

## Beneath The Surface: Digging For Deeper Meaning in *American Psycho*

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Censorship and taboo have proven themselves to be messily intertwined and therefore wholly inseparable from one another. Both taboo and censorship are influenced entirely by the social, historical, and cultural climate that they exist within. For this reason, some taboo subjects are found to be universally offensive and unacceptable while others pertain more specifically to a particular group, race, or religion. Context is absolutely critical in examining the nature of taboo, as the relationship between cultural climate and time period is the key to understanding why a text is labeled as transgressive and how the taboos within the text serve a greater purpose than being present to shock the reader. Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* contains just about every taboo imaginable yet it continues to be a popular and well-traversed work of literature. The seemingly endless parade of said taboos (cannibalism, necrophilia, pornography, and drug use just to skim the surface) within the narrative demonstrate the dehumanization and nihilism that pervaded the world of young urban professionals. *American Psycho*'s main character Patrick Bateman is, in totality, a direct byproduct of the 1980's Yuppie culture in which he is immersed and his subsequent gruesome thoughts and actions function as extended metaphors for the emotional repression, deindividualization, and excessive consumerism that he experiences in his day-to-day life.

To say that the publication of Ellis's *American Psycho* was met with commotion and uproar is a horrific understatement. Before the novel was even subject to the opinion of any reader, the manuscript was tossed around by publishers like it was a piece of hazardous waste. Carla Freccero, in her scholarly article entitled *Historical Violence, Censorship, And The Serial Killer*, relays a pared down version of what went down in regards to the novel coming to fruition:

“...*American Psycho* was accepted for publication, and its author was given an advance by Simon and Schuster. After the book had been advertised, announced in catalogs, and a press packet had been mailed around the country in anticipation of a publicity tour, prepublication proofs came under the scrutiny of *Time* and *Spy* magazines, each of which published particularly explicit excerpts of the novel accompanied by reviews decrying the decision to publish the book. The publisher at Simon and Schuster subsequently read the manuscript and decided to withdraw the offer of publication. Within forty-eight hours, Random House bought the publishing rights, and the novel appeared the next year in Random House's Vintage series” (Freccero 6). In her piece *The Real Filth In American Psycho: A Critical Assessment*, Donna Lee Brien notes that the premature rumblings from the realm of publishing, “...were so negative—offering assessments of the book as: ‘moronic ... pointless ... themeless ... worthless (Rosenblatt 3), ‘superficial’, ‘a tapeworm narrative’ (Sheppard 100) and ‘vile ... pornography, not literature ... immoral, but also artless’” (Brien).

*American Psycho*'s tumultuous publication process surely set the tone for the subsequent reception of the novel itself, which incited an infinitely more fervent response from readers, critics, and everyone in between. The literary journey of Ellis's grim satire is similar to another revered and challenged novel that is now arguably apart of the Western canon. Vartan P. Messier makes this poignant point in his article *Violence, Pornography, and Voyeurism As Transgression In Brett Easton Ellis' American Psycho*: “[the novel] created a stir equivalent to the release of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* almost half a century prior to the publication of Ellis' novel” (Messier 75). NOW, or the National Organization of Women, spearheaded the movement to boycott *American Psycho* and Random House and the group went to great lengths to encourage others to do the same. The organization, driven by their belief that Ellis's work was, “...socially

irresponsible and legitimize[d] inhuman and savage violence masquerading as sexuality”, utilized graphic passages from the text in question in order to prove their point (Freccero 8). Broadcasting what are quite possibly the most offensive bits of the book over the airwaves certainly seems counter-productive to NOW’s cause and as Freccero adds, “...the phone number is sure to fall into the wrong lonely hands” (8). In keeping with what is truly an awful “tradition” when it comes to authors of so-called offensive material, Ellis received numerous death threats and even “...photographs of him in which his eyes have been poked out or an axe drawn through his face” (Cohen).

Apart from NOW’s push for an *American Psycho* boycott and critical response from publishers and reviewers in America, the universal reaction to the novel did not change much in terms of intensity. Canada was unsure whether they should even import the novel into the country, let alone sell it, and when the book was eventually given the greenlight, “demonstrators protested the entrance of a shipment of the book” (Brien). Australia, on the other hand, took a more radical approach to the situation: the government branded the novel as ‘Category 1 Restricted’ which meant that it was “...to be sold sealed, to only those over 18 years of age” (Brien). On a more humorous note, Ellis expressed his amusement regarding Australia’s presentation of his quote on quote obscene novel to a reporter at The Sydney Morning Herald: “I love it, love it, love it...I told my publisher I want all my books restricted and put in little bags. It's like a little sandwich!” (*Shrink Rapping With Gen-X*, Sydney Morning Herald).

