Unlikeable Protagonists: Form and Function in Fiction.

> "Stories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman, Jahn & Ryan ix)
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> "Confrontation with the dark, the violent, and the different inevitably results in a pressing desire to explain, define, and categorize" (Moore 226).

The protagonist in any given work of fiction can take on many forms. These varying forms of primary character can be seen as one of the crucial devices for expressing authorial intentionality, taking the reader on a journey in a direction relative to the concerns of the author. The most commonly recognized form of protagonist is a figure that in some fashion generates in the reader sympathy and empathy: a character with whom the reader can identify and that to some degree fulfils reader expectations. Heroic and anti-heroic figures are exemplars of this tactic, representing behaviours and/or traits that are, in some fashion and to some demographic, desirable. However, dotted throughout the history of literature are contrary figures characterized by undesirable traits. These contrarians can be generally categorized as 'unlikeable protagonists'. In this essay I will briefly discuss Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Euripides *Medeia* as early and very early works offering prototypes for the unlikeable protagonist. Subsequently, I will analyze three works of fiction published in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, with particular attention to the portrayal and characterization of protagonists as unlikeable, providing a type of character study of these fictional portrayals. These three primary texts are Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho,* Irvine Welsh's 1998 novel *Filth,* and Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*.

My decision to use the term unlikeable protagonist is informed by the term anti-hero. The figures of yuppie-serial killer Patrick Bateman, utterly morally depraved Bruce Robertson, and monster-making mother Eva Khatchadourian, are not heroic in any positive sense: they are decidedly un-heroic, rather than anti-heroic. I contend that the figure of the anti-hero, the likeable villain, is opposed to that of the unlikeable protagonist as represented by these three characters. To that end I propose the

following comparative schema whereby an anti-hero is classed as a ‘positive’ character and an unlikeable protagonist as a ‘negative’ character:

{Hero + Anti-hero}

{Villain − Unlikeable Protagonist}

Lionel Shriver states that “the anti-hero [is] a protagonist the author has clearly portrayed as malign but for whom, curiously, we root anyway. An endearing mobster, Tony Soprano is an archetypal anti-hero” (‘In Defense’). In contrast, Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson is anything but endearing as he sabotages the efforts and social standing of his co-workers in the Edinburgh police department (Welsh 247). Tony Soprano is the leader of a group (of mobsters) whereas Bruce Robertson desires to be a leader, Tony Soprano is supported by, and is supportive of, his group whereas Bruce Robertson will destroy aspects of the group for personal gain. Thus, rather than complicating the nature of heroism, as an anti-hero such as Tony Soprano does, Bruce Robertson as unlikeable protagonist complicates the nature of villainy. Indeed, characters such as Patrick Bateman, Bruce Robertson and Eva Katchadourian refute the commonplace idea that a primary character, a protagonist, must be heroic. This essay will explore the reasons why such characters are beyond the definition of heroic and anti-heroic via analysis of the form, function and purpose of Ellis’, Welsh’s, and Shriver’s primary characters, from which I hope to glean some reliable impression of authorial intention. It is my contention that the increasing number of unlikeable protagonists occurring in postmodern fiction reflects concerns regarding new forms of society and individual, and that this type of primary character functions as a confirmation of what is unacceptable, thereby generating through contrast what is acceptable. All three primary texts are concerned with ‘roles’ in society; Bateman as hyper-masculine yuppie, Robertson as corrupt law enforcer, and Khatchadourian as anti-domestic mother. The roles that these characters play in their given society are presented as in need of reassessment, and as abject figures Patrick, Bruce and Eva are examples of what is deemed inappropriate or non-functional by their respective creators.

This new or updated form of realism, whereby contemporary tastes have been shaped by post-modern conditions of uncertainty, distrust of metanarrative and superficiality of treatment are indicative of responses to perceived problems with previous models of "essentialist" self that ideas of heroism rely on, and represent the necessity of an author's responsibility to channel modes of representation to which a reader can relate. Characterizations as hero or villain are an example of binary composition, construction, and representation of reality. An antihero complicates this dichotomy and an unlikeable protagonist complicates this model further still. To recognize an unlikeable protagonist, one may look for the following symptoms.

An unlikeable protagonist is a prime example of an aberrant character. In this way the post-modern figures of Bateman, Robertson and Katchadourian are informed by the gothic tradition of aberrant characters. The gothic antihero, much as an unlikeable protagonist, is an example of a person whom one should not aspire to be, and as such the unlikeable protagonist is possessed of a critical function. In her article "Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of American Psycho" Ruth Helyer states that gothic narratives

> warn against extremes of pleasure and stimulation, which are seen to dull the capacity to reason, and encourage the transgression of social proprieties and moral laws. Archetypes of "civilized" society are used […] to feed into our conception of reality. (726)

Helyer is saying that protagonists of Gothic narratives embody traits and behaviours that are unacceptable to a normative, functioning social environment, and that the archetypes of a particular society are used to link the fictional world of the narrative to a world that is recognizable to the reader, enabling a realist criticism of said behaviours. This is the function of Patrick Bateman's homicidal insanity and the decaying elitist world which he inhabits, of Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson's morally corrupt approach to law enforcement, and Eva Katchadourian's status as mother whilst lacking positive maternal qualities.

The unlikeable protagonist is always an unreliable narrator. Of the unreliable narrator, Wayne C. Booth states “we should reserve the term unreliable for those narrators who are presented as if they spoke *throughout* for the norms of the book and who do not in fact do so” (148). From this we can gather that is the unreliable narrator is consistently unreliable, rather than occasionally diverging into irony or exaggeration; the unreliable narrator may believe they are telling the truth when analysis of facts reveals otherwise, or the unreliable narrator may simply be intentionally deceitful. For example, the tales of Bruce Robertson and Patrick Bateman are told predominantly via first person narrative and Eva opens her heart to her husband, and the reader, via the epistolary tradition, speaking her private thoughts to her (deceased) husband. Their wholly subjective perspectives and biased representations of reality create an unreliable narration.

