

taboos, pervades popular culture, and has done so at least from the advent of the Byronic hero. Bateman himself enjoys reading the trashy “true crime” lives of his predecessors. But the enjoyment today’s readers share in reading about the aestheticized greed of Sherman McCoy and Patrick Bateman, these two antipodal money-men of the 1980s, is not likely to deter us from ethical irresolution, to judge by the implicit themes of the novels themselves. Perhaps it is enough, these texts seem to imply, to take what pleasure we can in recognizing the ironies and complexities of this inherited American dilemma.

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and the mass media, religious movements, and the art world. The rule of law Americans have historically prided themselves on is presented as a tyranny of lawyers after a fast buck. Alcoholic reporters manipulate the facts to suit the fantasies of a public addicted to the tabloids and TV and to promote the profits of cynical owners, to whom the phrase "social conscience" would be an oxymoron. Evangelical demagogues deal in financial skullduggery worthy of their professional counterparts on the Street and artists float their products on the currents of conspicuous consumption. The narrator of *American Psycho* is utterly dismissive of the inept legal system, but he luxuriates in the material girls of mass-market pornography and the lurid yet trivial talk shows on television. Paintings he judges by the price necessary to own them, and it seems one particularly treasured abstract work in his apartment he may have hung upside-down. His sensitive appreciations of contemporary popular music, presented in chapters that are near-parodies of magazine music reviews, only underscore how deeply intertwined sadomasochism and aestheticism can be. Though completely different in tone and treatment, these two novels coincide in their repudiation of the intellectual and spiritual pretensions of today's society: at best such loftier concerns are ineffectual and at worst they are tools at the service of monied interests.

It is not required, perhaps not even possible, for novels to solve the social problems which they depict. The exemplary *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may have helped hasten the end of slavery, as is sometimes claimed, but the bloodiest war in American history was more directly instrumental, surely. Both Tom Wolfe and Bret Easton Ellis leave readers wrestling with the paradox of novels which include the theme of art's inability to redeem those lost in the decade of greed. To the degree it succeeds in its social satire, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* may even encourage a comforting complacency, a knowing smile rather than a cry of outrage. *American Psycho*, a best-seller likely to titillate many readers with the most outrageous atrocities and salaciousness, could hardly form the impetus for social protest either. What would the rallying cry be? "Stop cannibalism now"? The fascination with the bizarre thought processes of the serial killer, and with his unenviable freedom from

culture presented in the two novels, it is only natural to ask whether any potential cause for optimism is put forth. Certainly neither novel offers a clear-cut resolution; they rely instead on ambiguous open endings. Nor does either novel offer a depiction of the virtues of free enterprise. Hard work and ingenuity rewarded by prosperity and social advancement are noticeably absent from the financial landscapes painted by Wolfe and Ellis. In one memorable passage, Sherman McCoy's daughter Campbell asks, "Daddy...what do you do?" and as he flounders in his explanation of a bond salesman's duties in the scheme of life the merriment of his wife and his parents grows. Finally, his wife Judy explains things in metaphorical terms designed to denigrate rather than clarify:

"...Just imagine that a bond is a slice of cake, and you didn't bake the cake, but every time you hand somebody a slice of the cake a tiny bit comes off, like a little crumb, and you can keep that."

Judy was smiling, and so was Campbell, who seemed to realize that this was a joke, a kind of fairy tale based on what her daddy did.

"Little crumbs?" she said encouragingly.

"Yes," said Judy. "Or you have to imagine little crumbs, but a *lot* of little crumbs. If you pass around enough slices of cake, then pretty soon you have enough crumbs to make a *gigantic* cake."

"For real life?" asked Campbell.

"No, not for real life. You just have to imagine that." (239)

The resulting argument escalates until the child is in tears and the wife seething in her assertion that financial intermediaries add nothing to the collective social good.

