

# Cogs in the Machine: An Analysis of *American Psycho*

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*American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is a post modern satire of the 1980s American culture. In this essay, I argue that Ellis uses the facets of a serial killer to methodically break down the impact that trickledown economics had on marginalized communities in the U.S. Trickledown economics is a tax policy which posits that favoring the rich in terms of tax breaks, allows the the wealthy to trickledown to the masses. While a seemingly good theory, the results devastated marginalized communities throughout the nation as the richer got richer and the poor got poorer. Ellis' novel establishes Bateman as the stand-in for this type of unchecked capitalism, and his

violence is a representation of this. For example, Ellis' depiction of Bateman as a product killer establishes how capitalism treats its victims before leaving them behind in the form of the homeless and marginalized. Furthermore, these people become Bateman's victims, who in the true crime community are known as the "less dead." This is Ellis' commentary on how the justice system treats these individuals already and why Bateman ultimately gets away with his crimes.

The 1980s in America was a time marked by terror and blood. With the election of President Reagan came a revolution that would follow the Republican Party until today after the introduction of trickle-down economics or also called Reaganomics. In *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis methodically breaks down each facet of a serial killer through his protagonist Patrick Bateman and compares them to stages of capitalism in 1980s America. While the movie has become iconic in pop culture, this essay will focus on Ellis's book as it is how the author originally intended it and because the depictions of violence are more extreme. Much of the modern scholarship surrounding *American Psycho* argues about the identity crisis of the white male and whether Ellis is sympathetic towards the white male anxiety, which stems from the fear that their time at the top of society is ending as the acceptance of new identities arrives. Storey argues that "Ellis shows us the monstrous heart of masculinity at the outer limits, a frenzied pomophobia [a convergence of fear from late capitalism, including feminism, non-straight sexualities, and anything else diverging from 'normal']" (58). In other words, Bateman's desire to be in control, in conjunction with his anxiety over losing power, is ultimately what causes his downfall. While I would agree that Bateman being white and wealthy are key in understanding this novel, Ellis is not focused on Bateman's identity itself, but rather what it represents, which is that those who gained the most from Reaganomics and who hoarded wealth and power caused economic despair upon the middle and lower classes. I contend instead that Ellis uses the composition of a serial killer to illustrate the effects of capitalism in America.

The concept of trickle-down economics posits that if the rich were given giant tax breaks, then the wealth would trickle down and eventually be distributed to the rest of society. In practice, it favors the upper class, particularly large corporations and extremely wealthy investors. Those who idealize this practice believe that when big businesses receive tax benefits, they will treat their workers better. When it was advocated by former President Reagan, however, all it resulted in was the rich getting richer, hoarding their wealth as the poor became poorer (Hartsoe). Not only was trickle-down economics forcing economic disparity onto the masses, but also, this decade saw the highest levels of active serial killers than ever before and since (Aamodt). By putting these two ideas together Ellis depicts how the violence of unchecked capitalism is similar to the violence of serial killing.

Ellis begins his novel by establishing the importance of the setting, which reveals the significance of the plot that unfolds. Ellis reveals the core of the attitudes held by the newly rich of the era via the first spoken words in the novel as Bateman and his coworker Price ride in a taxi towards an event and Price suddenly says, "I'm

resourceful... I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset" (3). In other words, because of Price's identity as a wealthy white man working on Wall Street, he believes that he is more valuable to society than other people. This is significant because it reveals the inner psyche of the characters, which will be juxtaposed by the events that happen as the novel progresses as well as the economic disparity that is also shown throughout the novel, but especially as Ellis establishes the setting: "His voice stops, he takes in a breath and then quietly says, his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, 'That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count'" (4). Price's casual counting off all the homeless people he sees while just on a casual drive demonstrates the disparity of the economy. It is important to note how the powerful can look at those affected by the economy that they are directly benefiting from and remain unaffected by them while their actions directly impact the homeless. This is demonstrated particularly when Price sees another homeless person and jokingly says to Bateman, "Ask him if he takes American Express" (7). His cruelty towards the homeless reflects the attitude of American society during this period, which is key to understanding why Bateman's murders and mutilations relate to capitalism.

Furthermore, Ellis introduces another motif that is consistently returned to throughout the novel at integral moments. As Bateman and Price continue the drive, Ellis makes sure to note that there is "another advertisement for *Les Misérables*" (6). While it could be explained that the musical is frequently brought up because it was the most popular show on Broadway at the time, I contend that Ellis is alluding to the French Revolution and the story of Jean Valjean because the musical tells the story of not just the lower-class starting a bloody uprising, but also the story of a man who was punished for stealing a loaf of bread for his family. In essence, he is punished for the entirety of his life for being poor. This is something that Ellis is clearly considering when crafting the setting for his novel. Having the backdrop of the poor being punished shows how cruel society can truly be. Without these critical themes that Ellis establishes, none of the gore that follows would hold any significant meaning.

