

William Magrino

From Disaffected Youth to Dangerous Adults: The Brooding Evil of the Familiar in Bret Easton Ellis's Fiction

Abstract: Contemporary American author Bret Easton Ellis has written seven novels, one collection of interrelated short stories, multiple screenplays, one long work of non-fiction, and a number of essays throughout the better part of the past four decades. In addition, in recent years, he has cultivated a significant online presence through social media, as well as a popular podcast. From the time of his debut novel, published while he was still an undergraduate student, until the present day, his works have been the subject of much scrutiny in terms of subject matter and style. Particularly in the case of the release of his best-known novel, *American Psycho* (1991), a good deal of the criticism of Ellis has shifted between the text and the public persona of the author himself. In typical postmodern style, this blurring of boundaries was not only welcomed, but frequently precipitated by Ellis, his publishers, and the public relations machinery at work on his behalf. The focus of the majority of this attention, self-perpetuated and otherwise, has been on the apparent element of *evil* at work in terms of the amorality of his characters and a corresponding lack of moral certitude. Firmly rooted in theoretical tradition established by Georges Bataille, as well as the work of numerous recent scholars, this project examines the squandering of youth and its damaging impact upon contemporary society as a consistent thread running through Bret Easton Ellis's oeuvre, particularly in his characters' pervasive drug use and conspicuous expression of sexuality. The trajectory of narrator-protagonist Clay, from isolated college student in *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) into savage narcissist in *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) is a prime illustration of *evil, as inherent in the familiar*, throughout Ellis's postmodern landscape. As opposed to presenting an external perpetrator of evil as a threat to an existing moral order, Ellis's narrator reports on the evil at work in these young people's daily lives. The reader, therefore, as this project contends, is placed in the uncomfortable, but imperative and at times voyeuristic, position of determining the extent of culpability for an entire society—one that is all too familiar.

Keywords: evil, morality, youth culture, postmodernism, subjectivity, performativity, commodification