

Tole Bobbink

Jochem Riesthuis

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*The Miserable Ones; the representation of success in New York novels of the 1980s*

Just think of the millions, from all over the globe, who yearned to be on that island, in those towers, in those narrow streets! There it was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being *where things are happening* – (Tom Wolfe *The Bonfire of the Vanities* 81)

This quote of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) by Tom Wolfe perfectly illustrates the topic of this thesis: the representation of success in New York novels of the 1980s. Since it is impossible to see the present in the greater scheme of things and evaluate its meaning in history (Martin 153), it is only after a certain period of time we can see or try to deduct the importance in history. Now that three decades have gone by, it would be interesting to examine the 1980s. It is therefore, that, in this thesis, I take a closer look at the novels that are situated in New York of the 1980s. I aim to get to a description of the discourse on success of the New Yorkers of the 1980s. My research question is: How is success represented in three specific novels that are situated in New York of the 1980s?

The novels that I have chosen to analyze are: *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) by Jay McInerney, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) by Tom Wolfe and *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis. These novels are analyzed according to the theories of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. By analyzing the novels with these theories, it is possible to

describe the cultural process at work in creating these images of success and the influence they had in New York during the 1980s and early 1990s.

In order to understand 1980s literature about New York, I take a closer look at the power relations in these novels. By close-reading the society that is portrayed in these novels according to the method of New Historicism, I can describe the way in which power relations are divided in the society portrayed in these novels. Jonathan Dollimore sees, in the “Introduction” of his book *Political Shakespeare*, society in general as a reflection of the natural order of things. “Those who rule may in fact be serving their own interests and those of their class, but they, together with the institutions and practices through which they exercise and maintain power, are understood as working in the interests of the community as a whole.” (7) On a conscious level they are working for their own wellbeing, but on an unconscious level they serve the bigger community that includes the less fortunate as well. Insofar as the powerful think of those less fortunate than themselves at all, they look down on them. The rulers are not fully aware of their role in the discourse of success. Neither are the less fortunate, but they both play an important role in the creation of the discourse of success.

Stephen Greenblatt writes in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) about the way in which the authors of the Renaissance were involved in reshaping the idea of identity and thereby becoming a better version of oneself. Greenblatt sees autonomy and self-fashioning as powerful social factors: “... the power to impose a shape on oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity – that of others at least as often as one’s own.” (Greenblatt 6) Self-fashioning is a controlled and well-considered manner of portraying yourself in the way you want others to see you. On a more general level, the theory of self-fashioning applies to the literature I analyze in this thesis. The characters I analyze are in a stream of constant self-fashioning by either creating an image of success or trying to reproduce it as closely as possible.

To really understand a literary text and the society it was inspired by, there has to be an analytical approach that combines different methodological elements. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield state the following in their “Foreword” to *Political Shakespeare*: (1) historical context; (2) theoretical method; (3) political commitment and (4) textual analysis. This combination gives the most elaborated comprehension of a text and its period.

Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which most criticism has hitherto been conducted; textual analysis locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored. (Dollimore & Sinfield vii)

This approach can operate without being obstructed by the former, one-sided critiques and analysis. Only then can the novels and the society they were formed by be really understood. It is this interdisciplinary approach Dollimore opts for when he states that theory in general has been too much of an individual practice (Dollimore & Sinfield 2). By combining different theoretical methods I can create a better understanding of the social environment of the 1980s and the cultural order the three novels were formed by. For my historical context, I will rely on essays written by Jay McInerney, Tom Wolfe, articles from the *New York* magazine from the 1980s and interviews held with the authors. My theoretical method for the analysis will be Greenblatt’s New Historicism and for a greater part Jonathan Dollimore’s and Alan Sinfield’s Cultural Materialism. For conclusions on the nature of the specific discourse discussed here, I will use *The Order of Discourse* by Foucault. On one particular concept of the discourse of success, objectifying women by watching pornography, I will rely on essays written by the

Dutch writer Rudy Kousbroek. He writes on the ethics of pornography and the way in which the subtext of pornography can be more than just the gratification of sexual desire.

Throughout the analysis, the following three novels are the foundation for the close reading form of textual analysis. *Bright Lights, Big City* is a novel about a young man living in New York who is at an unstable moment in his life. His mother recently died of cancer and his wife left him abruptly to focus on her modeling career in France. To avoid dealing with the ensuing emotional turmoil, he loses himself in going out every night and taking huge amounts of cocaine. His work at The Department of Factual Verification of the *Gotham* magazine (a thinly disguised *The New Yorker*) suffers from his nightly behavior and when he drops the ball on the verification of facts in a French text, he is fired. He starts to question and disapprove of his behavior when he meets a woman he likes. The day of the first anniversary of his mother's death, he has two experiences that almost work therapeutic. He talks with a colleague at length about the way in which his wife has left him and he talks, for the first time since his mother died, with his younger brother about the last days of their mother's life. When he, later that night, meets his ex-wife for the first time since her abrupt disappearance, it seems he can finally start to accept his failed marriage. It is at that point he feels the desire to turn his life around. The end of the novel brings the promise of change: his life is going to change because he outgrew his former lifestyle.

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a detailed novel about life in New York, centered on two main characters. Sherman McCoy is a successful Wall Street bonds trader at Pierce & Pierce and sees himself as a "Master of the Universe". He is wealthy, has an expensive apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and a much younger mistress. Lawrence Kramer on the other hand, is the Assistant District Attorney of the Bronx and although he has had a proper education, has to struggle to make ends meet and does not have a great financial future up ahead. Sherman McCoy is involved in a car accident in the Bronx with his mistress behind the

wheel of his car. Lawrence Kramer is the Assistant DA who deals with this “McCoy case”. Reverend Bacon is the one supporting the boy’s family who got injured in the car accident. He tries to generate as much media attention for the case as possible. He fights for the civil rights of all the lesser fortunate by making an example out of the Sherman McCoy case. He wants Sherman McCoy to be treated in the same way the poor African American would be treated if he had hit a white man. His main objection is the fact that the life of a poor black man has no value to the wealthy white population of New York.

*American Psycho* is also about a Wall Street trader at Pierce & Pierce. Patrick Bateman is a well-educated, wealthy man who has a high position at Pierce & Pierce, which he has allegedly achieved thanks to his father’s position in the company. Although this is never made explicit, it is clear that Patrick has the desire to fit in with his colleagues because of his father’s position. This ongoing desire makes him obsessed with the way he looks and acts. When he is not at work, he spends his time at the gym, going out or renting videos -- mostly pornographic ones. At first, he only fantasizes about torturing and raping men and women, but after a while he starts to act out his fantasies. He tortures and kills men, for women, he has sex with them before torturing and killing them. In some cases the women have sex with Bateman voluntarily. He describes in detail how he rapes and kills his victims. It is only when he discovers the disappearance of the hidden bodies, that he questions his killings. He finds it strange his victims are not reported missing by anyone and he starts to question his sexual outbursts. It remains unclear if his raping and killing these people really happened or were part of his imagination.

## Chapter 2 *Bright Lights, Big City*

The story of the novel *Bright Lights, Big City* is a story of fast success and wealth, of a glamorous life. When the novel was first published in September of 1984, Jay McInerney became an instant celebrity – a status to which he contributed with a certain willingness. In a 1998 interview in *Publishers Weekly*, held by Lorin Stein, McInerney tells that around the time of the publication of *Bright Lights, Big City*, the executive editor of *Random House* did not expect the novel to be a success and had warned him for a disappointment.

Jay McInerney became part of a group of young authors called the *Brat Pack*. Besides McInerney, Tama Janowitz and Bret Easton Ellis were members of the group. Much to his dislike. “I was really mad when this school started being created, because I had less to gain than anybody. I was the one who’d been there first.” (Stein 40) Due to their appearances in the media and the tabloids, the members of this pack became celebrities. Tama Janowitz appeared in paid advertisements and was an active self-promoter. (Stein 40) McInerney and Ellis were active in the 1980s New York nightlife and became part of the high society. They were well-known simply because they were celebrities, not just for their literary accomplishments.

