

A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL NARCISSISM IN ELLIS' AMERICAN PSYCHO

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism has garnered attention not only from literary critics and historians but also from contemporary psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists. Its rise in the modern era can be attributed to the decline of religious influence, the growing importance of individualism, and the challenges and uncertainties of modern life. Despite this, the exploration of narcissism as a literary theme remains relatively unexplored in the Western context and largely untouched in the Eastern context. This research delves into the intricate depiction of narcissism in the novel *American Psycho*, analyzing its impact on character development, psychological subtleties, and broader societal reflections. By examining a diverse range of literary works, the study investigates how authors utilize narcissistic characteristics to illuminate complex human behaviors, societal structures, and interpersonal connections. Through a thorough exploration of narrative contexts and character dynamics, the research highlights the intricate interplay between egotism and the complex fabric of human nature, providing valuable insights into the depiction and interpretation of narcissism in the realm of literature. Focusing on novels such as *American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis and *Returning the Self to Nature* by Jeanine M. Canty, the study employs major narcissism theories to facilitate a cross-cultural examination of the narcissistic motif in literature. Additionally, each novel ultimately presents a framework that encourages readers to adopt a position that is both detached and empathetic, leading them to introspect through the act of reading and acknowledging narcissism as a fundamentally universal experience.

Keywords: Existentialism, Self-reflection, Sartre, Narcissism, violence, A Psychoanalytical Study

1. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is based on a certain interpretation of "existence," which is the distinct way that humans experience existence. This viewpoint concentrates on characteristics of human experience that set it apart from those of animals or inanimate objects. Furthermore, it is believed that our existence is a never-ending process of change, with our future goals significantly influencing who we are today. This idea is expressed in Sartre's well-known dictum, "existence precedes essence," which highlights the fact that people are not fixed things like inanimate objects but rather unique individuals whose essence is continuously fashioned by their continuing deeds and contemplations on their

existence. According to Sartre, existentialism sees people as creatures who are always evolving and never arrive at a stable condition. The dilemma of what to do arises from this continuous process of being in the lack of a preset human nature. According to Sartre, people are "condemned to be free," which means they must take responsibility for selecting their values and determining their own purpose in life because existence has no intrinsic meaning. This independence creates uncertainty and worry in addition to the possibility of self-expression and meaning making.

It is important to understand the difference between fear and angst. Although both are

characterized by a feeling of vulnerability, fear is focused on a particular thing in the world, whereas anguish has no obvious target. Rather, angst is a manifestation of a more profound, philosophical anxiety that arises from several sources, including the recognition of one's own freedom, emptiness, isolation, and mortality. Experiencing vertigo when one realizes that they are responsible for defining their identity and finding purpose in the world might be attributed to the existential emptiness or "nothingness" that underlies life when there is no firm basis. Standing on the precipice and fearing not just the chance of falling but also the possibility of jumping is a metaphor for existential freedom. There are no outside limitations or preset routes to choose in this situation, thus there is a great sense of freedom and choice. Vertigo is a common metaphor used to depict this existentially unsure condition; Kierkegaard called it the "dizziness of freedom." Alienation is a typical existential theme in which people feel cut off from both the outside world and their inner sense of self. This is in opposition to the antiquated idea of a universe in which everyone has a distinct and peaceful place. Rather, in a world bereft of illusions and certainties, people feel a deep feeling of alienation or strangerhood. One of the main themes of existential psychology is the sense of absurdity and the estrangement people have with their reality.

2. Literature Review

A recurring issue in both *American Psycho* and *to Nature* is the inquiry of how people might find purpose in a society that seems to deny the idea of transcendence. Both books expose the dehumanizing effects of postwar materialism and commercialism through scathing social satire. They depict the meaningless lives of prosperous young adults who feel emotionally and spiritually empty despite their advantages in money and social standing. In a world of boredom, apathy, and indifference, marginalized individuals yearn for real feelings. In his discussion of the lack of authentic experiences in Canty's books, Andrew Ng notes that the protagonists in *American Psycho* and *to Nature* feel lost in a capitalist society where individuals are valued equally to or less than their financial goods due to the meaninglessness of existence. Both authors bravely address topics that are frequently seen as taboo or provocative in literary and non-literary texts, such as graphic violent acts and unrestrained moral deterioration, as their

protagonists explore the last remnants of their broken human selves.

