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# Fictitious Monsters: *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *American Psycho* in Popular Culture

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## Abstract

Crime fiction and true crime documentaries provide a contemporary view on the representation of the psychopath in American popular culture. In this thesis the representation of the psychopath in these mediums will be analyzed with regards to the themes of identity and status. The links between capitalism and consumerism in American culture and the appeal of the psychopath in crime fiction novels and true crime documentaries for American audiences will also be investigated. *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) by Patricia Highsmith and *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis will serve as case studies.

A close analysis of the themes of identity and status in both novels are a touchstone for American middle class fascination with the psychopath. Exploring the connection between American capitalist consumer culture and how this is incorporated in the chosen novels, as well as various true crime documentaries, will help explain the continued interest in psychopathy in modern day popular culture. Finally, comparing and contrasting the mediums of crime fiction and true crime documentaries enlighten the growing normalization and glorification of psychopaths as a means for entertainment.

**Keywords:** crime fiction – psychopathy – identity – status – consumer culture

## Introduction

### 0.1 Introduction

When someone expresses enjoyment of a crime novel, relishes in the suspense of a psychological thriller, or indulges in a true crime documentary, no one seems to blink an eye. Resorting to novels and series of this kind for entertainment purposes and thereby partaking in the assessment of a psychopath has become so widely accepted that only few have made the effort to question the reason behind their popularity. Furthermore, the construction of the fictional and non-fictional representation of the psychopath, in relation to the reasons for their appeal to such broad audiences is even less explored. Author Philip L. Simpson argues that in popular culture “the serial killer is ‘psycho’ – aberrant and depraved – while still remaining a recognizable product of American culture” (Simpson, 2). Could it then be that the serial killers that so many love to watch or read about, intrigue because of the self-reflection they pose to American society?

The question of how a society shapes psychopaths, living amongst ordinary people, continues to astonish and puzzle audiences of crime television and fiction. A reflection of this society in works of fiction and true crime documentaries offers an opportunity to find an answer to this question. Therefore, an analysis of the prominent themes of identity and status in the well-known works *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) and *American Psycho* (1991) will help advance understanding of American fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy. These novels, references to which can be found throughout most categories of American Popular culture, are two of the most widespread, universal examples of fictional psychopathy. With identity and status as key components of a consumerist society, and consumerism being very present in these novels, these themes are essential in analyzing renditions

of psychopathy in American popular culture. This research provides a means of contributing to debates concerning the link between American culture and the readership and allure of these types of works. Popular television shows like *Making A Murderer* (2015) and *Amanda Knox* (2016) have resulted in conventions like CrimeCon, promoting the interest and passion for true crime that so many seem to share (Mahdawi, par. 6). Arwa Mahdawi, journalist at The Guardian, writes that “[i]n a virtuous circle, a rise in high-quality true-crime content has created a wide audience, which means that more high-quality content gets made” (Mahdawi, par. 8). She argues that, as time goes on, the relevance of this topic will surely continue to increase with the careful scrutiny of both past and future homicide cases.

## **0.2 Background and Academic Discussion**

In order to place these novels in context, it is important to briefly outline how exactly the image and complexity of the psychopath has developed through American fiction and true crime documentaries thus far. The ‘psychopath’ as a fictional phenomenon originated in United States crime fiction, starting with Edgar Allen Poe. His renowned detective story published in *Graham’s Magazine*, titled “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), has inspired many crime writers over time and is commonly known as the first modern detective story (Martin, 31). Since then, Poe’s introduction of some of the key literary conventions attached to crime fiction such as “the Gothic atmosphere; the narrator/companion/assistant; the locked-room mystery; armchair detection; inductive thinking [...]; the retrospective reconstruction of the crime” remain present within the genre today (Worthington, 93).

Not only are Poe’s crime stories a leading example of the basic structure of crime fiction, his earlier crime writing also incorporated a component of

psychoanalysis. This is rather extraordinary when considering the widespread assumption in the nineteenth century of “a nearly absolute dichotomy between scientific thought, with which analysis was associated, and artistic thought, which was the realm of the imagination” (Martin, 33). Poe’s attempt to link scientific and methodical logic with imagination, in the framework of a convincing plot, was the first of its kind.

But the genre acquired its starkest popularity when writers such as Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov in his novel *Lolita* (1955) or Thomas Harris in *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) increasingly began to delve into the psychological processes behind a villainous character, breaking with the traditional format of a detective, or other character of the sort, solving a crime and deciphering the unknown that constituted the standard crime novel. This shift in emphasis strengthened the genre’s popularity as readers now resonated with the texts in different manners than just disentangling of a crime.

According to Micheal Cohen, five basic elements of appeal provided the foundation for the popularity of this genre: saving the innocents; getting inside the murderer’s head; combining fantasy and realism; separating us from them; and romanticizing everyday inference (Teel, 202). As such, Cohen argues that it was no longer solely the disentangling of the crime that drew readers to the genre but there were far more elements that generated interest.

The growing impact of real crime and the process of unraveling it led to the progression of the genre and subsequently the emergence of sub-genres including psychological thrillers and suspense novels. Throughout the 1950s, with the rise of consumerism and the arrival of television as a household staple, more media attention was brought to serial killers and their crimes. The American public gained more

interest in the psychopath and consequently early crime fiction began to be seen as “a formulaic and repetitive genre playing itself out” (Teel, 202). Representations in movies and on television began to overshadow the crime fiction genre as it previously existed.

The popularity of the true crime television genre was enhanced through visual culture, including Hollywood productions and television series. One of the first television series of this sort emerged in the 1950s and was titled *Lock-Up* (1959). This series established that there is more behind a conviction than solely the judge’s ruling, and that there are many factors at play that could manipulate the progression of a case in court. It was focused mostly on legitimate court proceedings. Other shows like *Perry Mason* (1957) zoomed in on the fictional lives of court officials, in this case a criminal-defense lawyer and his professional as well as personal endeavors. However, over time the nature of these shows changed and began to shift in focus towards the criminal as a more controversial character, as opposed to the honorable lawyer aimed at achieving justice. Besides these television shows, many novels were also made into movies, including an edition of *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). These films gave the genre a broader audience and more accessibility.

Moreover, true crime documentaries illustrate Americans’ continued interest in the psychopath. The 1980s and 1990s brought forth extensive documentaries like *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones* (1980) or *Aileen Wournos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992), the latter of which was also turned into an Academy Award winning film titled *Monster* (2003). Documentaries like this dissected the lives, identities, and backgrounds of psychopaths and the nature of their crimes (Murley, 1). They ultimately aim to find an answer to the question of why these people might resort to killing by delving into what shaped them to become so malicious.

Likewise, modern Netflix series like *Inside the Criminal Mind* or *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* “promise to furnish answers to serious questions about human behavior, because they’re formulaic and therefore as addictive and soothing as old-fashioned mystery novels” (Murley, 3). People are attracted to true crime television mostly for the same reasons as they are to crime fiction. However, because they entail heavily dramatized real events, with sonic and visual tools to enhance the experience, it remains very different from reading a book. In her article “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” Joy Wiltenburg argues that the role of emotion in true crime reception is vital, even if they are aimed at objectivity: “If one sees the mind as divided into emotional and rational components – a dubious though time-honored division – these cultural products operate much more powerfully on the emotional side” (Wiltenburg, 1378). Therefore, the different ways true crimes and their perpetrators are represented in these popular culture mediums, is important in finding an answer to what effect this can have on audiences, their interpretations of crime, and the reason for their sustained interest.

