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A POSTMODERN PERFORMANCE
Unreliable narrators revealing masculine anxiety in Bret
Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction*

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tutkielma tarkastelee kuinka epäluotettava kertoja osoittaa maskuliinisia sosiaalisia rooleja ja odotuksia Bret Easton Ellisin toisessa romaanissa *The Rules of Attraction*. Romaania on tutkittu huomattavasti vähemmän kuin Ellisin monia muita teoksia, ja erityisesti ensimmäisen ja kolmannen romaanin välissä oli selvä tyhjiö.

Romaani on tyyppiesimerkki postmodernista romaanista, jolle on ominaista intertekstuaalisuus, todellisuuden ja median vuorovaikutuksen kuvaaminen ja globaalin maailmantilanteen käsittely. Sen tapahtumat keskittyvät yhdelle lukukaudelle fiktiivisellä yhdysvaltalaisella yliopistokampuksella, joka on oma yhteisönsä kirjoittamattomine sosiaalisine sääntöineen. Nämä tulevat esiin kerronnan kautta. Romaanissa on useita epäluotettavia minäkertoja, jotka kuljettavat tarinaa pääosin kronologisesti eteenpäin, mutta välillä pysähtyvät kuvaamaan juuri kerrotut tapahtumat toisesta näkökulmasta. Minäkertoja tuo esiin hahmojen vaikuttimia ja pohdintaa, mikä edesauttaa lukijan samaistumista ja empatiaa hahmoja kohtaan silloinkin, kun heidän toimintansa on moraalisesti kyseenalaista. Kirjoitustyyli ei ota kantaa moraaliin, mikä siirtää vastuuta tulkinnasta kirjoittajalta lukijalle. Kerrontatapa kuitenkin paljastaa, että hahmot painivat sen kanssa mikä on oikein ja väärin, ja ennen kaikkea ulkoisten odotusten kanssa.

Nämä ulkoiset odotukset ovat hyvin erilaisia romaanin nais- ja mieshahmoille. Koska postmodernista maskuliinisesta kokemuksesta on kirjoitettu paljon, se päätyi myös tutkielman tarkastelun kohteeksi. Analyysi osoittaa, että sekä ajankohta että suljettu sosiaalinen yhteisö luovat omat rajansa sille, mikä on sallittua käytöstä miehille sekä miten hahmot itse sen tunnistavat, ja miten he siihen suhtautuvat. Vaikka monet käytökseen vaikuttavat asiat ovat nimenomaan tyyppillisiä omalle ajalleen, romaani on kirjoitettu katkelmana ajasta, joka sijoittaa sen suurempaan kontekstiin. Lukukausi on myös syklinen, toistuva ajanjakso, joka korostaa romaanin aikaa osana menneisyyttä ja nykyisyyttä, yhtä merkityksellisenä ja merkityksettömänä kuin mikä tahansa muukin. Näin ollen sen nostama yhteiskunnallinen kritiikki on ymmärrettävissä myös nykyhetkessä.

Avainsanat: Postmodern novel, unreliable narrator, multiperspectivism, masculine identity, generation X

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ABSTRACT

Suvi Parhankangas: "A Postmodern Performance: Unreliable narrators revealing masculine anxiety in Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction*"
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The thesis examines how the unreliable narrator reveals social conventions of masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis's second novel *The Rules of Attraction*. There is considerably less academic discussion on the novel compared to Ellis's other work.

The novel is typical of postmodern novel, with its intertextuality, discussion on interaction between reality and fiction, and themes of global contemporary culture. The events span one school semester on a fictional North American college campus, which has its own social code of behaviour. This social code is revealed through the narrators. The novel is written with multiple first-person narrators, which are all unreliable. They narrate the story chronologically, but often commenting on the events previously narrated by another character. The choice of narration exposes inner motivations and self-reflection, which elicits empathy from the reader towards morally questionable behaviour. The style of writing refuses moral positionality, shifting responsibility from the author towards the reader. The characters, however, do struggle with ethics and especially expectations, which is revealed through the narration.

The male and female characters in the novel experience outside expectations very differently. Because of how much was already written about masculine postmodern experience(s), the focus of the thesis was set. Analysis of the novel exposes that the time of writing, as well as the closed community setting create social boundaries for acceptable behaviour for male characters, how they recognize those boundaries and how they feel about them. Many of the factors affecting this social space are related to the time of writing, but as the novel is written as a fragment of time it should be considered within a larger context of time. The choice of a cyclical semester to depict in the novel further emphasises the time of the novel as part of past and present, as meaningful and meaningless as any other. The social critique presented should thus be appreciated in the present as well.

