

## **Hiding in Plain Sight: Understanding Psychopathic Concealment in 'American Psycho'**

### **Introduction**

The importance of an ability to discern psychopathic traits can be illustrated by an acknowledgement that psychopaths have 'probably the most dangerous and virulent constellation of personality traits that one can imagine' (1). Yet, despite being one of the most studied personality disorders and significant amounts of public interest (2), it remains a widely misunderstood diagnosis (3).

Characters that have been labelled psychopathic are featured eminently in modern literature and cinema. Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter of 'Silence of the Lambs' is considered to have originated the serial killer genre (4). The duplicitous yet charming Tom Ripley in 'The Talented Mr Ripley', the enigmatic, bone-chilling Anton of 'No Country for Old Men' and 'Saltburn's' conniving and merciless Oliver Quick, may all be considered to fall somewhere on the spectrum of psychopathic personality disorder (5). Patrick Bateman, of Brett Easton Ellis's 1990 social satire 'American Psycho', '(...) heralded the mass arrival of the US cable-television epoch of the anti-hero' (6). It was adapted for a film released in 2001, bringing further notoriety to Bateman's successful Wall-Street-financier-by-day, mentally-deranged-serial-killer-by-night persona.

Historically, folklore demons were largely supernatural in essence, whereas this has frequently been replaced by evil being ascribed to 'psychological dysfunction' in modern storytelling (4). Psychopathy is often represented in association with the serial killer genre. However, fictional presentations of psychopaths may bear little resemblance to real people diagnosed with the disorder (4). It is less common for professionally successful and non-violent psychopaths to be depicted, perpetuating the belief that they are all 'killers and convicts' (2).

Whether fictional presentations of mental health conditions, such as psychopathy, are helpful in clarifying public understanding of such diagnoses is to be questioned. The inability of a layperson to recognise a psychopath in plain sight is a key theme in 'American Psycho'. This essay will aim to analyse the techniques employed by Ellis in portraying Patrick Bateman as a 'psycho', elucidate how Bateman evades detection and consider the impact on the reader's understanding of psychopathy. A description of current understandings of psychopathy as a diagnosis and a brief overview of the background of the book will be included.

### **What is Psychopathy?**

Studied for decades, psychopathy as a construct arises from antisocial behaviour alongside a set of disruptive personality traits (2). Cleckley surmised that the 'diversity of opinion among different psychiatrists concerning the status of these patients never grows less' (7). Although psychopathy is not a specific diagnosis in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V) it is perhaps encompassed within anti-social personality disorder (8). The Eleventh Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 11) includes psychopathic personality within the definition of dissocial personality disorder (5).

Perhaps the most influential description of psychopathy is that of Harvey Cleckley, who compiled a list of 21 diagnostic features (3). More recently, Hare's psychopathy checklist is commonly drawn upon to make the diagnosis, which is largely derived from Cleckley's traits (7). Hare surmised that psychopathy is 'a severe mental disorder marked by a character deviation, absence of genuine feelings, coldness, insensitivity to other's feelings, manipulation, egocentricity, lack of remorse and guilt for cruel acts, and inflexibility with punishments' (2). The DSM V definition of anti-social personality-disorder makes no reference to these checklists (3). For the purposes of this essay, psychopathy will be characterised according to Hare's definition.

Complicating the matter further is the interchangeability and confusion in definitions of: sociopathy, antisocial personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, psychopathic personality disorder, amongst other disorders (2). The ambivalence of diagnosis and disagreement amongst professionals in distinguishing the key features of a psychopath (3,7) surely ought to exacerbate public incomprehension of psychopathic traits.

## **American Psycho Analysis**

### **Background and Synopsis**

A controversial storm surrounded the publication of 'American Psycho' in 1991. Considered too offensive, the publishers Simon & Schuster cancelled its publication despite having paid Ellis a \$300,000 advance. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women called for a boycott of the book, declaring it a 'how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women'. Scandalised readers who condemned the book's main character for the torture and mutilation of his victims ironically sent Ellis death threats purporting that the same should be done to him (9). The novel was instead published by Vintage in 1991 and in subsequent years reviews grew more favourable, with the book now being considered a modern classic (10).