All three unlikeable protagonists channel the mode of confession, though their confessions, as unreliable narrators, are marred. This is a highly effective method for generating a disagreeable character because the reader is privy to whatever inner monologue, thoughts, opinions and motivations the author chooses to furnish readers with. If those thoughts, opinions, and motivations represent aberrant or deviant morals and behavioural traits, the reader is easily able to dislike the character. Thus the privileged Patrick Bateman says “I’m very proud that I have cold blood” (Ellis 383), Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson thinks that “attack is the best form of defence” (Welsh 51) and Eva Khatchadourian believes that her son blinded her daughter without firm evidence (Shriver 341). Thus, within the framework of an aberrant character ‘unreliable’ translates into ‘unlikeable’.

Unlikeable protagonists are always possessed of an observable, recognizable fatal flaw. The fatal flaw that an unlikeable protagonist possesses will vary from character to character but will be a prominent aspect of the characterization and will lead to negative character development. As in classical literature, the fatal flaw will lead a tragic hero to a tragic end, but the unlikeable protagonist of postmodern literature will additionally undergo character development, they will be lead on a downward spiral that brings the character to a tragic end that is a direct result of the characters indulgence in, or ignorance of, their specific fatal flaw. Moreover, the fatal flaw is a universal human quality, meaning that characters in possession of it are relatable in

some fashion; are possessed of an accessible realism. It is here that the potential for sympathy emerges. While it is true that not all examples of a specific form of fatal flaw will be apparent (and relatable) in a reader, the general idea that a person is flawed in some way makes the flawed character accessible and believable. This is the point that Lionel Shriver makes in her essay 'In Defence of Unlikeable Characters' when she discusses the reasons behind her crafting of unlikeable characters: the purpose is realism, the result is a relatable character with increased potential to generate sympathy in the reader. As such the unlikeable protagonist can be seen to reflect undesirable yet relatable traits.

An unlikeable protagonist is simultaneously an individual, due to their specific characterization, and an everyman. This is due to the realism and consequent relatable character traits that creation of a flawed character can generate. It is essential for the unlikeable protagonist to be both an individual and an everyman so that the didactic message behind the aberrant behavioural traits can be applied to both the subject and society critiqued, whereby the gothic narrative function comes to the fore. Here we see a simultaneous micro and macro function, the role of which is to attend to an individual figure in a mass culture at a critical level. Bateman is lost in a world where he can be mistaken for others, Bruce Robertson as policeman is a figure present in most societies around the world, and Eva as mother represents an approximate percentage of any given population. All three unlikeable protagonists are critical, aberrant portrayals of major portions of society and as such a reader can recognize them on some level.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an unlikeable protagonist may, at times, perhaps under the duress of character development, display qualities that evoke notions of sympathy, but are highly unlikely to cause a mode of empathy to occur in a normative reader. This creates a degree of distance between the reader and the unlikeable protagonist, which, when compounded by the individual/everyman qualities, results in a complex relationship between reader and protagonist. The nature and degree of complexity is found in the ambiguous relational exchange between reader and character; in the potential for sympathy, but not empathy; in the compelling nature of narrative suspense and of resolution and/or comeuppance; in the aforementioned way in that an unlikeable protagonist is a reflection of undesirable yet

relatable traits; and is heavily reliant on the intention of the author. This complex relationship can take on a multitude of forms, as many forms as there are readers, and characters. However, the function is uniformly consistent and didactic, whereby one can learn from the mistakes of fictional yet recognizable others.

The recognition of these aspects, forms, and functions are helpful "to artist and critic because they are based on an agreement about a recognized literary effect" (Booth 141). By analyzing certain prototypical examples such as *Medeia* and *Crime and Punishment*, similarities between historically divergent societies can assist in the dual aim of identifying a historical development that led to the current form and function of certain protagonists as unlikeable and representative of postmodern societal malaise, but also to indicate that the unlikeable protagonist is not exclusively a postmodern phenomenon.

Medeia

Euripides *Medeia* is a complex multifaceted text. My contention is that the figure of Medeia is an early prototype for the unlikeable protagonist in that her filicidal actions are irreconcilable with an empathic response. Medeia's act of filicide is arguably the most extreme response to her predicament available. Euripides choice to have Medeia perform such an extreme act is indicative of the extreme message behind her actions. Infanticide and filicide (along with matricide, patricide and regicide) are acts that may be considered in many different contexts: as ritual, tradition, crime, and symbolic representation. However, regardless of the context, Medeia's actions do not provoke an empathic response in any kind of normative scenario.

Additionally, Medeia is a barbarian (non-Greek citizen) without political recognition, as well as being an estranged and betrayed wife. Accordingly, "her foreignness and status as an outsider remain constant features of her experience and predicament" (Allan 67). Her very status in Greek society strips her of personal power and the freedom to act in defence of herself and her children; she is an underdog. Furthermore, Lord Creon, the father of Jason's new bride, plans to force the "children with their mother from the land of Corinth" (Euripides 4), and Medeia has, prior to the onset of the play, severed all ties with her biological family. Thus, one may

sympathise with her situation as estranged wife, especially when considering the sacrifices Medeia makes, essentially trading her biological family for a life and family via marriage to Jason. This is how her character becomes relatable: via realistic character traits that some particular demographic can sympathize with (Luschnig ix). However her act of filicide places her beyond any normative, accessible mode of empathy, thus allowing her to be categorized as an unlikeable protagonist.

Broadly speaking the play is a work of social criticism in that it works to "expose the most fundamental tensions and conflicts within Athenian society, and explore its underbelly from a variety of angles" (Allan 13). Specifically, Medeia is a family-oriented play. This is why Euripides chose to begin his play with "Jason and Medea, now with two young sons, in Corinth, clearly sometime after they had fled as exiles from Iolcus" (Mackay and Allan 59), seemingly after the epic and heroic action has taken place. Thus Euripides is critiquing the family unit within a specific ancient Greek context, that of the Greek-barbarian union. Indeed, Medeia's nurse states that Medeia "is alien" (Euripides 3). Primarily Medeia is an unlikeable protagonist because of her act of filicide, but also because of her general attitude towards her family following the departure and betrayal of Jason. We are told that Medeia "hates her children and the very sight of them" (Euripides 3) and she describes her children and their father as "abominations all and loathed by me" (Euripides 7). An important aspect of the text to note is that the tutor says to the nurse "at last you understand that each and every man is more enamoured of himself than of his loved ones, whether moved by justice or by profit; to win another marriage Jason quit his children's love" (Euripides 4), whereby an underlying critique, not of barbarism, or filicide, but of patriarchal Greek society emerges. Euripides seems to be saying that the pursuit of selfish, individual goals is ruinous to a community. In this way *Medeia* can be viewed as a work of social criticism focused on the family unit as dominated by a negligent, self-serving patriarchal system.

