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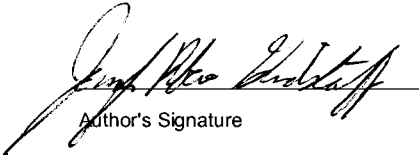
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Narcissistic Intertextuality in the Works of Bret Easton Ellis

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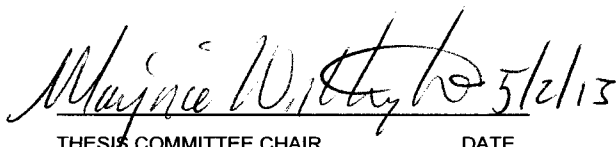
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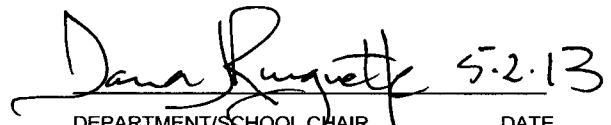
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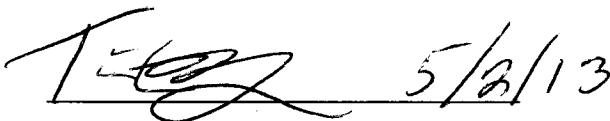
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Abstract:

This thesis examines the works of Bret Easton Ellis, specifically his three latest novels: *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Bedrooms*, and identifies the metafictional and intertextual elements in these texts. For my purposes, I am defining metafiction as fiction that draws attention to itself and makes the reader aware that he or she is reading fiction. Intertextual will be defined as elements in the novels that appear in other works of fiction. In the case of Ellis, he is drawing upon and reusing elements from his own fiction. These elements include characters that reappear in novels other than the text in which they originally appeared. This reappearance mirrors the characters' narcissism, defined as extreme-self obsession, which is enabled by the world of white male privilege in which the characters were raised. The movement of characters throughout the texts reflects their narcissism as they fight for attention within their own stories and within Ellis's oeuvre. This technique that Ellis is using by recycling his own characters is something I will be calling narcissistic intertextuality. I define this term as a form of metafiction where the reappearance of characters reflects the characters' narcissism.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Worthington, for her help in developing this topic and introducing me to metafictional texts in which authors appear as characters in their own novels.

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Introduction

The novels of Bret Easton Ellis contain white, wealthy characters. To date, his protagonists are all male misogynists as well. The novels reflect the time periods in which they were written and make satirical comments about popular culture and privilege. Throughout these novels an incestuous universe emerges. By incestuous, I mean the novels contain characters, places, and themes unique to the Ellis universe that reappear in novels other than which they were originally introduced, creating an overlap of characters throughout the novels. Some of the characters appear in their original form, and some are different, evoked only in name or discussed by other characters. My thesis will explain the reasons for the recurrence of these elements using a term that I am coining: narcissistic intertextuality. I define intertextuality as fiction that refers to other fiction, and in the case of Ellis, his own fiction.

Narcissistic intertextuality is a narrative technique used by Ellis, rooted in the characters' narcissism. I am using the word narcissism to mean self-obsession. The reappearance of characters in the texts draws attention to their fictional state and invokes satire of people like these characters and the society that enables their narcissism. The form of the novels mirror the narcissistic state of the characters by reminding the reader that he or she is reading fiction, and the texts draw attention to themselves in a similar way as Ellis's characters vie for the attention of the reader. In order to understand the intertextual nature of the novels, we must examine Ellis's novels and his career. The reasons for this are two-fold. It is essential to examine the earlier texts in order to identify reappearing characters and themes. Furthermore, it is important to situate Ellis's

work within the field of literary studies in order to give context for my work among other Ellis scholarship.

The basis for my examination of Ellis's work is the following: the Ellis oeuvre contains a group of characters who move from text to text, sometimes appearing as major characters and at other times appearing only through the whispers of gossip. Characters are stuck in a world where most days are the same, and the social circle is surprisingly small. The whiteness and privilege experienced by the characters fosters their narcissism. This narcissism encourages the protagonists to dehumanize others and put their own needs before anyone else's. The dehumanization of others demonstrates that the characters only care about their own needs; they are willing to do anything to get attention. The characters eventually become stuck in a delusional fantasy world where they are the center and the most important being. The small social circle and mundane routine of the characters is reflected in their confinement in the Ellis universe. Most of the characters in this world know each other or are connected through friends and family. The metafictional and intertextual elements in the novels mirror this state of connection by allowing the characters to seek attention through their reappearance in novels other than the novel in which they originally appear. The characters keep coming back and wreaking havoc to keep their grasp on their place in the Ellis world. For instance, Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American Psycho*, appears in four out of six of Ellis's novels, once as the narrator, twice as a minor character, and once as a malevolent spirit. Ellis's technique across his novels, which I will be calling narcissistic intertextuality, creates a self-referential universe that parodies our own by revealing what lies beneath the excess and glamour we typically desire.

This thesis has two aims. The first is to explore the metafictional and intertextual elements of Ellis's novels and the effect these elements have on the novels. The second is to explain these elements in terms of the narcissism of the novels' protagonists. This intertextual and metafictional movement that is created due to the characters' narcissism is something I will be calling narcissistic intertextuality. For my purposes, I am defining the term metafiction as fiction that draws attention to itself and calls out fictional elements to the reader. For example, Ellis appears as a fictional version of himself as the protagonist in *Lunar Park*, which calls attention to the fictional nature of the protagonist by reminding readers about the real Ellis. I argue that by recycling narcissistic characters that show up in multiple novels, Ellis is calling attention to their self-obsession and satirizing the society that encourages this narcissism.

My thesis is broken into three chapters. Because I am discussing elements in the Ellis universe as a whole, I will look at all six of Ellis's novels, but my primary texts are Ellis's latest novels *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Bedrooms*. The first chapter examines the whiteness, wealth, and masculinity that all of the protagonists and most of the characters share. I argue that this privileged position enables the characters' narcissism, which allows them to discount the needs of others. My second chapter contains an in-depth look at the fantasy worlds of the protagonists, and how these worlds are created by their narcissism and blur reality and fiction, making it difficult for the reader to decide what actually happened and what is part of the narrator's imagination. The final chapter discusses the metafictional and intertextual elements in the novels and the satire invoked by Ellis because of them. I will discuss how the narcissism of the

characters allows them to be brought back into novels from which they originally appear, culminating in a narcissistic intertextuality.

Containing white, wealthy, self-obsessed characters from the moment of their creation, the novels of Bret Easton Ellis have been controversial since their introduction to the literary community in 1985. This controversy was due to Ellis's minimalistic style and his characters' apathy in the face of disturbing scenes of violence and destruction. This violence and apathy takes place among characters who are conventionally beautiful, wealthy, and superficial. Ellis pulled back the curtain on the glamorous lifestyles of the privileged, and much of the public was horrified at what they saw beneath the beautiful façade.

Less Than Zero, Ellis's debut novel, was reviewed with vastly different levels of enthusiasm. The novel follows Clay, a young, wealthy, teenager home from college on Christmas vacation. It describes the parties, drug-use, and general debauchery (including the viewing of a snuff film and the gang rape of a drugged twelve-year old) of other wealthy teens living in Beverly Hills. Apathy and self-loathing are key themes within the book, and it is told in what became Ellis's signature narrative style, first-person present tense. The novel was maligned by some critics who could not see any literary or social value to the vapid novel, and *Library Journal* critic Janet Cameron wrote, "The best thing about this first novel is its title" (142). On the other hand, as Sonia Baelo-Allue points out, for Ellis, the novel "earned him the respect of many critics for capturing the speech of teenagers and the banality of their world" (14). The book grew in popularity among teenagers and twenty year-olds and Ellis was viewed as an emerging and influential voice for his generation. He was part of the literary "Brat Pack," which included fellow authors

Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, and Mark Lindquist. This group of authors gained celebrity status and were treated more like rock stars than authors. Ellis's fame and notoriety grew when he published his second novel *The Rules of Attraction* two years after *Less Than Zero*. Clay from *Less Than Zero* narrates a of chapter of *The Rules of Attraction*, and Ellis begins setting up his intertextual universe.

Ellis's fame turned into infamy with the publication of his third and most well-known novel, *American Psycho*, in 1990. The novel follows Patrick Batman, a wealthy stock-broker obsessed with fashion, music, and trendy restaurants and nightclubs; exhaustive lists about these topics appear and make up the bulk of the novel. Bateman is also a serial killer, and the novel contains several graphic descriptions of torture and sex. The novel received mostly negative reviews, including a *New York Times* Review by Michael Rosenblatt, who wrote,

American Psycho is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest (Rosenblatt).

Besides reviews like the one above, describing the pointlessness of the novel, Ellis received death threats because of the novel and protests were held by feminist groups because of its depictions of sex, torture, murder, and cannibalism, which are the elements that made it so "loathsome" in the eyes of Rosenblatt and many others. The novel could have ruined Ellis's career, but the controversy surrounding it helped to bolster sales and enhanced Ellis's reputation as a pop culture icon.

Ellis's intertextual universe continued growing with *American Psycho* as Patrick Bateman appeared in *The Rules of Attraction* as the brother of Sean Bateman, one of the novel's protagonists. This world only continued to grow with the creation of Ellis's latest novels *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Bedrooms*. The later novels contain similar themes of upper-class, white, masculinity as Ellis's earlier work. Like his characters, Ellis has first-hand experience with being a wealthy white male, and in many ways has become part of the culture he parodies in his novels. This becomes especially relevant when examining the novel *Lunar Park*, where Ellis appears as the main character. My thesis will argue that the masculinity, wealth, and whiteness in the novels contribute to and encourage the narcissism of the characters.

Much of the original scholarship on Ellis's work focuses on the sex and violence in the novels; recently, scholarship has shifted away from the more salacious elements in the texts. Recent scholarship over Ellis's works has gained popularity, culminating in three books published in the last three years of criticism devoted to Ellis's novels, and his oeuvre is viewed more favorably in the literary community than it once was¹. In my opinion, this shift came about in part because the literary climate of the times was changing. *American Psycho* is now largely viewed favorably in the scholarly community, and the book is seen as having merit for its satirical elements. As the culture changed, Ellis's later novels changed with it.

Recent Ellis scholarship has gone beyond the sex, violence, and controversial material in the novels to discuss the satire of consumerism and popular culture invoked in them. His work has been examined as part of a growing body of scholarship on post-9/11 literature, and although the metafictional and intertextual elements of his novels are

mentioned in criticism, they have not yet been discussed in depth. I am focusing on the intertextual and metafictional elements in the texts to explain the narcissism present in them. I am also discussing the satire of culture invoked by the novels. This satire comes about because the reader must confront both fiction and reality through the metafictional elements of the texts. This kind of criticism is important because without it, readers can easily sink into the belief (as so many reviewers have) that the novels are simply vapid representations of the world with no purpose or meaning.

¹ Baelo-Allue, Sonia. *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture*.

The Continuum International Publishing Group: London. 2011. Print.

Colby, Georgia. *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Mandel, Naomi. *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*. Ed. Naomi Mandel. Leicester, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Print.

Chapter 1: The White, White World of Ellis

The novels of Bret Easton Ellis feature protagonists who are all white, upper-class, males. The major supporting characters in the novels are also white and upper-class. In fact, Ellis's novels are practically devoid of racial and social diversity. When this diversity occurs, it takes the form of servants and victims of the protagonists. The extreme privilege and whiteness in the novels leads to the characters' narcissism and their dehumanization of others. Through this whiteness and privilege, Ellis is doing more than simply recording the state of the upper-class. He is invoking a parody of white masculinity through his unflattering depictions of his characters and their lifestyles. The excess and unlikeable qualities of the characters are a satire of upper-class society and privilege, as Ellis offers no solutions for their despicable actions. This chapter will examine the culture of the novels that contributes to self-obsession and depraved behaviors of the characters.

Whiteness in Ellis's novels becomes the racial equivalent of "normal." This underlying attitude about race coincides with the typical white-American view of race. In "An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory: Hidden from How Many?" by Douglass Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis, and Paul R. Croll, a sociology survey on attitudes about race is conducted and discussed. The findings about whiteness include the following: "we find substantial support for key tenets of whiteness theory: whites' racial identities tend to be less visible than those of individuals from other racial groups, and whites are less likely to see ways that they have been actively advantaged by being white" (409). In other words, white people usually do not think about their race as much

as people from other ethnicities often do, and they do not perceive that being white gives them advantages. Racial privilege and uniqueness become hidden for many Caucasians as they do not have to actively think about their race. Advantages and successes are viewed as achievements because of the individual's ability, and white male privilege is not considered to be a factor. This individualist thinking fosters narcissism within the individual.

