doing so, contradicts himself by the end when he claims Patrick is cured of his behavior upon kissing Jean. If Patrick's violent tendencies were in fact the manifestation of autistic brain synapses, he would be incurable—as autism is still considered to be a treatable disorder, but not a curable one (Maino 151). In that same scene, though, when Patrick kisses Jean, he himself admits that, although “[Jean’s] eyes tell [him] to rearrange [his] life in a significant way [...] sometime very soon, she too will be locked into the rhythm of [his] insanity” (378). It seems, then, to be unreasonable to suggest that Jean will ever cure Patrick. It seems more likely that, if anything, the kiss will change Jean: “...sometime very soon, she too will be locked into the rhythm of my insanity.” The current essay will argue that, while Patrick's psychotic tendencies are indeed caused by an abnormal brain function that can be attributed to biological anomaly similar to autism, that abnormality is not a scientifically recognized disorder.

Author of *The Things We Carried* (1990), Tim O'Brien, articulates fiction's unique place in the world: “[fiction] is for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth.” If O'Brien is right, if fiction is capable of expressing truths without bearing the burden of proof—if, in other words, concrete truth is not a necessary component when attempting to express a larger, abstract truth—then justification for particular themes within a specific work of fiction need not be rooted in objective sciences, as Schoene's essay wants to suggest. In an essay titled “*American Psycho: A Late Twentieth-Century Naturalist Text*,” Tony Williams works to make sense of the novel's violence by considering it as a “twentieth-century descendent of American naturalism” (403). Williams defends this reading by comparing Patrick's oddities and world of commodity with famous naturalist Émile Zola's social commentary on the “decadent Second Empire of Louis-Napoleon III” (403). Zola criticized Napoleon III's arrogance, and the crooked path he (Napoleon) took to becoming emperor of France. One similarity in Ellis's text, Williams

points out, is Patrick's commonality in his anger toward social outcasts and others (the homeless man, single women, the homosexual man), which serve to reflect the policies of Ronald Reagan, whose two presidential terms ran from 1981-1989. Additionally, Williams draws on clues found throughout the text remnant of classical naturalism, a tradition in which characters are trapped without any hope of redemption (410).

Stephen C. Brennan, a longtime scholar of American naturalism, provides a definition of the movement that aligns nicely with most of Williams's reading of *American Psycho*: literary naturalism, Brennan writes, is nothing more than "realism infused with a pessimistic determinism" (12). And while Brennan's definition of naturalism as "pessimistic determinism" reflects a good deal of Patrick's character, it does not address another important factor of the naturalist movement: namely the effect of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. But then again, neither does Williams essay examine how the theory of evolution might relate to *American Psycho*. However, by blending Schoene's autistic reading with Williams's naturalist reading, a new possibility reveals itself when Darwinism is added to the mix. But it is important to first draw out how the first person narrative informs reader perceptions of Patrick's world.

Issues of mistaken identity permeate the novel. Patrick makes it very clear throughout that he feels disconnected from everyone and everything around him. This is partly revealed because he consistently mistakes the identities of his Wall Street coworkers. One of the many examples of this occurs when Patrick is out to eat at a restaurant with friends, and he accidentally mistakes Luis Carruthers, a colleague, for Paul Owen, another colleague (155). Paul Owen, too, continuously mistakes Patrick for another person: Marcus Halberstram. In a chapter titled "Paul Owen" (214-21), the confusion reaches a darkly comical climax. The collection of colleagues exists as a group independent from Patrick himself, and independent too from another character:

Patrick's secretary, Jean, who he believes is in love with him (64). Jean exists separately from the coworkers. Though she always asks to go out with Patrick for lunch—one example being in the chapter titled “Office—she never joins him at the restaurants with his colleagues; and though there is some sexual tension between them, Jean and Patrick maintain a professional relationship until the novel's final moments. She is not part of the group of Patrick's colleagues. In this way she is like Patrick: isolated.