Keywords: Postmodern novel, unreliable narrator, multiperspectivism, masculine identity, generation X

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1. Introduction

Bret Easton Ellis is a writer of contemporary fiction and one of the staples of his generation of American authors. His novels have been widely critiqued and analysed, especially *American Psycho* which rose to notoriety even before its publication. Many literary theorists on postmodern American fiction use this novel as exemplary, especially in the discussion of the role of the novel in offering social critique. The heated debate surrounding Ellis revolves around whether he is an accomplished author who experiments on the literary form, or merely an opportunist that utilizes the voyeuristic tendencies of his public in order to gain personal acclaim. The specific focus of my work is to highlight Ellis's less discussed second novel as an influential standalone piece of literature integral to his body of work, as it employs many themes and techniques he later develops. More specifically, the thesis will look at how the use of multiple unreliable narrators reveals the social conventions of masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction*.

The novel was published in 1987 and the events span the fall of 1985. It is set mostly on the fictional campus of a Camden College in the United States, but some chapters follow the characters around other parts of the country, as well as one of the characters backpacking in Europe. Most of the novel focuses on three characters: Sean Bateman (brother of Patrick, main character in *American Psycho*), Lauren Hynde and Paul Denton, but includes a dozen other minor characters that narrate some chapters. The novel is written in present tense first person and the narrator changes after each chapter. This pluralism of voices makes for an immersive read but one that leaves much room for interpretation, as I will later show. One character only narrates her inner thoughts, while others include dialogue. The novel begins and ends in the middle of a sentence and advances chronologically, sometimes slowing in pace and portraying events from two perspectives consecutively. The novel introduces the lives of an

intertwined group of university students. Some characters describe meeting or seeing one another, representing a web of social connections. The physical setting lacks illustrative description and is narrated in brief mentions, which is suggestive of the familiarity with which the characters experience the space they inhabit. The social and physical setting portray the campus as its own society, complete with a specific social hierarchy and norms.

Typical to the postmodern novel, Ellis's writing presents media and reality in constant interaction, reflecting each other. To emphasize this dialogue the novel comments on its own position in the discussion on the postmodern society. Because of the heavily contextualised style of writing, understanding the larger context is important to draw conclusions based on the underlying meaning, not simply the surface level. *The Rules of Attraction* is a representation of the society of its publication in its style of narration and treatment of social norms. Ellis's refusal of literary form is juxtaposed with a depiction of human interaction indicative of a culture of conformity. This is most visible in the gender roles of the closed society presented in the novel, especially the masculine experience of the time of writing. By choosing to use an unreliable narrator, Ellis exposes the realities of the time period and the expectations an enclosed society places on a group of people, at the same time distancing himself from moral commentary.

2. Theoretical approach

To extract the necessary information from the novel I have identified three areas that require theoretical support. Firstly, the novel is a representation of its era, and the generational experience must be put in a theoretical framework. This experience defines the personal approach to society and social situations and explains why the gender roles and social hierarchies are defined as they are. Secondly, both the society and the characters are constructed through multiperspective first person narration in the novel. Therefore, a theoretical approach to the effect of this narrative technique on the reader is examined to

justify the analysis and close reading of the novel. Thirdly, postmodern experience of masculinity is analysed to consider how the characters, especially the male characters, respond to specific social norms and expectations based on their gender and sexuality. These three areas together support the analysis of the novel to examine my research question.

2.1 Generation X according to Annesley

Annesley discusses the characteristics of Ellis and his contemporaries, such as Jay McInerney, and identifies a common theme in focusing their work on the experiences of the Generation X, or the youth of the era (2). The emergence of youth culture in media and society has shaped the cultural landscape and spread to literature as well, introducing new themes and form. The title of his book, *Blank fictions*, refers to the blankness, bleakness, mundanity in the style of reporting, a novel way of narration. The result is an apparently nonchalant attitude towards violence, which often sparked critique. What Annesley recognizes as fundamental to the postmodern is that “in dealing with supposedly lightweight and ephemeral elements these texts manage to engage with the kind of material forces that are fundamental to the whole functioning of the late twentieth century society” (10). As the culture has shifted towards consumerism, it has affected the generation that grew with those ideals and thus the depiction of those stories, no matter how light in subject matter, identify the growing unease among this youth. This unease is dealt with indifference and indolence, with an emphasis on “the extreme, the marginal and the violent” (Annesley 1). Graphic imagery is more prevalent than ever before (ibid 39), and this has degraded its shock value in art. Annesley recognizes Ellis’s first novel, *Less than Zero* as “fuelled by an implicit hostility towards contemporary culture and an anxiety about conditions in the late twentieth century” (86). In *Rules of Attraction* the results of this anxiety are portrayed in terms of romantic and sexual relationships.

This cultural shift does not merely affect the choice of themes but the style of writing as well. Annesley argues the writing of Ellis and his contemporaries “does not just depict its own period, it

speaks in the commodified language of its own period” (7). As a critic of the consumerist culture, for Ellis this is especially astute. In *American Psycho*, the violence is the result and responsibility of an “increasingly commercial and materialistic society” (Annesley 13), and the same attitude of using other humans as a commodity is explored in *The Rules of Attraction* through the framework of superficial relationships and constant seeking for sexual gratification. Another example of this is how Ellis chooses to use brand names instead of common names to describe clothes, cars, and popular culture. Describing people through the brands they are wearing emphasize the “commodified nature of both [their] appearance and, by implication, [their] culture” (Annesley 116), but I would argue this extends to their commodified position as well.

