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The Soul of Man Under Capitalism

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THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER CAPITALISM

A Thesis

by

JOE L. CANTU

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2013

Major Subject: English

THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER CAPITALISM

A Thesis
by
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May 2013

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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the consciousness of three literary characters, divided by space and time, from mid nineteenth century Russia, mid twentieth century Italy, to late twentieth century American society. This paper exposes literature's rendition of modern man's varying consciousness as shaped by the changing social conditions around him. This paper recognizes these varying social conditions as different stages in capitalism's development. Capitalism has a history; the literature this paper examines discloses its negative impact on the consciousness of its characters. In analyzing *Notes from the Underground*, *Contempt*, and *American Psycho*, three novels separated by geography and spanning a timeframe of 127 years, this paper examines each protagonist existing in a state of existential angst proportionate to the stage of capitalism his respective epoch experiences, and respective of his social status. A Marxist framework is used to analyze this literature which reveals modern man's precarious condition has exacerbated alongside capitalism's development.

DEDICATION

The completion of my master's thesis would not have been possible without the love, support, and patience of my family and friends. I dedicate this to Anaïs Rodriguez, my mother, Hilaria Cantu, my father, Jose Luis Cantu, my brother, Allan Cantu, my sister, Laura Cantu and all my close friends who wholeheartedly inspired, motivated and supported me by all means to accomplish this degree. Thank you for your love and patience.

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CHAPTER I

THE SPIRIT OF ISOLATION IN LITERATURE

I would like to introduce the reader to this thesis by presenting a passage from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). I think it is best to present it uncut from the novel:

‘To transform the world, to recreate it afresh, men must turn into another path psychologically. Until you have become really, in actual fact, a brother to everyone, brotherhood will not come to pass. No sort of scientific teaching, no kind of common interest, will ever teach men to share property and privileges with equal consideration for all. Everyone will think his share too small and they will always be envying, complaining and attacking one another. You ask when it will come to pass; it will come to pass, but first we have to go through a period of isolation.’

‘What do you mean by isolation?’ I asked him.

‘Why, the isolation that prevails everywhere, above all in our age—it has not fully developed, it has not reached its limit yet. For everyone strives to keep his individuality, everyone wants to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself. But meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self destruction, for instead of self-realization he ends by arriving at complete solitude... Man keeps apart, each in his own groove; each one holds aloof, hides himself and hides what he has, from the rest. He ends by being repelled by others

and repelling them. He heaps up riches by himself and thinks, 'How strong I am now and how secure.' And in his madness he does not understand that the more he heaps up, the more he sinks into self-destructive impotence. For he is accustomed to rely upon himself alone and to cut himself off from the whole; he has trained himself not to believe in the help of others, in men and in humanity, and only trembles for fear he should lose his money and his privileges that he has won for himself. Everywhere in these days men have ceased to understand that the true security is to be found in social solidarity rather than in isolated individual effort. But this terrible individualism must inevitably have an end, and all will suddenly understand how unnaturally they are separated from one another. It will be the spirit of the time, and people will marvel that they have sat so long in darkness without seeing the light.' (346-7)

Dostoevsky's epoch, is the epoch of young, Russian capitalism. In other words, the age of isolation described in this passage refers to capitalism.

My thesis proposes that the aim of *Notes from the Underground* (1864) by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Contempt* (1954) by Alberto Moravia, and *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis, is to reveal how modernity has impacted modern man in a manner detrimental to his psychological, moral, and social well being. In the context of this thesis and the literature examined, modernity is understood to represent capitalism. Because these literary works are separated by space and time, this thesis captures different stages of capitalism. Implicitly, changes in capitalism produce changes in man. These novels recognize capitalism as an anti-humanist force to the human spirit, because capitalism alienates man. The existence of these fictional consciousnesses, when analyzed contiguously, proposes that capitalism spares no one

from alienation no matter the state of capitalism's social and historical development, or the status and class of the individual. Capitalism spares no one from misery.

A Healthy Type of Literature?

An interesting moment occurs in Alberto Moravia's *Contempt* (1954) when Battista—Ricardo Molteni's employer, a producer financing the production of a film Molteni is hired to write—is attempting to persuade Molteni to write a very specific script for the cinematic adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Battista wants his film to be pure spectacle—thus, profitable—but his dilemma is situated in recognizing Molteni, his writer, is an intellectual interested in writing a psychological, neo-realist film. Clearly, this is not the type of film Battista is interested in making. Thus, in *Contempt*, Battista enters into a discussion with his writer, Ricardo Molteni, where he argues against the merits of making the *Odyssey* a neo-realist film. Like neo-capitalism, neo-realist films originated after World War II ended and Benito Mussolini's government collapsed. This movement in art cinema distinguished itself by depicting stories of the poor and the working class. These films largely contend with the difficult economic and moral conditions of post-World War II Italy, representing changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life, including poverty, oppression, injustice and desperation.

“In my opinion,” Battista tells Molteni, “everyone is rather tired of the neo-realistic film mainly because it's not a healthy type of film.” In the context of the literary works my thesis examines, this is a telling passage. Battista continues:

‘When I say that the neo-realistic film is not healthy, I mean, that it is not a film that inspires people with courage to live, that increases their confidence in life.

The neo-realistic film is depressing, pessimistic, and gloomy. Apart from the fact that it represents Italy as a country of ragamuffins—to the great joy of foreigners

who have every sort of interest in believing that our country really *is* a country of ragamuffins—apart from this fact, which, after all, is of considerable importance, it insists too much on the negative sides of life, on all that is ugliest, dirtiest, most abnormal in human existence. It is, in short, a pessimistic, unhealthy type of film, a film which reminds people of their difficulties instead of helping them overcome them.’ (Moravia, 84)

Battista makes an interesting point. Although Battista situates his argument within the context of a fictional story—*Contempt*—and within the context of film, his opinion can be applied to each, literary work this thesis examines. These literary works—like the neo-realistic films Battista is referencing—depict specific, negative aspects of life. Each respective work depicts a protagonist suffering existential angst largely characterized by alienation. Thus, these literary works could be considered unhealthy; this, however, is only a valid claim if the aim of these works is ultimately, immoral, which this paper does not recognize these works to be.

Literature serves a variety of functions; however, the argument can be made its most vital contribution to man is its function to increase his awareness of life, itself. In his review of *American Psycho*, Norman Mailer considers what art is:

[...] we live in a world which, by spiritual measure, if we could measure it, might be worse than any of the worlds preceding it. In such a world, art becomes the remaining link to the unknown. [...] we are far beyond the moral universe—art has now become our need to be terrified. So art may be needed now to provide us with just those fearful insights that the uneasy complacencies of our leaders do their best to avoid. It is art that has to take the leaps into all the truths that our

media society is insulated against. Since the stakes are higher, art may be more important to us than ever before. (1072)

Literature—if it is understood to function as a positive end for man—has the potential of disclosing solutions to man’s forms of discontent. One of the ways literature does this is by explicating the source of various types of discontent and sometimes—not always— offering solutions by which man can mend his self—which in turn—can lead him to experience a more authentically, prosperous life. Thus, a fair question to ask is whether literature is, indeed, of value to us, when its goal is recognized as the intention of making the reader further, acutely conscious of his alienation. Being aware of our human and social condition—even if this reveals itself to be far from ideal in actuality—is the necessary first step towards improving not only our condition, but perhaps that of the world. Literature can therefore ultimately reveal itself as moralistic if it seeks to absolve us from self- illusion. If literature is of any value to us, should it not be to show us how we can be happier?

Out of the three works this thesis examines, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* has been obviously written about the most. The most interesting thing about this fact is how little attention is given to Dostoevsky’s introductory epigram as a way to understand the novella. In many ways, Dostoevsky’s epigram is the key to my thesis; it justifies why a Marxist framework is a fitting perspective for understanding this literature. The inclusion of Dostoevsky’s self-written epigram, prior to beginning reading the novella proper, serves to guide us in understanding Dostoevsky’s intentions with *Notes from the Underground*. The riddle Dostoevsky poses for the reader—understanding the conditions that shaped the underground man’s attitude and consciousness—is revealed to the observant reader before he is even introduced to the character of the underground man. In brief, the key to this thesis is this: “All

the same, if we take into consideration the conditions that have shaped our society, people like the writer not only may, but must, exist in society” (Dostoevsky, 13). The answer to Dostoevsky’s riddle is a question of environment—capitalist society—and its influence and impact on man. Dostoevsky’s modern man is angry, resentful, and alienated; he exists in an existential state of angst. Dostoevsky’s epigram is the key to the three, literary works this thesis analyzes.

Most scholars recognize *Notes from the Underground* to be about an individual’s protest for freedom, free will, and individuality against the prevailing, positivist thought of the times. Positivism can be traced to the Enlightenment, a movement Dostoevsky recognized as largely atheistic in nature, and one which advocated rationalism and science, simultaneously rejected traditional, classical systems, but promoted the possibilities of new utopias by which man could aspire toward new, potential assurances of freedom. Therefore, the themes of freedom and free will have received significant attention in much of the novella’s criticism. The aim of my thesis is not focused on understanding the underground man’s philosophical discourses concerning free will; the focus of my thesis aims to understand the source of the underground man’s existential angst—specifically, why he is alienated, bitter, and resentful. I explain this angst—in accordance with Dostoevsky’s epigram—as a result of conditions set by early capitalist society. A Marxist framework is appropriate to understand this work.

Out of the three works, Alberto Moravia’s fiction has received the least attention. The available scholarship tends to largely analyze Moravia’s fiction as a homogenous body of work. The available scholarship reflects that Moravia is primarily viewed as an existentialist. My understanding of Moravia’s *Contempt* comes from the novel’s text, scholarship, Moravia’s literary essay *Man as an End*, and Marx’s theory of alienation from his *Economic and*

Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. My thesis situates these novels within a broader, literary tradition whose aim—I will argue—is to expose man’s alienation under capitalism as a global phenomenon.

This leads us to consider Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. I am highly indebted to two, Marxist secondary sources which aided my understanding of Ellis’ novel. The first Marxist reading of *American Psycho* appears in Elizabeth Young’s essay, “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,” published in *Shopping in Space: Essays on America’s Blank Generation Fiction*, in 1992. Furthermore, I recognize Julian Murphet’s 2002 reader’s guide to Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* as the definite Marxist treatment of the novel. What my thesis contributes to the novel’s discussion is, specifically, to disclose the significance, as well as the relevance, of the explicit connection existing between Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Murphet ignores Dostoevsky’s epigram in *American Psycho*; he does a confined reading of the text without contextualizing Ellis’ novel as part of an existing dialogue—which began with Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*—interested in understanding modern man as he is shaped by the conditions of capitalism. This paper will argue that the Bret Easton Ellis’ inclusion of Dostoevsky’s epigram in *American Psycho* proves that the novel should be read in a definite—Marxist—way.

If these literary works focus on one thing, it is the precarious condition of modern man; furthermore, if these works agree on one thing it is that the key to understanding modern man’s suffering lays in his environment—in this case, capitalist society. The significant aim of my thesis, then, is to situate these three novels—Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864), Alberto Moravia’s *Contempt* (1954), and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991)—in a broader literary context which allows us to view these novels as an on-going dialogue focused

on capturing specific developments of capitalist society across space and time in order to understand who modern man is in the context of capitalism's development. Examining the three literary works contiguously, provides a better understanding and appreciation of the theories inherent in this literature and aids us to understand the function and afflictions of Dostoevsky, Moravia, and Ellis' protagonists, respectively. Rather than accept literary comparisons are a sign of intellectual laziness on behalf of the critic—a claim made by Easton scholar Julian Murphet—my thesis will prove that the message inherent in these literary works—capitalism is anti-humanist—is more evident when these works are read contiguously. Capitalism has not yet died, and neither have we.

CHAPTER II
THE ALIENATION OF MAN UNDER CAPITALISM

“Human beings are not at their best in conditions of scarcity, whether natural or artificial. Such scarcity breeds violence, fear, greed, anxiety, possessiveness, domination, and deadly antagonism.”

—Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right* (2012)

“[...] but the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. They are quite right to be so. As for being discontented, a man who would not be discontented with such surroundings and such a low mode of life would be a perfect brute. No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. He is at any rate a healthy protest. As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them.”

—Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891)

“It is not the consciousness of men that determine their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. ... Alienation must be studied as an historical phenomenon, which can only be understood in terms of the development of specific social formations.”

—Karl Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)

“I wish I was special... but I’m a creep... I’m a weirdo... What the hell am I doing here? I don’t belong here... I want to have control. I want a perfect body. I want a perfect soul. I want you to notice... when I’m not around... Whatever makes you happy... Whatever you want...”

—Radiohead “Creep” (1992)

In *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kauffman declares, “It is an altogether new voice that we hear in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*” (12). The underground man is an ordinary man. He is a petty clerk employed in the Russian bureaucracy; however, “No book or essay dealing with the precarious situation of modern man would be complete without some allusion to Dostoevsky’s explosive figure” (Frank, 310). Publishing the novelette in 1864, Dostoevsky prided himself claiming he was “the first to have portrayed the real man of the Russian majority and lay bare his ugly and tragic aspect” (Coulson, 9). Referred to as “the poet for the insulted and the injured, the humiliated and the oppressed,” Dostoevsky wrote the following about this personage:

The tragedy lies in his consciousness of his own deformity... I am the only one to have depicted the tragedy of the underground, made up of suffering, self-torture, the consciousness of what is best and the impossibility of attaining it, and above all the firm belief of these unhappy creatures that everyone else is the same and that consequently it is impossible to reform. (Coulson, 10)

In the novelette this interesting persona, who critics and the author understand to represent one underlying stratum in everyman, unromantically voices his spite, indignation, and alienation. It is clear that this character’s condition is unfortunate, most evident due to his alienated existence; however, why is this so? Is his isolation caused by his class, by his environment, by his financial status, or by his personality and attitude? Ultimately, the

underground man represents the tortured consciousness of the alienated, tortured, and mentally devastated everyman existing in an early capitalist society. His consciousness is distinctive of the following characteristics: alienation, status obsession, envy, a predisposition to dominate inferior individuals, and antagonism towards society, in general. The totality of his misery is undoubtedly derived from his acute consciousness; however, it is important to recognize that the novella depicts this character's consciousness as anti-humanist. Rather than believe this predisposition is inherent and natural in human nature, Dostoevsky wants us to consider the conditions that shape this individual's society to explain the emergence of this consciousness. Ultimately, the underground man's consciousness reflects the anti-humanist nature of capitalism.

Dostoevsky's epoch, is the epoch of young Russian Capitalism. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin, quoting Dostoevsky scholar Lunacharsky, writes, "Dostoevsky has not yet died, neither here nor in the West, because capitalism has not yet died, and even less the vestiges of capitalism" (35). Capitalism has a history; furthermore, as an economic system, it has changed throughout time. In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky not only presents a striking portrait of the soul of a conscious, Russian everyman existing during this particular era, but the author also presents a striking portrait of early capitalist society from within this character's consciousness. It is difficult to conceive of the existence of another literary character that could have more lucidly exposed the consequential sorrow, alienation, and bitterness resulting from existing in the epoch of young Russian capitalism. The underground man's existential angst can be best understood in accordance with Karl Marx's theory of alienation. The underground man's tortured consciousness did not appear in our mist by accident; it emerged with the advent of capitalism.

Two Social Classes

Two lives existed in Russia during the early 1800s. The first was the life of the minority and “the exceptions”—the kind of life depicted by Tolstoy in his works—the life “which existed in the tranquil and stable, long established Moscow landowners’ family of the middle upper stratum” (Frank, *Seeds*, 6). The second life existing in Russia was the life of the majority. This life was one of confusion, moral chaos, social order existing in a state of continual flux, and one described with intentions of destroying the traditions of the past. Dostoevsky’s works focus on the latter. *Notes from the Underground* was written at a time when the plight of the lower classes was finally being recognized in Russia. The underground man, while not of the lowest class, does consider himself impoverished, much to his embarrassment and resentment. Many of his attempts at revenge are simultaneously driven and frustrated by his inferior social standing compared to that of his enemies. Who exactly is this persona, and how did he emerge amidst society? Dostoevsky’s epigram offers a blatant explanation:

All the same, if we take into consideration the conditions that have shaped our society, people like the writer not only may, but must, exist in society. I have tried to present to the public in a more striking form than is usual a character belonging to the very recent past, a representative figure from a generation still surviving. In the chapter entitled ‘The Underground’ this personage introduces himself and his outlook on life, and tries as it were, to elucidate the causes that brought about, inevitably brought about, his appearance in our mist. (Dostoevsky, 13)

When Dostoevsky writes in his epigram, “people like the writer, appeared in our mist and must exist,” the author is indirectly speaking, not about a person, but about a particular, human consciousness that has emerged. Dostoevsky recognizes his hero as an individual whose psyche

is shaped and determined by society. He is affirming that human consciousness is shaped by environment; thus, changes in society result in changes in the human consciousness. The epigram does not reveal what society Dostoevsky is alluding to, specifically, but it is understood the writer wants us to view mid-19th century, St. Petersburg society, critically. *Notes from the Underground* is as much about familiarizing ourselves with this historical consciousness as it is about analyzing early, Russian capitalist society.

The underground man is bitter, envious, alienated and incorrigible; in other words, Dostoevsky is explicit in his epigram that this is the natural state of the human consciousness under specific economic, social conditions—or capitalism. The novella does not attack the underground man; instead, the reader is lead to pity him and sympathize with his condition. Since the social conditions governing society produced the underground man’s particular consciousness, the novella recognizes capitalism to be anti-humanist to this character’s psychological and social well being.

The Marx Connection

In *Communist Manifesto* published in 1848, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ ask, “Does it require deep insight to understand that with changes in man’s material conditions of life, social relations and social systems, his ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word his consciousness, also changes?” (140). Published 16 years prior to the publication of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* not only laid out the Communist League’s problems and purposes, but it also presented an analytical approach to the history of class struggle and the problems inherent in capitalism. The proletariat is for Marx, largely what the insulted and the injured, the humiliated and the oppressed are for Dostoevsky. Like Dostoevsky, Marx and Engels also recognized that capitalism produced a particular, tragic

disposition in man's consciousness. Marx and Engels would agree the underground man's consciousness reveals this sentiment precisely.

