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Subtle Sign Posts: Uncovering Moral Meaning in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

John Thompson

A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

Since its publication, *American Psycho* has been a challenging novel for critical interpretation. This thesis next seeks to build on the work of past and present critical responses toward *American Psycho* by considering unexplored places of potential meaning within the novel. After exploring the history of critical reaction toward *American Psycho* and comparing it to the larger serial killer novel genre, the thesis argues that "sign posts" within the novel—specifically references to *Les Miserables* and *The Patty Winters Show*—guide the reader toward a realization that *American Psycho* is a deeply satirical novel which stands in moral judgment of the actions of its narrator, Patrick Bateman. Contrary to the assumption put forth by some critics, the novel contains a moral voice through these sign posts. In other words, the burden of moral disgust at the violence, objectification, extreme consumerism, classism, and sexism within the novel does not rest entirely upon the reader. Rather, the sign posts within *American Psycho* guide the reader toward moral judgment.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the end result of over a year's worth of planning, discussions, frustrations, rethinking, proposing, writing, rewriting, revising, editing, and, finally, submitting. Engaging books like *American Psycho*, as I hope to have shown in my thesis, cannot be a solitary pursuit. Entering into critical and personal conversations about the content and meaning of the text is paramount if anyone hopes to gain insight. Or, as I describe it in this thesis, reading *American Psycho* must be done as a conversation.

There are many people who have been a part of my conversation with the text. First, Brett Easton Ellis's attempt to understand his life in 1987-1988 by writing *American Psycho* gave readers like me a tool to reflect upon my own moral convictions. I thank him for sharing his talents. Second, critical engagement with *American Psycho* has been passionate since even before it was published. Though they have differed greatly on their views of the novel, the majority of critics have taken Bret Easton Ellis's story as serious and impactful. The conversation of these critics over the course of three decades gave context to my own understanding of the novel. Without their work, I'm not sure I would have been able to find my own way. I am grateful for their careful consideration of meaning in *American Psycho*. I especially want to highlight the work of Sonia Allue, Martin Weinreich, Danial Cojocaru, and Namwali Serpell as especially helpful in my consideration of how I might contribute my own voice to the conversation.

The writers and critics above were extremely helpful as I thought and wrote about meaning in *American Psycho*. However, the personal conversations I have had with teachers and family about the novel have helped me even more to refine and clarify my response to the novel.

These personal conversations have been invaluable to my completion of this thesis. First, I want to recognize Dr. Talaya Delaney, my research advisor, who helped me think through my ideas and find paths in which to explore them. Dr. Delaney's help with me during the long crafting of my proposal—which included three different versions—set the stage for a successful thesis. Second, Dr. Patricia Bellanca, my thesis supervisor, has spent much time on helping me refine and revise my writing. The complexity of the novel and the academic context was difficult to wade through. Dr. Bellanca has been a helpful guide with her careful and close reading, notes, suggestions, and edits of the various drafts of my thesis. I thank Dr. Bellanca for her diligence and care while she supported me. Third, my wife and children who have been understanding of me as I spent much time away from them during nightly visits to my local coffee shops to write. The patience that they have had toward my absence is greatly appreciated. My wife, Jennifer, has been especially helpful to me during the writing process as she has challenged me to keep my consideration of *American Psycho* grounded in real life application rather than mere academic explorations.

To the critical and personal conversation partners who have helped me engage the text, I thank you immensely. I hope that the thesis that follows displays the fruit of your help. Any errors, omissions, or mistakes are entirely my own, and any unique or beneficial insights concerning *American Psycho* are not only mine but are the result of your help. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction. *American Psycho* a Moral Narrative?! 1
Chapter 1. A History of the Critical Reception of *American Psycho* 4
Chapter 2. *American Psycho* and the Serial Killer Genre 17
Chapter 3. Methodology: A Reader Centered Analysis 24
3.1. Reader as Locus of Meaning 25
Chapter 4. Literary Analysis 29
4.1. Introduction 29
4.2. Bateman as Narrator 32
4.3. Signs, Signs, Everywhere 37
4.4. Objectification and *Les Miserables* 40
4.4.1. Sex as Objectification 41
4.4.1.1. Jean 47
4.4.2. *Les Miserables*: Judgment of Objectification 51
4.4.2.1. Christie the Prostitute 53
4.5. Consumerism and *The Patty Winters Show* 56
4.5.1 Cannibalism as Consumerism 60
4.5.2. *The Patty Winters Show*: Judgment of Consumerism 62
Chapter 5. Implications: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT 68
Works Cited 73
Works Consulted 76

Introduction

American Psycho a Moral Narrative?!

American Psycho is a complex and challenging novel. *American Psycho* introduces the reader to its young, extravagantly wealthy, highly educated, and intensely attractive narrator, Patrick Bateman. Throughout the novel, Bateman narrates his life as a Wall Street banker in late 1980s New York City. Bateman tells the reader his thoughts, feelings, and actions in everything from high dining and fashion to his workout routines and music tastes. In short, *American Psycho* is unvarnished access to Bateman as he lives the life of a late 1980s cultural elite. What makes Bateman's narration interesting is his double identity as an unrepentant and ravenous serial killer who over the course of the narrative commits around a hundred murders (*American Psycho* 352).

Upon its publication, *American Psycho* faced a harsh, critical reaction which largely dismissed the novel. However, rather than assigning it to literary damnation, many critics gave the novel a second look and found meaning in the text. The focus of these scholars was on potential meaning behind the violent acts of the book's narrator, Patrick Bateman. Rather than being a reason for dismissing the book, these critics saw the violence in the novel as a symbol for understanding deeper meaning in a novel that was only seen as at best poor writing and at worst pornography (see first wave critics below in "Chapter 2: History of Critical Analysis of *American Psycho*"). As more scholars became convinced of this re-appraisal of the novel, they began to explore and develop more generous ways of reading the novel. These critics—which I will label as the third and fourth wave of critics—gave a fuller articulation of *American Psycho* as novel of deep meaning.

However, I will argue that the work of final group of critics—the most current perspective held toward the literary value of the novel—is not complete. Specifically, critics belonging to what I will call "the fourth wave of criticism" who found *American Psycho* to be rich in meaning, fail to fully flesh out that meaning. What is lacking is a final, full analysis which not only rejects the initial critical dismissal of the novel by "first wave critics," but demonstrates that the novel in fact is rich in moral meaning. Situating the novel within the context of its genre ("Serial Killer Genre"), recognizing the role of Bateman as narrator, and analyzing subtle textual guides within *American Psycho*, or what I will call "sign posts," leads to important implications for meaning—that *American Psycho* has a profound moral message. *American Psycho* and the conversational relationship between text, narrator, and reader guided by sign posts within the novel surprisingly develop a moral objection to a culture of objectification and consumption. In other words, fourth wave critics have failed to reject the view put forth mistakenly by Bret Easton Ellis himself that there is no authorial voice in the novel. Though fourth wave critics highlight multiple symbols within the text (discussed below) to argue for deep meaning within the novel, their acceptance of the claim that no authorial voice exists within the text has led to a missed opportunity of seeing the what the novel really means. By exploring subtle sign posts of the novel, I will argue that *American Psycho*'s most important meaning is a moral one.

In this essay, I will first discuss a history of critical response to *American Psycho*. I have constructed a framework of first through fourth wave responses to the novel. This historical framework allows me to situate my own response to the novel as closest to critics belonging to the fourth wave, yet also explain my own contribution to the group. After giving a historical context to critical consideration of *American Psycho*, most of my thesis will focus on analyzing two themes of the novel—objectification and consumption—and the signposts that guide a

reader's response to these themes. The two sign posts, out of many possibilities, that I will focus on are the numerous appearances of both Victor Hugo's novel and the related Broadway musical *Les Miserables* and the Oprah-Winfrey-Show-like "addiction" of Patrick Bateman, *The Patty Winters Show*. I hope to show that *American Psycho*, which is often seen as one of the most morally bankrupt novels published in the late 20th century, is a novel of tremendous moral depth.

Chapter 1

A History the Critical Reception of *American Psycho*

Before constructing my own analysis of *American Psycho*, it is helpful to explore a history of critical reaction to the novel. This serves a two-fold purpose—it contextualizes my own analysis against what other critics have said and it establishes a clear development of critical reaction toward *American Psycho*. This two-fold purpose is important as it provides the background against which I will explore my primary argument—that *American Psycho* is full of moral meaning. In the narrative that follows, I identify four transitions or "waves" of critical reaction to *American Psycho*—an initial rejection on account of the perverse violence, an inchoate recognition of literary value based upon the fictional nature of the violence in the novel, a recognition and argument for the value of the novel as social satire, and a defense of the novel as an ethical treatise.

While many of the scholars discussed below identify characteristics of previous criticisms of *American Psycho* as way to dismiss those characterizations of the novel and/or distinguish their own analysis of the novel from previous scholarship, there exists no extensive narrative of the history of interpretation of *American Psycho*. I chose to label these groups of critics as "waves" because while the groups' analyses have some continuation with the analyses of the previous waves, mostly each successive wave is an attempt to replace existing perspectives of the literary merit and potential meaning of *American Psycho.* Thus, according to the history I offer below, the fourth wave of critical analysis of *American Psycho* is the dominant current perspective of the novel among academics and thus provides the most apt group to

engage as I attempt my own contribution to the fourth wave's defense of the novel as an ethical treatise.

Even prior to publication, *American Psycho* and its pervasive violence sparked strong, negative reactions. In his review of the initial reception of *American Psycho*, Julian Murphet recounts the unusual pre-publication history of *American Psycho*. According to Murphet, in 1989, Simon & Schuster advanced $300,000 to a young writer named Bret Easton Ellis for his third novel, *American Psycho* (67). Murphet summarizes Simon & Schuster's pre-publication plans for a strong promotional campaign, until prepublication reviews of *American Psycho* pointed out the perverse violence in the novel. According to Murphet, this led Simon & Schuster to break its contract with Bret Easton Ellis thus forfeiting their cash advance to him. Later, however, the novel was picked up by Random House which published the book as a mid-price Vintage paperback (67-68). Robert Zaller highlights that the denial of publication in a more serious form like a hardcover publication was an insult to the novel that demonstrated this initial reaction. This act of publication into a mid-priced paperback "consigned *American Psycho* to a literary limbo somewhere between trade and pulp fiction" (Zaller 321).

Though the strange sequence of events of pre-publication elicited a minority reaction from the publishing world concerning a perceived censorship of Bret Easton Ellis's work, most early critics still condemned *American Psycho* as "pornography." For example, in her 1990 *New York Times* op-ed written before the publication of *American Psycho*, "Trashing Women, Trashing Books," Lorrie Moore draws attention to the potential issues of censorship in the "botched rejection" of the book, yet, in the end, she approves the rejection of *American Psycho* due to "reasons of taste." This she says is the right of any publisher. The issue is not censorship but a rejection of "pornography." For her *American Psycho* is not literature and, since it is not

literature, it must not be welcomed into the literary world (Moore).[1] Moore was the beginning of the first wave of critical reaction toward *American Psycho* whose principle characteristic was the argument for a wholesale rejection of it as a novel with any meaning.

Moore and other critics voices did not stop the publication of *American Psycho*, and, in March of 1991, *American Psycho* was published by Vintage Press. However, Murphet describes the initial reaction to the published book as faring no better with critics' post-publication than it did pre-publication. In fact, the reaction seems much worse. According to Murphet, the novel was condemned by the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization of Women who organized a boycott of the book, kept a hotline open to warn potential readers about what they perceived as "dangers" or the book, and declared that in determining whether to purchase it "each library should decide as they do when faced with hard-core pornography" (68). *American Psycho* found the mainstream press similarly disapproving. "A Revolting Development" was the headline in *Time Magazine*'s review (Murphet 70). *The New York Times* review instructed readers with its headline to "Snuff This Book". *The Washington Post* judged the novel to be "sensationalistic junk" (Murphet 73). In each of these reviews, the novel was declared pornographic, nihilistic, and grotesquely violent. While the labels changed, the one thing that united all of these attacks, according to Robert Zaller, was the absolute certainty that *American Psycho* "contained no moral purpose or insight" (320). To these reviewers, *American Psycho* was simply a story about violence perpetrated by an unrepentant killer who is never brought to justice.

[1] "What these boys have written, though they refuse to know it, is pornography. They have never seen a hacked-up woman. They don't know what they're talking about. A reader feels their belabored attempt to create this knowledge for themselves on the page, and what the writing becomes is not only inauthentic but motivated by its own inauthenticity: pornography. Not literature that shocks" (Moore).

In response to his critics, Bret Easton Ellis defended *American Psycho* as a work of satire and even comedy. According to him, when he wrote the novel, he was "writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing" (Cohen). The book was Ellis's response to the America of the 1980s. Yet most critics dismissed this intent. For example, Jonathan Yardley in his *Washington Post* review of the "empty" and "infantile" *American Psycho* rejects any recognition of the book as social satire or having a deeper meaning stating, "Beneath [*American Psycho*'s] very thin veneer of thematic posturing, [it] is pure trash, as scummy and mean as anything it depicts: a dirty book by a dirty writer" (Yardley).

Though most early critical responses to *American Psycho* regarded the novel as having no value, one notable critic, Norman Mailer, saw its potential for meaning (or at least potential to find meaning in the questions the novel's publication was creating). In his 1991 *Vanity, Fair* article, "Children of the Pied Piper," Mailer defended *American Psycho* against the almost universal critical dismissal. At first, Mailer appears to remain in line with his fellow book critics' dismissal of the novel writing that "the book is simply not written well enough . . . by a half-competent and narcissistic young pen" (Mailer). He further criticizes Easton Ellis's failure to provide a moral framework for his novel. In his review, Mailer writes, "Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him" (Mailer). Yet Mailer concludes his review by suggesting that *American Psycho*'s and Ellis's disgust with 1980s America is understandable and that the book reminds readers "that attempts to create art can be as intolerable as foul manners" (Mailer).

Mailer's acknowledgement that *American Psycho* might be something more than violent pornography foreshadowed a second wave of literary critics who argued that *American Psycho*

contained a depth of meaning missed by the initial critical response. The earliest stages of this critical response centered on the conclusion of the novel. Simply put, a number of events in the conclusion lead to ambiguity over whether or not Bateman actually committed his many murders.[2] These critics disagreed with the initial critics' dismissal of the novel due to its violence by arguing that the violence is simply imagined. *The Guardian Weekly* describes this point as "the interesting critical proposition that the antihero doesn't rape or mutilate, he merely thinks about it" (The Guardian Weekly). The contention that the novel is in part or wholly "a long, increasingly insane rant . . . conjured by the disturbed mind of Patrick Bateman" (Storey 58) was an initial step toward recognizing the merit of the novel.

