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**MASCULINITY IN BRET EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO***  
**BA Thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Gender norms continue to be a topic of great interest in today's society. This topic has caused tensions and a large number of people have many different and vocal opinions. Gender norms have seen big changes over the years, which many people are finding difficult to cope with and adapt to. This thesis focuses on how characteristics of hegemonic and toxic masculinity are portrayed in Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*.

The thesis consists of four parts: the introduction, the literature review, the empirical analysis and the conclusion.

The introduction first discusses masculinity in the context of society and then goes on to define the two terms in the context of which the novel will be analyzed – hegemonic and toxic masculinity. Finally, it analyzes why and how hegemonic masculinity can turn into toxic masculinity.

The literature review discusses the viewpoints from which *American Psycho* has already been looked at: consumerism, violence and postmodernism.

The empirical part analyzes the novel from the aspect of hegemonic and toxic masculinity and how their characteristics have been portrayed.

The conclusion summarizes the findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's society, gender norms continue to be a topic of great interest. It has caused tensions and a large number of people have many different and vocal opinions. Over the years, gender norms have seen big changes, which many people are finding difficult to cope with and adapt to. The changes started first occurring in the 1960s, the decade that saw the emergence of the second wave of feminism and gay liberation movement. Both of these social movements asked fundamental questions about the roles of men and women, in the public sphere and also at home. According to the pre-1960s gender norms, a man was the head of the family and the breadwinner who was expected to provide a good life for his wife and children, whereas women were expected to engage in homemaking and parenting. This division started to crumble when women increasingly entered the labor force. It was further challenged when the labor market was re-structured starting from the 1980s, leaving many working-class men without the stable jobs and through that they also lost their self-image as breadwinners. These parallel changes have contributed to the current debates on gender. The restructuring of the labor market has continued and brought along downward mobility to many working-class communities, at the time when gender and racial equality policies have become even more widespread. The confusion of this group of mostly white men turned into open anger in the Trump years, according to Michael Kimmel (2017).

So far, women and femininity have received most attention in the context of gender as women's roles have undergone more dramatic changes since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, we cannot analyze femininity without looking at masculinity. The latter has so far been looked at much less. According to Kimmel (2006), a large number of men in the USA feel like they are experiencing a crisis, as they can feel that their role in the world has changed. They feel like their ability to fulfill their ambitions has been limited or even taken away from them because of deindustrialization and changing social norms. Kimmel

(2006: 216) argues that because of deindustrialization, men feel like their “hold on the successful demonstration of masculinity” is “increasingly tenuous” and that “there are fewer and fewer self-made successes and far more self-blaming failures.”

The parameters of the changes that are taking place within societal norms or in society overall can be hard to follow or comprehend. However, literature has the ability to store all kinds of information about the changes taking place in culture. Therefore, different literary texts can be useful sources to look for changes in norms of masculinity. As Kimmel (2006) has stated, many social changes that challenged the earlier norms of masculinity were taking place in the 1980s. This is also the time that is represented in Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* (1991), making it a good work to write about gender norms, as it refers to some of the concerns and changes of this period. From this book, it can be seen how hegemonic masculinity could possibly become toxic, which is what the present thesis is interested in, as it helps to also shed light on some of today’s discussions of masculinity.

*American Psycho* is a rather controversial book because of its very violent nature. Despite that or maybe even because of that, it continues to be relevant in discussions of gender. There are many aspects in this book that have been looked at. For example, so far, a lot has been written about the violence that is portrayed in this book. Michael P. Clark (2011: 19) starts his essay by describing *American Psycho* as “one of the most shockingly violent novels ever published.” Clark (2011: 19) also claims that this book “challenges the limits of acceptable discourse and flaunts its disregard for ordinary standards.” Another topic that has been analyzed in regards to this book is consumerism. Baelo Allué (2002) discusses *American Psycho*’s main character Patrick Bateman who is a serial killer as well as a serial consumer. Allué (2002: 71) also claims that this book features many mass culture references and that Bateman “consumes in all possible ways: buying, eating and destroying.” Of the many different viewpoints that *American Psycho* has been analyzed from so far, masculinity

is one of the topics that has been looked at very little. This is why masculinity has been chosen as the focus of the present thesis.

The term “masculinity” can be difficult to define, as it can be viewed as a phenomenon that on the one hand seems natural, but on the other hand there can also be multiple masculinities. Smiler (2019: 8) has suggested that one possible definition for masculinity could be “the qualities, behaviors and roles associated with men”. Perhaps most typically, masculinity is seen as a set of characteristics that makes a male “manly” – according to traditional gender norms, a man is courageous, strong both physically and mentally, takes care of his family and so on. However, although we recognize the gender norm described above, we also know that in addition to it, there are different masculinities, such as hegemonic, complicit or subordinated masculinity (Smiler, 2019). This thesis will focus on hegemonic and toxic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is developed from a theory of masculinity which recognizes the idea that there can be many forms of masculinities. Smiler (2019: 47) claims that “the form that commands the greatest power in society is the most dominant – the hegemonic masculinity.” According to Connell (1987), hegemonic masculinity “describes a position in the system of gender relations, the system itself and the current ideology that serves to reproduce masculine domination” (Sociology). The hegemonic masculine norm demands domination over women and other men, competitiveness, toughness and financial independence. Although not all men perform this type of masculinity, they nevertheless benefit from it, as it establishes male power. Hegemonic masculinity is not available to all men in society equally: for example, racial and sexual minorities are often excluded (Connell et al 2005). Masculinities are also affected by factors such as time, but also class and generation (Connell et al 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is also unstable, as the norm needs to change with time but at the same time maintain its dominance. This internal instability

creates insecurity in men who are seemingly powerful as the loss of dominance would upset the system of masculinity and hence even the representatives of hegemonic masculinity are sensitive to challenges to their power.

