

"the american
psycho" and "the bell
jar" coursework essay
sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ The American Psycho” & “ The Bell Jar” Coursework Essay Sample

“...This essential peculiarity of the psychopath is not in itself evil or vicious, but combined with perverse appetites or with an unusually hostile or aggressive temperament, the lack of these normal constraints can result in an explosive and dangerous package.”

Within “ The American Psycho”, Bret Easton Ellis composes a narrative which attempts to instil in us the idea that “ that society is responsible for creating the warped aspirations of people like Patrick Bateman...” the main protagonist and serial killer within the novel. Similarly, Sylvia Plath creates the character Esther Greenwood, the protagonist and narrator of “ The Bell Jar”. However the novel has been described as a “ thinly veiled autobiography of the life of Plath set in the 1950s Boston”.

Bret Easton Ellis’ parents separated while he was very young and his father was a heavy-drinker. Although his parent’s had divorced, his father had an immense influence over his life which would seem to be predominantly negative. During an interview, Bret Easton Ellis had referred to his father as “ the sort of person who was completely obsessed with status and about wearing the right suits and owning a certain kind of car and staying at a certain kind of restaurant regardless of whether these things gave him pleasure or not”. It is clear that this actuality is what helped to shape the focal themes within The American Psycho where Patrick Bateman may be representing the sinister reality of the world and at the same time, divulging the superficial nature of society. In the late 80’s, early 90’s society wanted to

take ownership of this glamorous lifestyle and retain a high status which was also often referred to as " Yuppie Culture".

" Yuppie" short for " Young Urban Professional" is a term referring to members of the upper-middle class in their 20's or 30's and were well known for their remarkable expenditure and obsession over social status among their peers. In the savagely clever novel, Bret Easton Ellis illustrates a Western " yuppie" society - so caught up in this alluring image that they become completely oblivious of reality, and content with living in this trancelike world - even before the novel begins by quoting the Talking Heads " And as things fell apart nobody paid much attention". From the inlay on, it could be said that the reader is then led to " viewing the work from its outset as a commentary on a society gone wrong".

Whilst the American Psycho is constructed with parts of the author's life, The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel in a somewhat fictionalised form. Sylvia Plath, who is primarily known as an exceptional poet rather than novelist, struggled with a mental illness until February 1963 when she ended her life at the age of 31 which seems to be the path of Greenwood. Many people would agree that Sylvia Plath's mental illness was down to the men she had within her life whilst others would agree that it was down to society. Nevertheless, within The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath attempts to not ascribe Esther's mental illness and instability to men, society or herself thus not labelling the character's life.

Within The American Psycho, the character Bateman may be representing the superficial nature of society as the reader is able to see that on the

surface he is meeting the requirements of this " yuppie culture" by his incessant need to purchase frivolous and unnecessary items for example, while at the same time, demonstrates the struggle between the loss of identity and obsession with materialism - a theme also shaped by the authors own life. When becoming a successful author, Bret Easton Ellis found tremendous wealth and described working on *The American Psycho* as his " way of fighting against [himself] slipping into a certain kind of lifestyle." This could account for why the characters' loss of identity is seemingly effortless and allows Bateman to fit in with the rest of society - by during the day, looking, dressing and behaving like any other " sane" individual.

However, Sylvia Plath presents a different attitude on Greenwood's feelings towards this yuppie characteristic and that can be seen with "...all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet..."(page 2) marking one of first contrasts between the two protagonists. Whilst Bateman feels this is the way to behave, buying countless numbers of new suits, watches and ties, seeming to have semi-internalised this " yuppie" culture to give himself a sense of self-worth, Greenwood sees it as a pointless exercise and even regrets it in the beginning of the novel.