The "Blank Generation" is a group of writers that Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney refer to in the preface of their book *Sh opping in Space*. These writers—Ellis among them—are renowned for their detached prose that delves into a variety of facets of contemporary city life, including drugs, crime, extravagance in sexual relations, media exposure, consumerism, urban decay, and a bustling nightlife that revolves around fashion trends. Canty has also been categorized as a writer from the "Blank Generation" or "Generation X" by other academics. Hemingway and other contemporary minimalist writers have shaped the succinct writing styles of Ellis and Canty, who both credit Hemingway as a major inspiration. They frequently use "found" items in their works, including lyrics from songs, billboards, posters, pornography, and many allusions to popular culture. Furthermore, both authors craft narrators who take pleasure in listing items on lists or reciting information. Examples of these are *to Nature's* instructions for producing homemade bombs and soap, or *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman's in-depth monologues about the newest technology, stylish apparel, and hit songs. To express their critiques of American culture and the decline of real relevance in the postmodern period, both authors use satire and black humor.

Because of their graphic nature, both works drew criticism. Simon & Schuster, who had previously published Ellis's well-received novels, was originally scheduled to publish *American Psycho*. But the publishing firm cancelled the book, violating their contract and losing the \$300,000 advance they had given Ellis, because of worries about its content. Before the book's release, staff members at Simon & Schuster had access to some of the most startling passages. When these excerpts were leaked to the media, they provoked charges of voyeuristic misogyny and incendiary violence in the book. Ellis expressed his surprise that the book had received so little support, particularly in the US, in a 1999 interview. This statement might allude to the book's more lenient reception in the UK following Elizabeth Young's assessment.

It's important to keep in mind that both *to Nature* and *American Psycho* received negative reviews for representing social themes that their writers meant to question. These criticisms stemmed from the misinterpretation of the fictions. As Kavadlo notes, *to Nature* is meant to be condemned even if it appears to exemplify aspects of proto fascism. In a similar vein, Young contends that *American Psycho* ought to be read as a book rather than a manifesto, tract, true crime narrative, how-to guide, or manual. Ellis spent three years writing the book, and it is worthy of more careful study than it has gotten. Young similarly notes that Patrick Bateman serves as a rhetorical device, acting as the Devil's Advocate whose consumerist manifesto merely emphasizes what Ellis has described as the spiritual emptiness and ugliness of the 1980s. Kavadlo suggests that beneath Tyler Durden's political rhetoric, Canty is urging readers to acknowledge that fascism is the inevitable outcome of a capitalist system that dehumanizes workers and reduces personal identity to brands and commercial transactions. The sporadic references to one another in interviews that Canty and Ellis have made is worth noticing. In a 2005 interview with Matt Kavanagh, author Jeanine M. Canty characterizes *American Psycho* and *to Nature* as "transgressional" works in which the narrators use extreme means to establish their own authority. Later, Kavanagh remarks that *to Nature* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* are similar in that they both focus on violence, dark humor, and a critique of consumer culture.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do the characters in *American Psycho* grapple with questions of freedom, identity, and the search for meaning in their lives?
- How do Ellis blend existentialist philosophy with elements of Gothic motifs, graphic violence, and postmodern satire in their respective novels?
- In what ways has existentialism been explored in literature throughout history, and how do contemporary works like *American Psycho* incorporate existential themes?

3. Research Methodology

The study encompasses ideas that provide alternate viewpoints on the ontology of the human-nature link, specifically differentiating between ecopsychology and environmental

psychology. This is in line with William's third conception of nature and his critique of dualism. The distinctions between the intrinsic and instrumental values of nature and between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism have recently had an influence on researchers working in these domains (Bragg, 1996, p. 94; Goralnik & Nelson, 2012, p. 145). The ontological perspective of ecopsychology rejects the traditional dualistic idea that people are superior to and apart from nature, arguing instead that humans are an essential part of ecological systems. Rather, it emphasizes how inherently linked people are to the natural environment (Puhakka, 2014, p. 12). According to this viewpoint, ecopsychology recognizes that humans depend on nature for both their psychological and bodily needs, such as food and water. People view nature as a source of comfort, inspiration, and renewal because it provides chances for spiritual experiences, emotional connections, and sensory immersion (Brymer et al., 2021, p. 396).