The underground man's tragic disposition is caused because he is acutely conscious of the state of himself and of society; furthermore, he knows this. Aware that bourgeois society recognizes status to determine a person's worth and to measure their success, the underground man knows he is insignificant in society. This character does not consider himself on equal footing among others in society, "[...] even in the streets I could not manage to be his equal (55). Worse than feeling inferior, the underground man is also acutely aware that although he exists, he is, in a sense, invisible. Nobody recognizes him, nobody cares about him, and nobody else suffers what he suffers.

This character is of two minds regarding his consciousness. The underground man believes that his distinctive, heightened-consciousness—unique only in him and no one else—makes him a superior creature in comparison to the oblivious, inferior herd. Although it is the source of his suffering, it is also the one attribute he possesses which makes him something of an individual; however, there are sections throughout his confession where he views his condition from a different perspective. Perhaps, wonders Dostoevsky's bitter narrator, the ignorant mass is superior to me? What good is consciousness? He contemplates this in the novel:

[...] perhaps the normal man should be stupid, how do you know? Perhaps it is very beautiful in fact. And I am the more persuaded of that suspicion [...] if you take, for instance the antithesis of the normal man, that is the man of the acute consciousness, he genuinely thinks of himself as a mouse not a man. It may be an acutely conscious mouse, yet it is a mouse, while the other is a man [...]

Now let us look at this mouse in action. Let us suppose, for instance, that it feels insulted too and it almost always does feel insulted [...] (59)

According to Dostoevsky scholar, Joseph Frank, “Society is interesting [for Dostoevsky] because of its influence on the personality of the individual and appears largely as it is refracted through the consciousness of his characters” (207). Finding himself in a tavern, the underground man describes not only his alienated condition, but also describes his acute sensitivity feeling invisible and unrecognized among others:

I had been standing by the table and unknowingly blocking the way; he (officer) wanted to get past, and he took me by the shoulders and silently—with no warnings or explanations—moved me from the place where I stood from another; then he walked past as if he hadn’t even seen me. I could have forgiven him for striking me, but I couldn’t forgive that moving me from place to place without even seeing me. (52)

Although Karl Marx introduces his theory of alienation in earlier writings, it is in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* where Marx analyses man’s alienated nature under capitalism at greater length. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx theorizes that what distinguishes human life from that of animals is that human faculties, capacities and tastes are shaped by society. The perception of beauty, whether it is in sight, sound, art, or music, is a human faculty created by society according to Marx. At this point, it is important to acknowledge the manner in which Dostoevsky’s confessor views himself. In the first line of the novella, the third thing the underground man tells us about himself is that he is an “unattractive man” (15). Throughout his confession, he continues reminding the reader how dissatisfied he is with his physical appearance:

[...] I very often looked at myself with frantic dislike, sometimes amounting to disgust, and therefore attributed the same attitude to everyone else. For example, I hated my face, I thought it was a scoundrelly face, and I even suspected there was something servile about it, and so every time I went to the office, I made agonizing efforts to be as independent as possible, so that I should not be suspected of subservience, and to give my face the most well-bred expression I could manage. (47)

If society did not influence this character's idea of beauty and of personal worth in relationship to one's status in society, how would Dostoevsky's character differentiate between a "scoundrelly face," a servile expression, and what it means to carry a well-bred air? According to Marx, no human being exists who has not being born into and shaped by an ongoing society. Inherently, human character transforms according to changes in social conditions. Marx believes the conditions of capitalist production cause man's alienation from his 'species-being.'

Dostoevsky's novel supports Marx's theories concerning man's alienation under capitalism. Dostoevsky favors writing about characters who feel "insulted and injured;" however, what exactly produces this attitude in them? The answer is society, but to be more specific, the answer is capitalist society. Thus, *Notes from the Underground* can be read as an artistic, literary novella that vividly portrays the effects capitalism inflicts on an individual of low status, low self-esteem, and highly sensitive consciousness. If Dostoevsky adds anything to this theory, it is that the further, the conscious individual experiences capitalism's anti-humanist spirit, the more insulted and injured the individual will feel. This condition is not detrimental exclusively to the individual, but to society's wellbeing, as well, because the individual's social outlook becomes further nihilistic the more insulted and injured he feels. An ideal society is not

one populated by underground men. Dostoevsky's 19th century, St. Petersburg society is an unforgiving, loveless, and status-obsessed environment. As such, it is only natural for the underground man's consciousness to have emerged during this epoch.

Artificial Impoverishment and Sensitive, Acute Consciousness

Dostoevsky considered the underground man a real, social type representing the Russian majority. In writing about the proletariat, Marx describes this class in a manner which closely resembles the way Dostoevsky describes the spirit of the underground class—or in this case—the underground man; however, Marx identifies a key aspect, resulting from the spirit of capitalism, that answers why the underground man feels impoverished in his society, despite not being precariously destitute. *In Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*, Anthony Giddens identifies Marx's claim of the proletariat's 'universal character' to mean that:

The proletariat is a class which has radical chains; it is a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong, but unqualified wrong, is perpetrated upon it. The proletariat localizes within itself all of the worst evils of society. It lives in conditions of poverty which is not the natural poverty resulting from lack of material sources, but is the 'artificial' outcome of the contemporary organization of industrial production. (Giddens, 8)

The underground man's feeling of impoverishment is "artificial" in a sense. This artificial feeling of impoverishment is only possible if individuals are conscious of the conditions around them. With this logic, an unequal, status-obsessed society will hinder low-status individuals to feel artificially impoverished. Close to the end of his confession, the

underground man exclaims, “Humiliation, after all, is purification; it is the acutest and most vivid consciousness!” (121). Social inequality is an outcome of the contemporary organization of industrial production. This explains the underground man’s sense of feeling further impoverished, or further injured and insulted, despite not lacking essential, material necessities. The hero of *Notes from the Underground* has an apartment, a servant, and does not lack any necessities; however, he still considers himself impoverished when he views himself—his class, status, and significance—through society’s lens.

Consciousness and Evil Explained

For Marx, individual consciousness is determined by man’s social being. This is immediately evident when we first meet Dostoevsky’s hero. “My room is mean and shabby, on the outskirts of the town,” the underground man tells us, “I am told that with my insignificant means, it costs too much to live here. But I shall stay here; I will not leave St. Petersburg!” (17). On the same note, the hero of Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk*, Devushkin, is in many ways insulted and humiliated by society in the same manner the underground man is. “Devushkin is so excruciatingly self-conscious that the chief source of his suffering comes from the reflection of himself that he sees in the eyes of others” (Frank, 151). The key difference between Devushkin and the underground man is that despite his socio-economic adversities, Devushkin is able to remain a sympathetic and altruistic human being, unlike the unromanticized underground man who functions as the embodiment of the natural, in-humane attitude determined by capitalism.

The underground man observes, “I understood, of course, that they must now despise me for my unsuccessful career in the service, for having let myself go, wearing shabby clothes, and so on—things which in their eyes proclaimed my incompetence and unimportance” (62). When he reflects upon the ways Zverkov and himself part ways after finishing school and recalling the

years that follow soon after, the underground man recalls, “He no longer acknowledged me in the street, and I suspected that he was afraid of compromising himself by having anything to do with such an insignificant personage” (64). Is it really because the underground man is superficially and materialistically insignificant in society that explains why Zverkov and the other school-fellows ignore him, or does the underground man fail to admit, or to realize, that his personality is the real reason why he is isolated in society? For Marx and Dostoevsky, environment determines and shapes human consciousness. Thus, this character’s abrasive personality remains a natural outcome of his existence in a capitalist society. His personality is not an irrational enigma, but a consequence of his social being within his society. V. N Maikov, a close friend of Dostoevsky, explains this sentiment best:

Man is endowed with virtues, that is, needs and capabilities that make up his vitality... [and] the source of everything vicious can be located in nothing other than the clash between his suffering and acting powers and external circumstances, which creates a disharmony between them [man’s powers] by the destruction of the proportion of satisfaction for each established by nature. Human nature is thus essentially good, and evil is a result of the arrangements of society that do not allow mankind properly to satisfy its needs and capabilities. (Frank, 211)

Textual evidence in *Notes from the Underground* reveals the extent of society’s cruelty towards the underground man. When Dostoevsky’s “insignificant” confessor tries to have his friends recognize his superiority over them in the restaurant, his efforts are quickly thwarted on one, basic question they ask him:

‘We-ell, and what about monetary matters?’

‘I mean your salary.’

‘Why all this cross-examination?’

I named the amount of my salary, however, turning bright red.

‘It’s not much,’ remarked Zverkov, full of self importance.

‘No one can dine on decent restarurants on that!’ added Ferfichkin insolently.

‘I think it’s absolutely beggarly,’ Trudolyubov said seriously.

‘And how thin you’ve grown, how much you’ve changed... since those days,
added Zverkov, not without venom...

“You;ve got thin! Your clothes!” –Oh, those damned trousers! Zverkov noticed
the stain on my knee just now... But what’s the use? (74-5)

The manner in which the underground man’s school-fellows humiliate him on the basis of his inferior, social status is evidence that this character’s feelings against society are not unfounded and perhaps, not unjustified. It is in this passage from his youth where we realize how his behavior, attitude, and contempt are natural outcomes derived by his place in society.

‘I am asking you to be friends, Zverkov. I offended you, but...’

‘Offended me? You? Offended me? Let me tell you, my dear sir, that you could
never in any circumstances offend me!’ (80)

In bourgeois society, an individual’s status is indicative of his significance and his success. The novella recognizes the amount of respect and worth Dostoevsky’s hero fails to receive due to his low status.

Damaged Psyche: Pride and Ego

Where Marx recognizes this sense of an artificially impoverished condition in the proletariat, Dostoevsky explores the effects this condition produces on the psyche of his

character. The author reveals the resentment, humiliation, and nihilism this artificial condition produces on the downtrodden and humiliated. The underground man is worthless for lacking the superficial traits society secretly recognizes as valuable; however, his status as a hero is justified in his ability to endure crushing defeat amidst his circumstances.

According to the character's notes, his particular society scrutinizes and values an individual's class, his physical appearance, his financial status, and his social aptitude—typical in bourgeois, capitalist society—to indicate status and success. These are all things the underground man is fully conscious he is deficient in; they help explain the grounds for his social insecurities and social anxieties around other people; furthermore, they help shed light toward understanding his irrational behavior. He knows who he is, he knows his place in society, and he is acutely conscious, without deception, of how others see him, including those reading his notes:

[...] it was from feeling oneself that one had reached the last barrier, that it was horrible, but that it could not be otherwise; that there was no escape for you; that you never could become a different man; that even if time and faith were still left you to change into something different you would most likely not wish to change; or if you did wish to, even then you would do nothing; because perhaps in reality there was nothing for you to change into. (19)

Because of his self-professed, boundless ego and vanity, the underground man ardently believes despite these deficiencies society attributes in defining the worth of an individual, he is still superior to others. He states:

You recognize things like wealth, freedom, comfort, prosperity, and so on, as good, so that a man who deliberately and openly went against that tabulation

would in your opinion, and of course in mine also, be an obscurantist or else, be completely mad, wouldn't he? (30)

In order to justify his superiority among others to himself, and perhaps those reading his confession, he believes in his own, personal criteria that allow him to convince himself he is not an ordinary, common louse. In the third volume of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky, *The Stir of Liberation*, Frank argues that "the underground man does *not* reject prosperity, wealth, freedom, and peace in themselves; he rejects the view that the only way to attain them is by the sacrifice of man's freedom and personality" (324). Unfortunately, the underground man is as much tainted by society, as the individuals he antagonizes with and condemns for prospering in it. His dilemma is that he lacks society's unspoken, yet blatantly transparent criteria of what it deems is best in life; without these things, he considers himself invisible and insignificant. If he possessed the essential things society recognizes, he would not be who he is. He observes:

It was an agonizing torment, a never-ending unbearable humiliation, caused by the suspicion, constantly growing into clear-cut certainty, that compared to them, I was a fly, a nasty obscene fly—cleverer, better educated, nobler than any of them, that goes without saying—but a fly, always getting out of everybody's way, humiliated and slighted by everybody. (55)

Being somewhat of an idealist, our hero believes he possesses several things, unfortunately not recognized by his society, which should make up for the status symbols he so desperately lacks to consider himself superior among others. He believes being better educated, nobler, and being the individual in society who does not move aside for others in the sidewalk are what matters in deeming himself a "mature and educated man of his time" (Dostoevsky, 104). In other words, the underground man does not champion belief in class equality, or

abolishing the status quo that separates and differentiates the worth of men. But in lacking those immediate qualities his society views as, marks of prestige, he pathetically believes in other ideal qualities which are not the result of mere, arbitrary chances. He believes in the idea of the existence of class distinctions, yes; however, they should not be determined arbitrarily—gifts of nature rig the game—in the way they currently exist in his society, but should exist from merit. In other words, this personage wants society to identify his superiority by recognizing his intellect, his nobility, and his heroic virtues—not his looks, his clothes, and social skills. Unfortunately, for him, he exists in an early bourgeois society. In describing Zverkov in his school-day memories, the underground man observes:

In the lower forms he had been merely a lively pretty boy whom everybody liked.

I, however, disliked him even in the lower forms, precisely because he was good looking and lively. ...he was a person endowed with the gifts of nature.

...Zverkov was an expert in social dexterity and good manners. (63)

Dostoevsky's hero consoles himself by reading. He does not only read for pleasure, but he reads to satisfy and fulfill his ego in life—as a way for him to feel superior from others.

To escape their derision I deliberately began working as hard as I could, and soon forced my way to a place among the top boys in the school. This impressed them.

Besides, they were all gradually beginning to realize that I was already reading books they could not read, and knew about things they had never even heard of.

They regarded this fact with savage derision [...] (68-9)

Dostoevsky believed the reason why Russians had developed a most unpleasant characteristic for self-analysis and eternal dissatisfaction for life was because they were tormented by a desire for external, spontaneous activity they could not satisfy. Dostoevsky's hero confesses, "Reading,

of course, helped me a great deal-- it excited, delighted, and tormented me. But at times it bored me to death. I wanted to be active. ...I had no resort but reading—I mean there was nothing in my environment at that time that I could respect and feel attracted to” (51). This activity affects his psyche the way reading distorts Cervantes’ hero’s outlook; furthermore, it further perpetuates his alienation. “They understood nothing of *real* life,” the underground man says, “and that, I swear, is what I found most revolting in them” (68). What this character does not understand about himself is that he lives life unrealistically. “Oh if only you know what thoughts and emotions I am capable of,” the underground man thinks to himself, “and how enlightened I am!” (79). He dreams of being a hero, and of settling scores by engaging in duels. He speaks literary language so that society can recognize his intelligence, nobility, and superiority; like Cervantes’ Quixote, he becomes a ridiculous character the moment he socializes with others; however, he is only ridiculous because bourgeois society does not recognize intelligence and nobility as status determiners.

‘Oh, all right,’ I answered feeling I had gone rather far, ‘and I suggest it would be better if we chose a slightly more intelligent topic.’

‘I suppose you intend to show us how witty you are!’ (74)

Not only do his attempts at displaying intelligence end in ridicule and alienate him further by exacerbating his social ineptitude, but his resentment increases when others joke at his expense. “Well, how is anybody to understand you? ... all these high flown notions,’ Trudolyubov sneered” (66).

The Dostoevsky and Capitalism Connection

Although *Notes from the Underground* does not depict capitalism in its current state, it is still easy to identify the novella’s critical stance to bourgeois attitudes of status and behavior;

these traits remain visible, if not exaggerated and bloated, in our current capitalist society. Capitalism emerged in Russia almost catastrophically. According to Otto Kaus, “No author concentrated in himself so many utterly contradictory and mutually exclusive concepts, judgments, and evaluations as did Dostoevsky” (Bahktin, 18). Kaus explains this by claiming that Dostoevsky’s world is the “purest and most authentic expression of the spirit of capitalism. [...] his art is the cradle song of our contemporary world, a world born out of the fiery breath of capitalism” (Bahktin, 19). For Otto Kaus, capitalism explains Dostoevsky’s peculiar characteristic of revealing diverse points of view so accurately:

At some earlier time those worlds, those planes—social, cultural, and ideological—which collide in Dostoevsky’s work were each self-sufficient, organically sealed, and stable; each made sense internally as an isolated unit. Capitalism destroyed the isolation of these worlds, broke down the seclusion and inner ideological self sufficiency of these social spheres. In its tendency to level everything, to leave intact no divisions except the division between proletariat and capitalist, capitalism jolted these worlds and wove them into its own contradictory evolving unity. The spirit of this world-in-the-state-of-becoming found its fullest expression in the works of Dostoevsky. (Bahktin, 19)

Products, Consumer Culture, and the Underground Man

In his *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx argues that “in capitalism, the material objects that are produced become treated on par with the worker himself. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things” (28). It is this idea that may help explain why Dostoevsky’s hero feels invisible, unrecognized, and even unreal in society. “...so that everyone would have said looking at me: ‘Here is an asset! Here is something

real and solid!’ And, say what you like, it is very agreeable to hear such remarks about oneself in this negative age” (29). *Notes from the Underground* is not the first work to have, consciously or not, revealed this characteristic of capitalism. Gogol’s short story, “The Overcoat,” published in 1842, could be interpreted very much in this way. Gogol’s “The Overcoat” deals with an impoverished, invisible government clerk who only comes alive, or is only recognized in society—by his peers, superiors, and society itself—after he acquires a brand new coat. Certain moments in *Notes from the Underground* also support Marx’s point. When our hero decides to confront the officer in the street with the intention of standing his ground, he prepares for the moment by acquiring a coat, despite not having the means to buy it. Perhaps prophesying the manner in which consumer culture would characterize capitalism in the near future, Dostoevsky’s underground man informs us reasons why he needs new clothing to confront his enemy. In fact, in a couple of sentences, he is able to describe the lively clothes better than how he is able to describe himself, physically, throughout his confessions. This is characteristic of Ellis’ writing style in *American Psycho*, where products overshadow the characters, themselves.