Throughout *The American Psycho*, Bateman constantly spends money on unnecessary items, food, drinks and expensive gifts. This could be " part of the idea of the character, that everything is so empty [in his life], although he has tons of money he's constantly buying things...to fill this void...part of filling that void is trying to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak." This

explains why the character Bateman is jealous of his brother when he is able
<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

to get a reservation made straight away with "Dorsia", a new high-class restaurant. This idea of "keeping up with the Joneses" within *The Bell Jar* is seen through the themes consumerism and global supremacy - which can be seen as "suffocating and stifling" Greenwood. *The American Psycho* exemplifies society's overwhelming materialistic outlook when the characters Bateman and Evelyn go out to dinner and he offers her a urinal cake covered in chocolate and wrapped in luxurious Godiva packaging. "I adore Godiva" Her face is now one long agonized grimace mask and, shuddering, she coughs. "...it's just so minty".

"I adore Godiva" could be evidence of society's intense consumer culture and decadence at that time as Evelyn eats the cake refusing to admit that it tastes vile since Bateman had purchased it from Godiva. The shallow nature of society meant people would be quite happy to endure something negative if it had a prominent designer label attached to it. This attitude that materialist expensive items take precedence over everything else within society can also be seen *The Bell Jar* when Greenwood tells another character that she and her friend, Doreen are going to a party. His reply is "That sounds boring,"... "Whyn't you both join me for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? I've some friends waiting as well". (Page 3). It would seem that Sylvia Plath is trying to convey the idea that within this society, the thought of drinking expensive brands of alcohol with acquaintances has surpassed the idea of it being a social activity and appears to be more "pleasurable" than any other activity. Throughout both *The American Psycho* and *The Bell Jar*, it is "fun" to drink with fellow yuppies more than anything else and it is something the majority of characters enjoy. This in turn makes

the endeavour quite monotonous as it is something you have to do in order to retain status.

“ Materialism and conspicuous consumption [is seen to take] precedence over human decency and virtue” throughout both novels, particularly within *The American Psycho*. With the use of high-status designer labels, *Elis* clearly illustrates this type of society on page 110: “ I count three silk-crepe ties, one Versace silk-satin woven tie, to silk foulard ties, one silk Kenzo, two silk jacquard ties. The fragrances of Xeryus and Tuscany and Armani and Obsession and Polo and Grey Flannel and even Antaeus mingle, wafting into each other, rising from the suits and into the air, forming their own mixture: a cold and sickening perfume” Here, the description of clothes and perfumes is completely devoid in the mentioning of human life. However, the adjectives “ cold and sickening” may be referring to society at that time. There is also great significance in the fact that *Elis* has *Bateman* referring to the suits and perfumes by their correct name throughout the novel as there is a large amount of apparent mistaken identity from the beginning to the end.

In the novel, *Elis* describes each of the different characters in quite a similar manner. The 1980s was epitomized by the increase of volume and size. This was an imperative factor in fitting in among the “ yuppies” of society and a style played upon within *The American Psycho* and is seen in the descriptions of *Bateman*’s apartment in a New York hotel and an apartment of one of *Bateman*’s victims. Everything had to be big and expensive and within the novel, characters are not very concerned with expressing any kind of individuality causing the theme of mistaken identity to occur. This mentality

<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

is also seen in a few characters within *The Bell Jar*, for example Lenny. " I wouldn't have missed Lenny's place for anything...He'd had a few partitions knocked down to make the place broaden out, he said...Lenny popped out of the backroom. " I got twenty grand's worth of recording equipment in there". The imagery of size and worth here further reinforces the type of society each of the two protagonists are in.

Within *The American Psycho*, one of the most common cases of mistaken identity is between Bateman and Marcus Halberstram as they wear similar suits (both made by Valentino Couture) and both wear the same style of Oliver People glasses. Additionally, both Bateman and Halberstram do a similar job. However, in most cases, when Bateman is mistaken for another character he goes along with the charade. This may be part of the way Ellis denounces society as the biggest role in shaping a person's existence and therefore, the cause of psychopathy. The novel portrays acting as an individual an impossible task within such a society. By becoming the person whom society accepts, Bateman has failed in his quest of finding his own identity before the novel begins. Even acting as a human being seems demanding at times for him. " The lack of emotion and empathy for others as symbolized by Bateman is an extreme example of what [an overwhelmingly hollow and materialistic society] can do to a person.

