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Spend Your Life Spending

Matthew McConaughey is driving down the warm streets in his brand new 2017 Bentley Bentayga--that was a cheap $229,100-- as his tracks turn to an icy glaze as his impeccable hair perfectly styled with his Kevis-8 three-hundred-dollar shampoo flows in the bipolar breeze, and his designer $892,500 Stuart Hughes Diamond suit which is perfectly fitted and tailored to his exact size sits comfortably on his golden brown spray tan. The world has not always revolved around money, designer brands, and useless items, but around the 1980s the world of materialism started to implement into society as people became more inclined to prove their worth through their wealth. The brutal slaughtering of a magnitude of innocent people in the novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis reflects an extreme variation of the effect of materialism imprints on this 1980s New York society. Ellis’s literature shows how materialism influences society to determine the quality of human life by monetary worth, to be narcissistic and egotistical, to value a person’s appearance and surface rather than one’s interior self, and to make unnecessary expenditures.

When did society shift and conclude that a person’s self-worth can only be determined by how much money they make and how they spend this money? According to Ellis, this shift is peaking around 1980 in New York City, and he portrays how the treatment of the homeless is unnecessarily inhumane because they were deemed subhuman--due to the fact that they could not afford the luxuries of food, shelter, and brand-name clothes. Bateman and his friend, Craig McDermott, enjoy taunting the homeless with money on the way to and from their lavish dinners; on one particular evening, McDermott waves “a dollar bill in front of” a homeless woman’s face, and as she “pathetically [tries] to grab at it,” he “ignites the bill with matches from Canal Bar” (210) and watches her expression drastically change as the dollar bill incinerates in front of her eyes. Ellis depicts this cruelty to show how men like Bateman feel that they are of paramount importance to the homeless merely because they have more materialistic worth. On other encounters with the homeless, Bateman refers to them as the “genetic underclass,” as he observes an “ugly, homeless bum” (266) on the corner of the street, which furthers the fact that the homeless are despised on such an extreme level by these elitist men that they are perceived to be bestial. Even on the rare occasion that Bateman will feel any type of sympathy for these destitute civilians, he is shown to always retract his attempts at kindness. For example, after coming across a hysterical homeless man on the street and interrogating him on his unemployment, Bateman decides to give the man a ten-dollar bill, and then changes his “mind and [holds] out a five instead” (129) showing just how parsimonious people in this book truly are--and then he barbarically murdered him, but that is beside the point. Ellis uses this to emphasize the fact that the wealthiest of people can still be the stingiest when it comes to spending their money on something other than themselves. Furthermore, the homeless are not the only people being scrutinized throughout the novel. While checking out a few movies at the video rental store, Bateman is annoyed by the woman working at the front counter for being rude--after *he* was harassing *her*--and he sarcastically thinks about how working in a video store is “such a demanding high-powered profession” that “her bitchy behavior is reasonable”(112). Instead of condemning her behavior by acknowledging her actions, Bateman’s disdain for her is solely based off of her occupation, not who she is. Through this situation at the store, Ellis shows how people’s worth is truly based off the superficial aspects of their life--how they appear, what occupation they hold, and how much money they earn--and not on the basic fact that they are human and have emotions. Along with the discrimination against the homeless and people with lower level job positions, Bateman and his colleagues objectify women by judging them on their appearance. While eating lunch one afternoon at Harry’s, Bateman’s colleague, George Reeves, explains how a “good personality...consists of a chick who has a little hardbody and who will satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things”(39). Ellis constantly depicts the men in this novel and their crude behavior towards women since their worth seems to be determined by their wealth and looks. Moreover, when Bateman takes a woman named Patricia out to dinner one night, Ellis explains how she is “safe because her wealth” and “her family’s wealth” and that these aspects will “protect her tonight”(77) against Bateman’s wrath, which explicates how money is protecting people in this society and determining their lively value. Ellis clearly depicts the concept of wealth and perception influencing the quality of life one may hold.