In 2008 McInerney wrote an article *New York Magazine* “Yuppies in Eden”. This article gives a clear view of the background for the novel *Bright Light, Big City*. He looks back on the society of the 1980s in New York and explains what it meant to be a young adult at that time and how the yuppie culture evolved out of it. In the early 1980s, he writes, New York was strongly divided along ethnic and class lines. The wealthy people lived in the city, centered around the Upper East Side, the middle class was slowly moving out of the city and crime was a mayor problem. It was with the election of Ronald Reagan as President, that New York as a city was rising. The financial market grew and Wall Street created more jobs. This meant an increasing population of young successful men in the city who were looking for

housing that fit their living standard. These so-called yuppies did not only want to live on the Upper East Side, they also went to the less expensive areas: upper Amsterdam and Columbus. This “colonization” of New York, as Jay McInerney calls it, also created a backlash, a war against “yuppification”. Soon all over the city the catchphrases “Die Yuppie Scum” and “Eat The Rich” were spray painted.

McInerney states that the yuppies were rebelling against their parents for their taste and budgetary constraints. (McInerney 2008) They did not rebel out of political convictions, as had the hippies before them, although their desire for living in the city could be seen as a reaction to their suburban upbringing. But this growing population of Young Urban Professionals lived according to a certain lifestyle that was not only for the young professionals. This lifestyle came with the growing wealth in general and *The Yuppie Handbook*, first published in 1983, listed the criteria for a yuppie lifestyle as following:

A person of either sex who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money, or any and all combinations of the above; (4) anyone who brunches on the weekends or works out after work. (McInerney 2008)

Although these criteria do fit the Young Urban Professional, they are not selective enough to really define the yuppie. The term “yuppie” seems to mean, even in the novels of that period, the young and upcoming Wall Street professional.

*The Wall Street Journal* declared Jay McInerney as a spokesman for the yuppies. (McInerney 2008) Although it surprised McInerney, since the main character in the novel does not have an important job in the financial industry, nor goes to fancy restaurants or works out in the gym, the novel does deal with many of the themes of the yuppie culture. More specific, the people surrounding the protagonist are preoccupied with attaining and

living the right lifestyle, i.e. the discourse of success. McInerney is surprised when *The Wall Street Journal* dubbed him the spokesman of the yuppies, because he wrote BLBC as a coming of age story of a young man struggling with his identity after he loses his two most important women in the same year, as he explained in a 2008 interview in Belgian newspaper *De Standaard*.

Met *Bright Lights, Big City* probeerde ik inzicht te verschaffen in de identiteitscrisis van de hoofdpersoon. Journalisten vinden zoiets al gauw te ingewikkeld, die willen zo'n werk het liefst in één woord typeren. ... Mijn rol beperkt zich tot die van waarnemer van een milieu dat me fascineert. In mijn meeste romans fungeren New York en New Yorkers als decorstukken voor een vertelling waar ik mijn ideeën in kwijt kan over begrippen als identiteit, teleurstelling en ambitie. Het is een misverstand om te denken dat mijn boeken over New York gaan. Ze gaan over mensen. (Mathys 2008)

McInerney is unhappy with the position his debut novel got and there are plausible arguments for his dissatisfaction in the book itself. The yuppie lifestyle is only found in the background of the story, as McInerney states in the mentioned article, the citizens New York are merely the setting for the events.

The main character narrates his life in the second person singular (you), as if he is talking to himself. “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy.” (McInerney 1984: 1) The characters in the novel who do symbolize the yuppie lifestyle the most are his wife Amanda and his best friend Tad Allagash. Amanda works as an internationally successful model and Tad Allagash works in advertising. It is never mentioned what his exact position in the company is, but he is an important and



influential man. He can get the protagonist tickets for a closed fashion show where he can meet Amanda. He is the fast living young adult with influential friends.

Tad's mission in life is to have more fun than anyone else in New York City, and this involves a lot of moving around, since there is always the likelihood that where you aren't is more fun than where you are. You are awed by his strict refusal of acknowledge any goal higher than the pursuit of pleasure. ...

His friends are all rich and spoiled. (McInerney *BLBC*: 2-3)

This kind of behavior is typical for many characters in these novels of New York of the 1980s, especially McInerney's and Ellis's. This is an important element of the discourse of success: being at the right place at the right time. As Stephanie Girard states it in her article on *BLBC*, "Standing at the Corner of Walk and don't Walk", Amanda and Tad are the ones who symbolize both ends of the yuppie culture, they are producing and consuming it: "While our hero is busy trying to discover what kind of guy he is, Amanda and Tad are busy living the shallow lives of cartoon yuppies; participating in the commodification of culture when they work, they participate in the obsessive and excessive consumption of culture when they play." (Girard 174-175)

In the character of Amanda we find the desire for being part of the discourse of success. When the protagonist meets her in Kansas City, she is a rural girl from the "heart of the heartland". (69) Her background is one of a poor and disrupted family. Her father left when she was six and her mother did not really care for her. The man her mother remarried was abusive and inappropriately affectionate to her. Her poor background made her fascinated by New York and the luxurious lifestyle. "She asked about Fifth Avenue, The Carlyle, Studio 54. Obviously, from her magazine reading she knew more about these places than you did. ... She asked about the Ivy League, as if it were some kind of formal organization, and later that night she introduced you to her roommate as a member of it." (70) She thinks he stems from a

wealthy family just because he goes to college. Being with him is an opportunity to escape from her poor background. For Amanda it is important to rise above the people in Kansas and with a man from the Ivy League she sees an opportunity to do so. Whether she has to mold the truth to reach that goal is not important.

Everyone in Kansas seems to think being from New York gives you a certain advantage. And since everyone wants to live in New York, it is an opportunity she cannot ignore. The first night they are in New York, they want to stay in an expensive hotel, as part of a rite of passage.

... you wanted to stay that first night at the Plaza. Getting out of the taxi next to the famous fountain, you seemed to be arriving at the premiere of the movie which was to be your life. A doorman greeted you at the steps. A string quartet played in the Palm Court. Your tenth-floor room was tiny and overlooked and airshaft; though you could not see the city out the window, you believed that it was spread out at our feet. (151)

It is Amanda's desire to live in the city that makes her love the protagonist. When they, soon after they have met, live together in New York, she wants the wealth and success she sees for herself. After many remarks about her beauty, she tries to become a model. Although it starts off as a joke and a temporarily job, she quickly becomes very successful. Her status rises and she can afford, and wants, expensive silverware, to live in a neighborhood where the other models live.

It is especially Amanda who is constantly occupied with self-fashioning her identity in order to be part of the discourse of success. As Greenblatt writes in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, this constant pursuit of an ideal stems from the desire of the absolute. He calls this desire the evil pursuit of men. "... they freely proclaim their immense hunger for something which takes on the status of a personal absolute, and they relentlessly pursue this

absolute. The more threatening an obstacle in their path, the more determined they are to obliterate or overreach it: I long for, I burn, I will.” (Greenblatt 218) One of the characteristics of this personal absolute is that it can never be reached, because the inner desire of men cannot be subdued. As a result the personal fulfillment is always one step away.

Greenblatt states that with the self-fashioning of an identity there has to be the defining of a name and an object. A name for oneself and an object of desire. On both levels of self-fashioning, the materialistic level and the creation of the identity, there is the unfulfilling aspect. “No particular name or object can entirely satisfy one’s inner energy demanding to be expressed or fill so completely the potential of one’s consciousness that all longings are quelled, all intimations of unreality silenced.” (Greenblatt 219) It is this ongoing movement, as described by Greenblatt, that drives Amanda to pursue a modeling career. This does not have to be a conscious intention when she meets the protagonist and falls in love with him. Her love for the protagonist seems to be mistaken for the excitement of a new and better life, but this could easily mean she believes her love for him is real. Her never fulfilled desire for success and the hope for an even better life is what ultimately inspires her to stay in France with a French photographer.

In the fog of all the alcohol and drugs, the protagonist’s sense of self goes in another direction. He loses contact with his identity. When he meets Tad’s niece he can feel what he had lost before. She reaches out to him on an intellectual level and that is what makes him wonder if what he is doing is eventually what he really wants for himself.

With this discourse of success comes a certain look. It surprises the protagonist that everyone looks more or less the same and this repulses him.