The novel centres on Patrick Bateman; a charismatic and affluent socialite working in Wall Street in hedonistic New York City in the 1980s. Yet beneath his charming exterior, unbeknownst to his unwitting colleagues and acquaintances, Bateman is a psychopathic serial killer. Irvine Welsh stated that 'Bateman would probably be held up as an archetypal model of American success, were it not for the fact of him being a murdering psychopath' (6). Ellis describes the book as a 'work of satire and even comedy' (10), addressing the public obsession with material wealth and superficial appearances. The narrative follows Bateman's day-to-day activities which include doing limited work at the office, dining at exclusive restaurants and pleasure-seeking at nightclubs. This is interspersed with chapters graphically detailing murder, torture and cannibalism. The widespread notoriety of this novel may be attributed to these highly vivid descriptions of violence. However, he is never punished for his crimes, and aside from a few minor encounters, even evades suspicion.

### **Narrative technique**

The novel is told using first-person narrative through the lens of Patrick Bateman. Bateman may be considered an unreliable narrator, drawing question to the reality of what he has described and indeed his state of mind. Ellis' utilisation of this narrative technique enables the reader to uncover Bateman's psychopathic nature. The use of first-person narrative affords the reader an intimate perspective of the sadistic murder and torture scenes which have invoked such strong public reactions of disgust. Bateman's own awareness of his psychopathy is made apparent in his describing himself a 'total psychopathic murderer' (p.212) and admitting his failure to experience any emotion 'except for greed and, possibly, total disgust' (p. 271). This starkly contrasts with other characters perspectives on him.

One of the most arresting features of the narration is the relentless listing. Ellis employs listing as a key technique to convey Bateman's obsessive nature. Lists and lists of each item of clothing other characters wear, complete with their designer, appear consistently throughout the novel. For instance, he describes a character 'wearing a linen suit by Canali Milano, a cotton shirt by Ike Behar, a silk tie by Bill Blass and cap-toed leather lace ups from Brooks Brothers' (p.29). Interestingly, Ellis mentioned in an interview that Bateman incorrectly identifies the clothing, and these outfits would look ridiculous (11). This may not be obvious to the reader and could infer Bateman's status as an unreliable narrator or indeed his poor mental state. Little to no consideration is given to the facial or bodily features of anybody, except in rare cases to make derogatory remarks or objectify a woman. This could be an indication of Bateman's ability to dehumanise other people.

Though deeply disturbing to a reader, the graphic scenes of violence depicted in the novel are described in the same flat, factual manner as material objects. Ellis explained: 'it seemed clear to me that Bateman would describe these acts of brutality in the same numbing, excessive detail and flat tone that he recounts everything else' (9). Perhaps Bateman's most infamously barbaric act is recounted in a chapter entitled 'Girl', where he introduces a starving rat into the vagina of a girl he has trapped and mutilated. He is merciless telling her 'I hope this hurts you' (p.316). Although such scenes are extremely difficult to read, violence is a key theme in the novel and Ellis' use of graphic detail makes Bateman's psychopathic nature impossible to misconstrue. Bateman's monotonous daily routine contrasting with the murderous scenes may align with the conflicting lifestyles of real-life individuals diagnosed with psychopathic personality disorders, who must engage in mundane, ordinary activities just as anybody else does (2).

### **Obliviousness of other characters**

In contrast with the reader's insight into Bateman's condition, other characters in the novel are utterly ignorant of his psychopathic and homicidal tendencies. This is despite some glaring signals; firstly, Bateman repeatedly **telling** them. He is described as 'total GQ' (p.87) and 'the boy next door' (p.11); whispering in response that he is actually 'a fucking evil psychopath' (p.11). At dinner with his girlfriend Evelyn, he tells her he wants to 'blow her fat mother's head off with a Hamson AK-47 assault rifle', whilst she is preoccupied fantasising about their future wedding (p.119).

