

Murdered Selves: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Fragmented Identity in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis

Ahmed Hussein Abbood Altaai

General Directorate of Education in Karbala

Abstract: This study is an analysis of the fragmented identity of Patrick Bateman, the principal role in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic outline. At the core of this investigation lies Lacan's multilateral paradigm of the psyche, which embraces the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, each of which plays a fundamental role in forming Bateman's identity in a hyper-consumerist society. The imaginary demesne, recognized by delusions and misleading images, is ricocheted in Bateman's obstinate exploration of shallow rightness and collective confirmation, epitomizing how he generates a façade that disguises his inner uproar. In the symbolic order, the outcome of language, communal norms, and cultural hypotheses are examined, revealing how Bateman's identity is windingly connected with the commodification of selfhood and the force to follow social views. The real, indicating that which is outside of language and cannot be totally uttered, arises as a foundation of reflective trepidation and interruption for Bateman, tangible in his brutal expressions and existentialist tendencies. Through this Lacanian angle, the examination clarifies how Bateman's painful actions and obsessive fascinations are not only signs of psychopathy but rather specify a deeper mental desolation and existential dilemma. This concavity signifies an inevitable extraction from genuine selfhood, proposing that Bateman's violence acts as a despairing effort to proclaim control in a world that diminishes human beings to mere products and images. As well, it is contended that Bateman's character characterizes the fiasco of modern identity structure, where the pursuit of external authorization causes moral corrosion and existential wretchedness. Ultimately, this study shows that *American Psycho* is not only a narrative of sternness but a commentary on the emotional magnitudes of a culture that picks appearance over legitimacy, leaving people like Bateman trapped in a cycle of hostility and self-annihilation.

Key points: Identity, Imaginary, psychoanalytic, Real, Symbolic.

1. Introduction

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) can be viewed as a thought-provoking dissatisfaction with a society engrossed with surface things and plush consumerism. Happening in the 1980s Manhattan, the novel portrays the life of Patrick Bateman, a well-off and successful investment banker who concomitantly implies the apex of capitalist success and the convolutions of venality as a serial killer. Bateman's character functions as an upsetting image of a culture that highlights image and material prosperity over legitimacy and ethical veracity. Ellis's description of this twofold existence stimulates a profounder probe into the psychological intricacies that lie beneath the central character's fierce and isolated personality.

To discuss the particulars of Bateman's fragmented identity, this research uses Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic outline as a helpful theory for understanding the subtleties of the human psyche in the current society (Evans, 2006, p. 4). Lacan's theories of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real permit the researcher to inspect the forces affecting Bateman's identity and the succeeding breakdown of his selfhood (Lemaire, 2014, pp. 36). The imaginary realm, ruled by illusions and unrealistic self-images, discloses how Bateman creates his public character as a disguise to deal

with a world preoccupied with appearances. In contrast, the symbolic order, which includes social standards and linguistic structures, emphasizes the stresses and beliefs that dictate Bateman's behavior and sense of self. The real, signifying the disgusting and the traumatic, appears as a lingering presence in Bateman's psyche, specifying the depths of his isolation and the confusion prowling beneath his refined façade (Julien, 1995, pp. 62-96).

Through this Lacanian perspective, this paper studies the contradiction of Bateman's life: although he seems to prosper in a society that pays inconsequentiality and extravagance, he at the same time deals with an internal emptiness that is substantial in cruel needs and expressive cessation. By dichotomizing the collaboration amid the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, this inspection clarifies the bottomless existential calamity that lies beneath Bateman's character, a crisis that resonances the larger collective chaos of a culture that links importance with consumption and identity with image.

In analyzing Bateman's psychopathic feelings, this study finds that his passionate movements are not only an echo of moral corrosion but also a manifestation of his brawl to proclaim an articulate identity in a disorderly world. It is also discussed that *American Psycho* exceeds a mere narrative of horror; it functions as a critical commentary on the psychological inferences of living in a consumer-driven society, where the exploration of identity becomes tense with danger and eventually results in the obliteration of the self. As we probe Bateman's character, this research will first outline Lacan's theoretical constructs, placing them within the framework of psychoanalytic thought.

2. Statement of the Problem

The fragmentation of identity in a consumer-driven society is an unpreventable problem that has extensive insinuations for understanding the emotional background of modern individuals. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* depicts a vibrant picture of this matter through the character of Patrick Bateman, whose identity is penetratingly entangled with the trivial standards of the consumer culture in which he lives. As Bateman copes with his life as a rich investment banker in 1980s Manhattan, his character becomes more and more scrappy, which shows the bottomless emotional effects of collective tensions and the abrasion of frank selfhood.