Ellis devotes an entire chapter to describe at extreme length Bateman's morning routine to establish him as the vehicle for his metaphor for capitalism. Ellis begins by showing how Bateman describes his apartment: "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-event timer" (25). The depiction of the apartment's features, especially with the inclusion of the brand names, becomes a representation

of consumerism in the extreme and an embodiment of the slogan “greed is good,” which was popularized during the era. Bateman’s obsession with material things reveals not only his wealth and the shallowness of his personality but also turns him into a symbol of capitalism. The objective of capitalism is to gain and maintain as much wealth as possible, which is made much easier by trickle-down economics. This is displayed through Bateman’s obsession with having status symbols of his wealth and extends to his physical appearance, from his clothing and perfectly groomed hair to his in-depth morning ritual of skin care and workout routines, which Ellis takes the rest of the chapter to depict.

Another way that Bateman is both obsessed with his appearance and attempts to present himself the same as the rest of society is through his clothes, which are frequently brought up by Bateman himself. When he is leaving in the morning, he “find[s] a Burberry scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a little kid might wear) and it’s covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front, darkening the lapels” (Ellis 30). Ellis is subtly hinting, not only at Bateman’s materialism by again mentioning the expensive name brand and the details of the design, but also at his violence. “[W]hat looks like dried chocolate syrup” creates the image of dried blood, intrinsically linking violence as a part of his materialism. By creating this character profile for Bateman, Ellis establishes him as a symbol of capitalism and the violence that ensues from it.

An important feature of the novel is much like the economy at the time in which the novel is set, Bateman is already in a state of escalation with his killing. He needs increasingly more violence and deviance to get the same amount of pleasure. Graham argues that the intensification of capitalism is “comparable to the shocking amorality of transgression, this extremity is characterized by a process of escalation integral to Bateman’s hyperviolence, demonstrated through his increasingly depraved but localized scenes of brutality” (228-229). In other words, Bateman feels the need to escalate his crimes because he is a representation of the economy at the time. While I do believe that Bateman is certainly acting as a representation of what the economy is doing at the time, I argue that Ellis is even more specific in what he is depicting through Bateman. As a member of the Wall Street class of the nouveau riche, the economic scale is tipped in his favor as the stock market skyrockets—of course before its inevitable crash—and he can hoard the wealth that he is gaining in extreme due to the policies of the Reagan administration. His escalation can be seen in the way that Bateman casually starts to incorporate violence into his thoughts. For instance, when he is spending time with his coworkers, he begins to have violent urges when his coworker says something he does not agree with: “I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket and I’m tempted to gut

McDermott with it right here in the entranceway, maybe slice his face open, sever his spine” (Ellis 53). This is significant because it shows how casually Bateman regards violence at this point because something small can set him off and something equally as small—such as going to a club—can convince him not to murder and or torture someone.

Bateman’s violent personality traits continue to be depicted and gradually escalate as the novel continues through Ellis’s demonstrations of how easily Bateman is angered. For example, when the waitress at the club ignores his flirting he states, “I tell her I would like to tit-fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off, but the music, George Michael singing ‘Faith,’ is too loud and she can’t hear me” (Ellis 80). Not only is he set off by a minor inconvenience, which illustrates how Ellis is establishing that Bateman is in a state of violent escalation, but he also blatantly states several times the violent acts that he would like to commit or has already committed. Despite this, he is never taken seriously. This is comparable to the novel’s depiction of the increasing disparity between the rich and poor as well as the increasing homelessness that was taking place, yet no one is attempting to solve or take it seriously.