Ellis uses dark humour to convey the absurdity of the other characters misinterpretation of Bateman's intentions. When Bateman begins to strangle a colleague, this is mistaken for a

sexual advance. Bateman abandons the attempt, leaving the room in revolt and the would-be victim with a 'love-struck grin plastered to his face' (p.153). On telling another female character he is into 'murders and executions mostly', she is completely unphased believing him to have said 'mergers and acquisitions' (p. 197). The use of dramatic irony emphasises the characters failure to recognise a psychopathic murderer in plain sight. This could draw the reader's attention to real life parallels. For instance, the serial killer Ted Bundy, who murdered between 30 to 40 women, was able to entice and blindside his victims with his charm and handsome appearance (12).

Another hint of Bateman's true nature to the other characters is his fixation with serial killers. This fascination does not go unnoticed by his peers, but they fail to observe that this goes further than healthy interest. 'Bateman you are some kind of morose bastard ... you should stop reading all those Ted Bundy biographies' (p.37). Conversing with colleagues, he describes the serial killer Ed Gein as 'an interesting guy' (p.88) and shares Gein's contradictory thoughts when he sees an attractive woman; whether to treat her nicely or 'imagine what her head would like on a stick' (p.89). The indecency of this remark is not lost on them, but they fail to consider it more than an inappropriate comment. This highlights how seemingly innocuous jokes about a person's dark nature may bear some truth. For instance, it was reported that Wayne Couzens, a police officer convicted of the rape and murder of Sarah Everard, displayed misogynistic and highly offensive views in a WhatsApp group with other officers, which were not challenged (13).

### **Superficial appearance and charm**

Hare described psychopaths as 'social predators who charm, manipulate, and ruthlessly plow their way through life' (2). One reason for other characters failing to identify Bateman's true nature may be his charismatic, attractive exterior. The juxtaposition between his ostensible charm and his true psychopathic nature is utilised by Ellis to demonstrate the dichotomy. He tells a bartender '(...) you are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood' but says this 'whilst smiling' (p.57). His ability to charm is also highlighted when a detective comes to question him about the disappearance of one of his victims. Bateman offers coffee and an ashtray, insists on getting him a bottle of San Pellegrino and asks seemingly helpful questions about the victim's whereabouts (p.255-267).

Bateman's handsome appearance is also pivotal in disguising his psychopathy. His rigorous and extensive morning routine demonstrates the utmost care he takes with his looks (p.23-29). His self-obsession is frequently highlighted: 'I want Helga to check my body out, notice my chest, see how fucking *buff* my abdominals have gotten' (p. 110). Ellis' use of humour mocks Bateman's vanity and need to impress. This aspect of his personality may indicate psychopathy or narcissistic personality disorder as potential diagnoses. There are similarities between their respective traits; a grandiose sense of self-worth is included within Hare's checklist (2). This overlap could lead to confusion when assigning traits to a certain diagnosis and perhaps result in subsequent underestimation of somebody's level of threat. Considering him merely narcissistic, when he has a psychopathic personality disorder, might prove a perilous miscalculation.

Though Bateman may possess excess concern about his looks, Ellis was writing about 'a society in which surface became the only thing' (10), therefore this self-obsession does not seem particularly unusual. His work colleagues are also fixated on their appearances, and this is demonstrated when discussing their plans for the next day 'Haircut at the Pierre', 'Gio's. Manicure' and 'Sunmakers. Then private workout' (p.60) are their respective intentions. As egocentricity was, and still is, a prevalent aspect of modern culture, fixating on one's appearance is less likely to provoke suspicion of having a personality disorder, and this may contribute to an ability to go undetected.

### **Adherence to social norms**

Adhering to social norms can be considered a crucial component of Bateman's scheme to conceal his psychopathy. Psychiatrists have considered how the general public may fail to look past social stereotypes and disregard the fact that psychopaths could be professionally successful (2). Patrick Bateman has a successful career, an active social life and an ostensibly content relationship. His motivation for keeping up appearances is stressed when his ex-girlfriend asks why he does not just quit the job he hates, and he responds 'I...want...to...fit...in' (p.228). However, although it may be supposed that Ellis sought to emphasise Bateman's conformity to conceal his psychopathic tendencies, there is some evidence that true authorial intent was to explain it as a consequence of the stifling society he belongs to (10).