What seems to be emerging then is a cast which is broken into three distinct factions, each with its own respective biological origin, each a representation of an era: Patrick's coworkers as faction one; Patrick himself as the second faction; and Jean as the third. What is perhaps most important to Patrick's character, what most informs his behavior, is the way in which these three groups interact. With his isolation comes a degree of friction, a degree of discomfort and agitation. But, of course, one must ask why Patrick feels isolated and why Jean feels, in her own way, isolated too. But unlike Patrick, Jean manages to refrain from violent outbursts. By incorporating Williams's naturalist reading of the text, and expanding it to include Darwin's theory of evolution, the current essay suggests that each of these groups has a traceable biological origin. The coworkers are hyperbolic representations of the present, the late 1980s, as it were. They are fully invested in their contemporary capitalistic endeavors. Jean's character depicts a nostalgized version of a time when people communicated on a level beyond that which is comprehensible to most Generation Xers. She has been transplanted into the novel's present from the past, to serve as a kind of scientific control: something by which variations can be measured. Patrick himself exists as a mutant, stuck between generations, and it is his uncomfortable position that causes his angst.

Near the novel's finale, in a chapter titled "End of the 1980s," Patrick has brunch at a fancy restaurant off Broadway with Jean. While she attempts to connect with him on a meaningful level, while she says poignant things like "[a] lot of people have...lost touch with life and I don't want to be among them" (375) (a sentiment with which Patrick can absolutely relate), while she flirtatiously touches his shoulder, nudges his foot with hers beneath the table, Patrick is far away in the alleys of his consciousness, feeling around as if in a strange room in the dark, discovering why he lashes out the way he does<sup>1</sup>. He suspects, if only momentarily, that Patrick the Monster is not so much a product of chemical imbalances as a product of a society in which "nothing [is] affirmative, [in which] the term 'generosity of spirit' [applies] to nothing, [is] cliché, [is] some kind of bad joke" (375). Perhaps in some ways he is too self-aware, too emotionally fragile to bear the weight of 1980s American consumer capitalism and the throwaway culture that accompanies it. Despite a closetful of Armani suits and Vuitton alligator skin lace ups, and in darkly comedic juxtaposition with his daytime job as a Wall Street broker, Patrick is unsatisfied. He hates his stuff, and he hates himself for having wanting it.

He continues: "Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, [are] things, emotions, that no one really [feels] anymore" (375). For a character such as he, or such as readers have come to know him by this point in the novel, these moments of clarity seem out of place. They don't mesh with, they are in fact in direct opposition to, the man who, one-hundred pages previous, nails a woman's hands to his hardwood floor, opens her legs, inserts blue cheese, then a starved

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that Ellis ends the novel ambiguously: readers are never certain whether Patrick's murderous rampages exist in the physical world or only in his mind. However, for the purposes of this essay, it is not necessary to discern whether Patrick's desires manifest in the physical world. That he has them to begin with is the focus, and the source of the question this essay strives to resolve.

mouse into her vagina (245). Patrick is complex. He will make you cry, will make you wail, but he is also capable of critical self-analysis, capable of synthesizing the hatred he feels for the world around him, and of turning it into an unstoppable Monster.

Previous to this brunch, to this conversation / inner monologue, Patrick practices little to no self-reflection. Although we are almost always seeing the world through Patrick's own eyes (save a single section in which the narrative shifts to the second person), interpreting it as he interprets it, with a fierce (self-) hatred, with hot rage and breathless energy, it is close to impossible to imagine him as the novel's most tragic victim. But that may be exactly how Ellis wants us to read Patrick, and it becomes even more plausible as the chapter continues. Patrick refers to himself as "fabricated, an aberration...a noncontingent human being...sketchy and unformed" (377). On one level, this calls attention to Patrick's active participation in, and hypocritical promotion of, a lifestyle he does not believe in, a lifestyle that cripples him emotionally. He goes on: "Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behavior must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?" (377). This is not a question new to mankind, of course. Ellis is simply rephrasing a debate everyone is made privy to in Psychology 101: Are we products of nature, or nurture? In Patrick's case, we are led to believe that the cause for his actions lies in his environment. But loosely in the vein of a fictional character that preceded him (see: John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*), Patrick does not believe the world can be fixed; it is beyond repair. Unlike his anger, Patrick's softer moments of self-reflection do not manifest themselves as action in the physical world; they boil inside him like alien blood, strange to him, and mean. "I do not hope for a better world for anyone," he says. "In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this...there is no catharsis" (377).