According to Annesley “blank fiction is profoundly aware of its own time and place” (6), which is very true to Ellis as well. The consumerist language links the novel to contemporary conditions and the postmodern conditions, but more specifically to the time of writing and publication (Annesley 93). The reference points are more often commercial than temporal or situational, which attaches the novel to a cultural timeline rather than simply the time period. For Annesley the form of postmodern fiction is key, as it “does not depict its own period, it speaks in the commodified language of its period” (7). Annesley’s analysis is more descriptive, portraying this style of writing as symptomatic, than reflective on how this contextualisation could provide deeper meaning to the text. To understand the language and the society that has both produced and is represented in the text is to understand the underlying themes and motives in the text behind the form, providing opportunity for cooperative reading.

2.2 Postmodern masculine identity

Moss discusses the varieties of masculinity as shifting in supremacy, where the social environment influences the type of masculinity that is currently desirable (17). Ellis’s 1980’s is an era of materialistic abundance and consumerism, where wealth, especially in the upper classes and thus the group in which most of the characters in the novel belong to or strive to belong to, and material success

define the new masculine ideal. According to Moss, the media idolized men who “made so much money so quickly that they were seen as quintessentially heroic in the classic American sense” (73), making a historical point of reference to the new understanding of masculinity. Moss specifically mentions the Harley Davidson motorbike as an example of manufactured representation of masculinity: ownership of certain, especially expensive products enhances the masculinity of a subject. Masculinity according to Moss is a construction, and hegemonic masculinity the definitive standard (16). Moss presents differing masculinities in coexistence to one another, where traits of masculinity differ from country to class to group of individuals. The setting of *The Rules of Attraction*, a college campus, can thus be determined to inhabit its own interpretation of masculinity that is in part a construction of the socioeconomic class of the students but also different from that, as it is at the same time a representation of a generation’s interpretation of that masculine portrayal.

Byers sees the heightened sense of traditional masculinity as reactionary to social shifts in society. He describes a fairly straightforward causal pattern, where he attaches these social shifts to an economic framework and the human reaction to identify the cause of an economic crisis, leading to hatred and violence against the presumed culprit: the feminine and especially femininity in men (5). Throughout the 1980’s manliness was attributed to the breadwinner status (Byers 18), but the combination of women entering the job market and economic hardship this status is no longer exclusive to men, leading to a masculine anxiety (Byers 6). He sees the very identity of the masculine subject at odds with feminism redefining gender as a social construct and capitalism reorganizing the society. Thus, the crisis of masculine identity is related to postmodern society, and Byers calls this pomophobia. The latter part of the portmanteau refers to homophobia, which he argues is a result of the progressive attempts to normalise homosexuality. Homophobia is defined as fear of homosexual desire, fear of femininity and thus attached to the postmodern shift in society. The progressive movement is destabilising patriarchal construction of hierarchy (Byers 6), and homosexual men are seen to refuse

their privileged status as men. The traditional masculinity is seen as the only option against the normalization of homosexuality and feminism, and thus all change and the postmodern society itself (Byers 27). This is especially visible in how the closed-community social hierarchy is constructed in the novel, as reflective of that of the larger society.

Byers's analysis on the subconscious influences on individual's behaviour is interesting in its attempt to recognize not only the changes in attitudes towards gender but larger changes in society as well. The postmodern politics of identity and economic turbulence are bound to have an impact on how people see each other and themselves in relation to others. The feminism of 1980's portrayed often masculine or androgynous women aggressively breaking gender expectations, almost taking the male role in society. Byers attaches the crisis of masculinity to this: if the traditionally masculine role in society is taken by women, the masculine space appears to grow narrower. All alternatives to norm were seen as weak and abnormal. The feminist discussion did not discuss inherently masculine issues as it does today but concentrated on the fundamental issue of women's right to economic freedom. The tone of the discussion was accusatory, as the decision makers and thus those upholding patriarchal hierarchy were men. Through this historical context it is somewhat more understandable why the male characters in the novel reject weakness in themselves or attempt to hide it from others, and why the female characters attempt to portray themselves as very feminine, as opposed to the more masculine feminist woman, therefore adhering to expectations and being careful to not appear difficult or antagonising towards men.

2.3 From unreliable to trustworthy narration

Francese discusses in "Postmodern multiperspectivism" (107 – 154) oppositional perspectives as means to gain previously hidden knowledge. He argues that the construction of stories from historic fragments in narration deeply affect our understanding of the present. The postmodern present is "fragmented bits of episodic information" (Francese 109), exactly as Ellis presents us in his novel,

narrated in scene after scene of conflicting accounts constructing the story upon each other. The narration creates a community of voices, creating the social and physical surroundings through text. At the same time the narratives are in interaction with each other, much like the characters themselves interact and thus create their story together. Francene argues that this heightened individualistic presentation of characters eventually reveals their interdependence. At the same time, as the changes in technology have dramatically changed the daily rhythm of life to a more rapidly changing and less grounded existence, social bonds have become the new spatial points of orientation (Francese 109). The novel is focused on describing the relationships of the youth on the fictional campus, but the reader experiences this through the choir narrative. What eventually arises from the subjective is objectivity through multiperspectivism.