Now this study is going to investigate how Lacanian psychoanalysis can help find about Bateman's broke identity, principally through the standpoint of Jacques Lacan's ideas of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. To achieve this goal, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. How are Lacan's theories of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real represented in Bateman's character?

This question aims to show how Bateman's identity is constructed and deconstructed through these three indexes of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The imaginary refers to the development of the ego and the idealized self, the symbolic alludes to the social structures and language that form identity, and the real signifies what is outside of language and social norms, often linked with trauma and the unspeakable. Studying Bateman through these perspectives will clarify the intricacies of his character and the disjointedness between his public character and internal disorder.

2. In what ways does *American Psycho* condemn the construction of identity in contemporary society?

This question seeks to examine how Ellis's story functions as a disapproval of the social standards that lead to identity fragmentation. By depicting Bateman as a product of a hyper-consumerist culture, the novel asks questions about the genuineness of selfhood in a world subjugated by triviality, avariciousness, and an unyielding desire for prestige. The criticism spreads to the ways in which social outlooks form individual identities, often resulting in estrangement and withdrawal from one's real self.

3. Theoretical Framework

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory provides the researchers with an inclusive outline for understanding the intricacies of identity creation and fragmentation, chiefly in the contemporary consumer culture as represented in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Lacan's views of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real are central for scrutinizing the character of Patrick Bateman and the emotional allegations of his split identity. Each of these aids to recognize the ways in which Bateman's psyche is constructed and deconstructed, enlightening the bottomless magnitudes of collective anxieties on individual selfhood.

The imaginary is the dominion of images, misapprehensions, and the development of the ego. It is recognized as the first points of identity construction, where the self is created through identification with images or replications both factual and figurative (Lacan, 2018, p. 40). In *American Psycho*, Bateman's identity is prominently influenced by the superficial portrayals of success and attractiveness that permeate the consumer-driven society in which he lives. He is worried about his appearance, his trendy clothes, and the prestige symbols that refer to him.

For instance, Bateman's unremitting prerequisite to compare himself to others and his fascination with showing a perfect image serve as tools for self-validation. Nevertheless, these images are ultimately dull, resulting in a sense of desolation and withdrawal from his true self. The imaginary, hence, becomes a two-edged sword for Bateman: it offers a sense of identity while concurrently leading to his estrangement.

The symbolic dominion includes language, law, and societal structures that form our understanding of the world and ourselves. It is via the symbolic that human beings learn to deal with social standards and beliefs, internalizing the morals and principles that control their behavior (Lacan, 2018, p. 42). In Bateman's case, his identity is profoundly imbedded in the symbolic order of the elite capitalist society he lives in. His position as a prosperous investment banker, his devotion to the rules of societal etiquette, and his contribution to the rituals of prosperity and power all represent his association with the symbolic.

Nevertheless, Bateman's correlation with the symbolic is tense with incongruities. Whereas he seems to prosper in this framework, his actions often undermine the very standards he signifies. His ferocious outpourings and ethical corruption are in plain contrast to the refined exterior he shows to the world. This dissention between his public personality and private reality stresses the brittleness of his identity, signifying that his devotion to the symbolic is insincere and ultimately unmaintainable. The strain between Bateman's longing to follow social beliefs and his fundamental nothingness generates a psychological uproar that accentuates his disjointed self.

The real embodies that which exists outside of language and symbolization, often experienced as trauma or the unbearable. It is the dominion of raw experience that challenges classification and understanding (Lacan, 2018, p. 45). In *American Psycho*, the real is depicted in Bateman's fierce instincts and his encounters with death and sorrow. These moments of hostility with the real disturb his carefully constructed identity and uncover the fundamental disorder of his psyche.

Bateman's fierce actions can be regarded as efforts to struggle with the real as moments where the boundaries of his imaginary and symbolic identities fail. For example, his ruthless murders act as an obstinate declaration of his existence, a way to proclaim control in a world that feels progressively estranging and empty of meaning. Yet, these acts also emphasize his insightful withdrawal from humanity; they are expressions of a cracked identity struggling to reunite the incongruent features of his psyche.

Moreover, the interaction between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real is decisive for understanding the fragmentation of Bateman's identity. Disturbances or failures amongst these indexes can bring about important psychological conflicts, as noticed in Bateman's character. His preoccupation with the imaginary results in a phony identity, whereas his adherence to the symbolic exposes the emptiness of social morals. In the meantime, encounters with the real depict the trauma and turmoil prowling beneath the surface, bringing about a total breakdown of self.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Imaginary and the Construction of the Ego

In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman's identity can be analyzed in light of Jacques Lacan's notion of the imaginary, which accentuates the construction of the ego through images and exterior exemplifications. Bateman is not only a product of his environment, but also a hyperreal echo of the social principles that enclose him. His preoccupation with appearances, be it the punctiliously curated wardrobe, the newest designer accessories, or the high-class eating experiences, stresses his dependence on exterior confirmation to create his self-perception.