Prime time approaches, and the place is packed with eager secretaries and slumming lawyers. Everyone here has the Jordache look – the look you don’t want to know better. Hundreds of dollars’ worth of cosmetics on the women

and thousands in gold around the necks of the open-shirted men. Gold crucifixes, Stars of David and coke spoons hang from the chains. Some trust in God to get them laid; others in drugs. Someone should do a survey of success ratios, publish it in *New York* magazine. (153)

Although the protagonist takes part in certain aspects of the lifestyle, he does not fit in with the rest. He is too much of an observant to live according the rules of the culture. He sees the way the people around him live a certain lifestyle and therefore sees it too much as a regulation, a certain programmed manner, to blindly live by it.

The movie *Bright Lights, Big City* (James Bridges, 1988) provides a broader insight in the reasons for Amanda to fall in love with the protagonist. The movie provides extra information on the characters that the novel does not. Since the novel and the movie were partly written by the same author, the extra details can be used in analyzing the character's motives for their behavior. In the movie *Bright Lights, Big City*, during a dinner with Megan, a colleague, the protagonist explains how he met Amanda and how their marriage ended. He tells Megan that on the night he met Amanda, she overheard him telling a bartender he came from New York. That triggered her attention and he believes that was her motive for seducing him. In the words of Greenblatt: it was her pursuit for the identity of success as captured in the objects of New York. From that point on she was in love with the idea of what her live could be like. This does not necessarily make her love less real, just more temporary.

When they live in New York and Amanda starts making money modeling, they move to the Upper East Side because that is the neighborhood where all the other models live. "She brought home prospecti for co-ops and then, when you asked where the money was going to come from, suggested you could get a loan from your father. ... For the first time you realized that she thought your family was rich, and by the standards of her childhood they were." (38) Amanda is obsessed with luxury and the attributes of wealth, such as flatware, china, crystal

and the family crest on the sterling. For a short period of time they live a glorious life. They are a couple that everybody wants to welcome at their party: she is an upcoming model and he works for the famous magazine (40). But he is unable to combine his exhilarating nightlife with his writing ambitions and being a popular couple takes its toll. He neglects his writing and his job and marriage start to suffer.

In the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard*, McInerney tells in an interview that he does not think of New York as an able-bodied city, but as a city that quickly forgets its past. The people of New York are not fully aware of their cultural heritage and it is only the present that counts. He gives the example of the lack of graveyards in New York.

New York is altijd erg vooruitziend geweest, vooral Manhattan. Wist je dat er in Manhattan maar één kerkhof is, dat niet groter is dan deze kamer? Het is achttiende-eeuws en ligt in de East Village. Manhattan is geen plek voor de doden, het is een plaats die drijft op ambitie en toekomstgerichtheid. (Mathys)

That means that New York has not changed in its city culture over the decades. There has always been great attention placed on the present and future instead of the past and its heritage. The attention mainly goes to the fulfillment of personal absolute: attaining success.

Mensen hebben het altijd maar over de hebzucht, het materialisme en decadentie van de jaren 1980, maar ik denk dat het nu minstens zo erg is. Er is veel meer geld en er zijn veel meer economische topspelers dan in de tijd dat ik *Bright Lights, Big City* schreef. In zekere zin is New York een minder interessante stad geworden. Er zijn minder marginale buurten maar armere mensen of creatievelingen kunnen zich geen plek in de stad meer veroorloven. (Mathys)

If Jay McInerney is indeed right in saying that the culture of New York has not changed, the only thing that did change are the expectations of people who live in New York. There is a

common expectation that things change in general over time and that it must be an improvement in order to go forward as a society. As McCinerney sees it, this hope of people that things will get better, brings forth an expectation considering the fellow New Yorker. This expectation coincides with the self-regulating character of a capitalist society. If anyone pursues his or her own best interest, society as a whole can benefit and grow. But not everyone is able to grow and accomplish success at the same pace, not everyone can accomplish the same level of success and wealth. Therefore, there is a group that is bound to be left out: the lesser fortunate. And if nobody of the group of successful men and women is concerned with the wellbeing of the lesser fortunate, this indifference can cause a sense of injustice with the lesser fortunate. Not everyone's civil rights are taken care of and the society of New York will only be concerned with the needs of the rich and successful.

### Chapter three *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* is different on a literary level than *Bright Lights, Big City* and *American Psycho* because of the way it represents New York of the 1980s. As soon as McInerney's novel was published, it became a novel that spoke for a generation. *American Psycho*, on the other hand, declared the death of the 1980s and the yuppies. It became known as an over the top satire of that generation. But *The Bonfire of the Vanities* does not speak for a generation as much as the other two did and has a political message in it. The novel strongly underlines the inequalities that arise when the main goal of a society is its financial growth and political success.

Tom Wolfe intended to write a typical New York novel and was simply waiting for the right moment to do so. He explains in the introduction of the edition of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that was published in 2010: "To me the idea of writing a novel about this astonishing metropolis, a big novel, cramming as much of New York City between covers as you could, was the most tempting, the most challenging, and the most obvious idea an American writer could possibly have." (ix) Wolfe's aim for this novel was high and was less literarily intrinsic than, for instance, the novel Jay McInerney had when writing *Bright Lights, Big City*. Tom Wolfe wants to fill the void of the realistic fictional novel about New York. In 1979, he began his research for *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The early years of 1980 were the moment, as he saw it, to start working on the great New York Novel. (Wolfe xviii) He wrote *The Bonfire of the Vanities* serially for *Rolling Stone*. The first few chapters were published in July 1984, the last one in August 1985 (Plimpton).

Wolfe's purpose, to write a realistic fictional novel about New York of the 1980s, has a different literary method than the McInerney and Ellis had. It is not from the inside of the culture or out of a personal need of the author to write a particular novel. Wolfe's novel is written via observation from outside of the generation and cultural order of the young urban

professionals. He describes the discourse of that time, the discourse of success, from a more objective distance than the writers who are closer in age and upbringing to the described generation and cultural order.

A novel about New York of the 1980s, according to Wolfe, had to be written in a realistic style. America had just experienced turmoil from social changes, but without the literary reflection on all those changes. There were no novels about, for instance, the racial clashes of the past decades, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam. (xii) It was time for a realistic novel about America. A realistic novel, thus, according to Tom Wolfe, had to be a novel about a society in which several discourses clash, a clash between contradicting subcultures that do not have the same social rules. “A book about New York in the 1980s would have to deal with New York high and low. So I chose Wall Street as the high end of the scale and the South Bronx as the low.” (xxiv)

According to Joshua Masters, Wolfe wrote with *Bonfire of the Vanities* a satirical novel with a broad view on the New York of the 1980s. This view seems widely shared (see for instance Don Fletcher 1993; Edward B. 1987 Raya Kuzyk 2008; Zwagerman 2000). Perhaps more significant is the outline of the “Major Themes” on *Gradesaver* – a website for free study guides – where they state “*Bonfire* represents a universal cynicism” and “displays the worst of human nature” and “the only character who is presented entirely without flaws is the six year old Campbell McCoy” The description of the novel on a website such as *Gradesaver* is exemplary for the way the novel is generally read; how students – and readers in general – interpret *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The novel is supposedly a critique on the racial clashes that occurred in New York during the 1980s. For this thesis however, it is not that important to label *Bonfire of the Vanities* as either a satire or a serious critique. It simply is a representation of New York of the 1980s and therefore needs to be taken seriously in its



portrayal of society, in order to describe the portrayed discourse of success in it. The novel contrasts the different discourses of success, as produced by the different social classes. It shows African Americans and others fighting for their civil rights, fighting for their right to be treated in the same way as the white upper class. Or as they simply see it: they fight against Park Avenue. In the clash between the two classes, the discourse of success can be seen as a society that is ruled by the wealthy white Anglo man where there is no attention for the poor, especially not for poor black men. It is a cultural order with strict thoughts on the position of women. They objectify women and it seems almost necessary to have a mistress on the side. For both groups, poor black man and women, there is no place to contemplate on their position or the possible injustice in the way they are treated.