Emotions is what makes a human human..." This may be further expressing the idea that within this monotonous society, humans are "...some kind of abstraction..." and "...only an entity..." so it makes no difference what name they are called by. This notion is also presented within *The Bell Jar* through the sense of confinement permeating the novel. However as the protagonist
<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

disclaims, " I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn't hear a thing." It is not society that is seen as " some kind of abstraction" but her. It would then be reasonable to presume that the psychopathic violent attacks may be Ellis's way of breaking this lifelong routine and allowing the protagonist to feel something and release his frustration towards the world. The character Greenwood is able to feel " alive" when in the bathroom. " I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath...The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt..." showing the diverse ways in which each protagonist attempts to deal with the pressures of a society which leads them to psychopathy nevertheless.

When characters do wish to show some distinction between themselves and society within *The American Psycho*, it would only be shown through trivial differences in their designer clothing, perfume, hairstyle, job or restaurant bookings. However, although trivial, these minor differences appear to create envy and apprehension within the other characters. In the novel this can be seen quite often, for example when Bateman is with his peers comparing business cards and he panics when he sees that a peer's card is superior to his.

Most conversations throughout the text are on restaurant bookings and dress sense and for the most part, there are no clear distinctions between which character is talking between Batemans narration. The novel clearly depicts that this is a society where there are hardly any distinguishing features and it becomes difficult to realise which character is which with any <https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

certainty. However, this is never a concern to anyone and is demonstrated in the chapter "Another Night" (page 320-321):

"I get back on the other line.

"Bateman, I know this sounds like an impossibility", McDermott says. "But the void is actually widening." "I am not into Mexican", Van Patten states. "But wait, we're not having Mexican are we?" I say. "Am I confused? Aren't we going to Zeus Bar?" "No, moron", McDermott spits. "We couldn't get into Zeus Bar. Kaktus. Kaktus at nine." "But I don't want Mexican", Van Patten says.

"But you, Van Patten, made the reservation", McDermott hollers. "I don't either", I say suddenly. "Why Mexican?"

It's not "Mexican" Mexican", McDermott says, exasperated. "It's something called Nouvelle Mexicana, tapas, or something other south of the border thing. Something like that. Hold on. My call waiting."

The immature conversation does not resolve anything and the call goes on to be constantly interrupted by the technology of conference calling as "calls wait, lines cross, reservations are made and unmade, all in the same empty space." This description could be seen as an embodiment of Bateman's life within the novel as a lot appears to go on throughout his day in terms of the use of technology, miscommunication, decisions constantly being changed and no tangible relationships being built. However, there seems to be no substance to any of the other characters and they are all doing these things in "the same empty space", the society they are in. The very disjointed nature of this conversation and many others within the novel

epitomises the total lack of connection felt within society. As there is no differentiation between the characters other than the protagonist, it would make no difference if the names or occupations of the characters were switched around as no other characters are developed throughout the novel.

Unlike *The Bell Jar* where characters are developed and relationships can be acquired, the lack of character development within *The American Psycho* means that the male characters see nothing in the female characters and vice versa - apart from qualities likely to be found in a "lonely hearts" advertisement - for example, "single", "attractive", "good sense of humour" and "professional". This could account for the constant swapping of "girlfriends" and "boyfriends" within the novel, although Evelyn is the girlfriend of Bateman, he is constantly going on "dates" with other women and throughout most part of the novel is having an affair with another character's fiancé, Courtney. Nobody seems to have meaningful conversations and the majority of the dialogue within the novel appears to be based around meaningless lists of dishes, designer labels or drinks.

Elis demonstrates that this society holds such materialist things in a higher esteem than profound human interaction in the section of the novel where Bateman is on a date with another girl. He is so uninterested in having a conversation with her that he starts to list drinks in his head while she speaks, "J&B I am thinking. Glass of J&B in my right hand I am thinking. Hand I am thinking. Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking..."

Within *The Bell Jar*, Greenwood attempts to conform to this designer/drink listing society without fully understanding it. Plath makes this evident when

Greenwood says, "Ordering drinks always floored me. I didn't know whisky
<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

from gin and never managed to get anything I really liked the taste of". The fact that Greenwood has to conform to these fads within the novel and Bateman tends to have such fads on his throughout the novel could each be adding to this build-up of insanity prevalent within the novel.

