

Murders, Executions, and ‘Decapitated Iced Coffees’: The Black Humor of Bret Easton Ellis’

American Psycho

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The 1980s brings to mind Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Cold War, the AIDS crisis, and economic and racial disparities. As the influence of Wall Street increased, so did the power of stock traders and corporate raiders. Their greed symbolized a decade of corporate wealth and the rise of neoliberalism: a Reagan Era free-market economic and political approach to governance based on deregulation, tax cuts to the rich, private property, and shrinking social programs. These economic developments coincided with the rise of Yuppies, or young urban professionals. Described as members of the baby boomer generation with "an income of \$40,000 or more from a professional or management job," they were "three times as likely as other Americans to have an American Express card and twice as likely to engage in physical-fitness activities."¹ In Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, the main character, Patrick Bateman is a psychopathic, self-obsessed yuppie who wields his American Express card as well as he wields his stainless steel axe.

In his first novel, *Less than Zero* (1985), Ellis explores the effects of wealth and drugs on dispassionate twenty-somethings in the 1980s Hollywood scene with subtle humor, a deadpan narrator, and an onslaught of pop culture. *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), Ellis's second novel, is a drug-addled, booze-soaked look at rich, East coast college students that continues to flirt with dark humor. However, his strongest condemnation of money and materialism comes with his next, and most controversial novel, *American Psycho*. Ellis's black humor is fully realized in this dense postmodern *tour de force* as he satirizes the consumer culture of America in the 1980s and showcases the harmful results when people do whatever they want at the expense of others.

Before delving into the ways in which Ellis employs dark humor to explore the exploits and emptiness of his characters in *American Psycho*, a few words on black humor are in order. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Sigmund Freud claims that all humor is a defense mechanism against the deficiencies of life. German anthologist Gerd Henniger uses Freud's theory to suggest that black humor is a defense against horror, so the humor "produces feelings both of pleasure and [. . .] guilt."² Freud's theory does not come across as such a broad generalization when compared to the work of Bret Easton Ellis. Although bleakness and the meaningless of life are recurring themes in Ellis's novels, it is also possible to find the humor in his books. It is not only possible, it is necessary to search out the satire and social commentary because without the humor, albeit dark, reading Ellis would be even more of an emotionally draining task. The content and type of humor may not be appealing to all, but that is exactly one of the points of black humor—it disconcerts, makes one uncomfortable, even, at times, complicit.

According to Wolfgang Kayser, author of *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1933), black humor is a matter of individual reader response; it is not something that must be considered humorous by everybody in order to be effective. "Black humor," a term that can be used interchangeably with "dark humor," traces its roots to Aristophanes in Ancient Greece, Irish satirist Jonathan Swift, and French writer Andre Breton. Closer to home are American postmodernist writers Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut. Heller's absurdist novel *Catch-22*, according to Leon F. Seltzer, "operate[s] almost always to expose the alarming inhumanities which pollute our political, social, and economic systems."³ Similarly, Vonnegut often criticized American society and its unequal distribution of wealth. The work of Heller and Vonnegut is considered black humor for many reasons, one being how they use humor to force the reader to recognize larger global problems. The academic study of black humor gained traction in North America as a literary genre with the 1965 publication of *Black Humor* by Bruce Jay Friedman. The collection of stories, including works by Heller and Vonnegut, are held together by a

“feeling of insecurity . . . a sense of isolation and loneliness . . . and above all the element of social satire in a world gone mad,” words equally suited to describe Ellis’s *American Psycho*.⁴

While one unifying definition of black humor is yet to be agreed upon, the most recognized characteristic is its harshness. Likewise, black humor can be categorized, according to Patrick O’Neill, as any humor that is “sick, pornographic, [. . .] ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.”⁵ Is black humor a normal response to a tragedy or a collapsing world, or does it reflect some sort of pervasive sickness? Arguments can be easily formed in support of either claim. One of the first American definitions of black humor appeared in the 1975 *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, which explains black humor as “a grotesque or morbid humor used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of the modern world.”⁶ *American Psycho* uses grotesque and morbid humor in order to satirize the consumer culture and “dehumanizing forces” of 1980s neoliberalism.⁷ In this paper, I argue that Bret Easton Ellis uses black humor in *American Psycho* to exemplify his views on the abstractness and meaningless of life in the 1980s through the use of the grotesque, a deadpan narrator, and the disruption of conventional plot and characters. More than any novel of the era, the angst and sexual politics of Ellis’s work outraged readers, but his style was groundbreaking in its honest and dispassionate approach to life.

As Henniger explains, black humor can vary in its intensity, however, “the highest order of black humor obliterates laughter, or rather transmutes it into despair.”⁸ Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* does exactly that. The yuppie serial killer in this brutally satiric novel is an empty shell of a person who fits multiple definitions of black humor because of the cruelty and grotesqueness of his actions. The black humor of *American Psycho* ties into satire since, according to O’Neill, “satire is the soil in which black humor takes root.”⁹ Satire has many forms and definitions, but one widely recognized feature includes the attack of a specific target or larger audience with humor or wit that “modifies the attack and differentiates it from hell-fire sermonizing or foul-mouthed name-calling.”¹⁰ For example, Ellis attacks yuppie culture with long, self-absorbed paragraphs in Bateman’s internal voice detailing high-end fashion and furniture designers, consumer goods, haute cuisine menus, and Bateman’s daily fitness routine. Bateman drones on about his “Ralph Lauren silk pajamas” which he wears before taking a showering with his “universal all-directional shower head that adjusts within a thirty-inch vertical range [made] from Australian gold-black brass and covered with a white enamel finish.”¹¹ He uses shampoo and conditioner to prevent hair loss from Bloomingdale’s and Bergdorf’s.

One of the more interesting aspects of Ellis’s black humor is the way in which Bateman’s long, monotone advertising-like monologues are mirrored in the way in which he describes the horrors that he inflicts on his unsuspecting victims. For, as Todd Hanson of *The Onion* says, “humor is connected to pain,” because it is a way of “processing all of the terrible realities that, if you couldn’t laugh at, you’d want to roll over and die.”¹² Patrick’s obsession with the latest products and trends, along with his penchant for describing gore in sickening detail, is Ellis’s way of attacking 80s yuppie culture. Ellis pushes the boundaries of satire and black humor through his intensely graphic writing, for without the humor or the melodramatic main character, the novel would be an intolerable mix of horror and smut; with it, Ellis forces us to reckon with our moral conscious.

The grotesque is one trait of dark humor, and although these violent scenes are mostly humorless, the idea that the grotesque is the middle ground between comedy and tragedy is most fitting here. When humor and horror are juxtaposed, the reader may feel stuck between two

extremes, searching for the morally right reaction. Bateman's humorous commentary contrasts with his violent outbursts and when the horror dominates the humor, the grotesque humor is formed. The grotesque can be found, for example, when Evelyn, one of Patrick Bateman's many girlfriends, pulls out a fortune cookie from his pocket that he "lifted from the dead Chinese boy" and is delighted by this seemingly romantic gesture. The cookie is covered in blood, but when she questions the "red stuff," he responds with "that's sweet n' sour sauce."¹³ Patrick's cover-up is humorous because of Evelyn's obliviousness, but readers know the harsh truth of how the cookie came to be covered in blood from just a few pages earlier. The confusion is so absurd that it is hard not to laugh at Evelyn's blunder; however, one has to ask themselves if it even feels "morally right" to be laughing at scene that is a result of a dead boy? When Ellis uses humor to process pain or "terrible realities," it should leave the reader questioning more than just the scene on the page.

Patrick's thoughts drift to death when he is bored, frustrated, and even content. Ellis's grotesque humor manifests in Patrick's dialogue and cruel intentions because of the extreme blend of humor and violence. Readers should be unsettled by this unique combination because it disrupts moral and social values, and startles emotional and intellectual reactions. For example, in an earlier scene, Patrick fleetingly imagines "pulling out [his] knife, slicing a wrist, one of [his], aiming the spurting vein at Armstrong's head or better yet his suit, wondering if he would still continue to talk."¹⁴ This violent daydream is tame compared to other instances, but the humor is anchored in Patrick's frustration with a friend bragging about his vacation so much so that Patrick wants to hurt himself to end this miserable conversation.

Patrick's merciless attitude highlights the cruelty of the modern world because his lack of empathy is so intense and off-putting. Most fictional narrators have at least a few redeemable qualities that entice the reader to continue with their story. To emphasize the satirical nature of the novel, Ellis has given Patrick none. After using physical force to coerce Jeannette, another of his girlfriends, to have an abortion, he buys her "a doll, a rattle, [and] a teething ring." Patrick does not usually justify his actions, but he says that "this girl's favorite movie is *Pretty in Pink* and she thinks Sting is cool, so what is happening to her is, like, not totally undeserved and one shouldn't feel bad for her."¹⁵ The reasoning behind his taunting purchases ties in the black humor and grotesqueness of the situation. It is as if Patrick is explaining why he broke up with someone, which would still be shallow, but nowhere near as dark as this context. He even gets frustrated and begins to cry when he cannot tell if he is cooking any of his murder victims the right way because he has "never really cooked anything before."¹⁶ Readers are given a description of how Patrick is grinding, hacking, and cooking his victims, but his extreme personality aligned with the grotesque of the entire situation draws the focus away from the victims to Patrick's insane and absurd tendencies.

Another common feature of black humor is the compassionless, deadpan narrator. Patrick's first person point of view conveys a lack of empathy, while his sarcasm reveals his violent tendencies. When Evelyn complains about not seeing him the night before, Patrick tells her that she "couldn't have come over anyway . . . because [her] neighbor's head was in [his] freezer."¹⁷ Patrick says this casually, while yawning and arranging dinner plans with Evelyn to appease her. Evelyn, of course, does not hear Patrick's morbidly honest reason for avoiding her, because throughout the novel, Patrick speaks openly about his murderous "hobbies," only to be completely ignored by those around him. His casual tone emphasizes the dark sense of humor because one would not expect such a terrible murder to be an excuse for not seeing a girlfriend. Since Bateman is so flippant about something so undeservedly offhand, these intense opposites

make this situation uncomfortably humorous. Bateman does the same thing later when he tells Evelyn, who is absorbed in their wedding planning, that he wants “to bring a Harrison AK-47 assault rifle to the ceremony” to blow off “[her] fat mother’s head . . . though personally [he] doesn’t like to use anything the Soviets designed.”¹⁸ Ellis contrasts Evelyn’s wedding excitement with Bateman’s frustration and violence. Ellis takes the dark humor a step further with the addition of an unexpected Cold War joke, reminding readers of the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation during the 80s. Patrick’s conversations with Evelyn are often absurd, partly because she does not register his replies, and partly because Patrick uses sarcasm to openly admit to his crimes.

The reoccurring scenes of rape and sexual assault prove that Ellis is not one to shy away from taboo subjects. In some passages, he uses it as an element in his black humor. As Evelyn continues to talk during one of their dates, he wonders idly “if Evelyn would sleep with another woman if I brought one over to her . . . probably not; the odds don’t look good. But what if I forced her at *gunpoint*?”¹⁹ Patrick acts as if he solving a simple statistics problem, not creating a rape fantasy in his head. Rape also appears in the first chapter of his second novel, *The Rules of Attraction*. The speaker wakes up and realizes she was just raped, prompting her to realize she is no longer a virgin. But Ellis pushes some of the concern to the fact that “she had actually gone to bed with a *townie*.”²⁰ When the narrator realizes “the odds were good it was the film student from N.Y.U and not the townie,” she acknowledges that it “seems to be beside the point”²¹, but it is still a relief for her. The black humor of this scene is not so much making light of the rape, but more the speaker’s concern for social status. Her reaction reflects the flippant attitude of this generation. However, when reading either book today, the scenes do come across as insensitive and abrupt. Hanson says “[w]e all know that certain things aren’t funny, such as rape. . . . You can’t make a genuinely funny joke at the expense of a rape victim,” but one can joke about rape if “the target is the attitude toward rape.”²² Ellis is dangerously close to crossing this line in his novels; some may argue that he already has, but it is important to remember that Patrick Bateman is supposed to be a despicable character that readers should hate and not want to emulate.