One of the reasons for sustained interest is the role of contemporary cultural elements. The chosen novels, and to a slightly lesser extent true crime documentaries, contain strong references to capitalist consumer culture and its ramifications of American society. The United States saw an economic spur in both the 1950s and the 1990s. This resulted in a “[c]onsumer revolution at multiple levels. In terms of material standard of living, sustained economic growth has dramatically increased spending on discretionary consumer purchases and urbanites have enthusiastically consumed globally branded foodstuffs, pop-music videos and fashion. At the same time, however, income distribution has become increasingly unequal” (Davis, 692). Essentially, this part of American culture represents an ideal in which consumption is

celebrated despite its negative effects. Those who have status and money have the ability to consume, making them the perfect examples of the American dream. This is still a valid conclusion today; hence the decision to focus on the representation of a capitalist consumer society in these novels was made.

Both novels were released in consecutive time periods where an economic boom took place and the role of capitalism and consumer culture increased in the United States. In the 1950s, following the American victory in the Second World War, the country's economic growth began to establish its place on the map as a global superpower, resulting in an economic, social and cultural shift. This time is depicted in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, where “[m]acro economic growth doubled real incomes and almost all households substantially increased discretionary consumer purchases. Former luxuries such as refrigerators, color televisions and washing machines became household necessities” (Davis, 692). As people moved from cities to suburbs, the suburban lifestyle and competitive work ethic began to define the American lifestyle (Lindop, 5).

The emergence of the country's extremely wealthy social class and their excess consumption of luxury products and participation in leisure activities were prominent. According to William R. Leach, America at the beginning of the twentieth century was “a land of ‘possibilities’ and ‘dreams’ that flowered within the heart of a new culture” (Leach, 319). However, as argued by Deborah Davis in her article on urban consumer culture, these economic changes also caused large disparities between the upper, middle and lower social classes concerning income inequality (Davis, 692). This inequality provides an explanation for why aspects of capitalism and the consumer culture are so present in these novels and in crime documentaries.

Socially, these economic disparities caused issues of prejudice and social division, elucidated in the following chapters concerning Highsmith's and Ellis's novels.

The dangers of consumerism are also a returning theme in both novels, as they relate to a sudden surge of prosperity and the results this can have on a society in which class discrepancy persists. Gary Cross, author of *An All Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, argues that consumerism in the United States has risen so steadily and survived such a stable existence because “consumer goods better fulfilled the human needs of ‘personal identity and social participation’ than the available alternatives” (Sefton, 105). It could be seen as a good balance, yet the counterargument for this is that “consumerism weakened its own capacity to balance individual identity with social communion. Unchecked individualism eroded the familial and communal bonds that consumer culture had earlier helped sustain” (Sefton, 105). Cross argues that consumerism's victory weakened its strength, simply because many people focused only on their individual needs, no longer caring for the communal good. Ellis expressly incorporates this lack of a communal bond through the themes of identity and status. This will be elaborated on in the following designated chapters on these themes.

As for the emergence of true crime documentaries in the 1990s, another economic boom led to an upsurge of consumerism and capitalism. This explains the focus on economic background in many documentaries about the lives of psychopaths such as Ted Bundy or Richard Kuklinski. Chapter three will more thoroughly detail this connection.

### 0.3 Thesis Question and Sub Questions

Evidently, the interest in works of fiction and true crime is something that scholars like Cohen have delved into before. However, scarce scholarly debate regarding the development and continuous significance of psychopathy in American literature and popular culture has resulted in the following research question: to what extent can the themes of identity and status in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), *American Psycho* (1991), and twenty-first century true crime documentaries help explain the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy?

To answer this research question, the following sub questions will be addressed in the individual chapters. The construction of a fictional psychopath's identity, linked with elements of consumerism, generates the first sub question: in what way does the identity construction of Tom Ripley and Patrick Bateman in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) and *American Psycho* (1991) help explain the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy? Chapter one will present an exploration of the character composition and development of both Ripley and Bateman in relation to the setting of the novels and their relationships with other characters. This will clarify the ways in which their fictional identities are formulated. Thereafter, what elements are crucial in enticing the reader on this front can be determined and ultimately, the connection between capitalist consumer society and the development of these characters will help find an answer to this sub question.

Both of the novels have an emphasis on affluence and social status, which are characteristics of a capitalist consumer society. This results in the next sub question of this thesis: how does the theme of status in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) and

*American Psycho* (1991) help explain the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with fictional renditions of psychopathy?

Comparable to the previous chapter, this one will investigate the presence of status in these two novels, in relation to their main characters. The link between the prominence of capitalism and consumerism in America during the release of both novels, and American middle class fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy, will help in drawing conclusions regarding this chapter's sub question.

In addition, the difference between true crime documentaries and crime fiction novels will be addressed in chapter three, since true crime and fiction display two very different renditions of psychopathy and consumer culture. One is the invention of an imaginative psychopath whilst the other is the scrutiny of the real-life crimes and personality traits of an actual person from a particular perspective. This poses the last sub question: Do true crime documentaries, as opposed to fiction, have an entirely different appeal in their renditions of psychopathy? Since the two mediums are often comparable in content and aim of entertainment, an investigation of these differences with regards to their role in popular culture will clarify their influence on an audience. Also, the role of consumerism in shaping these novels and documentary series will delineate the influence of capitalist consumer culture in the American middle class fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy.

#### **0.4 Summaries of Novels and Method of Analysis**

Firstly, the decision to select these novels was made due to their widespread distribution and eminence. Responses, although often mixed, gave these novels a platform and resulted in their longstanding recognition. For example, according to Dave Schilling, journalist for *The Guardian* *American Psycho* (1991) as a novel "is a

pop graveyard of the 1980s – littered with references to brands, nightclubs and cultural figures that didn't quite make it out of the decade” (Schilling, par. 1). This close link with American popular culture that *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) also depicts through references to brand names and artwork, is what makes these novels contemporary yet timeless.

In addition, several of the elements of appeal explained by Michael Cohen are applicable to both of these novels, making them good examples of appreciated fictional renditions of psychopathy. For example the element of ‘getting inside the murderer’ can clearly be found in both works. They are written from the perspective of the psychopath, giving the reader as close of a look at the innermost thoughts and contemplations of their main characters as possible. ‘Combining fantasy and realism’ can be recognized as well, since both Ripley and Bateman fantasize about the crimes they desire to commit. In the case of Bateman, it is even unclear at times whether the crime has truly been committed or if it is simply a figment of his imagination. Thus the reasons for appeal of both novels are determined to be in-line with those of other successful crime fiction novels of this kind.

To briefly summarize, Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) encompasses the journey of a charming, young con man and serial killer named Tom Ripley. As an unexpected offer is presented to him in the form of a free trip to Italy, Tom does not hesitate for long before accepting. His goal is to convince Dickie Greenleaf, in principle a complete stranger to him, to return home and enter the family business. Dickie, an extremely likeable, charming and vain man who has been blessed with luxury his entire life, develops a liking for Tom. As Dickie uncovers a growing number of Tom's peculiar characteristics, Tom's objective poses more of a challenge than expected and he grows frustrated with his inability to sustain his

relationship with Dickie. Their bond doesn't end up being as strong as Tom had thought and Dickie begins to distance himself from Tom. Tom is so determined to resolve their differences and achieve his goal of returning Dickie home that eventually the situation escalates into violence. This results in the brutal murder of Dickie and Tom's ensuing trip through Europe in the hope of escaping the authorities. As he tries to cover his tracks, Tom takes over Dickie's identity and attempts to establish and maintain his place within a high-class social group whom Dickie has coincidentally never met. As the novel progresses, Tom is forced to deal with the horrors of his past and the confrontations posed by close friends of Dickie's and of course the police.