In closing the discussion of Medeia I will briefly draw attention to similarities between the characters of Medeia and Eva Khatchadourian. Medeia is a barbarian, an outsider of non-Greek origin; Eva is an Armenian-American who writes travel brochures for backpackers causing her to frequently 'disengage' with the society in which she lives when she travels abroad for research. Medeia is responsible for the

literal death of her offspring; Eva does not love her child, does not teach him to love and is responsible for Kevin's figurative death or perhaps for him not having developed a recognizable, functional mode of living, a lack of meaningful social interactions and relationships: features that some would suggest define a life. Both Medeia and Eva reject and redefine female and maternal roles in a given society. Thus a line of symmetry can be drawn between the two unlikeable protagonists, despite thousands of years of separation.

Crime and Punishment

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is a narrative driven by an unlikeable protagonist. Rodion Raskolnikov commits two murders: one that is premeditated, and one that is unanticipated. Maurice Beebe states that "the real motive […] is suggested when Raskolnikov admits to himself that he knew before the murder that he would be shaken and horrified by it" (154) and that Raskolnikov "has, in a sense, committed a murder for the thrill of it, because of his fascination with the horror of the very idea" (155). This fascination is also an aspect of the compelling nature of narratives driven by unlikeable protagonists. It is an experience of the abject, an attempt to define oneself and ones limits by engaging with, in this case, the horrifying sublime. As such, Raskolnikov's motivation/s are primarily existential in that he seeks to engage with abjection to discover a means of self definition in accordance with Julia Kristeva's theory (Moore 227). Indeed, we are told that Raskolnikov "was young, abstract and therefore cruel" (Dostoevsky 275). Accordingly, Raskolnikov is not a hero (idealized), or an anti-hero (enjoyable), but an unlikeable protagonist.

Crime and Punishment is, among other things, a work of social criticism. Raskolnikov is a metaphorical prisoner; his lodgings are "more like a cupboard than a room" (Dostoevsky 3) and he is in debt to his landlady. This metaphoric comparison becomes evident when one views Alyóna Ivànovna, the usurer that Raskolnikov murders, as a representation of the critiqued aspect of society. She represents exploitation, evident when we are told that she "can [lend] five thousand roubles at a time but she is not above taking a pledge for a rouble" (Dostoevsky 57). As a successful citizen archetype she indicates that "the source of the crime is St.

Petersburg itself" (Wilkinson 2). In this way *Crime and Punishment* is more than a philosophical investigation of morality, it is a work of social criticism.

Raskolnikov is a character that can generate sympathy in a reader due to his economic and social poverty. As early in the narrative as the second and third paragraphs we are told that he is "hopelessly in debt to his landlady" and has "become so completely absorbed in himself and isolated from his fellows that he dreaded meeting not only his landlady but anyone at all" (Dostoevsky 3). However, Raskolnikov's social isolation is a result of his nihilistic disposition and thus he cannot generate empathy in the average reader. Furthermore, he is irrationally generous with the limited amount of funds that do come into his possession. For example, when a girl asks him for "six copecks for a drink" he gives her "what comes first − fifteen copecks" (Dostoevsky 137). An overly generous wealthy individual is a potentially empathic character (that was/is/will/could be me), whereas an overly generous pauper who is in debt evokes sympathy at best (I'm glad that's not me). The main reason for this is that to empathise with another person's situation one must relate to the other, an impetus that is not easily possible when the other (in this case, Raskolnikov) is by nature self-defeating and antisocial.

Raskolnikov is a prime example of an aberrant individual. It is his irrational sense of pride and self-worth that prevents him from returning to his home and family. This perpetuates and compounds his dire financial situation, which becomes his practical, conscious motivation for murdering the pawnbroker. This inflated sense of self is linked to his delusions of grandeur, whereby he compares himself to Napoleon Bonaparte, and as such considers himself an extraordinary, privileged individual (Dostoevsky 234). His dilemma, initially in whether or not to commit the crime, and subsequently whether or not to confess, is a moral one and thus *Crime and Punishment* performs a similar function to a gothic narrative, and Raskolnikov to an anti-hero. But Raskolnikov's function goes deeper, indeed, he "commits a murder not that he may be an "extraordinary" man but that he may see if he is one" (Beebe 154). In this way Raskolnikov is engaging with abjection, he is defining himself through an experience with the abject. Raskolnikov states that "the old woman is of no consequence […]. The old woman was a mistake perhaps, but she is not what matters! The old woman was only an illness…I was in a hurry to overstep…I didn't kill a

human being, but a principle, I killed the principle" (Dostoevsky 234). Raskolnikov considers his crime to have been committed against a concept rather than a person. It is at this juncture that any meaningful degree of sympathy vanishes and Raskolnikov is revealed as an unlikeable protagonist, too villainous to be an anti-hero, but due to the complications derived from earlier sympathetic modes of relation between reader and protagonist, too multi-dimensional to be an outright villain.

Raskolnikov persistently slips in and out of consciousness, experiences periods of time and memory loss, and displays difficulty in separating dreams from reality. Accordingly, Raskolnikov states "why, who can tell? Perhaps I am really mad, and perhaps everything that has happened over the last few days may be only imagination (Dostoevsky 251). This is reminiscent of the overall conceit that Patrick Bateman does not separate reality from fantasy. Bateman states that "a string of days pass. During the nights I've been sleeping in twenty minute intervals. I feel aimless, things look cloudy" (Ellis 285). Later he tells us that it is "[d]awn. Sometime in November" that he is "unable to sleep, writhing on [a] futon, still in a suit […]. When I stumble out of bed into the living room, the walls are breathing" (Ellis 330 -331). Here we see a link between the 1866 figure of Raskolnikov and the 1991 figure of Bateman. Much like Bateman for whom "surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in", Raskolnikov leads "such a solitary life that [he] know[s] nothing of matters that concern [him] directly" (Dostoevsky 221). Neither character is able to function in "a modern urban society where the individual is called upon to choose his identity and behaviour patterns from among the established categories offered him" (Anderson 1).