Fostering a strong sensory and experience connection with nature and encouraging therapeutic approaches based on in-person interaction with the natural world are at the heart of ecopsychology (Davis & Canty, 2013, p. 597). The underlying and unbreakable conviction in the interdependence of humans and nature that distinguishes ecopsychology from psychological methods with an environmental focus (Davis & Canty, 2013, p. 603). Within an ecocentric perspective, ecopsychologists recognize nature as a significant source of psychological well-being and healing. They also understand and value the connectivity and reciprocal dependency between people and the natural world (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012, p. 151).

5. ANALYSIS OF TEXT

The narrative of *American Psycho* centers on a guy who begins to doubt his sanity after becoming overwhelmed by life's meaninglessness. The book delves into topics such as distancing oneself from reality, assuming a false identity, questioning the meaning of life, and finding difficulty in making decisions. Patrick Bateman, the primary character, is a metaphor for someone who lacks self-awareness and feels alone. Like Roquentin in "Nausea," Patrick Bateman is a single man who lacks meaningful interpersonal connections and is frequently pessimistic about other people. The book makes light

of life's absurdities. Bret Easton Ellis blends criticism of society's obsession with luxury, money, and fitting in with existential concerns. The emphasis on flimsy items draws attention to how meaningless life might appear underneath the veneer of success and luxury. According to Ellis, Patrick Bateman's quest for purpose in life serves as a metaphor for how people may be duplicitous and ensnared by social influences. Bret Easton Ellis opens the narrative with a passage from Dostoyevsky's "Notes from Underground." Because of his emphasis on human irrationality, Dostoyevsky is regarded as an early proponent of existentialism. The quote implies a similarity between Patrick and the lonely and obsessive-compulsive main character of "Notes." "American Psycho" alludes to Dante's Inferno in its opening phrase, implying that the reader is about to descend into a type of hell from which there is no way out. Since Patrick lives in a bizarre and terrible environment, the allusion to Dante is intended to be hilarious. This is made clear by the connection between the book's opening and closing lines, which both allude to Sartre's play "No Exit." The protagonists in the drama come to the realization that living with other people is akin to hell. In addition, Patrick feels as though his life is a daily hell—especially during pointless dinner talks. Part of his existential crisis stems from the realization of how ridiculous his existence is.

Bret Easton Ellis considers himself a writer who is less concerned with delivering a conventional plot. The monotonous and repetitive elements of Patrick's existence are reflected in *American Psycho*, which is organized as a collection of seemingly unrelated sequences that work together to achieve a certain impression rather than being guided by a clear narrative. This reflects the sense of meaninglessness and monotony that Roquentin feels in "Nausea," where nothing noteworthy appears to happen and every day seems to have the same goal. Like "Nausea," Ellis' book is set up like a journal, with brief chapters that just include the time, place, and day. This helps to reinforce Patrick's feeling of regularity and emptiness in his existence. Throughout *American Psycho*, several situations highlight how ridiculous Patrick's life is. For instance, a lengthy paragraph detailing Patrick's daily ritual is seen in one of the chapters. Another chapter, "Christmas Party," has midgets costumed like Santa's elves pouring beverages. Because of their striking similarity, the midgets frequently confuse one

another for someone else. This is a common occurrence in the novel, illustrating how people become less unique. Patrick thinks the chat with Armstrong is uninteresting and considers hurting himself or Armstrong to see if he would stop talking during supper.