Bateman's preoccupation with brand names acts as a mechanism for self-definition. He is intensely conscious of the supremacy that these symbols have in the societal hierarchy of 1980s Manhattan. As he asserts, "In this city, your worth is measured by the labels you wear and the places you frequent. If you're not on the list, you simply don't exist" (Ellis, 1991, p. 45). This quotation emphasizes the idea that Bateman's identity is not entrenched in an accurate self but rather in a disguise built from the images he observes as looked-for.

The imaginary, as Lacan suggests, is a dominion where the ego is formed by images and delusions, resulting in a fragmented sense of self. Bateman exemplifies this fragmentation, as his identity vacillates between the refined exterior he shows to the world and the forceful desires that lurk beneath. He often comments, "I feel like I'm living in a glossy magazine, where every smile is airbrushed and every moment is curated. But behind the page, there's nothing but chaos" (Ellis, 1991, p. 112). This opposition discloses the concavity of his life, as he struggles with the discord between the idealized self he projects and the reality of his internal chaos.

Furthermore, Bateman's communications are immersed in a performative quality, where he implements different facades to deal with social circumstances. He says, "I wear my identity like a designer suit—tailored to fit the expectations of the moment, but ultimately, it's just fabric draped over emptiness" (Ellis, 1991, p. 78). This metaphor emphasizes the triviality of his acquaintances and the degree to which he depends on the imaginary to uphold his self-concept.

Lacan's theory also underscores the implication of the mirror stage in the growth of the ego, where the child identifies with an image of themselves, producing a sense of consistency that is eventually misleading. Bateman's life is an everlasting mirror stage; he is stuck in a cycle of reflection and imitation, where his sense of self is depending upon the insights of others. He thinks, "I am both the mirror and the reflection, endlessly searching for a self that remains just out of reach" (Ellis, 1991, p. 134). This self-awareness of his fragmented identity intensifies his existential crisis, as he distinguishes the pointlessness of his search for a consistent self.

4.2. The Symbolic Order and Social Expectations

In *American Psycho*, the character of Patrick Bateman copes with the symbolic order of Wall Street, where language, standards, and social beliefs influence behavior and identity. This outline forms Bateman's connections and offers a structure within which he is anticipated to act. Still, his experiences disclose a deep feeling of bareness and objectivity, representing a discontinuation between his interior wishes and the roles enforced upon him by society.

The symbolic order, as expressed by Jacques Lacan, signifies the dominion of language, law, and societal structures that control human behavior. For Bateman, Wall Street acts as a small-scale version of this order, where triumph is determined by affluence, prestige, and devotion to a stiff sequence of standards. He says, "In this world, the language of power is spoken fluently, but it's a language devoid of meaning—just a series of hollow phrases designed to mask the void" (Ellis, 1991, p. 63). This excerpt captures Bateman's acknowledgement of the triviality intrinsic in the corporate culture he lives in; whereas he is capable in the language of victory, it eventually fails to offer him a sense of contentment.

Bateman's faithfulness to the beliefs of the symbolic order is obvious in his fanatical depletion of brands and status symbols. He claims, "Every morning, I dress in the armor of my social identity—

tailored suits, designer watches, and the right cologne. But when I look in the mirror, I see a stranger staring back" (Ellis, 1991, p. 92). This reflection stresses the dissension between his external appearance and his interior truth. Even though he follows social rules, the façade he presents is a mask that hides his true self, underpinning his estrangement.

Furthermore, Bateman's relations with others are often transactional, lacking sincere connection. He notes, "Conversations are just a series of calculated moves, like a game of chess where the pieces are all made of glass—fragile and transparent, yet somehow still deadly" (Ellis, 1991, p. 114). This figure of speech illustrates how Bateman perceives collective actions as premeditated exercises instead of consistent relations, additionally underlining his expressive dispassion from those around him.

The aridity suffered by Bateman can be accredited to his incapability to bring together his individual aspirations with the attitudes of the symbolic order. He acknowledges, "I am trapped in a world where ambition is worshipped, yet I feel like a ghost haunting the corridors of my own life—visible, yet unseen" (Ellis, 1991, p. 147). This feeling stresses his heavy solitude, as he fights against the recognition that his pursuit of victory and authorization has left him feeling more disconnected than ever.

