

Ville Oksala

ALIENATION AND SOCIETAL CRITICISM IN *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* AND *AMERICAN PSYCHO*

ABSTRACT

Ville Oksala: Alienation and Societal Criticism in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *American Psycho*
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The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the manner in which the depiction of societal alienation raises societal criticism in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. The concept of alienation is defined by the theoretical framework established by Mary Horton in her essay "The Literature of Alienation." The particularly pertinent concepts from Horton's article are the concepts of the Outsider and the Insider, which, as the thesis will demonstrate, are well applicable to the protagonists of both *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, and *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman, respectively. For the thesis, I will also utilize other academic articles, which directly address elements in the texts to be analyzed, such as their historical context and stylistic features. After the individual analyses of both novels, I will also compare the two in their depictions of alienation, the criticisms they raise and their treatment of common themes that are prevalent in both novels. Some common themes between the two novels are conformity, identity and connection with others, or lack thereof, and it is through these themes that both novels deliver a significant amount of their societal criticism. The treatment of these themes differs significantly in both novels; especially the theme of conformity is the main point where the two stories diverge, which then affects how the books address the other common themes as well.

Exploring societal criticism through alienation is fruitful, as perceiving the society through the viewpoint of someone who feels in some way as not belonging in it can highlight important issues related to the society. Both novels feature protagonists who feel anger and confusion towards their contemporary societies – Holden Caulfield due to his conflict between conformity and individualism and Patrick Bateman due to his succumbed sense of identity as a result of the yuppie culture - and thus are well suitable for this kind of analysis.

In addition, both novels can be considered somewhat complementary to each other, as they share similar themes and also the same setting, New York City, but offer vastly differing perspectives to the issues being discussed, as the protagonists in the novels are differently situated towards society, as Holden scrutinizes the society from the outside, while Patrick in many ways embodies the ideals of his society. Analysis about the historical context at the time of the novels' release also exemplifies the complementary nature of the two works as, due to them being released around forty years apart, they offer different perspectives towards the common themes of the two novels and introduce critique particularly related to their contemporary societies. These factors combined provide a broader view of the common themes of both novels and allows one to explore the manner in which the treatment of the common themes has changed over time, what issues have become more pertinent and what has become less significant.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield is an alienated teenager, whose steadfast refusal and inability to conform to the social norms around him make it difficult to connect with other people and brings him misery in a world he cannot understand. Exploring society through the viewpoint of a troubled teenager was remarkable at the time of the novel's release and, as such, the novel was massively influential in its unprecedented depiction of teenage rebellion and alienation, which offered a much-needed acknowledgement of adolescent issues to the public. The novel's quintessential depiction of teenage alienation offers significant criticism towards the societal and cultural norms of the 1950s United States, and highlights how painful the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be.

In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman is well integrated into the society's upper classes but also suffers a similar disconnect towards other people because of several issues related to the yuppie culture of the 1980s, especially the excessive consumerism associated with it, which is then linked to the brutal murders he commits throughout the novel. The indictment of the yuppie culture is further enforced by the book portrayal of Patrick as potentially being a product of his environment, which has caused his vanity and inner emptiness.

Keywords: alienation, societal criticism, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *American Psycho*, conformity, identity, connection

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tässä tutkielmassa analysoidaan, miten yhteiskunnallisen vieraantumisen kuvaus tuo esille yhteiskuntakritiikkiä J. D. Salingerin romaanissa *Sieppari ruispellossa* ja Bret Easton Ellisin romaanissa *Amerikan psyko*. Vieraantumisen käsite määritellään Mary Hortonin luoman teoreettisen viitekehyksen kautta, jonka hän esittelee esseessään ”The Literature of Alienation.” Erityisen merkittäviä käsitteitä Hortonin artikkelissa ovat ns. ”the Outsider” ja ”the Insider”, joista ensimmäinen soveltuu *Sieppari ruispellossa* -kirjan päähenkilöön, Holden Caulfieldiin, toisen soveltuessa *Amerikan psykon* päähenkilöön, Patrick Batemaniin. Tutkielmassa käytän myös muita akateemisia artikkeleita, jotka suoraan käsittelevät analyoitavia osa-alueita molemmissa romaaneissa, kuten historiallista kontekstia ja tyylikeinoja. Analysoituaani romaaneja yksitellen aion vertailla sitä, miten vieraantumista käsitellään romaaneissa, millaista kritiikkiä niissä nousee esille ja miten niissä käsitellään romaanien yhteisiä teemoja. Näihin teemoihin lukeutuu konformismi, identiteetti ja kyvyttömyys tuntea yhteenkuuluvuutta muiden kanssa, ja näiden teemoja kautta molemmat romaanit esittävät merkittävän osan yhteiskuntakritiikistään. Teemojen käsittelytapa eroaa romaaneissa merkittävästi, etenkin konformismin osalta, joka puolestaan vaikuttaa siihen, miten muitakin teemoja käsitellään.