Joshua J. Masters sees three important problems with the way *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is narrated:

First, the complete absence of a woman's perspective in the novel constructs urban space as unproblematically masculine. Second, despite the absence of a fully realized African-American subjectivity, the novel pretends to a layered examination of racial conflict. Finally, our view of the city is essentially microscopic rather than macrocosmic, and Wolfe offers little insight into the larger and economic processes determining the organization of urban space.

(Masters 210-211)

Masters uses these arguments to underline what he sees as the shortcomings of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. His research is focused on a realistic portrayal of the racial difficulties in New York and the novel does not give a perspective that is broad enough to do so. "Thus rather than facilitating a clearer understanding of the city, *Bonfire's* narrative perspective severely limits the range and scope of what can be known about it." (210) In Masters's argument, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a political novel with inherently racist and misogynistic elements.

As such it perfectly represents the discourse of success of 1980s New York yuppies. It is this narrow world, as represented in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, of the wealthy, white man that creates the discourse of success and simultaneously means the end of the white supremacy. Sherman McCoy is no longer part of the discourse of success and becomes someone with a more political worldview. "Sherman adopts a world view dominated by ethnic and racial categories, thereby defining the forces against which he must struggle." (Masters 223) In this instance he changed discourses but still has the same methods for defending himself and the discourse he entered. According to Masters, the novel has an apocalyptic message, a period of transition in which the society of the 1980s changed its inherent character. "...while the novel announces the end to an era of "white" supremacy, it also marks the beginning of a new urban struggle, sure to be as terrifying as the last." (224) It is this transition on a broader scale that Sherman McCoy is fighting. But he is not only competing with people outside of the discourse of success who want him out of it. The enemies of the discourse of success are in the discourse as well.

The main characters in the novel are three white men obsessed with the pursuit of success and recognition. Sherman McCoy the bonds trader, Larry Kramer, assistant District Attorney of the Bronx, and Peter Fallow the untalented alcoholic journalist that writes for the *The City Light*.

Sherman McCoy has a somewhat misshapen sense of self. He believes he is, just because he works on Wall Street, a "Master of the Universe". He is a successful stockbroker, has an apartment on Park Avenue that is expensive and luxuriously decorated and is married to a woman who was, in his own words, beautiful in her younger days. His mistress lives only a few blocks away in a small apartment they rent for their romantic meetings. He is successful on a scale beyond measure and he sees himself as a "Master of the Universe". He is more

important than the socialites of New York, simply because he is who he is and does what he does. (99)

Important in this sense of self is the university wealthy white men attended. Sherman McCoy is a Yale graduate and anything less than an Ivy League university is not worth any of his attention. For his identity, McCoy relies on his Yale heritage. Whenever he needs to boost his ego, or look confident, he throws his head backwards and points his “Yale chin” in the air. He looks at his colleagues and determines their importance based on which university they attended and the year they finished it. Harvard Class of 1976, Yale Class of 1973 and Stanford Class of 1979. (59)

Larry Kramer learns that his education is not a guarantee for financial success. Although he attended an Ivy League university, Columbia Law School, he is an assistant district attorney in the Bronx, only making \$36,600 a year. When he sees a former classmate of his he turns around and hides. He does not want his former classmate to notice him, but watches him getting in his private limousine instead. He hides because he is ashamed of his annual paycheck, which he assumes is much lower than that of his former classmate. When they both attended Columbia Law School Kramer felt superior to this man. He was going to fight injustice in the heat of the battle: “... he, Kramer, would embrace life and wade up to his hips into the lives of the miserable and the damned and stand up on his feet in the courtroom and fight, *mano a mano*, before the bar of justice.” (35-36, emphasis in original) Larry Kramer tends to feel morally superior to others, but when confronted with other, more fortunate men, he feels ashamed of his life and his accomplishments. Almost instantly, the desire to compensate for his self-imposed failure arises.

This feeling superior to others is typical for Kramer and McCoy. They are powerful in their own thoughts as long as they are among less wealthy people. Since Kramer cannot derive his self-esteem from the amount of money he makes, he feels the need to compensate

this void with a forceful and theatrical style of behaving in the courtroom. Kramer believes he has an impressive physique, especially his neck. He believes he looks tough (32), like an ox, a stud (37). Whenever he wants to impress someone, he too throws his head back, turns his head and clenches his neck muscles. This automatically gives him, he believes, the respect he needs, and he feels that women are impressed by his muscular superiority. This is an unusual neck movement and when he discovers that the woman he wanted to impress the most, Maria Rushkin, thinks this neck twist looks ridiculous, he feels utterly humiliated.

Larry Kramer is unhappy with his life and the elements that make him unhappy are the things from the discourse of success that are missing in his life. The things he does have are not the things a successful man should have – a high income, a wife, a child and a small but still expensive apartment. The things he misses in his life are the things Sherman McCoy does have. The case of the people versus Sherman McCoy thereby becomes a more personal trial; it becomes Larry Kramer versus Sherman McCoy.

Kramer has strong desires for Shelly Thomas, a woman who sat in the jury on a criminal trial case. This woman shows interest in him, but he does not have any place to take her and no money to impress her with. The only thing he believes he can show are his trial stories and his neck muscles. He tries to rent the former little apartment that Sherman McCoy used for his meetings with Maria Rushkin. When this is out in the open Kramer is taken off the McCoy case “on the grounds of ‘prosecutorial misconduct’” (719) Although Kramer despises people like Sherman McCoy (people who never have enough luxury or beautiful women) it is exactly this lifestyle he desires. He calls Sherman McCoy a rat, but he does so with admiration.

... the aristocratic honk of McCoy, the Southern Girl drawl of Maria Rushkin, it didn't take too much imagination to figure out what was going on. The pauses, the breathing, the rustling about – McCoy the rat, had taken this

gorgeous foxy creature into his arms... And this apartment on East Seventy-seventh Street where they were meeting – these people on the Upper East Side had apartments just for *their pleasure!* – while he still searched his brain (and his pockets) for some place to accommodate the yearnings of Miss Shelly Thomas. (698, emphasis in original)

Since he does not have what it takes to become part of the cultural order he desires to be part of so eagerly, he compensates, as mentioned earlier, with his behavior in the courtroom. He tries to become a man of the people, he wants to be admired and praised by the people who sit in the courtroom in the spectators' section. Kramer walks “like a football player” (688) and throws his head back and flexes his neck, addressing the judge in a popular manner to impress the public gallery. This behavior is not appreciated by the judge.

‘What makes you think you can come before the bench waving the banner of community pressure? The law is not a creature of the few or of the many. The court is not swayed by your threats. The court is aware of your conduct before Judge Auerbach in the criminal court. You waved petition, Mr Kramer! You waved it in the air, like a banner ... You were on TELEVISION, Mr Kramer. ... You played to the mob, didn't you – and perhaps there are those in this courtroom RIGHT NOW WHO ENJOYED that performance, Mr Kramer. Well, I got NEWS for you! Those who come into THIS courtroom waving banners .. LOSE THEIR ARMS! ... DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?’ (706, capitals in original)

With this public humiliation, and the discovery of his unethical behavior regarding Shelly Thomas and the “Rent-Controlled Love Nest” (718), he lost whatever chance he had to enter the discourse of success. Besides wealth and fortune, someone needs immaculate behavior to be accepted in the discourse of success.

The force behind men's ongoing need to be important and charismatic in a capitalist discourse, is, according to Declercq, the desire for libidinal enjoyment. A capitalist society is driven by the need for libidinal enjoyment. And societies are about production and consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment. "... a society that revolves around the production and consumption of objects of libidinal enjoyment *connects subjects with objects and not with other subjects.*" (75, emphasis in original) As a result, according to Declercq, such a society has an anti-social effect. If the aim is to bring people closer together by social interaction and libidinal enjoyment, the result is far from satisfying.

This discourse of success is one that is created and maintained by white men. In *The Order of Discourse*, Michel Foucault describes the way in which it establishes itself toward other threatening discourses, the way in which a discourse becomes dominant over others. It is not in a direct confrontation between two opposing forces, but in the growth of the one over the other, thereby becoming more dominant.

... discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire – it is also the object of desire; and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized. (Foucault 53)

In relation to the novel, this means that the struggle for power does not come from inside the discourse, but it is the discourse of success that ignites the confrontation. It is the obsession with being successful that is the driving force behind the ongoing desire to have more things, to want more publicity and to want to see the opposing party humiliated and incarcerated, as seen for, respectively, Sherman McCoy, assistant DA Larry Kramer and Reverend Bacon.

Only Sherman McCoy is the one closest to the discourse of success at the beginning of the novel. Albeit out of envy, a desire for justice or a need for retaliation, all the main male

characters want something from Sherman McCoy. They believe he is part of the discourse but does not deserve to be. There are three different groups represented by the character that are involved with the plot. There is the religious group of Reverend Bacon, the written media – the gossip type of journalism – by Peter Fallow and the justice department by Larry Kramer. The two parties that lose in the confrontation of the discourses are Sherman McCoy and Larry Kramer. McCoy lost his family and his possessions and now has a “Diminished Life-Style” (717); Kramer is taken off the case due to “prosecutorial misconduct” (719). Reverend Bacon wins the case he generated media attention for on behalf of Henry Lamb and his mother. But since Sherman McCoy has appealed, the case is not over. The ones who really won, in the order of discourse, are Thomas Killian (Sherman McCoy’s attorney) and Peter Fallow. Killian is wealthy enough to buy the 20-acre Phipps estate and Fallow is wed to Lady Evelyn, daughter of Sir Gerald Steiner, the publisher and financier of *The City Light*. In addition, he wins the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage McCoy case. (720)

All these different discourses are constantly shifting in dominating the others. The discourse of success is the only one that changes owners, figuratively speaking. Sherman McCoy loses ownership and Thomas Killian achieves the discourse simply by making enough money off of his wealthy clients.

... in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (Foucault 52)

The discourse of success is strongly controlled by the successful. The people who are part of the discourse try to rule out chance events and keep it pure by only socializing with others from the discourse. The producers of the discourse treat these people with less respect than those who are part of the discourse. A good example of this principle occurs when Sherman

and Judy are invited for a dinner party at the Bavardages. Sherman is seated next to Mrs. Rawthrote, a woman whom Sherman does not know. She embodies the rules and borders of the discourse of success, because she objectifies people according their success and position in the social hierarchy. She looks down on homosexuals, the less fortunate and, what surprises Sherman the most, bond traders. She places the poet Lord Buffing outside of the discourse by labeling him as the homosexual with AIDS. Furthermore, by saying “You show me a happy homosexual, I’ll show you a gay corpse” (377), she objectifies homosexuals as a group not worth entering the discourse of success. Their lives are of no value to her. Lord Buffing seems to think the same, since he explains to Maria Rushkin at the same dinner party that it took him seventy years to finally understand the sole purpose of life. He believes nature is only concerned with reproduction for the sake of reproduction. (380) Since he has not reproduced himself and he is a homosexual, he diminishes the value of his own life with this philosophy. He thereby agrees with the conditions of the discourse of success.

The rules of entering the discourse are vague and dynamic. Sherman is surprised to hear that Mrs. Rawthrote is a real-estate broker. He wonders why someone would invite a real-estate broker to a dinner party.

‘This one.’ He gestured toward the back of Mrs Rawthrote. ‘Who is she anyhow? Do you know her?’

‘Yeah. Sally Rawthrote. She’s a real-estate broker.’

Social grin: ‘A real-estate broker!’ Dear God. Who on earth would invite *a real-estate broker* to dinner.

As if reading his mind, Maria said, ‘You’re behind the times Sherman. Real-estate brokers are very chic now. She goes everywhere with that old red-faced tub over there, Lord Gutt’. (380, emphasis in original)



This quote is a good example of how the controlling of the social status of the discourse works. Nobody dares to speak of the dos and don'ts when dealing with who not to invite. The rules of exclusion are vague, but they are certainly aggressive and persistent. The cohesion of a group, the social order, is dynamic and can change quicker than one, in this case Sherman McCoy, can imagine. In the situation of inviting the real-estate broker Sally Rawthrote, the rules of exclusion are lifted. She is invited to dinner just because it is chic to welcome a real-estate broker at a dinner party. Furthermore, this heightens the status of the group and thereby strengthens the discourse of success.

Besides exclusion and inclusion, the balance of power inside the discourse of success constantly shifts in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The purpose of this shifting of power is to take power away from individuals who, according to others, do not deserve to be part of the discourse. They try to weaken their position or to exclude the ones who defile the discourse of success completely. When people believe there is someone in the discourse who does not belong there, envy grows, generating feelings of injustice. The discourse of success is not a static object and is therefore dynamically changing in time and switching owners. But by only socializing inside the discourse of success, the discourse is kept in a safe confinement of like-minded people. This is the notion of "ward of its powers and dangers" that Foucault mentions when he speaks of the procedures of a discourse. These procedures work on the principle of exclusion and subversion on the outside of the discourse.

## Chapter four *American Psycho*

In tradition with the common procedure for discussing *American Psycho*, according to Mark Storey in his essay “And as things fell apart”, the novel has to be introduced with an account of its troubled publication. Even before its publication, *American Psycho* was a well-known and much discussed novel. One of the main critiques was that it was highly misogynistic, homophobic and it supposedly made people insensitive to violence. (Library Journal, Editorial)

Right after the publication of *American Psycho*, the *The New York Times* printed an article with firm critique on its content as well as its form. In an interview on the YouTube channel of *booksbookshow*<sup>1</sup> on the Internet, Bret Easton Ellis talks about his greatest concerns in the first year after the publication. The most unpleasant situation concerning the interpretation of the novel, as he sees it, is that: “... the left got it wrong, liberals got it wrong. ... Liberals tried to kill it and the left tried to kill it. *The New York Times* wrote thirty articles about it, tried to kill it, to not have it be published.” (transcription from *booksbookshow*) His overall objection is the fact that the feminist and the liberal media read *American Psycho* too literally and were not able to see particular things for something else. It surprised him that the right didn't care and the conservatives couldn't care less, because he felt the novel was very anti-Ronald Reagan and anti some of the popular values of that period. (*booksbookshow*)

His main objection was the fact that the journalists took the novel too seriously and blamed him for not including a moral message, a message that denounces the ideas given by Patrick Bateman, the main character. He explains in that interview how nobody should try to put a label on the novel that tries to explain the intention of the author or filter out a subtext. Since Barthes denounced the death of the author as a source of reference for the novel in

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRa5hLHMEo>> 19 July 2011

1967, it is not done, among students and academics of literary studies, to proclaim authorial intent, or try to find subtexts. But if there is no room for interpreting an intention of the author, accusations toward the author of the content should not be taken seriously. The novel should be the primary source material and the common accusations regarding the author should not be a point of reference in further interpretation.

But if there is no room for filtering a message based on the author's intent, there has to be another way of interpreting the novel in an academically legitimate manner. Without being too interpretive or subjective, the discourse of success is still accessible to or interesting as a subject of research. Behind all the harsh violence lies a narrative of a sensitive and insecure young man who hides himself behind the discourse of success. This discourse of success is richly presented in the novel. The character Patrick Bateman thinks, breathes and presumably kills inside of this discourse and when something does not fit with the discourse, the way in which he views everyday life, he does not understand or recognize it for what it is.

Even before the publication of *American Psycho*, it was already a popular topic in *The New York Times*, due to the fact that the publishing house Simon & Schuster cancelled the publication just before it was scheduled for publication. A month before the novel is set to be published, *The New York Times* publishes an article by Roger Cohen called "Editorial Adjustments in 'American Psycho'". In this article, the chairman of Simon & Schuster, Richard E. Snyder, explains why he cancelled the publication of the novel. He chose to cancel because he felt the novel was in very bad taste. After his decision, Cohen explained that the response was two sided. "The cancellation, which came after the book had gone through final editing and legal checks, set off a furor, with some people in publishing contending that Simon & Schuster had been guilty of editorial cowardice and even censorship, while others said the publishing house had merely shown commendable good taste." (Cohen) The controversy grows when an imprint of Random House, Vintage, buys the rights to publish

quickly after the cancellation. “Mr. Mehta's decision to buy the book for Vintage angered women's groups, some of which have called for a boycott of the novel. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women called it ‘a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women.’”