The sociological studies about race have been applied to literary studies as well. The argument that the state of whiteness is seen as normal is discussed by Tim Engles when examining the white male protagonist in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. Engles writes,

The characters in this novel usually live in a social environment in which whites constitute the numerical majority. As a result, white people within such a setting tend to be regarded by others not in terms of their racialized group membership, but rather on an individual, "case by case" basis. Their membership in the "white race" seems to them to have little impact on their daily lives, and indeed, the fact of their racial whiteness rarely occurs to them. (757)

This racialized self-consciousness (or lack thereof) is true of Ellis's novels as well, where the reader is never told the race of the characters unless they are non-white. Race seems to have no impact on the novels because it is not discussed, and the state of whiteness seems normal. The reader assumes the protagonists are white and falls into believing the default race is white if not otherwise mentioned. The act of not describing the ethnicity of the characters unless they are non-white normalizes whiteness and mirrors depictions

of race more generally in American society. This normalization of the white race within the novels fosters the characters' narcissism, and their status as wealthy men functions in the same way. Ellis' characters are able to overlook their inherited privileges and believe that they are special.

Because they are especially encouraged by their highly privileged circumstances to believe they are special and unique, the protagonists of Ellis's novels are all narcissists. For my purposes, I will define narcissism as extreme selfishness and self-obsession. Ellis's characters believe that they are the most important beings in their worlds and act accordingly. The protagonists only care about others when they are being admired by them or when other people can do something for them. This orientation toward others leads to selfish, manipulative actions on the part of the protagonists that often have disturbing consequences for those around them.

For example, Victor, the protagonist of *Glamorama*, displays his self-obsession and lack of awareness for others in many details of his life, including his answering machine message, which causes a problem for PR reps RSVPing their clients to the opening of a nightclub because "They say it's playing thirty seconds of 'Love Shack' and then only five seconds to leave a message" (G 9). Victor replies in his typical fashion by responding that they only need to leave a yes or no answer (G 9). This scene shows that Victor cares more about forcing people to listen to his interests, in this case the song 'Love Shack,' but does not care what they have to say. Similarly, he needs the celebrities at the opening of his nightclub to reinforce his own brand of celebrity, but he does not want any explanations or information from them. In other words, he only cares about whether they can help him (yes) or not (no). Victor desires to be part of the group,

but also wants to stand out in it. If he can surround himself with celebrities, then he will be perceived as famous and glamorous by his association with them. He believes that he deserves fame and never mentions his wealth, race, or gender in helping him make those celebrity connections.

Victor further displays his shallowness and narcissism through one of his catch phrases in the novel: “The better you look, the more you see” (G 31). This phrase is untrue for Victor as he continually misses important information in the novel because he only pays attention to how he looks. This phrase is vital when examining Victor’s narcissism because his appearance helps him get into places that the average American would not be allowed, such as exclusive celebrity parties and backstage at fashion shows. Once again, appearance and whiteness contribute to his success, and to his demise. Victor’s inability to pay attention to others and his responses to others, which are often lyrics from popular music, such as “East Coast girls are hip, I really dig those styles they wear” (G 7) and “I’m a loser, baby, so why don’t you kill me?” (G 90), show his belief in his own self-importance and his willingness to accept phrases from popular culture and adapt them for his own purposes. Victor’s narcissism encourages him to be shallow with others and not seek or give meaning in conversations with others.

Victor’s narcissism consumes him to the point that he is unable to live comfortably off the money he earns from modeling and his trust fund. When going to an ATM, Victor realizes he is overdrawn because, “I blew my last cash on a glass-door refrigerator because *Elle Décor* did a piece on my place” (20). Later in the novel, it is revealed that Victor has a personal trainer, Reed, who is “more famous than the celebrities he trains” (G 63) and charges \$175 an hour, which, to Victor, is “totally worth

it” (G 63); as a result of these extravagances, several of Victor’s checks to Reed have bounced (G 64). Both the refrigerator and personal trainer examples show Victor’s dependence on the cult of appearance. He believes that having the right appliances and body fat percentage is more important than the ability to pay for rent and food. Victor’s self-obsession deludes him into believing that he is unique and should be adored. He believes his father should increase his monthly allowance and is indignant when his father suggests that he move to a less expensive city (G 93). He is unable to see the privileges handed to him because of his wealth and whiteness.

Bret, the protagonist of *Lunar Park*, and the fictional version of Ellis, is a narcissist whose self-obsession and childish behavior when he does not get his way destroys his family. In the beginning of the novel, Bret admits that his bad behavior has been nurtured for many years, and he, not his novels, became the product. He writes:

It was the beginning of a time when it was almost as if the novel itself didn’t matter anymore—publishing a shiny booklike object was simply an excuse for parties and glamour and good-looking authors reading finely honed minimalism to students who would listen rapt with slack-jawed admiration, thinking, I could do that, I could be them. But of course if you weren’t photogenic enough, the sad truth was you couldn’t. And if you were not a supporter of the Brat Pack, you simply had to accept us anyway. We were everywhere. There was no escaping our visages staring out at you from the pages of magazines and TV talk shows and scotch ads.

(LP 11)

In this passage, Bret emphasizes the culture that promoted his self-obsession. The literary “Brat Pack” was a group of authors who were celebrities and pop-culture icons in the early 1980’s. This group, which included Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz, appeared in television spots and on magazines, and became idols of twenty year-olds across the country. Bret admits that he was revered for his beauty, more than his words, and people wanted to be him. By invoking the importance of his appearance in this section, Bret is getting close to the truth about the role of whiteness and privilege on his success. If Bret had not been able to attend an exclusive college with professors who had contacts in the publishing world, he may not have been published and had the kind of successful career he enjoys in *Lunar Park*. He owes much of his success to the fact that his father was wealthy. The fact that he was featured on TV and magazines and given fame unknown to many successful authors puts Bret in a unique place where he could easily believe that he was the center of the universe.

Bret tells the reader he was “diagnosed with something called ‘acquired situational narcissism’” (LP 31) at the height of his career. This diagnosis seems like a convenient excuse for Bret’s behavior on his book tour, which included drug-fueled chaos and the inability to read his own work or sign autographs at scheduled appearances (LP 25). Bret’s diagnosis might be more convincing if his bad behavior stopped when his fame began to diminish, but it does not. He is a narcissist in part because of his instantaneous fame, but also because of his social status and the people around him who indulge his self-obsession. He has grown up in a society that reveres him because he is a wealthy, white, and conventionally attractive male. His narcissism is fostered by an environment that has held him up as not only normal, but the ideal, since his birth.

Bret's narcissism continues to show itself in his unwillingness to act like an adult and participate in building a relationship with his family. Bret gets married even though he is not ready to take on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. The marriage forces him to grow up and take on adult responsibilities, but he resists these responsibilities because he is not the center of the household. When trying to connect with his son, Robby, Bret becomes resentful because "it was all about what he wanted. It was all about what he needed. Everything I desired was overridden, and I had to accept this. I had to rise up to it" (LP 37). However, Bret is never able to "rise up to it," and continues acting irresponsible throughout the novel, including excessive drug and alcohol use. His relationship with Robby becomes more strained until the boy runs away, and Bret's wife leaves him.

Because of the group dynamic required to normalize the privilege, whiteness, and masculinity of the protagonists, it would seem as if instead of being self-obsessed, the characters would be group obsessed and want constant reassurance from those around them. However, as Sally Robinson argues in *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, many white men are indeed, individualists: "white men do not willingly fold their individual identities into a group identity except around perceived losses of power, articulated as impingements of rights. Anxiety over loss of privilege competes with a desire to forge a collective white male identity around claims of victimization" (7). In Ellis's novels, this anxiety over a perceived loss of privilege forces the characters to stay within their social circles. They cannot leave their mansions and lavish apartments because they would not thrive among the working classes and people of color. They believe they are victims when they are ignored or do not get their every desire. These

men want to stand out and are narcissists, but they must constantly compete in a sea of people who are just like them. Victor mentions this pressure in a conversation to his father: “I’m replaceable. There are a thousand guys who’ve got pouty lips and nice symmetry. But opening something, a club, it’s…” (G 90 Ellipses original). Victor realizes that he looks like everyone else in his social group and must do something different in order to stand out. Because the protagonists in Ellis’s novels have some group awareness that they may be lost in a sea of people who look like them, they perceive a need to do something to make themselves feel special. Some of the protagonists lash out and commit acts of violence in an effort to validate their own existence.

Clay, of *Imperial Bedrooms*, refuses to accept the wishes of others and his narcissism manifests in the violent subjection of those around him. He manipulates others to get what he wants, and his only focus is how it makes him feel. While forcing Rain, an actress he is sleeping with, to continue her relationship with him, Clay realizes, “Even though I thought she was numb from the tequila she keeps crying and that makes me harder” (IB 131). His arousal at Rain’s tears shows that Clay enjoys the manipulation of others, and more to the point, if she is crying because of his treatment of her, then he is at the center of her thoughts. He has so much control over her that even though she is drunk, she cannot control her emotions. Clay’s narcissism allows him to dehumanize others because in his mind, he is the only person who matters.

Georgina Colby argues that narcissism and the dehumanization of others often go together and writes:

Once the process of dehumanization has taken place in image fetishism, the inanimate image is then reanimated through the fetishistic gaze, yet remains dehumanized. It is a process in which the human body becomes part of the abstract space of capitalism. The body turns into both a site for the inscription of late-capitalist ideology and simultaneously the site of the loss of subjectivity. (104)

Both image fetishism and dehumanization run rampant in the upper-class world of Ellis's characters. The people in these novels are prized for what they can do for the protagonists. Women are seen as vapid sexual beings, prized only for their abilities and willingness in the bedroom and the status of having a beautiful and socially connected woman on one's arm in public. Men are also seen as sexual beings, social status symbols, or connections to drugs. Most of Ellis's characters (excluding the homophobic Patrick Bateman, protagonist of *American Psycho*), to their credit, do not uphold heterosexuality as an ideal standard as they do whiteness, masculinity, and privilege. Minority characters are simply bodies used for labor and loyalty. They are often no more real or valuable than any other cleaning tool, a vacuum cleaner easily discarded and replaced when it does not work anymore.

The commodity and capitalist aspects of Colby's argument are important keys to understanding the characters' narcissism. All of Ellis's characters are upper-class and extremely wealthy. This was not wealth that came to the characters through hard work, but wealth that they were born into. Parents of Ellis's protagonists have careers including real-estate developers, Wall-Street stockbrokers, movie producers, and high level politicians. These careers make the protagonists' fathers extremely wealthy, and thus

members of an elite social class. It is important to note that only the fathers of the protagonists have careers. Mothers, when mentioned in the novels, are vain, vapid, socialites, divorced from the fathers who now have twenty-year-old girlfriends. Because the mothers do not contribute to the wealth of the protagonists, this may be one reason that women are more often objectified than men.

Just as Ellis's characters are surrounded by whiteness and its accompanying perquisites, they are also surrounded by wealth and privilege. They rarely have to confront being upper-class and going to parties with celebrities because everyone in their lives has the same kind of existence. These characters, who already view themselves as normalized because of their race, believe their wealth is normal too. Victor never has to think about the consequences of spending a large amount of money for a famous personal trainer because his friends are doing the same thing. Clay abuses and manipulates others and is reinforced in his behavior by his friends who are also manipulating those around them. People who are not white and wealthy are considered outsiders and can be easily dehumanized by the protagonists because of their status as others. These others are either never mentioned within the texts or given attention only when they are cleaning up the messes of the protagonists.

The extreme wealth, privilege, and whiteness that surround Ellis's characters creates an environment that nurtures narcissism. The characters do not struggle. They do not worry about where their next meal is coming from or how they will pay for college. They have plenty of time to reflect upon themselves. They have maids and personal assistants, so they do not have to clean up after themselves or remember important dates. In the characters' minds, the world revolves around them, and their

social circles endorse this self-obsessive mindset. Here Ellis is invoking a satire of our culture that endorses and celebrates fame and wealth. We all yearn for this status and seemingly carefree lifestyle, but do not think about the implications or consequences of it.