As stated previously, *American Psycho* contains practically every taboo imaginable however, without a doubt, violence and pornography bulldoze all of the other problematic concepts to the wayside. The scenes from the novel that are considered to be the most repulsive, as evidenced specifically by NOW and outspoken critics, are those that involve graphic

depictions of violent acts (homicide, torture, dismemberment, ect.) and/or extremely explicit sexual encounters between Patrick and a slew of women, most of which end in violent acts. It certainly is curious that pornography (and really just sexuality in general) and violence are arguably the most offensive taboos of all because Sigmund Freud believed that, "...the most repressed feelings contained in the ego are of a sexual or violent nature" (Messier 83). In other words, we as civilized humans have to find an outlet for the sexual and violent urges that become suppressed, therefore we find ourselves attracted to and satisfied by indulging in these ideas in a normalized way. Sex and violence have always been, and continue to be, a pervading presence in literature and other various forms of media.

One cannot discuss the presence of pornography within the literary canon without again harkening back to Nabokov's *Lolita*. Written less than 40 years apart, *American Psycho* and *Lolita* were both deemed ban-worthy because of the so-called pornographic content that lurks within the novels. It goes without saying that these two books exist on a highly polarized plane, constructed by social and political context, therefore the graphicness of the pornography within Ellis' and Nabokov's stories and the way in which they address the taboo are extremely different. Cold War-era America was paranoid and suspicious to say the least and *Lolita* brought to light, "...the period's anxieties about pedophilia and pornography" (Whiting). Nonetheless, the firestorm that surrounded the publication and consequent release of Nabokov's *Lolita*, fueled by a kind of pornography that illuminated a socio-political fear in the 1950's, serves as a reminder that pornography (in one form or another) is not a novel taboo.

Violence is not a novel taboo either, though very early on in English literature graphic violence wasn't considered to be taboo. Rather, violence was a main facet of the epic genre and classics like *Beowulf* go as far as to showcase bloody battles and gory monsters. As Joseph

Carroll writes in his article entitled *The Extremes of Conflict In Literature: Violence, Homicide and War*, “The picturesque landscapes of Europe--crumbling castles, walled towns overgrown with moss and ivy--are the quaint relics of a history of mass violence that shaped the demographic and political landscape” (Carroll 416). Following suit with the authorless *Beowulf*, Greek works such as *The Iliad* and *Agamemnon* glorify violence in their depictions of “...the grisly forms of death produced by barbarian warriors wielding edged and pointed weapons” (Carroll 417). However, *Beowulf* and *The Iliad* live in the very distant past and the way violence manifests itself in the media we consume in modern times certainly does not suggest that we should elevate it or celebrate it in any way. The ultraviolence that oozes from Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* and director Quentin Tarantino’s various films (*Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Kill Bill*) that all take place in a blood-spattered uber hostile universe suggests that the modern reaction to violence is exaggeration for the sake of social commentary.

In her article *The Critical English Educator: Examining Violence In Literature*, Melissa Schieble notes, “Violence [in text], like violence in our world, is multifaceted. It functions at different levels, is perpetuated by different motivations, and is experienced in a variety of ways” (Schieble 18). She then goes on to describe the three “levels” of violence: individual, institutional, and structural-cultural. Individual violence is defined as “violence that we can see”, while structural-cultural violence is rather, “represented in worldviews, or ways of thinking, that accept violence as a natural part of life” (18). The extremely graphic depictions of violence in *American Psycho*, perpetrated by none other than our non-protagonist Patrick Bateman, align with both of these categories of violence though his attacks weigh heavily on the side of individual violence. The instances of individual violence are obvious to say the least, as these occurrences are impossible for the reader to miss because they are sometimes pre-meditated but

always described in varying levels of detail. For example, the execution of Paul Owen, Patrick's fellow Yuppie co-worker, is especially horrendous: "The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his mouth, shutting him up" (Ellis 217). The motivation behind Owen's murder was Patrick's narcissism and jealousy, therefore the murder was personal down to the core. The difference between individual violence and structural-cultural violence lies in the relationship between the perpetrator and the victims.

However, the structural-cultural violence tends to be a bit subverted as it lurks underneath the surface of Patrick's actions. As William Hathaway writes in *Varieties of Violence: Structural, Cultural and Direct*, "Structural violence is injustice and exploitation built into a social system that generates wealth for the few and poverty for the many, stunting everyone's ability to develop their full humanity. By privileging some classes, ethnicities, genders, and nationalities over others, it institutionalizes unequal opportunities for education, resources, and respect. Structural violence forms the very basis of capitalism, patriarchy, and any dominator system" (Hathaway). Patrick's numerous interactions with bums and prostitutes, individuals who belong to marginalized groups that are ill-treated both literally and figuratively by those who have power, exemplify this type of violence against "others". In a particularly cruel scene, Patrick belittles and insults a bum named Al before stabbing him to death and nearly killing his dog. He says to Al things like, "Do you think it's fair to take money from people do who *do* have jobs?" and, "I'm sorry. It's just that...I don't know. I don't have anything in common with you" (Ellis 130-131). Patrick's naivety is a result of his rearing and exposure to the selfish Yuppie culture and as Richard Dyer says in *Yuppie Culture*, "Yuppies don't just not care that others are poor; they also don't know that their comfortable lifestyle depends on others being poor" (Dyer). Patrick, as a white, rich, powerful male, functions under the pretense that his status and power