Yhteiskuntakritiikin tutkiminen vieraantumisen kautta on hedelmällistä, sillä merkittäviä yhteiskunnallisia ongelmia voi hyvin havaita jonkun näkökulmasta, joka tuntee kuulumattomuuden tunnetta yhteiskuntaan. Molempien romaanien päähenkilön tuntevat vihaa ja hämmennystä ympäröivää yhteiskuntaansa kohtaan – Holdenilla konformismin ja yksilöllisyyden välisen ristiriidan takia, ja Batemanilla hänen ns. ”juppikulttuurista” johtuvan identiteetin tukahtumisen takia – joten ne soveltuvat hyvin tämän kaltaiseen tarkasteluun.

Lisäksi romaanit jokseenkin täydentävät toisiaan, sillä vaikka niissä on yhteisiä teemoja ja sama miljö, New York City, ne tarjoavat eri näkökulman käsiteltäviin asioihin, koska päähenkilöt ovat asemoituneet eri tavalla suhteessa yhteiskuntaan. Holden arvostelee yhteiskuntaa ikään kuin sen ulkopuolelta Patrickin ollessa monella tapaa yhteiskuntansa vallitsevien ihanteiden ruumiillistuma. Romaanien aikalaiskontekstin tutkiskelu myös osoittaa, miten ne täydentävät toisiaan. Koska romaanit on julkaistu neljänkymmenen vuoden päässä toisistaan, ne myös siten tarjoavat erilaiset näkökulmat romaanien yhteisiin teemoihin ja tuovat esille myös omaan aikalaiskontekstiinsa sidottua kritiikkiä. Tämän ansioista romaanien pääteemoja voi tarkastella laajemmasta näkökulmasta; sitä, miten pääteemojen käsittelytapa on muuttunut ajan saatossa, mistä asioista on tullut merkittävämpiä ja minkä asioiden merkitys on vähentynyt.

Sieppari ruispellossa -kirjassa Holden Caulfield on vieraantunut teini, jonka järkkymätön kieltäytyminen ja kyvyttömyys elää sosiaalisten normien mukaan tekee hänelle vaikeaksi saavuttaa yhteyttä muihin ja tuo hänelle kärsimystä maailmassa, jota hän ei kykene ymmärtämään. Yhteiskunnan tutkiminen syrjäytyneen teini-ikäisen näkökulmasta oli mullistavaa romaanin julkaisuaikana, ja siten romaanin ennennäkemätön teini-ikäisen vieraantumisen kuvaus oli aikanaan valtavan merkittävä ja toi julkiseen diskurssiin paljon kaivattua tiedostusta murrosikäisten ongelmista. Vieraantumisen kuvauksellaan romaani esittää purevaa kritiikkiä 1950-luvun Yhdysvaltojen kulttuurillisia ja yhteiskunnallisia normeja vastaan ja esittää myös, kuinka kivulias kasvuvaihe murrosiän ja aikuisuuden välissä on.

Amerikan psykossa Patrick Bateman on hyvin kytköksissä yhteiskunnan ylempiin luokkiin mutta kokee myös muut ihmiset etäisinä, mikä liittyy kirjassa lukuisiin 1980-luvun juppikulttuurin ongelmiin. Näistä ongelmista suurimpana nousee konsumerismi, joka romaanissa myös yhdistetään Patrickin tekemiin raakoihin murhiin. Juppikulttuurin tuomitsee kirjassa myös se, miten Patrick esitetään ympäristönsä tuotteena, mikä on osaltaan aiheuttanut tämän turhamaisuuden ja sisäisen tyhjyyden tunteen.