Toxic masculinity is produced when hegemonic masculinity's stress on power and dominance is taken to an extreme, often as a result of a perceived threat. It can have a negative effect both on the surrounding people and also on the person himself. Waling (2019: 365) states that "in academic scholarship, toxic masculinity refers to what some scholars pertain 'toxic practices' of masculinity that have resulted in the oppressions men, women, and trans and gender diverse people experience." For Waling (2019) the toxic practices of masculinity are both physical and emotional abuse and violence. These very practices are believed to be the cause of hostile and exploitative heterosexual behavior, which in turn is the cause of sexual and domestic violence by men (Waling 2019). They are also believed to be the cause of men's mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, that can be the result of men suppressing their emotions because they are trying to perform hegemonic masculinity (Waling 2019). The term is today often associated with middle-aged heterosexual white men and their privileged mindset.

Kimmel (2017), discussing the topic of masculinities in the context of the USA, has come to the conclusion that men have always been angry and toxic. However, especially during the past 20 years, they have become even angrier. Kimmel gives several reasons for the anger. Firstly, white working-class men feel like they have been betrayed, both by their country and their fellow citizens and that they are not being taken seriously and appreciated enough. Kimmel (2017) also states that these men believe in one certain form of masculinity – which requires, as Faludi (1999: 40) puts it, having "a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent and reliable living, appreciation in the home, respectful treatment in the

culture.” This set of values is something that these men believe to have lost as they have lost their breadwinner status.

Another reason as to why men can feel betrayed and angry is the economic situation in the USA. Kimmel (2006: 18) states: “Many of the economic trends of the 1990s – outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, plant closings, downsizing, layoffs, cutbacks, and the gradual erosion of the safety net (health insurance, medical benefits, Social Security) instituted by the New Deal – have ushered in a new era of “social insecurity”.” It is this social insecurity that makes these men question whether they are able to provide a good life for their family. Kimmel (2006: 219) also claims that they might be finding it hard to feel like they belong somewhere anymore, they might lose themselves completely and they “don’t feel much like real men anymore”.

Although urban elites described in Ellis’ novel seem far from the concerns of the working class, they also experience insecurity as in their hyper-competitive work environment not everybody can be equally successful. Thus, the tensions described by Kimmel also appear among the upper classes. The present thesis tries to find out how hegemonic and toxic masculinity have been portrayed in Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho*. In order to achieve the goal, the literature review gives an overview of previous research on Ellis’ novel. The empirical section provides the analysis of the representation of hegemonic and toxic masculinity in the novel. The findings are summed up in the conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: RECEPTION OF BRET EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO***

Bret Easton Ellis has been one of the most scandalous writers of the 1990s, having been seen as a “literary bad boy” (Christensen 2019). He has been criticized for writing about violence, but he has also been praised because his works have forced people out of their comfort zones. He brought something very different to the literary field with his writing about the excesses of the life of the wealthy from drug use to violence.

Although some of Ellis' work is viewed as a document of the 1990s, *American Psycho* is one of the works that is still relevant to the present day. It also continues to create conflicting views: there are people who consider it a valuable piece of postmodernist fiction and people who are adamant that it should be boycotted. Clark (2011: 20) claims that while some readers think *American Psycho* is as indecent and as unethical as the acts that are described in it, then others are looking at it as a satire of the USA in the 1980s. Overall, *American Psycho* has gained a lot of heavy criticism over time, already before it was even published. Some months before this novel came out, Rosenblatt (1990: 3) wrote a review where the title already says a lot: “Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?”. In this review, this book was claimed to be a “tale of contemporary foolishness” and a question was posed about whether this kind of a book should even be published (Rosenblatt 1990: 3). He also states that it is void of pretty much everything, as he claims it is “so pointless, so themeless, so everythingless” (Rosenblatt 1990: 3). He also finds the violent parts of this book to be “some childishly gruesome descriptions of torture or dismemberment” (Rosenblatt 1990: 3).

In contrast, Teachout (1991: 45), who wrote her review some months after *American Psycho* had been published, admits that she at first actually felt some sort of sympathy for Ellis – “in much the same way that a soft-hearted member of the National Association of

Scholars might pity an Ivy League leftist who inadvertently ran afoul of the PC police and suddenly discovered that his old friends wouldn't return his calls." However, she also says that this sympathy did not last for long – it took her about six pages of reading this novel to form an opinion similar to that of Rosenblatt (1990), as she next claims that "every bad thing you've read about it is an understatement. It's ineptly written. It is, in the truest sense of the word, obscene" (Teachout 1991: 45).