Ellis continues to show how trivially Bateman’s actions are taken and how it parallels how the privileged part of society treats those they can ignore. This is particularly clear during a scene in the dry cleaners in which he is angry about them not getting the blood stains out of his clothes: “The Chinese dry cleaners I usually send my bloody clothes to delivered back to me yesterday a Soprani jacket, two white Brooks Brothers shirts and a tie from Agnes B. still covered with flecks of someone’s blood” (Ellis 81). When he is unable to get the dry cleaner to understand that he wants the bloodstains out because of a language barrier in conjunction with underlying racism and frustration at having to deal with someone below him in class, he becomes increasingly angrier, resulting in him having increasingly violent thoughts: “I have never firebombed anything and I start wondering how one goes about it—what materials are involved, gasoline, matches... or would it be lighter fluid?” (83). Bateman is prevented from acting out on his violent urges, however, because a woman who lives in his building also enters the dry cleaners. When she notices the bloodstained sheets, though, Bateman’s response is, “It’s, um, cranberry juice, cranapple juice... I mean, um, it’s really... Bosco. You know, like... Like a Dove Bar. It’s a Dove Bar... Hershey’s Syrup?” (84). Despite Bateman’s excuse being incredibly flimsy and practically incoherent, the neighbor does not care, which is clear when she still attempts to flirt with him. This is another extreme example of how society disregards issues that are staring them directly in the face, and in this case, how trickle-down economics is a disaster that is resulting in lower-class people paying the price.

Product versus process killers is a term colloquially used within the true crime community to characterize distinct types of killers. The difference between the two is whether the person kills because they want the outcome of having a dead body, such as in the case of Ed Gein or John Wayne Gacy, or whether the person enjoys the process and does not want to deal with the body afterward, such as BTK (Kissel et al.). Ellis distinctly establishes Bateman as a process killer, which reveals how capitalism treats its victims. Significantly, the first time that Ellis depicts Bateman carrying out an act of violence the victim is a “bum, a black man [with a] handprinted cardboard sign attached to the front of the cart [which] reads I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME” (128). It is not a coincidence that the first victim Ellis has Bateman attack is a homeless man. Ellis is establishing that not only will this man become Bateman’s victim, but he is already a victim of capitalism. In a game that is rigged for those who are already white and wealthy to win, this man has lost and now Ellis will demonstrate the consequences of losing the game of capitalism in America. Bateman, much like society, regards the man with disdain, asking the questions that privileged people untouched by economic despair frequently ask: “Why don’t you get a job?... If you’re so hungry, why don’t you get a job?” (129). In other words, Bateman becomes not only a representation of capitalism but also the cruel attitudes of society at this moment when he berates a man who is most likely at his lowest and relishes in the process.

Ellis establishes Bateman as a process killer when he starts to depict the actual killing: “I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina” (131). The graphic description reveals how Bateman is enjoying the process of torturing and mutilating, not just getting it over with so that he can use the body. In other words, Bateman is relishing the process of mutilating the man and the feeling he derives from it but does not want anything to do with the person after he has received his pleasure from the act, which can be seen later in the text when Bateman progresses to killing and when looking at the body he claims, “I get very tired looking at it” (291). This is the same as what capitalism does to those who suffer from the consequences and what society does to the victims of it. In the exact same way that Bateman does not want to deal with the consequences of his actions—the leftover bodies—so too does capitalism not want to deal with its victims—the homeless and desolate.

As the plot continues, Bateman’s victims, much like the homeless man, continue to be members of traditionally marginalized communities. Storey argues, “For Bateman to remain coherent, his unstable sense of self requires a particularly savage attack on the ‘other’ and a clear idea of who they are. Everyone he ‘murders’



presents some kind of challenge to his position of patriarchal supremacy” (Storey 65). While Storey is playing into the popular idea that Bateman’s acts of violence may or may not be real, his point of Bateman’s violence against others still stands on its own. In other words, to remain sane and in power, Bateman must attack others, especially those who are not white, wealthy, and male. While I agree that both Bateman’s and his victims’ identities are essential to the understanding of the novel, it is less about maintaining the patriarchy itself, but the entire capitalist system, which is upheld by the patriarchy. I also contend that the others that he references are part of a population that has been titled “the less dead” in true crime, which was defined by Los Angeles Police Department officer Mitzi Roberts, who caught infamous serial killer Samuel Little, as “people who live on the margins of society and whose murders have historically tended to be not as thoroughly investigated as those of their wealthier, whiter, and perhaps more sober counterparts” (Lauren 3). In other words, serial killers can get away with their crimes for longer—and perhaps even reach the status of a serial killer—because the deaths of the populations that they normally prey on are not investigated in the same way that a wealthy, white person’s death would be.

