

Anna Maria Flügge

James Ellroy
and the Novel of Obsession

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Introduction

The ubiquity of main characters who are obsessed, who are driven by some idea or desire, is a noticeable feature of American fiction. The frequent portrayal of protagonists whose obsession drives the action in the novel suggests that obsession resonates strongly with readers, that it is a feature of the contemporary world, even that it is ingrained in American culture. Here, a strong focus on the individual, its desire for freedom, its resulting struggle against authority, whether the state, the church, the law, or even fate or God—as for example shown in Captain Ahab’s confrontation with Moby-Dick—is a typical theme. Frequently, a quest for justice is the root of a protagonist’s obsession.

In spite of this ubiquity, obsession has only been discussed as a characteristic of the protagonists in individual works, in which they are referred to as mad, passionate, or “fiend-driven figures” (Current-García 15). Usually these works are categorized according to traditional genres as, for example, crime novels, campus novels, or *kunstlerromane*. However, a focus on the nature of the obsession and the structure it dictates sets these works apart and thus suggests a new genre. As will be seen, genre theory is a diverse and complex issue, and the group of critics who have argued against the subdivision of literary works into categories is not negligible; however, I argue that in order to discuss cultural and literary preoccupations and their

changes over time adequately, genre categories and their development are crucial. While obsession is a complex phenomenon that can be discussed from many different angles, the focus of this work is on its creating a new genre.

American writer James Ellroy is the most interesting among the authors of novels of obsession, since he is clearly obsessed with stories of obsession. He offends some readers and critics by what he writes and how he writes it. He is often labeled a crime novelist, or sometimes a historical novelist; however, the scope and the brutality of his protagonists and their surroundings, plus the language Ellroy uses defy these labels. Although the novel of obsession has not been fully recognized as a genre yet, authors before Ellroy have used it. More importantly, Ellroy has taken the novel of obsession and developed it into a personal and extreme form.

Originally, obsession denotes a mental illness. In this work, however, “obsession” is not used in a psychiatric sense, where it is defined as the presence of “[r]epetitive, unwelcome, and intrusive thoughts, images or impulses that are inappropriate and cause distress” (Frost and Steketee 15). In Ellroy’s novels, as in other novels of obsession, this psychiatric idea of obsession, that it controls the protagonists and leads them to commit criminal acts is present, but almost beside the point. Obsession is rather an idea which the main characters have, a purpose that makes them sacrifice everything, and that by necessity excludes all other personal and social considerations. The protagonists defy the postmodern world, a world that sees a quest for meaning or values as naïve. Thus, obsession is not wholly negative; Ellroy’s protagonists rather seem to embrace it as a possibility of giving meaning to their otherwise empty or twisted lives, as a possibility of making their actions count. They are the ones who think about life, who want justice, even if it is a very personal concept of justice. They could not have chosen any other path, and although the obsession might destroy them, it gives them insight into a truth which no one else gains. Obsessed characters are interesting exactly because they defy norms, or, as Ellroy called it in his interview with Tucker, they follow “the music in their own heads”: