

Fiction As a Conversation: Unreliable Narrators, Pop Culture, and Violence in David Foster Wallace's "Girl With Curious Hair" and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

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ABSTRACT

David Foster Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis are known for their contributions to postmodern literature; however, they also developed a contentious relationship outside of their literary works. But what caused this conflict between the two writers? Although they were often in competition with one another as literary contemporaries who both explored postmodernism, the real issue between the two writers is the difference in how they envisioned and portrayed a postmodern world. While both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony, examine collectivist identities, and critique equality in the West, they do so with a different endgame in mind—namely, Wallace's idea that the postmodern world encourages a deeper look into notions of selfhood that extend beyond Ellis's cynical emphasis on surface and superficiality. A comparative approach of "Girl With Curious Hair" (1989) and *American Psycho* (1991) offers fresh perspectives on how Wallace and Ellis utilized similar themes to contrast their different points of view regarding the postmodern world. (SSL)

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, *American Psycho*, *Girl With Curious Hair*



Introduction

In September 2012, four years after David Foster Wallace's suicide, Bret Easton Ellis attacked the deceased writer after reading D. T. Max's *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. This biography incited Ellis to claim that Wallace was a "fraud . . . and the most tedious, overrated, tortured, pretentious writer of my generation" (Flood 1). Ellis further argued that Wallace was "the best example of a contemporary male writer lusting for a kind of awful greatness that he simply wasn't able to achieve" (1). A few years passed and, with the release of Jason Ponsoldt's *The End of the Tour*, a film about Wallace's time with journalist David Lipsky, Ellis returned with additional thoughts on Wallace's relevance. This time, Ellis published a piece in *The Talkhouse* about the film, although his critique seemed directed solely at Wallace's work and life, rather than the film's strengths and weaknesses. Ellis explains that he refused to worship at the shrine of "Saint David," adding that while attempting to read *Infinite Jest*, one of Wallace's polemical works, he was

ultimately unable to finish it. He ends his commentary on the film by accusing it of hero worship because it only presents one version of Wallace. Joanna di Mattia argues that Ellis's response to *The End of the Tour* is a "tainted one" that, at best, functions as a "kamikaze film review" (1). Rather than simply representing impromptu book and film reviews, Ellis's statements about Wallace are indicative of a troubling relationship between the two authors, dating back to the publication of Wallace's first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987).

While Ellis critiqued Wallace's writing and legacy, Wallace similarly mentioned Ellis, albeit not as often or with as much vitriol. In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, for example, Wallace discussed the influence of television on 1980s culture and the desperate attempt of young writers to please their audience while hating them at the same time. In addition to this, Wallace argued that one sees this kind of hostility toward the reader in the following ways:

bludgeoning the reader with data. Or devoting a lot of energy to creating expectations and then taking pleasure in disappointing them. You can see this clearly in something like Ellis's *American Psycho*: it panders shamelessly to the audience's sadism for a while, but by the end, it's clear that the sadism's real object is the reader herself. (McCaffery 25)

Wallace targeted Ellis's cynicism, arguing that "[i]f readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything" (26).

But what caused the conflict between the two well-recognized authors? According to Gerald Howard, an editor who worked with both Wallace and Ellis, personality differences (mainly Ellis's) partly contributed to the conflict. Howard states that Wallace and Ellis were two young writers "of about the same age, wildly different in style and temperament, inhabiting the same crowded literary space and clearly getting on each other's nerves" (1). By the early 2000s, Wallace's style had become "dominant and that is what drives Bret Ellis nuts" (1). Because Wallace and Ellis were a part of the same generational cohort and had gained literary success at an early age, it became easy to compare the two despite obvious differences in their literary intent. Over time, Wallace became the writer championed by critics and readers, enough to overshadow Ellis, a fact that the latter remained acutely aware of both before and after Wallace's death.

The real issue between the two writers is the differences in how they envision a postmodern world. While both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony, examine collectivist identities, and critique equality in the West, they do so with a different endgame in mind—namely, Wallace’s idea that the postmodern world encourages a deeper look into notions of selfhood that extend beyond Ellis’s cynical emphasis on surface and superficiality. Even though Wallace and Ellis are grouped together as postmodernists, who clearly had a banter between each other off the page, scholars have not made a direct comparison between the two authors’ works, particularly Wallace’s “Girl With Curious Hair” (1989), the story from the same-titled collection, and Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991). While scholars such as Paul Giles, Wilson Kaiser, and Carla Freccero have analyzed sentimental post-humanism, other elements of postmodernism, and serial killer fiction in Wallace and Ellis, respectively, a direct comparison of “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* has remained largely untouched, even though the two texts evidence many plot-related similarities, such as the use of unreliable narrators and commentary on pop culture. Marshall Boswell argues that “Girl With Curious Hair” foreshadows *American Psycho* (46); however, he does not provide a deep analysis explaining what he means by this. A comparative approach offers fresh perspectives on how Wallace and Ellis utilized similar themes to contrast their different points of view regarding the postmodern world.

Unreliable narrators in “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho*

When Gerald Howard first received David Foster Wallace’s manuscript for *The Broom of the System* in 1986, he was reminded of what he refers to as the “Great White Postmodernists” like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon. He was also reminded of Bret Easton Ellis’s work, in particular *Less Than Zero* (1985), which he had read for reprint on Simon and Schuster’s behalf. After moving to W. W. Norton in 1988, Howard took *Girl With Curious Hair* with him (1). This time, he told Wallace that the short story from the collection with the same name struck him as an “obvious and expert parody of Bret Ellis’s affectless tone and subject matter” (1). According to Howard, Wallace denied ever having read Ellis’s work, a claim that Howard himself doubted. Although Wallace did not want to admit the truth about Howard’s observation in 1988, now the similarities between “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* can be openly acknowledged and examined.