The editors of Vintage who had worked on the novel had made only minimal adjustments to *American Psycho*, and the people responsible for it stress the fact that the editorial process for this novel was the same as any other. “Amanda Urban, Mr. Ellis's agent, said the book had gone through ‘normal editing.’ ‘There was some cutting of the beginning of the book,’ she said, ‘but no editing whatsoever of the violence. Bret is totally happy.’”(Cohen) For the interpretation of the social climate at the moment of publication, it is important to know that the people at Vintage wanted the public to know they did not limit the freedom of the author and his novel. At that point in time, right after the publication, one could not know whether this really is the case, but the fact that they want us to believe the published edition of *American Psycho* is as Bret Easton Ellis has intended it, is a clear message to all who wanted to ban the book for its content. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, we now know editing has been done beyond the satisfaction of Ellis, but it is important to know that at the moment of the publication of the novel the public did not know this. All they got from the statement was that the publishing house supported their author unconditionally.

In an interview for *Vice Magazine*, after the publication of *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010, the sequel to *Less Than Zero*), Bret Easton Ellis looks back on the editing of *American Psycho*. In this interview he contradicts the official statement that was given by the publisher right after the publication of *American Psycho*. His comments are regarding the editor Gary Fisketjon:

Well, he did a second pass on *American Psycho*. I thought that book was finished when I turned it in to Simon & Schuster, before they rejected it. Done. I didn't want it touched. But it got to Gary, and he touched it a little bit. I was kind of in a daze, and the editing was really hurried. He flew to LA and we sat in a hotel room, and basically he would edit and turn the pages over and I was just like, "Stet, stet, stet." And it grew heated. I don't think he understood the book, or he did but he didn't like it, and the editing process was really dismaying. There's still stuff in there that he did that I can't read. Like little clarifications.<sup>2</sup> (Pearson 2010)

In retrospect, we know for a fact Ellis' agent did not tell the truth and that there was some editing that the author did not approve of. It still is not clear how much and exactly what was changed, but that is not important for the consequences of the agents' message. It was a statement in defense of the speculations in order to protect the authenticity of the author and his novel. If they had confessed that some passages were left out due to its harsh description or lack of morality, it would not be an authentic expression of the writer anymore but a product altered for its economic value.

In an interview for *The New York Times*, conducted by the aforementioned Roger Cohen, Ellis explains that the stream of influence is the other way around than what the women's groups try to argue. His work was already a reflection of the society of that period and merely gave an insight in the numbed reaction toward violence that people already have. "This is a work of fiction and should speak for itself," he said. "But clearly there are metaphors here. Batman's actions and especially his reactions to what he does symbolize, at least to me, how desensitized our culture has become toward violence" (Cohen 1991)

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<sup>2</sup>< <http://www.viceland.com/int/v17n5/htdocs/bret-easton-ellis-426.php?page=7>> 19 July 2011

In another interview for the *Ask Men* website, Ellis explains that although there is some brutal violence in the novel, it is not what the book is about.

*American Psycho* is being a young man. The dream idea of being a young man. To be handsome, to be rich, to have a really cool apartment, and having beautiful women want you. Limitless freedom of money, limitless sex... but not happy – bitter. The world still sucks, even though you have all these things. I think that is much more common than you may think. If anything, it is the interior life of a man. (AskMen)

The violence is the outburst of the bitter feeling of not being happy, not being fulfilled. It is, as Storey explains in his article, part of the discourse of masculinity to regain power as a man over their own life.

Moments in which his carefully groomed masculinity is ignored, or at least is made to take a passive, feminine position, fracture his deluded belief in the patriarchal ideology, and he lashes out. The self-fashioning of Bateman to which *American Psycho* is a testament is done in the unquestioning belief in hegemonic masculinity; its dismantling is also Patrick Bateman's (Storey 65)

While Bateman is living behind the bars of his own success, he must have an outlet for his suppressed emotions. And when his masculinity is ignored or otherwise not respected enough, he uses violent behavior to overpower the feeling of having his masculinity challenged.

The discourse of success that entraps Bateman is one in which the exterior is more important than the inner self, as Storey argues. "Bateman's narrative becomes an intense case of masculine self-fashioning, a narrative edited by the teller to give the impression of a certain type of man – editing that occasionally goes awry when dangerous levels of self-awareness creep in." (Storey 63) Bateman sees the world with his narrow-minded worldview and what he sees is constantly confronted by his strong beliefs of what a man and a woman should look

like, or how they are supposed to behave. He thinks all women he meets or has known for a longer period of time, either have sexual feelings for him or are in love with him. When they do not pay any particular attention to him, he feels insulted and gets aggressive thoughts on what he wants to do to them. By this, he creates a very masculine worldview that functions as a straightjacket. When he acts on his aggressive feelings, he only strengthens the boundaries of his own thoughts and they demand evermore overpowering aggression and more extreme behavior. This “masculine” and aggressive behavior he displays is strongly contradicted by his constant grooming, his worrying about his hair and his obsession with looking strong and trimmed. This contradicts the desire how he wants people to see him. He is not the confident man he wants everyone to believe he is.

Bateman entertains the notion that he gains power over others by looking successful. And when he looks successful, he gets the opportunity to fit in with the rest, the people he admires. This notion of how he perceives the world is a demanding vision; he tries to mold everyone according to what he thinks they should look like. Bateman is trapped, according to Storey, in a very masculine and paternalistic discourse that is constructed from a masculine type of language. He is so obsessed by this picture of normality that he tries to mold Jean, his secretary, so she fits his notion of success.

“I said,” and I repeat myself calmly, grinning, “do not wear that outfit again.

Wear a dress. A skirt or something.”

... “You don’t like this, I take it,” she says humbly.

“Come on,” I say, sipping my Perrier. “You’re prettier than that.”

“Thanks, Patrick,” she says sarcastically, though I bet tomorrow she’ll be wearing a dress.

... “And high heels,” I mention. “I like high heels.” (Ellis 66-67)

In the example of his secretary, he is convinced she loves him and he believes they eventually will end up marrying each other. He believes she displays total devotion and does anything to get his attention. She ends up being his safe haven, a moment of rest where his carefully orchestrated appearance and behavior is not questioned or challenged. He ultimately feels safe enough with her, during a dinner, to confess his most intimate insecurities to her. This conversation works as an outlet and after this dinner, he continues his behavior with a clean slate.

In an intimate conversation with his secretary, Bateman reveals his feelings of not really existing. It is as if he is actively present but there is nothing besides his physical appearance. He has become a living advertisement. This feeling of non-existence could be the result of his substance abuse, or it could be the other way around, he uses drugs and prescription medication to numb the feelings of emptiness. The chapter that tells about the emptiness he feels is titled “End of the 1980s” and could, therefore, be seen as a rejection of the way he and the people around him have lived up until then. The discourse of success comes with a certain lifestyle that cannot fulfill Bateman’s needs anymore. But he tells Jean he once saw someone he knows in the men’s room writing on the wall “Kill All Yuppies”. The person who wrote that on the wall was a colleague, technically speaking a yuppie. So the discourse of success is shown to be undermined from the inside. All that is left when the package is removed, or when he goes beyond the discourse of success, is the empty Patrick Bateman. More generally this means that the lifestyle of the typical New Yorker of the 1980s is shallow and unfulfilling.

Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my piety, my hopes disappeared a long time ago



(probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist. There are no more barriers to cross. (377)

Patrick has not been anything else than the portrayal of success and he lost the feeling of being an authentic person. He misses a purpose of living and is only concerned with people's appearances. His knowledge of fashion is impressive. He knows exactly what people are wearing, down to the brands just by looking at their clothes. He can just as easily recognize their outfit in a dark club as by daylight.