Similarly, Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) revolves around the daily events in the life of Patrick Bateman. Patrick is the epitome of a Manhattan hotshot businessman. Through stream-of-consciousness narration, the reader gets to know Bateman's exact beliefs and judgments as they follow him throughout his everyday undertakings. His extensive thought processes lead the reader to discover that he is not the standard member of elite New York society, but that he is in-fact a sadistic serial killer. His fixation on his reputation and the way people perceive him is frightening. Bateman is a sexist, chauvinistic, and egocentric man. Although his crimes seem to lack motif, his subsequent approaches and personal reflection on his actions replicate just how mentally disturbed he really is.

For the purpose of this study, the two novels will undergo an examination on two different levels. Firstly, a thorough literary analysis will take place by applying the themes of identity and status to both case studies. Excerpts concerning character descriptions, character development, dialogue, and stream of consciousness will be used to draw conclusions with regards to the two themes. Secondly, a cultural analysis

of the novels and true crime documentaries will be done, linking the findings with debates on consumerism and popular culture.

Although these novels are set in a different time period, both authors construct a divide between ordinary citizens and the characters of Bateman and Ripley within a society consumed by capitalism and materialism. Ellis uses the themes of identity and status as more of a challenge for Bateman to uphold his rank and to compete with his friends and colleagues. In contrast, Ripley is forced to emulate Dickie's social standing in order to gain his approval and eventually take over his identity. Thus, both novels incorporate these themes with a key relation to the development of their main characters.

## Chapter 1: Creating the Identity of a Fictional Psychopath

### 1.1 Introduction

Because most people are so curious about the psyche of a psychopath, the representation of their construction in literature gives an idea of what it is that readers find so interesting about them. Identity, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others,” is a fundamental term in analyzing the fictional representation of the psychopath in literature (Cambridge Dictionary). Being a broad term, identity makes up a person’s individuality and distinctiveness. Delving into the uniqueness of the fictional representation of Tom Ripley’s and Patrick Bateman’s identities will shed light on the significance of the overall representation of psychopaths in literature.

The following sub question will help answer the main research question of this thesis: to what extent does the construction of identity play a role in the impact of Tom Ripley and Patrick Bateman as fictional psychopaths on popular culture? This chapter will provide a character analysis concerning the identity of Ripley and Bateman, respectively, in section 1.2 and 1.3.

### 1.2 Identity in *The Talented Mr Ripley*

Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr Ripley* portrays Tom Ripley as someone who is trying to escape his own identity because he is afraid of his true self. It is rather Tom’s admiration of particular characteristics belonging to Dickie that define his identity. This fear of facing his own nature is depicted through his passion for imitation and identity fraud. Ripley believes that: “If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to act those things with every gesture” (Highsmith, 193). He uses his talent for impersonation as a tool to disguise

his deep-rooted insecurities about his identity, sparked by the abuse he has endured throughout his childhood.

Moreover, the pleasure he experiences from pretending to be someone else gives “his existence a peculiar, delicious atmosphere of purity,” comparable to what “a fine actor probably feels when he plays an important role on stage with the conviction that the role he is playing could not be played better by anyone else. He was himself – and yet not himself” (Highsmith, 158). Tom seems to feel completely at-ease within his impersonation of Dickie, reveling in how good he is at it. Being able to convince people of his false identity gives him a feeling of satisfaction and security.

Ripley’s appreciation of Dickie as a person justifies what he finds strive-worthy. His explanations of him remain rather on the surface, with descriptions of his “big smile, blondish hair with crisp waves in it, a happy-go-lucky face. Dickie was lucky” (Highsmith, 8). It is mostly Dickie’s wealth, physical appearance, lifestyle and material possessions that Tom appreciates. His personality traits tend to clash with Tom’s at times, and Tom sometimes finds him to come across as quite entitled. When the two characters are fighting, Tom describes Dickie’s ingratitude of his friendship and hostility towards him whilst highlighting his stubbornness as well (Highsmith, 115). His imitations of Dickie after his death are simply a realistic means of carrying his luxurious possessions and living a lavish, carefree lifestyle. Dickie’s privileged and sometimes conceited behavior are not what Tom strives to possess. Tom’s attitude of consumerism links to the sense of self-worth he gains from focusing on possessions and material items. He feels as though he will be well liked by his social circle if he can show that he belongs with them through material items.

Avoiding the confrontation with his own identity also comes hand-in-hand with Tom's struggles relating to sexuality. Highsmith's novel contains several references to Tom's sexuality, in many cases implying that he has homosexual desires. However, the reader is unable to draw any definite conclusions regarding this question. In every instance that Dickie either asks or hints at Tom's possible homosexuality, Tom experiences a strong surge of shame. In response, he even sees flashbacks from the taunts he endured as a child from his Aunt Dottie "*Sissy! He's a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father!*" (Highsmith, 113). It is certainly arguable that he is traumatized from this childhood abuse and thus unable to explore or come to terms with his sexuality without feeling ashamed.

In 1955 when this book was released, homosexuality remained very much unaccepted and a subject of taboo in the United States. An increase in homophobia occurred with the "controversy that followed in the wake of Alfred Kinsey's findings on the widespread prevalence of homosexual experience. This was later reinforced by Senator Joseph McCarthy's highly publicized witchhunt in the early 1950s to fire homosexuals as well as communists from government employment" (Escoffier, 249-250). Books and films like for example *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) explored the concept of homosexuality, however this continued to be extremely controversial. It was only by the 1960s that more of a sexual awakening began to take place (Escoffier, 250). Thus, it would not have been unusual for an American young man like Tom to be ashamed of his sexuality.

With heteronormativity still being the norm, a masculine identity was praised in society and American popular culture. Historian James Gilbert describes how the 1950s saw a 'masculine crisis' in the United States. Masculinity became ever more important because of "the rise of the companionate, nuclear family, the entrance of

women in large numbers into the workforce, and finally by the feminist movements beginning in the 1960s” (Gilbert, 16). The need for men to establish their dominance did not combine well with the idea of homosexuality.

Nonetheless, the role of sexuality and sexual identity remains debatable in Highsmith’s novel. Whether she is trying to share a specific message regarding Ripley’s sexuality or the topic in general is undetermined. However, Edward A. Shannon feels that “sexual difference and sexual identity are most certainly among Highsmith's major concerns, and she explicitly addresses homosexual desire in the Ripley novels. ... much of Tom's behavior indicates that he has repressed his own homosexuality” (Shannon, 22). Nevertheless, it is never directly indicated in the novel that Tom feels disgrace as a direct result of his possible homosexuality, although it could be seen as implied within a subtext.

Sexuality provides major undertones for the detrimental relationship that Tom develops with Dickie. His intense admiration and scrutiny of Dickie’s character shows that Tom easily lets his emotions gain the upper hand. In many cases, emotions of frustration and resentment, being a result of his identity struggles, result in an escalation of a situation in which he feels the only option left is to eliminate the person causing his distress.