The three protagonists I have been discussing, Victor, Bret, and Clay believe they are victims and feel anxious over what they believe to be unfair treatment. Victor wants to own a nightclub and become a top male model, but does not think he can survive on his monthly allowance. Bret cannot thrive in his suburban lifestyle and new role as father and husband, and he does not think it is fair that the children get more attention than he does. Clay knows he does not have much power in Hollywood as a screenwriter, so he makes desperate actors believe he can get them roles in exchange for sexual favors. These characters pout and whine about their charmed existences because they cannot see past their own situations. Their wealth and privilege is normal to them, and they do not know any other life.

The characters' inability and inexperience in dealing with realism allows them to sink into fantasies of their own making. They ultimately sink deep into their own narcissistic delusions and ignore those around them, preferring their own fantasies to the realities around them. In an effort to be individuals, the protagonists reject even those around them who reinforce their bad behaviors and see them as meaningless commodities to be used as they see fit. The reader is ultimately drawn into this world of privilege, whiteness, and narcissism. Because the novels are written in the first-person point-of-view, we must see the world as the protagonists see it. We can choose to buy into the

vapid consumerism endorsed by the narrators or see through the fantasy into the danger of this world.

Chapter 2: The Protagonists: Blurring Reality

In the three latest novels of Bret Easton Ellis, the protagonist's narcissism causes each man to construct his own world. In these worlds no one else is real, and the protagonists are at the center of everything. The extreme narcissism of these characters allows them to disconnect from those around them, dehumanize others, and participate in acts of violence. Combined with a pervasive apathy, these protagonists are unable to care about anything outside themselves. They eventually create fantasy worlds within their own minds where they are the stars of the action and center of attention. The reader is never sure what scenes in the novels are real and what comes from the characters' delusions.

Several critics have discussed the state of delusion for Ellis's characters and agree that this literary tactic makes it difficult to distinguish reality of delusion. David Schmid notes, "*Glamorama's* conspiracy narrative, in which meaning is constantly deferred, poses crucial challenges to the reader. Every detail of the narrative is subject to question and revision. The reader, like Victor, cannot be absolutely sure what really happened, and this position of skepticism can never be abandoned" (79). Readers of Ellis must remain skeptics and be on guard against the unreliable narrators presenting the story. Naomi Mandel argues that not only must the reader remain skeptical, but must go deeper than surface level interpretations in his or her reading of the texts. She writes, "*Glamorama's* challenge to the reader is not to attempt to make sense of this world but to register her reluctance, or aversion, even to try" (67). We must fight to make sense of the protagonists' delusions if we are to understand the message lying beneath while maintaining awareness that all we want to do is remain on the surface. Georgina Colby

argues for the complexity of Ellis's texts and writes, "Crucially it is not the surface narratives of Ellis's texts that define him but his critique of what lies beneath the surface of culture. It is his complex act of underwriting that makes Ellis unique as a contemporary author" (2). This chapter will go beyond a surface level reading of the texts and argue that Ellis is creating a social satire through his novels' complex narrative structure which features characters who blur fiction and reality in their own minds.

The focus of this chapter will be on Victor from *Glamorama*, Bret from *Lunar Park*, and Clay from *Imperial Bedrooms*. Each of these characters possesses varying degrees of intelligence, likability, and sadistic tendencies, and each invokes different amounts of empathy from the reader, but they all lack awareness for those outside themselves. This inattentiveness pushes them away from others and damages any chances of meaningful relationships. On the surface, each protagonist has it all, luxury, wealth, and fame, and it would seem that if they hated their world or became uncomfortable with it, they could easily escape. They have the financial means to move away from their destructive and oppressive environments, but they cannot escape their own minds, which is the truly destructive and oppressive element these characters face. Their wealth only feeds their narcissism, and allows them to continue the fantasies and indulgent lifestyles.

The protagonists in Ellis's novels eventually become actors in their own movies. The novels use cinematic language and elements when describing situations that seem unlikely, reinforcing the possibility of the characters' delusions and the movie allegory. Sonia Baelo-Allue argues that the cinematic allegory extends into the characters point of view, and in *Glamorama*, "the reader is unable to distinguish between Victor's point of view and that of a camera. Like the 'thin strip of white' on the horizon that Victor sees

from the QE2 that can't be identified as land or sky (215), the real gradually disappears as a stable frame of reference" (88). Here the cinematic vision blends with the disillusionment of the narrator. Because the novels are written in the first-person point-of-view, the reader only has the narrator's words on which to rely. We are seeing his movie, and as a result, we are never sure which part of the narrative is real and what part of it is fantasy. To complicate matters more fully, the narrators lose touch with reality and are not always able to discern truth from fiction. They are confined within their delusions. The narrator's family and friends get swept up in this movie and become actors in a dangerous fantasy world they do not know they are a part of. Those close to the narrators suffer from the violence created in the narrator's mind, which often spills into reality. For instance, part of Bret's delusion in *Lunar Park* is the belief that his characters are haunting him and trying to hurt his family. This delusion manifests in a terrifying night when his children believe they are being attacked by one of these entities.

As touched on in the previous chapter, all of Ellis's characters are white and upper-class. This state of being cultivates the narcissism in the characters, and makes these characters out of touch with most of society and any reality other than their own. While appearing to have everything they could desire, these characters are trapped in an existence where they believe they should have and deserve happiness. As a result, each protagonist has rocky familial and social relationships. The inability to maintain successful relationships causes them to further disconnect from those around them and dive deeper into their delusions of grandeur.

Each man's birth into the upper-class helped cultivate his narcissism. Victor's father is a politician, Bret's father is in business, and Clay has a family trust. This

wealth not only encourages their narcissistic ways but was integral in creating it, causing a cycle of dependence. There is no danger to the men, other than Victor, of sinking too deep into their fantasy worlds as they do not need a steady income for their survival. They have wealth *despite* their behavior. Victor is in danger of losing his place in upper-class society as he is constantly out of money despite his monthly allowance and growing career as model and club owner. He has let narcissism take hold of him too tightly and spends all his money on personal training sessions, the latest in fashion, and lavish dinners and nightclub appearances. The further he indulges his narcissistic delusions, the more desperate his financial situation and status become. In contrast, Bret has reached a place of financial independence and admits that while on his book tour where he was abusing drugs to the point that he could not perform during public readings, he was unable to hit rock bottom because he was making so much money. Bret's money allows him to keep the fantasy going, and he does not have to admit defeat because someone will always be around to clean up after him and make excuses for him.

Each character is accepted and even embraced by those around him, despite the harm he causes. Their narcissism is nurtured and bad behavior is accepted and often expected. The low expectations of others encourage the protagonists to sink deeper into their worlds of narcissism and delusion. As a male model, Victor is supposed to embody the party-boy lifestyle. Even though people around him think he is unreasonable, vapid, and stupid, they accept him because this is what they expect of a model. As a young author, Bret¹ embodies the carefree lifestyle of a rowdy celebrity. His bad behavior is

¹ Bret is the fictional version of Ellis. Ellis and Bret's lives run parallel to a certain degree. They have both written the same novels and have achieved the same amount of success and infamy. In addition, they have similar backgrounds and family issues, specifically trouble with their fathers. Bret is married to a fictional actress, Jayne Dennis, and has a son with Jayne. Ellis is not married and has no children.

rewarded and encouraged through publicity and more book sales. He is indulged in every whim, and even though his book tour is disastrous because of excessive drug use, the public comes out in droves just to get a peek at the out of control author. He gives his fans exactly what they want and expect. Clay is indulged in his bad behavior because in his world it is okay to manipulate others for career gains. This manipulation and objectification is acceptable as long as it does not cross specific boundaries set up by those in charge. For instance, it is okay to sleep with people to get ahead in a career, but being a hired escort is looked down upon. Clay often crosses these boundaries, but people put up with his behavior because he offers them career gains.

Despite the nurturing of bad behavior, the protagonists are ultimately to blame for their own fates. As the stars of their own movies, they believe that all eyes are on them. Each character has a mental break within his novel and suffers from some kind of delusion, ranging from disturbing dreams and paranoia to full-fledged hallucinations. The presence of the unreal situation and element manifests due to the narcissism of the characters. The narcissistic movement created in the novels is later mirrored by their intertextual elements. The characters need to construct their own realities, and as a result multiple versions of reality and the characters exist. This concept of multiple characters will be discussed in the next chapter. Here, I am examining the narcissistic delusions present in the characters and how that narcissism lures the characters into creating their own versions of reality.

I argue that by allowing the protagonists to slip into their own versions of reality, Ellis is drawing attention to the narrative and the social commentary invoked through their self-deception. The protagonists are ultimately unreliable and unlikable, and Ellis

uses these traits to draw attention to the world of pain and excess caused by them. The characters are allowed to slip into their delusions and ignore otherwise glamorous lifestyles because they are dissatisfied with them. Through these characters, Ellis is making a powerful statement about the nature of wealth and excess.

Victor

Glamorama indulges its narrator, Victor, in his delusions to the point where the reader is never sure what is reality and what are scenes in Victor's movie. The novel includes two film crews that follow Victor around and shoot him in various scenes. These crews are never explained. It becomes clear early in the novel that Victor is unable to distinguish between fiction and truth, so the crews might not even exist. In a passage that details a typical week in the life of Victor and his girlfriend, Chloe, the text describes the following:

A friend of Chloe's gave birth to a dead baby. I left ICM. People told us that they either were vampires or knew someone who was a vampire. Drinks with Depeche Mode. So many people we vaguely knew died or disappeared the weeks we were there—car accidents, AIDS, murders, overdoses, run over by a truck, fell into vats of acid or maybe were pushed—that the amount for funeral wreaths on Chloe's Visa was almost five thousand dollars. I looked really great. (G 102)

When looking at the preceding passage, the reader must try and decide what is real and which parts are Victor's imagination. Victor probably did have drinks with a pop band and hear rumors about vampires (a common myth in Ellis's work), and some people might have died, but there was most likely not someone pushed into a vat of acid. In fact,

this is the origin story for the Joker from the *Batman* comics and Tim Burton film. Victor is confusing what he sees on television and in media and what is really happening to him. The fact that this is punctuated with the line “I looked really great,” tells us what is truly important in Victor’s world. He cares about name-dropping the celebrities and places he associates with mainly because they’re part of what makes him look great. He remains the center of his world.

If people are dying around Victor to the extent that Chloe has been charging five thousand dollars for funeral wreaths, his lack of empathy in this situation is disturbing. He shows his narcissism by giving the stillborn death of a child the same weight as vampire rumors and drinks with Depeche Mode. His narcissism has put him in a position that does not allow him to feel for others or care about anything unless it is directly happening to him.

Victor goes even deeper into his fantasy world as a strange and surreal plot develops. A film crew appears at the beginning of the novel that the reader initially assumes is part of a publicity interview about the nightclub Victor is opening. The film crew becomes more invasive as the novel progresses, and Victor is required to “reshoot” scenes with his girlfriend that would not be part of the interview. The reader is disoriented, and we are no longer sure what is actually happening and which scenes Victor is imagining. As part of a narcissistic delusion, the film crew is the perfect device. Victor is the star of the movie, and he is able to reshoot any scene that did not work the way he wanted it to. A second film crew, a French one, eventually comes into the novel as well, making the reader more disoriented and confused. If the crews are indeed part of Victor’s fantasy, then the inclusion of the second crew displays the depths of Victor’s

narcissism. When he believes the first crew is ignoring him or not paying him enough attention, he can simply create a new crew. He has now made himself the star of two movies. Here, Ellis is invoking satire of a world of constant surveillance and news coverage.

If the inclusion of two film crews, breaking the action whenever scenes must be reshot, is not confusing enough, Victor takes the reader down another equally problematic path. A plot develops where Victor is sent on an overseas mission by a CIA agent, Palakon, to retrieve a college girlfriend who has run away from home. During this mission, Victor is taken hostage by a group of models who have turned into terrorists. These models bomb various buildings and have a base of operations that includes outlandish details such as rooms within rooms, elaborate security devices, and hundreds of weapons complete with designer bags in which to carry them. Victor has probably gleaned these details from various spy movies and incorporated them into his narcissistic fantasy. This delusion invokes a parody of how media integrates itself into our lives, and in this case, becomes reality for Victor. Once again, these delusions fit into Victor's narcissistic world. In Victor's fantasy, he is the only one that can rescue the girl, and as the star of his own movie, he is important enough for the terrorists to kidnap and use as a puppet for their wrongdoing, and he is the one that eventually escapes and reveals their plot for destruction.

