

Shocking the reader
in american psycho
and a clockwork
orange



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The controversy surrounding Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* relates primarily to the central themes that are explored in both books. Nevertheless, the brutality and explicit expression that drench these novels is imperative in shocking the readers. Although it is not solely the violent content of the books that shocks, it is a "matter of form and style" and the methods used by both authors in their portrayals of monstrosity. Both Burgess and Ellis employ literary techniques in their novels that are significantly directed toward provoking a controversial response from readers upon publication. However, this is not to say that the principal purpose of these novels is to shock; arguably, this is merely an effect generated by the form in which these books are presented. It can be said that Ellis's presentation of a consumer society is fundamental in driving Bateman, Ellis's protagonist, to act in the way he does. Likewise, Burgess's depiction of an oppressive, totalitarian society is also crucial in understanding Alex's desire for sadomasochism. *American Psycho's* "bizarre mixture of yuppie satire and splatter horror caused reactions of scathing criticism, indignation, yes, even murder threat." The shocking nature of the novel is engineered by Ellis's use of graphic content, imagery, and detailed description; in conjunction with the other themes that are invoked, it is clear why *American Psycho* received such a controversial reception. Ellis refers to Dante's *Inferno* in the opening line of the novel: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE"; this caption, inscribed on the doorway to hell, is proleptic of the content of the book, acting as a caution to the reader, who will be subjected to "The 'hell' of endless presentations of consumer goods combined with scenes of gut-wrenching violence." The graphic content alone in *American Psycho* is <https://assignbuster.com/shocking-the-reader-in-american-psycho-and-a-clockwork-orange/>

shocking; however, Ellis carefully contrasts nauseating detail of brutal acts performed by the egotistical narrator, Patrick Bateman, with “some of the emptiest dialogue ever committed to print.” Endless description of male grooming products (such as the “Greune Natural Revitalizing Shampoo”), home electronics, and designer fashion brands not only emphasizes the significance of consumer society in '90s America, but appears in such stark contrast to the horrific scenes of mutilation that the sadistic behavior of Bateman appears all the more appalling to readers. In conjunction with this, scenes of brutality take up only a small proportion of the novel: Bateman's first act of violence does not take place until a third of the way through the book. Furthermore, the monotonous uniformity of Bateman's incessant descriptions of brand names and consumer products leaves the reader simply unprepared for the bloodshed that follows. For example, Ellis dedicates entire chapters of the novel to the history of bands such as “Genesis” and “Huey Lewis and the News.” These tedious, droning descriptions of Genesis albums such as “the concept-laden And Then There Were Three” are of almost no relevance to the rest of the novel; however, they are significant in provoking the effect Ellis is intending to pursue. The tiresome depth of detail that Ellis uses generates a false sense of security for the reader, therefore accentuating the more ghastly content of the novel. Correspondingly, a similar motif is employed in *A Clockwork Orange*. Alex's ardor for classical music — most significantly, Beethoven's famous Ninth Symphony — generates a comparable impression to that produced by Ellis in his use of language; moreover, it is mimetic of Burgess's approach to structuring the novel. Beethoven begins his Ninth Symphony with a mellow, placid tone that slowly develops to create maximum tension before erupting

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into a much sharper, more dominant sound that, like the juxtaposition of language in *American Psycho*, is responsible for creating such a dramatic effect. Similar techniques are put to effect in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, which was castigated by various critics for the "violent behaviour and perverse desires" of some of its characters. Ballard, like Ellis, exercises an extensive and unnecessary quantity of detail; however, unlike *American Psycho*, there is no contrast between the violence and the rest of the book. Ballard blends endless descriptions of mechanical structure, "listed exhaustively in precise technical prose" — for example, the "jutting carapace of the instrument panel" and "stylized sculpture of the steering column shroud" — with the perverse behavior of characters such as Ballard and Vaughn. In the case of *Crash*, the relentless use of mechanical jargon amplifies the erotic and violent nature of the book itself and, when used in conjunction with descriptions of "every pornographic and erotic possibility" and "every conceivable sex-death and mutilation," is very effective in generating a controversial effect. Ballard portrays "his distinctive interpretation of the culture of modernity" through the means in which he unifies sex, death, and metallic structure in his language. Ballard's view on society is similar to that taken by Ellis, who drenches *American Psycho* with contemporaneous detail; the reflection of a semi-realistic society in both *Crash* and *American Psycho* leads them to appear more shocking to readers. In contrast, the dystopian world of imagination created by Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange* contains elements of a futuristic culture, which can be seen to appear less offensive to the public. Ballard's title, *Crash*, is relevant to the content of the novel; it is also metaphoric of his view of society as sordid and headed for disaster, a point argued by Virginia Brackett. The language of *A Clockwork Orange*, a <https://assignbuster.com/shocking-the-reader-in-american-psycho-and-a-clockwork-orange/>