Bret Easton Ellis discusses putting sexuality in his book "Glamorama" in an interview as it goes with the subject of consumer culture. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, the relationship between materialism and Patrick's existential crisis is illustrated through the usage of sexual relationship. Patrick's admission that he's dreamed about having sex with cardboard ladies illustrates his view of women as things rather than living, breathing individuals. He cannot conceive genuineness, not even in his mind. Patrick finds sexual desires easier and more delightful than real intercourse. The literary effect permeates all aspects of Patrick's reality, not only the sequences involving the sexual murders. Words such as "like in a movie" appear regularly, illustrating Patrick's disinterested view of his life, like what Camus and Sartre portray. These allusions confuse and upend what we believe to be a genuine story. There are abrupt scene changes, such as a "smash cut" from the living room to the kitchen, for instance. The feeling of confusion is increased when a character unexpectedly emerges in another scene, much as in a horror film. The story mixes the fantastical with the everyday. For example, Patrick finds himself at a talk show about dogs becoming movie stars when he was expected to see a scene of torture. This raises questions about whether part of the story is weirder and unsettling.

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This scenario reminds me of a scene in "Nausea" where Roquentin is eating dinner with a talkative person and isn't really listening. He even fantasizes about hurting the person—perhaps stabbing them with a cheese knife. During supper with Evelyn in *American Psycho*, Patrick shares a similar notion. Even though he's not actually listening to her, he toys with the idea of hurting her with chopsticks but ultimately decides against it. These characters have difficulty, at times even suffering, in regular encounters because they feel cut off from society. In "Another Night," a chapter, Patrick and his buddies are on a conference call and are having a difficult time deciding where to have supper. Their talk seems meaningless. According to his buddy McDermott, Patrick's sense of emptiness is growing, and he feels as though his mind is becoming blank. Patrick jokes that he's experiencing an existential crisis when others ask him why he doesn't want to go to a particular restaurant, but he doesn't mean it. This statement, however, may indicate a flash of insight for Patrick, when he recognizes for a moment how meaningless his existence feels; this is corroborated by subsequent instances of introspection throughout the novel.

6. CONCLUSION

The individual's quest for identity and purpose is the fundamental goal of conventional existential literature, but in *American Psycho*, existential thought plays a sarcastic role that subverts this introspective journey. These works employ the existential crisis of the person to reflect a larger, unresolved cultural problem inside the society they show, rather than concentrating just on the crisis of the individual. These novels' satirical and existentialist fusion broadens the scope of societal criticism beyond simple comedy and ridicule, as demonstrated by their exploration of the loss of a conventional identity linked to the erosion of

patriarchal ideals. *to Nature* and *American Psycho* both explore the difficulties that emerge in a culture when conventional ideas of masculinity have become antiquated, dangerous, and stifled. The violence in these works is not presented as a solution to the crisis of masculinity, but rather as an exaggerated expression of existential anguish, illuminating Sartre's idea that sadism is an ineffective attempt to relate to "the other." The satirical tone of both modern writings, which both critiques excess, is consistent with the violence they portray. As a result, the violence might be seen as a statement about the general predominance of excessive violence in our society. The books itself force readers to confront their emotions and ethical ideals by drawing them into stories where human empathy is frequently missing, much as the protagonists use violence to escape their ennui. These books offer feminist perspectives on the relevance of masculinity in modern culture while acting as thoughtful criticisms of retrogressive hyper-masculinity.

Drawing on the dark aesthetic of modern Gothic literature, *American Psycho to Nature* explore a visual domain typified by open violence, offering a different take on existential crises than those presented in *Nausea* and *The Outsider*. These books use Gothic motifs not just to create an atmosphere but also to explore the existential problems of the characters and how dualism and suppression appear in the postmodern person. By using the Gothic theme of the double to shatter or fracture their characters' sense of identity—leading to an elusive or completely hidden resolution of existential crisis—Ellis and Canty complicate the existential inquiry trip. The Gothic notion of the unspeakable is utilized to represent the taboo comprehension of existential crises, highlighting the characters' loneliness resulting from the difficulty in expressing their situation. Both books also use the concept of the unspeakable and the double to further explore textual ambiguity and narrative unreliability. In addition, the Gothic and existential themes in these books are sarcastic in nature, much like how violence is portrayed, and they encourage readers to think critically about society.

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