Teaching Politically Incorrect Contemporary Gothic Fictions:
Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Stephen King's *Misery* (1987)

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Recent Gothic fiction, such as Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Stephen King's *Misery* (1987), challenges its readers to raise their threshold of tolerance. Students and teachers alike may resist the visualization of violence in these texts and/or the authors' ambiguous position regarding political correctness. Yet, these are reactions worth incorporating into the teaching of modern Gothic fiction. Reading these novels should also engage students and teachers in the discussion of whether, as Fred Botting (1996) argues, Gothic has reached the end of its evolution.

Today, Gothic is an aesthetic and a narrative mode used in printed and audiovisual fictions. *American Psycho* (a literary novel) and *Misery* (a non-literary or genre novel) are placed, therefore, within a wide range of Gothic fictions. Comparing –or rather contrasting– these two novels will not result in a single standard by which to measure modern Gothic. It will be, though, a useful exercise to explore reader reception and the students' awareness of their personal threshold of tolerance. The resistance encountered by these two novels outside the classroom should also help us to articulate a discourse on how class and gender issues interact within Gothic fiction and the (American) society Gothic addresses.

American Psycho is the diary of a Manhattan 1980s yuppie, Pat Bateman, who happens to be a psychokiller (or not, depending on whether we believe he’s mad). *Misery* narrates the captivity of best-selling novelist Paul Sheldon in the isolated home of his sadistic number-one fan. The common denominator linking *American Psycho* and *Misery* as Gothic texts is their emphasis on pain and the destruction of the human body –the most typical feature of contemporary Gothic (Boss 1986, Brophy 1986). Bateman inflicts pain obsessively onto others (mainly women), whereas Sheldon receives it from a woman, Annie Wilkes. Wilkes and Bateman are presented as murderous psychopaths, a popular figure used in contemporary Gothic to subvert the rationalization of evil by modern psychology and psychiatry. The gendered representation of evil in these novels raises important issues concerning the incompatibility between Gothic and political correctness. Ellis has been accused of sexism for representing women as victims of male aggression; King for representing woman as aggressors. They have been said to abuse the relatively high tolerance of violence in Gothic texts to perpetuate unacceptable, barbaric, patriarchal values. Indeed, critics such as Bram Dijsktra (1986) have argued that all horror texts are intrinsically misogynistic. This controversy should find a place in class discussion.

American Psycho is a thought-provoking, disturbing novel. This is a text that resists America's domestication of monstrosity, in Nina Auerbach's phrase, both by forcing the reader to enter the mind of a monstrous killer and by presenting itself as a literary novel and not as genre fiction. This is what made its publication so problematic (Twitchell 1992, 128-129). Following complaints from people who had read either the manuscript or the excerpts published in *Time* and *Sky*, Simon & Schuster refused to honor their contract with Ellis. His novel was eventually published by Knopf and Vintage, greeted by a barrage of negative reviews. The loudest protests came from feminists who decried the book because of Bateman's misogyny, which they identified with Ellis' own. David Skal argues that this situation came about because Simon & Schuster are not genre publishers. He writes that "although the whole incident was endlessly discussed in terms of taste, misogyny, and political correctness, a subtext of class snobbery predominated" (1993, 376). For Skal "the hideous progeny of Stephen King could be tolerated, or ignored, as long as they kept their place in the peasants' quarters in Brooklyn or New Jersey" (376), but nobody would tolerate the idea of a Manhattan psychopath and, much less of a Manhattan reader of genre (Gothic) fiction.

This comment justifies the linking of *Misery* and *American Psycho* and raises the issue of whether political correctness is a secular, middle-class value employed by intellectuals instead of morality and religion. Skal's thesis also implies that the threshold of tolerance depends on class and education –and here the students should pause to consider their own positions. Finally, this situation gives plenty of food for thought as regards authorial intentions, for Ellis has always maintained that his novel is an attack against the likes of Bateman: white, homophobic, racist, snobbish misogynists. To Ellis the rejection of his novel felt "a huge postmodernist irony" (White 1994, 20) reflecting the dissatisfaction of the 'moral lobby,' as he calls them, at his refusal to give the villain his come-uppance. In America, Ellis complained, people like Bateman are glorified rather than punished. If Ellis is sincere, this should make us consider why educated readers have failed to read his message. Elizabeth Napier (1987) has argued that Gothic fiction always fails because its moral point of view is too blurred by the attractive description of evil. *American Psycho* may either epitomize or question that failure, and this the students should discuss.

The following passage may give a clear indication of the problems that reading this text in the classroom may bring about. This is part of one of *American Psycho*'s most disturbing chapters –"Lunch with Bethany"– and describes Bateman's brutal killing of an ex-girlfriend. The whole episode lasts for two whole pages. It must be born in mind, though, that this is not an easy book to quote, for the passages are distorted when taken out of context:

> The fingers I haven't nailed I try to bite off, almost sucking on her left thumb which I manage to chew all the flesh off of, leaving the bone exposed and then I Mace her, needlessly, once more. I place the camel-hair coat back over her head in case she wakes up screaming, then set up the Sony palm-sized Handycam so I can film all of what follows. Once it's placed on its stand and running on automatic, with a pair of scissors I start to cut off her dress and when I get up to her chest I occasionally stab at her accidentally (not really) slicing off one of her nipples through the bra. She starts screaming again once I've ripped her dress off, leaving Bethany only her bra, its right cup darkened with blood, and her panties, which are wet with urine, saving them for later. (246)

This passage will elicit disgust, nervous laughter, hostility against other students' reactions and much resistance against any attempt at analyzing Ellis' writing methods (the pornographic visualization of violence, a refusal to leave any emotional distance between Bateman and the reader). So, why read this book? The answer is that Ellis' bad taste –he would surely argue that the bad taste is in the yuppie culture he so mercilessly rips apart– disrupts conventional notions about literary fiction. He challenges us to reconsider the meaning of aesthetics in the literary novel and he does so by using Gothic strategies in the telling of his story.