The structure of both novels may also be the authors' attempts at further putting across this theme of psychopathy. The short, disjointed sentences seen within each novel may be representative of how the protagonists feel within these fragmented societies. For instance, within *The American Psycho*, whilst Bateman is walking along to meet his secretary, Jean, he is thinking: "An accident has happened. An ambulance is parked at the curb. A pile of intestines lies on the sidewalk in a pool of blood. I buy a very hard apple..." (page 371). He clearly feels no connection between himself and society. Within *The Bell Jar*, an example of the short, disjointed sentences indicating a non-existent relationship between Greenwood and society is: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands...but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." The imagery of a tornado inside of a surrounding "hullabaloo" brings about the theme of suffocation and confinement once more. This is a sensation that each author is able to illustrate. Each protagonist appears to feel "suffocated" by society, which in turn leads to their psychopathy.

The disjointed sentences and Ellis's tendency to jump around different hours of the day and days of the week without making it explicit to the reader indicates "a discrepancy between Bateman's explicit narrative and the "
<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

silent" implicit narrative" This inconsistency between what is actually happening and what the narrator - protagonist would like to see happen creates a feeling of uncertainty within the reader and the need to question whether or not what he is saying is true. A clear example of this is Bateman's attack on another character, Luis Carruthers. Bateman grabs Luis' neck, just above his Adams apple, however he starts " to squeeze, tightening [his] grip, but it's loose enough to let Luis turn around-still in slow motion" (page 158). Bateman is supposedly strangling the other character, but he is still able to turn around. Bateman then goes on to say, "[Luis'] eyelids flutter for an instant, then widened, which is exactly what I want. I want to see Luis' face contort and turn purple and I want to be the last face, the last thing Luis sees before he dies...until his own gurgling's, accompanied by the crunching of his trachea, drown everything else out."

This may also be indicating Bateman's misperception of what is actually happening and what he would like to see. In most cases, the other characters reactions to what the protagonist says or does support this idea of Bateman's mis-narration of certain events. "[Luis] looks down at [Bateman's] wrists and for a moment wavers, as if he's undecided about something, and then he lowers his head" and looking lovingly and only " part-awkwardly" kisses Bateman's wrist. After Bateman's supposed violent attack, his victim is narrated to have kissed his wrist rather than make an endeavour to escape and the only shock that can be seen is when Luis asks " God, Patrick...Why here?". Luis' reaction gives the reader clearance to assume that Bateman may have actually been making an attempt to solicit him rather than attack him. Throughout the novel the reader is also able to

see incidents where Bateman's responses are mistaken for something else or are completely overlooked.

As seen in American Psycho, the disjointed sentences within The Bell Jar may be representative of Greenwoods position on the outskirts of this fragmented society. Throughout the novel, while Greenwood interacts with the other characters, she misses sections of the conversation, for example when speaking to Betsy. "...That's amazing," I said. "Amazing"

...After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race. "Why didn't you come along to the fur show with us?" Betsy asked. I had the impression she was repeating herself, and she'd asked me the same question about a minute ago, only I couldn't have been listening."
(page 29-30)

Another structural device used within The American Psycho is the heavy monotonous listing seen throughout the novel, which could possibly be Ellis' way of expressing to the reader that society is the cause of lunacy. Chapters such as "Genesis", "Whitney Houston", "Huey Lewis" and "The News" are simply mind-numbing descriptions of things such as stereo equipment, grooming products, food, singers/musicians etc. While this is quite wearisome for the reader, these lists may be in-fact be representing modern society, and the regularity of these mind-numbing descriptions emphasise the way in which material and superficial things have become the centre of our attention rather than human relationships. "These passages are evidently not designed to please", Ellis seems to be alarming the reader by

putting what is met on a daily basis, such as spending a great deal of money on superfluous items into " a literary text." The dullness of these long monotonous lists may be representing how dull and mechanical society has become and it is evident to the reader that as the novel goes on and these lists increase becoming even more arduous, Bateman's psychopathy increases becoming more palpable.