A feeling of shame, unrelated to sexuality is more of an apparent emotion that frequently returns in the development of Ripley’s character. In fact, he even expresses shame about his highly violent and murderous fantasies and inclinations. After Dickie articulates his suspicion of Tom’s homosexuality and his feelings of suffocation within their friendship, Tom reacts with a “crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration [...] swelling in him, hampering his breathing. He wanted to kill Dickie. It was not the first time he had thought of it. Before, once or twice or

three times, it had been an impulse caused by anger or disappointment, an impulse that vanished immediately and left him with a feeling of shame” (Highsmith, 114-115). Tom’s insecurity in combination with his hot-headedness sets forth a vicious circle of impetuous decisions. His need for validation that he is the person whom he so desperately pretends to be, is never fully met.

Tom’s need for acceptance and validation within Dickie’s social circle is reflected in his extreme vexation as soon as something does not go in the direction he wishes it to go. John Sutherland, in his introduction of the novel, sketches an idyllic scene of a future Ripley, who has since grown old, living in a chateau, but still “killing any visitor who dares threaten the even tenor of his life” (Sutherland, viii). This shows that what denotes Tom’s identity is his fundamental need to remain in control. Sutherland believes that even when Tom is old and settled, he will continue to eliminate anyone who threatens to disrupt his peace. Once his idea of perfection is disturbed, Tom lashes out in a desperate attempt to regain that stability. When Dickie communicates his need for space and when Freddie Miles comes to dismantle Tom’s imposture of Dickie, his tactics fail. They see through his act and consequently, the only option he sees fit is to kill both men in a frantic effort to not only cover his tracks, but also to conceal his real identity.

### **1.3 Identity in *American Psycho***

In contrast to Tom Ripley, Ellis’s Patrick Bateman is not so much an example of a troubled young man on whom pain has been inflicted in his youth. In fact, Carla Freccero states that when the book was first released, much of the criticism that Ellis received from critics was that there was a lack of explanation for Bateman’s insanity. Readers were unable to identify with him in any way, not only because of his evil

nature but also because there seemed to be no substantial cause-and-effect at play. According to Freccero, “What critics reproach Ellis for is that he precisely does not provide a psychologized narrative of origins, a comforting etiology for his killer's illness; we do not hear that he was a sexually abused child or that he had a domineering mother” (Freccero, 51). This can be interpreted in two ways: either the focus of the novel is not to find a reason to justify Bateman’s issues, or the reason is essentially more complicated than one might expect when trying to fathom the nature of a psychopath.

Bateman’s problems seem instead to be deeply rooted within society. The 1990s capitalist consumer society, which defines Bateman’s place of residence New York City, is defined by some key elements. For a businessman like Bateman these include retaining control, asserting and proving masculinity, trying to uphold perfection, and competitiveness. Berthold Schoene, expert of modern fiction studies, agrees with this claim and argues that “[i]n order to grasp the ambitious psychological complexity of Ellis's novel it is important to see it not as the portrayal of an individual person in extremis, but as a case study of the predicament of a particular type of man within a specific socio-historical context” (Schoene, 381). In this case, Ellis aims to provide a bigger picture by incorporating the influence that a society can have on shaping a person’s identity. Capitalism and consumerism can lead to a very empty existence, which is exactly what Bateman depicts. The only way for him to fill that void is to act on his murderous tendencies.

Bateman is a stereotypical Wall Street investment banker who has strategically generated a life of luxury and popularity, which in his eyes is perfect. According to novelist Irvine Welsh in his introduction of Ellis’s novel, “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” (Welsh, viii). The individualism that Bateman depicts relates back to the American dream and the concept of rags to riches. He is the poster child for self-made success and, just like Ripley, Bateman’s identity is a result of his own creation. Any real emotion that he expresses in his daily life is inauthentic since he doesn’t experience any real emotions. Bateman even addresses his own lack of identity: “there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there” (Ellis, 362).

He feels like he possesses all of the elements required to form an ordinary person, yet something is missing. He describes a process of depersonalization: “[M]y normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning” (Ellis, 271). Bateman is unable to pinpoint what exactly is wrong with him. This displays the internal identity crisis that he deals with in the novel.

In relation to this identity crisis, Bateman has his fair share of breakdowns and revelations throughout the book. Although he has stopped himself from experiencing almost any emotion, he seems to be looking for an answer to the meaning of life. The reader constantly finds him trying to draw conclusions about what his purpose is in the world and what he finds important. For instance, after dealing with one of his victims he experiences one of these breakdowns. He suddenly feels so much self pity: “I’m weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing ‘I just want to be loved,’ cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles,

distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer - all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt” (Ellis, 332). Although Bateman does not experience guilt as a consequence of his actions, he definitely feels alone. Unable to understand what his life’s purpose, he is left with a feeling of emptiness. This emptiness could be seen as a metaphor for the isolation felt by many in a modern consumerist society.

Although Schoene agrees that there is no real psychological profiling of Bateman in the novel, he argues that “there are other instances in the text that allow us to interpret Patrick's ultraviolent outbursts, or fantasizing about such outbursts, as acts of manly self-assertion compensating for a perceived lack in masculine stature” (Schoene, 381). Although seemingly confident in his own masculinity, Patrick’s masculinity and his ability to kill is questioned by Harold Carnes, a lawyer that Bateman reaches out to for a confession. But Carnes does not believe that Bateman is capable of what he claims to have done. He sees him as a “bloody ass-kisser, such a good brown-nosing goody-goody,” disregarding his confession and regarding it as a bad joke (Ellis, 372).

Clearly there is an element of desperate “masculine self-composure” that fuels some of Patrick’s killings (Schoene, 382). His misogynistic acts of violence towards women can be regarded as acts of masculine empowerment. Ideally he wishes to keep the bodies of his male and female victims separated. This is a sign that he does not believe them to be of equal value. By keeping them away from other men, this could be another way in which he can exert power over his female victims in order to demonstrate his masculinity.

Bateman constantly attempts to discover what it is that makes him different from others. He knows that what he is doing will eventually lead to some kind of

punishment, yet he feels no remorse. Ellis describes much of Bateman's inner struggle with himself. He feels pain but is unsure of its cause: "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone, in fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape, but even after admitting this there is no catharsis, my punishment continues to elude me and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself" (Ellis, 362). He feels powerless in his own body and wants others to feel the same pain as him, for someone to understand him.

From the way his thought processes are described, it appears that Bateman is so incredibly egocentric that his desires must be met at all times, no matter the cost. Living a normal life, without an excess of money, sex, drugs and indulgences, is simply unimaginable to this character: "It never occurred to him [...] that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one's own taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person's love or kindness" (Ellis, 360). Schoene agrees that the build-up of desires and constant reaching for more extremity in order to be satisfied is the core of Patrick's character. His "precarious selfhood is driven by both hysterical and autistic impulses, finding itself at the mercy of irreconcilable tensions that unleash themselves in hyperbolic acts of violence, both real and imagined" (Schoene, 381). He feels like he is in a state of survival and in order to survive he must constantly expand his list of victims. His crimes are a necessity for his existence and according to him his existence is meaningless anyway. There is nothing significant enough for Bateman to stop committing violent acts since everything in life is so unimportant to him anyway.

