

EXTENDED ESSAY

**Late Stage Capitalism in America
Explored through “*American Psycho*” and “*On the Road*”**

“How do Jack Kerouac’s Beat Era novel “*On the Road*” and Bret Easton-Ellis’ 1991 novel “*American Psycho*” convey the cultural implementation and detriments on personal identity of American Late-capitalism?”

3,881 Words

English A: Category I

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Introduction

Karl Marx has coined the term Late-capitalism (Marx) in his lifetime of work critiquing the free market and its corrosive effect on the individuals through industrialization. The theoretical nature of Marx's anti-Capitalist argument has transformed into practicality as at the end of World War II, United States of America has experienced an economic boom, solidifying its place as a global power alongside the communist Soviets. While the US had always been a capitalist country, this period saw the industrialization of close to every single consumer good has kickstarted what can be described as late-capitalism which started to impede individual identity due to the crushing pressures corporations now hold on American society.

“On the Road” written in 1951 by Jack Kerouac takes place in the delicate time period when economically and socially, over-industrialization had achieved complete dominance but had not achieved the same on a cultural level due to the slow and grass-roots nature of culture. This cultural limbo saw a generation impaired by a culture of war rise up against the social norms of the time through the early stages of Beat Culture, of which Kerouac was a part, and its natural revolution into the counter culture. In contrast, “*American Psycho*” was written in 1991 by Bret Easton Ellis, an upper class male who benefited and embraced the economic system, when late-capitalism had not only been embraced within the frivolous pop culture but also defeated its antithesis, communism, as the Soviet Union had started to crumble along with the other states behind the Iron Curtain. Both of these pieces are informed by and have informed the cultures of their corresponding time periods and raise the question **“How do Jack Kerouac’s Beat Era novel “On the Road” and Bret Easton-Ellis’ 1991 novel “*American Psycho*” convey the cultural implementation and detriments on personal identity of American Late-capitalism?”**

It is obvious that Kerouac's revolt against a soulless society was ultimately futile as late-capitalism had been ingrained into American culture by the time "*American Psycho*" was published. This contradiction is especially apparent in the points of view of the protagonists of the novels both of which are written in first person. The points of view the pieces take shifts the focus away from general societal statements and portrays what being an individual in such a society brings. Both of the characters are outcasts despite the extreme gap between them, proving how late-capitalism is harmful to every single individual. Therefore, analyzing these characters and their places in America within their time periods would provide a better answer for the effects of late-capitalism on culture and identity.

"On the Road" and Individual Identity

Kerouac's piece has an important place in the American Beats Culture, a literary and social movement rejecting industrialization's influence on personal identity and the consumerist culture alongside country's extreme militarism and embracing simple human experiences instead¹ Salvatore Paradise, the protagonist of "On the Road", has a disconnected approach to life in post-World-War-II USA. During this period, the country had experienced two great impacts on its free market with the Great Depression and World War II and by the Beats had rolled around these periods of hardship had started to wear off and industrialization had started to fill every inch of American life which lead to strict class divisions within the system. (Jaworski) The Beat revolt against consumerist-militarism was a natural anti-thesis to the extremity of America's growing late-capitalism. Kerouac's novel revolves around his travels across 1950s America through various means including hitchhiking, which parallels the Beat revolt as it rejects the consumerist road trip culture, focusing on cheap or free forms of transport without the

¹ (Czaplewska)

intention of consumption of goods and aiming to experience the country instead. During this period of economic boom in the US, brands and corporations were becoming the sole perpetrator of consumption for Americans. However, late-capitalism was still at its infancy and due to the smaller nature of societal change in the USA of the time industrialization didn't have the power to impact culture or personal identity the way it could in the following decades. This early late-capitalism is clearly observed in "On the Road" through the characterization of Sal.