Critics like Mark Storey, Elizabeth Young, and Naomi Mandell argued that the violence of Patrick Bateman must be understood as existing within a fictional world by a fictional person and thus cannot be thought of as real in any sense. These critics utilize characteristics or features of the narrative as evidence in support their argument. For example, several of these critics (see examples in Storey 58) argue that Ellis immediately calls attention to the fictional nature of the story in the epigraph of *American Psycho* through a quote he takes from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*: "Both the author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictional" (Epigraph of *American Psycho*). In his essay, "American Psycho: Sick City Boy," Nick James identifies fictional characters from other novels and even films making appearances in the novel as indicative of the made-up quality of the entire story (e. g., Gordon Gecko from Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*) (259). Similarly, Elizabeth Young identifies

[2] The most notable element of the novel which creates ambiguity is the rejection of Bateman's confession to murdering Paul Owen by his lawyer, the detective investigating Owen's disappearance, and finally by the appearance of Paul Owen's apartment by the end of the novel which had previously been full of the many bodies of Bateman's victims but is empty and being shown by a real estate agent to another couple (*AP* 301, 366-370, 386-389).

Bateman himself as constructing his speech along the lines of fashion, business, and music reviews while also shaping his behavior from pornography and violent films (119). In her book *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, Namwali Serpell summarizes the viewpoint of these critics that Bateman is "purely text"—a character existing in a "fictional world" who is "devoid of agency" (197). In this view, the violence is fictitious and therefore cannot be evil. In other words, the strong ethical reaction of critics against Bateman's violence is misguided. As Serpell puts it, "If Patrick Bateman does not exist, neither do his murders" (Ibid.) . . . "If Bateman's murders are simply hallucinations . . . then we can reassess the perhaps reactionary ethical judgments pronounced on the character and the book" (N. Serpell, "Repetition," 49).

This second wave of criticism apparently leaves readers with two choices: either the book should be rejected on the basis of its disgusting violence perpetrated by a disgusting main character as the first wave of critics suggested, or, the reader must reject the first wave's argument because the violence is made up—Bateman is evil or Bateman doesn't exist. However, a consideration of these two options reveals that they actually are not in contradiction. That Bateman is evil does not make him more real; that he is not real does not make him less evil. As Serpell argues in "Repetition and the Ethics of Suspended Reading in *American Psycho*," the second wave of critics "negate the book and Bateman" just in a different way (53). Both positions fail to recognize the interplay of author-narrator-text-reader within the novel and thus deny the novel any depth. Once again there is no meaning, no moral framework in the text, only possibility. The reader is still left wondering. However, while the second wave of critics' views of *American Psycho* might fail to articulate meaning within the novel, the positive effect of their position was, as Marco Abel pointed out, "to have established the conditions of possibility for future responses to Ellis's *American Psycho*" (5).

Just as Mailer's review of *American Psycho* foreshadowed a second wave of critical reaction toward the novel, critics who argued for the fictional nature of did the same for a third wave of critical reaction. The third wave of response of critics denied the claims of both the first and second wave of critics. These critics argued that the violence of *American Psycho* is real and meaning in the novel can be found in the recognition of that reality.

The earliest example of this third wave of critics was American writer Robert Zaller. In his essay "*American Psycho*, American Censorship, and the Dahmer Case," Robert Zaller laments the "denial of moral purpose or insight" to the novel (320). Zaller argues that the negative reaction toward *American Psycho* rests on these early critics' dismissal of the novel due to its "squeamishness and bad taste" (325). This bias has led to the dismissal of "a work of at least considerable topical importance" (320). For Zaller, the violence of the novel—the perceived primary reason for the novel's rejection—is the key to understanding the novel as a critique of "the public morality of our times" (322). The violence, according to Zaller, highlights the satirical quality of the novel.

Other critics echoed Robert Zaller's attempt to understand the importance of the novel rather than merely defending it with the ambiguity argument. For example, in his 1996 *National Review* article, James Gardner argued that *American Psycho* was "not nearly as bad as many had supposed or hoped without having really read it" (56). Similarly, Christopher Sharret argued in *USA Today* that the novel characteristics of social critique like the demonization of "personal excess at the exclusion of all other values" as exemplified by Bateman is what made the book "one of the key social testaments of our age" (Sharrett). Yet perhaps the most noticeable attempt to see the novel's violence as full of potential meaning is found in the work of filmmakers Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner's adaptation of *American Psycho* into a feature film. As Harron

herself argues in an interview about the film, she saw *American Psycho* as "social satire" (Bowen). Guinevere Turner similarly argued against negative perspectives toward the film in another interview: "I was definitely freaked out by the violence. It had pages and pages of stuff you wish you'd never read, but I saw the satire and it was really sharp and timely" (King). Though an analysis of the film is beyond the scope of this paper, David Eldridge's analysis of the film's satirical elements in "The Generic American Psycho" point out how Harron and Turner flesh out this interpretation (Eldridge). Of particular importance is Eldridge's connection of the film's interpretation with what I have labeled the second wave of criticism—emphasizing the fictitious violence. As Eldridge points out, though the film does raise the question of whether Bateman kills for real or simply imagines the violence, it ultimately emphasizes the reality of the murders (Eldridge 23). In a 2020 interview about the film, Guinevere Turner would support Eldridge's interpretation of their film:

> To me and Mary, the book left it up in the air, too, what was real and what was not real. We didn't think that everything was real because some of it is literally surreal. But we just decided, together, that we both really disliked movies where the big reveal is that it was all in someone's head or it was all a dream. (Molloy)

A new analytical area from the third wave critics was a focus on the genre of *American Psycho*. This focus was ironic in that genre categorization was actually used in the earliest dismissal of *American Psycho* as a debased form of literature. For example, *National Review* critic, Brad Miner, categorized the book as "pornography, not literature" (see discussion above) (Miner).[3] As film critics engaged the content of the novel through Harron and Turner's 2000 film, genre considerations once again came to the forefront. Many critics labeled the film a horror/slasher film comparing it to adaptations of Thomas Harris's novels like *Silence of the*

[3] It is worth noting that Miner's review appeared before *American Psyc*ho was published. Gardner's suggestion is that condemnations of the novel were often made by people who made them prior to reading it.

Lambs, but finding the film lacking the impact of these films in that they had no pretense to literary seriousness (see for example Spence). Ellis himself defended the film, arguing against the categorization of the film as horror since the film was not constructed within the parameters of the horror/slasher genre and thus could not be understood from a critical perspective that recognized it as such.

Zaller, Gardner, and, especially, Harron and Turner's film recognized *American Psycho* as a novel of merit marking a shift in critical reaction toward the novel. This interpretation failed to provide an in-depth articulation of that merit beyond brief suggestions of the novel's inherent social critique of late twentieth century capitalism. In the decade after the release of the film adaptation of *American Psycho*, several critics approached the novel with the positive perspective championed by the third wave of critics. However, this fourth wave of critics sought not to argue for only the recognition of *American Psycho* as social critique. Rather, these critics sought to articulate the sharpness and specific message of that critique.

The turn to *American Psycho* as satire and social critique led critics in the fourth wave of criticism to explore the ethical dimension of the novel. This move toward recognizing the potential of the novel to evoke ethical reflection is the key characteristic distinguishing critical reaction to *American Psycho* from the third wave of critics. To trace the development of the critical recognition of *American Psycho* as containing an ethical dimension I will explore several important essays on *American Psycho* chronologically. The key thread linking them all is the exploration of sign posts within the novel which suggest that *American Psycho* is a morality tale.

In her 2002 essay, "The Aesthetics of Serial Killing," Sonia Allue explores *American Psycho*'s use of excess violence as a tool to understand meaning in the novel. In her article, Allue points out the appearance of two literal signs that bookends the narrative—"Abandon All

Hope Ye Who Enter Here" and "This Is Not an Exit." According to Allue, these signs designate the violence within the narrative as "self-conscious violence" (as opposed to a "superficial violence"). In this sense, Allue contends, the violence in *American Psycho* is "underlined" or identified as a feature of the novel which can be utilized to draw implications of meaning from the text (18-19). The implication Allue draws from recognizing the violence as "self-conscious" is the "denunciation of violence through violence" (20). According to Allue, this is a unique characteristic of *American Psycho* which contrasts with most violent narratives which seek to alleviate the violence or condemn it through the capture of the primary source of the violence (see Chapter 2, pp. 18-24).

Allue's argument is helpful in that she is the first critic (as far as I have found) who looks at the violence as holding a key for understanding deeper meaning in the novel rather than a source for repulsion. The argument suffers in that—though she recognizes the potential for "ambiguous effects" of using violence to condemn violence—she does not fully do so except to say that *American Psycho* is something other than a usual serial killer narrative.

Like Allue, critic Martin Weinreich argues that *American Psycho* is social critique in his 2004 essay "Into the Void: Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*". Rather than look to the novel's violence as the principle evidence for his claim, Weinreich turns to the narrator and the setting of the novel. Weinreich argues that Ellis's "deliberate decision" to write *American Psycho* as a first-person narrative in seemingly "a realist manner" has led critics to incorrectly understand the novel as "flat" and "nauseating . . . with endless lists of brand-name consumer products and explicit descriptions of pornography and violence" (65). According to Weinreich, the mistake is in reading the novel as a realist novel. This is an incorrect reading as "the book resists a traditional realistic interpretation as Ellis's narrative neither provides the

reader with any reason for the atrocities committed by Bateman . . . or psychological insight into his character to justify those actions" (Weinreich 76-77). The meaning in the novel is found primarily in the engagement of the narrator with the "New York yuppie cosmos of the 1980s" (Weinreich 66) which reveals Bateman to be both victim and victimizer in a world which he cannot escape (Weinreich 75-77). Similar to Weinreich, Florian Niedlich identified Bateman's violence as suggesting an inescapable conflict between narrator and setting, Bateman and hyper-capitalist 1980s America. Yet Niedlich contradicts Weinreich's claim that the violence is merely repetitive. Rather, for Niedlich, "the violence is revolt" (Niedlich 231-232).

Daniel Cojocaru's 2009 essay "Confessions of an American Psycho" serves as a kind of synthesis of the arguments begun with Allue. In his essay, Cojocaru labels Bateman an "anti-hero" who "attacks his society" with his violence. Cojocaru identifies Bateman's confession and other characters' rejection of that confession as absurd (*American Psycho* 387-388) as a "key textual moment" to understand Bateman's position to society. That position, according to Cojocaru, is symbiotic—"a connection of individual desire and collective structure" (194). In other words, the violence that he commits doesn't belong to Bateman nor does it even originate completely within him. Rather, the violence is relocated to the society of the narrative and, by transfer, to the reader and the reader's society (Cojocaru 195). Thus, according to Cojocaru, Bateman, his violence, and his relationship to his society demand that readers regard the novel as social critique not just of late 1980s America, but of the society they exist within as well. Cojocaru summarizes this interpretation with a pithy statement from another critic with similar views, David Price: "We are all Batemans" (196).

The critical work of Namwali Serpell fully encapsulates the fourth wave of critics. After repudiating the position that Bateman's violence is fictional thus not a cause to dismiss the novel

– "If there is no evil action in the novel, no evil person in the novel, the novel cannot infect the reader" (N. Serpell, "Repetition," 52)—Serpell highlights the continual use of repetition in the novel to make a case that Ellis is specifically drawing the reader into Bateman's world of violence and force the reader to encounter Bateman himself. According to Serpell, repetition (of "habits," "locations," "actions," "verbal tics," etc.) renders the question of real vs. unreal moot. Instead, the repetition renders both Bateman real and fictional simultaneously. Bateman exists inside and outside of the novel. To read *American Psycho* is to encounter this narrator and his violence, or, in Serpell's words, "To experience it" ("Repetition," 65). Thus, as Serpell sees it, "Any interpretation of *American Psycho* is an interpretation of the reader . . . Any response to the novel's sex or its violence is likelier to tell you more about the critic's take on it than Bateman [or Ellis]. This aligns with Ellis's stated intention for the novel: to provoke people, to let them discover their own limits as readers" (*Seven Modes*, 216-217). Recognizing this quality of *American Psycho* lends potentiality for an ethical reading of the novel including its nightmarish narrator and the violence he inflicts—"to give ethical value to novels with even the most horrifying subject matter" (N. Serpell, "Repetition," 70).

Viewing the history of critical reaction toward *American Psycho* as narrative indicates that the novel has been rehabilitated from the initial critical rejection that the novel contains any depth of meaning. Instead of consignment to status of pulp-fiction, sub-genre, or, as Lorrie Moore called it, sub-literary, the final wave of critics argued that the novel has rich depth of meaning that might even be seen as providing a moral framework. According to these critics, many characteristics of the novel warrant such a conclusion, but, ironically, it is the novel's overwhelming violence—the principle reason for the initial critical rejection—that provides the key for uncovering this textual meaning. As Namwali Serpell succinctly put it, "To say that

American Psycho's violence registers as nothingness or as Otherness is to ignore the novel's literary effects completely" ("Repetition," 65).

The contribution of these fourth wave of critics is a very convincing argument to any reader who approaches *American Psycho* with the question of what this provocative novel is all about. Yet the fourth wave of critics' development of answers to the question remains largely incomplete or unfinished. Allue, Weinreich, Niedlich, Cojocaru, and Serpell as well as others do not consider all the elements of the novel that lead to *American Psycho* being recognized as a morality tale. There are still several key issues that remain unexplored. First, although critics explore *American Psycho* in relation to genre, they insufficiently distinguish it from its closest sub-genre, the serial killer genre. Second, a full articulation of sign posts rather than relying upon Bateman—his violence and relationship to the setting of the novel—is important. While there are some in-depth literary explorations of *American Psycho* (e. g., Serpell's examination of repetition as a key literary device of the novel), many literary elements of the novel receive only scant critical exploration. What is needed is full articulation of what I identify as important sign posts within the text and their meaning. Third, a fuller consideration of the larger issue at the heart of identifying *American Psycho* as a morality tale is crucial. The key difficulty in finding meaning in *American Psycho* is that it requires the reader to provide the critical condemnation of Bateman's thoughts, attitudes, and actions. In other words, the moral framework or lens through which to engage Bateman and his violent acts must come from the reader as they are not provided by the narrator. Yet at the same time, the author and text provide important sign posts within *American Psycho* to guide the reader toward finding a moral position. In other words, it is not just the reader but a conversation between author-text-narrator-reader that provides a clear moral meaning in the narrative. What does this entail?

Chapter 2

American Psycho and the Serial Killer Genre

American Psycho is a part of a larger genre of works often referred to as the "Serial Killer Genre."[4] According to Jean Murley, this genre developed during the late 20th century due to the society's fascination with the so-called "serial murderer" (4-6). As Peter Vronsky notes, the term serial murderer had been coined a decade earlier by FBI Behavioral Unit agent Robert Ressler during a 1974 address to the British Police Academy in Bramshill, England. Vronsky notes that, during the address, after hearing descriptions of patterns of violent crimes, Ressler declared that the crimes sounded similar to "serial adventures," which referred to short episodic films shown in movie theaters during the 1930s and 1940s (328). Ressler argued that the completed murders by these criminals each time increased the desire to commit a more perfect murder that mirrored his/her ideal fantasy. Rather than being "satisfied" by their crimes, the murderers are engaged in an unending "serial cycle." Ressler recalled from his youth that no episode had a satisfactory conclusion and the ending of each one increased rather than decreased the tension in the viewer. Similarly, Ressler believed that the conclusion of every murder increases the tension and desire of a serial killer to commit a more perfect murder in the future—one closer to his/her ideal fantasy. Rather than being satisfied when they murder, Ressler concluded, serial killers are instead agitated toward repeating their killings in an unending "serial" cycle (Vronsky 328-329). Vronsky's account of Ressler's 1974 address provides the genesis of the concept of a serial murder or serial killer which would have a strong cultural impact.