The first thing was that when I carried out my plan I must look more respectable and take pains with my clothes. If there is a scene in public... I must be well dressed; it makes good impression, and puts us at once on an equal footing, in a way, in the eyes of good society... bought black gloves, and a decent hat from Churkin’s. Black gloves seemed to me both more respectable and more bon ton than the yellow ones that tempted me first. ...My overcoat was not bad in itself, it kept me warm; the raccoon collar constituted the essence of flunkydome. I must at whatever cost change the collar and buy instead a beaver one such as officers wore... Although these imitation beavers very soon show signs of wear and begin

to seem shabby, they look very nice at first, when they are new; and after all, I only needed it for one occasion. (56-7)

Gogol's story, "The Overcoat," deals with Akaky's shabby and threadbare overcoat. Gogol's hero finds himself the butt of jokes at work and in society because of his tattered overcoat; he is finally advised by his tailor, who refuses to continue fixing it, that he must buy a new one. Even in Gogol's story, it is the shabby overcoat—or the new overcoat later—which is recognized in society. It is the overcoat, itself, not Akaky the individual, who exists in society. There is enough evidence from the underground man's observations to suggest this is also the case in *Notes* and serves as a subtle precursor to the society presented in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, where capitalist society is identified by consumption. It seems as if the only people who are visible in his society are the very poor and the very well-dressed, and this is only because it is their striking appearances that make them real. When the underground man describes his servant, he says, "My servant is a peasant woman, old, crabbed, and stupid, and what's more, she always smells bad" (17). Although he earns a meager salary, in the eyes of society, the underground man is financially better off than Akaky. He is not starving from impoverishment, like Akaky; however, his need for a new overcoat does not stem from necessity but from what Marx sees as living in conditions of artificial poverty.

The second chapter in *Notes*, "A Story From the Fallen Sleet," examines this individual's life when he is 24 years old, during 1848. Although Dostoevsky's novella does not mention this, 1848 marked a period in European history when revolutions spread against the remnants of feudal power. In *A History of Modern Europe: from the French Revolution to the Present*, historian John Merriman states that the European Revolutions of 1848 remained the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history. Some of the factors that incited the

wave of revolution were the widespread dissatisfaction with political leadership throughout Europe, and the demands of the working classes. Within a year, however, reactionary forces were victorious causing the revolutions to collapse. (715) It is during this period where the underground man runs into former school-fellows, and we observe his interactions with them. Several, key scenes in this chapter reveal important details that help explain and humanize the underground man's resentment and feelings of impoverishment among others in society. The night before he meets his school-fellows in the restaurant, our hero's dreams reveal the source for his contempt of others:

[...] even by that time they had grown used to worshipping nothing but success. Everything honorable, but humble and downtrodden, they greeted with disgraceful and unfeeling laughter. They thought rank was intellect... I was always longing to see them humiliated. (68)

Similar to the manner in which he takes great importance in dressing well before he confronts the officer, here again we see how conscious the underground man is about what his clothes will reveal to his school-fellows, others, and society, in general. It is in this chapter where we discover whether his societal paranoia is well-founded, or whether there are no grounds for his behavior.

Then I carefully inspected my clothes, and discovered they were all old and worn and shabby. I had grown very slovenly. My office coat was fairly decent but I wasn't going to go out to dinner in my office coat. But the main thing was that there was a huge discolored patch on my trousers, right on the knee. I foresaw that that mark alone would rob me of nine-tenths of my self-respect. (70)

The Social Mask is in Vogue

Despite our hero's acute consciousness and resentment pertaining to the exclusive manner bourgeois society—a superficial, materialistic, and hypocritical society—views men, he cannot escape its clutches or avoid doing that which he despises others of doing. The argument could be made he is the most blatant perpetrator of these crimes. He implicitly criticizes this merciless society of the things he explicitly perpetuates to others. Although he is in constant fear of others noticing his flaws, in his observation of other individuals he never misses their pimples, monkey-like faces, stupidity, class, or poverty. He observes, “I was afraid that everybody present—from the impudent lout of a marker to the least of the greasy-collared low-grade clerks hanging about, covered with pimples and rotten with disease...” (53). This is what makes him a ridiculous and amusing character. “The underground man in *Notes*,” writes Dostoevsky scholar, Skaftymov, ‘is not only the accuser but also one of the accused,’ whose abjurations and insults are as much (if not more) directed against himself as against others” (Frank, 313). In Zverkov's farewell gathering, Dostoevsky's hero listens with disgust, criticizing and hating Zverkov when he mentions a bosom friend of his, a Prince Kolya, who Zverkov mentions owns an estate of three thousand souls. He criticizes Zverkov of boasting about this because he only understands this as Zverkov's attempt to boost his social standing in their presence and to impress them. Ultimately, our hero describes this particular night as one he would remember with loathing and humiliation; it was the nastiest and most terrible night of his life. Yet, the next day he casually and hypocritically mentions to his superior, Anton Antonovich the following:

[...] the day before ‘some friends and I had been going the pace at the Hotel de Paris; we were seeing an old pal, one might even say a childhood friend, and, you know, he's a bit of a lad, a spoilt darling—well, of course of good family, pretty

well off, a brilliant career, a wit, an awfully nice chap, carries on intrigues with certain ladies [...] (103)

He does this to improve his social standing in the eyes of his superior; however, he is guilty of doing that which he criticized his school-fellows of doing. There is the idea in this passage, among others, that the underground man is aware that what is on the surface can be just as important in society, as what is actually there—that is, unless the truth eventually surfaces, if it ever does. The underground man does something that disgusts him personally, but he cannot help avoid believing it is necessary for others to recognize and respect him—he wears a false social mask—but simultaneously and publicly is always giving speeches about “loving truth, sincerity, and honesty” (77). Here, the argument could also be made that upon initial contact with our hero, his school-fellows—who initially appear to try to be in good terms with the underground man—are perhaps also wearing deceitful masks. It is not until our hero exasperates them that they reveal their real feelings towards him. Although he is broke the day he is to meet his school-fellows, he spends his last, fifty copecks to “drive to the Hotel de Paris like a lord” (71), thus abiding by the logic of bourgeois society he operates in.

It is in his interactions with Liza, the only character in the novel who finally recognizes him and symbolizes the only tangible salvation he has, where we discover the underground man is just as bad as his bourgeois society enemies, regarding his status-obsessed attitude. His scene with Liza reveals how love and community for the underground man, as well for everyone else in bourgeois society, is not possible. Liza is insignificant to Dostoevsky’s hero because his conception of status and success are, in fact, bourgeois in nature; he harbors the same prejudice and contempt against those beneath him that others harbor back at him for his insignificant status. He is not able to see the individual in Liza, or his servants for that matter, but sees only

the prostitute in her. “So even she was capable of ideas?” (91). Before meeting Liza for the first time, the underground man acknowledges having had a friend, once, in his younger years. This early confession foreshadows his later actions and attitude towards Liza.

I did once make a friend. But I was a tyrant at heart; I wanted unlimited power over his heart and mind, I wanted to implant contempt for his surroundings in him; I required of him a haughty and final break with them. ...he was a simple-hearted and submissive soul, but when he became wholly devoted to me I immediately took a dislike to him and repulsed him—just as though I had needed him only to get the upper hand of him, only for his submission. (69)

Self-centered and status obsessed, he extols his social standing as he lowers Liza's; he achieves this with deceit and hypocrisy. He describes himself from Liza's perspective, "...as if I was some higher creature who knew everything without being told..." (101). Rather than witness the first act of compassion occurring in the story, the underground man tells Liza, “At any rate, your value will be less in a year's time. You'll leave here for somewhere more degraded, another house. ...always getting lower and lower, and in about seven years you'll come to a cellar in the Haymarket” (89). He tells Liza in the brothel he meets her in:

You have to be drunk to come here. But if you were in a different kind of place, living as decent people live, then perhaps I would not only hang round you, but absolutely fall in love with you, and be glad of a look, let alone a word, from you; I'd lie in wait for you at your gate, I'd always be on my knees to you, I'd look on you as my future wife, and think myself honored. (96).

Sympathy, community, and love are non-existent human traits in the underground man's unforgiving, bourgeois epoch. In his efforts to lower, or point out to others their inferior social

standing, he shamefully recognizes his deceit. When the underground man realizes Liza might visit him in his apartment, after his first encounter with her, he begins to fear Liza will see him as he really is. This disconcerts Dostoevsky's hero:

Yesterday I made myself out such... a hero... to her... and now, h'm. It's a great pity I've let things go so much. My flat is positively beggarly. And my oilcloth sofa with the stuffing coming out! And my dressing gown, that you can't even cover yourself decently with! Rags and tatters... and she will see it all; ...I'll put on airs, wrap the skirts of my dressing gown round me, and start smiling and trying to pretend. Pah, disgusting! And that's not the worst. There's something more important, nastier, and still lower. Yes, lower! And I shall put on that dishonest lying mask again, again...!' (105)

Notes from the Underground implies that human connections in capitalist society are inauthentic. In a society obsessed with status and recognition, and shamed by an artificial sense of inferiority, this literary work exposes the idea that people in a capitalist society are not themselves when they are in contact with each other in society. Can we trust the underground man of authenticity as he writes his confession? Like the rest of the characters this thesis examines, the underground man is an unreliable narrator.

St. Petersburg: Entrance to the Modern World

Most of Dostoevsky's literature, including *Notes from the Underground*, is set in St. Petersburg, Russia.

For all young Russians, the journey from Moscow to St. Petersburg was a symbol of entrance into the modern world, the journey from past to present, from the city of monasteries and religious processions to that of severe government buildings,

the journey to the spot where Peter the Great had broken a window through to Europe. (Frank, 70)

Upon his arrival in Petersburg, his first day to be exact, Dostoevsky witnessed a government official beat the driver of his carriage, a peasant lad, for no apparent reason. The incident of the horse and the courier, would appear later in Dostoevsky's *The Diary of the Writer* in 1876.

"This sickening picture remained in my memory all my life," Dostoevsky recalled. Furthermore, witnessing this event caused him to imagine what would come about when the young peasant returned to his village after his beating. Dostoevsky imagined the peasant to be ridiculed because of his sore neck and unlucky misfortune, only to later find himself beating his wife to revenge his own humiliation. He considered this incident his first, personal insult.

There is an allusion to this scene in *Notes*. After his school-fellows leave the Hotel de Paris to visit the brothel, the underground man hurries after them desperately jumping into a sledge to be driven towards the brothel. He recounts:

'Get on, cabby, get on, get on, you wretch!'

'Oh lord, sir!' groaned the son of the soil.

And in my impatience I thumped the cabby on the back of the neck.

'What's that for, why are you knocking me about?' cried my wretched peasant, but he whipped up his miserable nag, so that it began to lash out with its hoofs. (83-4)

The underground man takes his sense of inferiority towards those beneath him in class or status. V. N. Maikov, a close friend of Dostoevsky, believed that, "only heroism can unite moral worth with poverty. Such "heroism," nonetheless, exists; there will always be a small handful, a saving remnant, of such heroes; the human personality will never allow itself to be completely subjugated by material conditions" (Frank, 211). In *Poor Folk*, such heroism still exists, indeed,

in Devushkin. But in *Poor Folk*, there is still a bit of humanity and hope left in Dostoevsky's Petersburg. Near the end of *Poor Folk*, when Devushkin is nearly physically and emotionally crushed by the totality of his circumstances, Devushkin's superior finds compassion in him and freely awards him a hundred rubles for his dire, economic misfortunes. It is the fact that Devushkin is able to come across another human being, his superior, in fact, who treats him on equal, social footing that most elates him and saves him. He remarks:

I swear to you that it is not the hundred roubles which are as dear to me as the fact that his Excellency deigned to shake my unworthy hand, nobody and drunkard though I may be. In doing this, he restored me to myself. By this act, he resurrected my spirit, made my life forever sweeter. (*Poor Folk*, 122)

There is a distinction in the way Dostoevsky portrays Petersburg society in *Notes from the Underground* from the way he presents it in *Poor Folk*. Of the two works, society's future in *Notes* is much more fatalistic. Could this be because we experience this environment through the consciousness of an unredeemable and spiteful hero? I do not believe so. I believe *Notes from the Underground* presents us with a character who is more sensitive and conscious of the effects a capitalistic society serves its citizens. Devushkin and the underground man have their differences. Devushkin is not an intellectual, whereas, the underground man is. Furthermore, the latter is also more conscious of his condition in society. In *Notes*, at least from the nihilistic perspective of the underground man, society appears as:

[...] intrinsically a sphere of unrestrained egoism, where each man is pitted against every other. Men are rational order beings, only to the degree that they accept the order adherent in the state, which is a universal sphere cutting across the egoistic human actions in civil society. (Giddens, 5)

Although the underground man originally appears to be an unpleasant, despicable, and cruel individual, there are strong reasons for sympathizing and understanding his situation and behavior. In a society that fails to recognize him, identifies him a loser and wretch, how else is this individual able to exist and feel good about himself? How is he able to love himself, otherwise? He confronts and deals with this problem realistically and rationally. Unfortunately, in his solution to make himself feel good about himself, he undergoes a downward spiral becoming increasingly morally bankrupt, tyrannical, ridiculous, and becomes further alienated and disconnected from society. “There was one other circumstance that tormented me at that time, namely that nobody else was like me and I wasn’t like anybody else. I am ‘one person, and they are everybody’, I would think, falling into a brown study” (Dostoevsky, 48-9). In capitalist society, individualism alienates man.

Notes from the Underground reveals an individual’s metamorphosis in his attempt to cope with arbitrary deficiencies produced by an unequal society. But this transformation turns him into an “uglier” individual, metaphorically; his solution is ultimately a logical, necessary sacrifice for elevating his own self-worth. There is no ultimate compromise in these *Notes*. No redemption exists for the underground man just like there is no easy solution available to remedy his dilemma. What is disturbing about this novel and this particular literary hero, as dark and unheroic as he might be, is that he exists well outside the pages of literature and outside his time and place. The underground man loses, and so does society for his solution is hostile and detrimental to human and social welfare. “Let the world go smash as long as I get my tea everyday.” (154). Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* would further develop one of the themes present in *Notes*. Capitalism breeds individualism, indifference, and lack of morality. Not only

does this character voice the concerns of his day and age, but his words reverberate as future warnings for where society would be heading in the following centuries:

There's our nineteenth century... And what softening effect has civilization had on us? Civilization develops in man only a many-sided sensitivity to sensations and... definitely nothing more. And through the development of that many-sidedness man may perhaps progress to the point where he finds pleasure in blood. In fact, it has already happened. ... At least, if civilization has not made man more bloodthirsty, it has certainly made him viler in his thirst for blood than he was before... Then a new political economy will come into existence, all complete, and also calculated with mathematical accuracy, so that all problems will vanish in the twinkling of an eye... for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving he is a man and not a piano-key! It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism! (31-3)

CHAPTER III

THE PROSTITUTION OF MAN UNDER CAPITALISM

“But now it is the alienation of man that is expressed first and foremost in the arts... The arts, as usual, play their part in disclosing the characteristics of the modern world. They mirror, in exasperated form, the negative characteristics of neo-capitalist humanism. And what are these characteristics? I would say they could be summed up in one word: nothingness... So we must have no illusions. We shall have an ever larger number of cheap, well-made consumer goods; our life will become more and more comfortable; and our arts, even the most demanding and difficult ones, indeed those especially, will become more and more accessible to the masses; at the same time we shall feel more and more despair. And we shall feel more and more that at the heart of this prosperity lies nothingness or a fetishism which, like all fetishisms, is an end in itself and cannot be put to the service of man.”

—Alberto Moravia, *Man as an End* (1965)

“For the world says: ‘You have desires and so satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the most rich and powerful. Don’t be afraid of satisfying them and even multiply your desires.’ That is the modern doctrine of the world. In that they see freedom. And what follows from this right of multiplication of desires? In the rich, isolation and spiritual suicide: in the poor, envy and murder... How can a man shake off his habits? What can become of him if he is in such bondage

to the habit of satisfying the innumerable desires he has created for himself? He is isolated, and what concern has he for the rest of humanity? Men have succeeded in accumulating a greater mass of objects, but the joy in the world has grown less.”

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

“Could these sensations make me feel the pleasures of a normal man? It’s getting faster, moving faster now, it’s getting out of hand... on the tenth floor, down the back stairs, it’s a no man’s land... lights are flashing cars are crashing, getting frequent now... I’ve got the spirit, lose the feeling, let it out somehow... Who is right, who can tell, and who gives a damn right now... Until the spirit new sensation takes hold, than you know... I’ve got the spirit, but lose the feeling...”

—Joy Division “Disorder” (1979)

“The dominant theme of my work,” Moravia informs us in a 1958 autobiographical essay, “appears to be man’s relationship with reality” (Rebay, 3). In *Contempt*, this theme is conveyed as man’s dependence for an authenticity which the conditions of his life render impossible. (Rose, 60) According to Joan Ross and Donald Freed in *The Existentialism of Alberto Moravia*, the defining essence of Moravia’s characters is their “inability to relate themselves to a reality that leaves them hollow and empty, struggling with an existence which often reveals itself as shameful, false, and pretentious” (36). For these characters, their construction of reality is determined by the environment they inhabit. Thus, for Moravia, alienation equals impotence and is derivative of his characters’ inability to engage in authentic conduct in an environment that fills them with rage, disgust, and then nausea, apathy and indifference. The novel introduces us to Ricardo Molteni and his outlook on life:

[...] a society which, as I thought, in reference to myself, allowed its best sons to languish and protected its worst ones. Usually in simpler and less cultivated people, this process occurs without their knowing it... but to me, the whole thing was clear and visible... I felt that the metal of my spirit, like a bar of iron that is softened and bent by a persistent flame, was being gradually softened and bent by the troubles that oppressed it. In spite of myself, I was conscious of a feeling of envy for those who did not suffer from such troubles, for the wealthy and the privileged; and this envy, I observed, was accompanied—still against my will—by a feeling of bitterness towards them, which in turn, did not limit its aim to particular persons or situations, but, as if by an uncontrollable bias, tended to assume the general, abstract character of a whole conception of life. (21-2)

According to scholars, Moravia's novels are always about alienation, money, and sex. (Brose, 61) Published in 1954, 90 years after the publication of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Moravia's *Contempt* introduces us to Italian society during the 20th century through the perspective of a middle class writer. Like Dostoevsky before him, Moravia is interested in understanding who modern man is in relation to his specific epoch. While *Contempt* does deal with alienation, Moravia's novel introduces a new concept to the dialogue my thesis examines: the dilemma of authenticity for modern man.

Primarily viewed as an existentialist writer, it is important to recognize that Moravia's fiction has largely been examined from an existential perspective. Moravia, however, recognized his works as Freudian, Marxist, and Existentialist novels. Given this, a purely existential, or purely Marxist perspective would be disadvantageous to our understanding of *Contempt*. For one, existentialism tends to seek to discover the cause and cure of man's problems strictly in

man's inner self; furthermore, the novel makes clear that Molteni is besieged by external tensions which are intrinsic to his historical epoch. It is possible, however, to reconcile Marxism and Existentialism; both movements, after all, concern themselves with the problem of authenticity and alienation presented in the novel. Moravia recognizes the anguish of living to be the foundation of the existentialist current to which he belongs; however, Marx is ultimately needed to understand the manner in which bourgeois society, neo capitalism in Moravia's term, specifically, creates this anguish. In other words, it is Marx who links man's existential alienation to his social conditions. This chapter will attempt to reconcile both perspectives—Existentialism and Marxism—to explicate the afflictions—alienation and inauthenticity—that Moravia's modern man experiences throughout *Contempt*.