Avainsanat: vieraantuminen, yhteiskuntakritiikki, *Sieppari ruispellossa*, *Amerikan psyko*, konformismi, identiteetti, yhteenkuuluvuus

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1. Introduction

Depictions of societal alienation can provide significant insight and critique about a society, as the portrayal of the main focal characters who conceive themselves to be outsiders to their surrounding world offers a different perspective to the cultural and social values and norms that govern their daily lives, which in turn may yield some valuable societal criticism. This thesis will be centered around analyzing the depictions of societal alienation and the manner in which the depictions reflect and criticize several contemporary societal issues in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991).

The reasons for choosing these two texts in particular are that despite them both sharing the same setting of New York City, the two novels offer vastly different historical perspectives of their surrounding societies due to them being released forty years apart. Consequently, both novels address various social issues based on the historical context of their time of release. Furthermore, even though both novels share similar themes of societal alienation and identity, the topics are discussed differently in them, thus offering a larger perspective around the issues, as it differs greatly how the protagonists are situated towards society. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist Holden Caulfield is a disillusioned teenager, who is struggling to find his place in society, whereas in *American Psycho*, the Wall Street banker Patrick Bateman is successful, wealthy and strongly associated with the upper social circles of New York, but is unable to feel any connection to the people around him and is only able to achieve satisfaction through brutal murders. The two novels offer interesting points of comparison, as Holden can be considered to be an outsider towards society, while Patrick is an insider, but both share a conflicted and even hostile stance towards their surrounding world. Another connecting factor between the texts is the use of first-person narration, which in both novels, in addition to offering a more intimate look into the minds of the protagonists,

also stylistically reflects the attitudes and worldviews of the characters, as will be demonstrated later in the thesis.

2. Theory

While the thesis will not strictly adhere to any single branch of literary theory or criticism, the concept of social alienation will be explored through the framework established by Mary Horton in her essay “The Literature of Alienation” (1978). In the essay, Horton separates six prevalent themes related to alienation, which she then presents as both distinct entities, although at least partly related, and also as being “very roughly arranged in order of increasing portrayal of sickness or disorder” (200), the different themes being in order: the Insider, the Outsider, the Detached Man, the Hollow Man, the Waste-Land and the Possessed (199). However, only the first three are specified as being more specifically related to social alienation (200).

As will be explored later in the thesis, Horton's succinct description of the Insider as being “the theme of the over-conformist, the individual who can only decide what he wants to do in terms of the expectations of others, with the accompanying loss of feelings of spontaneity and authenticity” (200) applies well to the protagonist of *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman. On the other hand, the concept of the Outsider is not discussed in the essay in such a straightforward manner. The state of social alienation as experienced by the outsider is not merely either physical isolation from others or the feeling of loneliness, as Horton argues that, “It begins to be alienation when the feeling of isolation becomes reflected in a sense of inner or outer desolation” (201). She elaborates further how: “... mere intellectual awareness of the state of purposelessness is not alienation. ... What is important is the sense of confusion and of impending chaos ...” (201). This description of the outsider as a figure, who feels bewilderment and anxiety towards the society from their outside perspective is applicable to the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden

Caulfield. The rather elusive description of the theme of the Detached Man as "... the awareness and expression of the denial of reciprocity" (203) is later better defined as being related to utter indifference towards one's surrounding society (204).

The usage of these three distinct themes for framework demonstrates, however, that they are by no means closed classes, as the theme of The Detached Man is somewhat applicable to the protagonists of both stories.