“Girl With Curious Hair” begins at a Keith Jarrett concert attended by Sick Puppy, a corporate liability troubleshooter, and his punk rock friends Gimlet, Big, Mr. Wonderful, and Cheese. Throughout the concert, the punk rockers, high on LSD, become fixated on a young girl in the audience accompanied by her father. The story culminates in Cheese’s preoccupation with Sick Puppy’s state of mind, in particular his happiness, and the assumed violence directed at the young girl and her father leaving the concert hall at the story’s conclusion. The plot hinges upon the emotional disconnectedness the characters feel in response to others around them, their environment, and the trauma from their past.

To understand both Wallace’s and Ellis’s works, it is important to note the themes the two writers examine, such as anti-realism, collectivism, and criticism of the West. Stephen R. C. Hicks explains that postmodernism can best be understood through its rejection of the tenets of modernism, mainly that “perception and reason are the human means of knowing nature” (6). Instead of reason or a fixed idea of what reality means, postmodernism substitutes these concepts with a “social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality” (5). Reason, for the postmodernist, cannot be the pathway to acquiring objective knowledge (5). Postmodernism similarly rejects elements of the Enlightenment, mainly by attacking its essential philosophical themes, such as reality, reason, individual identity, and autonomy (14). Questions of honesty or integrity in postmodern thought are viewed as being a part of an “aesthetic autonomy that has been discredited as theoretically naive” (Bewes 421), mainly because of the anti-realism and anti-philosophical nature of the postmodern condition. Hicks also explains that postmodernism criticizes the West, drawing attention to the fact that the law has been a cover for the “assertion of white male interests. The only antidote to that poison is the equally forceful assertion of the subjective interests of historically oppressed groups” (17). For this reason, postmodernism examines whether the West is progressive on liberty, equalities, and opportunities for everyone—or whether it is sexist, racist, and class-bound (Hicks 18). Despite the critique of the West, postmodernism examines the low-brow, evidencing what Fredric Jameson calls a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (9). Jameson’s notion of flatness or superficiality also lends itself to the use of cynicism in postmodern thought.

To explore these themes, Wallace utilizes irony. In his analysis of Wallace’s use of postmodern irony, Wilson Kaiser suggests that Wallace sought to “reimagine the boundaries of postmodern fiction, dispensing with the sense of superior detachment he saw as the major problem with ironic

distance” (32). To achieve this, Wallace uses irony as it relates to Sick Puppy’s superficiality and lack of emotional depth. While Sick Puppy remains acutely aware of details like the taste of Gimlet’s nails, the shape of her hair, and the quality of the sports jacket that the little girl’s father wears, he cannot form an emotional attachment to the people themselves. When paying for the jazz concert tickets, for example, he states that “I paid the face behind the window” (Wallace 57), thus dehumanizing the person working at the Irvine Concert Hall. In a flashback about joyriding, Sick Puppy explains that “he [Big] laughed so heartily that he wet his pants and could have damaged some of the leather interior of my new Porsche, and I have to admit that I got peeved” (58). Despite the fondness he claims to have for his punk rocker friends, at the same time, he values the superficiality of the material world more. Later, during his philosophical conversation with Cheese, Sick Puppy exclaims that “I did not know that Negroes had sub consciousnesses” (66). He eventually applies the same comment to Keith Jarrett when he suggests that Jarrett (as an African American) might not have a subconscious mind either (66). In all these examples, Sick Puppy’s racist claims are delivered in an affectless way that either go unnoticed by the other characters or takes them off-guard. At the same time, his comments are punctuated by grammatical errors that, from the reader’s perspective, dismantle Sick Puppy’s white, patriarchal superiority—a clear jab at the values embraced by the West. All of Sick Puppy’s character flaws contradict what one would expect from an upper-class lawyer: his poor grammar, his close-minded attitude toward race and ethnicity, and his complete disregard for human beings. While each characteristic functions as postmodern—the lack of emotion or depth, the critique of the West—at the same time, Wallace’s use of irony allows him to show readers what a postmodern world looks like and what is at stake within it: the human condition and notions of selfhood.

Wallace expands upon the problems associated with the human condition or notions of selfhood in the postmodern world when he contextualizes Sick Puppy’s psychology through solely negative ways. When a concert attendee complains about Gimlet’s hair blocking the stage, Gimlet argues with the woman, which pleases Sick Puppy as an observer: “Gimlet told the woman to Fuck You, but good old Cheese was concerned at the situation and politely traded to Gimlet’s outside seat so as to solve the vision problems of the woman” (59). During a recount of Sick Puppy’s first contact with the punk rockers, he states that he was happy after setting fire to a young man’s beard who criticized Sick Puppy’s military family. When Cheese asks Sick Puppy if he loves Gimlet, he avoids directly answering the question,

choosing instead to focus on the pleasurable sexual relationship he has with her. Throughout the story, Sick Puppy repeatedly returns to his gold lighter, linking it to his own sexual gratification: “but Gimlet let me burn one of Big’s nipples with my gold lighter at a rest stop, so I became happy” (58), and later: “I was there with Ms. Paisley Campbell-Greet, a fine gal whom I was trying to convince to fellate me and subsequently let me burn her” (61). David P. Rando argues that Wallace’s work is “peculiarly invested in diagnosing male lovelessness as a form of hideousness” (579), evident in both Sick Puppy’s detachment and sexual sadism. Although Wallace explains the moral symbolism of the gold lighter later in the story, at this point, he uses its presence as an introduction to Sick Puppy’s troubled identity. Sick Puppy remains incapable of connecting to the people around him, and when he believes that he does, it is only through sadistic acts. Yet these sadistic acts merely dehumanize others rather than establishing a bond of understanding between them. The irony of Sick Puppy’s sadism suggests that collectively, the characters in the story cannot feel, and when they do, it is only through pain, which they, in turn, conceptualize as happiness. The human condition, one of wide-spread cynicism and emotional lassitude in the text, cannot be explained through reason. The human condition and any conceptualization of selfhood is thus an absurdity filled with contradictions in the story.

In keeping with the human condition as divorced from reason, Sick Puppy’s emotional detachment contributes to the erosion of his ability to interpret reality—oftentimes in ironic ways. Once the group enters the Irvine Concert Hall, for example, Sick Puppy claims that “[t]he other crowds coming to see Keith Jarrett’s concert were in approval of our bunch’s happy go luckiness and gave us a generous amount of room and privacy in the Concert Hall’s spacious lobby” (57). In contrast to Sick Puppy’s interpretation, the other concert attendees view the group with wariness or outright fear. In his analysis of minimalist writers, Arthur M. Saltzman suggests that what matters is “the intensity of perception” when it comes to extracting narrative potential (425). In Sick Puppy’s case, the intensity of his perception creates the reality or the dominant narrative of the story. Yet, his version of reality is problematic throughout the text because he represents the opposite of what is real. For example, while describing his occupation, Sick Puppy states that

when a consumer gets a wild hair about being injured and attempts to litigate against one of my firm’s clients, I am called in to trouble shoot. . . . I am especially pleased and challenged in my career when it really happens that a

manufacturer's product has a bug and has injured a consumer, because then it is even more challenging to try to convince a jury or a jurist that what really happened didn't really happen. (64–65)

His whole occupation centers upon altering the appearance of things to make the truth about them irrelevant. This same altering of reality extends to Sick Puppy's and Cheese's belief systems. When Cheese describes the punk rockers' ideology, he explains that they

all felt as if they had nothing and would always have nothing therefore they made the nothing into everything. However Cheese stated that I was a Sick Puppy who already had everything, thus he wished to inquire as to why I traded my big everything for a big nothing. (67–68)

On the one hand, the punk rockers convert nothingness into everything, thus reversing their real-world circumstances, at least in thought. On the other hand, Sick Puppy chooses to do the opposite—exchange everything for nothing—which reverses how others, like Cheese, perceive him. Reality, in all these instances, depends upon the characters' definition of it, thus demonstrating the postmodern belief that truth and reality cannot be defined. Claire Fabre suggests that Wallace's characters know how to survive in a world dominated by perversion (107), clearly apparent in these belief systems that pervert or, at least, distort reality. Paul Giles posits that Wallace's intellectual “agenda takes its bearings from alternative sources, being concerned as it is primarily to resituate the affective and emotional life of American romanticism in an apparently alien social and historical milieu” (34). In this case, that milieu is a reality with a superficial, privileged surface hiding a hideous underbelly of discontent. When Sick Puppy avoids reality, he avoids the lovelessness and hideousness of men, as mentioned by Rando. Yet, from the reader's perspective, it becomes obvious that Sick Puppy cannot interpret reality and that his inability to do so is an example of the postmodern condition—one that makes metaphysical issues contradictory or meaningless.

Like Wallace, Bret Easton Ellis utilizes an emotionally detached narrator who finds happiness through sadism to set the tone in his postmodern novel, *American Psycho*. Patrick Bateman, a Wall Street broker, spends most of his time working out, attending the newest, hippest restaurants and clubs, while commenting on the clothing ensembles of his friends and associates. On the side, he allegedly commits horrible acts of

violence and murder. Before Bateman's violent side emerges, however, the readers follow him through a series of love relationships without love and friendships without care.

Like Wallace, Ellis uses irony when describing his characters' emotional detachment from the world around them, the only difference between the two texts being that this detachment appears from the opening line. The novel begins with the graffiti "Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here," thus setting the hopeless tone of *American Psycho* and connecting it to Dante's *Inferno*. Later on, at a dinner party at his girlfriend Evelyn's apartment, Bateman lists a host of suggestions for improving society: "We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people" (16). The dinner party responds to Bateman with total silence, suggesting that they remain unaffected by his commentary on social issues. Bateman's tone throughout his speech sounds like the beginning of a conservative article, not a component of a legitimate conversation. At another get-together, Bateman tells Courtney's friend, Anne, that she looks "exactly like Garfield but run over and skinned" (95). Anne responds with: "Exactly. Oh Courtney, where *did* you find Patrick?" (95). In these examples, most of which are repeated throughout the novel with slight modifications, Bateman and the other characters make speeches about problems in their society without truly engaging with the content that they bring up. They merely issue empty commentary without listening to the import of their own words or those of the other characters. Hicks argues that in the postmodern world, individuals "are not in control of their feelings: their identities are a product of their group memberships, whether economic, sexual, or racial" (82). Hicks's claims can be seen repeatedly throughout *American Psycho* as the characters are seemingly united by economic privilege in ways that Sick Puppy and the punk rockers are not. Ellis makes ironic the collective nature of the characters formed by the same social status, yet unable to emotionally bond despite the close proximity of sameness.

When Bateman has to confront unavoidable emotional situations like his break-up with Evelyn in "At Another New Restaurant," he either relies on his violent imaginary persona or finds other ways to distance himself from reality. According to Fredric Jameson, "concepts such as anxiety and alienation . . . are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern" (14). Yet, *American Psycho* is filled with examples of Bateman's emotional anxiety,

thus demonstrating another use of irony in Ellis's novel. When initially breaking up with Evelyn, for example, Bateman explains that "My. . . my *need* to engage in . . . homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected. . . . But I . . . have no other way to express my blocked . . . needs" (338). Evelyn completely disregards his confession, like most of the other characters do when he either insults them or divulges his murderous fantasies, arguing that "your friends are my friends. My friends are your friends. I don't think it would work" (339). Bateman further describes their relationship, in his mind, as "blacked out, bombed, footage from the film in my head" (343). Later, he admits that "[i]t's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. . . . If I were an actual automaton, what difference would there really be?" (343). Previously, when Luis confesses to being in love with Bateman, the latter tries to avoid him and thus escape an uncomfortable emotional moment; however, Luis follows him and "roughly grabs my shoulder, spinning me around so I'm facing him: Luis blotting out reality" (294). When Bethany, his college girlfriend, asks about the facets of his personality that she once knew, including being his lover, Bateman responds with: "My eyes fall on her coldly, untouched" (241). Like Sick Puppy, Bateman cannot emotionally engage with the world or with people around him, no matter the context—from past relationships or unrequited crushes like Luis's to his current break-up with Evelyn. Jameson argues that liberation from the older anomie of the centered subject also leads to a liberation "from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (15). He adds that this liberation is not utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that these emotions are now "free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (16). Bateman's lack of self, best characterized by his impersonal approach to others, results in a euphoria consisting of an alter persona, one that can only feel via imaginary acts of violence.