The fact that these victims’ crimes go uninvestigated due to social and economic factors exemplifies how even the world of crime is not untouched by the politics and evils of capitalism, which Ellis is clearly aware of, proven by Bateman’s murder victims. Ellis makes this clear, not only with Bateman’s first assault being a black, homeless man but also when the first person he is shown killing is “an old queer... walking a brown and white sharpei” (164). Homophobic attitudes have prevented police from investigating crimes for many years, but particularly in the eighties with the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, the likelihood of a gay man’s death to be investigated is significantly lower, which includes members of the LGBT+ community in the “less dead” population. Ellis demonstrates the cruelty that society unleashes on members of the communities through Bateman’s violent killing as he “start[s] randomly stabbing him in the face and head” (166). Unlike before, however, where his victim was left alive and wounded, Bateman opted to “make sure the old queer is really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do) I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave” (166). By depicting the violence and killing of a gay man, Ellis argues that in capitalism members of the LGBT+ community also suffer.

As the plot progresses, Bateman turns to sex workers as his next category of victims, which then includes them in Ellis’s own definition of the less dead and victims of capitalism. After Bateman picks up two sex workers, brings them back to his apartment, and engages in a sex act, his reoccurring urge to escalate takes over

as he describes, "I stand up and walk over to the armoire, where next to the nail gun, rests a sharpened coat hanger, a rusty butter knife, matches from the Gotham Bar and Grill, and a half-smoked cigar; and turning around, naked, my erection jutting out in front of me, I hold these items out and explain in a hoarse whisper, 'We're not through yet...'" (Ellis 176). This extreme act of violence he commits on the two women he does without fear of repercussions because he is aware that as sex workers, they are not able to report the crimes that are taking place against them. Those who are lumped into this category share the fact that both in capitalism and in death, they lose their value and identity.

Ellis broadens who he believes loses value in capitalism, however, when Bateman starts to pick off people within his own class. Colby contends that "[t]he novel exhibits a present-day society devoid of values, one that has been made vacuous by the violence of global capitalism, revealing an unbearable nihilism that has deeply affected the family unit and the individual in everyday life" (340). In other words, the violence in Ellis's work reveals the belief that no one and nothing matters in globalized capitalism because of the deep devaluation of individuals. In capitalism, the only thing that is valued is your output of work, which should be sacrificed more than anything else. This can be seen in the ways that up until this point, Bateman's victims were homeless people, gay men, and prostitutes.

When he kills Paul Owen—another Wall Street yuppie, whom Bateman is in fact frequently mistaken for—Ellis begins to show the ways in which people are devalued in capitalism and how the extreme lack of identity leads to everyone being interchangeable, which can be seen in the way that Owen has the same kind of violent death as all of Bateman's other victims: "The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up" (217-218). In other words, capitalism has turned him into just another body that is only meant to be used, and when the system has decided that its use is finished, it eliminates it. This can also be seen in the way that Bateman treats Owen's corpse: "I carry the body up four flights of stairs until we're at the unit I own in the abandoned building and I place Owen's body into an oversize porcelain tub, strip off his Abboud suit and, after wetting the corpse down, pour two bags of lime over it" (219). In other words, Bateman, as the hand of capitalism, starts to treat those within his own class the same way that he has treated the "less dead." Ellis is showing that in the world of capitalism, no one's identity truly matters—that everyone is valueless in this system.

Ellis continues to develop this theme when he introduces a private investigator hired to investigate Owen's disappearance. At first, Bateman believes he will be caught, but his alibi is created by another co-worker who claims "[h]e was at



Atlantis with Craig McDermott, Frederick Dibble, Harry Newman, George Bunter and... you [Bateman]” (Ellis 274). Ellis shows how even Bateman is replaceable in a capitalist system because while he is murdering someone an unknown person can take his place and the people that he spends the most time with will not notice that it is not Bateman that is having dinner with them. Ellis even begins to depict Bateman as taking the place of the now-dead Owen: “I decide to use Paul Owen’s apartment for a little tryst I have planned for tonight” (301). Much like a job opening, once the position for Owen is open, Bateman can seamlessly slip into that role, and no one questions it. In fact, Bateman goes as far as to buy expensive items “charging them on Paul Owen’s gold American Express card” (301). In other words, Bateman becomes a spiritual replacement for Owen, which he can do because who Paul Owen is does not matter—only the output of the work he creates. Ellis is subversively showing how it is not just those who suffer from the violence of capitalism who lose value and identity but that in a capitalist society, no one’s identity actually exists and therefore does not matter.