For Moravia, modern man is the man of the neo-capitalist age. Neo-capitalism—literally, new capitalism—refers to capitalism that emerged with the development of modern capitalism after World War II. The neo-capitalist ideology represents the idea that everything should be made private property, or privatized, and that the rule of that state should be as minimal as possible. In 1964, Moravia published *Man as an End*. In this essay, Moravia attacks what he considers to be the anti-humanism of the modern world, neo-capitalism, which the writer denounces to be fetishistic, and thus, anti-humanist to man's well-being. For Moravia, the modern world, a capitalist world, is also a Machiavellian world. Once we recognize Moravia's critical attitude to neo-capitalism, we begin to understand his intentions with the characters he creates and the spaces these characters inhabit. According to scholar Oliver Boyd, in a world where traditional social, religious and moral beliefs are no longer acceptable, Moravia considers sex and money the only basic criteria for judging social and human reality.

This struggle for money, power, station in life, expensive clothes, and jewels forms an important obsession of these characters, and betrays that sense of insecurity and instability which contribute so much to their final ruin. ...It is against this background of material comfort, apparent or otherwise, real or not, that the Moravian hero is projected. Likewise, it is this material solidity that shields the true moral fiber of this society. .. (Pacifi, 69-70)

In *Man as an End*, as well as in *Contempt*—this chapter will argue—Moravia’s thesis is that neo-capitalist man, or modern man, suffers because he lives an unreal and inauthentic existence because neo-capitalist society entices him, in his pursuit of material happiness, to be a means rather than an end throughout his life. From this premise, Moravia identifies two modes of inauthenticity which prevail in neo-capitalist society: fetishism and automatism. “For the fetish of material happiness,” Moravia tells us, is the most inhuman of all inhuman ends, and more ruthlessly than any other end, it compels the employment of man as a means” (51). Margaret Brose’s article, “Alberto Moravia: Fetishism and Figuration,” aids us in understanding Moravia’s logic:

The objects of love, labor, and language have become reified. Man himself has become a means chained to some other means, rather than an end... The desire to possess money is an expression of the more basic need to form some immediate bond with the world. All of Moravia’s protagonists are, understandably, given the bleak parameters of this bourgeois hell, seeking a conversion: a conversion from Existence into Being; from lust to love; from an abstract desire to possess money to an immediate contact with the fruits of one’s labor. (63)

What does this mean to us in the context of *Contempt*? Let us consider Moravia's novel within the larger context of the literary works my thesis examines—Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. Moravia's *Contempt* distinguishes itself from Dostoevsky and Ellis' works in two, significant ways. First, Molteni is a man with clear aspirations and ideals regarding what he wants out of life. The novel makes clear Molteni views himself as both an intellectual and an artist; his ambition and his obsession is to produce genuine art by writing for the theater. This distinction allows Molteni the possibility of reaching a solution, or exit, to at least one of modern man's afflictions in bourgeois society—the problem of authenticity.

According to scholar, Charles J. Rolo, "The most important critical complaint about Moravia's fiction has been that, as one writer put it, he keeps cultivating a petty Inferno from which apparently there is no exit" (Moravia, *5 Novels*, xiv). This criticism holds true for Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Ellis' *American Psycho*, but not for Moravia's *Contempt*. There is an exit for Molteni at the end of *Contempt*; however, scholars Ross and Freed are correct in observing that this exit tends to have a painful price for Moravia's characters:

It is true that Moravia's characters often give in to their alienation; that is that they choose to remain entrapped by their empty, hollow existence. For Moravia, alienation equals impotence. Too powerless to act, their indifference, futility, and frustration blind them to alternate courses of authentic conduct. But Moravia's men and women can also resolve their pointless suffering into acts which are meaningful, even though these very acts may bring further suffering. However, the difference just here between the varieties of suffering is crucial;

these new acts take on meaning and purpose; they form the stuff of good faith and authenticity. (51-2)

In other words, Moravia's solution distinguishes between meaningless suffering—man existing as a means to an inauthentic end, money—and suffering as a result of a character's decision to achieve meaningful, self-realization. The novel makes clear Molteni's ideals are to write for the theater. Molteni's discontents, however, begin as soon as he prostitutes this ideal for material prosperity, or money.

Like *Notes from the Underground*, *Contempt* is written as a confession. Molteni describes two, distinct periods of his life throughout his confession. The first period depicts Molteni's circumstances and his outlook on life before renouncing his reality for material prosperity. The second period depicts Molteni's outlook after compromising his authenticity for money. At this point, life for Molteni becomes unendurable. Thus, *Contempt* makes sense if we associate Moravia's proposition from *Man as an End*—neo-capitalism is an anti-humanist force—and read the novel accordingly; this is an explicit Marxist perspective by way of understanding the novel. Like Moravia's first novel, *The Time of Indifference*, *Contempt* is “a ferocious indictment of the falseness which infects contemporary society...” the writer “lays bare the corruption, baseness, and sham which characterize modern man's preoccupation with material wealth and prosperity” (Ross and Freed, 37). The one line that best expresses the culminating epitome of Molteni's frustrations occurs near the end of the novel. It is in this passage where we are able to understand Moravia when he says modern man's source of suffering comes from being a means in neo-capitalist society:

...this script, however, fine, however perfect it is, will be, for me, merely a script... a thing—allow me to say frankly—that I do simply in order to earn

money... Now at the age of twenty-seven one has what are commonly called ideals—and my ideal is to write for the theater!... Why am I unable to do so? Because the world to-day is so constructed that no one can do what he would like to do, and he is forced, instead, to do what others wish him to do. Because the question of money always intrudes—into what we do, into what we are, into what we wish to become, into our work, into our highest aspirations, even into our relations with the people we love!” (170).

The Honeymoon Period: No Room for Love in an Anti-humanistic World

Contempt begins with Molteni describing relations between his wife and himself throughout the first, two years of their marriage. He confesses:

Emilia, in fact, seemed to me wholly without defects, and so also, I believe, I appeared to her. Or perhaps I saw her defects and she saw mine, but, through some mysterious transformation produced by the feeling of *love*, such defects appeared to us both not merely forgivable but even loveable, as though instead of defects they had been positive qualities, if of a rather special kind. Anyhow, we did not judge: we loved each other. (3)

Not only does the novel ultimately denounce love to be an ailment for modern man’s existential dilemma, but the novel forces us to question its existence in a capitalist society. It is clear in *Contempt* that both characters tragically drift apart throughout the course of the story presented in the novel; what is not immediately clear, however, is why this happens. Molteni informs us, “This story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her, Emilia, on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me” (3). *Contempt* can also be read—in fact, the logic of the novel demands it—

as a story of how Molteni, himself, gradually ceases to love his wife, rejecting her to pursue his literary ambitions. The novel makes clear both characters tragically drift apart. Molteni is not a reliable narrator. What Molteni omits from his confession is as important, if not more so, than what he does not omit. This is inherent to the logic of the novel, which tasks the reader to discover who the characters really are and identify their respective motivations. Thus, we begin with an existential start, but resort to Marx to understand Molteni's and Emilia's growing contempt for each other. The novel is efficient in revealing how quickly money interrupts their blissful, honey-moon phase:

[...] although I loved my wife and she loved me, I felt a lack of security for the immediate future. This was true: we barely managed to grub along on what I earned, with great difficulty, as film critic on a daily paper of secondary importance, combined with similar journalistic activities; we lived in a furnished room in a lodging-house; we often had no money for extras, sometimes not even for necessities. (4)

In retrospect for Molteni, there appeared to be genuine love and genuine happiness for the newly married couple during their first, two years of marriage—despite their impaired, financial situation. If we read *Contempt* guided by Moravia's assertions that a real force of anti-humanism exists caused by capitalism, Molteni's happiness—although questionable—during this period could be considered genuine, in fact, for the reason that although their financial situation is impaired, Molteni is still pursuing his desire to write for the theater; at this point in time, Molteni has not prostituted his real ambitions for material interests. "Up till then, I had looked upon myself as an intellectual," Molteni tells us, "a man of culture, a writer for the theater—the "art" theater, I mean—for which I had always had a great passion and to which I felt I was drawn by a

natural vocation” (20). Thus, we can say his life, at this point, remains within the parameters of authenticity. The logic inherent in capitalism—more money equals more happiness—however, cuts both ways. This logic appears to us as the Mephistophelian fetish for material prosperity that inclines Molteni to compromise his genuine ideals: “If anyone had told me, at that time, that I was happy,” Molteni tells us, “I should even have been surprised. How could I have been happy?” (4). In retrospect, Molteni doubts whether Emilia and himself were happy during this period due to their meager financial conditions.

As a direct response for his dissatisfaction with his social status, during this period, Molteni becomes a member of the Communist party. “I also noticed in myself a growing sympathy for those political parties which proclaimed their struggles against the evils and infamies of the *society* to which, in the end, I had attributed the troubles that beset me...” (22). Molteni blames his society for his discontent. Far from being a communist, Molteni does not realize he is, in fact, an individualist. Ultimately, Molteni regrets his decision to become a communist caused by the feeling that by joining the party, he is changing colors, like everyone else, according to the difficulties of the moment. He fears joining the Communist party diminishes his individuality. His fear, which later causes him to regret joining the Communist party, is that he is not acting like the young, unrecognized genius he dreams of being, but like the “starving journalist or the scraggy employee into which I was so terrified that time would transform me” (23). Ultimately, Molteni is not a communist; his decision to join the Party is self-interested. He briefly sympathizes with communism because of his momentary, dire situation; however, he cannot escape his high-flown feelings about himself—which explains one reason why he is alienated from others.

To make matters worse for Molteni during this short-lived period of “happiness,” he is aware his wife longs for a better home than the furnished room they find themselves living in:

And then, from time to time, in moments of excessive weariness or discouragement, she would complain... but not without evident bitterness—asking me how long this provisional, this inferior, way of living would have to continue... (17).

The Amityville Effect: Modern Man’s Tragic, Horror Story

Ultimately, Molteni decides to buy the lease of a more expensive flat to satisfy his wife’s desires of acquiring a suitable home of their own. The implication here is Molteni and Emilia’s assumption that the flat will increase their comfort and overall happiness. Marx tells us the opposite occurs under capitalism in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

The savage in his cave—a natural element which freely offers itself for his use and protection—feels himself no more a stranger, or rather feels himself to be just as much at home as a fish in water. But the cellar-dwelling of the poor man is a hostile dwelling, ‘an alien, restraining power which only gives itself up to him so far as he gives up to it his blood and sweat’ – a dwelling which he cannot look upon as his own home where he might at last exclaim, ‘here I am at home’, but where he finds himself at someone else’s house, in the house of stranger who daily lies in wait for him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent. (117)

Molteni purchases the lease without really having the financial means to do so. His decision to buy the expensive lease becomes the major driving force that leads him to begin living life inauthentically, as a scriptwriter, thus, becoming what Moravia recognizes as being a means rather than an end. This action produces inevitable consequences leading him to gradually harbor

contempt and resentment toward his wife. In other words, this leads him to gradually cease loving Emilia:

[...] I was anxious and seriously distressed, because I did not know in the least how I would manage... in fact, I was so desperate that I almost had a feeling of rancor against Emilia, who by the tenacity of her passion, had in a way forced me to take this imprudent and dangerous step. (18)

Man's dwelling under capitalism—explained by Marx—clarifies the reasons for Molteni's anguish. Thus, Molteni's love towards his wife gradually diminishes, near the end of their first two years, as his contempt for her increases. "I recall that time as a period of great anxiety and, in a way, of diminishing love for Emilia" (19). Moravia's protagonist, at this point, cannot help but criticize his wife for not worrying about the manner in which he is able to afford the lease despite knowing his financial position perfectly well. "I wondered how it came about that she, who loved me so much, failed to guess at the cruel anxieties that oppressed me..." (20). At this point, Molteni's opinion of Emilia cannot be described as coming from a man who loves his wife. There is an abrasive and marked difference regarding Molteni's favorable opinion of his wife at the beginning of his marriage, to the transformation that "mysteriously" appears after he is subjected to a more financially demanding style of life:

Emilia had not had a good education... So she had grown up in poverty, and, as regards her education and manner of thinking, could almost be described as belonging to the working class; and, like many women of that class, she seemed to have nothing to fall back upon except her common sense, which was so solid as to appear sometimes like stupidity or, to say the least, narrowness of ideas...

But there it was: I had not married a woman who could understand and share my ideas, tastes and ambitions; instead I had married, for her beauty, an uncultivated, simple typist, full it seemed to me, of all the prejudices and ambitions of the class from which she came. With the first, I could have faced the discomforts of a poverty stricken, disorganized life, in a studio or a furnished room, in expectation of the theatrical successes that were bound to come; but for the second I had to provide the home of her dreams. And at the cost, I thought in desperation, of having to renounce, perhaps forever, my precious literary ambitions. (21)

Despite being the only character in my thesis that is married, this passage makes clear how alienated Molteni is. The cold, impersonal tone Molteni uses to describe his wife, as well as the precise reasons this character provides to explain why they are ultimately incompatible, bleakly suggests that love and marriage are not impervious to the effects of alienation. Incapable of recognizing his wife as anything other than a lower class, uncultivated typist, Moravia's hero fabricates preconceived assumptions to rationalize not only his wife's limitations but her desires. This passage reveals how Molteni's view of his wife reveals his unmasked prejudice towards the social class from whence she comes.

Throughout much of *Contempt*, Molteni fails to understand why Emilia has ceased loving him. Earlier, I pointed out that Molteni viewed his confession as a story that set out to relate how his wife discovered certain defects in him, judged him, and consequently ceases loving him. We understand Molteni's growing contempt and frustrations directed at his wife; however, why does Emilia harbor contempt towards her husband? Marx answers this question. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx explains the manner in which marriage—in a society characterized by the ownership of private property—reduces women to prostitution:

The relationship of private property persists as the relationship of the community to the world of things. Finally, this movement of opposing universal private property to private property finds expression in the brutish form of opposing to *marriage* (certainly a *form of exclusive private property*) the *community of women*, in which a woman becomes a piece of *communal* and *common* property. It may be said that this idea of the *community of women* gives away the secret of this as yet completely crude and thoughtless communism. Just as woman passes from marriage to general prostitution, so the entire world of wealth (that is, of man's objective substance) passes from the relationship of exclusive marriage with the owner of private property to a state of universal prostitution with the community.

Thus, Marx not only explains Molteni's existential angst, but he also explains Emilia's. Although *Contempt* is presented from the perspective of Molteni, the novel makes Marx's observations—women pass from marriage to general prostitution—explicit on numerous occasions. Emilia's diminishing love towards Molteni is caused, we realize, by her awareness of being used as an object, prostituted in a sense, in order for Molteni to secure his employment as a scriptwriter. Battista, the producer who hires Molteni to write his films, is attracted to Emilia and seduces her every chance he gets. Emilia is aware of this; her contempt for her husband stems from feeling she is being prostituted, in a sense, from a husband who fails to defend her honor. Emilia is disgusted with Battista for his advances toward her; furthermore, her contempt increases in noticing her husband's indifference, and for even seeming to encourage Battista's advances to her. The reader sees this occur in the novel. Molteni, the narrator of the story,

appears to ironically attach no importance to the significance of his passivity. Every time this occurs in the novel, his wife's feelings towards him continue to diminish:

Then, completely reassured with regard to her feelings towards Battista's demeanor towards her, I went on to point out to her the reasons that told so strongly in favor of her giving us her company on these occasions... how her presence gave pleasure to Battista, as was shown by her urging, every time he invited us: 'Of course, bring your wife'; how her absence, unexpected and difficult to justify as it was, might appear ill-natured, or even worse, insulting to Battista, upon whom our living now depended... it was preferable that she put up with the fatigue and boredom required of her. (10-11)

Early in the novel, Molteni informs us Emilia and himself are invited to Battista's house to discuss Molteni's work. Battista, whose car has only two seats, offers to drive Emilia while Molteni suggests he will find another way of reaching Battista's house. It is not difficult for the reader to realize Emilia is upset at her husband for allowing her to ride with Battista, who is clearly attracted to her and seduces her behind her husband's back. Not only does Molteni treat Emilia as an object, but he treats her as a means to an end. This is Sergio's dilemma in Moravia's unfinished novel, *Two Friends*, whose plot bears uncanny resemblance to that of *Contempt*'s: "How could she not realize that he did not love her and considered her an object, precious, perhaps, but inanimate, to be used as a means to an end?" (157). Molteni believes Battista might take offense if he opposes him, and thus, asks Emilia to ride with his employer.

Throughout *Contempt*, Moravia's hero makes it clear how much he hates to write film scripts; he agonizes his dilemma to his wife asking her whether he should write the script for *The Odyssey*. Like Rheingold asks of Ulysses, however, "are we to believe him, Molteni?" No, we

are not. Molteni's ambitions—until the conclusion of the novel presents Molteni with authentic alternatives—are to continue working writing film-scripts and to continue living in the flat that perhaps means a lot to *him*, as it could mean to his wife. Molteni attributes little importance to the incident; however, we can clearly deduce Emilia does not.

“Emilia, you go on with Battista... I'll follow in a taxi.”

Emilia looked at me then answered slowly, in a reluctant tone of voice:

“Wouldn't it be better for Battista to go on, and for us two to go together in a taxi?”

[...] then I suddenly noticed that her beautiful face, usually so calm and harmonious, was now darkened and, one might say, distorted by an almost painful perplexity. (5)

As if this association was not clear enough in the novel, the best analogy Molteni is able to use to his wife's changed attitude toward him, later in the novel, is that of a prostitute. This should not be surprising to Molteni for he treats his wife as a prostitute to satisfy his employer, to continue to secure his job as a scriptwriter and to acquire financial security to continue living in the flat:

I was no longer face to face with the wife I loved and who loved me, but with a rather impatient and inexperienced prostitute who was preparing to submit passively to my embraces hoping only that they would be brief and not too tiring. (35)

“...you've never refused me... but the way in which you do it is not the way of a person who loves.”