Bateman's detachment, like Sick Puppy's, makes it difficult for him to interpret reality, thus illuminating periods of anti-realism in the novel. It is not until "Dry Cleaners" that the degree of Bateman's inability to understand reality begins to emerge. After arguing with the dry cleaning employee, for example, he mistakes a pretty college student outside for a homeless girl. For a brief moment, he says that his nastiness vanishes and "wanting to offer something kind, something simple, I lean in, still staring, eyes radiating sympathy into her blank, grave face" (86). Only by misinterpreting reality can he forge a semblance of sympathy for another human being, but especially a

homeless person, a group of people he hassles and terrorizes throughout the novel. In “Harry’s,” while discussing a preference for dating women for their personalities rather than their looks, Bateman uses a quote that he attributes to the serial killer, Ed Gein when it is Ted Bundy who actually says it. In “Concert,” Bateman believes that he has a connection with U2’s lead singer, Bono: “I hear it, can actually feel, can even make out the letters of the message hovering above Bono’s head in orange wavy letters” (146). The message convinces Bateman that Bono is the devil. Although small instances in the novel, at the same time, position Bateman as an unreliable narrator who cannot properly interpret reality. In contrast to Sick Puppy, however, this is not always clear, particularly when it comes to his alleged crime sprees throughout New York City. These earlier cues help clarify that the later graphic displays of violence function as mere fantasies for a protagonist who needs them to develop a sense of self.

Both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony to comment upon the postmodern condition, especially when describing the characters’ definition of reality or emotional depth. The degree that individualism dissolves, however, separates Wallace’s perspective from Ellis’s. Wallace always argued that “rule-breaking has got to be for the *sake* of something. When rule-breaking, the mere *form* of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*’s nipple-shocks” (McCaffery 27–28). Wallace also looked for purity and authenticity in his works (Lipsky 175). Hicks argues that “[f]or part of the process of the dissolution of particular beings into a state of undifferentiation is the dissolution of one’s own sense of being a unique, individual being” (63). Hicks further explains that this dissolution slips into a state of nothingness that can be distressing to the individual (63). Unlike Ellis, Wallace breaks with the postmodern condition by providing an individual context for Sick Puppy’s emotional detachment, thus separating him from collectivist identity. Sick Puppy, as a result, never reaches the dissolution of self mentioned by Hicks, even if he does not overtly connect the origin of his sadism with his present sense of self. Patrick Bateman, on the other hand, experiences nothing but the dissolution of self because he never truly detaches from the collective group except via fantasies of murder and violence.

Furthermore, this difference lends itself to differing degrees of cynicism in both works. While Wallace ends “Girl With Curious Hair” with assumed violence, he also allows Sick Puppy one small gesture to comfort the little girl before her life changes forever: “I slowly assumed a happy and

comforting and reassuring expression at the young blond girl” (74). Although this passage illustrates the same type of irony as Sick Puppy’s occupation, at the same time, it is more than that. For a brief moment, Sick Puppy and the little girl engage in ways that they did not before the concert’s intermission, even though Sick Puppy’s expression is an empty attempt at reassurance. Bateman, on the other hand, begins and ends the novel performing the same meaningless activities with his friends, despite numerous opportunities to emotionally engage with Bethany, his mother, and, most importantly, Jean. Instead, when pressed to respond to Jean’s love confession, for example, he resorts to the same meaningless babble that he used with Evelyn when he describes the man writing “Kill All Yuppies” in a bathroom stall (Ellis 274). He admits that “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, of receiving another person’s love or kindness” (375). This cynicism embodies the dissolution of self into nothingness mentioned by Hicks. Yet, it does not provide Bateman with any type of liberation or revelation regarding the point of existing. As a result, this dissolution of self merely destroys any chance Bateman has at greater understanding or an emotional attachment to the world, no matter who offers him the chance for it.

In addition to this, the structure of the two works evidences the authors’ rejection or acceptance of the same type of cynicism. Wallace’s story is metanarrative. While Keith Jarrett plays improvisation, for example, Sick Puppy’s surroundings cue his revelations to Cheese. Through the improv structure of the story, Wallace provides Sick Puppy’s moral framework for the reader, as if the reader is a psychoanalyst listening to a mentally-ill patient. As a result, the structure creates Sick Puppy’s arc as a character, thus allowing him to separate from collectivist identity. Ellis’s novel, in contrast, utilizes a circular structure in which the last words, “[t]his is not an exit” (Ellis 399) mirror the bleakness of the graffiti in the novel’s opening line. The circular nature of the novel illustrates the deep cynicism embedded in Bateman’s world, or what Martin Weinreich calls an “operationally closed system,” (76) in which nothing changes.

Wallace and Ellis create emotion and structure differently in their works, mainly because of how they view the act of writing itself. In a 1993 interview, Wallace explains:

Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look

banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something. (qtd in. Giles 332)

As Marshall Boswell suggests, *Girl With Curious Hair* is a book that challenges postmodernism and the “bleak and emaciated world of Ellis” (39). In contrast to a willingness to embrace emotion and critique postmodernism, Ellis does quite the opposite when he states that

I haven’t tried to write that novel that’s going to give critical acclaim or a prize or two—which I’ve never won. And I seem to be continually controversial and rub people the wrong way. . . . I mean the big joke is: cancel me. Come on, cancel me if you can’t stand it so much. (qtd. in Leith 1)

Even with his suggestion to cancel himself, Ellis lauds the dissolution of self and cynicism rejected by Wallace, but without a higher revelation or purpose.