American Psycho

American Psycho is Bret Easton Ellis' condemnation of 1980s Manhattan, of capitalism and the commodification of sex and violence, and of the values that underlie these aspects of culture. Through presenting the most extreme portrait possible of a hyper-consumer, Ellis invites the reader to reject all that causes or allows a character such as the overtly masculine Patrick Bateman to become conceivable. When confronted with that which is designed to repulse, one must, by default, reconfirm that which categorizes them as not-Bateman.

American Psycho features an archetypal unlikeable protagonist. Empathy is nigh impossible due to the extreme nature of Ellis' portrayal of the hyper-real serial killer Patrick Bateman. Even sympathy is not a wholly viable means of relating to him. However, it is at times possible to pity him, and for that pity to occasionally spill into a zone of limited or reserved sympathy. Essentially, Bateman exists in a living hell, a hell defined by cyclical inevitability, from which there is no escape. This is indicated by various signals in the text. Ellis repeats chapter titles, such as "Girls" (160, 271), as well using chapter titles such as "At Another New Restaurant", both of which evoke notions of a Nietzschean eternal return. Also, during certain scenes phrases such as "this all would have happened anyway" (Ellis 315) and "where there was […] life […], I saw a desert landscape that was unending" (Ellis 360) provide insights into Bateman's perceived reality. In one of the final scenes in the novel, the following exchange between Bateman and a taxi driver who has recognized and robbed Bateman at gunpoint occurs:

> "You're a dead man." I smile grimly at him.
> "And you're a yuppie scumbag," he says.
> "You're a dead man, Abdullah," I repeat, no joke. "Count on it."
> "Yeah? And you're a yuppie scumbag. Which is worse?" (Ellis 379)

The implication is that there is a fate worse than death and that Bateman is suffering it. Indeed, it is hinted that Patrick was, it seems, doomed from the start (Schoene 381). For instance, Patrick reminisces about the "Christmas when [he] was fourteen and had raped one of [the] maids" (Ellis 329). While at the zoo he notes that "nearby a mother breast-feeds her baby which awakens something awful in me" (Ellis 285), and he describes a photo of his father "wearing a six button double-breasted black sport coat, white spread-collar cotton shirt, a tie, pocket square, shoes […] and there's something the matter with his eyes" (Ellis 352). This surface description could quite easily be a description of Patrick himself, and this is not the only point in the text where Ellis draws attention to an aberrant gaze (286). Ultimately, Patrick is trapped in an endless cycle of sex, violence and consumption that is all "surface, surface, surface" (Ellis 360). Because of this, Bateman is pitiable, however he evokes little sympathy and no empathy.

Bateman is an unreliable narrator. Several aspects of the text contribute to the instability of the narrative (Serpell 51). The novel is primarily told via first person perspective, which is by its very nature a subjective and thus unreliable account. Furthermore, Bateman routinely experiences time and memory loss, in one such instance stating that the mutilated remains in his apartment "lie, rather delicately, on a china plate […] on top of the Wurlitzer jukebox in the corner, though I don't remember doing this" (Ellis 331). He uses the word 'maybe' and the term 'I think' when describing events and experiences, making trustworthiness of the description tenuous. During a particularly hyper-real event the first person narration fractures and becomes third person narration (Ellis 335-338), indicating Bateman's detachment and disassociation, as well as potential delusion or fantasy. More than once Bateman experiences hallucinations that are completely inexplicable such as being chased by a park-bench (Ellis 380). Some or all of the graphic murders he remembers committing did not take place, including, though not limited to the death of Paul Allen. His entire identity is interchangeable and exchangeable (Cojocaru 188). Patrick's unreliability as a narrator can be summed up by his statement "another broken scene in what passes for my life" (Ellis 374). Thus Bateman is an unreliable narrator.

Bateman is a postmodern gothic figure. Indeed, "Bateman's behavior, his submission to bestial urges, is viewed as abhorrent, the exact model of what is to be avoided" (Helyer 727). Despite having social interactions with work colleagues, their partners, and people in the service industry, Bateman is profoundly antisocial. He lives alone, is not married, has no children, detests his brother, has a difficult, distant relationship with his mother and barely mentions his father at all in the narrative. Beyond the familial realm Bateman's antisocial proclivities are severe in the extreme. He is jealous and envious of his work colleagues. He covets Paul Allen's apartment despite living in luxury himself. He dates beautiful wealthy young women and then rapes, tortures, mutilates and kills them. He describes his acquaintances by what they are wearing and which designer made them, using the language of commodification, providing surface detail. For all of these reasons Bateman is an aberrant, gothic figure, a personality template that is undesirable or non-functional.

Underlying the idea that Bateman represents a personality template that is non-functioning is a criticism of the values and power structures that motivate this behavioural mode. Among the motivations and values that drive the capitalist mentality that is critiqued in *American Psycho,* commodification of the body, of the human subject itself is prominent. As subject, Patrick Bateman embodies the product of consumer driven economics, his world, his life, are symptoms of a mentality "so devoid of reason and light and spirit" that all that is left is a reality where "reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence" (Ellis 360). In this way Patrick is an example of Ruth Helyers description of a gothic character, she states that "typically, they are *dark, brooding* […] *aristocrats, with guilty secrets and unpleasant habits*. These mad or evil people, […] present us with 'doubles', the other side to the traits respectable society has chosen to uphold. Instead of development, honesty, and credibility they represent *regression, deceit, and untrustworthiness*" (Helyer 727 emphasis added). As such the novel is

> a case study of the predicament of a particular type of man within a specific socio-historical context. Patrick is a specimen of the Young Urban Professional, or "yuppie," the soon-to-be-extinct scion of modernity in an increasingly postmodern world [and] this putatively majoritarian, androcentric world is on the wane and so is the male that inhabits and compulsively reasserts it (Schoene 381).

Here we see how Bateman embodies the concerns of a realigned male construct that is in flux in a capitalist, consumer-driven society.