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[4] The key characteristic of this genre is a primary character who is a serial killer. The genre includes works such as Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*, Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley novels, etc.

Mark Seltzer, a sociologist and leading expert on serial killers and culture, identified the cultural impact of Ressler's label as "turn[ing] the figure of the serial killer into one of the superstars of our culture" (2). According to Seltzer, the celebrity status of these killers directly led to the creation of fictional villainous murderers such as Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter and Jame Gumb in his novel *Silence of the Lambs* (both based on killer Ed Gein) and Poppy Z. Brite's Andrew Compton and Jay Byrne in *Exquisite Corpse* (based on the British serial killer Dennis Nilsen and American serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer). Paired with these fictional killers in this new genre of novels was a multitude of detectives and law-enforcement agents such as Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, James Patterson's Alex Cross, Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme, and Jonathan Kellerman's Alex Delaware, to mention just a few. The common characteristic of all of these novels is the structure of the detective-heroes following clues and investigating the bodies of victims in order to stop the murder and mayhem of the killers. This narrative type has been tremendously successful in Western culture leading Seltzer to declare that "the serial killer subgenre has by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and bodily violence in [American] culture" (1).

To uncover meaning in *American Psycho*, the novel must be read against the larger corpus of serial killer novels. For these novels within this genre, the serial killer is in most cases an aberration of the normal social order. As an aberration, the serial killer's purpose, according to Sonja Allue, is to "allow [the reader] to locate violence in the killer's disorder rather than in ourselves or in the social order" (11). In this way, the killer symbolizes the public disavowal of violence. Narratives with the serial killer are "reassuring" because the killer, the only source of disruptive social violence, is stopped in the end. In a serial killer narrative, the "bad" serial killer

must be caught in the end for a satisfactory resolution.[5] Killing the serial killer, according to Carla Freccero, "makes the problem of violence go away" (Freccero 48).

In *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*, Philip Simpson draws attention to Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs* and its two serial killers—Hannibal Lecter and Jame Gumb (a. k. a., Buffalo Bill)—as the origin of the serial killer genre. According to Simpson, *Silence of the Lambs* perfectly illustrates the conventions of the serial killer genre—the repetitive violence perpetrated by the monstrous/socially aberrant killer who is tracked in the gothic setting by the intelligent detective (or, in this case, FBI agent) with whom the reader identifies. Simpson notes that in the progression of the plot of any serial killer novel, the reader is treated to the violence as part of an intellectual game as the detective closes in on the monster before finally triumphing over him and thus removing the threat from the story (70-74). In *Silence of the Lambs*, for example, this storyline centers on FBI agent Clarice Starling's hunt for Jame Gumb to stop him from kidnapping, murdering, and skinning his female victims. Harris goes further, Simpson argues, using the character of Hannibal Lecter to highlight the intellectual game quality of this search. Lecter, a captured and incarcerated serial killer himself, serves as a devil's advocate/playful instigator of Starling's desperate search for the deranged killer. Simpson concludes with the implication that this type of story mirrors the cultural fascination with real serial killers as it transforms violence and murder into a form of aesthetics that can be considered pure entertainment at worst and societal comfort in the removal of a threat at best (Simpson 70-83).

As Isabel Santaularia notes, this form of fiction—with the heroic detective utilizing science, technology, or a position of moral superiority stopping the subversive serial killer and

[5] Of course, the exception are novels where a cliff-hanging ending sets up the forthcoming sequel (e. g., *Silence of the Lambs*).

thus restoring order—has the interesting effect of "endorsing the status quo." A functional "bogey-man," the serial killer as the agent of society's destruction, forces a response of fear and thus activates the intervention of sanctioned agents acting in the name of society to regulate and/or stop the destructive element. Even when this doesn't work, society and its characteristics are always presented as something worth saving.[6] In other words, the figure of the serial killer is the threat for destabilizing society and requires a heroic restablization of the social order by an agent of law enforcement. In the end, Santaularia observes, this dynamic surprisingly "articulates a socially conservative discourse" (66). In other words, a convention of the serial killer novel is the promotion of order and stability of the status quo.

If the critics above are correct, then reconsideration must be given to the claim that *American Psycho* fits into the serial killer genre due to the absence of the corrective element (e. g., heroic detective) to the aberrant killer. Simply put, *American Psycho* does not follow the principle convention of the serial killer genre. Instead, the novel ends without Patrick Bateman receiving any kind of punishment (or even recognition from other characters) for his crimes; a fact that led the first wave of critics like Norman Mailer to declare that the novel lacked any moral framework (see above "History of Critical Reaction to *American Psycho*"). In other words, *American Psycho*, though containing the element of the serial killer character, is something other than a serial killer novel. The novel itself seems aware of its connection to the cultural fascination with serial killers—the genesis according to Seltzer of the creation of the serial killer

[6] This idea, as Santaularia writes, epitomized in the closing lines of the cult serial killer film Se7en—"Hemingway once wrote: 'The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.' I agree with the second part" (63-66).

genre (see above)—as both fictional[7] and non-fictional[8] killers appear in the narrative. Thus, it would be fair to assume that Ellis is aware of the basic plot of removal of the killer. Ellis's ostensible awareness of genre conventions and his intentional decision to break the convention lead the discerning reader to ask why. Why does Ellis choose to avoid punishment and/or removal of Bateman and his violence from the narrative in a kind of moral tidying up?

It seems that the reason Ellis avoids eliminating Bateman's existence and the violence he commits by re-establishing social order is that he refuses to offer the reader the tidy resolution found within the closed narrative of traditional serial killer novels. Ellis shifts that responsibility, the responsibility of moral judgement, to the reader. Ellis himself stated this in a 1990 interview in which he responded to a question about the frequent rejection of the novel by stating, "If people are disgusted or bored [in reading *American Psycho*] then they're finding out something about their own limits as readers. I want to challenge their complacency to provoke them . . . *American Psycho* is partly about excess—just when readers think they can't take any more violence . . . more is presented—and their response toward this is what intrigues me" (Qtd. In Hoban 36). In this response, Ellis is getting at the purpose of the novel's violence. Namely, the violence exists to confront and "provoke" the reader to find meaning that the book itself, unlike the serial killer genre, refuses to provide. *American Psycho* begins with the words "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (3) and its final words are "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (399). The opening and closing of the book, in the words of Sonia Allue, are "metafictional devices" that announce "a spiral of violence and death to follow" and "the offering of no easy

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[7] For example, Jason from Friday the 13th (*American Psycho* 112) and Leatherhead from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (*American Psycho* 153) appear in the novel.

[8] Bateman is obsessed with reading serial killer biographies and appears to be knowledgeable about the life and crimes of Ed Gein (*American Psycho* 92), Ted Bundy (*American Psycho* 38, 153, 364, 374), and the Hillside Strangler (*American Psycho* 153).

escape" (Allue 18). Or, in the words of Patrick Bateman himself, the reader will find "no catharsis" (*American Psycho* 377).

The lack of moral resolution in *American Psycho,* especially situating this lack against the standard convention of the serial killer genre to provide moral resolution raises a troubling question—Is there no moral meaning in the novel? Is the novel simply a spectacle of gratuitous violence from the hands of an unrepentant, unredeemed, and unjudged serial killer? If these questions are answered in the affirmative, then the staunch critics occupying the first wave of critical reaction to the novel were always correct, and those critics coming after who sought meaning in the novel are misguided. Yet as especially the fourth wave of critics have sought to show, there is moral meaning in the novel. In other words, *American Psycho* is a unique novel featuring a serial killer as its main character that both conforms to and deviates from the serial killer genre. The defense of this claim must be made from elements internal to the text itself. Otherwise, any defense of *American Psycho*'s moral message would appear arbitrary. Many of the fourth wave of critics have attempted to ground their claim in *American Psycho* having moral value in key literary elements of the text (e. g., the repetitive narrative style, the violence itself, Bateman's position against the society of the novel, etc.) (See "History of Critical Reaction" above). However, their defense when taken in full is incomplete because many important sign posts within the text remain unexplored. These textual sign posts provide key guides or cues for any reader of *American Psycho* to discover the moral meaning within the text. Yet this only goes so far for, as I would argue in the final section, the reader, in the end must, bridge the final interpretive gap between *American Psycho* and a moral message with their own interpretive framework. In other words, the novel provides guides for the reader toward finding moral meaning in the text, but the reader must make the final connection between the two. However,

before I explore the literary elements that do what I claim, a statement of the methodology I will employ is in order.

Chapter 3

Methodology: A Reader Centered Analysis

In her analysis of *American Psycho*, Elizabeth Young argues that "the onus is on the reader to interject the moral values so conspicuously lacking [in the novel] . . . to engage personally with the text, to fill in the blanks as it were . . . to scrutinize his own values and beliefs" (100). In other words, *American Psycho* requires a reader-centered methodology whereby the reader is asked to "interject," "engage," and "scrutinize" the book through their own interpretive lens. This is the only way to draw out any kind of moral meaning from the book. Young's point is important because it is the foundation upon which all fourth wave critics' analyses of *American Psycho* rests. However, claiming that this is the position from which *American Psycho* must be read requires more elucidation. What does this specific type of reading entail? To understand how this kind of reading might be accomplished and to set the foundation for my own literary analysis to follow, in this section I will explore one type of reader-centered methodology—a "conversationalist" method of analysis. This type of analysis has found strong exposition in the work of the self-identified "Cognitivist School" of literary analysis as found in the work of Ansgar and Vera Nunning, Greta Olson, and Bruno Zwerk. Cognitivist analysis focuses on the reader as the locus of meaning; albeit a reader in deep conversation with and reliant upon the text and author. In other words, this methodology, though it privileges a reader-based interpretation over an authorial-based one, is constrained by textual boundaries (i. e., requires textual evidence as the foundation of any claims).[9]

[9] While most interpretations of a text require textual evidence, a Cognitivist analysis privileges the reader over the text. However, textual evidence in this method of analysis serves as a regulation to the interpretation. Thus, while readers inject meaning into the text. This meaning must be based in the text itself.

3.1 Reader as Locus of Meaning

In contemporary literary theory, the reader as the locus of meaning has eclipsed the author and text as meaning makers. This eclipse is usually attributed to Roland Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author" (1959). In that essay, Barthes argues for a reorienting of literary criticism away from the author and the penetrative discipline of discovering the meaning of the text toward a reader-centered multiplicity of textual analyses. According to Barthes, "The author is never anything more than the man who writes" (144). The "liberating" removal of the primacy of the author "transforms modern literature" to open itself up to a number of readings. Thus, according to Barthes, "the space of writing is to be traversed, not penetrated" ((146). Since Barthes, scholars have developed his thesis to construct what is often referred to as a "conversational model." According to Joanne Golden, in this model, the reader "combines the identification of cues from the text to construct patterns" with their own personal knowledge of the world (or "interpretive framework") to construct meaning. In this understanding, Golden argues, the text is "a living organism" whose interpretation is fluid, changing due to shifting context—the personal knowledge and experience of the reader (92-96). Thus, interpretation in the conversational model has both external and internal components.

While this model seems to simplify the issue, the relationship becomes more complex when a narrator is inserted between author and text and reader. Does the relationship change? Does the locus of meaning shift? And, what if the narrator is found to be an unreliable story teller? Is the reader's ability to construct meaning or identify cues lost? Blaine Mullins and Peter Dixon provide a helpful analysis of this issue. In their essay, "Narratorial Implicatures," they too argue for a conversational model. In their understanding, the conversational model extends to the narrator. Through a series of experiments, Mullins and Dixon demonstrate that the narrator and

reader are in a "conversational" relationship through which "readers' inferences concerning the mental state of the narrator affect their representation of the story world" (263). In other words, the text (and the presentation of the narrator within that text) impacts how the reader views "the story world, and the events in the story determine how they are represented and processed by the reader" (Ibid.). Toward the end of the article, Mullins and Dixon deal specifically with the implications of their study and the "conversational narrator" for the concept of the unreliable narrator. They argue that the conversational model "allows us to interpret the narratorial information provided by unreliable [narrators] . . . Just as we can hold a conversation with someone we believe may be lying, so too can readers understand a narrative in which the narrator may be less than forthright (Dixon and Mullins 275). In other words, rather than destroying the reader's ability to construct meaning from the text, the reader applies "inferences" in identifying the narrator as unreliable and the very recognition of the narrator as unreliable from those inferences actually increases the reader's ability to construct meaning.

Cognitivist theorists—Ansgar and Vera Nunning, Greta Olson, and Bruno Zwerk—have explored these issues in depth in their work. While a complete exploration of the Cognitivist School is outside the scope of this thesis,[10] an identification of the central concept in the work of Ansgar Nunning (usually regarded as the founder of the Cognitivist School of literary analysis) provides the necessary element for understanding the Cognitivist Approach of literary analysis. Similar to the conclusions drawn by Mullins and Dixon and intensifying their claims about the role of the unreliable narrator in meaning making, the Cognitivist approach argues that the

[10] See esp. Ansgar Nunning, "But Why Will You Say That I Am Mad? On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction" in *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1997): 83-105; Greta Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators" in *Narrative*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 2003): 93-109; Bruno Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," in *Style*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2001): 151-176.

unreliable narrator not only increases the reader's ability to make meaning from a text, but is the most important textual element to do so. In his essay, "Reconceptualizing the Theory, History, and Genetic Scope of Unreliable Narration," Ansgar Nunning writes, "Cognitive narrativists have argued that it would be more adequate to conceptualize unreliable narration in the context of frame theory as a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator's 'unreliability'. In the context of frame theory, the invention of 'unreliable narrators' can be understood as an interpretive strategy or cognitive process" (30). What Nunning means by this is that the very identification of a narrator as unreliable is an extra-textual act whereby the reader deems the narrator as unreliable using criteria that do not exist within the text itself. To make this identification requires the reader to impose their own framework upon both the narrator and the text itself—to construct meaning within the text using extra-textual considerations. The application of extra-textual considerations in interpretation, according to both the Cognitivist Approach (and any reader-centered method of analysis in general), is always a part of reader engagement with an unreliable narrator. In other words, the narrator, especially in their unreliability, is the textual gateway which invites the reader to make meaning from the text.

The Cognitivist School's work on narration and analysis of texts with unreliable narrators highlights the reader as the locus of meaning and the unreliable narrator as the primary textual gateway through which the reader might make meaning. In fact, Cognitivist theorists argue that meaning can only be constructed through a reader's "conversation" with the unreliable narrator. While there are some attempts to explore a conversational analysis on film (notably by Vera Nunning (See V. Nunning)), there are no attempts to do so with specific novels. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho,* with its unreliable narrator, complicated narrative, and ambiguity of

meaning, seem a perfect opportunity to consider a conversational model of analysis. If Young (and her fellow fourth wave critics) are correct, then meaning in *American Psycho* is not entirely located within the text, a claim echoed by the novel's lack of adherence to the convention of moral resolution found in most serial killer novels. However, it is also not entirely outside of the text either. Rather the reader must enter into a "conversation" with the seemingly morally bankrupt narrator, Patrick Bateman, to discover any sense of a moral message. This task must include both literary elements and a reader's own "injected" moral values. In the end, Young is correct that the reader must do some of the difficult work in constructing meaning (especially moral meaning) in *American Psycho*, yet she is wrong to assume that the novel itself does not provide some guidance for the reader in the task.