The American image during the Beat era had peaked as a working class, white nuclear family living in a quiet suburb and owning a car. Kerouac's protagonist exists as an antithesis to this concept as when he leaves his suburban family, he goes in search of something greater than the dull suburban life. Even before late-capitalism, this move could not be considered logical by any American of the time as the white suburban middle-class life was completely undisturbed and monotonous in the safest ways. Sal's denial of this American picture is present even in his methods of departure from suburbia. For example, he mostly hitchhikes to his uncanny destinations which not only defied the car as a crucial American status symbol and took it as nothing but a mere way of transportation but also rejected the capitalist idea of basic property ownership. Hitchhiking is intrinsically a communal way of transport that involves little to no payment for a service America is used to pay for and goes against the nature of capitalism held dear by the US for much of its presence. Sal also consistently uses drugs such as Marijuana which is a trait associated with ethnic minorities including African Americans another point of departure from the white suburban middle-class American's image. During a time of heavy racism in the US, this was unconventional and extremely open-minded. Sal's moral degeneracy from his time period also persists with the lack of a family or an intent to form one during the course of the novel. American capitalism put an extreme value on nuclear families and gender

roles which ostracizes Sal's status at the time. He even keeps a company of hustler and lesbians. Once again, groups shunned by the white Christian suburbia of America.

Tolerance

Sal differs from most Americans as he exists outside the scope of the system without a job or any other form of stable income. In the novel, money and social status are never the end goal but means to get to the goal which in itself is basically the human experience, something Mandel argues is impeded by late-capitalism and industrialization. The exploration of the human experience in "On the Road" consists of individuals with diverse backgrounds and unconventional living situations paralleling the nature of change as a *metaphor* through the journey present in the book.

"*On the Road: The Original Scroll*" an initially unpublished early version of the book which was censored and edited by Kerouac's publisher due to their attempts at gatekeeping was later published by Penguin Books and proved Kerouac's point in the book further. In "*the Original Scroll*", there are open references to male homosexuality, deemed far more degenerate and offensive than female homosexuality due to the misogynistic nature of Christian America, and Sal has more experiences regarding prostitution, even becoming one himself for a ride². "*The Original Scroll*" further establishes the point many Beats and their subsequent counter culture revolutionaries had with the laid back, Northern Californian attitude to life and the people surrounding them. This message included tolerance, love and acceptance without condition which laid the foundation for many ideals within American progressivism in the modern day.

² (Kerouac, On The Road: The Original Scroll)

However, this attitude is still present within the finalized version of the book. The censorship of the original scroll points towards the gripping attitude of the era's literary market.

In the published version of the novel, Sal has numerous friendly interactions with African Americans, despite the racism of the segregated pre-Civil-Rights USA. On page 22 he has an interaction with a black man, "a negro character whispered in my ear about tea. One buck. I said OK, bring it". Later, he realizes that the brown cigarette had no effect on him, therefore he was scammed. Instead of blaming the dealer or making any racist statements he simply states, "I wished that I was wiser with my money" (Kerouac, 53). This is both an indicator for his willingness to own up to his irresponsibility and shows that he does not jump to conclusions about people based on the color of their skin. His ethnic tolerance once again defies the nature of American Capitalism which had an economy established mostly through the slavery of people of African decent and while slavery was abolished before the book's time period, there was still extremely violent racism within America alongside racial segregation which was a subsequent impression with the capitalist frustration regarding the free market.

"On the Road" breaks down the American suburban family into an artistic endeavor by traveling across America. Sal does not dismiss people based on who they are for example, when his temporary roommate Marylou disappears and then comes "out with her girlfriend, the nightclub owner, and a greasy old man" he dismisses her by stating "I saw what a whore she was" (Kerouac, 100). Instead of judging Marylou for her sexual orientation or partying habits, he only feels disturbed by being ditched by her. Later, instead of throwing a baseless tantrum he opens his hotel's window and enjoys the smell of San Franciscan food. In ways, Sal can be optimistic about life even at its most difficult and disappointing situations.