Furthermore, the delineated moral abuses of the Wall Street milieu are not counterbalanced by other, nobler sectors of the society. Quite the contrary, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* materialistic motivations are shown to have thoroughly infiltrated the legal system, journalism

feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn't figure out why - I couldn't put my finger on it. The only thing that calmed me was the satisfying sound of ice being dropped into a glass of J&B. (282)

This "depersonalization" or loss of self is paralleled by Bateman's utter isolation, revealed in another private meditation:

While taking a piss in the men's room, I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal's handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, say somehow miniaturize and slip into it, the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No ... one ... would ... care. In fact some, if they noticed my absence, might feel an odd, indefinable sense of relief. This is true: the world is better off with some people gone. Our lives are not all interconnected. That theory is a crock. Some people truly do not *need* to be here. (226)

But almost immediately after these musings on sociopathic self-worth, he once again ponders which *other* people should disappear into the cracks, and how he can assist them in their departure. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, since it operates largely in a comic mode, has no such horrifying personal revelations but objectification and victimization are nevertheless central to this novel as well. Henry Lamb, the young black man accidentally killed by McCoy's mistress, is most noticeable in the novel for his absence. He is a shadowy figure seen for only a few seconds, a dead man whose image is manipulated by the mass media, the legal system, and others for their own purposes. Both works, regardless of tone, present a dark estimate of the psychological and sociological consequences of the contemporary American passion for material success.

Given the extensive critique of the contemporary American money

It's not the seals I hate - it's the audience's enjoyment of them that bothers me. (297)

In this case, money is quite literally Bateman's weapon, but a few moments later he offers a five-year-old child a cookie, then stabs the boy in the neck, killing him. Unbelievably, Bateman is disappointed in the murder because he would prefer to maximize his destruction of human relationships more effectively.

Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I'm suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child's life. This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost. It's so much worse (and more pleasurable) taking the life of someone who has hit his or her prime, who has the beginnings of a full history, a spouse, a network of friends, a career, whose death will upset far more people whose capacity for grief is limitless than a child's would, perhaps ruin many more lives than just the meaningless, puny death of this boy. (299)

The child, like Bateman's other victims, is viewed as an object of value only insofar as it can yield him intense pleasures. Materialism reaches an extreme where other human beings are completely objectified, a theme most shockingly symbolized in the narrator's consumption of human flesh. Selfishness becomes not merely the love of possessions, but rather the love of nothing but one's own sensations. Unfortunately for Bateman, his lust for psychopathic excitation demands increasingly extreme measures to yield satisfaction - otherwise, he feels nothing. As he explains in a rare moment of introspection,

There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being - flesh, blood, skin, hair - but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to

inconsequential. But more disturbing is the fact that both protagonists also see material wealth as moral license; the novels resonate with unspoken disdain for ethical behavior as a mere consequence of economic constraint. In McCoy's case the moral crisis is a betrayal of youthful liberal values and passive acquiescence in covering up a tragic accident. Eventually McCoy returns to his core beliefs, though he does use some underhanded tricks in his legal fights for survival. Bateman, on the other hand, is unencumbered by remorse, guilt, or lost ideals, and we see him in an accelerating downward spiral of moral decadence fueled by his lust for money. Both these novels offer contemporary refinements to the traditional motif of money as the root of all evil.

Both writers devote considerable attention to delineating money's destructive effects on personal relationships, including family ties. Though McCoy inherits wealth and position, the primary feelings evoked by his father are envy and intimidation. Similarly, Bateman is insanely jealous of his brother's superior wealth and *savoir faire*, falling into a murderous rage because of his sibling's ability to garner a particularly coveted restaurant reservation. Beyond the family, wealth is presented in both novels as promoting racism, class divisions, gender prejudice, nationalism, and rampant hypocrisy. In McCoy's case, such tendencies prick his purportedly liberal conscience, and in the end when he loses his wealth he regains something of his youthful egalitarianism, if we can judge from his courtroom "power to the people" salute. Bateman, however, does not suffer from such idealistic qualms and few groups escape his violent hatred. Asians, blacks, women, homosexuals, and the homeless are among those he viciously attacks. In what almost seems grotesque self-parody, Ellis even has Bateman disembowel a "cute" pet in front of its master. A day at the zoo provides this nice symbolic touch:

On the seals' tank a plaque warns: 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. So what do I do? Toss a handful of change into the tank when none of the zookeepers are watching.

the mass media, and evangelical religious cults all receive incisive parodic treatment by this master of American cultural analysis, though stylistically Wolfe often seems uncomfortable writing fiction rather than free-wheeling essays.