The superficial world of pop culture in “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho*

In describing the role of television’s influence on the postmodern condition, Wallace states that “the fact is that for at least ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative” (qtd. in McLaughlin 64). In other words, TV no longer champions American values, but “cynically mocks, deflates, and debunks these values” (McLaughlin 64). For Wallace, TV played a powerful role in shaping viewers’ perspectives as well as the communities that they imagined inhabiting. It was what he called the “texture of the world I live in” (Miller 60). He even suggested in interviews that “it’s seldom acknowledged that viewers’ relationship with TV is, albeit debased, intricate and profound” (McCaffery 21).

In “Girl With Curious Hair,” the superficial world of popular culture that so influenced Wallace, also helps shape Sick Puppy’s identity formation. For Wallace, pop culture functions as “our new mythos, the source of our contemporary archetypes” (Boswell 39). As a result, Wallace engages with the postmodern debate about consumerism versus improving longevity and wealth across generations. According to Hicks, postmodern cultural themes range from group identities to debating the reality of progressivism in the United States (18). Hicks argues that one postmodern debate examines “whether life in the West, and especially America, is improving with average

longevity and wealth increasing in each generation” (19). The other side of the argument examines the West as having “abandoned its urban underclass and fostered a bland consumerist culture of shopping malls and suburban sprawl” (19). Although the action of the story largely takes place in the urban setting of Los Angeles where Sick Puppy socializes with his punk rocker friends, his past represents upper-class culture. Because of his privilege, Sick Puppy actively engages and embraces the superficiality of bland consumerism. From the opening paragraph, for example, Sick Puppy describes an English Leather Cologne commercial, sounding like a commercial himself when he says that “I wear English Leather Cologne which keeps me smelling very attractive at all times” (55). Yet, the commercial is more than a subscription to the superficial world of television and the products represented there; rather, elements of the commercial are directly linked to Sick Puppy’s sexuality when he masturbates while watching the woman from the ad. The fact that Wallace links a common TV ad with something as important as Sick Puppy’s sexuality demonstrates that life in the West has not fostered progressivism, but the life of shopping malls and suburban sprawl mentioned by Hicks. Later, Sick Puppy describes his new suit which he purchased on Rodeo Drive, and his hair cut from Julio’s Unisex Fashion Cut Center that he modeled after a picture from a magazine. He repeatedly returns to his hair, explaining that “I have finely styled hair without any of dandruff’s unsightly itching and flaking” (65). Not only does Sick Puppy attach sexual importance to television commercials, but he also uses additional elements of popular culture like the magazine clipping to shape what he appears like to others. His language is similarly shaped by the rhetoric of commercials. Paul Giles argues that these objects “have become commodified and commercially overdetermined as if refracted through the prism of television advertising” (334). Sick Puppy exhibits Giles’s claims when he places great importance on his appearance, stating that “people naturally like me out of instinct, because of my appearance” (65). Being liked even helps him within his occupation: “The average layman would be surprised to know how much juries are impressed by appearances” (65). Although characters like Sick Puppy cannot emotionally engage with one other, they can, as the story’s protagonist demonstrates, both connect to and represent the superficial world of popular culture.

Pop culture has such a hold on Sick Puppy that he links notions of happiness to it—thus demonstrating how pop culture and consumerism

shape identities in the postmodern world. When Cheese asks him why he is so happy, for example, Sick Puppy responds with:

I patiently explained to Cheese once more about my great amount of income and clothing and fine home entertainment products, however Cheese shook his predominantly bald head and claimed that he meant a different word by the word happy which he had groped for. (70)

Ironically, Cheese struggles to define what he means by happiness even though he fixates on its meaning in his question. Sick Puppy then demonstrates his allegiance to the superficial world of popular culture with his response. Jaroslav Kusnir calls the “commercialization of people’s lives and language, the (in)ability of language to communicate truth about outer experience, the relationship between language, philosophy and science, psychology of human beings, frustration of living in various kinds of partnership, and various kinds of violence” (321) as themes that Wallace repeatedly incorporates throughout his work. Kusnir further states that “thus the alternative world the narrator creates represents a replacement of physical reality by a constructed combination of the stimuli from various sources (reality, popular fiction, film)” (324). In “Girl With Curious Hair,” Wallace examines these themes to illustrate how one’s identity has been replaced by meaningless objects, most of which have been garnered from popular culture.

Like Wallace, Ellis explores his characters’ relationships with popular culture in a postmodern world. Bateman’s character in *American Psycho* repeatedly defines himself through brand names, the clothing that he and his friends wear, and the weight and appearance of their business card paper. Martin Weinreich explains that *American Psycho* “portrays the city after this shift from production to consumption” (66) and that “in the New York yuppie cosmos of the 1980s, the commodity seems to have become the only referential authority to the world” (66). Ellis illustrates these claims when he fills the novel with paragraphs listing commodities such as name-brand clothes, the trendiest food, and where *Zagat* recommends dining. Florian Niedlich suggests that Bateman’s apathy and “the monotony of his life are reminiscent of a machine” (228). The repetition of lists lends itself to this monotony. During one of Bateman’s observations littered with name brands, for example, he states, “Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and the same pair of silk-satin d’Orsay pumps Courtney has on” (9). As this passage suggests, the material items listed by Bateman describe an opulent lifestyle, one that

presumably sets the characters above the homeless people flooding the streets, crying and begging for money. They become “all one sees” (Weinreich 66). Yet, most of the time, the characters mix each other up, as if they are all the same or somehow replaceable because they dress alike. Daniel Cojocaru states that “[s]ince everybody imitates the same yuppie-ideal script, it becomes increasingly difficult to be truly different from others, as Bateman recognizes” (188). Bateman recounts how “Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn’t matter” (Ellis 89). Weinreich posits that “[a]s everyone dresses according to exchangeable fashion-models, all individuals become virtually exchangeable” (70). Berthold Schoene similarly argues that the characters only “look like themselves, but even appearances cannot save them from anonymous obliteration as they continue to confuse—and be confused with—each other” (383). Like Wallace, characters like Bateman define themselves through pop culture, especially through the commercialization of it. In contrast to Wallace, however, Ellis engages more with collective identities formed by pop culture.