On the one hand, Bateman's identity is a simulated construction of a perfect life, but in reality the emptiness inside constantly eats away at him. What Ellis aims to show in this work is that appearances say nothing about a person or his or her mental

state. Bateman, to the outside world, looks like the ideal son-in-law. The message brought forth is that identity has nothing to do with the way people present themselves. Freccero concurs that the novel “demonstrates that there is no truth to be found beneath appearances, and the accumulation of Bateman's successful, unnoticed, and ultimately deeply unsatisfying torture-murders that do not teach him-or the rest of us-anything, proves this point” (Freccero, 52).

In contrast, Ripley has found himself in a vicious cycle of compensation when it comes to his identity. The pain from his past forces him to hide behind the identity of the people he surrounds himself with in order to build up a protective wall and stop others from unmasking his true self. As such, Ripley's identity is shaped exactly in the way critics of *American Psycho* would have preferred. In this case, there is some kind of “a model of truth, and its disclosure and/or recovery, that [...] produces the desperate monstrosity of the psychopath in the first place” (Freccero, 52). Because of this, the reader is more inclined to sympathize with Ripley's character than Bateman's. Since Ripley is in many ways a sophisticated gentleman, it makes sense for him to have experienced something traumatizing which might help to explain his sinfulness. Highsmith herself argues that Ripley is “a civilized person who [...] kills when he absolutely has to” (Shannon, 18). Bateman represents more of a purely evil psychopath who, as mentioned before, wishes to inflict as much of his own pain on others as possible, simply because he is otherwise not comfortable with himself.

Lastly, the role of consumer culture has a close relation to the theme of identity in this novel. Not only does the main character of Patrick Bateman have an obsession with owning certain items, especially luxury, high-end items, he practically builds his identity on this idea of ownership. According to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, “consumption is not primarily the satisfying of material needs, but rather

is largely an idealized practice that takes place in people's heads. It is primarily mental and emotional, so that commodity goods become building blocks in the construction of a personal identity" (Calder, 7). This is precisely what Bateman has done since he attempts to shield his real identity as a psychopath with the materials he owns. In this way he somewhat maintains control in shaping his own identity.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Having analyzed the construction of these two psychopathic characters in relation to this chapter's research question: to what extent does the construction of identity play a role in the impact of Tom Ripley and Patrick Bateman as fictional psychopaths on readers of this genre?

To summarize the main arguments of this chapter, Ripley's character struggles to come to terms with his own identity because of his childhood traumas and his shame regarding sexuality and his own nature. Since he is unable to accept himself, he resorts to taking over Dickie's identity as a kind of consolation. His intense need for validation and control lead him to latch out at any times when that control seems to be lacking. The consumer society in which he finds himself has left its mark on the relationship Ripley has with material goods and luxury, outweighing his desire to form a bond with the people around him.

Bateman's identity has been constructed in close relation to the essence of a capitalist consumer society, in which his character finds himself. The standards expected to be met in a society like this, with a competitive career and elite circle of friends and acquaintances at the core, are exactly what consumes Bateman's daily life. The only thing he concerns himself with is providing the most impressive outside image of himself for others to see. In essence, everything about Bateman is normal

and there is no specific reason why he is so evil. He is simply a product of the socio-historical context of the novel and the development of his identity is a mirror of this.

The construction of the identities of Ripley and Bateman present a very mysterious representation of the psychopath. With Tom's nature being very hidden and held back, he leaves the reader intrigued in what there is behind his mask. In the case of Bateman his identity remains very undefined and vague. His identity is very on the surface, as Ellis explains, presenting a deeper message about American culture of the 1990's and the harmful effects of capitalism and consumerism. These renditions of the psychopath aim to be thought provoking and enigmatic about identity, because that is the general consensus on psychopaths in reality. With the 1950s as an age of conformity, this is the perfect environment for a psychopath to hide behind a façade.

## Chapter 2: The Role of Status in Developing a Psychopath

### 2.1 Introduction

Both of the main characters in *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *American Psycho* are occupied with the concept of status. Status is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “[t]he amount of respect, admiration, or importance given to a person, organization, or object” (Cambridge Dictionary). Ripley and Bateman surround themselves with a particular social class, being wealthy-upper-class Americans. Bateman is very much a part of this elite group whereas Ripley is determined to come across as if he belongs with them.

Nevertheless, despite this difference both men are aiming to project a specific image of themselves on their social circle. The significance of materialistic goods plays an important role in this too as both characters attach an unhealthy value to their possessions, making them substantial in defining who they are as people. Taking all of these aspects of status into consideration, this chapter aims to find an answer to the following sub question: how does the theme of status in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) and *American Psycho* (1991) help explain the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with fictional renditions of psychopathy?

### 2.2 Status in *The Talented Mr Ripley*

Tom Ripley focuses predominantly on climbing up the ladder of success. His first priority is not to cause harm to others, instead it is to live as pleasant of a life as he possibly can. Shannon argues that “Highsmith's subversive, disturbing novel focuses the reader's attention on the political and economic contexts that define Tom Ripley, who is first and foremost an American bent on ascending the ladder of class and

privilege” (Shannon, 17). After being enormously charmed by Dickie’s carefree and lavish lifestyle, this is what he wishes for himself as well. Not only does he aim to be accepted in this social class, he too wants to achieve Dickie’s popularity and reputation. This eventually leads him to take over Dickie’s identity entirely, but this was not deliberately planned when he left for Italy. In fact he recounts, “[t]he first step, anyway, was to make Dickie like him. That he wanted more than anything else in the world” (Highsmith, 62). Initially Ripley simply wanted to fit in with Dickie and his friends and be able to profit from their wealth and social standing in the process.

Ripley aims to live up to Dickie’s standards regarding his quality of life. He “[...] spends the novel not assailing but coveting that world’s privileges, after all, and his pursuit of the finer things in life advances by way of the opportunistic identity management widely perceived as crucial to upward mobility in fifties America” (Trask, 585). He yearns for a life just like Dickie’s, entirely free of worries and financially comfortable. What typifies Dickie is his privileged lifestyle in combination with his stylish and unique presence, with his charisma being the most challenging thing for Tom to imitate. According to Edward A. Shannon, literature professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey, “Highsmith’s Tom Ripley is a diabolical culmination of the American success ethic” (Shannon, 18). His character will do anything to achieve success, abandoning any morals and principles that he has as the novel progresses.

Kelley Wagers, contemporary literature scholar and English professor at Penn State, therefore argues that Ripley is a *persona ficta*. This is someone “[d]iscursively distinct from a ‘human being,’ this ‘person’ is [...] an often incoherent, self-contradictory, improbable creature who disrupts and collapses conventional narratives of individual and social formation” (Wagers, 267). Ripley is exactly this; his ulterior

motives are entirely based on self-interest whilst he tries to uphold an outwardly social appearance. He “exists as just such a persona ficta, forged through a process of incorporation that (almost) conceals a capacity for changeability and collectivity beneath the self-interested motives of corporate capitalism” (Wagers, 267). According to Wagers, climbing the social ladder is ultimately the only thing that is important to Ripley. He is the embodiment of the harm that capitalist society can bestow on a person.