In contrast, Patrick Bateman's rambling first-person narrative in *American Psycho* seems plotless, an endless, seemingly achronological sequence of restaurants, clubs, bars, and senseless nocturnal violent crimes. Bateman is obsessed with the details of fashion, cuisine, hygiene and big-ticket consumer items and, diary-like, the text assumes the reader will share these materialistic obsessions. More notoriously, Bateman is equally obsessed with his own sadistic sensations, and as the novel proceeds he pours out more and more horrific detail of his random but meticulously fabricated crimes: rapes, tortures, murders, mutilations and finally even necrophilia and cannibalism. There is no clear-cut progression to the narrative, other than the worsening disintegration of the protagonist's personality, and at times it seems certain chapters could be relocated without harming the effect of the presentation of this Jekyll and Hyde madness. We have here the confessions of a madman, a hallucinatory Gothic monologue in the mode of Poe or Dostoevsky, and there is no resolution, certainly no cathartic fatal elimination of this intimately known monster in the last scene. The final sign shown us by Patrick Bateman reads, "This is not an exit," suggesting the cycle of violence is a hellish circular journey from which there is no escape.

As different as the two modes of narrative presentation are, the two novels share numerous similarities in terms of thematic focus. At the most basic level, both texts present a contemporary American society in which money has become a national obsession. Not merely a medium of exchange or a means of insuring a livelihood, money has become an index of personal power and social status, even a measure of spiritual worth. Sherman McCoy and Patrick Bateman alike realize that money is a sign of superiority and they share with readers their expertise in conspicuous consumption: both novels are filled with sociological details of the suits, briefcases, shoes, addresses, restaurants, automobiles, etc. that signal 1980s decadent absorption with expensive

Acid Test and *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, provides in this first novel an external view of McCoy's world, a critical - almost sociological - comic focus on the overloaded legal system, fractured race relations, a self-serving mass media, and other current cultural phenomena. Ellis's internal focus is much darker and nastier. The narrator's unreliable, even hallucinatory point of view is often hard to fathom, partly because Bateman is at once absurdly self-absorbed and un-selfaware. His contradictions are abundant, but here is a typically grotesque example. After blinding and mutilating a street "bum" and mauling his little dog, Bateman offers a soaring appreciation of the "lyrical craftsmanship" of the musical group called Genesis, and says of one song that it is "extremely uplifting," "positive and affirmative." While much of Sherman McCoy's life is ably portrayed as laughable hypocrisy, Patrick Bateman's schizoid sadism is gothic horror at its contemporary best.

The central plot of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is simple and rather conventional. At the height of his success in business, Sherman McCoy believes he is invincible, but he loses wife, daughter, wealth, job, and reputation because of a car accident. His mistress is driving when a young black man is hit and they leave the scene in a panic, but by hiding their involvement they invite horrendous consequences. McCoy eventually is jailed, assaulted by the mass media, tried in criminal court, sued, and impoverished. In the Epilogue he is quoted as saying he is a "professional defendant" who has "nothing to do with Wall Street and Park Avenue," but strangely enough this is not presented as a defeat for McCoy. A classic case of a fortunate fall, his troubles are unending but McCoy is stronger and more independent in the last scenes, fighting for moral survival. The newspaper records his plea in the most recent trial: "Absolutely innocent." Losing everything but finding his own true self, McCoy fits a traditional pattern, one that would not have been out of place in a nineteenth century novel such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. In fact, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was first published serially in *Rolling Stone* magazine, a format if not a venue Dickens would have found familiar. The numerous subplots included by Wolfe are juggled rather well; the criminal justice system,

become precisely that...Masters of the Universe. There was...no limit whatsoever! (12)

Ellis, on the other hand, reveals a much, much darker vanity based on a nihilistic vision of the way the world works.