3. *The Catcher in the Rye*

J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is widely recognized as one of the most influential American novels in its unprecedented depiction of teenage rebellion and alienation (Privitera 2008, 203). Even though - especially in our contemporary society - the feeling of some adolescents of not having a place or a purpose in society can be considered a somewhat universal theme in fiction, it is important to note the significance of Holden's character in the novel's time of release. As described in Yahua and Babae's academic journal entry "Salinger's Depiction of Trauma in *The Catcher in the Rye*" (2014), the conflict between the two opposing ideologies after the Second World War, capitalism and communism, caused a massive clash between the cultural and political identities of the east and the west. As a result of the political turmoil of the Cold War, this competition between the superiority of the ideologies exacerbated the ideal of a unified, patriotic American identity. However, the ones who would fall outside of this ideal of mass-conformity would then be subject to significant social isolation and ostracism (1825).

A defining characteristic of Holden is his stubborn refusal to succumb to the sense of unity brought by mass-conformity. As noted by Yahua and Babae in their essay, "Holden represents his individual term of disparagement, 'phony,' and so wants to share trauma of a conformist culture" (1825). This reflects Holden's position as an outsider in a society that angers and confuses him. A

notable example of this is Holden's disdain towards popular forms of culture, such as movies and plays: "I don't like any shows very much, if you want to know the truth. They're not as bad as movies, but they're certainly nothing to rave about" (Salinger 1951, 152). In particular, Holden holds less than flattering views on most people who frequent Broadway shows: "You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were" (164). This antipathy towards massively popular forms of cultural expression contributes to a feeling of disconnect between Holden and the people around him and serves as an example of Holden's outsider status in his unwillingness to follow the mainstream culture of his society.

A possible reason for Holden to resent the cultural works around him could be the relative scarcity of art forms that addressed issues or experiences particularly related to the youth at the time. It is notable how it was only after the release of *The Catcher in the Rye* that new cultural products were being created that particularly had youths as their target audience, such as rock-and-roll music, and movies, such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, which featured youths as the main characters and which were directly addressing issues related to adolescence. The notion of Salinger as having "given a voice to a generation" (Privitera 2008, 203) demonstrates the cultural impact of the book in giving adolescents a voice of their own, which is something that youths, such as Holden, would have lacked at that point. In this case, the mainstream culture's inability to address the youth's anxieties could also have contributed to perpetuating these anxieties.

In addition to cultural works, Holden exhibits a hostile stance towards societal attitudes and norms in general. It has been observed how: "Like a sociologist, Holden scrutinizes the society and he is aware of the impending danger of losing a genuine idea and intellect that results in losing individuality and authenticity" (Dashti and Bahar 2015, 457). This once again is connected to Holden's negative feelings towards mass-conformity and the "phonies" it creates. Throughout the story, the term "phony" is linked to pretentiousness and insincerity. For example, in a bar Holden

discusses a famous pianist who is playing there: "... old Ernie turned around on his stool and gave this very phony, *humble* bow. Like as if he was a helluva humble guy ... It was phony - I mean him being such a big snob and all" (110, emphasis in original).

This perceived insincerity prevents Holden from connecting with other people, as, potentially as a result of the aforementioned dearth of media about adolescent issues, even Holden's peers are under the same cultural influences as the adults. For example, during his disastrous date with his old acquaintance, Sally Hayes, Holden described her as the "queen of the phonies" (152) and is unable to join her pretentious conversation with one of her snobbish acquaintances (165-66). This serves to further alienate Holden from the society, as his individualist ideals clash with the conformity of the people around him.

Another example of Holden's unwillingness to conform to the social norms around him can be observed in his unusual use of language. A notorious aspect of the novel is its first-person narration delivered in a distinctive vernacular style. It has been noted how: "Instead of engaging himself with vandalism or anarchism, Holden resorts to language to express his iconoclastic demeanor. As in ideological toolkit, language provides Holden with the opportunity to both assert and differentiate himself from others" (Yazdanjoo et al. 2016, 764). While obviously different from the adults' speech, Holden's use of language also differs from his peers and, as such, is once again one of the possible reasons for his lack of connection with them. For example, Holden cites language as one of the things demonstrating Sally Hayes' "phoniness": "*Grand*. If there's one word I hate, it's grand. It's so phony. For a second, I was tempted to tell her to forget about the matinee" (138, emphasis in original). In fact, while the narration in the novel can be characterized as a specific sort of youth slang, it has been noted that: "Although Holden belongs to an educated Northeastern American family and attends an elite school like Pencey, he uses language in a manner quite different from a WASP" (Yazdanjoo et al. 2016, 764). The notion of Holden using language not only in a different manner from those around him but even differently as his social background

would entail altogether is an interesting one, as it can be viewed as an example of Holden's insubordination to social norms but also as an even further indication of his utter disconnect from the society at large. Language would, then, serve as another contributor to Holden's feelings of alienation from those around him.