In addition, what comes hand in hand with outward appearance and status is the ownership of prized products and goods. The importance that Tom places on his possessions is illustrated in the way he deals with Dickie’s things. He finds so much gratification in admiring Dickie’s luxury items, especially when spending evenings alone, “handling Dickie’s possessions, simply looking at his rings on his own fingers, or his woolen ties, or his black alligator wallet, was that experiencing or anticipation?” (Highsmith, 207). He feels entirely at ease being alone with these items, as opposed to keeping up his fake persona around people. In the novel Tom’s love of a select few possessions is described as giving “a man self-respect. Not ostentation but quality, and the love that cherished the quality. Possessions reminded him that he existed, and made him enjoy his existence. [...] He existed. Not many people in the world knew how to, even if they had the money. It really didn't take money, masses of money, it took a certain security” (Highsmith, 287). This excerpt describes how materialistic Tom really is. He relies on objects more than his relationships with people to feel content. Objects allow him to maintain in control, as they are solely what they are, in contrast to people who are difficult for Tom to read.

In terms of the way a capitalist consumer society, like that of the 1950s in which the novel is set, plays a role in the theme of status. *The Talented Mr Ripley*

depicts exactly who belonged to one of the highest socio-economic classes of the 1950s. Dickie, benefitting from his father's booming family business and having the luxury to travel through Europe and living a financially carefree life, is the perfect example of a privileged product of the rich. His life as an amateur painter, strolling along the streets and beaches of Italy and enjoying lavish meals and extravagant parties without ever actually working, illustrates consumer culture to a tea. The role of Tom Ripley in this scenario of indulgence and excess is his desire to achieve this also. Tom has not grown up with this kind of entitlement, in some ways allowing him to justify Dickie's murder because of the way Dickie took his blessings for granted. Dickie has gained effortless status, simply because of the family he was born into. However, ultimately Tom ends up exceptionally covetous of Dickie's lifestyle, so much that he attempts to steal it. This effectively makes him just as consumed by capitalism and consumerism as Dickie was. Hence, Tom's yearning for a higher social status represents how strongly people from all socio-economic backgrounds in society are influenced by capitalism and consumerism.

### **2.3 Status in *American Psycho***

In *American Psycho*, the prominence of the status theme is even more obvious than in *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Bateman's character and his friends are in a continuously competitive cycle, attempting to outdo one another. In her introduction to the novel, Irene Welsh argues that Bateman's "focus on his material wealth transcends the mere psychotic; his fan boy's eye can detect the designer of any item a person owns" (Welsh, viii). In one particular scene, Bateman and his colleagues are comparing each other's business cards. As two of his colleagues seem to have a fancier card than Patrick's, he grows incredibly jealous and loses his temper. Bateman and his friends

rank someone based on their possessions and their wealth, entirely disregarding their personality traits. Since they all act exactly the same anyhow, personality is of no importance to them.

Ellis attests to this, as he admitted: “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” (Freccero, 51). His intention was to depict how American society had become exclusively materialistic and status-oriented. He does not want to hide this message somewhere deep within a subtext of the novel, instead he simply has Bateman say it: “Soon everything seemed dull: another sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made about each other. The only thing that didn't bore me, obviously enough, was how much money Tim Price made, and yet in its obviousness it did. There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust” (Ellis, 271). Dennis Cooper, a fellow author of Ellis's, described the novel as “a seemingly endless litany of grooming products, restaurant menus and designer labels – a text which only really comes ‘alive’ when Patrick kills someone” (Eldridge, 22). This is exactly the surface-level, repetitive impression that Ellis wanted to give his readers.

Bateman's idolization of Donald Trump, who is currently in place as President of the United States, shows just how relevant Ellis's mirroring of society really is. Trump, at the time of publication, was considered one of the wealthiest and successful businessmen in the country. Although this could be considered somewhat of a façade nowadays, he depicts exactly what Bateman and his friends wish to achieve on a professional and social level. His current presidential status is precisely what Ellis

warns the reader against in this novel, which is giving the greedy and materialistic too much power. This is a strong criticism on the basis of modern capitalism.

In addition to his constant focus on materialism, Bateman takes a strong disliking to people whom he considers of no value to society. As a result of income inequality caused by the sudden growth of economic welfare, social cohesion was damaged in the United States. As previously introduced, a division was formed in the population, leaving people to focus primarily on supporting themselves. Bateman is the exact result of this divide, shaping him into the inconsiderate and intolerant character that he is. His victims are predominantly people of low social standing such as prostitutes or homeless people. Throughout the novel both he and his friends intimidate and bully the homeless, as they consider them not worthy of respect. Likewise, prostitutes are both easy targets for Bateman and preferred victims.

Misogynistic passages and the objectification of women, not only prostitutes, are very present in the novel. This can be linked to the desire to appear masculine within competitive Wall Street corporate society. Gilbert claims that by the 1990s “many Americans, evaluating the lives of the middle class in the 1950s, believed that women had already come too far and traveled along the road at that, gaining unwarranted power in the home, over consumption, and threatening to revolutionize the workplace, and their men suffered greatly for it” (Gilbert, 80). The men in Ellis’s novel seem to be of this opinion also. Welsh explains that many consider the novel’s violence against women to be “a public display of abuse for entertainment,” although viewing it as “a criticism of, or satire on, late capitalism, with the abuse of women deployed as a metaphor” is another perspective. These depicted elite, male-dominated Wall Street circles simply believe in male supremacy and the belittlement of women. Thus, women are considered lower on the social ladder. Since monetary and social

status is the only way of measuring social standing, homeless people and women, especially prostitutes, are free to be treated as objects in Bateman's eyes.

The novel, awfully gory and outrageous in its inclusion of misogyny, violence, and taboo issues like pornography, has the ability to offend almost anyone. Whether it is from a political, racial, or gender standpoint, Ellis has written this book with the risk of affronting many. It is no question whether the novel contains inappropriate text in many readers' opinions; the question is rather how Ellis has chosen to do so in relation to the theme of status. Media professor Christopher Sharret of Seton Hall University summarizes this very well: "Bateman's 'incessant account of his dutiful consumption of all the latest au courant consumer goods... [and] the emphasis on personal excess to the exclusion of all other values' is what made the book 'one of the key social testaments of our age'" (Eldrige, 22-23). The reflection of a disturbing, extremely status-oriented society in the novel makes for a good opportunity to reflect on the everyday workings of American society at the time of release, as well as today. Bateman as the product of what anyone would fear to become, in combination with the many desired aspects of his life, make the reader consider how much harm money, status, and materialism can instigate.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Status provides a basis for the social construction of Tom Ripley and Patrick Bateman. This theme gives an opportunity for the authors to give a clear indication of the priorities of their main characters and what they consider to be the most important thing in life. Both Ripley and Bateman deem social status as essential in upholding their personas. Hiding behind status in 1950s and 1990s consumerist society, allows these characters to mask what truly defines them as a people. Cultural phenomena,

such as the rejection of homosexuality and extreme materialism are highlighted through the analysis of this theme in Highsmith's novel. Ellis embeds the masculine ideal and misogyny against women in the fictional representation of male-dominated, corporate life in New York City.

The theme provides an explanation for how some psychopaths are able to function within this society, as these two characters do. Belonging to a particular social group, an essential part of what status is, could be considered a means to mask one's true self. Since Ripley and Bateman put in such a desperate effort to fit in, they do not stand out as necessarily different from anyone else. Therefore these renditions of psychopaths give a rather complex, yet realistic perspective on a psychopath's ability to stay hidden whilst immersing themselves in society. The inclusion of historically relevant cultural phenomena previously discussed, clarifies the consequences of a capitalist consumer culture. The American middle class fascination with fictional renditions of psychopathy can be explained because of the relevance of these cultural phenomena in American popular culture.