...it did not occur to me, *ever*, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one's taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, or receiving another person's love or kindness. Nothing was affirmative, the term "generosity of spirit" applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire - meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in...this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged... (375)

Both Sherman McCoy and Patrick Bateman lead double lives, melding material success and deep-seated moral inadequacy; by day they play at working and by night they struggle unsuccessfully for sexual and emotional satisfaction.

These two depictions differ fundamentally, however. Wolfe's protagonist is a bit older, in his late 30s, and a family man who idolizes his daughter. But Ellis's narrator is a bachelor in his 20s who despises and envies his brother while repressing all thoughts of his parents; his only idol is Donald Trump, though his fetishes are many. At the risk of oversimplifying, one can say Tom Wolfe's presentation offers readers a Dickensian social satire while Bret Easton Ellis's emulates a Dostoevskian psychological expose. Wolfe, who first made his name with new journalism essay collections such as *The Electric Kool-Aid*

Similarly, when the narrator of Ellis's novel tires of summer in the city and decides on a vacation in the countryside, where does he go but to the Hamptons, to a four-storey retreat described in pages of artificial detail: a three-door refrigerator and walk-in freezer, nine antique marble bathrooms, thousands of video cassettes and CDs, and even a Jacuzzi and exercise room to help keep to a minimum any contact with the great outdoors. His companion on the retreat brings her dog, who shares her dietetic chocolate truffles during this sylvan tryst; the pet's name is NutraSweet, one of the text's many acerbic asides about the bizarre artificiality these characters wallow in.

The main characters portrayed in these two novels share a number of similarities. Wolfe's protagonist, Sherman McCoy, has a degree from Yale, hereditary wealth, and enviable social position. Ellis's narrator/protagonist is Patrick Bateman, whose alma mater is Harvard. Details of his family background are minimal, but he is also fabulously wealthy from a Wall Street inheritance and has made a fortune on Wall Street himself as well, though it would be ridiculous to call what he does "working." During appearances at the office he listens to his Walkman, chats on the phone, makes restaurant reservations, and occasionally glances at some luminescent numbers on a computer screen. Both these bastions of the big-money world depend on social contacts rather than business acumen for success, and both revel in a sense of superiority. Wolfe mocks his hero's hubris by presenting it in terms of a childish superhero.

The Masters of the Universe were a set of lurid, rapacious plastic dolls that his otherwise perfect daughter liked to play with. They looked like Norse gods who lifted weights, and they had names such as Dracon, Ahor, Mangelred, and Blutong. They were unusually vulgar, even for plastic toys. Yet one fine day, in a fit of euphoria, after he had picked up the telephone and taken an order for zero-coupon bonds that had brought him a \$50,000 commission, *just like that*, this very phrase had bubbled up into his brain. On Wall Street he and a few others - how many? - three hundred, four hundred, five hundred? - had

prestigious of Wall Street firms. Here is the bond trading room as presented by Wolfe.

...and there it was: the bond trading room of Pierce and Pierce. It was a vast space, perhaps sixty by eighty feet, but with the same eight-foot ceiling bearing down on your head. It was an oppressive space with a ferocious glare, writhing silhouettes, and the roar. The glare came from a wall of plate glass that faced south, looking out over New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, and the Brooklyn and New Jersey shores. The writhing silhouettes were the arms and torsos of young men, few of them older than forty. They had their suit jackets off. They were moving about in an agitated manner and sweating early in the morning and shouting, which created the roar. It was the sound of well-educated young white men buying for money on the bond market. (58)

The glass and steel world of these financial predators ironically stands opposite the Statue of Liberty, looking down on everyone.

These men have been exiled from the world of nature, and both novelists offer clever satirical depictions of how far from Eden they have come. About halfway through *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, for instance, there occurs a grotesquely extravagant dinner party which Wolfe lampoons by drawing readers' eyes to the pretentious rustic modesty of the centerpiece.