Bateman is a critical manifestation of the 'everyman', but in a specific, yuppie-oriented context. This is what Cojocaru terms the "Everyyuppie" (187). He is the ultimate consumer. He feeds upon and reproduces in himself the materialist world he inhabits (Wilson 489). In this way he is both parasite and host; is "illusory" and "simply not there" (Ellis 362) while simultaneously mass-produced and interchangeable, a copy that can easily be confused for one of the other members of the everyyuppie multitude that is Wall Street, centre of commerce for the world of the 1980s. Indeed, Bateman is an embodiment of "the utopian fantasy of neoliberal free market economics" (Heise 136). He relates to the external world in visual terms, in

modes of ownership and possessions, pop culture music, designer clothing; shallow and on the surface. Sex and violence provide a relief from the endless stream of consumables "in an economy where commodities and bodies become interchangeable and indistinguishable" (Heise 138). For Bateman, for the hyper-consumer, sex and violence merge, becoming a violent and desirable commodification of the body. Thus, subject becomes object, becomes a possession, becomes (at points in the narrative quite literally) consumable.

As a mass-produced individual Bateman is a product of a capitalist economic value system. This can be summed up as "the effacement of clearly defined identities" (Cojocaru 190). Effacement is able to take place because Patrick has an interchangeable identity. Consider the following excerpt:

> [Paul] Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam […] but for some reason it really doesn't matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so [the mistake] seems understandable (Ellis 86)

Here we see the true nature of Bateman. He is just one of many, is a mass-produced and disposable item. The recent "explosive proliferation of art and artefacts associated with serial killers" (Jarvis 327) indicates the degree to which consumer driven economics and violent commodification of the body are intertwined. "Action figures of […] Ted Bundy, Jeffery Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy" (Jarvis 327) ensure the mass-production, and potential for perpetuation and replication, the dualistic parasite and host system requires. The identity is effaced, subject becomes object, Bateman, Bundy, Dahmer and Gacy are interchangeable reproductions, mass-produced and consumed.

Related to the characterization of Bateman as a gothic figure, is Ellis' use of abjection. Indeed, "throughout the novel […], the reader/viewer is consistently exposed to the abject" (Moore 228). Abjection, in this sense, can be defined as an experience with horror, akin to the sublime, that reaffirms in the subject a sense of

self in contrast to that which is abject. In this way the process of abjection in the novel relates to the characterization of Bateman as a gothic figure. Scott Wilson states that "the novel's strategy, in its appeal, is to generate 'affect' through standard aesthetic means, mixing the generic conventions of horror and pornographic fiction. The moral aim is to represent transgressions horrifying enough to evoke the powerful affect of taboo and prohibition in the form of revulsion." (Wilson 477). Ellis' use of abjection confirms in the reader what is and what is not. Bateman is wealthy, handsome, fit and (on the surface) desirable. As such the reader can be drawn into the elitist world that is his life. "The [readers] alignment of him or herself with Bateman is particularly discomforting because s/he expects Bateman's representation to include the standard elements of the Symbolic serial killer—including psychological reasons for killing, accentuated differences that separate him from the reader/viewer, and atonement for the crimes of the killer—but they do not appear" (Moore 235). This, in conjunction with horrific, hyper-real, repeated violent escapades, is how Ellis is able to generate an experience with the abject. The 'I' is not there, is not present in the text, in the character of Bateman, and by contrasting association, comes to be in the reader. This is the end result of engagement with abjection, a reconfirming of what is and what is not, what functions and what fails. As an overtly masculine prototype, Bateman is an example of an obsolete model; a mode of being that seeks to function must define itself through contrast with Bateman.

Filth

Bruce Robertson is literally and figuratively falling apart. Welsh's *Filth* traces Robertson's descent, both moral and physical, beyond the point of no return. Robertson is utterly morally corrupt and his position as a law enforcement official allows him to exercise his debauched nature at will. Where Patrick Bateman is hyper-real consumer and an illusory, effaced, mass produced, hyper-real figure, Robertson is a distinct destructionist with goals and motivations that are defined by his self-centric amoral disposition. Robertson's actions, motivations, and personality traits categorize him as an unlikeable protagonist.

It is difficult to empathise or sympathise with Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson. Like Bateman, Bruce is capable of evoking temporary or limited sympathetic responses but is primarily a pitiable figure (Punter 12-13). Empathy and sympathy are

difficult modes of relating to Bruce Robertson because he is driven to promote self interests and is aware of the detrimental results of his goals. He is the architect of his own demise. Rather than employ the assistance of his associates, he consistently works to undermine them. The result of this is that he undermines himself, which is due to the fact that he wants to lead a group but is not a positive contributing member of said group. This rejection of a communal effort for mutual benefit is what leads to his downfall. Essentially Bruce's perception and treatment of others as a means to his own ends is what places him beyond an empathic or sympathetic mode of relation.

Bruce uses and abuses, exploits and manipulates his 'friends' and co-workers and he calls this process 'The Games'. All people associated with Robertson are subject to his machinations. Robertson routinely telephones his friend Clifford's wife; Bunty, and abuses her in a mock British accent (Welsh 96). He then visits her as an investigative officer to advise her and Clifford how to handle the abusive caller. By the novels end Bruce has managed to seduce Bunty and implement Clifford himself as the abusive prank-caller and Clifford is facing criminal charges and potentially divorce (Welsh 322-323). Also, when one of his co-workers attempts suicide Bruce declares "this puts me in high spirits" (Welsh 255). Furthermore, Bruce enacts a campaign against fellow officer Peter Inglis whereby Bruce spreads rumours that Inglis is gay. Bruce does this in order to defame Inglis and damage his potential as a rival for Bruce's much coveted promotion. The culmination comes when Robertson convinces an actual gay person to approach Inglis and insinuate that Inglis is a former partner of his (Welsh258-259). Inglis is subsequently ousted from the circle of trusted friends in the force and will no longer be considered for the promotion that is Bruce's motivation for the campaign. This is exemplar of his treatment of his co-workers.