“Why? In what way do I do it?”

I ought to have answered her: “You do it like a prostitute who submits to her client and wants only that the thing should be quickly over... That’s how you do it!” (68)

Molteni fails to see that he is—in a sense—prostituting his wife Emilia for money. Thus, the novel makes Marx’s theory explicit.

At this point, a valid question to ask is what really characterizes Molteni’s view of love? What is the novel suggesting love becomes in a capitalist society? These answers do manifest themselves in *Contempt*, particularly, in a scene where Molteni dines with Pasetti and his wife. Pasetti, described by Molteni as a mediocre, psychologically obtuse, unimaginative, and nerveless individual, is a director Molteni collaborates with early in his scriptwriting career. As they dine together, Molteni observes the devotion Pasetti’s wife holds for her husband. It is here where we realize Molteni’s ideal view of love reduces the woman into an object:

[...] she [Pasetti’s wife] never took her eyes off his face for one single moment, like an affectionate dog with its master. Pasetti, so colorless, so thin, so mediocre, so obviously lacking in qualities that might please a woman, seemed an incredible object for attention of that kind [...] I shall never be happy like them. How shabby all this is, how ordinary, how unoriginal. I am following in the footsteps of all husbands who are not loved by their wives—envying a perfectly ordinary couple while they hug and kiss their offspring [...] (48-57)

“The Shining Effect”: Molteni the Scriptwriter

After these first, two years of marriage, Molteni’s financial situation improves by way of him becoming a scriptwriter. This leads us to examine the second period of Molteni’s marriage which is the major focus of *Contempt*’s plot:

At the end of those two first years of married life our situation at last improved: I got to know Battista, a film producer, and for him I wrote my first film-script [...]

At the same time, however, my relations with Emilia began to change for the worst. My story, in fact, begins with my first own beginnings as a professional script-writer and with the deterioration of my relations with my wife—two occurrences that were almost simultaneously and, as will be seen, directly linked together. (4)

Being a scriptwriter disgusts Molteni and distances him from his true ambitions; the only thing it does, however, is increase his material prosperity. Rather than find his wife and himself happier with a bigger, financial check, Molteni's contempt increases in all aspects of his existence.

According to Marx, in bourgeois society, "The product of labor is labor [...]. The realization of labor manifests itself so much as a loss of reality, that the worker becomes unreal to the point that he starves to death." It is Molteni's new reality the following passage conveys. Furthermore, as part of the broader, literary context I am positioning *Contempt* in, it is interesting to recognize Molteni's first line in the following passage to be largely reminiscent of the underground man's first line in *Notes from the Underground*. At this point in his life, Molteni describes his day to day life accordingly:

I began therefore to live like one who carries within him the infirmity of an impending disease but cannot make his mind to go to the doctor; in other words, I tried not to reflect too much either upon Emilia's demeanor towards me, or upon my work. I knew that someday I would have to face this kind of reflection; but just because I was unaware that it was unavoidable, I sought to put it off as long as possible; the little that I had already suspected made me shy away from it, and

also, albeit unconsciously, fear it. And so I went on having those relations with Emilia which at the beginning had seemed to me intolerable, and which now, when I feared the worst, I tried to persuade myself—without any success—were normal[...] In the meantime, I continued to work diligently, even furiously, though more and more unwillingly, and with a more and more decided repugnance. If I had had the courage to acknowledge the situation to myself, at that moment, I should certainly have renounced my work and renounced love as well, for I should have been convinced, as I was later, that all life had gone out of both. (45-6)

Molteni has transformed, in Moravia's words, into an automaton, or a lifeless individual acting his day to day existence in a mechanical fashion. In Ellis' novel, *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman is similarly described as a cipher, a void, and as a nonhuman being—much more dramatically and exaggerated than Molteni. This is caused by Bateman's insane consumption, his fetish of material prosperity, and his fixed, social class.

To return to the novel, Molteni gradually and painfully realizes the disillusionment that comes from pursuing a life where the only existing end is money, and one which reduces both man and woman to be mere, means. Molteni contemplates his situation at a poignant moment in the novel when he regrets having agreed to write a commercial, inartistic script for the adaptation of Homer's the *Odyssey*:

For the first time, I was given a glimpse of the difficulty of the task which I had undertaken rather light-heartedly and thinking only of material advantage [...] I said to myself; 'why should I subject myself to this disagreeable effort [...] to the compromises that are bound to follow, to the bitterness of putting my name to a

production that is false and commercial? Why all this?' [...] in brief, by
appending my signature to the contract, I had sold my soul to a devil [...] (156-7).

The character of Molteni's brings to mind Leo Tolstoy's character, Ivan Ilyich, from his short story, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*—a literary work which could have easily established itself as part of this thesis. It is interesting to read the following passage from Tolstoy's short story, in light of Moravia's *Contempt*. Confronting death, Ilyich realizes his dilemma:

His marriage—a mere accident—and his disillusionment with it, and his wife's bad breath, and the sensuality, and *the pretense!* And that deadly service, and those worries about money; and so it had gone for a year, two years, ten years, twenty years—on and on in the same way. And the longer it lasted the most deadly it became. [Ivan Ilyich states...] 'It's as though I had been going steadily downhill while I imagined I was going up. That's exactly what happened. In public opinion I was going uphill, but to the same extent life was slipping away from me. And now it's gone and all I can do is die! (119-20)

One of the reasons why confronting death is intolerable for Ivan Ilyich is because at the moment the character looks to the past to judge his whole life, he painfully recognizes how wasted he spent it. Nothing in his life was real or genuine; thus, Ivan Ilyich struggles coming to terms with this painful reality because he cannot help but feel he really lived a real and authentic life according to the logic of the capitalist society he operates in. He spent his life as a careerist who concerned himself with the sole purpose of ascending the sociological ladder of success, attaining material prosperity, and finally, establishing connections with people of good standing. His death produces an existential dilemma when he realizes how inauthentic and wasted his

entire life really was. The difference between Ilyich and Molteni is that Molteni does not need to stare death in the face to realize this.

Inauthentic Man Produces Inauthentic Art

By situating Molteni as a scriptwriter involved in producing films, Moravia places much more emphasis and attention to the idea that money destroys the integrity of art, as well as the manner in which modern work, or labor in a capitalist society, alienates the individual both in his work environment, as well as in his relations with his loved ones. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx argues, “The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things.” In *Contempt*, Molteni attributes a large part of these occurrences with his dissatisfaction writing scripts, a profession far removed from his ideal of writing for the theater. Having no other way of paying the lease for the newly acquired flat, he feels forced to accept and continue this profession, despite his disgust. “Now that this love was on the point of failing me,” Molteni tells us, “the work lost its meaning and justification and acquired, in my eyes, the absurd character of sheer slavery” (38). Aside from this, Molteni relates to us—in explicit Marxist language—why he feels discouraged, repugnant, and alienated from his job as a scriptwriter:

The script-writer, in short, is the man who remains always in the background; who expends the best of his blood for the success of others; and who, although two thirds of the film’s fortune depends upon him, will never see his own name on the posters where the names of the director, of the actors and the producer are printed. (39).

Molteni’s explanation for his disgust to work, can be traced to Marx’s writings, specifically, in “The Estrangement of Labor.” Marx claims the following:

First, the fact that labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. ... His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. ...so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (30)

Speaking of scriptwriters and their work, Molteni continues, "He may be very well paid, but he can never say: 'It was *I* who made this film [...] In this film *I* expressed myself [...] this film is *me*'" (39). Money becomes the real and only purpose of his job. Furthermore, the attitude of Molteni, at work, is also telling as to why he is alienated from his labor—reasons that bring to mind the underground man.

[...] the script-writer finds himself forced to work with people he does not care for, people who are his inferiors in culture and breeding, who irritate him by features of character or behavior that are offensive to him [...] in short, the creation of a fictitious, artificial intimacy whose only purpose is the making of a film, or the making of money. (40-1)

Molteni's ego and contemptible attitude prevent him from recognizing his collaborators as anything but inferior individuals. Incapable of recognizing anyone in equal footing with himself, in terms of culture and breeding, we observe, in the former passage, the manner in which Molteni, like the underground man, also perpetuates his own alienation. In fact, Molteni's disgust with other people in his work is reminiscent of Jean Paul Sartre's play, "No Exit." One of the most evocative lines in Sartre's play is spoken by the character of Garcin when he realizes what hell really is:

So this is hell? I'd never have believed it. You re-member all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell—is other people! (26)

In an alienated society where money becomes the only real end for individuals, where people are lead to prostitute their genuine realities, ambitions, and ideals for an anti-humanistic fetish, hell can be other people. If the novel is trying to say that characters like Molteni are not the exception, but a realistic portrayal of common man under a capitalist society, then there is truth to this idea. It is not unfathomable to imagine a capitalist society populated with negative, alienated, and envious egomaniacs.

To return to Dostoevsky's novel, In *Notes from the Underground*, the underground man felt a strong aversion for feeling the need to wear a false mask in order to artificially socialize with others, or impress others, like he does with Liza or his superior at work. Dostoevsky's hero admits, "I'll put on airs, and start smiling and trying to pretend... Pah, disgusting! And that's not the worst. There's something more important, nastier, and still lower. Yes, lower! And I shall put on that dishonest lying mask again, again!" (105). In *Contempt*, we hear the same anguished

voice of the underground man in Molteni when he discusses socializing at work. The need to wear a social mask is indicative of the falseness infecting Molteni's work environment:

This (artificial) intimacy, moreover, is of the worst possible kind, that is, the most fatiguing, the most unnerving and the most cloying that can be imagined, since it is founded not on work that can be done in silence, but on the spoken word [...]
And indeed the mechanical, stereotyped way in which scripts are fabricated strongly resembles a kind of rape of the intelligence. (41)

Illusion becomes more real than Reality

Another important theme shared by the three works my thesis examines is the authors' treatment of the theme of *illusion versus reality*. "Moravia suggests in *Il Disprezzo* as he does in the rest of his work, that illusion is more real than reality for his characters" (Horton, 208). "If you don't tell me the truth," Molteni tells his wife, "I might imagine anything... I might imagine something really nasty" (107). Moravia modernizes this idea when it is both literature and cinema that makes reality fragile for Molteni. In the novel, Battista offers Molteni the chance of writing a cinematic script for Homer's *The Odyssey*. Moravia confronts the question of artistic integrity in a world concerned with money and materialism by proposing two opposing treatments for the script. There is the producer's vision, reflected by Battista, who desires the film to be pure spectacle, and thus, inartistic yet profitable. He masks his real motive—that of producing a profitable film—by attacking neo-realist films as unhealthy and tiresome. "When I say that the neo-realistic film is not healthy, I mean that it is not a film that inspires people with courage to live, that increases their confidence in life. The neo-realistic film is depressing, pessimistic, and gloomy" (84). Molteni recognizes Battista's desired treatment of the *The Odyssey* as "spectacle," to be a question of money, or profit. Molteni tells us, "I waited patiently

for him to reach the point where, always and inevitably, he (Battista) came to a halt—the question of economic advantage” (84). The other vision is perpetuated by Rheingold, who is played by Fritz Lang in Godard’s film; Rheingold is the director Battista hires to collaborate with Molteni; however, his desired treatment of *The Odyssey* is meant to symbolize real *art*, and not spectacle. Using Freud as a guide, Rheingold’s desired vision of the epic recognizes *Ulysses* to represent the Everyman. “We shall explore the mind of *Ulysses*—or rather his subconscious,” states Rheingold. Coincidentally, Rheingold’s Freudian treatment of Homer’s epic appears to parallel and explain the marital problems plaguing Molteni.

It is the slowness of Ulysses return... in spite of his much proclaimed love for Penelope, he does in reality betray her every chance he gets... Homer tells us that Ulysses thought only of Penelope, that the one thing he desired was to be reunited with Penelope... bought ought we to believe him Molteni? Ulysses, in reality, is a man who is afraid of returning to his wife because his relations with her have been unsatisfactory, even before he goes off to war... and with the fear in his heart, seeks in his subconscious mind to create obstacles in his own path... In *The Odyssey*—to put it briefly—Penelope represents barbarism and Ulysses civilization. (142-3)

In fact, if we assume Rheingold is correct in his analysis of Ulysses and Penelope, then this incident reveals the key source of Emilia’s contempt for her husband. When Battista suggests Molteni and his wife travel to Capri together to work in the film, Emilia once again shows reluctance in going. Battista demands they both stay at his villa, throughout this time. She anticipates Battista will probably court her again, and she appears frustrated that her husband cannot sense this and that he does nothing to protect her honor.

I was immediately aware—as I had feared a few days before, when I too hastily accepted Battista’s offer—that Emilia, for some reason of her own, did not like this plan. In fact, she at once freed herself from my embrace and, drawing away from one corner of the divan, repeated:

“Battista’s villa... and you’ve already accepted?” (133)

To draw the last straw, once in Capri, Molteni is presented with another opportunity by which he can redeem himself to his wife. Once again, Battista suggests Emilia ride with him to the villa, suggesting Molteni and Rheingold ride together to discuss the script. Again, Moravia’s hero passively permits his reluctant wife, who really desires to ride to the villa with her husband, to ride with Battista. Ironically, Molteni fails to attach little importance to these incidents, much to his wife’s dismay.

I glanced, automatically, at Emilia, and noticed on her face that curious look of disintegration of the features that I had observed on other occasions—the sign in her of perplexity and aversion. But I attached no importance to it; nor did I in any way connect this expression with Battista’s proposal, which was in any case, quite reasonable. ...I saw Emilia look at me with a bewildered, questioning air, and wondered whether I ought not to insist on taking her with me. But I thought Battista might take offense... (136)

The comparison between Homer’s heroes and Moravia’s heroes is evidently intentional, from the writer. We are meant to make this connection when Rheingold discusses his interpretation of *The Odyssey*. The similarities are evident because Molteni describes Emilia, himself, and their relations in the exact manner in which Rheingold describes Ulysses and Penelope’s. “And so *The Odyssey* was no longer the marvelous adventure,” complains Molteni,

“but had become the interior drama of a modern man entangled in the contradictions of a psychosis” (144). Rheingold’s Freudian analysis of *The Odyssey* neatly and clearly reveals the answer why love, for Molteni, or for modern man, as the director views it, is impossible.

What is the psychology of Ulysses and Penelope? Penelope is the traditional feminine figure of archaic, feudal, aristocratic Greece; she is virtuous, noble, proud, religious, a good housewife, a good mother, a good wife. Ulysses, on the other hand, anticipates, in character, the man of later Greece, the sophists and the philosophers. Ulysses is a man without prejudices, and if necessary, without scruples, subtle, reasonable, intelligent, irreligious, skeptical, even cynical. ... The reason for the bad relations between Ulysses and Penelope must therefore be sought in the difference between their characters. (186)

Rheingold concludes his analysis by explaining that in order to regain Penelope’s lost love and restore himself in the eyes of his wife, Ulysses ultimately realizes he needs to kill her suitors. “Civilization has its inconveniences,” Rheingold tells Molteni, “it forgets, for instance, very easily, the importance that so called questions of honor have for people who are not civilized” (190). Molteni does not exist in the age of Ulysses; he realizes this himself. “In theory you ought to kill Battista,” Molteni analyzes, “but we live in a less violent and uncompromising world than that of the *Odyssey*” (195). This bleak view of modern man is not original in Moravia, but is acknowledged by the underground man in Dostoevsky’s *Notes*.

I was the only one in the whole office who always seemed to myself a slave and a coward precisely because I also seemed (to myself) civilized. But I not only seemed, I really was a coward and a slave. I say this without shame. Every decent

man in this age is, and must be, a coward and a slave. That is his normal condition. I am profoundly certain of this. (48).

Ultimately, this becomes Molteni's cruel reality. "But don't you understand," Molteni cries to Emilia, "don't you understand that my situation has become intolerable... that I cannot go on taking money from the man... the man who is on the process of seducing my wife?" (218). Unfortunately, Molteni realizes this too late in the novel. Why does Molteni wait so long to admit this to himself? Herbert Goldstone makes the claim, "The theme of the novel is the shattering of illusions based on self-deception" (665). According to Herbert Goldstone's article, "Arts and Letters: The Ghost of Moravia," both characters mask their value for money which, ultimately, leads to their growing "contempt" for each other:

At first, neither Ricardo nor Emilia adequately recognizes how much he values money, and how low is his self-esteem. Ricardo does not see that his excessive concern for Emilia's material comfort may mask his own desire to be rich, and his belief that he has to compromise his ideals by writing scenarios for money may be a defense against seeing his limitations as a writer. Emilia, for her part, recognizes that Battista is more self-confident and more honest about his desire to have money than is Ricardo, but she cannot perceive that her preference for Battista indicates how much she also values money. (666)

Goldstone's reading of *Contempt* is valid considering that Moravia's fiction is derived—according to existentialist scholars—by his characters' inability to engage in authentic conduct in an environment that fills them with "rage, disgust, and then nausea, apathy and indifference." It is only at the end of *Contempt*—after Molteni loses Emilia only for her to die alongside Battista in a car crash—that Molteni sees reality, much like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich.

An Exit for Modern Man?

Jean-Luc Godard understood Moravia's intentions with *Contempt*, which he translated successfully in his cinematic adaptation of Moravia's novel—*Les Mépris*. Godard's message is Moravia's own—capitalism entices modern man to prostitute his self, his ideals, his love, his art—his whole life, really—for the fetish of material prosperity—money. In his article, “Godard's *Contempt*: Alberto Moravia Transformed,” Andrew Horton discusses the ending of Godard's film. Not only does Horton tell us what has occurred to the characters in both the novel and film—prostitution is an evident theme— at the end of the novel, but his analysis also recognizes that Molteni has exited the false reality constructed by capitalist society.