To underscore the informality of the occasion there had been placed, in the middle of each table, deep within the forest of crystal and silver, a basket woven from hardened vines in a highly rustic Appalachian Handicrafts manner. Wrapped around the vines, on the outside of the basket, was a profusion of wildflowers. In the center of the basket were massed three or four dozen poppies. This *faux naïf* centerpiece was the trademark of Huck Thigg, the young florist, who would present the Bavardages with a bill for \$3,300 for this one dinner party. (359)

This literature of alienation has endured throughout the twentieth century, for serious poets and novelists in America have never reconciled themselves to the terms of the modern economic system. They remain hostile to it and pessimistic, mocking the values of corporate bureaucracy, lamenting the soul-deadening materialism. Instead, literature and popular culture continue to celebrate what seems lost - the free-ranging individualism, the honesty and simplicity of rural life, the idyll of self-reliance. A familiar story line, repeated endlessly in novels, films, and rock 'n' roll lyrics, depicted the lonely rebel who resists and somehow beats the system - romantic tales that mourned the idea of America's lost Eden. (289)

Though financial journalism is his preoccupation, Greider here incisively presents a major current in American fiction and popular culture, the thematic repudiation of urban life, which is seen as insensitive, greedy, corrupt, materialistic, and just plain evil.

It would seem then that the striking resurrection of greed in the last twenty years or so offers a tantalizing test case for literary studies: in the Decade of Greed, an era when materialistic tendencies are said to have gained exceptionally widespread approval, how are these paradigm shifts newly thematized? A preliminary reply to this sweeping question could arise from a contrastive analysis of two recent fictional portraits of wealthy Wall Street bond salesmen, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991).

It should come as no surprise that both novels are set in the city or, more exactly, in The City, as New York has come to be known. Specifically, the Wall Street financial district serves as a backdrop for rich, white, arrogant, and power-mad males ranging from one high-rise building or trendy restaurant to another, figures always moving by taxi or limousine or luxury automobile. Taking the bus or subway would be a debasement and moving under one's own power unheard of - except perhaps on a Stairmaster going nowhere. Interestingly, both novels' protagonists are employed by Pierce and Pierce, one of the most

Fictional Portraits of Two Materialists in the Decade of Greed

Hardly the sort of exhortation one would expect for students about to embark on their careers, but the Machiavellian rationalization clearly struck a chord with them and even reverberated nationwide long after Boesky and many of his cohorts were sentenced to prison, thus giving the 1980s its now-famous banner, the Decade of Greed.

However, another famous speaker, President Jimmy Carter, had identified the strength of such materialistic tendencies years earlier, though his attitude was very different from Boesky's. In 1979, in one of his most stirring national sermons, Carter berated the American people for their worship of Mammon:

... In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we have discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We have learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. (14)

William Greider, who cites this passage in his study, *Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country*, notes that the news media scorned the message of the speech for the most part, while the American public at first showed enthusiastic approval. The contradictory reactions, Greider feels, point out a central paradox of the nation's values: Americans "were devoted to the pursuit of their own affluence, but they still hearkened to spiritual themes" (15).

Though Greider's work is economic in orientation, a study of how influential the non-elected members of the Federal Reserve are, he does step aside from time to time to make insightful remarks about cultural matters and about literature in particular. For instance, after commenting on the country/city theme projected in much of naturalistic fiction of the late nineteenth century, Greider adds the following perceptive comments.

Fictional Portraits of Two Materialists in the Decade of Greed:

The Bonfire of the Vanities and *American Psycho*

Scott Pugh

Commencement speakers are notoriously boring, but the 1986 graduating class of the University of California's business school was looking forward eagerly to the speech by Ivan Boesky, a Wall Street arbitrageur of fabulous wealth. In fact, the students had voted to bring this well-known figure of the investment world to campus to enlighten them, and they greeted him "with enthusiastic applause," according to James B. Stewart in his Pulitzer-winning chronicle of the financial finagling of the 1980s, *Den of Thieves*. However, Boesky "quickly demonstrated that he could be an excruciatingly dull speaker."

...He dwelled on platitudes about America as a land of opportunity and told of his own rise, a highly edited story of how the Detroit-raised son of immigrant parents had conquered Wall Street. Then, when it seemed as though he would lose his audience permanently, he galvanized the crowd with just a few sentences.

"Greed is all right, by the way," he said, raising his eyes from his text and continuing with what seemed like genuinely extemporaneous remarks. "I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself." The crowd burst into spontaneous applause as students laughed and looked at each other knowingly. (261)