Death follows Victor throughout the novel, but it never seems real to him or affects him more than being a personal inconvenience. In fact, the closer Victor is to the death of others, the further away from reality he becomes by way of the film crews and surreal plot. When it is revealed that the DJ Victor wants for his club opening is found

strangled with her own intestines, Victor is not concerned because he has already found a replacement DJ. On his voyage to England, Victor tries to become involved with Marina, a fellow passenger. After a suspicious meeting with Marina, who according to the text is taller than Victor remembers, even though she is wearing Nike's and not heels (G 251), wears a wig for no apparent reason, and keeps her face hidden throughout the encounter, Victor does not react. Even after finding Marina's blood and a tooth in her bathroom, he does not confront the situation, but is immediately distracted by the ship's landing and his meeting with Jamie. Victor's refusal to acknowledge these deaths shows his lack of empathy for others. He is disappointed that he will not be seeing the girl again, but beyond that thought he allows himself to be distracted from a situation that could ultimately become inconvenient and messy. For a narcissist like Victor, the death of these characters is easier to face than their possible rejection of him. The plot and potentially Victor's fantasies become more violent as the novel continues, and the reader is still unable to discern the novel's truth from its fiction.

The bombings and mass deaths in the novel are difficult for the reader to reconcile. They are either part of Victor's movie, increasing the terrorist threat and Victor's ability to play the hero, or they are real events that Victor is trying to deal with. In a world of twenty-four hour news coverage, it is easy to distance ourselves from all the terrible events taking place in the world. Just like Victor, we are able to ignore these events if they do not directly affect us. If the bombings are taking place in the real world, Victor would have heard about them, and as a narcissist, he may fear that he will be a victim of a future attack because he believes he is important. In order to deal with his fear, Victor may imagine these bombings as scenes in his movie. Victor's first brush

with the explosions is a bombing in London. The novel describes a scene on a busy street with many people milling around. A bomb goes off, and the destruction is massive, and just as quickly as the bomb explodes, Victor realizes this bombing is all just part of a movie. Victor notices Jamie, conveniently the girl he was sent by the CIA to find, among this destruction, and the novel states, “she’s surrounded by disconnected heads and arms and legs, but these body parts are made of foam and soon crew members are picking them up effortlessly. A director has already yelled “Cut” and someone is wrapping a blanket around Jamie and whispering something soothing in her ear” (G 272). Several other bombings take place throughout the novel, and each one is described in increasingly graphic and disturbing detail, but they all go back to the film crew and the actors taking part in the destruction. Victor is able to distance himself from this destruction because he is not harmed. It is not until the death of Sam Ho, an ambassador’s party-boy son, that Victor becomes intimately connected to the brutality in the novel.

After taking Sam Ho out of a night-club, past Sam’s bodyguards to the cheering extras (G 319), Victor stumbles into the room where Sam is being questioned and tortured. At first, Victor does not know what he is seeing and believes that Sam is a mannequin. Victor describes how “a mannequin made from wax covered in either oil or Vaseline...lies twisted on its back in some kind of horrible position on a steel examination table...(G 322). Even after Victor sees Sam electrocuted, he refers to the mannequin here and later in the novel as the “Sam Ho mannequin.” Victor panics during this scene, and his eagerness to believe that Sam is a mannequin coincides with Victor’s narcissism. He wants to believe this is not happening, so he is not in any danger. Once again, the reader can write this scene off as one of Victor’s delusions. He may have

heard a news story about the murder and torture or disappearance of an ambassador's son. Victor's narcissism allows him to be the star of this story and construct a new reality. If we believe that Victor is actually viewing the torture and murder of Sam, it is more reason for Victor to want to believe that Sam is just a mannequin. His connection with this event puts him directly in the path of danger. Victor has witnessed the terrorists' actions, and they will frame him for the death of Sam if he does not cooperate with them. Victor runs out of the room, vomiting, and has to be calmed by Bobby, the leader of the terrorist organization, and handfuls of Xanax. Bobby says "You shouldn't be shocked by any of this, Victor, This is expected. This was in the script. You shouldn't be surprised by any of this" (G 326). Victor's narcissism cannot allow him to disconnect completely from this death because he could be implicated in it. This will personally affect him, and ignoring it will not make the death go away.

Along with the film crews and terrorist plot, another surreal element exists that further confuses and forces the reader to question the reality of what they are reading. Throughout the novel, body-doubles are present. There are characters that look exactly like other characters and pose as those characters. In the novel, Victor has multiple run-ins with celebrities insisting that they had dinner or drinks with him. Victor has no recollection of these events. Pictures are produced that show Victor in various locations where he has never been. At first, the reader wants to believe that Victor is being vain or stupid. He either does not want people to know where he was, as it makes him seem more elusive if he appears to be "too cool" to go to certain places or he does not remember where he was at specific times. Given Victor's level of narcissism and lack of intelligence, both of these scenarios are plausible. It is equally plausible that Victor is so

caught up in his fantasy world of espionage that he loses all track of what he actually does during the day. Remember, this is a character who is constructing reality as he sees fit, so many explanations for the photos are possible. These doubles serve to reinforce Victor's delusions and paranoia. He cares that other people might look like him because he is supposed to be one of a kind.

As the novel progresses, the body doubles become more invasive. Victor sees another character manipulating photos and videos. Characters that Victor has seen killed, reappear, specifically Sam Ho. At the end of the novel, Victor is replaced by someone who looks so much like him even his sister does not realize the other person is not Victor. Once again, the reader is never sure how much of this is actually happening and how much of this plot is due to Victor's narcissistic delusions. If he does in fact have a double, he can live in his fantastic movie while the other Victor goes through the routine of daily life. It is unclear why Victor would reject the carefree lifestyle of male model, other than the impending financial problems Victor faces that would cause the end of this world.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader is told that something might be amiss. Victor has a melt-down about the décor of his club, JD reminds him "Reality *is* an illusion, baby, Reality *is* an illusion, Victor." (G 10 emphasis original). The repetition of the phrase warns the reader and Victor that we may be entering a fantasy world. Just a few pages later when JD urges Victor to be more realistic about the planning of the club, Victor retorts, "I'm not in a realistic mood, JD, so spare me" (G 12). Victor does not want to deal with the decor. He wants to be the star of his movie, and he cannot do this if he must consume his time thinking about mundane decorative details instead of himself.

The text reinforces the difficulty of discerning truth from fiction with the following description: “it’s a Wednesday but outside feels Mondayish and the city looks vaguely unreal, there’s a sky like from October 1973 or something hanging over it” (G 18). Victor cannot accurately describe the sky, and the reader must remain guarded against other information that comes from Victor. When Victor tries to live in reality and says “I am in the here and now.” the reply is “That’s not what I hear.” (G 69), shortly after this exchange, he admits to giving up the real world and says “Oh, I don’t care what’s real anymore” (G79). This exchange shows us that other characters have noticed that Victor might not be living in the present moment. If he is indeed concocting a fantasy world that revolves around him, his behavior is likely strange, which explains the reactions of other characters to him. The fact that all of this occurs within the first fifth of the novel, along with more examples showing the unreality of Victor’s world, suggests that the reader is supposed to have a foundation of fantasy built for us in the rest of the novel. We have already been set up to question what parts of the novel are real and what parts are only happening in Victor’s head. This foundation culminates with the introduction of Victor’s quest for the missing girl, which comes in the form of the CIA agent, Palakon.

The meeting with Palakon reinforces the idea that Victor’s story may be a delusion. To start the meeting, Victor greets Palakon, who Victor believes to be the replacement DJ, by saying “So here I *am*, I exist” (G 130 emphasis original). Victor protests too much, shown by the emphasis on “am.” He is not only trying to reassure Palakon, but also himself. At the end of the meeting Victor distracts Palakon and runs out of the room realizing it is empty. When he returns to show Palakon a note, Victor finds out that Palakon is no longer there. Even though the restaurant was sparsely

populated when Victor arrived, it is deserted now. There is no trace of the staff or Palakon, suggesting this may have been just another scene in Victor's movie. Once again, it is difficult for the reader to decide if this is real, but it seems unlikely that the thus far inept Victor would be chosen to track down a missing classmate.

When confetti is seen within the novel, it is linked to surreal events and is specifically linked to the terrorists and acts of terror committed by them. The confetti becomes a symbol that alerts the reader that they might be in Victor's movie. It is unclear whether anyone else can see this confetti, and no one seems to notice it besides Victor. The other consistent dreamlike element in the novel is the constant coldness. At the beginning of the novel, Victor complains that everything is freezing. As the novel progresses, the rooms are so cold that the characters can see their own breath as they speak, and finally, ice begins forming on surfaces. The following passage illustrates both the coldness and the envelopment that Victor feels within it. The text states:

The room is a trap. The question about the hat will never be asked. The question about the hat is a big black mountain and the room is a trap. A photo of your expressionless face is on the cover of a magazine, a gun lies on top of an icy nightstand. It's winter in this room and this room is a trap. (389 italics original)

Like the confetti, the cold is a warning that Victor might be inside his own narcissistic delusion because of the unlikeliness of the presence of these elements. The ice could also represent the coldness of Victor to others. He is apathetic about the deaths around him unless he could be harmed or implicated.

At the end of the novel, a new version of Victor emerges. This Victor wants to give up modeling and go to law school; he behaves himself, and is not the unaware fool presented previously. It is hinted at that this version of Victor is actually one of the doubles, and the real Victor is hidden away in Europe, awaiting his death at the hands of assassins. One potential version of this story is that the new studious Victor was the real Victor all along.

The reader of *Glamorama* is continually in a disoriented state. Readers must rely on Victor for their information, and they are never sure what is really happening and what is only in Victor's mind. Just as Victor is the center of his own world, he is also the center of the reader's world as he or she must rely on Victor for information and direction. Through Victor, Ellis invokes parody of a violent world where we are obsessed with celebrity and glamour, constantly under surveillance. This is a world where we want to deny reality if it cannot directly harm us.

Bret

Like Victor, Bret in *Lunar Park* is trapped in a world he created, so he could be the center of it. Bret's world, while privileged, is not as indulgent as Victor's world of models. By living in the suburbs with his wife, an actress, and because of his past fame, Bret still lives near fame, but avoids the typical Hollywood lifestyle. Bret struggles with this distance and desperately wants to relive his party-boy lifestyle again. His fantasy is created mostly because he feels ignored by his family. During anger management, his son Robby comes up in conversation. Bret is resentful because of the attention given to Robby and says, "It was all about what he wanted. It was all about what he needed. Everything I desired was overridden, and I had to accept this. I had to rise up to it" (LP

37). Instead of rising up to the challenge of raising a son, Bret goes deeper into his fantasy, and creates situations where he is the one in need. These crises take up so much of Bret's time that they distract him from Robby, who actually needs the attention.

Bret has the need to perform. He initiates these performances through parties, an increasing dependence on drugs and alcohol, and sex with his students. He admits, "Parties seemed frivolous and random and formless but in fact were intricately patterned, highly choreographed events. In the world in which I came of age the Party was the surface on which daily life took place" (LP 43). The parties may be meaningless, but Bret knows how to navigate this lifestyle, and he was successful and the center of attention when he was performing. Because he is largely ignored in his new role as father and husband, he must find new ways of performing, and acting out is one of these ways.

Bret's bad behavior serves to reinforce his narcissism because he is able to get whatever he wants through destructive behaviors. His drug and alcohol use in the novel serve to keep him in a haze. The morning he wakes up after a Halloween party he refers to himself as "the ghost," and he spends much of the novel being regarded as little more than an annoying spirit by his family. Looking at the family through the eyes of the ghost, Bret realizes he has failed. He knows how to act during parties but cannot be the center of attention for his family. He thinks,

The strange guilt I felt—the sense of having done something wrong—
never left me in that house. I tried to appear quiet and thoughtful, instead
of my only other option: fainting in pain and defeat...I wanted badly for

breakfast to end—I closed my eyes and wished it—and for everyone in the house to slip quickly away. And then they did.” (LP 88)

The family disappears around Bret and ultimately ignores him, but Bret believes they left because he willed it to happen. Bret is beginning to construct a suitable reality. After this point in the novel, Bret wills other events to happen, and this is when the supernatural, cinematic elements in the novel occur. Bret does not create a terrorist spy plot, but rather a detective movie about a killer and a haunting.