This initial reception already shows why the novel has often been looked at as an example of transgressive fiction, as this type of fiction typically focuses on the topics that are not tolerated in the society, such as violence, drugs and crime. Sári (2015: 481) states that Bret Easton Ellis has been a transgressive writer since he first started writing and that most of his works have also been said to be as either "directly challenging received literary conventions" (such as *Less Than Zero*) or "openly confronting institutionalized forms of representation" (such as *American Psycho*). He claims that *American Psycho* is "committing every crime conceivable against the regime of political correctness" (Sari 2015: 481). This can be said because of the novel featuring indecent language and numerous descriptions of graphic violence (sadistic murder, rape, necrophilia) and torture.

*American Psycho* has been looked at from many different viewpoints. As was also stated at the beginning of this thesis, this novel was written during a time when many changes were happening within societal and gender norms. If the horror and violence is put aside for a moment, this book reacts to these changes. Therefore, as Rawlinson (1991: 147) argues, although this book contains many horrendous acts, "they should be read in the context of the book as a whole; the horror does not lie in the novel itself, but in the society it reflects", which she describes as a "world in which the elegance of a business card evokes more emotional response than the murder of a child".

Violence is overall the topic that has been discussed the most in regards to this novel. Clark (2011: 20) says that “the status of *American Psycho* as a work of art depends on a distinction between the vile actions described in the narrative and the description of those actions as an act of narration/.../”. In fact, the novel has a complex narrative style that creates doubts about the reliability of the narrator and even whether the events actually took place. Because of the graphic actions described in this book, it can be a difficult one to read. Therefore, Rawlinson (1991) and Clark (2011) agree that the true meaning of the book can go unnoticed because of the horror created by the graphic descriptions of violence. Clark (2011: 19) also discusses the use of language in this novel and notes that it is “an act of violence itself”, because of the shocking effect it has on the reader, and how this is a literary text that pushes the boundaries of what is socially and morally acceptable and what is not, implying the very detailed descriptions of murders here but also the unemotional way in which they are described.

There have been suggestions that maybe all the vile actions described in this novel did not actually take place but only happened in Bateman’s head (Clark 2011). Some critics have come to this conclusion on the basis of Bateman not having any negative reaction to or judgment of his doings. However, Clark (2011: 33) claims that Patrick does not have it in him to have such fantasies – “Patrick has no “inside”, no interior depth in which such fantasies could play out in isolation from the words that describe them, nor do those same words reliably designate objects and actions in the world outside the text.” Clark (2011: 33) gives an example from the book where Bateman steps on someone’s foot and asks: “Did I do this on purpose? What do you think? Or did I do this accidentally?” This suggests that at times, he does briefly reflect back on his actions, as he sometimes addresses the reader as “you”.

Additionally, this book has also been looked at from the standpoint of fashion and how it has been presented there. Patrick Bateman has been shown to be a very fashion-conscious and brand-aware person, who considers his looks extremely important – it is, in fact, what he has built his whole persona on. Gomel (2011) has referred to him as being a dandy or a man of fashion. He is highly aware of what kinds of clothes he is wearing, which can be seen from one of the many descriptions in this book: “I am wearing a two-button single-breasted chalk-striped wool-flannel suit, a multicolored candy-striped cotton shirt and a silk pocket square, all by Patrick Aubert” (Gomel 2011: 59). Being as fashion conscious as he is, he seems to be offended when the other person is not – or when the other person is dressed in a way that he does not find suitable. Gomel (2011: 60) points out a situation from the book where Bateman is talking to a girl in a video store and is very surprised because of her choice of outfit as she is “actually wearing a baggy, nondescript sweater, definitely *not* designer”, along with some rather ordinary sneakers. It must be noted here Bateman is not upset because of this girl’s clothing choices, but because she is not even interested in fashion and therefore, she also does not appreciate Bateman’s high taste – he feels like she does not “realize Patrick for what he is” (Gomel 2011: 60). Patrick does not have substance; all he has is consumerism-based style and thus a person not recognizing the status symbols conveyed in the style makes Patrick feel invisible, something he as a powerful man is not accustomed to.

Gomel (2011) thinks that in Bateman’s life, which is already filled with so much chaos and negativity, fashion and everything related to it are the only stable things that he can stay true to – they are always there and he can always rely on them. Gomel (2011: 60) also notes that “fashion provides him *not* with a stage for multiple self-performances but with a set of rules to hold together this disintegrating psyche.” This suggests that his taste and clothes that he wears are Patrick’s identity.

Another point of view that this book has been looked at from is family, more specifically, the father. Blazer (2011) notes how critics have come to the conclusion that in Ellis' novels, the existence of a father figure is problematic. He also discusses whether or how much Patrick Bateman's father was present in his life, as in the book, he is only ever visible in a photograph. Blazer (2011: 37) then poses some questions as a result of this possible problem: whether Bateman's father is dead or whether he "rules his family through intermediary lawyers and managers from atop some Wall Street skyscraper?" – (since the father comes from a line of businessmen). This all leads the most important question: whether Bateman is someone to respect the authority of his father?

Here, Blazer (2011) draws a parallel with Oedipus. After Oedipus had unintentionally fulfilled the prophecy which resulted in him marrying his mother and killing his father, he blinds himself as a punishment for having broken the law and committed incest. Here, a similarity with Bateman can be seen: "the inaccessibility of the father, the absence of his law, assume the form of psychosis as Patrick inflicts his inner paternal confusions upon the world in torturous and murderous form" (Blazer 2011: 37). Therefore, Blazer believes that the reason why Patrick Bateman has turned out the way he has and does the things he does is because he has possibly never felt how it feels to be raised by a father.