Bruce's treatment of women is overtly misogynistic and is a type of relations driven by conservative individualism and informed by power structures of ownership, possession, and disposal. He is utterly sexist, habitually describing and forming opinions about women based upon their appearance. When Bruce does this he is channelling a mode of ownership, he is appraising a subjects potential for utility, for pleasing him aesthetically. In conjunction with sleeping with his sister in law and abusing Bunty over the phone, Bruce is continually attempting to undermine the efforts of Amanda Drummond, a fellow officer. When she first appears in the

narrative Robertson describes her in his inner monologue as “that silly wee cow Amanda Drummond” (Welsh 26). He then states that “she is superfluous” because there is now in the office a “big blonde civvy piece wi the waxed legs and sunbed tan” (Welsh 26). He characterizes Amanda’s efforts as “Girl Guide projects” (Welsh 34). Indeed, Robertson’s chauvinism is persistent and extends to all females in one form or another. Ultimately it is revealed that Bruce treated his wife very poorly, cheated on her routinely and that she left him for another. Bruce’s treatment of others is summed up by his phrase ‘same rules apply’, meaning that all people are the same to him, are means to an ends, and as such it is exceedingly difficult for a normative person to relate to him in an empathic or sympathetic manner.

Bruce’s entire narration is unreliable. A majority of the novel is narrated in the first person by Bruce, a minority is narrated by his tapeworm. The tapeworm becomes a window into Robertson’s past, an aspect of his unconscious, and reveals key information that assists in complicating the narrative (Karnicky 145). To make Bruce even more unreliable Welsh has him snort cocaine (Welsh 317), drink alcohol excessively, pass out from time to time, and periodically experience memory loss. Also, he both praises (Welsh 31), and admonishes (Welsh 30), his immediate superior, Toal’s, abilities as a law enforcement official thus offering contradictory statements. In conjunction with Robertson and the tapeworm; Carol, Robertson’s wife narrates briefly and sporadically. Near the end of the novel it is revealed that Bruce has been impersonating his wife who left him for another, a revelation that destabilizes the narrative further (Lanier-Nabors 95). Of Carol/Bruce, Anthony May says

> The sections narrated by Carole demonstrate that Robertson has developed a split personality, and that he has paranoid and delusional episodes characterised by extreme violence and exhibitionist behaviour. It is clear that Robertson is in the middle of a mental breakdown, and Carole becomes an alter ego through which he is able to indulge his most violent fantasies. He is also able to use Carole in order to indulge the fantasy that he is a reliable husband with a normal family life (3).

Essentially, Robertson exhibits a schizoid personality which, in conjunction with multiple first-person narrators and self-contradicting statements, complicates the novels potential for authenticity.

At times the narrative uses the term ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. When talking with Shirley, his sister-in-law who he has been sleeping with, the narrative reads

> −Be there Bruce, please don’t let me down …
> −I won’t, we tell her. I won’t what: be there or let her down? Then, thinking of Bunty, not how we feel about Bunty, but what we said to her, we say, −I love you.
> […]
> What is that spasticated cow wanting from me? We have enough fucking trouble on our plate as it is. (Welsh 326)

Soon afterwards the narrative continues with “and I, we, I … we’re all here … jump in the motor and speed towards […] the South side. We decide to drive through Queens Park and we marvel at Salisbury Craigs’ imposing face which towers above us” (Welsh 327). It is here where the narrative becomes most unstable, making it and its narrator wholly unreliable.

Bruce Robertson is an inherently flawed individual. Greed, specifically greed for power, is his primary motivation and because of his persistent pursuit of a selfish aspiration he is fighting a losing battle. Bruce is obsessed with obtaining a promotion and will stop at nothing to attain his goal. In this way “Welsh presents power as the ultimate corrupting variable, and the pursuit of absolute power as the source of most corrupt behaviour” (May 2). Bruce’s pursuit of power is not limited to attaining a promotion; he exhibits a need to control in many of his activities but most obviously in his sexual escapades (Lanier-Nabors 95). Consider Robertson’s musings of Bunty, and of women in general. Bunty’s husband, Clifford, has told Bruce that the abusive phone calls have “been getting to her” and Bruce reveals that this knowledge makes him feel “charged up with a sense of […] power over her” (Welsh 101). Bruce’s fatal flaw, his pursuit of absolute power, is what leads him to his eventual death by suicide; his entire daily motivation for living has come to nothing and death is the next logical

step for him. This is the end result, postulated by Welsh, of the persistent pursuit of selfish goals; the utter destruction of the self beginning with a progressive deterioration of the body and moral centre, and ending in disgrace and the finality of death.

Detective Bruce Robertson is an example of a critical everyman figure. Robertson is 'Bobs' son or 'bobby's' son, the symbolic descendant of Robert Peel who is credited with the inception of the modern police force in Britain. Generally speaking, any large population will have some means of population control and management, most often represented by a police force of some description. As a law enforcement official who is inherently morally corrupt Bruce Robertson is an archetypal representation of "the corrupt police practices shown in the novel [that] became firmly entrenched within the eighteen-year period of Conservative rule (1979-1997) [in Scotland] (May 1). Further to this, it is suggested [by Robertson's rejection of communal effort] that the corruption depicted was a consequence of the individualism that marked the ideology of the period" (May 1). Rather than serve and protect society, Bruce pursues his own agenda which is defined by his corrupt mentality. Bruce states that "you can't afford a conscience in this life, [a conscience] has become a luxury for the rich, and a social ball and chain for the rest of us. Even if I wanted one, which I certainly do not, I wouldn't have the faintest idea as to how to go about getting one" (Welsh 109). This quotation reveals Bruce's wholly selfish mindset, he simply does not care for the well-being of anyone but himself and Welsh presents this trait as utterly detrimental to Bruce, his wider social circle, and the public in general. Ultimately Bruce is an example of moral corruption within a system that is intended to uphold the current moral values of society. The inference is that a selfish individual will not attend to the needs of others, in this case all of society in need of policing, and that the overtly individualized subject will be detrimental to the moral social cause.