When Bret fails to get attention through his performances as “party guy” and his failed attempts to play the helpful father, he must raise the stakes and create danger for his family. This danger comes in the form of the supernatural. Bret’s fictional creations come to life and try to hurt those he loves. Because Bret, like Victor, is ultimately unreliable, this new role that Bret creates for himself and his creations might all be a movie created in his mind. Because of Bret’s narcissism, the danger surrounding his family, either real or imagined, stems from Bret. Bret puts his family in danger through his beliefs that have him waving a gun around the house and threatening entities that may not exist.

The effort to create attention for Bret comes in the innocuous form of a doll called a Terby. The Terby is a popular bird-doll that Bret’s step-daughter, Sarah begs for. Bret gets her the doll, but Sarah complains that the doll is talking to her and does not like Bret. Bret initially believes that Sarah, who is highly medicated and only six, is engaged in a make-believe fantasy. Soon Bret believes the doll is alive and killing animals around the neighborhood. He never sees the doll do any of these things, so like the reader, he is not sure what part of this is real and what is delusion. Each time Bret sees the doll move he

is under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, increasing his unreliability as narrator of these events. In Bret's narcissism, the doll becomes all about him. He discovers that Terby is Y Bret (why Bret), backwards. Furthermore, he discovers a story he wrote as a child complete with illustrations about the doll in question. Bret now believes he has created this entity. He is no longer just an actor in this movie, but the writer and director as well.

Bret finds another story about a hairy monster who tries to chew through doorways. The same monster appeared in his house a few nights previously and tried to attack Bret and his children. Bret admits that he wrote these stories, "Because I was so scared all the time" (LP 324). When asked what he was scared of, he reveals "My father." Bret's children are terrorized by the entities he created to allay his fears about his father. The irony here is unmistakable. The sins of the father are repeated upon the children, and Bret is at the forefront of all these sins. Bret's guilt about his own faulty parenting is now influencing his movie. His description of the monster attack is unreliable because he drank most of a bottle of vodka before going to bed, and even though the children woke up because of the attack, they are not sure what they saw. Robby may have initially woken Bret up because of a nightmare, and Bret's panic caused hysteria in Robby, which transferred to Sarah. Bret's fear and delusions are influencing the children. His fear is strong enough to infect them.

The incident with the children would not be the first time Bret caused a widespread panic. Patrick Bateman is arguably the most infamous character in Ellis's oeuvre. Bateman is the protagonist and brutal serial killer from the novel *American Psycho*. This novel caused a lot of controversy for its extremely violent and upsetting

scenes. At the center of the controversy, Bret was hated, but his popularity and book sales soared because of the chaos. The first chapter of *Lunar Park* includes a brief version of the controversy including the protests that happened because of it. The character of Patrick Bateman has haunted Bret since his inception, and thus appears in what is possibly a delusion. Bret first notices Bateman at his Halloween party after he has been drinking and snorting coke. The description of the Bateman character is as follows: "Someone I didn't recognize came as Patrick Bateman, which I didn't find funny and had a problem with; watching this tall, handsome guy in the blood-stained (and dated) Armani suit lurk around the corners of the party, inspecting the guests as if they were prey, freaked me out and somewhat diminished my high" (LP 49). Each time Bret thinks he sees Bateman, he is under the influence of one or more substances. When Bret is later told that murders are being committed that mimic the murders in *American Psycho*, Bret's beliefs are reinforced. The reader never knows if Bateman has actually reappeared or not, but it is revealed that the murders did take place at the hands of a copycat killer.

Bret's potential delusions stem from his creations. As creator, he should have ultimate control over these entities. When he believes he is haunted by the characters he has created, it reinforces his narcissistic fantasies because he is at the center of the hauntings. He believes he is the victim when his own characters strike out against him. This is parallel to the feelings he has about his new family. Bret thinks he is the victim when Robby will not do the work in reaching out to him.

Bret's selfishness and instability ultimately cause the breakdown of his family. Robby runs away in part because Bret was too consumed by his own version of reality to

see and react to the signs of a boy in crisis. Bret is able to take back control of his narrative when he writes a story of reconciliation with Robby. This is problematic because the story is still about Bret's needs and wants over that of his child. He has not learned his lesson about constructing his own reality. Bret's narcissism and his indulgence in it make him unsuitable for anything but writing fiction, where he can be the god of his world and control all the entities in it.

Through Bret, Ellis is invoking a parody of suburban culture and aging. Bret refuses to accept responsibility for his fictional creations and his physical creation, Robby. Ellis comments on a culture that pumps its children full of prescribed drugs, but will not allow them to have high fructose corn syrup. Bret's paranoia is parody of those who move to the suburbs to escape their worst fears that they believe lives in the cities.

Clay

Out of all characters discussed in this chapter, Clay's narrative in *Imperial Bedrooms* is the most realistic and thus the most disturbing. Clay does not connect with others and is a sociopath. He has little to no remorse for the pain he inflicts on those around him. He knows what he wants and will lie, manipulate, and pay to get it. He seeks a narcissistic existence where others fear him and he controls everyone around him. Even though Victor and Bret do hurt others in their fantasies, they are ultimately trying to be the heroes. Clay recognizes that he is the villain in his world and has no desire to save anyone, including himself. He seeks only to gain as much happiness as he can and where the other characters are destructive because of their self-love, Clay displays self-hatred that makes him seek pleasure no matter the expense, and construct new versions of reality despite and often because of the pain it directly causes others.

Readers of the Ellis oeuvre will already be familiar with the Clay of *Less Than Zero*. This Clay witnessed several horrible acts in that novel but did not participate in any of them. He also did nothing to stop his friends. Examples of these acts are the viewing of a snuff film that Clay walked out on while his friends debated about the reality of the movie, and the drugging and gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl. The Clay of *Imperial Bedrooms* immediately lets the reader know that he was represented inaccurately: “For example, there actually had been a screening of a snuff film in that bedroom in Malibu on a January afternoon, and yes, I had walked out onto the deck overlooking the Pacific where the author tried to console me, assuring me that the screams of the children being tortured were faked, but he was smiling as he said this and I had to turn away” (IB 3). At first, the reader is lulled into a sense of safety with this new version of Clay. Maybe he is not the apathetic and uncaring character we thought we knew. Maybe this character will be something better, more likable. However, Clay is conning us just like the rest of his victims, and the illusions are soon shattered as we realize that this Clay is more of a monster than the other version of him.

As the novel progresses, Clay divulges more of his lifestyle to the reader and becomes more despicable. As he dives deeper into his nature, his need for control and destruction is revealed. When he initially begins dating Rain, a young aspiring actress, the relationship seems innocent enough. The reader is aware that Rain is using Clay to get a part in a movie he is writing, unlike the other novels where the characters are figuratively writing a movie, Clay actually is a writer. Clay is taking full advantage of the situation with Rain. It is not until later that Clay reveals that he needs the manipulation of Rain and her fear to feel fulfilled. More disturbing, Clay has done this

many times before. He says, “Her need is so immense that you become surrounded by it; this need is so enormous that you realize you can actually control it, and I know this because I’ve done it before” (IB 52-53). The potential to control another being is what fuels Clay’s desires. He can construct not only his reality, but the reality of others. He eventually becomes more aroused by Rain when he knows she does not want to be with him. The more Rain cries and must numb herself with alcohol, the more control Clay has and the happier he is in the relationship. This relationship is problematic and as another character asks, “Do you know *anything* about her except how she makes *you* feel?” (IB 74 emphasis original). The answer, of course, is no, and to Clay the only thing that matters is how he feels. If Clay can possess Rain, even against her will, then she is dependent on him, and his version of reality. Clay’s narcissism allows him to construct a world where Rain submits to him completely.

Even though this novel has less evidence that the actions taking place are only in the narrator’s mind than the other two novels, there are a few unlikely elements that could be Clay’s fantasy. Clay needs to construct his own version of reality at which he is the center. First, he believes he is being followed and watched constantly. He gets text messages from an unknown number indicating that he is always being watched, and he often sees a blue Jeep following him and parked outside his apartment. These kinds of delusions center only on him. He is the focus of the stalking, and for a narcissist like Clay, any attention, even negative attention, is welcome. Clay receives a few videos showing the torture and murder of Amanda and Julian, both acquaintances of Clay. After watching the disturbing video of Amanda’s death, Clay has a realization and thinks, “And then the thing that makes me shut if off happens: you realize this isn’t just about Amanda.

I can't help thinking that it's happening because of me" (IB 144). Clay is narcissistic enough to believe that the death of another person that he is not involved in is happening because of him. Both the video of Amanda and the video of Julian are shrouded in mystery and rumor. Not many people have seen the videos, though there is media speculation about them. These videos could be part of Clay's delusion. Sitting safely in his home, watching them gives Clay a safe distance. He can watch brutality against others and feel like he is in a position of privilege for having watched these videos and being responsible for their creation.

Clay is not haunted by all his horrible past acts. He enjoys them because he is at the center of them. He is presented as demonic in the scene during a weekend with two actors that are paid to be beaten and sexually humiliated by Clay. In an essay by Alex E. Blazer examining Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, he writes, "For a character like Bateman, hedonism is an easy feat since, in the age of popular culture's mass marketing of desire, all-consuming campaigns for consumer products, and media blitzkriegs upon reality, human beings do not live life, they traverse textuality-mediation and the imaginary" (1). This theory also applies Clay. He is able to dehumanize others because he does not see those outside him as real humans. Clay's lack of humanity stems from his own self-importance. After he pays for teenage actors and instructs them not to talk, he degrades and beats them. When the female runs away he tracks her down and puts her in her bedroom, which is referred to as her "kennel." After more horrible treatment, the actress has a mental break. Clay remembers:

At the end of the weekend the girl admitted to me that she had become a believer as we sat in the shade of the towering hills—"the crossing" is

what the girl called them, and when I asked her what she meant she said, “This is where the devil lives,” and she was pointing at the mountains with a trembling hand but she was smiling now as the boy kept diving into the pool and the welts glistened on his tan back from where I had beaten him. The devil was calling out to her but it didn’t scare the girl anymore because she wanted to talk to him now. (158)

When the girl reveals that she now knows where the devil lives, it is because she has seen him in Clay. She has no reason to be afraid because she has already seen the worst, and she has likely experienced a psychotic break because of the torture. This break is evident in her smile. She has experienced hell in this weekend as a slave. Clay is her master and demonic ruler. At this point in the novel, the reader fully understands that because of his delusions of grandeur, Clay is capable of anything. He has crossed a point in his narcissistic delusions where he can disconnect from the humanity of others and dehumanize them completely. Because this scene is a flashback, the reader has the startling realization that Clay had crossed this point before the novel’s action took place. He has been capable of this level of depravity and reality manipulation throughout the novel.

As a writer, Clay does not have much pull in Hollywood, and this is brought up several times throughout the novel. Clay is aware of his limited power. He has just enough power that he can get aspiring actors to sleep with him by promising them favors, but he is no one’s first choice in that matter. Clay is aware that Rain originally tried to date the producer and director in order to get a part in the movie, but they would not have anything to do with her. Clay preys upon the weak and desperate. He knows that Rain is

past her acting prime, and he makes sure the director is not interested in her for a role before he pursues her. Each time Rain wants to leave or seems disinterested in him, Clay threatens to either not help her get the acting job or make phone calls ensuring that she will not get any jobs in the future. He feeds upon her desperation, and the weaker she becomes, the more powerful he feels. Clay lives in a cycle of violence and manipulation. The final line of the novel, "I never liked anyone and I'm afraid of people" (IB 169), is especially appropriate as Clay seems to not even like himself. What seems like self-love may actually be self-hatred and disgust.

Through Clay, Ellis is urging readers to look at the film industry and realize the deception and despicable actions that take place beneath the seemingly glamorous façade. Ellis is also forcing the readers of *Less Than Zero* to reconsider the characters in that novel and reconcile the new information about them with their previous feelings about the characters. Our perceptions about what we thought we knew might be incorrect, and we must constantly reassess what we once knew.

Conclusion

Ellis makes his readers feel as confused as his characters, never fully aware of what is real and what is fantasy. By creating limited worlds that function on their own, in the characters' heads, and in relation to each other, the reader is forced into the same space as these struggling protagonists. Georgina Colby addresses this issue and writes, "Creating duplicity through double-voicing, asserting the text as commodity, and indeed, Ellis's refusal, are contingent upon the culture he seeks to critique. It is precisely by trapping the reader within the monological narratives of his one-dimensional narrators that Ellis's fiction works to critique this restricted experience" (14). By restricting the

experience of the reader into a limited world, Ellis forces them to focus on the elements he deems to be important. In addition to ensnaring characters into his world, he further closes this world through metafictional and intertextual elements which reflects the situation of the characters and reality construction.