The climax of the novel is reached when Bateman’s largest killing spree is triggered. Ellis depicts at this point that the bloody spree serves as a cautionary tale of what will happen if unchecked trickle-down economics is to continue. The biggest economic failure of Reaganomics did not occur until the recession of 2008, which left those who played the stock market penniless in some cases (Hartsoe). This spree, however, warns of this collapse as foresight as early as the 1990s because of the great inequality that was already apparent. Ellis begins to show the economic collapse when Bateman kills a street performer:

I screw a silencer onto the gun... I raise the gun to his face and midnote pull the trigger, but the silencer doesn’t work... [T]he booming sound of the gunshot deafens me... I pop the clip and replace it with a full one, then something bad happens... because while doing this I’ve failed to notice the squad car that was traveling behind me. (Ellis 348)

Up until this point, Bateman has not feared being caught, but when his power is threatened by the means of being caught by the police it causes a break in his psyche. Not only does he begin to murder people without abandon, seemingly not even enjoying the process, yet almost as a reflex, like it is the only thing he knows how to do, but he also begins to have an out-of-body experience, which is seen when Ellis, without warning, switches perspectives: “Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab” (349). In other words, Bateman’s perception of his body representation has shifted from inside him to

the external, as though he is a spectator watching his actions—as if he is trying to distance himself from what he has done. I contend that this out-of-body experience is a type of depersonalization, which represents what society does when it inflicts violence on others via capitalism—it tries to distance itself from it as much as possible. This switch in a moment of heightened drama is a physicalized version of what society inflicts upon the left-over bodies of capitalism after it has wreaked havoc. The kind of mass destruction both Bateman and capitalism are capable of is truly portrayed, however, when “a stray bullet, sixth in a new round, hits a gas tank of a police car, the headlights dim before it bursts apart, sending a fireball billowing up into the darkness” (350). The explosion draws attention and even more police to the scene, yet Bateman escapes out of sheer luck. While this moment is the largest display of mass violence in the book and ultimately causes him to call his lawyer to confess to all his crimes, Bateman’s escape from the law reveals Ellis’s argument that the criminal justice system allows the white, straight, cis, upper class to get away with crimes, leaving the rest of society to suffer at their hands.

As the bodies have piled up after his killing spree and the novel reaches its conclusion, Bateman starts to feel the need to compulsively confess his crimes. However, Ellis depicts how confession is not an option or exit: “[H]e confesses at the end of the novel that all of his violent acts come to nothing... [Therefore,] the text seems to warn that white male crisis is the latest form of justification for fascistic violence against racial, sexual, and classical minorities” (Kwon 66). In other words, Ellis turns his novel into a cautionary tale that warns against the dangers of indulging the excuse of the white male crisis against social injustice. While I would agree that this is true, this view ignores the fact that capitalism is already committing “violence against racial, sexual, and classical minorities,” and that Bateman is merely a stand-in and an extreme expression of what capitalism is already doing. Therefore, the confession that follows shows that there is no solution or escape from capitalism. When Bateman confronts his lawyer to whom he had previously confessed and who tells him it is impossible that he killed Paul Owen, Bateman responds, “I chopped Owen’s fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. That whole message I left on your machine was true” (Ellis 388). Instead of believing him, though, Ellis shows exactly how interchangeable people in society are when he reveals that Owen cannot be dead “[b]ecause... I had... dinner... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... just ten days ago” (388). Ellis depicts how the people of Wall Street—just like Bateman’s victims—are also valueless in capitalism. They are interchangeable just like a cog in a machine that can be swapped out with another identical part.

Ellis establishes that whether or not Owen is alive is irrelevant because either he has been replaced by someone who serves the same function or Bateman killed

someone whom he believed was Owen, but either way the machine of capitalism hums on. Therefore, Bateman's confession is meaningless because his crimes mean nothing in the end. They are all a part of the endless violence of capitalism that will not end with Bateman, which is demonstrated in the very last words of the novel: "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis 399). In other words, the end of the novel is not an end to the system that Bateman is a representation of. There is no escape or "exit" from the violence of capitalism. In doing this, Ellis creates a space within the crime fiction genre to allow for critique, especially within the justice system and how it is corrupted by capitalism. Just like Bateman, the wealthy, white upper class gets away, while everyone else suffers at their hands.

Through the portrayal of Patrick Bateman, Ellis depicts several facets of a serial killer and methodically relates each one to capitalism devaluing individuals and creating violence in the form of economic terror. Akin to the way that the capitalist machine chews up its victims and spits them out, so does Bateman, which is portrayed in the way that Ellis characterizes him as a process killer. His victims are all members of the "less dead," who are people who have already lost at the game of capitalism until he reaches Paul Owen—a member of his own class. Ellis does this to show how eventually, everyone loses their identity because capitalism only values measurable output. Finally, Bateman's last killing spree and confession reflect how there is no escape from the system that America has created. This is a fact that remains hauntingly true as we consider the most recent events and the economic despair that continues to grow in our country, which reminds us that there is never an exit.

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