## Chapter 3: Crime Fiction vs. True Crime Documentaries

### 3.1 Introduction

Most people in this day and age tend to prefer watching a suspenseful television program instead of opening up a book. True crime documentaries, being of a slightly more modern appeal due to visual and sonic features, could be considered more provoking of emotion. However, the fictional representation of a psychopath and his or her crimes is thought to rely on the concept of sensationalism just as much as true crime (Wiltenburg, 1379). A purposeful use of descriptive language to describe a gruesome murder scene could be equally as astounding to a reader as the direct viewing of it on screen. Undoubtedly, the two mediums have a set of similarities, yet the amount of differences between them is of equivalent prominence.

This results in the following sub question for this chapter: do true crime documentaries, as opposed to fiction, have an entirely different appeal for audiences in their renditions of psychopathy? What exactly makes these genres distinctive and what differing effects they have on American popular culture are crucial questions in explaining contemporary American middle class fascination with the psychopath. By comparing and contrasting the two entertainment mediums and their effect on psychopath representation, followed by the effect of this on the depiction of a consumerist society, a conclusion will be drawn about what it is that constitutes their persistent appreciation.

### 3.2 Comparison of Mediums

Sensationalism is something that both crime fiction and true crime documentaries strongly incorporate. Joy Wiltenburg, expert on the concept of sensationalism in true crime, writes that “discourses and rituals of crime, rather than direct experience of

criminal acts, are the key determinants of crime's cultural impact. Not specific events, but varying cultural uses of them, bring deviant actions from the margins of experience into the mainstream" (Wiltenburg, 1377). Hence, the point she makes is that renditions of crime and the psychopathic criminals represented seem to have more of an effect on American culture. Normalizing evil is what will leave marks on American culture, not realistic, objective reports of crime. Hence, the common consumerist society setting that helps depict this.

Likewise, what makes these mediums comparable is the fact that they both rely on an emotional response. Whether it is writing about evil or showing just how evil something is, "[i]ts dependence on emotional response – the factor that most tend to arouse scholarly disdain – emerges as central to the genre's functioning, in particular its ability to mold common response to extreme violations of social norms" (Wiltenburg, 1378). Wiltenburg argues that "linking violent crime and criminal justice procedures with a prescribed emotional response both personal and communal, these works have been a powerful means of constructing both shared values and identity" (Wiltenburg, 1380). The fact that emotion is so important in the analysis of this genre, both on screen and in writing, is what makes scholars so skeptical of its implication. Especially when it comes to documentaries that are biased and aim to convey a rather one-sided argument, academics find it difficult to take their effect on popular culture seriously.

Another similarity between crime fiction and documentary is the ability to depict serial killers in a slightly positive light. The romanticizing of their identity is something that has become "a feature of the twentieth century, a phenomenon that contributed greatly to the valorization and ultimate celebrification" of figures like Ted Bundy (Schmid, 207). But also fictional psychopaths like Tom Ripley have been

subject to this form of admiration in combination with awe. This topic has been a prevailing point of discussion with the release of feature films that further amplify this valorization and celebrification that David Schmid describes.

Finally, when considering this question of a growing interest in psychopathy through true crime documentary series, their popularity began in the 1990s simultaneous with the release of *American Psycho* (1991). Most of these documentaries sketch an elaborate image of the offender, commonly starting with an introduction of their childhood. Since the infantile days are usually considered to be the part of one's life that shapes people the most, it provides context and perhaps a cause or explanation for the tragic occurrences usually elaborated on further on in these documentaries.

For example, the crime documentary *The Iceman Tapes: Conversations with a Killer* (1992) begins with a brief explanation of the conviction of Richard Kuklinski and the nature of his heinous crimes. Ten minutes into the documentary the viewer is taken back to Kuklinski's youth, where they learn that he was born in a low-income public housing project in Jersey City. Instantly, it becomes clear that the socio-economic element seems to be of importance in this description.

An emphasis on the psychopath's family and their financial situation might give the audience a feeling of minor pity. Socio-economic status is mentioned in a large majority of documentaries of this sort, showing that it is considered important in providing context to the lives and growth of psychopaths. It gives viewers a means of finding relatable elements in the lives of psychopaths, through which they can attempt to form a better understanding of them. Novels that entail the lives or endeavors of a fictional psychopath, as Highsmith and Ellis have written, use the socio-economic background and situation to aid the development of their characters also. However,

this is less for the purpose of making them seem relatable as it is for providing the character with more depth and complexity. Yet, in both mediums their inclusion of this component is conventional.

Notwithstanding the similarities between true crime documentaries and crime fiction, the differences are equivalently noteworthy in determining the representation of a psychopath and the effect on audiences. According to Anthony Channell Hilfer, due to crime fiction's relative indistinctness as a genre, "[n]ot having a clear awareness of precedent, writers kept reinventing what could be done with a murder novel in which the protagonist is not a detective and the reader may know from the start whodunit" (Hilfer, xii). This gave historic crime authors and current writers of this genre the ability to be creative in their structure and writing styles, such as Ellis's writing from the perspective of the murderer and Highsmith's Ripley writing letters whilst posing as someone else. As seen in both of these novels, the authors activate "something that is of great concern to the author or his society," the themes of identity and status, as well as the representation of a capitalist consumer society belong to this objective (Hilfer, xii). The creative freedom, due to the genre's fluidity, gives authors like this the chance to convey a message that goes beyond simple horror.

True crime documentaries and their composition really cannot be compared to that of crime fiction. Since these documentaries concern real people and their lives and life-events, creative freedom is much more limited. Directors and writers of these programs or series are restricted to the information they are able to collect. Whilst being able to make consecutive decisions regarding which approach to take, and thus which information to include, the perspectives and ingenuity is less extensive.

However, in some cases the psychopath in question is still alive and open to interviews, or past interviews are accessed for use. For example in several

documentary series like *The Iceman Tapes: Conversations with a Killer* (1992) or *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019), these prosecuted predators are interviewed directly. In *The Iceman Tapes: Conversations with a Killer* (1992), the interviewer asks Richard Kuklinski personal questions about his tactics when it comes to killing, but also his emotions in response to being confronted with his actions. The interviewer even asks the question of whether there are any murders Kuklinski has committed that continue to haunt him, in an attempt to humanize this criminal. Having a person explain the skeletons they have hidden in their closet for so long is clearly going to have a different impact on a person than reading about it. These kinds of unique perspectives in combination with visual and sonic tools to enhance the anticipation, gives this medium a unique appeal as well.

Moreover, television critic Jack Seale explains that the slow pace of true crime documentaries is what makes it fascinating, because “the significance of each small development is highlighted, [...] ending each episode on a bigger revelation that feels like a cliff-hanger in an episodic drama” draws people in and keeps them coming back for more (Mullan, par. 11). Turning real-life events into more dramatized versions of the truth is what makes these series so addictive.

As argued by Sue Turnbull in her article “Crime as Entertainment: The Case of the TV Crime Drama,” the crime drama genre was “as much influenced by public service films and documentary forms of storytelling as it was by film” (Turnbull, 822). This elucidates the necessity for sensationalism within television crime drama shows, for which creators draw inspiration from documentary styles. This connection cannot possibly be drawn with crime fiction, as there is absolutely no need to dramatize a fictitious storyline.