Consumerism is another major topic that has been dealt with in regards to *American Psycho*. According to Baelo Allué (2002), this novel contains two forms of seriality that are linked – Bateman's serial killings that never end and Bateman's serial consumerism of the mass culture that is around him. In her article, she brings out different reasons as to why *American Psycho* is filled with consumerism and references to it. Bateman kills in series, but the murders do not really go anywhere, as every new killing does not really give any hints to what his motivations would be. Additionally, it can also be difficult to see or find a

pattern in these murders. Baelo Allué (2002) compares Bateman's killings to television series that just go on and on, without really reaching a point.

Another aspect of consumerism that Baelo Allué (2002) points out, and that has also been talked about by Gomel (2011), is Patrick Bateman's obsession with different brands. Clearly, brands mean more to Bateman than just a social status. He does not look at things as just things, he looks at them as what their brand is: "He looks not at his watch but at his "Rolex", he drinks not whisky but "J&B", nor water but "Evian" (Baelo Allue 2002: 81). Baelo Allué (2002) also refers to the continuous descriptions of different kinds of clothes, restaurants, furniture and so on, as one of the features through which we can see *American Psycho*'s critical position in relation to consumerism.

This novel has also been looked at as being a work of Gothic postmodernism. Helyer (2000: 744) states that the Gothic novel "celebrates unacceptable behaviour, the violent, the self-promoting, and those who indulge their cravings" and that in *American Psycho*, Bateman can be seen displaying all of these characteristics.

Helyer (2000) believes that Gothic characters are usually very stereotyped, and so is Patrick, as he is a serial killer, but also someone who is very well-off. He does not necessarily need to work, as his family has been said to "own half of Wall Street" (Helyer 2000: 728). He is also very good-looking and obsessed with himself, and often gets asked whether he could be a model or an actor (Helyer 2000: 728). As his looks are so important to him, even one of the numerous shampoos he is using is claimed to make its user younger, as he is extremely scared of aging (Helyer 2000: 736).

Helyer (2000: 736) points out different routines and rituals, which are also aspects of the Gothic and which are "indicative of a human urge to keep within certain bounds". In the case of Patrick, Helyer (2000: 736) brings out the increasing repetitions of Patrick's

exercising and how he keeps replaying the same videotape and the same record on his jukebox, which can be considered as him trying to regain control. The more agitated and irritated he gets, the more intensive his exercise routine gets. Patrick is clearly striving for control in his life, as he wants to behave and do exactly as he feels like, at the same time keeping societal norms and constructs out of his mind, but expecting those who do submit to these constructs to “immediately be able to discern his superiority” (Helyer 2000: 736).

Another feature of the Gothic is the doubles – two different sides existing at the same time (Helyer 2000). The author contrasts the two sides that Patrick has in different situations: he can be a “wealthy executive *and* brutal killer, seemingly ‘charming’ date *and* sexual partner from Hell, one of the boys *and* rampant homophobic” (Helyer 2000: 740). Here, Helyer (2000) considers the most interesting aspect to be the fact that Patrick is someone who is often misrecognized: many times throughout the book, he is referred to by incorrect names. Patrick usually reacts calmly to this, as if he was indeed the person who was named. But eventually, this results in him having a many-sided identity. He manages to turn these wrong namings of him to his good, as this way, he is able to get the information and alibis he needs and also mislead investigators (Helyer 2000). Helyer (2000: 740) notes that because Patrick is not recognized for what he is, he ends up creating his own reality: “an apocalyptic reality that validates *his* priorities and perspective, one that questions the generally accepted version of ‘normal’”.

Helyer (2000: 737) claims that “to fear what is hidden behind locked doors” is another characteristic of Gothic. As Bateman decapitated the neighbor of his fiancée as if it was nothing, and as he can also very casually run into Tom Cruise in an elevator, is suggesting that “nobody is safe” – that horrifying things can happen to anyone at any time (Helyer 2000: 737).

Finally, another topic has been looked at in the context of *American Psycho* is the issue of white male behavior or white male crisis, as Kwon (2019) puts it. Kwon (2019) also discusses that even though white male identity is actually never clearly defined in this novel, it comes through from how other people (women, sexual minorities and different races, who have in this context been characterized collectively as the Others) are treated by Bateman and his friends in this novel. Kwon (2019: 65) notes: “They reconfirm their classial status by insulting beggars, claim heterosexual masculinity by mocking women and homosexuals, and reassure their whiteness by articulating the racial identities of Jews, Japanese, Iranian, African Americans around them”. There are situations in the novel where a dollar bill is burnt in front of a beggar, a homeless person is asked whether if “he takes American Express”, and a doorman is told to “get a real job” (Kwon 2019: 65). People of different races, such as an Iranian and an Asian individual, are insulted as well. Kwon (2019: 65) notes that using such language shows that “these men’s scorn for the underprivileged always mirrors their own economic status, specifying what they own and thus flaunting the power and prosperity of upper-class lives”.