While it is true that Ellis wants us to see Patrick as a victim, it would be an injustice to deny that Patrick is the primary cause of his own suffering, an active participant in the very world he despises, drawn to the consumerist culture, to what we might call a twisted and hyperbolic (although not necessarily untrue) representation of the American Dream, because of the short term euphoria that comes when purchasing a two-hundred dollar entrée or ten-thousand hound's-tooth and textured business cards—it is in his power to rebuke the system he hates: he has money; he has connections; he has a podium. And yet he does nothing (aside from viscously lash out at the homeless, at his Wall Street competitors, at prostitutes). But to stop there, to end the analysis, may be doing Patrick Bateman another kind of injustice. It is true he has these things (access to money, to a network of wealthy acquaintances, to a podium from which to speak, from which to promote change), but he is also a product of nature and, in his own way, incapable of change.

I mean Patrick is incapable of being moved to inspire change—at least in such a way that will allow for the human race to still exist. He is, as Ellis would like us to understand, a product of the generation in which he was raised: Generation X. Patrick would like to see himself as a victim of the times alone, but I think there is something he's missing. I would like to suggest that Patrick is slightly less evolved than his capitalist counterparts in the novel. He is not solely a product of his environment. His friends and coworkers express no qualms about their society: they seem to, in fact, relish it (a single exception here is Jean, whose function is elaborated upon below). They are evolved beyond the point of mild reprimand, beyond any vestigial notion that maybe this is not the best possible way to exist. Those vestiges remain in Patrick, though, at least to the point that he is aware of their existence, but not to the point of articulation. He is incapable of fully embracing consumer-capitalism, precisely because he retains a sketchy notion



that people are losing touch with what it means to be human. In order to make this abstract concept a bit more concrete, I prefer to compare Patrick's unformed notions directly to biological vestiges—rudimentary, usually non-functioning organs or bone structures that were, at some point in the past, fully functioning. The Blue whale, for example, retains two bones structurally identical to (albeit much larger than) human hipbones. They are, of course, non-functioning, but their presence also suggests that the Blue whale may have, at one point, been a land-mammal. Patrick is stuck between generations; he is not fully formed; he exists in this novel as a kind of transitional species, somewhere between the past and the present. It is the discomfort that comes with being on the fence, with being a kind of mutant, pinched between generations, that causes Patrick's lashing out. In that way then, it is nature that has formed Patrick's character. He gets closest to expressing his feelings in this chapter ("End of the 1980s")—but even so, he says, "there is no catharsis" (377).

Jean's character plays a vital role: she ushers Patrick toward his epiphany, and it is no coincidence that Ellis builds this pivotal moment for him around their brunch. Patrick's coworkers and Wall Street friends exist as fully formed species of Generation X, incapable of expressing interest in, or a longing for, the past, and Patrick himself represents the transition. Jean exists as a tangible representation of, a harkening back to, a time when people connected on a level beyond the comprehension of the stereotypical Generation Xer. She has been, for all intents and purposes, transplanted into the novel's present from the past. These things Patrick ponders, this fuzzy articulation of his vestigial notions, arise because he is close to Jean, physically, here, and because she says things that Patrick himself is incapable of saying, but to which he deeply relates: "A lot of people seem to have...lost touch with life and I don't want to be among them" (375). This is how Patrick feels, of course, but where Jean is capable of

expressing this societal rift, Patrick fails. Instead, he reacts in the only way he knows how: with sheer force, with a brutality well beyond even that which nature's most violent predators are capable. Hence, he is beyond that which could be a product of nature and, as Ellis has wanted us to see all along, Bateman's violent impulses (prolonged, to be sure) are the product of an environment, not of chemical imbalances or something else addressable by modern medicine.

