

Road Rage: The Importance of Relatability in Literature

How important is it to be able to relate to literary characters, their values, and their world?

Gerrard refers to ‘relatability’ as the “top candidate for neologism most hated by English profs”¹, criticising students’ tendency to read on a solely affective level, and to be overly concerned with protagonists’ likeability. This scathing anecdotal remark outlines the danger of egocentric and uncritical reading, portraying the heightened importance of sympathy due to similarity as a barrier to appreciating satire, irony, and more complex works.

Contrastingly, Bishop employs an analogy to explore young readers’ relationships with books, thereby articulating the significance of relatability in an educational setting. Works function as either mirrors, windows, or sliding doors. In the case of the mirror, literature “transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as a part of the larger human experience”². Whereas windows offer glimpses into real or imagined worlds, those that are familiar to readers and those that are alien. Sliding doors, furthermore, invite readers to step into these worlds, via a vivid imagination. Bishop concludes that relatability in children’s literature is paramount, as it becomes an educational and personal process of self-affirmation and a recognition of diversity.

¹ Garrard, G., 2016. In-flight behaviour: Teaching climate change literature in first-year intro English. In *Teaching climate change in the humanities* (pp. 144-151). Routledge.

² Bishop, R.S., 1990. Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, 6 (3). *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, 6(3), pp. ix-xi.

But does this principle still stand when reading is no longer an educational tool? What about when it comes to reading for pleasure? Simply how essential is it that literary characters and their attached worlds resonate with the reader?

This essay explores these questions using two examples: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. The former utilises an intentionally alienating protagonist, while the latter encapsulates an anachronistic post-war optimism. Considering the contrasting opinions of Gerrard and Bishop, I will assess whether the absence of relatability successfully expresses the author's message, or if it hinders it, locking the sliding door and closing the blinds.

Consider a laughably extreme example of a detached protagonist and unreliable narrator: Patrick Bateman. Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) is a satirical horror novel set in 1980s New York; it follows Bateman, a narcissistic, depraved Wall Street serial killer, defined primarily by consumerism and wealth. Ellis details intolerable, gruesome depictions of his rapes, abuse, "murders and executions", showing Bateman's rapid demise into psychopathy. The novel, then, is an instance in which elements such as satire, social commentary, and horror eclipse relatability as more vital components.

Notably, Christian Bale, who portrayed Bateman in the 2000 film adaptation describes him as "an alien who landed in the unabashedly capitalist New York of the '80s"³, rejecting attempts to rationalise his behaviour with indulgently traumatic backstories, recognising Bateman's detachment as essential.

This alienating depersonalisation permeates the novel, Bateman describes himself as "an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction [...] maybe you can sense our lifestyles are

³ Molloy, T. (2024) *American Psycho Oral History, 20 years after its divisive debut*, *MovieMaker*. Available at: <https://www.moviemaker.com/american-psycho-anniversary-oral-history-christian-bale-mary-harron-bret-easton-ellis/> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

probably comparable: I simply am not there”.⁴ This ironic self-awareness of his depravity solidifies him as a detached figure; readers feel connection to him, and that is precisely the point.

Ellis, then, uses Bateman as a vehicle to criticise neoliberal consumerism and warn of its impacts. Tedious, elongated, superfluous instructions on how to look rich dominate the narrative, glamourising the stock character of the serial killer from a “sullen, inadequate loser” to a “sullen, inadequate loser” with the appearance of a “film-star protagonist” with “inherited wealth, elite schooling, gym-hewn body”⁵ etc. This presents Bateman as a figure to look up to for guidance, his disillusionment and lack of identity ironically resonate with readers. Thus, in portraying Bateman as a homicidal pervert, an irony around who is rewarded and upheld in consumerist America permeates the narrative, making readers feel guilty for relating to him at all.

From a Marxist perspective, Bateman has been alienated and reduced to a consumer. Commodification is exaggerated to include marginalised individuals, especially female prostitutes who are objectified and literally disposed of. In the opening passage, Price declares “society *cannot* afford to lose me. I’m an *asset*”⁶, reflecting how capitalism reduces human value to economic utility and market worth. Finally, Ellis portrays a hyper-capitalist society, offering a class critique on the elite’s protection from accountability. The novel ends with Bateman confessing to the murder of Paul Owen and, ironically, growing increasingly frustrated at the fact that nobody will believe him. “Why isn’t it possible?” he asks, “It’s just not”, Carnes replies. Ellis completes the narrative with the warning of eternal tyranny of the bourgeoisie, utilising a cyclical structure to replicate the banal conversation of the first

⁴ Ellis, B.E. (2022) *American Psycho*. London: Picador, an imprint of Pan Macmillan. (p. 362)

⁵ Welsh, I (2012) Introduction. In: Ellis, B.E. (2022) *American Psycho*. London: Picador, an imprint of Pan Macmillan

⁶ Ellis, B.E. (2022) *American Psycho*. London: Picador, an imprint of Pan Macmillan. (p. 362)

chapter. In a different font to the rest of the novel's text reads "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT", definitively implicating the reader in the chilling lack of justice, encouraging them to break the cycle.

However, *American Psycho* resists categorisation as a metaphorical 'window'. Welsh says that it holds a "hyper-real, satirical mirror up to our faces"⁷, causing an "uncomfortable shock of recognition". Consumerism, classism, and toxic masculinity – these are all ailments of today's society; so why do Bateman's actions appear as so fundamentally impossible? Why is his character so ultimately unfathomable? Perhaps the reader's understanding of the disconnect between fiction and reality augments the implausible, allowing us to ignore the glaring dangers at hand.