Completely alone as a result of Camille's [Emilia in the novel] death, he [Paul/Molteni] chooses to return to Rome in order to fulfill his wish to write for the theater. He now begins to live for himself rather than “prostitute” himself for others... Paul [Molteni in the novel] has sold himself to Prokosch [Battista in the novel] for money which he needs to buy the apartment he hopes will please Camille. Camille, on the other hand, appears to have sold out for the apartment, and Prokosch has prostituted cinema and poetry for commercial success. But by choosing to pursue his interest in theater, Paul suggests he is on the way to self-realization. (209)

At its core, *Contempt* is about an individual seeking an authentic reality for himself after experiencing the falsity that comes from compromising himself, his dreams, and his love for the fetish of material interests. In order to escape his hell, Molteni must act:

I saw that I now had a good reason for throwing over the *Odyssey* script, for ridding myself of a task that disgusted me and returning me to my beloved

theater. This consideration had the quality of being good for the three of us—for Emilia, for Battista, and for myself. The kiss I had witnessed marked, in reality, the culminating point of the falsity against which my whole life was contending, both in my relationship with Emilia and in my work. At last I saw the possibility of clearing away this falsity, once and for all. (165)

For Molteni, action means renouncing material success as well as anything else he recognizes as false in his compromised reality. It means abandoning his job as a scriptwriter, abandoning the troublesome flat, and abandoning his wife, whom, ultimately, the novel reveals he does not love. A return to authenticity for Molteni also means his return to his only real end—the theater. It is important to observe that this solution, although it restores meaning and authenticity to Molteni's life, does not necessarily end his alienation. This is because the novel portrays Molteni as an individualist. There is no exit.

CHAPTER IV

THE REIFICATION OF MAN UNDER CAPITALISM

“In the modern world, it would be hard to find the solid confidence, the full-bloodedness and the richness of temperament that were the hall-marks of humanism at its dawn. The man of the neo-capitalist age, with his refrigerators, his supermarkets, his mass-produced cars, his missiles and his television sets, is so bloodless, insecure, devitalized, and neurotic that he provides every justification for those ready and anxious to accept his decline as a positive fact, and reduce him to the position of an object among other objects. But unfortunately neo-capitalist man is unable to forget his own nature which, after all, is human. And so his anti-humanism falls short of real conviction. Beneath the bright, abstract, appearance, we find—if we look carefully—boredom, disgust, impotence and unreality.”

—Alberto Moravia, *Man as an End* (1965)

“[...] for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving he is a man and not a piano-key! It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism!”

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1864)

“Morning seems strange, almost out of place... Spent all my time, learnt a killer’s art. Took threats and abuse ‘till I learned the part. Can you stay for these days? These days, these days... Use outward deception to get away, broken heart romance to make it pay. We’ll drift through it

all, it's the modern age. Can you stay for these days? These days, these days..."

—Joy Division "These Days" (1979)

"They all wanna be something better... a better singer, a better actor, a better job... better money, better lover... It's too much... Too much conceit, give me one religion, it's too much...too much passion, information...too much selfish, too much fake... too much to take, it's too much... They all wanna be something better... Really a better human... It's too much, It's too much... Aaah yeah, aah yeah... It's too much..."

—Bauhaus "Too Much 21st Century" (2008)

Bret Easton Ellis' controversial novel, *American Psycho*, (1991) explores the mind of a serial killer, Patrick Bateman. This character personifies the acme of success in capitalist society during the consumerist eighties in Manhattan, New York. The internal logic of *American Psycho* does not allow us to read the novel, as one critic claimed, as a "how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women" (Young, 86). Instead, the novel forces the reader to supply the moral framework of the book and to intervene and question its message. Ellis' novel is stylistically and structurally controlled and calls into question the extent of Bateman's realism, his reliability as a narrator, and even Bateman's acts of violence. Although many critics regarded the novel as an immoral work of fiction, specifically due to its violence as well as the specific portrayal of the vapid, yuppie characters in the text, the logic of the novel never actually condones this particular class' lifestyle, attitude, or behavior. The novel does repel us with grotesquerie; however, it is not the fictional murders, themselves that should elicit repulsion from the reader, but the bourgeois hell these characters find themselves in that elicits their particular, yuppie lifestyle and attitude as normal.

American Psycho conveys the madness of the Reagan, consumerist eighties and suggests contemporary capitalism is, ironically, more damaging to the human spirit of individuals meant to prosper most from its offerings. The novel examines the psyche of a privileged, elite persona in a society experiencing a more developed stage of capitalism compared to that of the previous novels. In her essay on *American Psycho*, “The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,” Elizabeth Young describes the state of Bateman’s society:

This is up-town, this is the modern world, the adult world—money status, pragmatism, skills, market-value... It’s an amoral world, a status-driven, food-obsessed world, a world of interchangeable people, a misogynistic world despite its apparent equal opportunities for women and finally a brutal, violent and terrified world. (99)

The aim of my thesis proposes that capitalism determines a particular consciousness. Reading *American Psycho* and adhering to its controlled textual structure, explicitly reveals that a fictional character such as Patrick Bateman represents something that distorts human nature. This chapter will show that Bateman personifies a historical entity; his consciousness is a product of the madness of the consumerist, capitalist eighties.

Insane, Previous Criticism of *American Psycho*

At this point, I refer to Norman Mailer’s 1991 review of *American Psycho*, “The Children of the Pied Piper.” Tasked with reviewing the controversial novel before its publication, Mailer concerned himself to ascertain whether the novel was, in fact, a valid, artistic work. One of the mistakes Mailer makes in his review is to read the author in the place of Patrick Bateman. “The suspicion creeps in that much about what the author knows about violence does not come from his imagination but out of what he has picked up from *Son and Grandson of Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre [...]” (1075). The logic of the text makes clear that the violence in *American Psycho* is grotesque, absurd, and extreme to reflect the consumption habits of its protagonist. Bateman is obsessed with serial killers and has an affinity for renting horror videos. Thus, the violence in Patrick Bateman’s murders is intentionally structured to mimic the violence this character has read about or viewed. Another problem Mailer had regarding the violence, specifically, was in its lack of realism. “We won’t know about extreme acts of violence,” declares Mailer, “until some author makes such acts intimately believable [...]” (1075). Mailer is right in suggesting that the violent acts that occur in *American Psycho* are not “intimately believable.” Unlike Mailer, I believe this is not a sign of Ellis’ incompetence as a writer, but that this is the intention of the author, as well; later in this chapter, I show how the logic of the novel depicts Bateman as an unreliable narrator and provides enough textual evidence to make us doubt the murders actually happen. The valid criticism that the extreme acts of violence are not intimately believable can be further proof that the depiction of absurd, gratuitous violence in *American Psycho* is controlled and designed precisely to lead the reader to doubt that murders are actually taking place in the novel.

Mailer concluded his review by faulting Ellis for presenting us a murderer who lacks any semblance of inner life for us to identify with. “Bateman, however, remains a cipher,” Mailer observes correctly. “The failure of this book,” argues Mailer, “is that by the end we know no more of Bateman’s need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film” (1076). My thesis will demonstrate what Mailer failed to grasp: it is intentional, necessary even—if we follow the logic of the novel—that Bateman is meant to be understood as a cipher, a void, as something not human. Furthermore, in the context of my thesis, Norman Mailer also adds, “...Ellis believes he

is close to Dostoyevsky's ground to quote him in the epigraph... [*American Psycho*] the first novel to come along in years that takes on deep and Dostoyevskian themes is written by a half-competent and narcissistic young pen" (1074, 1076). This is the bare extent to which Mailer connects Ellis' novel to Dostoevsky. In his analysis of *American Psycho*, Julian Murphet—who I am heavily indebted to and find myself largely in agreement with regarding many of the points disclosed in this thesis—also criticized Mailer's reading of the novel. Murphet writes:

Both Mailer and Rosenblatt cite Dostoevsky as the inevitable point of contrast, since it was Dostoevsky who had first delivered a fictional murderer with sufficient psychological depth and complexity to have attained our genuine 'apprehension.' And of course, Ellis courts this comparison with his first epigraph, from *Notes from the Underground*, which explicitly associates his novel with Dostoevsky's. But critical comparisons such as these are always a sign of intellectual laziness. Rather than rest secure in a literary example some century old, surely the task is to come to terms with the formal law of the text at hand, and determine *why* Ellis should have created a psychological portrait with no depth. Mailer failed this task comprehensibly. (70)

Although I largely find myself in agreement with Murphet's reading of *American Psycho* in many respects, I disagree with him on several of the points mentioned in the above passage. There appears to be some confusion regarding which particular, Dostoyevskian novel influenced *American Psycho*; this is clear in the above passage. In the context of Mailer's review, who we are to assume Murphet read carefully, it appears that the Dostoyevskian novel mentioned above—and the one being used as a source of reference—is *Crime and Punishment*, as there are no murders in *Notes from the Underground*. This is evident when Murphet highlights, "...it was

Dostoevsky who had first delivered a fictional murderer with sufficient psychological depth and complexity to have attained our genuine ‘apprehension’ (70). It is evident Murphet dismisses Dostoevsky’s epigram in his reading of *American Psycho*—he even condemns Mailer and Rosenblatt for citing Dostoevsky—but why is this? Contrary to Murphet’s view, is not the sign of intellectual laziness rather the dismissal of any potential vital clue or evidence by way of the writer’s own intention? If we follow the formal law of the text—as suggested by Murphet—why brush aside Ellis’ intention to initiate readers to his novel’s text, by way of Dostoevsky, from the start? If *Notes from the Underground* had not been published with Dostoevsky’s vital epigram, would readers be able to figure out Dostoevsky’s intentions with his work single handedly? These are valid questions to consider if we pay attention to Murphet’s claim, in the context of Mailer’s review, and in the broader context of my thesis—that is—to situate Ellis’ novel in a broader literary context which allows us to view these novels as a resuming dialogue interested in capturing specific developments of society across space and time—in this case capitalism—and more importantly, its impact on us, modern man.

To return to Mailer, his 1991 review of *American Psycho* finds the novel not entirely meritless; Mailer identified the novel’s thesis to be:

American Psycho is saying that the eighties were spiritually disgusting and the author’s presentation is the crystallization of such horror. When an entire new class thrives on the ability to make money out of the manipulation of money, and becomes altogether obsessed with the surface of things—that is luxury commodities, food, and appearance—then, in effect says Ellis, we have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: The objective

correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder. Murder is now a lumber mill where humans can be treated with the same lack of respect as trees. (1073)

Mailer's thesis for Ellis novel' questions us to consider society. "It is art," observes Mailer, "that has to take the leap into all the truths that our media society is insulated against" (1072). As a precursor to Ellis' novel, reading Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* in a Marxist framework, as I did in chapter one, proves to be a legitimate and relevant way to understand *American Psycho*; however, my thesis follows the law of its text, as well. Examining the novels contiguously provides a better understanding and appreciation of the theories inherent in both works and best explains the function and afflictions of Ellis' protagonist, Patrick Bateman.

Explicating *American Psycho* through Marx and Dostoevsky

The first, tangible link connecting the two works appears when Ellis excerpts Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* on the inlay of his novel, prior to the text of his story:

Both the authors of these *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed, must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of the recent past. He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us. In the fragment entitled "Underground" this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst. The subsequent fragment will consist of the actual "notes," concerning certain events in his life.

Prior to beginning the novel proper, the choice that Ellis makes to begin the actual book with this passage from Dostoevsky provides evidence that the novel is structured with a clear recognition of this connection that might not have been evident to all readers if it had not been included; it is significant that it is the very first thing written. This is an extremely significant passage; by citing Dostoevsky, Ellis is making explicit my thesis, which is that these two novels, separated in time and space, national traditions and moments, are engaged with the same problems despite the historical, cultural, and temporal differences. Therefore, we should follow Ellis' suggestion and read this novel in light of Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's passage in *American Psycho* leads us to "view the work from its outset, as a commentary on a society gone wrong, in which the protagonist is perhaps incidental to the purpose at hand" (Newal, 1). Thus, the value of reading *American Psycho* through the lens of *Notes from the Underground* and from within the Marxist critique of capitalism, seems valid. Capitalism—its impact in society and individuals—is much more apparent and revealing in Ellis' novel. What is true of the society in *Notes*, is largely still true of the society in *American Psycho*, despite being written approximately 130 years apart, set in different countries, and depicting different stages of capitalism: "... it struck me that I was infinitely better-looking, more successful and richer than this poor bastard would ever be..." (138); this is the voice of the fictional, narrative persona in *American Psycho*.

Bateman's consciousness reflects the society he exists in. "From the first line, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here," to the last, "This is not an exit," we are *signed*, we are entered in to what is really a *circle* of hell" (Young, 93). These intertextual references—Dante's *Inferno* and Sartre's famous play, "No Exit"—serve to bookend and confine *American Psycho's* text; coincidentally, both of these works are thematically focused on each respective writer's idea of "hell." "My life is a living hell," Bateman tells us several instances throughout the novel, but

nobody hears him. (141). “All it came down to was: die or adapt. I imagine my own vacant face, the disembodied voice coming from its mouth: *These are terrible times*” (346). Capitalist society—what it has become—is the backdrop to the protagonist’s alienated affliction:

While taking a piss in the men’s room, I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal’s handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, say somehow to miniaturize and slip into it, the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No... one... would... care. In fact some, if they noticed my absence, might feel an odd, indefinable sense of relief. (Ellis, 226)

21st Century Woes: More Products, Same Society, Same Shit

To return to the novel, *American Psycho* takes place in Manhattan during the economically prosperous, yet nihilistic eighties. Bateman describes the conditions around him as he perceives them:

... where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending... so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level... a vision so clear and real and vital to me that in its purity it was almost abstract. This was what I could understand, this was how I lived my life... Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in... this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged... (374-5).

American Psycho, like *Notes from the Underground* before it, examines the consciousness of an individual and his social relations within his respective society; furthermore, we might ask how much has changed since the Eighties. Like the underground man, Bateman is intensely aware of the conditions around him as the above passage implies. In order to best reveal and condemn this society in full—for I will argue this is the heart of the novel’s agenda—the reader is shown the consciousness of a character who is *on the surface* everything Dostoevsky’s underground man is not. Dostoevsky’s character is physically ugly, barely in the middle class, and suffers relative economic deprivation; on the other hand, Bateman personifies “success” INXS—the magnum opus of what the everyman aspires towards under capitalism—he possesses the looks, power, status, wealth, and seemingly adept, social skills a capitalist society forces us to recognize with awe and admiration. Having wealth, handsome features, and status in society are not enough to earn popularity among Bateman’s yuppie circle, who are ultimately, indistinguishable from one another. So, what makes Patrick Bateman popular within his immediate social group? Julian Murphet observes, “Patrick Bateman who is the accumulated identity of this kind of this kind of cynical egotism, is also always ready with a preposterous in pedantic ‘information’, evidence of his mastery over the facts and products which make him so desirable” (26). In the novel, for instance, when asked what the proper way of wearing a tie clasp is, Bateman responds:

While a tie holder is by no means required businesswear, it adds to a clean, neat overall appearance. But the accessory shouldn’t dominate the tie. Choose a simple gold bar or a small clip and place it at the lower end of the tie at a downward forty-five-degree angle. (160)

In order to fit in and stand out among his yuppie social circle, Bateman must subscribe to and master knowledge of an exhaustless plethora of products. In this bourgeois hell, possessing ‘good taste’—no matter how insignificant the degree superior to that of others—elevates an individual’s status. Status is everything to this particular class, especially to Bateman.

Wealth allows Bateman the acquisition of an abundance of infinite commodities, inaccessible to the underground man due to his meager, financial means, and inexistence in his historical epoch. Thus, society in *American Psycho* is not depicted through the vantage point of the “poor folks,” or “*Les Miserables*” of its era. The novel indicts a particular class—yuppies—and criticizes their culture. This, novelistic decision is sound for a variety of reasons. Consumer capitalism has impacted society, culture, and modern man. In some ways, Bateman is alienated by the same factors that alienated the underground man; however, in many other ways, Bateman is further alienated and voided as a self by the products of postwar consumer capitalism. Mary Harron, the director of the filmed adaptation of *American Psycho*, expands on this notion when she describes her portrayal of Bateman:

We reckon that Bateman watches things [movies] in order to know how to do things. He is just like a Martian who fell to earth and didn’t know what to do with life. If he’s going to have sex, he’ll watch pornography. If he’s going to kill somebody, he’ll watch a horror movie. It’s like he needs to get lessons; nothing can come from within because there is no within. Everything is modeled from the outside.

This is what Norman Mailer failed to grasp in his review of Ellis’ novel. Mailer sought humanity in Bateman despite the text of the novel denying him any. Mailer also failed to grasp that the

violence of *American Psycho* is stylized in the novel to reflect Bateman's consumer obsession with horror movies and serial killers.

If the novel tells us anything, it is that this is the natural outcome of man's condition under an abrasive regime of commodity and advertisement consumption mixed with alienation. In this society, "There are too many fucking movies to choose from," observes our hero, mid-anxiety attack. (Ellis, 112) In the precise moment the novel is set, it is particularly striking how the novel reveals the consciousness of the rich, powerful, and privileged individual as an example of the disturbing spirit of isolation and dehumanization characterizing modern capitalism. The reflection of society from the perspective of Bateman's consciousness also reveals characteristics of consumer capitalism unique to his class and era. In her Marxist reading of *American Psycho*, Young elaborates:

Within consumer capitalism we are offered a surfeit of commodities, an abundance of commodity choices, but this image of plenty is illusory. Our desires are mediated by ideas about roles and lifestyles which are themselves constructed as commodities and our "choices" are propelled by these constructs. In a world when the only relations are economic we remain alienated from any "authenticity" of choice or desire. Patrick has been so fragmented and divided by his insane consumerism that he cannot "exist" as a person. (104)

Our desires are sociological constructs; within consumer capitalism, choice is null, yet *the logic* embedded in capitalism makes consumption endless. Ellis' hero, like Dostoevsky's hyper-conscious hero, understands his affliction. Lehmann-Haupt describes the essence of Ellis' novel, "Patrick Bateman lives in a morally flat world in which clothes have more value than skin,

objects are worth more than bones, and the human soul is something to be sought with knives and hatches and drills.” In a key scene of *American Psycho*, Bateman confesses:

... there is an idea of a 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 flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being... 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 on others. I want no one to escape... (377)

This is reality constructed by Bateman’s consciousness, which is shaped by the sociological conditions of his epoch. Bateman, like the underground man, is aware of the insanity of his epoch from the perspective of his respective, social class. He is the only character who *gets it*. His existential angst is derived by this realization. Unfortunately, there is no exit out of the bourgeois hell within the novel. There is no way out. In his review of the novel, Mailer claimed that Ellis’ novel failed because Bateman was not human enough to attain the reader’s sympathy. I show that the novel does allow us to pity Bateman. His awareness to his condition, in fact, makes him the most humane character compared to the rest of the content, yuppie characters in the novel. The constraints manifesting themselves in Bateman’s society did not develop spontaneously; traces of similar, related tendencies are described to the reader by the underground man during his epoch. The difference lies in the way *American Psycho* portrays the extent of their intensity through the character of Patrick Bateman. The underground man speaks

of them as a mere presentiment of what awaits the future. Consider the underground man's words in light of the above passage from *American Psycho*:

I'd sell the whole world this minute for a copeck. For the whole world to vanish into thin air, or for me not to drink my tea? I say, let the world perish, if I can always drink my tea... So perhaps I turn out to be more alive than you... We even find it difficult to be human beings, men with real flesh and blood of our own; we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace, and are always striving to be some unprecedented kind of generalized human being. We are born dead... Soon, we shall invent a method of being born from an idea. (116, 123)

Capitalism and Reification

In his writings dealing with the fetishism of commodities, Marx called this phenomenon *reification*, or "the transformation of relationships between human beings into relationships between things" (Murphet, 37). Reification explains Bateman's way of describing himself as simply "not being there," a "fabrication," and even as a "non-human" entity. If we used Moravia's *Contempt* to understand what is occurring in Ellis' novel, we could say Bateman represents the end result of a character characterized by a complete inauthenticity of self. This is the future the underground man prophesizes about in the passage above. In his analysis of *American Psycho*, Julian Murphet explains the role reification plays in Ellis' novel:

Reification is both what is behind the urban alienation Patrick experiences, and his only method for curing it. The infinity of things through which he can identify himself opens up the 'existential chasm' in Bateman; he closes it briefly in the gesture of purchase. (37)

While Murphet is right, we must remember that Bateman's social identity is confined to a specific, social class. As a yuppie consumer, Bateman's choices are already delineated and determined. The novel does not allow him the possibility of attaining any other identity other than that of a yuppie.