### 3.3 Effect on the Depiction of a Consumerist Society

The effect that crime fiction has on the depiction of a consumerist society is far more notable than that of true crime documentaries. Overall, both of the chosen novels by Highsmith and Ellis have a strong message regarding the American capitalist consumer society in the 1950s or 1990s. As described in previous chapters, criticism on materialism, pressures to appear masculine, marginalization of certain social groups, sexism and commentary on homophobia are all present in these novels. The extreme depiction of these possible consequences of consumerist society, through the use of a main character who falls entirely outside of the idea of ‘an ordinary citizen’, allows authors to amplify these damaging effects. For example, since Bateman is an utterly amoral human being because of his murderous tendencies alone, the degrading behavior towards a homeless man will come as no surprise to a reader of the novel. Conversely, this allows for an exaggerated demonstration of the most severe result that a society of this sort can produce.

True crime documentaries give less of a broad view regarding the societal effects that consumerism can have on a person. The aim of most of these documentaries is to focus strictly on the development and events of the lives of their subject. Ultimately, they aim to form a timeline in which any missing pieces can be used to provide a new perspective. Yet, literature proves to be more of an appropriate medium for social commentary. Bentham, an English philosopher and social reformer, shaped his theory of fictions. This theory was “founded on linguistic psychology rather than on logical assumptions, the term ‘real’ can have no use other than as a pointer indicating a high degree of symbolic approximation to a technological ideal” (Ogden, lxi). Thus, according to Bentham symbolism and the communication of a certain message through this symbolism is essential in the

creation of a successful work of fiction. Fiction remains a matter of preference, however literary review is often focused on the analytical evaluation of conceivable social impact of a text. True crime documentaries are less critically evaluated on this criterion.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Returning to this chapter's research question of what makes the effect of true crime documentaries as opposed to crime fiction in their renditions of psychopathy unique, it is fair to say that their aim and effects on audiences typically differ. The normalization of crime and the psychopath is something that both mediums add to, as well as the desire to provoke an emotional response in their audiences. The tendency to glorify psychopaths is another approach that both authors and documentary-makers often resort to. As for crime fiction alone, this genre's fluidity and creative freedom is one of a kind. This lack of restrictions allows authors like Ellis to downright shock his readers and create a surge of disapproval, and yet still be considered a modern classic.

Writing allows the more subtle communication of hidden messages or meaning behind a text, whilst crime documentaries are fairly limited to the information they have collected. This is not only due to the structure of both mediums, but also because of the criticism in their review. The two mediums have different apparatus to work with, as crime documentaries are open to exclusive perspectives of real psychopaths, whilst literary authors are pressured to portray a social or societal message in their novels in order to be taken seriously.

Overall, the challenges that an author faces are almost incomparable to those of a documentary-creator. Since the aim of a true crime documentary is to both inform and educate people on a certain set of crimes and their perpetrator and to entertain,

whilst crime fiction novels are extremely varying in aims. As seen from the analyses of *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *American Psycho*, these two novels alone are so diverse that a generalization of the aim of all crime fiction authors is impossible. The portrayal of a psychopath in either medium is simply limited to individual rubrics, as audiences resort to them in search for differing effects. Therefore, the more in-depth societal analysis is more suited to a crime novel, whilst the tension build-up and realistic basis of a documentary is more fitting.

## Conclusion

The incorporation of themes in the representation of psychopaths within the crime genre, both in literature and in true crime documentaries, has been scrutinized in this thesis. This has been done in order to find an answer to the following research question: to what extent can the themes of identity and status in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), *American Psycho* (1991), and true crime documentaries help explain the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with popular culture renditions of psychopathy? Due to the complexity of this question, with its inclusion of aspects of American popular culture, literary analysis and capitalist consumer culture, its execution was split into several sub questions.

In order to provide a literary analysis of the themes of identity and status in both Highsmith's novel and Ellis's, the impact of these themes on the representation of a fictional psychopath was looked into. In general, the novels integrate the theme of identity in a way that sparks the reader's interest due to the element of mystification and alienation. The identity of these psychopathic characters relates closely to the way the general American population perceives psychopaths in real life, being physically present amongst average citizens but extremely distanced from normality on a mental level. The inability to fully comprehend the mannerisms and innermost thoughts of a psychopath is reflected in the fictional construction of them in popular culture. Both novels provide a connection between the theme of identity and the consumerist society the characters find themselves in. The capitalist consumer society gives the characters a means of building a façade in order to mask the fear or lack of a personal identity.

As for the theme of status, its relevance within American culture at the times these novels were released makes them vital in the analysis of their influence on

popular culture. The novels show the obvious weight of social pressure that was put on the average American citizen, especially in the times where consumerism was at its peak. The fact that these characters are not average American citizens makes for an opportunity to magnify the detrimental consequences of this pressure. Hence, the inclusion of this theme in crime novels of this sort provides an intricate yet realistic perspective on the immersion of psychopaths in society.

In addition, capitalist consumer culture and the relation it has to the interest in the psychopath in modern day American popular culture have been explored. The economic situation in which a country finds itself will always remain fundamental in literature as well as true crime documentaries. Both of the chosen novels incorporate the country's contemporary tenure to provide context for the development of their main characters. Economic status, in this case also, will undoubtedly always remain an imperative part of what makes an individual. Therefore, Ripley, Bateman and subjects of true crime documentaries like Ted Bundy will continue to be linked to affluence or lack thereof in an attempt to understand their evolution.

The mediums of crime literature and true crime documentaries, relative to their effect on American popular culture, differ vastly in their representation of psychopaths and the depiction of consumerist society. Determining what makes these mediums unique in their effect on audiences has proposed a specific deduction. The aims and guidelines for crime fiction novels differ too much to generalize this medium and to come to a conclusion regarding its effect. In addition, the true crime documentary is mostly set on one goal, which is an informational, educational and entertaining one. Hence, the effects these mediums have on the representation of the psychopath in American popular culture are enormously varied. Readers decide to pick up a book for different reasons than people turn on the television to watch a

documentary. It is discernable that the appeal will differ accordingly. However, problematic practices that can be found in both mediums, like the glorification or dramatization of the psychopath, are unquestionably disputed and dubious for popular culture.

As a suggestion for further research, an investigation of the existing ethical debate around the glamorizing of real-life psychopaths, could lead to intriguing outcomes concerning long-term consequences of exposure to this kind of entertainment. Outweighing the importance of, on the one hand monitoring public content of this sort for impressionable adolescents, and on the other hand personal responsibility in protecting these adolescents, is convoluted. Whether the twisted admiration of a fictional or real psychopath can do genuine harm to American culture is a point for further enquiry. Nevertheless, the influence of crime literature and true crime documentaries on American culture, especially with regards to the ramifications of a capitalist consumer culture, has proven to be extensive. The serial killers in these novels and true crime documentaries, and accordingly the American middle class fascination with the psychopath serves as, how Philip L. Simpson so recognizably phrases it, “a broad metaphor for a plethora of concerns facing contemporary American society” (Simpson, IX).

The themes of identity and status in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), *American Psycho* (1991), and true crime documentaries have provided a means of analyzing the influence of capitalist consumer culture on American middle class fascination with psychopathy. In the literary works the themes of identity and status have been found to closely relate to contemporary issues of American capitalist consumer society. This has helped shape the fictional renditions of the psychopath characters and made them intriguing in a realistic and pertinent way. Due to the historical relevance, these

novels remain sought-after for modern-day readers. True crime documentaries, although incorporating the themes of identity and status, present little connection with capitalist consumer culture. The medium shows trivial concern for this societal element.

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