Bruce Robertson is a gothic figure. Essentially, he is a "hyperbolic and carnivalesque [representation] of dominant, oppressive and misogynistic masculinity" (Anderson 110). Specifically, Bruce "suffers from a number of physical and mental problems which Welsh presents as being a consequence of his corrupt mind-set" (May 2). In this way he is an aberrant character exhibiting traits that are intended to contrast with the accepted norm. As a corrupt police officer Bruce represents a form of personality

that is counter-productive to a communal environment, he is promoting his own selfish, amoral beliefs rather than ensuring that society's values are upheld. Indeed, through Robertson Welsh portrays a "certain demise of the oppressive masculinity" (Anderson 110). Effectively, Robertson is contrasted against co-worker Amanda Drummond who represents a modernised, non-patriarchal member of the police force. It is she that persistently contradicts Bruce's policing, it is she that contests Bruce's misogyny, and it is she that finally confronts him regarding the fractured and inhospitable being that he has become (Welsh 336-340). As a hyper-masculine figure, Bruce represents a form of male that is non-functional and in this way Bruce is an aberrant figure, representative of what is not normative in a modern society where patriarchal authority is all but eroded.

Bruce Robertson's amoral disposition is Welsh's didactic message regarding corruption in law enforcement and in the individual. As a law enforcement official he is representative of government power abuse. Indeed, "the novel suggests the existence of 'filthy', corrupt methods and beliefs within the Lothian and Borders Police Force, which is presented as representative of all the major public institutions in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s" (May 2). While discussing "postmodern books on evil such as Irvine Welsh's" (104) in 'Moral Commitment of the Realistic Modernist and Postmodern Novel', Joanna Clara Teske discusses how "the traumatic childhood experience is revealed to the reader only after he/she learns about the victim's current criminal life, as if making their evil deeds not justifiable but in a way comprehensible" (105). Because Robertson is the product of rape, and is responsible for the childhood death of his brother, the "need for power becomes an obsession for Robertson, and the novel presents power as a corrupting force which warps behaviour and causes injustice on both the personal and societal levels" (May 4). Here, Welsh simultaneously provides both a realistic "comprehensible" portrait and an abject figure, replete with traumatic experiences, bringing the function of pity to bear upon the reader while reinforcing that Robertson's behaviour is explainable, but not normative.

Welsh's text employs abjection via the grotesque to bring the degradation and filth of Bruce Robertson to bear upon the reader. Not only is Robertson host to a parasitic worm but he is suffering from an itching, flaking, skin rash that is designed to repulse

the reader. For example, Robertson states that his scrotum feels “scaly and crusty” (Welsh 94) and that the “crotch and thighs of the black flannels” he is wearing produce a “low, thick hum of stale sweat punctuated by the occasional sharp whiff of [urine]” (Welsh 108). In conjunction with moral degradation, Welsh describes a physical degradation. When the two are combined the reader is actively repulsed and becomes misaligned with the characterization of Robertson. By repulsing the reader, Welsh invites a confirmation of that which is not-Robertson. The reader can not readily identify with Robertson because they are repulsed by him and thus, by contrast, the characterization of not-Robertson is confirmed as a normative mode of being.

We Need to Talk About Kevin

Lionel Shriver’s portrayal of Eva Khatchadourian is subtle and wrought with care. Where Robertson is representative of endemic, chauvinistic, moral corruption and Bateman is a failing hyper-masculine figure, Eva is perhaps the most terrifying and unlikeable of the three protagonists this essay is concerned with. Eva’s dreadfulness is found in her position as mother and her expression of un-maternal ideals. The power to create life, to birth a living being, is, in many instances, akin to that of a god or goddess. Eva is, in this sense, an irresponsible and aloof deity; the mother of a monster, and through her misbegotten son, Kevin, she gives birth to the deaths of others.

Eva’s tale is told via letters to her estranged husband, Franklin, through which she reveals her own perception of the experiences that led up to and beyond the high school massacre perpetrated by their son, Kevin. Eva’s narration is unreliable at best. The novel presents Eva’s “highly subjective perspective [as a] confessional [narrative] of guilt, failure, and resentment” (Jackson 1). Indeed, the narrative as epistolary is wholly Eva’s perspective and is structured to deceive. From the novels outset we are led to believe that Eva is communicating with her estranged husband whereas in truth he is deceased. In addition, Eva routinely describes Kevin’s intentions or motivations, from birth, as being anti-Eva. For example, Kevin covers Eva’s private room, plastered in maps to remind her of her pre-Kevin existence as a travel guide researcher, in red and black ink from a squirt gun (Shriver 184 -185). Eva says that she wanted Kevin to be proud of, and to take example from, her pre-Kevin life but

when, at three years of age, Kevin interacts with the room in a three-year-old manner, she views this as a calculated affront. Furthermore, Eva states that "in the very instant of his birth, I associated Kevin with my own limitations − with not only suffering but defeat" (Shriver 90). At the heart of these descriptions is Eva, she is wholly self-centric. Perceiving the motivations of Kevin while he is an infant or young child as formed and directed with intent destabilizes Eva's narrative, making her perception and description unreliable.

Eva's flaw is that she is utterly self-centred. She seems to base her entire understanding of reality on how a given situation or experience will affect her. A specific example of this is while pregnant with Kevin Eva decides to dance to music. Franklin stops the record from playing and Eva from dancing and accuses Eva of endangering their unborn child. She retorts "last time I read pregnancy wasn't a prison sentence […] not that long ago women worked in the fields right up to childbirth" (Shriver 75). Franklin replies that up until recently "infant and maternal mortality were sky high" and Eva responds "what do you care about maternal mortality? So long as they scoop the kid out of my lifeless body while its heart is still beating you'll be happy as a clam" (Shriver 75-76). Franklin asks Eva if two more months is "a big sacrifice to take it easy for the well-being of a whole other person and Eva reveals that she "was already sick of having the *well-being of a whole other person* held over [her] head" and she tells Franklin that her own well-being "apparently, now counts for beans" (Shriver 76). This type of self-centric disposition is typical of Eva, is a part of her personality and as such "part of her maternal work, then, is her privatized maternal thinking while mothering Kevin and which she later engages in to produce the narrative" (Messer 16). This insulated approach to motherhood is likened to Eva's self-centred nature; in a role that is inherently social, Eva is anti-social. Her inability to place her child's needs before own is ultimately what causes Kevin to become a psychotically self-centric individual. Essentially, Kevin learns how to be a person by observing and interacting with his mother in early childhood. Eva's attitude to motherhood prior to Kevin's birth is wholly self-centric and at odds with the nature of self-sacrifice that a loving parent needs to exhibit. Indeed, "Eva's demise [as both social and maternal figure] denotes the failure of modern times to give her satisfactory social representation as a mother" (Gambaudo 162). Ultimately, Kevin's murderous

act, an act of hate, can be tied to Eva's lack of love for Kevin, which begins with her inability to place Kevin's needs before her own.