While Wallace links pop culture’s influence to Sick Puppy’s sexuality, Ellis utilizes it to help Bateman deal with troubling emotional encounters. When Luis mistakes Bateman’s actions for a sexual advance, for example, a flustered Bateman returns to his table, ending the “Yale Club” chapter with tie-holder etiquette. While renting *Body Double* and allegedly explaining how much he likes the violence in it, he has to take a breath before admitting that “*I have to see her [the checkout girl’s] shoes*” (Ellis 113). Weinreich argues that these objects “only supply an immaculate surface” (67), or the superficial world of consumerism that Bateman understands. Niedlich posits that “[g]enuine communication has become an impossibility in Bateman’s circles” (227). Without real emotional connections or the ability to communicate emotion, the characters turn to the tangible world of pop culture to remain moored.

In contrast to Wallace who links pop culture to happiness, albeit a superficial version of it, the characters in Ellis’s novel never feign happiness over the items that they possess. Rather, it becomes mere etiquette to dress the same, vacation in certain spots together, or have dinner at trendy restaurants, demonstrating their allegiance to a specific group identity cultivated by class privilege. Cojocaru claims that Ellis’s novel is a “critique of consumerism but is paradoxically brought forth by and is part of its emptiness” (187). At the same time that Ellis critiques consumerism, he also

demonstrates that Bateman's relationship with pop culture, especially music, has two purposes in the novel: to act as stabilizing items in his life and to further illustrate his unreliability as a narrator.

This is most evident in the three chapters that function as impromptu music reviews: "Genesis," "Whitney Houston," and "Huey Lewis and the News." In each music review chapter, Bateman misinterprets lyrics or mixes up facts about the artists or bands. In "Genesis," for example, he claims that "Turn It On Again" is about "the negative effects of television" (133) when, in fact, the lyrics describe an obsessed fan who feels an unreal connection with a TV star. In his reaction to "Illegal Alien," he finds the lyrics humorous when they attempt to draw attention to the serious social issues surrounding the undocumented. In the "Whitney Houston" chapter, he refers to "You Give Good Love" as a song with "lush jazz arrangements" (253) when the song is R&B. He claims that "The Greatest Love of All" is about self-preservation and dignity (254). Although dignity is one component of it, the song largely focuses on self-respect and children needing respectable role models. In "Huey Lewis and the News," Bateman compares the band to the Beach Boys, stating that Huey Lewis and the News posed with a surfboard on their first album (named after the band) just like the Beach Boys once did. In actuality, their first album cover features the band jamming out, without a surfboard in the photo. In his analysis of "I Want a New Drug," he states that "not only is it the greatest antidrug song ever written, it's also a personal statement about how the band has grown up, shucked off their bad-boy image and learned to become more adult" (355). In reality, the song is a love song, with no references to being an adult or shredding the band's bad-boy image.

Much like Sick Puppy in Wallace's story, Bateman determines his own reality even when referencing music. While Bateman gives great importance to these musicians that he mentions throughout the novel, he cannot interpret their work properly. He gets what he wants out of them, in particular love songs which seem to "reflect all that he is longing for" (Niedlich 23). Given the characters' dependence on the superficial world of pop culture, it is no wonder that Bateman cannot truly engage with the music on its terms. Rather, it becomes a placeholder for him. In each case, the chapters preceding the music reviews evidence some type of graphic violence. Just like he uses fashion etiquette to deal with anxiety-ridden situations, he uses the music review chapters as a brief reprieve from the imagination that causes him so much anxiety.

Both Wallace and Ellis recognize that popular culture has informed their generation—not always in positive ways. Wallace once said that “if there’s something that’s distinctive about our generation, it’s that we’ve been steeped in media and marketing since the time we were very, very small” (Paulson 130). Writers like Wallace use popular culture in ways that previous generations of authors did not—generations that, as Wallace stated, viewed pop culture as “vapid and trivial” (Goldfarb 141). For both Sick Puppy and Patrick Bateman, the world of pop culture provides them with either superficial happiness or the ability to emotionally stabilize.

Neither author attempts to describe a solution to dependence on the superficial, a characteristic dominating 1980s culture; however, Wallace does try to provide more context for this problem to better understand the failures and the hypocrisy of the West. *Girl With Curious Hair* is a book that “demonstrates how history is primarily a text, a constructed narrative that is less about truth than about the will to power” (Boswell 39). Claims like Boswell’s appear in Wallace’s interview with Larry McCaffery, who asks Wallace if he believes that writers of his generation are not only responsible for describing issues, but also for the solutions to them. Wallace responds:

Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctly hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. (26)

He later said that writers themselves were “really sort of working on how to be a human being” (Kennedy and Polk 14). According to Robert C. Clark, Wallace “argued that writers should not shy away from tackling pertinent ethical issues and expressing possible solutions” (408). When Wallace creates a character like Sick Puppy, he exposes emotional detachment and the elements of pop culture that contribute to this condition—all of which make it possible for him to critique the failures of the West. At the same time, Wallace does not redeem Sick Puppy or make excuses for him. Instead, he speaks to the reader and “make[s] people feel less lonely” (16) or he “get[s] some empathy with the reader” (Crain 124). He simply creates another community, this time outside of the ones forged by television, for readers to examine how the failures of the West—the lack of equality across classes and

dependence on the superficial world of pop culture—impact members of society.