The world surrounding Jean and Patrick, the world of 1980s America, is represented by Patrick's colleagues. They are invested in their work and find no fault in their lavish lifestyle. The novel includes a huge cast of side characters that fall into this category, including Luis Carruthers, a homosexual man whom Patrick despises, Paul Owen, Patrick's coworker and professional rival, Evelyn Richards, Patrick's official girlfriend, colleagues Craig McDermott and David Van Patten, and Patrick's best friend Timothy Price, among a host of others. Such an elaborate cast grants Ellis the freedom to confuse the names and identities of each member, and since this is a first person novel, it reinforces the theme of discomfort and isolation Patrick feels. Patrick's best friend, Timothy Price, describes himself in this way at the beginning of the novel: "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" (4). And Price is right: the society Ellis has created in *American Psycho* cannot afford to lose him, or any of the other characters like him. Although they are all interchangeable and their identities are malleable, the colleagues exist as a pure reflection of the 1980s culture that Ellis is working to build. But it is important, too, to evaluate how Ellis has built the 1980s, why he has created it in such a way. Early reviews, like the one mentioned earlier by Rosenblatt, suggest that reviewers did not envision the 80s as Ellis did. They were disgusted by the content, and found no justifiable reason for Patrick's madness.

Sonia Baelo Allué, in an essay titled “Serial Murder, Serial Consumerism: Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*,” evaluates pop culture’s influence on the novel. She begins by defining what critics have dubbed the “blank generation”: a group of American writers from the 1980s and 90s who regularly incorporated mass culture into their fiction, alongside themes of violence, indulgence, advertising, pop music, and so on. Allué interprets Patrick as a character who is, like his colleagues, fully invested in his culture. She contends that he “consumes in all possible ways: buying, eating and destroying” (71). It seems problematic to suggest that destruction falls beneath the umbrella of consumerism. However, what Allué brings to the table is justification for Ellis’s version of 1980s America. She discusses the author’s elaborate use of repetition, especially insofar as it concerns brand labels: “[Ellis’s] use of designer labels [...] express[es] the power and reach of commercial culture” (84). A chapter titled “Morning,” which comes early in the novel, is especially full of brand names and mass-culture products. Patrick describes, without sparing even the smallest detail, his daily routine. He tells the reader about the things he owns, the cosmetic products he uses, spending a good deal of page space on shampoos, conditioners, and facial moisturizers:

[...] a Foltene European Supplement and Shampoo for thinning hair which contains complex carbohydrates that penetrate the hair shafts for improved strength and shine. Also the Vivagen Hair Enrichment Treatment, a new Redken product that prevents mineral deposits and prolongs the lifecycle of the hair. Luis Carruthers recommended the Aramis Nutriplexx system, a nutrient complex that helps increase circulation. (27)

At this point in the novel, Patrick has not yet murdered anyone on the page. But despite the fact that the violence has yet to begin, scenes like this are perhaps in part what Rosenblatt

meant when he claimed Patrick has no motivation for his madness. It is maddening to read elaborate descriptions of mundane things like cosmetic products, and the abundant presence of scenes such as this suggests something quite mad about Patrick himself, too, that he would find it worth such detailed description. But Allué addresses Rosenblatt's review, and suggests his critique "ignore Ellis's point: [...] we see the excess in the number of available products and Bateman is depicted as a compulsive consumer, completely engulfed by mass culture" (84). Rosenblatt's critique may have a degree of truth: the consumerist culture Ellis builds in *American Psycho* is unrealistic and without reason; but that is exactly why it works. The hyperbolic nature of 1980s consumerism that Ellis creates serves as a catalyst for Patrick's outrage, which is also a fictional account of one man's relationship with the world around him. Ellis's novel does not claim that this is the only way one might understand consumerism and its consequences (both good and bad). Ellis "criticizes consumerism from within and to do so he exaggerates their visibility by naming and repeating them to excess (Allué 85). *American Psycho* is told first person, from Patrick's perspective. This is how he sees his world. This is how he reacts to it.