In the analysis that follows, I hope to demonstrate that applying a conversationalist approach to Bateman and *American Psycho* reveals the novel to have a resounding moral message. For me to make this claim requires engagement with the unreliable narrator of the novel, Patrick Bateman, and judge him from my own moral framework. However, as my analysis will show, there are elements or sign posts within the text itself that guide interpretation. These sign posts direct moral judgement at Patrick Bateman and his actions and buoy my own moral judgement of his actions. Thus, the discovery of moral meaning in *American Psycho* is not merely text centered or reader centered, but rather it is a synthesis of the two. *American Psycho* does provide an important moral message/critique, and this critique is not entirely extra-textual.

Chapter 4

Literary Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Recognizing the relationship *American Psycho* has to other texts in its genre is important for finding meaning in the novel. Nevertheless, this recognition pales in importance to the role of sign posts within the novel to aid the reader in constructing meaning. Two important elements in the preceding sentence need further elaboration. First, I use the phrase "sign posts" rather than "literary devices" or "stylistic effects" because—rather than just contributing to meaning within the text as literary devices or stylistic effects do—these sign posts, I argue, are elements specifically set within the text by Bret Easton Ellis to guide the manner through which the reader interprets meaning within the text. While literary devices like figurative language are used by the reader to determine the meaning, the intentionality of the sign posts as guides sets this particular literary element apart. Second, the methodology of interpreting the text will be reader-centered. This style of literary interpretation does indeed need some defense—why is the purpose of interpretation not uncovering the author's intent rather than the reader determining the meaning of the text?[11] However, I will explore a specific type of reader-centered methodology ("conversationalist" approach) in the final section of this thesis where I explore the implications of the literary analysis for *American Psycho* as a morality tale. For the purposes of this literary

[11] Why is the purpose of literary analysis reader centered rather than author centered? This is an old debate in the field of literary analysis which I alluded to in chapter 4 especially in regards to Barthes's article "The Death of the Author." It is not within the scope of this thesis to rehash this debate. However, to consider how the tension between a reader-centered analysis and an author-centered analysis continues—that Barthes's article did not in fact lead to the death of author-centered literary analyses—see Clara Claibrone Clark's article "Author! Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes".

analysis section, I believe it is sufficient to state clearly that I will be considering how sign posts might offer direction or guidance to the reader in constructing their own meaning from the text.

As seen in the above section on the critical history of *American Psycho*, most literary analyses of the novel center on its two major literary devices—the book's narrator, Patrick Bateman, and the overwhelming violence he perpetrates. Response to these two elements are diverse, from causing a complete (and disgust-filled) rejection of the novel to arguments that they provide the foundation for understanding the depth of meaning within the novel—especially in its satirical and socially critical characteristics. Rather than rehash these arguments, my contribution will be to explore key elements within the text, sign posts, which hint at why and how the text is socially critical. Utilizing these sign posts leads to an understanding that Bateman and his violence are what I will call "critical spectacle"—the excess and absurdity of Bateman and his enacted violence are meant to evoke the reader to a form of response which reflects the world the reader inhabits (both internal and external). Before exploring this point (the implication of my claims), it is necessary to identify and examine what elements of the text I designate as sign posts and what they might mean.

Bateman and his violence as spectacle are emphasized through minor sign posts within the novel. These sign posts all focus back on to Bateman and his violence. Failure to read Bateman, the serial killer narrator, and his violent acts through the lens of these sign posts leads to a misunderstanding of their role. These sign posts warrant a rejection of the view that the violence is merely gratuitous and/or pornographic and simultaneously point to a strong moral framework in the novel. While previous critics have made this exact claim in regards to other components of the novel, no analysis exists that incorporates what I distinguish as minor or perhaps overlooked sign posts repeated throughout the narrative.

Granted, *American Psycho* is difficult to read, and disgust and outrage at its contents is entirely warranted. Consider coming across the following passage [**WARNING DISTURING AND GRAPHIC PASSAGE**]:

> I'm trying to ease one of the hollow plastic tubes from the dismantled Habitrail system up her vagina, forcing the vaginal lips around one end of it, and even with most of it greased with olive oil, it's not fitting in properly . . . I finally have to resort to pouring acid around the outside of the pussy so that the flesh can give way to the greased end of the Habitrail and soon enough it slides it, easily. "I hope this hurts you," I say . . . The rat doesn't need any prodding and the bent coat hanger 1 was going to use remains untouched by my side and with the girl still conscious, the thing moves effortlessly on newfound energy, racing up the tube until half of its body disappears, and then after a minute —its rat body shaking while it feeds—all of it vanishes, except for the tail, and I yank the Habitrail tube out of the girl, trapping the rodent. Soon even the tail disappears. The noises the girl is making are, for the most part, incomprehensible. (*American Psycho* 328-29)[12]

As critics point out, a scene like this may be one of the more nauseating and despicable images in modern literature. It is "emetic" (Allue 16) and seems out of context merely to indulge the worst kind of misogynistic voyeurism and disgust for the female body. Thus, *American Psycho* should be categorized as "pornography," "surface," or "juvenile (all claims made against the book at some point). Yet to make that claim is to misdirect the reader's disgust as displayed above in the critical history of *American Psycho*. While this claim seemed adequately argued and defended by the critics within the second and third wave of critical response, the critics in these waves failed to offer a compelling positive account of how the novel should be read. This positive account of reading *American Psycho* was not available until the analyses of the critics whom I label as the fourth wave of critics became available. These fourth wave critics connected the violence to the potential of the novel to contain moral meaning. Yet while these fourth wave critics provide insightful explorations of Bateman and his violence as ironic meaning makers,

[12] I have intentionally avoided any specific textual examples of the extreme violence described in the book until this point in my thesis as I believe many of these examples, this one included, are so extreme that a kind of knee-jerk rejection of the possibility of *American Psycho* having any positive moral message is a real danger.

they did not identify important sign posts that supported their analyses. In other words, their analyses are incomplete. The fourth wave of critical analysis is not at its end. In the analysis that follows, I hope to provide an addendum to the claims of the fourth wave of critics by exploring some of these sign posts in detail. My purpose is to demonstrate that the novel itself provides guidance within the narrative to acceptance of the moral meaning within the text.

4.2 Bateman as Narrator

What do can we make of Patrick Bateman as the narrator of *American Psycho*? Much ink has been used to analyze and discuss Bateman as a narrator, so I won't go into too much analysis.[13] However, it is important to briefly discuss how Bateman is presented to consider what kind of conversation partner he can be. In what way does Bateman, and his own thoughts and views toward the action of the narrative, provide the material from which to draw out meaning? Understanding how Bateman—the serial killer narrator who is uncaptured, unrepentant, and the perpetrator of the novel's violence—functions within *American Psycho* is clearly an important element for understanding the novel. *American Psycho* is uncompromising in its connection of Bateman, the character, to his acts, the violence. Thus, finding purpose or meaning of the violence within *American Psycho* requires and understanding of the character and vice versa. In other words, to understand the violence the question must be asked, "Who is Patrick Bateman?"

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[13] See especially Marco Caracciolo's character analysis of Bateman in *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction*. Caracciolo analysis and conclusions are representative of using Bateman as narrator to understand *American Psycho*. For example, Caracciolo concludes, "The novel's epistemological instability through mind baffling unreliability feeds into the interpretive openness of the novel itself" (113). In other words, Bateman as an unreliable narrator forces the reader to discount Bateman as a suitable foundation to find meaning in *American Psycho* (a claim I make in this section as well). However, this weakness isn't grounds to label the novel as meaningless rather it, according to Caracciolo, it "contributes to the complex pattern of reader- response." This "complex pattern" is the conversational aspect that I think is so important for exploring *American Psycho* as a novel of moral meaning.

To understand Bateman requires an analysis of the two principle ways he is presented in *American Psycho*—from the perspective of himself and from the perspective of other characters. These two perspectives diverge. Early in the novel, Bateman is described by other characters as "total GQ" (*American Psycho* 90) and "the boy next door" (*American Psycho* 11, 16, 20, 37), yet Bateman balances this positive perspective with his self-description as a "fucking evil psychopath" (*American Psycho* 20). Bateman as the narrator gives the reader a privileged position of inhabiting his internal character whereas the characters within the novel do not. Though Bateman gives hints to characters about his true nature, these hints are either ignored or dismissed. I identify two important hints given by Bateman to other characters in the novel which are summarily dismissed as quirky or strange, rather than revelations of danger—Bateman's fascination with serial killers and the complete inability of other characters to hear or understand the gravity of Bateman's psychotic comments.

First, in *American Psycho*, Bateman is represented as a man obsessed with serial killers (both real and fictional), often commenting on their life, actions, or views toward life (*American Psycho* 38, 92, 153, 364, 374). Other characters in *American Psycho* are presented as aware of Bateman's obsession. "You should stop reading all those Ted Bundy biographies," his friend Preston tells him in an early scene at a bar (*American Psycho* 38). "Bateman reads these biographies all the time: Ted Bundy and Son of Sam and Charlie Manson . . . You've always been interested in stuff like that," Reeves echoes in another (*American Psycho* 92). "You always bring up [serial killers]" McDermott mocks Bateman at the Yale Club: "I don't want to know about Son of Sam or the fucking Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy . . . for god sake" (*American Psycho* 153). The characters Bateman encounters consider his fascination with serial killers a

part of Bateman's "morose" (*American Psycho* 38) character, not a sign of psychosis. Yet for the reader, his obsession with serial killers is something more. It reveals who Bateman really is.

Consider an exchange with Reeves and Hamlin at one of the many nameless upscale Manhattan bars that dot the settings of the novel. In this exchange, Bateman draws on real life serial killer Ed Gein's views of women to contribute to the group discussion about women. "Do you know what Ed Gein says about women?" Patrick asks. "He said . . . when I see a pretty girl walking down the street I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her and be real nice . . . [the other part wonders] what her head would look like on a stick." Bateman laughs indicating that he believes this comment to be humorous while the others "look at each other uneasily" (*American Psycho* 91-92). This moment at first appears to be insignificant, yet it reveals an important character element about Patrick as a narrator. He is not as he appears on the surface. Rather he is a combination of Wall Street Banker/socialite and vicious, serial killer.

Second, paralleling the dismissal of Bateman's serial obsession, Bateman's frequent psychotic claims and even confessions are completely missed or possibly even ignored (i. e., Bateman and the real estate agent, *American Psycho* 366-370). This is most noticeable in a scene near the end of the novel. After leaving a confession of his crimes on the answering machine of his attorney, Harold Carnes, in which Bateman "leaves nothing out, thirty, forty, a hundred murders" (*American Psycho* 352), Bateman runs into Carnes at an Upper East Side club called "World's End."[14] Bateman approaches Carnes "nervously" concerned about Carnes's reaction to Bateman's confession. However, Carnes gives Bateman no indication of disgust or fear; rather he smiles at him. Irritably, Bateman asks, "Harold, did you get my message?" Carnes "seems

[14] The irony of the bar's name is clear in that, if Carnes had taken Bateman's confession seriously, Bateman's alternative world of torture, murder, and cannibalism would have most likely ended. Yet, as the chapter progresses, Carnes' dismissal of Bateman's confession as a joke allows Bateman's violent world to continue.

confused at first" before laughing and declaring the message hilarious. Even when Bateman insists that the confession is true, Carnes is incredulous. "Come on," he tells Patrick, "You have one fatal flaw [with your joke]: Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown nosing good-goody" (*American Psycho* 387-388). Even in confession, Bateman's proclivity toward violence is not recognized. Carnes is only one example, though the most blatant one in the novel, of characters' inability to see Bateman for what he truly is, a monster.

Bateman's confession to Carnes is similar to the numerous times in the novel when Bateman openly comments on his own psychotic thoughts or desires to other characters, and the strange fact that none of these characters seem to hear him (*American Psycho* 59, 80, 82, 113, 124, 141, 204, 206, 216, 221). For example, while having dinner, Bateman strikes up a conversation with Libby, a minor character who only appears in this scene in the novel. When Libby asks Bateman what he does, he replies, "I'm into murders and executions mostly. It depends." Libby responds, "Do you like it? . . . Most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don't really like it." Bateman answers (with a smile) , "That's not what I said" (*American Psycho* 206). Similarly, Bateman confesses to Paul Owen that he is "utterly insane" and "likes to dissect girls," which Owen responds to by discussing the merits of tanning salons (*American Psycho* 216). These two moments are representative of the continual dismissal or ignoring of Bateman's homicidal side.

To the characters in the novel, Bateman is the boy next door. This view of Bateman leads to easy dismissal or ignoring of his obsession with serial killers and his confessions and revealing psychotic statements. However, the reader does not commit the same failure to recognize Bateman for who Bateman is. To the reader, Bateman is a psychotic serial killer. In other words, Bateman privileges the reader with a perspective the characters within the novel do

not have. Having this privileged perspective grants the reader an understanding of Bateman's role as a conversation partner in understanding the novel. The reader in lieu of Bateman's obsession and unvarnished confessions and revealing psychotic comments understands exactly who Bateman is and how his role as narrator might contribute to understanding *American Psycho.*

The complete access that Bateman gives the reader as narrator is double-sided. On the one side, the reader has a privileged position to realize the real Bateman. On the other, because Bateman provides the only first-person response to the action of *American Psycho*, the reader is bound to Bateman's thoughts, opinions, and morality as the medium of analysis. Because Bateman is an unrepentant serial killer who feels no pity for his victims, it might seem that the Bateman's internal reflections are a useless tool to consider any moral meaning in *American Psycho*. As Bateman himself recognizes, "[We] are searching for a rational analysis of who [he] is, which is, of course, an impossibility: there . . . is . . . no . . . key" (*American Psycho* 264). However, I argue that this is not the case. Bateman is not the only interpretive key to glean moral meaning from *American Psycho*.

While Bateman as narrator is a key literary device, there are minor sign posts within the text that suggest or guide the reader to stand in judgment against Bateman, his actions and beliefs, and the opinions of many of the minor characters of the novel. To properly engage Bateman the narrator, the reader must engage him through these subtle hints that push the reader into acceptance or judgement of Bateman's actions. In other words, *American Psycho* is not merely "surface, surface, surface." Rather, the book is a social and moral critique of contemporary society along the lines of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal."[15] This social and

[15] "If *American Psycho* is not about morality—the public morality of our times—then 'A Modest Proposal' has been misshelved and really belongs with the cookbooks" (Zaller 322).

moral critique can only be captured if Bateman is viewed from the external position of the reader. Bateman (and other characters' mistaken views of him), in other words, cannot guide the reader's reaction to his horrible acts. To do so would lead to an ostensible justification of Bateman's acts. In the end, Bateman is a poor conversation partner and unfit for the kind of work necessary to find moral meaning in *American Psycho*. More than that, because the reader must use their own moral judgment to oppose Bateman's views and acts, he is an antagonist to the reader's attempt to uncover moral meaning in the text. However, as the following section will hopefully make clear, this effort to oppose Bateman is not without support from the text itself. The appearance of sign posts within the narrative guide the reader's opposition against and judgment of Bateman toward a moral message hidden in *American Psycho*.