In the case of this novel, the performing of white male identity is associated with the violence (more specifically, mutilation and cannibalism) (Kwon 2019). The majority of women, in spite of their social status, suffer a horrible fate through the different violent acts performed on them by Bateman. Kwon (2019: 66) claims that “Bateman’s violence is an ultimate means of reproducing the logic of purity/contamination dichotomy. It is an attempt to physically inscribe the sign of contamination on the body of Others, through which its difference from the damage-free white male body can be visibly reclaimed.” What Kwon (2019) means here is that by Bateman projecting violence on those who he considers to be lower than him, (women, other races and sexual minorities) he feels his own superior status reconfirmed and the threatening Others are purged from the system. Kwon (2019: 66)

borrowed a term from Levine-Rasky (2013: 168), who claims that according to Bateman's logic here, "whiteness is saved".

Berthold Schoene (2008: 378), who has analyzed this novel from the aspect of masculinity, claims that the male characteristics that used to "constitute the gender's strength and thus legitimized its hegemonic status" are today looked at as a number of psychopathologies, cognitive impairments and mental disorders, like high-functioning autism as well as Asperger's Syndrome. Schoene (2008) cites Wing (1998: 12), who has described the people suffering from Asperger's Syndrome as being "socially odd [and] emotionally detached from others", but also "markedly egocentric and highly sensitive to perceived criticism, while being oblivious to people's feelings", that their speech is "fluent but long-winded, literal and pedantic, used for monologues and not for reciprocal conversations" and that "they have circumscribed interests in specific subjects, including collecting objects or facts connected with these interests" (Schoene 2008: 379).

Here, Patrick is said to have both hysterical and autistic impulses, as he is experiencing great tensions, because of which he ends up committing different kinds of violence (Schoene 2008). In the novel it can be seen how Bateman tries to balance himself, as he is "warding off the threat on unmanly hysterical self-expenditure by investing in a desperate mental scramble for masculine self-composure", which means that the more Bateman's panic starts to get out of control, the more difficult it gets for him to compose himself (Schoene 2008: 382). For example, in some parts of the book, Bateman starts feeling weird seemingly out of nowhere, wanting to desperately relieve it with drugs: "I don't know where, but I'm sweaty and a pounding migraine thumps dully in my head and I'm experiencing a major-league anxiety attack, searching my pockets for Valium, Xanax, a leftover Halcion, anything, and all I find are three faded Nuprin in a Gucci pillbox" (Schoene 2008: 382).

Schoene (2008: 382) claims that one way of masculine self-composure is monologue (which Bateman does a lot in the book). This means that there is a constant reassuring to oneself about their social status and how much it is possible for them to spend money: “I head towards the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream” (Schoene 2008: 382). Although doing this does give him short-term relief, he cannot “reassemble his fragmented self into a coherent, viable identity” (Schoene 2008: 382).

As can be seen from this literature review, Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* has been analyzed from the perspective of its representation of consumerism (of different brands as well as television). There has been less work on masculinity, but the novel has been analyzed from the perspective of father-son relations and also problematic white male behavior and the ways the men in this book express it. From the perspective of the present thesis, the most important findings from the previous research are the nature of the problems associated with white male behavior, which have been studied by Kwon (2019) and Schoene (2008). For some men, reconfirming their status, and therefore, also masculinity by insulting and humiliating (or in the context of this novel, also murdering and torturing) other people is making them feel better (Kwon 2019). The issue of having to constantly deal with securing their place and status is causing them internal tensions. These tensions can make these men to go to absurd lengths on the expense of other people to secure their status (Kwon 2019). Schoene (2008) says that the previously admired hegemonic characteristics are now looked at as different mental disorders. These are also the questions that will be looked at in the next chapter, in the context of hegemonic and toxic masculinity in the novel.

## **1. HEGEMONIC AND TOXIC MASCULINITY IN *AMERICAN PSYCHO***

*American Psycho* is a story about Patrick Bateman and his colleagues and friends, who are all working high-paying jobs in investment banking, living a lavish and high-class lifestyle in New York City, often accompanied by excessive use of drugs and alcohol. In the middle of the expensive dinners in fancy restaurants and other costly entertainment, Bateman at first starts having violent thoughts and then, as the novel progresses, living a secret life as an extremely violent serial killer. Some of the narrative is conveyed real-life conversations and some is Bateman's interior monologue, by the discussions he is having with himself. Because of that, it can occasionally be difficult to distinguish between what is happening in reality and what is happening only in his head.

In the following empirical study, different excerpts will be analyzed in the context of hegemonic and toxic masculinity. The excerpts that will be analyzed were chosen on the basis of where the characteristics of hegemonic and toxic masculinity were visible the best. Specifically, the discussion will focus on Bateman's and his colleagues' relationship with their work, their attitudes towards people who they think as having a lower social status than them (women, racial and sexual minorities), as well as how and when Bateman first started turning violent, first in his thoughts and later in his actions.

### **1.1 Characteristics of hegemonic masculinity among the men in *American Psycho***

Characteristics of hegemonic masculinity can be seen in the context of work, as the businessmen among whom Patrick Bateman works feel the need to be successful and the very best. Bateman has a prestigious job, as he is an investment banker on Wall Street. He, as well as his ring of male friends and colleagues, who all also work in banking, are very wealthy and therefore, think very highly of themselves, living a high-class life.