Van Lissa et al. attempted to examine the emphatic response and trust of the reader towards the protagonist through shift in narrative (44). Their aim was to examine characters that were morally complex, challenging readers with “perspectives and worldviews dramatically different from their own” (Van Lissa et al. 45). The object of their study was Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, narrated in first-person stream of consciousness. The narrative resembles that of *The Rules of Attraction* with its seemingly unfiltered account of the narrators thinking in addition to action, albeit from a single perspective. For the purposes of their experimental study they manipulated the narrative and created a third-person narration of internal focalization of the same account, which they presented to some of their test subjects. Their experimental study found that the reader’s emphatic response towards the protagonist did not change significantly according to the style of narration (Van Lissa et al. 53). However, they found the reader trusted the character more when reading a third-person internal focalization narration than they did when reading a first-person narration of the same account (58).

This finding is interesting in relation to Ellis’s novel as well. Because of the multiperspective narration the reader is able to see how each character manipulates their narrative to themselves and the

reader. This could in turn create a sense of untrustworthiness, but at the same time the reader is able to see the internal conflict of the characters. As the reader learns to not trust what the characters are describing to have happened, they learn to trust the description of emotions. The sometimes despicable actions of the characters may not evoke relatability, but I would argue it is not necessary. To understand the internal motivations is more crucial, and the style of narration elicits empathy towards the experience of self even when the actions could be condemned.

Currie's work continues to explore the theme of sympathy towards moral other. He acknowledges that defining any *postmodern narrative theory* is difficult, as postmodern as a term itself is unsteady (1). His starting point is the definition of a postmodern novel as follows: a novel of the relationship between fiction and reality, an intertextual novel, and a novel representing the "contemporary state of global culture" through form and content (Currie 2-3). For Currie, the discussions on representation of violence and drug use in postmodern fiction are uninformed of the ethical and ideological level of the narrative. These novels are often labelled as voyeuristic or sensationalising, but, according to Currie, the new narrative theory that is postmodern itself can inform of the moral function of the text. (17). In Ellis's novels the moral position is often a refusal of position, where violence, sex, and drugs are represented but not commented on. The commentary is expressed through the narrative, which makes the reader question the reliability of the narrator, blurring the lines of reality, fiction, and fantasy. What is written in words is only a part of the story, and the narratological theory is helpful in determining the ethical standing and message of the novel, and further the author.

Currie also discusses the question of narration constructing identity. Characters with moral values far from our own should be unrelatable, but Currie explains the sympathy stems from the narrative that accesses the inner lives and motivations (27). It is constructed and controlled through "access, closeness and distance". He also states that the understanding of readers as plural is a key

difference in postmodern narrative theory, and the level of this sympathy is not constant (30). To elicit any sympathy a character must be formed, and to write a character is to conjure an identity (Currie 25). Currie describes any identity as a construction, and more importantly a self-construction, often described through differences in relation to others. This is especially visible in *Rules of Attraction*, as any action, persona or thought is described through its relationality to others. For Ellis's novel, distance is controlled through the layered narratives, first eliciting sympathy towards a character, then revealing a flaw in their constructed narrative. The next reaction is a deeper understanding through what the flaws reveal of the narrator and of their identity.

3. The concept and context of time

In order to discuss Ellis and his novel as representative of the postmodern and the era of its writing, we must understand what this means. Francese defines postmodernism in relation to modernism as “the dramatic acceleration of the reshaping of structures of experience precipitated by the extremely rapid advances in information technology” (1), which roughly means the human experience and sense of self is in constant evolution due to the changes in the surrounding society. He goes on to say one of the most influential of these changes is in how we view time and temporality. “The loss of temporal bearings supervenes the individual who is now made to live more intensively in the present: the present is all there is.” (Francese, 2) This is paramount in Ellis's writing. His novel is rooted to the time it represents and its characters' experiences and actions are representative of an understanding that the presence in present time is what matters, reflected by the present-tense narration. The significance of acknowledging the time of writing is highlighted by Francese's argument that because the postmodern is profoundly invasive in its nature, any writer is conditioned by the social, political and economic factors that surround them (6). This view is true to the characters of the novel as well: their

understanding of the world and the motivations driving their actions is deeply affected by where and when they are.