Chapter 3: Narcissism, Intertextuality, and Metafiction

As discussed in the first chapter, the whiteness and privilege experienced by the characters in the novels of Bret Easton Ellis creates narcissism within them. This narcissism allows them to dehumanize others and put their own needs before anyone else's. The characters eventually succumb to their narcissistic tendencies as they lose touch with reality and become actors in the movies of their minds. The characters are afraid of losing their place in their world and are reduced to reactionary beings who blur the line between fantasy and reality. Throughout this process, the reader is never sure what is actually happening in the novels and what is only in the mind of the narrator.

The metafictional and intertextual elements in the novels mirror the state of deception and confusion among the protagonists by creating something I am terming narcissistic intertextuality. For my purposes, I will be using the term metafictional to mean works of fiction that remind the reader they are reading fiction or fiction that draws attention to itself. I will be using the term intertextual to mean fiction that references other works of fiction.

The characters in Ellis's novels keep coming back to other novels and wreaking havoc, appearing in the novels to keep a grasp on their place in the Ellis world. The attention these characters seek in their original appearances in their own novels is replicated when they insist on coming back into other novels before they can be forgotten. These characters often surface as different versions of themselves than what appeared in the original novel. The self-referential universe created by Ellis makes the texts both intertextual and metafictional. The characters' narcissism, which make them prone to attention seeking and self-delusional behavior, is mirrored by the texts that

exacerbate this narcissism by allowing the characters' entrance into the narratives, thus creating a repeating cycle and a narcissistic intertextuality.

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, by Linda Hutcheon, a view of the intertextual and metafictional novel as inherently narcissistic is presented.

Hutcheon describes the reading process for the reader of an intertextual novel and notes that the reader must do more work deciphering meaning when reading a text with many intertextual elements than texts with fewer intertextual elements because the reader has the task of recognizing and deciphering the references presented to them.

The reader of intertextuality must either recognize the references to other texts, or risk missing underlying messages in the texts. This is especially true of Ellis's brand of intertextuality, which usually includes references to his own work instead of, with a few exceptions, the works of others. Georgina Colby writes about the reader's responsibility to seek out the underlying message in Ellis's work and states, "Ellis's narratives rely on the reader to listen to the nuances of his implied narratives. In this vein, Ellis makes certain demands on his readers. Those readers who do not read intuitively into Ellis's work are liable to be assimilated into his oblique critique of surface culture and ridiculed" (18). The reader who is not willing to put in the effort to find the "point" of the narrative will possibly take away a superficial interpretation.

In Ellis's work, several kinds of intertextuality are present. There is a common type of intertextuality used by authors when they refer to the works of others. This kind of intertextuality is almost unavoidable as authors are often influenced and inspired by the work of others. For instance, *Lunar Park* revolves around a plot that has a father trying to give his son messages from beyond the grave. The son seems mad to those

around him, and the novel ends in the tragic dismantling of the son's family. A reader who recognizes *Lunar Park's* connection to *Hamlet* will take away different meanings from the novel than those who miss the relationship between the two texts. The plot of *American Psycho* has elements of *Dante's Inferno* intertwined within it, and the novel's first line, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" (1) refers to Dante. In addition, the characters in *American Psycho* are constantly referring to the musical *Les Miserables*, or *The Miserables*, which refers to their own states of apathy and dissatisfaction with their lives. In the case of *American Psycho*, it is important for the reader to notice these details to find the meaning of the novel, or they will be overcome by the graphic accounts of sex and violence in it, rendering the novel little more than snuff pornography, which some critics maintain it is. Roger Rosenblatt, for instance, wrote a scathing review of the novel for *The New York Times*, stating "It would be sweet revenge if we refused to buy this book. Thumb through it, for the sake of normal prurience, but don't buy it. That nonact would give a nice ending to our tale. It would say that we are disgusted with the gratuitous degradation of human life, of women in particular" (Rosenblatt). In his review, Rosenblatt maintained that the novel was little more than trash; worthless to the reading public.

Ellis's second type of intertextuality, which I am calling narcissistic intertextuality, is achieved by cannibalizing his own work to create an incestuous movement within the texts. He reuses fictional places, themes, and characters that reappear in different forms, and occasionally the same forms throughout his novels. This kind of intertextuality is much rarer than the previously discussed type of reference to the works of others, especially in works that are not pieces in a series. For instance, one

would expect characters and places in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to appear in multiple books but not in non-serialized texts. Unlike books in a series, Ellis's novels can stand alone or connect with the other novels in the universe to impart the reader with a fully developed picture of the universe.

Readers of all texts face the task of recognizing the intertextual elements within them. As Hutcheon argues, the reader is "assaulted from all sides, often by a self-consciously literary text" (24-25). Ellis's novels are not only self-consciously literary, but also self-conscious. I argue that Ellis's novels assault readers with their self-referential elements. Readers of Ellis's novels not only have the references made to other texts to grapple with, as in the *Hamlet* and *Inferno* examples above, but they also have the self-referential intertextuality of Ellis's other works with which to contend. Ellis achieves this specific kind of narcissistic intertextuality through the repetition of his own characters and fictional settings. The novel's structure and repetition embody the narcissistic state of its characters. The unsuspecting reader is forced to deal with the resurfacing characters and themes in a way that is different than the process for readers of a series who are expecting the return of characters from the previous books. Readers can then choose to assimilate these new versions of familiar characters into previously existing knowledge, but they are not allowed to dismiss characters as they will likely reappear again.

Ellis forces readers to deal with the nature of fiction itself through the returning characters. The reader understands these characters are fictional, but is reminded of this through the reemergence of the characters in different forms throughout the novels.

Many authors want readers to get lost in their fiction and almost forget the fictional nature of their characters. Ellis challenges the reader to confront his fiction *as* fiction.

In any metafictional and intertextual novel, the reader not only does the work of acknowledging the references to other works of fiction, they are constantly made aware that what they are reading is fiction. When a novel references other works of fiction, and in the case of Ellis's novels, his own fiction, the reader is reminded of the other works, which draws attention to the referenced text. By referencing his own texts, Ellis is reinforcing the narcissism inherent in them by drawing the reader's attention to the fictional nature of the texts. If the reader is familiar with his other work, Ellis ensures that the reader's attention goes away from the current text they are reading and onto another work in his oeuvre. Thus, the reader's attention remains in the Ellis universe and enables the narcissism present in the texts through this constant, insular attention. For instance, the reader of *Imperial Bedrooms* is forced to confront *Less Than Zero* and the film adaptation of it. The opening chapter of *Lunar Park* runs through an analysis of the opening lines of each of Ellis's books preceding it. Readers of Ellis's work are confronted with their memories of the texts, and uninitiated readers of the Ellis oeuvre will gain some access into the world of the novels. In *Glamorama*, we have not only the appearance of Patrick Bateman, but also two different versions of Christian Bale who played Bateman in the film adaptation of the novel. Even Ellis's short story collection, *The Informers*, has references to characters and themes (there are rumors of vampires throughout the works) that occur in the novels. The more the body of work builds, the more self-referential, and hence narcissistic it becomes.

Because of the narcissistically recurring elements, a claustrophobic world is created, and much like the characters in the novels cannot escape their worlds of fantasy, the novels cannot escape themselves or each other. Eventually, story lines and characters become blurred together and incestuously self-referring. For example, Clay, the protagonist of Ellis's debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, narrates a chapter in Ellis's next novel *The Rules of Attraction*. Sean Bateman, a protagonist in *The Rules of Attraction*, is the younger brother of Patrick Bateman, the narrator of *American Psycho*. Victor Ward, protagonist of *Glamorama*, narrates a chapter in *The Rules of Attraction*, and has an affair in *Glamorama* with Lauren Hynde, a protagonist of *The Rules of Attraction*. Bret, the protagonist of *Lunar Park*, is the fictional version of Bret Easton Ellis and has written all of the previously mentioned novels. Ellis's most recent novel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, is a sequel to *Less Than Zero* and thus features most of the major characters from the first novel, but in a different form, which will be examined in more detail in a proceeding section. Almost every character in the Ellis universe has connections to the other characters and novels.

By creating a fictional version of himself as the protagonist of *Lunar Park*, and providing information about the protagonist that mirrors his own life in many ways, Ellis produces a metafictional text that blurs the lines of fiction and reality, creating a paradox for the reader. Hutcheon discusses the paradox of metafiction and writes:

while he reads, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However, paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. This two-way pull is the paradox of the

reader. The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader. (Hutcheon 7).

I argue that all fiction forces the reader to acknowledge they are reading fiction, and the reader must suspend their disbelief in order to accept the fictional premises of the text. Ellis wants the reader to teeter between suspending his or her disbelief and acknowledging the fiction they are reading.

In the example of *Lunar Park*, suspension of disbelief is constantly challenged by both the fictional and real details presented. The plot of the novel revolves around a ghost story that the reader knows could not have happened, yet we are told by Bret that "all of it really happened, every word is true" (LP 40). Because Ellis presents himself as a character, the reader is already in a state to wonder if what they are reading is true. Bret urging the reader to believe, comes right after an introduction where most of the events described about Bret's life actually happened to the real Bret Easton Ellis. To make matters even more confusing for the reader, websites were created by Random House, the book's publisher, for Jayne Dennis, Bret's fictional wife, providing both fictional and real information about Ellis's past. These websites include a link to the mostly blacked out FBI report that is mentioned in the novel. As Jeffery Karnicky notes, "attempts to separate fiction from fact in *Lunar Park* are continually undermined; indeed, even separating the text from its context becomes difficult, if not impossible, as a large part of the novel's text is precisely about the context of Ellis's life" (118). The fake websites are a part of this process of undermining the deciphering of fiction from reality.

Ellis's narcissistic intertextuality is oriented both toward the reader and inward to itself. The reader is needed to reinforce the narcissism in the texts, just as the characters need the attention of others to thrive in their narcissistic delusions. The texts rely on each other to create the intertextual elements. Both the readers and the previous texts are integral and connected in creating a continual narrative loop, where characters are recycled. Just as Ellis's protagonists often have trouble discerning truth from reality, the reader of *Lunar Park* is placed in a similar state. The reader mirrors the characters and the characters mirror the format of the novels, making the novels themselves inherently narcissistic from their inception.

Just as the characters are trapped in their own delusions, unable to distinguish reality from fiction, the very form of *Lunar Park* works to deceive the reader. The novel can be seen as Ellis's effort to repent for his creation of *American Psycho*. Georgina Colby writes: "In *Lunar Park*, Ellis parodies this demand for contrition by his own critics through providing a surface narrative that shows the author suffering retribution for his depraved ways and his violent creations, namely Patrick Bateman. In short, the book is a trap." She continues, "Many critics then failed to realize that the narrator of *Lunar Park* is a creation of their own moralistic interpretations and misapprehensions of Ellis's work" (136). Ellis places himself in his own novel, thus creating a satire of himself. Ellis reflects and parodies the morals of his readers, giving them what they want to see and at the same time criticizing that morality.

The reader of *Lunar Park*, already disoriented and exhausted from deciphering the metafictional and intertextual elements in the novel, can easily be deceived into believing that Ellis and Bret are the same person. Just like the deluded protagonists of Ellis's

novels, we believe what we want to believe and what best serves us. Bret is seeking forgiveness for his sins, but Ellis is not necessarily doing so as well. The reader must recognize the fictional nature of the character and separate him from Ellis in order to identify the difference between the real and fictional Brets. Bret is the narcissist, and he wants the reader to empathize with him and like him. He wants to be the hero in this narrative. However, Ellis is neither hero nor villain because he is separate from his texts.

Bret is as narcissistic as any other protagonist in the Ellis universe and becomes the god of his own world. Annesley argues that, "Ellis's use of his fictional alter ego enables him to analyze his own brand, and it is the clarity with which he does so that stands out" (152). Ellis is able to analyze his characters as well through providing himself as a character as satire. Ironically, even though Bret is creator in his story, he ultimately has no control over his characters. Throughout the course of the novel, Bret perceives that his creations are coming to life and attacking him and his family. He is unable to stop them, and is continually distracted by them, and by his own narcissism, ignoring his family in their time of need. Ellis, the writer, as opposed to Bret, the character, wields the real power in the novel. By invoking himself fictionally, Ellis is reminding the reader that even though Bret struggles for power, Ellis maintains control and chooses which characters come back to his novels.