4.3 Signs, Signs, Everywhere

The very act of using sign posts to guide the reader to meaning is strongly suggested by the appearance of ***actual*** signs throughout *American Psycho*. The novel begins and ends with signs—"ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE" and "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT—and numerous other signs appear throughout the narrative.[16] These signs appear as seemingly obvious textual cues to guide the reader toward meaning in the novel. For example, as Allue, Young, and Serpell all point out, the two sign bookends of the novel and their allusion to the sign above the entrance to hell in Dante's *Inferno* are tone setters for the outcome of the narrative (i.

[16] Literal signs frequently appear in *American Psycho* (emphasis in the text): "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (3)**, "**Fear" (3)**, "**DYKE" (4, 151), "I am hungry and homeless please help me" (40)**, "**Ive lost my job I am hungry I have no money please help" (113)**, "**I'm hungry and homeless please help me" (128) **"**I . . . am . . . the . . . devil . . . and I am . . . just . . . like. . . you . . . " (146)**, "**M E A T" (168), "Hungry and Homeless, please help me, God Bless" (177)**, "**COINS CAN KILL—IF SWALLOWED COINS CAN LODGE IN AN ANIMAL'S STOMACH AND CAUSE ULCERS, INFECTIONS, AND DEATH. DO NOT THROW COINS IN THE POOL" (297)**, "**I AM BACK" (306), **"**MASS MURDERER and DRILLER KILLER" (330), "Kill All Yuppies" (374)**, "**VIETNAM VET BLINDED IN VIETNAM. PLEASE HELP ME. "WE ARE HUNGRY AND HOMELESS" (385)**,** and **"**THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (399).

e., the refusal to give the reader a cathartic resolution to the story) (Allue 18-19; Young 93; Serpell 223-224). While critics have discussed these two signs, the other signs throughout the novel are largely overlooked.[17]

One example of critical oversight or a missed opportunity for analysis is the sign Bateman sees above the singer Bono's head as he watches the band U2 perform a concert. The sign reads "I . . . am . . . the . . . devil . . . just . . . like . . . you" (*American Psycho* 146). The sign is not actually above Bono. Rather, Bateman alone sees the message "hovering above Bono's head in orange wavy letters" (*American Psycho* 146). This vision appears to Bateman in the midst of what can only be described as a religious experience. The audience and the other musicians dissolve from Bateman's view and all that remains is Bono and himself. Bateman reads the message above Bono's head while the final lyric of Bono's song—"A hero is an insect in this world"—reverberates in his mind. It is a moment of possible personal introspection and reflection for Bateman, an opportunity to consider his own morality and his actions. It is no coincidence that the arrival of this moment comes on the heels of Bateman's own self-admission (and self-judgement): "My life is a living hell" (*American Psycho* 141). However, Bateman rejects the moment as an opportunity to reflect on the any sort of transcendent meaning. Instead, Bateman turns to his friend Paul Owens and asks, "Are you still handling the Fisher account?" (*American Psycho* 147) before they both engage in a crude conversation about "trim-coordinators" (men who recruit women from the audience to have sex with the band), the size of Bono's dick, and arguing with "two dumb-looking fat girls from New Jersey" over their marijuana smoking.

[17] Along with Allue, Young, and Serpell, see esp. Paragga (2017).

Though this scene and the corresponding sign might be further analyzed, the importance of this moment for my argument is as an example of how Bret Easton Ellis uses signs to draw the reader's attention to specific details. A focus on these specific details guides the reader away from viewing *American Psycho* as devoid of depth toward a position of openness toward potential meaning in the text. The appearance of these actual signs indicates the potential existence of metaphorical signs (or sign posts) in the narrative. Just like the literal signs of the novel, these sign posts are also designed to draw the reader's attention to specific moments where the potential to make meaning is ripe. Though critics have done a lot of work on major ones—especially violence as a sign post (see Allue)[18]—minor sign posts have been largely overlooked. In the following sections, I will explore the appearance and meaning of some of these sign posts. The principal question concerning their appearance is what meaning are they guiding the reader toward. Following the identification and purpose of other signs in the work of Allue, Young, Serpell et. al, I will argue that the two signs below—*Les Miserables and The Patty Winters Show*—guide the reader toward meaning in the novel. Specifically, when paired with the two themes of objectification and consumption, these two guide the reader toward moral judgment of both. My identification of these sign posts and the absence of critical exploration of them suggest that *American Psycho* still has uncovered meaning. A fact even more clear when one takes into account that *Les Miserables* and *The Patty Winters Show* are only two of many potential minor or possibly even hidden sign posts in the novel which include, in my opinion, elements like Bateman's workout routine, his musical reviews, and his visits to the video store among others.

[18] See Chapter 2 above (esp. 13). As discussed above, Allue identified the violence of *American Psycho* as "self-conscious." According to Allue, the extreme nature of Bateman's violence serves as to underline the acts and provoke reaction from the reader. In other words, the violence itself is a sign much like the literal and metaphorical signs discussed in this section.

4.4. Objectification and Les Miserables

The theme of objectification is one of the most prevalent and constant themes throughout *American Psycho*. The theme manifests around Patrick Bateman in a number of ways. The principle manifestation is how Bateman and other characters interact and categorize women, the poor, and non-white races. An exploration of these interactions reveals a common characteristic of Bateman and the environment of the novel—the tendency toward objectification. While a thorough description of Bateman's views on the poor[19] and race[20] provides evidence of objectification, the strongest example of objectification concerns Bateman's views on women. This along with accustations of misogyny leveled against the novel and Ellis (see first wave critics above, Chapter 2) make a careful consideration of how Bateman and other male characters objectify women in the book the most apt focus for the theme.

In the sections that follow, I will first identify and explore the theme of objectification in the *American Psycho* as it concerns, specifcally, the objectification of women. The objectification of women, as I will show below, is most apparent in the way women are defined by Bateman and others as sexual objects for the gratification of males. After exploring objectification (specifically objectification of women) as the target of moral judgment, I will

[19] The theme of objectification manifests itself through Bateman and the other characters treatment of the poor. Through their engagement with homeless beggars, the characters reveal an intense classism—an elitist, dehumanizing stance toward the poor. Through continual mockery of the poor the characters of *American Psycho*, especially Patrick Bateman, demonstrate an elitist position toward the lower classes. For example, at a number of moments in the novel, Bateman tells various representation of poor people things like to "Get a fucking shave" (*American Psycho* 113) or "Why don't you get a job (*American Psycho* 129). He describes them as "member[s] of the genetic underclass" (*American Psycho* 266), and, at a rare moment when he is in danger of possibly being killed instead of being the killer, he is comforted by one thought—"I am rich—millions are not" (*American Psycho* 392). Needless to say, each of these moments are ripe for analysis as elucidating the theme of classism in the same manner as I discuss objectification in sexism, yet this elucidation is outside the bounds of this thesis.

[20] Similar to both sexism and classism, there is a lot of racism also in the novel. For example, though he chides Price for being racist (*American Psycho* 37), Bateman consistently uses racist language toward non-white characters within the book. He uses the extremely offensive word "nigger" multiple times (*American Psycho* 38, 132, 199, 212, 257, 297, 348, 385) as well as insults other races ("Fucking Iranian," *American Psycho* 70, 348). Bateman's racism reaches its symbolic epoch in his killing of a Japanese delivery boy Japanese Delivery boy (*American Psycho* 180).

analyze how *Les Miserables* functions as a guide provoking the reader toward moral condemnation of the objectification of women. Due to the absence of any moral reflection by Bateman on his and others' objectification of women, the reader is challenged to provide their own moral judgment. However, the reader does not have to determine their moral position on their own. Rather, *Les Miserables* functions as guide pointing in the direction of moral condemnation of objectification. In other words, the appearances of *Les Miserables* and their purpose in the novel serve as examples that critics who see no moral position in *American Psycho* are wrong. *Les Miserables* as sign post provides an escape from the amoral perspective of Patrick Bateman.

4.4.1 Sex as Objectification

Throughout *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman and other characters display an almost unceasing tendency to objectify sexual partners, especially women. In the eyes of the male characters of the novel, women are defined as sexual objects for male gratification. The sexual objectification of women in the novel is most epitomized in the use of the term "hardbody" or its plural "hardbodies"—occuring in some form over fifty-seven times (*American Psycho* 40, 46, 47, 50, 51, 52, 54, 79, 89, 177, 199 , 229, 332, 335, 347, 376)—to identify women Bateman and the other characters find attractive.[21] The objectification of these "hardbodies" centers, as the term implies, on the women's bodies and the usefulness of the women's bodies to appease the sexual appetities of the male characters. The following exchange between Bateman and Reeves is characteristic of the views toward women by male characters:

> There are no girls with good personalities we all say in unison, laughing, giving each other high fives. A good personality, Reeves begins, consists of a chick who has a little hardbody

[21] Additionally, as an alternative but related form to hard body women are usually described by their sexual anatomy—"blonde, big tits, great ass" (see *American Psycho* 8, 30, 40, 79, 228).

> and who will satisfy all sexual demands without begin too slutty about things and who will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut . . . The only girls with good personalities who are smart or maybe funny or maybe halfway intelligent or even talented are ugly chicks. (*American Psycho* 91)

Within this exchange, we have all the elements of sexism found throughout *American Psycho*—description of women as mere bodies, the use of hardbody, and the purpose of women as sexual gratification of males. The final element, women as sex objects, is worth exploring deeper as it is the center of the objectification and relates specifically to Patrick Bateman. Sex as objectification is presented in several ways in *American Psycho*, but the most prevalent seem to be: 1) Sex as commodity exchange, 2) Sex as amoral act displayed as BDSM activity, 3) Sex as unconstrained in partner selection, and, 4) Sex as pornography

First, Sex is framed as a cost analysis transaction, a business deal, from the very beginning of *American Psycho* and continues throughout.[22] In an early exchange with Price, sex is described as always having a "cost" and that women in some way always "expect to be paid" for it (*American Psycho* 57). At first, Bateman objects to this description by simply telling Price, "No way." Yet as the novel progresses Bateman too begins to see sex within this framework. For example, Bateman begins refering to women as "restaurant whores" (*American Psycho* 74) for their monetizing the potential of sex to acquire a meal at an upscale Manhattan restaurant. This intiates a cost-benefit analysis within Bateman's own mind whether or not the dinner is worth is worth sex. In one moment of the novel, Bateman is dining with the fiance (Courtney) of his friend Luis Carruthers. His thoughts are focused on sex as he sexually objectifies both Courtney and other women ("blonde, big tits, tight dress,"; see below) at the restaurant, but her mundane

[22] It is worth pointing out that sex described in business terms ironic as the only actual business activities described in the novel are lunches in expenseive restaurants where the most basic discussion over who oversees "the Fisher account" take place (*American Psycho* 147, with Paul Owen, *American Psycho* 216). This is unusual given Bateman and his colleagues profession as employees within Wall Street investment firms.

conversation conflicts with his sexual desire (e. g., "I'm thinking Courtney is a babe, but no sex is worth this dinner," *American Psycho* 100). Yet, in the end, Bateman ends up with Courtney in her apartment where they engage in sexual intercourse.

The sex with Courtney illustrates how Bateman defines sex itself—a relationship with and act upon an object. Specifically, Bateman's sex with Courtney demonstrates an extreme superficiality and an absence of intimacy (*American Psycho* 100-105). The tone of both participants is often hostile and combative rather than intimate and warm. This is most aptly represented in their conversation over Bateman's application of spermicidal lubricant. Mid-coitus, Bateman realizes that, while he's wearing a condom, he has not applied spermicidal lubricant. This realization invokes an "Oh, Shit" realization from him. Bateman's alarm registers with Courtney who, upon learning of the absence of spermicidal lube on Bateman, responds in a similar fasthion. "Oh, my god," she cries out, "You didn't have any on?" (*American Psycho* 102). Bateman's struggle to find the lubricant and then apply it engenders frustration and anger in both of them. The sex turns from any semblance of personal connection or warmth to a kind of hostile argument between them. This tone ultimately climaxes in Bateman violently forcing Courtney to see how he has properly applied the lubricant—"See? Happy? You dumb bitch? Are you happy dumb bitch?"—and Courtney responding, "Oh god just get it over with" (*American Psycho* 104-105). The sex ends with Bateman describing his final ejaculation as an almost perfunctory task while Courtney lies sobbing beneath him.

This sex scene between Courtney and Patrick represents the nature of sex throughout the novel. The males are the consumers of the women's bodies (there is a connection here with the theme of consumption explored below) and the women using their bodies as a commodity. Thus, sex acts are simply transactional and devoid of intimacy—an epitmoization of objectification. In

other moments in the novel, Bateman echoes this specific view of sex. For example, in another sexual encounter with a woman named Daisy, Bateman describes her connection to him as entirely objective—"I get on top of her and we have sex and lying beneath me she is only a shape" (*American Psycho* 212). Sex for Bateman has no connection to whom he has sex with. It is simply another act. Intimacy and personal connection are absent from the act for Bateman. In perhaps the most representative reflection Bateman has regarding sex, he declares toward the end of the novel that "sex is mathematics" and, for sex, "individuality is no longer an issue" (*American Psycho* 375). Sex for Bateman is the manipulation of objects for his own ends. This view of sex absolves Bateman of seeing sex as containing any inherent meaning, and, without meaning, sex lacks any personal initmacy; it is a simple commodity exchange. As commodity exchange, there is no space for moral reflection on sex. Instead Bateman views his sexual partners as utility objects through which he might fulfill his own personal lusts.

Second, the amorality or lack of space for moral reflection withn Bateman's view of sex manifests itself with Bateman's appetite for BDSM activities. The BDSM activities themselves are a performance of objectification through sex and include a pattern of non-consent, individual gratification for Bateman through violence, and eventually the death (or disposal) of the used object (a woman). The primacy of BDSM sex in the novel and the way Bateman reflects on the sex reveal the commodity/consumption quality discussed above. As Casey Moore argues, in each sexual scene of *American Psycho*, Bateman "recounts the sex in very matter of fact language" (232). The language is significant in that it "is the same one in which he lists off what he and other characters wear, his restaurant reviews, and scenes of murder" (Ibid.). According to Moore, the purpose of this language and the mirroring of what she calls "the boring parts of the novel," is to highlight both the lack of empathy or intimacy Bateman has for any of his sexual partners

and their complete sexual objectifcation (243-244). The straight forwardness of the prose, according to Moore, relegates the moral reflection upon the objectifying sex to the reader especially since it is entirely absent in Bateman's reflections. Or, as she puts it, it is the responsibility of the reader "to feel what Bateman does not—namely, feelings of disgust and repulsion for the acts of sexual violence" (234). Moore's look at the purpose of BDSM sex and how Bateman views it is important because it highlights Bateman's objectification of sexual partners and how *American Psycho* presents that objectification through minimalist prose.