neo-Slavic Nadsat, is hugely significant in addressing the violence of the novel, and is described by Esther Petix as “ the jargon of rape, plunder and murder veiled in unfamiliarity.” The typical tongue spoken between the narrator, Alex, and his “ droogs” is important in considering how Burgess intends to depict violence as both a theme and a way of life for the gang. It is imperative to take into account, when interpreting the Nadsat lexis, the distinct lack of connotations for love, emotion, and compassion that are typically applied in a natural domestic environment. In contrast, Alex’s dialogue contains a huge variation of words implicating brutality, violence, and misogyny: for example, “ Krovvy” for blood and “ Groody” for breast. This in itself represents the extent to which bloodshed and brutality are normal to Alex; “ A bit of dirty twenty-to-one” or “ Ultra-violence” is routine for Alex and his Droogs. Similar to American Psycho, A Clockwork Orange also uses a contrast in language to amplify the violence recorded in the book, thus provoking a more deplorable effect. The Nadsat lexis, in offering a variety of misogynistic and violent terms, also includes a number of conflicting phrases. Burgess “ flecks his dialogues of evil with endearing traces of childhood” in words such as “ appy polly loggies” and “ skolliwoll”; this juxtaposition of infantilisms and violent terms aids in repeatedly shocking the reader. In conjunction with this, the Nadsat dialogue is also significant in personalizing the reader with the narrator, implicating us in the sadistic violence he commits. The narrative stream of consciousness we see from Alex constantly incorporates us in his violent behavior. On the other hand, the personalization and interaction between the reader and Alex leads us to empathize with him, raising the argument that the principle of A

Clockwork Orange is not purely to shock, but also to pursue other themes. All
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three books — A Clockwork Orange, American Psycho, and Crash — have been produced into relatively recent films, all of which provoked controversial receptions; the most shocking, A Clockwork Orange, was banned upon release. This illustrates the contextual significance of the novels and represents how the shock of language has dissipated in modern society after exposure to media and film culture. Furthermore, this signifies why the explicit nature of American Psycho generated less of a response than the more subtle motifs of A Clockwork Orange that upset many when it was released. Ellis's use of language in American Psycho is clearly of great significance in provoking shock; however, it is the illustration of violence that is the substance of the novel. The gut-wrenching depth of detail and graphic imagery thrown at the reader is almost difficult to comprehend. The first act of violence performed by Bateman is a representation of class hatred perpetrated on a black homeless man named Al, which suggests that the encounter is merely an embellishment of the racial prejudice that underlies the novel. However, Ellis "images the victim's body with tremendous specificity," and the gruesome imagery of Al's mutilation traumatizes the reader. The illustration of Al's eye as a "red, veiny egg yolk... oozing over his screaming lips in thick, webby strands" paints such a repugnant image that it becomes almost nauseating for the reader. Ellis continues to express such explicit detail regarding almost every act of brutality that Bateman performs. In the second half of American Psycho, the disturbing nature of the novel heightens, as readers are introduced to the first of Bateman's sexual attacks. Unlike Burgess, Ellis produces a narrator that readers are unable to empathize with due to the barbarous and sadistic acts that he commits. The perverse scenes of erotic vulgarity involving various prostitutes and "