To illustrate this phenomenon vividly, Ellis describes products instead of people. In *American Psycho*, humans have become hollowed-out, soul-less, lifeless shells of their former selves. Over and over again, much of Ellis' novel is devoted to lists of products or commodities which are intentionally described much more vividly and lively than the people wearing, consuming, or being personified by them. There is a scene in *American Psycho* where Bateman and other investment bankers compare business cards. This particular passage in the novel reveals the absurd significance and the power Bateman, and the rest of the male investment bankers, gives to the most insignificant things. For Bateman, such things are a means by which to be noticed, to stand out. No matter how miniscule their impact on status and the visibility of its owner, the significance of a mere, business card is colossal in the novel:

A brief spasm of jealousy courses through me when I notice the elegance of the color and the classy type... I'm looking at Van Patten's card and then at mine and cannot believe that Price actually likes Van Patten's better... Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum... I am unexpectedly depressed that I started this. (44-5)

Status, for Bateman, is an illusory means to an impossible end. The novel makes implicit Bateman desires to be noticed and recognized. He wants to exist legitimately. The absurd attention this character gives to material items satirizes the logic implicit in consumer capitalist culture. Rather than say Bateman is merely materialistic, the novel suggests Bateman's obsession

with products and status is this character's way of trying to be recognized. Although ridiculous, perhaps, this logic is sound according to the way the novel depicts Bateman's class culture. Unfortunately, despite Bateman's possession of the latest products, his good taste, and his extensive knowledge of products, fashions, and trends, this character remains invisible. No matter how hard this character tries, he is just like every other yuppie in his class.

What drives Bateman and others from his social class, to constantly buy this product, rent this thing, order this, and consume that? Referencing Marx, Young answered this already claiming that our desires are mediated by ideas about roles and lifestyles which are themselves constructed as commodities. Bateman is not an isolated case; his response is symptomatic of an entire culture of consumerism. This is why everyone who works with Bateman, or anybody who can afford to—this high up the ladder—lives up to the idea of the specific “yuppie” role and lifestyle “attitude” society has constructed for them. They achieve this by shopping and “choosing,” or *not* “choosing,” the products they purchase. In the novel, for example, the musical for Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is exclusive to the upper classes; it is used satirically and allegorically as a key to understanding the class politics of Bateman and the rest of the yuppies. This particular class' fascination with this musical reveal the upper class' cruel appetite for consuming other people's unhappiness. Murphet elaborates in this sentiment:

As an allegorical device, Boubil and Schonberg's musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's great nineteenth century novel of social complaint, nicely, if rather repetitiously, underscores the bourgeois transformation of a polarized urban political context into an opportunity to come and enjoy the image of misery. (55).

Everyone in Bateman's circle of yuppies purchases the same products, shops at the same stores, eats in the same restaurants, visits the same night clubs, goes to the same gym, talks about the

same things, etcetera to infinitum because they afford the best commodities capitalism can offer. Thus, their attitudes, appearances, individualities, and even “self,” end up being indistinguishable from one another. Bateman and the people around him do not see each other; all they are able to see are the products—what kind of product—society consumes, or the lack of them. In the chapter titled “Pastels,” for example, Bateman observes four women sitting across the table opposite McDermott, Price, Van Patten, and himself. He describes the women as he sees them:

... all great looking—blond, big tits: one is wearing a chemise dress in double-faced wool by Calvin Klein, another is wearing a wool knit dress and jacket with silk faille bonding by Geoffrey Beene, another is wearing a symmetrical shirt of pleated tulle and an embroidered velvet bustier by, I think, Christian Lacroix plus high-heeled shoes by Sidonie Larizzi, and the last one is wearing a black strapless sequined gown under a wool crepe tailored jacket by Bill Blass. (40)

Although Bateman does not describe himself as having an “acute consciousness” like the underground man, he is conscious of the consequences the conditions around him are causing to his “being.” “Thus, for Marx, the relations between men are not only reified in their products, but these reified products interact with men so as to make what appeared false true” (Ollman, 200).

Marx refers to this as *reification*:

In capital-profit, or still better capital-interest, land-rent, labor-wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct coalescence of the material production relations with their historical and social determination. It is an enchanted, perverted topsy-turvy world, in which

Monsieur le Capital and *Madame La Terre* do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as things. (809).

To return to Dostoevsky, In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues, "It is important here to emphasize that the major emotional thrust of all of Dostoevsky's work, in its form as well as in its *content*, is the struggle against a *reification* of man, of human relations, of all human values under the conditions of capitalism" (62). How is this understood in the context of his works? Bakhtin's response is that "Dostoevsky's hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him" (59). This phenomenon appears in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* when the underground man decides to confront the officer with the intention of standing his ground; he prepares for the moment by acquiring a coat, despite not having the means to buy it. Furthermore, the underground man "sees" what people wear, their superficiality, their class, before seeing them, if he ever does, as persons. "This is how they see me," he believes. "With great insight, Dostoevsky was able to see how this reifying devaluation of man had permeated into all the pores of contemporary life and even into the very foundations of human thinking" (Bakhtin, 62). Consider the following passage from *Notes from the Underground*, in light of *American Psycho*:

The first thing was that when I carried out my plan I must look more respectable and take pains with my clothes. If there is a scene in public... I must be well dressed; it makes good impression, and puts us at once on an equal footing, in a way, in the eyes of good society... bought black gloves, and a decent hat from Chrurkin's. Black gloves seemed to me both more respectable and more bon ton than the yellow ones that tempted me first. ...My overcoat was not bad in itself, it kept me warm; the raccoon collar constituted the essence of flunkydom. I must at

whatever cost change the collar and buy instead a beaver one such as officers wore... Although these imitation beavers very soon show signs of wear and begin to seem shabby, they look very nice at first, when they are new; and after all, I only needed it for one occasion... (56-7)

In *American Psycho*, reification is much more pronounced and damaging to the hero's alienation and his social relations. In Bateman's society, clothes and products do not make you visible—contrary to the underground man's implied belief in *Notes*—worse than invisible, products or commodities now have the power of eradicating the individual within you. In Moravia's language, to put things differently, the fetish of products, commodities, and material prosperity do not make individuals more full-blooded, but less so. They lead man to an entirely inauthentic reality. The underground man does not understand the logic he is operating in. Giving so much importance to clothes in order for him to look respectable, he is also perpetuating the idea it is “things” and not human beings, society recognizes. Thus, this idea is not original to *American Psycho*, it is, however, intensified to an absurd degree to drive the point home. The following passage from Ellis' novel is a good example where people are no longer visible; they are emasculated, or swallowed, by the various products they wear:

I count three silk crepe ties, one Versace silk-satin woven tie, two silk foulard ties, one silk Kenzo, two silk jacquard ties. The fragrances of Xeryus and Tuscany and Armani and Obsession and Polo and Grey Flannel and even Antaeus mingle, wafting each other, rising from the suits and into the air, forming their own mixture: a cold, sickening perfume. (110)

Bateman is aware of this. In the chapter, “Lunch with Bethany,” Bateman's date asks him if he is seeing anyone at the moment. Bateman responds with a half-crazed answer:

‘No I’m not really,’ I say snapping out of it, then, not of my own accord, ‘I mean, does anyone really see anyone? Does anyone really see anyone else? Did you ever see me? See? What does that mean? Ha! See? Ha! I just don’t get it. Ha! I laugh.
(238)

This is an interesting passage to consider. It appears as if the novel is suggesting Bateman is, ironically, the sanest character in the novel; he is the only character who is aware of what is happening to him. This is why the character is miserable, alienated, and psychotic. The rest of the yuppies are happy in their ignorance. Consciousness, for Bateman, is problematic largely for the same reasons it is problematic for Dostoevsky’s underground man.

I See You’re Nothing Like Me—You Must be Shit, Then

There *is* a connection between reification and alienation. Both *Notes from the Underground* and *American Psycho* reveal this phenomenon when both protagonists, although both at opposite ends of the societal ladder, mingle with individuals of different status or social classes. In the first chapter of *American Psycho*, “April Fools,” Bateman and Price arrive at Evelyn’s house for dinner. All the guests come from Bateman’s yuppie world, with the exception of two characters: Stash and his girlfriend Vanden. Bateman quickly recognizes the odd couple out:

Stash doesn’t speak. Even though he is probably uncomfortable at the table with us since he looks nothing like the other men in the room—his hair isn’t slicked back, no suspenders, no horn-rimmed glasses, the clothes black and ill-fitting, no urge to light and suck at a cigar, probably unable to secure a table at Camols, his net worth a pittance... (13).

Thus, Stash is worthless in Bateman's eyes. This passage identifies the factors Bateman considers to value an individual's worth: look, products they consume, status, and net worth. This scene is reversed in *Notes from the Underground*, but the point both writers intend to make—demonstrating the way reification perpetuates alienation as a two way street—remains the same. In *Notes*, this scene appears when the underground man socializes with his boyhood “friends;” his efforts are quickly thwarted on one, basic question they ask him:

‘We-ell, and what about monetary matters?’

‘I mean your salary.’

‘Why all this cross-examination?’

I named the amount of my salary, however, turning bright red.

‘It’s not much,’ remarked Zverkov, full of self importance.

‘No one can dine on decent restarurants on that!’ added Ferfichkin insolently.

‘I think it’s absolutely beggarly,’ Trudolyubov said seriously.

‘And how thin you’ve grown, how much you’ve changed... since those days, added Zverkov, not without venom...

“You;ve got thin! Your clothes!” –Oh, those damned trousers! Zverkov noticed the stain on my knee just now... But what’s the use? (74-5)

Out of the three characters my thesis analyzes, Patrick Bateman is represented as more alienated, more abstracted, and most delusional of the two. Patrick Bateman is afflicted far more for existing in a society undergoing a more advanced stage of capitalism, specifically, consumer capitalism. Furthermore, the manner in which his particular class culture is depicted, reveals a more extreme form of alienation experienced by Bateman. Rather than suggest Bateman is happier and livelier existing in a more privileged class, the novel suggests the opposite.

I Kill, Therefore I am

“He’s rich,” I say.

“*Everybody’s* rich,” she says concentrating on the TV screen.

“He’s good-looking,” I tell her.

“*Everybody’s* good-looking, Patrick,” she says remotely.

“He has a great body,” I say.

“*Everybody* has a great body, now,” she says. (23)

Patrick Bateman kills to exist—to feel alive in a world where individualization and an individuals’ selves are being eradicated by consumer, capitalist society.

...from designer wardrobe to designer pharmaceuticals, Bateman is seemingly perfect—so is everyone else in his crowd. Bateman desperately wants to fit in yet, the terribly irony is, the more he tries to be like every money-drenched man on Wall Street, the more faceless he becomes—and the less control he has over the terrible urges that, ironically, make him feel like an individual. Bateman is a paragon of conformity in an amoral society where to conform is to be amoral.
(Lehmann-Haupt)

Lehmann-Haupt is correct in observing that the novel portrays yuppie culture—which is anti-humanistic to Bateman’s self and existence—as far more immoral in its conformity, ignorance, and happiness, than the novel’s psychotic protagonist.

The existential motif embedded within consumer capitalism is, “I shop therefore I am” (Young, 104). Bateman realizes this, but cannot stop himself from participating in it. The logic of his capitalist society voids his choice to *stop* consuming and *stop* fitting in. He wants to “fit

in;” however, he also realizes his desperate need to be and feel alive. Thus, for Patrick Bateman, “I shop therefore I am” becomes “I kill therefore I am.”

“Oh god, Patrick,” she sobs blowing her nose into the handkerchief I tossed her.

“You’re so lousy. You’re... inhuman.”

“No, I’m...” I stall again.

“You... are not...” She stops, wiping her face, unable to finish.

“I am not what?” I ask, waiting, interested.

“You are not”—she sniffs, looks down her shoulders heaving—“all there. You”—she chokes—“don’t add up.”

“I do too,” I say indignantly, defending myself. “I do too add up.”

“You’re a ghoul,” she sobs.

“No, no,” I say, confused, watching her. “*You’re* the ghoul.” (341-2)

Bateman is conscious of how “dead” everyone and himself really are; however, killing others helps him placate his condition, however futile a solution it may be. Why is killing, specifically, Bateman’s solution against reification’s “deadening” effects? This question troubled Mailer, who concluded that the novel failed to justify this important point. Ellis’ inspiration for Bateman’s killer urges—as a way to attempt to re-assert and re-validate his “existence”—appears to come from Dostoevsky’s *Notes*: The underground man tells us, “[...] for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving he is a man and not a piano-key! It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism!” (31-3). This is further evidence of the connection between the two works. At some points throughout Ellis’ novel, Bateman’s murders are, in fact, characteristic of cannibalism. Furthermore, the grotesque violence is perhaps commensurate to what the novel is suggesting the degree of alienation is for this particular class, in this period of

capitalism. Yes, Bateman kills to feel alive. How does Ellis' character decide, however, who he kills and why he kills? Once again, Dostoevsky's fiction—the mind of the underground man, specifically, best answers these questions.

What is Patrick Bateman?

Patrick Bateman is neither proletariat, nor capitalist; in the societal ladder of success, he is just beneath the capitalist. Bateman is an investment banker working and living in Manhattan. This is typical of his class identity. Bateman does not possess genuine ideals or ambitions outside of those that are predetermined for him by his class consciousness, unlike the character of Molteni from Moravia's *Contempt*. For Bateman, being an investment banker represents the epitome of success for his class consciousness at this period in time. Furthermore, Bateman is obsessed with fitting in. Trapped in this mentality, devoid of possessing his own ideals and ambitions, Bateman does what is typical and expected of him—to be an investment banker. Investment bankers assist capitalists—individuals, corporations, and governments—raise capital by underwriting and/or acting as the client's agent in the issuance of securities. Investment bankers may also assist companies involved in mergers and acquisitions—this is actually what the novel reveals Bateman does for work. When a character asks him what he does, Bateman responds that he is into “murders and executions;” however, characters hear him say “mergers and acquisitions.” *American Psycho* and the persona of Bateman, an investment banker, are interesting to consider in light of the recent economic collapse that triggered the nation and large part of the world into depression. Even Mailer's 1991 review forebodingly acknowledges this fact. Mailer writes, “I cannot recall a piece of fiction by an American writer that depicts so odious a ruling class—worse, a young ruling class of Wall Street princelings ready, presumably, by the next century to manage the mighty if surrealistic levers of our economy” (1065). Bateman

would be in the equivalent of an individual working for a firm like Layman Brothers, Goldman Sachs, or one of these kinds of firms that was bailed out; if they hadn't been bailed out, they would have collapsed the economy recently.

Regardless of the altitude in the societal ladder of success, Bateman is not spared the fear of slight, failure, and disrespect the underground man experiences in his "inferior" work as a government clerk. Despite the perceivable advantages associated in being a wealthy investment banker, Bateman remains just another injured and insulted individual largely similar to the type Dostoevsky wrote about in his literature. Bateman kills as an attempt to authenticate his existence; this in itself does not explain his specific motivations for killing others or explains how, specifically, he targets his victims. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* fills in the missing gaps and answers these questions. In this regard, Patrick Bateman's consciousness is not very different from the underground man's. In a sense, Ellis has intensified this persona and situated it to modern times. Julian Murphet asks "*What* links the assaults occurring in the novel? The answer is complex and yet surprisingly simple: the precise mixture of envy and hate which determines Patrick's class consciousness as a yuppie" (42).

In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky's hero, well aware of those, specific deficiencies that deem an individual successful in society, compensated, pathetically, by relying on his own criteria by which to put himself in equal footing in society and even to assert himself superior to others. We witness his failures in *Notes from the Underground*. "Oh, all right," says the underground man feeling he has gone too far, "and I suggest it would be better if we chose a slightly more intelligent topic." His former school friends mock him, "I suppose you intend to show us how witty you are!" (Dostoevsky, 74).

Despite his privileged social position, Bateman's consciousness is depicted much more anti-humanist to others and society than the underground man's. Bateman envies those who have more than he, himself, has, or those he deems to be of higher social standing than himself. He is antagonistic with those who are different from him as well as those beneath him. Thus, Patrick Bateman's view of society and attitude towards others largely coincides with that of the underground man; he is not spared the underground man's injuries and insults. He simply experiences them from the other side of the social fence. The underground man wants to be recognized in society for his intelligence and honor, whereas Bateman wants society to recognize him for his wealth, his knowledge of products, and his social status. Both characters end up humiliated in their respective novels. Compare the following passage in *American Psycho* in light of the humiliations the underground man experiences in *Notes from the Underground*:

“Don't you want to know what I do?”

“No. Not really.”

I stare at the two of them for a minute before recrossing my legs and sighing very irritated. “Well, I work on Wall Street. At Pierce & Pierce.”

She thinks about it for a minute then says, “Yeah. A shoe outlet? Isn't P & P a shoe? (Ellis, 172).”