... Ted Madison leaning against the railing in the back of the room, wearing a double-breasted wool tuxedo, a wing-collar cotton shirt from Paul Smith, a bow tie and cummerbund from Rainbow Neckwear, diamond studs from Trianon, patent-leather and grosgrain pumps by Ferragamo and an antique Hamilton watch from Saks... (Ellis 54-55)

Knowledge of what is in is important in the discourse of success. Only by having the right type of clothes and jewelries and going to the restaurants and clubs that are "hip", can they be part of the discourse of success. This element of knowing what is important is illustrated by the conversation Patrick Bateman, McDermott and Courtney are having concerning the right type of bottled water and the right way of drinking it. Their conversation looks a lot like the reciting a catalogue on the differences in water. Bateman and McDermott are explaining to Courtney what the differences in all the different brands of bottled water are and why you should prefer the one over the other. This conversation is very static, the things McDermott and Bateman say are standard phrases and it is as if they are performing a monologue. They can finish each other's sentences and seem irritated by the knowledge the other has. On top of that they both want to look bored with the topic but are eager to show with their knowledge. Knowledge directly copied from somewhere else, since they both know the same details and try to share them before the other can.

“With distilled or purified water,” McDermott is saying, “most of the minerals have been removed. The water has been boiled and the steam condensed into purified water.”

“Whereas distilled water has a flat taste and it’s usually not for drinking.” I find myself yawning.

“And mineral water?” Courtney asks.

“It’s not defined by the –” McDermott and I start simultaneously.

“Go ahead,” I say, yawning again, causing Courtney to yawn also.

(Ellis 250)

When his self created image of success and masculinity is not confirmed or accepted by others he responds aggressively. In a situation where he is not praised or admired, he gets a heightened self-awareness that brings unpleasant and aggressive feelings. When he has lunch with Bethany, we see a glimpse of Bateman’s history, the background of his insecurities. It is in the morning of the day he has the appointment with Bethany that provides some insight in the origin of his behavior. That morning he starts to question why he is so nervous, he wonders if it is because he has a lunch appointment with his former girlfriend, or because he used a new Italian mousse. He suggests it could be the fear of rejection by Bethany. Although it is clear that that probably is the reason for his nervousness, the way he rationalizes this option away illustrates his general train of thoughts: “It’s either that I’m afraid of rejection (though I can’t understand why: *she* called me, she want to see *me*, she wants to have lunch with *me*, she want to fuck *me* again)...” (230, emphasis in original) This confrontation with his past scares him, according to Storey, because in a situation where he is unable to control and act on his objectification of women, his aggressive urges take over. (Storey 65)

The topic of work comes up and it becomes clear that he does not have to work at P & P because his family is wealthy, but he does so to fit in. During the dinner he wants a constant

affirmation of his success and psychical excellence. He asks her if his hair is still okay, he wants her to feel his biceps. He wrote her a very inappropriate poem about a “poor nigger on a wall” that has to be “fucked” because the black man is the devil. (Ellis 233) At this point, it is not clear whether or not his behavior is an imagination (on a narrative level), so the tension between them seems to rise to an awkward level.

He wants to pay the bill for lunch, but Bethany wants to take the check since she invited him. Bateman insists because he has a platinum American Express card. When she tells him she also has one, he feels an uncontrollable rage coming up. “Violent convulsions seem close at hand if I do not get up.” (242) He tries to look unimpressed, but the imagined balance of power has shifted and she does not see the Bateman he wants her to see and to acknowledge. Furthermore, she undermines his status by thinking his suit is from a cheaper brand than it actually is. She notices his expensive high-brow painting (David Onica) hanging upside down and laughs about it. By making fun of him, he gets more agitated. During lunch it becomes clear he wants to torture her, and when she constantly ignores his need for affirmation and laughs about the painting hanging upside down, he kills her ferociously with a nail gun.

His behavior and his way of thinking is the embodiment of the discourse of success. This discourse of success is constructed, as in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, from a masculine, white men’s dominating force of wealth and ambition. Anyone who does not fit within this discourse is a possible threat and is not approached with respect. In the case of Bateman, this means he often uses physical violence to protect the image he has of himself. When it is already too late to protect the sensitive Bateman he lashes out to punish his victims (in his mind) for not paying him the respect and admiration he so desperately needs.

## Chapter five *Concluding the 1980s*

A discourse operates on the principle of exclusion and subversion. A historical and cultural order operates with the same purpose as a discourse works: to establish themselves against “opposing” orders. Yet, the cultural order operates in a slightly different manner. According to Foucault, a discourse knows three systems for exclusion: (1) prohibition, (2) division (and rejection) of madness and (3) the will to truth. (Foucault 1981: 56) The historical and cultural process uses (1) consolidation, (2) subversion and (3) containment. (Dollimore 10) The similarities between a cultural order and a discourse are significant. They both direct the view on society and create a subculture with a strong concept of ideology. It is the way the people in a particular cultural order (i.e. a discourse) see the world; it colors the way they think and talk about the world. These social rules prescribe the way in which they view the world and how they create a coherent reality. This is a passive way of constructing a notion of reality, since reality is narrated back to them by these social rules.

Cultural Materialist criticism is concerned with “the cultural connections between signification and legitimation: the way that beliefs, practices and institutions legitimate the dominant order or *status quo* – the existing relations of domination and subordination.” (Dollimore 6, emphasis in original) This legitimation of social order is mostly accomplished through consolidation and containment. The existing social relations are “naturalized” (7) This coincides with the systems of prohibition and division in Foucault’s order of discourse that forge a particular discourse. (Foucault 1981: 56) In the example of the discourse of success, there are opposing others from inside and outside the discourse, respectively men and women with (more) ambition, women in general and the less fortunate who try to enter the discourse. The characters in the novel try to naturalize the social relations constantly by consolidating and containing their social status and the importance of their own social group, their culture.

This unification of the individuals of a group is important in a cultural order, as this strengthens the group.

Legitimation further works to efface the fact of social contradiction, dissent and struggle. ... if the very conflicts which the existing order generates from within itself are constructed as attempts to subvert it from without (by the 'alien'), that order strengthens itself by simultaneously repressing dissenting elements and eliciting consent for this action: the protection of society from subversion. (Dollimore 7)

This type of behavior is very clearly represented in the selected novels. The characters in the novel *Bright Lights, Big City* socialize only with their own group of people. Amanda seems to use the protagonist for her own interests. As soon as she is socially more important than her husband, the protagonist, she leaves him for a more important man. Tad Allagash is not as concerned with the social status of the protagonist as Amanda is. At least he thinks of the protagonist as a literary promise and is not held down by his friendship. Although the protagonist is not sure whether their friendship is very good, at least it is not measured for the ways it can benefit one of them.

*Bright Lights, Big City* sets the framework for the discourse of success. The discourse is not as clearly represented as it is in the other two novels. It is, however, the beginning of the society that has its peak in the other novels and can be read as a prelude to the beginning of the discourse of success. All the different elements are there. Social confinement in a particular group of rules, the complete disregard of socially less important people, the objectification of women and a great sense for what is chic and what is hip. It is more important to be at the place where all the interesting people are than to create a situation where it is interesting to be.

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* shows the protection of a society for subversion in the way Sherman McCoy is treated by his so-called friends. He is seen as a threat for the social health of the group and the reputation of the ones involved. When his lawsuit generates a huge amount of media attention and an angry mob starts to form in front of Sherman's building, Pollard visits Sherman. He is the president of the board for all the tenants of the building and he wants Sherman to move out due to "Unacceptable Situations" (581). The real-estate broker calls Sherman and offers him to sell his house. She tries to make it look like a nice gesture, but Sherman feels a certain pressure in her wanting to sell the house

Although the main focus of this thesis is not with psychoanalysis, it is fruitful to mention Frederic Declercq's article on Lacan again at this point. As shown in the chapter on *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, it is the inherent sexual enjoyment that drives the capitalist discourse. According to Lacan, the current capitalist discourse is a vicious circle: we must produce to consume, but we have to consume if we want to produce again. (Declercq 80) This vicious circle creates an ongoing hunt for the unattainable and the object of desire. It is this longing that has important consequences on the topic of objectifying people in general and women specifically. By wanting a specific object of desire, whether that be a woman, a flourishing career or an expensive car, it is not the subject who objectifies women. It is not the desire for libidinal enjoyment that is acting up. It is, via the rules of the capitalist discourse, the object that exploits the subject's desire. "... the capitalist is not less subjected or subordinated to the capitalist discourse, but just as equally exploited by the objects of libidinal enjoyment as the proletariat. That's probably why 'the law of quantity' and the 'never enough' principle dominate capitalist societies with such ferocity." (Declercq 81) The subjects in the discourse are immersed in the desires that are common in the discourse. They are drawn toward the object of desire by a force that is greater than themselves and becomes their own. The only way to step out of the discourse of success, is, in the case of Sherman

McCoy – the only one who really steps out of the discourse – by losing the power to follow through the consequences of his behavior. When following his desires, he is pushed and pulled out of the discourse of success without wanting it. He is no longer drawn to his objects because the situation does not allow him any longer to fulfill his inner desires, his libidinal enjoyment.