Eva is a complex character that, at times, generates sympathy, but overall is difficult to empathise with. By the novels end she evokes pity, and via the narrative resolution whereby she finally accepts her responsibility as mother and creator, she generates a form of limited sympathy. The "narrative voice is hard—impossible, actually—to like" (Somers 188) and indeed, the most difficult aspect of Eva's characterization to understand is her blatant and near prideful lack of love or appreciation for her first-born son. It is this character trait which places her decisively in the unlikeable protagonist category. Eva describes Kevin's ability to write well at a young age as "awful" (Shriver 227). Similarly, his assignments for school, essays consisting of only three letter words (a masterful achievement) are equally deprecated (Shriver 192). When Eva notices Kevin has attracted the attention of girls, she decides that it is because of his five sizes to small fashion ensemble rather than any positive, unique quality he may possess (Shriver 319). "Eva […] shows no compassion for Kevin" (Jackson 5) because she is "in love with her travel-guide business" (Somers 189) and as such has no 'spare' love for Kevin who, as an infant, simply siphons her time away for self-centric experiences. Even before Kevin is born Eva has formed an opinion, revealed when she confesses to Franklin that she had prenatal tests performed but that "Dr. Rhinestein did not test for malice, for spiteful indifference, or for congenital meanness" (Shriver 86). Essentially, Eva as mother "can't access the emotions that are socially ascribed as belonging to those tasks, and which create meaning and are linked to self-fulfilment" (Messer 16). This is a pitiable and sympathetic state of affairs, however it is Eva's own self-centred personality, her need for the freedom to travel abroad and how this form of freedom informs her sense of self, that prevents her from relating to her son on an emotional level. Thus, Eva, as an emotionally detached mother figure, rejects an empathic mode of relations.

Eva is one version of a modern mother, a modern everywoman. She is a woman who has rejected a domestic role and has assumed a non-traditional stance in terms of self-definition. Specifically, she periodically travels to foreign countries to research locations for her travel guide business, and in this way she is almost the opposite of a domesticated individual. She is "in a sense, an everywoman struggling to cope with a

difficult child" (Jackson 2) and represents the post-modern free female feminist, a figure who is able to choose masculine as well as feminine roles regarding her mode of self-expression. "Eva is the epitome of the superwoman. She displays a strong identification with the paternal metaphor; has rejected the maternal (her own mother as well as motherhood) in favour of paternal agents (work, partner). Yet the narrative suggests that leaving the maternal is done at a cost" (Gambaudo 159), and because the narrative is wholly Eva's, it is inferred that "in the loss of authority over her life project, Eva believes she must choose between 'motherhood' and social arena, as if motherhood was sacrificial" (Gambaudo 161). Indeed, Eva persistently declares that she has given up part of herself, that instead of "hope for the future" (Shriver 89) Kevin's inception has caused "a rumbling subterranean tremor quaking through the very ocean floor of who [she] thought [she] was" (Shriver 90). This lack of acclimatization to the repositioning of women in society is at the heart of Shriver's novel. Eva represents a modern 'free' woman, a person who bears the burden of trying to fulfil two incompatible roles in society; mother with dependent child, and free spirit with independent needs.

To make Eva into an unlikeable protagonist Shriver has Eva think, say, and do incredibly selfish things. Eva cannot sacrifice herself into the role of motherhood and from the moment of Kevin's birth her experience is marred by preconceptions. When Kevin fails to latch during his first attempt at breast feeding, minutes after he is born, she states that "I could only interpret his lassitude as a lack of enthusiasm" and that "his head lolled away in distaste" (Shriver 96). When Kevin is deemed to have intentionally soiled his diapers three times in under an hour Eva throws her young son across the room, breaking his arm (Shriver 229). Years of failing as a mother lead her to utter frustration and this is because she has not, in any significant way, made the necessary sacrifices required to form a meaningful relationship with her son. Her inability to make these sacrifices is linked to the fact that she plays a more masculine than feminine role in society. As a person who owns a travel guide agency and who personally researches the destinations "Eva tames the exotic for the purpose of domestic consumption" (Gambaudo 160) and as such has a decidedly masculine personality construct. Indeed, Eva "experiences her labor in a consistently negative way, while the experience of running her own publishing company, also central to her subjectivity, is consistently positive" (Messer 18). While it is valid for Eva to engage

in pursuits that are traditionally defined as masculine, when she makes the decision to assume a maternal role the responsibility that goes hand in hand with bringing a life into existence must be assumed in conjunction with the maternal role. The failure of Eva as mother results in the success of Kevin as murderer.

Conclusion

Lionel Shriver's essay, 'Perfectly Flawed: In Defense of Unlikeable Characters' is an invaluable text that to a large extent informs this essay. In it she explains the form, function and motivation behind the crafting of such characters and postulates a dedication to realism as her primary intention. Eva Khatchadourian, however realistic she may or may not be, is an archetypal representation of a particular form of modern woman; Patrick Bateman is her hyper-real masculine counterpart. In between these two binaries is Bruce Robertson, symbol of corrupt morality and degradation. Each character, each text, performs a didactic function and it is the importance of this message that overrides the vicarious enjoyment of the reader and deletes the heroic mode from the protagonist role. The realist portrayal of a protagonist as unlikeable is the respective author's way of bringing the message home. Nothing is held in check, all barriers are torn down, the private thoughts, hopes and fears of the characters are revealed and the revelation is not normative, it is wholly unlikeable.

All three of these novels are concerned with construction and actuation of gender roles. With the radical changes over the last century to inter-human relations and the roles of men and women in society comes responses and critiques, an attendance to relevant and important concerns. Whether it is Patrick Bateman; trapped in an eternal cycle of hellish, replicated interactions and experiences, Bruce Robertson; dying alone and in shame, or Eva Katchadourian; loveless mother who created a destroyer, the unlikeable protagonists represent aberrant behaviours and values that in practice are not socially viable. More disagreeable than an anti-hero, more believable that an outright villain, more relatable than an idealised hero, the unlikeable protagonist is an increasingly visible and relevant figure in literature.

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