Instead considering relatability in terms of worldview and era, an example of a distant novel, lost in 21st century postmodernism, is Kerouac's *On the Road*. Written in 1951, during a frenetic three-week period fuelled by Benzedrine and caffeine, the book chronicles a post-World War II adventure into debauchery and newfound American liberty. It was initially praised by Millstein as "the most beautifully executed [...] most important utterance" made by anyone yet in the Beat generation.⁸

But modern critics are often less laudatory, viewing the book as an artefact rather than a sober rejection of conformity to a renewed America's social and economic norms. In his retrospective analysis of the work, Brooks notes that it reads as "dangerous, childish and embarrassing", becoming a book of "gloomy middle-aged disillusion".⁹

⁷ Welsh, I (2012) Introduction. In: Ellis, B.E. (2022) *American Psycho*. London: Picador, an imprint of Pan Macmillan

⁸ Millstein, G (1957) 'Books of The Times', *New York Times*, 5 September.

⁹ Brooks, D. (2007) 'Sal Paradise at 50', *New York Times*.

Kerouac wrote the manuscript for *On the Road* on “the scroll”, a 120-foot-long collage of parchment paper¹⁰, covered in ink, and taped together. His approach of freedom and hunger was reflected in his ‘stream of consciousness’ writing style where “thoughts are often not fully formed, or they change course in the middle and become ‘run-on sentences,’”¹¹. This keen reinvention is reflective of postmodernist Barth’s ideas on literature, who stated that all conventional modes of literary representation had been “used up”. Kerouac envisioned a youthful rebellion against the restraints of society, fuelled by spontaneity and “the famous search for ‘IT,’ a truth larger than the self, which, of course, is never found,”¹². The concept of ‘IT’ is interpreted as many different things throughout the narrative – sex, drugs, family, jazz... Eventually the purpose of the journey is distorted, there is a lack of traditional plot and resolute ending; readers understand that the ‘road trip’ is symbolic of a wider comment on life. Kerouac’s significantly unique presentation therefore becomes hugely personal, deepening the philosophy of ‘Beat’ as something he lived and breathed.

However, the vast difference in context means that modern readers are more practical and less freewheeling than the Beats. Crowned as ‘generation sensible’, “teenagers today are less likely to take drugs, smoke, and drink.”¹³ The ever-increasing cost of living means that young people are reluctantly more work-oriented as a result of late-stage capitalism.

¹⁰ Shea, A. (2007) ‘Jack Kerouac’s Famous Scroll, “On the Road” Again’, *npr*. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2007/07/05/11709924/jack-kerouacs-famous-scroll-on-the-road-again> (Accessed: 2024).

¹¹ Frisella, E. (2017) ‘Stream of Consciousness’, LitCharts. Available at: <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/stream-of-consciousness> (Accessed: 2025).

¹² O’Rourke, M. (2007) ‘The American Sacrament That Is On the Road’, *Slate*. Available at: <https://slate.com/culture/2007/09/the-american-sacrament-that-is-on-the-road.html> (Accessed: 2025).

¹³ Okolosie, L. (2014) ‘Teenage kicks? Today’s young people are too focused on the future’, *The Guardian*.

But the concept of rebellion surely remains universally resonant and timeless. Kerouac presents a disdain for the rigid traditions of the older generation, symbolised by “an old man with white hair”¹⁴ walking towards him with “the Word” to “make us silent”. This reflects a listless yearning for change, and an omnipresent fear of being controlled. The generational cycle of contempt for the past and excitement for the future should be still felt today. Kerouac’s insistence on change is reflected in the iconic passage “the only people for me are the mad ones [...] who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars”¹⁵.

New historicism gives us a powerful method of analysing and contextualising literary works, to help us find the roots of ‘Beat’. After World War II, America found itself in better economic condition than any other country in the world.¹⁶ The American dream of a bourgeois life was more prevalent than ever, particularly in response to the looming fears of communism. Therefore, in a time of nationwide conformity, Kerouac might have been reflecting on loss and death following the war. The ‘Beat’ philosophy embodies a passionate indulgence in life, recognising the futility of submitting to work in the context of inevitable death – *carpe diem*.

This message feels somewhat eclipsed by the demands of modern life, devaluing it as unfairly unrelatable. Therefore, *On the Road* seems to be a ‘sliding door’, in that the aspirational freedom it details is just within our grasp, but contemporary pragmatism hides the key.

¹⁴ Kerouac, J., 1972. *On the Road* (1957). *Road Novels: 1957–1960*.

¹⁵ Kerouac, J., 1972. *On the Road* (1957). *Road Novels: 1957–1960*.

¹⁶ Overview: *The post war united states, 1945-1968: U.S. History Primary Source Timeline: Classroom materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress* (no date) *The Library of Congress*. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/post-war-united-states-1945-1968/overview/> (Accessed: 05 January 2025).

In conclusion, Ellis demonstrates that the absence of relatability serves as an instrument to provoke critical reflection, forcing readers to confront the true gore of a postmodern consumer capitalist society. Comparatively, *On the Road* illustrates the fragility of relatability as a literary device – a manifesto of rebellion and optimism now feels like a dated photo album of youthful carelessness, collecting dust. This comparison reveals that relatability cannot be an inherent quality of literature, but rather a dynamic one, defined by the ever-changing values and perspectives of the reader. Therefore, writers cannot ensure that their characters and worlds will be relatable to the individual, diminishing the importance of relatability as an uncontrollable variable. Then, it is for us to consider that the responsibility of relating to the text is on the reader, and through this emotional labour they can fully experience the transformative power of literature.