In an essay titled "Repetition and the Ethics of Suspended Reading in *American Psycho*," C. Namwali Serpell investigates what effect this hyperbolic construction might have on Patrick himself and the novel's readers. Serpell argues the text creates an ethical deliberation on its usage of violence and explores what these ethical considerations might be through an examination of the form of the text. The repetitiveness throughout, argues Serpell, both incites Patrick's outrage and keeps readers in a state of tense anticipation (50). Serpell concludes his argument by suggesting that the novel's ability to suspend violence through the use of puns (in particular) invites the reader to experience "violence without censorship, but also without being

overwhelmed” (67). And he elaborates: in this way “we [readers] might just get a glimpse into our own fears and desires (69). The novel’s title is, after all, *American Psycho*, so even first-time readers will surely suspect murder scenes, at the very least. But the first murder does not occur until one hundred and thirty pages into the novel. Everything leading up to it is a series of details surrounding Patrick, his colleagues, Jean, and the respective commodities belonging to each.

However, while Serpell is right to point out that the repetition of commodities paired with the use of puns creates a sense of anticipation in the reader, he then moves into problematic territory. Serpell stretches his argument so that he may also make the claim that Ellis “uses the repetition to render the violence normal,” and asks of his readership, “is literary violence more or less dangerous when it is banal?” (53). He seeks to answer this question by observing the ways in which Ellis poses puns through “the juxtaposition of alternate meanings in both homophones and homonyms” (54). In one of my favorite scenes, Patrick orders a decapitated coffee, then corrects himself: “I’m mean...*decaffeinated*” (372). Serpell points out other examples too: “someone is described as a ‘pâté animal’ (398); [Patrick] works for Pierce & Pierce, which is frequently mistaken for a shoe store (P & P), but also cuts both ways as a murderer’s workplace; even his name could be interpreted as [Patrick] Bait-man, a bait to the reader” (54). Yet another pun appears in the text in the following conversation between Patrick and Libby:

“Ask me a question,” I tell her, feeling suddenly, well, spontaneous.

She inhales on the cigarette, then blows out. “So what do you do?”

“What do you think I do?” And frisky too.

“A model?” She shrugs. “An actor?”

“No,” I say. “Flattering, but no.”

“Well?”

“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. (205-6).

Serpell then suggests that violent yet humorous puns such as these are included in the text as Ellis’s effort to encourage his readerships’ banal relationship with the violent scenes. But he goes on to point out that, with each progressive murder scene, the violence increases. Patrick’s first victim in the novel, a homeless man, is left “disfigured” by Patrick’s knife, but he is left alive, screaming agony in an alleyway (132). The violent scenes grow more and more gruesome as the text continues, but they are few and far between. There are only five explicit murder scenes in the text, each lasting an average of three pages. The text itself is four hundred pages. Violence is not given much page space. This is especially true when comparing it to the page space given to the repetition of commodities (which is most of the book). In this way Patrick’s outbursts are foreseen by readers, but still have an element of shock value.

There is very little in the way of plot in the book. The narrative exists mostly as a barrage of brand labels and narcissistic commentary from the characters on surface level issues, particularly restaurants and designer business suits. The bland scenes of description are occasionally undercut by dark-comic puns, as Serpell points out, which primarily functions to establish and reestablish Patrick’s character as a psychopath, but it also keeps readers in a state of anticipation. However, it is nearly impossible to read the text without searching for an *understanding* of Patrick’s character, an understanding of why he is this way. Drawing from Tony William’s naturalist reading, then, and incorporating as well the notion of Darwinism and

evolution, it becomes quite clear that Patrick, his colleagues, and Jean exist as three distinct categories. Patrick, as a fictional character, has been built as an intermediary between Jean, who is a representation of a nostalgized past and Patrick's colleagues, who represent the novel's present.

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