allows him to harm those who are lower on the socio-economic ladder. This belief is not something that comes about randomly but rather, "...feelings of superiority/inferiority based on class, race, sex, religion, and nationality are inculcated in us as children and shape our assumptions about us and the world" (Hathaway). The Yuppie culture that Patrick identifies with and is surrounded by is what contributes to this belief, as it is described as, "...the experience of affluence, upward mobility, and the freedom of lifestyle" (Dyer). Violence in *American Psycho*, regardless of its nature and motivation, is how self-centered Patrick attempts to interact with other human beings.

If the taboo of violence exists in the text as a metaphor for emotional repression, then pornography operates as a metaphor for excessive consumerism and deindividuation. It goes without saying that the relationship between sex and violence is palpable, as more often than not Patrick participates in graphic sex with the women that he goes on to torture, kill, and eventually cannibalizes. And, the novel often flip flops between chapters involving violence and chapters involving graphic sex. While Ellis includes explicit pornography in *American Psycho* with the intent to shock and give the reader total access to the recesses of Patrick's mind, the pornographic scenes have much more depth to them upon further inspection. Bateman, who is brainwashed by Yuppie culture and its obsession with transactions and materialism, views the women that he has sex with as objects that are his to purchase, manipulate, and ultimately name. As Messier states in his scholarly article, "...women are paid and sex is merely another consumer good" (Messier). Patrick, tongue in cheek, even says to a prostitute at one point, "Do you take American Express?" (Ellis 169). The chapter in which Patrick has graphic sex with two prostitutes, one of which is nameless until he tells her "...to respond *only* when [he] calls her Christie" (169-170) and then sadistically tortures them is entitled "Girls", and this title shows up

again as a title of a later chapter. Not only does Patrick view the prostitutes as a purchase, he deindividualizes both of them by reducing them to their gender and physical components.

Foreshadowing is an eerie device, but in *American Psycho* the effect is even more off putting because of what is to come further on down the line. In the first “Girls” chapter, Patrick makes this chilling observation: “Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me” (Ellis 168). If only Patrick could have just been satisfied with homicide, but alas he had to take consumption one step further and go full-on cannibal. The end of the same “Girls” chapter ends with an ambiguous description of the torture that the prostitutes endured at the hands of Bateman, and the last few words nod to the first instance of cannibalism: “Bloodstained Kleenex will lie crumpled by the side of the bed along with an empty carton of Italian seasoning salt I picked up at Dean and DeLuca” (176). Towards the end of the book, the cannibalism is much more apparent and detailed, as there is an entire chapter called “Tries To Cook and Eat Girl” dedicated to the vivisection and literal ingestion of another “girl” that Patrick has killed. At this point, the foreshadowing from earlier has come true as not only does Bateman treat women as though they are just a “piece of meat”, but they actually become meat that he consumes. In “Tries To Cook and Eat Girl”, our main character ties together both of the aforementioned metaphors when he muses, “...while I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties, and though it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I’m doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit” (345). To further add to the relationship between Patrick’s cannibal urges and his urges to conform to Yuppie materialistic culture, he even describes that the corpses’ breasts “...lie, rather delicately, on a china plate [from] Pottery Barn” and that “...her chest is indistinguishable from her neck, which

looks like ground-up meat, her stomach resembles the eggplant and goat cheese lasagna from Il Marlibro” (344). The pornography in *American Psycho* is manifold as it succeeds in appalling readers with its lewd and sickening connection to violence while simultaneously critiquing 1980’s Yuppie culture.

As Patrick says towards the end of the novel, “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (Ellis 375). Certainly, there is a parallel between the public’s reaction to Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and the focus in the book on the importance of what lies on the surface. Even before *American Psycho* was published, when people had only read excerpts from the book, the book was judged merely on the surface level. Though individuals definitely have a reason to be offended by this novel and textual evidence to back up their claims, especially women, it goes without saying that underneath all of the grime and gore there is something greater at work in the piece. The shallowness of the narrative focuses on the visceral details of Patrick’s gruesome actions and thoughts, but below the surface the horrific scenes that involve violence and pornography function as complex metaphors that illuminate the detached and dehumanizing nature of 1980’s Yuppie culture. If you want to blame someone for the “crime” of writing this novel, don’t blame Patrick Bateman or even Brett Easton Ellis, put the blame on the culture that fostered such evil in the first place.

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