Patrick Bateman does not simply watch pornographic movies; he looks for representations of the forces of power. It is not just the desire for sex; it is the wish for an uncomplicated but fulfilling connection with someone else in which he can be the dominating person. He compensates for the lack of domination and his inner masculinity by reenacting the pornographic movies he watches. When he sees in pornographic movies women who are subdued by men, he tries to create a satisfying situation just as he has seen in the settings of the pornographic movies. His motives for watching porn are to be found in his desire for feeling powerful and dominating over women. “Verkrachting is, zoals recente onderzoekingen nog eens duidelijk hebben bevestigd, niet een seksueel, maar een geweldsmisdrijf; ... - de motor is niet erotische wellust maar machtswellust.” (Kousbroek 103) His motive for acting sexually aggressive (even if his acts of violence are only part of his imagination) toward women is found mostly in his neglected need for feeling masculine. The main purpose of him raping and killing women does not free him from his sexual desires. It is only a momentarily release of his desire for overpowering people in general. He does not have any real fulfilling relations with men or women so he has adapted himself to fit the portrayal of success. His wants to fit in and does everything in his power to accomplish this.

Another important aspect of the discourse of success, is objectifying not only objects of desire, but objectifying oneself via self-improvement. By modeling themselves into something they think they are supposed to be, they try to fit the model of desire. They make themselves more desirable by taking on the appearance of a successful person. Lacan suggests

that this works the other way around as well. If you desire someone who looks successful, logically you are more desirable for someone else when you look successful too.

As a result, people objectify every aspect of the discourse of success in order to succeed in having it or looking like it. As I mentioned in chapter four on *American Psycho*, the novel can be seen as a satire on the genre, a persiflage on the typical Wall Street scene. This means that *American Psycho* displays social structures that are more clearly represented than in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, especially the relations between men and women. If it is not unusual for men to objectify women in *The Bonfire*, then the men in *American Psycho* are grotesquely disfiguring women (possibly literally) and their sexual desires. And in the case of Patrick Bateman this is the case. He turns women into objects and takes them by taking their life. His possible sexual assaults are an outburst of his objectifying behavior. When he treats women as objects he is able to do with them as he pleases, as long as he only acts out in his imagination. The fact that women's groups accused him of being a misogynist, can be seen as a confirmation of the way Bret Easton Ellis succeeded in writing a satirical novel that portrays the discourse of success successfully.

The remarks are somewhat valid; Patrick Bateman is a misogynist. But he is much more than that. He is psychopath who kills men as well as women. Bateman's actions cannot be attributed to Bret Easton Ellis as a person. He has merely written an account of a cultural order, albeit it somewhat metaphorical. "A materialistic feminism ... follows the unstable constructions of, for example, gender and patriarchy back to the contradictions of their historical moment." (Dollimore 11) It is only then, that the masculine-oriented society can be understood and questioned for its ethics. In order to get beyond the accusation that *American Psycho* is a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women, there has to be a theoretical method to find the answer to the question of what happens in the novel. By



attempting to describe the discourse of success, the novel is taken seriously and analyzed the right way.

The critique Ellis got for *American Psycho* can be used for Wolfe in a broader perspective as well. He too objectifies women and sexual relations. The women Larry Kramer and Sherman McCoy meets and desire, are represent as superficial and only concerned with appearance and wealth. An important aspect of this appearance is to not look foolish or overpowered by (their) man. Maria Rushink is embarrassed when she mistakes Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593, the author of a dramatized version of *Faust*) for a writer of movie scripts. She feels humiliated by the man because he responded with “I shouldn’t think so. He died in 1593.” Her concern is that Sherman McCoy believes she is stupid if she does not know who Christopher Marlowe is. (Wolfe 80)

When Sherman McCoy is out of the discourse of success, he sees the discourse for what is actually is. It is everything his former self stands for. Just as the protagonist in *Bright Lights, Big City* did, he rejects his former lifestyle. Whether that is voluntarily or out of necessity is not that important. The moment they do not believe in it any more is the moment the discourse of success does not draw them to it any longer. The objectification of them by the discourse is interrupted.

Wolfe had an ambitious goal when writing the novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. He wanted to write a realistic novel on New York in the 1980s. (Wolfe ix). Reading the reviews that were written more recently (Masters, Fletcher, Edward B., Kuzyk, Zwagerman), the impression rises that he reached this goal. A novel that captures the New York of the 1980s as realistically as possible is destined to become dated at a certain moment. Joost Zwagerman thinks the novel is dated because it gives such a clear outline of the political situation of New York of the 1980s. He believes Wolfe creates characters who only think of their social status and their financial wealth, their stocks. He portrays people only in their social class and in the

confrontation between rich and poor, black and white, creating characters who are bound to become dated. (157)

Not only is *The Bonfire of the Vanities* slightly dated, it soon became prophetic after its publication in 1987. A week after the novel reached the bookstores in October, Wall Street experienced its infamous crash of 1987. Three months later the Tawana Brawley case appeared in the media and a man named Reverend Al Sharpton handled the press very similarly to Reverend Bacon. Just as in the opening chapter of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the mayor of New York was harassed and shouted down by demonstrators in Harlem. (Wolfe xxvi-xxvii) Although the novel showed similarities with real life, Wolfe did not think of the novel as prophetic. He merely thought of it as a testimony of how he succeeded in writing a realistic novel on New York of the 1980s. “The book only showed what was obvious to anyone who had done what I did, even as far back as the early Eighties, when I began; anyone who had gone out and looked frankly at the new face of the city and paid attention not only to what the voices said but also to the roar.” (Wolfe xxvii)

Bret Easton Ellis pointed out that two weeks after writing *American Psycho*, the novel had already become dated. It is a novel about the New York in the 1980s and was first published in 1991. There are references that only people who were present at that time can really understand. (*booksbookshow*) Bret Easton Ellis commented on the fashion of the 1980s and the way people behaved; how it really was typical for that period. “Most of the time, if you put the products together, they would actually look ridiculous – none of it went together. If you could see what the characters in *American Psycho* were wearing, they would all look like clowns. It didn’t seem odd at the time, given the culture, to have a brand obsessed guy, who was into grooming and going to the gym. Today that is called being metrosexual, but that term didn’t exist then.” (*AskMen*) This may be the best argument illustrating how an author succeeded in capturing a historical moment in a novel.

Bateman's wish to fit in with the rest of his colleagues is a desperate call for company, to not stand out of the crowd, to not be alone. He is the only character who says it literally to one his ex-girlfriend Bethany.

“Patrick”, she says slowly. “If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work.”

‘Because’, I say, staring directly at her, “I ... want ... to ... fit ... in.”. (236)

As a consequence he is obliged to live according the rules of the social order he follows. He gives up his sense of self to be accepted in the discourse of success. The concept of free will is minimized in a society constructed around an ideology. Greenblatt discovered this when analyzing Renaissance literature. He found that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by society and its cultural mores is intertwined in the process. In the freedom to choose a certain identity or wanting to become part of a discourse, there is the restricting force of power relations.

Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force. (Greenblatt 256)

This applies to the ideology that forms the discourse of success. There is freedom insofar that you choose to follow the strict rules applied in the discourse. If you choose to disobey the rules, you are no longer part of the cultural order. The freedom of choice is therefore a misleading freedom. The discourse of success is filled with individuals who feel comfortable in their restricted sense of freedom because they are incapable of living their lives as if they were really free. The characters in the novels show us a generation that fails to take control of their lives. They can keep up appearances and simulate a satisfying lifestyle.

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