Third, another important and unexplored element is Bateman's lack of any boundaries in terms of selection of sexual partners. No scholarly exploration of this element exists at the moment, yet, as I read *American Psycho*, Bateman's liberal choice of sex partners seems to echo and support Moore's analysis of BDSM sex in the novel. Though some might argue that Bateman's lack of boundaries in partner selection is most apparent in the latent homosexuality of the character and the related homophobia of Bateman, Bateman's possible attraction toward men is not extraordinary or morally repugnant in any sense (especially in a 21st century context).[23] However, Bateman's sexual attraction to children seems almost universally morally repugnant. While this inclination of Bateman is not pervasive wihtin the novel, it does appear at specific moments. For example, in a pivotal chapter entitled "Shopping," as he wanders throught Bloomingdale's department store in Manhattan, Bateman offers the following narration upon seeing a young girl—"I see a ten-year-old-girl standing by her mother, who is buying a scarf, and I'm thinking: Not bad" (*American Psycho* 180). It is no conicedence that Bateman has this reaction toward the young girl while shopping in Bloomingdale's. The girl is simply one more object amongst shaving cream, candlesticks, pilllow covers, and hand-knitted cotton snowfake

[23] However, it would be naïve to assume that there are no contemporary readers who might object to the presence of homosexuality and homophobia in the novel.

sweaters (*American Psycho* 179) which Bateman can obtain. And, just like the other objects, she has a purpose. For her case, the purpose is sexual. Her age is incidental and has no impact on that purpose for Bateman.

Finally, Bateman's view of sex—women as objects to achieve self-satisfaction and, thusly, sex as having no moral context—are directly related to Bateman's constant consumption of pornography. In a number of scenes from the novel, Bateman is either purchasing pornographic magazines (*American Psycho* 70), renting pornographic video tapes (*American Psycho* 111-112, 229), or watching pornographic movies (*American Psycho* 97, 177, 395). It is clear in the novel that Bateman equates the fantasy world he encounters with pornography with his own sex life. Even his sexual fantasies are rooted not in any sense of realism, but rather in the world of pornography. For example, as Bateman is receiving a facial, Bateman is encouraged to think of "only positive things." Of the many positive things his mind turns to is pornography specifically "beautiful oiled hardbodies . . . under harsh video lights" (*American Psycho* 116). In another connection of sexual fantasy and pornography, Bateman recounts a dream he had that was "like pornography" and where he had sex with "girls made of cardboard" (*American Psycho* 200). In fact, in a moment of self-reflection about his consumption of pornography, Bateman pronounces his preference for pornography over real sex. Bateman sates, "I am beginning to think that pornograpjy is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable" (*American Psycho* 264).

Bateman never qualifies his reflection by defining what exactly he means by "complication," but, from his acts both prior to and after this pronouncement, it can be inferred. The complication Bateman is referring to is the personal intimacy between two people engendered by the sex act—the very opposite of the type of objectification already seen in his

sex with Courtney. Bateman's rejection of personal intimacy for the objectification of sexual partners that occurs in pornography is apparent when Bateman begins fliming his sexual encounter in the second half of the book. These filming episodes are all characterized by extreme violence—each ending with the torture and murder of the women with whom he is having sex. Yet they are each subtly distinct in the type of women Bateman is filming, torturing, and murdering. He begins his filming of sex, torture, and murder with Bethany (a former college girlfriend) (*American Psycho* 245). Later, Bateman is seen filiming the sex, torture, and murder of two escorts—Torri and Tiffany (*American Psycho* 304). Finally, in the last scene of the novel in which Bateman films one of these violent sexual episodes, he describes his victim as "another girl, who I meet at M. K. and remains nameless to me" (*American Psycho* 327). In his filming of his sex/torture/murder acts, Bateman has progressed or, to put it more appropriately, regressed from a somewhat intimate ex-girlfriend to disconnected prostitutes to a completely nameless and entirely objectified victim. Through his act of filming, Bateman's real sexual encounters are no different than the entirely fictional sex he watches on his pornographic videotapes. Just as the adult actresses are mere objects in the sexual fantasy, his real-life sexual partners too are nothing but objects.

4.4.1.1. Jean

However, there is one woman in Bateman's world who seemingly escapes Bateman's almost universal objectification of women and challenges his personal ideas about sex, his secretary, Jean. Early in the novel, Jean makes sporadic appearances always in her role as Bateman's secretary. However, as the novel progresses, Bateman, aware of Jean's attraction toward him, initiates a romantic relationship with her. Bateman treats Jean differently from the

other women in *American Psycho* and clearly struggles against his psychotic desire to do her harm. Does the presence of Jean and Bateman's attempt to have a relationship with her provide space for a more positive view of women in the novel? Does her existence in the narrative show that Bateman has the ability to rise above his objectification of women and thus reveal at least some level of moral reflection?

At first glance, Bateman's relationship with Jean seems to break free from his implacable objectification of all women. Early in the novel, Bateman describes Jean as "in love with him and who he will probably end up marrying" (*American Psycho* 64). Later, in the midst of Bateman's extreme violence toward women, Jean is spared the same treatment as other women. In a chapter simply titled, "Dinner with Secretary," Bateman asks Jean to dinner at an upscale restaurant. As he is asking Jean out, Bateman fills out a *New York Times* Times Sunday crossword puzzle. Rather than writing the correct answers, Bateman "fills out every space with either the word meat or bone" (*American Psycho* 257), a fact which Jean observes and "emits a slight gasp." Bateman then begins erasing the "m" in each "meats" transforming the words into eats and bone (*American Psycho* 257). Bateman's actions reveal his current state of mind which has significant bearing for his relationship to Jean. He is in the throws of homicidal madness and has recently begun eating his victims (Bateman consumed parts of Bethany in his most recent murder; *American Psycho* 252). The crossword puzzle seems to be a foreshadowing of his date with Jean which would involve a conclusion similar to his date with Bethany. During the date, Bateman's condescending view that Jean "would swallow any misinformation [he] would push her way [due to her] crush on [him] rendering her powerless" (*American Psycho* 263) reveals that Bateman is objectifying Jean just as he does all women in the novel. And, when Jean invites Patrick up to her apartment after the date, any reader would be justified in expecting Jean's

violent demise. Yet Patrick turns Jean down reflecting that "something stops me, something in me quells the bloodlust" (*American Psycho* 264). Something about Jean has broken through Patrick's objectification of women which leads to torture, murder, and cannibalism.

It is unclear what it is exactly that stays Bateman's hand with Jean until near the conclusion of the novel. In a pivotal chapter, "End of the 1980s," Bateman is again on a date with Jean. Again a number of allusions to Bateman's psychotic state are included in the events of the chapter—the shapes of clouds appear to him as a woman cut in two and he makes a Freudian slip ordering a decapitated coffee rather than a decaffinated coffee (*American Psycho* 372). As they walk through Central Park, Jean confesses her love for Patrick. Patrick responds, "I love someone else" (*American Psycho* 375). Whom he loves isn't entirely clear, yet from the context of the narrative, it must be himself. However, Bateman immediately adds that something can be done about it before wavering and saying maybe it can't. Jean pushes Bateman to mirror her love for him stating that without him "[her] life would be much emptier" (*American Psycho* 376). Jean's words contrast starkly with Bateman's introspective views voiced while Jean confesses her love for him that "nothing is worth looing forward to" and "the world is senseless" and "without meaning" (*American Psycho* 375, 376). Jean ironically finds meaning in Bateman whom she pushes to make a decision to find meaning in her. This is a moment of possible redemption for Bateman as the novel nears its end. Bateman himself recognizes the importance of this moment reflecting that "this is a crucial moment in my life" (*American Psycho* 378).

Just a few chapters earlier, Bateman has for the first time experienced a kind of existential dilemma with his murderous actions. Looking upon the corpse of one of his victims, Bateman breaks down weeping and cries out "I just want to be loved" (*American Psycho* 345). This moment with Jean is his chance to be loved. At first, he appears to be redeemed tearfully

telling Jean "I think it's . . . time for me to . . . take a good look . . . at the world I've created" (*American Psycho* 378). But, immediately Patrick turns toward an introspective consideration of a life with Jean. Patrick experiences internal conflict in this moment:

> Why not end up with her floats in my line of vision. An answer: She has a better body than most other girls I now. Another one: every one is interchangable anyway. One more: it doesn't really matter. (*American Psycho* 379)

Patrick's conflict doesn't move in the direction of the kind of intimacy that Jean wants with Patrick. In fact, his internal dialogue reveals that though he has some inclination of desiring physical intimacy, his tendency to calculate and consider people through a prism of objectification is too strong. Before turning down her offer, Bateman asks a series of strange questions to Jean—Do you have a briefcase? Is it a designer?—which all further highlight that Jean is just one more object in Patrick Bateman's world.

The chapter ends on an ambiguous note, Bateman says, "He is moving toward as well as away from something, and anything is possible" (*American Psycho* 380). While this seems to have a hopeful tone—in most narratives it probably would—what Bateman is moving away from is a redemption from his violent, objectifying nature through a loving, intimate relationship with Jean. He is moving toward an intensification of his violent murdering. In the final six chapters of the book, Jean is entirely absent. Bateman's psychosis intensifies.[24] At the book's conclusion Bateman is presented as beyond any sort of redemption from his objectifying nature. Objectification women is simply what he does, a foundational characteristic. In the conclusion of the novel, Bateman responds to a question he asks of himself, "Why?" The full question is

[24] "Bigfoot was interviewed on The Patty Winters Show this morning and to my shock I found him surprisingly articulate and charming" (*American Psycho* 381) "I have started drinking my own urine" (*American Psycho* 382)"I'm having a hard time paying attention because my automated teller has started speaking to me, sometimes actually leaving weird messages on the screen, in green lettering, like 'Cause a Terrible Scene at Sotheby's' or 'Kill the President' or 'Feed me a stray cat,' and I was freaked out by the park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me. Disintegration—I'm taking it in stride" (*American Psycho* 395-396).

meant to be understood as "Why am I this way?" Bateman "automatically answers" that "this is the way 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, so, well, yup uh . . . " (*American Psycho* 399). Why is Bateman the way he is? Why does he see women as mere objects? According to him, he just does, and that's the way life as he experiences it proceeds.

4.4.2. Les Miserables: Judgment of Objectification

The complete objectificaton of women as spaces for or tools of male sexual gratificaton has always provoked strong response toward *American Psycho*. This response began even prior to its publication (see Chapter 1, p. 5-6). The scenes of the novel detailing the extreme levels to which Bateman objectifies, uses for his own ends, and usually discards women are difficult to read. Does *American Psycho* deserve the charges of misogyny and pornography levelled against it?[25] Is it a sexist novel promoting the objectification of women? I will argue below that the answer to both of these questions is no. For, even though Bateman as narrator provides no moral reflection on his and others' objectification of women, that does not mean there is no moral condemnation of objectification embedded in the novel. Bateman's lack of moral reflection does not imprison the reader within his own amoral perspective. Rather the vacuum left by Bateman is filled by the reader's own moral sensibilities. This is the very nature of regarding oneself in conversation with the novel (see Chapter 3)—the reader engages the novel and its narrator in a kind of epistemological dialogue. The novel provides the content of that conversation, and the

[25] This charge brought about by the first wave of critics persists in the conversations around the novel indicating that the possibility of *American Psycho* as simply "misogyny in disguise" is still an important and unresolved issue (see for example Glosswitch).

reader reflects upon it through their own lens. However, the reader is not left completely alone or without any input from the text in constructing their own meaning. Rather, *American Psycho* provides sign posts pointing the reader in a specific direction. In regards to objectification of women, the sign posts guide the reader to moral condemnation. In this way, *American Psycho*, even though it contains some of the most vile views of women in modern literature, ironically provides a kind of moral instruction to the reader. This moral instruction is accomplished by the recurrent appearance of *Les Miserables*.

Within *American Psycho*, the absurd objectification of women is judged by the repeated embedding of the musical *Les Miserables* into the narrative. References to *Les Miserabes* appear twenty-three times in the novel (in either full or shortened form (e. g., *Les Miz*)). What is the purpose of this inclusion? As a sign post, *Les Miserables* draws attention to the cruel mistreatment and objectification of the "contemporary miserables" that fill the book: beggars, the homeless, and the poor. In that way, the novel forces the reader to consider the rampant objectification and corresponding de-humanization heaped upon this social group.

Consider Bateman's reaction toward a woman in the middle of the novel:

> A blond girl close enough to physical perfection, with big tits and a *Les Miserables* playbill in one hand, wearling a long rayon matte jersey evnning dress by Michael Kors from Bergdorf Goodman, Mnaolo Blahnik shoes and gold plated chandelier earrings by Ricardo Siberno, stops by to say hello to Sean and though I would fuck this girl, Sean ignores her flirtatious manner and refuses to introduce me. (*American Psycho* 228)

Bateman's thoughts about the girl characteristically manifest a theme of objectification of women (sexual object, description by sexual body parts) and warrant a charge of misogyny at Bateman (and by connection Bret Easton Ellis). However, the subtle detail of her holding "a *Les Miserables* playbill" is significant. It is a kind of framing perspective on Bateman's thoughts—as

if the text itself were saying "what this guy is thinking about this woman is wrong." That, I argue, is the purpose of each occurrence of *Les Miserables* in *American Psycho*.

Though *Les Miserables* appears plenty of times in the narrative, at several points its appearance draws a strong condemnation of the actions of characters wtihin the novel and, thus of the society of late 1980s America in particular.[26] Within these moments, *Les Miserables*'s appearance is particularly poignant. One of these appearances concerns the objectification of women discussed above. To better nuderstand the function of *Les Miserables* as guiding the reader toward moral judgment of the objectification of women, I will analyze this specific appearance of *Les Miserables*—Bateman's initial interaction with Christie the prostitute (*American Psycho* 168-176).

4.4.2.1. Christie the Prostitute

In an important scene in *American Psycho*, *Les Miserables* makes a powerful and condemnatory appearance toward Bateman's actions. The scene details Bateman's relationship with Christie, the young prostitute. In this chapter entitled appropriately "Girls," Bateman picks up a young prostitute, Christie,[27] from the meat-packing district of Manhattan. Several important connections to both the occurrence of sign posts to guide the reader toward moral condemnation and to the theme of objectification described above immediately appear. When Bateman takes Courtney home from their date, the reader expects Bateman to narrate another night of using

[26] Some of the moments *Les Miserables* appears in the novel include Patrick's threats to dry cleaners (*American Psycho* 85); after mocking the poor by giving him a finger (*American Psycho* 94); Bateman taunts the bum with the dollar trick taught to him by Reeves (*American Psycho* 113); Bateman's fantasy over switching the blood between a girl and a dog (*Psycho* 116); before "ignoring the beggar" (*American Psycho* 151), when Bateman steals Paul Owen's CD player containing a Les Mis CD after murdering him (*American Psycho* 219), when Bateman kills a man who was playing songs from *Les Miserables* on saxophone (*American Psycho* 347-348).

[27] It is worth noting that Christie is not the young woman's name, but the name Bateman chooses to call her and demands that she responds to it. According to his own admission, Bateman doesn't know nor wants to know her real name (see *American Psycho* 169).

