

Postmodern Euphoria and Disillusionment in *American Psycho*

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Abstract

The paper titled 'Postmodern Euphoria and Disillusionment in *American Psycho*' takes its musing from Bret Ellis's fantastic character, Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* (1991); revered and scorned upon in equal measure. The paper discusses the fragmented erroneous life of Bateman and the events that unfold due to his disrupted deliberation. The text is an articulation on chaos and disillusionment expounded upon a protagonist with a superego tainted in conflict and confusion, and an irresolute ego, which cumulates in apathy and indifference; a far drawn representation of an era of coldness, and alienation in a society that plunges in materialism. The protagonist Bateman, a twenty seven year old stockbroker, a quintessential yuppie of 80's, is shallow in deeds and wallows in the up-end trends and fashion; the one with money to burn and things to buy. The character is a loner in a background of equally careless individuals of the Wall Street boom which stands in contrast with the downtrodden inches of society of destitute and prostitutes, forced up on by industrialization, highlights a strong sense of class divide. The protagonist's self-loath transcribes into a dual life of normalcy and utter bedlam of violence which cultivate a tension that gradually builds up to an anticipatory devastation. The work is set in a dark superficial world of appearances and unconcern, a brutish satire on the consumerist society of the late twentieth century, America.

KEYWORDS: Absurd, Postmodern chaos, fragmentation, unreliability, consumerism, misogynistic violence

Bret Easton Ellis's most notorious novel, *American Psycho* (1991) which opens with the apocalyptic admonition, "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE THAT ENTER" is presented almost uniformly in a first person, present tense voice in the indicative mood, by the protagonist Patrick Bateman. An un-modulated voice of this sort necessarily creates enormous resistance in the reader's mind, and the monotonous consistency of Bateman's monologue dispels most of our expectations of 'style' from this reading experience. It is a provocative and mocking deflation of our hopes that literature should explore the best and most meaningful potentialities of our language. It is this state of disillusionment that the paper tries to explore. There is a deep sense of pathos that point at the absurdity of human existence throughout the novel, highlighted by the erratic and delusional narration of Bateman. The progression of the text is a buildup against a brewing tension of bleakness of regularity climaxing in the dictation of an absurd monologue of hellish quality.

In the novel, Patrick Bateman occupies a very specific part of the social hierarchy of New York life. As a vice president level executive in mergers and acquisitions at P&P, he lives by a set of conditions distinct from the majority population. Outwardly he is a model of acceptable behaviour and thoughts. All of this is a facade for the disturbances that lie beneath the carefully groomed surface, indicating at a silent menace of skeptic disparagement and chaos. Bateman actively hates minorities, homosexual males, and the poor or homeless. Through contrasting imagery Ellis has portrayed the "WALLSTREET" boom and the intimidating class faculties that followed. The protagonist also has a generalized hate of women, though

he may be particularly brutal toward those who also occupy positions of power. However, this hate rarely spills into his daily life and he maintains a carefully created facade of political correctness in most social situations. While Bateman maintains a careful social appearance among his exclusively male group of friends, also from P&P and other financial and law firms, are openly bigoted, racist, and misogynistic. Bateman's transactions indicate at a society both bizarre and alien. In contrast to his carefully maintained public self Bateman is capable of horrifically depraved violence. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* by David McLellan, it has been said that:

Thus the most general abstractions commonly appear where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be shared by many, and to be common to all (389).

In the text Patrick commits a total of fourteen murders. He also kills multiple animals. In addition he hurts and maims a number of others and makes allusions to other violent acts in his history. It gives a very apocalyptic look to the polished society of New York. However, assessment of his violence is problematic. Bateman narrates each murder in exact detail and with little to no emotion. Despite this detailed record of narration, almost every act of violence is, in all probability, imagined. Through the course of the text Bateman progressively degenerates further into hallucinations and erratic behavior that may be regressions of either borderline or schizotypal personality disorders or may represent fully schizophrenic symptoms. The violence detailed by Bateman becomes brutal to the point of parody by the end of the novel. This ultimately culminates with a series of violent events, delusions, and a confession to his lawyer's answering machine of such fantastic quality that it is thought by others to be nothing more than a strange joke. Raymond Chandler in his classic *The Big Sleep* states that: "It seemed like a nice neighborhood to have bad habits in." (341)

All of these events, though, are real to Bateman and remain persistent, in his environment. Other situations at work, home, normal sexual situations, etc., are clearly written to be lucid accounts. The line between fantasy and reality is at least blurred and quite possibly nonexistent. All of these problems create a scenario of certain fragmentation of ideas rooted in absurdity and chaos.

Ellis gives us the un-reflexive repetition and monomania of a voice that has not escaped the cocoon of its own routine, and enacts the inhumanity of pure habit. Its monotony is the drab and prosy hum of everyday life itself, which, despite all the rotations of fashion, fundamentally repeats its own elements and structures in a seamless procession of the same. The numb conviction that past and future have both collapsed into a point without dimension is reinforced through every single monologue, beginning with Bateman's snobbish arrogantly flourished description of his apartment followed by a fully fledged description of his routine in the shower. Devoid of even the hint of a human being, this rich and fascinated description luxuriates in the allure of a kind of commercial nominalism. In Bateman's world humans are eclipsed by a strong craving for material luxury of Versace and Armani. As mentioned in the novel:

The shower has a universal all-directional shower head that adjusts within a thirty-inch vertical range. It's made from Australian gold-black brass and covered with a white enamel finish. In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser, then a honey almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Vidal Sassoon shampoo 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. The conditioner is also good - silicone technology permits conditioning benefits without weighing down the hair which can also make you look older. On weekends or before a date I prefer to use the Greune Natural Revitalizing Shampoo, the conditioner and the Nutrient Complex. These are formulas that contain Dpanthenol, a vitamin-B-complex factor; polysorbate 80, a cleansing agent for the scalp; and natural herbs (26).