Perhaps the dubious behaviour of Bateman's peers enables someone with truly psychopathic features to blend in amongst them. It was noted in a review of the novel that "Patrick Bateman, of course, is a breed apart from his fellow bankers, but (and this is the novel's most haunting suggestion) only by evolutionary degrees" (14). This sentiment was considered in the 'Angiolini Inquiry' into Wayne Couzens' behaviour. It was conjectured that 'as long as vile behavior and deeply abusive language are normalised and accepted as 'banter' in policing culture and elsewhere, people like Couzens will be able to continue to commit atrocious crimes undetected' (13).

Bateman's group of friends frequently engage in racist, misogynistic discussions and display ruthless and narcissistic traits. Ironically, Bateman berates his friends for their poor behaviour on occasion and is the only member of the group not to laugh at a racist joke. This may be evidence against him being a psychopath or construed as a means to display a façade of humanity. If everybody lies on a spectrum of a personality disorder, it leads to greater challenges in identifying somebody on the extreme end.

Ellis makes it apparent that Bateman's efforts to blend in with society are largely successful. When laughing on cue he observes 'I've perfected my fake response to a degree where it's so natural-sounding that no one notices (...)' (p. 150). In his review of the novel, Norman Mailer wrote: 'the same man who makes his rounds of restaurants and pretends to work in an office, this feverish snob with a presence so ordinary that most of his casual acquaintances keep mistaking him at parties and discos for other yuppies who look somewhat like him, can also be the most demented killer ever to appear in the pages of a serious American novel?' (15)

It could be construed that the tendency of other characters to mistake him for somebody else, are owed in part to his successful attempts to conform. He considers one such

misidentification a 'logical faux pas' (p.86), as he has the same '(...) penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses' (p.86) as the man he is mistaken for. His outward persona is so plausible in fact, that when he admits all his crimes to his lawyer, he considers it a joke: 'Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody that I couldn't fully appreciate it. Otherwise, it was amusing' (p.372). In portraying such a barbaric, psychologically unwell character as seeming unbelievable as such to other characters, Ellis leads the reader to consider whether they would ever know if they were in the presence of a psychopath.

## **Conclusion**

Consideration has been given to the narrative techniques, themes and content employed in 'American Psycho' to portray Patrick Bateman as a psychopathic murderer hiding in plain sight. The irony and dark humour facilitate an arguably entertaining reading of what may otherwise be a bleak and disturbing novel, rife with graphic depictions of violence and cruelty. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of the story is the sheer ignorance of the other characters to the true nature of somebody they consider a friend, colleague or lover. Ellis illustrates how Bateman blinds them with his appearance, social status and ability to conform to the societal norms of his time. It is important to note that though Bateman indeed showed traits of psychopathy, there was some overlap with psychotic features that were not discussed in this essay.

In showcasing how easy it may be for psychopaths to appear charming and guileless; unchallenged by peers and avoiding any suspicion from their victims, Ellis emphasises the danger that psychopaths pose. Cleckley considered that the behaviour of psychopaths "probably causes more unhappiness and more perplexity to the public than all other mentally disordered patients combined". (3) Therefore, it is crucial for a member of the public to possess some awareness of somebody with such a personality disorder.

Anticipating that this novel might give a member of the general public some scope to recognise a psychopath may be unrealistic. This is in view of professional disagreement in the definition of a psychopath, and an accurate depiction of psychopathy not being an aim of the novelist. However, psychopathic traits are highlighted in the novel and their ability to fall in line with accepted societal behaviour is highlighted. Norman Mailer wrote that: "All the more valuable then might be a novel about a serial killer, provided we could learn something we did not know before. Fiction can serve as our reconnaissance into all those jungles and up those precipices of human behavior that psychiatry, history, theology, and sociology are too intellectually encumbered to try" (15). Perhaps 'American Psycho' will afford the reader some greater insight into how a psychopath may operate in social circles and give some warning of their presence if they were ever to meet one.

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