Sal himself is also referenced to be part of an immigrant family as his aunt is Italian. In fact, Sal being of immigrant descent is indicative of his disenfranchised approach to life. Sal is of a minority but he never acknowledges that he is different from any other American the same way he does not reference or place importance on the differences other Americans have. This, again, parallels one of the most crucial aspects of the Beats with its respectful and nonchalant approach to humans. This correlates to one of the more progressive attitudes of late-capitalism as, despite modern conservative populist rhetoric, it results in a globally connected world in which cultural exchange and migration is a constant as certain nations benefit industrialization far more than the economically crushed ones.

American Attributes of On the Road

It is established that “On the Road” is a story of defiance but it still embraces the presence of an American identity. The journey in “On the Road” encompasses a wide section of the USA and is focused more on appreciation of the land and its people rather than vaguely stated ideals. The journey starts with the goal of reaching San Francisco, an idyllic paradise where Sal and Dean can reach expressive freedom they have lacked in their previous lives. While the rebellious nature of this journey adds a surface level critique to the American society of the time, it is important to acknowledge how this defiance is actually more in line with an American identity that exists outside the reach of late-capitalism. One of the most apparent ways this is expressed in the novel is with the allusions to hobo identities of America.

The term hobo originated most likely in the West Coast of the US, the primary destination of the journey in “On the Road”, in 1890. Hobos were migrant workers who generally had little to no possessions beyond basic needs (Lieberman). When Sal acts similar to a *hobo* and does everything possible to achieve his goal of traversing the States, it may be wild and

scrumptious in the eyes of a middle-class suburban family. However, the migrant workers who worked hard for little money and sometimes wondered around aimlessly are an unmistakable part of the American history (Hix). Sal does everything in his power to travel or to make money in order for his living and transportation. He works hard and sees the country he lived in, not as different states but as one nation. He is a very clear embodiment of the American Dream consisting of getting to one's desires related to conceptual enjoyments of life rather than propaganda by brands. In this sense, "On the Road" is an invitation for the American public to acknowledge its nature before extremely right-wing economic policies before late-capitalism had set in. In the end, however, late-capitalism could not be stopped as the coming years for the USA saw only more industrialization and brand culture became a crucial part of American society in irreversible ways.

"American Psycho", 1990s Capitalism, and Degeneracy

Within the socially progressive 1990s New York City climate, there still existed a group of neoliberals on the financial district called The Wall Street of which Ellis' *"American Psycho"*'s protagonist Patrick Bateman is one. The premise of the novel is explicitly one of decadence and degeneracy and it holds many implicit connotations for the American society in the 1990s. These are mostly apparent in the plots of the chapters "Killing Child at Zoo" and "Girl" alongside the capitalistic imagery present throughout the book.

In "Killing Child at Zoo" Bateman murders a Jewish woman's child at Central Park Zoo later pretending to be a doctor in order to enjoy the kid's struggle to stay alive. His language, labeling her as "homely, Jewish-looking, overweight, pitifully trying to appear stylish in designer jeans and an unsightly leaf-patterned black wool sweater" shows frustration with the woman's ethnicity and social class. Bateman defines his victims through their appearance, possessions and

societal status. This is in stark contrast with “On the Road” where the character, while nonchalantly mentioning ethnic identity of the people he encountered, never expressed anger towards their status. This suggests evidence towards late-capitalism setting in to a degree where all social interaction and personal identity is informed by individuals’ placements within the free market economy. Bateman, while being an exaggerated character, certainly parallels the vanity of American society after late-capitalism had formed the new American culture.