Already the first page of the novel gives an idea of what kind of people this novel is dealing with, as Timothy Price, Bateman's best friend and colleague, exclaims how he feels about himself: "I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society *cannot* afford to lose me. I'm an asset." (Ellis 1990: 3) This quote reflects the high self-esteem and self-centeredness of the successful businessmen who all seem very confident about their position in society.

Another aspect which suggests how important these people think themselves to be is Bateman making a comment to Price about reservations on two separate occasions in the book: "Where are we eating? I ask, my patience at an all-time low. We need to make a reservation. I'm not standing at some fucking bar" and "I can't believe you didn't make the reservations for later. We're going to have to wait" (Ellis 1990: 35, 140). The characters only agree to go out if reservations for some high-end places have been made previously. Standing in line and waiting to be seated is not an option for them under any circumstance. This shows that they are used to their privilege, but at the same time are also aware of the possibility of losing it, for example, when a desirable reservation is unavailable and they feel that their status is threatened by having to wait in the bar, like other customers.

The need for validation and the desire to be the best in everything can be seen when Bateman and his colleagues David Van Patten, Price and Montgomery compare their business cards. Bateman pulls his brand new one out first, as he wants to "even up the score a little bit" (Ellis 1990: 42). Both Van Patten and Price are impressed by it, until Van Patten takes out his card: "It is very cool, Bateman," Van Patten says guardedly, the jealous bastard, "but that's nothing..." He pulls out his wallet and slaps a card next to an ashtray. Look at this" (Ellis 1990: 42). Bateman admits that he can feel a wave of jealousy going over him and states the following: "I'm looking at Van Patten's card and then mine and cannot believe that Price actually likes Van Patten's better. Dizzy, I sip my drink then take a deep breath"

(Ellis 1990: 43). He admits feeling so offended by his card not being everyone's favorite that he feels dizzy.

After this, Price says "You ain't seen nothin' yet" and also takes out his card (Ellis 1990: 43). Again, Bateman admits, though he does not want to, that it is "magnificent" (Ellis 1990: 43). Finally, Montgomery takes his card out. Bateman now feels even worse than before, after having been feeling dizzy: "Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum, compared to this card" and says that he feels "unexpectedly depressed" that he started this (Ellis 1990: 43). Bateman picks Montgomery's card up and looks at it, to which Montgomery asks whether if he likes it, realizing that Bateman is jealous. Bateman replies with a forced "yeah", and then he is "giving Price the card like I don't give a shit, but I'm finding it hard to swallow" (Ellis 1990: 43). This example suggests that the businessmen feel they are competing against each other through everyday items and that losing is very hard even in these trivial circumstances. This scene also suggests that Bateman's position of privilege is never fully secure and he sees threats even from his friends.

Another situation which indicates these people's entitlement and selfishness is when the group want to smoke some cigars while being at a restaurant and Bateman tells the waitress about it:

Now listen, we are good customers here and we're probably going to order some fine brandy, cognac, who knows, and we want to relax and bask in this.../we would like to enjoy some *fine* Cuban cigars afterwards and we don't want to be bothered by some loutish and inconsiderate patrons or tourists who are inevitably going to complain about our innocuous little habit.../so if you could make sure we aren't bothered while we do, we would gratefully appreciate it. (Ellis 1990: 45)

Suggesting in a very arrogant manner that because they are so rich and if they are going to buy something that is supposedly going to be high-priced, they also have the right to do whatever they want, in this case, smoke. So, if they pay, everything is allowed to them, not thinking about respecting other people or rules that apply to other people.

Another trait of hegemonic masculinity is the need to dominate over women, in this case in the workplace. An example of this can be seen from the way Bateman talks to his secretary Jean at work (whom he, for no apparent reason, expects to be in love with him, as he does with almost every other woman he meets). After Bateman is not pleased with how their discussion about Jean booking him reservations is going, he says to her: “Be a doll and just get me a Perrier, okay?” (Ellis 1990: 63). He then later on also calls her a “good girl” as well as a “simpleton” and tells her to “not wear that outfit again”, that she should instead wear a skirt or a dress, because she is “better than that” (Ellis 1990: 64, 102). Bateman already believes himself to be superior and it can be seen very well here, as he dominates over her, for example, by controlling what she wears, probably because he sees his secretary as an accessory that affects his status. We also see him using sexist language casually, referring to an adult woman as a doll.

However, Bateman also treats her fiancé Evelyn, a woman of his own social status, rather poorly, as he is frequently seeing other women and often lying to her. He thinks of Evelyn as negatively as he does about every other woman. One of the women he is seeing at the same time as Evelyn is Courtney, Evelyn’s friend. Bateman is frequently comparing them from different aspects, but most often, their bodies, also mentioning that he would enjoy watching them fight: “Courtney /.../ seems intent about clawing Evelyn’s face open, which right now, though it’s the better-looking face, seems not a bad idea and one I wouldn’t mind watching Courtney carry out. Courtney has a *slightly* better body, Evelyn nicer tits” (Ellis 1990: 138).

This suggests that to Bateman, every woman is lower than him. It does not matter whether the woman is in a lower social class than him, which Jean is, or in the same social class, as is Evelyn.