Holden's inability to connect with his peers and adults is, however, contrasted by the fondness he exhibits toward children, especially his little sister, Phoebe. In particular, Holden's fantasy of being the so-called "Catcher in the Rye", who stands at the edge of a cliff and catches children before they fall down has largely been interpreted as a desire to protect their childlike innocence (Dashti and Batar 2015, 460). Holden's desire to protect children's innocence can also be observed in his appalled reaction to someone having written "Fuck you" on a wall in Phoebe's school: "I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids could see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant ... I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it" (260). Holden imagining the writer to have been "some pervert bum that'd sneaked in the school" (260-61) instead of the writing being a juvenile antic by one of the children reveals his idealization of children as being innocent and incorruptible. For Holden, the profanity is, in a way, an unwelcome intrusion from the harsh reality of the adults to the still pure and unspoiled reality of children. His conception of the childhood as something to be fervently protected, consequently, presents the grown-up world as being noticeably harsher and crueler. The tensions related to becoming an adult are occasionally mentioned in the novel, as Holden even remarks how he self-admittedly does not always "at his age" (13) and his slightly older friend Carl Luce repeatedly asks him "When in *hell* are you going to grow up?" after being annoyed by Holden's nosy questions (189). This exemplifies Holden's complicated place in society: he is too old to be considered a child anymore but also feels the adult world to be strange and foreign.

Consequently, throughout the novel Holden is unable - or, more accurately, unwilling - to cope with the pressures the society has laid on him. This can most obviously be observed in his

poor academic success, as he has been expelled from several boarding schools (18). However, it can be construed that expulsions were not caused by an inability to learn but rather an indifference towards what the society considers worthy of pursuit, namely wealth. Even as the improving wage levels and standards of living in the post-war United States compelled more and more people to strive for financial success (Yahya and Babae 2014, 1825), Holden demonstrates his rejection of these ideals during his discussion with Sally: “Take most people, they're crazy about cars ... if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about changing it for one that's even newer” (169-70). Instead of wishing to acquire a large amount of wealth and living in a big city, Holden merely fantasizes about living a quiet life in a cabin in the woods (171). This can be seen as a criticism towards the increasing urbanization and consumerism of the American society.

In general, much in accordance with Horton's definition of the Outsider figure, Holden's stance towards his surrounding society is founded in his anxiety and bewilderment towards it. Particularly relevant in the concept of madness, as it has a two-sided function in the story: Holden perceiving the world around him as mad, which in turn makes him mad. It has been noted how: “The socio-analytic Holden wonders [sic] in New York, observes people's madness and gets depressed of people's madness and ignorance ... Holden's feeling of disappearance while passing the street implies his fear dissolving in the mad society” (Dashti and Bahar 2015, 460). His unwillingness to conform to common social practices and his inability to connect either with his peers or superiors truly marks him as being outside of the ideal of a unified American identity as mentioned in Yahya and Babae's journal entry. Through the depiction of Holden's disillusionment, the book presents the feelings of absolute loneliness and isolation by those who refuse to conform to the prevalent norms in their society in the fear of eschewing their individuality.

4. *American Psycho*

Holden's depiction as a perpetual outsider to the society in *The Catcher in the Rye* is contrasted by the depiction of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* as someone who very much embodies the ideals of the society around him; him being an affluent and successful Wall Street yuppie (Ellis 1991, 190), who lives in a high-end apartment in Manhattan (73). As noted in the introduction, this posits Patrick more as an insider to society than Holden, since he fully adheres to the stereotypical consumerist, urban lifestyle of the yuppies. He has been described as: "... a young and shallow man who could easily fit into the absolute stereotype of a yuppie: he is greedy, wealthy, addicted to sex, drugs and obsessed with expensive clothes and furniture" (Saraiva 2018, 111). However, Patrick's conformity does not allow him to connect with those around him any more than Holden – even less so – nor does it provide him any stable image of his own identity.