Lastly, in “Girl” Bateman releases a rat he has been starving for two weeks into a woman’s vaginal cavity with the help of a glass pipe and proceeds to murder her and have necrophilic sex with her. Contrasting the other two examples, he is not too concerned with her social class. However, the manner in which he treats her, and her sexual organ is once again grueling, and it shows a deeper frustration with women in both social and sexual context. All of these examples have the core theme of obliterating those Patrick deems lower to him. He pushes the limits of social conservatism and has no regard for ethnic minorities, LGBT individuals or women. In his extreme depiction of how this Wall Street mogul cruelly treats different social groups, Ellis criticizes the more conservative higher class Americans, of which he is a part of. He reflects how the total disregard for decadents itself leads to extreme deviant behavior and breaks the social norm of tolerance in menacing ways.

Brand = Life = Everything

An unusual method for imagery Ellis utilizes is companies and their products. Bateman has a wide screen Sony TV, drinks Evian still water and Perrier sparkling water (both originating in France). Even the depiction of Bateman’s living room includes a David Onica piece, a Toshiba VCR with extensive capabilities, a Turchin coffee table, “Steuben glass animals” and “expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff” (Easton Ellis, 25). Vanity is present within his depiction of his

life, a depiction not centered around emotions or social interaction but luxury. This vanity is also present in his self-described addiction to the Patty Winters Show a tool Ellis uses to convey social practices of the US at the time and Bateman's reactions to them along with his general attitude towards life. He is repulsed when the show is about autism in a socially conscious way, he calls the woman who has had a breast reduction surgery "a dumb bitch" (Easton Ellis, 68) but he doesn't react as passionately and vilely when the issue is vain and less socially charged like UFOs or Nuclear War. The most insightful episode of the show however, is when it is about Toddler- Murderers. Bateman is delighted at the "futile" (Easton Ellis, 138) efforts of psychiatrists attempting to help these children cope and enjoys watching child murderers on death row utilizing legal loopholes to get parole. Fitting for his sociopathic nature he doesn't display any sign of empathy even though these children are extremely relatable to him. While Bateman's superficiality is outrageous compared to the average American, it is still a critique of the growing influence of capitalism over people's lives whether it be absurdly simplifying TV shows becoming a part of American's everyday lives or the extreme value placed on belongings by the society with Bateman's psychopathy serving as a *hyperbole* for the emotionless and vain American life at the time.

Bateman's behavior is one of objective vice aiming nothing but personal gain. However, within the climate of 1990s American Capitalism, his actions have little to no societal setbacks. His incomprehensible wealth isolating him from the general public is a protection for his actions, leaving them inconsequential and the drive behind his sociopathic tendencies. His sins having little to no consequences only makes the emotional gap he feels grow bigger and causes him to attempt to fill it with his decadent, degenerate behavior.

Male Homosexuality and Decadence

In “Killing Dog”, Bateman meets an old man with a feminine look and expensive clothing walking his dog Richard, immediately labeling him as a queer. After a friendly conversation with the man, who compliments Bateman’s striking looks, he slashes the man’s Sharpei’s belly watching him die and later moving on to kill the old man by stabbing him. The whole interaction is cruel, senseless and fittingly sociopathic and the title of the chapter not even referencing the seemingly gay man Bateman kills reflects his lack of recognition for the LGBT as human beings. This is a parallel towards late-capitalism’s destruction of individuality and personal identity because in Bateman’s America there is no place for outliers within the society. Every man of upper classes is entitled to objectified sexy women and anyone who does not partake in his brand of decadence is considered sub-human. This is even conveyed in the title of the chapter as even though Bateman also kills the man, he only acknowledges the killing of a dog. While this initially may be seen as referring to the man as a dog (therefore sub-human by the standards of Western culture) but since Bateman kills the dog before the man, the acknowledgements go to the dog whereas the gay man is not even held to the same regards as the dog.

Bateman’s attitude towards male homosexuality contradicts the general attitude of Americans, especially those of New York City where the gay rights movement started with the Stonewall riots. After all, this was when mainstream celebrities had started to come out as gay and LGBT rights had started to gain traction from the media and politicians. The contradiction points further evidence towards the character’s disillusionment with the general public. This leads to themes of alienation his character faces throughout the book.