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hardbodies” that Bateman lures back to his apartment are critical in generating the level of controversy that arose upon publication. In particular, Ellis describes a scene where Bateman forces a Habitrail tube “ up into this bitches cunt” before inserting and trapping a starved rat inside her for personal satisfaction. Ellis continues to describe Bateman’s animalistic brutality, using sickeningly graphic imagery of “ skin and muscle and sinew and bone” before he “ hack[s] the bone off her chin.” Although it is clear from the fierce descriptions of various mutilations and murders that Ellis wanted to disturb his readers, there is a definite correspondence between Bateman’s victims that represents a portrayal of ’90s American society. This is reflected in Bateman’s choice of targets, which progresses from “ Al” (“ The bum, a black man”) to an “ old queer” and his Shar-Pei and then onto various “ escort bimbo[s].” Julian Murphet argues that what Ellis presents as acts of brutality should actually be considered as, “ The cinematically projected fantasization of general class violence toward everything that is not white, male and upper middle class.” To a certain extent, Murphet’s statement is accurate: both misogyny and racial prejudice are expressed explicitly in the lives of Bateman and almost all of those embedded in “ yuppie” culture. The uniformity of such a mundane routine pursued by Bateman drives him toward exorbitant methods of gratification. Carl Tighe supports Murphet’s argument, stating that Ellis’s portrayal of women in American Psycho is that “ they are not intellectuals, they are barely even people.” Furthermore, the dialogue exchanged between Bateman and his associates — Van Patten, McDermott, and Price — in pretentious restaurants and bars such as “ Nells” and the “ Yale Club” clearly illustrates their materialistic and misogynistic views of women in society. Any females are

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merely referred to as “hardbodies” or “bimbos”; Bateman fails to gauge anything behind the façade or initial impression of a woman. Ellis exaggerates the significance of appearance in American Psycho to such a degree that a waitress becomes intolerable to our protagonist when he perceives that her left kneecap is “almost imperceptibly thicker” than the right. At “Harry’s,” Bateman and two “friends” concur that a good personality in a woman consists of someone who will “satisfy all sexual demands” and “essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut”; the consistent and deliberate level of yuppie satire and offensive dialogue is a reflection of Ellis’s outlook on the consumer society of ‘90s America. Therefore, in Bateman’s egotistical routine of habitual violence, monotonous monologues, and cocaine, it can be seen that Ellis is raising fundamental social and racial problems, which were rife in America during the era of Reagan’s presidency. However, the extent to which racial prejudice and misogyny are adopted by Bateman and his acquaintances enhances the shocking nature of the book, leading numerous feminist groups to berate Ellis with scathing criticism. Similarly, A Clockwork Orange contains indications of misogyny that are apparent throughout the novel, with our narrator regularly partaking in “a bit of the ultra-violence,” raping and beating young women for his own amusement. The numerous derogatory terms encompassed in the Nadsat dialect regarding females also reinforce such indications, suggesting that A Clockwork Orange was not published solely to shock. The violence of A Clockwork Orange is presented in a very different manner. Despite the lack of specificity regarding every detail of the victim’s injuries, the violence committed by Alex and his gang of “droogs” is “both appalling and appealing.” We are able to empathize with the 15-year-

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old narrator through Nadsat and through his presentation as a typically mischievous teenager in a way that we could not connect with Bateman. Therefore, when Alex and his gang assault, strip, and rob an “old veck” and “viddy” him swim in his own blood in the opening chapter, we are shocked to discover Alex finds it “real beautiful.” Our 15-year-old protagonist takes aesthetic pleasure in the merciless beating of an old man and finds it “a source of comedy”; this is consistent in Burgess’s attempts to create distress in the readers. A Clockwork Orange does not contain the same level of specificity as American Psycho. However, Alex is presented as an artist in his violence, and Burgess describes his behavior with a surreal and almost facetious detachment. Midway through a brutal gang fight, Alex begins to “waltz — left two three, right two three” before slicing the face of his nemesis, “Billyboy,” whose “blood poured in like red curtains.” This illustrates the pleasure that Alex takes in violence and brutality. Similarly, in American Psycho, while torturing a young woman, Bateman is “grimly lip-synching” to “The Worst That Could Happen” while it plays on the jukebox. Both Alex and Patrick Bateman are embedded in their own routines of cursory periodic violence, which they perform for no other reason than their individual enjoyment. Arguably, there is a distinct political motive behind A Clockwork Orange: Burgess’s observations during his visit to Leningrad in 1961 inspired the dystopian elements drawn on by the novel. The oppressive, state-regulated nation that Burgess witnessed is arguably what prompted the Ludovico technique, a government program consisting of a variety of “ultra-violent” films engineered to revert the malicious desires of a young criminal such as Alex. The technique is a clear reflection of the totalitarian society of A Clockwork Orange and that observed in Leningrad. Burgess opposed the