Moreover, the perplexing problem of self-absorption and obsession with appearance gives light to the true nature of materialism in Ellis’s writing. Ellis uses Bateman’s egotistical nature to expose how selfish people can truly be. Anyone that Bateman deems to be subordinate to him or who is friendly towards him--such as his secretary, Jean, and a woman who works at a gym, Cheryl--seems to be “in love with [him]” (64). Additionally, Bateman often contemplates his relations with other women, and he comes to the conclusion that if a woman is only with him for his “muscles” and good looks then she is shallow, but if she is “physically superior” and “near-perfect-looking” than it can “override anything” (157). However, the men are not the only people obsessed with themselves; after dinner with three stunning models, Bateman is flagging down a taxi when his date starts posing and flaunting herself for what she thinks is a photographer, but is really “lightening. Not a photographer. Lightning!”(210). Ellis depicts the vainglorious actions of this model to show that not only Bateman is egotistical, but so are a majority of people in this novel. On the other hand, Bateman is still shown to be arrogant when he goes on a lunch date with his ex-girlfriend, Bethany. In his nervous flurry he cannot stop asking Bethany how his hair looks and he puts his “elbow on the table” and flexes his “biceps, asking her to squeeze the muscle,”(236) which makes the situation painfully uncomfortable for Bethany, and shows how vanity is replacing any civil conversation that should allow people to get to know each other in the New York society Ellis depicts. Even when Bateman is about to enter the gym, he looks at himself in the mirror and goes back into his “briefcase for some mousse to slick” back his hair, uses “a moisturizer and, for a small blemish” he notices “under [his] lower lip, a dab of Clinique Touch-Stick” (68). Ellis reveals the incredible amount of effort that people like Bateman put into their appearance every day because every time these elitists are going in public they feel the need to look flawless. After he makes his appearance perfect, Bateman starts working out on the Stairmaster and all that crosses his mind is how some “faggot” is probably behind him “checking out [his] back, ass, leg muscles” (68). To show how obsessed people are with their own appearance and how other people perceive them, Ellis portrays Bateman as this narcissistic man who needs validation from the people who surround him. In a different instance, Bateman shows his true colors when he is visiting his ill mother in the hospital. On this visit, Bateman barely acknowledges his mother and proceeds to stay there for an hour “studying [his] hair in the mirror [he] insisted the hospital keep”(365) in his mother’s room. Ellis uses this to further his point that people care so much about themselves that, in their minds, no one is more important than themselves. Lastly, Bateman is determined to have the workers at his apartment fix the small crack in his wall, and when he sees the new doorman in the lobby, he decides that he will not even “[lodge] a complaint” because he is “indefintely better-looking, more successful and richer than this poor bastard would ever be”(138). Ellis displays this typical narcissistic behavior to reveal how people judge who is worthless or priceless based on their physical appearance and how much money they are deemed to make. Even further, these prejudices all sprout from the incredibly high standard that these people hold themselves to and how important they feel their lives are compared to others.

Throughout this novel, Ellis also illustrates the paramount importance of surface over one’s inner self. There is the saying if you look great you feel great, but in this 1980s New York society it is not always the case. After contemplating what his life is looking like, Bateman comes to the conclusion that he feels “like shit but [looks] great”(106) which enhances how, in this society, one’s interior emotions are irrelevant if their appearance seems to be intact. Moreover, one of Bateman’s friends, Tim Price, explains his encounters with women and how his “behavior couldn’t matter less” once he tells them what his “annual income is”(53). According to Ellis, one’s personality, character, and emotion is irrelevant when money is involved because the world of wealth is seen paramount to any interior aspects of a person. Furthermore, when it comes to personality, Bateman and his friends discuss and decide that the “only girls with good personalities who are smart or maybe funny or halfway intelligent or even talented...are ugly chicks”(91). This furthers the idea that only looks are essential when looking for relationships because these men do not care about any internal quality of these women, only how they appear. Bateman compulsively lies about basically every aspect in his life, and to continue to fit in with the materialistic people he despises, he has “perfected [his] fake response to a degree where it’s so natural-sound that no one notices” (156-157). Ellis emphasizes that no one values honesty or actual opinions and beliefs, only sharing the same ideas as everyone else to *fit in*. Considering that Bateman is a serial-killer psychopath, it is sensible that he self-reflects and finds that the only emotions that he holds are “greed and, possibly, total disgust” (282); however, this goes beyond Bateman’s personal emotions, Ellis uses this to enter the entire realm of the disgust and greed that seems to seep into this New York society and taint everything it touches with its Gucci gloves. Bateman reflects on the community he is living in and condemns the fact that “individuality [is] no longer an issue” in this materialistic world, but even though he realizes this and is repulsed with the fact, he still does anything in his ability to easily slide into the same materialistic mold of every other man on Wall Street. Secondly, while Bateman is reflecting on the loss of individuality, he also realizes that “surface, surface, surface [is] all that anyone found meaning in” and that this civilization he was thriving in was “colossal and jagged”(375). Interestingly enough, Bateman is having this epiphany, yet he continues to solely judge people off of their appearance and their wealth. Ellis pinpoints the key aspects of materialism in his writing by emphasizing the rapid reduction of the significance in individuality.