Like Wallace, Ellis does not provide consequences, more or less solutions for the ills that plague his characters like Bateman. Weinreich argues that there is “neither cause nor consequence” to Bateman’s actions (75). Yet, Ellis’s style evidences a deeper cynicism than Wallace’s. While he may describe in great detail the effects of popular culture—namely, gross materialism, emotional detachment, and interchangeable identities within a group—it ultimately does not matter as Bateman repeatedly suggests throughout the novel. This cynical worldview simply shows that the postmodern world is all surface, evident in the experiences of Ellis’s characters.

Violence in “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho*

When the superficial world of pop culture fails to make the characters feel anything, they turn to violence in “Girl With Curious Hair.” Violence plays an important role in the postmodern world. Hicks contends that “Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict . . . and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, post-modern accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force, whether masked or naked; the use of force in turn leads to relations of dominance, submission, and oppression” (6). The conflict mentioned by Hicks emerges because of dissension within different collectivist groups. The dissension can relate to differences in sex, race, or ethnicity. In “Girl With Curious Hair,” Wallace focuses on class-based dissension, specifically as it relates to Sick Puppy’s inability to belong to his own social class. In the conversation about happiness between Cheese and Sick Puppy, for example, the latter at first gives a list of superficial reasons for the origins of his happiness. Eventually, Sick Puppy expands upon his answer to include the two occasions in which he felt “down in the dumps” (71), thus allowing Sick Puppy’s moral framework to emerge through his inability to belong to an upper-class family. In the first instance, he explains:

I went to proudly enlist in the United States Marine Corps R.O.T.C. program to continue to follow in the footsteps of my father and brother who serve with honor in the military and the Recruiting Colonel made us take a dumb personality test and I flunked and later when I went back to politely complain they gave me another dumb test and said I flunked it. (71)

The psychological problems identified in the test prevent Sick Puppy from following in his family's prestigious footsteps. Even though his family has great standing in society, especially his brother who carries the black box of nuclear codes, there is a great difference between his family members and Sick Puppy.

As his narrative moves even further back in time from college to childhood, the origin of the gold lighter fetish emerges. After being turned on by pornographic magazines, Sick Puppy rapes his sister. Once his father discovers what Sick Puppy has done, he burns his son's genitals with a gold lighter. It becomes clear to the reader that Sick Puppy later fails the personality test at Brown University because of the trauma he carries with him since childhood. In all these instances, he speaks using an "inimical, zombie-like style" (Boswell 47), thus emphasizing his emotional detachment as he reveals to Cheese what has made him this way. An understanding of his moral framework at first elicits sympathy for him on the part of the reader, especially when contrasted with the differences between his father's generational culture and his own. As the story progresses, however, readers begin to understand that Sick Puppy's emotional detachment and his relationship with pop culture are effects rather than causes. According to Hicks, to get to the metaphysical center of Being, "[o]ne must absolutely not . . . give into one's overpowering sense of distress and run away from dread and back to the safety of one's petty, day-to-day life" (64). In other words, Sick Puppy does the exact opposite by embracing the petty, superficial elements of his life, rather than face the dread and trauma of his past and his subsequent inability to represent the values of his socio-economic class.

Once Wallace establishes the origins of Sick Puppy's moral framework, the story culminates in a violent ending where dissension works across different class groups. Throughout the concert, for example, the punk rockers and Sick Puppy have focused on a little girl and her father who sit in the audience. During the intermission, after Sick Puppy finishes his conversation with Cheese, the punk rockers follow the girl and her father out of the auditorium. Sick Puppy observes that

Gimlet's eyes continued to be all dark black pupil rather than white and color and pupil and she was running slowly in her leather and plastic and reaching out with her hand for the curious hair of the girl with the curious hair who was asleep in the protective arms of the distinguished older man running slowly past me. (74)

Sick Puppy watches the events unfold, ending the story with: “And here’s what I did” (74). This ending encapsulates what Wallace calls “uneasy” reading (McCaffery 33), or that which makes the reader work harder to put all the story’s characteristics together. There can be no doubt that the punk rockers hurt either the girl or her father or both, and that Sick Puppy helps in some way, given the build-up to this very moment throughout the story. Yet this violent ending also describes the use of force mentioned by Hicks. Because Sick Puppy cannot belong to his own collectivist group, the one that he adopts, that of the punk rockers, brings its own relationships of conflict that emerge at the story’s violent end.

Ellis provides many examples of Bateman’s violent tendencies in *American Psycho*. The intent behind the violence in both “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* is the same: to show relations of conflict in the postmodern world. Bateman routinely makes confessions to those around him about his murderous rampage or his desire to commit homicide—all of which are ignored within his social circle or those connected to it. While receiving a massage, for example, he tells Helga that he would like to kill a girl and a dog. She responds with, “Shhh, Mr. Bateman. . . . Relax” (116). Later, when speaking with Evelyn, he informs her that she cannot come over because “your neighbor’s head was in my freezer. . . . Listen. Dinner? Where? Can you hear me?” (119). Just like Helga, Evelyn completely ignores his confession, focusing instead on the practical part of the conversation. Like the repeated listing of brand names, his ignored confessions culminate in Bateman’s final attempt to be heard: his confession on an answering machine. Berthold Shoene states that “[h]is formerly secure first-person identity has come unstuck and succumbed to postmodernity’s third-person flux, which Patrick can only experience as self-erosion” (383). It is at this point of the novel that Patrick refers to himself in third-person, as Shoene indicates. At the end of his answering machine message, Patrick states that he is a “pretty sick guy” (Ellis 352). Shoene further argues that Bateman’s violence is a case study for the “predicament of a particular type of man within a specific socio-historical context” (381). According to Shoene, Patrick’s insecurity exists because of a “massive epistemological paradigm shift” (381), one in which the previous gender-specific hegemony has collapsed. In other words, masculinity for Bateman no longer carries the same weight in the 1980s that it did in previous eras, thus causing a gender-based conflict within his social circle. As a result, Bateman unleashes “hyperbolic acts of violence, both real and imagined” (381)—to metaphorically suppress these social changes. While

it seems entirely plausible that Bateman's confessions are uttered and then ignored, at the same time, the violent acts themselves represent a fantasy—one in which Bateman can silence and oppress others, or force them into the submissive situations that he finds himself experiencing. Ironically, these fantasies separate him from the replicated identity of the other characters.