In fact, the lack of a coherent self-image is a recurring issue in the novel for Patrick Bateman. For example, towards the end of the book he muses how:

... there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel my flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there.* (406, emphasis in original)

This description paints Patrick as someone who even himself does not understand who he truly is. The label of the Insider, as Horton describes it, is then not sufficient for describing Patrick's circumstance of not only being alienated from the outside world but also, in a sense, feeling alienated from himself. As mentioned before, Horton's initial three themes of alienation she considers to be more specifically related to societal alienation, whereas the latter ones are related to

what she calls “individual alienation” (200). Particularly pertinent is the theme of the Possessed, which is described: “This is the true state of alienation in the sense of ‘belonging to another’” (209) and, furthermore, the second stage of this theme “metamorphosis”, which refers to one’s sense of self being “consumed” by something external (212). The notion of an external force consuming a person’s identity is especially important, as it is through the book’s depiction of the utter dissolution of Patrick’s identity and sanity that it delivers its scathing criticism of the vanity and hyper-consumerism associated with the yuppie lifestyle.

Particularly noteworthy is the book’s conveyance of this message even through its most surface level elements, namely, Patrick’s first-person narration. It has been described how: “... Bateman’s narrative is a repetition of behavior patterns, situations and reckless consumption of products that leaves the reader with the impression that Bateman’s world is small and futile” (Saraiva 2018, 111). It can be argued, however, that Patrick’s narration achieves far more than merely the impression of his life as small and futile, as it aptly demonstrates just how absolutely his worldview and perception of others are engulfed by the society’s ideals of wealth and status.

This is best exemplified by how much of the novel’s narration is devoted to excessively detailed descriptions of various consumer goods in any one place, and how the brands of different products are named in almost every part of the book. For example, just the description of Patrick’s morning routine and his apartment spans over several pages, as the brands of the different skincare products he uses and pieces of furniture in his apartment are meticulously listed: “Next to the Panasonic bread maker and the Salton Pop-Up coffee maker is the Cremina sterling silver espresso maker ... and the Sharp Model R-1810A Carousel II microwave oven ...” (34). Patrick’s overt focus on brand products is not only limited to descriptions of locations, as this tendency also extends to almost all the character descriptions in the book as well. Physical features of the characters are largely left unmentioned, as more attention is drawn to the brands of clothes each character is wearing: “Once inside Harry’s we spot David Van Patten and Craig McDermott at a

table up front. Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat ... by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers” (37). Furthermore, this is the book’s introduction to both Van Patten and McDermott, which demonstrates the common narrative feature in the book of rarely offering any direct account of the different characters’ personalities or other mental properties. By discussing about essentially everything and everyone only in terms of products and brands, Patrick presents the people around him in a thoroughly dehumanized manner, thus further showing his detachment from them.

However, throughout the novel it is also suggested that the other characters may view Patrick in the same way. A recurring event in the novel is the characters constantly mistaking each other for other people, which has been linked to the rampant consumerism blending everyone’s identities together, thus completely erasing their individualism: “It is not only that Patrick is mistaken for his fellow ‘vice presidents’ ... but he also seems interchangeable with them, making them all in a sense a designer construction” (Ross 2016, 111). Patrick seems to acknowledge this interchangeability, as after cryptically asking his secretary Jean whether two snowflakes can be alike, he comments how he thinks that many snowflakes are alike, as well as many people (406). The irony of everyone looking nearly identical despite Patrick’s detailed descriptions of their varied high-end brand clothing highlights the yuppie culture as somewhat paradoxical: an environment where one is encouraged to express one’s individuality and uniqueness through conspicuous consumption in itself undermines said individuality.