Lastly, the materialistic world that Ellis portrays is fueled by the need for unnecessary expenditures that the wealthy constantly participate in. Nearly every time Bateman and his *friends* meet up for lunch or dinner--lavish dining at places such as Dorsia, Le Bernardin, Barcadia, Pastels, etcetera--their discussions of choice remain extremely superficial such as talking about “tanning salons or brands of cigars or certain health clubs”(216) which show how little these men care about what is happening in the world and how the only things that seems to have any kind of significance in their lives are materialistic and self-centered topics. These extravagant meals that these Wall Street men eat every day are extremely expensive and unnecessarily exquisite; for example, during one lunch Bateman’s girlfriend, Evelyn, orders “quail stuffed into blue corn tortillas garnished with oysters and potato skins,”(123) which would sound like an odd combination to any person in the middle class, but Ellis uses these interesting items to show how these pricey meals could be used to keep one of the “genetic underclass”(266) alive for months. Once winter begins to dawn on New York, Evelyn throws an intricately planned Christmas party--it even has midgets dressed like elves--where she asks Bateman what he wants for Christmas, in which he responds that he “wants a car stereo,” (183) even though he does not own a car. Ellis portrays how the rich are running out of things to spend their fortune on so people like Bateman decide to use their prosperity to buy more items that they do not need or do not even use. On a different night, as Bateman bounces from club to club in his limousine, he is slightly irritated that he misses a stop light because of the “four or five [other] limousines are trying to make the same right” (251) turn. Through this depiction of wealth driving down the street, Ellis is able to portray the excessive wealth that is poured into different ways of unessential spending that the elite find to be significant. In addition, When Bateman gets bored he goes shopping and buys whatever sounds good at the moment although he might not need it; for instance, he goes to Barney’s and buys “three ninety-dollar ties, ten handkerchiefs, a four-hundred-dollar robe, and two pairs of Ralph Lauren pajamas” (291). Ellis makes sure to emphasize exactly what brands people are wearing throughout the novel to show how the world revolves around what people are covering themselves in instead of what those people have to offer the world. Moreover, duringhis visit with Charles and Nancy Hamlin and their baby, Bateman wipes the germs of baby Glenn off his hands with a luxurious “two-hundred-dollar bath towel that hangs on a marble rack,” (222) which shows how much these people spend on items that can be purchased at a much more affordable price, but since everything revolves around the world of money, it seems to be a necessity to own such lavish items. From all of this unnecessary spending, Bateman’s pride in his Platinum American Express card only skyrockets when his card goes “through so much use that it [snaps] in half,” (279) showing how much he uses it to spend his money on materialistic needs. Lastly, when a college student asks Bateman to “name the saddest song” he knows, the first song that rolls off his tongue is “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. When depicting Bateman, no other song could better represent what he would truly find to be depressing since his main goal in life is to have an immense amount of wealth so he can fill his seemingly empty life with useless objects.

Ellis goes into depth on the psychotic nature of Patrick Bateman to emphasize the fact that his insanity is triggered by the ever-deepening greed that is so prevalent throughout the civilization he is surrounded by. He uses various techniques to promote the idea that materialism is influenced by more than just having money; it is influenced by the constantly escalating standard that people are being held at, the selfish nature and self-absorption in humanity, the decline in significance in one’s true self, and the fact that people’s worth is solely determined by their wealth and mien.

Works Cited

Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho.* A Vintage Contemporary Original, 1991.