The events in the novel happen within an approximate of a school term, but this does not appear to offer any other importance than that a relatively short novel has its limits in how long a series of events it can depict. The first temporal marker is the mention of “the crisp October air” (Ellis 11) and the last indicates the start of Christmas vacation: “The last day. People packing.” (Ellis 321) The novel begins *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, but this device often uses flashbacks or chronological reversal to introduce the previous context to the reader. Ellis never gives the reader what was before, instead beginning the novel in the middle of a sentence “and it’s a story that might bore you” (1) and lets the events unfold before the reader without explanations, following a chronological sequence of events. The novel ends in “. . .my hand squeezing her knee, and she” (326). By cutting the first and last sentences of the novel and choosing a repetitive, cyclical time frame such as a school term, Ellis sets the events in the novel to a larger chronological time frame and literary history, evoking the sense that this is merely an extract of the world according to him. His later body of work further constructs this world with reappearing characters and other intertextual elements. The beginning and end of the novel seem arbitrary, as if chosen only because a book has to have those. There is evident refusal of a traditional plotline and insignificant evolvment in any of the characters common to the traditional story arch, like Sean admits himself in the last pages: “I got back in my car. I haven’t changed.” (Ellis 325). The usual pattern in which events develop into a climax and eventually resolve are replaced by monotone writing, showing Ellis’s microcosm that is evocative of a larger construction of the society. Real life does not follow plotlines or offer us neat periods of time that have a beginning and an end. As these are left out of the novel as well, however temporarily marked it is, the reader should see that to understand the novel, time is actually unimportant.

Regardless of the apparent insignificance of why this specific term was conjured on paper, the events in the novel are inherent to the culture and time they inhabit. Ellis roots the novel in its era with “FALL 1985” on its own on a page before the rest of the novel. This is to provide context not offered by the subjective narrative. The characters and their actions are explicitly justified as suffering from the time they live in, one suggesting the assassination of John F. Kennedy caused trauma in their mothers, ruining the entire generation (Ellis 24). Another indication on the importance of understanding time are the multiple pop culture references in the text: Joy Division, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, Hüsker Dü, Dire Straits are only few of the examples that further establish the novel’s events as part of the era and culture in which it is published. Ellis appears to understand that him and his works contribute to forming the society as well, humorously portrayed by a drunken rant in the text that could just as well be said of one of his novels:

’But Vittorio, let me ask you, don’t you think that the admittedly Bohemian punk outlaw scribblings of these wasted post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-... hell, post-everything minstrels, is the product of a literary establishment bombasting a lost generation with worthless propaganda exploiting greed, blasé sexual attitudes and mind-corrupting, numbing jejunosity and that’s why works like *Just Another Asshole*, a searing, searing collection of quote-unquote underground writing, become potent fixtures on the minds of this clan of maladjusted, nihilistic, malcontent, self-serving... well, hell, miscarriages, or do you think it’s all...’ And now Trav stops, searches for the right word.’... bogus?’ (225, emphases in the original)

The characters seem to understand that some of their faults are not due to them but to the time they inhabit. This appears to be Ellis’s message, and he includes himself in his own critique. The significance of this is that the campus, along with its students, is merely an example. They are representative of the American upper class, their age between youth and adulthood, and their whiteness. All these combined gives them almost unlimited opportunity, yet they are not content. They are challenged by the high expectations of academic achievement but the rapid changes in society fails in giving them direction. The reader is left with a representation of how individuals experience this

conflict and interpret it, at times following expectations and at times breaking them, expressed in their own narration.

4. The sympathetic unreliable narrator(s)

To understand Ellis, we must understand his choice of narration, because the narrative manufactures the reader's response to a text. The multiple accounts of same scenes in the novel give the reader many perspectives to the story, but are often in conflict with each other, revealing the motives behind the action. Ellis further develops the use of this device in his third novel. *American Psycho* has been discussed in terms of unreliability in narration as it deals with violence that seems fantastical and unlikely to be real even in the world of the novel. Patrick Bateman himself is confused as to how people around him don't catch him in the act, and he cannot find any physical evidence when he returns to the scene of his crimes. Murphet's reader's guide points to linguistic shifts in the text as evidence of true and imagined events (41), much like Tighe argues that the textual ambiguity reveals to the reader that the murders are psychotic fantasies (113). Giles discusses *American Psycho* in terms of the mental space it presents, also concluding that the exaggerated surrealism of the killings makes them improbable (169). Furthermore, in Duran's opinion "the extent to which much of the violence in the novel actually happens or is merely hallucinated is never entirely clear" (10), and this is the problem of an unreliable narrator. This room for interpretation moves responsibility towards the reader, and away from the author. However, it also provides an opportunity to examine the characters' inner motives and impulses.

The multiple narrators in *The Rules of Attraction* make the narration highly subjective and unreliable. According to van Lissa et al., the first-person narration can make the protagonists untrustworthy to the reader (58), and Ellis has multiplied the effect by choosing to write with a plurality of voices. Contrary to how in *American Psycho* this "blurs the line between fact and fantasy" (Mandel

16), here subjectivity eventually gives more information, providing the reader more clues of the same events and allowing to ponder on the character's reasonings for their actions. As everyone is unreliable, even untrustworthy, the truth must lie somewhere in between. Often one narrator's account alone would leave a very different impression compared to the other, but the two (or more) together provide the ambiguity that reveals that there are things either left unsaid or details that likely did not happen. This becomes visible only when the two accounts are juxtaposed, and this is how the narrative gives more information to what is simply written on paper.