It is this compromised sense of individuality which then also connects to Patrick’s sense of having no tangible identity, which in his mind renders his existence futile. The shallow, interchangeable nature of nearly everyone he knows contributes to his feeling of being a rather generic, replaceable entity. For example, he remarks how: “... I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal’s handle and think to myself if I were to disappear into that crack ... the odds are

good that no one would notice I was gone. No ... one would ... care (244, last three ellipses in original). Patrick's cynical view exemplifies how, despite all his success and wealth, he still feels frustration at his nondescript position among his peers and also, more importantly, can be seen as yet another criticism of the supposed shallowness associated with the yuppie culture. It is, then, the inner emptiness of Patrick's which is given as a possible reason for the mindless violence he commits throughout the story. He remarks how: "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted upon others" (405). Patrick's outbursts of violence can be viewed as an extreme example of the complete loss of empathy one can have when being subjected to such an environment, where everyone views each other only as commodities and maintains surface-level friendly relationships to maintain their social contacts. An example of this superficiality would be the recurring gag of different characters wondering about Paul Owen's work-related "Fisher account", which they find alluring (98), and which causes Patrick to pretend to be another person to learn more about it (231-232). Owen not even recognizing that Patrick is indeed not even his supposed friend is yet another example of the mostly shallow nature of the characters' relationships.

In fact, it is worth noting how those around Patrick exhibit remarkably similar sense of detachment from others as he does, albeit not as extreme, further criticizing yuppie culture as potentially being detrimental to the creation of deep, meaningful relationships. Most of the interaction between the characters can be summarized as somewhat banal and vacuous conversations about matters, such as proper clothing etiquette, restaurants and consumption habits, or crass stories about their sexual encounters (37-39) Consequently, any discussions about deeply personal matters are virtually nonexistent. The scarcity – or lack – of genuine care or affection between the characters can be observed when one of the characters, Price, suffers a mental breakdown in a night club, and the other characters hardly react to it, and one of them even gleefully describes him as a "riot" (66-67). In addition to the apparent friendships between the

characters, this also applies to their romantic relationships. While Patrick's indifference towards his partner Evelyn is made explicitly clear in the book in how he even remarks how she is not "terribly important" to him (359), the romantic relationships of his acquaintances are rather tenuous as well. Many of them engage in liaisons with others, even the partners of their own friends (28), which suggests that even romantic partners are only reduced to status symbols in their world. In other words, it is not only Patrick who suffers from everyone's self-absorbed behavior, as it renders everyone else equally indistinguishable and expendable.

However, there are some outliers to this narrow description of the novel's characters, who in their own ways also reflect the absurdity of the world around them and whose relationships with Patrick differ from the others. One of these characters is the aforementioned Timothy Price. While displaying the same sense of narcissism and classism as the other yuppies (13), he still shows notable contempt towards his environment, such as in his acidic disdain towards New York City (10). Compared to the others, he is also more willing to discuss political issues outside of the typical discussion topics of the group, even indirectly implicating Patrick by talking about Ronald Reagan's friendly exterior masking his true malice (430-31). As a result, Patrick possibly feels at least slightly more connected to Price than the others, as he remarks how Price is the "only interesting person [he] know[s]" (28). Price's mental breakdown early in the book may suggest that he has similar feelings of meaninglessness as Patrick does and suffers because of the shallow consumerist culture as well.

Another anomaly within Patrick's social circle is Luis Carruthers, who is attracted to Patrick. Luis' sudden revelation shocks Patrick to such an extent that he is unable to kill Luis despite trying it, as Luis misconstrues Patrick's attempt to choke him as an embrace (174). Luis is an exceptional character in the novel in his sincerity and genuine affection towards Patrick and, much like Patrick, is also forced to hide his true self from others, as he attempts to hide his homosexuality from others by being married to a woman (414). Although Luis having to mask his sexuality may not be related

to the novel's critique of consumerism, it does once again highlight the loss of identity inherent to the novel's depiction of the yuppie culture.

Finally, there is Patrick's secretary Jean who also professes her love for Patrick. Her shyness and modesty separate her from Patrick's entourage, and she is the only person for whom he displays any semblance of affection. In a climactic moment, he sees her as someone who would possibly be able to change his meaningless life: "I sense she wants to rearrange my life in a significant way – her eyes tell me this and though I see the truth in them, I also know that one day ... she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity" (407). As a rare display of mercy, he chooses not to deceive her with false proclamations of love and merely muses how the relationship would be unlikely to change him (407). This crucial moment ultimately not leading to anything suggests that Patrick is, in a sense, already "too far gone", his capacity for genuine relationships already evaporated because of his prolonged exposure to the dehumanizing effect of consumerism, as, in the end, he remarks how everyone is "interchangeable anyway" (408).