The descriptions of the violent acts work as a “parody of the slasher genre” (Cojocaru 187), thus indicating that the purpose of them is pure fantasy or entertainment, rather than realness. Ellis, in fact, has posited that Bateman “may in fact only be fantasizing about being a serial killer” (qtd. in Schoene 392). When he lures Bethany to his apartment, for example, he allegedly tortures and murders her. Yet, Bethany, a woman with a Black American Express card and significant ties to the community, is never reported missing. The chapter ends with Bateman returning to the comfortable stability of materialism when he screams at her: “And another thing . . . It's not Garrick Anderson either. The suit is by *Armani! Giorgio Armani!*” (247). He does the same thing later when he describes her decomposing body in his apartment—a building also inhabited by Tom Cruise—before moving on to his unreliable music review of Whitney Houston. After he allegedly murders Paul Owen of the infamous Fisher account, another high-standing member of society, the next chapter weaves together gross materialism—expensive ties as birthday presents—with an inability to emotionally handle or avoid Luis's sexual advances. Weinreich argues that Bateman murders to “discover something authentic, something remotely meaningful” (72). Weinreich further states that Bateman's “narration makes no stylistic distinction between endless lists of commodities and atrocious mutilation” (74). In contrast to Weinreich, Schoene suggests that it does not matter if Bateman “has only dreamt about murder” (389). Cojocaru posits that Bateman “tried to be acknowledged by society as a serial killer” (192) and that to read Bateman's murders as pure fantasy risks losing the most disturbing irony of the book: no one is interested in stopping people like Ellis's protagonist (194). It seems plausible that the answer rests between Weinreich, Schoene, and Cojocaru's arguments: the reality of the murders only matters in that it continues an established trend in the novel in which Bateman is an unreliable narrator who believes in nothing, but who cannot escape the exterior conflict arising from social change. Florian Niedlich argues, “Violence, for Bateman, is a way to sublimate his repressed feelings, needs, and drives” (230). Rather, fantasizing about murder gives him a sense

of control, while separating him from the other herd-like characters that are indistinguishable from one another.

The absence of a moral framework, or the psychological background that has created an alleged serial killer like Patrick Bateman, suggests that Bateman does not need one because his life as a serial killer is pure fantasy. If the murders are real, multiple opportunities exist in the novel to present a moral framework like Wallace does with Sick Puppy, namely in the “Sandstone” and “Birthday, Brothers” chapters. In “Sandstone,” for example, Bateman visits his mother but does not express any resentment or troubling emotions in response to her—a direct contrast to Sick Puppy’s childhood experiences with his father. In “Birthday, Brothers,” Sean’s success, evident in his managing to get a reservation at Dorsia, makes Bateman feel small and inconsequential: “if I were to disappear into that crack . . . No . . . one . . . would . . . care” (Ellis 226). Although Bateman resents his brother’s “coolness,” the chapter does not do anything more than describe sibling rivalry. Sonia Baelo Allué argues that “[i]nstead of blaming one isolated person Bateman becomes the reflection of the selfish eighties US society, a decade that saw the increase of the gap between social classes due to the cuttings in the federal budget” (21). Ellis does provide a context for Bateman’s emotional distance in other ways, however, by making him a representative of 1980s culture, when he states that

I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface—food, clothes—that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive. (qtd. in Freccero 51)

Trapped on the surface of things, Bateman repeats the same actions over and over again, never able to dissolve his identity and prepare for what Hicks calls the “ultimate revelation” (64), or the acceptance of Being and Nothing.

Both Wallace and Ellis create characters that either commit violent acts or dream about doing so. This difference between the two is characterized by the presence or absence of a moral framework. Fabre argues that Wallace lacks interest in psychological motivations (108); however, the fact that Wallace provides a moral framework for Sick Puppy’s behavior (his childhood) suggests otherwise. At the same time, in a 1993 interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace explains that *Girl With Curious Hair* is “a very traditionally moral book. This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it’s

our job to make them up, and we're not doing it" (18). In contrast, Ellis has been taken to task by critics for not providing a moral framework for Bateman (Freccero 51), when in fact it is not necessary because the sole purpose of the novel is an examination of the superficial.

Again, the root of this difference centers upon the purpose of the texts for both Wallace and Ellis. Wallace wanted to write about the human condition, while Ellis focused on the surface of the human condition. In Ellis's novel, "pain becomes synonymous with meaning" (Niedlich 231) while everything else is surface. This tends to be a consistent trend in postmodern discussions of masculinity. In contrast to this emphasis in Ellis's novel, Wallace's willingness to be vulnerable seemingly irked Ellis, simply because of how that vulnerability contrasted with Ellis's cynicism. After all, Wallace had criticized Ellis in the past for lacking courage in his books (McCaffery 51). At the same time, *Sick Puppy*'s toneless tale of depravity seems to be based on Ellis as a "flat, inhuman WASP personified" (Boswell 47). As Wallace once said, "I don't think there's a [writer] alive who doesn't make their books somewhat out of other books, and particularly ones they really like. The trick is to do this enough, and have enough of kind of your own stuff going on that when you're using things you're transfiguring it and making it your own" (Thompson 11). For Wallace, "fiction is a conversation" (Miller 62), one between reader and writer—a trait lacking in Ellis's fixation on the superficiality of the postmodern world.

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