The most revealing example of this conflict between narrators is in the encounter between Paul and Sean. The scene starts narrated by Paul, who identifies as bisexual and is infatuated by Sean. Paul describes how he goes out looking for him and eventually they meet in The Pub, a bar on campus. The two then end up in Paul's dorm room, where in a scene narrated in detail by Paul, they end up in bed together. Sean's depiction of events is vastly different, which is evident as these chapters follow one another, first with Paul:

We came together, or close enough, and lay like that for a long time, barely moving.

SEAN Go to Denton's room. We drink some cold ones and smoke some pot and talk but I can't deal with the friend's death story and the Duran Duran music and his weirdo stares so we talk a little while longer and I get wasted. Then I leave and wander around campus.
(Ellis 89, author's formatting)

There are two possible interpretations. Firstly, that Paul, having a crush on Sean, fantasizes the rest of the night after they have said their goodbyes. Secondly, that Paul's account of the events is mostly true, and Sean refuses to admit it even to himself. For the reader Paul's account is more credible, perhaps because it is presented first, but also because it is described in much more detail. The time Sean spends in Paul's room is spread across multiple pages and it describes other discussion and actions apart from the sexual act. Paul also mentions further sexual encounters between them in his later chapters. The reader is left to conclude Sean omits this relationship, albeit casual, from his narrative. A possible

reasoning is that he is disappointed to have broken from his role in the social hierarchy, constructed by his female conquests along with his carefully curated personality.

The banal consistency of the narration is at times broken for further effect. In Lauren's narrative she describes a visit to an abortion clinic, which is followed by an empty chapter, "LAUREN" being the only word on page 309. Her next chapter begins with "first time I leave my room in four days" (Ellis 317), which gives some explanation to the ellipsis. Lauren is upset from her experience and chooses to recover in seclusion. Her statement "An abortion in New Hampshire: my life reduced" (Ellis 306) suggests the trauma and the following recovery is as much mental as it is physical. This psychological response seems to arise from the conflict of falling unwillingly to a situation she has previously described as "terrible" when speaking of another girl going through abortion. The empty chapter ensures this does not go unnoticed as it forces the reader to a halt. This unevent is contrasted with multiple other characters continuing with their lives. Combined with the style of the novel where extreme behaviour is reduced to banal, the contrast reduces her personally traumatic experience to insignificance. This inner conflict would be left unseen without the comparison the reader is able to make between the characters.

Another notable inconsistency is a shift from first to third person narrator, similar to what Ellis later uses in *American Psycho*. Furthermore, the effect is marked visually, with an incomplete line and ellipses:

I tilted her face up, her eyes were so grateful that. . .
 . . he had to kiss her quickly on the lips"
 (Ellis 186, author's formatting)

The rest of the chapter, almost one page in length, continues to describe Sean and Lauren sleeping together in detail, but maintains internal focalization from Sean's perspective, reporting his thoughts such as "he was oddly grateful" (Ellis 186). The level of detail is in contrast with Lauren's view of events: "Sean fucks me. It's not bad. It's over." (Ellis 185). Currie argues that this oscillation in

perspective controls the reader's response to the characters (36). This shift in distance, combined with Lauren's apparent nonchalance, transforms sympathy to identification. According to van Lissa et al., third-person narrative also correlates with greater trustworthiness to the characters in the reader (53). Sean's masculine ego is suddenly fragile as he wonders why this experience differs from others, followed by the realization that "he can't remember the last time he had sex sober" (Ellis 187). The shift can also be understood as a fantasy, but the one certainty is that Sean and Lauren do not feel the same way about each other. For Sean, the shift may reveal his true feelings, and that he has not accepted them. Considering Ellis's fashion of commenting on his own writing in his own writing, as this is one of the most confusing scenes for the reader to interpret, it can be argued he uses the shift to make the reader conscious of his control over the reader position.

By choosing this plural first-person narrative, Ellis reveals his characters to be unreliable and shows how he manipulates text, which places the burden of truth on the reader and their interpretation of the text. This refusal to conform to the idea that the reader can expect narration to be an accurate representation of the experience of the character is significant in determining the positionality of the author. If Ellis is to be understood as a critic, his moral standing has to be determined. *The Rules of Attraction*, however, is written with such subjectivity in each character's account of the events that the morality of the story is blurred. This shows Ellis's position as the refusal of positionality, a stance where he attempts to portray the symptoms of his era without placing overt moral value on them. The novel introduces difficult themes, such as abortion, drug use, and conflict with sexual orientation, and how they affect each person's life differently. As some have been unable to distinguish between what is the position of the author and what are the views he places on his characters, Ellis has often been the subject to widespread critique himself (Annesley 12). There is, however, a greater impact in his writing. By showing us not one, but many truths, Ellis is able to provide a larger context to the malaise

of the era without explicitly moralizing, appealing to a wider audience. The form of the novel helps the audience understand the struggle to conform through the microcosm of the novel.