The ultimately terrifying prospect of the book may be that Patrick is really not an anomaly in his environment but rather a product of it. It has been suggested that: "... Patrick is presented as a psycho of our time whose psychotic behavior stems from the dehumanizing effects of consumerist American society ..." (Liktör 2016, 374). The book's relentless attack towards consumerism and Patrick' superficial similarity to the other characters in the novel suggests that the vain, self-centered and materialistic environment of the 1980s yuppie culture may be breeding other such hollow and utterly alienated people as Patrick, even though their perspective may not be seen in the novel.

5. Conclusion

As can be seen from the preceding analysis, both novels address remarkably similar themes, despite the decades long gap in their publication. The themes of conformity, identity and the inability to connect with others can be strongly observed in both novels, but it is the handling of these themes, which yields the books' criticisms of their contemporary societies.

The issue of conformity is interesting, as the two books offer exactly opposing perspectives towards the matter; Holden refusing to conform to social norms, while Patrick conforms to them excessively. Although it is fairly unambiguous how the portrayal of Patrick's conformity to a decadent society around him is critical of said society, the matter is not as clear in the case of Holden. His refusal to adhere to social norms is not necessarily presented in a positive light either, as it contributes to his sense of unhappiness in the novel, and perhaps happiness would be achievable if he downplayed his individualistic tendencies. However, in stark contrast to Patrick, he is largely written as a sympathetic and (arguably) likeable character, which invites the reader to also question the world which Holden views as mad. In this way, the novel expresses a more ambivalent attitude towards conformity as potentially something that can bring one comfort but also as something that can stifle one's sense of identity.

Issues related to identity are at the forefront of both novels as well. Holden's difficult position between childhood and adulthood is reflected in his protective fervor towards the former and his anxiety towards the latter. As stated before, through this the novel potentially criticizes the position of adolescents in its contemporary society as too pressured and the society as unsympathetic towards troubled youths which, for example, can be observed in the aforementioned scarcity of cultural works related to adolescent issues. The point of criticism in *American Psycho* is, once again, clearer, as it depicts the yuppie culture of the 1980s in a thoroughly negative manner and

especially links consumerism with the utter loss of one's identity. It is worth noting how the issue of consumerism can also be linked to Holden's dissatisfaction with the American society, as evidenced by his disdain towards materialism, but how roughly forty years later *American Psycho* presents the same problem as massively exacerbated.

Lastly, the novels share the theme of the disconnection from others. However, while Holden is depicted as wanting to connect with others but only being able to feel a meaningful sense of connection with his little sister, Patrick is depicted as completely unable to feel any connection to other people. Both of these standpoints are related to the issues discussed earlier in relation to the analysis of the novels' criticisms of society: Holden's ability to only connect with his sister is related to his aversion toward the adult life and his unwillingness to conform to the social norms of his peers, while Patrick's erasure of empathy is related to the dehumanizing effect of consumerism and the superficiality of the yuppie culture.

In conclusion, although both characters feature heavily alienated characters as their protagonists, the societal criticism in *The Catcher in the Rye* can be viewed as more intangible and as rather describing the disillusionment experienced by many teenagers than overtly criticizing its contemporary society, especially compared to *American Psycho*. That is not to assert that the novel does not include contemporary societal criticism, however, but that a lot of the criticism relates to a particularly subjective adolescent experience, which, as stated before, can still be considered somewhat universal or at least widespread, especially in retrospect. The societal criticism in *American Psycho*, on the other hand, is heavily tied to the experiences of a very particular cultural environment and by featuring a protagonist who is so heavily immersed in the environment, the novel exposes the depravity of the yuppie culture in a more explicit manner. Despite this, it is noteworthy how the issues prevalent in both novels are still hugely relevant to this day. It is not only that delicate balance between conformity and individuality is a likely struggle for adolescents

(and adults) in the future, but also the issue of conspicuous consumption remains relevant decades after the release of Ellis' novel.

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