Characters who injure and insult Bateman, whether directly or indirectly in the novel, end up dead. The chapter, “Lunch with Bethany”—Bethany being an old, ex-girlfriend of Bateman who he has met again coincidentally—illustrates and supports one side of this theory best. In his analysis of *American Psycho*, Murphet explains what exactly prompts Bateman to torture and kill Bethany. His response explains much of the novel's violence and recalls the weight that

Dostoevsky attributed to an individual's "insults and injuries" in much of his work, especially *Notes from the Underground*.

... Bethany has been guilty on their date of two unforgiveable acts of 'violence' against Patrick's monumental egotism: she confesses that her boyfriend is Robert Hall, the chef and co-owner of Dorsia, the restaurant at which Patrick has no success at booking tables; and she tells him, giggling, that his prize *objet-d' art*, his David Onica painting, is hung upside down on his living room wall. She has thus one upped him socially and culturally... (41)

Thus, Bateman kills Bethany. There are defined motives underscoring Bateman's murders. For example, Bateman kills Paul Owen not because this character directly insults him, but because of what he represents to Bateman. Paul Owen is to Bateman in *American Psycho*, what the well-dressed, superior officer who will not step aside for anyone is to the underground man in *Notes*. Considering the logic Bateman's society operates in, Owen—without directly doing anything to Bateman—pushes all of his buttons for a number of petty reasons. Bateman views him contemptibly because he perceives Owen to be slightly better than himself regarding his looks, his net worth, his taste in fashion—Owen has a better looking apartment, better haircut and tan, and a better looking business card than Bateman—and increasingly contemptible for Bateman—Owen handles the Fisher account, the Holy Grail of accounts in the world of investment bankers. The last straw for Bateman is that Owen can easily manage to book reservations at Dorsia. Thus, Bateman kills Paul Owen. The murders in the novel serve to highlight Bateman's envy, desire to avenge insults and injuries, and strong aversion to anything not resembling his own class. Alienation is not the only symptom of the capitalist epoch; a consciousness of envy,

individualism, and hate also characterize Bateman's attitude. Yes, killing makes Bateman feel alive; however, the fact that his murders are not altogether random demands valid answers.

Furthermore, there is also a reason why many of Patrick's victims are homeless, as well as why most of the girls Bateman picks up and kills are prostitutes. Guinevere Turner, who wrote the script for the film, points out:

He's taking out his sense of inferiority. He has the need to feel superior to someone. So he takes who he perceives to be the most inferior person readily available. He not only kills him [the bum] brutally, but mocks him, degrades him, and puts him down. He does live in a class world where these people are not really people.

Turners' observation of Bateman's character, likewise, explains why the underground man treats those beneath him contemptibly. If we recall *Notes from the Underground*, a defining characteristic of Dostoevsky's hero came from his brutal treatment towards those beneath his social standing. In *Notes*, we witness the underground man treat his servants contemptuously and viciously, slap peasant caddies, and we see him take his frustrations and resentment by verbally assaulting Liza, a prostitute he meets at the end of *Notes*. It is his sense of inferiority that propels him to demean and degrade those lower than himself.

Thus, we return to the previous theme concerning the mad consumption of products occurring throughout the novel. There exists another vital reason why Bateman and others from his social class cannot stop purchasing, consuming, and indulging in products. We return to this specific point because many of Bateman's victims are women and many critics felt this fact was unjustified in the novel. In light of the consumer capitalist society Bateman and others from his social circle exist within, the novel is explicit in defining what pleasure and feeling mean for this

particular class. The characters are only able to relate or connect, if at all, during moments of consumption, be it food, alcohol, or drugs. At one point, Bateman literally eats, “consumes,” his victim. Julian Murphet discusses this theme in his analysis of *American Psycho*:

If there is pleasure, it is a pleasure purely of reification: the transformation of intensely private human relations into things, tableaux, props, and prices...

Consumer goods intervene between human agents to the point that they displace anything resembling feeling; pleasure is knowing you’re using the right lubricant.

(39)

This idea is captured perfectly in the novel when Bateman is attempting to have sex with Courtney. The characters’ verbal exchange as they are futilely attempting this act reveals that no authentic sexual relation remains possible in Bateman’s world.

‘Is it a receptacle tip? Get off me.’...

‘Take it off,’ she says curtly...

‘Where’s your lithium?’

‘Well, it’s [the condom] *not* a turn on for *me*? ... I have a promotion coming to me. I’m going to Barbados in August and I don’t want a case of Kaposi’s sarcoma to fuck it up!... Oh God, I want to wear a bikini,’ she wails, ‘A Norma Kamali I just bought at Bergdorf’s’...

I [Bateman] tell her, ‘but I don’t want to wear a condom because I don’t feel anything...’

‘If you don’t use one you’re not going to feel anything anyway.’ (103-5)

In his analysis of the novel, Julian Murphet argues—and I agree with his claim—that “Bateman’s sexual/textual violence is a symptom of the waning sexual feeling under a regime of

commodities in which he functions” (40). My reading of *American Psycho* explains, justifies, and redeems the criticized, sexual violence of the novel; however, it is important to ask ourselves if the violent acts the novel depicts grotesquely are even real according to law of the novel.

The Violence of *American Psycho*: Is this Shit, Real?

The underground man does not kill people in *Notes*; however, this does not stop him from imagining and fantasizing duels in his desire to assert himself in the eyes of others and revenge himself from those who have insulted and injured him. *American Psycho*, in fact, forces readers to consider whether Bateman’s murders are real, or figments of his delusional, fragmented mind. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and Moravia’s *Contempt* both presented unreliable narrators, who struggled coming to terms with “reality.” The underground man’s consumption of literature distorts his reality. He longs to be a hero, to win duels, but the reality is that he is not. In Moravia’s *Contempt*, Ricardo Molteni’s job—writing a screenplay adaptation to Homer’s *The Odyssey*—soon leads him to believe his marital problems are those of Homer’s *fictional* Ulysses and Penelope characters. Cinema, literature and real life intermingle and become one reality for Molteni. For these characters, illusion tends to be more “real” than reality. This theme is evident in Ellis’ novel, as well, regarding Bateman’s supposed murders. Julian Murphet argues that [...] what the text presents as violent acts, are in fact to be considered as the cinematically projected fantasization of a general class violence towards anything that is not white, male and upper middle class” (43).

In fact, this reading of *American Psycho* asserts that Bateman is not a literal murderer in the novel, but more likely a “civilized” and decent character who experiences unsettling fantasies as a manifestation of his struggle attempting to be a *self*, in a world that is trapping him and

eradicating his individuality. In his novel, *Lunar Park*, published 14 years after the publication of *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis defends this reading of his novel:

Patrick Bateman was a notoriously unreliable narrator, and if you actually read the book you could come away doubting that these crimes had even occurred. There were large hints that they existed only in Bateman's mind. The murders and torture were in fact fantasies fueled by his rage and fury about how life in America was structured and how this had—no matter the size of his wealth—trapped him. The fantasies were an escape. This was the book's thesis. It was about society and manners and mores, and not about cutting up women. How could anyone who read the book not see this? (122)

Thus, we return to a particular passage in *Notes from the Underground* where Dostoevsky's fictional, narrative persona tells us:

I was the only one in the whole office who always seemed to myself a slave and a coward precisely because I also seemed (to myself) civilized. Every decent man in this age is, and must be, a coward and a slave. That is his normal condition. I am profoundly certain of this. (48)

Who is Patrick Bateman then? Is he who he says he is, or is he who others say he is? “You have these frequent suggestions that Bateman is not this stud—the perfect GQ model;” Guinevere Turner tells us, “there's references to Bateman as being this pathetic loser when other people talk about him.” This is a direct reference to certain passages in the novel; in these passages, characters' description of Bateman force the reader to consider who Bateman really is:

...your joke *was* amusing, But come on, man, you had one fatal flaw: Bateman's such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody' ...

‘What are you *talking* about? Bateman is *what*?’

‘Oh, good god, man. Why else would Evelyn Richards dumps him? You know, really. He could barely pick up an escort girl, let alone...’

Bateman is not a reliable narrator. There are numerous moments in the novel, clues, in which the character is informing us of this. “This is my reality,” Bateman tell us, “Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw” (345). Guinevere Turner, *American Psycho*’s screenwriter, tells us, “What you are seeing is what is going on in his head. His perception of reality can’t possibly be right. It’s Patrick Bateman’s fantasy world.” Unfortunately, a sizeable number of critics took *American Psycho* on a literal level—Mailer included—when the novel was published. My reading of *American Psycho* identifies Bateman as an unreliable narrator, and treats the novel’s violence to signify the extent of modern man’s existential angst under capitalism. Bateman represents modern man trapped in a disquieting reality from which there is no exit.

This is not an Exit

Ellis’s last line in *American Psycho* reads: “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399). This line reinforces the idea that Bateman is trapped, and will continue to be trapped, at the end of the novel. This is an inherently bleak message; however, I do not read *American Psycho* as an immoral or invaluable work. Perhaps still frustrated with the reception of *American Psycho*, Ellis’ published *Lunar Park* in 2005—14 years after introducing us to the character of Patrick Bateman. *Lunar Park* found the writer revisiting his previous, 1991 novel in an attempt to rectify his intentions with it. The protagonist of *Lunar Park* is actually Bret Easton Ellis, himself. It is interesting to read Ellis’ first line in *Lunar Park*, in the context of his more, infamous novel:

“I’ve decided against wearing masks,” Bret Easton Ellis tells his wife, Jayne, proudly. “I want to be real, honey” (5). Having read Moravia’s *Contempt* and *American Psycho* together, we can associate this line in relationship to the solution Moravia presents us in his literature—man needs to strive for authenticity in a capitalist society. In *Lunar Park*, Ellis finds himself explicating the personal factors that propelled him to write *American Psycho*:

It [*American Psycho*] was an indictment not only of the way of life I was familiar with but also—I thought rather grandly—of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment. ... my career, all the money I had made, the way my fame had blossomed and defined me, how recklessly the world allowed me to behave. (5).

At this point, Ellis and Moravia’s message can be linked—capitalism entices man to succumb to an inauthentic end for the fetish of material prosperity. Ellis distinguishes his claim, however, by recognizing the implicit danger this produces to society and the individual if man allows himself to continue pursuing this false end. Not only do we recognize this end as one which leads man to inauthenticity and alienation, but Dostoevsky and Ellis recognized an inherent, immoral danger within it. This is something Guinevere Turner—the screenwriter of *American Psycho*—identifies:

It’s almost that alienation breeds serial killers. Everyone is so disconnected, it doesn’t really matter. It doesn’t matter who you kill. It doesn’t matter what you do. To me, that’s what you’re supposed to be left with, emptiness, fear, nothingness, no one is paying attention. Nothing really matters. It’s just depressing really that we are right back where we were in the Eighties. He’s such a blank canvas, in a way... He’s alone in the world... That’s part of the idea

about the character. Everything is so empty. He has a ton of money and is constantly buying things and obsessing over having “the thing.” He’s trying to fill this void and it’s not working. Part of filling up that void is him desperately trying to stand out as an individual which is arguably why he’s killing people and he can’t get noticed. It’s all part of him trying to feed this void. Which in the larger sense is the void of the 80s, of intense consumer culture and decadence.

CHAPTER V

THE CURRENCY OF MISERY: RUBLES, LIRES, AND DOLLARS

In *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), Oscar Wilde contends:

It will be a marvelous thing – the true personality of man – when we see it. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be[...] One’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him – in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living. He is also, under existing conditions, very insecure [...] With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

The characters my thesis examines “exist,” in a literal sense, within their respective fictionalized worlds; in the language of Wilde, however, these characters are not alive. Formerly, my best attempt to articulate something remotely close to Wilde’s precise observations were that the underground man, Ricardo Molteni, and Patrick Bateman appeared to find themselves striving to be original characters throughout their respective novels. This sentiment appeared somewhat clunky and vague in early drafts; it vanished altogether in later, subsequent drafts. The reason for the excision of this material from my thesis was not due to its lack of relevance—this was an

extremely interesting point of contention I felt all three works expressed; I simply could not express this sentiment coherently in the manner in which Wilde achieves this in the passage above. In time, I realized the reason I was unable to nuance this sentiment in a Wilde-like fashion, coincided with the fact Wilde and Marx are two, distinct writers. Evidently, this thesis sought to examine this literature from a Marxist perspective. Wilde's deepest concern in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is that, precisely—the soul of man. The word “soul” is typically not encountered in Marx's language. Thus, Wilde expresses his sentiments in his style, and Marx in his. Although Wilde's language distinguishes itself from Marx's language in describing man's adverse condition under capitalism, Wilde's conclusions in this literary essay coincides with Marx—along with Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alberto Moravia, and Bret Easton Ellis in their respective novels—that capitalism is anti-human. Wilde's thesis in the *Soul of Man under Socialism* is that capitalism prevents man from developing a unique personality. According to Wilde, most people exist. The rarest thing in the world is finding people who live. Marx believed that the end of material scarcity, private property, exploitation, social classes, and the state—the end of capitalism—would lead to the emancipation of human, spiritual wealth on a major scale. Freed from former constraints, men and women would flourish as individuals in ways impossible to them under capitalism. Thus, at the core of Marx's ideology is the belief that humans cannot achieve complete self-realization under capitalism. At one point in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, the writers declare:

The history of all past society is the history of class antagonisms, which took different forms in different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, the exploitation of one section of society by another is a fact common to all previous centuries. No wonder then that the social consciousness of all centuries, despite

multiplicity and diversity, always moved in certain common forms, in lines of thought which can only completely vanish with the entire disappearance of class antagonism. (140-1)

The reason why the three characters my thesis examines share similarities in attitude, behavior, and personalities—or lack thereof—attests to this idea.

If the underground man, Ricardo Molteni, and Patrick Bateman existed outside their respective texts, perhaps the biggest insult one could launch at them—if they were real—would be that there was nothing special one could say about them that distinguished them from others in their particular social group in society. As stated in my thesis, these characters are characterized as being hyper-conscious of their condition throughout their respective novels. This, in itself, is what sets these characters apart from the oblivious herd of characters who populate their respective societies. They are aware they are different largely because they believe this acute sensitivity is particular to them only. Rather than recognize this realization as a source of triumph, this acute consciousness presents itself as part of the source of their despair, discontent, and their alienation. In a society that only recognizes surface externals, how could these characters ever be recognized and understood for their internal consciousness? The underground man writes his confession believing he is different from others in his society; he is certain his confession will not be read by anyone. Implicitly, this is perhaps because he believes his words will not be understood by anyone; who, but himself—the underground man assumes—understands life as he does? In *Contempt*, Molteni renounces his membership to the Communist Party due to his inherent individualism. He fears his individuality is at risk if he remains affiliated to the Communist Party. Molteni does strive to regain his lost ideals throughout *Contempt*, but there is also enough evidence to suggest he is also concerned about his individual

personality. Although being acutely conscious of their condition is detrimental to these characters' sense of emotional prosperity, this trait also contributes to their sense of superiority among others. In *American Psycho*, the reason why Patrick Bateman wants to be caught is because he wants to be recognized as an individual. The fact that he is not caught—rather than be a source of relief for him—is crushing to him. Bateman, like the rest of the literary characters my thesis examines, is conscious of his tortured awareness, in contrast to the ignorance of others. On a surface level, he is indistinguishable from the oblivious yuppies of his social class. Bateman, however, is aware of his condition. Therefore, he is also aware he *is* different. In the character's own words, he is not a “ghoul,” like the rest of the yuppies in his social circle. Now, awareness and individuality are two distinct things; individuality is mute in *American Psycho*. Bateman strives to exist independent of both the social class he is in, and independent of the countenance produced by the products he consumes. Ellis' character desperately and futilely murders his way into a potential existence, failing to attain it.

All these literary characters—the underground man, Molteni, and Bateman—desire to be special; throughout their stories, these characters are striving to be individuals. Do we ever, however, encounter real personalities in these literary works? If Oscar Wilde were to answer this question, he would respond with a firm, “No.” If these characters embodied full, distinct personalities—perhaps of the kind Wilde believes could appear in a society which has ridden itself of private property—they would not sound largely so similar, would they? Furthermore, I would argue that whatever Wilde and Marx recognized to be a personality—in a potential future—would undoubtedly be far from the pessimistic personalities we encounter in this literature. It is incorrect to equate awareness, itself, as distinctive of personality. However large the degree of misery, angst, and dissatisfaction this awareness attributes these characters, it—in

fact—remains a gain to their self. What this thesis reveals then—in the literature examined—is characters in a gradual state of “self” decay proportionally related to the state of environmental decay their epoch is experiencing. Capitalism decays both man and his environment, not overtly, but intrinsically.

This leads us to examine the problem of individualism inherent in these characters. Although these characters are aware of the negative, existing conditions of their respective epochs, they are not revolutionaries who—unlike Marx—are attempting to re-engineer their respective societies for humanity’s well-being. These characters are only concerned for their individual needs. Perhaps, this is the reason why these characters fail to attain a satisfactory solution to their respective, existential angst. They are only looking out for themselves. These characters are not concerned with having other characters understand them. In fact, they do not know what to do with their awareness, but to continue living alienated, contemptuously, and unfortunately, as best they can—whatever this means—under their respective conditions. At the end of *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman remains free. No matter the number of murders he commits, or does not commit throughout the novel, he remains right back where he started. Is the novel suggesting Bateman’s desire to exist is defeated because he is not one step closer to being caught at the conclusion of the novel? The novel does not say. Perhaps these novels are suggesting that the individualism inherent in these characters is, ultimately, unhealthy because it fails to lead them towards a true exit. Each of them, as well as each of their respective societies, loses, ultimately, because the characters begin and end their stories in a state of misery.

The literary works my thesis examines spanned from 19th century Russian society, to America during the “prosperous” eighties. From rubles, liras, and dollars, these novels reveal how capitalism and material prosperity—money—are powerful agents affecting man’s authentic

prosperity. Yet, outside of this literature, man and society continue existing. Capitalism continues to develop. Where are we now? What characterizes our epoch? Did the events that occur on Monday, September 29th, 2008—the Wall Street crash—resonate—in any way—in the context of this thesis? Does the emergence of the internet enter this dialogue in any way? I believe they do. It is now possible, due to technological advances, to consume just about anything there is. Was Alberto Moravia correct in asserting that the only end in capitalism was the inhuman fetish for material prosperity and material consumption?

Capitalism has changed; Men are more capable of accumulating a greater mass of objects in contemporary society. For man, this results in: alienation, deindividualization, reification, boredom, envy, murder, disgust, impotence and unreality.

The End

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