5. Anxious to conform

Contrary to other situations where the reader must interpret much of character motivation, Sean explicitly comments on how separated the campus is from the world around it: “I hated these people, yet I wanted to stay here with them... These were people I would never have spoken to outside of this room” (Ellis 307). This frames a society of its own, complete with a specific social code of conduct and set of norms that prevail in its enclosed setting, which the characters accept and follow. According to Annesley, “the fictional environment of Camden College provides a sequestered space” for the characters’ “decadent explorations” (115). This includes a liberal attitude toward sex and the use of drugs, where (men) having multiple partners is celebrated and criticism towards drug use is shunned. There is a lack of criticism toward multiple partners or sexual expression outside relationships. Relationships are sought after, but not an expectation. Paul’s friends compile a student blacklist, where they jokingly add students whose parents are still married. Paul intervenes, stating his still are, which is met with disbelief. Students in the college come from affluence, but their families are not intact, separating Paul from them as someone whose life experience has been easier compared to others. The student life is undoubtedly influenced by how they grew up. Sexual freedom is the norm and questioned only in instances very specific to the setting of the novel. Female characters discuss how relations with teachers, especially if they are married, are forbidden, in case they lose their jobs (Ellis 37). This shows a social hierarchy, where male teachers and their reputation is highest, and female students the lowest in social value. Homosexuality is not shunned, but femininity in men is.

The norm hierarchy is visible in Sean’s inaccurate account on his and Paul’s relationship. Sean attempts to conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal mainly through his sexual exploits. He scouts for

his next possible target in the college cafeteria (Ellis 41) and is “embarrassed because she’s not that great looking and they all know I screwed her last night” (Ellis 46-47). Sean also presents an inflated masculine idea of self, much as his older brother Patrick in *American Psycho*, and assumes all women find him attractive (Ellis 221, Storey 65). The reader interprets this as Sean being so afraid of his homosexual attraction that he denies it from himself. The conformity to norm, here a norm of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, is so prevalent it interrupts self-reflection. This may be explained through Moss’s theory on postmodern masculine identity. According to Moss, the American masculinity in the 1980’s was influenced by the plethora of “buddy-films” which portrayed male friendship as representation of proper masculine relationships and increased the visibility of homophobia in popular culture (41). Even Paul describes a fellow student as “this scrawny, ugly drama-fag” (Ellis 59). Attempts to express emotions towards other masculine men are an extension towards femininity and to save Sean’s status in the norm hierarchy, he must explicitly distance himself from any notion of homosexuality. When he eventually refers to the relationship Sean blames Paul, the homosexual and thus the feminine of the two. “‘Whose fault is this?’ he shouts. . . . ‘It’s yours. You ruined our friendship with sex,’ he says, disgusted” (Ellis 210). This is less of a revelation as the reader has already been able to interpret it before, and more an acknowledgement to Sean himself, creating dramatic irony on the level of the character’s psyche.

The social space available to women is different and often in relation to the men on campus. Some examples suggest it is the men who decide the space for women, and Sean reveals his attitude in his observation that addicts are “pathetic enough”, but addicts with money are “Even worse than girls” (Ellis 27). For him women are entertainment, as in his opinion his and Lauren’s relationship has run its course when she becomes boring to him (Ellis 216). This position is not unknown to the women in the novel, who reveal in narration to act against their personal will if men express attention or attest social power on them. Lauren thinks Sean’s joke is not funny “but because he laughs I laugh” (Ellis 183). She

also sleeps with another male character in the novel “Because...the beer has run out” (Ellis 15), as she has made an excuse to him previously that she would not leave because of her unfinished drink. She wonders why the man will not leave but as he hasn’t before she is done with her beer, she is out of excuses. Victor, another male character feels “disgusted” when a girl does not respond to his attention, wondering “Why couldn’t she have been nice and smiled back?” (Ellis 315) These are all evidence of male ownership exerted on women in the closed community setting and show a lack of understanding that women are allowed to act of their free will. Because the reader is able to see from first person perspective how each character interprets these situations, it is evident that both men and women often act against their best interest to follow what is expected of them.

Acting according to expectations appears to be in conflict with the expression of free will in multiple accounts in the novel. This is especially visible where the characters are expected to express romantic emotion despite their true feelings, again revealed through the inner monologue of the narrator. Sean betrays Lauren by sleeping with her best friend, but she is merely “trying to act angry, clutching at my teacup, spilling a little, trying to elicit some feeling” (Ellis 242). She knows the code, that a woman is supposed to act angry when betrayed and acts accordingly without the personal urge to do so. “It seems to be so minor that I don’t understand why I’m harassing him like this. Probably because I want this thing to be over with” (Ellis 234). These thoughts of hers during the previous argument show women seem to need to excuse themselves to men rather than simply speak their mind. For men it appears to be different, as strong emotions are deemed feminine, and thus portray weakness and fragility. Sean, a self-proclaimed masculine hero, hides from Lauren his opposite emotional response. He loves her and is desperate for her attention but looks away as she looks over at him (Ellis 221). He will deny the extent of his emotion for Lauren in order not to appear too feminine. Paul, in turn, expresses both the expectation placed on women to speak favourably to men and the male attention to physical attraction. Both are manifested in one sentence, “it just seems like the thing to say

and he's really so much better-looking than Gerald" (Ellis 290). His experience is a combination of the two gender norms, as he is allowed to express more emotion than the heterosexual male.