Ellis reinforces the idea of authorial control through Bret's struggles in *Lunar Park*. The struggle to control the characters he has created is a battle Bret faces throughout this novel. This battle mirrors the battles each character faces for his own dominance and sanity in his respective novel. Each protagonist fights to become the center of his world; this often means the creation of delusions where they star in the

action. Bret, already the writer and creator of his world, creates a secondary fantasy where these creations are out to get him. In an effort to control the action, the character of the writer emerges. Once again, the readers are tempted to ascribe this new character to Ellis, but must remember they are separate. The writer is Bret's alter ego and whispers to him throughout the novel. While the writer never has a corporeal form, he does gain power as the novel progresses and eventually creates more chaos and questions as Bret tries to control the entities attacking him. Just as Bret cannot ignore his characters, he cannot ignore the writer who gives Bret information as he needs it.

The writer further complicates an already complicated set of "Ellis's" with which the reader must contend. As Karnicky argues, "There is no escape from the disaster of Bret Easton Ellis: Ellis the narrator, Ellis the author, Ellis's characters, and the writer become indistinguishable. At novel's end, a reader cannot find a 'real' Bret Easton Ellis and a reader cannot distinguish between fiction and fact" (128). This is similar to the paradox the reader must face in Ellis's other novels when distinguishing between fiction and reality. The writer continually reminds Bret that he is in control, but the reader knows that Ellis holds the power. The struggle for power between the writer and Bret reinforces the narcissism within the novel. Each entity wants power over the other and ultimately, the story's plot.

Within the novel, the author has little to no control over his creations, and even the powerful writer, who claims to have control over the elements during a windstorm, states, "*Look how black the sky is*, the writer said. *I made it that way*" (LP 282 emphasis original). He can control the sky, but has no control over the other characters. The writer

addresses the fact that Bret will not have control over his fictional characters because the very act of writing makes Bret lose control. The writer whispers:

(You dream a book, and sometimes the dream comes true)

(When you give up life for fiction you become a character)

(A writer would always be cut off from actual experience because he was the writer) (LP 251 italics original)

At the same time the reader is reading this, they are aware that it is untrue. They are taken out of the fictional story and are drawn to think about Ellis. He is not the character, Bret is. Ellis, the all-powerful writer, draws attention to the power of writing through author characters who are, in fact, powerless.

The writer is creator, and should be the god of his world. As a character in *Lunar Park*, he is constantly either withholding information from Bret, or adding to the knowledge that Bret does not have. When Bret is questioned by the police about a disturbance in his house, he relates, “The writer told me that the policemen thought I was taking advantage of them” (LP 322). The writer creates paranoia in Bret, and he thrives on chaos. He gives fuel to Bret’s delusions and allows Bret to sink deeper into them because the writer has the situation under control. Emerging like some kind of sleeping god, the writer becomes a voice inside Bret’s head because he realizes that Bret has lost control of his creations. The writer has always been with Bret, but sat silently, acting as a muse for Bret’s fiction. Even though he acts as a separate entity from Bret, the writer can be thought of as an alter ego or separate personality. He is ultimately powerless because Bret is powerless.

The reader quickly learns that while he does make things more interesting, the writer is neither reliable nor likable. The writer arises because in order for Bret to be the hero of his narrative, he needs to put the blame for any disturbing thoughts onto a separate entity. Bret explains:

The writer disliked me because I was trying to follow a chart.

I was following an outline. I was calculating the weather. I was predicting events. I wanted answers. I needed clarity. I had to control the world.

The writer yearned for chaos, mystery, death. These were his inspirations.

This was the impulse he leaned toward. The writer wanted bombs exploding. The writer wanted the Olympian defeat. The writer craved myth and legend and coincidence and flames. (LP 277)

The Writer embodies and rejects both what Bret and the reader want. Bret does want some mystery, but he also wants explanations. Bret, who cannot be trusted, tells us that he wants to give us order and answers. The writer has no answers to give, nor does he care that everything is neatly tied up at the end. His love for chaos and never-ending questions makes the writer not like an author at all. Through this character, Ellis creates a satire of writers. Writers, gods of their own worlds, actually want most questions to have answers. They want controlled chaos that has a reason and moves the plot along. The writer is an example of narcissism without limits, and speaks about the nature of writing through his poor example of an author.

In many ways, The Writer is a scapegoat for Bret's bad behavior. At the beginning of the novel, Bret explains the controversy surrounding his novel, *American*

Psycho. There were boycotts, protests, and publicity. There was also the fear in the public and for Bret that someone would recreate the horrific acts of violence portrayed in the novel. Bret describes the process of writing the novel, saying that he was often in a trance, would black out and upon waking up find that ten pages had been written (LP 16). Bret can either blame the writer for this trance or the malevolent spirit of Patrick Bateman, but he does not have to take responsibility for the creation of the novel nor the consequences that come from it. Remember, this is Bret's fantasy world, so he can choose to create a myth where he had no control over the novel's creation. The fact that he loses control of even this fantasy shows his powerlessness as a character when Patrick Bateman returns as a spirit in the novel.

Before a brief wrap-up of discussion about *Lunar Park*, we must turn our attention to the character of Patrick Bateman. Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of Ellis's most infamous novel, *American Psycho*, is a frequently recycled character in Ellis's oeuvre and appears in four out of six of Ellis's novels. Although not explored as a protagonist in the previous chapter, Bateman is just as mired in confusion about reality and fiction as Ellis's other narrators, and the reader has a difficult time distinguishing between fiction and reality when Bateman narrates. The end of *American Psycho* leaves readers unsure whether the brutal torture, murder, and cannibalism in the novel actually took place or if they were all or part of Bateman's delusional world.

Bateman is infamous, and readers have expectations of violence when they encounter him. In *Glamorama*, when Bateman tells Victor he has a coat of arms (44) and that he likes to "keep abreast" (44), readers of *American Psycho* will know that this is probably a literal statement as Bateman often kept various body parts of his victims

stashed around his apartment. Later in *Glamorama*, when a DJ is brutally murdered, readers may connect the earlier appearance of Bateman with the murder, but soon find out other forces are at work. The reader of Ellis is tricked into giving meaning to the event that does not exist. A kind of exclusive dramatic irony is also at work here. When Chloe, Victor's girlfriend says that Bateman "is strange," and Victor replies "He's nice" (44), the reader knows Chloe's intuition is correct. Chloe counters with "Spare me" (44 emphasis original). If we were in *American Psycho*, Chloe's words would take a different meaning and be about sparing her life. This irony is lost on readers who are unaware of Bateman and what he stands for.

Bateman's brutal actions are often a result of his narcissism. He attacks women to prove his masculinity and the homeless to validate his superiority as an upper-class citizen. As Mark Storey argues, "In its most explicit form, Bateman's fear of his own subjugation expresses itself through the violence he enacts on 'others'" (Storey). This fear of subjugation by those he perceives as threats and need to inflict violence on others makes him a force that one novel cannot contain. The character of Bateman is apparently too powerful and too famous to be removed from Ellis's work.

Bateman, like all of Ellis's protagonists, lives in a world that nurtures his narcissism and self-obsession. These characters are all upper-class, white, and male, with a privileged existence where their every whim is catered to. Because of this lifestyle that has made each man believe he is the center of the universe, the characters are encouraged to dehumanize others and commit horrendous acts of violence. The violence in the novels and the apathetic way in which it is presented, characters are never punished for

their wrongdoing, mirrors the characters' narcissism. Bateman represents this idea in Ellis's work and becomes a powerful symbol of self-obsession at its worst.

In *Lunar Park*, Bateman comes back in two forms, one a supernatural entity haunting Bret, Ellis's fictional persona and the story's narrator, and the other a man posing as Patrick Bateman and recreating murders from *American Psycho*. Bret has already provided background information on Bateman in the form of the novel's first chapter. Even uninitiated readers of Ellis will be able to understand the controversy (the book was and still is banned in many places) surrounding the novel. Bret is warned that the creation of this character will lead to copycat killers, and when this happens in the novel, Bret is confronted with the consequences of his fiction. He has a meeting with Detective Donald Kimball (who readers of *American Psycho* will recognize as the detective of that novel) and learns that murders are taking place that mirror the murders in *American Psycho*. During a meeting with Kimball when Bret is concerned he might be the next victim, Kimball asks, "you're not a fictional character, are you, Mr. Ellis?" (LP 164). The novel is playing with the idea of fiction invading reality. Colby examines this concept and writes:

The guiding structural principle of *Lunar Park* is the complex interplay of fiction and reality and the problematics engendered by the blurring of these two states. Bret's narrative stands poised on the boundary between fiction and the claim to reality, shifting between the two states and erasing this boundary through the haunting of Bret by his fictional creations. Bret's fictional constructs become real within the perimeters of his consciousness. (139)

Once again, the reader has to work to distinguish meaning. In most novels the author is not a character and is therefore safe from the harm they might cause in the narrative.

Ellis is calling attention to his process and even though the possibility of horrific murders is terrifying, the moment is lightened by this bit of metafiction. By calling attention to itself in this way, the novel makes itself known and becomes a character in its own right. The novel mirrors its characters' pleas for attention and screams "look at me and my form."

The irony is that the creation of Bateman gave Bret more fame than he previously had as an author. Bret's narcissism is reinforced by his fame, and now he is threatened by the entity he created, which could mean the loss of his life and his fame. Colby explains the different manifestations of Bateman and writes:

Patrick Bateman is the mediating figure in both the hauntings and the murders. Clayton, the mysterious boy who claims to be a student at the college, resembles both Clay and a younger Bret. He initially disguises himself as Bateman at Bret's Halloween party. The copycat murderer who reenacts Bateman's crimes disguises himself as Donald Kimball, the detective from *American Psycho*. The becoming real of the copycat murders act out the scenarios imagined by critics such as Roger Rosenblatt, who conceived the book as a piece of snuff literature. In view of Rosenblatt's criticism, the reenactment of the murders plays into the parody of Bret's repentance. (159)

If Bret can solve the murders in the novel, he can be the hero, and the consequences of creating Bateman will subside. In his fantasy, Bret creates a solution to the murders that

probably happened in the novel, which Bret cannot stop. Eventually, Bret realizes the only way to get rid of Bateman is to write a story in which he is killed. Ellis is apparently satisfied, but ultimately loses control of his creation again, and Bateman yells “I am everywhere” as he is gunned down (LP 369). This line signals that Bateman may return in another novel, and Bateman really is everywhere in the Ellis universe.

Bateman’s appearance in *Lunar Park* is different than his appearance in *The Rules of Attraction*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama* because he is a supernatural entity in *Lunar Park*, not a living character. He is more “real” in the other novels and evolves into something closer to a myth in his appearance as a malevolent spirit. The graphic nature of Bateman’s misdeeds has left Ellis little room to go with the character. It would be difficult to make Bateman any more hated or terrifying than he is in *American Psycho*, where he kills and tortures women, children, and animals. If, as I posed earlier, Bateman is committing these deeds out of his fear of losing his place in the world, which is a product of his self-obsession, the next step in his evolution is to become a spiritual entity. Bateman the man could be killed, but Bateman the spirit or idea is much more difficult to dispose of. His narcissism has progressed to the point where he is almost unstoppable in *Lunar Park*, and the reader is unsure whether or not he will return.

In an interview conducted by Jaime Clarke, Ellis admits that Bateman creeps into the texts despite his resistance. Ellis says, “I kept resisting the impulse to drag him into *Glamorama*, but I couldn’t help it; I caved in” (91). In the same interview, Ellis insinuates that Bateman made *American Psycho* more graphic than he had intended it to be. After he had done research for the novel he said, “What happened, though, was once I had all these details and descriptions down and I started writing these sequences, Patrick

Bateman's voice entered into the scenario and he perverted them even farther" (75). In these statements, Ellis is revealing the power of his fictional character. While Bateman is not an entity in and of himself, he does seem to have some sway on Ellis, who cannot resist including him in his novels.

Like the evolving Bateman, the narcissism in Ellis's novels is shown in different forms, including the reappearance of characters, places, and themes, and the structure of the novel. Narcissism is the flaw in every protagonist/narrator and many of the supporting characters. As discussed in the previous chapter, the protagonists of Ellis's work are self-obsessed to the point where they have difficulty functioning in reality. These protagonists must create imaginary worlds where all the attention is on them. The characters of these novels have egos too large to be contained. By allowing the characters to reappear in his work, often in different forms than originally presented, Ellis is making a statement about the power of the characters' egos. They must invade other books so the attention can be back on them. These characters continually haunt the novels looking for attention. In addition, Ellis is invoking satire of a society that is so self-obsessed, they will go to any lengths for their fifteen minutes of fame and attention.