Courtney to fulfill his sexual lusts.[28] Instead, Bateman makes up an excuse to leave her "to score some drugs" (*American Psycho* 167). This is a lie as Bateman immediately after leaving Courtney directs his driver to the meat packing district "to look for prostitutes" (*American Psycho* 168).[29] As he shops for his girl—another nod to Bateman seeing women as mere objects—he sees a "blond and slim and young" girl standing in front of "four-foot tall red block letters" sign which says "M E A T" (*American Psycho* 168). The symbolism of the word is not lost on Bateman who states that Christine standing in front of a sign that reads M E A T "awakens something in [him]" (*American Psycho* 168). The sign mimics a product advertisement anyone might encounter while shopping. Which, as perverse as it might be, is exactly what Bateman is doing.[30] The appearance of the literal sign heigthens readers' attention to the presence of any other signs in the scene (see 4.3 above).

After persuading Christine to return with him to his apartment, Bateman orders another prostitute from a service. He orders the second girl with "his American Expres card" (*American Psycho* 170) and stresses his preference for a blonde escort. Both his method of payment and his stress on a particular type of woman continue to suggest that this moment for Bateman is closer to buying furniture for his apartment than engaging in any personal relationship with another human being. Once the other girl, Sabrina, arrives, Bateman engages the two women in simple conversation. While serving the women drinks, Bateman plays the Broadway cast recording of *Les Miserables* for them on his stereo (*American Psycho* 171-172). The recording continues to play as Bateman engages the two women in sexual intercourse. The novel describes the sex as

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[28] An expectation drawn from Bateman and Courtney's sexual history (See p. 44 above; *American Psycho* 100-105).
[29] An interesting double entendre occurs here. Bateman says he is going "to score drugs," instead he goes to pick up a prostitute. An interesting insight for this scene is that at least one of Bateman's "drugs" are prostitutes. This scene is a case in point as Bateman is going to use prostitutes to fulfill a base longing or lust. This is the very purpose of illicit drugs.
[30] It is not coincidental that the very next chapter is entitled "Shopping" (*American Psycho* 176).

objectifying and dehumanizing toward all three participants with Bateman ordering the girls to perform sexual acts on him and each other. *Les Miserables* is literally the soundtrack for this scene.

The appearance of *Les Miserables* in connection to prostitution is almost expected since one of the central characters in the first act of the musical, Fantine, is a young woman forced into prostitution to support her young daughter. In perhaps the most emotionally wrenching moments of the musical, Fantine, after engaging in sex with a customer, sings a highly emotionally song lamenting her station in life and how it has destroyed any hopes or dreams she once had. The prostitute Fantine succumbs to tuberculosis early in the musical, but not before Jean Valjean promises to raise her young daughter, Cossette, as his own. The loving act of Jean Valjean—though not entirely loving as he blames himself for Fantine's fall into prostitution—and the corresponding redemption accorded to Fantine, Cossette, and Valjean himself compose one of the principle storylines in the second half of the musical. Thus, the choice of Ellis to reference *Les Miserables* in the midst Bateman's dehumanizing objectification of prostitues seems to have some kind of interpretive function or purpose.

If left alone, this scene is nothing more than pornographic violence enacted upon women who are not human to Patrick Bateman. Scenes just like this one lead people to argue that *American Psycho* should be dismissed as pornography. However, readers can read such scenes and find moral instruction—in this case an indictment or condemnation of Bateman's actions toward Christie and Sabrina. The appearance of M E AT and the shopping for/purchasing of women by Bateman suggest that this scene is representative of the theme of objectification in the novel. How the reader might respond to this theme is not entirely clear. Nor at first glance is it clear that Bateman's actions are condoned or condemned by the book. It this seeming absence of

moral positioning that elicits such strong chrages of sexism, mysogyny, and pornography against *American Psycho*. Yet the appearance of the reference to *Les Miserables*—which is not accidental—with its loaded meaning in connection to prostitutes and how one should view women suggest that there is a hidden guide for readers to take a moral position. *Les Miserables* condemns Bateman's actions even though he himself is unaware of the condemnation or irony with playing a song from a musical which features a strong condemnation of objectifying prositutes. But, the reader, aware of the intertextual issue that *Les Miserables* presents, is challenged to condemn Bateman and what he is doing as immoral. Thus, *American Psycho* with its inclusion of *Les Miserables* in this scene does not abandon the reader to make a moral decision but provides the guidance to do so in the text itself. In short, *Les Miserables* is the resounding judgment against objectification of women even in the midst of Bateman's extreme actions of doing just that.

4.5 Consumerism and The Patty Winters Show

Related to objectification is the theme of consumerism and consumption. Objectification describes how characters relate to others as they dehumanize the people around them. This tendency to dehumanize and transform people into objects is not limited to outward acts. Rather, those who dehumanize others outwardly do the same to themselves. Characters in *American Psycho*, especially Patrick Bateman, dehumanize themselves and transform themselves into detached consumers. Thus, objectification and consumerism are really two sides of the same coin. Consumerism, like objectification, occurs early and often in the novel. In the very first page of the novel, Timothy Price,[31] one of Bateman's friends describes himself as follows—"I'm

[31] Once again, Ellis seems to consciously or unconsciously employ a name to highlight or mock what's really going on in the scene (see p. 34 above).

creative. I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled . . . society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an *asset*" (emphasis by the author; *American Psycho* 3). Price sees himself as an object within society. This self-perspective is shared by almost all of the other characters, especially Patrick Bateman. Consider two things Bateman does throughout the novel. First, he constantly describes the items in his office and apartment emphasizing the quality or brand of the product itself. For example, in the chapter "Morning" (*American Psycho* 24-30), Bateman, for six pages of text, meticulously catalogues the things he owns. Any part of this chapter might be cited as evidence of the extreme value Bateman places on the things he owns. However, a brief sample will suffice:

> A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set; it's a super-high-band Beta unit and has built-in editing function including a character generator with eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and three-week, eight-even timer. A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. A glass top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke. Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. (*American Psycho* 25)

Patrick continues on and on describing the things in his apartment. He does this a number of other times in the novel as well—both his apartment and others apartments. The example of above is representative of the style of description that Bateman employs in each of these other moments. That style, as the quote above aptly demonstrates, is characterized by placing value in the name brand of the object and their existence alone. It has nothing to do with their usefulness to or for the person owning the object. In the above quote, Bateman describes his "expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff," yet admits he doesn't smoke. The piano he owns has never been played.[32]

[32] "This somehow sets off my remembering that the piano tuner will be stopping by this afternoon and that I should leave a note with the doorman to let him in. Not that [the piano] has ever been played; it's just that one of the girls [I

Why does Bateman place such value in these objects in his apartment? Because he sees the value of these objects as being the source of his own value. He is the things that he owns. In other words, Bateman finds value in his role as consumer. While Bateman discussing the things in his apartment does demonstrate how he sees consumption of things as granting self-worth, Bateman's view that things give value to people is most apparent in his recurrent description of people by employing a consistent formula. The formula takes the form of x was wearing y by z designer. In other words, the most important personal characteristic of people and himself for Patrick Bateman is what they are wearing. For example, Bateman describes shopping with Nancy and Charles Hamilton and their two-year-old daughter as follows:

> I'm standing in Paul Smith talking to Nancy and Charles Hamilton and their two-year-old daughter, Glenn. Charles is wearing a four-button double-breasted linen suit by Redaelli, a cotton broadcloth shirt by Ascot Chang, a patterned silk tie by Eugenio Venanzi and loafers by Brooks Brothers. Nancy is wearing a silk blouse with mother-of-pearl sequins and a silk chiffon skirt by Valentino and silver earrings by Reena Pachochi. I'm wearing a six-button double breasted chalk–striped wool suit and a patterned silk tie, both by Louis, Boston, and a cotton oxford cloth by Luciano Barbera. Glenn is wearing silk Armani overalls and a tiny Mets cap. As the sales girl rings up Charles's purchases, I'm playing with the baby while Nancy holds her, offering Glenn my platinum American Express card, and she grabs at it excitedly. (*American Psycho* 221)

This formula is repeated throughout the novel. In the above example, Bateman, just as he did in his description of the things in his apartment, places value in the brand of the clothing item by meticulously noting it in each description. The simple description of what is happening in this scene—Bateman is playing with the couple's baby while Glenn makes a purchase—is dominated by Bateman's description of the clothes everyone is wearing. Nine of the fourteen lines in his description are about the clothes. Very rarely does Bateman describe any character (or himself)

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recently murdered] fell against it and some strings (which I used later) were pulled out, snapped or something" (*American Psycho* 382).

through personal characteristics (unless, as seen in especially in his objectification of women, he is insulting someone).

Seeing people through the prism of things owned and clothing warn and placing value not in the usefulness of an object but rather its brand, Bateman reduces all characters and himself into receptacles of things owned. People are not just objects but exist in his world as consumers of other objects. Within the text, very rarely is identity founded on consumerism critiqued much less reflected upon by Bateman. Yet, in a few moments of the novel, a critical perspective from Bateman seems to appear. In several scenes, Bateman experiences what can only be described as severe anxiety attacks. Some of these attacks are directly connected to consumerism. For example, in a chapter aptly titled "Shopping" (*American Psycho* 176-180), Bateman is Christmas shopping down Madison Avenue. The experience brings on "panic" in Bateman which he tries to combat by swallowing large amounts of Xanax (*American Psycho* 177). The ensuing description of Bateman's shopping experience is interspersed with exhaustive lists of things that surround Bateman (. . . "correspondence cards and mirrors and shower clocks and aprons and sweaters and gym bags and bottles of champagne" . . . ; *American Psycho* 178-179). Bateman reflects that the overwhelming amount of stuff in these lists causes "some kind of existential chasm" to open before him at Bloomingdales (*American Psycho* 179). The existential chasm, whatever that might be, induces a rare moment of regret for the way he has viewed and treated another human being (in this case Evelyn). Yet, before he is pulled too far into any semblance of humanity, Bateman reverts to his usual ways in this case with a double dose of extreme female objectification ("I see a ten-year-old girl standing by her mother . . . and I'm thinking: Not bad" (*American Psycho* 180)) and consumer reduction ("I'm wearing a cashmere topcoat, a double

breasted plaid wool and alpaca sport coat, pleated wool trousers, patterned silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and leather lace-ups by Allen-Edmonds" (Ibid.)).

4.5.1. Cannibalism as Consumerism

Some analyses of *American Psycho* have drawn upon Bateman's acts of violence as a protest against the extreme consumerism in the novel reaching a primary manifestation in Bateman's eventual turn toward cannibalism.[33] Florian Niedlich, for example, sees Bateman's violence and cannibalism "as an allegory of the collective violence of capitalist culture; his cannibalism as an extreme form of consumption (Niedlich 229-230, 232). This insight suggests that Bateman's cannibalism serves as a focus on the theme of consumption; a kind of extreme example. In this manner, Bateman's cannibalism is a manifestation of theme of consumption in the same way Bateman's sexual activity is a manifestation of objectification (see 4.4.1 above).

In one scene, after having killed two women, Tiffany and Tori, Bateman, unable to distinguish between the bodies due to the extreme carnage, describes one of them as "having teeth marks where I had bitten into it" (*American Psycho* 306). This allusion to Bateman's consumption of the body is paired with him "scrawling the words I AM BACK," a literal sign,[34] onto the wall in the victims' blood. This scene, Niedlich writes, shows that "Bateman sees his cannibalism as a kind of revolt against society . . . he is now the extreme other" (Niedlich 232). Niedlich fails to note that below the words Bateman draws "a scary drawing which looks like this" (*American Psycho* 306). The previous is not a typo. The space after "this" is empty just as it is in the book. There is nothing that Bateman draws. The empty space below Bateman's "revolt

[33] Bateman murders and eats parts of: 1) His old Harvard girlfriend, Bethany (*American Psycho* 252), 2) His friend, Elizabeth (*American Psycho* 290), and, 3) Two prostitutes, Tiffany and Torri (*American Psycho* 303).
[34] Cf. "M E A T" (*American Psycho* 54); See 4.3 above.

against society" (Niedlich 232) suggests that the claim just like the drawing is empty. Bateman is not revolting against consumerism; he is modeling it. Cannibalism is not a path away from consumption, but an increase of it. By cannibalizing his victims, Bateman is now the ultimate consumer.

Bateman's complex relationship to his culture of consumption—his place in it and his turn to cannibalism as the most extreme manifestation of it—is just like his views and acts of sex; not meant to be taken on their own. In other words, the revolting cannibalism has a purpose just like the revolting sex acts: to focus the reader toward moral judgment of both consumerism and the culture of consumerism. Seeing cannibalism of his victims this way, admittedly, is very difficult. Why not just turn away in disgust at the extreme violence in the novel? That would seem like the right action to take, but, doing this, misses an important element of the novel—*American Psycho* stands in judgement of consumption. The reader does not bear the complete responsibility of making this conclusion for much like the role of *Les Miserables* standing in judgment of objectification in the novel, there is a textually embedded protest lobbed at both the culture of rampant consumerism and Bateman's reduction of people to mere consumers within the text itself. This second sign post guides the reader toward judgment of Bateman consumerism and the extremely capitalistic environment of the novel. The sign post that does this is the ubiquitous appearance of Bateman's "addiction" (*American Psycho* 64), *The Patty Winters Show*.

4.5.2. The Patty Winters Show: Judgement of Consumerism

Banality and violence, common life and gruesome murders are woven together in Bateman's life. This occurs at a macro-level in the "non-narrative" [35] of *American Psycho* and at a micro-level in the various sign posts surrounding Bateman's life. One of these sign posts is Bateman's obsession with the Oprah-like show *The Patty Winters Show*. References to *The Patty Winters Show* occurs forty-six times in *American Psycho*.[36] One perspective is to take the occurrences of the show and Bateman's account of the content of the show as mere filler for the story. Yet, the frequency of the occurrences and their proximity to moments of extreme consumption suggest something more than that. *The Patty Winters Show* cannot be taken at such a simple value. Instead, the show—which treats subjects like toddler murders (*American Psycho* 138), Nazis (*American Psycho* 156), shark attack victims (*American Psycho* 143), and a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth (*American Psycho* 347) as well as banal ones such as salad bars (*American Psycho* 225), aerobic exercise (*American Psycho* 200), or how

[35] Much of the text of *American Psycho* is non-narrative in that no action is actually occurring. Rather, the majority of American Psycho is Bateman describing his thoughts, actions, or surroundings. The non-narrative quality of *American Psycho* is intentional—to force the reader to consider the very nature of the constructed world and characters within the novel. According to Ellis, when he wrote *American Psycho*, "[He] was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface . . . that is what defined people. So, I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, endlessly repetitive" (quoted in Freccero 51).