The inner conflict is put into words by Paul, going after Sean leaving the campus, not unlike in scenes from romantic comedies.

But I was running and I was running because it felt like the 'right' thing to do. It was a chance to show some emotion. I wasn't acting on passion. I was simply acting. Because it seemed the only thing to do. It seemed like something I had been told to do. By who, or by what, was vague. (Ellis 324)

The characters live in a setting that limits their expression of self and drives for conformity. They are aware of the values and expectations set on them, yet not how they are constructed and thus unable to break them, no matter how aware they are of it in the moment. This generation expresses love and emotion and relationships differently to their parents, so it can be assumed that's not where Paul has learned this. A more likely explanation is the media that is mass producing content for young adults for the first time in history. The awareness of media influence wasn't, however, on the level it is today, and it is understandable that Paul cannot see how he is shaped by his immaterial surroundings. According to Annesley, this is a representation of the text itself, a conscious distancing by Ellis between the commercialism and his own fiction (105). Even though his texts are seen as examples of the exploitative culture they represent, Ellis himself sees them as stopping just before they reach that point. During the scene Paul is disappointed to find his parents eventually divorcing, just as the parents of all his friends, and wishes to find some emotional response from within. He is desperate to cling to the idea of love, which he would hope to experience as well. When it does not appear, he stops running. His emotions or emotionlessness are as insignificant as anyone else's. The banality and indifference are the result of being surrounded by too many options. The first-person narration is crucial here, as an outside commentator would appear to place an outsider's value judgement on the characters. Here the reader is able to recognize Paul's level of self-reflection.

6. Conclusion

The Rules of Attraction is a novel deeply rooted in the time period of its publishing. The writing references popular culture and current events, making the characters and themes explored both representative and symptomatic of the society of the 1980's United States. Situated in an enclosed setting, the novel portrays a microcosm of the wider malaise of the youth culture, riddled with an abundance-driven anxiety and indifference. The central themes, including relationships, sex, and drugs, are common to other authors of blank fiction and their effects are not glossed over, as is typical to the style. Ellis creates a fragmented novel, distancing himself from both the literary norm and the novel itself. The refusal of a traditional literary form is echoed in his refusal to place judgement on the behaviour he presents. From this refusal stems a choir narrative, which allows the exploration of identity, attitude to norm, and the level of self-reflection of the characters.

Ellis depicts a group of American young adults growing up between the expectations of the previous generation and the modern society, presenting its new values and ideals through media. This conflict and confusion leads to previously unseen pressures and a culture that is clearly identifiable as that of the Generation X. Ellis argues that the new normal is greatly affected by the consumerist culture and it affects even the social norms governing friendships along with romantic and sexual relationships. Humans have become another commodity item. Sex is so overwhelmingly present through media everyone is expected to be liberal and open about it. Drugs are used to self-medicate, and one is almost expected to do so. These are used as an escape from the mundane which is at the same time too much and too little. The understanding of what is allowed and what is expected extends from how to act to how to be. The anxiety of identity is visible especially in how the characters in the novel experience and perform their assumed gender roles.

The effect of these norms affects different genders very differently, especially in themes such as abortion and sexual orientation. The novel shows a clear distinction between the space allowed for sexual expression for men and women. Then again, the masculine space of expression of identity appears narrower, as femininity is seen as a weakness. The reader is able to experience sympathy and empathy through the narrative style, which reveals the weakness characters themselves attempt to disguise by often aggressive and reckless behaviour. There is an argument to portray men as victims of patriarchal hierarchy as well, as any deviation from a very tightly defined norm may turn to (emotional) violence towards the self.

Bret Easton Ellis is an author often criticized for the chauvinism, violence, and graphic imagery in his novels. His work is sometimes labelled as unimportant and called popular, as opposed to the important works of literature. Whatever the case may be, his novels have a wide audience, and that enhances his argument of the media, literature, and society being in constant interaction. His novels, filled with intertextuality, create their own parallel universe that is juxtaposed with our own in an attempt to show its flaws. At the same time, the discussion around his work has undoubtedly reached people who have not read it. It is important to distinguish between the opinions of the author and those of his characters, and in Ellis's case it is not always clear. He shows us a world without prefacing it with moral judgement. He does it to say that we, as humans, react to adverse circumstances in sometimes morally questionable ways, and thus are not always responsible for our own actions. *The Rules of Attraction* may be his least discussed novel, but it is an experiment on a style of narration and themes that have built the backbone to his later work.

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