Taking the whole novel into account it is " a sequence of restaurant meals, parties and clubs - interrupted by episodes of psychopathic violence and bouts of heartless sexual athleticism", if these episodes were not in place, Bateman's life would be a routine filled with endless lists and descriptions of designer labels. As with taking *The Bell Jar* into account as a whole, it too is a sequence of this yuppie lifestyle interrupted by episodes of psychotic bouts, this theme of imprisonment within society important to the development of psychopathy.

Bateman's gruesomely violent actions within the narrative " are some of the most factual and research-based sections of the novel" based on actual cases of serial killers and Greenwood's life-events are all based on that of Plath further supporting the argument that the authors are forcing the reader to confront issues society would rather ignore and utilizing the protagonist within each novel to infer to their readers that this superficiality seen within society is what begins psychopathy within those " nominally cultured and civilised" individuals.

Bibliography

The American Psycho - Bret Easton Ellis

<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

The Bell Jar - Sylvia Plath

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuppie>

http://www.galilean-library.org/site/index.php?page/index.html/_essays/literatureandfilm/american-psycho-reinterpreted-r90

http://www.galilean-library.org/site/index.php?page/index.html/_essays/literatureandfilm/american-psycho-reinterpreted-r90

<http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Winter09/baker.html>

<http://www.suite101.com/content/lack-of-individuality-and-differentiation-in-a>

a

[american-psycho-book-a254860](http://www.suite101.com/content/lack-of-individuality-and-differentiation-in-american-psycho-book-a254860)

<http://hi.baidu.com/%B6%BE%D2%B6%C7%E0/blog/item/71f6a6f4121dc5e77709d769.html>

[com/%B6%BE%D2%B6%C7%E0/blog/item/71f6a6f4121dc5e77709d769.html](http://hi.baidu.com/%B6%BE%D2%B6%C7%E0/blog/item/71f6a6f4121dc5e77709d769.html)

html

[http://www.suite101.com/content/lack-of-individuality-and-differentiation-in-](http://www.suite101.com/content/lack-of-individuality-and-differentiation-in-american-psycho-book-a254860)

[american-psycho-book-a254860](http://www.suite101.com/content/lack-of-individuality-and-differentiation-in-american-psycho-book-a254860)

http://www.fact-index.com/a/am/american_psycho.html

<http://www.kinowear.com/blog/the-psychotic-yuppie-mentality/>

<http://www.wrongplanet.net/postt7899.html>

[http://www.google.co.uk/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=](http://www.google.co.uk/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4ADFA_enGB397GB397&q=Lykken+Psychopathy%2c+Sociopathy%2c+and+Crime)

[1T4ADFA_enGB397GB397&q=Lykken+Psychopathy%2c+Sociopathy](http://www.google.co.uk/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4ADFA_enGB397GB397&q=Lykken+Psychopathy%2c+Sociopathy%2c+and+Crime)

[%2c+and+Crime](http://www.google.co.uk/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4ADFA_enGB397GB397&q=Lykken+Psychopathy%2c+Sociopathy%2c+and+Crime)

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/x0307m53u283640h/>

<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-psycho-the-bell-jar-coursework-essay-sample/>

Word Count: 3792

[1]. Psychopathy, Sociopathy, and Crime - David T. Lykken 1996 [2].

American Psycho - Laura Hird

[3]. " The Bell Jar" A Classic Story of Depression - Nancy Schimelpfening [4

]. American Psycho Reinterpreted - Paul Newall 2005

[5]. American Psycho - Guinevere Turner (2000)

[6]. " American Psycho": A Social Commentary Examined - Hi Baidu (2009)

[7]. Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide - Julian Murphet [

8]. Unreliable narration in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho: Interaction

between narrative form and thematic content - Jennifer Phillips [9]. Bret

Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A reader's guide - Julian Murphet [10].

Week 6 Lecture Notes - Michael Miller

[11]. " American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis" Week one: the running joke -

John Mullan (2010) [12]. /14 Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A