The business dialogue, which interrupts the monologue with the voices of others, indicates a stereotyping. The clear lack of distinction between one voice and another, initially introduced by a kind of wild comedy marks the distinct sense of loss and identity in the world of new economic order. The scene at the drycleaners and allocation of more than a dozen names to Bateman, the conference call in the chapter "Another night" are some among the many strong incidents that validate the same. This lack of identity hints strongly at sense of alienation. People go missing and still nobody notices. One of such instances in the novel has been narrated as: "I think a lot of snowflakes are alike... and I think a lot of people are alike too."(378)

The indefinable boundaries of the sexual orientation and the other few voices again provide for the accumulation of a lack of identity, which induces a sense of anarchy. Gay Pride parade down Fifth Avenue nauseates Patrick, and he is often to be found uttering homophobic epithets, there is a consistent hinting that he may himself be gay. His relationship with Luis Carruthers in particular, one of the novel's funnier story lines, is loaded with ambiguities. Luis reads Patrick's attempted strangulation in the Yale Cub toilets as a pass. Later, in 'Confronted by Faggot' Bateman is fully confronted with his possibly latent homosexuality he has to say he doesn't find Carruthers "sexually attractive", but not that he is not gay. And it is among rows and rows of ties that Patrick has this confrontation with Luis, phallic symbols in serried ranks, which cannot ward off the incipient dissolution of Bateman's assumed sexual persona.

The scene where Bateman comes across a couple of acquaintances when dragging of Paul's dead body embodies the role brand consciousness and role class status than any other ruling sense. Bateman's conversations with working-class and ethnically differentiated characters are grotesquely overstated episodes in what can only be described as Patrick's class and race war against everything that does not resemble him, again drawing a fragmented process of thought.

The arrogant confidence of Bateman's language of pedantry comes to mean so much, as pure compensation for the lack of any actual achievement, act as a smokescreen masking risible ineffectuality. Bateman is unable to reserve seats in Dorsia, unable to handle the elusive Fisher account, unable to hire a new video, unable to hang his David Onica the right way up, unable to be recognized by anyone outside his immediate circle of friends, unable to strangle Carruthers, unable to retain control over Paul Owen's apartment and so on. His ineffectuality as a central protagonist is extraordinary, ever-escalating fury and desperation at his actual uselessness. It emphasizes and cut through the charade of accomplishment molded against the society of rich. It paints an image of uselessness in a tint of pathos and fury.

Chapters "A Glimpse of a Thursday Afternoon", "Shopping" and some of "Chase, Manhattan" holds various citations of urban alienation and fragmentation. Ellis, by the authentication of insane consumerism enclosing Bateman, has indicated the lack of existence of Patrick Bateman as a whole, thereby fragmenting the idea of

humans at large. “The Best City for Business” is a chapter that reflects the lack of permanence in Bateman’s narration, throwing light on the fluidity of existence.

Bateman a ‘democratic’ killer, and he murders as many men as he does women (as well as a few animals), the sheer excess of his descriptions of the sexual torture, rape, dismemberment, desecration and abjection of women tilts the balance of the reading experience towards a disproportionate engagement with misogynistic violence. The graphical violence and the series of murder that follows without a follow up corrupts the idea of a just world of perfect calm and peace. The remorseless actions of Bateman paired along with other companion voices of same built raises strong questions against the writings of humanity and goodness. Ellis, through this work has created a world of perfect bedlam in the bedrocks of a superficial society of commercial normalcy and urban alienation. The final monologue from the part of Bateman is the gist of all actions.

Someone who looks remarkably like Marcus Halberstam paying A check, someone asks, simply, not in relation to anything, “Why?” And though I'm very proud that I Have cold blood and that I can keep my nerve and do what I'm supposed to do, I catch something, then Realize it: Why? And automatically answering, out of the blue, for no reason, just opening my mouth, Words coming out, summarizing for the idiots: “Well, though I know I should have done that instead Of not doing it, I'm twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in A club in New York, maybe anywhere, at the end of the century and how people, you know, me, Behave, and this is what being Patrick means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh...” and this is followed By a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh, and above one of the doors covered by red velvet Drapes in Harry's is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes' color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT(383-384)

The ultimate embodiment of absurdity menace and hopelessness transcribes in the scene. The parting line “this is not an exit” accentuate the themes of disillusionment and chaos.

The above stated instances reinforce and contribute to the idea that, Bret Ellis’ *American Psycho*, is an aggravated dance between the fragile realities threatened by fragmented sense of disillusionment in the society. The narrator takes the reader into a world dominated by a distinct sense of apocalypse, where living humans stand indifferent to general humanity by a sense of affectionate consumerism. Pathos and perverse incidents transcribe into a sense of disillusionment in the text. The fragmented self in Bateman and the numb narration that glows only for goods stress the instances of chaos and absurd disillusionment.

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