[36] In *American Psycho*, Bateman watches and often discusses/reflects on *Patty Winters Show* episodes featuring Women with multiple personalities (29), Autism (63), Interview with the president (81), Real life rambos (87), Perfumes and Lipsticks and makeups (93), Descendants of members of the Donner Party (107),UFOs that kill (115), Possibility of Nuclear war (119), Toddler Murders (138), Shark attack victims (143), .Asprin (148), Nazis (156), Dwarf tossing (167), Women who married Homosexuals (179), Teenage Girls Who Trade Sex for Crack (181), Aerobic Exercise (200), Deformed People (219), Concentration Camp survivors (221), Salad bars (225), Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not (231),Talking Animals (250), Donald Trump (257), Women who had been tortured (257), Obesity (283), How Pet Can Become a Movie Star (291), Boy who fell in love with a box of soap (297), Princess Di's Beauty Tips (301), Monkey who watches Oprah Winfrey (302) , Spuds McKenzie (325), Machine that lets people talk to the dead (326), Home Abortion Kits (330), Human Diaries (344), Interview with a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth (347), Beautiful Teenage Lesbians (360), Men Who've Been Raped by Women (362), People with half their brains removed (368), Axl Rose Interview and letters that Ted Bundy' wrote his fiance Carole from deathrow(363), Interview with Bigfoot (381), Asking a child . . . isn't that another term for an orgy (382), Interview with a Cheerio (386), Girls in the Fourth Grade who trade sex for crack (389), Debate between Oprah, Geraldo, and Donahue—Does Economic Success Equal Happiness? (396), Doormen from Nell's: Where are they now? (398).

your pet can become a movie star (*American Psycho* 291)—must have some purpose in the narrative. That purpose—like *Les Miserables*'s judgment of objectification—is to guide the reader toward moral condemnation of consumerism. In other words, like *Les Miserables*, *The Patty Winters Show* is an important sign post embedded in the novel.

The purpose of *The Patty Winters Show* as a sign post is revealed in a provocative appearance in the chapter "Girls" (*American Psycho* 300-306)—the very scene discussed above as an example of Bateman's turn to cannibalism. Prior to Bateman having sex with them, torturing them, and killing them, one of the prostitutes tells a seemingly innocuous story about a pimp and his monkey who would only watch *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. According to her, "the monkey would screech at [her] and would only calm down when Oprah was on" (*American Psycho* 302). The metaphor quality of this passage for the book (and by implication Patrick Bateman) is far too obvious. Like so many elements of *American Psycho*, it seems to be a kind of strange insertion in the flow of the narrative. As I argued above with the appearances of *Les Miserables*, strange insertions seem to have significance in the novel. In this case the appearance of a narrative within the narrative of a monkey who screeches and attacks if it can't watch Oprah seems to allude to or parody Patrick Bateman. In fact, Bateman's response to the prostitute's Oprah-watching monkey story reveals this allusion. He responds with "Silence. Arctic, frigid, utter silence" (*American Psycho* 302). This could be read as Bateman's disinterest in the girl's story which might find support in his response to her—"I don't care whether you have led a decent life or not" (*American Psycho* 303). However, the strong focus on Bateman's silence in response to the monkey story seems like something else. It appears as a response of someone who realizes that through being told some figurative story, they are being judged or morally lectured—a kind of parable to point out just how shallow Bateman is. If that is the case, then the

use of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in this scene (the only specific occurrence in the novel) seems to be an allusion to the *Patty Winters Show*. An apparently strategically placed reference to *The Patty Winters Show* on "Princess Di's beauty tips" (*American Psycho* 301) on the previous page seems to encourage readers to make this connection. If *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s appearance is a substitute for T*he Patty Winters Show*, which I believe it is, then this scene seems to provide the key to the function of *The Patty Winters Show* in the novel—an indication of moral judgment.

As the scene unfolds, Bateman engages in sex with the prostitutes Torri and Christine that lacks any hint of intimacy.[37] Curiously (or perhaps not so much), this scene features Bateman not just describing in lurid detail the sexual acts performed but also meticulously describing the objects that surround the threesome during the sex acts. For example, Bateman "stares at the Angelis silk screen print hanging over the bed" while having sex with the prostitutes, and he videotapes the sex act and the violence he enacts on the girls afterwards with a "Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5 mm film, has a 15 mm f/3.5 lens, an exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter" while listening to "a CD of the Traveling Wilburys [playing]in a portable CD player" (*American Psycho* 303-304). The description by Bateman sounds less like an attempt to provide detail of the setting of the sex and violence and more like an advertisement. Though there are other numerous other acts of sex described in the book by Bateman with extreme detail and almost pornographic language, nowhere else does Bateman describe the objects in the room with focus on brand and features. This form of product

[37] This suggests a connection to the above theme of objectification with consumerism; a connection I argue is suggested throughout the novel. In fact, the textual cues of *Les Miserables*, *The Patty Winters Show* (as well as numerous unexplored ones in this thesis—e. g., Bateman's workout routine, music reviews) usually work in tandem. Yet, for the purposes of this literary analysis, I felt it worked better to separate them and apply them to the vice they most stand in judgment of (*Les Miserables*/Objectification and *The Patty Winters Show*/Consumerism).

description is kept separate from the many acts of sex and violence. But here, Bateman's blend of sex and consumer culture is overt. And, if the appearance of *The Patty Winters Show*, the rough insertion of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the advertisement-like description by Bateman of the objects around him during the sex act were not enough to suggest a connection to the theme of consumption, Ellis adds one of four moments of cannibalism (see 4.5.1 above) by Bateman. All of these components make it very difficult not to associate this scene with the theme of consumerism.

As a kind of description of the function of *The Patty Winters Show*, the scene above doesn't provide an overly deep critique of consumerism. Its purpose is more to describe function and then briefly demonstrate that function. A better example of the function of *The Patty Winters Show* as a sign post suggesting moral condemnation of consumerism occurs in the chapter "Business Meeting" (*American Psycho* 105-111). In this scene, Bateman, Luis Carruthers, Paul Owen, Reed Thompson, Todd Broderick, McDermott, and Greg McBride do have a business meeting at Pierce & Pierce, but it concerns nothing that might be considered true business of investment banking. At one moment, the meeting appears to veer toward a discussion of finance when McDermott suggests that the other members of the meeting should "read the review in the *Times*" (*American Psycho* 109). However, the article he recommends is "Where Does Donald Trump Think the Best Pizza in Manhattan is Served" (*American Psycho* 110). Instead the conversation topics in the meeting drift to restaurant dining, women, Olympic divers, and mostly the content on that mornings *Patty Winters Show*. On that morning, *The Patty Winters Show* had "descendants of the Donner Party" (*American Psycho* 107) as guests. The allusion to consumption here is quite strong as the Donner Party were a group of American pioneers who, during their journey west, became snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the winter

of 1846-1847. The members of the party resorted to cannibalism to survive. The allusion to this tragic incident and the related cannibalism foreshadows Bateman's own eventual practice of cannibalism (see 4.5.1 above), yet it also subtly relates to the immediate context.

Besides the content of the conversation within the so-called business meeting, Bateman's description of each of the participants is striking. As each character enters, Bateman employs his X was wearing Y by Z formula to describe them—"[Luis Carruthers] is wearing a wool plaid sports jacket, wool slacks, a Hugo Boss cotton shirt and paisley tie—slacks, I'm guessing, from Brooks Brothers" (*American Psycho* 106-107). Bateman similarly uses the same to describe himself—"I'm wearing a wool tweed suit and a striped cotton shirt, both by Yves Saint Laurent, and a silk tie by Armani and new black cap-toed shoes by Ferragamo" (*American Psycho* 106). But, Bateman adds one component to his description of himself in this manner that never occurs anywhere else in the novel and he only says it about himself. He reflects on his clothing by stating, "I feel like shit but look great" (*American Psycho* 106). This rare moment of emotional reflection for Bateman reveals that he too feels the weight of empty consumerism. At least in this instance, Bateman does seem to realize that what he owns adds no value to who he is as a person. His clothes though great do not make him feel any better.

Immediately after Bateman's reflection and description of Luis Carruthers's clothes Bateman draws readers' attention to *The Patty Winters Show* and the Donner Party descendants. The immediacy of Bateman's interjection of something seemingly so trivial is jarring to the flow of the chapter and suggests it has something to do with what is happening in the chapter. Like the appearances of *Les Miserables* discussed above, the appearance of *The Patty Winters Show* in this scene is subtle rather than overt. Its subtle purpose is guide the reader as a sign post toward moral judgment of the culture of consumption within the novel—a culture represented in some

form in close proximity to appearances of *The Patty Winters Show*. Both Bateman's almost daily consumption of the show (the act of consuming) and the grotesque parade of modern American life represented in the content of the show (the content of consumption) critique the culture that produces it. While we do not have an overt critique of this culture, the textual cue of *The Patty Winters Show* guides the reader to make this insight with evidence to support it.

Chapter 5

Implications: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT

After exploring the history of critical reception of *American Psycho* and offering my own literary analysis against this history—focusing on genre context and sign posts that I argue guide the reader toward a particular moral stance *vis-a-vis* the violence of the novel and its sadistic narrator—I am left with several implications. Each of these implications centers on the overall claim of this essay: Even though the story features one of the most disgusting, violent, and offensive characters in 20th century literature, *American Psycho* is a novel of social and moral critique. This claim has been made by critics belonging to what I labelled "the fourth wave of critics" who argue that certain elements within the text are meant to draw reader's attention to the absurdity, perversity, and immorality of those actions. My thesis has attempted to build on the work of these critics by exploring how other lesser, seemingly mundane elements within the text—in this case the numerous references to *Les Miserables* and *The Patty Winters Show* and their proximity to manifestations of key themes of the novel—do the same. My hope for this thesis and my purpose were to supplement the work of these critics by analyzing previously unexplored elements in the narrative and their purpose as sign posts to guide the reader toward moral condemnation of Bateman's violence. The insightful exploration of violence as an ironic tool to condemn violence by critics like Allue, Weinreich, Niedlich, Cojocaru, and Serpell becomes even more compelling when supplemented by the minor sign posts I have analyzed.

Unredeemed, unrepentant violence as holding potential for positive moral meaning seems counter-intuitive, and it is hard to find any redemptive quality in violence of any kind much less the kind found in *American Psycho*. The evil of Patrick Bateman is not eliminated (usually by

killing the evil serial killer, see Chapter 2 above) in *American Psycho* as in other serial killer novels. Thus, there is no framework of good triumphing over evil (i. e., redemption) in the novel. Bateman is neither punished nor transformed (even though opportunities for both exist within the narrative). In the end, everything just is. This, "everything just is" is what causes so much frustration with the book. For the novel to be a morality tale, there must be an exit or resolution for the reader. *American Psycho* offers none and highlights this absence with its iconic ending "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (*American Psycho* 399). However, as I have explored above, that doesn't mean that Bateman's acts "have meant nothing." Instead, the novel that has been described as surface, if read properly, has rich moral meaning—namely moral judgment of personal and societal acts of objectification and consumerism. The novel itself contains textual sign posts which guide the reader of *American Psycho* toward moral judgment. In my analysis, I pointed out only two of many.

It is difficult to read and understand *American Psycho*. The difficulty is not just the extreme violence, but, as some critics pointed out (e. g., Norman Mailer), the difficulty is found in the monotonous and repetitive elements in the text. This includes Patrick Bateman's description of clothing, workout routines, insipid yuppie conversations in Manhattan bars, music reviews, brands shopping, and others. Yet, as I hope to have shown in my analysis, these seemingly empty or surface details are exactly the keys to uncovering deeper meaning in the novel. If my analysis is correct that Bret Easton Ellis placed sign posts in the text to guide the reader, then the conclusion of many critics and even Bret Easton Ellis's suggestion himself that the author's voice is not present in text are incorrect.[38] Instead of being entirely absent, the

[38] "The irony is that Ellis himself is almost entirely absent from his novels. His writing deliberately contains no authorial voice as a commentary on the perspective of the narrator (Aitkenhead).

author's voice, though taking a back seat to the reader's own interpretation, nonetheless guides the reader toward potential meaning in the text through minor, repetitive details placed in proximity to repugnant perspectives (objectification, consumerism) held by the novel's principle characters and especially by its narrator, Patrick Bateman. This is the very definition of seeing author, text, and reader in conversation. The implication of this applies not only to *American Psycho*, but to other literature as well. It is not just the usual or major literary devices that merit attention (e. g., narrator of the text), and failure to pay attention to the details surrounding or guiding the reader's perspective toward those elements in the more minor details of a text might lead to a misreading or overlooking of potential spaces for meaning.

This point gets at what I consider the most important macro-implication for my exploration of *American Psycho*: the book itself in its synthesis of author and reader challenges the conversation of the author-text-reader relationship that lies at the center of the act of literary analysis. Specifically, what is challenged is a kind of binary thinking of the two. Either the text itself dictates meaning and the reader's role is to uncover that meaning or the reader supplies the meaning by reading the text through their own unique perspective unbound by specific limitations of the text. On the one hand, the text is overly simplified, reduced to only one meaning, and, on the other, the text becomes overly complex and expanded to include infinite interpretations. What I think *American Psycho* (and my analysis of it) demonstrates is that the relationship between author and reader that plays out in the text is much more of a synthesis of the two positions. Because Bateman supplies the only reflective voice within the novel, critics were quick to dismiss it (and the author) as misogynistic, pornographic, and sadistic. In other words, Bateman and the narrator were conflated. That would be true, if every character in every

novel ever written was a direct representation of its author and the own personal ideals of that author. That, of course, is absurd.

However, even with this realization, *American Psycho* is still difficult to read because readers at first glance appear to be at the mercy of Bateman's mind. Readers cannot distance themselves from Bateman or the text, but are given a close-up, intimate perspective on the violence and disgusting views of Bateman. Yet Bateman's control of the narrative and the confinement of the reader to Bateman's interpretation of the narrative and his own response to those events is an illusion. *American Psycho* requires the reader to supply their own interpretation to challenge Bateman's. In *American Psycho*, the reader is the focal point of the narrative and has the responsibility to feel what Bateman does not—namely, feelings of repulsion and disgust toward violence, objectification, rampant consumerism, sexism, classism, racism, homophobia and other revolting elements of Bateman's life. Bateman does not control the reader but rather the reader stands in judgment of him. The reader does not have to rely upon a kind of eureka moment to realize their role in interpreting the text in this way. The author has provided guides pushing them to this realization in the form of what I have labelled "sign posts."

In the end, *American Psycho* must be taken as form of ethics as spectacle. Rather than moralizing, the narrative grants the reader full access to Patrick Bateman. If this full access is taken at face value, then it might seem to be a kind of tacit moral acceptance of Bateman's thoughts and actions. Yet if the reader takes their rightful control of the narrative (encouraged by the appearance of sign posts to claim this control), then Bateman and his thoughts quickly become the objects of scorn. In other words, Bateman and everything he does and says is a moral spectacle. It is no coincidence that Bateman repeatedly describes himself as feeling like he lives within a movie (*American Psycho* 245, 265, 279, 292, 345, 350, 367, 372, 373, 375, 391). The

most powerful of this occurs when the narrative abruptly and briefly switches from first person to third person as Bateman has a movie-like car chase and shootout with police in the lead up to the novel's conclusion (*American Psycho* 347-352). Bateman's description of himself as existing within a movie is one more sign post suggesting to the reader to stand outside of Bateman's own mind in judgment of him. In other words, it's easier to judge Bateman if the novel were written in the third person. In the first person, it is slightly more difficult. This final heightened third person moment seems to be one more reminder of how the reader should react to Patrick Bateman. Reading *American Psycho* from the position of moral judgment of its narrator—a position guided by sign posts within the novel—reveal that it is a social and moral critique of the immoral acts of Bateman—objectification and consumerism—and should be recognized as such.

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