Patrick likes things to be a certain way, and nothing will get in the way of that, not even his morbid hobby. After brutally murdering Bethany, another woman he is seeing, he cannot focus on a conversation with his friends—not because he is worried they will find out—but because he is trying to figure out the most time-effective method to get rid of the body. His inner thoughts reflect his terrifying neutrality towards his crimes. After contemplating taking it to his apartment in Hell’s Kitchen that he uses to store his victims, he decides it wouldn’t be a good idea since he likes “to keep the men’s bodies separate from the women’s” and a “midnight trip to Hell’s Kitchen, even without a stop at Bellvue’s for a small bite to eat, wouldn’t give me enough time.”²³ Bateman’s luxurious lifestyle and dining habits are always on his mind, which is yet another way Ellis critiques yuppie culture, allowing his narrator’s deadpan, sarcasm, and nightmarish neutrality to shock and outrage the audience as he acts as if his thoughts are the norm.

Ellis disrupts typical notions of character and plot throughout *American Psycho*; this disruption acts as an element of black humor, but it also helps to emphasize the novel’s satirical nature. Although Bateman frequently says the wrong thing at the wrong time, the people around him are incredibly oblivious to his strange behavior, the blood on his clothes, or his brutally honest (and highly unethical and horrifying) answers. When out with his secretary, Jean, for example, she tells the waiter she would like an “iced decaf au lait”; likewise, Patrick says he

would like a “decapitated coffee also.” Neither the waiter nor Jean notice. In fact, Jean simply “smiles emptily” at Patrick.²⁴ Similarly, earlier in the novel, Evelyn declares that ““Patrick is not a cynic . . . he’s the boy next door,”” but Patrick whispers, unheard, that he is an “evil psychopath.”²⁵ Patrick gets away with all of his crimes, despite telling people about them in great detail. Ellis shows the world, as Greiner would put it, “as fractured and chaotic to the extent that disorder is the rule.”²⁶ The characters of *American Psycho* are too obsessed with themselves and their lifestyle to notice the horrors right in front of their faces.

Humorists and comedians have their own opinions on the purposes of humor. O’Neill argues that “we must not lose sight of what in the final analysis is the most important aspect of black humor as it is of all humor: it allows us to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair.”²⁷ On the other hand, humor is not always used to cheer people up, because as Hanson says, humor is a way to process terrible realities. Without the black humor, *American Psycho* could not be read as the satirical social commentary that it is. Ellis’s controversial novel pushes many boundaries, forcing us to acknowledge that the morbid and absurd should shake us out of our complacency or comfort. Society cannot and should not function the way it does in Ellis’s novels if there is to be any hope left in the world. If readers question how they are supposed to react to these novels, then Ellis’s black humor has served its purpose. Through Ellis’s writing, it seems that humor can be just as complex, or problematic, as human existence.

Notes

¹ “The Year of the Yuppie”

² O’Neill 151

³ qtd. in Green 187

⁴ qtd. in O’Neill 147

⁵ O’Neill 145

⁶ qtd. in Applegate 13

⁷ Rogers 231

⁸ qtd. in O’Neill 150

⁹ O’Neill 157

¹⁰ Hume 305

¹¹ Ellis 26

¹² qtd. in Sacks 147

¹³ Ellis 13

¹⁴ Ellis 140

¹⁵ Ellis 382

¹⁶ Ellis 346

¹⁷ Ellis 118

¹⁸ Ellis 124

¹⁹ Ellis 120

²⁰ Ellis 15

²¹ Ellis 16

²² qtd. in Sacks 146

- ²³ Ellis 249
²⁴ Ellis 372
²⁵ Ellis 20
²⁶ Greiner 42
²⁷ O'Neill 165

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