The Millionaire Alien

While discussion surrounding liberalism, therefore its antithesis communism, is often disregarded as a purely practical issue covering economics and politics, much of the political philosopher and pioneer of Communism Karl Marx's early writing analyzed the mental and social effects a liberal economy had on the individual. Marx suggested that the proletariat was alienated from the society due to their disadvantaged status. However, American Psycho's Bateman is disconnected and alienated from other people just as much if not more than a blue collar worker even though he holds status close to the highest possible as a Wall Street businessman. This suggests a different oppressor-oppressed dynamic to Marx's as it shows the beneficiary in a liberal economy does not necessarily feel fulfillment.

An explanation for this phenomenon can be Ellis' disregard for superficiality. In his first published novel, which was inspired by his own life, "Less Than Zero" he tells the story of a Californian upper class college freshman who cannot find fulfillment and happiness despite his easy access to luxuries unavailable to most Americans at that time including large amounts of Cocaine. Bateman's story is, although more hyperbolic, similar in its vanity and obsession with pop culture luxury. This critique of seeking fulfillment through items the capitalist system provides has been present since the beginning of Ellis' cannon.

Authorial Context and Social Critique

Bret Easton Ellis was born rich family in Los Angeles and he has admitted that he has never had a job other than writing. He has carried out a hedonistic lifestyle as apparent in his first work "*Less Than Zero*" and he admits to being superficial himself. Moreover, Ellis has stated that "*American Psycho*" is mainly about "the dandification of the American male", dandification meaning becoming dandy, a slang word for the term metrosexual (Easton-Ellis, 'American

Psycho' at 25: Bret Easton Ellis on Patrick Bateman's Legacy) despite Ellis himself being gay. Therefore, Ellis' approach is not one of criticism but naked observation. His own superficiality and pursuit of pleasure is reflected in Bateman who never holds back in voicing his pessimistic statements. For example, he comes across what he thinks is a Halloween parade at first but later realizes it's Gay Pride Parade and describes it as, "made my stomach turn. Homosexuals proudly marched down Fifth Avenue, pink triangles emblazoned on pastel-colored windbreakers, some even holding hands, most singing "Somewhere" out of key and in unison". The character contrasting author's character leads to a juxtaposition apparent in every aspect of the work. On the contrary, Jack Kerouac was born into a middle-class family, speculated to have immigrated from Québec, in Massachusetts. He lived through World War II and experienced a USA that was damaged by war and crises, segregated by race, and threatened by the approaching menace of the USSR and the cold war. However, "On the Road" isn't depressed by the conditions of the era it takes place in. It merely revolts against the presence of mainstream culture in an ineffectual way. Although it is futile, Sal's revolt embraces tolerance and kindness in ways Patrick Bateman is never shown to possess.

Conclusion

"*On the Road*" builds a character who contrasts the moral and economic state of the time period he lived in whereas "*American Psycho*" embodies every single aspect of late-capitalism. While both authors have included critiques of late-capitalist America within their work, contextually and literarily "*American Psycho*" holds more merit in its critique as Ellis' personal experience reflects on a hyperbolic portrayal of the businessman archetype. In contrast, "*On the Road*" is more concerned with the influence it has on the Beat sub-culture. While it led to the revolutionary counter-culture, Kerouac, and his ideas, were ineffectual on the American social revolt. Moreover, the literary gatekeeping Kerouac experienced caused him to tone down the

revolutionary attitude of his original scroll. Obviously, this took down the value of his remarks on late-capitalism as his work itself was not only affected by late-capitalism, but it gave in to the economic system. *American Psycho*, coming from an author with more financial privilege in a more liberal time, wasn't affected by gatekeeping and was published with its hyperbolic review of its contemporary society in a more effectual way. In conclusion, this leads to the conclusion that Ellis' review with its social and literary context is more effectual than that of Kerouac's.

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