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infamy and repressive nature of the prevailing Communist governments, and it is evident that his political ideology was influential in the writing of his novel. Critic Esther Petix offers a supporting argument involving the contrast of the government advocates representing the Communist regimes witnessed by Burgess in Eastern Europe subsequent to the Second World War. The Ludovico technique itself is a paradox, supposedly a method of rehabilitation; it instead manipulates our protagonist into “ a piece of pulps, juiceless flesh that acts upon command and not out of will.” The Ludovico technique is a clear example of the political message that underlies *A Clockwork Orange* and is critical in presenting the idea of the intrinsic evil of government and the purity of free will, both of which are key themes throughout the novel. However, the inhumane procedure that Alex is subjected to is also fundamental in generating shock, in conjunction with the portrayal of a totalitarian society. Ellis, in his representation of '90s America, “ takes us into a decadent cocaine-addicted world that basically revolves around the hunger for parties and sex.” This is illustrated in the temporal depiction of a consumer society where clothing possesses more significance than those wearing it. The extent to which Bateman is preoccupied by commodities leads him to become subservient, a commodity himself. It is critical to consider the importance of physical demeanor and possession in *American Psycho*, for it is imperative in exposing the “ Psycho” of the title. Bateman identifies that physical brutality, torture, and rape have become “ his only way of escaping his hollow life in consumer society”; arguably, the drug-fueled, materialistic world that surrounds our protagonist is the basis for the shock that is that is implicated in Ellis’s writing. Similarly, *A Clockwork Orange* sees Alex and his “ droogs” habitually drinking from the “ Korova

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Milkbar," which serves "milk plus something else." The drug-laced milk cocktails that are consumed by our "humble narrator" prior to an evening of physical brutality and sexual animosity would "sharpen you up" and remove any resemblance to human compassion. Once Alex and his "droogs" "feel the knives in the old moloko starting to prick," they are "ready for a bit of twenty-to-one" and are able to commit senseless violence with no feelings of remorse. Hence, the drugs consumed by Alex and his gang, as in *American Psycho*, form the foundation of the gang culture and "ultra-violence," two key implications of shock incorporated into the novel. Comparatively, a further representation of drug use in literature as a basis for shock is Hunter S. Thompson's postmodern novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which generated a contemptuous response when it was published in 1971.

Thompson's exertion of surrealist imagery is significant in emphasizing the savage nature of drug use and the pursuit of the "American Dream" reflected in "high-powered blotter acid" and "a whole galaxy of multi-coloured uppers, downers, screamers, laughers." The absurd excursions of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, the language compounded with a blend of political satire, and the plentiful hoard of drugs all reflect Thompson's perspective on American society and the American Dream. Thompson's use of language and imagery twists a pretentious Las Vegas cocktail lounge into "a fucking reptile zoo!" Furthermore, our protagonist's correspondence to readers from the midst of a "drug coma" led *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to be excoriated by various critics for its unfettered plot and adjudicated by readers for its drug use. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has been named a "classic in the literature of depravity" as a result of its sardonic depiction of

'70s America; allusions to "The San Francisco Acid wave" illustrated an
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endorsement of a drug-charged nation and triggered controversy when it was released to the public. Implications of drug use are included in all of these postmodern novels and form a fundamental basis for the society that the authors are presenting, which consistently creates controversy. Whilst *A Clockwork Orange* may appear shocking in content, there is arguably an overt philosophical and political purpose behind it. Hence, it was not published purely to generate controversy; that controversy is merely a tool in conveying a greater message. It can be argued that *American Psycho's* "disturbing thematics are the product of an apocalypse culture," a culture that Ellis depicts as corrupted by consequence of its lust for cocaine, its impulsive drive for glamour, and its prejudice regarding those who do not tailor to its idealistic optimum. However, it is difficult to justify the book's provocative and offensive nature without the development of a prevailing theme, other than implications of consumerism and misogyny. In the explicit portrayal of the life of Patrick Bateman, Ellis is fundamentally endeavoring to evoke shock among readers, and it is evident that this is the principal purpose of the novel.

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