## 1.2 Characteristics of toxic masculinity among the men in *American Psycho*

One of the ongoing problems in *American Psycho* is the degrading attitude of men towards women. Already from the beginning of the book, it can be seen how the men look at women – they objectify them, mostly only seeing their bodies. The men frequently assess the women they see either passing them on the street or somewhere in a restaurant or a club, be it by Bateman thinking about it in his head or the whole group discussing loudly what different parts of the women’s bodies look like and whether they like them or not. For example, on one occasion, Price whistles at a woman he sees on the street: “/.../though he does manage a grim wolf whistle toward a woman – big tits, blonde, great ass, high heels – heading toward Water Street” (Ellis 1990: 29). The book is filled to the brim with descriptions like these.

Another example of the idea of women being objects can be seen when Bateman is going out with one of her female companions and discusses that “/.../physically Patricia is appealing and I wouldn’t mind having sex with her body/.../” (Ellis 1990: 75). It can clearly be seen here that Bateman does not have any interest in this woman as a person – only as a body.

Another example of this mindset can be seen in the words of Hamlin, an acquaintance of Bateman, who more or less puts this into words: “The only reason chicks exist is to get us turned on, like you said. It’s as simple as that” (Ellis 1990: 88).

As the novel progresses, Bateman’s violent tendencies are starting to show themselves. It must be noted here that already at the beginning of the novel, Bateman actually already admits that he is a psychopath. As Evelyn, Bateman’s fiancé, tells Price that Bateman is “not a cynic” and that he is “the boy next door, aren’t you honey?”, Bateman whispers to himself: “No I’m not, I’m a fucking evil psychopath” (Ellis 1990: 19).

Bateman's passive-aggressiveness leads to actual violent thoughts. As he is at a business dinner with a couple, Anne and Scott, they insist that they should all order the same dish. Bateman thinks that if this dish had not already been on one of the menus of the place he had been to, he would not have ordered it. He then goes on a ramble – if Scott and Anne would still have insisted on him also ordering it, despite him not wanting to, he would have broken into their apartment at night, and done some dreadful things to them and their whole family (Ellis 1990: 92). In this analysis, the examples have been picked sparingly and in some parts, there are no examples in the form of quotations as to refrain from showing the extremely graphic violence. It can be seen here how Bateman does not like to be told what he should do and that the perception of that somebody has the right to order him around has triggered Bateman's disturbing thoughts.

Another example of Bateman's thoughts getting violent at something very minor can be seen when he is in a video store, renting movies. He and the girl working there are talking about an actress, whom Bateman is surprised that she does not know. He then tries convincing her that she definitely does know, to which she finally replies: "I don't think I know who you mean" (Ellis 1990: 108). Here, it is only the tone of the girl's voice that makes Bateman have horrendous thoughts about the violent acts he could do to her body. He is also very annoyed that the girl is not looking at him and giving him the attention he desires and thinks he deserves: "She hands me the tapes without even looking at me, refusing to recognize who I am/.../" (Ellis 1990: 109). This again demonstrates how vulnerable his masculinity is and how even the slightest perception of offence can send him into anger and violence.

Another of the continuous problems in *American Psycho*, which Kwon (2019) has also studied, is the hatred towards homeless people and sexual minorities (in this case, homosexual men). There are many instances in the book where homosexuals are being

referred to as “faggots”. In another situation, he sees gay men peacefully marching during a “Gay Pride Parade” and this makes his “stomach turn” and that he cannot grasp how “a man, a human being, could feel over sodomizing another man” (Ellis 1990: 134).

However, as it turns out later on in the novel, Luis Carruthers, another colleague of Bateman, is actually a closeted homosexual and has secretly developed strong feelings for Bateman. When being together in a public bathroom, Bateman has thoughts of killing Luis, but Luis takes this as Bateman trying to make a move on him. Bateman is shocked and almost frozen in place, trying to strangle Luis but cannot get himself to do it (Ellis 1990: 153). As he finally manages to get away, he admits feeling defeated: “I practically gag, and shaking visibly I sit back at our table, completely defeated/.../” (Ellis 1990: 154). The fear of losing his heterosexual masculinity threatens Bateman’s sense of himself.

From this, it can be interpreted that the anger he feels towards homosexual men, insulting them throughout the book and feeling disgust towards them, but not being able to do anything when a friend tries to make a move on him, indicate that he himself might also be a closeted homosexual (Ellis 1990: 154). He is never planning to admit it to himself, as he considers it to be very wrong and disgusting, trying to suffocate his own personal feelings by directing his inner confusion as anger towards other people. It can again be seen how insecure he is about his masculinity: something as simple as a colleague of the same sex trying to approach him is causing him to react so strongly.

Throughout the book, a lot of rage and insults directed towards homeless people can also be seen. Bateman and his friends frequently laugh at them, burn money in front of them on one occasion, and tell them how they should just get a job and stop having a “negative attitude”, calling them “bums” (Ellis 1990: 125). At one point in the book, Bateman approaches a homeless person sleeping on the street. He at first seems even sympathetic,

offering the man some money, asking if he wants food and promising to help him in finding a job. But then, as their discussion goes on, he is taken over by blind rage, starts insulting the man and then goes on to brutally torture and murder him (Ellis 1990: 126).