Besides recycling elements and characters of his own world, Ellis further entwines the real world of the reader into his novels. One of his signature writing techniques is the use of lists. These lists include both fictional and real restaurants, celebrities, brands of clothing, and music. These constant lists of all things pop culture further blur the line between reality and fiction as the reader begins to lose track of what items exist in his or her world, and which only exist in the Ellis universe.

Many examples of such lists occur in *Glamorama*. In a specific scene Victor is going through his daily routine. He says, "I take a shower, rub some Preparation H and Clinique Eye Fitness under my eyes and check my answering machine: Ellen Von Unwerth, Eric Stoltz, Alison Poole, Nicolas Cage, Nicollette Sheridan, Stephan Dorff and somebody ominous from TriStar" (45). Note the brands and real celebrities mixed with one of Ellis's characters, Alison Poole. This technique of list-making pushes the Ellis novels into the realm of intertextuality and narcissism. It is not necessary for the reader to know the specific products Victor uses, but giving the information grounds the characters into a similar world as that of the reader and exposes the characters' narcissism through the fact that they care enough about specific brands and celebrities to comment on them. The fictional elements in the novel bombard the reader and make him or her aware of the real. The fictional elements thus become as important as the real for a moment.

The repeating elements and characters in the Ellis universe converge to create a feeling of claustrophobia for the characters and *deja vu* for the reader. Characters live in a world that encourages their narcissistic delusions through the repetition of a social group that is oppressively small. The Allens are a couple who appear in many of Ellis's novels. They never take up more than a couple lines of space, and they are not especially interesting or noticeable in and of themselves, but they are continually the dinner party guests and neighbors of the protagonists. Minor characters like this are insignificant enough that many readers may not recognize them, but the repeated name often lights a spark of recognition, which further reinforces the connected world of the novels. Repeated characters do not have to act surprised at the depraved actions of the

protagonists; they have seen it all before. These characters draw attention towards the narcissistic protagonists.

Because of all the narcissism in Ellis's novels, they can be read as satire of an apathetic, celebrity-obsessed, consumer society, or American people in general who are equally narcissistic and vapid as their characters. I argue that Ellis is creating satire through narcissistic intertextuality. He continually forces the readers to confront the fictional elements in his novels and makes them look at their own world in response. Through the *déjà vu* of constant lists and repeating dinner guests, Ellis wants to remind us that we are reading fiction, and that the real world is important. By pointing out the powerlessness of his characters and emphasizing his own power as author, Ellis reminds us that we have control in reality and unlike his characters we can choose which narratives we repeat.

Characters are not the only repeated elements in the Ellis universe as recurring phrases are found within the novels. "Disappear Here" is one of those reappearing phrases. The phrase initially appears in *Less Than Zero* as a billboard slogan. Clay, the protagonist, sees the billboard and is immediately shaken by it. It comes to represent the apathy in the novel as something that Clay could get lost and disappear into, and is repeated by Clay eight times throughout the text. Readers see the slogan in *Lunar Park* at a climactic moment when Bret realizes that his son has run away. Bret's son has scrawled the phrase on a poster in his bedroom. A few pages later, the writer, Bret's alter-ego in the novel, whispers the phrase to Bret as he loses consciousness after a car crash. The reader of Ellis's other novels will know this phrase signals the loss of hope. This phrase also works outside the texts and becomes a mantra to the reader who has read

more than one Ellis novel. As many of the elements reappear in the Ellis universe, readers have the expectation that certain entities will never disappear. Each time the phrase appears, it brings up the memory of the times it was used previously.

The phrase, "Disappear Here" connects the characters as well as the novels together and is primarily used for apathetic characters who are trying to escape the world. The irony of this phrase is that given the narcissism of the protagonists, most of them would not want to disappear anywhere, and to them, disappearing would be a despicable fate. It is fitting that these characters, who care about nothing but themselves, would use a phrase that signals apathy and the loss of hope.

Ellis's recurring elements include places as well as characters. One of the recycled and self-referential features in the Ellis world is the fictional Camden College, a small, private, liberal-arts school located in the Northeast. This college is mentioned in all of Ellis's novels. Camden provides a convenient explanation for the inclusion and connection of characters to others. In fact, Camden is often given as the initial meeting place for the characters. It seems that everyone either attended the college or knew someone who did. Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, attends Camden for a few years, but eventually drops out. Patrick Bateman has a brother, Sean Bateman, who attends Camden. Bret, the protagonist of *Lunar Park* attended Camden, as did Victor, protagonist of *Glamorama*. This fictional college is the meeting ground of all of the previously mentioned major characters as well as many minor characters that appear throughout the novels. If any of the characters run into a long-lost acquaintance, it is a safe bet they met at Camden. No matter where they go in the world, the characters who attended Camden cannot escape their past.

Camden represents a closely knit, incestuous world where everyone is having sex with everyone else. In this claustrophobic environment substance abuse and narcissism are encouraged. The size and exclusivity of the college creates an intimate world where everyone knows everyone else, and it is easy for the characters to feel that they are the center of attention. The characters turn inward so much that they often do not remember who their own sexual partners were and are often surprised to find out they dated someone they do not remember. An example of this interconnected and yet self-absorbed lifestyle of Camden students occurs in *Glamorama* when Victor does not remember Lauren Hynde even though they may have dated briefly, and Lauren is the best friend of Chloe, Victor's girlfriend (96). This affair between Lauren and Victor occurs in *The Rules of Attraction* and it is unclear whether the affair takes place only in the mind of Lauren because on returning from a trip to Europe, Victor does not remember the affair or Lauren. It is equally possible that affair happened but the vapid and self-obsessed Victor does not remember it. Camden is an institution not of academia, but a breeding ground for self-obsessed individuals. The interconnected world of Camden is surely an exaggerated version of what happens in exclusive, upper-class, private colleges, and provides some social commentary about such institutions, further blurring the lines between fiction and reality as it has been speculated that Camden is the fictional version of Bennington College in Vermont where Ellis attended and wrote *Less Than Zero*.

Ellis further blends truth and fiction with literature and film in *Imperial Bedrooms*, the sequel to *Less Than Zero*. The world of *Imperial Bedrooms* is not a sequel in the traditional sense as both the novel and cinematic version of *Less Than Zero* exist within the novel; this is explained by Georgia Colby who writes:

Imperial Bedrooms opens with a prologue in which Clay reflects on the former representations of himself and his groups of friends in both *Less Than Zero* and the consequent film adaptation of the book. This prelude, written in the past tense, locates a conflict between a figure he refers to as “the writer” and himself as the narrator. Unlike *Lunar Park*, “the writer” in *Imperial Bedrooms* is not conceived at the outset as an aspect of Clay’s consciousness. Rather, he is a figure in the social collective of *Less Than Zero*, whom Clay regards with contempt as having manipulated and exploited that social collective in the depiction of the events of *Less Than Zero*. (168)

She continues, “as a fictional character, Clay’s identity as such is enslaved to the author’s representation of him. His imprisonment within the boundaries of narrative space is reinforced by his physical reflection in *Imperial Bedrooms*” (171). This information is immediately given to the reader within the first few pages of the novel along with information to help the reader understand this new world. This creates disorientation for the reader and reminds them they are reading fiction. We must immediately reconcile the previously held beliefs with the new information we are given about the characters. The demand that the reader participate in the novel, as mentioned earlier by Hutcheon, is now in full effect. We are not sure if we can trust this new version of Clay, and must wait to see if he is a reliable narrator. Clay feels the need to abuse and control others just as he is trying to control his narrative.

Clay of *Less Than Zero*, *Imperial Bedrooms*, and to a certain degree *Lunar Park* is another character lost and reappearing in different forms within the Ellis universe.

Clay is a dangerous character, though not to the degree of Patrick Bateman, in a world of narcissists where he wants to be the center of attention. In this environment, he must commit acts so horrible that people cannot forget him. Clay implies he had to move from New York to California to escape his past. He is now placed back in a world with people he knows and a past he cannot escape. By the end of *Imperial Bedrooms*, Clay is presented as an almost demonic figure. He feels powerless and tries to gain power through the manipulation of others and the attention he receives from it. The more he appears in the novels, the more attention he receives from those around him because he has the chance to commit increasingly heinous acts. This attention makes Clay feel in control and powerful, and he continues this cycle whenever he is reminded that he holds no real authority because he is just a writer. Clay's career as screenwriter and the lack of power it gives him is interesting, especially when considering Bret and the writer in *Lunar Park*. All of these characters possess only the illusion of control, and once again, Ellis is invoking satire through them.

The basic plot of the novel follows Clay and his relationship with Rain, an aspiring actress. Rain is dating one of Clay's friends, Julian. She is also seeing Rip, another friend from Clay's past. Out of jealousy and his need for power, Clay eventually leads Julian to his death at the hands of Rip. By the end of *Imperial Bedrooms*, the reader realizes that Clay has been set up. He is not as powerful as he thought, and he has fallen into the traps set by his acquaintances. Rip needed Clay to lure Julian to him. Colby argues that any power Clay thought he had gained through the manipulation of others is stripped from him in the novel's final scene when the deception of Clay is revealed. She writes:

Clay is eliminated through Ellis's process of reconstruction. A final act of coercion sees Blair taking control of Clay as he dissolves back into the narrative of *Less Than Zero*. Blair remarks to him, 'you don't look like anything has happened to you,' (IB, 177) and in doing so, declares Clay's narrative to be a nonevent. (186)

Blair, Clay's love interest in *Less Than Zero*, seems to be one of the few characters who can control Clay. Blair knows that as a narcissist, Clay will be especially vulnerable to comments about his appearance. When she tells him he *looks* like nothing has happened, she is stripping him of his power by invalidating his experiences. Clay, who believed he was in control throughout the novel, must now realize that he is powerless. He did not mastermind any of the events like he thought. All his control was an illusion. As a result, the novel must end because Clay cannot continue his narrative if he is not in control of it.

Considering the size of the ego of Ellis's protagonists and the level of confusion and inability to distinguish reality from fiction they possess, it is not surprising that they cannot be contained in a single novel. The self-referential, and at times, chaotic, structure of the novels reflects the state of the characters and indulges them in their bad behaviors. Victor's apathetic treatment of Lauren in *The Rules of Attraction* is repeated in *Glamorama*. Patrick Bateman, is allowed to come back time after time, wreaking more havoc and causing fear in each novel in which he appears. Even Ellis acknowledges his own potential and need for characterization in *Lunar Park*, and James Annesley argues:

Lunar Park shows Ellis recognizing that his own name has now become a brand and circulates alongside the other commodities in his text. In these

terms the increasingly self-reflexive quality of the fiction Ellis has published since *American Psycho* can be explained by understanding that Ellis is a writer who cannot now write about branding and consumption without writing about himself as well. (149)

Through his fiction, Ellis, the brand, is connected with narcissism and consumerism. Ellis seems to be aware of this, and uses himself and his recurring characters to create a satire of this branding. He has been able to build a self-referring universe from his work in which each novel strengthens the others within it. The narcissistic intertextuality in Ellis's work serves to reinforce a parody of society by making readers deal with their own reality by recognizing the elements of fiction in his work instead of allowing them to sink into their own delusions.

Conclusion

Despite the controversy that surrounds the novels of Bret Easton Ellis, there is more to the texts than the surface level violence, sex, and apathy. Ellis invokes satire of upper-class, white, males; glamour; and the state of celebrity by drawing attention to characters who embody these traits by having them reappear throughout his novels. These characters, stuck in their gilded cages of the Ellis universe will not be ignored and seek attention because of their self-obsession.

Through his narcissistic characters, Ellis uses intertextual and metafictional elements in ways not used by many other authors. His characters do not reappear because they are an essential part of a series; they appear because they are needed to create a parody of a culture that cares more about its appearance than its humanity.

Ellis's novels become a warning to the careful reader who will notice the repeating elements in the novels and the satire in them. By recognizing the fictional elements in the texts, the reader can step away from the commodity of the novel and see the message about masculinity, wealth, and whiteness within them. Victor, Clay, Bret, and the other reappearing characters are doomed to live in an unchanging world, desperately seeking attention at the cost of those around them and because of their self-obsession, narcissistic intertextuality is formed.

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