American Psycho is a very ambitious novel that attempts to capture the essence of 1980s yuppie, Reaganite US culture. Ellis forces us to share Bateman's violence by means of his first person narrative, but, far from being the stereotypical villain of most modern Gothic fiction –a character devoid of a clear philosophy of life, except the pursuit of evil– Bateman can articulate better than anybody else the reasons for his malaise and that of his own times. Passages such as the one above are placed next to passages of pure (black) comedy but also next to more critical passages like this one:

> Nothing was affirmative, the term "generosity of spirit" applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire –meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only performance. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in ... this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged ... (374)

How many of us would subscribe to Bateman's views is another point that should be raised in the classroom, together with the question of whether this is an acceptable justification for his behavior (or perhaps fantasies, for Bateman's hysteria increases as the novel goes on), as not all pessimistic people become psychokillers. In any case, what makes the book literary is, essentially, Ellis' sincere criticism of the American society that created the monstrous figure of the yuppie and his subversion of the aesthetics of literary fiction through the use of Gothic strategies.

Misery is much less ambitious in scope than *American Psycho*, but not much easier to read. Stephen King describes most effectively the torture and the pain that beset Sheldon when his life is saved by the ex-nurse Wilkes after a car crash. She imprisons him, hurts him psychologically and also physically to the point of severing a thumb and a foot. Actually, *Misery* deals with fiction, for Sheldon, a writer, confronts in Annie the angry reader. Having gained fame and money with his historical romances for women, Paul is now planning a second career as a literary author. When Annie discovers that he has betrayed her by killing her beloved heroine Misery Chastain, she pours her frustration onto his body and forces him to become a second Scherezade and write a new Misery novel for her.

Gender and class condition the relationship between Annie and Paul, reader and writer: she is a female, working-class, barely literate reader unable to grasp the most basic rules of writing fiction; he is a male, middle-class sophisticated reader of literary fiction, who feels trapped by his success as a writer of trashy novels for women like Annie. However, King's presentation of Paul is ambiguous. He seems to condemn as snobbish Sheldon's expectations that his novel *Fast Cars* (an experimental, post-modern, 'masculine' story) will win the National Book Award. Sheldon's punishment seems to signify King's jealousy of writers who can aspire to the main literary prizes unlike genre writers like him. But, the fact that Paul manages to survive his imprisonment and publish to great acclaim both a new version of *Fast Cars* and *Misery's Return* (Annie's novel) suggests that King has transformed him through Annie's harsh editorial policies into an ideal, multi-talented kind of writer. On the other hand, clearly, Annie reflects King's fears about his own readers (who are, nonetheless, mainly male) and the thralldom that binds him to them because of his success.

This is a subject he also revises in *The Dark Half*, the story of a literary writer who fails to do away with the persona he has assumed to write ultra-violent horror novels. But, unlike that novel, *Misery* deals with the confrontation between the male writer and the female reader as his dark half. The gender issues attracted the attention of feminist readers and critics who have regarded Annie as an misogynistic, unrealistic representation of woman designed to keep the fires of patriarchy burning. The paradox is that, in comparison to Bateman, Annie is more credible: there are no known Manhattan psycho-killers, but there are a few notorious cases of caregivers like Annie who have gone over the top to become killers rather than healers.

King employs a section of his novel to describe Annie's background and expose her reasons for killing ill babies and elderly people: she is a mixture of natural evil, disastrous upbringing and murderous anguish in the face of death and disease. Feminist critics, however, have questioned Annie's torturing of Paul, reading her violence as a travesty of masculine violence, Bateman style. The fact that her relationship with Paul clearly bespeaks male fears of the Freudian castrating mother (see Creed 1993) has also been noted. This is so, indeed, but Annie is actually assimilated by Paul to the lost Jungian figure of the goddess of destruction –herself a patriarchal perversion of the forgotten mythical goddess who ruled the cycles of life. "The image of Annie Wilkes," King writes "as an African idol out of *She* or *King Solomon's Mines* was both ludicrous and queerly apt ... Like an idol, she gave only one thing: a feeling of unease deepening steadily towards terror. Like an idol, she took everything else" (8). At the end of the book, Paul's newly found balance allows him to put Annie finally in her place: "There was no Annie because Annie had not been a goddess at all, only a crazy lady who had hurt Paul for reasons of her own" (366). This is, curiously, what feminist criticism does not do, for it tends to see female characters created by men as representation of woman as a whole class and not as individuals. The question of why no men resist texts like *American Psycho* that offer very negative representations of masculinity is hardly ever asked, but should be asked indeed in the classroom when reading these two novels.

In conclusion, contrasting and comparing *American Psycho* and *Misery* within a course in Gothic fiction results in the raising of most relevant issues which are essential for an accurate understanding of contemporary Gothic fiction and the American or Western contemporary society this addresses. These two texts are an excellent starting point to discuss political correctness and Gothic (should there be a politically correct Gothic novel?, isn't political incorrectness the essence of Gothic?), the reader's threshold of tolerance, social class, the publishers' controversial labeling of novels, and gender issues, among other topics. Each novel is, in addition, a valuable (Gothic) text and should be used in the classroom to explore the differences between literary and non-literary Gothic, and, indeed, to train the students as literary critics.

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