Feeling anger and hatred towards a group of people just because one does not like the fact they exist is never justified. In regards to Bateman's mindset about homeless people, he is extremely critical of them seemingly just sitting around and doing nothing, in his opinion. According to him, it is even more wrong how they ask other people for money, as he asks the homeless man: "Do you think it's fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who work?" (Ellis 1990: 125). It should perhaps be kept in mind here that Bateman himself is very wealthy, and the five dollars he was at first thinking to give the man would not make him any less poor. It can again be seen how fragile Bateman's masculinity really is, as he is sensing some sort of danger by homeless people – who are lower than him. It can be concluded that despite Patrick being of high status, he can also experience the same insecurities that anyone else from a lower class experiences.

## CONCLUSION

In today's society, gender norms continue to be a topic of great interest. It has caused tensions and a large number of people have many different and vocal opinions. Over the years, gender norms have seen big changes, which many people are finding difficult to cope with and adapt to. The problematic nature and continuous relevance of this topic is what makes it important.

Hegemonic and toxic masculinity are two of all the possible forms of masculinities. In the case of this novel, many traits of both hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity can be traced. Hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculinity that is based on and reproduces male dominance; toxic masculinity is an extreme form of masculinity that is based on physical and psychological violence as means of maintaining male dominance that is believed to be threatened. Thus, the two terms – hegemonic and toxic masculinity – are connected in the sense that one can transition into the other: hegemonic can turn toxic.

In the novel, examples of hegemonic masculinity can best be seen in regards to work, where Patrick and his colleagues are constantly looking for validation from one another. Additionally, it can also be seen in the need for men to assert their dominance, as they have degrading attitudes towards women, especially in the workplace, but also outside of work. Characteristics of toxic masculinity can be seen the most well in seeing women as nothing more than objects, as well as in Patrick's violent tendencies, which start off as him experiencing violent thoughts when people are not behaving in the way he wants or expects them to, and end up in him committing vile crimes and living a double life as a successful banker and a serial killer.

Previous research on *American Psycho* has discussed two of its most obvious traits: violence and consumerism. Although wealthy Wall Street bankers seem very far from the

underprivileged angry white men described by Michael Kimmel, we can see traces of this male insecurity in this novel as well. It has been argued that consumerism and especially fashion give Patrick his identity. Patrick does not seem to have substance; all he has is a high-status style and thus a person not recognizing the status symbols conveyed in the style makes Patrick feel invisible, something he as a powerful man is not accustomed to. This conclusion from previous research can be directly tied to hegemonic masculinity: Patrick tries to perform hegemonic masculinity, but it is just a surface performance with the help of consumer items. As a result, he is always insecure, as if afraid that he will be exposed by his male colleagues or by women whom he objectifies to keep them in a subordinate status. Previous research has shown that Patrick lacks a father figure who could have modeled a stable form of hegemonic masculinity to him. This suggests that Patrick's masculine dominance is not secure and this makes him slide into toxic masculinity and violence.

Although Patrick and his friends are rich and privileged, they do not seem secure in their position; they need to demonstrate their power to each other and to people they believe to be lower than them (their female staff, servers in restaurants, homeless people). Although they all seem perfect examples of hegemonic masculinity, the underlying insecurity can become a source of toxic violence, like in the case of Patrick. He frequently lashes out against people who fail to behave like he wants them to or who challenge his power. The novel suggests that hegemonic masculinity is always on the verge of toxic masculinity, especially when confronted with Others like gay men, women and poor people. Although the Others do not threaten the status of hegemonic masculinity, men like Bateman have lost confidence in their position and, for the fear of losing it, resort to extreme displays of their own power. However, this shows not hegemonic but toxic masculinity.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Maris Kobin**

**Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho***

**Maskuliinsus Bret Easton Ellise romaanis "American Psycho"**

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Soonormid on jätkuvalt päevakajaline teema ka tänases ühiskonnas. Läbi aastate on soonormidega kaasnenud mitmeid muutusi, millega inimestel, kes on harjunud varasemate normidega, on raske kohaneda. Käesoleva töö eesmärgiks on uurida, kuidas on Bret Easton Ellise romaanis "American Psycho" kujutatud hegemoonilise ja toksilise maskuliinsuse avaldumist.

Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatausest, kirjanduse ülevaatest, empiirilisest analüüsist ning kokkuvõttest.

Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate maskuliinsuset ning defineerib kaks mõistet, millele toetudes romaani analüüsitakse – hegemooniline ja toksiline maskuliinsus. Ka on sissejuhatuses arutatud, miks ja kuidas võib hegemoonilisest maskuliinsusest kujuneda toksiline maskuliinsus.

Kirjanduse ülevaade teeb ülevaate varasemast uurimistööst. Näiteks on seda romaani analüüsitud tarbimiskultuuri, vägivalda ja postmodernsuse vaatepunktidest.

Töö empiiriline osa analüüsib romaani hegemoonilise ja toksilise maskuliinsuse vaatepunktist, vaadeldes, kuidas nende tunnuseid ning avaldumist kujutatud on. Analüüsis selgub, et kuigi peategelane ja tema sõbrad peaksid olema hegemoonilise maskuliinsuse esindajad, pole nende maskuliinsus piisavalt kindel ning muutub ohustatuna toksiliseks maskuliinsuseks.

Märksõnad: hegemooniline maskuliinsus, toksiline maskuliinsus, ameerika kirjandus, Bret Easton Ellis, tarbimiskultuur

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