In conclusion, Bateman's disjointed identity is regarded as a disparagement of the communal arrangements that stress dishonest fulfilments over truthful selfhood. His helplessness to derive meaning from the symbolic order echoes a greater commentary on the desolation of a culture preoccupied with materialism and prestige. As he reveals, "In the end, we are all just actors in a play, reciting lines that have long lost their significance" (Ellis, 1991, p. 172). This remark summarizes the core of Bateman's existential crisis, as he challenges the worthlessness of a life dictated by exterior outlooks.

4.3. Encounters with the Real

The character of Bateman also exemplifies the tension between the imaginary and the symbolic, with his fierce acts working as upsurges of the real. As said by Jacques Lacan, the real characterizes that which is outside of language and cannot be completely uttered or signified; it is the territory of raw experience that disturbs the constructed identities of the imaginary and symbolic. For Bateman, these fierce upsurges are not only expressions of psychopathy but are also despairing efforts to declare control and grasp an accurate experience among the irresistible barrenness of his life.

Bateman's violent acts can be regarded as a reaction to the insufficiency of the imaginary and symbolic to satisfy his profounder wishes. He states, "In the midst of my meticulously curated existence, the only time I feel truly alive is when I'm plunging a knife into flesh. It's the only moment that breaks through the facade of my life" (Ellis, 1991, p. 203). This citation demonstrates Bateman's cognizance that his vehement actions show a transitory sense of reality that is otherwise missing from his life. The turmoil of violence becomes an absurd basis of legitimacy, although one that results in more fragmentation rather than determination.

The real, as Lacan defines, is often linked with trauma and the boundaries of human experience. Bateman's encounters with the real are represented in his ruthless actions, which mean to emphasize the meagerness of his efforts to construct an articulate identity through consumerism and social prestige. He says, "Every scream I silence is a reminder of the emptiness within me, a void that no amount of wealth can fill" (Ellis, 1991, p. 218). This acknowledgment discloses that his fierce outbreaks are not only expressions of sadism but also a conflict with his own psychological confusion. The violence becomes a means of engaging with the real, even as it emphasizes his intense isolation.

Additionally, Bateman's violent illusions often haze the boundaries between reality and delusion, exemplifying the unpredictability of his identity. He ponders, "In the throes of my darkest impulses, I can't tell if I'm the monster or the spectator—watching my life unfold like a grotesque film, where every scene is drenched in blood and despair" (Ellis, 1991, p. 236). This interior struggle emphasizes the disjointed nature of his self, as he copes with the results of his actions while

remaining entangled in a cycle of violence that further estranges him from any sense of genuine existence.

The moments of violence in Bateman's life can also be understood as pointless efforts to regain agency in a world that has rendered him helpless. He acknowledges, "When I kill, I am not just taking a life; I am asserting my existence in a world that has stripped me of my humanity. It is a desperate grasp at something real, even if it is drenched in blood" (Ellis, 1991, p. 254). This quotation captures the catastrophic insincerity of Bateman's search for genuineness; in his chase of the real, he only excavates his psychological disintegration, becoming more detached from the very spirit of what it implies to be human.

5. Conclusion

By applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyzing *American Psycho*, it was found that this novel is a profound commentary on the creation and fragmentation of identity in modern society. Patrick Bateman acts as a plain illustration of the outcomes that appear from an overreliance on exterior images and social structures to describe the self. His character captures the inconsistency of a life methodically curated for public consumption yet basically dull at its core. As Bateman wavers between the roles of a prosperous investment banker and a pitiless killer, he demonstrates how the persistent chase of social authentication can bring about a deep mental failure when these constructs eventually fail to offer sincere contentment.

The examination of Bateman's fragmented identity in light of Lacan's imaginary, symbolic, and real discloses the complicated structures at play in the development of selfhood in a hyper-consumerist setting. The imaginary emphasizes Bateman's fascination with surface-level perfection, where his identity is created from curated imageries that lack substance. In the symbolic dominion, social beliefs and cultural standards dictate his behavior, accentuating the stresses that form modern identity. In the meantime, the real interferes with Bateman's prudently crafted façade, demonstrated as a negated that drives him to ferocity and pessimism, revealing the complexities of his estrangement and desolation.

References

1. Ellis, B. E. (1991). *American Psycho*. Vintage.
2. Evans, D. (2006). *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
3. Julien, P. (1995). *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary* (Vol. 2). NYU Press.
4. Lacan, J. (2018). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Routledge.
5. Lemaire, A. (2014). *Jacques Lacan*. Routledge.